



# Technically Nothing: Enframing Life and the Properties of Nature

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# Technically Nothing

## Enframing Life and the Properties of Nature

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This essay will examine what it takes to be two foundational aspects of traditional metaphysics – the “concepts” of nothingness and nature – to offer a critical reading of how they enframe our understanding of “life.” It asserts that these two concepts are the limit point for metaphysical thought: the tangle that emerges when trying to overcome or reimagine them is an impasse encountered in pressing humanist concerns like ecological collapse, nihilism, alienation, and extinction. Readers of this journal may value a detailed, *technical* attempt at such an untangling; this article will suggest that a heightened sense of technics can be productive of a new image of thought, one that might escape the anthropocentric basis of these concerns.<sup>1</sup> In doing so, the argument will insist on the flaw within certain metaphysical schematisms’ desire to appropriate, form and hold sense into static and reproducible properties—a desire notably critiqued in Bernard Stiegler’s reading of technics. This flaw, it suggests, is constitutive of a sense of nature and nothingness based on property, one Stiegler notes is how we enframe being(s). It will then discuss Gilles Deleuze’s notable critiques of such “proper” enframing’s impossible limits and, following Deleuze, will turn to Marcel Proust’s writing as suggestive of a new image of thought—one that, focused on imagining (or enframing) nothingness through writing, inscribes an indelible remainder as that very imagination, suggesting that it is nothingness “it”self that will always remain.

For this reason, the article will work through some key influences on Stiegler’s political metaphysics – from Aristotle to Martin Heidegger to Gilles Deleuze—to consider how popular understanding enframes thinking as limited by technics’ impossible constructs, like the thoughts of nature and nothingness. We live in an era increasingly dominated by unquestioning assent to the hegemonic “efficiency” of the machine—a hegemony that, Stiegler argues, has the potential to stow away in it disastrously “entropic” consequences for human life’s noetic ability to think the, or any, future into being.<sup>2</sup> Directly questioning the assumptions tied up in dominant ideological

frames of life—especially those distinguishing “the human” from “nature,” “being” from “nothingness”—calls on us to think through, noetically, the frameworks that structure thinking, and the techniques that bring being into being. These are the frames that too easily allow us to sequester the impossible to the linguistic or figural tropes of the everyday—tropes that, buttressing the screen and marketing grammars of increasingly all twenty-first century communication, hollow out noetic, conceptual, and political thinking and replace it with the always-already assented pathways of digital nihilism—and post-political populism. It is for this reason that this article will conclude with the argument that the abyssal impossibility of what we too readily assume, or *frame*, to be “nothingness” is vital to consider, because doing so requires *active* thinking. To acknowledge the *injunction to think* that the impossibly unfinished “thought” of nothingness and nature requires is to acknowledge the negentropic thinking-into-being (becoming) of life at its most living—the “political” demand of subjective individuation (the endless work of imagining) against the technical, politically-operative “void” of nothingness.

## Nature and Technics

To begin, we should consider this technical conception of “nature” as the potential ground for such a metaphysics of properties. As Brian Massumi rightly identifies, it “is meaningless to interrogate the relation of the human to the nonhuman if the nonhuman is only a construct of human culture, or inertness.”<sup>3</sup> Is the human conception of nature a technical construct? That is, if nature is life, and the human is alive and thus part of nature, is it human technical production that sets the definitive distinction, or even the possibility of a (proper) separation between the human and nature, because the human can create something that has no natural being, or no natural life? Such questions would bring in to focus important biopolitical distinctions between types of life that have, often unwittingly, been a central tenet of political decision-making throughout Occidental human history. And at no time in or beyond that history has the relationship between “life” and “technics” been of greater or more imperative concern than today. Referring to his conception of the “*ecotechnical*,” Jean-Luc Nancy sets this concern out ontologically. “Unless we ponder without reservation the ecotechnical creation of bodies as the truth of *our* world, and a truth *just as valid as* those that myths, religions and humanisms were able to represent, we won’t have begun to think *this* very world.”<sup>4</sup> It is precisely for this reason that it is not simply the relationship *between* nature and technology which should be scrutinized as the basis of “modern” metaphysics (or whether such a between is even manageable), but the *conception* and tropologies of both, in order to think *this* very world—before it can never be thought again.

Roberto Esposito puts such a separation between the two categories down to anthropology, a science which could not exist without a split

between nature and the “science” of technics. But it is in reflecting upon the origins of this definition that we can find a point of contention. Esposito considers that such a reflection is possible, but only under certain conditions.

Unless we recognize—as Bernard Stiegler suggests—the essence of human nature precisely in the expropriating character of technique. If this were the case, obviously, if man’s *physis* were one with his *logos*, then the question of the relationship between man and technology would not even be posed to begin with. The question to be posed instead would be about man’s originary techno-logicality. But at this point, the language of anthropology — or paleontology — would slide directly into the language of ontology, and the problem of *immunitas* would be no different from that of *communitas*.<sup>5</sup>

What are the consequences of this lexical conflation? For Esposito, the root *munus* is an originary or defining debt. In its twin evocations through *immunitas* and *communitas* it forms community, or political being, in an always-already exchanged gift (that can never *yet* be fully given)<sup>6</sup> of mutually constitutive debt and exemption. *Munus* is an *a priori* expropriation, the dispersal of the self as its very constitution, *among* what gives it. How does life come to be technical — that is, scientifically interpretable — from outside of the nature or world that is the horizon from which it is never finished being given? Any co/i-munity must cut short nature’s becoming in order to form (to make technical sense of) itself. The *munus* expropriates because it is natural: it collapses property from a nature that, otherwise, would never finish with it. Therefore, what is most interesting in Esposito’s logic here is the “expropriating character of technique” taken from Stiegler’s thought, especially its concomitance of “man’s” *physis* and *logos* that negates the separation between man and technology. How could an expropriating character render such a cleft inconsequential (a question that “would not even be posed to begin with”)? Surely the expropriating nature of technics would render the technical idea “man” further distanced from nature — or does such an expropriation bring man back to nature? And where does technology sit in relation to the two, especially as it is here the active agent and thus the most “living”? All of these questions are pertinent to how we define “life,” and by attending more closely to Stiegler’s thought something resembling an answer can be approached.<sup>7</sup>

Any kind of answer here hinges on the nature of the *physis*, the nature of nature, as properly defined by human language. How does the human bring nature into being through the technicity that is naming? This is a proposition that eats into itself — how to define nature without naming it, or how to name nature without defining it — and as such, draws to attention the immunitary structure of appropriation as a natural expropriation<sup>8</sup> — that is, the *munus*. It is significant, then, that Esposito brings us to Stiegler at this juncture, because the latter seeks to account for this impasse by unpicking the source of the appropriative gesture that gives it.<sup>9</sup> He consults Aristotle’s definition of *technē* as what brings something into being. In this way, *technē*

“effects a passage from a concealed state to a nonconcealed state,” and as such, both nature on one side, and the human productions of *technē* and *poiēsis* on the other, render “an object’s” final cause not as “the efficient operator but being as growth and unfolding: *phusis* and being are synonyms.”<sup>10</sup> In this manner, teleology is not the function of human intervention – be that naming, art or technics – but rather these constitute a kind of revealing, and thus human technical production works in the same way as nature does.<sup>11</sup> But then Stiegler, qua Heidegger, runs this rule over what he calls “modern technics,” which he notes inflict “violence upon *phusis*” because they “become modern when metaphysics expresses and completes itself as the project of calculative reason with a view to the mastery and *possession* of nature, itself no longer understood as *phusis*.”<sup>12</sup> This appropriative force shuts off the *munus* and seeks to appropriate its force *as form*, an ecotechnical logic that works over “man himself” (hence the development of Roman personhood detailed so thoroughly by Esposito<sup>13</sup>). This abyssal violence is the site of modern technics, which Stiegler refers to as “the *Gestell* of nature and humanity through calculation,”<sup>14</sup> in all of its nominative, appropriative iterations: the offspring of *mathesis universalis* and ontology itself.

Heidegger initiated this line of thinking by arguing that “the essence of modern technology [modern Technik] is no longer technical or technological, but rather Enframing [*Gestell*].”<sup>15</sup> For Heidegger, *Gestell* is this human process of framing that shuts off the abyssal encircling of nature *as man and technē*. We can “produce” concepts, language, ideas, technical objects, when we frame them *as what they appear to be* in any one “enframed” moment – ignoring, or framing out, their inevitable becoming-other (inflicting violence upon the *phusis*). This is why David Wood refers to *Gestell* as the “temporality of programmatic action,”<sup>16</sup> one that stands in for authentic and lived-through *Dasein* in favour of anthropocentric, temporally constricted forms. But for Heidegger, the *Gestell* is always undecidable, a Janus head; it is this abyssal conjunction that he describes as being itself, the non- or pre-appropriative *abgrund* from where ontology emerges as enframed. It is for this reason that Stiegler reads *phusis* and being as synonymic (but only if being is thought of as *Geworfenheit*): the abyssal “event” of *Er-eignis* is always *outside of* appropriative identity. Both technics and nature are expropriations (or *Gestell*) of independent property, or personhood, even if both must necessarily be *given* by the undecidable human subject in order to be thought.

## Enframing “Life”

This is something of a *précis* to Stielger’s influential early theory of epiphylogenesis – the world as constituted by *technical nature*. The interwoven generation of phylogeny and ontology is this *Gestell* – an undecidable, and incompletable *pro*-cess of framing. *Gestell* is, perhaps for this reason, a contentious (non)concept, especially anthropologically – indeed, it is more a

floating transitive that a “concept” – and necessitates a patient development of Stiegler’s theory in terms of “nature,” from Aristotle to Heidegger. This is especially because the human residue, or imagined mastery *over* nature, is fraught by the same appropriating gesture that the *Gestell* of technics and nature implies. When, in *De Anima*, Aristotle argues that the soul’s capacity to think disqualifies it from being thought as magnitude only,<sup>17</sup> he gestures to the transcendental movement of the soul *in-itself*, that because parts of the body can be framed and combined in many ways, “it will follow that we have many souls, spread all over the body.”<sup>18</sup> While this does not lead Aristotle to describe anything resembling virtuality, or what Deleuze would define as the Body-Without-Organs, he does determine (famously, and as a ballast to all subsequent metaphysics concerned with immanence) matter as potentiality, and form as actuality, “of which the possession of knowledge and the exercise of it are examples.”<sup>19</sup> According to the Stagirite’s logic, matter is the living being *because* it has becoming and the propensity for change and development. Matter is what explodes formal frames: what does not develop does not live.

However, as Judith Butler points out, this historically dominant reading of materiality *as* a temporality that gives matter is in error if it does not adequately account for the absence of property and presence that change must necessarily take in. Life as becoming *alters* bodies, and in that very sense cannot *be*, singularly and irrevocably, only one or another of these bodies. Becoming “takes place” without place, as a temporality that cannot be formalized without appropriating and locking it in to *one* expropriating *munus* (which defies the originary *Gestell* of such “constitution”). Butler thus points out that in Aristotle, “we find no clear phenomenal distinction between materiality and intelligibility,”<sup>20</sup> and this is precisely the impasse from which identifying life as becoming encounters: how to *present* a determination of matter *as* change if that change is immaterial, or virtual – escaping the frame as it is being posited? In this way, when Aristotle defines some natural bodies as having life – or rather “being” a *zōon*; “having” “self-nutrition, growth and decay”<sup>21</sup> – and others as not, it is this possession of matter *already in form* that discounts the potential of materiality as something that it cannot be. It is the human appropriation of the becoming of life as being – as embodied – that cannot take place *as* the virtual bodies of *the* body, and nor can such appropriation fix becoming as “a” body.

“The soul, therefore, is a substance in the sense of being the *form* [εἶδος; *eidōs*] of a natural body [φύσικον; *physikos*] which potentially has life [ζωήν; *zōon*],”<sup>22</sup> Aristotle specifies, but in doing so he appropriates technico-taxonomical *form* onto the materiality of sense. It is this disqualifying *zōon* (the potentiality that “has life”) which has a body, yet alters it, that confounds this conception of formal immanence. The human appropriative desire toward making form subsist *in* a body, the *eidōs* which reduces the *phusis* into the *physikos* (or *zōē* into “a” *zōon*) is technical – it seeks to enframe the concealed,

disembodied work of nature and becoming into the forms of property and being. In this way, all technical production must be considered as this kind of property, or a misunderstanding of nature that ignores the forever incomplete Janus head of *Gestell*. As Heidegger outlines (and Stiegler cites), “that in which and from which man and being are of concern to each other in the technical world claims us in the manner of *Gestell*,”<sup>23</sup> because, as Stiegler goes on to point out, “*Gestell* also determines the co-appropriating of being and time in terms of the ‘there is’ (*es gibt*) of being and time.”<sup>24</sup> Matter *as* potentiality is the same as being *as* time or man *as* technics—the co-appropriative, abyssal movement from one to the other can never take a distinct, irreversible form or time from which “there is” objectivity, or the expropriating disembodiment of becoming. In this way, the *Gestell*, is a co-appropriation (expropriation) that “forms a prelude to *Er-eignis*”<sup>25</sup> and, again in Heidegger’s words, it is here that “man and being reach each other in *their* nature, achieve *their* active nature by losing those qualities with which metaphysics has endowed them.”<sup>26</sup> It is in the *Er-eignis*, the pre-appropriative co-appropriation (*munus*), that the beguiling form of matter begins to become sense, but precisely because its *Er-* is the co-appropriative *abgrund* from which this gift begins: no exchange can take place across the lack of property, and thus a virtual concomitance encircles what *might be* the origin—except that their giving renders such a “place” undecidable. Such is the *Gestell* of life, technics, and “their” materiality. The *munus* that gives life is that which cannot take a form, but can be sensed in the *Gestell* of life’s translational, immaterial essence.

Stiegler’s argument is, of course, that technics constitute time on the basis of such enframing movement, and this reading of matter as temporalizing in the range of its becoming (and because of its potentiality) underlines its veracity. But what of the tension that gives matter as virtual? What is most critical in this conversation is the role the virtual plays in this conception of technical nature. Reading is not only exemplary of the virtual—its formless, disembodied nature that delivers a meaning that cannot be made into a *logos*, nor a *zōon*, despite its *zōē*—but is the only way to interpret life. Life must be read, but not in an incremental, presentational “downloading.” Rather, like the *effects* of reading, “sense” emerges in the virtual becoming of life itself, the transversal nature of *Gestell* that always engulfs being “as-itself.” Life flows. This is typified by the experience of reading, which is durational, but equally an appropriative-expropriative exchange in which the “embodied” life of subjectivity translates across different selves, modes, and forms in the (im)material act of reading. Life is translational, and improper to any one “subject”—epitomized by the exchange of ideas and identities that occurs in *reading*, which cannot be framed within any *one* time, property, or form.

*Gestell*’s interweaving of these categories necessitates an examination of the ground of ontological perspective—especially from the reading *Dasein* of “appropriative,” analytical writing. Deleuze and Félix Guattari describe the

internalization of inscription as a hyper-technicity that cannot not lead to deterritorialization and life (a perpetual “re-grounding” of the sense of property). They write that, in the work of reading, there is “from sign to sign, a movement from one territory to another, a circulation assuring a certain speed of deterritorialization.”<sup>27</sup> These speeds are important to note, because they take place across multiple planes of sense and immanence, and inscribe different, constitutive “virtual bodies” across any attempt to singularize, or enframe, matter. It is no coincidence, then, that Deleuze and Guattari are so interested in inscriptions upon bodies: not only are both of these terms radically material (in the de Manian sense), but the inherent escape or lines of flight that inscription overwrites challenges any specificity of the body, and draws attention to its “supplementary” (to impart a deconstructive logic that Deleuze and Guattari welcomed here,<sup>28</sup> it seems), or undecidable overlap with the life of literature. “What takes the place of the book always has an external model, a referent, face, family or territory that preserves the book’s oral character,” they note. The virtuality of inscription means that the book’s writing is always escaping, deterritorializing and *re*-territorializing the sense of its varied interpretations across different external properties, often those that interact with and reset the book’s possibilities and “new” inscriptions. Deleuze and Guattari note the “passional regime” latent in the “subjectifying” power of this kind of preserving inscription. In the desire to “fix” the immaterial by subjectifying it, by applying a transcendental sign-system to appropriate its deterritorializing movement, every *Gestell* of sense is tied to a backward loop of reductive, and futile, appropriation. This subjectifying effort only loops back into further deterritorializations. In the “passional regime the book seems to be internalized, and to internalize everything: it becomes the sacred written Book. [...] *The book has become the body of passion*, just as the face was the body of the signifier. It is now the book, the most deterritorialized of things, that fixes territories and genealogies.”<sup>29</sup>

Appropriation inherently inverts itself, and the desire here, to master and subjectify the book as *one, technically inscribed meaning*, becomes the most deterritorialized “thing” in seeking to impart definitive meaning, or territorialization, onto other possible iterations. From this perspective, the literary’s (as “the Book’s”) technical “function of interpretation has totally changed. Or, it disappears entirely in favor of a pure and literal recitation forbidding the slightest change” as espoused by monotheistic religious practice and incantation, the passional regime of appropriation. What Deleuze and Guattari call the monomaniacal, “passional delusion” of subjectifying life into forced and territorialized properties will always break open into greater deterritorializations: this much is evident from the lines of flight that incessantly emerge from fetishism. “A dress, an article of underwear, a shoe are points of subjectification for a fetishist,” write Deleuze and Guattari, but in this hypercathexis of insistent, obsessive territorialization (or appropriation), the faciality of these subjectifications is “no longer the body of the signifier but has become the point of departure for a



deterritorialization that puts everything else to flight.”<sup>30</sup> The natural process of degradation, even as it applies to the passional and subjectifying regime, can do nothing other than break attempted appropriation open into other “lines of flight,” a re-Worlding process that underwrites the *nature* of technicity, even in its most metaphysical strata of faciality and subjectification.<sup>31</sup>

## Style

Inscription then, typified by literary textuality, exemplifies the function of *technē* as the *Gestell* of art as technics *par excellence* — that is, “things” torn from unfinished nature by the passional human hand. The “nature” of literary art is a kind of geomorphism that seeks to spread the intensities of the “subject’s” body without organs across the map, or sensible environment, that these intensities form part of. Its treatment does not rely on the *a priori* existence of the human subject or person; on the contrary, the ability for art to be inscribed, and created anew in interpretation, fires any imagination of a discrete subject outside of itself into the ephemerality of “nature.” Property never lasts, but the desire to enframe these ephemeral properties is the artistic impulse, the animal territorialization, which is only ever a duration, a *new* singularity. Life renders properties that are only ever rhythms of expiration and their refrain *as art* that produces new singularities. This is why Deleuze and Guattari have, on this subject, such a Proustian interest in *style*, the technics that give art, because it is this impossible singularity that gestures to the virtual, subjectless *nature* of the technico-aesthetic work. Style is the return of the same, but *in difference*, and hence why it can only ever be virtual; style is the exteriorizing sense of something that cannot be captured or bound up into form, quantity or language. We note style in the sense of that which is same but different: a motif that reminds us of another but whose (lack of) similarities cannot be accounted for; a motif that reminds us of itself in its repetition, but whose (lack of) difference cannot be accounted for. Deleuze and Guattari describe Wagnerian lietsmotifs which, as they develop throughout the operatic work, “increasingly enter into conjunction, conquer *their own plane* [...] become melodic landscapes and rhythmic characters continually enriching their internal relations”: they point out that “Proust was among the first to underscore this life of the Wagnerian motif.”<sup>32</sup> It is in this movement of difference *as* repetition that art, in territorializing — for what could be more territorial than the repetition of a phrase, a marker to designate the “properties” of a particular character, place, or emotion? — *deterritorializes*, that is, fails to capture the fixity and *static singularity* of sense. Motifs, matter, and bodies are always sensed differently, even in, and as, they work to territorialize, to reinscribe and appropriate, a sense of their uniqueness.

Proust was acutely aware of this virtual movement of property. Anne Simon writes that the “relation of envelopment” that his writing promotes

“between the world and the self demonstrates that phantasm itself can become the creator of existence.”<sup>33</sup> The envelopment that occurs in-between the self and the living world (the “in-between” that is constitutive of life) is given by the creative, or *technical* act, which is always phantastical because it is always driven outside of the proper limits of any technically imagined subject. In this regard, the virtual that is necessary for creation is always other-than-real, yet it is the essence of the living. In the famous scene from Proust’s *Recherche* in which the narrator misreads a telegram as being from his dead lover because he misinterprets the signature, his narrator makes an instructive comment about reading.

How many characters in each word does a person read when his mind is on other things and when he is already sure that he knows who the letter is from? How many words in each sentence? We guess as we read, we invent; everything stems from one initial error; those that follow (and this not only in reading letters and telegrams, not even only in all acts of reading), however extraordinary they may seem to someone who does not share the same starting-point, are natural enough [*sont toutes naturelles*]. Thus it is that a great deal of what we believe to be true, not to mention the ultimate conclusions that, with equal perseverance and good faith, we draw from it, results from an initial misconception of the premiss.<sup>34</sup>

When Proust’s narrator refers to invention as stemming from an “initial error” he anticipates Stiegler, who refers to being *itself* (*Dasein*’s originary differing/deferring) as the *Gewissen* [being-at-fault] that individuates on the basis of difference.<sup>35</sup> For Stiegler, and Proust, invention and individuation emerge from an originary, natural mistake, a breaking out of the proper. “Presentness-at-hand considers the *what* in such a way that it misses the *what* as such. The ‘as’-ness of the *what* is its worldhood,”<sup>36</sup> writes Stiegler, and it is this sense of *missing* the *what* that *gives* the expropriation, and temporality, necessary for becoming and territorialization. Inscription itself is to mark—to fault—the world. Being as presence is always-already faulted because it can only be individuated by modes of “its” alterity—it is only ever given by difference, which is primordially intertwined with otherness in order to become what it is. It is by following Proust’s understanding of sense as a mistake unique to each “reader”—a mistake that can never be withdrawn—that the significance of technical nature can be identified. Being can only be known through a *who*—*Dasein*—rather than a *what* that is always missed, mistook, or rather, (mis)given because of its multiplicity. This originary mistake *makes* sense, as expropriation or *munus*—a faulty frame that opens outside of itself.

Proust insists on this virtual nature of art, especially music, throughout his *Recherche*. Art is what enframes in order to break outside. His narrator refers to music as “a pure and supernatural being that passes through the air uncoiling its invisible message,”<sup>37</sup> and such interest in this virtual texture of music leads to some of Proust’s most developed reflections about the sense,

and multiplicity, of what we enframe as “matter.” As Deleuze and Guattari note, this reaches a particular apogee in Proust’s work on the subject of the compositions of Vinteuil, the *Recherche’s* fictional composer.<sup>38</sup> This “subjective” detail about Vinteuil, a composer whose life and work are modelled on “real” characters but given a fictional name and integrated into the novel contemporaneously with real figures like Wagner, Debussy, or Stravinsky, is a telling one in this musical context. Vinteuil, “that unknown, sublime brother who must have suffered so,”<sup>39</sup> is an unknowable composite; we know him through his sublime music, but this is fictional—we can only imagine it or listen to the extant examples of music from these contemporaries *in order to imagine* what his music, and thus Vinteuil, might have been. And music itself is always communicated in this apocryphal way—we can imagine the extant music of a Wagner, but in its ephemerality, its virtual (non)constitution, it can never be made fully present to us—that is, appropriated.<sup>40</sup> Vinteuil’s music might be fictive, but in its deliquescence, what distinguishes it from other music, and other fictions (or mistakes)? Indeed, Vinteuil’s music speaks to Proust’s protagonist about “the vanity of his sufferings,”<sup>41</sup> his consuming and overwhelming sufferings; the rhythm of music’s disappearance speaks to the vanity of property, or the desire for a permanent, binding frame.

Proust’s narrator goes to great lengths to describe the virtual power of music, especially the effect that Vinteuil’s “phrase” has upon Swann, the aforementioned protagonist who, having invested so much of his life and memories into it, senses the translational effect its singular deterritorialization has upon all of the variously embodied forms of his material life. The performance, and importantly the *event*, of Vinteuil’s sonata evokes for Swann so many differing versions of himself that it becomes impossible for him to reconcile them all in a distinct form. The phrase deterritorializes Swann’s subject in its immaterial work: it draws him onto its virtual plane. “Swann, who could no more see it than if it had belonged to an ultra-violet world, and who was experiencing something like the refreshing sense of a metamorphosis in the momentary blindness with which he was struck as he approached it,”<sup>42</sup> is here experiencing the transversal movement of sense as it passes through multiple frames of virtual constitution. He senses the passing differences its rhythms *give* but can never *have given*, and as these rhythms draw his attention to the vanity, or transience, of those differences *as they are*, he experiences the fullness of a singularity that is not one, that is not proper. Vinteuil’s phrase cuts through Swann’s sufferings, deterritorializing them as ephemerally as it, in the same movement and plane, territorializes them; whatever the phrase’s “opinion of the brief duration of the conditions of the soul, [it] did not see [his sufferings] as these people did, as something less serious than the events of everyday life, but on the contrary, regarded them as so superior that they alone were worth expressing.”<sup>43</sup> In pouring Swann’s memories through the abyss of life, life that lives only for its change, the multiplying infinity of difference emerges as “a” singularity—one that is

always deferred, just beyond the horizon. The narrator notes that Swann understood the musical structure (or technical nature) of the phrase, that it was composed of merely “five notes,” accentuated by “the constant repetition of two of them,”<sup>44</sup> but it is this *constant* repetition that signifies the multiple planes that Swann’s understanding, and the singularity of his *life*, ascend to and interweave with. Indeed, within this repetition of so few notes, he experiences “a few of the millions of keys of tenderness, of passion, of courage, of serenity which compose it, each as different from the others as one universe from another universe.”<sup>45</sup> Musical notation—a technique that is so singular, so finite, so repetitive—releases an impossibly transcendent and spiritual phrase: it can show us “what richness, what variety, is hidden unbeknownst to us within that great unpenetrated and disheartening darkness of our soul which we take for emptiness and nothingness.”<sup>46</sup> This difference *exchanged* by the imagination of nothingness, or the radical openness *given* by closed sets, typifies life’s impossible closure, since it is defined as *that which goes on*, that which changes—the remainder that always emerges from the imagination, or attempted appropriation, of nothingness. The singularity of difference is one which is not one—it is the transcendence of that which *is there*, which cannot be enframed without dispersing, and certainly not without taking the subject with it in the dispersal.

## No-thing-ness

This apparent singularity draws attention to the difficult *transcendental* constitution of individuation: is the *property* (that which can be returned to and reigned over) of singularity ever possible, or does it always return differently? This would be this sense of Proust’s, as well as Deleuze and Guattari’s, depiction of technicity as art—that singularity and multiplicity are always intertwined, and rather generate their *sense* (crucially, in place of their *meaning*), from the always-unfinished exchange (*Gestell*) between the classic metaphysical categories of apparent transcendence and immanence. This much is meant by Deleuze’s formulation of pure immanence—the inevitable revelation of difference in the apprehension of form, and all of the diversity it brings. He argues that the “error of all efforts to determine the transcendental as consciousness is that they think of the transcendental in the image of, and in the resemblance to, that which it is supposed to ground.”<sup>47</sup> In fact, individuation retains and projects its sensible multiplicities as it becomes a possible “thing.” As Deleuze points out,

Being is necessarily individuated, since it regulates to nonbeing or to the bottomless abyss every predicate or property which expresses nothing real, and delegates to its creatures, that is, to finite individualities, the task of receiving derived predicates which express only limited realities. [...] Always extraordinary are the moments in which philosophy makes the Abyss [*Sans-fond*] speak and finds the

mystical language of its wrath, its formlessness, and its blindness: Boehme, Schelling, Schopenhauer.<sup>48</sup>

This kind of reasoning is what makes Deleuze's thought so difficult, or resistant to standard metaphysical frames: if we ask how the one can be multiple, it seems as though his reply is precisely *because* of its singularity. But this is only because of a necessary abandonment of metaphysical expectations of proper form—once those frames are abandoned, the abyss which *gives* form from the multiplicities of its is-not, from the *pro*-cess of *Gestell*, come sharply into view. The "mystical language" of the abyss's formlessness pushes itself outside of language; it writes with the not-language of sense so as to draw attention to its constituting outside. Such is the rhythm of the artwork, of that which breaks down the technical imagination of the discrete body or subject and spreads the self across the individuation of the virtual work itself. For Deleuze and Guattari, it "is not by chance that the apprenticeship of the *Recherche* pursues an analogous discovery in relation to Vinteuil's little phrases: they do not refer to a landscape; they carry and develop within themselves landscapes that do not exist on the outside."<sup>49</sup> There is no "outside" to Vinteuil's phrases for Swann because they *are* the expropriating outside that *gives* the *moi profond*. It is not possible to go outside of the "landscapes" or frames territorialized by this music, because their aesthetic experience expropriates the subject across a multiplicity of planes, deterritorializing it in the process.<sup>50</sup> The inside wraps around "itself," and the abyssal result is the pure immanence of life lived, inscribed and un-enframed across a transversal plane—hence the radical immanence, the "superior" expression, of Swann's sufferings. The Abyss of being, the experience of sense, projects versions of the abyss into an outside that gives it, but cannot *be given*.

Deleuze argues that full deterritorialization of the subject brought about by art's abysses is difficult to sense, that "even if the formless ground or the undifferentiated abyss is made to speak, with its full voice of intoxication and anger, the alternative imposed by transcendental philosophy and by metaphysics is not left behind: beyond the person and the individual, you *will discern* nothing."<sup>51</sup> If you seek to *discern* form, to appropriate the abyss of being, then you will find nothing. This is literal, and recursive: *you will find* nothing—becoming non-subject, transversal—you will discover the aesthetic "nothing" that is any and every-thing other than no-thing.<sup>52</sup> Instead, the differentiating repetition of aesthetic sense unfolds planes of "free and unbound energy," very similar to Aristotle's kinetic formlessness of life "itself." For Deleuze, un-enframing this kind of elusive becoming, outside of conventional transcendent-immanent categories, is critical to overcoming the dominant metaphysics of property. It is worth quoting him here at length. These "impersonal and pre-individual singularities," the basis of life *and* matter, are

nomadic singularities which are no longer imprisoned within the fixed individuality of infinite Being (the notorious immutability of God), nor inside the sedentary boundaries of the finite subject (the notorious limits of knowledge). This is something neither individual nor personal, but rather singular. Being not an undifferentiated abyss, it leaps from one singularity to another, casting always the dice belonging to the same cast, always fragmented and formed again in each throw. It is a Dionysian sense-producing machine, in which nonsense and sense are no longer found in simple opposition, but are rather co-present to one another within a new discourse. The new discourse is no longer that of the form, but neither is it that of the formless: it is rather that of the pure unformed. [...] The subject is this free, anonymous, and nomadic singularity which traverses men as well as plants and animals independently of the matter of their individuation and the forms of their personality. "Overman" means nothing other than this—the superior type of *everything that is*. This is a strange discourse, which ought to have renewed philosophy, and which finally deals with sense not as a predicate or a property but as an event.<sup>53</sup>

Property becomes an event; the subject becomes a multiplicity of singularities; the abyss becomes a sense-producing machine of co-present planes of sense (*Gestell*). The nomadic singularities that constitute "Being," freed from the strictures of embodied, subjective individuation, instead forge a transversal dividuality, the improper being-with of this pure, *unformed* life. A technicity of this nomadic singularity encircles the possibility of individuation—it is only upon stopping the sense-producing machine of the unformed and appropriating this unbound energy into forms that cannot contain it, that we humans feel as though we have overcome nature, that we have met (or created the technology of) the possibility of nothingness. Instead, "nothingness" is, by its very (technical) essence, always becoming-other, engendering unformed life within and into it, just as that "darkness of souls" does not open into nothing but rather is the most significant opening towards the full, pre-individuating and subject-less deterritorialization of pure immanence, or life. As Nancy argues, the sense of nothingness "indicates not a mystical nothingness but simply the *ex* that *creates* the exposition of existence. Not nothing = no thing, but nothing = the very thing of passing and of sharing, among us, from us to us, from the world to the world."<sup>54</sup> The event, the jumping from one plane to another of these nomadic singularities, takes machines, takes technicity, takes lives into it, and multiplies the singularities that give life living, as a body that is always in the event of giving, but "is" never given.

For Swann, Vinteuil's phrase is always unfolding, on multiple, nomadic planes, as the constituting dispersal of his subjectivity. It

existed latent in his mind in the same way as did certain other notions without equivalent, like the notion of light, of sound, of perspective, of

physical pleasure, which are the rich possessions that diversify and ornament the realms of our inner life. Perhaps we will lose them, perhaps we will fade away, if we return to nothingness. But as long as we are alive, we can no more eliminate our experience of them than we can our experience of some real object, than we can for example doubt the light of the lamp illuminating the metamorphosed objects in our room whence even the memory of darkness has vanished.<sup>55</sup>

What might be the memory of darkness? Surely only the conflation of “darkness” with, or across, the objects it obscures, the unique remainder *produced* by this subtraction? Does its memory generate a new singularity, and if so, what is the finite objectivity—the property—of the darkness *on its own*? The “material” world, Proust is suggesting here, is nomadic—its *vital existence* is precisely what escapes form while passing through it, that which human frames seek to anchor down, to beguile us into believing in a proper, fixed individuality. The experience goes on, jumping from plane to plane and possessing, collapsing, our bodily self along with it. The mutual metamorphosis of matters is the event of experience, an event that cannot not go on, cutting through and developing innumerable planes, and it is by doing violence to the migratory, transitory and formless *movement* of this deterritorialization that metaphysics imagines property. It is wrong to do so. Even the most inequivalent properties, like the “notions” of light and sound, are merely nomadic singularities of the event, the metamorphosis of the same, vital becoming “itself.”

What Proust is describing in this long reflection on the nature of matter and nothingness is the vital force of life across the imagination of nothingness—brought about by the contentious, technical metaphysics of property. If there can be form, then surely there can be not-form—and this is the most troublingly proper invention metaphysics has, technically, imagined. But does not the very life of technical production imply a kind of eventual status in its unwavering production of difference, one that cannot extinguish the nothingness (life, the impossibility) of nothingness? The mere fact that nothing can be imagined—in fact it is *only* and *entirely* imagined—implies that it is, too, a technical production. The brazen human fear of nothingness, of extinction, is exactly that—a *human* anxiety as to its forms and properties. When Jacques Derrida asks whether we will “one day be able, and in a single gesture, to join the thinking of the event to the thinking of the machine,”<sup>56</sup> he is asking whether it is possible to marry the nomadic singularity of thought, of life, with the automatic repetition that *we call* mechanical, or technical. Equally, Michael Syrotinski has recently used Barbara Cassin’s thoughts on untranslatables to “reinvent” the (technical) “question of nothingness as a problem of translation, or rather untranslatability.” Syrotinski points out what should be self-evident, that *always*, “the thing negated is at the same time affirmed,” tracing Cassin’s philological work that shows how the very “names” or figures for

“nothingness” often derive from those for “thing.”<sup>57</sup> Here, we are in the muddy primordially of technics—etym, the bits and turns where language emerges from and splits itself—the *abgrund of abgrunds* where technical nature enframes itself in order to disappear. In reality, this living technicity is what *gives* such a gesture—the possible imagination of nothingness, the human imagination of an event without difference, without human intervention—extinction itself.

As Proust has shown in this little musical example, such “translation” (or untranslatability) is one that will be impossible to *know*. But that does not deny it life, life as matter: it only means that the abyss will have, again and customarily, surpassed “the notorious limits of knowledge” that are the very basis of thinking “itself.” “Maybe it is the nothingness that is real and our entire dream is non-existent,” his narrator writes.<sup>58</sup> As all of our proper, technical productions, including the body, the self, property and form dissipate, certainly there is no-thing-ness, but only insofar as the property of a fixed body is forgone. What emerges, instead, is the vital force of life (*zōē*)—nomadic, liberating, dispersing singularities of the most multiple variety. And these singularities are those made from the most living of human technical productions, even those which are forgone and “no-thing,” especially, and including, the territorializing-deterritorializing force of art. Art, literature, and the event of human technical production, be it the fullest trope of our own life with everything else in it, including our enframement of “nothingness,” whatever “thing” that might be, go on living, jumping from plane to nomadic plane across the degradation of “our” mind and bodies—“for sickness and death are the event itself,” as Deleuze writes.<sup>59</sup> The proper body long gone, as Swann feels it in the joyous living-through of Vinteuil’s nomadic sonata, leads our once-embodied human selves towards “a new causality, that is, an eternal truth independent of their corporeal realization—thus a style in an *œuvre* instead of a mixture in the body.”<sup>60</sup> Style, as the territorialization of a life *through* its technical productions, spreads life along this new causality; life passes from one body to another, all deriving from the absent origin of great nature, the abyss of dividuality. The emergence of technical production is merely the overlapping, the nomadic blend of technical imagination—and art inscribes this nothingness *as* its every virtual interpretation. “We will perish, but we have for hostages these divine captives who will follow us and share our fate. And death in their company is less bitter, less inglorious, perhaps less probable.”<sup>61</sup> The mere possibility of such a captive, a remainder, reinscribes the “thing” into nothingness—this much is made clear through the living death that art *becomes*, as each new, or possible, interpretation. Nothing, especially the death it promises, is life at its most living.



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- <sup>1</sup> As Gaston Bachelard noted (and he was, of course, not the first to do so), “Nature’s true order is the order that we put into it with the technical means at our disposal.” *The New Scientific Spirit*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Boston: Beacon Press, 1984), 108.
- <sup>2</sup> See Bernard Stiegler, *The Neganthropocene*, trans. Daniel Ross (London: Open Humanities Press, 2018), 43, 51, 78.
- <sup>3</sup> Brian Massumi, “The Autonomy of Affect,” in *Deleuze: A Critical Reader*, ed. Paul Patton, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), 232.
- <sup>4</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy, *Corpus*, trans. Richard Rand (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), 89.
- <sup>5</sup> Roberto Esposito, *Immunitas: The Protection and Negation of Life*, trans. Zakiya Hanafi (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2011), 111.
- <sup>6</sup> My approach to this complex ontology of the gift is here informed by Gerald Moore’s comprehensive *Politics of the Gift* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011).
- <sup>7</sup> Frédéric Neyrat’s work also provides a response to these questions. Neyrat’s return to nature on its own terms, as *natura denaturans*, is fundamentally engaged with not simply “loosening the vice grip” of dualisms like “nature/technology or nature/culture” (which amount to the same technics), “but of contesting this category” in its entirety. *The Unconstructable Earth: An Ecology of Separation* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2019), 6.
- <sup>8</sup> This is not an especially new point—see Keith Ansell-Pearson’s criticism of the “gross series of anthropomorphisms” endemic to studies of “cosmic evolutionism” and “negentropic complexification” (“Life Becoming Body: On the ‘Meaning’ of Post Human Evolution,” *Cultural Values* 1, no. 2 (1997): 220). Despite the clarity of Ansell-Pearson’s (and numerous others’) interventions, this conflation continues to be made, without adequate interrogation, in “post human” criticism.
- <sup>9</sup> It is interesting to consider Ben Roberts’ seemingly hypothetical criticism of Stiegler in this light: should one “wonder if it is not because Stiegler is *himself* operating from within such a rigorous distinction between *phusis* and *tekhne* that he is able to convince himself that it is only after the ‘rupture’ of the technical that death is the economy of life” (“Stiegler Reading Derrida: The Prosthesis of Deconstruction in Technics.” *Postmodern Culture* 16, no. 1 (2005)? My suggestion in reply would be that the inability to truly account for, to escape the metaphysical *a priori* of this assertion, is precisely the undecidable weft of technics as a category—one that Stiegler’s work (and Roberts’, it could be said) takes as its starting point. For more detail on Stiegler’s position here, see *Technics and Time, 3: Cinematic Time and the Question of Malaise*, trans. Stephen Barker (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011), 172-76.
- <sup>10</sup> Bernard Stiegler, *Technics and Time, 1: The Fault of Epimetheus*, trans. Richard Beardsworth and George Collins (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 9.
- <sup>11</sup> As Laurent Dubreuil makes clear, human “cultures are natural through and through” because what is apparently “inconstructible of *phusis* has well been fabricated to some extent, something the classical dichotomy of nature and culture always disregards. [...] None of this is acknowledged, or even understood, by the *phrase* of human nature, which is why we should rather abandon it, once and for all.” *The Intellectual Space* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016), 105-06.
- <sup>12</sup> Stiegler, *Technics and Time, 1*, 10.
- <sup>13</sup> Roberto Esposito, *Third Person: Politics of Life and Philosophy of the Impersonal*, trans. Zakiya Hanafi (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2012), 87-93.

- <sup>14</sup> Stiegler, *Technics and Time*, 1, 10.
- <sup>15</sup> Pieter Lemmens and Yuk Hui, "Reframing the Technosphere: Peter Sloterdijk and Bernard Stiegler's Anthropotechnical Diagnoses of the Anthropocene," *Krisis: Journal for Contemporary Philosophy* 2 (2017): 28.
- <sup>16</sup> David Wood, "On Being Haunted by the Future," *Research in Phenomenology* 36 (2006): 276-77.
- <sup>17</sup> Aristotle, *De Anima*, trans. William David Ross (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1961), 184-85.
- <sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 193.
- <sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 211. For more developed analysis of this point, see Neyrat, *The Unconstructable Earth*, 135-36.
- <sup>20</sup> Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 8.
- <sup>21</sup> Aristotle, *De Anima*, 211.
- <sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>23</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Identity and Difference*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (New York: Harper and Row, 1969), 35, my emphasis.
- <sup>24</sup> Stiegler, *Technics and Time*, 1, 7.
- <sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>27</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia, Volume Two*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 417.
- <sup>28</sup> *Ibid.* It is important to keep in mind the specificity of Deleuze and Guattari's reading here. I would suggest that their idea of the abstract machine incorporates a broader logic of the supplement in the sense of inscription. For a much more detailed reading of this problem and the concept of inscription between Derrida and Deleuze, see D.J.S. Cross, "Apocrypha: Derrida's Writing in *Anti-Oedipus*," *CR: The Centennial Review* 17, no. 3 (2017): 177-197.
- <sup>29</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 417.
- <sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 129.
- <sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 126-27.
- <sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 319.
- <sup>33</sup> Anne Simon, *Proust ou le réel retrouvé : le sensible et son expression dans A la Recherche de Temps perdu* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 2000), 6 (my translation).
- <sup>34</sup> Marcel Proust, *The Prisoner and The Fugitive* (London: Penguin Modern Classics, 2003), 620.
- <sup>35</sup> Stiegler's English translators Richard Beardsworth and George Collins render *Gewissen* as "being-at-fault" rather than "being-guilty" (or "conscience", the predominant English translation) for precisely the reason of this "originary default". *Technics and Time*, 1, 288. Stiegler develops this "originary default" in *The Decadence of Industrial Democracies: Disbelief and Discredit*, 1, trans. Daniel Ross and Suzanne Arnold (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2011), 55; 90-91; 115.
- <sup>36</sup> Stiegler, *Technics and Time*, 1, 240.
- <sup>37</sup> Marcel Proust, *The Way by Swann's*, trs. Lydia Davis (London: Penguin Modern Classics, 2003), 350.

- <sup>38</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 271.
- <sup>39</sup> Proust, *The Way by Swann's*, 350.
- <sup>40</sup> Music divests all but the *sense* of its property, Elizabeth Grosz claims. "Music submits the refrain to the process of deterritorialization, removing it from the place of its 'origin' and functionality, enabling the refrain to free itself from a particular place, purpose, rhythm or force." *Chaos, Territory, Art: Deleuze and the Framing of the Earth* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 41.
- <sup>41</sup> Proust, *The Way by Swann's*, 350.
- <sup>42</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>43</sup> Ibid., 351.
- <sup>44</sup> Ibid., 352.
- <sup>45</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>46</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>47</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, trans. Mark Lester with Charles Stivale (London: Athlone Press, 1990), 105.
- <sup>48</sup> Ibid., 106.
- <sup>49</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 319.
- <sup>50</sup> See Marielle Macé's interesting thoughts on Proustian transversality and the "passivity of immersion" (particularly as it relates to territory and "reading"), where identity is only the composite, or enframing, of what exceeds "it". "Ways of Reading, Modes of Being," *New Literary History* 44, no. 2 (2013): 226-27.
- <sup>51</sup> Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, 107.
- <sup>52</sup> As Jean Baudrillard argues, "what lends writing, fictional or theoretical, its intensity is the void, the nothingness running beneath the surface [...] nothing is wholly obvious without becoming enigmatic. Reality itself is too obvious to be true." *The Perfect Crime*, trans. Chris Turner (New York: Verso, 1996), 98.
- <sup>53</sup> Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, 107.
- <sup>54</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy, "Conloquium," trans. Janell Watson, *The Minnesota Review* 75 (2010): 106
- <sup>55</sup> Proust, *The Way by Swann's*, 352.
- <sup>56</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Without Alibi*, ed. and trans. Peggy Kamuf (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 72.
- <sup>57</sup> Michael Syrotinski, "On (Not) Translating Lacan: Barbara Cassin's Sophistico-Analytical Performances," *Paragraph* 43, no. 1 (2020): 106. See also Barbara Cassin, *Jacques the Sophist: Lacan, Logos, and Psychoanalysis*, trans. Michael Syrotinski (New York: Fordham University Press, 2019), 102-06.
- <sup>58</sup> Proust, *The Way by Swann's*, 352.
- <sup>59</sup> Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, 108.
- <sup>60</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>61</sup> Proust, *The Way by Swann's*, 352-53.