THE ONTOLOGY OF RETRIEVAL: MCLUHAN, BENSUSAN, AND LOCKE

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ABSTRACT: Hilan Bensusan's *Memory Assemblages* makes prominent use of the term "retrieval," which is also a key technical term of the Canadian media theorist Marshall McLuhan. To what extent do the two authors mean something similar with this term? The differences ultimately outweigh any similiarities. Bensusan is concerned not only with Derrida and Heidegger, but especially with John Locke's account of retrieval in the form of memory. In one sense Locke holds that memory has the *additive* feature of alerting us that a given perception was already had by us previously; in another, he stresses the inherent erosion and oblivion to which memory is inherently subjected. This article claims that Bensusan misses the latter aspect of Locke's theory by overly emphasizing "addends" as opposed to subtractive forces in the mind. Furthermore, it is argued that Bensusan leaves no room for the figure/ground relationship that is characteristic of retrieval in McLuhan's sense of the term.

KEYWORDS: Retrieval; Memory; McLuhan; Bensusan; Locke

The term "retrieval" has an intriguing place in the thought of Marshall McLuhan, who uses it to refer to the revival of a previously dead medium that becomes the content of a new one. This is the meaning of his phrase "from cliché to archetype," a phrase that would become the title of his co-authored book with Wilfrid Watson.[1] McLuhan and his son Eric would later include retrieval as one of the four poles in their "tetrad" theory of media, which I am already on record as calling one of the most important contributions to theoretical culture in the twentieth century.[2] Whereas two poles of the tetrad –enhancement and

[1] Marshall McLuhan & Wilfrid Watson, *From Cliché to Archetype*, New York, Viking, 1970.

[2] Marshall McLuhan & Eric McLuhan, *Laws of Media: The New Science*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1988. See also Graham Harman, "The Tetrad and Phenomenology," *Explorations in Media Ecology* 6.3 (2007), pp. 189-
196; Graham Harman, "The McLuhans and Metaphysics," in *New Waves in Philosophy of Technology*, ed.

obsolescence– are said to refer to the "morphology" of any human artifact, retrieval joins reversal in describing an artifact's sudden "metamorphosis" into something else. Reversal occurs beyond human willpower, as a result of the overheating of a medium due to an oversaturation of detail. For instance, data becomes so excessive in quantity that it reverses into data mining, in the sense of general pattern recognition. e-mail begins as a fast and convenient alternative to postal mail before turning eventually into the loathsome reign of spam and phishing attempts. It is different with retrieval, which for McLuhan requires not only human decision and effort, but that very special sort of effort that belongs to the "artist" in the broadest sense of the term. From a human sphere littered with countless dead media, it is the artist who performs the difficult labor of reviving a dead artifact under the new and modified conditions of a later historical era.

Well then, retrieval was on my mind once again as I read Hilan Bensusan's latest book, *Memory Assemblages*.[3] In particular, it is one major theme of a section early in the book entitled "Retrieval and Retention." (33-40) For this reason I could not help but wonder whether there was any resonance with McLuhan's use of the word, even though the great Canadian media theorist is not cited in Bensusan's book. In what follows, I will share my sense of what the two uses of "retrieval" do and do not have in common.

BENSUSAN ON RETRIEVAL

Bensusan is one of our least predictable contemporary philosophers. As seen in the recent books *Being Up For Grabs* and *Indexicalism*, Bensusan is considerably influenced by any number of recent canonical thinkers, yet somehow the results of this influence resemble the products of someone working in a fresh parallel tradition.[4] In the present book, *Memory Assemblages*, one of the most prominent

J.-K. Berg Olsen, E. Selinger, & S. Riis, London, Palgrave, 2009, pp. 100-122; Graham Harman, "McLuhan as Philosopher," in *Bells and Whistles: More Speculative Realism*, Winchester, UK, Zero Books, 2013, pp. 180-197.

[3] Hilan Bensusan, *Memory Assemblages: Spectral Realism and the Logic of Addition*, London, Bloomsbury, 2024. In what follows, all in-text references to this book will appear in parentheses.

[4] Hilan Bensusan, *Being up for Grabs: On Speculative* Anarchaeology, London: Open Humanities Press, 2016; Hilan Bensusan, *Indexicalism Realism and the Metaphysics of Paradox*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press,

themes is that of "addition." This term suggests that reality does not just unfold from some pre-given starting point or root, but advances from one stage to another by means of unpredictable supplements and combinations between previously separate things. Bensusan makes the point with lovely simplicity:

> First, there was a Beginning— it doesn't matter what it was. It brought with itself no power to start anything and be followed. That Beginning has since been incrementally and unceasingly covered with addends of all sorts. These came from outside the Beginning— assuming Beginning to be primordially what there is, the addends were extra-beings. Exterior to the Beginning, the addends continued coming until Beginning was washed out, along with all its supposed intrinsic effects […] This fable is iself the starting point of the book, not its final thesis. (23-4; emph. removed)

Among other things, it should immediately be clear that this is not a *modernist* principle of thinking. For the modernist spirit, whatever is created –whether a building or book– should be organized systematically according to a central idea, from which everything else follows as a matter of course. Whatever is added to the object must not be a superfluous ornament, but should be a direct expression of the central idea. Bensusan's notion of "addends" entails the contrary principle that a thing is not constituted by its root principle, but by the series of unforeseeen later interactions that shape its history. When we read the first book of Livy's history of Rome, nothing in his pages suggest the later Roman Republic or Empire as if "in germ."[5] Some addends prove to be irreversible steps in the history of Rome, such as the annexing and settlement of certain hills, or the duplicitous abduction of the Sabine women as unwilling wives, not to mention the annexation of Alba Longa and the eventual conquest of the rival Etruscans. This series of turning points –and they may be found in the history of any object– cause the purity of the origin to fade into inaccessible irrelevance. This sheds further light on the inadvisability of fundamentalism, a famously modern phenomenon in religion and elsewhere. For a Christian to base everything on

2021. For a condensed version of the argument of the altter book see Hilan Nisoir Bensusan, "Towards an Indexical Paradoxico-Metaphysics." For my own thoughts on the *Indexicalism* book see Graham Harman, "Indexicalism and its Risks."

[5] Livy, *The Early History of Rome, Books I-V*, trans. A. de Sélincourt. London: Penguin, 2002.

Biblical text is to show disrespect for some crucial addends that arrived well after the text was established in something like final form.

There is one form of addition that should be of particular concern for philosophers and others involved in theoretical work. As a rule, the idea of knowledge implies a subtractive process in which we strip away all of the purportedly biased human accretions added to reality. By cleansing these extraneous supplements from our midst, we aspire to reach the thing as it was in its own right, prior to any supplementation. This in itself is not inherently horrendous; it is the guiding principle of all realism, and I am not the only recent author in the continental tradition who speaks in favor of a realist approach.[6] But if I were to make a realist case for Bensusan's idea, I would say that the addend is not so much about denying the existence of a reality outside our cognition of it, as about recognizing the *new* reality that is produced when a knower is added to what they know. The same would hold good for human activities other than knowledge, as when Lincoln's victory in the Civil War sheds light backwards on the United States Constitution. Here as with all combinations, the larger compound often has a retroactive effect on the elements of which it is made.[7] It is not that early Rome contains Caesarism in germ, but that Caesarism retroactively imbues the primitive Roman conditions with something that was not quite there in the initial ingredients, just as only Plato and Aristotle transform the earlier pre-Socratics from physicists into philosophers. Bensusan suggests that this resembles the ancient Sorites paradox: "each addend, including the beginning, is irrelevant, while the accumulated existing sum is not." (24) And furthermore, "aside from the idea of an archaic genesis, the fable also exorcises the notion of a completed reality —there is no end to addition as long as there is a persistent outside— and makes no room for any addend to either provide completion or take over as an ἀρχή." (24) There are clear implications here for retelling the history of philosophy, which also has no possibility of completion and no clear ἀρχή.

Yet there is one implication made by Bensusan's notion of addends that I do

[6] See Graham Harman, *Speculative Realism: An Introduction*, Cambridge, UK, Polity, 2018.
[7] See Graham Harman, "DeLanda's Ontology: Assemblage and Realism," *Continental Philosophy Review* 41.3 (2008), pp. 367-383.

not accept. It is one thing to challenge the supposed pregnancy of the ἀρχή with all that comes later, and here I am in agreement. But it is quite another to deduce that this requires us to abandon the classical distinction between substance and accident, as Bensusan does when speaking dimissively of "οὐσίαι, indifferent to their accidents." (25) Read in context, it is clear that Bensusan's inspiration on this point is Jacques Derrida, a figure whose impact is felt throughout the book. Bensusan's philosophy of addends might look like the ultimate "flat ontology," in which all realities are equal and none is subordinate to any other in the way that accidents are supposed to be. That said, flat ontology in the post-DeLandian sense need not be completely flat; the concept was introduced primarily in order to prevent the long modern subordination of reality to human thought, as explained in my contribution to an anthology co-edited by none other than Bensusan.[8] Our disagreement is best explained as follows. The reason I am persuaded by the argument against pregnant origins is not that all additions to the origin should have equal status with the origin and with each other. Instead, the origin fails precisely because some later addends *are* more important than others. The term "emergence" comes to mind.[9] The mere fact of starting with one atom, then adding another, then another, and then still another need not lead to anything of consequence, just as the mere origin of a thing is not necessarily of any consequence. It is quite different when two atoms of hydrogen fuse with one of oxygen: now we have water, and something new and important has happened by contrast with the mere collection of individual atoms. Indeed, the very introduction of the term emergence was meant as a contrast with the merely additive result of placing one thing alongside another; chemistry has always been more concerned with emergence than physics has.[10] Likewise, when we speak of a substance we are speaking of an emergent reality irreducible to its component elements. The same cannot be said for accidents, which are not at all

[8] Manuel DeLanda, *Intensive Science and Virtual Reality*, London, Continuum, 2002; Graham Harman, "Flat Ontology and Speculative Realism," in *After Speculative Realism*, ed. C. Johns & H. Bensusan, London, Bloomsbury, 2025, pp. 25-49.

[9] Manuel DeLanda, "Emergence, Causality and Realism," in *The Speculative Turn*, ed. L. Bryant, N. Srnicek, & G. Harman, Melbourne, re.press, 2011, pp. 381-392; Young, Niki. "Object, Reduction, and Emergence: An Object-Oriented View," *Open Philosophy* 4
(2021), 83-93.

[10] Manuel DeLanda, *Philosophical Chemistry: Genealogy of a Scientific Field*, London, Bloomsbury, 2019.

emergent, but merely encrusted onto whatever susbtance/object governs their reality. Here there is clear subordiantion, and moreover, there ought to be. In short, I agree wholeheartedly with Bensusan that the origin does not contain everything: as I have written about elsewhere, the dawn of the Dutch East India Company was little more than a name and some principles.[11] But I cannot agree with any Sorites version of the theory of addends which entails that any addend adds just as much or little as the rest.

In any case, Bensusan has much to say in *Memory Assemblages* about Derrida and Heidegger. Here I will not follow him into the weeds in discussions about Derridean hauntology and Heidegger's only possible second beginning after the first Greek beginning.[12] These references are important but not especially startling. What is more intriguing is when Bensusan leans on another author who is appreciated only rarely among those who philosophize in a continental idiom: John Locke. It is possible that Bensusan's unexpected appreciation for Locke has the same source as my own: the sincere admiration for Locke felt by Alfred North Whitehead, who treats him as the modern analogue of Plato. In Whitehead's own words: "the writer who most fully anticipated the main positions of the philosophy of organism [i.e., Whitehead's own philosophy-GH] is John Locke in his *Essay*, especially in its later books."[13] As for Locke's similarities with Plato, we need only recall Plato's "personal endowments, his wide opportunities for experience at a great stage of civilization, [and] his inheritance of an intellectual tradition not yet stiffened by excessive systematization[…]," features all visible in Locke's biography as well.[14] Bensusan's own appeal to the great English philosopher comes when he tells us that the belonging together of memory and addition "can be understood as the intrinsic connection between retention and retrieval, in John Locke's terms […] Because retention and retrieval are entwined, there can be no element in retention that would remain independently of retrieval. Retention is as dependent on future recuperation as archives are

[11] Graham Harman, *Immaterialism: Objects and Social Theory*, Cambridge, UK, Polity, 2016.
[12] Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*, trans. P. Kamuf, London, Routledge, 2006; Martin Heidegger, *Contributions to Philosophy (Of the Event)*, trans. R. Rojcewicz & D. Vallega-Neu, Bloomington, IN, Indiana University Press, 2012.
[13] Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, New York, Free Press, 1978, p. xi.
[14] Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, p. 39; Roger Woolhouse, *Locke: A Biography*, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2007.

dependent on addition; retrievals are indeed exercises in addition." (34) Bensusan cites Chapter X of Locke's major book, which is suitably entitled "On Retention."[15] But nowhere in this chapter, or eslewhere, does Locke explicitly use the term "retrieval." He speaks instead of memory as "the power to revive again," and this seems to be what Bensusan has in mind.

One way of retaining something in mind, Locke charmingly notes, is simply to keep it there once it has entered our consideration; "contemplation" is his term for this sort of retention. The other way, of course, is to revive our previous awareness of something by way of memory. In Locke's words: "For, the narrow mind of man not being capable of having many ideas under view and consideration at once, it was necessary to have a repository, to lay up those ideas which, at another time, it might have use of."[16] Bensusan would no doubt be pleased to note that Locke describes memory explicitly in terms of an addend: "the mind has a power in many cases to revive perceptions which it has once had, with this additional perception annexed to them, that IT HAS HAD THEM BEFORE."[17] Nonetheless, memory is not just augmented by this addition of a flashing light informing us of our existing track record with a given perception. Memory inevitably also loses something of what it once possessed. As Locke puts it, in a passage of extraordinary beauty: "ideas in the mind quickly fade, and often vanish quite out of the understanding, leaving no more footsteps or remaining characters of themselves than shadows do flying over fields of corn, and the mind is as void of them as if they had never been there."[18] Memory might also be compared to a shipwreck lying at the bottom of the sea, forever losing extraneous detail.[19] We might naturally be inclined to regard such forgetting as a failure of some sort. But it should not be forgotten that detail is often oppressive. For instance, the reason that literary canons form is not primarily to exclude authors from outside some ruling demographic group (as contemporary activism

[15] John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Humane Understanding*, Vols. 1 & 2. Peoria, IL: Royal Publishing, 2023, Kindle locations 2233-2332.
[16] Locke, *An Essay Concerning Humane Understanding*, Kindle location 2233.
[17] Locke, An Essay Concerning Humane Understanding, Kindle location 2233.
[18] Locke, An Essay Concerning Humane Understanding, Kindle location 2233.
[19] See Graham Harman, "The Shipwreck of Theseus: Philosophy and Maritime Archaeology," in Contemporary Philosophy for Maritime Archaeology: Flat Ontologies, Oceanic Thought, and the Anthropocene, ed. P. Campbell & S. Rich, Leiden: Sidestone Press, 2023, pp. 57-73.

likes to think), but because the world has become overheated with too much writing, and we only have so much time to read what is most important.[20] A human being who remembered each and every tiniest thing they ever perceived –and there are documented cases of this sort– would risk insanity. One thing I miss from Bensusan's book is a treatment of subtraction to complement his idea of addition. This, however, is something McLuhan does not miss.

MCLUHAN, FIGURE, AND GROUND

There is another aspect of McLuhan's notion of retrieval for which we find no equivalent in Bensusan. Namely, McLuhan is also attentive to the figure/ground relation introduced by Gestalt psychology. To some extent Bensusan's flat and non-hierarchical outlook might even tend to exclude such a relation, given its implication that any visible figure is reliant on a deeper and more fundamental ground. In fact, retrieval for McLuhan is all about this Gestalt structure.

Take the example of radio, whose first public broadcast occurred in 1906. Families and friends would gather around the radio set, listening to whatever programs were made available. A McLuhanian analysis would tell us that this points to the retrieval of oral storytelling and tribal communication, both of them previously pushed into the background by the print revolution of books and newspapers. What happens here is not only that the previously lost medium of oral storytelling *reappears*. Instead, it reappears in a completely different role from the one it had previously. In some past pre-Gutenberg age, oral storytelling was simply the way that information was transmitted; it was taken for granted. Individual stories were certainly capable of fascinating their listeners, but oral storytelling itself (as a medium) was not something of which people were conciously aware in most cases. In the age of radio, however, oral storytelling itself reappears in the shape of an art form. The rapt attention of an entire living room to a crackling voice becomes itself an object of awareness. Meanwhile, it is the medium of radio itself that recedes into the background, even as it reshapes human consciousness in the early twentieth century, opening the world to new forms of music and comedy, while paving the way for the novel radio tyrant Hitler

[20] Harold Bloom, The Western Canon: The Books and School of the Ages, New York, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2020.

with his mesmerizing demagoguery.

McLuhan's attention to the interplay between background and foreground has further consequences. One is his preference for grammar and rhetoric over dialectic, the third member of the classical liberal arts Trivium.[21] Whereas rationalists thrive by demanding clearly stated prose propositions about the world, rhetoricians pay attention to half-articulate detections of our background assumptions about the world. Stated differently, the rhetorician is aware of the way things hide from direct view. I have written about how McLuhan shares this awareness of the hidden background medium with both Heidegger and the art critic Clement Greenberg.[22] But a more classical example would be Aristotle's *Rhetoric* and its treatment of the enthymeme: an unstated syllogism that is present in the heart though not clearly registered in the mind.[23]

My second question about Bensusan's book, then, is whether its admirable focus on addends leaves sufficient room for the nested figure/ground structure explored in such detail by McLuhan, and utterly central to Heidegger's *retrieval* of the question of the meaning of Being. In the previous section I asked whether Bensusan's Sorites model of addition contains sufficient resources to account for Locke's account of the *erosion* of memory, like shadows flyinf over fiedls of corn and leaving no footprints. Here I am asking whether this model can account for McLuhan's insight that a retrieved object differs from its original form not only because of addition, but also due its shift from silent enthymeme to explicit fascination.

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[22] Graham Harman, "The Revenge of the Surface: Heidegger, McLuhan, Greenberg," trans. G. Harman, *Paletten*, Issue 291/292 (2013), pp. 66-73.
[23] Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, trans. C.D.C. Reeve, Indianapolis, Hackett, 2018.

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