



Un-timely Mediations: Questing Thought

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abstract

In this 'interview' Robert Cooper responds to a series of questions originally put to him by Steffen Böhm and Campbell Jones in July 2001. Developing his answers into a series of short, but self-contained micro-essays, Cooper considers issues ranging from the disciplinary organization of the academic knowledge producing machine, to the decentering of the self, the role of negation in thought, and the concept of the burrow. In responding to Böhm and Jones' questions, Cooper produces an almost rhizomatic piece of writing in which concepts appear, reappear and transform, continually connecting to other writings and thinkers to produce a mapping of his thinking that serves as a contextualizing and positioning device for those readers who are new to Cooper's work, and links to more recent concepts and ideas for those more familiar with his writings.

ephemera: Let's start with a general question. Your work doesn't seem to fit easily into the conventional academic categories and programmes of the university system. It seems much more cross-disciplinary and diverse than the current specialisations require. Would you care to comment?

Robert Cooper: Your question raises some very important general issues about the nature of the social sciences – issues that go back to the historical emergence of sociology and psychology. But we have to understand these issues within the wider historical context of the modern university system in so-called advanced societies. We know that Kant was critical of the new developments in the German university system more than two hundred years ago which transformed the former spirit of intellectual inquiry into an academic production system. Knowledge became a product for the consumption of the emerging mass student and industrial population. In our own time, Kant's analysis has proved remarkably prescient. The universities have become like factories whose main objectives are to produce ready-made products for public consumption. The specialised academic categories and programmes you mention are both a means and a result of what seems to be an inexorable pursuit of the consumable as opposed to the thinkable. In this process sociology and psychology, for example, have become specialised products with their specific places in the supermarket of modern knowledge.

After many years in the academic system, I've become more interested – and perhaps

more concerned – with the limitations that the new knowledge-production system imposes on both its producers and its consumers. Instead of the freedom to raise fundamental questions about the nature of the disciplines that supply us with consumable ‘food for thought’ and the precise roles of academics in this production process, we seem to be hemmed in and constrained by the production system we have produced. The disciplines even define our identities to the extent that we identify ourselves as sociologists or psychologists who think and speak according to specialised conceptual vocabularies and whose professional identities are further fortified by the specialised publication requirements of the academic journals as well as the university career system. While we are all subject to this regime, it is still possible to remind the system – however gently – that its rules of behaviour censor and exclude alternative ways of thinking and writing, ways that are more critically demanding, potentially more illuminating and which can expand our intellectual vision. Max Weber’s work offers some illustration of the problematic I’m sketching here. As a founding father of sociology and social theory, Weber saw his task as one of presenting sociological ideas to the new larger academic audiences of his time; this necessarily meant simplifying complex and sometimes ungraspable ideas. Though he is sometimes criticised for being too rational and orderly in his writing, in his thinking he was well aware of the problems the creative and open thinker made for itself when it addressed social and cultural questions from a more imaginative and visionary perspective. The conceptual vocabulary of sociology for Weber was essentially a collection of *convenient fictions* which summarised ideas which went far beyond rational analysis and understanding. Terms like *society* and *organisation* served no more than to draw attention – but not to focus it too specifically, too tightly – to social and cultural phenomena that defied ultimate intellectual capture. Weber’s *Verstehen* and *ideal type* were really devices that provided at best rough insights into the overcomplicated nature of human sociality. Beyond these convenient fictions lay forces which, despite and because of their immanent yet invisible presence in everyday life, could only be hinted at and vaguely sensed and which ultimately belonged to something Weber called *meaningless infinity*. Meaningless infinity refers to the idea that the world does not naturally offer itself to human comprehension, that it’s intrinsically unreadable and that we have to convert its inarticulation into meaningful signs and symbols. Organised religions were among the first social institutions to do this. In our own time, universities perform a similar role by converting the vague, fluid and even hyperactive mass world into rational and comprehensible messages. From this perspective, social institutions appear as devices for translating the infinite into the finite. Sociology itself is such a device, as Weber recognised. But, for Weber, every finite statement was haunted by a silent, invisible presence that reflected the unsayable of the infinite. Rational (and rationalised) accounts of social life always suggested and alluded to an unreachable infinite space that still evokes in us a deep desire to transcend the knowable and sayable of the here-and-now finite world of the everyday.

All this is a way of backgrounding my own general approach to the social and cultural issues I write about. The specific or finite is essentially a partial and transient makeover – what Weber called a convenient fiction – of the generic or infinite. To exclude the generic is to cultivate a space of academic specialisation where ideas and thoughts are reduced to comforting packages that give the illusion of providing neat, authoritative answers to questions of social understanding. Specialisation in this context means that

specialist communities construct their own rules for thinking, their own vocabularies and their own sense of what's important. As a member of such a specialisation, one becomes disciplined by the discipline rather than by the specific-generic nature of the question being addressed. One consequence of such specialisation is the exclusion of other intellectual approaches that address similar issues. Another consequence is the illusion of intellectual mastery, that as a specialist who uses a specific conceptual methodology and vocabulary, one's controlling a specific way of thinking and a specific language seduces one into the delusion of authoritative and authorial knowing. This leads to a comforting certitude which might almost be said to be the main motive for this approach to the production of knowledge.

What motivates my approach is less the search for answers and more the cultivation of searching as a process of continuous questioning; even answers must lead to more questions. Questioning becomes a form of mental *questing*. And this, for me, necessarily involves the transgression not only of the conventional academic categories but also of the specialised thought styles they impose. In other words, it means that I try to relate the specific to a wider generic context. The specific not only has to be shown to be a partial, transient expression of this wider generic space but the peculiar nature of their interaction has also to be explored. So that the cross-disciplinary and diverse character of my work that you mention I would see as a strategy of reasoned transgression, of breaking down the very barriers of institutionalised thought production in order to reveal the devious and creative cross-currents that animate the rude, untamed and excessive energies that lie beneath the rational glosses produced by the academic disciplines. The development of modern knowledge has quietly edged out the vague and excessive powers we associate with the generic and irrational. Even Freud's treatment of the unconscious – a version of meaningless infinity – has been critiqued for its institutional programming and censoring of forces that instinctively resist such meaningful ordering. Art and literature are perhaps the only remaining fields of cultural expression which address the question of the nature of the specific-generic, rational-irrational interaction but even these fields are subjected to the professional programming of the academic disciplines.

To be cross-disciplinary and diverse, as you put it, in one's way of thinking is to recognise the cross-current and essentially mixed – even mixed-up – character of social existence. It is also to recognise that the academic disciplines censor the complexity within this aboriginal mix in their programme of consumable knowledge production. In a recent essay on culture as symbolic production¹, I have used the image of the newspaper crossword to represent the complex interactive nature at the heart of all social relationships and communication. The crossword tells us that the ordinary, everyday words and ideas we use derive from a primitive, degenerate base where they mix with and cross each other in a process of dynamic interaction which defies rational specification. The crossword thus hints at the heart of darkness at the core of human knowledge and experience; it reminds us of Weber's meaningless infinity and Freud's unconscious, both of which resist being placed in logical categories and ready-made

1 Robert Cooper, 2001, 'A Matter of Culture', *Cultural Values*, 5(2): 163-197.

systems of knowledge. The crossword also suggests that the knowledge and information we produce in order to make a reason-able world has to be extracted from a primal, degenerate mix of matter and while this primal mix has to be repressed by the formalisations of the conscious mind, it is still always with us, haunting us with its ghost-like presence, gnawing away at all our attempts to be rational. Yet the interaction between the irrational primal mix and the convenient fictions of rational practice constitutes a creative source – perhaps *the* source – for all aspects of social and cultural life. Human communication is itself founded on this interaction, including as it does the experience of *community* as an aboriginal togetherness from which all our connections – with each other, with language, with the objects and technologies of the world – derive. Hence the importance of including the transgressive with its *crossings* and its *double-crossings*, with its diversities as lateral expressions or di-versions of the clear and rational.

As we've already noted, art and literature are perhaps the only remaining fields of cultural expression that begin to do justice to the specific-generic, rational-irrational interaction. The art theorist Anton Ehrenzweig² has drawn out some of the main implications of creative thinking in art and music for the more general task of how we perceive and experience ourselves in the world. His ideas help us to get nearer to the problem of cross-thinking in the social sciences and, incidentally, to the methodological questions posed by Max Weber. Ehrenzweig expresses the specific-generic question in terms of *differentiation* and *undifferentiation*. Differentiation sees the world in terms of bounded, separate and static structures whereas undifferentiation sees it as a wider dynamic field in which structures lose their distinct, separate features and merge into a more diffused field of 'blurred plasticity'. Where differentiation has a narrow focus on specific forms and events, undifferentiation provides a more mobile and more comprehensive way of approaching the dynamic and interactive reality of life. Instead of the precise, focused attention of differentiation, Ehrenzweig shows us what he calls the 'scattered attention' of undifferentiation through which we see the world as a flow of transient, incomplete and often vague impressions. Undifferentiation and scattered attention offer themselves as strategies for bridging what Weber sensed as the undivided wholeness between social and cultural products and their origins in meaningless infinity. The more specialised strategies and vocabularies of the modern academic disciplines emphasise differentiation and focused attention at the expense of the more open, more mobile – and Ehrenzweig would say more fertile – thinking styles of undifferentiation.

For such reasons, I favour a generic way of thinking which calls upon a range of ideas and subject areas. The generic meaning of 'diverse' refers to the scattered attention and blurred plasticity that mark all our relations with the world. While within any one essay I may draw on themes and writings from philosophy, art or literature, my purpose is to show that these so-called specialised academic fields derive from a more aboriginal source which suggests, despite their different languages and thinking strategies, they are more like kaleidoscopic and variable expressions of an implicit power that, like the

2 Anton Ehrenzweig, 1967, *The Hidden Order of Art*. London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson.

crossword's heart of darkness, ultimately resists all our attempts to capture it in rational discourse. This is how I approach the concept of *information* which the globalisation of information technology has made into a common and pervasive commodity of our everyday existences. We now – and perhaps *only* – understand information as the answer to a specific question. It's the answer rather than the question or questioning that gets the emphasis. But information has also to be understood in a generic – even irrational – way. Its pre-modern meaning emphasised its origins in shapeless, formless matter. Any specific form of information is simply a transient and partial expression of this infinite and meaningless origin. Put another way, any specific form of information is already inhabited and meaningless origin. Put another way, any specific form of information is already inhabited by its *unformation*, its scattered attention and blurred plasticity, its openness to other interpretations, its tendency to resist focused meaning and to be other than it seems.

Let me sum up. The conventional academic disciplines implicitly impose rules of thinking on their professional practitioners. These rules are necessary to give coherence to the discipline and to provide professional identities to these practitioners. A necessary feature of this coherence and identity is a shared way of thinking and language which serves to differentiate the discipline from other academic fields. This means that the main ideas of the discipline tend to serve the requirements of the disciplinary system itself rather than reflect the complex human reality it assumes to address. Again, this was the problem that Weber faced, at times with deep uncertainty and anxiety. One way to gloss the general is to focus one's thinking on *answers* to questions rather than the nature of the questions themselves. My interpretation of diverse, cross-disciplinary thinking – to use the terms of your question – is that it is far less concerned with answers and far more concerned with the process of questioning itself. The act of questioning seeks *beginnings* rather than ends and, as we know, beginnings are always yet-to-be determined states that await some sense of an ending, that suggest, to quote Hans-Georg Gadamer, “a movement that is open at first and not yet fixed but which concretizes itself into a particular orientation with ever-increasing determinateness”. One might say that the conventional academic disciplines favour the translation of rough beginnings into specific, determinate ends. Questioning as questing reverses this process. This importantly means that the accumulation of knowledge is not its goal. Instead, intellectual questing seeks un-knowledge, it is animated by a spirit of *unlearning*, for once it thinks it knows something, it turns this knowledge into yet another question. There is, of course, a long and even ancient tradition to this form of generic thinking – over historic time it has been variously called *learned ignorance* and *negative capability*. Nearer our own time, Max Weber's work testifies to its universal incipience, its immanent power to remind us that rational, systematic knowing is always haunted by an intriguing infinity.

ephemera: Although you have written on the general theme of organisation, you appear not to be specifically interested in organisations as such. Is this a fair way of describing your approach to the general field of organisational analysis?

RC: My earliest interests in the systematization of social production systems, including industry and commerce, developed in the more general context of *social organisation*. This is a term we rarely hear these days but it was a major theoretical concern of earlier

social theorists such as Alvin Gouldner. Whenever Gouldner thought about work systems and organisations, it was always in the wider context of social organisation. In other words, he was less interested in organisations as specific structures and more concerned with work and organisation as general *processes* of society and social organisation. This, too, was my approach to the understanding of work systems in the development of modern organising. I discussed some of Gouldner's ideas in a paper I wrote on the theme of 'Organization/Disorganization',³ which dealt with the mutual relationship between order and disorder in social and institutional life. I drew attention in particular to Gouldner's way of thinking two types of social organisation – the 'rational' and 'natural' models – against the wider social and cultural backgrounds of Classicism and Romanticism, which he saw as two 'deep structures in social science'. The 'rational' model stresses Classic control and sees the world in terms of fixed, definite forms and neat categories of thought; the 'natural' model is nearer the Romantic view of reality as an 'intrinsic vagueness' in which objects and events blend into one another and so lose their specific identities.

Since Gouldner's time, the concept of organisation has lost its more general meaning of social organisation and has been increasingly narrowed down to the specific, instrumental meaning of an industrial or administrative work system. The wider social, cultural and philosophical implications of organisation raised by Gouldner have been almost completely forgotten. No doubt this is largely due to the emerging power of big corporations, especially in the last half-century, which has made the term *management* into a major icon in contemporary public thinking to the extent that it has become almost synonymous with organisation. Corporate power has no doubt also been the force behind the huge development and presence of management as a validated academic subject in the modern university system. What interests me in this context is how concepts can be appropriated and lose their more general and more variable meanings. We saw this earlier when we discussed the older meaning of information and its technologisation and narrowing down in the contemporary world with the universal usage of information technology. I suspect this narrowing down in the way we view our conceptual vocabularies is rather like the process that Weber noted in the tendency of rationality to censor the irrational. In order to understand this rationalisation process with regard to organisation, we need to place it in the wider setting of social organisation just as Gouldner did. Industrial and administrative systems are never simply objectively and ideally rational. An industry, for example, is never just a mechanism for efficient production; it insinuates itself into all aspects of social and cultural life. So much so that the idea of a specific production system has to give way to Gouldner's observation that all systems, however seemingly formal and rational, blend into each other and thus lose their specific identities. We see this all around us in our daily lives. The industrial product is also a social product in that we eat it, we wear it, we speak it; it enters our minds and bodies in such a way as to constitute us as a corporate body.

3 Robert Cooper, 1986, 'Organization/Disorganization', *Social Science Information*, 25(2): 299-335.

Richard Poirier⁴ has used the term *corporate humanity* to describe the modern social world. By this he means that institutional products of every kind have come to dominate our individual existences. It requires a very special effort ‘to be yourself’ when you are constantly defined through the corporate images of television and the mass media, the products on the supermarket shelves, the commercial logos, pop music, cinema, as well as the institutionalised messages sent out by art galleries and museums, schools and universities. The products of these corporate sources diffuse into the common culture and provide the conceptual and verbal vocabularies for much of our thought and experience. The term *corporate* was originally a way of expressing the idea of social organisation since it imaged the human community as a *social body*. Included in this idea of the social body was the recognition that it was a collection of physical bodies which related to each other and their environments through their various *organs*. In this very basic sense, corporateness leads us back to an archaeology of social organisation through the concept of the collective human body with its various sensory organs that help it make sense of its world. The modern corporation is a development of this primitive idea, especially in its ceaseless production of objects, images and expressions that our sensory organs consume in the ceaseless transmission of the noise and chatter of the hyperactive modern world. Corporate products thus circulate as mental and linguistic scraps and fragments that enable us to express and transmit ourselves through such physical organs as brain, sight and vocal apparatus. This view of social organisation also reminds us that corporate production doesn’t stop at the boundaries of the corporation – the principle of diffusion and loss of object identity I mentioned earlier means that we as individuals also become raw material in the corporate production process. At this point, everything blends together in a dynamic mass mix and it becomes difficult, and perhaps impossible, to separate one thing from another. Like Weber’s convenient fictions, whatever terms and images we extract and isolate from this moving mass are no more than transitory stopping places, transient forms which ultimately have to return to their aboriginal sources.

Social organisation in this complex, mobile sense can only be approached through the indirect methods of scattered attention and blurred plasticity discussed by Ehrenzweig in the contexts of art theory and the Freudian unconscious. Every specific structure we posit in the social sciences is subject to this generic displacement, and this reminds us yet again that it is not so much the actual contents of the human world we are trying to capture and represent but the very movements of our thought processes. The idea of a specific organisation or institution is no more than a positioning strategy that we use to locate the slippery contents of our conceptual mindscapes. Seen against the complex, mobile mix of social reality, the image of a specific organisation or even a human individual is no more than a provisional placement or transient impression. We come back to the powerful model of the human world that the crossword provides in which individual meanings seem to emerge out of an aboriginal source of dynamic displacement and degeneration. It’s this dynamic displacement and degeneration that, for me, especially characterises social organisation as *common* culture. I don’t mean

4 Richard Poirier, 1971, *The Performing Self*. New York: Oxford University Press.

common in the sense of vulgar or low quality but in the sense of *community* where we find Ehrenzweig's idea of undifferentiation at its most basic – no differences, only sameness. It's this sense of community applied to social understanding and self-reflection that we see in art and literature and which makes them into forms of social analysis that creatively complement the academic social sciences. Pop Art, for example, has been recognised not just as a vivid expression of common culture in the modern industrial world but also as a revealing intellectual commentary on its intrinsic tendency to merge everything together in a continuous movement of mass dedifferentiation. In this sense, Pop Art reveals social organisation as the crossword of community, especially in its portrayal of the blurred plasticity and ephemerality of modern life where things come and go in a continuous stream of experience in which the specificity of forms gives way to a diffused sensing of impressions. As the art theorist John Russell points out, Pop Art drew our attention to the productive profusion and confusion of modern society; it reminded us of the necessarily mutual definition between positive and negative, that at the heart of reality there was no possibility of choice, no yes or no, no either-or, just purely degenerate criss-crossings. Differentiation took second place to undifferentiation, and there were thus no ultimate distinctions between high and low culture. The taken-for-granted differences of everyday life receded into a general perception of vagueness which, for Russell, is exemplified by Andy Warhol's painting of an early designed Coca-Cola bottle. At one level, a painting of a simple coke bottle seems so ordinary, so familiar, even trivial, but when we look at Warhol's picture long and hard enough, it loses the temporal identity it had as the representation of a 1950s consumer product and takes on the appearance of an abstract and even degenerate form. Like the crossword and the complex, mobile profusion of mass society, Pop Art moves us back to a stage in human understanding where knowledge becomes un-knowledge, where the framing and forming of taken-for-granted reality has yet to take place, where the tracing of shapes and boundaries are still dubious and open to chance. Pop Art also announces itself as part of this unlearning process when it implicitly says it goes beyond the canons of institutionalised art in order to approach the fundamental community of common culture. It doesn't know if it's an artistic creation or an industrial product, preferring perhaps not to ask the question in terms of such disciplinary divisions and leaving it as a version of scattered attention.

When we think of organisations and institutions in the larger context of social organisation, it seems to me that we have to think them differently from the conventional view that they are commercial and administrative structures directed by specific goals. The bigger picture shows them to be strategies for ordering disorder, for making sense out of the senseless, and for providing a language of images and mental maps for dealing with the meaningless infinity that Weber saw as a prime motivator in human society. It's in this sense that I have preferred to call the different systems of social organisation – from factories to supermarkets, universities to professional disciplines, newspapers to television companies, hospitals to churches – *human production systems* whose general purpose is to recreate and reproduce meaningful categories and narratives of thought out of the blizzard of noise and mutterings at the degenerate core of human community. In this context, *production* is not merely the provision of functional goods and services, for the term itself is subject to the condensation or degenerate recession endemic to all social organisation: *production* is also *prediction* in the sense of laying out meaningful cultural codes to shape ourselves

in time; it is also *protection* in the sense of shielding ourselves from the vagueness and irrationality that shadows all human sense-making in its inveterate tendency to condense into the unreadable density of its aboriginal sources. Social organisation is thus not to be seen as a static structure to be captured in the interests of academic explanation; it's much more like a frenetic but life-creating contention between the generic forces of organisation and disorganisation.

ephemera: Your comments on going beyond institutional boundaries remind us of your early paper on 'The Open Field'⁵. Was that essay a sort of philosophical statement for you later work?

RC: The thoughts and feelings I explored in 'The Open Field' essay were the result of a personal reevaluation of my academic knowledge of social science and my attempts in the late 1960s and early 1970s to apply some of this knowledge to practical problems in industry and urban communities. The essay also directly reflected some of the main critical social ideas that emerged during the famous May 1968 political protests in France. This was a period of intense social turmoil which at times generated extreme emotional and conceptual reactions to the political and ethical aspects of capitalism at that time. Issues of people power were raised against the developing powers of political and commercial systems. The essay looked at certain aspects of people power from an experiential point of view – how this power might be thought about through the works and writings of philosophers, social theorists, poets, artists, mathematicians and others who had directly addressed questions of the personal implications of freedom, authentic experience and creative possibilities. It was also a reaction against what I saw as the routinisation of human life as depicted in the academic social sciences. This necessarily meant that any sense of people desiring more than the routine and ordinary was played down and even neglected; any human wish to transcend the pervasive, ready-made programmes of work and leisure provided by corporate systems was viewed as abnormal by the increasingly normalised thought systems of organised life, including those of the academic disciplines. My essay was a heartfelt attempt to call attention to the need to see human life in bigger terms than those laid down by the corporate mentality, to think life not merely as a forever open and unfinished process but also to stress what I saw as an innate human compulsion to seek the open and unknown, the vague and indeterminate.

Instead of the roles imposed on us by corporate thinking, I was also asking how it might be possible for individuals to create and recreate themselves. Instead of the determinate world laid out for us by corporate society, I asked myself what were the conditions necessary for thinking and feeling one's life as an open field of *rough beginnings* where *learned ignorance* became more important than the limiting corporate 'ignorance' that patterned our existences. The general theme of the essay I have continued to explore in various ways in more recent work. The way I interpret information, for example, is inspired by an open field approach in which questions and not answers are the driving force of human action. The way I transgress conventional boundaries of thought and

5 Robert Cooper, 1976, 'The Open Field', *Human Relations*, 29(11): 999-1017.

mix together approaches from social theory, art and literature in order to reveal the infinite complexity of any theme I might address is another example of the open field approach. And, more generally, this is how I think human and social phenomena – as a dynamically generic, indeterminate mix that requires an open and mobile intelligence in order to do justice to that strange commerce between what I called in my essay “the pristine continuity of form-not-yet-realised” and the finished, specific forms that make up our daily lives and which we take so much for granted.

‘The Open Field’ was just as much a plea for a return to the beginnings of forms-not-yet-realised as it was an attempt to think through the general question of open beginnings. It essentially asked how it was possible for people to live their lives more self-creatively and less through the packaged and commodified end-products of the corporate system. The literary theorist Richard Poirier addresses the same theme in his idea of ‘the performing self’ which examines the conditions under which the self performs itself rather than being performed by corporate structures. Through television images, public advertising, manufactured pop music, supermarket products, our lives become more like responses to the ‘implantations in our heads’ placed there by corporate humanity. Instead of reacting mechanically to this regime of corporate signals, the ‘performing self’ sees them as raw material or rough beginnings for creative play. Poirier analyses the later work of the Beatles to exemplify this translation of corporate products as specific signals into a generic medley of images, voices, sounds, etc., in which there are no identifiable subjectivities, no recognisable authors or sources, but simply the anonymous media through which we live. This anonymous media becomes an open field of creative possibilities through which the later Beatles creatively found themselves. Poirier discusses *Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band* as an example of the Beatles’ creative effort to go beyond themselves by *alluding* – that is, not directly expressing or representing – to a world they sensed but did not completely grasp, to a world of half-forms and blurred bits of old Beatles’ hits, all came together in a kind of common generic culture to create what Poirier calls a ‘kaleidoscopic effect’ which infused “the imagination of the living with the possibilities of other ways of living, of extraordinary existences, of something beyond ‘a day in the life’”.

The openness of the field of human experience now extends to include all that which lies beyond the ordinary, the routinised and rationalised, beyond the familiar and known and even the knowable. At its most adventurous and demanding, the open field seeks that which exceeds explanation, for what can be *explained* or laid out on a *plane* suffers from the *plainness* of the ordinary. It’s this understanding of the open that Philip Fisher examines in his provocative essay on *Wonder, the Rainbow, and the Aesthetics of Rare Experiences* in which he dramatizes for us the nature of undifferentiation, rough beginnings and aboriginal sources through the experience of wonder. Wonder, for Fisher, is the exact opposite of Max Weber’s account of modern rationality and organisation as the de-magicification or disenchantment of the world. Rationality and formal organisation fill the world with order and instrumental purpose, leaving little room for the magnificence of wonder and aesthetic surprise. Re-enchantment begins with the substitution of the open field for the closed field of rational explanation and its pursuit of a world where answers reign supreme and every big question has disappeared. Wonder is a basic human response to the open nature of experience but this aspect of experience is concealed from us by the closed nature of everyday, practical

consciousness. Wonder is a sudden, lateral intrusion into this closed consciousness; it reveals what Fisher calls ‘the deep interconnections of things’ which we have mostly forgotten, and where ‘the play of thought’ (as opposed to the structure of knowledge) opens to us the “remarkable cluster of submerged and tangential energies” that lie (usually hidden) within the most ordinary, taken-for-granted experiences. Rare experiences are the sources of wonder; aesthetic experiences that hit us unexpectedly, instantaneously and usually for the first time. Wonder, in other words, hits us when we’re not looking. For Fisher, the sight of the rainbow is one source of wonder that enters the lives of most people from time to time and which has the capacity to make them stop in surprise and admiration. Because of its power to stimulate a deep aesthetic response, the rainbow has incited a rich range of thoughts and emotions from poets, philosophers and scientists which Fisher discusses in some detail. Fisher reveals the special communal character of these responses inasmuch as they reflect ‘the deep interconnections of things’ and their blurred plasticity. The aesthetic experience of the rainbow thus reminds us of the specific-generic interconnections of the crossword as well as the unexpected and rich interconnections we find in the common cultures of both Pop Art and the words and music of the later Beatles.

My essay was thus a spirited call for us to recognise the significance of vision, imagination and wonder in people’s lives and to include these as central features of social science thinking. It was also a call to extend the conventional categories of thought and vocabulary in social science by being more sensitive to the potential richness and complexity of the ideas and language that reside often unrecognised in our habit of producing formal academic papers that focus on specific statements rather than generic questions, on representing social reality as a system of ready-made, easy-to-read structures. The approach of the open field starts where conventional approaches finish; it opens up issues which normalised, routine thinking glosses over as already known; it sees human life as a complexly mixed and plastic stream of experience that is open to as-yet unnoticed perspectives and lateral ways of thinking. A necessary aspect of this open strategy is the critical questioning of the capacity of the conventional social science disciplines to do justice to what other more exploratory areas of human inquiry such as art, literature and music had long ago revealed as essential forces in social and cultural life.

ephemera: And yet the passionate spirit of ‘The Open Field’ seems so different from of your later work, e.g., ‘Assemblage Notes’⁶. Would you agree?

RC: Although passion, as you call it, was a vital part of the writing of ‘The Open Field’, my main purpose in the essay was to draw attention to neglected possibilities in the academic institution of social science and to plead for a more cross-disciplinary and hence more creative and more fluid approach to its subject matter. While this more open approach assumed that feeling was a necessary component of all sensitive conceptual analysis and understanding, it was more concerned with tracing the main conceptual

6 Robert Cooper, 1998, ‘Assemblage Notes’, in Robert Chia (ed.) *Organized Worlds: Explorations in Technology and Organization with Robert Cooper*. London: Routledge, 108-129.

outlines of the open field and with developing their implications for rethinking the study of social and human experience. One such outline was the viewing of social forms – individuals, groups, institutions, etc., – from a perspective of dynamic movement and transience. Instead of individuals or institutions as bounded, quasi-solid structures, they were to be seen in a much wider and more diverse context which revealed their transience and even their kaleidoscopic potential to be understood from a vast variety of different perspectives. Instead of the rigid definition of a social form, we were challenged to see society as a massive mix of temporary, mobile outlines. Instead of fixed theoretical concepts, we were being asked to substitute *provisional impressions*. An impression had an inbuilt vagueness about it; it was a combination of feeling and mental concept. It was more like Max Weber's *Verstehen*, a way of understanding which combined intuition or gut feeling with reasoned elaboration. We spoke earlier about the *diverse* character of my work. The idea of provisional impression helps us to understand *diversity* from a more 'open' point of view. *Di-verse* literally means divided and multiple versions, and a *di-ersion* refers to the moving attentions which multiple versions of the same experience impose on us. The multiple and moving attentions of *di-versity* are thus like provisional impressions which come and go with the constant changes in perspective we are all continuously subjected to. And every di-verse impression is also made up of a di-verse mood or feeling.

I'm therefore less interested in passion as such and much more interested in developing, if you like, the fruits of passion. In this programme of development, passion – necessarily perhaps – loses some of its power and gets translated into feeling, into a feel for ideas. The contribution of feeling to perception and understanding is vividly expressed in the personal philosophy of the novelist-poet Thomas Hardy who spoke of images and ideas as 'provisional impressions' which embodied feelings – and sometimes passions – that were less like finished products of intellectual theorising and more like temporary intereffects of the everchanging associations between objects and forms. Hardy called these changing intereffects *seemings* because they were transient effects rather than permanent truths and hence only *seemed* to be. Hardy's linking of feeling and image in *seemings* was his way of emphasizing the significance of the irrational over the rational, especially in the common culture from which he came and which he wrote about. Hardy's *seemings* are a version of Ehrenzweig's scattered attention and blurred plasticity as well as being examples of open-field thinking.

Although at the time of writing 'Assemblage Notes' I wasn't aware of Hardy's philosophy of *seemings*, the theme of that essay is strikingly similar to Hardy's thinking. A central feature of the argument is the definitive role of temporary associations in our making sense of the world. Forms and events emerge out of associations or interactions with other forms and events; the mobile kaleidoscopic mixings and changes that constitute our dynamic associations with the di-verse forms of daily existence are transient creations out of the *seams* that serve both to join and separate individual outlines from the wider irrational and infinite stream of experience. The social and cultural products of corporate society are, therefore, more realistically seen as moving assemblages that only *seem* to be. The assemblage essay does not directly address the theme of feeling as an immanent feature of the common understanding but at various points it explicitly raises the related question of the human body and its various limbs and senses which it reinterprets less as tools of an

autonomous, self-directing organism and more as organs which 'feel' their way in an open field of *seemings*. The essay's extensive play on *seam* and *seem* (and related terms) is also intended to illustrate the idea of provisional impression as *di-version* or the rough feeling of a complex, multiple, interconnected presence that is pre-conceptual, pre-linguistic and thus can't be located in any conscious system of thought. Instead, the unplaceable *seemings* of *seam* and *seem* move *between* conscious locations. We can't say who or what thinks or senses them for they are more like mutable spirits that can never be pinned down. They move between and beyond the locatable points of consciousness that enable us to assert who said what and when they said it. The *seam* itself is an unlocatable origin into which sense recedes and from which sense emerges. The cultural theorist Leo Bersani has described this ontological point of appearance-disappearance as an 'estheticising movement' of primal perception marked by a simultaneous 'coming-into-form' and 'subversion of form'. The term 'aesthetics' in this context takes us back to its original meaning of pre-conscious feeling so that Bersani's insight also recognises the origin of all conscious and rational thought in pre-conscious and irrational feeling. We are reminded yet again of the powerful image of the crossword.

The general theme of the feeling-thought interaction is always at least implicit in my later work but it appears not as emotional statement. Feeling, for me, is a way of approaching the vague intuitions, the passing moods and unconscious desires that 'feel' their way through us and which we later gloss as conscious thoughts for which we are rationally responsible. 'I feel, therefore I think' would be one way of summarising the logic of this approach.

*ephemera: Organized Worlds*⁷ was the title of a recent book edited by Robert Chia that dealt with some aspects of your work on technology and organisation. The title seems to suggest a Heideggerian way of thinking about the relationship between technology and organisation as general strategies for creating the forms of the modern world. Is this an appropriate way of approaching your work? And has Heidegger influenced your thinking?

RC: The expression 'organized worlds' I first used in an unpublished paper I presented at a conference in Lancaster some ten or more years ago. The purpose of that paper was to draw people's attention to the neglected but highly significant theme of *human organising*. Organisation had been reduced, in my view, to a fairly specific functional structure – that of the administrative-economic unit. The wider human context of social organisation had been censored as a marginal irrelevance to the functional concerns of the new corporate society. I was especially interested in looking at organisations and institutions in the context of what I have more recently called *human production systems*. Instead of thinking of organisations as simple providers of goods and services, I saw them as forces that actively constituted and defined the very act of being human, that produced and re-produced the structures and textures of daily existence, that even

7 Robert Chia, ed., 1998, *Organized Worlds: Explorations in Technology and Organization with Robert Cooper*. London: Routledge.

provided the vocabulary and syntax through which we made sense of ourselves and the worlds we lived in. The church had always been a form of human production system, constructing images, ways of speaking, belief systems, moral codes, etc., for the express purpose of making human life humanly meaningful. In our own times, this role has been appropriated by the big – usually commercial – corporations. And a major new meaning has been added to the definition of the human in the new corporate society – the human being is now a *consumer*. These observations were also intended to recontextualise our traditional ways of thinking about people in society, to move beyond sociological concepts such as roles, groups, organisations, and society, and to begin thinking about the human context as a general process of human *being* or *being* human. The key term here is *being* as the *act of being*.

The act of being is a much more fundamental way of approaching the human condition than the sociological study of people in occupational or consumer roles, of cultural values and social hierarchies, of institutional power and corporate control. Despite their importance in understanding the sociology of society and social relations, because these themes are necessarily couched in a societal framework of already-constituted functions, they cannot ask fundamental questions about the nature of being itself. As an example of what I mean here, let's again take the big question of information and our increasing preoccupation with it both in theory and practice. Information is seen as a commodity that is sent round the world at great speed through the globalised information technologies. The world is now not so much a physical territory but a space of virtual networks where information is defined, at a technical level, by the binary digit, and, at a social level, as the transmission of messages. One result of this technologisation has been a narrowing of our former understanding of information to messages sent from one electronic point to another. The big, wide physical world we used to know and imagine has almost disappeared – those faraway places with the strange-sounding names, of the old popular song, no longer call on our imaginations; instead, it's the computer screen and its informational contents that draw us and which engender a state of mind where we seem to be excommunicated from direct sensual contact with the world as a habitat of human possibilities. Without our realising it, we are in danger of becoming technical products of the technology we have produced. The older understanding of information emphasised a non-technologised version of knowledge and experience: information was more like *unformation*, a generic condition of rough beginnings and creative possibilities which remained always open and unfinished, whose unformed vagueness stimulated mind and body to yet further horizons of varied feeling and thought. The technologised definition of information almost pre-defines its human operator as an adjunct to the computer and even as an information-processor. The pre-technologised definition places information in the more basic and wider question of human forms, their nature and origins. Expressed in this way, we can perhaps see that information-unformation is yet another version of the specific-generic relationship we discussed earlier. And with reference to your question, we may note that it's an example of the theme of 'organised worlds' in which corporate society increasingly structures the social body and its modes of being. There are Heideggerian echoes in this theme, as you suggest, but they tend to take second place to the emphasis on the corporate production of the social body as a system of determinate and determinable behaviours. This effectively means that the question of human being remains concealed within the general idea of 'organised worlds'. To begin to unconceal

– and, hopefully, more fully reveal – the being question we need to recognise that the big modern corporate systems create the various *worlds* that constitute the modern experience, so that we're not talking simply about the administrative-economic systems that provide our goods and services. These goods and services are also 'good' to think with and not merely 'good' to consume. They are not merely physical supports for living but increasingly constitute the inner makeup of our lives.

In trying to understand the contribution of the corporate society to the question of modern human being, we have to relax our conventional ways of thinking society as a collection of bounded terms – individuals, groups, institutions – and try to develop an approach that recognises social life as a stream of experience in which the separate terms also join together in a kind of corporate flow. Ehrenzweig's strategies of scattered attention and blurred plasticity are clearly ways of realising this more open and fluid approach. When I spoke earlier about social organisation as a *social body of organs* I had in mind that the concept of *organisation* should itself be included in this definition just as Thomas Hobbes, in his *Leviathan*, saw the social body of society as the living enactment of human limbs and organs. In this context, specific organisations mediate between the wider world and the specific organs of individual bodies. The mass media organisations structure their products for the convenience of the human body: the tabloid newspaper is made to be easily held in the hands and easily read by the eye; television brings the distant world into the visual comfort of our homes; the supermarket is an emporium for the visual promise of taste and digestive satisfactions. In these everyday examples of what I called 'organised worlds', it's *organisations* that *organise* themselves and their products for the *organs* of the social body. And it's in this sense that organisations as human production systems both constitute and maintain *human being*.

Acts of being are more than acts of consumption. They are the basic acts by which we construct and compose our worlds. Before the taken-for-granted meanings and ready-made narratives that routinely guide our everyday actions, something more primal works to convert the meaningless into the humanly meaningful, or what Leo Bersani⁸ has described as a coming-into-form of the formless – that moment in the crossword when the individual ideas and words both emerge out of and merge into a primal recession of sense. That moment is the moment of being which underlies – mostly unrecognised – those secondary actions laid out for us by our social institutions. The term 'organised worlds' refers to this double-levelled movement in which primal acts of being are made over into the secondary products which structure the unquestioned comings-and-goings of our everyday behaviour. Human being in this sense can be viewed as a complex process of making *beings* – secondary products – *present* to the various senses and organs of the human body. Our worlds are structured primitively around this idea. We *handle* problems in general as though with our *hands*. Future time is always *a-head* of us. We measure local space with our *feet*. Presencing is thus the conversion of absent or vaguely sensed possibilities into forms – or 'organised worlds' – that the human body can see, grasp, and manipulate. The daily use of our personal

8 Leo Bersani, 1986, *The Freudian Body*. New York: Columbia University Press.

computers is a significant contemporary example of such presencing which has brought about the conversion of the giant computers of some fifty years ago to the eye-hand convenience of today's laptops.

The idea of 'organised worlds', as I've briefly described the term, is not obviously Heideggerian, although there are superficial connections with certain of Heidegger's ideas. Heidegger's conception of *Being* – the capital letter is important here – refers to a condition which can never be known which is always too much for human knowing, and yet it's invisibly immanent in all we do. Totally negative Being lies like a ghostly background to the everyday things – what Heidegger calls *beings* – we knowingly, routinely and habitually deal with. Being in this ungraspable sense is, for Heidegger, only to be approached through an endless questioning which never provides answers. The strategy of 'organised worlds' is in some respects like this, especially in the idea that modern organising, with its heavy reliance on techno-science, is subject to a continuous reaching out beyond itself to an unrealised set of possibilities. Other thinkers have made the point. Georges Bataille has also thought of being as a negative condition, subject to what he calls *a principle of insufficiency* in which we as individuals are parts of 'particles' that exist in an 'unstable and tangled' stream of experience which always exceeds common sense and rational thought. Leo Bersani, too, has written of being as that which can never be properly grasped but only alluded to, and, significantly, has argued that art and literature are the only forms of reflective expression that can begin to do justice to this peculiar negative depth of being. It's this sense of there being something much more to the familiar things and structures of daily life that Heidegger senses and wants us to open our imaginations to. Common sense thinks it fully understands the objects it sees and uses but it seems unable to recognise the obvious point that every positive – that is, *positioned* – object or event depends for its existence on a negative background that cannot be made obvious. As an example of being, an organisation is always more than any rational description can provide. We know what an organisation such as the church does, what it means and what its buildings look like – these features we can easily identify and communicate to others, but the spiritual being of the church as expressed in its words, music and symbolism can only be *felt* at the level of the body's organs since this aspect of being far exceeds any external description or form of knowing. The organisation is a being *at the level of the sensing and feeling of its members' organs*. This, again, is one way of looking at the idea of 'organised worlds' where the meaning of 'worlds' suggests an imaginative territory that lies far beyond what we ordinarily consider to be the useful roles of organisations in keeping society going. Your question asks about the relationship between technology and organisation as strategies for creating the forms of modern life. It's in this relationship that we can perhaps begin to sense some of the more dramatic aspects of Heidegger's vision of positive *beings* in the wider context of negative *Being*. The relationship between so-called high technology and corporate organisation promises to be a major area for the future demonstration of the power of Being – though it would perhaps require the imagination of a science-fiction writer to bring this out – when we consider current techno-scientific scenarios for human cloning and holidays in outer space. Though Heidegger himself would probably not see Being in this way – he saw it as an expression of our immediate sensory experience of the world where imagination developed itself through a continuous questioning of those (usually taken-for-granted) things such as language that make up the physical and mental reality of daily living – it

seems to me appropriate to apply his notion of the *call* of Being or the call of the not-yet or yet-to-be to the profound stirrings which move techno-scientific organisation beyond itself.

‘Has my thinking been influenced by Heidegger?’, you ask. Heidegger has been one among many thinkers from whom I’ve drawn inspiration and who have exemplified for me an open-field approach to general human questions about society and culture. Reading Heidegger in the context of these other thinkers – and vice versa – has been especially revealing because of the complexly mobile nature of his thinking. The idea of Being in his work is like a receding horizon: at best, it can be approached but never possessed. Heidegger’s Being, along with other of his thoughts, is best approached in *di-versionary* terms; one senses it only as an ever-changing montage in which each piece or aspect is revealed as a transient reflection of the others. At times, Heidegger’s method of thinking reminds me of Hardy’s *provisional impressions* or *seemings*. In Heidegger’s writings, Being assumes a number of different guises according to his contexts and the overall development of his thought. In his early work, it appeared as Being which we could only approach through its specific expressions of beings in the world; in later work, the Being-beings relationship reappears as the *Earth-World* duality, which I have used in some recent work that looks at the nature of modern mass society.⁹ Earth and World are clearly ways of rethinking ‘organised worlds’ in the wider context of Being. Earth is the unlocatable, forever mutable matter from which World has to realise itself. World gives human meaning and significance to Earth and its obscure and inexhaustible sources. Techno-scientific organisation represents modern World’s attempts to capture the continuous recession and dissolution of sense that characterises Earth. Yet again we meet the model offered by the crossword. A further aspect of Heidegger’s thinking is indirectly reflected in Max Weber’s thoughts on the methodology of sociology and especially in his reservations about the supposed rationality of sociology when questioned by concepts such as convenient fictions and meaningless infinity. Heidegger’s Being can be seen as another version of Weber’s meaningless infinity just as convenient fictions may be viewed as versions of Heidegger’s beings. In a different and non-Heideggerian context, Richard Poirier’s analyses and insights into ‘the performing self’ help us to approach Heidegger’s ideas of *authentic* and *inauthentic being*. By ‘performance’, Poirier means creative self-questioning, self-discovery and self-forming in contrast to the corporate shaping imposed on the social mass by the institutions of corporate society. Poirier’s analyses and illustrations of ‘performance’ help us to understand Heidegger’s concept of authentic being as a continuous questioning of the state of being human, of being creatively and critically sensitive to the intrinsic strangeness that lies hidden within the acts of everyday living, in contrast to inauthentic being which simply accepts and acts out the automatic instructions of the anonymous They of the social mass, a version of what Poirier has called ‘corporate humanity’. Heidegger’s Being can also be elaborated through Philip Fisher’s work on wonder and rare experiences where ‘the play of thought’ reveals ‘the deep interconnections of things’ and the ‘remarkable cluster of

9 Robert Cooper, 2001, ‘Interpreting Mass: Collection/Dispersion’, in Nick Lee and Rolland Munro (eds.) *The Consumption of Mass*. Oxford: Blackwell/Sociological Review Monographs.

submerged and tangential energies' that shadow even the most mundane of human expressions. These different examples merely indicate how I use the ideas and approaches of various thinkers, including Heidegger. They illustrate the nature of the cross-disciplinary and diverse strategies we discussed earlier as well revealing the cross-fertilising and di-versionsary potential of Heidegger's way of thinking.

ephemera: A persistent theme of your work seems to be about going beyond the self, beyond the anthropomorphism of the subject. In this attempt to decentre the subject, how and where do you see the role and nature of the so-called 'subject'?

RC: When I stop to observe and think about the everyday actions of individuals in society, I'm struck by one major impression: that we are essentially transmitters of messages, that we are defined by acts of sending and receiving signs, signals and symbols. Social life is a dynamic stream of communication in which we as individuals are forever caught up and moved along. It's as if the signs and symbols of the messages use us as material means for their own movement rather than us using them to communicate our thoughts and feelings to each other. This seems to be what Georges Bataille had in mind when he noted that human society was a mobile 'labyrinth' of communication through which individuals had to find themselves as well as find their ways: "I am and you are, in the vast flow of things, only a stopping-point favouring a resurgence". In this context, the concept of the individual self or subject is better understood as a secondary product of this primary and autonomous stream of transmission.

Since we're so used to thinking of ourselves as reasonable and responsible human agents with a natural capacity to think and speak for ourselves, to have our own feelings which we can communicate to others, and to rationalise ourselves collectively as the source of what we still sometimes call human civilisation, the suggestion that something other than ourselves courses through all aspects of human living seems almost chillingly gothic. And yet the history of human reflection from ancient religions to psychoanalysis tells us that we were never completely ourselves but were always haunted by unknown forces that we tried to mollify by re-presenting them as extensions of ourselves. Within this history, the idea of the rational subject begins to look like a defensive construction and a denial that we are other than ourselves.

Faced with this primal unknown, this autonomous 'vast flow of things', we have to humanise it, convert it into a language we can understand and, hopefully, control. All this necessarily involves the way we think about ourselves as subjects and agents in the wider scheme of things. In short, we convert the unknown into the known by *mapping* ourselves and our contexts in space and time. The mapping of the self is essentially a question of *locating* or *positioning* itself in these everchanging contexts. It rests on a series of basic questions as to *who*, *what*, *where*, *when* (and often *why*). These are the techniques we use to sort out the rough beginnings and aboriginal sources of human being. The example of the newborn baby well illustrates this initiatory process of human mapping. Prior to the long programme of humanisation transmitted initially through its parents, the newborn has no conscious knowledge of what it is to be a self. It is *told* what and who it is as the first locations of its human identity. In other words, it is *positioned* as to age, gender, nationality, class, etc., so that it begins to know itself

through a developing series of social and cultural placings which not only give it a sense of identity but instruct it in how to *behave* that identity in travelling its social map. But since the sense of self comes from the parents and since the parents themselves were given their 'selves' in the same way, we are left with the strange suggestion that the force driving the human mapping process seems unlocatable and nowhere in particular. We are even led to ask who or what ultimate power speaks and thinks these strategies of self-mapping. Is it us as individual subjects who speak and think or is it something beyond us that speaks and thinks through us. Difficult questions – perhaps impossible to answer. But they do at least raise the bigger question about the nature of the human self or subject: can we really know it, can we really know ourselves or are we simply temporary stopping-points in the wider, unmappable flow of things, as Bataille suggests?

We can perhaps suggest that these rough speculations enable us to rethink the sometimes oversimplified view of the human subject as over-individualised, autonomous and self-contained. When we think of the subject or self as the result of a locating process, we taken on a much looser understanding of it. We see it less as a known, bounded structure and more as a continuous searching to know and define the subject. This slant on the subject clearly admits the necessary role of the unknown and indefinite in its constitution. It suggests that the subject or self is permanently *incomplete* and that it is precisely this sense of incompleteness that motivates the very idea of the subject as a term forever in search of itself. The human body and its organs can be seen in the same way. The hands, for example, seem made to create flexible spaces, to reach out and bring the far near, and the manipulative dexterity of the fingers in particular seem to call for a variety of tools and objects to extend their dexterity even further. Here again we begin to see the subject less as an independent, rational mind-body entity and more as a temporary stopping-place or transient marker which continuously defers itself, which recognises that its sense-making – including the making sense of itself – is the radically problematic product of something that refuses to be made transparent to rational understanding. At best, sense is di-versional, multiple, mobile and intrinsically 'unreadable'.

For you and I as so-called human subjects, all this means that experience of the world cannot be reduced to packages of knowledge or disciplines that can be used to delude ourselves that we truly know and understand things, that we can locate the unlocatable, which includes the locating of ourselves as definable subjects. The incomplete self, the subject as temporary stopping-place, now begins to see itself as a moving part of an open field of eroticised, auraticised and even erraticised possibilities.

ephemera: In talking about the self in this way, we are led to another aspect of your work – the recognition that so-called positive forms such as the self necessarily depend upon the 'existence' of negative forms such as the *un* or negative Other. Could you elaborate on this?

RC: The idea of the negative has a long and honourable tradition in human thinking, as Robert Kaplan's recent book, *The Nothing That Is*, so beautifully reminds us. Kaplan's title is significant in that it also reminds us that nothingness doesn't mean a condition of non-existence; rather, it is a quality or power which is always with us, always co-present

with the somethingness which we normally consider to constitute the physical reality of our existence. To do justice to the negative, we have to think more subtly and more deviously than when faced with the already-constituted, taken-for-granted facts of the positive somethings that surround us. This involves a radical loosening up of the oversimplified interpretation that the negative is what opposes the positive, that it's simply that which does not exist.

Dictionary definitions of the negative are not in themselves overly helpful here. Negation is usually said to be the absence of the positive, and its verbal form, to negate, is said to mean non-existence or the denial of something. More supple definitions are sometimes offered which suggest that negation can also mean a failure to affirm or a neutralising of the positive. We begin to suspect that negation is a necessary and intrinsic element in every act of positive thinking since to be positive also means to affirm by *denying* the negative. To be positive is to assert form, to fix it so that it has clear, definite and stable meaning. To negate, in contrast, is the resistance to the fixity of positive meaning and form; and, importantly, it also implies the dissolution of meaning and form. Clearly, the positive needs the creative antagonism of the negative in order to be positive; and vice versa. Where the negative disfirm and dissolves, the positive confirms and solves. What the positive does, the negative *undoes*. All this helps us to see the negative as a necessary and constructive force in the general creation of reliable and certain structures. The negative may be difficult to define because of its intrinsic resistance to clear definition and positive form but it can never be seen as simple non-existence. Here again we require more open, more subtle ways of approaching the creative deviousness of the negative.

In explaining the nature of the Freudian unconscious, Jacques Lacan has dealt directly with the creative capacity of the negative to initiate the human world. He tackles the negative in the form of the *Un* of Freud's *Unbewusste* or unconscious. The *Un*, for Lacan, is not a condition of inexistence but rather of *lack* or what we earlier called incompleteness. Lack is that which exceeds the differentiation that Ehrenzweig observed to be the main feature of conventional thinking; it's more like his *undifferentiation*, a space of rough, aboriginal beginnings where everything mixes together like the core of the crossword. Because it exceeds the divisions of ordinary, practical life, lack can't be rationally grasped and hence must always be seen as a mistake, di-ersion or, what Lacan calls, a vacillation in sense. It takes us by surprise as in spontaneous jokes or surreal events which, when we try to reduce them to rational sense, lose their power to surprise, to stop us in our tracks, to reveal the immanently irrational. Derrida's 'idea' of *différance* as that which is neither word nor concept but simply a trace of that which can't be properly named is another way of intimating the negative of lack. Lack may retreat under threat from rational differentiation and identification but it is always primordially present. Strangely perhaps, it is differentiation that reveals the *undifferentiation* of lack as well as their necessary interdependence, just as positive and negative echo each other. Lacan underlines the special character of this relationship in the example of sound and silence. A sudden sound such as a cry does not merely stand out against a background of silence but actually makes the silence emerge as silence. In the same way, the positive makes the negative emerge as nothingness, as a creative void which recedes at the approach of common sense. This, too, is the significance of the crossword as a simple model of

human consciousness: the conventional words and meanings of the crossword crisscross each other to reveal the vacillations of sense they secretly contain and which are normally censored. The individual terms reveal their origins in a dense, amorphous core of what Lacan would call the *Un* as lack.

The unreadable excess of lack has to be subjected to a programme of rational differentiation or what I've elsewhere also called the labour of division. This involves the translation of lack as undifferentiated excess into clear, positive divisions through a strategy of *positioning*. Here we see that the positive is an effect of positioning (or positing) objects and events in a space-time grid. To be positively identified and known, each object or event must have a 'positioned address' (to use Leo Bersani's term) in a social-cultural system. To address a position is to dress, arrange or set it in order so that meaningful messages can be directed its way. All human communication turns around the positioned addresses we take on in mapping ourselves. The positioned addresses that constitute us as social beings answer the basic human questions of who, what, where and when. The defining of the positive in this way reminds us that our world is founded on *un*foundation, on negative excess. This means that there is only positioned sense, and no substantive truth. The negative *un* is what mobilises us continuously to tame its irrationality, its exuberant spirit, as well as constantly reminding us that the positivities which secure the human world are in themselves never enough.

ephemera: The question of the negative raises a number of important issues for the way we think about the subject matter of social science. Among these is the question of slowing down when we think and write, of hesitating in the face of complex questions we can't easily answer. All this underlines the significance of the negative as a motivating force in life in general and in intellectual enquiry in particular. How do you see this?

RC: In our general preoccupation with the world as a positive reality we tend to marginalise and even deny the idea of negative forces creatively complementing our mental and physical efforts to construct knowable, stable and usable structures to reassure our existences. It could even be said that the modern invention of busyness is motivated by a deep mass desire to censor any thoughts and suggestions which might threaten this reassuring illusion of life as an exclusively positive experience. It might also be seen as an exaggerated concern with making things present, with grasping presence as opposed to non-presence or absence, which, as I've already suggested, is a major feature of human production systems and 'organised worlds'. Lyotard has addressed this problem as one of 'gaining time'. The mass media in particular focus on the quick transmission of 'messages' which condense brief information content into the shortest possible time slots. All this means that the 'gaining of time' is the loss of time for *reflection*. Reflection requires that 'you don't already know what's happening'; it begins in ignorance and rough beginnings; it explores questions rather than seeks answers. In short, reflection is the patience and slowness of thought as it loses itself in questions of negation. In the contemporary world of fast positivities – from fast food to fast thoughts – reflection as the slow and endless drifting through negation is downgraded to 'a waste of time'.

Your question returns us to our earlier discussion of the role of academic institutions in

the construction and transmission of knowledge and the constraints on reflection they impose. Knowledge begins to look more like information as the answer to a specific question where it's the answer that gets the emphasis rather than the question or the questing. The critical theorist Samuel Weber has examined the distinction between institutionalised knowledge and creative reflection through the writings of the philosopher of science, Gaston Bachelard. The language of the traditional academic sciences – and one could generalise this observation to perhaps most academic disciplines – is *differentiating* and *representational*. It assumes a reality which is already 'out there' for our understanding and analysis, and this reality is seemingly already divided for us into psychology, sociology, philosophy and of course many other disciplinary boxes. Since it's already divided up and defined for us, we can simply go ahead and represent it. Bachelard offers us a vastly different view of the process of human knowing, one which foregrounds *diversity* – what I call *di-version* – as the basis of the knowledge experience. Diversity refers to the ambiguity and intrinsic play of things which underline the undifferentiation and negation within all expressions of positive presence. Positive presences are merely transient and partial perspectives of something that we can never capture in formal knowledge systems. Instead of the differentiating-representational model of knowing which fixes things in categories and definitions, Bachelard argues for a mobile, ever-open view of reality. He sees this latter approach most vividly in modern science where the objects of analysis are marked by uncertainty, duplicity and conflict; the objects of science seem less *objective* than they used to be, almost impossible to pin down. Instead of the traditional object of knowledge, Bachelard posits what he calls the *non-object* which can be seen as a *di-version* of negation's non-presence.

Both Weber and Bersani have investigated the broader implications of these different forms of knowledge and knowing in various professional and academic contexts. Both have analysed Freud's approach to the unconscious – a space of negation or non-presence – as an example of a conflict between the differentiatonal-representational and the undifferentiatonal-nonrepresentational approaches. Both have exposed Freud's desire to project psychoanalysis as institutionalised truth despite the anti-institutional nature of its raw material. When unconscious forces are represented as conscious concepts, when they're made rationally present, then they lose any sense of their aboriginal beginnings, their anti-conceptual roughness. For Freud, this often – though not always – meant that his thinking was so mixed up that his writings seemed completely at odds with what they were trying to say. Bersani has applied the same argument to the academic study of literature which he sees largely as an institutionalised methodology to render the meaningless infinity of negation finitely present and significantly knowable. But, like modern science and psychoanalysis, literature is also pervaded by the *un* of negation – for Bersani, literature is essentially *unlocatable* and to appreciate its ghostlike quality of *unlocatability* we have to *unlearn* those methods which present only locatable presences. Instead of demanding that everything makes only positive sense, that literature is able to reveal the hidden and profound messages within human experience, we are faced with the possibility that negation implies the 'dissolution of sense' and that all our mental graspings are ultimately merely attempts to redeem transient, positive presences from the ungraspable flow of the *unpresent*.

In extending these ideas of presence-nonpresence, locatability-unlocatability, to the

social sciences, we come back to the question of sociology and psychology as institutionalised disciplines which think mainly in terms of the logic of positive presence: social experience is structured around bounded, identifiable, knowable entities that can be directly represented in disciplinary discourse. In introducing the negatives of non-presence and unlocatability into the analysis of social life, we move social science into the more basic question of *being*. As we saw, Heidegger's concepts of Being and being rely explicitly on an unplaceable, unknowable negative space which, despite its ungraspability, infuses and moves every aspect of our lives. Heidegger's beings are the positive instruments and elements through which we live our being but they're never self-sufficient nor self-defining; they point always in the direction of the unknown, the vague and incomplete, or what we earlier called the recession and dissolution of sense. As we saw earlier, the increasing absorption of contemporary society in information as answers to questions excludes being from its practical and positive concerns. But Being is already invisibly present in information as both concept and word: the *un*form and *in*firm of the negative *un*formation make *in*formation an expression of Derrida's notion of *différance* which, as we've seen, is neither word nor concept but merely a trace or hint of the negative beyond that can never be positively positioned. This is the challenge for social science thinking as it recognises itself as a producer and product of being.

ephemera: Deleuze and Guattari¹⁰ describe Kafka's work as a burrow in which there are multiple points of entry and, once you're in the burrow, you find there are so many different ways of approaching the same question. Your work seems to be a burrow of sorts. For those who like some simplicity, is there a way of simplifying the complexity you present?

RC: The metaphor of the burrow can be viewed as another way of expressing the themes of cross-disciplinarity and diversity raised by your first question. The burrow crisscrosses and diversifies in such a way as to suggest a maze or labyrinth in which thought can either lose and get cross with itself or wander and wonder in amazement. Serious thinking requires the burrower to be patient and passive, open to the unanticipated and, hopefully, to do further burrowing. This kind of burrowing was what Foucault expressed in his *This Is Not a Pipe*, which explored the lateral and di-versive character of René Magritte's artwork in such a way as to reveal its negative probings into the unplaceable. The burrow thus became a di-version of negative non-presence. In analysing the non-representational play in Magritte's work, Foucault used the expression 'burrowing words' to indicate the artist's preoccupation with the strange relationship between words and things. Language was not just a tool for expressing ourselves or helping us to cope with the world. As with Heidegger, Magritte saw that language actually constitutes us as human beings. What's more, language has a life of its own; it melds together words and images of objects, so that it's not possible to separate them. The word burrows into the object just as the object burrows into the word. In this process, the burrow buries the conventional distinction between language and its referents. In other words, Magritte and Foucault make us aware that burrowing is

10 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (1986) *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

not just a multilateral activity – it works beneath and beyond our conscious awareness, which is why we can say that the *burrow* is where we *bury* things, and where *burrowing* is a form of *burying*. Magritte's approach underlines the intense interdependence between human life and its objects to the extent that an individual life cannot be understood as being separate from the objects that support its existence. The life and the objects *borrow* their existences from each other. It's in this sense that the burrow is another version – a di-version – of community, the common, and communication. For what is common in the most radical sense is that which is shared by everyone and everything and owned by no one in particular.

The crossword is a simplified model of the much more complex argument presented by Magritte and Foucault. The crossings between words and concepts not only highlight their inextricable entanglement of community but also their burrowing-borrowing movement. At the core of the crossword, words and their things recede and even begin to dissolve in a common mass of burrowing, borrowing and burying. The crossword illustrates burrowing-borrowing through *displacement* and *condensation*, which happen to be – though not by chance – the defining features of the Freudian *unconscious*. Displacement refers to the *unlocatability* of terms and hence their continuous interchangeability, while condensation is the intersecting of various terms and their concentration in one common idea. At this point, we begin to see social and cultural life less as a contents list of thought and more as the very movement of thought itself. Where representational thinking presents its objects as finite, finished products for the convenience of our mental consumption, burrowing brings out their partial, lateral and transient character; burrowing shows human being as a process that Bersani has described as “multiple, indeterminate, undecidable, mobile, intervallic”, forever refinding and recreating itself from the *unfoundedness* of non-presence and negation.

So, it's the movement of thought that intrigues me rather than the formal representation of the objects of thought. In the social context, it's the movement of the social mind – not so much society and its institutions – that draws and stimulates me. This necessarily involves the questioning of representation as a taken-for-granted methodology and the rejection of fixed, determinate concepts and definitions through which representation works. Instead, I prefer to think of re-presentation as ongoing movement by which we work and rework ourselves, movement in which we ourselves are more like *seemings* or *traces* or *différences* that appear and disappear in the dynamic burrowings and borrowings of the stream of positive-negative experience. For such reasons, I have to see society and its institutions *in flow*. An organisation, for example, can never be caught in a definition, to repeat a point I made earlier. The noun it represents is more than a convenient fiction. When we burrow into its buried di-versions we can see it as part of the social body whose collective sensory organs work through a reciprocal borrowing between themselves and their objects to originate a corporate society. A constant agitation between presence and non-presence results in an equally agitated movement of the social mind to realise itself as a human production system whose desires must be forever deferrable. In this context, organisation recedes and dissolves into an *erogenous origin of organs of organisation* where *organ*, *origin* and *erogenous* burrow into each other through *unconscious displacement* and *condensation*. At the level of the social body, we have to understand society and social organisation as the *erogenous movement of desire* – individual or mass – towards the continuous letting go

of formalised and formulaic sense and the excited embracing of the lateral and diverse wandering of burrowing-borrowing. This is the only 'place' where we can find our 'performing selves'

ephemera: We've spoken about the interdisciplinary, diverse and even complex approach you take in your analyses of social and cultural themes. We know that more recently you have begun a project that looks at various aspects of modern mass society in contexts such as the new information and communication technologies. Could you tell us something about this project, and how it might connect with the theme of social organisation you raised earlier?

RC: I had been fascinated for some time with the image of society as a social body or corporate human organism. My current project on the nature of mass society stems from this early interest. One of my first problems was how to understand the term *mass* itself, for it seemed to have a range of quite different meanings, seemed to change according to the context it was used in. This itself fascinated me and even suggested that there was something about *mass* that placed it in the category of the negative. I also looked at its early religious meaning mainly because I suspected that its religious context could provide some insight into its relationship with the big question of *human being*. I soon found that the religious significance of *mass* stemmed from its felt sense of vagueness and other-worldliness, the feeling of a mystical presence that attracted exactly because of its power to call us into the beyond. We see this power in the Christian and Buddhist Masses where a felt absence is made present through vague words and unearthly music. At best, the Mass only intimates and suggests, as if to say that what it senses can't be made rational and explicit, can't be spelled out in fully conscious terms. It's this implicit vagueness of Mass that leads to its *tropes* or creative embellishments of its words and music. Troping seemed to indicate that these early conceptions of *mass* recognised that its essential indeterminacy and vagueness was perhaps *the* source of human culture and meaning. Religion seemed to view *mass* as an inarticulate and infinite source of possibilities that had to be expressed through human forms, a creative void that had to be both filled in and filled out. It also suggested that this inarticulate source was *infinite* in a special way – it could never be pinned down, it seemed to evade complete capture, it was deviously mutable like the mythical story of Merlin the magician who, when pursued, kept on changing into different kinds of creatures from a fox to a rabbit, then a bird.

All this made sense for me in terms of similar interpretations of human express from modern science with its emphasis on the uncertain nature of physical matter, through William James's philosophy of pragmatism, to Ehrenzweig's insights into modern art which also revealed the infinite and mutable vagueness at the heart of art. And it provided insights into various aspects of the modern world, including especially its globalisation through electronic information theory viewed information as a process of making a choice from a range of equally probable alternatives. This is the basis of the information *bit* or binary digit. I began to interpret this definition in the wider, non-technical context of *mass* as a kind of primordial source of forms, a primal void from which we created the forms and meanings we put into social circulation. Instead of thinking of information in terms of equally likely possibilities, I saw it as *unformation* or that which preceded any and all kinds of form and meaning. Unformation was like

Merlin the magician – a negative condition you could never find because it had no foundation in the so-called real world. Whatever forms we used to help us communicate and understand the world were simply partial and transient expressions of this always receding source. Early religious conceptions of *mass* and modern information theory were strangely alike inasmuch as they, too, were different ways of reaching out to the inexpressible void of negative *unformation*. And they, too, could only be understood as partial and transient *di-versions* of the ultimately unknowable and unsayable.

This way of looking at mass can be applied to other features that distinguish modern mass society from pre-modern societies. Mass production well illustrates the partial and transient character of mass as a negative origin. Mass production concentrated on the manufacture of parts rather than the whole objects made by the craftsman. Whole products suggest completion, finiteness, whereas parts suggest transition, transience. The motor vehicle leaves the factory as a seemingly complete product but its completeness is secondary to the part-assembly strategy of mass production in general. The finished vehicle is still incomplete – it awaits its human driver who is simply another part in this moving, unfinished assemblage. It's in this sense that parts are 'carriers of 'being'' and wholes 'no more than the provisional array of parts' as Philip Fisher has noted. And it's as if we needed parts to remind us of the significance of the gaps or holes between things that keep us moving mentally and bodily. Parts animate us because they are partial and incomplete; wholeness as completeness is finality, ending, expiry. It's as if the part reminds us of the void of the religious Mass which almost demands to be completed, at least temporarily, as a means of supplementing movement. The Mass gives us the same ontological message as the motor vehicle factory: parts constitute our very being and they make us just as we make them.

Parts underline the intervals between things and it's the intervals that keep us going in a continuous movement of *transmission*. This is the point that the philosopher Gianni Vattimo makes about modern mass society – there's nothing stable about it, it's just endless, unremitting movement. Vattimo calls it the *society of generalised communication* where the practical presences of things are secondary to the intervals between them. In other words, it's the *displacement of presence* that Vattimo's analysis reveals. From the transient consumables of the supermarket to the evanescent images of the television, the products of mass society seem no more than vehicles for communicating absence or non-presence. The mass media are motivated by more than the wish to inform us of the news of the world – they will also create news when it does not exist. This development seems to be directly tied in to my previous point about mass production revealing a world of moving parts rather than static wholes. In the 1920s the telephoto lens radically changed the nature of journalism; it enabled the photojournalist to photograph hitherto unreported aspects of public life: from a safe distance, he could capture a public figure in an unguarded moment of sexual dalliance or inebriation. Later developments in phototechnology of provocation showed the dark and devious side of institutionalised public life in 1950s Italy. Here again we see the overturning of finished, stable, permanent forms through the introduction of technologies which promote the idea of moving parts and through them the multiple, undecidable, mobile and indeterminate, all features intrinsic to the old religious interpretation of mass.

Transmission in this sense is not the conventional idea of sending and receiving messages and signals. It draws attention to a much neglected aspect of human communication we've already mentioned – namely, the hidden or negative presence of unlocatability, undifferentiation or lack in all our conscious forms. As we noted, *information* is already haunted by *unformation*. Derrida's *différance* as that which is neither a word nor a concept summarizes the point I wish to make – that form is not only made out of non-form but that form always carries within itself the inclination to break up, to dissolve into the formless. All this means that transmission not only carries meaningful messages but it also carries the potential negation of these messages. This, again, is the significance of the crossword which, like the religious Mass, tropes its inarticulate, infinite core of possibilities which still inhabit the quick and practical glossings we give to our everyday communications. Transmission in this fundamental sense is the crossing (the *trans*) of that which must necessarily be left out or missed (the mission and *missive* of *mass*) in any conscious attempt to communicate and this must include the communication of the infinite and negative. Transmission, therefore, is more like what Bersani has called the 'crossing of intervals' or negative gaps than it is the communication of ordinary sense.

Mass and transmission, in the ways I have sketched here, take us back to our earlier discussion of Max Weber's view of the social as the presence of convenient fictions grounded in the non-presence of meaningless infinity. Presence and absence, positive and negative, are active co-ingredients of social mass as it transmits itself through a field characterised increasingly by blurred plasticity and scattered attention. Social organisation is perhaps today to be better understood in this context of the organisation of social mass where the significant action has far less to do with self-contained, bounded, completed individuals and their objects and much more to do with the movement of parts as carriers of being which itself has to be understood as partial, transient, forever incomplete.

discussion

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1(4) Cooper – Un-timely Mediations

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