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PERFORMATISM IN THEORY: THE NEW MONISM

One of the salient features of Igor' Smirnov's theory of literary history¹ is its emphasis on a basic alternation between primary cultures which think of sign, user and referent as a unity and secondary cultures which assume the existence of an unbridgeable gap between sign and referential reality. Primary cultures can thus be said to adhere to a *monist* notion of sign, secondary cultures to a *dualist* one. In the last thirty years, the overwhelming dominance of a specific type of secondary culture – postmodernism – has led to a mindset which disregards, disdains or debunks any and all monist concepts of sign. The result has been a post-historical attitude in which the possibility that one's *own dualist* concept of sign could be replaced by *another monist* one is not even taken into consideration.

In the following I would like to show that the alternation between primary and secondary cultures as outlined by Igor' Smirnov has not ceased to exist. Beginning in the late 1990's, a whole slew of books, movies and architectural objects have begun to exhibit the basic features of primary culture: a distinct turn towards an anthropological notion of sign (unity of sign and user) and towards a heightened awareness of thingness (unity of sign and referent), accompanied by a distinct turn away from the textualization of reality and from the schizoid subjectivity² that are essential features of postmodernism.

The focus of the following discussion is, however, not on works of art but on theory. In spite of the nearly monolithic dominance of secondary culture and dualist semiotic theory over the last thirty years, a number of monist concepts have succeeded – with varying degrees of success – in freeing themselves from the dualist strictures of poststructuralist discourse. The most well developed of these theories in semiotic terms is Eric Gans' notion of generative anthropology which I have also used as the starting point for my own epochal concept of performatism. Since I have treated both Gans' semiotics and the notion of performatism elsewhere in greater detail, I will not reiterate their basic premises here.³ In-

¹ Most notably in Döring-Smirnov und Smirnov 1982.

² As described, for example, in Smirnov 1991.

³ See, for example, the original formulation in Eshelman 2000 as well as a more recent reworking in Eshelman 2005/2006. For a thorough presentation of generative anthropology see Gans 1993.

stead, I wish to undertake a brief survey of some other current monist theories and consider their role in effecting the shift to what I call performatist culture.

My short foray into the new monism begins in a kind of limbo reserved for theories that are monist in design but lack certain crucial features that would enable them to leave the gravitational field of posthistorical discourse. As a result they continue to orbit endlessly around the very kind of postmodern paradoxes that their authors set out to overcome.

Pragmatic Performatism: "Against Theory"

In America, the most widely discussed monist concept up to now has been Steven Knapp's and Walter Benn Michaels' campaign "against theory" which was launched in the early 1980's.⁴ Viewed in performatist terms, Knapp and Michaels place author, sign and recipient within the bounds of an inner or primary frame.⁵ Signs only mean things because human subjects intend them so for other people; interpretations by those other people, for their part, can only seek to reconstruct those intentions through the signs provided by the work. All three elements meet in a unified performance that cannot be reduced to any one of its parts. Attempts to isolate and favor any one part of this unity – be it the mark or trace after the fact (poststructuralism) or the author before the fact (hermeneutics) lead to logical absurdities in the way interpretation is defined and practiced. For example, by radically separating human intention from the sign, poststructuralists like Paul de Man wind up positing the existence of completely arbitrary signifiers that "mean nothing" – a definition suggesting, in effect, that we are no longer dealing with signifiers but with mere sounds.⁶

With their concept Knapp and Michaels establish an airtight primary frame that would choke off all "theory" – all attempts to intervene one-sidedly in the basic semiotic relation linking author, sign and recipient. As such, interpretation acquires a distinctly performative rather than an epistemological cast. Different people interpret what they believe is someone else's intent and the best or most convincing interpretations of the signs conveying that intent compete for acceptance. Individual subjects constitute themselves by expressing intentions they necessarily believe in; their beliefs make their own selfness accessible to others who in turn make their own selfness available through the act of interpretation.

⁴ For the original article and the debate surrounding it see Mitchell 1985.

⁵ Performatist narratives (and arguments) work by constructing a congruent pair of frames. The inner frame (or scene) highlights an unbelievable or dubious situation or argument; the outer frame (or work frame) then confirms the peculiar logic of the inner frame on the higher level of the work as a whole. The observer knows that this logic is askew, but has no choice but to accept it as a structural principle; he or she is thus forced to *believe* in an aesthetic context. For literary examples of how this framing works see Eshelman 2005/2006.

⁶ See Knapp and Michaels' critique of de Man in Mitchell 1985, 22-23.

Belief rather than knowledge becomes the motor of interpretation and the subject rather than the signifier its agent; the benchmark of historical criticism becomes pragmatic and performative.

Unfortunately, Knapp and Michaels never moved beyond this first argumentative step. The fatal flaw of their monist scheme is that it lacks an outer, synthetic frame relating the act of interpretation to human culture on some higher level. If Knapp and Michaels' neo-Peircean, pragmatic concept really were operative, culture would consist of an endless clusters of unified interpretative performances jostling one another until one or the other comes up on top. The post-structuralist notion of culture as endlessly proliferating textuality would be replaced by a pragmatic, anti-theoretical notion of endlessly proliferating primary frames or interpretative performances. The history of culture would become a chain of interpretative acts elbowing one another for primacy with "theory" – or what's left of it – tagging harmlessly along behind. Knapp and Michaels' scheme turns out to be atomistic and in the end nearly tautological. Before interpretation, as it turns out, there is just interpretation and after interpretation – still more interpretation. For this reason, apparently, Michaels himself has never been able to develop a positive concept of post-postmodernism.⁷ His own work lacks an outer frame – a *theory* – that would link the atomistic, belief-centered monism of anti-theory with some overarching construct around it. Inasmuch as it stays true to its name, anti-theory rules out any synthetic concept of literary history or culture; its own claim to novelty remains restricted to the analytical nuts-and-bolts realm of argumentative logic.

This is most evident in the scene devised by Knapp and Michaels to dismantle "theory." In their by now well-known scenario waves mysteriously inscribe a pantheistic poem by Wordsworth on a sandy beach – suggesting an originary confrontation with the possibility of a higher, transcendental intent.⁸ The authors, however, in keeping with their strict anti-theoretical agenda do not extend their analysis to the structural significance of belief for the development of culture as a whole. This rules out any Durkheimian insight into religion or cult as the basis of secular culture and it rules out any semiotic insight into history as the alternation of two basic competing sets towards the sign – of which Knapp and Michaels' stringent anti-theory is just one variant. Although in itself a groundbreaking step forward into the new monism, anti-theory is unable to reflect on its own innovative historical contribution and remains mired in posthistory.

⁷ His most recent book, *The Shape of the Signifier. 1967 to the End of History* (Michaels 2004), is a stinging critique of postmodernism and poststructuralism that however presents no positive alternative to them.

⁸ See Mitchell 1985, 15-18.

Cynical Performatism: Boris Groys's *Unter Verdacht*

As far as I am aware, the only critic to realize the crucial importance of giving the new a formal theoretical justification has been Boris Groys. Like Knapp and Michaels, Groys began his critique of poststructuralism using a single-framed monism and taking performativity as the main benchmark of innovation. Groys' basic strategy, first set forth in his book *Über das Neue* [On the new] (Groys 1992), was to jump-start history again by redefining epochal innovation "the new" – as performance (Groys states that it "has the character of an event"⁹). Groys posits the existence of two realms: the everyday or profane world and the privileged realm of the archive. Innovation – and with it the historical development of art – is determined by what gets into the archive and what is expelled from it over the course of time. Groys argues that there is no "secret" guaranteeing the inclusion of a profane object in the realm of artistic value. Neither market manipulation nor the Freudian unconscious nor authenticity nor otherness nor any other rule formulated by discourse itself is capable of regulating entry into the archive. The reason for this is that all discursive rules themselves are subject to a performative mechanism arising from the tension between the archive and the profane, undifferentiated world of otherness around it. According to Groys, valuable things in the archive gain their value by presenting the profane other in a new, exciting way. Unfortunately, the luster of this presentation begins to dim at the very moment that it gains general acceptance in the realm of the archive. In other words, as soon as a theory of the profane is canonized within the archive it loses precisely that mysterious bond with the profane, other world that made it attractive to the archive in the first place.¹⁰ The search for a new interpretation of the profane other can then begin anew.

Using this performative theory of cultural innovation, Groys has no trouble disposing of the main conceit of posthistorical discourse. Deconstruction's zig-zagging, trace-guided strategy of coupling new with old and old with new does not end history, since a quick glance at its intellectual predecessors confirms that deconstruction's specific way of showing that there is nothing really new is itself something new (Groys 1992, 48). Although Groys' performative, monist redefinition of history has an undeniable logical charm to it, it is like "anti-theory" dangerously close to turning into an airtight, arid argument. If we take Groys at his word, the only irreducible, constant element in history is a performative mechanism that devalues its canons as soon as it grows bored with them and re-

⁹ "True thought has the character of an event—and disappears with time." ["Das wahre Denken ist ereignishaft – und vergeht mit der Zeit."] (Groys 1992, 150)

¹⁰ "The successful, true description changes the boundary separating the valorized and the profane and in succeeding robs itself of its own truth." ["Die gelungene wahre Beschreibung verändert den Verlauf der Grenze zwischen dem Valorisierten und dem Profanen und beraubt sich mit ihrem Gelingen selbst ihrer Wahrheit."] (Groys 1992, 151)

places them with new ones. For someone familiar with the tradition of Russian literary theory, the whole thing sounds like a warmed-over version of the Russian Formalist notion of automatization and deautomatization which reduced literary history to a struggle between musty old canons and dazzling new shock effects. As Groys himself appears to have realized, this two-dimensional, mechanistic definition of historical innovation was not enough to grasp the historical process in all its profundity.

With this in mind, Groys returned to the problem of the new in a second book entitled *Unter Verdacht* [Under Suspicion] (Groys 2000). In trying to describe the “cultural economy” determining historical innovation, Groys introduces two new structural features to his model. The first addition is a unified sign encompassing a “submedial space” in addition to signifier and signified; the second is what he calls a “submedial” subject manipulating that space. In more conventional terms one could say that Groys introduces an ontological, an anthropological and a transcendent dimension to the sign. For Groys signs are no longer composed of signifiers and signifieds that freely combine and disperse in the endless ebb and flow of signification. Rather, signs have the purpose of conveying to us something fundamental and mysterious about being without our ever really being able to pinpoint what that relation is. Groys calls this profound, hidden realm below the signifier-signified relation the “submedial space.” This space, like the profane realm outside the archive, appears to the archive as an ineffable other. Unlike the profane realm the submedial space is already *inside* the archive; it forms the substrate of the valued objects of art within that privileged space. The archive, in other words, has a horizontal dimension (pertaining to the transactions between valued and profane things) and a vertical one (pertaining to a “deep,” ontological or submedial realm and a “superficial” or merely semiotic one). The point of including things in the archive is to plunge into an abyss of speculation on being; the archive itself, however, must always react to this by transcending its own closure – by reaching outside of itself – to renew the search for what is at the root of existence. The archive, as the highest repository of cultural value, is now in any case implicated in “deep,” inner questions along with regulating economic transactions between the valuable and the profane.

In contrast to his first model which left the question of agency open, Groys now introduces a half-human, half-transcendent subject into his scheme. According to Groys, in dealing with the archive we always suspect that an unknown someone – a “submedial subject” – is manipulating the submedial space to his or her own ineffable ends. The workings of the media in the archive are hence always “under suspicion” of being misused or abused for someone else’s purposes. Although this suspicion can never be entirely eliminated, it is possible to diminish it somewhat with what Groys calls the “forthrightness effect” [*Effekt der Aufrichtigkeit*] (Groys 2000, 23). This means that even though it is impossi-

ble to be truly candid or forthright about the (unknowable) workings of the archive, the effect of this can be temporarily achieved when someone seems to reveal to us the “real” workings of ontological or submedial space. According to Groys this revelation occurs mainly by way of paradox, alterity and surprise. Signs that seem most forthright tend to be “first of all, new, unusual, and unexpected and, second of all, poor, base, and vulgar” (Groys 2000, 73). To summarize, the basic workings of culture are rooted in a never-ending process of revelation that seems to be manipulated by a malevolent subject with distinctly theist capabilities – a devious God of small things, as it were, who is really a projection of our own jealous insecurities and desires.

Whatever one happens to think of Groys’ personal conclusions, his monist model of media culture is in structural terms directly comparable to both generative anthropology and performatism. Like Gans’ originary or ostensive sign, Groys’ concept of submedial space breeds resentment that must be constantly assuaged through new acts of signification, valuation and regress to an unreachable origin. And, like performatist constructs, Groys’ model of media culture consists of a double frame (archive and sign) presided over by a distinctly theist subject. In spite of these similarities, however, Groys’ attempt to formulate a “media ontology” never quite crosses the threshold of postmodernism. The reason for this is Groys’ tenacious, typically poststructuralist insistence on favoring knowledge over belief. Since Groys “knows” that ontology is a bottomless pit and since he “knows” that there is no submedial subject or God of culture, he has no particular interest in getting involved in the day-to-day workings of the archive itself. Having demonstrated with epistemological means that poststructuralist discourse is really an ontology, he is content to walk off with the grand prize for epistemological criticism but does not take an ontological stand himself – thus, in effect, repeating the basic argumentative gesture of poststructuralism. Accordingly, the last section of *Unter Verdacht* rounds up and interrogates the usual suspects – Derrida, Bataille, Mauss, Lyotard etc. – but says nothing about the across-the-board switch to monism now taking place in contemporary culture. One leaves Groys with the suspicion that although he himself has intuitively grasped the new, monist turn to a spatially framed apprehension of being, he still feels more comfortable playing the old, postmodern game of trying to get in the last epistemological word at all costs. This is why Groys prefers to talk about the new in the abstract as a transcendental, empty category but not as an immanent state or way of being – unless you happen to think that “being” means getting constantly hoodwinked by an unseen, malicious Other. Groys, like Knapp and Michaels, leads us to the promised land of post-postmodernism but is unable to enter it himself.

As these two examples show, the minimal conditions for overcoming postmodernism would seem to be, apart from holding to a monist concept of sign, a

synthetic rather than merely analytical, methodology and the unequivocal grounding of discourse in ontology instead of epistemology. The two following theories that I would like to discuss in greater detail – Peter Sloterdijk’s spherology and Jean-Luc Marion’s philosophy of givenness – not only meet these criteria in full but also add, respectively, a cultural-historical dimension and a phenomenological one to the existing body of monist, no longer postmodern theory.

Effervescent Performatism: Peter Sloterdijk’s Spherology

One German philosopher who has had no qualms about switching over to a monist, spatially defined ontology of culture is Peter Sloterdijk. With his massive 2,400-page trilogy *Sphären* [Spheres]¹¹ Sloterdijk has tried nothing less than to show that all human culture is based on discrete psycho-social spaces that he divides into “bubbles,” “globes” and “foams.” Although not wholly original in its basic premise about the importance of closed-off, spiritualized space – Mircea Eliade has said something similar before¹² – Sloterdijk far exceeds Eliade in the boldness of his philosophical vision and the scope of his cultural commentaries which range from the beginnings of civilization to the present day and include discussions of such wildly diverse topics as prenatal mother-child bonding, mesmerism, Heidegger’s concept of being-in-the-world and the history of air-conditioning. Sloterdijk’s own discourse in fact exemplifies the ebullient “foaming” [*Verschäumlichung* {sic}] that is the focus of his third volume. Rather than building up a carefully articulated philosophical edifice step by step, he surges from one encapsulated sphere or topic to another, demonstrating as he does their basic phenomenological unity in diversity.

As with the other theories discussed here, the outlook of spherology is explicitly postmetaphysical. Sloterdijk is interested neither in returning to the old global unities of classical metaphysics (at one point, he calls his own method a “critique of round reason” [I, 63]) nor in restoring the whole, well-rounded subjects that were once thought to reside within them. Instead, he suggests that all human culture arises in what he calls spheres which he defines as spatial encapsulations, spheres or “bubbles” [*Blasen*] enabling a dyadic, intimate bond to develop between at least two people: The sphere is the interiorized, developed, divisible round space that people live in insofar as they succeed in becoming human. Because living already always means creating spheres both small and large, humans are the beings who erect round worlds and gaze off into horizons. Living in spheres means creating the dimension in which people can be con-

¹¹ *Sphären I. Blasen* [Spheres I. Bubbles] (Sloterdijk 1998); *Sphären II. Globen* [Spheres II. Globes] (Sloterdijk 1999); *Sphären III. Schäume* [Spheres III. Foams] (Sloterdijk 2004). Cited henceforth as I, II and III.

¹² See Eliade (1987, 22). Sloterdijk himself doesn’t acknowledge this connection directly.

tained. Spheres are spatial creations that act as immune systems for ecstatic beings upon which the outside world exerts its influence.

Die Sphäre ist das innenhafte, erschlossene, geteilte Runde, das Menschen bewohnen, sofern es ihnen gelingt, Menschen zu werden. Weil Wohnen immer schon Sphären bilden heißt, im Kleinen wie im Großen, sind die Menschen die Wesen, die Rundwelten aufstellen und in Horizonte anschauen. In Sphären leben heißt, die Dimension erzeugen, in der Menschen enthalten sein können. Sphären sind immunsystemisch wirksame Raumschöpfungen für ekstatische Wesen, an denen das Außen arbeitet. (I, 28)

Translated into the terms of performatism this means that the basic unit of human existence is an artificially created frame privileging inside over out but not excluding the external world entirely; the inner world must constantly “maintain, reconstitute, and improve itself in the face of the provocation that is the outside” (I, 46). Unlike generative anthropology, Sloterdijk’s argumentation lacks any causal explanation of the originary spherological scene; he simply posits it as a universally empirical given, using as he does the biologically suggestive metaphor of the immune system and stressing its creative, artificial nature with evocative terms like “innenhaft” [having the character of insideness], “Schöpfung” [creation], “erschlossen” [opened up for use, made accessible], or “bilden” [to form]. God, rather than being an outside entity, is the emotive froth atop this creative, bubble-blowing performance: “God is an ecstasy arising out of the idea of competency, which encloses the world and the subjectivities embedded within it” (I, 38). For Sloterdijk, our own secular, technological striving is the one, rationalized side of a much older unity of outwardly directed ecstasy and creative competence. Sloterdijk does not wish to concoct a crypto-theological justification for modern science. However, he does note that the most spectacular areas of research in the “living sciences” – the brain, the genome and the immune system – can hardly be reconciled with intensified self-reflection on what is human. With the “becoming explicit” of these and similar implicit relations, might we not as Sloterdijk questions be confronted with “something completely idiosyncratic, alien, different, something that was never implied or expected, and that can never be assimilated to our thinking?” (III, 78). In such a case we would be dealing with a technological, object-based newness that could not be routinely assimilated into either what traditional phenomenology calls self-reflection or what poststructuralism calls discourse. For Sloterdijk the transcendent returns again as a promise and problem through the medium of scientific discovery.

As this line of thinking makes clear, Sloterdijk is less interested in *aesthetic* framing – in bracketing knowledge to bring forth beautiful belief – than in what might be called *technical* framing – a way of making things explicit by means of

a creative, spatially delineated performance that continually redefines the boundaries of the phenomenal world while invigorating our perception of it. Here, Sloterdijk is evidently following in the antique philosophical tradition that stresses *technē* and subordinates the experiencing of beauty to a way of knowing (a predecessor of sorts is Heidegger in his essay "The Origin of the Work of Art" [Heidegger 1960]¹³). Sloterdijk's notion that we acquire knowledge by making the implicit explicit is as he himself emphasizes lifted directly from Leibniz's monadology – the crucial difference being that the spatially limited bubble replaces the Leibnizian fold which meanders endlessly through the arabesque, ineffable whole of a constantly shifting reality.¹⁴

The third salient feature of Sloterdijk's spherology is its recourse to a specifically theist, dyadic argument that frames, unifies and renders immanent the old metaphysical call for a unified, self-sufficient subject and a preexistent origin. According to Sloterdijk, the mythological origin of the sphere is neither individual nor divine but lies in the paradoxical, coextensive reciprocity between a theist source and the subject he creates in his own image: "man [der Mensch] is an artificial product [Kunstgebilde] that could only be created all at twice [auf zweimal] {sic}" (I, 32). In his following excursions into cultural history Sloterdijk justifies this "pneumatic reciprocity," (I, 41) or "bipolar intimacy" (I, 40) between the inspiring source [*der Hauchende*] and its inspired recipient [*der Angehauchte*] on a wide variety of levels resisting reduction to any one particular discipline, category or time. *Sphären I*, for example, contains discussions of the myth of Adam's creation; a history of "interfacial relations"; an attempt to position prenatal mother-child relationships before Lacan's mirror stage; a synoptic treatment of angels, twins and tutelary gods; an intellectual history of the "fascination with proximity" and a good deal more. *Sphären II*, for its part, deals with the grand but ultimately fruitless metaphysical attempts to encase the world in all-encompassing "globes." *Sphären III*, which treats the ills afflicting and potentials residing in (post-)modernity, discusses the breakdown, aesthetization and technologization of spheres as well as their re-formation and proliferation in the guise of plural ontologies that Sloterdijk calls "foams" and "anthropogenic islands" (he suggests nine different island categories bearing names like the "thanatope," the "ergotope," the "erototope" etc.). It is not possible to go into any of these topics in any detail without falling victim to what Sloterdijk calls his "cornucopia complex" (III, 872). It is, however, striking how Sloterdijk, using mainly mythological examples, arrives at a concept of dyadic reciprocity

¹³ Sloterdijk, although not uncritical of dangers posed by technology, has none of Heidegger's rooted-in-the-sod, anti-modern bias. In keeping with his attempt to describe the "worst-best of all possible worlds" (III, 878) Sloterdijk also accords considerable space to a treatment of what he calls "atmoterrorism" (III, 89-125).

¹⁴ See III, 78 as well as Leibniz's *Monadology*, § 61.

structurally similar to Gans' originary scene¹⁵ and in a sense confirming it on the level of originary mythology. Although lacking both a semiotic dimension and a causal explanation of its origin, Sloterdijk's spherology insists no less than generative anthropology on a framed scene in which a dyadic, coextensive relationship between two founding figures results in a necessary intuition of personified divinity and initiates the beginning of culture.

Although his own spherology is manifestly monist and most certainly no longer postmodern, Sloterdijk says little or nothing about the possibility of an epochal turn – something odd in a book that otherwise intensively and exhaustively reflects on all aspects of (post-)modern existence. The main reason for this seems to lie in Sloterdijk's one-sided fixation on spatiality and in particular in his effervescent postmetaphysical concept of foams. The foams – the multitude of spatially organized, ontologically founded mini-realms that have spread out to replace the all-encompassing “globes” of classical metaphysics – bear a deliberate structural resemblance to Deleuze and Guattari's uncontrollably proliferating rhizome (Deleuze and Guattari 1988, 3-25). Sloterdijk in fact calls the foams “rhizomes with an inside space” [*Binnenraum-Rhizome*] (III, 302). The rhizome, as we may recall, consists of an unbounded network of intersecting, relationally determined, node-like positions that lack any ontological center, origin, ground or end. These nodal positions (like Leibniz's monads and Deleuze and Guattari's schizophrenic subject in their *Anti-Oedipus*) are not specifically anthropological; they are beholden only to the shifting patterns of energetic relationality coursing through them and not to any “outside” source like the human being. Sloterdijk for his part imposes precisely this unified human ground or frame on the rhizome's anti-human dualism, breaking it up as he does into countless cells or bubbles existing together “in lateral annex formations, in flat condominiums, or co-isolated associations” (III, 302). Unlike Deleuze and Guattari who are content to gyre and gimble in the rhizome's endless, internally given relationality, Sloterdijk is not satisfied with taking an extended, postmetaphysical bubble bath in his own foams. Instead he suggests the possibility of a higher perspective akin to that of a satellite photo that would capture the “unstable, momentary synthesis of a teeming agglomeration” (III, 303) made up by the foams. If this “momentary synthesis” would be given a temporal dimension it would be possible to place Sloterdijk a step ahead in time of the rhizomatic theory that he has surpassed with his own innovative monism. The synthesis in any

¹⁵ In Gans's hypothetical originary scene two hominids without language are caught up in a state of mimetic rivalry, with one hominid imitating the desire of the other for some object. Before the rivalry can escalate into murderous strife, one hominid emits a sign which, if it is accepted by the other, defers the violent situation and enables language, religion and culture to arise. The initial situation is a performance based entirely on intuited reciprocity mediated by the sign and not on the meaning conveyed by the sign (which at this stage in fact has no meaning). For a more detailed discussion see Gans 1997, 13-29.

case would act as a Kantian corrective to the neo-Leibnizian order of overflowing foams.

Taken in the most general philosophical and mytho-theological terms, one can say that Sloterdijk begins with a theist bubble-built-for-two and allows it to proliferate in “neomonadological” (III, 298), neo-Leibnizian fashion (with the possibility of taking a quick theist look at the whole thing from above, in the manner of a tutelary god or *observer*, a subject touched on by Sloterdijk himself in *Sphären I* [I, 423-424]¹⁶). The question nonetheless arises as to how the theist bubbles interact with one another, communicate and multiply as psychosocial entities. Sloterdijk for very good reasons is unwilling to resort to an energetic, non-human explanation of how the bubbles expand and proliferate as foam – for this would lead him straight back into the deist, dualist fold of Deleuzian poststructuralism. At the same time Sloterdijk also avoids the Kantian tradition in which a collective more or less unanimously perceives phenomena as social or aesthetic facts. Instead he seeks an answer to the problem of communication by resorting to a presemiotic, quasi-biological notion of mimesis or imitation advanced by the 19th century French sociologist Gabriel de Tarde.

Originally considered a serious alternative to Durkheim’s more structured neo-Kantian approach, Tarde’s radical monist, neo-Leibnizian attempt to ascribe all interpersonal relations, social structures and cultural developments to the effects of imitation had faded into obscurity by the mid 20th century.¹⁷ Following Deleuze and Guattari who revived Tarde’s line of thinking in *A Thousand Plateaus* (1988, 218-219), Sloterdijk uses Tarde’s concept of mimesis to explain how his windowless spheres manage to communicate with one another in spite of themselves: “agreement among them [the spheres, R.E.] doesn’t occur through direct exchange between the cells, but rather through the mimetic infiltration of similar patterns, excitations, infectious goods, and symbols into each one of them” (III, 61). For similar reasons, Sloterdijk sees his “erototope” operating according to René Girard’s pre-semiotic notion of erotic, triangular mimesis.¹⁸ Eros accordingly is not “a dual-libidinous tension between an Ego and an Other, but a triangular provocation” (III, 406). Projected onto a global stage, this sort of erotic and social jealousy comes to resemble the problem of resentment as outlined by Gans.¹⁹ Sloterdijk sums this up in the following way: “If the cultural theory were to pose a question to the 21st century, it would be this:

¹⁶ The position of the synthetic *observer* injects a Kantian corrective into Sloterdijk’s otherwise Leibnizian thinking.

¹⁷ His main work is *The Laws of Imitation* (Gloucester, Mass.: P. Smith, 1962; orig. 1890). Sloterdijk also draws on a work obscure even in its own time, *Monadologie et sociologie* (Paris: Institut Synthélabo, 1999 [orig. 1893]).

¹⁸ As outlined in Girard 1965.

¹⁹ Resentment is an unavoidable consequence of the originary scene in which the tacit acceptance of the sign in the place of a desired object may lead to material disadvantages for one of the participants.

whether modernity can bring its experiment with the globalization of jealousy under control" (III, 411). The difference between spherology and Gans' generative anthropology resides not only in Sloterdijk's lack of a semiotic perspective but also in his assumption of a postcapitalist, mimetic exchange mechanism that would, as it were, submerge both traditional contractual and naturalistic explanations of human coexistence in a gigantic bed of foams.²⁰

Summing up his own results in *Sphären III* in an oblique way, Sloterdijk allows one of the participants in an imaginary round-table discussion to speak of his work as "postpessimistic" (III, 876) – thus, explicitly confirming the metaphysical optimism that is characteristic of performatism and anathema to post-modernism. Also congenial to performatism is Sloterdijk's interest in paradoxality. In his imaginary discussion he has another critic note how an oxymoronic, spherological discourse would allow "the conversion from a monotonously pessimistic science to a sad-happy one" that would correspond to a "contemporary form of the *docta ignorantia* ["doctrine of learned ignorance," R.E.]" (III, 877-8). Precisely this paradoxical, artificially induced conflation of external knowledge and inner ignorance plays a central role in performatist aesthetics – and in the phenomenology of the next monist author to be treated below.

Phenomenological Performatism: Jean-Luc Marion's *Being Given*

As I have pointed out elsewhere (Eshelman 2001/2002, 1), my own notion of performatism is a kind of phenomenology turned inside out. Instead of bracketing away belief in order to achieve knowledge, performatist works bracket away knowledge in order to achieve belief. This observation was embedded in a semiotic line of argumentation and I did not choose to develop it further. It is thus all the more interesting to observe how a professional philosopher and theologian goes about reversing the basic premises of phenomenology in a similar, albeit more exacting way.

The philosopher in question is Jean-Luc Marion, who has been developing a phenomenological counter-strategy to deconstruction since the late 1980's. In the following I will focus on Marion's major work *Etant donné* (English translation: *Being Given*; resp. Marion 1998 and 2002) which has striking structural similarities to the projects of generative anthropology and performatism. Accordingly, the angle of approach will be typological rather than philosophical in the strict sense of the word. Rather than attempting a critique of Marion's individual argumentative positions, I would like to demonstrate his more general affinity with Gans' and my own semiotically based concepts. With its distinctly

²⁰ III, 261-308. Sloterdijk titles this position "Neither Contract nor Natural Growth" [*Nicht Vertrag, nicht Gewächs*]. Gans, whose views may best be described as neo-conservative, suggests that liberal democracy and capitalism are the best means of dissipating and diminishing resentment (see, for example, Gans 1996).

Kantian aesthetic tilt Marion's phenomenology also presents a distinct counterpoint to Sloterdijk's emphasis on technologically mediated knowing and neo-monadological foams.

Marion's phenomenological point of departure is what he calls givenness which he opposes to the traditional phenomenological preoccupation with objectness (Husserl) and being (Heidegger). Marion, in other words, seeks to shift the focus of phenomenology from a positivistic apprehension of things or an existential interpretation of man's condition to the analysis of a purely immanent domain (givenness) involving the relations between a giver, a givee and a gift. Translated into performatist terms, Marion establishes givenness as an outer frame in whose immanent boundaries certain irreducible value transactions take place. This immanent domain in turn contains a starting point for a new synthetic upsurge – an inner frame – which would transcend the immanent field of givenness when taken to its outer limits. In short, Marion formulates a performative phenomenology of givenness that has important repercussions for the study of art, culture and religion.

Marion begins by defining givenness in terms borrowed directly from Kantian aesthetics. Using an "ordinary, indeed mediocre" (2002, 40) painting as the starting point of his discussion, Marion suggests that its givenness is dependent neither on the material status of its objectness (what Heidegger calls subsistence or *Vorhandenheit*) nor on the ability of the given to be used or manipulated in practical terms (the ready-to-hand, or *Zuhandenheit*). Drawing on the terminology employed by Groys, one could say that the painting's givenness can neither be traced back to the material substrate of its signs (paint, canvas, etc.) nor to the way it is manipulated in economic or pragmatic terms (e.g., placed in or removed from a museum). Unlike Groys, Heidegger and Derrida, Marion refuses to subsume the beauty of the painting to a search for truth: "Beauty is accomplished and abolished in the truth" (2002, 45-46). Instead Marion draws on the Kantian definition of beauty as something corresponding neither to a concrete end nor to a concept: "the painting [...] obeys a finality for which no concept provides the objective representation" (2002, 43). The catch here is the *deliberate mediocrity* of the painting – something alien to Kant's argumentation. Since the banal painting has no special attraction to us above and beyond its own visibility, its analysis is, according to Marion, applicable to everything else, for "then all ordinary phenomenality, whose paradigm it would be, could also be reduced to a given" (2002, 40). In Groysian terms one could say that Marion privileges a cultural object inside the archive but deliberately weakens its pretensions to lasting or "eternal" value – the painting in question is in fact close to being ejected from the archive entirely. Conversely, Marion's definition also raises the chances of mediocre objects *outside* the archive being included in it at some future time. The result is a distinctly Kantian definition of givenness in

terms of what one might call weak beauty. By definition, this weak, phenomenal beauty transcends the bounds of any archive and can be found in all of cultural reality.

If the phenomenality of the painting is not subordinate to pragmatic ends, to concepts, to truth or to the archive, then just how does it work? Unlike Groys, who at this point reverts to a noncommittal, purely epistemological account of how cultural value is churned out in a process of endless regress, Marion takes a specific ontological stand. To the ontic visibility of the painting is now added an “upsurge” or “coming forward” (2002, 47) is added that can be said to “impose” (2002, 47) itself on the viewer. As Marion suggests, “it is no longer a matter of seeing what is, but of seeing its coming up into visibility [...]” (2002, 48). It is not really the viewer that does this but the painting itself: “the initiative always falls to the painting itself, which decides, as a long-closed barrier yields, to let us reach what is all too visible for us to be able to represent it as a mere being” (2002, 48). The painting thus moves from invisibility to visibility by appearing in its imposing, binding givenness to a viewer who must “fall in alignment” with its “immanent axis” (2002, 123). The term Marion uses to describe this movement – anamorphosis – is both auspicious and uncannily familiar.²¹ For anamorphosis is an almost literal translation of the phrase *per formam* – “ana” means “movement across” and “morphosis” pertains to form. At its core, then, the new phenomenology of givenness is a kind of *performance*. Seen in this way anamorphosis corresponds in pictorial or visual terms to a primary frame binding author, art work and viewer in a single, dynamic, binding unity. As we have however seen beforehand, simply establishing this performative unity is not enough (as the case of “against theory” demonstrates). We must also address the problem of how this inner frame relates to things outside and above it (as marked by a synthetic outer frame) and how this relation affects the subject that is caught in its phenomenological “lock.” Before turning to these questions, however, it is first necessary to deal with the deconstructive critique that presents itself as an unavoidable given in any discussion of gifts, giving and givenness.

The main obstacle on the way of defining an immanent domain of givenness is without a doubt Derrida’s well-known deconstruction of Marcel Mauss’ essay *The Gift in Given Time* (Derrida 1992). Derrida’s by now classic exposition demonstrates with devastating efficacy that Mauss’ essay on the sacral economy of the gift is a kind of metaphysical shell game in which the very conditions used to define the gift at the same time work to exclude its appearance. Taking Mauss exactly at his word, Derrida shows that the gift can only function as such when a) it is not part of the exchange system which it is supposed to organize; b)

²¹ In conventional terms anamorphosis is a distorted image that requires an odd or unusual angle to be seen in proportion. For Marion’s own definition see 2002, 119-125.

the recipient is not aware of it; c) the giver is not aware of it either; and d) the gift itself never achieves presence. Put in phenomenological terms, the gift can only appear when it has been bracketed out of existence from the very start. The only real gift you get from participating in this economy, it would seem, is that of insanity – since anyone who believes in the monist unity underlying it would have to be pretty well off his rocker.

Marion does not dispute Derrida's analysis and reviews it again in some detail in order to confirm its basic veracity. Marion's aim is not to refute Derrida's deconstruction but to take it a step further – to undertake an even more radical bracketing that allows us to focus on the purely immanent side of the gift as opposed to the metaphysical side reinscribed – and rendered ridiculous – by Derrida. As Marion notes, Derrida is first and foremost interested in a general critique of metaphysics rather than in working out a positive phenomenology of the gift: "in identifying the possibility of the gift with its impossibility, this contradiction [i.e., the one uncovered by Derrida, R.E.] states the essence of nothing at all, therefore not of any gift whatsoever" (2002, 81). If we are to talk about the gift it is, according to Marion, necessary to speak about it in terms of its *possibility* rather than impossibility. This in turn can only take place beneath the threshold of the metaphysical-economic model used by both Mauss and Derrida:

The standard model of the gift in fact eliminates the gift – at least the gift as complete loss, such that it would imply a break of the circle and a suspension of the gift's return, of the gift in return. If the truth of the gift resides in the payback, the truth lowers it to the status of a loan. (2002, 83)

Marion's response to this metaphysical-pragmatic model is to undertake what he calls a "triple *epokhē*" revealing precisely that immanent phenomenality supposedly written off forever in Derrida's general critique of metaphysics. This triple *epokhē* or bracketing of givee,²² giver and gift involves a move that, as I have mentioned above, owes a great deal to Kantian aesthetics. In order to recover the gift in its phenomenological immanence Marion must sever it from all purposive and metaphysical ties. In this realm of redoubled bracketing Marion is able to reveal numerous phenomenal manifestations of non-circular, unecological giving that were swept under the rug in the course of Derrida's deconstruction. Marion can show convincingly, for example, that it is possible to bracket the givee when the gift is anonymous or when the givee is an enemy or an ingrate (someone incapable of, or unwilling to indulge in reciprocity). As a case in point one can take the ingrate. Even as he asserts the metaphysical principle of self-identity ("I don't owe anything to anyone") his conduct "lays bare the pure immanence of the gift" (2002, 91) since the ingrate shows that the gift

²² The translator of *Etant donné*, Jeffrey Kosky, introduced this neologism to maintain the morphological symmetry between *don* (gift), *donataire* (recipient) and *donateur* (giver).

“is perfectly accomplished without the givee’s consent” (2002, 91). With his ingratitude, in other words, the givee shows that the immanent, anti-metaphysical performance of the gift – its “losing itself without return,” its break with “self-identity” (2002, 91) – is so real a threat in phenomenal terms that it becomes something well worth denying.

This surprising revelation of phenomenological immanence applies no less to Marion’s way of bracketing of the giver and the gift, which I can only briefly touch on here. It will suffice to say that Marion’s phenomenological readings appear strikingly refreshing and rich when read against the background of Derrida’s merciless, predictably aporetic dismantling of Mauss. Thus, Marion has no trouble showing that it is indeed possible to bracket the gift *as an object*, for this is precisely what takes place when power is bestowed on someone or when someone gives his or her word (power and confidence are not objects that can be exchanged). Marriage vows have this character, too. If you were merely to give yourself as a sexual object when getting married, it would lower the entire institution of marriage to something akin to prostitution; the phenomenological function of marriage vows is to deny this purely material or economic relation (2002, 104). Similarly the simple case of inheritance suffices to show how giving need not depend on any form of reciprocal economic (and metaphysical) exchange. If the giver does not physically exist any more, any exchange mechanism is rendered void to begin with – and the phenomenality of giving is once more confirmed as something that does not require the giver’s metaphysical or pragmatic presence.

Having confirmed that Marion’s phenomenology is not simply a return to metaphysics as understood by Derrida, I would now like to address some of the issues involved in Marion’s definition of givenness. Assuming that the visual performance or anamorphosis works as it does, it is legitimate to ask the same questions directed at anti-theory and Groys’s monist theory of suspicion. How does “givenness” differentiate and develop? Where are its boundaries? Who or what mediates it? And finally, does it have any self-consciousness of its own epochal innovation?

As I have already suggested, one of Marion’s major affinities with performatism consists in his modifying Kantianism in such a way as to cast givenness in terms of a weak, non-conceptual beauty that imposes itself on the viewer in a unified visual performance (the “becoming visible” of a given object for consciousness or anamorphosis). This mild but sweeping aestheticization of phenomenal reality is in turn accompanied by another crucial move owing a great deal to, but also correcting, Kant. This move, whose importance for founding the new monism cannot be overestimated, is a turn to Kantian intuition (*Anschauung*) which Marion places firmly before the concept:

To be sure, intuition without concept is as blind as the concept without intuition is empty; but blindness counts more here than vacuity: even blind, intuition still gives, while the concept, even if it alone can make the given seen, remains as such perfectly empty, therefore quite incapable of seeing anything whatsoever. Intuition without concept, though still blind, nevertheless gives material to an object, while the concept without intuition, though not blind, sees nothing, since nothing has yet been given to it to see. (2002, 193)

This radical privileging of intuition is at odds with Kant and most of Western philosophical tradition (including deconstruction which “feeds” on already existing, no longer intuitive binary concepts). From Marion’s point of view, philosophy traditionally favors phenomena poor in intuition (i.e., logical and mathematical phenomena that are often unreal); keying in on these phenomena in turn blocks out access to a whole wealth of phenomena both “extreme” and “common-law” in nature (regarding the latter he names “the beings of nature, the living in general, the historical event, the face of the Other in particular” [2002, 195]). As Marion emphasizes, “none of the real phenomena with which we traffic daily and obligatorily can be analyzed adequately, and what is more, they are barely even granted the right to appear” (2002, 195). Apart from these everyday givens, the focus of a phenomenology of givenness would be on phenomena that Marion calls rich in intuition or “saturated”; they would be phenomena that “would give *more, indeed immeasurably more*, than the intention would ever have aimed at or foreseen” (2002, 195).

Once again, Marion’s notion of saturation is heavily indebted to Kant’s aesthetics. For in Kant’s notion of the aesthetic idea (as interpreted by Marion), “intuition is no longer exposed in the concept; it saturates it and renders it overexposed – invisible, unreadable not by lack, but indeed by an excess of light” (2002, 198). In the aesthetic idea, in other words, the concept is occluded by the intuition of an object that now unfolds, to use Kant’s words directly, in its own “free play.”²³ And this “free play,” as Marion suggests, is not just qualitatively beautiful in the narrow Kantian sense, but must also be opened to include the quantitative dimension of the sublime.

Given these conditions, it is now possible to reconstruct the field of givenness in its entire phenomenal range. It stretches by degree from the intuitively apprehended, weakly beautiful becoming visible or anamorphosis of a phenomenon to the outer bounds of a sublime, heavily saturated intuition arising when a phenomenon exceeds its own conceptualization in paradox. The inner frame (marked by anamorphosis) and the outer frame (marked by the sublime, dazzling occlusion of the concept in paradox) reveal themselves as part of one and the same immanent field. At the same time, they serve to delineate that field

²³ *Critique of Judgment (Kritik der Urteilskraft)*, § 57.

from mere unmediated materiality and from any metaphysical concept purporting to regulate that field from without.

While it is not possible here to treat Marion's discussion of saturation and paradox in anything other than a cursory way, it is worth dwelling briefly on four "topics of the phenomenon" suggested by Marion near the end of his exposition – topics derived from the saturation of the Kantian concepts of quantity, quality, relation and modality.

Marion calls the first such topic "the event." The function of the event is, stated most simply, to make history once more possible. The event "is not limited to an instant, a place or an empirical individual," but "covers a physical space such that no gaze encompasses it with one sweep" and "encompasses a population such that none of those who belong to it can take upon themselves an absolute or even privileged point of view [...]" (2002, 228). The paradigm of this kind of event is the battle, "which makes itself of itself, starting from a point of view that it alone can unify, without any unique horizon" (2002, 229). The resulting "plurality" or "proliferation of horizons," "forbids constituting the historical event into *one* object and demands substituting an endless hermeneutic in time"; out of this endless hermeneutic eventually results a "historical community" (2002, 229). Although Marion suggests that the event has an "epoch-making" function (it "delimits a homogenous duration and imposes it as 'a block'" [2002, 228]), he does not go into detail as to how such a "homogenous duration" could impose itself upon the supposedly endless range of hermeneutical positions. For my purposes it will suffice to say that Marion succeeds in refocusing our attention on the phenomenological origins of history – his starting point is the saturated battle and not the polyunsaturated discourse about the battle. However, he remains vague on the crucial question of how epochal or framed time imposes itself on historical discourse after the event. This is clearly a line of argumentation demanding some sort of explication of the temporal "block" or epoch – something that is perhaps better achieved on a secondary level with semi-otic or structuralist means.

Marion links the second topic, i.e., the one of the "idol," with the previously discussed model of painting and of anamorphosis. The difference is now that instead of a weak, mediocre "upsurge," he allows for the possibility of a highly saturated, aesthetically dazzling performance on the part of the work of art. This is the domain of aesthetics proper or to use Groy's institutional term, the archive. Because in the case of the idol intuition always "surpasses the concept [...] proposed to welcome it," the result is a continual renewal of aesthetic experience: "The intuitive given of the idol imposes on us the demand to change our gaze again and again, continually, be this only so as to confront its unbearable bedazzlement" (2002, 230). Unlike Kant – upon whose notion of beauty and sublimity this is based – Marion denies the common necessity of this bedaz-

zlement, suggesting instead that the idol provokes an “ineluctable solipsism” (2002, 230) comparable to Heidegger’s *Jemeinigkeit* or Mineness. For the time being, it will be sufficient simply to note Marion’s insistence on aesthetic solipsism which stands in direct opposition to Kant’s aesthetic collectivism arising out of the necessarily same reaction of different observers to the beauty of the object.²⁴

With the third topic, “the flesh,” Marion introduces a specifically erotic and emotional component to his saturated phenomena. The flesh marks the invisible point where contact of what feels with the felt exceeds any relational category around it, as in ecstasy, agony, grief, feeling, orgasm etc. To this general list of “auto-affectations” Marion also adds culturally or philosophically more specified borderline states such as “the evidence of love,” Proust’s “living remembrance,” or Kierkegaard’s “fear and trembling” (2002, 231). Needless to say, the flesh remains personal due to its overwhelming immediacy. The experience of the flesh also ends in solipsism, although of a more radical variety than was the case with the idol (the flesh “gives me to myself” [2002, 232]). Marion’s discussion of the flesh, in any case, would initiate a monist phenomenology of intuitive affect – and not simply tack already always conceptualized signs onto the bare behind of presemiotic physical experience, as is now the practice in deconstruction and postfeminism.

Finally, Marion speaks of “the icon,” which represents the “ultimate point” (2002, 232) of anamorphosis and resides on the very outer rim of the immanent. From the performatist point of view, the icon is a stand-in for that theist, ineffable subject which may or may not exist outside the realm of immanent givenness (of course depending on what you believe or suspect). The icon, according to Marion, is an Other that imposes its own face and gaze onto the spectator in such a way that he or she gives itself over entirely to its silent force. The gaze and the face of the Other can only be “endured” and not reduced “to the rank of a constituted spectacle” (2002, 232-233); the icon in this way exceeds what turns out to be the mere aestheticity of the idol. Similarly the icon breaks through the solipsism of both the idol and the flesh. Transfixed by the icon the spectator renounces his “own transcendental function of constitution” and becomes what Marion calls a “witness,” i.e., someone constituted first and foremost by an other, personified gaze allowing no reflexivity. Accordingly, Marion assigns to the icon the power of synthesizing the other three aspects of saturation previously discussed. Like the event it “demands a summation of horizons and narrations” (2002, 233); like the idol it “begs to be seen and reseen” (2002, 233), albeit in a mode of endurance rather than enjoyable bedazzlement; and like the flesh it affects the I so intensely that it loses its transcendental bearings in a kind of selfless ecstasy. With the supremely potent, barely resistible figure of the

²⁴ See the *Critique of Judgment* (*Kritik der Urteilskraft*), § 22.

icon, Marion reaches the limits of the immanent field first established in the inner frame of “weak” anamorphosis.

Even for someone unfamiliar with Marion’s professional credentials, it is hardly surprising at this point that his discussion now takes an explicit theological turn. Having synthesized the saturated phenomena of the event, the idol and the flesh in the mediating, Christ-like figure of the icon, Marion leaves the sector of the immanent and begins to expound upon the possibility of a “saturation of saturation” in Christian revelation – something he does not even pretend to justify in purely immanent terms. How are we to deal with this (not entirely unexpected) leap into transcendence? Are we being “framed” so that we have no choice but to accept a purely theological interpretation of givenness? Or – what is no better – are we supposed to discount Marion’s immanent phenomenology of givenness because it originates outside the frame in open metaphysical space?

The answer, at least from my perspective, is a double “no.” Seen from an epochal bird’s-eye view, Marion’s own argumentation merely recreates the typical narrative structure of performatist works in general. Marion begins by establishing an immanent field composed of a double frame. The inner frame – anamorphosis – encloses immediately given objects of perception and draws them into the phenomenal field; the outer frame – the icon – marks the outer boundary separating that field from an unknown Outside. Within this field surprisingly innovative things happen – not least because it operates the exact same way that any other aesthetic field operates (by occluding conceptuality and practical finality). Having encouraged us to accept this immanent field of argumentation (itself saturated with many surprises), Marion then goes a step further and *transcends it himself*. In an authorial performance of his own he dares us to accept a transcendent or outside explanation that we can only believe in or reject. What is relevant here is not the actual content of Marion’s outside solution which cannot be proven one way or another. Rather it is the fact that it reinforces and gives direction to our previous position which has been to assume the *stance of a believer per se*. As critical individuals we have every right to remain skeptical of Marion’s doubly saturated revelation. However, we have been compelled by the immanent force of his argument to assume, at least temporarily and intuitively, the *possibility* of its truth within what is in effect an aesthetic frame. Whether we like it or not, we have been made to take on the phenomenological stance of *believers*. Whether of course we continue to maintain this stance on a conceptual, outside level is quite another issue – for most secular individuals this will not be an option at all. However, many secular individuals – including myself – have no difficulty at all maintaining this attitude on the *intuitive, aesthetic level* where there is no need (and where there are no means) to express belief in a dogmatically binding, conceptualized way.

In essence, all performatist works do the same thing. They begin by creating a compelling immanent scene – an aesthetic given whose intrinsic or immanent logic imposes itself forcefully on the viewer or reader (anamorphosis). This givenness is by nature saturated with scenes, relations, images etc. that acquire an entirely new, paradoxical logic within the context of the frame – a logic that is experienced intuitively and objectively by the observer as something that must be believed (the observer usually has little or no choice in the matter, short of ignoring the work entirely). This half-intuitive, half-coercive experience of aesthetically mediated belief in conceptually implausible givens sometimes comes with strings that have been attached from outside. For example, at the end of a movie we may be asked to accept what is ultimately a transcendent explanation, as in *American Beauty*. More often than not this explanation is simply deferred; the plot resolution is offered as a new given that can be taken up again in the future (this is the case in realistic works like Lars van Trier's *Idiots* or Ingo Schulze's *Simple Stories*²⁵). The fact that we are made aware that there is an outside to the aesthetic frame or field of givenness does not render its immanent logic invalid. It does however encourage us to take on a synthetic attitude causing us to reach out past the given frame and solve the problem at hand in a new, perhaps more successful way. This synthetic set of performatism towards transcending any given frame leads to a basic metaphysical optimism, even if the concrete, immediate results happen to be very meager.

Another productive perspective opened by Marion's phenomenology is the juxtaposition of a closed, solipsistic subject and an open subject set to transcendence; this subject is highly susceptible to saturated givenness and practically sits around waiting for the icon to come along and bedazzle it in a flash of *admiratio*. While Marion is clearly prejudiced toward this latter type of quasi-religious sensibility, he accurately captures the spatial poles between which the subject must move if it is to overcome its own limitations in a performance. The closed or solipsistic feeling of self is needed to focus the self enough to achieve an aim or intent; this aim or intent must however by nature lead outside the frame of the subject formulating it. Secular aesthetics and religiously tinged phenomenology obviously differ greatly in what paths such a transcending of closure can take. Here, Sloterdijk's ebullient account of intimate dyadic relationships²⁶ is perhaps closer to the pulse of post-postmodern life than is Marion's rather passive mode of waiting-to-be-called outlined in the fifth and last book of *Being Given*.

²⁵ For an analysis of *Simple Stories* see Eshelman 2005/2006, 2-4.

²⁶ See in particular, "Humans in the Magic Circle: An Intellectual History of the Fascination with Proximity" (I, 211-268).

Summary

In my discussion of the new monist theories I have tried to dispel two widespread, mutually confirming assumptions. The first is that the only true kind of theory derives from the notion of sign as something belated, uncontrollable and split apart from its referent; the second is that the new, unified concepts of sign are simply repeating old, well-known metaphysical errors. In a purely formal sense all the theories discussed do indeed start out with poststructuralist notions of sign (or in the case of Sloterdijk with the energetic-organic concept of the rhizome). The new monism however frames and unifies these concepts in a distinctly different way no longer compatible with the basic semiotic credo of post-structuralism. The crux of this difference shows itself most directly in the new monism's *framed reduction to the originary*. The focus is no longer on the wildly proliferating, secondary relations that signs indisputably enter into after they have been around for a while, but on the basic – one could say apriori – conditions necessary for the sign to come about in the first place. This “givenness” of the sign (Marion), its “ostensivity” (Gans) or the “binary reciprocity” of its creators (Sloterdijk) suggest that the creation of the very first sign must have involved a spontaneous, object-related, inspired unity of two human intuitions rather than an ironic, after-the-fact suspicion that signs were being arbitrarily or deviously tacked onto some ontological *fata morgana* (a notion still underlying Groys' theory of suspicion in the media). While all the monist theories discussed allow for the possibility of deceit, resentment or abuse after the fact, they all agree that these aspects are secondary to the logic of the original founding scene. And in normative terms all the new monist theories agree that it is now imperative to tap into this originary or primary scene again so that we may renew and revitalize our attitude towards art, ethics, religion, and reality in general. The result is a paradoxical, oxymoronic or saturated *return to metaphysics using postmetaphysical means*. This means that the grand metaphysical postulates – presence, center, love, beauty, truth, God etc. – all return *but only insofar as they can be apprehended as immanent relations*. To adhere to this proof of immanence in the most rigorous way possible is a common goal of all three theories.

The second move crucial to the new monism is the revitalized notion of *performance*, or the move from immanence to transcendence. The anamorphic upsurge (Marion), the creation of new bubbles, globes and foams (Sloterdijk) or the leap from a horizontal to a vertical plane in the originary scene (Gans) mark the transcendent striving of the human forces inside the frame, their attempt to extend their apprehension of givenness, their creative intimacy or their reconciliatory scene to the entire world around them. The goal of performatism, stated

most simply, is to analyze this transcendent striving in the realm of culture after the fact.

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