

After After Finitude: An Afterword

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It is very common for people to think that they live in times of dissolution and decay. In Christian Europe, for example, the book of *Revelations* was canonical: ‘The Apocalypse was widely commended as utterly indispensable.’¹ Prophets of one kind or another would accordingly emerge to declare that the end of the world was nigh. It is still grimly amusing to see the phenomenon of firm dates for the End being given, then broken—and then further dates given, to be broken in turn. Year-after-year, the End has come and the End has passed, without the attitudes and forms of thinking for which the End is clearly necessary failing to remain popular. One might then propose with the poet Wallace Stevens that ‘the mind is always at the end of an age’: that is, that a certain apocalypticism is perhaps a condition for any possible or actual thinking as such.

Certainly, there have always been critics of the sense of an ending. Maurice Blanchot has wittily declared that ‘the apocalypse will be disappointing,’ given that we now know how miniscule our entire solar system is in the scheme of the universe.² What previous ages enthusiastically imaged as the total obliteration of created things turns out to have been an almost-risible irrelevance. For his part, Jacques Derrida has shown that the thought of the ‘end of man’ is itself inscribed within philosophical anthropology itself, such that all putative calls for a transcending of Man in fact repeat the fundamental operations of humanism.³ Compatible contemporaneous critiques can be cited from across the post-World War II humanities.

Only apparently paradoxically, this recognition of the insufficiency of the concept of an end derives from analytics that draw their inspiration and methods from finitude itself. The discovery of finitude is one of the most profound developments in modern philosophy, and one of its greatest thinkers is Martin Hei-

1. C.A. Patrides, “‘Something like Prophetick strain’”: apocalyptic configurations in Milton’ in C.A. Patrides and Joseph Wittreich (eds.), *The Apocalypse in English Renaissance thought and literature: patterns, antecedents and repercussions*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1984, p. 207.

2. See ‘The Apocalypse is Disappointing’ in M. Blanchot, *Friendship*, trans. E. Rottenberg, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1997.

3. See ‘The Ends of Man’ in J. Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. A. Bass, Brighton, Harvester Press, 1982.

degger. Why finitude? The ancient Greeks were finite thinkers of the finite: they submitted all thought and being to the limiting order of the One, and found the formlessness of the *apeiron* repulsive. But this isn't finitude; quite the contrary, it is merely the finite (of which more below). In contrast, Christian theology found a way to render God infinite—in fact, found a way to give its deity a number of staggering predicates or anti-predicates, such as immortal, immutable, infinite, and so on. This is clearly not finitude, either. Yet this very 'infinity' was inscribed in transcendence, that is, of an attitude to time that renders the time of this world finite, integrally marked by the End. Although scientific thought, in particular modern physics and mathematical set theory, renovated the thought of an infinite universe and the status of infinity itself, it allegedly failed to comprehend being-as-time.

Among other accomplishments, Heidegger returned simultaneously to the necessity to rethink being, the traditions of thinking itself, and above all to the problematics of disclosure, eclosion, and unveiling. As Christopher Fynsk puts it: 'By virtue of its inescapable temporal determination, thought can achieve no final definition of its own situation and thus cannot transcend the history in which it finds itself as it turns back upon that which gives it its impetus.'⁴ Such an analysis of finitude is not a naïve one. The finitude of Being is not simply an empirical finitude. Finitude is neither the finite, nor simply the negation of the infinite. It is a critique of totality. It is a critique of science. It proposes that Being's finitude is inaccessible by most of the means by which thought seeks to grasp it, and turns to the opening of questioning itself as a priority. Finitude is at once *after-and-never-yet-after* insofar as it seeks on principle to return any thought to the time-of-its-own-happening.

Given this intellectual context, it seems that thought is confronted with at least a double problem today. On the one hand, we are confronted with what seems to be the patent evidence from an enormous range of events that we live, at the beginning of the 21st century, in an unprecedentedly turbulent world. To advert to the essays collected in this volume and to the editors' expressed aims, climate change, algorithmic capitalism, and technological innovation go beyond any prior challenges that humanity has faced. On the other hand, the inherited tools that we have to think such phenomena present as not only insufficient, but possibly as part of the problem itself. Yet—and this has been essential to Heidegger's contribution—we cannot simply, by force of will or desire, think that we can think our way out of this double-bind. If we do indeed need to actualize a thinking that is *after* finitude, we must be aware that it was the thought of finitude that has radicalized the problematic of the *after* as such.

So what then would it mean to be after finitude at all? What does the title of the conference, this book, and perhaps this project even mean: *Aesthetics After Finitude*? First of all, it is an allusion to Quentin Meillassoux's *After Finitude*, as well as to an entire milieu of radical thought, to Graham Harman and Object Oriented Philosophy (OOP), François Laruelle and his non-philoso-

4. C. Fynsk, *Heidegger: Thought and Historicity*, Ithaca and London, Cornell University Press, 1993, pp. 16-17.

phy, Ray Brassier and *Nihil Unbound*, Reza Negarestani and *Cyclonopedia*, to Nick Land, whose *Fanged Noumena* exerts a powerful if occult force upon a wide range of contemporary thinkers.⁵ Behind these, moreover, is an entire host of tutelary figures, from C.S. Peirce and A.N. Whitehead through Wilfred Sellars and beyond.

To the extent that Meillassoux's book provides the keynote reference for the present collection, *Aesthetics After Finitude* should also be understood as *Aesthetics After After Finitude*, as the editors themselves note in their Introduction. But this phantom 'after' is not *written* as such; it is patent but suppressed, as befits the structure of allusion. Moreover, this should alert us to the meta-nominal aspect of the title: the reflexive incorporation of another title within it, at once marked and unmarked. Yet this also provokes a question: is this title a statement or a question? Does it announce: *here is aesthetics-after-finitude*, this is what aesthetics looks like *after finitude* or rather *after after finitude*; or rather *is there aesthetics after finitude*? In the second case, there is a suppressed question mark, a punctuation mark that is present-in-absence.

'After' implies, and this is part of the intention behind the nomination, a temporal reference. 'After finitude' implies that finitude is finished. Finitude has proven to be—perhaps unsurprisingly—finite. Finitude was finite in time; it had its time (finite), and now it's gone. Hence: what do we do now, in the time after finitude? Presumably, we're now in the in-finite or at least the non-finite, which certainly poses some further questions. After all, finitude is not simply done away with by the infinite. Finitude is by definition a subset of the infinite, included in the infinite. Yet if we were just continuing to enjoy finitude-after-finitude, one wouldn't presumably need to have any discussions about it, we could just keep doing what we've always done. So the title proposes a discussion of the non-finite aftermath of finitude. Part of the problem would immediately seem to be that 'infinite' has traditionally been equivalent to 'everything': what do we do now, then, but everything? So perhaps we need to ask more about this equivalence. Perhaps the infinite is not simply endless.⁶

The title may also imply that the time after finitude is infinite. But is that so? What happens if, 'after finitude,' we've really hit the time of the infinite? That doesn't necessarily mean, however, that infinitude is infinite in time. In fact, the 'after' might seem to preclude an infinitude of time after the infinite; the time of the infinite has already been limited by the time of the finite that it comes after. The time of the infinite may not be infinite. In which case, there would be a strong sense in which infinitude itself would still be finite. After finitude, then, would be finitude, just more of it, more intense finitude. Which might imply that

5. See, *inter alia*, Q. Meillassoux, *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*, trans. Ray Brassier, London, Continuum, 2008; G. Harman, *Guerilla Metaphysics: Phenomenology and the Carpentry of Things*, Chicago, Open Court, 2005; F. Laruelle, *Principles of Non-Philosophy*, trans. N. Rubczak and A.P. Smith, London, Bloomsbury, 2013; R. Brassier, *Nihil Unbound*, Houndmills, Palgrave, 2007; R. Negarestani, *Cyclonopedia*, Melbourne, re.press, 2008; N. Land, *Fanged Noumena*, Falmouth, Urbanomic, 2011.

6. As one of the editors of the present volume commented here: 'the prefix in is significant here too. In doubles in English as a verb formative but, equally, a substitute for the negative un, from Latin ante-. What is nice about the word infinity is that the paradox of the concept is allegorized in the lexeme, specifically in this Janus faced prefix.'

finitude was or is or will itself be endless, that is, already infinite. Or, conversely, that infinity and time necessarily part company; if there is to be infinity, then it cannot be in time. It is not a priori clear that an infinite time is the equivalent of eternity. Just because something lasts for ever doesn't make it eternal: as any good theologian might tell you, God is eternal but you yourself have only the chance at everlasting life...the life *after* this life, which is not true life but its antechamber.

Aesthetics has historically always been attentive to the problem of 'after.' In being a discourse regarding the operations of formal invention in the regime of the senses, aesthetics has always also had to deal with the problem of time-as-form-giving. Here, again paradoxically, 'after' has meant in aesthetics not only *temporally* belated, but *formally* belated as well. 'After Poussin' means, for example: in the style of Poussin; or, alternatively, a new work created on the basis of a work of Poussin's. Thus 'after finitude' can mean: *in the style of finitude*. 'Aesthetics after finitude' would then demand not infinity, but a continuation or extension of aesthetics in the style of finitude.

We can then again reinterpret the project as asserting: 'there are perhaps many possible styles, such that finitude is one of them, and the one that we are adopting here.' Even more strongly, there's a rather mournful edge to 'after finitude': we've lost finitude, it's gone, and now we're chasing after it, hunting its traces. Where has finitude gone? How do we get it back? 'Aesthetics After Finitude' might then mean: although we are seeking to come to terms with, even affirm, the present, in which we are post-finitude, what we really want is to get back to finitude so we can have our aesthetics again. Or again: our aesthetics is modelled on finitude. So the temporality of the 'after' is also a question of a principle of the creation and transmission of forms: what does 'after' mean for form? Is form necessarily finite? Or must form and finitude divide after finitude?

After finitude therefore denominates and participates in an event of oxymoron, contradiction, and paradox. It is also, as the contributors to this volume all insist in their own ways, *after* what Meillassoux calls 'correlation.' That is: finitude was the last recourse of a subjacent correlationism that ruled all modern philosophy, at once illicitly limiting itself as it retained the privilege of an anthropological bond. Such correlationism is a humanism, that is, a kind of self-denying humiliation of thought and its objects in the name of a covert yet grotesque inflation of humanity. Yet the greatest problem with finitude is that—despite the sophisticated analyses it presented regarding time and being—it *was never really an after* after all. While the philosophies of finitude proposed themselves as a philosophical reaction to and affirmation of the Copernican Revolution in natural science, they in fact accomplished quite the opposite, a Ptolemaic counter-revolution, to invoke Meillassoux. Finitude was the reinsistence of *the before* posturing as *the after*. As such, it integrally installed the relation of the *for us* as its non-negotiable condition and ideal. To be after finitude therefore also means to generalize the *not-for-us* of thought. *After finitude* must be *not-for-us* because we must now affirm our own cosmic deracination, our own irremediable levelling in existence.

And this is why the absolute exigency of an inhuman speculation as absolute and real is the governing motif of these investigations. Moreover, as the editors admirably posit, part of the challenge is that the cosmic deracination attendant on the *after* be given its properly aesthetic freighting. Yet this means that aesthetics is no longer a science of feeling, sensibility, or sense, but ensnared in imperceptible batteries of polysonic decorporations. These essays, in other words, and in line with their own professed inspirations and the challenges of their often-anonymous materials, are offering a kind of philosophical therapy. Philosophy has been from its foundations such a therapy: Socrates has been a long time sick, as the phrase has it; Wittgenstein wanted to show the fly the way out of the fly-bottle. Here, the treatment will and must be played out in the absence of the for-us, in the often savage speculations regarding hyperstition, the hyperfly, the hyperlaruellean, the hypermillennial, the hypergeological, the hypersynthetic, the hypertransfinite, the hypercyclonic, the hyperalgorithmic, the hypermallarmean, the hyperaccelerationist, the hypertiamatic, the hyperchimerical, the hypergardic. *Aesthetics After Finitude* proffers a hypertherapeutics of the afterthought among the madness of the molecules. Thinking big requires feeling small.

So *Aesthetics After Finitude* seeks to cure us of ourselves by really unleashing our own finitude, in all senses of that phrase. After the end of a thought of finitude which itself had declared the end of the end, we find the thought of the after as activating an absolute end. The end of correlationism is not only a destruction, but a consummation of that which correlationism sought to think. One consequence of the critique of correlationism must be the true assumption of our own finitude. If one can see this elaborated with the utmost clarity throughout the contributions to this volume, we could also invoke Brassier's genial move as exemplary: taking contemporary science seriously entails dealing with the absolute necessity of universal extinction.

As Brassier puts it in the conclusion to his brilliant book:

In becoming equal to it [the trauma of extinction], philosophy achieves a binding of extinction, through which the will to know is finally rendered commensurate with the in-itself. This binding coincides with the objectification of thinking understood as the adequation without correspondence between the objective reality of extinction and the subjective knowledge of the trauma to which it gives rise. It is this adequation that constitutes the truth of extinction. But to acknowledge this truth, the subject of philosophy must also recognize that he or she is already dead, and that philosophy is neither a medium of affirmation nor a source of justification, but rather the organon of extinction.⁷

If I have any complaints about such a position, it is that this practice of philosophy has sutured itself too directly and lovingly to contemporary physics. As Brassier announces regarding the destiny of science: 'the point is not just that science enriches and amplifies our understanding of reality but that it uncov-

7. Brassier, p. 239.

ers the truth.⁸ Confusing the refusal of ineffability with a particular image of science, Brassier's magnificent statements—such as 'I am a nihilist because I believe in truth'—remain superb interventions into contemporary thought, yet only have pertinence on the basis of his prior collapsing of an old conception of truth into a particular figure of knowledge. I don't think anybody has to believe—however authentically nihilistic such a belief may present itself as being—that science uncovers truth. However, I do believe we have to agree that science establishes what counts as knowledge. What's the difference? Whether there is one ring to rule them all. This is precisely where aesthetics can intervene to snap apart such contingent competing collages of belief. What the current collection does through its very attentiveness to *aesthetics* is supplement and extend such work as Brassier's by effectively de-suturing truth from knowledge again. If there is indeed a general political point to aesthetics after finitude, it is surely this: to ensure that the after is in the end the without-master.

But what I finally wish to emphasize in these heterogeneous writings is an experience—or, more precisely, the *contemporary non-experience of the loss of all possible experience as an atemporal after*—to which they all testify, but which none of them directly discuss. This experience is in some sense a loss of the real—not just of any real, but a loss of the real of time as loss. This is a cut between modernity, for which time crystallizes in historical sites, and the contemporary, for which the loss of the real of time is embodied in atemporal and inhuman articulations. Of course, time still passes, vulgarly, experientially, non-linearly, kairotically, differentially repetitively, intermittently, what have you. But the loss of the real of time revivifies a kind of spontaneous speculative naivety regarding the irreducibility of objects (OOO and OOP) and a concomitant if contradictory tendency to revive one or another master of thought (e.g., physics for Brassier, logic or mathematics for Meillassoux). Yet between this Scylla and Charybdis, a new aesthetics of the aftermath. Speculation is to the present what melancholia was for modernity—the attempt to present in thought the trace of an irreducible in-temporal difference as the exhibition of action-in-inaction.

The classical melancholic was immobilized by the overwhelmingness of what-was-gone—the void of the past deactivating the forces of the present beyond any possible explanation—as a kind of zombie of being. Whether that persecutory past had ever existed at all is unlikely; whatever the case, the key was that it marked the present with its vitiating absence. Hence the pure time-mark expressed by the melancholic: that there is time turns time against time within time by intensifying the impotence of the living body. The melancholic enacts and expresses the inability to act destined by the flaming brand of temporality. Then, afterness was the real essence of being-time: that is, finitude. But now we are after after. When that happens (or rather doesn't happen), the only discourse able to introduce a comparable immixture of consistency and paradox, in-action and fabulation, is fantastic speculation on the basis of rigorous impersonal knowledges.

8. R. Brassier and B. Ieven, 'Transitzone/Against an Aesthetics of Noise,' NY, 5 October 2009, <http://ny-web.be/transitzone/against-aesthetics-noise.html>, accessed 1 March 2016.

Still: the future is obliteration and oblivion, extinction and extermination. It swallows all speculation whole. Thinking at its geophysical and energetic limit, where past-time's exhaustion receives the final consummation from the future's inevitable apocalypse, the present presents as if it were already after. Today we are living—and dying—in and as the Phantom of the After. This book is a *Necronomicon* for its summoning.