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Attention Disorders between Impairment and Ferality. Towards a Political Aesth-Ethics of Dismantlement

Western societies have been shown to generate a permanent crisis of attention. Jonathan Crary has masterfully documented and studied the surge of questions about attention during the last quarter of the 19th century, in connection with the extension of industrialism, advertisement, electricity, new media and experimental psychology. Enrico Campo recently published a remarkably synthetic and critical view of what our first quarter of the 21st century describes and experiences as its own attentional crisis, in connection with neoliberal governance, globalization, digital media and the threat of ecological collapse¹.

It may be relevant (even though not original) to put the results of their studies in relation with the major changes in *infrastructure* that took place during these two periods. Industrialization and digitalization, intimately linked to each other, have not only dramatically transformed our external environments (landscapes, urbanization, architectures, work relations), they have also deeply altered our modes of sensing, feeling, experiencing the world we live in. As ready-to-use systems of substrates providing an often invisible background to our activities,

infrastructures are matter that enable the movement of other matter. Their peculiar ontology lies in the facts that they are things and also the relation between things. [...] Roads and railways are not just technical objects, but also operate on the level of fantasy and desire. They encode the dreams of individuals and societies and are the vehicles whereby those fantasies are transmitted and made emotionally real².

In attempting to understand and map what mediality does to us, I suggested to consider “media” (in their broadest definition) as *intrastructures*, i.e., as technical assemblages that structure in parallel our external networks of communication, our perceived environment, and our internal capacity to experience and act in the world³. In this article, I will suggest that two concepts may help us get a clearer and deeper view of our current “crisis of attention” in its intrastructural dimensions: *impairment*, drawn from a recent book by Jonathan Sterne, and *ferality*, as defined by Anna Tsing and her collaborators in the *Feral Atlas*.

FROM ATTENTION DISORDERS TO SCHOOL MISORDERS

Some aspects of “the crisis of attention” are diagnosed across the world many, many times a day, in the form of Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). While the identification of such a “mental disorder” goes back to the end of the 19th century, with George Still’s article « On Some Abnormal Psychological Conditions in Children » published in 1902 in *The Lancet*, our current clinical category has been made official in the 1980 (TDA)

¹ Jonathan Crary, *Suspensions of Perception. Attention, Spectacle and Modern Culture* (Cambridge MA, MIT Press, 1999); Enrico Campo, *Attention and its Crisis in Digital Society* (Abington NY, Routledge, 2022).

² Brian Larkin, “The Politics and Poetics of Infrastructure”, *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 42 (2013), p. 329 & 333.

³ Yves Citton, *Mediarchy* (Cambridge: Polity, 2019).

and 1994 (TDAH) editions of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM), regularly published and updated by the American Psychiatric Association. Since then, the diagnoses of this attentional disorder, and the prescriptions putting (young) adults on drugs like Ritalin and Adderall, have soared in a spectacular manner. In the USA, “scripts for ADHD numbered 5.6 million in 2007; only five years later, the total number had tripled, to 16 million⁴”. Studies suggest that the worldwide use of ADHD medications has grown by 274 percent between 1993 and 2003, while the consumption of methylphenidate increased by about 450 percent in Chile, and by more than 750 percent in Brazil, after 2005⁵.

The most striking figures contrast, on the one hand, the number of children actually suffering from a disorder psychiatrists claim to identify with ADHD (a number which vary between 3 percent and 7 percent worldwide) and, on the other hand, the number of children that end up being diagnosed as such and put on drugs like Ritalin or Adderall (a number which sometimes reaches 30 percent of boys in some Southern states of the USA⁶). The difference between these two figures can be explained in part by the fact that, while a serious diagnosis would take a few hours and up to a day, a large number of diagnoses are performed in about 15 minutes, by hurried pediatricians or school assistants. Of course, the procedures set in place in different countries—and sometimes in different schools and healthcare facilities within the same country—cover a very wide range of practices and responses. Figures about the global consumption of methylphenidate are simultaneously revealing (of general trends) and deceptive (since local situations vary greatly)⁷. While fieldwork shows very diverse realities, what I am describing here is *one* model (among many) which operates as a powerful attractor for the framing, definition and management of “attention disorder”.

Apart from the expansive advertisement campaigns set up by Big Pharma to persuade physicians, researchers and the general public of the benefits of these drugs, at least two types of factors push diagnoses and prescriptions through the roof. First, in the younger age of schooling, classes with 20, 30 or even more pupils become unmanageable for one teacher when too many kids act in an “unruly” or “agitated” manner. Poorly funded schools therefore tend to use ADHD drugs as a means of class management, since kids on Ritalin tend to sit more quietly and obediently. Second, in colleges and universities, ADHD drugs tend to be favored by students as an enhancer of intellectual performance (especially during exam periods), in a context that puts an increasing sense of competition among them, under the burden of student debts sometimes reaching hundreds of thousands of dollars (which require successful grades and a good paying job in order to be reimbursed). As a consequence, “dozens of studies since the 1990s have estimated that about 8 to 35 percent of undergraduates take stimulant pills illicitly to improve their grades; a reasonable estimate among high-pressure colleges is probably 15 to 20 percent⁸”.

The notion of “attention disorder” is therefore a textbook case of the reduction of social issues to personal problems, i.e., of the obfuscation of an infrastructural mismatch into a psychological disability. In their day-to-day reality, many people *do* indeed benefit from the intake of medication. Living with impairment (and with an impaired person) can be strenuous, and methylphenidate *can* provide a life-changing help. However, while between 3 percent and 7 percent of children and young adults may be affected by a medical condition which psychiatrists and neuroscientists assimilate to some form of “brain dysfunction”, more than

⁴Alan Schwarz, *ADHD Nation. The Disorder. The Drugs. The Inside Story* (NewYork, Little Brown, 2016) p. 190.

⁵Luciana Caliman *et al.*, *L’attention médicamentée. La Ritaline à l’école* (Rennes, Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2023).

⁶Schwarz, *op. cit.*, p. 199. See also Caliman *et al.*, *op. cit.*, chapter 2.

⁷See Schwarz, p. 204-205 and Caliman *et al.*, *op. cit.*, chapters 4, 5 & 6.

⁸Schwarz, *op. cit.*, p. 164.

half (and up to four times) as many people are prescribed drugs like Ritalin or Adderall, only in order to fit into an educational structure which is itself torn and warped by insufficient funding and unrealistic demands.

While the problems with ADHD have been fairly well studied and discussed over the past decades, they ought to be considered as one particular symptom of a much broader imbalance in what has come to be expected from our individual attentions and what they can actually deliver. Going from individual disorders to infrastructural misorders requires specific conceptual tools, among which I believe impairment and ferality can be particularly helpful.

IMPAIRMENT THEORY

Jonathan Sterne, one of the most prominent scholars in Sound Studies, went through a series of surgeries in the 2010s in order to remove a tumor in his throat, which resulted in an acquired impairment of a paralyzed vocal cord. In his 2021 book *Diminished Faculties*, he reflects upon this experience and draws out of it *A Political Phenomenology of Impairment*, which turns the tables on a number of common assumptions about disability, handicap, illness, and disorders. Taken together, these assumptions provide a background for most of our judgements—a sort of phenomenological infrastructure—which Tobin Siebers has labelled *an ideology of ability*, “the unstated preference for ability over disability⁹”.

Against the dominant habit of considering impairment as the negation of a faculty (a loss, a lack, an *ab*-normality, an *in*-capacity, a *dis*-ability, a *dys*-functioning), Sterne synthesizes a rich literature that teaches us to view it rather as “a shady place between function and non function”, where technical devices can be impaired as well as people, and where non-impaired functioning is not necessarily an ideal to be expected. “Transmission impairments”, for example, refer to “engineering problems in communication systems, not all of which were ever meant to be overcome”, since every system will have some kind of impairment, if for no other reason that perfection is simply too expensive¹⁰”. In a wonderful “User’s Guide to Impairment Theory”, he summarizes his approach as follows:

Impairment is not simply a defect or a malfunction. It is better understood as a productive distortion of an ability. The ability itself might be real or imagined. The distortion could be pleasurable or painful. [... Impairment] exists in relation to something: an external norm of ability or action, a remembered embodiment or affect, an unrealized or altered intention. [...] So much scholarship—and so many institutionalized protocols—take on a Panglossian best-of-all-possible-worlds attitude when describing social process, perception, interpretation, and technical operations. They assume that impairment is not there. But technologies must be constantly maintained and repaired; [...] people get sick; bodies break down; systems fuck up. The world is full of impairments¹¹.

As illustrated by the engineers’ tolerance of imperfect transmissions, there are many cases where a form of impairment is indeed considered as normal, if not sought-after: inebriation and drug use, grief, menstruation, diminished capacity of hearing or remembering due to ageing. In other words, impairment is not simply a fact, but rather a relation to a certain

⁹ Jonathan Sterne, *Diminished Faculties. A Political Phenomenology of Impairment* (Durham, Duke University Press, 2021) p. 20, in reference to Tobin Siebert, *Disability Theory* (Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 2008).

¹⁰ Sterne, *Diminished Faculties*, p. 31-32.

¹¹ Sterne, *Diminished Faculties*, p. 194 & 197.

norm. “How far does one need to be able to walk to be considered able-bodied?”, asks Susan Wendell¹².

In the last chapter of his book, Jonathan Sterne considers more in detail one common form of “normal impairment”: *fatigue*. His analysis will help us reassess attention disorders under a rather different light. Most “approaches to fatigue treat it as a kind of depletion, where fatigue is what’s left when energy is gone¹³”. Fatigue resulting from work is considered normal, but tends to be pathologized when it is not work-related. Workers in general, and professionals in particular, are expected to demonstrate their tireless “executive athleticism”—just like schoolchildren are expected quietly to sit down for hours, and college students to get straight As. More than the symptom of a personal shortcoming, chronic fatigue and attentional deficit should be seen as the infrastructural consequence of an overtaxing infrastructural condition. Under the competitive pressure of our extractivist modes of production, the available energy is never sufficient: “growing numbers of adults are using ADHD medications as performance-enhancing drugs; Adderall misuse has graduated from college into the American workplace¹⁴”. By individualizing this infrastructural imbalance, the dominant extractivist approach to fatigue and attention disorders promotes the intake of chemical prostheses as the most convenient solution—aligning the consumption of Adderall or Ritalin with that of Viagra, and attention disorder with erectile dysfunction.

As a radical alternative to this “depletionist approach”—shared by those who expect workers, students and real men to be constantly erect, as well as by those who denounce the alienating, ecocidal and egocidal consequences of such unrealistic expectations—Jonathan Sterne promotes a “nondepletionist” perspective, inspired by Robert Hockey, which reframes fatigue as a form of aversion and refusal. Instead of resulting from “a loss of energy, caused by the activity of carrying out (too much) work”, instead of being interpreted “as a primarily negative state, an ‘unwanted by-product of (physical and mental) work’”, fatigue should rather be seen as “an aversion to an activity, or a recalibration of motivation”, as well as “an attempt to retreat or escape from a situation”. Which raises the question: “what if fatigue points to a set of political problems rather than problems in subjects, energy, or efficiency?¹⁵”

Such an analysis provides a good opportunity to reflect upon the relation between “impairments” (attention disorders, fatigue) and infrastructures. While the etymology of *impairment* points to the French word *empirer* (“to worsen”), a constellation of related terms weave a much more suggestive semantic mesh, which balances *impair* with *repair* (from the Latin *reparare*), and which resonates with the *pairing* of *peers*. Within this echo chamber, impairments result from the fact of “not being on a par with” someone or something supposed to be a peer or a partner, against the expectation of forming a good-standing pair. Just like attention disorders point to infrastructural misorders, impairments reveal the fallacy of attempting to pair a limited individual with a systemically unlimited demand for attention or performance. While the depletionist approach denounces the painful *saturation* of individual capacities, the nondepletionist perspective calls for a *subtraction* in the expectations or in the operations of the infrastructure.

To subtract oneself from the systemic demands of paying attention has been shown to constitute a powerful tactics of dissidence. In *Politiques de la distraction*, Paul Sztulman and Dork Zabunyan provide many examples of inattention undermining the grip of totalitarian powers over their subjects. They remind us, along with Paul North, that distraction is never a

¹² Sterne, *Diminished Faculties*, p. 30 (see also 155), in reference to Susan Wendell, “Toward a Feminist Theory of Disability”, *Hypatia*, vol. 4, no. 2 (1989).

¹³ Sterne, *Diminished Faculties*, p. 162.

¹⁴ Schwarz, *ADHD Nation*, op. cit., p. 223.

¹⁵ Sterne, *Diminished Faculties*, p. 180-181, in reference to Robert Hockey, *The Psychology of Fatigue: Work, Effort and Control* (Cambridge University Press, 2013)..

mere absence of attention, but rather a deflection of attention towards other objects than those prescribed by the ruling authority¹⁶. This resonates remarkably well with Jonathan Sterne’s definition of impairment, quoted above, as not being “simply a defect or a malfunction”, but rather “a productive distortion of an ability”, which can be “pleasurable or painful”. Only a “Panglossian best-of-all-possible-worlds attitude” (which is in itself a totalitarian worldview) can pretend to “treat” inattention as a disease, an illness, or a disorder to be medicated away. Here again, this is obviously not to deny that some intakes of methylphenidate can help in specific cases. Nor should impairment theory lead to romanticize disabilities that have painful consequences on people’s insertion in societies. The point of considering ADHDs as impairments is to reframe them within a broader perspective, where a merely individual disability can be turned into the denunciation of a systemic saturation, as well as into an active strategy of subtraction.

FERALITY

Feral Atlas. The More-Than-Human Anthropocene is a website resulting from a collective project curated and edited by Anna L. Tsing, Jennifer Deger, Alder Keleman Saxena and Feifei Zhou. It invites its readers “to explore the ecological worlds created when nonhuman entities become tangled up with human infrastructure projects”, their entanglement resulting in “‘feral’ ecologies, that is, ecologies that have been encouraged by human-built infrastructures, but which have developed and spread beyond human control. These infrastructural effects, *Feral Atlas* argues, are the Anthropocene¹⁷”.

The project displays the multimedia production of a wide array of investigations in the form of video poems, drawings, audiovisual documentaries, explicative texts, all tracing the many ways in which infrastructural changes worldwide have led to unintended side-effects, acting as “detonators”, shifting local ecologies past tipping points (“tippers”) with potentially ecocidal consequences. The notion of *ferality* identifies a wide diversity of nefarious, toxic and ravaging behaviors, which we would be tempted to qualify as savage, wild and brutal (according to the Latin etymology of *ferus*), whereas they indeed result from human-made infrastructural causes.

Feral qualities are ways entities attune to infrastructures. [...] By beginning with the attunement between an infrastructure and an entity as the source of out-of-control spread, scholars might get used to the idea that humans and nonhumans together are equally involved in self-transformation and in transforming world history and ecology. [...] Most study of infrastructure has focused on what apparatuses can do—or, alternatively, what blocks or stymies this function. *Feral Atlas* asks instead about non-designed effects of infrastructures. To appreciate how infrastructures make the Anthropocene, analysts need to go beyond what infrastructures are supposed to do to see other things they do, even if these were not part of their planning. Climate change is a non-designed effect of fossil-fuel burning factories, power plants, and combustion engines, for example.

“To *Feral Atlas* attention disorders”—as the editors encourage us to turn their title into a verb—is to recast individual behaviors (considered as “un-civilized”, “a-social”, “un-trained”, insufficiently obedient) as the out-of-control results of non-designed attunements to human-made infrastructures. According to the principle that “feral flows and blockages require mapping at different scales and angles”, the infrastructures involved in ADHD entangle young and adult individuals with a certain schooling system, a digital

¹⁶ Paul Sztulman and Dork Zabunyan, *Politiques de la distraction* (Dijon, Presses du reel/ArTeC, 2021); Paul North, *The Problem of Distraction* (Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2011).

¹⁷ All quotes come from the website <https://feralatlans.org/>, a Stanford Digital Project, 2020.

communication networks, as well as a financial system which tends to subject all behaviors to “the financialization of daily life¹⁸”. Ferality explains how what is treated as an impairment emanates from the compulsory but impossible pairing forced between a human entity and a superposition of human infrastructure projects.

EIGHT TIPPERS OF FERILITY

In order to map out the prevalent ecocidal consequences (rather than the usually localized ‘collateral damages’) triggered by human-designed infrastructures, *Feral Atlas* suggests a methodology of investigation articulated around eight “tippers” induced by settler colonialism, which I will reappropriate (with an occasional twist) to unfold some of the dimensions entangled within attention disorders:

To show how infrastructures create state changes, *Feral Atlas* starts with the kinds of work they are designed to do. We ask: In the process of doing that work, what gaps and rifts appear in the state of things? What disappears? What proliferates? We begin with eight one-syllable words, each derived from the early history of the English language, and, as such, at the base of English-speakers’ experience: TAKE, GRID, CROWD, PIPE, SMOOTH/SPEED, BURN, DUMP. Consider these as verbs; they describe things that people—and infrastructures—do. By classifying infrastructures according to these verbs, we aim to make clear the rifts that can appear when imperial and industrial modes of work take over from other ways of doing things.

TAKE—The notional definition of attention disorders is structured thru and thru by extractivist (i.e., “taking”) premises, at least on three superposed levels. At the level of the individual, attentional impairments are conceived as an inability properly to take what is (authoritatively deemed) to be taken from an informational situation: kids daydream or run around to grab frivolous objects, while they are expected to concentrate on in-taking the teacher’s lesson. Why is it a problem that a given individual fails properly to sort out what information should be extracted from the environment? Because, at a second level, the economy should be able to extract from its workers the added value that results from a working capacity to extract information deemed relevant. And how do we ultimately know which information should be taken in, so as to boost productivity? Because, at a third level, financial markets are guided by the investors’ drive to maximize the profit they manage to rake in from the productive process. On these three levels, just like the Conquistadores took with them the germs of smallpox that killed millions of people across the ocean, these grabbing operations carry unforeseen consequences: the definitions of what is supposed to be extracted from a field of activity “take along” with them unintended seeds that spread out-of-control within the colonized field (conformism, bottom-line short-sightedness, greed).

GRID—The medical modelization of attention disorders relies on the grids designed by psychiatrists to diagnose ADHD. Sloppy (underfunded and hurried) gridding is suspected to account for half to four fifths of the recorded cases, as the simplified model of the impairment ends up co-producing the problem it was designed to remedy—or rather, as it translates it from an infrastructural shortcoming to an individual disability. More broadly, the over-diagnosing of ADHD in schools results from an over-simplification of what attention is and does, comparable to the reduction of multi-species living milieus to mono-cultural plantations. Within any environment, there are multiple ways to pay attention to a multiplicity of objects: the type of education practiced in most of our schools narrowly grids this multiplicity into a monomaniac focusing on teachers’ lessons and grade results.

¹⁸ Randy Martin, *The Financialization of Daily Life*, Philadelphia, Temple University Press, 2002.

CROWD—The “principle of packing things or people together to further political, economic, or scientific programs” accounts for the main cause of what has come to stigmatize attention disorders as a mental disability. While the democratization of (basic and higher) education certainly is a progress to be celebrated, the industrial methods designed to implement it have promoted crowding practices that pushes teachers and schools to medicalize kids in order to have them “behave” in an orderly and disciplined fashion—according, here again, to industrial models devised on plantations, and later on in human or animal factories.

PIPE—“The infrastructural state changes of settler-colonial water management” sheds an interesting light on the ways in which our intensely schooled, interconnected and laborious societies treat and manage human attention: in the same way as, “through techniques such as draining, dams, irrigation, dredging, river capture, and more, the interface between land and water is shifted to support an entirely different way of life”, similarly, what is considered as relevant information has been canalized through a network of tubes in the context of which attention disorders appear as damageable leaks. For what is a pipe, if not a tube designed to isolate its content during its circulation from point A to point B, so as to prevent any contact with the environment? And what is distraction, if not a leakage putting the subject’s attention in touch with a part of this environment, against the authoritative design of the institution? And what more striking representation of the Anthropocene crisis, than a settler-colonial information management system which drains, dams, irrigates, dredges and captures our attentions, through pipes that isolate us from vital environmental sensations, leaving us out of touch with our surround?

SMOOTH/SPEED—Since flows must travel smoothly and speedily through the pipes, the *Feral Atlas* invites us to consider “the physical qualities and temporal rhythms of infrastructures: the making of artificial smooth surfaces; the coordinated acceleration of one process after another”. These tippers remind us that ADHDs cannot be reduced to the sole question of selecting the proper (i.e., authorized) *objects* of attention. *Tempos* and *rhythms* are equally important: industrial education and industrial production need to streamline their processes to subject all participants to a narrowly disciplined synchronization, driven by a single universalist definition of historical progress. Their common enemy is not just slowness and delay, but what Roland Barthes theorized as “idiorhythmicity” (our individuating capacity and need to invent the singular pace of our breathing with our partners and our surround), or what Jacob Lund has explored as “the anachronic approach” of the contemporary (“the anachronic intertwinement of heterogenous temporalities [understood] not only vertically, as connections between past, present and future within one singular unified history (most often the Western one), but also horizontally, as the interconnection of different vertical histories in the *same* present¹⁹”). No less importantly, by building roads and highways (i.e., pipes) that smoothens the transport across a territory and by isolating the traveler from this territory’s specificities, colonial settlements homogenize and standardize the formats of travelling, so as to remove any *stickiness, hairiness, roughness, resistance*—all of which could “distract” the wayfarer from the smoothest transportation at the highest speed²⁰.

BURN—Just like “fossil fuel burning at an industrial scale has changed the dynamics of the planetary carbon cycle, changing earth’s climate”, similarly, the consumption of commodified attention at an industrial scale under the incentives of ad-driven communication networks is intrastructuring the planetary circulation of information, images and sounds, collectively disabling our capacity to react to climate change. Increasing occurrences of

¹⁹ Jacob Lund, *Anachrony, Contemporaneity, and Historical Imagination* (Berlin, Sternberg Press, 2019) p. 33.

²⁰ For the distinction between wayfaring and transport, see Tim Ingold, *Lines: A Brief History* (London, Routledge, 2007), chapter 3; for consequences in the classroom, see Tim Ingold, *Anthropology and/as Education* (London, Routledge, 2017).

“burn-out”, bi-polar disorders and other forms of oscillations between attention deficits and hyperactivity are individual symptoms of this collective scorching out of our societies and our planet²¹.

DUMP—Beyond their mere increase in volume and scale, “the waste and by-products of new materials manufactured from the 20th century onward generate novel forms of environmental toxicity [that] align with, and exacerbate, broader social patterns which designate places, people, and other organisms as ‘sacrifice zones’ or ‘wastelands’.” The infrastructural (‘systemic’) forms of violence cumulated against our endogenous attention by the tippers of TAKE, GRID, CROWD, PIPE, SMOOTH/SPEED and BURN “leave some places and organisms unprotected from environmental harms, while enabling zones of environmental privilege to be maintained elsewhere”. The dumped individuals and sub-communities can then tragically backfire in acts of open violence, mass shootings, suicide bombings—disqualified and discarded by our regimes under the all-encompassing labels of “mental illness” or “terrorism”²². Here again, however, the apparent “savagery” and the dramatic “brutality” of such individual disorders need to be recast and reframed as the result of hyper-civilized noxious attentional infrastructures. These “feral effects arising from a convergence of toxicity and socio-environmental discrimination are the hallmark of DUMP”.

TOWARD A POLITICAL AESTH-ETHICS OF DISMANTLEMENT

At this point, the reader may wonder about the relevance of the previous pages in a journal devoted to aesthetics. Yet, even if they have not surfaced explicitly, art practices and aesthetic issues play a significant part for both Jonathan Sterne and the *Feral Atlas*. While theorizing his status as an “unreliable narrator” of his own experience of impairment, the former acknowledges that his phenomenology, rather than the authoritative voice of the philosopher, needs “a touch of artist or design research, or, as it’s called in Quebec, research-creation²³”. Impairment theory needs to be played with and performed, explicitly staged as an aesthetic questioning of aesthetics—since *aesthesis* is an ability to sense, and since impairments are to be understood as a productive distortion of this ability.

Even though most contributors to the *Feral Atlas* would be categorized as social and life scientists, ferality too calls for an attitude described as an art (of attention), rather than as a scientific discipline:

To turn *Feral Atlas* into a verb is to extend an invitation to participate in the creation of new forms of urgent transdisciplinary practice and collectivity. It is to encourage an art of attention vitalized by situated differences of perspective; a mode of attending to the world that draws power and purpose by recognizing that one is taking part in a necessarily iterative and shared endeavor, through which it becomes more fully possible to apprehend the Anthropocene—and the ground from which we might start to respond to its challenges.

Beyond these two projects, the cross-pollinating of impairment with ferality reveals its inseparably aesthetic and political stakes in the claims made by Tobin Siebert, according to whom “the idea of disability aesthetics affirms that disability operates both as a critical framework for questioning aesthetic presuppositions in the history of art and as a value in its own right important to future conceptions of what art is.²⁴” Nowhere has the “nondepletionist” approach to fatigue found more committed and radical advocates and

²¹ See Jonathan Crary, *24/7. Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep* (New York, Verso, 2014) and *Scorched Earth: Beyond the Digital Age to a Post-Capitalist World* (New York, Verso, 2022).

²² See Franco Berardi, *Heroes: Mass Murder and Suicide* (New York, Verso, 2015).

²³ Sterne, *Diminished Faculties*, *op. cit.*, p. 15.

²⁴ Tobin Siebert, *Disability Aesthetics* (Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 2010) p. 20.

practitioners than in the world of avant-garde art, as Mikkel Bolt Rasmussen invites us to revisit it in *After the Great Refusal*²⁵. Even if it can be assessed as “a failure”, with supposedly “revolutionary art” being bought and collected to be displayed in the aseptic environment of galleries and museums, the “obstinacy” displayed by avant-garde artists “to retreat or escape from their situation” in the capitalist economy, the radicalism of their stated “aversion and refusal” towards the ability to work in it, all of this *did* probably contribute (modestly) to the great “recalibration of motivation” we are currently experiencing as the Anthropocene. Against the urge to GRID, CROWD, PIPE, SMOOTH/SPEED, the avant-gardes’ sticky, hairy and resistant obstinacy can be understood as a sacrificial gesture of self-DUMPing—becoming an artist as an alternative to becoming a “terrorist”.

One of the most radical—raw, wild, un-domesticated, un-anesthetized, un-aesthetized: feral?—instance of such a refusal was expressed and practiced in the early 1970s by the German collective SPK (for *Sozialistisches PatientenKollektiv*) in their reclaiming of illness as the first revolutionary step towards an anti-capitalist revolution. Half a century later, their call to arms sounds at the same time exotically outdated and strikingly relevant to the epidemiology of attention disorders and burn-outs, from school benches to office floors:

The capitalist system also creates in the shape of illness the most dangerous weapon against itself. Therefore it's quite clear that capitalism, in the case of being confronted with the progressive moment of illness, soon will mount its sharpest weapons: health sector, judiciary, police. In the objective view, illness as a destroyed labour force is the grave-digger of capitalism. Illness = intern barrier of capitalism: if all persons at once fall in illness, thus becoming unable to work, all possibilities to produce surplus value are completely exhausted. Illness, if it is based on a collective process of consciousness, is the only one force of production in revolution nowadays, following gradually the steps of effectiveness as there are: protest in the state of a stopping, conscious protest, collective consciousness, warfare based on solidarity²⁶.

Only by absolutely sticking to one’s impairments can one oppose, contain and block the ferality of settler colonialism enforced through the extractivist tippers of TAKE, GRID, CROWD, PIPE, SMOOTH/SPEED, BURN, DUMP. Only by subtracting oneself to a fully saturated and saturating economy can one hope to counter—or rather precipitate—its ecocidal and egocidal accelerating collapse.

To fend off the risk of a romanticization of illness and impairment, as well as to possibly overcome the historical failures of the avant-garde movements of the 1970s, this strategy of subtraction can be updated along the lines sketched by a group of philosophers and designers under the banner of *an ecology of dismantlement*²⁷. Its argument pivots on the notion of *negative commons*: while we spontaneously tend to consider the commons and commoning as producing and protecting positive assets (breathable air, drinkable water, knowledge), these authors point towards infrastructures that are undeniably common (because they currently sustain our existence), but inescapably negative (as they threaten our shared destinies). A nuclear power plant provides a prime example of such negative commons: we currently need it as it provides the electricity powering our communication systems; this production, however, generates radioactive waste which will be dangerous to future generations for hundred thousands of years; whether we like it or not, whether we approved of its construction or opposed it, we cannot simply forget about it, nor destroy it; its functioning

²⁵ Mikkel Bolt Rasmussen, *After the Great Refusal. Essays on Contemporary Art, Its Contradictions and Difficulties* (London, Zer0Books, 2018).

²⁶ SPK, *Turn Illness Into a Weapon* (1971), Heidelberg, KRRIM - self-publisher for illness, 1993, p. 84 (quoted here in the rough and hairy translation from the German that circulated at the time).

²⁷ Alexandre Monnin, Diego Landivar & Emmanuel Bonnet, *Héritage et fermeture : une écologie du démantèlement* (Paris, Divergences, 2021).

requires (costly) maintenance to prevent it from poisoning our lives, and its (costly) dismantlement will be supported by future communities paying for past benefits, once it has stopped producing electricity without stopping to be radioactive.

“Negative commons” could be understood as another name for “feral ecologies”: the threatening and toxic unintentional consequences of human-designed infrastructures. The specific problems they raise come from the fact that they nourish our present while they poison our future. They range from Alpine ski stations, on whose tourist economy whole regions depend while they require an increasing amount of water and energy to produce the artificial snow needed to make up for global warming (in situation of worsening drought), to the global financial and banking system, whose extractivist dynamics are scorching our planet while its uncontrolled collapse would wreak havoc in billions of people’s life. From the local to the global scale, countless negative commons need to be carefully, patiently, prudently dismantled—with the added problem that, even if we came to a consensus over the necessity to dismantle them, we would not have the knowledge, the experience nor the tools to dismantle them in an orderly fashion. Here too, while the sciences of (reverse) engineering are crucial to such tasks, what we collectively need, well beyond a (martial) strategy of subtraction, is an art of attention, practices of care, and experiments in speculative design.

This is why an ecology of dismantlement is inseparably an exercise in politics (how to reach concerted decisions about the treatment of our negative commons?), in economics (how to distribute resources more fairly in order to do without the infrastructures that poison our future?), in ethics (how to alter our forms of life and reconfigure our relations to other living beings along more sustainable and desirable lines?) and in aesthetics (how to improve our modes of sensing and shaping our environments to be better attuned to our shared needs of co-habitability?). It may not be out of place to publish these considerations in a journal of aesthetics, since this discipline develops its reflection at the juncture between our capacity to sense our living milieus (*aisthesis*) and our capacity partially to reconfigure their appearance (design). Let’s call such an endeavor a *political aesth-ethics of dismantlement*.

Here again, etymology can be our guide since the word *dismantlement* shares its root with the French *manteau* (“coat”, “mantle”): to dismantle is literally to take off the protective or embellishing clothes which cover a body, to scrape off the superficial layer providing its color and appearance—a highly aesthetic activity. Rather than stripping bare individuals, infrastructures and institutions, an ecology of dismantlement should aim at *re-mantling* them, i.e., at re-painting them with less toxic, more truthful and better-inspiring colors. It is to the discussion of the type of attentional re-order needed by this task of re-mantling that I will devote the last sections of this article.

EXTRACTIVIST ATTENTION AS A NEGATIVE COMMON

I have suggested elsewhere²⁸ that several centuries of progressive immersion into the ideology of possessive individualism and *homo economicus* have led a good number of humans spontaneously to imagine the activity of our attention as ruled by a fundamentally extractivist dynamics²⁹. If the defining features of extractivism can be summarized by an

²⁸ Yves Citton, « Collapsonaut Attention », SNSF Research Project *Ecodata-Ecomedia-Ecoaesthetics*, HGK FHNW Basel, online at <https://www.fhnw.ch/de/forschung-und-dienstleistungen/gestaltung-kunst/forschungsprojekte-des-instituts-kunst-gender-natur-iagn/ecodata-ecomedia-ecoesthetics/texts/media/citton-collapsonautattention-e-final.pdf>

²⁹ To unfold the implications of this immersion in possessive individualism and to have a glimpse towards possible alternatives, see Cedric J. Robinson, *The Terms of Order: Political Science and the Myth of Leadership* (Raleigh, University of North Carolina Press, 1980); Denise Ferreira da Silva, *Toward a Global Idea of Race* (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2007); Sylvia Wynter, *On Being Human As Praxis* (ed. By

attitude which 1° reduces a complex living environment to a single resource, exploited in the form of monoculture; 2° depletes the biodiversity of the territory in order to extract this resource in the most profitable way; 3° operates this exploitation without respecting the renewal rate of the resource in question; 4° is therefore not able to exploit the resource in a sustainable manner in the long run—then this extractivist attitude is surprisingly homomorphic with the dominant conception of attention that have developed over the last two centuries in our Western countries. According to this standard conception, 1° the operation of selection central to the definition of attention provided by William James is portrayed as the extraction of relevant information from infinitely rich sensory environments; 2° attention is conceived as an ability to focus our intellectual faculties in order to make the most profitable use of an informational resource present in our environment, whether to avoid a danger or to take advantage of an opportunity; 3° we feel no obligation to “give back” anything to the living environments from which we derive information, nor do we feel responsible for ensuring their sustainability; all information is good to take as long as it can be useful to us—the very idea of “owing” something to what we draw information from seeming ridiculous or preposterous; 4° our standard attention is therefore modeled according to a perfectly self-centered economic rationality, not only short-sighted, but properly “dromophile” (intrinsically inclined to maximize speed): having only limited attentional resources, I must invest them as sparingly as possible in objects that promise me the best return on investment.

A more synthetic characterization of this extractivist attention, set forth by Erin Manning and Brian Massumi in a discussion of neurodiversity, depicts it as systematically favoring affordances over textures, in contrast to the attitude observed in people identified as “autistic”. Neurotypical individuals have been successfully trained into scanning their environment with a single obsessive question in mind: “what’s in it for me?”, aka “what affordance offer themselves to me out there?”

All experiential fielding includes incipient entrainments and immediate entertainments. It is a question of degree, and of mixture. The call to smell a flower upon seeing it—the willing sense that a flower is for something, for smelling—is a neurotypical response that is already moving toward grasping the flower as an object against the environment as a background, even as the environment is just coming to entertainment. For the neurotypical, the mode of entertainment tends already to be saturated with entrainment. The field of experience is pre-perfused with for-ness. It is already tending toward expression in use-value—rather than entertaining expressibility on its own account. For the autist, the flower and environment, entrainment and entertainment, are not immediately separable. Flower and environment are not reciprocally delimited as foreground and background, separable object and surround, but feature jointly in co-activity. They co-feature as tonal differences in a field modulating the whole of experience at all levels, composing an overall mode of existence that is in a different key than the neurotypical norm³⁰.

Here we have a striking illustration of Tobin Siebert’s disability aesthetics “operating as a critical framework for questioning aesthetic presuppositions”: what is generally considered as a disability, an impairment, a mental disorder, reveals in fact, by contrast, the aesthetic presupposition upon which neurotypical attentions limit their scope to identifying affordances. We come full circle when we realize that extractivist attention may be considered as a crucial

Katherine McKittrick, Durham, Duke University Press, 2015); Stefano Harney & Fred Moten, *All Incomplete* (Wivenhoe, Minor Composition, 2021).

³⁰ Erin Manning & Brian Massumi, “Coming Alive in a World of Texture” in *Thought in the Act: Passages in the Ecology of Experience* (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2014), p. 8. On the notion of affordance, see James J. Gibson, *An Ecological Approach to Visual Perception* (New York, Psychology Press, 1979).

factor in the spread of ferality: the overestimation of intentional (utilitarian) affordances of infrastructures goes hand in hand with the under-sensitivity to the unintentional (ecological) damages they cause to our social and environmental textures.

An important book by French historian Jean-Baptiste Fressoz has convincingly shown how industrialism had actively suppressed the sensorial and judicial resistance it encountered between the 1750s and the 1850s, in order to impose the acceptance of its ecological damages on populations which had to repress their sensitivity to its nuisances by means of what he called “small dis-inhibitions³¹”. People living near a factory could smell the stink, they saw the alterations in the colors of the river, they saw fish dying: their *aesthesis* was obviously sensitive to the textural degradations in their living milieu (they *had* inhibitions against pollution). But they—or rather *we*—learnt *not to pay attention* to these degradations: governmental pressures that forced these infrastructures to be established in the (poor) neighborhoods (DUMP), and seductive promises of economic prosperity (TAKE) managed to *dis-inhibit* (disable) our intuitive rejection of feral infrastructures. Fressoz’s small dis-inhibitions are a textbook case of Sterne’s normal impairment.

Such considerations invite us to *consider extractivist (in)attention as a negative common!* It is simultaneously what keeps us alive (we survive insofar as we have been properly trained to avoid short term threats and to seize opportunities, noticing dangers and affordances at a glimpse, ignoring countless details and textural qualities) and what poisons our neighborhoods and ruins our future. We cannot simply get rid of our extractivist attentional habits, and substitute them with a more sustainable eco-friendly attentional mode. Our extractivist (in)attention needs to be patiently dismantled: it will take time and care and frustration to do so—and, tragically, time is what we do *not* have under the pressure of climate change.

TWO COMPASSES FOR COLLAPSONAUT ATTENTIONS

In the absence of a sudden revolution which would probably look very much like an overall collapse—at the occasion of which our extractivist attentions could show their ugliest, most violent and self-destructive features—what we can do is hasten a necessary complementation of our extractivist attention with a counterbalancing attentional mode Jacopo Rasmi and I have suggested to label “collapsonaut attention³²”. Our current challenge is to navigate the (currently slow) collapse of our political, economic and anthropological regime, by dismantling its most destructive negative commons, and by remantling our local and planetary communities with different forms of sensitivity and different modes of cooperation.

In order to do so, I will conclude this article by sketching out two conceptual compasses designed to provide some reorientation in our collapsonaut navigation³³. The first one, the compass of ferality, attempts to answer the question “Where are we?”—this (very problematic) *we* referring primarily to the relatively affluent populations of the global North, historically responsible for the spread of industrialization and its feral damages.

We are in a dramatic and painful situation of IMPAIRMENT: our individual and collective abilities are certainly not on par with our needs to transform our modes of living. We lack in energy, knowledge and (political) will. Our forms of life depend upon feral infrastructures, to which we seem to be addicted and without which we would feel disabled. While becoming

³¹ Jean-Baptiste Fressoz, *L'Apocalypse joyeuse. Une histoire du risque technologique* (Paris, Seuil, 2011).

³² Yves Citton & Jacopo Rasmi, *Génération collapsonautes. Naviguer par temps d'effondrement* (Paris, Seuil, 2020).

³³ An exemplary contribution to this work of re-orientation is provided by Frederique Ait-Touati, Alexandra Arenes & Axelle Gregoire, *Terra Forma: A Book of Speculative Maps* (Cambridge MA, MIT Press, 2022).

aware of our own impairment is a step in the right direction, our dominantly depletionist approach to it may be part of the problem. A reflective attitude towards impairment could help us adopt a nondepletionist approach, which would re-dress (i.e., re-mantle) a lack into an aversion and a refusal.

What we should refuse is FERALITY. Countless of our infrastructures need to be (carefully) dismantled as negative commons. The tippers of TAKE, GRID, CROWD, PIPE, SMOOTH/SPEED, BURN, DUMP need to be identified, watched and neutralized in their worst feral effects. This approach will help us address the structural causes of many of our contemporary problems, whereas most of our current policies fail in remedying their symptoms. Our aversion toward the feral effects of our infrastructures can be steered towards a refusal of their feral (ir)rationality.

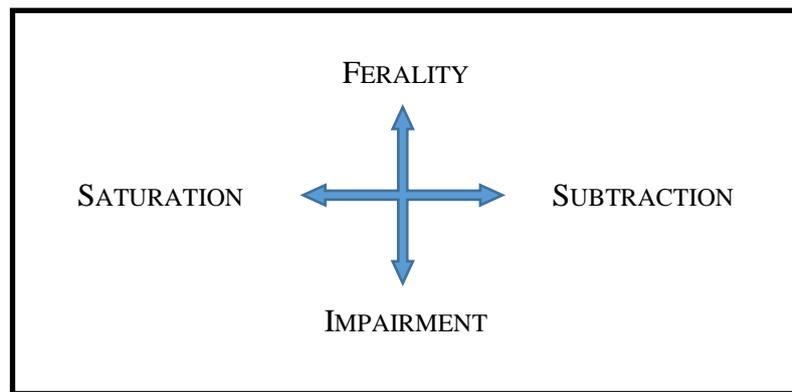


FIGURE 1: *The compass of ferality* (“Where are we?”)

The “crisis of attention”—as it is largely discussed in terms of ADHDs, burn-outs, and other weapons of mass-distraction—is mostly experienced as SATURATION (information overload). In Manning & Massumi’s vocabulary, “the mode of entertainment tends already to be saturated with entrainment”, as “the field of experience is pre-perfused with for-ness”. Saturation signals a breaking point, a ferality in action. However, an impairment (in this case, autism) can be re-valued as “a productive distorsion of an ability”, inviting us to reverse the status of saturation³⁴, from an overload of affordances and an overCROWDing of immediate entrainments, to an entertaining richness of textures, where “foreground and background feature jointly in co-activity”. As a matter of fact, the dominant ADHD discourse denouncing our period (and our youth) for its pathological “distraction” and “dispersion” may be a typical denial and inversion of our much deeper problem: capitalism has made us *excessively concentrated and focused* on one single-minded *figure* (the bottom line, profit, return on investment, GDP growth), at the expense of a much more necessary but neglected (360°, multi-channel) background perception of our surround³⁵.

Dismantling feral infrastructures will certainly lead to SUBTRACTIONS in our supply of certain (toxic) goods and (exploitative) services. The controversial perspective of “de-growth” long acted as a boogie man, agitated stubbornly to reject measures that are now about to pass under the coated (i.e., re-mantled) qualification of “sobriety”. Here too, impairment theory can be precious to uncover the productive, nondepletionist potentials of doing-without the easy, short-term solutions provided by feral infrastructures. Beyond the deceptive divide

³⁴ See Manola Antonioli *et al.*, *Saturations. Individus, collectifs, organisations et territoires à l’épreuve* (Grenoble, Elya Editions, 2020).

³⁵ See Yves Cïtton, “Eloge écopolitique de la distraction à l’âge de l’effondrissement” in Paul Sztulman and Dork Zabunyan, *Politiques de la distraction* (Dijon, Presses du reel/ArTeC, 2021), p. 36-55.

between technophilia and technophobia, the containment of ferality calls for the design of “technologies of subtraction”, providing sober shortcuts to substitute for wasteful habits.

While this first compass, directed towards ferality as its North position, tends to make noticeable the negative aspects of our current (Westernized) lifestyles, a second compass may be useful to help us devise more positive perspectives of action—this compass of co-habitability displacing the question, from “Where are we?” to “Where should we go?” and, more importantly, “How to get there?”.

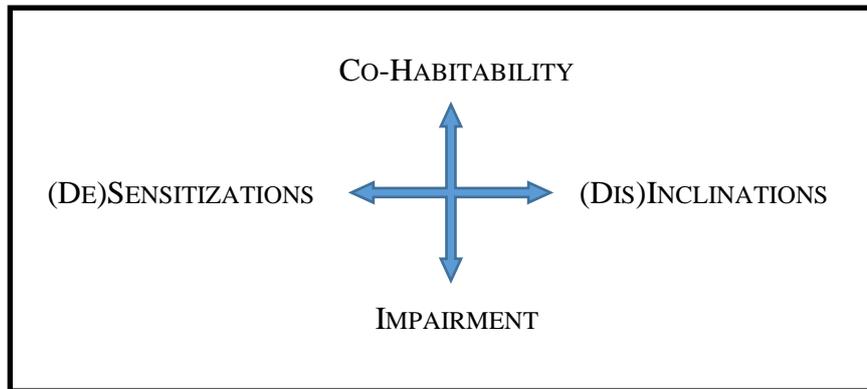


FIGURE 2: *The compass of co-habitability* (“How to get there?”)

CO-HABITABILITY of planet Earth among the widest possible diversity of cultures and species should be our main point of reference, while always starting from the acknowledgement of our current situation of IMPAIRMENT. *All incomplete*, the title of Stefano Harney & Fred Moten’s latest book could be our common premise, while the invitation to share our incompleteness could provide an ideal mediation between co-habitability and impairment. The main challenge of our age is to articulate the necessary “patchiness” of our living conditions—“Treat the Anthropocene as patchy” is one of the tenets of the art of attention promoted by the *Feral Atlas*—with the no less necessary attention to “planetary³⁶”, resulting from the scale of certain environmental degradations (starting of course with climate change, but not limited to it).

Faced with the improbability and undesirability of authoritatively imposing sobriety from above, the first task toward this goal of co-habitability consists in a work of (DE)SENSITIZATION. Aesthetics is truly central, insofar as *aisthesis* and attention are two sides of the same coin. A collapsonaut attention needs a re-mantled and re-mantling aesthetics in order to overcome the small “dis-inhibitions” to which industrialism has habituated us. The medicated treatment of ADHD can serve simultaneously as a counter-example and as a warning in this difficult work of (de)sensitization. On the one hand, it operates as a desensitizer towards inner impulses or outer stimuli which may very well deserve to be taken into account, and in doing so, it pursues the noxious modernization trend of small dis-inhibition. On the other hand, however, within the narrow context of our (underfunded) schooling systems, Ritalin and Adderall do indeed contribute to co-habitability in the

³⁶ On planetary, see for instance Benjamin Bratton, *The Terraforming 2019* (Moscow, Strelka Press, 2019); Holly Jean Buck, *After Geoengineering: Climate Tragedy, Repair, and Restoration* (New York, Verso, 2020); Dipesh Chakrabarty, “The Planet: An Emerging Humanist Category”, *Critical Inquiry*, 46-1 (2019); William E. Connolly, *Facing the Planetary: Entangled Humanism and the Politics of Swarming* (Durham, Duke University Press, 2017); Ingrid Diran & Antoine Traisnel, “The Birth of Geopower”, *Diacritics*, 47-3 (2019); Jennifer Gabrys, « Becoming Planetary », *e-flux Architecture*, 2018, <https://www.e-flux.com/architecture/accumulation/217051/becoming-planetary/>; Lukáš Likavčan, *Introduction to Comparative Planetology* (Moscow, Strelka Press, 2019); Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Imperatives to Re-Imagine the Planet* (Wien, Passagen Verlag, 1999).

classroom. With 8+ billion humans co-habiting on the surface of planet Earth, the challenge of maintaining compatible forms of cultural sensitization will necessarily call for some forms of—non-chemical and duly negotiated—“normal impairments” of our attentions (i.e., de-sensitizations).

This type of negotiations are already underway, not so much in the UN General Assembly as within and through the cultural artefacts, films, TV series, books, performances and installations which contribute to shape and infrastructure our attentions through narrative immersion. If, as Brian Larkin claimed in the first quote of this article, “infrastructures encode the dreams of individuals and societies”, it is equally true that fictions prepare, sustain and occasionally call off the deployment of infrastructures. Whether their authors and producers are aware of it or not, narrative experiences are the main factors capable of entraining/entertaining the (DIS)INCLINATIONS we need in order to co-habit peacefully, diversely and creatively on the surface of the planet. Our enmeshed social fabric is not so much made up of free-willed individuals (*subjects*), or of technical networks of communication (*media*) but, much more decisively, of transpersonal patterns of behavior (*norms*), which can occasionally be made explicit through rules, laws and policy, but which are usually incorporated in the form of (dis)inclinations (propensities, reluctances, dispositions)³⁷. Barring benevolent dictators violently constraining us into subtractive lifestyles, change will emerge from a resonance between altered infrastructures and altered inclinations towards different definitions of prosperity and happiness (*buen vivir*). Aesthetics—in its traditional definition focusing on the production of artistic (and more generally cultural) experiences—holds the key to the emergence of collapsonaut attentions: what is at stake is the redefinition of the cultural norms which infrastructure our “normal impairments”, in order to fend off ferality in a co-habitation of local patches made compatible at the scale of planetarity.

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³⁷ On this “normative pragmatism”, see Pierre Steiner, *Désaturer l’esprit. Usages du pragmatisme* (Paris, Questions théoriques, 2019), p. 105 sq., based on a discussion of Ludwig Wittgenstein, Wilfrid Sellars and Robert Brandom. “A rule is an embodied generalization which [...] tends to make itself true. [...] We always operate *within* a framework of *living* rules », i.e., “dispositions to behave” (Wilfrid Sellars, “Language, Rules and Behavior” in Sidney Hook (ed.), *John Dewey: Philosopher of Science and Freedom*, New York, Dial Press, 1949, p. 299 & 315). Sellars’ quote eerily resonates with Nick Land’s definition of hyperstitions as fictions which “function causally to bring about their own reality” (Nick Land, “Hyperstition: an Introduction—Interview with Delphi Carstens”, *Orpha Drift Archive*, <http://www.orphandriftarchive.com/articles/hyperstition-anintroduction/>, 2009).