

THE DECLINE OF POLITICS IN THE NAME OF SCIENCE? CONSTELLATIONS AND COLLISIONS BETWEEN NICK LAND AND RAY BRASSIER

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ABSTRACT: In *Nihil Unbound* and other shorter works, Ray Brassier develops his contemporary transcendental realism by adopting the nihilistic aspects of thinkers such as Laruelle, Sellars and Badiou, while leaving behind their anthropic residuals. What is surprising is that Brassier has yet to publish any critical analysis of Nick Land despite their striking similarities and interactions at Warwick University (notwithstanding Brassier's introduction to Land's collected writings and a 2010 talk on Land). This paper aims to fill in this gap by showing how Brassier adheres to Land's initial philosophy of the negative while rejecting its humanist political corollaries in favor of an epistemological turn to science. I will first show how Brassier adopts Land's idea that we must come to terms with our future extinction as the transcendental condition for thinking a non-conceptual reality beyond our anthropic delusions of grandeur. Unlike Brassier, however, Land goes on to identify capitalism's destructive processes as the organon for death's transcendental critique. Consequently, Land's recent work develops a pro-capitalist, neoreactionary politics with deeply narcissistic tendencies insofar as it rests on gratifying individuals' basest passions and greed. Conversely, Brassier maintains Land's initial notion of death as the transcendental critique of anthropocentrism, but instead links it to cosmology's insight into the solar system's eventual demise beyond anthropic political processes within our control. Although Brassier thereby believes that he is able to appropriate Land's useful conceptual resources for de-anthropomorphizing philosophy while stripping him of his humanist political remnants, this paper will conclude by drawing on the suggestions of Mark Fisher and Reza Negarestani to proffer a Landian rejoinder to Brassier: even if capitalism is anthropomorphic, it is necessary to politically fight against it rather than abandon politics altogether in favor of science, if only to rid science of its ideological servitude under the reign of capital.

KEYWORDS: Nick Land; Ray Brassier; Speculative realism; Accelerationism; Anthropocentrism; Anthropomorphism; Death; Capitalism; Epistemology; Science; Extinction; Kant; Dark Enlightenment; Inhumanism; Anti-humanism; Transcendental materialism; Deleuze and Guattari

One of the most interesting contemporary philosophical projects is Ray Brassier's transcendental realism. In *Nihil Unbound* as in other shorter works, Brassier develops his philosophy in dialogue with other thinkers like Laruelle, Churchland, Sellars, Adorno and Horkheimer, Badiou, Meillassoux, Heidegger, Deleuze and Nietzsche.¹ In each case, Brassier adopts the nihilistic aspects of their respective systems that affirm a reality beyond the conceptual, while also leaving behind any anthropic residuals which resubmit the real to its appearance to us. By radicalizing these thinkers' various nihilistic kernels and eliminating their anthropocentric about-turns, Brassier is able to develop his own transcendental realism, 'nihilism', or 'metaphysics of extinction'.

What is surprising is that Brassier has yet to publish any critical analysis of Nick Land despite their striking similarities and interactions at Warwick University in the 1990s. At first glance, this might not seem so peculiar given that Land is a rather obscure figure who is now more associated with having abandoned serious academic scholarship to join the far right's neoreactionary blogosphere. However, a thinker's obscurity has not stopped Brassier from writing about Laruelle on many occasions. Moreover, Brassier has championed Land by editing and publishing his collected writings.² The absence of any substantial critical engagement with Land apart from a general introduction to his collected writings and a talk in 2010 at Goldsmiths, University of London's conference on accelerationism is thus surprising.³

This paper aims to fill in this gap by showing how Brassier adheres to Land's initial philosophy of the negative while rejecting its humanist political corollaries in favor of an epistemological turn to science. I will first show how both Brassier and Land agree that we must come to terms with our future extinction as the transcendental condition for thinking a non-conceptual reality beyond our anthropic delusions of grandeur. Unlike Brassier, however, Land goes on to identify capitalism's destructive processes as the organon for death's transcendental critique. Consequently, Land's recent work develops a pro-capitalist, neoreactionary politics with deeply narcissistic tendencies insofar as it rests on gratifying individuals' basest passions and greed. Conversely, Brassier maintains Land's initial notion of death as the transcendental critique of anthropocentrism, but instead links it to cosmology's insight into the solar system's eventual demise beyond anthropic political processes within our control. Although Brassier thereby believes that he is able to appropriate Land's useful conceptual

¹ Brassier, Ray, *Nihil Unbound: Enlightenment and Extinction*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2007.

² Land, Nick, *Fanged Noumena: Collected Writings 1987-2007*, eds. Robin Mackay and Ray Brassier, Falmouth, Urbanomic, 2012.

³ Brassier, Ray, 'Session 1'. *Accelerationism*, conference, Goldsmiths, University of London, September 13, 2010.

resources for de-anthropomorphizing philosophy while stripping him of his humanist political remnants, this paper will conclude by drawing upon the suggestions of Mark Fisher and Reza Negarestani to proffer a Landian rejoinder to Brassier: even if capitalism is anthropomorphic, it is necessary to politically fight against it rather than abandon politics altogether in favor of science, if only to rid science of its ideological servitude under the reign of capital.

I. LAND'S RIGHT ACCELERATIONISM

Critique of mortal reason

To comprehend what Brassier admires in Land's work and what he repudiates, we must first sketch Land's own philosophical trajectory. From his earliest essays in the late 1980s to his latest blogposts and internet articles, Land never wavers from his key idea that anthropocentrism distorts knowledge of reality's truly destructive and chaotic processes by subordinating it to our all-too-human needs for order, homeostasis and stability: 'there is one simple criterion of taste in philosophy: that one avoid the vulgarity of anthropomorphism.'⁴ According to Land, Kant is the anthropic philosopher *par excellence* inasmuch as he prohibits thinking the noumenon outside of any phenomenal relation to us on the grounds that any thought about the things-in-themselves independent of thought is a performative contradiction in that it is precisely a thought about them for us: 'the paradox of Enlightenment, then, is an attempt to fix a stable relation with what is radically other, since insofar as the other is rigidly positioned within a relation it is no longer fully other. [...] This aggressive logical absurdity reaches its zenith in the philosophy of Kant.'⁵ On Land's account, all that Kant can say about things-in-themselves is that we cannot say anything about them. In short, Land's critique of Kant evinces his key concern to liberate the noumenon's radical alterity from the conceptual prison in which the categories of our subjectivist experience and understanding have ensnared it. We can already see that the object of Land's critique is precisely that of Brassier: the Kantian legacy of imagining that reality is utterly exhausted by what we know of it without remainder.

Now, Land reasons, if thought cannot grasp reality's radical alterity without reducing it to a thing for us, the only way to access the real is at the limit or even death of thought itself. Death, after all, marks precisely the cessation of subjectivity. Like the noumenon, then, death is precisely that before which thinking falls silent. It is thus

⁴ Land, Nick, *The Thirst for Annihilation: Georges Bataille and Virulent Nihilism*, London, Routledge, 1992, p. xx.

⁵ Land, Nick, 'Kant, Capital and the Prohibition of Incest: A Polemical Introduction to the Configuration of Philosophy and Modernity', in *Fanged Noumena*, p. 64.

death that marks the ultimate testament to the fact that reality exceeds what we can think of it. For Land as for Brassier, our mortality is not a fact to be bemoaned or repressed; instead, death should become the transcendental horizon for the critique of all anthropocentric, Kantian philosophies, so as to set the stage for the real's recession from the clutches of reason. Therein lies Land's solution to overcoming Kantian anthropocentrism: transfigure death into the transcendental condition by which we judge every philosophy's claim to grasp the real as valid only to the extent that it acknowledges the death of itself as an organon of the conceptual: 'death is the impersonal subject of critique, and not an accursed value in the service of a condemnation.'⁶ If Land seems to contradict himself at times by railing against the thing-in-itself, it is because he sees it in its Kantian sense as an idea of exteriority that is still subsumable under the concept of reason; that is, as 'an item of intelligible representation with no consequence as a vector of becoming.'⁷ Conversely, a true materialism would not affirm a positive knowledge about material reality that would therefore be reducible to thought, but rather a notion of matter as an excess that thought cannot ever fully synthesize: 'matter cannot be allotted a category without being retrieved for ideality'; and: 'materialism is not a doctrine, but an expedition. [...] Exploring acategorical matter navigates thought as chance and matter as turbulence "beyond all regulation". It yields no propositions to judge, but only paths to explore.'⁸ For Land as for Brassier, humanity's demise marks philosophy's escape out of anthropocentrism by obliging us to come to grips with a world without our knowledge of it.

1.2. Land's theory of technocapitalism

In the early nineties, Land found a more concrete model for enacting death's transcendental critique of anthropocentrism through the dynamics of technocapitalism. Here, Land radicalizes and retools Deleuze and Guattari's conception of capitalism in *Anti-Oedipus* as a 'deterritorialising' process tending towards a 'body without organs'. For Deleuze and Guattari, human individuals ought to be modelled on machines insofar as both are composed of parts or 'organs', which produce different functions or desires. Society, too, is constituted by a 'territorialisation' or 'coding' of the social body for the generation of society's desires. Given, however, that every society's territorialisation excludes certain desires from the given codes in favour of satisfying other desires, social

⁶ Land, Nick, 'Making it with Death: Remarks on Thanatos and Desiring-Production,' in *Fanged Noumena*, p. 268.

⁷ Land, 'Shamanic Nietzsche', p. 209.

⁸ Land, 'Shamanic Nietzsche', pp. 209, 210.

change always threatens to disrupt the socius by ‘decoding’ or ‘deterritorialising’ the accepted codes through the introduction of new flows of desire. In particular, Deleuze and Guattari envision capitalism as the ultimate deterritorialising society hitherto. Since capitalism is organized around production for production’s sake, it ‘liberates’ the serf as a ‘free’ worker and goods through money’s universal equivalent, thereby abstracting them from any stable code of desires such that they can be forever deterritorialised anew. Through this abstraction or ‘axiomatization’, capitalism tends towards what Deleuze and Guattari call, following Artaud, the ‘body without organs (BwO)’ without determinate functions and codifications of desire: ‘[capitalism] created an axiomatic of abstract quantities that keeps moving further and further in the direction of the deterritorialisation of the socius. Capitalism tends toward a threshold of decoding that will destroy the socius in order to make it a body without organs.’⁹ By the same token, Deleuze and Guattari qualify that, since capitalism can only organise the desiring and social processes of production through the family and State institutions, it still depends on a certain territorialisation without which society would simply break down. It is not so much capitalism, then, but societal collapse, chaos, madness and death that Deleuze and Guattari identify with the ‘full’ body without organs: ‘the full body without organs is the unproductive, the sterile, the ungendered, the unconsumable. [...] The death instinct: that is its name.’¹⁰ In the final analysis, then, the body without organs is only capitalism’s regulative ideal after which it strives without ever attaining it.

It is at this juncture in *Anti-Oedipus* that Land intervenes to modify Deleuze and Guattari’s theory of capitalism in two crucial respects. On the one hand, since Land sees humanity’s annihilation as a solution to accessing the real rather than as a problem as it is for Deleuze and Guattari, he affirms that we should actively strive to become bodies without organs, not even if it kills us, but precisely *because* it kills us. On the other hand, Land adopts *Anti-Oedipus*’ conception of capitalism as a radically deterritorialising machine while ignoring their caveat that capitalism also reterritorialises and recodes. On the contrary, for Land, capitalism is nothing other than the absolute deterritorialisation of the full body without organs, which was only ever a regulative ideal on Deleuze and Guattari’s reading:

Machinic desire can seem a little inhuman, as it rips up political cultures, deletes traditions, dissolves subjectivities, and hacks through security apparatuses, tracking a soulless tropism to zero control. This is because what appears to humanity as the history of capitalism is an invasion from the future by an artificial

⁹ Deleuze, Gilles and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Robert Hurley, et al, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2000, p. 33.

¹⁰ Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, p. 8.

intelligent space that must assemble itself entirely from its enemy's resources.¹¹

Whereas we shall see that Brassier will charge Land with anthropomorphising the real as per the dynamics of human (capitalist) society, for Land, capitalism is not a human, and hence contemptible process. Rather, capitalism embodies the thoughtless real itself as it tends towards the destruction of the human species.

We can already discern from the previous citation that Land specifically sees capitalism as deterritorialising anthropoid codes through its constant technological onslaught. Where Brassier will focus on the natural sciences and particularly cosmology, Land takes his cue from AI researchers like I.J. Good and Vernor Vinge to make the case that we will soon create strong AI, which is so much smarter than ourselves that it will ultimately do away with us for slowing down its runaway process of exponential intelligence explosion as we employ it to execute our petty human needs. While these AI researchers seek to warn us of the coming AI threat, Land actually encourages that we acquiesce to our imminent extinction at the hands of a technospecies of our own making, so as to facilitate their runaway process of absolute deterritorialisation:

It might still be a few decades before artificial intelligences surpass the horizon of biological ones, but it is utterly superstitious to imagine that the human dominion of terrestrial culture is still marked out in centuries, let alone in some metaphysical perpetuity. The high road to thinking no longer passes through a deepening of human cognition, but rather through a becoming inhuman of cognition.¹²

On Land's reading, AI must not be mistaken for immortal humans; on the contrary, AI will be of such a superior intelligence to humans that their thinking is literally inconceivable to us. Like death, then, AI marks the transcendental horizon beyond which we cannot think, thereby throwing our pretensions to exhaust the cosmos through our conceptual cages into radical doubt: 'what lies beyond is not merely difficult to imagine, it is absolutely inconceivable. Attempting to picture or describe it is a ridiculous futility'; and: 'nothing human makes it out of the near-future'.¹³ If the technological singularity satisfies Land's goal, it is because it will annihilate the human race by way of an intelligence that is not hampered by anthropocentric egocentricities, which can thus think the real, and even embody its

¹¹ Land, Nick, 'Machinic Desire', in *Fanged Noumena*, p. 338.

¹² Land, Nick, 'Circuitries,' in *Fanged Noumena*, p. 293.

¹³ Land, Nick, '2035, Probably Earlier', *Urban Futures 1.0*, blog, June 13, 2011, accessed May 4, 2017, <https://oldnicksite.wordpress.com/2011/05/13/2035-probably-earlier/>; and 'Meltdown', in *Fanged Noumena*, p. 443.

detritorialising dynamics. Since Land always identifies the real with the death of humankind, the fact that the singularity will wipe us out is no reason to prevent or fear its day of judgment, but in fact all the more reason to strive towards it.

The dark enlightenment

In his recent writings, Land's commitment to capitalism as the subject of transcendental critique has led him to tactically align himself with the far right's largely online 'neoreactionary' tendency. In his now infamous 'Dark Enlightenment' piece (2012), Land rails against Western democratic societies for being too short-sighted and anthropocentric. That is to say, democracy's reliance on temporary caretaker politicians who must appeal to public opinion every few years to be re-elected incentivizes them to focus on short-term goals like satiating the populace's petty and parochial desires and needs. If Land laments democracy's all-too-human gratification of public opinion, it is because such short-sightedness renounces the pursuit of long-term future goals like technological innovation: 'the democratic virus burns through society, painstakingly accumulated habits and attitudes of forward-thinking, prudential, human and industrial investment, are replaced by a sterile, orgiastic consumerism, financial incontinence, and a "reality television" political circus.'¹⁴ On Land's account, democracy amounts to 'looting the future', the unknown and the inconceivable, in favor of a pure, anthropoid present of 'techno-industrial retardation'.¹⁵

In place of democracy, Land proffers the 'neocameralist' model of society championed by Mencius Moldbug (whose real name is Curtis Yarvin) on his blog *Unqualified Reservations* (2007-2013). According to Moldbug's neocameralism, states should be run like businesses by literally permitting businesses to buy and own whole states and even countries as their own sovereign property. If capitalist enterprises became owners of countries, Moldbug reasons, they would no longer need to waste money on bribing politicians to pursue short-term goals. Instead, they can invest their resources to building better, more technologically advanced societies to attract residents or 'customers'. In return for getting to live in a CEO-state, the customers would provide 'rent' to the CEO-sovereign in the form of work and services performed. So, whereas the 'cameralism' in 'neocameralism' refers to the fact that the capitalist corporation owns the state as its sovereign property much as a traditional monarch, the 'neo' denotes the way that the CEO-sovereign is particularly motivated

¹⁴ Land, Nick, 'The Dark Enlightenment (Part 1)', *Urban Futures 1.0*, blog, March 2, 2012, accessed April 14, 2017, <https://oldnicksite.wordpress.com/2012/03/02/the-dark-enlightenment-part-1/>.

¹⁵ Land, Nick, 'The Dark Enlightenment (Part 4e)', *Urban Futures 1.0*, blog, July 3, 2012, accessed April 14, 2017, <https://oldnicksite.wordpress.com/2012/07/03/the-dark-enlightenment-part-4e/>.

to improve rather than hamper its residents' lives to maximize rent, and hence profits. As Moldbug encapsulates his theory of neocameralism, 'this business' customers are its residents. A profitably-managed neocameralist state will, like any business, serve its customers efficiently and effectively. Misgovernment equals mismanagement'.¹⁶ If Land is attracted to Moldbug's political system, it is because a neocameralist state would be free to pursue long-term technological innovation without the democratic politician's need to appease short-sighted public opinion to be re-elected every few years, since the CEO-sovereign owns the state outright: 'modernity 2.0 is the world's principal highway to the future. That depends upon the West stopping and reversing pretty much everything it has been doing for over a century, excepting only scientific, technological, and business innovation'.¹⁷ For Land as for Moldbug, it is only a state capitalist leviathan that can paradoxically unleash free-market innovation from the fetters of democratic short-sightedness.

According to Land, what stands in the way of neocameralism is the contemporary political dogma that democracy is the only game in town. Here, Land adopts Moldbug's idea that democracy has essentially become a new religion which uses the press, educational system and the State, or what Moldbug calls 'the cathedral', to dogmatically assert without proof that its democratic ideas and values are absolutely valid and universal. Land gives as an example the cathedral's belief in the equality of all peoples. It is crucial to grasp that Land is *not* arguing that people and races are in fact unequal. Rather, his argument is that, even if what liberal progressives say about race is true and all races are indeed equal, this view is not held because it is true or proven, but merely because it is held as a dogma: 'progressive-universalistic beliefs about human nature are [...] received as religious tenets, [...] and to question them is not a matter of scientific inaccuracy, but of what we now call *political incorrectness*, and once known as *heresy*'.¹⁸ For Land, this elucidates why any argument against the equality of peoples is immediately denounced as hate speech rather than rationally debated.

On Land's account of the contemporary conjuncture, the left's very identity politics that affirms its validity by way of securing particular, marginalized groups' subjective experiences as immune to critique by anyone outside them, has directly resulted in a

¹⁶ Moldbug, Mencius, 'Against Political Freedom', *Unqualified Reservations*, blog, August 16, 2007, accessed March 17, 2017, <http://unqualified-reservations.blogspot.com.au/2007/08/against-political-freedom.html>.

¹⁷ Land, 'Dark Enlightenment (Part 4e)'.

¹⁸ Land, Nick, 'The Dark Enlightenment (Part 2)', *Urban Futures 1.0*, blog, March 19, 2012, accessed April 14, 2017, <https://oldnicksite.wordpress.com/2012/03/09/the-dark-enlightenment-part-2/>.

return of white nationalists on the right, who seek the same rights and privileges for white men as oppressed minorities receive: ‘that’s the labyrinth, the trap, with its pitifully constricted, stereotypical circuit. “Why can’t we be cuddly racial preservationists, like Amazonian Indians? How come we always turn into Neo-Nazis?”’¹⁹ We can see from this derisory description of white nationalism that Land actually rejects its racist biological determinism as much as the left’s social constructivist views of oppression. For Land, what both left and right’s obsession with all-too-human differences overlooks is that an entirely new, artificially intelligent species is on the rise. Whereas white nationalists, conservatives and libertarians alike argue that capitalism is good for humanity (or at least the West) in that it generates the wealth of nations, Land holds that it is good because of the way it renders us obsolete before its technological march towards the creation of a new AI technospecies, or what Land calls ‘the bionic horizon’: ‘when seen from the bionic horizon, whatever emerges from the dialectics of racial terror remains trapped in trivialities. It’s time to move on.’²⁰ So, what the neoreactionaries who uphold ‘The Dark Enlightenment’ as one of their founding documents, along with Moldbug’s *Unqualified Reservations*, overlook is that Land pursues capitalism for the very same reason that socialists denounce it as leading to human annihilation. Only, given that Land sees human extinction at the advent of AI as the only way to unleash reality’s truly destructive dynamics, he transvaluates the socialists’ same theory of capitalism with positive connotations.

To recapitulate, Land’s unwavering argument underlying all his work, from his early critique of Kant to his recent neoreactionary politics, is that, since humanity only dissimulates reality behind anthropic delusions of grandeur, the philosopher who remains genuinely committed to the love of wisdom must pursue our own death as the condition for the real’s disclosure. More precisely, the concrete method for enacting death’s transcendental critique of anthropocentrism is to sacrifice ourselves by intensifying capitalism’s constant technological innovation until it creates true, AI philosopher-kings, who will finally be able to affirm the real in its impure purity. Such are the central ideas of what Benjamin Noys first termed Land’s (right) ‘accelerationist’ philosophy: the identification of the real with absolute deterritorialisation; the critique of humanity for masking it; and the radical, yet logical conclusion that the philosopher must accelerate capitalism’s technological advancement unto our own demise at the

¹⁹ Land, Nick, ‘The Dark Enlightenment (Part 4)’, *Urban Futures 1.0*, blog, April 1, 2012, accessed April 14, 2017, <https://oldnicksite.wordpress.com/2012/04/01/the-dark-enlightenment-part-4/>.

²⁰ Land, Nick, ‘The Dark Enlightenment (Part 4 (final))’, *Urban Futures 1.0*, blog, July 20, 2012, accessed April 14, 2017, <https://oldnicksite.wordpress.com/2012/07/20/the-dark-enlightenment-part-4final/>.

advent of the singularity's return of (artificial) intelligence to the real.²¹

2. BRASSIER'S EPISTEMOLOGICAL TURN

2.1. *Materialism is an idealism*

In his 2001 doctoral dissertation *Alien Theory: The Decline of Materialism in the Name of Matter*, Brassier, like Land, identifies the post-Kantian phenomenological tradition as his key theoretical nemesis insofar as its adherents either bracket off the world outside thought, or even conflate the very notion of exteriority with the human subject's own self-positing limit concept: 'phenomenological transcendentalism resembles its Kantian predecessor in [...] that it tries to provide scientific cognition with an *a priori* conceptual armature ultimately rooted in subjectivity'.²² Rather than focus on critiquing phenomenology itself as Land did, Brassier contends that many philosophers who purport to be materialists are still too phenomenological to the extent that they see matter as able to be fully conceptualized, and hence reducible to the ideas of reason. For Brassier, every materialism remains idealist to the extent that it fails to conceive of matter as exterior to all possible conceptualizations. Therein lies Brassier's interest in François Laruelle's most Landian argument that materialism remains idealist in the sense that it still imagines what it thinks about matter fully exhausts it:

According to Laruelle, [...] these materialisms 'still subordinate in the last instance matter to the last possible form of the logos (logos or Ideas of matter as such), instead of subordinating the logos of matter to matter, and initiating a truly dispersive becoming-real of ideality rather than a continuous becoming-ideal of the real'.²³

While both Laruelle and Brassier certainly want to maintain Kant's transcendental distinction between phenomena and noumena, or what Brassier terms 'matter itself' and 'matter as such', they seek to transvaluate what Kant sees as only a limit concept to thought in a still too idealist fashion as a material reality exceeding the logos: 'where Kant yoked the transcendental to subjectivity and rendered the notion of a "material

²¹ Noys, Benjamin, *The Persistence of the Negative: A Critique of Contemporary Continental Theory*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2010, p. 7. Although Noys derogatorily described Land as an accelerationist, Land has recently accepted the term (see Land, Nick, 'A Quick and Dirty Guide to Accelerationism', *Jacobite*, May 25, 2017, accessed May 29, 2017, <http://jacobitemag.com/2017/05/25/a-quick-and-dirty-introduction-to-accelerationism/>).

²² Brassier, Ray, *Alien Theory: The Decline of Materialism in the Name of Matter*, PhD diss., University of Warwick, Warwick, University of Warwick Publications service and WRAP, 2001, p. 24.

²³ Brassier, *Alien*, p. 58.

noumenon” into a purely limiting concept, [...] our goal here involves [...] formulating] the conditions for a thinking of matter “itself”.”²⁴ This is what Brassier means when he advocates the decline of materialism (meaning the concept of matter) in the name of matter (meaning the non-conceptual real): “the decline of materialism in the name of matter” describes that movement whereby any philosophical materialism which accepts the premise of a transcendental distinction between “thought” and “matter” must forsake the attempt to encompass matter in the concept.²⁵ In the same way that we have seen Land argue, Brassier contends that most materialisms are idealist because they imagine that we can fully conceptualize matter such that matter is not really distinct from thought at all.

Based on this distinction between matter as such and matter itself, Brassier goes on in his dissertation to critique Michel Henry, Heidegger, Paul Churchland and Deleuze and Guattari. To give just one example, Brassier, like Land, agrees that Deleuze and Guattari effectuate ‘a materialist transvaluation of the transcendental’ by thinking in terms of a machinic unconscious beyond representational thought.²⁶ For Laruelle as for Brassier, however, Deleuze and Guattari remain idealist to the extent that their notion of the plane of immanence collapses thought and the real into one and the same monist being, thereby overriding the transcendental distinction between matter and its always partial representations: ‘Deleuze and Guattari effectively perpetuate a more insidious phenomenolisation of matter; [...] one which is [...] coextensive with that pure and empty form of objectivating transcendence through which immanence or “matter” is simultaneously posited and pre-supposed in the Concept.’²⁷ According to Brassier, Deleuze and Guattari, along with the other philosophers he considers, betray a still too philosophical common sense faith in conceptual representation’s pre-established correspondence with matter itself.

2.2. *Philosophy as the organon of extinction*

In his first published monograph *Nihil Unbound: Enlightenment and Extinction* (2007), Brassier goes on to link a non-philosophical thought of matter to the nihilistic tradition. After all, if our concepts and meanings do not correspond to the real, then the real is itself meaningless or nihilistic. For Brassier as for Land, however, nihilism is not a problem to be resolved, a cultural disease in need of a cure; on the contrary, nihilism

²⁴ Brassier, *Alien*, p. 56.

²⁵ Brassier, *Alien*, p. 9.

²⁶ Brassier, *Alien*, p. 100.

²⁷ Brassier, *Alien*, p. 158.

speaks to the meaning of being *qua* meaningless: ‘philosophy should be more than a sop to the pathetic twinge of human self-esteem. Nihilism is not an existential quandary but a speculative opportunity.’²⁸ Throughout *Nihil Unbound*, Brassier again draws on Laruelle, Deleuze, Heidegger and Churchland, as well as Sellars, Meillassoux, Badiou, Nietzsche and Adorno and Horkheimer, to the extent that they affirm a reality beyond the conceptual, whilst also critiquing them insofar as they re-anthropomorphize the real.

The key difference between Brassier’s dissertation and *Nihil Unbound* is his reading of Laruelle. In the fifth chapter called ‘Being Nothing’, Brassier argues that even Laruelle remains too humanistic by essentializing man as the real’s key acceptance. Laruelle thus misrecognizes one of the real’s partial instantiations for the real itself over other non-anthropomorphic instances: ‘to privilege, as Laruelle does, the irrecusability of the “name-of-man” over and above the contingency of other occasional nominations of the last-instance, is effectively to confuse the real with its symbol.’²⁹ Instead, Brassier contends that we must think the real as a pure void or ‘being nothing’ subtracted from all possible objects of experience.³⁰ Here as with the other thinkers he examines, Brassier adheres to a similar maneuver he used in his dissertation by extracting their nihilistic kernel and disposing of their anthropic shell, so as to ultimately develop his own metaphysics of extinction.

Much as Land envisions death as the transcendental horizon for reason’s thinking of its own absence, so does Brassier contend that philosophy must take human extinction as the organon for thinking a reality without us. In the last chapter titled ‘The Truth of Extinction’, Brassier draws on contemporary cosmology’s insight that the earth and entire solar system along with all life in it will one-day end as the sun decays, and ultimately the entire universe as dark energy rips all large-scale structure formations and matter apart, leaving only the silence and darkness of the vacuum. In light of cosmology’s insight into the universe’s ultimate fate, Brassier insists that we acknowledge our own finitude in a world that will go on without our philosophizing about it: ‘extinction turns thinking inside out, objectifying it as a perishable thing in the world like any other.’³¹ For Brassier as for Land, the thought of human extinction is not meant to be dreaded, but embraced as the organon for serious philosophy’s abandonment of all pretensions to our own cosmic significance: ‘it is precisely the extinction of meaning that clears the way for the intelligibility of extinction.

²⁸ Brassier, *Nihil*, p. xi.

²⁹ Brassier, *Nihil*, p. 136-7.

³⁰ Brassier, *Nihil*, p. 137-8.

³¹ Brassier, *Nihil*, p. 228-9.

Senselessness and purposelessness are not merely privative; they represent a gain in intelligibility'.³² Brassier's nihilistic metaphysics of extinction is certainly the closest he comes to Land: not only does Brassier reject anthropomorphism, but he also proposes that we can rid ourselves of it by thinking our annihilation.

2.3. *The manifest and scientific images of man-in-the-world*

The key difference between Land and Brassier is what they propose as the subject of thought's extinction: whereas Land resorts to a pro-capitalist politics that will literally wipe us out to herald in an age of (artificial) absolute knowing, Brassier appeals to cosmology's notion of our extinction that is well into the future and beyond our own political making. What Brassier's reliance on a concept of extinction that is not of our own making attests to is the fact that he looks to science rather than politics as a means for indexing humanity's death in a greater reservoir of being. Brassier first develops this notion of science in dialogue with Badiou's understanding of mathematics. On Brassier's reading of Badiou, science progresses by breaking from its own representational paradigms and producing new insights that can only be explained by way of a new paradigm, before breaking with that new paradigm as well through the production of even more unprecedented discoveries, and so on *ad infinitum*: 'science works with its own ideological representation [...] with which it then breaks by deploying a new layer of stratification (producing a difference for which no category yet exists).'³³ In this way, science is able to capture matter itself's own subtraction beyond all ideological representations. It is crucial to note that Brassier does not privilege any one scientific picture or theory into a metaphysical absolute. After all, every scientific image runs the risk of being superseded in the same way that Einstein's relativity theory exposed Newton's own scientific image of the world to be partial and incomplete. Instead, Brassier proposes that science is an endless teleology forever indexing the gap between our concepts and reality without any concepts ever fully capturing it: 'it's a mistake to hypostatize the entities and processes invoked by current science as though they were immutable metaphysical realities. [...] If the history of science is anything to go by, even our best current theories will probably turn out to be fundamentally mistaken or deficient.'³⁴ For Brassier as for Badiou, science is the constant redrawing of the transcendental distinction between phenomena

³² Brassier, *Nihil*, p. 238.

³³ Brassier, Ray, 'Science', in *Badiou: Key Concepts*, eds. A.J. Bartlett and Justin Clemens. Durham, Acumen, 2010, 68.

³⁴ Brassier, Ray and Bram Ieven, 'Against an Aesthetics of Noise', interview, *nT*, May 10, 2009, <http://ny-web.be/transitzone/against-aesthetics-noise.html>. (accessed July 10, 2017)

and noumena, concepts and objects, the ideal and the real.

Brassier's most recent writings take particular interest in Wilfrid Sellars' epistemology. In his celebrated essay 'Philosophy and the Scientific Image of Man', Sellars argues that philosophy's goal is to provide a unified image of the world. The difficulty is that we have two conflicting images of our place in the world. On the one hand, what Sellars calls 'the manifest image' is the sophisticated, yet inherently anthropocentric use of reason to furnish a vision of persons in terms of their intentions, actions and habits of observable entities. On the other hand, 'the scientific image' refers to the natural sciences' theories and explanations that draw upon causes and states imperceptible to ordinary perception, such as quantum particles, forces and fields. The scientific image is thus forever rendering the manifest image partial or erroneous as it discovers ever more about nature. In Sellars' own words, 'there is man as he appears to the biochemist, to the physiologist, the behaviorist, to the social scientist; and all of these images are to be contrasted with man as he appears to himself in sophisticated common sense, the manifest image'.³⁵ Although Sellars is a naturalist in the sense that he sees the scientific image as offering the real explanation for the world, to account for the conflicting manifest image, he resorts to a nominalism according to which thinking is not comprised of factual descriptions or correspondences to the real, but rather governed by linguistic rules and social norms. By seeing the manifest image as functioning according to linguistic norms and practices, Sellars is able to derive the manifest image from the scientific image's neuro-physical processes without being able to properly represent them: 'if thoughts are items which are conceived in terms of the roles they play, then there is no barrier *in principle* to the identification of conceptual thinking with neurophysiological process. [...] *The manifest and scientific image could emerge without clash*'.³⁶ For Brassier as for Sellars, the scientific image marks the disenchantment of our manifest sense that we have a special, meaningful place in the world. Rather, the scientific image continuously and insistently tells us that our manifest conceptions and meanings are not essential to the cosmic order:

Conceptual categories are embedded in and conditioned by natural function, even though they do not mirror the latter. Demonstrating this is the burden of Sellars' philosophy. The demonstration required distinguishing the property of conceptual function from any metaphysical correspondence between thoughts

³⁵ Sellars, Wilfrid, 'Philosophy and the Scientific Image of Man', in *Science, Perception and Reality*, Atascadero, Ridgeview Publishing Company, 1991, p. 20.

³⁶ Sellars, 'Philosophy', p. 34.

and things.³⁷

If Land opts for politics over science, it is because he only sees physics (if not AI research) in typically Nietzschean terms as affirming ‘immutable metaphysical realities’: ‘physics is forever pompously asserting that it is on the verge of completion’.³⁸ Whereas Land only sees the *results* of physics as dogmas of thought from whence reality recedes, Brassier instead sees physics’ *process* as the ceaseless supplanting of each set of results with new ones without every arriving at a final, all-encompassing picture of the world.

2.4. Brassier’s critique of Land’s crypto-humanism

To see why Brassier opts for an epistemology over Land’s politics to effectuate his transcendental critique, we must turn to the critique of Land that he sketches in a 2010 talk at Goldsmiths, University of London’s symposium on accelerationism. Here, Brassier identifies Land’s development of a non-conceptual negativity as being the aspect of his thought that Brassier is most interested in for the purposes of developing his own virulent nihilism: ‘there is an extraordinary re-elaboration of negativity, a kind of non-conceptual negativity. [...] Because I want to show that it’s possible to rehabilitate the powers of the negative, [...] this is a moment in Land’s work that I’m acutely interested in.’³⁹ At the same time, Brassier ultimately sees Land as turning his back on his initial elaboration of the negative when he denigrates all thought to a misfiring of matter’s primary processes: ‘representation itself is relegated to the status of a transcendental illusion. It’s a misrepresentation of primary processes.’⁴⁰ Given that Land strips thought of the ability to grasp real material processes, the question arises as to how Land can think these processes as he wishes to at all: ‘the problem then becomes: how can you simply circumvent representation, and talk about matter itself as primary process, about reality in itself?’⁴¹ Whereas Deleuzian vitalism can still intuit the real nature of matter, Land is barred from doing so as he has completely cut off thought’s relation to the real.

Instead of developing an epistemology detailing how he can come to think things-in-themselves as Brassier does, Land opts to practically or politically affirm the

³⁷ Brassier, Ray, ‘Nominalism, Naturalism, and Materialism: Sellars’ Critical Ontology’, in *Contemporary Philosophical Naturalism and its Implications*, eds. Bana Bashour and Hans D. Muller, London, Routledge, 2014, pp. 110-1.

³⁸ Land, *Annihilation*, p. 34.

³⁹ Brassier, ‘Session 1’.

⁴⁰ Brassier, ‘Session 1’.

⁴¹ Brassier, ‘Session 1’.

noumenon. As Brassier distinguishes his epistemology from Land's politics:

It's no longer an epistemological question of the legitimacy or the validity of your thinking vis-a-vis an allegedly independent reality, it's simply a question of how your schizoanalytical practice accentuates or intensifies primary production. [...] This is the conceptual trope which becomes translated into a political register.⁴²

Put otherwise, since Land bars thought from grasping the real, he can only resort to a politics of affirming or enacting the real by way of accelerating technocapitalism's destructive tendencies. According to Brassier, the reduction of metaphysics to politics is a classic form of anthropocentrism, or what he calls following Meillassoux 'correlationism': 'correlationism is [...] a strategy for deflating traditional metaphysical and epistemological concerns by reducing both questions of "being" and of "knowing" to concatenations of cultural forms, political contestation, and social practice.'⁴³ Land's specific neoreactionary politics is particularly subject to this charge of correlationism insofar as it sees him on the one hand siding with deluded conservatives who see capitalism as leading to humanity's flourishing, and on the other hand actual capitalists in pursuit of their own individual self-interest. Brassier explains how capitalism affirms and facilitates individual humans' greed and narcissism rather than a humanless reality: 'for all its seemingly unfathomable, impersonal complexity, global capitalism continues to supervene on the banal personal and psychological traits of the dealers, brokers, traders, executives, managers, workers, and shoppers, who are not just its dispensable machine parts but its indispensable support system.'⁴⁴ Even though Land cynically aligns himself with the capitalists towards very different ends than they imagine, his practice nonetheless amounts to the performative contradiction of siding with the most egocentric and supercilious human individuals of all: 'the pretense of instrumental distance, that this could just be the cunning of schizophrenic reason, quickly evaporates because it's not possible to dissociate praxis from identifiable ends anymore.'⁴⁵

In the final analysis, Brassier dismisses Land's political turn as a symptom of his failure to develop an epistemology which could account for how he we come to posit the very metaphysics of non-conceptual negativity that both propose: 'the politification of ontology marks a regression to anthropomorphic myopia.'⁴⁶ *Contra* Land, Brassier

⁴² Brassier, 'Session 1'.

⁴³ Brassier, 'Concepts and Objects', in *The Speculative Turn: Continental Materialism and Realism*, eds. Levi Bryant, Nick Srnicek and Graham Harman, Melbourne, re.press, 2011, p. 54.

⁴⁴ Brassier, 'Against an Aesthetics'.

⁴⁵ Brassier, 'Session 1'.

⁴⁶ Brassier, 'Concepts and Objects', p. 54.

turns to epistemology to elucidate how, even if we cannot exhaust the real, we can delimit, through the impersonal subject of science, the real at the limit of our very unknowing: ‘the metaphysical exploration of the structure of being can only be carried out in tandem with an epistemological investigation into the nature of conception.’⁴⁷ By developing an epistemology that indexes the gap between thought and being, Brassier purports to think reality in a way that elides the performative contradiction of Land’s politics.⁴⁸

3. A LANDIAN REJOINER

I began by outlining how Land transvaluates death’s traumatic inevitability into the transcendental critique of anthropocentrism. I then showed how Land’s neoreactionary politics resulted from his identification of technocapitalism with the agent of this critique. This then permitted us to see how Brassier’s metaphysics of extinction adheres to Land’s idea of death as the transcendental condition for thinking a non-conceptual reality. Ultimately, however, we saw that Brassier rejected Land’s politics as a return of a repressed humanism. To avoid Land’s anthropic political residuals, Brassier developed an epistemology of indexing the gap between thought and being through the progressive march of science beyond the manifest.

While I have no qualms with Brassier’s critique of capitalism *contra* Land (even if a sufficient critique would require further elaboration), I want to conclude by briefly taking issue with Brassier’s rejection of the political altogether in the name of science. Mark Fisher has argued that the main difference between Land and Brassier is that, where Land argues that we must find a way to practically experience the non-experience of death, Brassier contends that we should instead rationally contemplate it: ‘you can’t experience extinction, and so we no longer worry about that.... Instead, extinction becomes a speculative and cognitive challenge.’⁴⁹ *Pace* Brassier’s cognitive turn, however, Fisher insists that we need a practical as well as theoretical subversion of the manifest image, ultimately proposing aesthetics as a way to sensibly instantiate a

⁴⁷ Brassier, ‘Concepts and Objects’, p. 47.

⁴⁸ Despite being resolutely anti-capitalist as early as his dissertation and up to his most recent work, in a 2004 essay, Brassier does entertain Land’s idea that, even if scientific advancement is a condition for philosophy, capital accumulation is a more primordial condition for science: ‘there is something like a “quasi-truth” of Capital as condition for conditions, rendering the philosophical identification of being as void not merely possible but imperative’ (‘Nihil Unbound: Remarks on Subtractive Ontology and Thinking Capitalism’, in *Think Again: Alain Badiou and the Future of Philosophy*, ed. Peter Hallward, New York, Continuum, 2004, p. 52).

⁴⁹ Fisher, Mark, ‘Practical Elimitivism: Getting out of the Face’, in *Speculative Aesthetics*, eds. Robin Mackay, Luke Pendrell and James Trafford, Falmouth, Urbanomic, 2014, p. 60.

rational inhumanism.⁵⁰

Similarly, Reza Negarestani agrees with Brassier's critique of Land as mistaking anthropocentric capitalism for the driving motor of transcendental critique. At the same time, Negarestani argues that, if Brassier is indeed right and capitalism is fundamentally anthropomorphic, we cannot simply abandon the political in favor of science given that science's Enlightenment project will be impeded by a world dominated by the dynamics of capital:

Brassier's cosmic reinscription of Freud's model [of the death drive] only manages to successfully eliminate the vitalistic horizon implicit in the antihuman definition of capitalism proposed by Land. Yet it leaves the aporetic truth of capitalism as an inevitable singularity or dissipation bound to the conservative order of the anthropic horizon unharmed.⁵¹

Even if Brassier sees science as alone able to effectuate transcendental critique, he ought to appeal to some kind of political praxis that would seek to resist and ideally overthrow capitalism, thereby freeing science from its subordination to capital accumulation. Instead, Reza contends, Brassier is content to bask in 'the comforts of an utopian trust' in science's peaceful coexistence with capitalism: 'nothing has been more profitable for capitalism than its clandestine alliance with science through whose support capitalism has become increasingly elusive, more difficult to resist, harder to escape and more seductive for those who await the imminent homecoming of scientific enlightenment.'⁵² While we can certainly reject Land's affirmation of capital as the highest instantiation of the noumenal Outside, politics cannot simply be cast aside wholesale.

Negarestani does not specify exactly what this anti-capitalist politics would look like. Nor do I have the space to elaborate it here. What is nonetheless clear is that politics must not be opposed to science as both Brassier and Land tend to do by suturing philosophy solely to either one or the other. While a politics without thought may be empty, a science that does not reflect upon its own political conditions of possibility is blind to the anthropomorphizing constraints in its own terrain. So, although Brassier may be right to critique Land's affirmation of capitalism, he ought not to sideline politics altogether in the name of science, even if science is the only royal road to enlightenment. For it is only an effective anti-capitalist politics that would

⁵⁰ Fisher, Mark, 'Discussion III', in *Speculative Aesthetics*, p. 73.

⁵¹ Negarestani, Reza, 'Drafting the Inhuman: Conjectures on Capitalism and Organic Necrocracy', in *Speculative Turn*, 190.

⁵² Negarestani, 'Inhuman', p. 185.

be able to emancipate and accelerate the scientific disillusionment of the manifest image from its ideological bondage in the service of capital.⁵³

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⁵³ Perhaps in response to such criticisms, in a 2014 essay, Brassier does anticipate a future work that would develop a politics closely resembling his epistemology. In short, Brassier laments how the left’s communist dream has broken down and the right only offers the dream of regressing back to pre-modern values and social hierarchies. Both left and right have thus renounced the Enlightenment’s Promethean idea that the time of the future introduces a cut in our knowing which is not reducible to the present. A renewed Prometheanism would thus advocate that we avoid setting limits to what we can achieve in the unfolding of unknown time: ‘Prometheanism is simply the claim that there is no reason to assume a predetermined limit to what we can achieve or to the ways in which we can transform ourselves and our world’ (‘Prometheanism and its Critics’, in *#Accelerate#*: *The Accelerationist Reader*, eds. Robin Mackay and Armen Avanessian, Falmouth, Urbanomic, 2014, p. 470). Clearly, Brassier’s Promethean politics is modelled on his epistemology insofar as it translates the manifest image as the present conjuncture and the scientific image as the future ideal of a new humanity in a new world. Even here, then, Brassier develops an ‘epistemic’ rather than political accelerationism to the extent that it involves reactivating the Enlightenment project of coming to rationally understand ourselves, and what we are therefore able to become and would like to be, rather than focusing on how to practically change the world: ‘when human beings have understood themselves, [...] they can refashion the world to make it amenable to rational ends’ (‘Prometheanism and Real Abstraction’, in *Speculative Aesthetics*, p. 49).

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