Responsible Objects: How Human-Nonhuman Relations Reconfigure Authority, Responsibility, and Activism

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Statement of Authentication

The work presented in this thesis is, to the best of my knowledge and belief, original except as acknowledged in the text. I hereby declare that I have not submitted this material, either in full or in part, for a degree at this or any other institution.

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Abstract

This thesis is an exercise in reconceptualising and re-evaluating a set of familiar problems, or as I argue complex objects, involving authority, responsibility and activism. It does so through the lens of an object-oriented ontology framework, and through the analysis of the way in which the relationships between the human and the non-human can reconfigure our understanding of events and concepts associated with these.

The chapters describe an entailed set of problems around a series of ‘network objects’: the internet community and the operation of a ‘network authority’ therein; the multinational corporation and questions of corporate responsibility when humans are nearly impossible to hold responsible when things go wrong; and the emerging trend of internet ‘shaming’ as a strategy for activism and the questions it raises about the responsible treatment of human beings.

I conclude that the problem of finding a responsible object is indelibly tied to the contemporary circulation of responsibility, of responsibility being shifted and distributed across or amongst any number of objects. I describe the circulation of responsibility as a feature of a contemporary money ontology: the unspoken but evident belief that money is not just paramount, but in some way constitutive of reality itself, or at the very least, is treated as the best guarantor of what is truly ‘real.’ I conclude by proposing a speculative response rather than a solution to the problem of responsibility and the search for a responsible object.
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Preamble

Facticity will be revealed to be a knowledge of the absolute because we are going to put back into the thing itself what we mistakenly took to be an incapacity in thought. In other words, instead of construing the absence of reason inherent in everything as a limit that thought encounters in its search for the ultimate reason, we must understand that this absence of reason is, and can only be the ultimate property of the entity. We must convert its facticity into the real property whereby everything and every world is without reason, and is thereby capable of actually becoming otherwise without reason. We must grasp how the ultimate absence of reason, which we will refer to as ‘unreason’, is an absolute ontological property, and not the mark of the finitude of our knowledge. From this perspective, the failure of the principle of reason follows, quite simply, from the falsity (and even the absolute falsity) of such a principle – for the truth is that there is no reason for anything to be or to remain thus and so rather than otherwise, and this applies as much to the laws that govern the world as to the things of the world. Everything could actually collapse: from trees to stars, from stars to laws, from physical laws to logical laws; and this not by virtue of the absence of any superior law capable of preserving anything, no matter what, from perishing.¹

In the above epigraph, speculative philosopher Quentin Meillassoux outlines a provocative vision of a universe detached from reason altogether. It is a vision that emerges as a result of his complex train of persuasive argumentation, beginning with an attempt to resolve a seemingly insurmountable clash of truth claims produced by the bringing into contact of scientific discourse and the body of western continental philosophy up to the turn of the millennium. Scientific discourse, which has so powerfully managed to claim positive knowledge of events and objects which pre-exist the emergence of human consciousness in time, clashes irrevocably with the philosophical claims of various strains of thought from Kant onwards, which take the epistemological situatedness of thought within a cogito or mind as limit, and to which

Meillassoux gives the name “correlationist”. The core position of correlationist thought, according to Meillassoux, is the claim that that which can be known is not the object in itself but merely the correlation between the object and my apprehension of it. Meillassoux constructs a complex line of reasoning, ending up construing the knowledge of the impossibility of access to things as a form of knowledge in itself. This is his concept of ‘facticity’ mentioned in the introductory epigraph. He continues:

What I experience with facticity is not an objective reality, but rather the unsurpassable limits of objectivity confronted with the fact that there is a world; a world that is describable and perceptible, and structured by determinate invariants. It is the sheer fact of the world's logicality, of its givenness in a representation, which evades the structures of logical and representational reason. The in-itself becomes opaque to the point where it is no longer possible to maintain that it exists, so that the term tends to disappear to the benefit of facticity alone.²

For Meillassoux, ‘philosophy is the invention of strange forms of argumentation, necessarily bordering on sophistry, which remains its dark structural double’³ – something of an acknowledgement of the apparent contradiction in detaching reason from necessity and then attempting to argue anything whatsoever (via some kind of reasoning). A full accounting of Meillassoux’s thought contained in After Finitude is not possible here, and would fail to do its intricacy justice. However his facticity very much informs my idea of the nonhuman, representing the necessity of facing up to an excess or remainder that is inexplicable or left over by correlationist thought and the epistemological limits of the human subject. I would describe Meillassoux’s thought as both ticklish and muscular, routinely delighting with surprisingly ingenious and inventive methods of argumentation and conclusions. However two important points remain for me to underscore. First, his willingness to unearth apparently absurd or impossible claims is more than just stylistic, consisting of an ethos that reflects a fundamentally open orientation towards the manifest strangeness of the world (a theme which this thesis takes up in places, particularly the final chapter). Secondly his diagnosis of the bind of correlationism has reinjected a vitality and sense of purpose into

² Ibid., p.40.
³ Ibid., p.76.
contemporary continental philosophy which finds itself free to speculate about a world beyond (the important, but limited) human-world correlate. For Meillassoux,

facticity fringes both knowledge and the world with an absence of foundation whose converse is that nothing can be said to be absolutely impossible, not even the unthinkable.⁴

This sense of both the opening up of possibilities of thought and philosophy to the proverbial great outdoors of things in themselves, as well as a commensurate sensitivity and credulity regarding the absurdity of existence comes at a crucial moment as two things happen conjointly: firstly, the old consensus established throughout the 20th century about the very frames of reference which have determined our engagement and description of problems breaks down, and secondly, new problems emerge of a complexity and scale unlike anything ever dealt with previously. These new problematics operate completely outside older frames of reference and require new conceptual tools to address, for instance, climate change, about which Timothy Morton has quite rightly claimed that,

the ecological crisis we face is so obvious that it becomes easy – for some, strangely or frighteningly easy – to join the dots and see that everything is interconnected.⁵

The first and second world wars established a number of givens, such as the unacceptability of global-scale military, underscored by the apocalyptic threat of nuclear weaponry and the promise of mutually assured destruction. Similarly, the revolution in individual consciousness, co-opted so effectively by consumer capitalism in the final 30 years of the 20th Century, initially ushered in new norms and expectations around self-expression and individual freedoms, as well as a concomitant imperative to think and experience for oneself, rather than collectively or vicariously, causing an erosion of traditional institutions and authorities such as church and state. Left wing, feminist and civil rights movements made huge strides, achieving over the

⁴ Ibid., p.40.
century universal suffrage, the establishment of human rights (of prime importance the
universal *applicability* of all human rights regardless of ‘race, colour, sex, language,
religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other
status’
), a provisional acceptance of multiculturalism, pluralism, etc., and while these
have always had their detractors, there seemed to be a period where it was assumed
that the progressive project had won, or was at least winning over the forces of reaction,
conservatism and capitalism.

This is no longer the case, and it appears as though the fleeting and fragile consensus
has fractured, leaving behind increasingly polarised associations and groups talking in
ways that are increasingly unrecognisable to one another – unable to agree even on
the terms with or values with which to frame discussion. This appears to have
occurred synchronously with the rise of neoliberal modes of governance in the West,
and not simply because, as some would have it, a generation had supposedly
“forgotten” the lessons learned from the horrors of the twentieth century’s many
moments of barbarism and horror. Indeed, it seems we are more aware than ever of
the horrors of the world, but ironically we seem more powerless than ever to stop
them, or do anything other than mitigate the very worst, to care for ourselves and
those closest to us. Meanwhile, the parameters of these problems have not been
updated to keep pace with the problems themselves. It is thirty years since fields like
Science and Technology Studies began incorporating notions of nonhuman agency –
thoughts of the activity and agential powers of ‘the outside’, frequently declared *verboten*
in philosophy prior to the speculative turn – bringing with them consequentially, ideas
about nonhuman politics and its implications.

Nevertheless, popular public arguments still frustratingly resolve into tenacious entrenched questions and
perspectives at least a hundred years old or more. The ‘nature/culture’ split, mind-
body dualism, technological, biological and social determinisms, amongst many other
formulations of contemporary problems are proving inadequate in the face of globally
distributed networks of capital and the encroaching threat of devastating climate

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Palais de Chaillot, Paris, December 10, 1948. See Article 2, available online:

7 See: Donna J. Harraway *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature,*
University Press, 2009).
change. Disciplinary and popular boundaries are serving little purpose but to perpetuate these tired perspectives, and contributing ultimately to a contemporary sense of what Mark Fisher has called ‘a moment of profound cultural deceleration.’ He describes our current malaise by arguing that,

the first two decades of the current century have so far been marked by an extraordinary sense of inertia, repetition, and retrospection, uncannily in keeping with the prophetic analyses of postmodern culture that Fredric Jameson began to develop in the 1980s. Tune the radio to the station playing the most contemporary music, and you will not encounter anything that you couldn’t have heard in the 1990s.8

Going beyond cultural critique, Fisher’s argument unfolds a compelling picture of the left’s desuetude from ‘a social and psychic revolution of almost inconceivable magnitude’9 – a line borrowed from cultural critic Ellen Willis.10 The revolution referred to by Willis is not a revolution in the means of production, or even a revolution in governance, but a deeper and more fundamental restructuring and reimagining of all social and human relations, beginning with the dissolution of the institution of the family. The historical forgetting and foreclosure of just this one example of numerous now-lost visions constitutes the template for the current malaise.

What are the contours of these new problems? In what ways do the old approaches need revision to account for contemporary conditions, and what are the key missing components? Why have progressive political victories become bogged down or even reversed and how are we to deal with these new problems? In this thesis I take as fundamental the importance of the ongoing incorporation of the nonhuman into contemporary thought and assessment of these and other crucial problems.

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9 Ibid.
Chapter 1 – Introduction: Describing the Research Object

This thesis describes a problematic informed by the philosophical turn instigated in part by Quentin Meillassoux that involves a turn towards considerations of things in themselves. These ‘things’ themselves frequently force us to recognise they are profoundly and distinctively nonhuman. I argue in this thesis that the perspectival focus provided by the concept of the nonhuman as a real, agential force in the world profoundly reconfigures our sense of the parameters which define and determine the problems alluded to above. Seeking to contribute to the understanding of the changing frames through which we look at global and networked problems like climate change, environmental destruction, corporate malfeasance, and networked culture, I ask the question: how do relations between humans and nonhumans change us, and change them?

My first task in answering this question is to briefly summarise the philosophy of object-oriented ontology (hereafter OOO), which provides a methodological framework. Thought not strictly considered a methodology, my application of OOO allows me the conceptual flexibility to handle the network objects which are the focus of much of this thesis – internet communities, multinational corporations consisting of everything from deep-sea oil rigs to khaki-overalls and the humans wearing them, and the objects revealed by the work of activists putting a face on nonhuman concepts such as patriarchy and privilege. Keeping OOO in mind, I then turn to describe what I mean by the human and the nonhuman and why it is such a central figure in my research. Of the three themes this research takes as its focus, responsibility is the one most complicated by human and nonhuman relations, and which presents the most complications for the others, given its entanglement with questions of causality. I then attempt to explain Mark Fisher’s concept of capitalist realism, which is an important feature of the contemporary problematic and an crucial figure for the final chapter’s concluding discussion of a particular characteristic of responsibility under capitalism, before moving to explain my conceptual understanding of the theme of responsibility. Finally, I move to explain my understanding of the ‘network object’, a seemingly
contradictory figure that expresses something about the nature of certain contemporary nonhuman objects.

Object Oriented Ontology as method

Object-oriented ontology (henceforth OOO) is a recent philosophical project begun in the late 2000s under the auspices of four main practitioners: Graham Harman, Levi Bryant, Ian Bogost, and Timothy Morton. According to Robert Jackson, a philosopher of computation and another adherent of OOO, of these four main thinkers who have contributed to the philosophy’s origins and development, ‘every proponent of OOO has a different insight and a different collection of metaphors to illustrate their nuanced ontological differences.’¹ For my purposes, I apply only the primary OOO insights which are unanimously accepted, and cleave closest to Ian Bogost’s explanation of the approach as described in Alien Phenomenology. My first encounter with OOO was however with Harman’s Prince of Networks,² which draws heavily on the Actor-Network Theory developed over many years by Bruno Latour, John Law and others, and which also richly colours my understanding. While Harman’s articulation in Prince of Networks is perhaps the most traditionally philosophical of the recent attempts at grounding and explaining OOO (others including Levi Bryant’s Democracy of Objects³ and Morton’s Realist Magic⁴), as already mentioned, in application I tend to adhere more to Bogost’s approach to OOO, primarily for its clarity and simplicity.

Objects, Bogost claims, are the stuff of the world⁵ – but objects in a particular sense, with no privileged entity, size, type or unit of analysis preferentially treated as ‘more real’ at the expense of others – not atoms, not Higgs Bosons, not particles, not images perceived by a mind, not flux or becoming or void, but objects of all shapes, sizes,

⁵ Ian Bogost, Alien Phenomenology, or, What it’s Like to be a Thing, (University of Minnesota Press, 2012), p.23.
colours, flavours and dispositions. This includes both objects which would be considered material and nonmaterial – machines and ideas, for instance, are assumed to be just as much objects as one another, if not necessarily equally matched in terms of agency or their number, quality, or type of association with other objects. Additionally OOO regards as objects those which might be considered partially both, or what Latour would call ‘hybrids’. In Alien Phenomenology we find Bogost offering the most succinct description of the core tenets of OOO yet:

OOO puts things at the center of being. We humans are elements, but not the sole elements, of philosophical interest. OOO contends that nothing has special status, but that everything exists equally—plumbers, cotton, bonobos, DVD players, and sandstone, for example. In contemporary thought, things are usually taken either as the aggregation of ever smaller bits (scientific naturalism) or as constructions of human behavior and society (social relativism). OOO steers a path between the two, drawing attention to things at all scales (from atoms to alpacas, bits to blinis) and pondering their nature and relations with one another as much with ourselves.

The appeal for the current project is obvious – in OOO and Alien Phenomenology in particular we gain a point of entry into the world of the nonhuman. The subtitle to Alien Phenomenology is ‘What it’s like to be a thing’ and an interest in and focus on ‘things themselves’ is a distinct feature of OOO. Bogost notes that OOO ‘might bear some resemblance to more familiar arguments against anthropocentrism (such as posthumanism),’ but claims that OOO need not entail the discounting of the human as a result:

Let me be clear: we need not discount human beings to adopt an object-oriented position—after all, we ourselves are of the world as much as musket buckshot and gypsum and space shuttles. But we can no longer claim that our existence is special as existence. This is true even if humans also possess a seemingly unique ability to agitate the world, or at least our corner of it.

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8 Ibid., p.7.
(although this too is a particularly grandiose assumption, given that humans interact with only a tiny sliver of the universe)… To put things at the center of a new metaphysics also requires us to admit that they do not exist just for us.  

OOO resolutely opposes anthropocentrism, and encourages us to consider things in addition to or beyond their human utility, and to recognise their existence in and for themselves. Perhaps this may seem unnecessary, since we already have philosophies that address this consideration, particularly in regards to consideration for nonhumans including plants\textsuperscript{10} and animals.\textsuperscript{11} But one of the primary benefits of OOO resides in its ability to avoid what Graham Harman describes as the twin temptations of undermining and overmining – a process remarkably similar to what I describe as the circulation of responsibility in chapter 5. To explain the problem that undermining/overmining presents, Bogost offers Bruno Latour’s controversial description of the way science pursues explanation, noting that it ‘is forced to explain one marvel with another, and that one with a third. It goes on until it looks just like a fairy tale.’\textsuperscript{12} For Example, according to the logic of scientific reductionism humans are explicable in terms of psychological functions arising from structures within the brain; in turn explained as the result of biological operations coded in DNA; in turn explained by the functioning of physical atoms and electrons; which are yet further still explained by being constituted by the strong and weak atomic forces propagated by quarks, gluons, etc.; which are yet further still explained as being made up of superstrings 11 or 13-dimensions in size (depending on the variety of quantum theory) and so on. At each step along the way of this chain of explanations certain dimensions and fidelities of the originary objects get lost, descending into absurd reductive and transformative explanations that find a home millions of miles from anything resembling a living, breathing human being.

It is no coincidence that this structure of argumentation bears a striking resemblance to political buck-passing, which often performs an exculpatory function while

\textsuperscript{9} Ibid., p.8-9.
\textsuperscript{10} Michael Marder, \textit{Plant-Thinking: A Philosophy of Vegetal Life} (Columbia University Press, 2013).
transporting responsibility miles from its origin. A bridge collapses and engineers are
called to explain how this could possibly be allowed to happen, they blame insufficient
maintenance, and point to the local council’s budget papers. The politicians in the
local council argue they were doing what they could with available resources,
hamstrung by state ordinances put in place by the governor or premier. This new
actor then passes responsibility upwards to the president or prime minister for not
distributing federal tax money to states more equitably, etc., until finally someone,
perhaps the President or Prime Minister, blames the global economy or some other
faceless, featureless nonhuman object beyond the reach of human accountability,
control or divination. Importantly, in both this example, and the one preceding it, the
explanation is subject to a particular rationalization or rationing, in that explanatory
power is never shared, is only ever held by the superordinate, that is, whichever is the
‘best.’ Chapter 5 goes into some detail about what I believe is the root cause or
significant exacerbating factor in this impulse, linking it to capitalist realism and what
I claims is a ‘money ontology.’

The position of OOO, then, is one of credulity towards objects and things at all
shapes and sizes and levels of analysis. Bogost’s explanation for how it is possible for
objects at all scales co-exist at once, without favouring one over others, involves a
‘tiny’ ontology, as a rejoinder to the mereological problems arising from more well
known flat ontologies. As an answer to how one can credibly suggest that both a
‘brain’ and a ‘neurone’ exist simultaneously, and without one necessarily in a
subordinate causal or explanatory relationship to the other, Bogost suggests an
alternative metaphor for understanding the OOO model:

An alternative metaphor to the two-dimensional plane of flat ontology is that
of spacelessness, of one-dimensionality. If any one being exists no less than any
other, then instead of scattering such beings all across the two-dimensional
surface of flat ontology, we might also collapse them into the infinite density of
a dot. Instead of the plane of flat ontology, I suggest the point of tiny ontology.
It’s a dense mass of everything contained entirely – even as it’s spread about
haphazardly like a mess or organized logically like a network.\(^\text{13}\)

\(^{13}\) Bogost, *Alien Phenomenology*, p.21.
Bogost’s ‘tiny ontology’ seems not just counter-intuitive, but also somehow impossible, as if it were trying to sneak unreality into the real world. But why such incredulity at the suggestion when, meanwhile, similar claims of multi-dimensional strings at bottom of the universe proffered by quantum physics raise nary an objection? The position of authority from which science speaks of ‘matters-of-fact’ has been powerfully challenged by the field of Science and Technology Studies, and Bruno Latour laments that this challenge to the figure of scientific authority, however, ‘was never [intended] to get away from facts but closer to them.’\textsuperscript{14} This opening up of previously closed structures and processes (such as authorisation) is closely involved in the workings of network-authority and the politics of ‘openness’ that will be discussed in chapter two.

The issue, for Latour, is an attitude problem and of restoring the realist vocabulary to the one concerned. This why he feels critique has ‘run out of steam,’\textsuperscript{15} as made famous by his well-known essay. Because criticism has become entirely incredulous:

The critic is not the one who debunks, but the one who assembles. The critic is not the one who lifts the rugs from under the feet of the naïve believers, but the one who offers the participants arenas in which to gather. The critic is not the one who alternates haphazardly between antifetishism and positivism like the drunk iconoclast drawn by Goya, but the one for whom, if something is constructed, then it means it is fragile and thus in great need of care and caution.\textsuperscript{16}

In a piece for the eclectic Strange Attractor journal, Mark Backlock tells a story of the rich history of thinking in four dimensions, profiling Charles Howard Hinton’s (1852-1907) four dimensional ‘cube sequence’ which, with thoughtful practice and repetition, supposedly allows individuals to think and see in four dimensions. Blacklock offers it as an example of ‘a materialist approach to the supra-sensible,’\textsuperscript{17}
and his tale highlights the way the professionalization of science in the late 1800s itself favoured certain kinds of thinking, given the lack of credulity with which Hinton’s claims were received. While OOO is resolutely not a materialism, it shares the similar sense of being extra-dimensional, outside the realms of Cartesian space, and requiring a different attitude, sensibility or attunement than that of the rational, detached scientific enquirer.

Bogost further explains his ‘tiny ontology’ by using an analogy from mathematics to helps us grasp the relationship between the ‘parts’ and ‘wholes’ of objects via the phenomenon of fractals. According to Bogost the parts and whole relationship,

is fractal—infinit and self-similar. The container ship is a unit as much as the cargo holds, the shipping containers, the hydraulic rams, the ballast water, the twist locks, the lashing rods, the crew, their sweaters, and the yarn out of which those garments are knit.18

There is (or can be), quite seriously, ‘more’ on the inside of an object than on the outside. He quotes Timothy Morton, who has suggested that ‘an object is like Doctor Who’s Tardis, bigger on the inside than it is on the outside’.19 The Tardis-like quality of objects and their nonhierarchical relations between one another will be addressed later in this chapter, when I discuss my understanding of the relation between objects and networks that OOO permits.

Because OOO lacks the kind of established methodological concrescence of other, more mature approaches, it has also given me the freedom to marry the approach with my more writerly or literary sensibilities. My other main methodological approach, reflecting an eclecticism and interdisciplinarity of interest and approach, is what I informally refer to as ‘embedded research’. My guiding lights here are not so much the academic research of digital ethnographers, instead I trace the lineage of my work more to the tradition of New Journalism and the personal embedding and self-reflexive immersion of “Gonzo” reporting. The first-person journalism that sprung up

18 Bogost, Alien Phenomenology, p.22.
19 Timothy Morton, Realist Magic, unpublished manuscript, quoted in Bogost, Alien Phenomenology, p.23.
in the 70s with writers like Tom Wolf, Hunter S. Thompson and Michael Herr, the latter pair in particular who have stylistically and methodologically influenced this thesis’ approach to research as writing. It’s not an obvious inspiration, but the way these writers immersed themselves in the very objects and situations they were describing has been an important practical guide.

I see both Thompson and Herr’s method as an improvisational one, based upon entering cultures or groups (from bikers to hippies, politicians, to soldiers) and in the process, perhaps inevitably, becoming something like them. In nearly all his work, from writing about the Hells Angels, to his campaign for Sherriff of Aspen, and in his reporting from the US Presidential Campaign Trail in 1972, Thompson unavoidably *influenced* and was influenced by the objects and communities he was entangled within. He was beaten up by the Angels while also playing a formative part in their public mythologizing; he threatened the dominant, institutional political parties in Aspen to the extent that they banded together to defeat him – and in the process cementing his own cynicism and disgust at political power; and he involved himself in the ‘72 election while covering it, famously starting the rumour that spurred Democratic candidate Ed Muskie to quit the race, by claiming that he was an ibogaine drug abuser and had been receiving secret visits from a Brazilian doctor for its regular administration.

Part of the appeal of the approach taken by Thompson and Herr is a certain understanding of the necessity of study as embodied participation in cultural groups. In Herr’s *Dispatches*, a lengthy series of embedded reports from the Vietnam war, he has quite clearly undergone a similar arc to soldiers as an embedded reporter. He struggles with returning to normal life, just as they do. And as someone not merely watching from the sidelines – his life is actually at risk most of the time – he knows some of what they know, feels some of what they feel. It is an extreme version of the process that I have, at first unwittingly, then deliberately, engaged in to conduct some of the following research. The second chapter reflects my accidentally-becoming-an-authority in the videogame criticism community. The fourth stems from my growing interest and involvement in internet activism and feminist political action online. Thompson’s observation of the Hells Angels biker groups from his debut novel involves storytelling by someone sharing the similar perspective of “outsider-on-the-
inside,” a perspective that I identify with. And while Herr’s pioneering work set a new standard of embedded reporting, his ability to convey unique culture and perspective often goes unacknowledged.

The approach involves a certain breakdown of the distinction between the subject and the object-of-study which has proven to be appropriate for the kind of messy, networked objects I am attempting to grapple, and for the new kinds of problems which entangle nearly everyone and everything. In chapter 2, that entangling object is the internet community and the authority that accrues to certain figures in the network – it is a network object made out of blogs, people, pages, hyperlinks, and nonhuman ideas. In chapter 3, the object of enquiry becomes the multinational corporate object, British Petroleum plc. (BP) primarily, along with the other corporations, objects and people responsible for the Deepwater Horizon oil spill. In chapter 4, the network object focus takes in internet sites and the online digital profiles that accrete from our online routines, coalescing into a whole picture of an ‘us’ behind which we assume exists a ‘me’ or ‘you’ and entailing a dual problem and opportunity for activism. Chapter 5 unites the insights achieved in the previous chapters by looking at the deleterious effects of capitalist realism on the ability to find individuals and corporations (networks of humans and nonhumans) responsible and what can reasonable and sensibly be done about it.

**Humans and nonhumans**

I want to make quite clear upfront the way in which I am using the word ‘nonhuman’, and the relation that I envisage for it with OOO’s ‘object’. There are two senses in which I deploy nonhuman terminology throughout this thesis, the first in sympathy with broadly OOO tenets, the second in a more idiosyncratic way. Nonhuman, in the first sense that I use it, is simply a way of saying ‘object’ without invoking the unfortunate spectre of an assertive, authoritative ‘objectivity’. There is no such claim to authoritative objectivity invoked in a OOO-style ‘object’ – it comes closest when it states axiomatically that all things are objects, at all scales and on all levels, but even this is remarkably catholic and unrestricted. But using ‘nonhuman’ instead of ‘object’ also performs a rhetorical function as well, reminding us that this object is not human
and foregrounds that difference – this is the second sense in which I use, and often mean, ‘nonhuman’ – as a way of understanding the uncanny or surprising nature of things-that-are-not-us.

Returning to the first sense, the principal OOO axiom is that all nonhumans are objects, because all things are objects – there are good reasons to eschew referring to humans as ‘objects,’ but these are not ontological reasons. This reason reflects the equally real political reality and history of problematic associations with ‘object’ and ‘objectification’ of certain groups of humans, especially women and minorities. But unlike human ‘objectification’ in the case of objectifying women, say, the OOO ‘object’ status does not perform any such conversion from subject into object, entailing no attendant loss of agency. The objectification of women, for instance, is so problematic in part because of the way it robs agency, subjecthood, and personhood. But OOO objects retain full status as subjects in their own right, and in fact much of OOO literature focuses on thinking through and about the experiences and implications of objects as subjects and agents in their own right. In Alien Phenomenology Bogost, in his answer to the challenge presented by correlationism, proposes ‘not the rejection of any correlate but the acknowledgment of endless ones, all self-absorbed, obsessed by givenness rather than by turpitude.’

In this way, all objects and humans are subjects, fully subjects, in the fullness of all their relations. This may seem absurd to consider for some nonhumans such as rocks, for instance. But a particular influence on my thinking regarding nonhumans is Jane Bennet has who conceives of matter as ‘vibrant,’ and almost alive with respect to its possession of uniquely thing-like agency. In the opening pages of her book Vibrant Matter, Bennett introduces the old-English common law legal concept of the ‘deodand’ which is particularly germane to my later discussion of blame and responsibility around humans. The deodand, according to Bennett, was

a figure of English law from about 1200 until it was abolished in 1846. In cases of accidental death or injury to a human the nonhuman actant, for example, the carving knife that fell into human flesh or the carriage that trampled the

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20 Bogost, Alien phenomenology, p.78.
leg of a pedestrian-became deodand (literally, “that which must be given to God”). In recognition of its peculiar efficacy (a power that is less masterful than agency but more active than recalcitrance) the deodand, “A materiality suspended between human and thing,” was surrendered to the crown to be used (or sold) to compensate for the harm done. According to William Pietz, “any culture must establish some procedure of compensation, expiation, or punishment to settle the debt created by unintended human deaths whose direct cause is not a morally accountable person, but a nonhuman material object. This was the issue thematized in public discourse by . . . the law of deodand.”

The archaic deodand looks today like a sensible and pragmatic response to a troubling issue, given the frequency with which “no one” or “no thing” can be found responsible for distributed or networked tragedies or accidents. What, after all, would be the point of blaming a piece of concrete and holding it responsible in the same manner as a human? We might be tempted to do so from an animate nonhuman perspective. However the average hunk of building material is indifferent to our chastisement, no matter how passionately the aggrieved respond. And yet no response at all seems inadequate for the most extreme of these situations – leading to what Meillassoux has called the Spectral Dilemma of ‘a dead person who has not been properly mourned’ and remains behind, haunting us. Meillassoux describes these spectres as created by deaths for which ‘the work of mourning, the passage of time, proves inadequate for a tranquil bond between them and the living to be envisaged.’ While he describes these as ‘premature deaths, odious deaths, the death of a child, the death of parents knowing their children are destined to the same end – and yet others,’ I would also suggest that similar deaths with no one or no thing (no human or nonhuman) responsible might leave a residue of similar specters. This because responsibility is frequently offloaded or circulated to be held by nonhumans with

23 Ibid., p.262.
24 Ibid.
complete indifference to our aggravations or accusations – from nonhuman markets responsible for setting and directing price signals, to multinational corporations which are never either completely human or nonhuman.

These particular forms of ‘distributed’ nonhuman receive further attention from Jane Bennett who writes persuasively about the way that electricity itself behaves unpredictably, with a highly complex and contingent situation causing the nearly-nationwide blackout in the United States in 2003. The lesson she takes from the distributed agency of electricity as it conducts through national grids is to take distributed nonhuman agency and the philosophical and the political problems and impasses it presents quite seriously. Her examples and discussion make a powerful argument for a reconceptualisation of ideas like agency, the questions they inevitably lead to around causality, responsibility and action, all of which this thesis takes up in places.

Sharing a number of Bennett’s interests is Michael Marder, whose thinking contained in his book Plant Thinking: A Philosophy of Vegetal Life builds upon findings from the biological sciences to reach some startling new conclusions regarding the aliveness and vitality of the nonhumans we know as plants. Marder finds a plant form of thinking and even communication, and builds his philosophy of vegetal life on top of an increased awareness of nonhuman agency. It is difficult to find the correct words to describe something like plant communication, however, as it is not simply a ‘rudimentary’ form of communication but rather a form uniquely plant. There is no simple evolutionary narrative of plant to animal to us, and from a deep historical perspective plants have spent longer evolving than has anything resembling humans. Equally, though, the root of all life can be traced back to single-celled organisms, displaying the manifest difficulty of framing these types of distinction sensibly.

By contrast, a more extreme nonhumanism is found in the work of Nick Land who, in a typically controversial interview with Wired in 1997 proclaimed that, ‘organization is suppression’. Land argued that,

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organisation involves subordinating low level units to some higher level functional program. In the most extreme cases, like in biological organisms, every cell is defunctionalised, turned off, except for that one specialised function that it is allocated by the organic totality. And hence the preponderant part of its potential is deactivated in the interests of some higher level unity. That's why the more organised things get, the less interesting their behaviour becomes – “interesting” simply meaning here how freely they explore a range of possible behaviours, or how “nomadic” they are.26

A OOO perspective might resist this view, arguing against the simple hierarchy and subordination it implies. In some sense though, even humans are nonhuman. As Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari remark: ‘In truth, there are only inhumanities, humans are made exclusively of inhumanities.’27 If this is case, however, then it presents something of a problem for what we mean by the human as well.

The human

Jane Bennett herself prefers a spectrum view of humanity and nonhumanity, and this is certainly compatible with the pin-point ‘tiny ontology’ and it gels with other spectrum-type approaches to the nature of ‘life’ and aliveness. In an interview with Gulshan Khan, Bennett provides her own answer for why she remains ‘on the side of the human’ in light of the rapidly disappearing human/nonhuman dichotomy and questions of who or what is entitled to favourable treatment or preference:

Since I have challenged the uniqueness of humanity in several ways, why not conclude that we and they are equally entitled? Because I have not eliminated all differences between us but examined instead the affinities across these differences, affinities that enable the very assemblages explored in [Vibrant Matter]. To put it bluntly, my conatus will not let me “horizontalize” the world completely. I also identify with members of my species, insofar as they are

bodies similar to mine. I so identify even as I seek to extend awareness of our interinvolvments and interdependencies. The political goal of a vital materialism is not the perfect equality of actants, but a polity with more channels of communication between members. (Latour calls this a more “vascularized” collective.)

With the human/nonhuman no longer in clear binary opposition, but rather instead inscribed as a pragmatic distinction, we gain a more modest place from which to begin knowing what a “human” is, originating in our lived experience and identification as “human” ourselves and by extending that recognition to others. Chapter 3 introduces Nicholas Mirzoeff’s concept of ‘the right to look’ as a reciprocal act of mutual seeing and construction – a seeing-and-being-seen with important political ramifications and solid grounding for reasons to do so. From this type of perspective, the progressive project can potentially be reconceptualised as the impetus to extend such recognition as far as it can be stretched, first to other humans who have historically or otherwise been excluded from being counted as ‘human’, and then further to other living things with which we recognize our shared bond and shared responsibility, as part of the kingdom of the living.

Literary and cultural critic John Gray has a powerful thesis about the application of the myth of human ‘progress’ in the realm of culture, society and politics and particularly how it pertains to our ideas about the human. While technology might be seen to ‘progress’ (for a certain bourgeoisie understanding of both technology and what it means to progress) Gray finds in historical accounts of war and barbarity the evidence of a more cyclical, push-pull process in which moral and political lessons are continually forgotten and relearned only (or most frequently) through the most extreme of human traumas: the horrors of wars, famines, genocides. The lure of human barbarity (he doesn’t describe it as inhumanity, but we could) is a powerful and ever-present temptation, according to Gray. Barbarity is also a uniquely appropriate adjective to describe numerous features of contemporary life: what other

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word sufficiently describes the widespread adoption of torture as acceptable practise as part of western nations intelligence gathering activities? What other word sufficiently accounts for the human cost visited upon innocents swept up within the political myths of ‘the war on terror’, ‘the war on drugs’ etc.? What other word adequately describes the carbon-debt that every human alive on planet earth today is currently leaving for future generations to pay? The barbarity of the present is on full display to anyone who cares to look and see it.

Gray takes two lessons from the dogged persistence of moral and cultural barbarity in human beings. The first is that cultural progress is a fiction, or myth, and that even if culture ‘evolves’ it cannot be said to be evolving with any particular end in mind. He notes that a major problem for the cultural evolutionary perspective is that, no one has come up with a unit of selection or a mechanism through which evolution operates in society. On an evolutionary view the human mind has no built-in bias to truth or rationality and will continue to develop according to the imperative of survival.\footnote{Ibid., pp.78-9.}

Secondly, Gray reaches a familiar conclusion regarding the “human animal” as just another animal, asserting that ‘the unique status of humans is hard to defend, and even understand, when it is cut off from any idea of transcendence’.\footnote{Ibid., p.77.} If immanent human moral and political “progress” is mythological in character, then equally so is progress in our\footnote{} biological evolution – certainly human evolution likewise has no end goal, aim, or purpose to it even if manifest evidence of our apparent ‘fitness’ for our environment persists (for the time being). This is a problem of language or conceptual confusion as Steven Shaviro remarks,

\begin{quote}
\textit{even the most dedicated evolutionists are unable to avoid reverting to the language of purpose. After all, living organisms, and their parts, are evidently...}
\end{quote}
purposive in terms of how they grow and how they relate to the world around them.\textsuperscript{32}

And yet the overall arc of evolution stalwartly resists such a purposive understanding, which would grant a teleology of ‘progress’ – a hard-to-assert concept, as Shaviro explains: ‘I may well be more “reproductively fit” because I can see, but the purpose of my eyes is seeing and not reproductive fitness.’\textsuperscript{33} Evolutionary ‘progress’ is ruled out, leaving us back where we started with respect to human distinctiveness, uniqueness, or separateness from animality. And yet there remains something inadequate about the ‘myth of humanity’ that Gray holds as a valuable fiction. Accepting the human-as-myth seems insufficient to me, as it lacks the grounding with which to compellingly close off certain undesirable perspectives. Even though it is difficult to argue with his assessment of the human-as-just-an-animal, I equally find myself unable to let go of the idea of the human, human distinctiveness and (to some extent) human separateness as something not simply mythological, much like Bennett’s earlier refusal to completely horizontalise and flatten out all distinction. The mythological perspective lacks the authority to preclude (and thus, it seems to covertly sanction) exactly the barbarism Grey deprecates, and this via a failure to establish or locate the grounds on which to oppose it. Perhaps that is not that much of a problem, but I am critical of this kind of conclusion for it gives up a useful practical position.

In one sense I am in agreement with Grey, in that (true or not) even the myth of human exceptionalism (let alone a grounding of that distinction as real) may be useful in countering, at the very least, a fatalism regarding our indelibly flawed ‘human nature,’ a capitulation to pessimism, stasis and austerity. After all, why can’t we be better as a whole species – what’s really stopping us? Why can’t we better understand ourselves along with our place in the world? Why can’t we have our cake and eat it too? Much fruitful work has been done to question the very existence of conceptions of ‘Nature’ itself and, along with it, stable ideas of a single monolithic ‘human nature’, with ideas of the natural heavily influenced by certain historical ideologies, most closely


\textsuperscript{33} Ibid., p.135.
associated with western imperialism and the rise of industrial capitalism. Timothy Morton’s *Ecology Without Nature* provides just such an attempt at thinking the strange new ecologies and hybrid things that cut across the artificial (indeed, mythical) nature/culture divide (which Bruno Latour has also diagnosed extensively, particularly in *We Have Never Been Modern*). The point here is not to fall back into the old position of constructivism by arguing for solipsistic conceptions of the pre-Copernican world, with humans as the masterful, willing subject at the centre of an infinitely malleable and masterable world. Neither is it to reinstitute the teleology of human ‘progress’, but rather instead it is a reminder to be mindful of the various resistances, limited-malleabilities, and indeed the very agencies of things – nonhumans – which are indelibly caught up and entangled with humans, in an a seemingly inescapable cycle. Perhaps the mythical figure of the Ouroboros, a serpent eating its own tail, forever recycling, forever consuming and producing itself, is an appropriate visual metaphor for the human here.

To briefly return to the cake-eating aphorism itself, so easily taken for granted as a common sense instance of realism, it assumes that there is or can only be one cake! What if there are two? Or three? If there is one thing I wish to eschew at all costs it is the incursion of the language and thinking of the zero-sum: that hallmark of economic rationalism, of neoliberalism and market fundamentalism, even baser – that simple fear of missing out. This presently popular form of super-rational accounting finds its antithesis in a host of excitingly weird new realisms, and the emerging continental philosophical strand known as speculative realism. To take just one brief example: for Timothy Morton who is inspired heavily by the strangeness of quantum physics, things are self-contradictory and multiple – both themselves and not themselves at the same time. Further, as a counter-intuitive conclusion from his brand of OOO, rather than time taken as a container in which all things flow at the same inevitable rate, the dynamism and movement of objects end up producing time by their effects and interactions. Latour’s similar approach to time involves the idea of time as the result of the irreversibility of action. The very flavour of these ideas present a striking

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challenge to the economic fundamentalism embedded in the common sense of contemporary capitalism. In the next section I turn to discuss Mark Fisher’s concept of ‘capitalist realism’ and its indelible hold on the human imagination. It is an important concept returned to repeatedly throughout this thesis, particularly in the final chapter, which examines the way capitalist realism affects the three themes of the thesis (authority, responsibility and activism) in a way that is entirely unrivalled by any other contemporary frame, object, or explanation.

**Capitalist realism’s hold on hope and imagination**

If the role of the human and its obverse, the nonhuman, takes a central role in this thesis, then contemporary capitalism is cast in an important supporting role, influencing everything it touches, and touching nearly everything. I suspect future historians (if any survive to reflect upon history) will look back on the current era with some astonishment at how profoundly we have allowed our very humanity to be reflected back to us through the lens of something so nonhuman – even inhuman. Even that very idea of looking back on the present, of occupying a speculative future position, is a rather bizarre, nigh unthinkable, exercise today. *What future? Even if we could imagine it, how could it possibly differ from the present? Who is left that can imagine anything beyond a stretched out version of today, with at best a few technological improvements, perhaps some slightly nicer trimmings? This stagnation is what a number of thinkers have begun to diagnose, from Mark Fisher’s description of the contemporary ideological complex he calls ‘capitalist realism,’ to Jodi Dean’s *The Communist Horizon* which attributes the Left’s inability to think alternatives to capitalism to the disappearance of actually existing communism from the world (referring to both state party-based communism and the political possibilities it once stood for).

In his 2009 book *Capitalist Realism: Is There Really No Alternative?*, Fisher explains that capitalist realism has installed a ‘business ontology’ according to which ‘it is *simply obvious* that everything in society… should be run as a business.’\(^{37}\) More recently he has

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distinguished it from neoliberalism, that set of political and ideological principles of
governance which David Harvey has historicised,\textsuperscript{38} and the more recent turn to
capitalist realism. Fisher says that capitalist realism

isn’t the direct endorsement of neoliberal doctrine; it’s the idea that, \textit{whether we}
like it or not, the world is governed by neoliberal ideas, and that won’t change.
There’s no point fighting the inevitable.\textsuperscript{39}

In my experience the way this manifests is less through overt declarations than in
attitudes of resistance to hope for alternatives. The most prominent feature of
capitalist realism, then, is not its necessary \textit{correctness} so much as its seeming lack of
contingency. Neoliberal bureaucracy, according to Fisher, both ‘naturalises and
normalises the language and practices of business’ and ‘makes the ritualised
performance of this naturalisation a condition of workers retaining their jobs.’\textsuperscript{40} But
according to Jeremy Gilbert capitalist realism is

both a ‘structure of feeling’, in [Raymond] Williams’ terms (or perhaps an
‘affective regime’ in a slightly more contemporary register) and, in quite a
classical sense, a hegemonic ideology, operating as all hegemonic ideologies
do, to try to efface their own historicity and the contingency of the social
arrangements which they legitimate.\textsuperscript{41}

Althusser in his essay on ‘Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses’ argues that
ideology always has a material basis, and is instantiated into practises and rituals.\textsuperscript{42} While object-oriented ontology, in spite of its focus on ‘things’, is not a form of
materialism (matter and objects not being interchangeable substances), we can
investigate the history, objects and practises of capitalist realist ideology – and this
becomes a significant element of chapter 5. One stunning example of capitalist

\textsuperscript{38} David Harvey, \textit{A Brief History of Neoliberalism} (Oxford University Press, 2005).
\textsuperscript{39} Mark Fisher and Jeremy Gilbert, “Capitalist realism and neoliberal hegemony: a
\textsuperscript{40} Ibid., p.93.
\textsuperscript{41} Ibid., p.89.
\textsuperscript{42} Louis Althusser, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses \textit{(notes towards an}
realism occurred in late 2013 during a TV interview on the US cable news channel CNBC. Ostensibly a debate over whether JPMorgan Chase CEO Jamie Dimon was right to keep his position as head of the ‘too-big-to-fail’ bank, given the unprecedented fine the firm was levied with as part of a settlement to avoid criminal prosecution. CNBC’s Closing Bell programme invited Salon writer Alex Pareene to argue the case that the JPMorgan Chase CEO ought to go. His opponent, business reporter Duff McDonald, went on to argue that Dimon was, in fact, not just a suitable candidate but in actuality, the only possible candidate qualified to run the complex multinational corporation.

The interview quickly descended into farce, as the neutral journalistic mask slipped to reveal the utterly partisan ideological position of the CNBC program anchors themselves who, along with McDonald, all refused to accept the necessity of taking anything into consideration other than the sheer profitability of JPMorgan Chase. Apparently, they literally believed, not just that the profit the company was making was the only thing that mattered, but that it was the only thing that truly existed. A telling opening statement, offered by host Maria Bartiromo, attempted to frame the debate, blithely stating that ‘legal issues aside’ one had to admit the company was highly profitable. After some objection and attempting to get around such a one-eyed set-up, Pareese ends up listing a number of legal breaches which ought to immediately disqualify Dimon on the grounds of criminal culpability or (at best) sheer incompetence, including a case in which the company was involved with corrupt payments to Chinese government officials. When the hosts questioned the existence of this incident, Pareese mentioned that it was “a fact” widely reported in the New York Times, and Bartiromo even went so far in her farcical defence of Dimon as to ask in response, the following question, ‘What is a fact?’ Retreating into questioning the nature of what exists (with profit as the only undeniable fact) is utterly revealing and indicative of capitalist realism.

The segment was commented on extensively by Rolling Stone journalist Matt Taibbi on a New York radio programme. Taibbi, who spent the majority of the period since the 2008 global financial crisis chronicling the scandals, criminal activities and profligate excesses of the US financial services industry, adds a layer of analysis on top of Pareene’s harried comments on the program, rattling off scores of criminal findings
against JP Morgan Chase which were the reason for the huge settlement and which clearly were factual. Pareene later wound up writing a piece for Salon, claiming that he had ‘botched it’ on the program, by not making a strong enough case. But he also acknowledges that, for the anchors and the people inside the “bubble”, there exists the idea that “profitability is its own justification”. I would go even further – for these same people, they would like profitability to be the only thing counted as real. This is precisely what I call ‘money ontology’.

What can be counted as ‘real’ is frequently limited by what it is possible to imagine, with creative and speculative fiction often doing much to expand the boundaries of the possible. Much ‘common sense’ resistance to alternative visions of the present and the future can be boiled down to a failure of imagination, a failure to image any other way to live and organise society other than the current capitalist mode. Both Mark Fisher and Jodi Dean have engaged with this contemporary dynamic ascribing much of its purchase in popular thought to the failure of alternatives to capitalism, such as communism and socialism. The famous anarchist slogan “another world is possible” also engages with this question of imagination and its connection to what it is admissible to think. It’s a prominent and distressing feature of capitalist realism that dreaming of a ‘better’ and realistic future that is neither dystopian nor hopelessly utopian has become so difficult. Nina Power captures the sense in which the ideological dominance of capitalist realism somehow seems to utterly totalize reality. Referring to the (im)possibility of ‘classical forms of political organisation’ such as trade unions and protest groups, as a form and method of political organization, she notes that they ‘seem unnecessary, outmoded and impossible all at the same time (at least in the more affluent parts of the world). Capitalist realism sets a limit on what we can even think about, especially when it comes to what it means to be human, variously forcing us, as it often does, to act or to think as ‘economic actors’ or in other financialised ways peculiar to the current period, and which inevitably perform a reduction of the fullness of what it can mean to be human.

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One of the few remaining realms of imagination and acceptable speculation about the future still open to us is the realm of technology, grinding on with “innovation” after “innovation”, with all the apparent inexorability of something eternal, unchanging, like gravity or the sun. Even when imaginable, the end of technological progress or of capitalism is only contemplated in purely apocalyptic terms, the common refrain being that “oh yes it's all unsustainable, we’re all going to be obliterated by climate change” which leads so often to an overwhelming sense of paralysis, fatalism or despair. Evan Calder Williams’ Combined and Uneven Apocalypse\(^46\) examines this very proclivity of modern popular culture. The only way, it seems, in which popular culture can imagine capitalism’s failure – in spite of the manifest evidence of just such catastrophic failure all around us from the 2008 subprime mortgage crisis to the ongoing failure of austerity policy in Europe – is if there is no one around left to keep the machine running, that is, if it comes married to imagining our own extinction and disappearance. Popular culture’s vision of capitalism’s only contingent element is the persistence of human beings themselves, and Williams points towards the genre of films, documentaries and speculative fiction works that depict the ruins of modern urban and industrial culture such as skyscrapers, bridges and built-up-areas as they are reclaimed by nature following the rapturous disappearance of humans from the earth. These programs like the History channel’s “Life After People” series, ostensible vehicles for the communication of the sublime power of nature, reveal the only admissibly contingent element of contemporary capitalism – it takes the extinction of humans for the machinery of capitalism to be transformed into useless crumbling ruins. By contrast, whenever humans survive in visions of the future, while the world may degenerate into a flaming horrorscape, so long as humans persist in some form it seems as though capitalism or elements of it remain – as though it is almost impossible to unthink, even at the very end of the world.

A better world for humans is possible. Abundant examples of societies arranged quite radically differently from our own populate anthropological and historical records. David Graeber’s Debt, The First 5,000 Years offers tantalizing glimpses into these worlds.\(^47\) These are like a break in the clouds allowing the transmission of hope and

\(^{46}\)Evan Calder Williams, Combined and Uneven Apocalypse, (Zero Books, 2011).

\(^{47}\)David Graeber, Debt: The first 5,000 years, (Brooklyn, New York: Melville House, 2011).
possibility that things could be entirely otherwise. Reading Graeber it seems as though whole realms of possibility lie outside of what is commonly acknowledged in the mainstream social imaginary. An experimental township called Gaviotas in the harsh Columbian savannah has over a period of several decades shown the world (though it has hardly noticed) that it is possible to exist in even the most inhospitable of environments and maintain a thriving, sustainable mode of existence, collectively organized even while surrounded by the influences of the marketizing imperatives of neoliberalism. Perhaps the inhospitable Colombian steppes has actually helped in this respect, enabling Gaviotas, like Graeber’s grand historical anthropology, to escape becoming an ‘impossible dream’, ruled out in advance by the strictures of what often passes for economic rationality, or feasibility. Rather than just reflecting back to us the contingencies in our own world, Graeber’s historical anthropology and the Gaviotas community show what could be otherwise about the present itself; they are positive, creative and optimistic visions. The head of Gaviotas says explicitly:

Gaviotas isn’t a utopia… utopia literally means ‘no place’. In Greek, the prefix ‘u’ signifies no. We call Gaviotas a toopia because it’s real. We’ve moved from fantasy to reality. From utopia to toopia.

Reading about it, one gets the very real sense that living in Gaviotas isn’t all hammocks and aguardiente – the inhabitants have to work hard, but unlike the majority of ‘paid work’ done in the west, the work is neither alienating, nor compelled by the looming threat of either poverty, starvation, eviction, or crippling debt – inevitabilities for much of the western working poor following the dismantling of all but the most basic of welfare safety nets. Gaviotan’s labour is not work done for a boss, a manager, a corporation, or even a government (all nonhumans, not coincidentally despite being entangled with humans), but for a community and for fellow people. Graeber himself has referred to the proliferation of nonessential work as ‘The Phenomenon of Bullshit Jobs.’ The viral popularity of this idea is a telling sign -

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49 Paolo Lugari, quoted in Ibid., p.8.
the website the piece was initially posted on crashed from the traffic load, and it has subsequently been republished in many diverse news outlets around the world.

The responsibility of nonhuman objects like capitalism is one of the major concerns of this thesis, and it is worth considering how a nonhuman like it can be responsible. As a highly abstract but also incredibly durable political-economic and ideological complex, capitalism clearly does things in and to the world. The question of nonhuman responsibility, entailed in the admission of nonhuman agency, and an explanation of what I mean by the term responsibility itself is worth examination in some detail.

**Responsible objects**

One of the foremost thinkers of responsibility today is legal scholar Nicole Vincent, who works at the intersection of neuroscientific discovery and the legal system. In this thesis, I am drawing on two kinds of responsibility inspired by Vincent’s work. In order to deal with the unique challenges presented by responsibility in the space of intersection between the law and advances in neuroscience, Vincent has developed six types of responsibility. Her approach is highly specific, treating responsibility as a “syndrome” rather than one unified concept. She deploys the oft-used parable of ‘Smith the ship captain’ to make a series of statements that illuminate the various ways in which a human (here the apocryphal Smith the ship captain) can be responsible. It is worth quoting at length each particular sense in which one can be ‘responsible’:

(1) Smith had always been an exceedingly responsible person, (2) and as captain of the ship he was responsible for the safety of his passengers and crew. However on his last voyage he drank himself into a stupor, (3) and he was responsible for the loss of his ship and many lives. (4) Smith’s defence attorney argues that the alcohol and Smith’s transient depression were responsible for his misconduct, (5) but the prosecution’s medical experts confirmed that Smith was fully responsible when he started drinking since he was not suffering from depression at that time. (6) Alas, his employer will probably have to take responsibility for this

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tragedy, since the victims families’ claims for damages far outstrip the limits of Smith’s personal indemnity insurance policy.52

Vincent gives each term its own name: 1) virtue responsibility, 2) role responsibility, 3) outcome responsibility, 4) causal responsibility, 5) capacity responsibility, and 6) liability responsibility. Importantly, each is conceptualised in the past tense with the exception of liability responsibility (conceptualised in future tense because it is the only form of responsibility that makes a claim on future action, or what should happen), and degrees of speculation are circumscribed within certain authorised causalities – for instance, “depression” is a cause ruled out in the assessment of Smith’s capacity responsibility (i.e. he was not “incapacitated” by depression causing him to drink). But crucially in this case, the admissibility of depression causing certain action in Smith the ship captain is accepted, even as in this specific instance it is declared irrelevant. By contrast, the moon as the cause of Smith’s depression is inadmissible, and for reasonable, scientifically and culturally informed reasons. This is an important point I will come back to in a moment, and again in the introduction to chapter 3 ‘network responsibility.’

Because I am attempting to generally apply notions of responsibility to both human and nonhuman alike, I am adapting these six into two types of responsibility, in order to account better for what might be a potential nonhuman responsibility. The history of legal interaction and judicial judgment of guilty nonhumans extends further than just the figure of the deodand (discussed previously), with a number of particularly colourful incidents occurring throughout the middle ages, recorded by E. P. Evans in The Criminal Prosecution and Capital Punishment of Animals.53 While these mainly concerned living nonhumans, a rather more bizarre example involving nonliving nonhumans is a part of the history of the papacy. In January of the year 897, Pope Stephen VI, for largely political reasons, exhumed his predecessor Pope Formosus and carried out a lengthy show-trial, denouncing him for a variety of crimes and

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52 Ibid., p.44-45.
pronouncing him guilty. Though this bizarre trial was more a piece of political theatre than actual trial, being aimed at what the living Pope Formosus had done, this fascinating example nevertheless demonstrates a willingness to try the nonhuman, and pass judgement on the nonliving.

In order to bring nonhumans into a discussion of responsibility I treat responsibility as two concepts – moral and causal responsibility. When we accept (moral) responsibility, we accept consequences, and this is the foundation for an activist conception of responsibility. On the other hand, causal responsibility is simply an assessment, a claim to knowledge, as one might claim to know where a certain thing is in space, or what time the next train is scheduled to arrive. At this stage we have made no necessary moral determinations, and have not yet attached any sense of moral wrongs (or rights), instead merely having conducted a post-hoc assessment of matters of fact – or, better still, ‘matters of concern’ as Bruno Latour puts it.55

Responsibility has been, and continues to be reconfigured significantly by capitalism. Particularly important is the way that forms of capitalism have undone many former civilizing and socialising institutions, as part of what Gilles Delueze and Felix Guattari describe as its “deterioralizing” power, a point that Fisher also underscores.56 The dissolving power of laissez faire capitalism is revealed in the famous mantra that under capitalism one is always free to starve; a statement which conversely assigns to the individual – and only them – the ultimate responsibility for their complete welfare. The consequences of this laissez faire capitalist attitude towards responsibility is well documented, if perhaps not widely known, resulting in the Victorian era, during which time laissez faire capitalism was ascendant, in what Mike Davis has labelled Late Victorian Holocausts.57 In many countries of what is now known as the third world, their then-recent integration into globally networked food markets, along with a gross and negligent attitude towards the welfare of the inhabitants of these colonial countries on

55 Latour, “Why has critique run out of steam?”
the part of their rulers and administrators, resulted in hundreds of millions of deaths. According to Davis, millions died in India, China and Brazil bestowed with the capitalist “freedom” to starve. These effects of capitalism and imperialism combined with drought and the resulting price increases left the responsibility for feeding starving peasants entirely to themselves, after having already done away with traditional community safeguards against starvation such as granaries and storehouses. The resulting death toll is almost unthinkable, with Davis suggesting a figure of between 30 and 60 million over three El Niño cycles towards the latter parts of the 19th century.

The *laissez faire* perspective gives us a clue into one of the most common moral responsibilities which adults are assumed to have in contemporary western capitalist society, ultimately this is responsibility *for themselves*. Young adults upon leaving home quickly learn that they need, in the absence of anyone else whose role it is to make sure they do not “starve”, to take on the responsibilities of feeding themselves, and making sure they have adequate clothing, shelter, etc. (these responsibilities often unavoidably resolve down to economic responsibilities – the responsibility to get a job, to draw an income, to rent a house, etc).

But of all these responsibilities which are expected under present western capitalist societies there is nothing ‘natural’ about their particular distribution, in the sense that there is at least nothing necessary about them. Frequently these norms break down or blur as in ordinary day-to-day life, as people often recognise the inability (even the undesirability) of behaving like the ideal capitalist, rational, self-possessed unit. Unemployment is a frequent site for this kind of blurring of responsibilities, as people and groups take on the responsibility for ensuring their friends, flatmates, or extended families avoid starvation and destitution. This takes the form of either direct taking-responsibility, as when one pays for a friend’s food or drink, or indirectly, as when one finds someone a job, or aids their efforts to do so.

But it is important to also acknowledge that moral responsibility, while an important diagnostic and activist tool, is neither sufficient in necessitating action, nor is it automatic in its application (some may and will reject their moral responsibility, or the assessment of moral responsibility, and there may be little one can do about this). This is an important feature of moral responsibility, which operates in a realm of “should”,

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rather than “will”. But it is distinguished from liability responsibility in that it is not necessarily attached to the same strong allies as the legal system, which is backed by the power of many forces (literally and figuratively). In the final assessment, then, moral responsibility is highly problematic, negotiated, and invariably underwritten by the concept of causal responsibility.

What complicates the otherwise apparent straightforwardness of causal responsibility, at least relative to moral responsibility in cases where others are assessed as “being responsible”, is that causal determinations are highly influenced by whichever one of the numerous competing philosophies of causality one subscribes to. While the history of philosophical theories of causality in the West begins with Aristotle’s four causes (material, formal, efficient, and final) and proceeds into complicated territory beyond the scope of this discussion, what is worth considering here is the way that particular causalities become authorised while certain others are consigned to the realm of the inadmissible, the outrageous, or the paranoid. As mentioned earlier, depression (if proven to the courts satisfaction) is an admissible cause for aberrant behaviour in humans, however at present, the waxing of the full moon is not.

The primary reason for focussing on the authorization of causality is that it informs what we might describe as the contemporary ‘common-sense’ or ‘everyday’ approach to causality, which is anything but stable and which is subject to the legitimating or delegitimizing effects of authorisation (authority being the overriding theme of the first chapter of this thesis following the present introduction). Which causalities are, or are not, able to be authorised is highly dependent on context, and taking Vincent’s legal context as a starting point we can ask what constitutes legitimate causal regimes in a legal setting? This is often precisely the site of court room struggle, as (depending on the problem or question at hand) an expert witnesses may be called to give evidence and authorise a physical Newtonian causality, quantum mechanical causality, social causality, brain chemistry causality, technological causality or other, depending on context, the witnesses to be called, the predilections and demographics of the jury, the strategies of the prosecution and defence, etc., etc. Likewise, the earlier comparison between (at least in certain instances) authorized and admissible depression-as-causality contrasts starkly with the unauthorized and inadmissible moon-as-causality, due to certain common-sense understandings of what counts as causality according to
science, which excludes the classic-mythological sense of the moon “causing” madness and human transformations. Nevertheless, this is contested ground, and even science is no simple (de)authorizer, and as I argue in chapter 5, the effect of capitalist realism often delivers a favourable reception for certain causalities at the expense of others. The legal context is just one example, but we find the same contest repeated in various fora, as causalities struggle for authorisation by experts, or just as commonly, by particular nonhumans who sanction them – a point which I shall return to in a moment.

In at least some sense, however, a rigorous philosophy of causality is largely unnecessary, even unexpected in most cases, with the everyday sense in which causality is discussed more commonly governed by standards of reasonableness and permissibility than by any strict adherence to a given theoretical position. We find an echo of this approach in many western Common Law legal systems, which recognise that unassailable, totally legitimate and authorised proof is practically unattainable (even undesirable, given it’s often frequent indistinguishability from dogma) and instead are concerned with something more like the overall weight of evidence, codifying only assessments of guilt or innocence beyond reasonable doubt. It seems that productive, good faith discussions between two interlocutors more often conform to a similar standard, but perhaps only discussions in good faith, and only if a certain understanding of what is considered reasonable or acceptable is common to all parties. For example, two interlocutors may find themselves discussing the causes of a phenomenon as complex and distributed as climate change – yet if both do not agree at least on the reasonableness of some or other causal link between human activity (carbon dioxide in the atmosphere, the greenhouse effect, etc.) and the observable effects of climate change (as measured by satellite land temperature records, long term statistical analysis, etc.) then it is common for the argument to turn, in a Latourian sense, to whichever conceptual, theoretical or even practical allies that are closest to hand (closest via Google search or otherwise, an application of the first chapter’s concept of network authority) to provide ready authorisation of a particular causality. These allies themselves often appear in the form of legalistic appeals to professed, or

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assumed-to-be inarguably real or material allies: scientific reasoning, logic, or other unassailable absolutes.

But just as we might wish to share the burden of reasonableness across both parties, it is also unfair to allow one interlocutor the right or ability to dictate the reasonable terms of plausibility regarding causal responsibility. A number of situations immediately spring to mind when that would itself be irresponsible or unreasonable: when arguing with a child, for instance, or when the rights and freedoms of some party – even the upholding of justice itself – comes to depend on the good faith of an opponent in agreeing on causal responsibility. Hence the involvement of third party neutral arbiters, whether human or nonhuman, and the western legal tradition recognises this, acknowledging that arbitration often requires a neutral third party (often taking the form of a judge, a jury of peers, or even God himself, as in the case of certain Middle Ages 'trials' – trials by fire, combat, etc.).

In light of this tendency, the temptation then is to provide a trump card, by aligning oneself to a particularly unassailable object and its particular authorised philosophy of causation, perhaps classical physics, another of the physical sciences (popular choices in online comment thread discussions include evolutionary psychology and neuroscience), perhaps even quantum mechanics. The terminological and theoretical complexity of these, far from becoming a reason to avoid naïve and credulous adherence, often becomes a virtue for one party who, by way of this terminological closure gains a largely unassailable position. Cleaving to a particular science or discipline for this often reduces or elides the sense in which knowledge is often provisional and continually revised in these fields. In the final chapter of this thesis I will discuss the ne plus ultra of this approach which we find under contemporary capitalism. I argue that it involves a supposed realism based entirely on the market, behaving as if money was the most real or durable entity, and in which causality and responsibility both take on characteristics of money: namely complete fungibility and unceasing circulation.

Timothy Morton, who himself has a strange take on causality, provides an important critique of this practise of causality authorisation via a “trump card” which often comes in the form of a gestural appeal to concrete reality, via a stone to be kicked, or
some other irresistible notion. Morton describes the “machismo” of this kind of refutation, commonly deployed in order to counter Berkeleian idealism, noting quite importantly that:

Referencing the sound of a boot hitting a mineral compound is not an argument. Perhaps the sound alone is a kind of argument. We are getting used to how oil spills and strange weather really do “speak” to us—OOO is timely in giving us concepts with which to address the feedback we are receiving from Earth… But my aggressive, correlationist assertion that this is my refutation (myself, here, located above this stone, at the other end of this boot) is not an argument: it’s a compelling aesthetic image.59

Confusingly, Morton’s own interpretation of object-oriented ontology principles leads him to conclude that causality is itself aesthetic as in the above quotation. But whether it is necessary to adopt Morton’s aesthetic causality and the arguments as he lays them out in Realist Magic is missing the point. They will likely not convince everyone—perhaps this is even part of their charm. Morton’s argument has already drawn significant criticism from some quarters for its rather haphazard approach,60 drawing as it does from a dizzying array of sources, notably the field of quantum physics (one of perhaps the most “strong” and convincing, or so we are told, explanations for everything at present) and the reliance upon it sometimes does feels like a similar repeat of the stone-kicking gesture. However the critique of stone-kicking-as-irrefutable-demonstration (rather than viewing it as yet another compelling, aesthetic image; a convincing act or performance authorising a certain causality that assembles the objects ‘stone’, ‘boot’ and ‘foot’ such that the sound itself makes an argument) is important for my treatment of casual responsibility, and lends weight to my own argument that causal responsibility—at least, as negotiated—is best considered through the lens of a kind of test of reasonableness which I describe in more detail at the start of chapter 3.

The network: non-subordinate parts and wholes

I now turn to establish what I mean by the ‘network object’, a term which would seem to convey the contradictory sense of a disunity within a whole, a sense beyond merely being heterogeneous. My usage of the term ‘network’ and my concept of the ‘network object’ is somewhat idiosyncratic, informed by OOO’s re-articulation of Latour’s approach to the ‘network’ portion of actor-network theory. OOO has often regarded Latour as a philosopher, and I have picked up this same habit, which might set me apart from those who take Actor-Network Theory (ANT) more strictly as a methodology. It has been the source of confusion for some – I once asked Bruno Latour via videolink at a conference what attitudes he thought were necessary in a good ANT researcher and his response demonstrated some of the disconnect: “ANT is a toolbox” was his curt reply, largely dismissing the idea that attitudes were involved. While I understand his perspective, it is also clear (especially from a reading of Graham Harman’s *Prince of Networks*) that what is just a toolbox for one can become for another a thrilling philosophical project from a slightly different angle. Two key Latourian concepts inform my understanding of the network: the principle of irreduction, and the concept of the ‘black box’.

According to Latour’s principle of irreduction, contained in the appendices of *Pasteurisation of France*, ‘nothing is, by itself, either reducible or irreducible to anything else.’ This is the key insight that informs my approach in this project and to research more broadly – inspiring me to a credulity (similar to Meillaux’s) around the nature of explanation, and allowing for any object to do the work of convincing. Harman further elaborates his interpretation of this principle in the following passage:

In one sense we can never explain religion as the result of social factors, World War I as the result of rail timetables, or the complex motion of bodies as pure examples of Newtonian physics. Yet in another sense we can always attempt such explanations, and sometimes they are fairly convincing. It is always possible to explain anything in terms of anything else—as long as we do the work of showing

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61 “Knowledge/Culture/Social Change International Conference,” The University of Western Sydney, Australia, Parramatta Campus, November 7-9, 2011.
how one can be transformed into the other, through a chain of equivalences that always has a price and always risks failure.63

To explain its applicability to the concept of the network, I offer the following (admittedly less catchy) détournement64 of Latour’s principle of irreduction: no network is, by itself, either reducible or irreducible to any number or quality of its parts or their relations. In this way, I simply mean that a network, far from being just a rhetorical framing device or a kind of catch-all for its constituent parts, can be both an object and a collection of object-parts (themselves objects) simultaneously. This is not an argument for the concept of “emergence” so much as it is the outcome of the peculiar mereology enabled by OOO, but neither is this to install a hierarchy of wholes-over-parts, and vice verse. Latour in his wonderful study of the Aramis transportation project – a utopian public transport project that was under development throughout the 60s and 70s – captures something of this sense of the network-object. In Aramis, Latour writes about the topology and interaction of complex ideas and technologies in the Aramis project which involved the development of never-before-seen technical solutions, the expenditure of millions of dollars over several decades, and numerous iterations on the project’s founding idea of point-to-point individual mass transportation. In projects like this, he notes;

their topology is so nonstandard that the very smallest one may, from time to time and for a certain period of time, contain the larger ones. Is nonmaterial coupling Aramis’ content or its container? Hard to say… If Aramis were in operation today, its transitivity would be easy to observe… From the general to the particular, the logic would be easy to follow. But in the real Aramis, precisely the one that does not exist, we see that nonmaterial coupling becomes, for some people, the big doll that contains and justifies all the others.65

64 Guy Debord, Mohamed Dahou, Giuseppe Pinot Gallizio, and Maurice Wyckaert, “Central Bulletin Published by the Sections of the Situationist International”, Internationale Situationniste 1, June 1958, http://www.cddc.vt.edu/sionline///si/is1.html, see ‘Definitions.’
What he is talking about here is a confusion, uncertainty, or instability over which objects are superordinate ‘containers’ to others. Is the ‘idea’ of Aramis the container calling forth the technology to make it real, or does the technology bring with it the possibility of the idea? It is far from clear, and never stable. To understand the process of closure that enables a network of parts to also have a sense of unity or wholeness, Latour introduces the concept of the black box. Harman explains this, saying that, ‘A black box is any actant so firmly established that we are able to take its interior for granted.’ 66 Latour’s black boxes are more typically machines like laboratory equipment but they also include experimental processes, assemblages of people and Petri dishes, humans and nonhumans. Harman summarises Latour’s position, once more:

There is no special plane of reality on which we find substances, as opposed to mere conglomeration of parts. This puts Latour at odds with both the Aristotelian and materialist traditions. 67

What the OOO approach does is take both the principle or irreduction and the concept of the Latourian ‘black box’ and port both to the realm of ontology, so that all objects are both open and closed, and with infinitely massive potential interiors. Ian Bogost elaborates on this perspective, as we saw earlier, labeling it a ‘tiny ontology’ and removing the spatial dimension from the metaphor, an approach that also gels with Timothy Morton’s attitude towards objects as self-contradictory. The appeal of this approach is that it contributes to solving the special kind of problem the network presents. This problem typically revolves around a question of whether the network is one or multiple, and whether it is sensible to refer to something as distributed and complex as ‘the internet’ as a coherent whole at all. My network-object perspective reflects a search for a space in the fissures between approaches, a speculative bridge between methods or conceptual schema based on essential ones or units, like Adam Smith’s rational calculating individual – to which there is a kernel of truth, in that sometimes some people do act in this way, or times when it is useful to think in this

66 Harman, Prince of Networks, p.33.
67 Ibid., p.46.
way – and approaches more comfortable with aggregations, assemblages and networks of uncertain, heterogeneous elements.

Further, there is some indication that the OOO approach closely reflects our ordinary sense experiences. In his book *Dispatches*, Michael Herr describes the way that his diverse and extreme experiences with the infamous Huey helicopters – that at times saved his life, at others risked it, brought relief, dread, terror and hauntings by the dead – morphed into a ‘meta-chopper’:

In the months after I got back the hundreds of helicopters I’d flown in began to draw together until they’d formed a collective meta-chopper, and in my mind it was the sexiest thing going; saver-destroyer, provider-waster, right hand-left hand, nimble, fluent, canny and human; hot steel, grease, jungle-saturated canvas webbing, sweat cooling and warming up again, cassette rock and roll in one ear and door-gun fire in the other, fuel, heat, vitality and death, death itself, hardly an intruder.  

My network-object concept reflects the idea of the meta-chopper – throwing out non-contradiction and the necessity that a thing not be both singular and multiple at the same time. There is a tonal resonance here with Meillassoux’s universe of ‘unreason’ in this perspective. Morton makes an addition to the network-object perspective via a discussion of the Sorites paradox, which can be recast as a question of if or when an aggregation becomes a whole or unity unto itself. Morton finds that similar problems abound in nature, and in biology. While no amount of adding grains of sand to a heap will ever produce a definitive point out from which emerges a singular ‘heap’, likewise he notes rhetorically that ‘an evolving species and an ecosystem meet with similar problems. Does that mean that they don’t really exist, or that our logic is too brittle to cope with them?’  

His argument is that it is absurd to proscribe belief in the useful concept of ‘species’ simply because it cannot be accounted for except diachronically, and thus at a step abstracted from the *creature itself*, likewise the existence of a unity,

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whole, or object should neither be rejected because one can see only what immediately goes into a thing, in other words, one can see “inside” the black box. The heap is no less real than the grains because the heap is an abstraction, and likewise the species. Genetics and the evolution of genes and species exemplify self-contradiction, with Morton worrying that an unfortunate feature of the many New Materialisms is that they ‘risk editing out a significantly illusory dimension of reality: illusory not only for humans, or even for sentient beings, but illusory all the way down.’\(^{70}\) He observes that if one were to

stop the clock anywhere in the course of a genome’s mutation… one won’t find the essence of a cat or whatever came before a cat: one will never catch evolution in the act. Yet cats exist and they are markedly different from their ancestors.\(^{71}\)

Morton is highly critical of the solution to the Sorites paradox offered by process-relationism, noting that it ‘never specifies what constitutes the relations or the process: of what are these things relations or processes?’\(^{72}\) To recast this discussion into the language of contemporary networks and the network object, it is quite similar to asserting that my Facebook profile is just my (one) profile and just an accumulation of data while holding both the unitary and fragmented senses in mind at once. It is both a matter of perspective and something more, reflecting the fundamentally uncertain nature of the network object itself. Morton connects his critique of the necessity of non-contradiction into a criticism of patriarchal ideology, claiming that ‘non-contradiction is the dominant face of patriarchal ideology: a master signifier establishes all the others, and holds all values captive.’\(^{73}\)

I have already established that this thesis takes as a major concern the popular ideology that Mark Fisher calls capitalist realism, and largely that ideology becomes the target of this peculiar, self-contradicting network-object perspective and its application. Capitalist realism, for instance, largely takes two positions on networks

\(^{70}\) Ibid., p.62.
\(^{71}\) Ibid., p.63.
\(^{72}\) Ibid., p.56.
\(^{73}\) Ibid., p.62.
and objects: the first, that humans are individuals (objects) and thus not plural (networks), as in the case of the Adam Smithian economical actor, mentioned above. The second position it affirms is that networks are not ‘individual(s)’ and thus are multiple, and we see the results of this logic in the classic phrase uttered by Margaret Thatcher that ‘there is no such thing as society’ – in other words, to assemble a unitary idea from a network of humans is incomprehensible if it contradicts the tenets of neo-liberal capitalism. The OOO perspective is able to see and affirm two more contradictory concepts in addition to these, with the four total perspectives being:
- human-as-one
- human-as-many (or network)
- network-as-many
- network-as-one

This undecidability is quite a useful capacity, though it is hard to describe the value in the abstract, and largely I leave the demonstration of its usefulness to my application and analyses in the following pages. One practical thing that OOO allows me to do, however, is talk about something like ‘the internet’ as a whole object, without necessarily closing off the question of its contents. I take it as possible to discuss the network and the kinds of things it does as a whole without resorting to the awkwardness of something like Evgeny Morozov’s position that “the internet doesn’t really exist,” which enjoins him to place “the internet” rather absurdly in inverted commas at each mention for the length of an entire book. The internet as a whole, a unit, or an object does exist, and things and people interface with it as a whole all the time – and not just rhetorically. This perspective allows for the wholeness of the network-internet while also not closing off the network-parts that exist within it.

This network-object, which could even be characterized as a network-ecological perspective, is useful because it sometimes reflects the real ways that network-objects interact with their own parts – much like Latour’s description of the confusion around the containing object in technical projects. As Morton reckons, ‘an ecosystem can exert “downward causality” on its members.’ At certain scales grains of sand become “heaps”, heaps become dunes, dunes become deserts and interfere with weather

74 Ibid., p.59.
patterns. Sand dunes are, at least in some sense, explicable in terms of *dunes*, without necessary recourse to sand. How do conventional approaches deal with questions like ‘does this mean grains of sand interfere with the weather?’ without reductionism? The public battle over climate change demonstrates this great difficulty. Likewise, Morozov’s “the internet” can exert a similar causality on its constituent objects, like people browsing web pages, or server configurations. This is identical to Ian Bogost’s description above of *being* as ‘tiny ontology’; *being* condensed onto a planeless point smaller than the head of a pin, and in which the ship’s cargo hold and the cargo it contains both exist on the same flat dot, existence freed from Cartesian spatiality and the apparent iron-clad nature of material laws (which Meillassoux, as we saw at the very outset, claims as contingent in any case).

But let me also be abundantly clear: OOO is not the ‘solution’ to the contemporary problematic and the numerous problems diagnosed throughout this thesis – from the problem of nonhuman network authority, to the problem of responsible object, objects with a human face, and the circulation of responsibility. OOO is, at least, not a solution on its own. Rather I find it to be an analytic tool that best gives me a handle on what is happening ‘out there’ in practice, from the networks of the internet and blogging, to the multinational corporations that drill for oil miles beneath the deep sea floor, to the individuals and communities doing activist work on the internet. OOO is the tool for understanding what is happening, and for describing these problem – not an automatic solution to merely be applied.

Timothy Morton has already begun to do some of this work of diagnosis in this area, particularly with his concept of the ‘hyperobject.’ The term itself testifies to the existence of hyper-complex objects which are ‘massively distributed through time and space.’ Hyperobjects like climate change, the first seeds of which were planted as early as the industrial revolution in the 1700s, have effects that will still be felt hundreds if not thousands of years from now. The conceptual framework of the hyperobject – more than just making the problem clearer in front of us – helps clarify

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the issue. No serious scientist today denies the existence of some form or other of anthropogenic climate change, despite the fact that we never encounter ‘the whole object’ of climate change. Instead all we come face-to-face with are localized weather effects, trends, warmer or cooler than average surface seawater, and the increased frequency of extreme events. Naming the hyperobject is not the solution, however it may be a crucial conceptual move, a step in the direction of an answer (or of discovering there may be no answers). For this reason I am comfortable discounting the critiques of OOO that find it suspect, either reminiscent of a certain logic of post-Fordist capitalism, or harbouring a ‘political conservatism’ at its core. Like Bruno Latour entreats us, I want to take on and understand the logic at work as it exists and happens, in the world of internet blogs (Chapter 2), oil spills (Chapter 3), oppressive internet discourses (Chapter 4), and capitalist realist ideology (Chapter 5). Follow the actors, Latour reminds us, and ‘look… rather as one looks at gas lines or sewage pipes’. OOO, and my network-object perspective seems to allow me to do so.

79 Latour, We Have Never Been Modern, p.117.
Chapter 2 – Network Authority

In the following chapter I examine a new permutation of the concept of authority, one that has become increasingly apparent given the rise of certain forms of internet communications technology, demonstrated most clearly through the online encyclopaedia Wikipedia, but with the same logic of authority also working in blogs. Network authority, which arises as a function of place, proximity or association in a network, is a form of authority that has become impossible to ignore thanks in large part to the rise of the internet and day-to-day familiarity with online experiences. Naturally, I begin with the question of what authority is, taking on board Richard Sennett’s notion of authority as a process or negotiation, but one that is in search of a stable object. From this I take an object-oriented view of authority, finding ‘objects’ – and in particular non-human objects – involved with network-authority. I also take on board Hannah Arendt’s politically and historically situated understanding of authority, defining it as she does in contrast with both coercive violence (which indicates a failure of authority) and rhetorical persuasion (which indicates likewise, given that a command is not simply enough to be obeyed if persuasion is required). Authority cannot be either forced or persuaded, it simply commands and assumes obedience. Arendt also offers us a take on both ends of the left/right political spectrum’s responses to authority – with the left seeing history progressing towards more and more freedoms (deviations from this being viewed as regressions), and the right finding in the general loss of authority a process of loss of protection offered by authority. The contemporary neoliberal era – and particularly the rightwing extremism in the United States – complicates these two Arendtian narratives of authority, as the neoliberal right pushes for a return to the morality of unfettered free markets (expressed as the ultimate guarantor of human freedom). Within this gesture, however, one finds concomitantly the authority of the market – itself a nonhuman object. In this way the Arendtian paradox of a libertarian right, which would otherwise seem curiously unworried by the loss of authority, is somewhat resolved, with the authority and morality of the market powerfully taking on the role of former human authorities (such as the church and state). Even better for them, it does so in a manner that is more difficult to detect and harder to challenge as the market (a nonhuman) benefits from the seemingly apolitical nature of ‘things.’

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This logic of network authority (as a market is most certainly a form of network) intersects and overlaps with a number of other contemporary political ideas, including another seemingly apolitical ideal, namely that of “openness” – which Nathaniel Tkacz has thoroughly critiqued – and the neoliberal project with which it is intertwined, in, for example, the idea of the ‘free market’ itself. In the ideological push towards “openness,” Tkacz finds a conceptual indecision about what it consists of except in the negative (open is not closed, for instance), and its original proponent Karl Popper reveals an obsession with openness as not being communism, socialism, or authoritarianism. Much like the contemporary market ideology of neoliberalism, which David Harvey has historicised and in which he uncovers a core belief in the inherent morality of markets, the contemporary obsession with the ‘open’ freights in a secret nonhuman authority. Both the “open” and neoliberal market ideology speak to the notion of ‘the expert’ and expertise, the performance or demonstration of which plays an important role in network authority. Crucially, however, network authority involves a decentralisation or distribution of authority, destabilising classical notions of an authorising object, such as priestly vestments or the royal crown which bestows the authority of office.

Adjacent to and informing these ideas about networks and authority is the emerging notion of distributed cognition, which adds much to our picture of network authority as it now includes both humans and nonhumans. A central component of this chapter is a discussion of the thesis of ‘the extended mind’ as outlined by David Clark and Andy Chalmers. The extended mind treats the human mind itself as an object, and I argue in a OOO sense, embodied but also able to be embodied in more than just flesh and blood – in a network. Following this theoretical groundwork, I look at these ideas through the prism of the videogame criticism blogosphere, an online community of writers working in the field of game criticism. This community goes some way to illustrating the workings of network authority – including some of the perils of this mode of authorisation. The blog community also offers us a demonstration of an alternative form of knowledge production as a communal, emergent project with members seen as potential overlapping ‘extended minds’, producing productive disagreement and consensus. I will argue that the critical videogame blogosphere is a productive site of controversy worthy of attention from games scholars, as well as
other researchers interested in the changing relationships humans form with technology and the resulting reconfiguration of authority.

The chapter concludes with a short discussion of the implications of nonhuman (network) authority, connecting with the work of Stanley Milgram who has suggested the importance of resisting obedience to authority. I conclude with a question that opens into the animating concerns of the remainder of the thesis - if nonhumans can be authorities, as in the case of network authority, how does that change or reconfigure notions of responsibility as well?

Authority

In his classic work simply titled Authority Richard Sennett looks at the nature of authority in the West and how it has shifted and transformed over the past two centuries, attempting to plumb the depths of its operation in ‘modern society’.\(^1\) Perhaps the most important contribution Sennett makes comes from his insistence that, ‘in ordinary life, authority is not a thing. It is an interpretative process which seeks for itself the solidity of a thing.’\(^2\) This is a crucial, if somewhat confusing point. What Sennett is attempting to make clear is the fact that authority is almost entirely a human concern, and is thus unlike a commodity, a property, or a quality of a thing. But equally, authority, as part of that process of interpretation or negotiation seeks out solid and stable objects for itself. This is the first theme which we shall see repeated throughout the chapters of this thesis: negotiation over an object. At certain points and times, and for different entities, we will see that it becomes politically expedient (and part of a deliberate or intentional tactic) to obscure this element of negotiability in order to maintain a façade of inevitability over an object or assessment.

Building on the work of Max Weber, Sennett describes three categories of authority to which I will later add a fourth: the first based on ‘an established belief in immemorial traditions,’\(^3\) largely dependent on the endurance of an idea or memory; the second the category of ‘legal-rational authority, which is ‘based upon the belief in the legality of

\(^2\) Ibid., p.19.
\(^3\) Ibid., pp.20-21.
rules and on the right of those who occupy posts by virtue of those rules to issue commands; and the third, ‘charismatic authority, which “rests upon the uncommon and extraordinary devotion of a group of followers to the sacredness or the heroic force of the exemplariness of an individual and the order revealed or created by him.”’ In all three we find some object of stability; traditions in the first, laws in the second, and a (demonstrated) common world revealed or created by the charisma.

Hannah Arendt adds an important dimension to our understanding of authority, defining it in contradistinction to other methods of governance or control. In her essay ‘What is authority?’, Arendt couches her analysis of the term in the context of the crisis of authority of twentieth century, beginning with the loss of traditional authorities such as the church and the state. Arendt claims that,

the rise of political movements intent upon replacing the party system, and the development of a new totalitarian form of government, took place against a background of a more or less dramatic breakdown of all traditional authorities.6

She takes as evidence of this crisis the fact that it had ‘spread to such pre-political areas as child-rearing and education, where authority in the widest sense has always been accepted as the natural necessity.’7 Though doubtless the situation has changed or evolved in the intervening period since Arendt was writing in 1961 (a full discussion of the ways in which authority in these areas have changed will have to be omitted here for the sake of scope) certainly it is fair to say that the opening up of authority to questioning and challenging survives today. There are precious few realms of knowledge where authority remains largely closed to challenge, and it is telling that they are largely in highly technical fields, or possess some aspect or veneer of the technical – a point I shall return to. Arendt’s most salient observation about authority, however, is that,

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4 Ibid., p.21.
7 Ibid., p.92.
authority precludes the use of external means of coercion; where force is used, authority itself has failed. Authority, on the other hand, is incompatible with persuasion, which presupposes equality and works through a process of argumentation.\(^8\)

This is an oft-overlooked dimension to authority, which seems to unsettle the idea of the Weberian authority of ‘legitimate domination,’ and likewise sits uneasily with current preoccupations with democracy and inclusion. Naturally, Arendt adds the caveat that she is not talking about “authority in general” since the authority we have lost in the modern world is no such “authority in general,” but rather a very specific form which had been valid throughout the Western World over a long period of time.\(^9\)

So in this traditional authority, which rests neither on violence nor on persuasion, there exists a definite structure that gives both the authority and the subject their sense of place:

the authoritarian relation between the one who commands and the one who obeys rests neither on common reason nor on the power of the one who commands; what they have in common is the hierarchy itself, whose rightness and legitimacy both recognize and where both have their predetermined stable place.\(^10\)

Here we find another object, though in the abstract – that of hierarchy itself. Arendt goes on to outline two competing but intertwined political narratives that are often used to make sense of authority and broader social changes at both ends of the political spectrum. Certain tendencies of the left and right, according to Arendt, that lead to clouded judgement about what is actually happening over the course of history:

\(^8\) Ibid., p.93.  
\(^9\) Ibid., p.92.  
\(^10\) Ibid., p.93.
Generally speaking, it has been quite typical of liberal theories to start from the assumption that “the constancy of progress...in the direction of organized and assured freedom is the characteristic fact of modern history”… this makes them overlook the differences in principle between the restriction of freedom in authoritarian regimes, the abolition of political freedom in tyrannies and dictatorships, and the total elimination of spontaneity itself.\(^{11}\)

Arendt charges the left with a kind of teleology of freedom from authority, in which authority's is seen as mainly oppressive and restricting, leading to confused assessments of different forms of authority in governance. Arendt separates out the restrictive forms of authoritarian governance from the complete restriction of agency (“spontaneity itself”), a kind of over-determination the left tends to fall into. The alternative narrative Arendt identifies with conservative political tendencies, she outlines as follows:

Where the liberal writer sees an essentially assured progress in the direction of freedom, which is only temporarily interrupted by some dark forces of the past, the conservative sees a process of doom which started with the dwindling of authority, so that freedom, after it lost the restricting limitations which protected its boundaries, became helpless, defenceless, and bound to be destroyed.\(^{12}\)

This is reminiscent of Margaret Atwood’s famous phrase in *The Handmaid’s Tale*, in which a certain religious character tells the narrator/protagonist, “There is more than one kind of freedom... Freedom to and freedom from.”\(^{13}\) In the liberal and conservative narratives, authority plays an inverse role: limiting freedom in one, protecting it in the other.

For Arendt, ‘it seems as though one has only to fix his glance on either of these two phenomena to justify a theory of progress or a theory of doom according to his own taste… we are in fact confronted with a simultaneous recession of both freedom and

\(^{11}\) Ibid., p.96.
\(^{12}\) Ibid., p.97.
authority in the modern world.'\textsuperscript{14} Neither Sennett, nor Arendt, could have anticipated the role the Internet would come to assume in twenty first century experience, bringing with it a form of \textit{network authority} shown most clearly in online communities. This is the fourth type of authority at work today, and one that this chapter investigates.

In contrast to Sennett’s three types of Authority, with their emphasis on human negotiation in which a valid exercise of authority contains a blend of both moral \textit{right} to authority as well as what we might call a realised \textit{power} of authority, network authority appears at first glance to be entirely a technical authority; an actual evaluation devoid of moral implications. However this reflects only a surface appraisal, and examining the concept in greater depth reveals important asymmetries. One fairly valid criticism of the otherwise ostensibly democratic Wikipedia project, for instance, is that a person attempting to join in at this relatively late stage of the project has a long learning process ahead of them in which they must accumulate the technical knowledge and skills, not to mention acquire a familiarity with Wikipedia’s own bureaucracy and myriad policies, to become a valuable contributor – let alone a recognised, influential central authority. Such requirements are entirely non-trivial, and as O’Neil notes:

\begin{quote}
this de-bureaucratization or charismatization of merit means that people have to prove their competence to all during public performances of excellence.\textsuperscript{15}
\end{quote}

While hierarchical ranks such as ‘admins’ and ‘sysops’ do exist in the Wikipedia project, in practise it is much more closely aligned with post-action justifications – in which users exercising “their authority” must justify their decisions and behaviour to fellow community members if challenged – rather than with Weber’s legitimate domination in which actions become legitimate by virtue of the authority possessed by the doer. To describe the situation O’Neil proposes a “remix” of the Weberian authority-as-legitimate-domination by way of hacker culture’s “individual type of

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{14} Arendt, \textit{Between Past and Future}, p.100.
\end{flushright}
The importance of the charismatic hacker ethos is not solely confined to Wikipedia, and O’Neil claims applicability to all such ‘volunteer-staffed online peer projects.’

The same logic is at work in the blogging community, described by Ben Goldacre of the Bad Science blog when he argues that bloggers build their own authority in the absence of more traditional institutions under the mastheads of which one would have traditionally worked: ‘most bloggers have no institutional credibility, and so they must build it, by linking transparently, and allowing you to easily double check their work.’ Here credibility stands in for authority, with online bloggers, lacking the institution that would (presumably – though even institutional credibility is now in short supply) bolster their legitimacy. Responding to this state of affairs, many bloggers demonstrate or perform their authority by placing themselves in proximity to sources, citations, or other ‘authentic’ objects through hyperlinks, becoming a network authority by way of their demonstrated ability to reorganise a section of the internet network in such a way that it places themselves at the centre, or at the very least, close to these authoritative objects which are only a short click away. In this way we also find ourselves at the end point of Sennett’s definition of the process of authority – the seeking or making solid of a thing. It is a very Latourian ‘solidity’, remaining solid only so long as the object goes unchallenged, or so long as the black box goes unopened. Latour’s terms for the solid object is the “black box” which, according to Graham Harman’s reading, ‘is any actant so firmly established that we are able to take its interior for granted.’ But any black box and the authority it holds ‘must constantly be maintained’ and the maintenance that goes into keeping them ‘closed’ is both what gives them their strength as authoritative, stable objects and also the source of any resistance to being opened. While it is easy enough for a person to follow a hyperlink to one of these sources (the complicated packet switching and routing of data leading to the downloaded source is handled for them by an internet

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16 Ibid.
17 Ibid.
20 Ibid., p.46.
browser), it is often harder to interrogate the network of actors maintaining the
source’s closure or integrity. For this reason Evgeny Morozov has argued against
uncritical uses of the phrase “the internet” to describe the assemblage of networked
software and hardware, placing every instance of the phrase in inverted commas. I
eschew this cumbersome procedure, however the point is fairly made, with OOO
affirming both Morozov’s perspective and the utility of referring to “the internet” as a
singular object. As noted earlier, this disagreement over the stability or appropriate
composition of an object is an issue that we will see repeated, as it forms a key
battleground for competing claims about a range of significant questions, including
causality.

An important presumption required by network authority, however, is that any reader
ought to be able to evaluate the sources themselves and, within reason, come to the
same or very similar conclusion, and as discussed above, it means that to challenge or
negotiate this kind of authority one needs to possess both the requisite time to be able
to assess the source, as well as whatever skill or aptitude is necessary to do such
evaluation. This may not be as unreasonable an expectation or imposition as it
initially seems as blogospheres and other online communities are frequently based
around common interests, experiences or expertise. Engagement with the science
blogging community, for example, will require a totally different kind of literacy and
experience to the feminist activist blogosphere. Network authority as found in online
communities, then, is a form of authority that seems to operate best or reach its full
potential in communities of common interest participants. Already we see network
authority perspectives raising important questions about the structure and make up of
groups and societies.

According to O’Neil, the phenomena often referred to as Web 2.0 or participatory
culture,\(^{21}\) which includes blogging, comment threads, social media, etc, has

precipitated an evolution of online charisma, which no longer solely depended
on exceptional competence or creative action. Online charisma now also

stemmed from the position on a network and could apply to non-human actors such as websites.\textsuperscript{22}

O’Neil’s “charisma” might also be rendered as attractiveness or appeal, which paints a more appropriately relational picture. While charisma tends to be treated as a quality inherent to an object or a performance, an attraction implies a relation and association between an object (or person) and another. By linking to primary sources, bloggers position themselves closer to authentic or legitimate objects, which now become only a click away, and reflect a form of taste or judgement. For instance, science bloggers can link directly to primary materials and published research papers and discuss them to a degree and depth not always afforded to mainstream science journalism and reporting.

From one perspective, network authority can be perceived as merely an opening up or extension of formerly closed institutional authorities, for example, the institutional authority of newspaper journalism. Prior to this opening or making visible, the institution itself guaranteed the integrity and value of the process – one could disagree but the institution and the person both rose and fell together, with individuals hidden from open scrutiny except in exceptional circumstances. Compare the quite strikingly different attitudes towards newspaper displayed by Benedict Anderson, famous for his theory of the nation as ‘imagined community,’ with Bruno Latour’s discussion of a single newspaper story in \textit{We Have Never Been Modern}. Anderson asks, ‘What is the essential literary convention of the newspaper?’\textsuperscript{23} finding an arbitrariness around the inclusion of stories and their juxtaposition, indicating to him ‘that the linkage between [news stories] is imagined.’\textsuperscript{24} Further, the source of this imagining, Anderson argues, is both ‘calendrical coincidence’\textsuperscript{25} and the newspaper’s relationship (‘as a form of book’\textsuperscript{26}) with the market. But to an experienced newspaper editor, this will seem a wilfully obtuse reduction of the production of the paper – the connections between stories are not simply the accident of chronology, but are managed and arranged by a

\textsuperscript{22} O’Neil, “Wikipedia and Authority”, p.311.
\textsuperscript{24} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{25} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{26} Ibid.
series of careful and deliberate human beings. I strongly suspect that it is Anderson’s attitude towards the closed nature of the authority structure of the Newspaper – and an unwillingness to open that structure – that results in this rather superficial analysis. Bruno Latour has no such reservations about trampling all over the territory of others, as his long and distinguished cross-disciplinary research has made clear. Contrast Anderson’s attitude with the opening passage of *We Have Never Been Modern*, in which Latour takes a similar look at the newspaper but finds an entirely different sort of situation, and an entirely different set of problems:

On page four of my daily newspaper, I learn that the measurements taken above the Antarctic are not good this year: the hole in the ozone layer is growing ominously larger. Reading on, I turn from upper-atmosphere chemists to Chief Executive Officers of Atochem and Monsanto, companies that are modifying their assembly lines in order to replace the innocent chlorofluorocarbons, accused of crimes against the ecosphere. A few paragraphs later, I come across heads of state of major industrialized countries who are getting involved with chemistry, refrigerators, aerosols and inert gases. But at the end of the article, I discover that the meteorologists don't agree with the chemists; they're talking about cyclical fluctuations unrelated to human activity. So now the industrialists don't know what to do. The heads of state are also holding back. Should we wait? Is it already too late? Toward the bottom of the page, Third World countries and ecologists add their grain of salt and talk about international treaties, moratoriums, the rights of future generations, and the right to development.

The same article mixes together chemical reactions and political reactions. A single thread links the most esoteric sciences and the most sordid politics, the most distant sky and some factory in the Lyon suburbs, dangers on a global scale and the impending local elections or the next board meeting. The horizons, the stakes, the time frames, the actors — none of these is commensurable, yet there they are, caught up in the same story.\(^27\)

Before leaving even one story we find juxtapositions of things and events, never mind the juxtapositions across articles. This goes to the heart of Latour’s project, which moves in an entirely opposite directions from Anderson who, when faced with juxtaposition and serendipity, resorts to imagination to explain a connection and a relation. Latour on the other hand multiplies rifts between even seemingly connected and associated items, opening up the black boxes and institutional structures.

It is worth considering why closed authority is no longer stable, or present, in network authority situations, and what became insufficient or objectionable within the old model? It is also worth asking whether it resulted from a change of social norms that lead to an increased willingness to open closed structures and question black-box authorities, or whether it was a purely ‘apolitical’ technological reconfiguration, the result of something like the democratising effects of the internet, which is a common culprit. Informing these question is a larger history, involving the ideology and politics of ‘the open,’ elaborated in great detail by Nathaniel Tkacz, who has offered an excellent critique of that term and its frequent deployment, particularly in regards to politics and political processes. The organisational trope of the desirability of ‘openness’, according to Tkacz,

appears seemingly without tension, without need of clarification or qualification, in writers as diverse as the liberal legal scholar, Lawrence Lessig, and the post-Marxian duo Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri. Every political position worth its salt, it seems, must today pledge allegiance to this strange and relatively new political concept.28

The roots of this idea, which Tkacz suggests ‘has become a master category of contemporary political thought,’29 can be traced back to Karl Popper and his ideological ally, Austrian economist and philosopher of information Friedrich Hayek. Tkacz is extremely critical of the use of ‘openness’ both politically (as in the case of ‘open government’ advocates) and descriptively. He notes that, ‘the concept contains

29 Ibid.
a poverty that has existed in all its uses throughout history and that makes it unsuitable for political description.\textsuperscript{30} Furthermore,

the open actively works against the development of a political language – if, that is, we take the political to extend beyond questions of just governance to the circulation and distribution of power and force, and take politics to mean the distributions of agency in general, as well as the conflicts and issues that emerge when antagonistic flows intersect.\textsuperscript{31}

The term works against a political language, Tkacz claims, primarily because it has historically been nearly entirely negative, with Popper’s foundational work “almost entirely dedicated to critique.”\textsuperscript{32} Popper’s work focuses almost entirely on the enemies of the open,\textsuperscript{33} and never offers a sufficiently rigorous outline of the positive form or incarnation of the open. He notes that,

as a concept, therefore, the open is reactionary; it gains meaning largely through a consideration of what it is not. The open is significant in terms of the actually existing political situation of Popper’s time largely because it is neither fascism nor communism.\textsuperscript{34}

This goes some ways towards explaining the appeal of the open, and the shift from institutional authority – by opening up, or atomising the process – towards network authority. Tkacz notes a perverse effect of this opening up:

somewhat ironically, once something is labelled open, it seems that no more description is needed. Openness is the answer to everything and it is what we all agree upon.\textsuperscript{35}

\textsuperscript{30} Ibid., p.399.
\textsuperscript{31} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{32} Ibid., p.400.
\textsuperscript{33} In support of his own reading, Tkacz cites Bryan Magee, Popper (London: Fontana, 1982), p.87.
\textsuperscript{34} Tkacz, “From Open Source To Open Government”, p.400.
\textsuperscript{35} Ibid., p.403.
O’Neil notes a similar irony in projects that involve network authority like Wikipedia, expressed as a ‘tension between openness and elitism,’ in that what primarily distinguishes Wikipedia users from non-users is familiarity with the rules and conventions of the site. Wikipedia remains “open” to anyone, so long as they accommodate themselves to its procedures, as the site cannot operate otherwise.

It is often recognised that Wikipedia itself (a nonhuman database) has become something of an authoritative object – and a prime initial source of general or background information. Defences of the value of Wikipedia stress that, unlike a traditional Encyclopaedia in which the institution holds authority, the operation of the Wikipedia contribution process and the policies that enable it act as the guarantor of authority, dictating the relative authority of a page – primarily via the citation process involving studious hyperlinking, in other words, involving being placed close to a source. Again, the earlier presumption of (someone; anyone) having the ability to evaluate the quality of the source is tacitly implied. This requirement has been obliquely critiqued by Scott Kildall and Nathaniel Stern in the same Wikipedia Reader volume as O’Neil’s article. According to them,

Wikipedia defines citations only ‘loosely’ as ‘a reference to a published or unpublished source (not necessarily the original source)’ (and not necessarily true). In other words, the declared ‘threshold for inclusion’ of knowledge on Wikipedia is ‘not truth’, but cited sources, despite their acknowledgment that the reliability of a source, how ‘trustworthy or authoritative’ it is, ‘depends on context’.

But their obsession with whether or not the ‘truth’ is contained in a source assumes a solid, stable ‘truth container’ and not the contestable Latourian ‘black box’ of the network object, the contents of which are yielded up to a sufficiently powerful investigator and which categorically precludes permanent closure.

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36 Ibid., p.309.
I now turn to look at the role played by expertise in keeping closed certain authority structures. If certain types of knowledge or experience, here designated as expertise, allow for only certain individuals to open authority structures, then expertise is revealed to have a certain political valence.

**Expertise**

The recognition of expertise is both pre-requisite to ‘opening’ authority black-boxes and another regime of knowledge that appears to contribute to the solidity and stability of authority in an object. To stick with the example of Wikipedia, according to O’Neil, ‘central to Wikipedia is the radical redefinition of expertise, which is no longer embodied in a person but in a process, in the aggregation of many points of view.’ In other words, it is the process itself – the ‘solidity of the object’, though in this case the object is a page, edited and refined over time – that holds authority. In Wikipedia and other online communities, authority by way of the hacker-ethic’s prioritisation of individual-charismatic, demonstrated or performed expertise combines with a radical new approach to the notion of an expert as aggregator, or collaborator. Compare this new notion to a more traditional conception, which I have fittingly chosen from Wikipedia itself, in which:

> an expert is someone widely recognized as a reliable source of technique or skill whose faculty for judging or deciding rightly, justly, or wisely is accorded authority and status by their peers or the public in a specific well-distinguished domain.

There is a political dimension to our aggregate/expert, certainly, and O’Neil comments on the technocratic authority held by early hackers, saying that

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when computers became networked, only hackers knew how to manage the new systems: they assumed by default the power to control conditions of access and user privileges.\textsuperscript{40}

Naturally enough, the allure of a non-aligned expert technologist, or ‘technocrat’, has proven attractively applicable to the fractured and polarised political situations of many nations. For example, after the 2008 Global Financial Crisis and the European Central Bank’s imposed austerity measures, some nations such as Greece have been governed by a coalition of ‘technocrats’. Joshua A. Tucker writing for \textit{Al Jazeera} explains that:

a technocratic government is one in which the ministers are not career politicians; in fact, in some cases they may not even be members of political parties at all. They are instead supposed to be “experts” in the fields of their respective ministries. So the classic example is that the Finance Minister would be someone with an academic background in economics who had worked for years at the IMF, but has not previously run for elective office or been heavily involved in election campaigns.\textsuperscript{41}

In what world would the appointment of anyone to such an important position be apolitical? Only in the same world as a constellation of contemporary political ideas around the notion of transparency and openness in governance – a set of ideals that Nathaniel Tkacz has criticised resoundingly for their hidden politics. In practical terms, this is the very situation – the imposition of economic policies by technocratic fiat – that Greek economist Yanis Varoufakis has roundly and unambiguously criticised in numerous public lectures and fora.\textsuperscript{42} Varoufakis regularly excoriates the European Central Bank’s imposition of austerity policies via a technical ‘must simply

\textsuperscript{40} O’Neil, “Wikipedia and Authority”, p.312.
\textsuperscript{42} See for example, Varoufakis’ inaugural Europe Lecture, “The Dirty War for Europe’s Integrity and Soul” delivered at the State Library of NSW, Dixon Room, October 23, 2013. A recording is available online: http://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/bigideas/the-dirty-war-for-europe28099s-integrity-and-soul/3049088
be done’ economic mandate in Greece, Ireland, Spain and other struggling economies within the European Union because of the impact that it has on ordinary citizens, and the patently political nature of its imposition. To save the investments of a few German and other European banks, Greeks simply must suffer the pain of losing pensions, welfare, etc. undermining their political self-determination.

The expertise and rarefied knowledge of the technocrat achieves a patina of ‘openness’ via the intimidating complexity of the governing area. The specialised meanings and terminologies of economists means that they do not even have to be circumspect in the descriptions of their actions, the question of managing the economy of a small country like Greece, for example, precluding understanding by any layperson. Economics professor Steve Keen has taken the implications of this so seriously that he suggests that ‘economics is too important to leave to the economists.’

Similarly, author and journalist at Rolling Stone Magazine Matt Taibbi has written extensively on the complexity and jargon-filled proceedings within and against the Wall Street financial sector in the wake of the 2008 global financial crisis. When it comes to economic decisions (which are, at the level of governmental policy irredeemably political-economic decisions as all such decisions must be) we can ask, in what world would the appointment of anyone to a ‘technocratic’ position, such as the European Central Bank, or to the finance ministry – positions with great importance and power – be considered an ‘apolitical’ appointment? What, in any other circumstances would be considered a political appointment, becomes closed off to questions of representation, as well as questions of just whose interests the appointee will be representing.

Part of the reason for the retreat from politicising economics has been what David Graeber describes as the shift in Arendtian revolutionary authority from the political Left to the political Right. According to him, following the late 80s and early 90s collapse of the Soviet Union and the failure of alternatives to capitalism, a long-standing

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44 Matt Taibbi, Griftopia: Bubble Machines, Vampire Squids, and the Long Con that is Breaking America (New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2010).
ideological disagreement within the left itself seemed resolved, only to see a collapse in the authority of the left:

Social Democrats believed they had finally won the argument with the revolutionary Left and expected to shepherd the former subjects of the soviet bloc into their fold… instead, they got shock therapy and the most savage form of unrestricted capitalism.\textsuperscript{45}

The result was a shift of revolutionary authority from Left to Right, as the Right lost its historical conservatism and went on the offensive, following (for instance) Milton Friedman’s Chicago school of economics, ‘shock doctrine’ style structural readjustment.\textsuperscript{46} Graeber describes the effect this had on the political terrain:

On a dozen interlocking registers simultaneously, the emerging pattern seemed catastrophic. It seemed like it would go something like this: On an international level, capitalism was transforming into a revolutionary force. Abandoning the welfare-state version of capitalism that had won the Cold War, the old Cold War Warriors and their corporate sponsors were demanding a pure, no-holds-barred, free-market version that had never actually existed, and were willing to wreak havoc on all existing institutional social arrangements in order to achieve it. All this involved a kind of weird inversion. The standard right-wing line, since at least the 1790s, had always been that revolutionary dreams were dangerous precisely because they were utopian.\textsuperscript{47}

With the loss of visions of Left utopian transformation, Graeber argues that the Right filled the new vacuum: ‘Free-market “reformers” overnight began declaring themselves revolutionaries.’\textsuperscript{48} The ongoing effect of this transition of revolutionary authority is discussed in chapter 5, which looks at the way this ‘capitalist realism’ (first

\textsuperscript{47} Graeber, \textit{Direct Action: An Ethnography}, p.ix.
\textsuperscript{48} Ibid., p.x.
mentioned in the introduction) imposes limits and boundaries on the very construction of objects, with implications for questions of agency and responsibility.

**Aggregates of network authority**

The increasing authority of Wikipedia itself (or at least, the network authority, made visible by the Wikipedia process) is evidenced by the high ranking achieved within search results on Google, which O’Neil calls ‘index authority’:

> Index-charisma results from the independent choices of a multitude of people: in the case of Google, for example, links made by other sites and decisions made by internet users when confronted with the result of a query determine the ranking of websites.⁴⁹

But on the inside of these kinds of collective organizations, like Wikipedia or any other online community, authority is not ordered according to the ranking or index of ‘a multitude of individual people’, residing instead “in the collectivity as a whole”; decisions become authoritative to the extent that all members have the right to full and equal participation.⁵⁰ It becomes a process of negotiation *a la* Sennett, networked and distributed.

Advances in the field of neuroscience and their philosophical interpretation make a further contribution here. The work of both Andy Clark and David J. Chalmers, encompassing the nature of intelligence and cognitive functions, challenges commonly held ideas about the boundaries and limits of the individual. In *Being There: Putting Brain, Body and World Together Again*, Clark outlines a compelling case for a philosophical approach to intelligence that treats it as fundamentally embodied, and ultimately a network comprising human and nonhuman elements. Both Clark and Chalmers frequently draw upon descriptions of familiar tools like pens, paper and notepads, defamiliarising them by suggesting cognitive equivalences in function

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between the mind’s own memory and information stored on external devices, nonhuman objects.

Clark and Chalmers acknowledge that intelligence arises not from the ability to store and retrieve accumulations of fact and figures, but rather, argue that it is ‘in the coupling of organisms and world that is at the root of daily, fluent action’.\textsuperscript{51} This is a network object perspective, with the outcome of an ecology of human and nonhuman components the only ‘thing’ that can reasonably considered ‘intelligence’.

Again we find a reliance on a process as the object of authority, and we can now evaluate the knowledge of Wikipedia and other communities’ productions differently, with the intelligence of Wikipedia not consisting in the retrieval of facts, but in the broader process of page creation, editing, the pages themselves, the computer servers they are stored upon, and so on. Viewing Wikipedia and other supra-human entities (like corporations, etc) as coherent beings or objects in their own right (though nonhuman ones) may seem implausible, but it is a core feature of OOO. It also becomes particularly important for the fifth chapter, as it offers an alternative set of responses to the problems presented by contemporary capitalist realism.

In Clark and Chalmer’s collaborative paper ‘The Extended Mind’ the authors outline a case for including certain tools that act as mental aides (such as a calculator, diary and other devices) within the total mind system.\textsuperscript{52} An “active externalism” that redraws the boundaries of the human mind out beyond the cranial cavity, arguing that in certain circumstances,

the human organism is linked with an external entity in a two-way interaction, creating a coupled system that can be seen as a cognitive system in its own right.\textsuperscript{53}

\textsuperscript{52} Andy Clark and David Chalmers, “The Extended Mind,” \textit{Analysis} 58, no. 1 (January 1998), pp.7-19.
\textsuperscript{53} Ibid., np.
For Clark and Chalmers, if a process performed inside the brain counts as a cognitive one (for example mental arithmetic), then the same process happening outside it should count likewise. Cognitive scientist Terry Dartnall deployed the analogy of the mind “leaking” into the world, suggesting that the reverse process is equally possible. This perspective curiously fits with the same gesture expressed by Plato’s denunciation of writing in ‘The Phaedrus’, where he argued that writing was bad for memory and concentration, although we would recognise today that it clearly negates the damaging result of such by these outsourcing former skills. In one sense he was correct – the skills required to recall the long oratory speeches and ballads that formed much of the cultural basis of Greek society were certainly lost, or at least deemphasised, but in another sense we recognise the important benefits provided by the written word which, by embodying traces of the thought and cognitive work of their creators, allow transmission through space and time. It is almost unthinkable now to have to give up this ability to outsource to the written word, which relies so heavily on nonhuman elements such as paper, pens and ink, and now computers and electronic tablets.

To illustrate the case for the extended mind, demonstrating the role played by nonhuman objects in the cognitive system, Dartnall explains Clark and Chalmers example of Otto, the Alzheimer’s sufferer:

Otto hears that there is an exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art. He consults his notebook, which says that the museum is on 53rd Street. He walks to 53rd Street and goes to the museum. Clark and Chalmers (1998) [say] that the notebook plays the same role for Otto that biological memory plays for the rest of us. It just happens that “this information lies beyond the skin.”

Levi Bryant, a founding member of OOO, applied this idea to internet communities. He wrote on his blog Larval Subjects in May 2011 a post entitled ‘It Thinks - Some

55 See: Plato, Phaedrus, trans. Robin Waterfield (Oxford New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 274e: ‘It will atrophy people’s memories. Trust in writing will make them remember things by relying on marks made by others, from outside themselves, not on their own inner resources, and so writing will make the things they have learnt disappear from their minds.’
Reflections on Blogging’. He has the following to say about the blogosphere and the kind of “thinking” that it does:

It is not that I share my thoughts, and then that others share their thoughts. To be sure, something like that is, of course, going on. But there is also a much more diffuse, distributed mind at work on a blog and across blogs. The others that speak and participate are a part of the thinking. The mind is not so much something in each of these speakers, but rather is that assemblage of participants.57

So a ‘non-one’ or a network-as-multiple human is evident from community blogging practise, and from the extended mind hypothesis. This, again, is important ground for the arguments I will make in chapter 3 when I tackle the neoliberal frame of the individual. To expand on this communal dimension of blogging, I now turn to discuss network authority in the videogame criticism blogosphere.

**Network authority in the videogame criticism blogosphere**

Amidst the proliferation of internet communities following in the wake of so-called “Web 2.0” technologies and the social communities they provide the scaffolding for, the critical videogame blogosphere stands as a particularly interesting and demonstrative example. Having participated in it from late 2007 onwards, I have been involved with and seen the growth of one particular community from humble beginnings into something much larger, and with influence out of proportion to its relatively small size. It’s a difficult community to describe and delimit, with membership numbered in completely different orders of magnitude depending on where one decides to set the boundaries of the community – anything from the tens, to the hundreds of individuals. Rather than trying to make a list of who is within or without the community, a more pertinent way to orient is according to the question of function, purpose or aim. This separates the videogame criticism blogosphere from the plethora of videogame news and culture blogs, community sites and forums.

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Additionally, the community as I came to know it was based distinctly around blogging and in a particular mode. Speaking to me in an interview for the present research, Chris Dahlen, founding member of the literary-minded quarterly *KillScreen* – itself created in part as an outlet for publishing and retaining much of the work of the authors in the videogame criticism community58 – defined the act of videogame criticism as:

any incident where you sit down and write a piece of any length about a topic that's on your mind [about] games, for the purpose of expressing an idea and/or starting a conversation.59

This definition, suffices at least to separate the community from the otherwise oriented groups mentioned above (for instance, news sites and forums) while keeping the boundaries just fuzzy and malleable enough to include a large number of peripheral or temporary members and contributors, as well as pieces by authors “in” the community published on other blogs and sites. The picture I am painting deliberately resembles that proposed by Bruno Latour’s ‘Actor- Network Theory’,60 which has been highly influential in systems and network thinking, and which forms a theoretical foundation for the current thesis. As we begin to follow this community’s traces and meet the people and things caught up in the network, we should take seriously Latour’s caution that the things in such a network are not easy to pin down, with connections and relations, people and objects ‘appear[ing] to us sometimes as a thing, sometimes as a narrative, sometimes as a social bond, without ever being reduced to a mere being.’61 A major problem encountered with not only defining the community but describing the components of the community itself is the difficulty deciding whether these things are either purely ‘natural’ or ‘social’, which in essence is a question about the network as one or multiple. Is a blog community a ‘natural’ occurrence (insofar as a technical object exerts a ‘natural’ or recalcitrant force), or is it an artificial construction of society which falls apart as soon as one uncovers its

58 Chris Dahlen, personal interview with author, November 30, 2011.
59 Ibid.
constructed nature? Latour finds a crack between this confusion and inserts a wedge, arguing that indeed all things are:

much more social, much more fabricated, much more collective than the ‘hard’ parts of nature… On the other hand, they are much more real, nonhuman and objective than those shapeless screens on which society… needed to be projected.62

If anything, this applies to the concept of community, which, depending on one’s perspective, appears variously as an aggregation of ‘real’ individuals, or perhaps as a social construction ready for de-construction and dismantling, or even for certain purposes an implacably hard reality to be encountered as one might encounter a stone, a river, or a bridge. Add to this the confusing result of humans coming into contact with a resistant or recalcitrant series of apparently discrete technologies (the internet; the blogger platform; the ‘comment section’ of a blog) that eludes either simple constructivism or determinism and we have a particularly difficult task. Geert Lovink in his book *Networks Without A Cause* notes the critical difficulty faced by researchers of internet cultures:

Ever since the early 1990s, user cultures have emerged from nowhere, and researchers cannot anticipate or synthesise the speed with which these large structures come and go. User cultures long surpassed the imagination of IT journalists, and society is way ahead of its theorists (including this author). The response is either to panic or to leave the topic of new media altogether. The object of study is in a permanent state of flux and will disappear shortly.63

Understanding how the community, or “user cultures” in Lovink’s terminology, arose and developed gives us important clues to how it worked during a certain period, particularly what and how nonhumans are involved, and how authority operates in the community. Development and documentation of the community has been a preoccupation of a few individuals, and the subject of some speculation more

62 Ibid., p.55.
generally, since it began to significantly grow in size. Many smaller blogs, tending to post less frequently and with (presumably) fewer readers, judging by date and amount of comments received, first gained attention in the form of links (and the traffic they brought) from larger sites in 2007 and 2008 often from commercial blogs like Kotaku and Game, Set Watch. In a series of interviews published in July of 2008 Michael Walbridge talked to six members of the community he identified as particularly influential or important. The interviewees were: Michael Abbott, N’Gai Croal, Mitch Krpata, Kieron Gillen, Leigh Alexander and Chris Dahlen. The role of these individuals in the community was primarily demonstrated by their blogging, their connections with one another, and the size of their audiences.

They came from a variety of professional and amateur backgrounds. Abbott was a theatre professor at Wabash College, Indiana; Croal was then a Newsweek editor, running his paid blog under the Newsweek masthead; Krpata, a writer for the Boston Phoenix, also kept a well-read blog; Gillen’s experience was in videogame journalism, having spent over a decade writing for British enthusiast publications; Alexander was dramatically trained, but gained a foot in the door of freelance videogame journalism through her blogging and writing; and Dahlen had years of freelance work under his belt, working for outlets like leading online alt-music blog Pitchfork. Walbridge, describing the collegial attitude and many shared connections these leaders of the early community had, stated that:

They all know each other and interact on a regular basis, even if it’s not readily apparent. Phone calls, AIM, working together at different outlets, and recommending each other aren’t uncommon.

When asked, as I informally have done with a number of these bloggers in the course of this research, about their discovery and entry into the videogame criticism blogosphere, a common theme that arises from the stories told by them is often one of

64 http://www.kotaku.com
65 http://www.gamesetwatch.com
serendipitous, accidental discovery. Many anecdotes involve discovery of the work of one of these prominent members, with Michael Abbott and his ‘Brainy Gamer’ blog a common entry point for many, as was Maggie Greene’s weekend editor position at the aforementioned commercial site Kotaku, a member of the Gawker blog network started by Nick Denton. Green’s access to Kotaku and its traffic (one of the largest English language videogame news and culture blogs on the internet) meant that she could direct readers to these and other blogs in the videogame criticism blogosphere, giving many of them their start by introducing potential readers to these smaller sites. In a post on her blog reflecting on her time with Kotaku, Greene noted the effect her work had on Kotaku itself, explaining that:

At some point it occurred to me… that, hey, I was posting stuff that wouldn’t be appearing on such a widely read site otherwise.67

She went on to relate an anecdote of receiving a small “thank you” from videogame scholar and blogger Ian Bogost, who messaged her in appreciation of a link she gave him on Kotaku.

It dawned on me that if someone like Ian Bogost gave me a polite nod to say thanks for flinging traffic his way… maybe all this stuff did need a lot more exposure on a place like Kotaku than I thought. 68

Community member Eric Swain discussed his own entry point into the videogame criticism blogosphere, inadvertently discussing the role of network authority, saying that ‘I found everyone by pure accident; a link at YouTube to an article, which linked a post that mentioned BrainyGamer.’69 Swain also mentioned that he felt he was ‘not the only one to walk this path of cluelessness.’70 By this, he means that he is by far not the only one to stumble upon the ‘brainysphere’ rather than seeking it out consciously or deliberately. The chances of accidental discovery rise the more central a blog

68 Ibid.
70 Ibid.
becomes to a given network. The accidental discovery is interesting, because it elucidates the strangeness of network authority, the counter-intuitiveness of something like the importance of Rapoport’s ‘weak ties’ hypothesis,\textsuperscript{71} and the possible relative importance of seemingly accidental, or carelessly arranged connections. This might have implications for our evaluations of the so-called ‘filter bubble’ phenomenon,\textsuperscript{72} in which personalisation and tailoring of common internet functions (such as search) and user-created networks of information create silos of opinion, information, leading to something of an echo chamber effect, as Eli Pariser has described. When one is not connected to a community, social circle, or more generically a particular network, it is because one is more distant, not yet connected or linked to the elements of that community or network.

But a certain amount of network authority, or centrality in a network (in other words, access to an agency to direct large numbers of readers) comes with, or should come with, a sense of responsibility. Maggie Green, the blogger doing much of the linking and audience building from Kotaku, expressed in the same blog post that she ‘sometimes felt a little bad about throwing smaller blogs under the Kotaku bus.’\textsuperscript{73} Explaining what she meant by that to me, she told me the following anecdote about the iHobo blog, run by Chris Bateman:

> When he first started writing, when I first started posting him [linking to his work on Kotaku], that blog wasn't separate from his more philosophical stuff [but] by the end of the time he was writing, he decided to split things off because he was getting enough readers not coming from his little blog ecosystem but coming from the outside, coming from places like Kotaku...it would change the ecosystem of his blog. ...Kotaku isn't the only reason for that, but it helped, because it was bringing lots of traffic in cycles...\textsuperscript{74}

Curiously, not all instances of network authority convey a felt sense of responsibility however. The question of why network authority is sometimes felt along with the

\textsuperscript{72} Eli Pariser, The Filter Bubble (Penguin UK, 2011).
\textsuperscript{73} Greene, “I Was a Blogger Once, and Young (II).”
\textsuperscript{74} Maggie Green, Personal interview with author, October 2011.
attendant responsibility is a question I will come back to at the end of this chapter, and the operation of responsibility in networked situations is the focus of chapter 3.

All these anecdotes demonstrate the authority that arises from a location in a network - such as Greene’s position at Kotaku which gave her access to a large audience and the ability to place hyperlinks to Michael Abbott’s or Chris Bateman’s iHobo blog in front of that audience. The unknown article Swain mentioned likewise positioned The Brainy Gamer blog just a hyperlink away, and that article was either linked to by someone on a YouTube video, or perhaps even by an accidental commenter who made some connection between the video and the article. A more classical analysis might say that Maggie Greene used her institutional authority or clout (in the case of an endorsement of his work, that just happened to be instantiated in a hyperlink) and in the process increased the authority of Michael Abbott and his blog. But how can we resist the seductive knowledge offered by ‘opening up’ the institutional authority? Furthermore, this runs the risk of turning the institutional authority of Kotaku into an efficient, irresistible cause stripping readers of their own agency, who might not click the link or even read Greene’s post, and does not provide as sufficient answer for the new readers of Abbott’s blog who, we should remember, become their own vector of network authority as they grow in number. The network authority approach seems preferable, as it becomes more a question of facilitation through location and proximity. In the second example, it’s entirely possible that a thoughtless or accidental link left in a comment thread, perhaps up-voted by fellow viewers, increased traffic to The Brainy Gamer - a difficult case to explain via traditional, institutional authority analysis. Much of Abbott’s site’s popularity and his audience is not a result of a traditional institution, instead it was built over time as he accumulated readers. This was as a result of both deliberate linking (from sites like Kotaku), but also by serendipitous accidental discoveries of the site (via Google, other sites, etc.), the latter making it somewhat difficult to account for these unintended increase in readers and hence network authority.

In Walbridge’s interview series, speaking with blogger and videogame critic Leigh Alexander, the pair had the following exchange. Walbridge remarked upon his surprise at discovering the community, to which Alexander replied:
Alexander: “Lots of people don’t know about this kind of discussion, and many still don’t. If more people knew this discussion was taking place I think we’d have more people who are interested.”

Walbridge: “I didn’t even know about this kind of discussion myself...I’d have gotten into [it] a long time ago had I known about it. Gamasutra and GameSetWatch introduced me to it and from there I found [your column] the Aberrant Gamer and from there I found your blog and eventually decided to write this piece.”

I have so far offered a number of examples of the serendipity brought by hyperlinked, network authority-style introductions to the community, demonstrating that network authority certainly cannot be characterised as an efficient or smooth transporter of human intentions. But complicating this somewhat is the fact that network authority doesn’t only operate through serendipity, and is perhaps even more commonly encountered through deliberate planning, and these issues go to the question of whether network authority can be considered a human or nonhuman authority.

At the start of 2009, Dan Golding, a student at the time and later a PhD candidate from Melbourne Australia, having read enough of this new conversation happening on blogs and websites, was prompted to create a list to collate them. Starting with an initial 29 blogs he ended up with 47 based on feedback and suggestions. The initial list became a blog post, titled ‘Mapping the Brainysphere’, opening with the following note:

The year 2008 was nothing if not a great year for intelligent discussion of videogames. Every month, it seemed to me like a new blog would pop up with an amazingly insightful analysis of some new game, and I’d be forced to go through their backlogs for everything else they’d written. Underneath it all, there is a real community thriving here; one that talks to itself and many hundreds of silent readers out there in the great internet ether. So, I decided, as much for myself as for any visitors of this blog, that I’d try and map out the

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Brainysphere; those blogs which have discussed videogames in 2008 in a manner beyond the surface.\textsuperscript{76}

The post did a number of things, but our primary interest is, first, in the role it played in giving the community a name, and second in the way that it directed a reader to \textit{where} these community conversations were taking place. The name itself was controversial and would come back to haunt Golding and other members of the “brainysphere” later for so explicitly tying it the Brainy Gamer blog – the name being used in association with accusations of insularity, and the exclusionary nature of the community. In a comment on a “Critical Compilation” for the game \textit{Grand Theft Auto IV}, Regina Buenaobra (commenting under the handle of Brinstar) calls it ‘the incestuous boys’ club “Brainy Sphere”’.\textsuperscript{77}

Detractors rejected this symbolic construction of the community around one blog, and accused it of overtones of colonisation, intended or not. This criticism has some merit, for the post brought together a number of blogs, and placed them in close proximity to one another. Golding’s hyperlink list put each blog a click away from each other - but crucially, only one link away if starting from the ‘Mapping the Brainysphere’ post. The hyperlink is a one-way link and while it can be returned, it isn’t automatic. Using Michel Callon’s addition to actor-network theory terminology, this arrangement of the network positions Golding’s list as an “obligatory passage point,”\textsuperscript{78} and while it was hardly a nefarious attempt (and other, similar attempts at ‘mapping’ the community indeed proceed in the same manner) it nevertheless was a contestable action.

But the important question is \textit{why} was this political dimension so easily overlooked, why isn’t it always immediately completely obvious that arranging and ‘mapping’ a network has a political valence? This could be because network authority wants to be

overlooked, following the depoliticisation of economics, technology, etc, and this is a problem I shall return to before the conclusion of the chapter.

**Criticism, collaboration and controversy**

So far we have seen a new kind of authority that arises from a position in a network, we have seen how the videogame criticism blogosphere both demonstrates and, as a result, negotiates with network-authority, and we now turn to the content the blogosphere produces. Accordingly, the videogame criticism blogosphere produces criticism, but in the following final section we will see what this criticism does, and what unique aspect the communal nature adds – *aka* the extended mind, nonhuman or *more than human* permeable mind – as well as finding ways it resists consumer capital’s co-option of taste dynamics.

Rather than assume that the community is doing good through criticism, we should ask ourselves what criticism is for, and what good (or ill) it can it bring? In an article published in *The International Journal of Communications*, Ryan Gillespie addressed this particular topic with specific reference to the unique situation criticism finds itself in ‘the age of interactive technology’. Importantly Gillespie defines criticism as its own separate category from typical internet ‘participatory culture’\(^{79}\) such as product reviews (as found on Amazon or the Apple appstore), *YouTube* and blog comments and the like. While many of these may be highly critical of the object under review, according to Gillespie they do not represent criticism. In contrast, criticism does not take as its goal to inform purchasing decisions.\(^{80}\) Instead criticism at its best is for ‘helping audiences see the object in a new way, using a specific vocabulary or perhaps developing new grammar or terms or even concepts.’\(^{81}\) A seemingly worthy goal, Gillespie’s main concern is that:

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\(^{81}\) Ibid.
criticism is being lost to the review under the ethos of participation, and that the consumption mentality of reviews encourages the treatment of art and entertainment as merely means to the ends of pleasure, thereby eliminating the appreciation and contemplation of challenging, experimental, and avant-garde works.82

In contrast to comments and product reviews, which are generally appropriated by companies such as Amazon and Apple to enrich their own marketplaces, criticism enriches an audience ‘via the furnishing of a faculty for understanding the works or practice’, or even by creating entirely new audiences and tastes.83 The purpose of this is resolutely for humans, and not for non-human capitalist corporations.

Gillespie also wisely addresses the counter-point raised by media and communications theorists such as Raymond Williams that characterises the figure of the critic as an elevated arbiter of taste, imposing normative judgements from a position of authority and influence.84 This conundrum leads Gillespie into the following formulation, suggesting that

we are stuck with a paradox; the critic is someone who can direct attention to the new and alert society to a politics of difference at play, and is also someone who can, by that same token, be a dominating and subjugating force in the face of contrary opinions. The critic can both subjugate and emancipate; the critic can alert audiences to the structures of replication that are Fascistic or the critic can be the one, in the nature of universal judgment and normative pronouncement on objects, to perpetuate Fascism.85

This view reflects the critic as authority, which is what a fascism of taste suggests, remembering that Arendt specified authority is neither violence nor persuasion but is obeyed. Gillespie’s way out of the paradox draws on the philosopher Stephen Finlay’s

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82 Ibid., p.66.
83 Ibid., p.62.
85 Gillespie, “The Art of Criticism in the Age of Interactive Technology,” p.68.
“end-relational theory,” which suggests cultural objects be evaluated with reference to particular “ends” they can plausibly service. In this surprisingly straightforward approach that provides a practical account of a variety of cultural productions, judgement moves from unqualified expressions of preference to how well, for example, a film meets the ‘end’ of impressing an audience interested in cinematography; or whether a record meets the end of being suitable for play in a London night club. Evaluations of taste exist no longer purely in the realm of the subjective, detached from any possibly criticism or assessment themselves. Instead, like the opening up of institutional authority, which sees its processes now scrutinised and evaluated rather than simply obeyed, taste and critical appraisal is found to be less arbitrary and more open to evaluation and interrogation itself.

Good criticism then comes from pointing out to both the audience and the creator particular ends that may not be immediately obvious to the non-critic, for example a subtle and otherwise overlooked social critique present in a piece of literature, and thereby performing the positive role Gillespie set out earlier. The move also follows Bruno Latour’s suggestion that ‘the solution to relativism is always more relativity.’ By attaching the otherwise breezy ends of subjective preference to a specific ‘end’, Gillespie makes clear that end-relational theory ‘avoids the charges of elitism as well as the celebratory tone of participation equals democratic equals good.’ It allows, conceptually if not always practically, any decision or judgement based on taste or preference to be interrogated more thoroughly, by exposing the way in which taste or preference is legitimised by attachment to specific ends or purposes.

This is germane to the videogame criticism blogosphere and the final, and most speculative brand of emergent communal-production. Brendan Keogh has discussed some of the ways that a practise of bottom-up, specific criticism of individual videogames has produced and championed alternative values from the mainstream academic games studies ‘purity complex’ which privilege formalist analyses of games

87 Latour, Reassembling the Social, p.122.
88 Gillespie, “The Art of Criticism in the Age of Interactive Technology,” p.70.
and certain kinds of games. Keogh has also championed communities of so-called ‘queer games’ makers, who exist outside of the mainstream of game maker culture and who make games according to an entirely separate set of values. In his work Keogh is here both acting as critic (an authority, able to champion the new, following Gillespie’s argument), and gesturing towards a community with alternative (arguably, more noble and progressive) values and concerns it deploys. This communal process is the kind of authority we saw earlier with Wikipedia, its aggregation and application of the extended mind hypothesis. But how does the videogame criticism blogosphere communally produce its authority? What does it aggregate, and what kind of process is it?

On the first of February Simon Ferrari, a PhD student researching videogames at Georgia Tech, tweeted a sequence of comments directed at his followers and fellow videogame criticism community members:

Attention writers: when you write something good, the jerk commenters are wrong. When you suck (most of the time), they're quite reasonable…

everything I've ever written is awful and there was always a commenter with the answer and when I paid attention it was good

While this statement might appear to simply be a case of writerly inferiority complex, Ferrari – a PhD candidate at Georgia Tech – is a published author and respected member of the videogame blogging criticism community. Instead I read his statement as more of a rhetorical device that speaks to something that the community does, something arising from its communal nature, from community interactions, feedback and discussion. A few days earlier on the 29th of January, two other community members had a heated twitter argument over what one saw as the trend of developers


treating DLC (downloadable content) as a core element of their games rather than traditional ‘optional’ expansion content. While one saw only the nefarious efforts of publishers and developers to further ‘nickel and dime’ players already significantly invested in the base game, the other saw it as a legitimate extension of a creator’s right to capitalise on their creative efforts. The important aspect is not who was right or wrong, but that there was an argument and a controversy, the frequency of this kind of occurrence, and that it happened in the relative openness and visibility of social media.

This is a prominent feature of the videogame criticism blogosphere, and a seemingly inevitable by-product of the focus on discussion and conversation. An example from May 2011 brings this aspect into sharp relief. Dan Cook, a blogger, critic and game developer who writes for his blog ‘Lost Garden’ wrote a provocative post which castigated large swaths of the community for a series of perceived failings.92 He provoked something analogous to an autoimmune response of discussion and a number of interesting defences of the community’s output, which ultimately served to bring the community closer together. Leigh Alexander wrote in defence of the expanded community of critical videogame bloggers saying that,

in just a few short years we've rocketed from wondering what there is besides 'review' to an environment where so many people are eager to answer that question that it's overwhelming. Maybe not all the writing done on that spectrum will be criticism, will be professional or will have useful yields for game developers, but people are applying themselves with professional or near-professional sincerity to the discussion of their experience of the game developer's work.93

Another response by Daniel Golding cited Pierre Bourdieu and asserted that good critics ‘are respecters of “the complexity of problems,” and demolishers of “simplistic

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either-ors.”\textsuperscript{94} Unlike the technical diagnosis of problems and solutions, which Cook bemoaned the lack of in his article, Golding said:

\begin{quote}

criticism… can provide analysis in terms that may neither be wholly right nor wrong. It can provide an understanding of the world that is thankfully fuzzy and that venerates complication and depth.\textsuperscript{95}
\end{quote}

Christian McCrea from RMIT University Melbourne observed the discussion about Cook’s article as it unfolded and commented on twitter, from a now-deleted account, saying that:

\begin{quote}

what criticism is or isn’t good for isn’t described on blogs. It’s not bloggable or tweetable. Writing non fiction is an art and has its own responsibilities.\textsuperscript{96}
\end{quote}

Focussing on what the critic can accomplish, Sydney based game developer Andrew Doull wrote that, ‘a game critic has a chance of changing someone's view of the world’\textsuperscript{97} and Michael Abbott of \textit{The Brainy Gamer} blog advocated for the value of simply ‘saying a thing like nobody's ever said it. Saying it in a way that cuts to the bone.’ Adam Ruch, at the time a Macquarie University lecturer, student and videogame blogger, writing a PhD thesis on approaches to videogame criticism, put forth on his blog \textit{Flickering Colours} his own vision for the purpose and benefits of criticism, saying:

\begin{quote}
a critic who fails to address the systemic nature of the videogame is ignoring something fundamental to the object itself. But a critic who fails to appreciate
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{95} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{96} Christian McCrea, Twitter Account “Playstayxian,” \textit{Twitter}, May 8, 2011, https://twitter.com/#!/playstayxian/status/67115233780568064 (account has since been deleted).
\textsuperscript{97} Andrew Doull, “Dear Dan,” \textit{ASCII Dreams}, May 9, 2011 http://roguelikedeveloper.blogspot.com/2011/05/dear-dan.html
the human experience of playing is missing the point of videogames in the first place.98

Discussion also took place in the comments section of Cook’s post, and in response he revised the piece, toning down much of the early inflammatory language and clarifying some of his points. What we glean from the responses to Cook’s post, or from the visible discussions that happened in response, is that some kind of aggregation, collaboration or reconciliation of views is happening. The result of some of the most prolific and celebrated videogame critics online all thinking about and working towards an answer or solution is a kind of emergent-authority - a general trend in certain directions, towards certain ideas, much like we saw in the Wikipedia editing process discussed earlier. Add to it the ‘extended mind’ hypothesis and we reach something quite like what Levi Bryant mentioned earlier, ‘a much more diffuse, distributed mind’ in which ‘others that speak and participate are a part of the thinking.’99 This has ramifications for notions of ‘the public’, and begins to gesture towards the questions that Jane Bennett has taken up around new political ecologies involving multiple, nonhuman agencies.100

In a paper titled ‘Blogs, genes and immigration’ Felicitas Macgilchrist and Inse Böhmig raise the following paradox about social media in the current political context of the ‘Arab Spring’ revolutions of 2011: while social media is commonly identified as the cause or enabler of these revolutionary movements, much of the “pre-revolutionary scholarship” on the same social media suggests that the original democratic promise of the technology had failed ‘because they did not appear on the radar of commercial media and/or have not themselves become big media, accessed by a large number of readers/users.’101 Because blogs and social media failed to usurp traditional mass media, they had ‘failed’ in bringing about a more democratic situation. However, according to Macgilchrist and Böhmig,

99 Bryant, “It Thinks – Some Reflections on Blogging.”
these two apparently opposing arguments draw on the same logic: media are considered political if, and only if, they have a major impact on political decision-makers and the public sphere… The danger for media analysis is that we then forget about the political import of mundane, quotidian everyday practices: they no longer fit within the notion of politics.\textsuperscript{102}

If I agree with Macgilchrist and Böhmig that politics does not solely consist of visible ‘taking it to the streets’ style protests and upheavals, then it is possible to consider the political potential of collaborative or emergent authority in blogging communities like the videogame criticism blogosphere. However it is an open and ongoing question for many within (and without) the academy at present just how precisely to balance the types of concerns and political effects that can be encompassed in terms like “identity politics” and affirmative slogans such as ‘the personal is the political.’ For instance, Oliver Marchart has described these competing approaches by noting the history of ‘the conceptual differentiation between “politics” and “the political”’\textsuperscript{103} and attempting to ground a theory of democracy on a ‘minimal politics.’ Marchart describes four minimal criteria required for any social action to reach ‘the minimal conditions of political action: collectivity, strategy, conflictuality, [and] organization.’\textsuperscript{104} Marchart adds that, according to his perspective,

\begin{quote}
politics is not about taking a blind leap of faith; it is a process of acting in a contingent situation on a terrain of immanence, criss-crossed by a plurality of antagonisms.\textsuperscript{105}
\end{quote}

This conception of politics as acting, or perhaps as the politics of agency itself, and the problems it leads to when nonhumans and networks are considered becomes a repeated theme in the following chapters.

\textsuperscript{102} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{103} Oliver Marchart, “Democracy and Minimal Politics: The Political Difference and Its Consequences,” \textit{The South Atlantic Quarterly} 110, no. 4 (Fall 2011), p.965.
\textsuperscript{104} Ibid., p.971 (emphasis in original).
\textsuperscript{105} Ibid.
Assessing the consequences of nonhuman authority and obedience

One of the best known and oft-cited discussions of the ‘politics’ of technologies, and by extension, a category of nonhuman, is Langdon Winner’s famous essay ‘Do Artifacts Have Politics?’ Winner forwards a position that they do, and speaks of technology as encompassing all ‘modern practical artifice’ to which we may take to mean intentional, or created, nonhumans. His famous example is the low railway overpasses on New York’s Long Island, designed by Robert Moses who prohibited, with his designs, the passage of public busses into certain areas (public parks, etc) with his low bridges. This is an explicit political design, but Winner upholds a stronger thesis than this, arguing that ‘to recognize the political dimensions in the shapes of technology does not require that we look for conscious conspiracies or malicious intentions.' This is not so much ‘a politics’ according to Marchart’s standards, as a political dimension to the nonhuman.

In this chapter I have looked at the nonhuman authority that arises in a network, that is the authority of place and location in a network. It is worth asking one final question, however, namely what occurs when a nonhuman is an authority in this way, and in accordance with its political implications, causes or instigates harmful, undesirable or problematic results via its authority? This question can be reframed as a question of obedience to authority, about which a significant body of research has been undertaken. Psychologist Stanley Milgram became famous for his experiment looking at obedience to human authority, and he provides a fairly useful broad contextualisation of what might be called the mainstream or dominant view about the functional utility of authority. At the start of his ground-breaking 1974 work Obedience to Authority, An Experimental View, Milgram argues that,

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107 Ibid., p.22.
108 Ibid., p.25.
Some system of authority is a requirement of all communal living, and it is only the man dwelling in isolation who is not forced to respond, through defiance or submission, to the commands of others.\textsuperscript{109}

But this isn’t a sufficient argument for the on-balance benefit of authority in the face of the number of ills it causes, of which Milgram is intimately aware. Milgram’s work, though often misunderstood, was highly concerned with the problematic dimensions to authority, and investigated the issue of obedience to authority through a series of experiments involving unwitting subjects who were enlisted as participants in a mock learning experiment. In the experiment, the actual subject took on the role of a ‘teacher’ who was then directed by the authority (that is, the researcher whether that be Milgram himself or an assistant) to electrically shock a ‘learner’ (actually an actor) with increasingly high voltages of electricity. The main aim or purpose of the experiment, Milgram explains, ‘was to find when and how people would defy authority in the face of a clear moral imperative.’\textsuperscript{110} Milgram explains that subjects were well and truly aware (certainly as the voltages were increased) that what they were doing was morally dubious, and even outright dangerous, as the actor portrayed increasing levels of distress and unwillingness to continue being shocked (even mentioning being in the possession of a “weak heart”). Oddly, most continued in the face of increasing protestations. Milgram’s conclusion is that authority is an incredibly compelling force. He elaborates:

many of the subjects, at the level of stated opinion, feel quite as strongly as any of us about the moral requirement of refraining from action against a helpless victim. They, too, in general terms know what ought to be done and can state their values when the occasion arises. Many people were unable to realize their values in action and found themselves continuing in the experiment even though they disagreed with what they were doing.\textsuperscript{111}


\textsuperscript{110} Ibid., p.4.

\textsuperscript{111} Ibid., p.6.
In nearly all cases subjects continued – with the distinction between them primarily the varying points at which they became unwilling to make the necessary ‘break’ with authority. The forces of compulsion, Milgram suspects, are a suite of factors: ‘factors such as politeness… his desire to uphold his initial promise of aid… and the awkwardness of withdrawal.’ Likewise, there are two main features of internal rationalisation that Milgram strongly suspects goes on inside the mind of subjects (consciously or otherwise). First,

the most common adjustment in the thought of the obedient subject is for him to see himself as not responsible for his own actions. He divests himself of responsibility by attributing all initiative to the experimenter, a legitimate authority.

In line with this “diversion” of responsibility to the authority, which I will begin to refer to as an “outsourcing” in the following chapter, it is a central argument of this thesis that a similar process comes into play in other situations when nonhumans get involved. A delegation, even a deliberate outsourcing, of responsibility to nonhumans is a critical feature of so-called distributed situations, and networks of authority and responsibility. The following chapter takes up the investigation of this issue in depth, but remaining with Milgram’s examples, we already find some evidence of this process’ involvement of nonhumans here, in the second cognitive process Milgram offers as explanation for subject’s behaviour. Milgram notes that often subjects displayed a ‘narrowing of moral concern’, as the concern of technically performing well the tasks required of them absorbs their concentration. This is identical to a powerful observation made by philosopher of technology Jacques Ellul, who has described the difficulty, even impossibility, of any single human being responsible, given the present conditions of exceptionally specialised and divided labour. In line with Milgram’s ‘narrowing of moral concern’, Ellul relates the following horrifying anecdote to elaborate a similar argument about the effects of technology:

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112 Ibid., p.7.
113 Ibid., pp.7-8.
114 Ibid., p.7.
just consider, for example that atrocious excuse… It was one of the most horrible things I have ever heard. The person in charge of the concentration camp Bergen-Belsen was asked, during the Auschwitz trial, the Nuremberg trials regarding Auschwitz and Bergen-Belsen: - “But didn’t you find it horrible? All those corpses?” He replied: “What could I do? The capacity of the ovens was too small. I couldn't process all those corpses. It caused me many problems [difficulté extraordinaire]. I had no time to think about those people. I was too busy with that technical problem of my ovens.” That was the classic example of the irresponsible person. He carries out his technical task and he’s not interested in anything else.\textsuperscript{115}

The obsessive focus on technical objects, problems, or the task at hand – in all cases something other than actual humans – ends up inuring the human to moral concerns. I want to suggest that, from Ellul’s perspective, nonhuman authority masquerades as the technical. The authority of the Bergen-Belsen ovens themselves were ‘obeyed’ with grave implications.

Similarly, Milgram finds his subjects gain a rather intense ability to focus only on the technical dimensions of the experiment, even just simply flipping switches. Milgram’s explanation for this, he argues, is that rather than removing or clouding the subject’s moral sense, it has merely shifted their focus and concern:

his moral concern now shifts to a consideration of how well he is living up to the expectations that the authority has of him. In wartime, a soldier does not ask whether it is good or bad to bomb a hamlet; he does not experience shame or guilt in the destruction of a village: rather he feels pride or shame depending on how well he has performed the mission assigned to him.\textsuperscript{116}

This interpretation is reinforced by slight variations to the experiment, that place the subject in closer proximity to the actor being shocked, up to and including having to physically touch the ‘participant’ compelling their continued participation through

\textsuperscript{115}Jacques Ellul, Betrayal by Technology: A Portrait of Jacques Ellul, Interview by Jan van Boeckel and Karin van der Molen, (ReRunProductions, 1992).

\textsuperscript{116}Milgram, Obedience to Authority, p.8.
force. In the earlier version of the experiment, participants could only see the shocked person vaguely through glass, and often averted their heads ‘in an awkward and conspicuous manner.’\textsuperscript{117} Milgram’s suspicion was that ‘the salience of the victim may have, in some degree, regulated the subject’s performance’\textsuperscript{118} and this was confirmed by increasing the relative proximity of the subject. In other words, the increased visibility of the humanity of the human made an impact on the likelihood of disobeying a cruel, or immoral directive from authority (this echoes the work of Levinas who makes much of the ethical nature of the face-to-face relation\textsuperscript{119}). And yet, while this proximity decreased the ‘mean maximum shock’\textsuperscript{120} that subjects were willing to administer (making them more likely to disobey authority sooner) nevertheless ‘obedience was [only] significantly reduced’ and not eliminated altogether.\textsuperscript{121}

From one perspective, the history of the twentieth century has been one long, protracted lesson in the importance and necessity of resisting authority, but these issues go back even further. In a missive fired off in 1872, Frederick Engels responded to the “anti-authoritarians” with a fairly rudimentary and unpersuasive argument for the necessity of authority.\textsuperscript{122} Citing banal examples of the necessity of cooperation in certain situations (industrial manufacture, railway timetables, and times of war) which affirm ‘the necessity of authority, and of imperious authority at that.’\textsuperscript{123} Engels takes these examples as self-evident, but Engels glosses over the objections of the autonomists and anti-authoritarians, ignoring their focus on the conditions of legitimate submission to authority, claiming that their focus on ‘a commission entrusted’ means, ‘these gentlemen think that when they have changed the names of things they have changed the things themselves.’\textsuperscript{124} There is indeed a body of literature, admittedly

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item\textsuperscript{117} Ibid., p.34.
\item\textsuperscript{118} Ibid.
\item\textsuperscript{120} Milgram, \textit{Obedience to Authority}, p.36.
\item\textsuperscript{121} Ibid., p.34.
\item\textsuperscript{123} Ibid., p.732.
\item\textsuperscript{124} Ibid.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
beyond the scope of this current discussion to incorporate, that rejects all authority, seeing it as imposed by definition.

But what about nonhuman authority? Even if all human authority were done away with and that were the true and legitimate conclusion to draw, it doesn’t seem clear or obvious that network authority, and *nonhuman* authority, would be or could be done away with. Engels seems to gesture at this in his fairly glib missive, such as in passages like the following: ‘All these workers, men, women and children, are obliged to begin and finish their work at the hours fixed by the authority of the steam, which cares nothing for individual autonomy.’\(^{125}\) He likewise describes ‘The automatic machinery of the big factory [as] much more despotic than the small capitalists who employ workers ever have been.’\(^{126}\) Here we have clear instances of the pervasiveness of nonhuman authority. And if, as it is tempting to conclude from Milgram, cultivating an attitude or culture of resisting authority, and a willingness to do so in morally dubious situations, is an important task – what about resisting nonhuman authority? What would this resistance even look like, and how might it avoid the trap of technocracy?

**Conclusion**

In this chapter I have attempted to give an overview of ideas about human authority, ranging from Weber, Sennett and Arendt, to more recent networked conceptions of network authority as suggested by O’Neil. Along the way, I have discussed the depoliticising tendency of various technological trends such as the “openness” movement, and the figure of the technocrat, opening up a set of problems along these lines. I then demonstrated the network authority in action, looking at the videogame criticism blogosphere, and concluded by considering the implications of Milgram’s work on resisting authority for a network authority, and the authority taken on by nonhuman objects. In the next chapter I pitch this problem somewhat differently, coming from the angle of responsibility, and particularly nonhuman responsibility. If nonhumans can be a source of authority, then what happens when that authority is

\(^{125}\) Ibid., p.731.  
\(^{126}\) Ibid.
“obeyed” against clear or ambiguous moral imperatives, and what happens when no one can be found responsible?
Chapter 3 – Network Responsibility

In the previous chapter I introduced the work of French philosopher of technology Jacques Ellul, who raised the issue of technology’s ability to obfuscate moral questions, which was supported by Milgram’s experimental claim that obedience to authority shifted the moral focus to a technical one. In this chapter I tackle the issue of responsibility, and I want to return to Ellul’s thought as he makes a rather extraordinary claim about responsibility in the technological society – he claims that it is actually impossible to be responsible. But he means this in the fairly narrow sense I call ‘moral responsibility’, which I outlined in the introduction. Ellul gives the following example of the problem he finds in contemporary, technologically advanced society, in which labour and work is highly specialised and technical:

In a society such as ours, it is almost impossible for a person to be responsible. A simple example: a dam has been built somewhere, and it bursts. Who is responsible for that? Geologists worked on it. They examined the terrain. Engineers drew up the construction plans. Workmen constructed it. And politicians decided that the dam had to be in that spot. Who is responsible? No one. There is never anyone responsible. In the whole of our technological society the work is so fragmented and broken up into small pieces that no one is responsible. But no one is free either. Everyone has his own, specific task. And that’s all he has to do.¹

Given that I have outlined earlier the way in which I find moral responsibility negotiable and subject to variable assessments, why is Ellul saying that no one can be assessed as responsible? I do not believe he is claiming that there is anything essential about the nature of responsibility that is contra my own formulation, but rather there are two perspectives with which I think Ellul’s description of the modern problem can be viewed. The problems revealed by these two perspectives make up this and the following chapter. The first is to view responsibility as a problem of distribution, and a problem of not being able to find any ‘one’ responsible. The second is a problem of

¹ Jacques Ellul, Betrayal by Technology: A Portrait of Jacques Ellul, Interview by Jan van Boeckel and Karin van der Molen, (ReRunProductions, 1992), approx. time: 6:50.
reasonability – and of certain requirements that we must adhere to when making assessments of responsibility that involve human beings.

Of the two perspectives on Ellul’s dam problem, I take the first as an indictment of the unsatisfactory nature of current understandings of both causal and moral responsibility – no ‘one’ can be clearly determined as the cause (without being reductionist or partisan), and no ‘one’ is morally responsible because no ‘one’ can even be found, an important pre-condition for moral responsibility, since distribution amongst a network of objects causes responsibility to dissolve, losing its moral power of conviction.

For Ellul, much of this problem is put down to what he calls ‘technique’. Not quite the same as contemporary conceptions of technology, for him ‘techniques mediate between man and matter.’ In *The Technological Society* Ellul’s makes some rather grandiloquent claims and some of his arguments are rather unconvincing, including some based on rather specious or cursory historical examples. However there’s a certain undeniable appeal to a number of his ideas, and his ‘technique’ as not-quite-inert matter but not quite active ‘thing’ either, bears some resemblance to the idea of the nonhuman. Ellul claims, for instance, that, ‘in his conflict with matter, in his struggle to survive, man interposes an intermediary agency between himself and his environment.’ Not entirely human, but without a clear theory of nonhuman agency or vitality, what can this intermediary agency be if not the same apparently inert, clod-like stuff as what he also calls in the same passage “matter”? In his elaboration of technique, I believe Ellul is reaching for something like a vitalist theory of agency (hence its active, mediating role), in other words what I would call the *nonhuman itself*.

We can now reformulate the problem of the dam that has burst – the problem becoming one of the agency of nonhumans *as well as humans*, and networks of both. As a way of tackling this problem, this chapter takes up the case of the responsibility for the Deepwater Horizon oil spill that occurred in the Gulf of Mexico in 2010, and examines a particular series of discussions and arguments that attempt to construct a responsible object. The relative efficacy of these efforts demonstrates important points

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3 Ibid., p.25.
about what is and is not allowed to be responsible and leads into further critical questions.

The second perspective on Ellul’s claim to the impossibility of responsibility in contemporary society is harder to draw out, but it involves what might be considered a test of reasonability which is often (and often rightly so) involved when responsibility is assessed. I first mentioned the test of reasonability in chapter 1, as a way of countering the iron-clad machismo (as Timothy Morton pointed out) of certain causal regimes and their invocation. But it is by no means a perfect solution, since a test of reasonableness would presumably, and perhaps unfortunately, be normative, as what is “reasonable” at one time and according to one set of standards may be unreasonable at another. Even in a legal context, the doctrine of the ‘reasonable man’ has prompted academic debate over ‘whether we should require a standard that is “objective or subjective,”’ as Victoria Nourse says. Nourse claims, however, that the terms of this debate makes a category error, fixating on ‘the “characteristics” of the reasonable person’ rather than the normative guidance provided by the heuristic which the ‘reasonable man’ figures. While Nourse does not advocate the doing away with the “reasonable man” for jury instructions, which ‘need the metaphor because it invites emotional identification with the defendant in ways that are intended to elicit restraint,’ she argues that the anthropomorphized concept “flattens” the analysis, forcing us to whipsaw between hypermajoritarian views (the standard of the law-abiding) and hyperminoritarian views (the standard of the particular defendant). In other words, when the law overlooks the normative role of the “reasonable man” figure, it results in ironically unreasonable extremes that do not take context into account, and distort or prevent the equal application of the law.

But at least acknowledging the normative content of responsibility (in sympathy with Nourse’s arguments about the ‘reasonable man’ doctrine) seems to me to be a more honest position from which to begin: to start by acknowledging this nature of the act

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5 Ibid.
6 Ibid., p.47.
7 Ibid., p.48.
8 Ibid., pp.36-49.
as inevitably caught up in competing ideas of causality and reasonability, and to let those norms become subject for discussion, examination and controversy. This would be a rather different approach to the present everyday context, which sees various explanations jostle for the position of single, master or *objective* causality. In everyday arguments and conflicts, as occurs on a daily basis on the internet for instance, common sense and the ideological predilections of the current era mean that certain causalities are more readily accepted than others. Chapter 5 looks at one particular object, money or capital, that asserts or authorises a particular system of causality most frequently over others in contemporary life — representing something like the apotheosis of the causal trump card and often having the final say in questions of causality.

There are important precedents for normative approaches to causality in other fields, with one type of probabilistic reasoning popular within the fields of AI probability and uncertainty known as a “Bayesian network” which involves an explicitly normative approach. The Bayesian network is a graph of relationships between variables and dependencies, based on empirical premises and then the application of statistical probability to the likelihood of, say, the presence of a particular disease given a host of symptoms. In his charmingly titled article ‘Bayesian Networks Without Tears,’ Eugene Charniak provides an example of the presence of a dog being left inside a house and the way in which that can be taken to indicate some corresponding state (such as ‘people are at home’). He stresses that,

> The important thing to note about this example is that the causal connections are not absolute. Often, my family will have left without putting out the dog or turning on a light. Sometimes we can use [these approaches] anyway, but in such cases, it is hard to know what to infer when not all the evidence points the same way.\(^9\)

The attractive dimension of the Bayesian network and its normative assumptions is precisely this acknowledgement of ambiguity and indeterminacy. The Bayesian network’s openness to questions of causality, I suspect, is a better place to begin than

stricter, even dogmatic applications of hard-and-fast causal regimes. It is the effect of the attitude that is important here. There are significant correlates in strains of certain analytic philosophical approaches, specifically those influenced by Bertrand Russell. For instance, Peter Menzies has forwarded a concept of causality that is ‘context sensitive.’ He offers the following explanation of his argument:

Take any objective substructure of events and relations, whatever it may be, this pattern cannot determine the truth-conditions of a causal judgement, because its truth-value can vary from one context to another, depending on how a certain contextual parameter is set. The very same pattern of objective relations, viewed from within one context, may support a causal judgement, but, viewed in another context, may fail to support the judgement.\textsuperscript{10}

Menzies also mentions other contemporary theorists of causality, such as John Collins\textsuperscript{11} and David Lewis,\textsuperscript{12} who involve or recognise the normative nature of causal assessment, particularly the role of context, summarising Lewis’s conclusions as recognising that ‘our judgements of causation depend upon which possibilities we deem to be too far farfetched.’\textsuperscript{13}

David Graeber makes a similar point, about the importance of reasonableness, in his book \textit{The Democracy Project} as part of his larger discussion of democratic consensus. Graeber briefly traces the origins of ‘rationality’ as a criterion for authority and judgement in Occidental thought, finding its roots in ancient Athens. He mentions that Aristotle ‘states the matter quite explicitly in the beginning of his \textit{Politics}, where he argues that only free adult males can be fully rational beings, in control of their own bodies, just as they are in control over others: their women, children, and slaves.’\textsuperscript{14}

According to this tradition – which Graeber finds similar to much of the thought and attitudes of the American ‘founding fathers’:

\textsuperscript{13}Menzies, “Causality in Context,” p.195-196.
\textsuperscript{14}David Graeber, \textit{The Democracy Project: A History, a Crisis, a Movement} (Spiegel & Grau, 2013), p.198.
To be rational… has everything to do with the ability to issue commands: to stand apart from the situation, assess it from a distance, make an appropriate set of calculations, and then tell others what to do. Essentially, it is the kind of calculation one can make only when one can tell others to shut up and do as they are told, not work with them as free equals in search of solutions. It’s only the habit of command that allows one to imagine that the world can be reduced to the equivalent of mathematical formulae, formulae that can be applied in any situation, regardless of its real human complexities.\(^{15}\)

By contrast, Graeber describes the very different set of expectations and involvements when one is required not to merely behave ‘rationally’ but reasonably, saying that when we inquire whether someone is being rational ‘we aren’t asking very much: just whether they are capable of making basic logical connections.’\(^{16}\) Machines – that is, nonhumans – are able to perform (or imitate) many basic, logical connections, so we could even go as far as to say that by asking for ‘reasonability’ all we are asking for is that someone behave like a human, and embrace the fullness of their own humanity. This could also be construed as a question of “can you be reasoned with?”, which would seem to be in stark contrast to the pernicious effects of claims to objective rationality and its claim to universality (otherwise it’s not objective) and thus no need to engage or consult with others.

It is possible that I am perhaps arguing against an extreme or strawman version of ‘rationality,’ however abundant examples of this position exist, such as the highly influential ‘objectivist’ philosophy of Ayn Rand. Alternative accounts such as feminist accounts of rationality do exist, such as Deborah K. Heikes’ *Rationality and Feminist Philosophy*, which both criticises the Enlightenment’s conception of rationality as disembodied, and argues for a continuum of rationality.\(^{17}\) But I find Graeber’s concept of reasonability still has value, breaking with some of rationality’s troubling contemporary baggage and, as he acknowledges, reminding us that any standard of reasonability is going to demand more than just rationality:

\(^{15}\) Ibid.
\(^{16}\) Ibid., p.200.
\(^{17}\) Deborah K. Heikes, *Rationality and Feminist Philosophy* (Continuum, 2010), pp.5-7.
Reasonableness implies a much more sophisticated ability to achieve a balance between different perspectives, values, and imperatives, none of which, usually, could possibly be reduced to mathematical formulae.¹⁸

In one of his most memorable passages, he gives the example of deciding ‘what to cook for dinner’¹⁹ – just the kind of ordinary decision that we face everyday but which is irreducible to a formal logic. And yet, as he notes: ‘of course we make such decisions all the time. Most of life – particularly human life with others – consists of making reasonable compromises that could never be reduced to mathematical models.’²⁰

This is not to suggest that causality itself must (or even should) always be ‘reasonable’, on the contrary it is a perverse state of affairs that often finds precisely the most apparently ‘reasonable’ and banal causalities becoming the most unyielding bludgeons during negotiation. Certain droll deployments of versions of materialism come to mind, akin to those who refuse to believe in anything that they cannot see with their eyes or touch with their own hands. Not confined to merely the obstinately naive, many seemingly sophisticated thinkers will likewise apply reasonability as a bludgeon – as anyone can attest who has ever engaged in an argument with someone holding to any position deeply influenced by forms of scientific reductionism or eliminativisms, or a distinctly old-school brand of dialectical materialist. In other words, anyone who has encountered an interlocutor unwilling or unable to admit the existence of objects or things outside the remit of their particular approaches and schemas. Likewise the apparently inarguable obviousness of certain really existing things, whether “individuals” for the economically minded, or the inarguable “realness” of the Higgs-Boson for science boosters, both contribute to a kind of unreasonableness when these categories are given pride of place, relegating all competitors.

In a sense, when asserting the realness of some favoured object over another, what one is really objecting to is the decision not to use one’s own favoured terms. Even Science, Latour says, ends up behaving like a fairy-tale as it explains the realness of

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¹⁹ Ibid.
²⁰ Ibid.
one thing in terms of another, in terms of another, *ad infinitum*21, and when the science graduate is outraged at scepticism about the “realness” of the Higgs-Boson particle what they are really often arguing over is the skeptic’s resistance to being drawn into a *type of discussion* in which it is already a foregone conclusion that the construction of the Large Hadron Collider (LHC) was the *right and appropriate thing to do* with the approximate 7.5 billion euros it cost to build. Such an objection is not however to argue necessarily against its construction, nor is it meant as a denial of the use and value of the LHC, both practical and theoretical, instead it is meant simply as an acknowledgement of the contingency of who gets to determine the terms used in an argument over causes – of crucial importance when it comes to controlling the outcome of an assessment of causes or responsibility, as with, for example, the case of the Deepwater Horizon disaster.

What this boils down to is the *authorisation* of certain causalities, a contest over who (or just as frequently *what*) has the right to enforce or uphold the standards of what can sensibly be included as a cause. This is not a minor issue, as ruling out a thing from being a cause effectively strips it of all agency – we can consider the ways in which medical and psychiatric authorities have authorised causalities that determine ‘hysteira’ as the cause of women’s irrationality or insanity throughout the ages, rather than noting the truly pernicious effects of the system of oppression known as patriarchy – which becomes a major theme of chapter 4. Chapter 5 details the way in which money itself has come to be, in many contexts, the Ur-determinant of causality, authorising certain explanations for phenomena and determining their consideration from an economic perspective. All these examples lack the singular element of reasonability – they all insist on monopolising and authorising causalities. The benefit of considering the problem of responsibility as a problem of distribution and construction of objects, as well as through the question of reasonability, is that it allows us to take greater note of the ways in which authorisation of certain causalities (or objects) operates.

This chapter deals with an ‘ontography’, a literary device particular to OOO, of the multinational corporation BP that lists the objects assembled in a short public

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relations film produced by the corporation. It then discusses the competing accounts of the ‘causes’ of the Deepwater Horizon spill, drawing on both Abraham Lustgarten’s book-length investigative account of the accident, which is damning and definitive but fails to suggest an appropriate response, before moving on to a detailed analysis of the testimony and the questioning of Miles Ezell, a senior toolpusher on the Deepwater Horizon oil rig. I first came upon Ezell’s testimony while browsing the sources cited on the Wikipedia page for the Deepwater Horizon explosion, finding a link to the testimony of Ezell as a citation for a fact that stated there were BP representatives present on the rig the day of the accident specifically there to present an award for ‘no lost time accidents’\(^\text{22}\) in seven years of operation. I found Ezell’s account of the event, beginning at around the 29 minute mark in the C-SPAN video\(^\text{23}\) that documented his and the preceding witness’ accounts, and continuing until the board of inquiry and the company representatives have ‘no further questions’ at close to the 1hr 37 minute mark in the video.

The first of these series of questions Ezell is asked is led by Captain Hung Nguyen, of the US coast guard, who asks about who had “full visibility” on the rig – a managerial-speak euphemism for who had the responsibility of oversight. Nguyen’s questions do not reach a satisfactory conclusion, coming apart when faced with the problem of an eminently reasonable defence. In the terms developed here, it could be said that his search for a responsible object ultimately fails – one is not discernible, and the responsible object he attempts to construct in its stead is easily disassembled by the defence. In contrast, his fellow inquiry member Jason Matthews takes a more antagonistic approach in his line of questioning, asking about a certain lifting operation that occurred far prior to the spill, and using it to rhetorically indict the company Transocean for its questionable behaviour. Finally, the chapter concludes with a discussion of what is perhaps the most tenacious problem, which leads into the subject of the fourth chapter, describing the way that any encounter with BP that a

\(^{22}\) A ‘lost time accident’ is any accident that causes a worker to spend time off work as a result. For a typical definition see: http://www.sca.com/en/Pages/Glossary/Lost-Time-Accidents/

claimant might make is mediated through a human face, a human delegate and the problems that presents for activists and other claimants.

**An ontography of BP**

From much of the month of May 2013 the website of British Petroleum plc (hereafter referred to simply as BP) featured a main story advertising how the corporation was “Committed to Safety.” The story linked to a video featuring Safety Officer Jon Parker who describes BP’s attitude towards safety in some detail:

> When we made our commitment to the gulf, BP had two big goals: help the gulf recover, and learn from what happened, so we could be a better, safer energy company. I’ve been with BP for 24 years as part of the team that helped deliver on our commitments to the gulf, and I can tell you, safety is at the heart of everything we do.²⁴

This video – as a microcosm of the larger process BP is engaged in – is an important illustration proving insight into how BP the company wants itself to be viewed, and not just from a public relations perspective, but also from an ontological one. The images it shows us in this video are all elements in the global, distributed network of capital and labour – nonhumans and humans – that BP has captured for itself, under its brand or label. The video is an inventory of all that BP wants us to see, to know as quintessentially composing “BP.”

The video’s tone is one of slick competence – featuring dozens of shots of clean, professional workers, smiling in satisfaction or with expressions of studied seriousness in place. Establishing shots of the Gulf of Mexico – nary a drop of oil or sickly animal in sight – set the tone: *we are a professional company who clean up after ourselves.*

Jon Parker temporarily becomes the inoffensive, walrus-moustachioed face of BP, speaking on behalf of the company and on behalf of himself. He is wearing safety gear

²⁴ BP plc., “BP’s commitment to America has never been stronger,” YouTube, Published May 1, 2013, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LLBTT7MvK2Q
– navy overalls, a hardhat and eye protection, and his delivery is deliberate but made
with the unaffected cadence of someone speaking to an acquaintance or friend, and
the narration has been recorded and edited with great skill and attention to detail. It’s
very simple or plain speech (speaking as he does almost out the side of his mouth)
matching his middle-American appearance and workmanlike attire, but the overall
effect is one of charisma. His is the voice of authority and expertise, as he speaks of his
twenty-five years as a safety officer and the lessons that BP has learnt from the 2010
Deepwater Horizon explosion and subsequent oil spill.

In between shots of BP workers in clean khaki overalls, whose lips we see moving as
they discuss plans around a central workbench, we see shots of the backs of helmets
that read ‘THINK SAFETY’ in big red lettering. At the same time, Parker mentions
the numerous new machines that BP has invested in:

We’ve added cutting edge safety equipment and technology, like a new
depth water well cap, and a state of the art monitoring centre where experts
watch over all our drilling activity 24/7. And we’re sharing what we’ve
learned so we can all produce energy more safely.²⁵

Accompanying these words we see shots of the very machines he mentions, shining
attractively in the bright Texan sun, being demonstrated in an industrial setting. The
camera cuts away to a control room where professionals in business attire stare
intently at readouts on large screens. A title card is shown in BP’s iconic green
lettering on a white background – ‘We’re sharing what we’ve learned.’ More shots of
overall-clad and safety-equipped workers in heavy industrial surrounds of gleaming
stainless steel holding tanks and overhead piping, testing the fit of harnesses and
ascending ladders on drilling platforms. In fact the number and in many cases literally
dazzling appearance of the many nonhumans involved – from pipes to Petri dishes –
is impressive, demonstrating visually both the claims of the enormity of investment in
the United States, as well as the impressive technological sheen of BP’s operation.

²⁵ Ibid.
We see a lab technician, wearing safety goggles and those now pervasive overalls (navy) turning over in his hands a pink-tinged Petri dish while another technician in a white coat looks on approvingly. We see a complex computer screen of pipes and readouts, with a man briefly gesturing at one area of the screen, before the video cuts away to a scene with two men in grey overalls both visibly exerting themselves to tighten a single gigantic nut with an oversize wrench, attached to a segment of piping at least as wide as a person. Two more workmen in overalls (navy again) with eye protection appear, one yanking on the yellow steel handle on the nozzle of a black pipe to demonstrate some technique to the other. Two engineers in lighter blue coloured overalls, with requisite American flag patches on the arms, looking so much like NASA Astronauts, write equations on a piece of glass in front the camera. The equations are blurred out as the camera’s lens focuses on the two individuals – a middle-aged Hispanic looking man and an African American woman. A series of rapid shots follows; another of yet more khaki overalled men walking next to beige to light-olive coloured oil-pipes, distant snow-capped mountains in the far background; the interior view of a giant crane-like structure, hoisting a weighty yellow machine up on a sheet of black cables eight-thick; more khaki overalled workers looking at plans; navy overalled workers in a machine room festooned with pipes and lights, readouts, an inconspicuously placed American flag jutting from the wall; desks and chairs, as well as neatly arranged vials of chemicals; back to the lab and a technician who is adjusting something inside a piece of machinery protected with clear plastic flaps; before a final pair of quick shots: one of a smiling, charismatic youngish looking African American man in a lab wearing navy overalls and eye-protection, followed likewise by a smiling middle-aged woman in a hardhat and with eye and ear protection, some kind of radio device clipped around her neck.

Underneath this final flurry of images, Jon Parker’s narration asserts that:

Safety is a vital part of BP’s commitment to America and to the nearly 250,000 people who work with us here. We invest more in the US than anywhere else in the world, over 55 billion dollars here in the last five years, making BP America’s largest energy investor [here another title card reads: “We’re America’s largest energy investor”, reinforcing the importance of this
point, being doubled in narration and onscreen]. Our commitment has never been stronger.

The video finishes as it began, with Parker’s body the site for a visible struggle between control and enthusiasm, as his visible upper body rises and falls with the delivery of his lines. Two final title cards follow, with a pair of phrases displayed in green BP typography on the same white background:

Committed to the Gulf.
Committed to America.

and

Find out more about BP at bp.com/US

The music that plays throughout the video is worth noting, and is treated with just enough reverb to sound like it was recorded in a small-to-medium sized auditorium. It’s the kind of music that would not be out of place in an expensive stock music library, a professional recording of professional session players, hints of depth – and above all competence – without evoking overt seriousness. The music is light and playful, infused with both the energy of close-mic’ed drums and the ‘class’ of a small string section. It is an up-beat piece of music for an up-beat message about BP that vaguely brings to mind prime-time HBO-style dramas with artful cinematographic title sequences. As with the video overall, the effect is of unpretentious, yet slickly produced, competence.

This is an incredibly attractive world – with the cinematography, choice of music and imagery all being incredibly compelling. Having watched the video repeatedly, my lasting impression is one of the unreality of the images and the world created – I almost want to live within whatever world is evoked by these glorious sound and visuals, in which people wear clean overalls and smile while working collegially alongside one another, or expend serious mental energy on worthwhile and rewarding cognitive labour.
But the important question to ask at this point is “What actually is BP amongst all this?” How do we conceive BP in all of the things described in the video above, and more? Because, from an OOO perspective, not all the things in the video are BP (or are solely BP); they are also objects or things in their own right. This is the tension that object-oriented ontology places its finger upon, and which is the pulse indicating the heartbeat of an important set of contemporary problems. These problems, by nature, arise from the contemporary network object – any thing that claims the membership of other things. In *Alien Phenomenology* Ian Bogost provides the example of a cargo ship to explain the odd relationship between parts and wholes that OOO proposes. According to Bogost’s “tiny ontology”:

The container ship is a unit as much as the cargo holds, the shipping containers, the hydraulic rams, the ballast water, the twist locks, the lashing rods, the crew, their sweaters, and the yarn out of which those garments are knit. The ship erects a boundary in which everything it contains withdraws within it, while those individual units that compose it do so similarly, simultaneously, and at the same fundamental level of existence. This strange mereology, to use Levi Bryant’s phrase for it, underscores the weird relationship between parts and wholes. For OOO, “one object is simultaneously a part of another object and an independent object in its own right.”

The list of objects that makes up the BP entity and the extensive description I have employed in order to highlight the amount of work that goes into assembling these objects as part of BP – from the tasteful range of coloured overalls, to the shiny new blowout preventer gleaming in the Texan sun, to the smiling workers and the objects they manipulate, all cohering into a strong and definite brand impression of BP – is a deployment of what Bogost calls ontography:

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The practice of ontography—and it is a practice, not merely a theory—
describes the many processes of accounting for the various units that strew
themselves throughout the universe. To create an ontograph involves
cataloging things, but also drawing attention to the couplings of and chasms
between them. The tire and chassis, the ice milk and cup, the buckshot and
soil: things like these exist not just for us but also for themselves and for one
another, in ways that might surprise and dismay us.27

The purpose of my ontography of BP seen through the lens of one not particularly
special video advertisement is to demonstrate the network-object nature of BP. The
video itself serves to draw together audio-visually everything within itself, and apply
the name BP to it. It projects a world view of BP, a world of sunlight glinting off
water, of smoothly sailing fishing ships, smiling workers and safe equipment. By
drawing our attention to the multitudinous objects that make up BP, the ontography
underscores BP’s dual network-and-object existence. BP is not just a brand - as we
shall soon see it is a thing in its own right, exerting an agency upon the world that is
potentially catastrophic. But it’s also not-just-BP, it is also oil wells and workers and
Petri dishes – things and objects that have a life of their own.

Responsibility through the lens of the Deepwater Horizon

Very shortly after the April 20th explosion that began the Deepwater Horizon disaster,
the Minerals Management Service (MMS) and the US Coast Guard (USCG) began a
joint investigation of the incident, calling witnesses to testify before a panel made up of
MMS officials and USCG personnel, as well as attorneys and representatives of a
number of the companies involved in the disaster: BP,28 Transocean,29 Halliburton,30

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28 The owner of the lease, the holder of the right to exploit the natural resources at
this oil field within US coastal territory.
29 A multinational corporation that owns and operates oil rigs on behalf of companies
with oil leases.
30 Involved in drilling and well creation operations for BP, in the case of the Deepater
Horizon by providing under-water cementing.
Cameron,\textsuperscript{31} and others. The hearings went on for weeks and questioned numerous witnesses. Three particular incidents will be focussed on here, all occurring during the testimony delivered by Miles Ezell on the 28\textsuperscript{th} of May.

Mr Ezell’s position on the rig was that of a “senior toolpusher,” and his role was one of three critical decision makers on the Deepwater Horizon – involving the senior toolpusher, the OIM (Offshore Installation Manager) and the “company man,” who in this case was an employee of BP. The Deepwater Horizon oil rig itself was owned and operated by Transocean, who leased the rig to BP, who in turn owned the rights to exploit the well-sites in the deep waters of the Gulf of Mexico. Though Ezell’s position as toolpusher is one of three key individuals involved in operational decisions, more individuals would on occasion contribute, for instance the ‘captain’ of the floating rig itself may have some input, and each role was filled around the clock on the Horizon, involving handoffs between toolpushers during shift changes. Ezell worked closely with his colleague and fellow toolpusher Jason Anderson, who had then recently been promoted to senior toolpusher, and whom Ezell testified as being a highly qualified expert at containing the kind of ‘kick’ which eventually resulted in the series of explosions and subsequent conflagration that destroyed the Deepwater Horizon. A ‘kick’ is a pocket of gas that may be released by the drilling operation, the primary danger of which is the rapid expansion it undergoes as it rises towards the lower-pressure surface, quickly becoming a gigantic cloud of explosive gas as it approaches the surface. Jason Anderson was the toolpusher on duty at the time of the explosion, and his team was in the process of displacing the heavy mud and drilling material with much lighter seawater in preparation for beginning to extract oil from the well.\textsuperscript{32} A highly detailed account of the events leading up to the explosion is contained in Abraham Lustgarten’s \textit{Run to Failure: BP and the Making of the Deepwater}...

\textsuperscript{31} Equipment manufacturer and provider of the “blowout preventer” which failed on the well which the Deepwater Horizon was working on.

\textsuperscript{32} Lustgarten in \textit{Run to Failure} points out that this operation itself was somewhat unusual, and likely undertaken in order to sidestep regulatory requirements regarding the proper disposal of drilling mud: a technicality allowed for a certain usage of the material to become exempt from regulations about its proper disposal. As with just about every facet of the Deepwater Horizon disaster, it is entirely debatable whether this was a contributing or causal factor in the explosion.
Horizon Disaster, which I will return to periodically and much of the details of my understanding is informed by Lustgarten’s work.

It is important to note, however, what kind of a book Lustgarten’s is, with much of the volume devoted to the history of BP and lengthy discussions of the corporate culture of the company going back many years prior to the notorious spill. In fact its relation of the ‘facts’ of the events leading up to the Deepwater Horizon is fairly minimal, with the whole event being covered in the space of a few pages. Run to Failure is then far less a factual dissection of the Deepwater Horizon drilling operating and explosion than it is a journalistic account about the corporate object that is BP. It features whole chapters on prominent figures and events prior to the Deepwater Horizon, which provide illustrative context and framing for the events of 2010. On one hand, the benefit of this is plain – it points to deeper or larger forces responsible for the catastrophe than just the events on the day of the explosion. But on the other hand, this particular focus means that it never names any one, or even any ‘thing’ besides BP (and perhaps something equally slippery – BP’s “corporate culture”) as being responsible. It is possible that the main reason Lustgarten avoided the more typically expected ‘naming of names,’ as it were, perhaps because of ongoing legal action that was still pending at the time of writing. Yet there appears no mention or acknowledgement of this in the text. Instead, Lustgarten locates responsibility solely in the aforementioned corporate culture:

Because the series of missteps goes back so far, and was so well known by so many people – officials and company executives alike – the events that unfolded on the Deepwater Horizon in April 2010 were also predictable. [Retired EPA attorney Jeanne] Pascal, the Department of Justice, former employees at BP, all knew something like this might one day happen. Perhaps even the chief executives that led BP through its defining years – Sir John Browne and Tony Hayward – also knew that the strains they put on their company might one day lead to disaster. All of them had failed to prevent it. 

34 Ibid., p.xvi.
And yet it remains problematic for exactly this reason – no matter the intricacy or detailed cultural-historical analysis, no matter how persuasive an account Lustgarten can assemble, there are no laws or serious moral injunctions against something as intangible as ‘bad corporate culture,’ and certainly no individuals who can be pointed to decisively and held responsible. In short, there is no responsible object. As important as a narrative accounting of the cultural conditions that led up to the explosion are, a ‘corporate culture’ is too ambiguous a thing to point to any one individual member, human or non-human, as responsible. So what is to be done? This chapter will not be able to satisfactorily answer that question, but by the conclusion I will have described the problem in a productive manner, and later chapters will add to this understanding, reframing and clarifying the question of the responsible object further still.

**Miles Ezell’s testimony**

On the day Ezell delivered his testimony, the USCG/MMS joint inquiry was primarily run by two officials who were pursuing their individual lines of inquiry, and as we shall see, with varying degrees of success. Each of their individual aims are by no means entirely transparent, and watching the questioning it is difficult to know why precisely they ask the questions that they do - are they acting primarily to exonerate the actions of their department, or themselves, or are they just trying to honestly get to the bottom of the disaster, motivated only by duty, or the job, or by a sense of responsibility to due diligence regarding the outrageous spill that was then still ongoing in the gulf? What other suspicions, experiences, and imperatives are guiding them?

The MMS itself, it was later brought to light, contained a certain important conflict of interest, being tasked with both promoting and regulating the oil industry. There is simply no way to know why the members of the board were asking their questions in the general case, but often they are strikingly revealing in their specificity: they often seem to lead to certain kinds of conclusions, and this was the source of at least one

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objection on this particular day of the inquiry. Additionally, it behoves this analysis to be generous and assume good faith from all parties, even from BP, no matter how much we might be tempted to assign nefarious motives. The reasoning behind this decision is that I believe it is actually unnecessary to posit nefarious motives - the positing of such motives itself represents a kind of paranoia. At least since Hannah Arendt’s *Eichmann in Jerusalem* we have been aware of the sheer banality of much of the evil that is done, and likewise I shall argue that such is often the case with nonhuman corporations. Instead of positing a malevolent impulse within BP's directors and members, the tension between humans and nonhumans, as well as the flexibility of composition that BP is afforded as a nonhuman is sufficient explanation. For instance, when BP agreed in 2012 to a massive settlement payment to the US Government in return for escaping further criminal prosecution, at the cost of two former BP managers who are no longer considered a part of BP, they are human liabilities who, like the settlement monies, are collateral for the sake of the company.

Specifically, regarding the flexibility of composition of the BP object at the hearings, it’s worth noting the fact that while representatives or delegates of companies such as BP were present, *the companies themselves* were not – and how could they be? The pipes that carry BP's oil for miles through the Alaskan tundra could no more attend the inquiry than the souls of those who died on the Deepwater Horizon – and both might have something to say to or about the accident. They each might have some or other piece of evidence or perspective on events that deserves to be taken into account by the inquiry (and here is where Lustgarten’s narrative account of the events leading up to the Deepwater Horizon is usefully inclusive of such things). But here, in the room the inquiry is being conducted, is the first sign of asymmetry in relations, and the differing degrees of agency and latitude afforded to humans and nonhumans: BP can (in fact must, in many instances) ‘delegate’ its corporate presence to another, often to a human. This delegation, which I will later refer to as ‘outsourcing’, is taken up in the following chapter as it concerns the question of how to deal with the problem of shifting, or circulating responsibility, largely from an activist perspective.
‘Full visibility’ and a ‘reasonable’ defence

Heading up proceedings on the particular day of the testimony was Captain Hung Nguyen of the Coast Guard, and from the Minerals Management Service Jason Matthews. There is a point immediately after Ezell finishes giving his account of the events of the day (which I discuss later in this chapter) where Captain Nguyen begins to attempt to get to the bottom of an issue he termed a question of who had or should have had “visibility” on the Deepwater horizon, and which might be understood as an issue of oversight. He begins by prefacing his question for Ezell as being about finding out a bit more about the employees ‘working relationship [sic] out there.’36 Nguyen outlined his understanding of the tripartite nature of oversight of the Deepwater Horizon rig; ‘operation decisions involve the OIM… the company man… and the toolpusher… is that correct?’37 To which Ezell replied that, ‘Yes sir… with drilling you’re right.’38 Nguyen then proceeded to re-establish that Ezell was the toolpusher, which Ezell confirmed. He then asked a fairly reasonable question:

From your testimony it appears to me, and you can correct me if I’m wrong, but you didn’t have full visibility of what’s going on during that afternoon, did you?39

Ezell agreed that he did not, as he had quite clearly and uncontroversially stated as much in the earlier portion of his testimony, when explaining the series of events as he recalled them. Nguyen then paused, before continuing, suggesting that, ‘part of it is that you relied on Jason Anderson, because he’s a toolpusher, who you have personal relationship [sic], confidence in his ability.’40 At this point, Ezell interjects, asking ‘Could I explain why?’ Nguyen assents and Ezell elaborates on his knowledge of Jason Anderson’s experience and the kind of working relationship that the two shared:

37 Ibid.
38 Miles Ezell, in Ibid. approx time: 1:17:40.
39 Nguyen, in Ibid. approx. time: 1:18:00.
40 Ibid. approx. time: 1:19:00.
Well Jason… he probably had more experience as far as shutting in for kicks than any individual on the Horizon. He also was offered a position with Transocean well control department, he was gonna be the instructor of the well control department. He had just been recently promoted to senior tool pusher. He did carry an OIMs\(^\text{41}\) license, as I did… Jason was very acute on what he did… and then that made me feel comfortable when he said ‘If I have any problem I’ll call you.’ Because I knew him that well… that’s why I was able to kind of rest at ease because I knew they were going to do a negative test and if they had any kind of result that wasn’t what was expected, that he would call me.\(^\text{42}\)

What Ezell was arguing for, in essence, was the \textit{appropriateness} of his judgement and confidence in Jason Anderson’s experience, ability and judgement. Captain Nguyen understood this, but that wasn’t quite the purpose of his questioning:

Yes, sir, I understand that… and that’s my understanding, however you are the senior tool pusher, you are at that layer in the safety net in terms of decision making, and because of your confidence in Mr Anderson you did not have full visibility of what’s going on, you rely on him to make the proper judgement, is that correct?\(^\text{43}\)

Put this way, and his reasoning for his trust firmly on the record, Ezell assented to Nguyen’s assessment, adding that it was ‘correct.’\(^\text{44}\) Nguyen was satisfied for the moment, and chose to move on and return to this line of questioning at the end of the period of questioning of his testimony. A significant event happens between the end of this question which we shall return to in a moment, but skipping ahead to the end of the questioning, after all other parties have been given an opportunity to ask

\(^{41}\) OIM is an abbreviation of Offshore Installation Manager.


\(^{43}\) Nguyen, in Ibid. approx. time: 1:19:00.

\(^{44}\) Ezell, in Ibid. approx time: 1:19:00.
questions, Captain Nguyen returns to the line of questioning about “full visibility” once more, putting together the statements Ezell had made about his own visibility over the drilling operation with the statements of one of the other witnesses from the day prior:

Nguyen: Mr Ezell, just one more question, you admitted a while ago that you did not have full visibility of what’s going on in the drilling operation, [Ezell: yessir] now Mr Harold yesterday, the OIM, from his testimony… my understanding that he wasn’t aware of certain activities going on also. Do you believe he had full visibility of what’s going on during the drilling operation?
Ezell: Do I believe Jimmy did? No sir, I don’t think he had full visibility either.
Nguyen: So here we have a three legged stool. You don’t have full visibility, Mr Harold doesn’t have full visibility, and so then… the third guy is the company man. So if he doesn’t have full visibility also of what’s going on… we havin a problem, you think?

What is going on here may not be completely obvious – as we tend to view this kind of testimony through a court-room drama lens, as a struggle of wills and the search for truth or facts. But what I want to suggest is that it is more usefully viewed as a problem of the composition of an object. Here it’s an object responsible for the oversight or having “full visibility” over the Deepwater Horizon’s drilling operations. Viewed from this perspective we find a very different kind of struggle unfolding with respect to the usual courtroom drama. Nguyen’s reference to the ‘three legged stool’ is an attempt to organise the three individuals, namely Mr Ezell, Mr Harold, and the ‘company man’ from BP, as a single responsible object. The way that Nguyen is trying to construct the responsible object here is primarily discursively, hence his inordinate labouring of the point, asking the same questions again and again, and the use of the metaphor of a ‘three legged stool.’

But objecting to this construction, even dismantling it with his own remarkably reasonable counter-formulation, is the Transocean attorney, Mr Edward Kohnke, who

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45 Ibid.
interjects at this point: ‘the question reaches a conclusion and I didn’t hear the conclusion.’ Captain Nguyen is visibly uncomfortable with prosecuting such a challenging line of questioning with clear implications for both Mr Ezell personally and the powerful corporate interests represented at the inquiry, but Nguyen presses on and restates the conclusion to his question, tripping over some of his words:

The conclusion is there are three senior people that are... in the decision making, uh, here. Mr Ezell doesn’t have full visibility, Mr Ezell says that Mr Harold the OIM doesn’t have full visibility, and my thing is if the company man, whoever that is, Kaluza or Vidrine, didn’t have full visibility of what’s going on... my conclusion... or based on that, is that nobody has full visibility of what’s going on, in a senior position.

This is the problem that the Deepwater Horizon presents: there were three people who jointly were ‘responsible’ for oversight of the drilling operations - both morally, and also causally for their failure to act otherwise to prevent the disaster. All three claim not to have been responsible (or had ‘full visibility’) in the sense that they could not have done any differently, they didn’t know what precisely was going on two miles under the ocean’s surface and several miles into the earth’s crust, and as such did not have the “full visibility” that would allow Nguyen to pin moral responsibility upon them – because moral responsibility assigned in hindsight is an assessment of a failure to do otherwise (and an attendant necessary assumption of the ability to do otherwise). But there’s an escape hatch for these three people – specifically because they are also people and as such a standard of reasonability applies to them, as the Transocean attorney next makes clear in his objection to Nguyen’s line of questioning:

Let me note my objection, [To Ezell:] I want you to answer, but I want to note my objection. [To the inquiry:] A captain... a captain of a ship sleeps sometimes. I’m sure he showers sometimes. And he doesn’t have full visibility sometimes. But there’s a handoff to an appropriate person, and I believe this witness has described how appropriate that person was. Secondly, there was

46 Edward Kohnke, in Ibid. approx. time: 1:30:10.
47 Nguyen, in Ibid.
an operation, you’re saying a drilling operation, there was no drilling going on. This was a static well [pokes table for emphasis]. It had been tested. So when you say there’s full visibility, or there’s a lack of full visibility there are a lot of pertinent facts that aren’t built into your question and therefore I object. But with that objection, I want the witness to answer.48

It’s a very clever argument, and powerfully persuasive especially for its appeal to Nguyen’s own experience as a captain in the Coast Guard. Kohnke’s explanation must have left Captain Nguyen scratching his head in confusion and frustration – how could anyone possibly deny such a reasonable explanation? With a stroke, the attorney seems to have neutralised all of Nguyen’s hard work authorising a certain story, a certain causality, that would allow for some kind of blame or responsibility. Of course these three individuals, even ones in such important positions of oversight have to sleep, they are only human – all too human. To deny this would be ridiculous, but being able to explain the problem doesn’t lessen it one iota. In fact it could be argued that it actually makes things worse, as we are now left with the added confusion of having no one to blame and nowhere to turn.

But why does this argument about reasonability work – or perhaps more pertinently: who does it work on? Presumably, as Graeber described in the discussion that introduced this chapter, we recognise that it constitutes a suitably higher standard of argumentation than simply asserting the ‘rationality’ of something like ‘full visibility’ – explaining the attorney’s assertion of ‘a lot of pertinent facts’ that the line of questioning does not account for. But crucially, reasonability only works on or applies to humans – as a corporation, a bank, or a government will be entirely deaf to our appeals, which is the very basis behind the Kafkaesque nature of bureaucracy. In any reasonable situation, the kind of bureaucratic nightmare Kafka describes, and which Mark Fisher ascribes to the modern, automated call centre,49 would never occur – a reasonable human being ought recognise the farcical nature of labyrinthine bureaucratic structures. The human delegates of nonhumans may or may not recognise reasonability, to the degree to which they are free from being subsumed

48 Kohnke, in Ibid. approx time: 1:31:00 (my emphasis).
within the whole nonhuman entity, and to the extent that they have any power to do anything about un-reasonability (such as being stuck in an endless, bureaucratic nightmare or on the Deepwater Horizon that fateful day).

This leads to the obvious conclusion that there are also conditions, in which reasonability in humans breaks down. Most notably, we often call these conspiracy theories, which Jack Z. Bratich describes in *Conspiracy Panics: Political Rationality and Popular Culture*. According to Bratich, ‘conspiracy theories are simultaneously a type of narrative and a sign of narrative disqualification’. They aren’t so much as *wrong*, as they do not reach the threshold of acceptability to even be tested, to be falsifiable. If the mind is that sphere that can distinguish between truth and falsity, then conspiracy theories are beyond that sphere. They are *para* (beyond or beside) the *nous* (mind). They are *paranoid*.

This does not invalidate the argument for reasonability however, so much as it affirms its status as normative. It is important to remember that the paranoid, then, also deserve to be treated humanely (as humans) and *reasonably* even while their narratives lie outside the realms of what others would call reasonable. Again, reasonability is not, the solution to the problem of competing causalities, or aesthetic causalities (which I mentioned in the introduction as a useful counter to the machismo of anti-Berkelean realist impulses), so much as it may be a partial requirement for a solution. In fact as we shall see towards the end of this chapter, a certain form of resistance to being reasonable may be both appropriate and necessary.

But where does this leave us and our commitment to being reasonable in determining and authorising causality? We might say that we have found a limitation of the extent to which we need to be ‘reasonable’ – and that we only need to be reasonable *to humans*. But this doesn’t solve the problem of Kohnke. While nonhumans, clearly,

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51 Ibid., p.4.
52 Ibid., p.3.
have no such compulsion about reasonability, what I would suggest is useful to do is to view the eminently reasonable argument presented by Kohnke not as one just being presented by a human, but by a human on behalf of Transocean (his employer) as Kohnke makes up part of the Transocean network object. This is a problem that I call the nonhuman with a human face, and a discussion of it makes up the final section of this chapter, and further exploration of it strategies to deal with it are the focus of chapter 4.

Returning to the testimony where we last left it with the Transocean attorney arguing for the reasonability of sleep, once Kohnke had finished his detailed argument Mr Ezell added, to an eruption of laughter in the room, ‘That’s exactly what I was going to say.’ At this point Mr Kohnke, in one of the stranger moments of the testimony, clearly fairly pleased with the way the questioning is unfolding, breaks his composure and goes in for a high-five with Mr Ezell, who is distracted, realizing it is happening too late and misses. Kohnke finishes his high-five by himself. Ezell goes on to elaborate on this shared responsibility between the three individuals in terms of “full visibility:”

> We’ve got two tool pushers that provide 100% coverage as far as supervision. And both of them are highly capable, or were, highly capable of taking charge of something of that nature. And they’re also to the point [where] if they had any kind of problem they will call. And they will move to the next level, if I have a problem, I’ll tell Jimmy. Everybody will be in the loop.

Ezell’s pointed change of tense from ‘are capable’ to ‘were capable’ invokes the spectre of the deceased Jason Alexander and the other ten men, invoking certain standards of reasonability regarding the way we speak about the dead. Mr Kohnke’s and Mr Ezell’s joint explanation ended Captain Nguyen’s line of questioning: ‘I understand sir. Well thank you for your testimony.’

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54 Ibid.
55 Nguyen, in Ibid. approx. time: 1:33:00.
So what can we say about Nguyen’s search for the ‘three legged stool,’ and what does it add to our understanding of how nonhumans are, or can be, involved with assessments of responsibility? It’s worth adding one more piece to the picture, involving three former BP employees. The first two, involve the third person in ‘the three-legged stool’ – the ‘company man’ that Nguyen referred to. On the Deepwater Horizon, this position was filled by two individuals, Robert Kaluza and Donald Vidrine, both BP well site leaders. The other individual is David Rainey, who was charged with allegedly lying to Congress over the amount of oil that was issuing from the uncapped wellhead after the Deepwater Horizon sunk.

On the 15th of November 2012, BP put out a press release detailing its resolution with the US Government of all criminal charges stemming from the explosion on the Deepwater Horizon in 2010. To resolve the charges, and rather than going through the lengthy court process, BP agreed to pay out roughly $4.5bn over five years:

BP has agreed to plead guilty to 11 felony counts of Misconduct or Neglect of Ships Officers relating to the loss of 11 lives; one misdemeanor count under the Clean Water Act; one misdemeanor count under the Migratory Bird Treaty Act; and one felony count of obstruction of Congress. This resolution is subject to U.S. federal court approval.

As part of that settlement, however, the three individuals – Kaluza, Vidrine and Rainey – are left to fight their respective felony charges on their own, and face possible jail time if they are convicted. The significance of this is that it represents a jettisoning of a liability, a recompositioning of the BP object to exclude these legal and financial liabilities. To an extent this is to be expected, but it goes to underscore the wide gulf that exists between humans and nonhumans which are, in many cases (though not all) afforded much more latitude both in their recompositioning which is ‘to be expected’; liabilities must be ‘limited’, after all. Meanwhile, when humans minimise liabilities, when buck-passing occurs or when loopholes are exploited, moral

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opprobrium is often attracted, the individuals are shamed or excluded from public, moral sociality. Contra the compositional latitude offered to (and expected of) the BP corporate entity, none of the three men charged, Vidrine, Kaluza or Rainey, are able to cut off the offending portions of themselves that committed the crimes they are accused of – in certain fundamental ways, the responsibility is borne by the whole of them.

By this same method of recomposition, CEO’s and prominent figures frequently escape responsibility, insulating themselves from direct responsibility or culpability. The fact that the CEO’s position is so visibly recognizable and distinct from, say, the multitudes of mid-level managers like Vidrine, Kaluza and Rainey, is an important one, highlighting the CEOs mobility from corporation to corporation. Boards of directors pay huge sums of money to stop the flight of CEOs for this reason. In a number of high profile cases we have seen the mobility of employees, in other words the composition of the corporate object, resulting in seemingly perverse results. The September 2008 collapse of the Bear-Stearns and Lehman Brothers banks saw supposedly crucial employees paid huge bonuses under the auspices of retaining their important knowledge, even though these were the very same employees whose incompetence and risky bets led to the huge losses that triggered these companies’ collapse!

It is arguable that responsibility does occasionally travel ‘up the chain’, so to speak – as in cases when individuals in some position of oversight and leadership fail catastrophically, from government ministers to CEOs, but in the case of the latter these are becoming increasingly rare (and not for reasons of better performance). In the case of BP’s CEO Tony Hayward, who was made to step down during the spill, it’s entirely evident that rather than the spill itself being the reason for his forced resignation, it was at least one of his responses to it and certain of his comments pertaining to wanting ‘his life back’ that were said to the press, in particular.57 This rather perverse state of affairs – Hayward ousted not for presiding over the largest oil

spill in US history, but for *failing to manage press relations* – shows the shocking disconnect between causes and effects.

In the same vein, why wasn’t Lastgarten’s book – which pinpoints the managerial decisions by former BP CEO John Browne – able to perform the same kind of ousting that, for instance, Hayward received? This question will be partially answered at the conclusion of the following section, where we return to Ezell’s testimony and another much more successful line of questioning that attempts to attach blame to the nonhuman objects involved in the spill.

**Ezell’s testimony: the lifting operation and the ‘lost time’ accident**

The second incident that illuminates something about the difficulty in pinning responsibility down when it is a corporation or other nonhuman involves something of a diversion during the middle of the longer ‘full visibility’ questioning. After Nguyen finishes questioning Ezell for the first time about the oversight responsibility issue, he continues the roll call of other parties who may have questions for Mr Ezell. When he gets to Transocean (owner and operator of the Deepwater Horizon itself and the employer of Mr Ezell), an interesting exchange begins, as the attorney Mr Kohnke has a question. Kohnke, in short, is seeking to use the opportunity to question Mr Ezell in order to clarify and have on the record further elaborating details surrounding the circumstances of a ‘lost time accident’ report that had been uncovered during questioning on one of the days prior. Kohnke begins by asking Mr Ezell to look at the MMS’ record associated with that incident, and whether he had any personal knowledge about that accident:

Ezell (hereafter E): Yes sir matter of fact I was on the rig when that happened, that was a third party… hand on the boat.

Kohnke (hereafter K): Was that an employee of Transocean?

E: No sir it wasn’t it was a boathand.

K: And so the accident happened, where did it happen, on the boat or on the rig?
E: It happened on the vessel… he removed a chock and a tool rolled on his foot I think.
K: This would have been a member of the crew of a vessel, a supply boat?
E: Yes sir this was exactly what it was.
K: And the accident would have happened on the supply boat?
E: Correct.
K: But because it was on the BP lease and BP reports all accidents to the MMS then this report would have emanated from that lease.
E: You're exactly right.
K: In fact it shows the reporting person as BP.
E: Yes.\(^\text{38}\)

What the Transocean attorney Mr Kohnke is attempting to do is construct a plausible (or reasonable) explanation for the incident’s irrelevance as a ‘lost time accident’, or to even detach its relevance from the Deepwater Horizon’s own operational safety record. The importance of this might not be immediately apparent, but Jason Matthews of the MMS does not accept the explanation and is quite terse, asking to make a follow-up question: “This was occurring during a lifting operation, correct?” to which Mr Ezell replied,

E: Yeah but I don’t even think the crane had even hooked to anything yet. I think… the boathands were present on the deck before the removal of these tools.
Matthews (hereafter M): Can I read a sentence for you? ‘The crew was unloading the motor vessel \textit{Fast Bullet} with the port crane.’ Who is responsible for the lifting with the port crane?
E: Well of course if it was actually being hoisted with the crane, that would be Transocean.

M: And what is Transocean’s health and policy statement, that says that ‘each employee has the obligation to interrupt an operation to prevent an incident from occurring’?
E: That’s correct.
M: Who is the sole responsibility in the Transocean lift plan, who manages the lift?
E: The sole responsibility?
M: Yes sir. [pause] Is it not the crane operator?
E: It should be the crane operator, but...

At this point, the attorney Mr Kohnke interrupts Mr Ezell:

K: Excuse me Mr Matthews, you’re suggesting that the crane operator caused this and I’m telling you that this witness has personal information that is the removal of a chock causing the load to move.59

The Transocean attorney here explicitly references causality, attempting to establish causal responsibility as the issue in question, however Matthews disagrees and doesn't let him define the issue in that way, replying, 'I'm not arguing with this I'm arguing with what was reported to the MMS.'60

For Matthews the importance of the event is not that a crane caused a tool to roll onto the foot of a boat hand, but that Transocean’s own health and safety policy gives each employee responsibility for preventing accidents like the one that occurred. Further, I would also argue that it is likely Matthews wishes to establish this event as important evidence of a pattern of behaviour involving the covering up of, or at least a carelessness about reporting safety issues. But by nature this is the sort of thing that is almost impossible to ‘prove’ without the sort of smoking gun that would indicate a deliberate policy decision. Proving the existence of a dangerous corporate culture becomes more an exercise of storytelling, or even ethnography, neither of which are easy (or perhaps even possible) to carry out in the sort of high pressure, finicky and argumentative environment of the joint inquiry.

59 Ibid.
60 Ibid.
Matthews is quite likely to be taking a similar approach to Lustgarten’s *Run To Failure*, in that both tell a story about a company’s operating history and certain tendencies regarding safety. In *Run to Failure* it’s BP, but here it’s either/both BP (who acted as though the Deepwater Horizon was never involved in a lost time accident when it ‘technically’ was) or BP’s contractor Transocean who is accused of some kind of irresponsible behaviour.

But again, the issue of composition of the responsible object becomes the contested ground – with Kohnke arguing that Transocean does not display a lax attitude towards safety (at least, not based on this one incident) because it was actually something outside the Transocean object – the action of a boathand which was responsible. To that assertion, Jason Matthews of the MMS pointed out that Transocean’s own safety policy implied the company had a responsibility to extend its purview and care beyond itself – to interrupt a dangerous operation.

But we have to ask ourselves – why does Matthews’ accusation of irresponsibility work when, in comparison, Abraham Lustgarten’s narrative of causality as expressed in *Run To Failure* does not? The reason is actually fairly simple, and stems from the fact that Matthews’ attitude or orientation is different to Lustgarten’s. Matthews is visibly angry throughout this portion of the proceedings, he is exercising the authority of his office in an almost militant, far more belligerent way than Lustgarten. The former is oriented, purposively and actively, more towards Transocean and BP with a view to exercising his agency and authority than he is towards the hypothetical reader of the latter’s *Run to Failure* who Lustgarten aims, mainly, to inform.

The orientation is the key difference between being accusatory (in Matthews’ case) and becoming a cautionary or classic morality tale, perhaps even an expression of less effective outrage (Lustgarten). Perhaps failures of moral responsibility induce, or need to induce, action beyond ‘just’ words. Lustgarten’s book is knowledge work, it’s typical of investigative journalism and done quite well, but it lacks any of the invective, failing to bridge the gap that Eve Sedgwick describes as the necessary disconnection between knowing and acting. Discussing the numerous conspiracy theories around the
emergence of the AIDS virus in the 80s, Sedgwick in a chapter of *Touching Feeling* asks her friend, prominent AIDS activist Cindy Patton, whether knowing AIDS were deliberately created (a conspiracy theory that placed the US Government behind the epidemic) would that change any of her activities. Somewhat surprisingly, Patton replied that it would actually change nothing about the work that she does. Sedgwick concludes that Patton’s comment,

suggests that for someone to have an unmystified, angry view of large and genuinely systemic oppressions does not intrinsically or necessary enjoin that person to any specific train of epistemological or narrative consequences.

Indeed, it takes a certain something extra – a certain *political orientation* or antagonism to bridge that gap between knowing and doing. This describes precisely the problem with Lustgarten’s approach which falls into the abyssal crevasse of knowing *precisely* how bad BP and its management is, but being unable to mobilise a significant audience or political body to do anything about it. It lacks much of the essential antagonism to Matthews attitude and Matthew *position* with the inquiry, which presumably gives him some power to mobilise political recommendations and perhaps the possibility of a *public* in the form of an audience which is angry and antagonistic towards BP. Further, perhaps some of what Matthews’ anger does is resist the dissipating and networking tendencies of the network-object itself – Transocean almost isn’t able to dissolve and disintegrate into a series of disconnected objects before his rather withering cross-examination. This idea of holding or keeping an object together, or somewhat suppressing its network dynamic becomes the focus of chapter 5. If OOO is an object orientation, then it may prove useful or necessary in future to maintain certain orientations towards particular objects, especially those deleterious objects such as BP and other corporate objects – but others too – perhaps whole industries, such as the fossil fuel industry, or the public relations industry. In this way we begin to overcome the problem that stalled Lustgarten’s account, which by naming no single thing or object, aside from the difficult to implicate ‘corporate

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63 Ibid., p.124.
culture’ of BP, left us with little avenue or plan for action amongst the messy and distributed network of BP and the Deepwater Horizon.

Clearly, Matthews’ anger also stems from a sense of offense, from the sense of some breach of the moral order, and which animates him with a desire to respond in a way that sees that order restored. Oil drilling companies simply should not cause oil spills – on many levels we simply understand this is not acceptable. In the next chapter I will discuss a form of shaming as a method of upholding or restoring a moral order and reintegrating transgressing individuals. But this tactic only works on humans – a corporation cannot feel shame in any meaningful sense, hence Matthews frustration and somewhat dogmatic insistence on the letter of the law regarding the reporting of the lost time accident. Not letting the company and its representatives squirm out of responsibility for even a minor breech of regulation seems to be his only recourse.

This chapter has so far shown that seeing with an eye for the human and the nonhuman allows us to perform a new kind of calculus, and one important example is at the interface between individuals and industries. The relationship between the increasingly embattled and time-poor journalist, and their counterparts at public relations firms, who often are far better funded and supported – individuals who are more closely wound into and incorporated into the stronger, well funded PR industry – lends itself to analysis from this new frame. How does a journalist, when faced with the attractive and smiling (as they inevitably are) faces of the PR reps, respond in a way appropriate to the interests of independent, historically ‘objective’ journalism? Or put another way, what limits of acceptability or response does the PR industry, seeming as it does to possess a smiling human face, impose upon the already beleaguered journalist?

Videogame journalism as an industry knows this problem intimately, as it is routinely engulfed by rounds of ‘scandals’ in which journalists are accused of taking one-too-many freebies from the PR companies whose games they are meant to be objectively reviewing or reporting on, and constant accusations of ‘bias’ and corruption on the part of the games journalists and reviewers from their very own audience adds to this awareness. As Rebecca Carlson notes, even in the post-Web 2.0 world with the prevalence of user generated content, including reviews, journalists by and large are
still seen as the negotiators and gatekeepers of videogame commodity value or worth. Anecdotally from my own brief career attending “preview” events, I have experienced the cozy relationship the Australian games journalism industry has with the public relations arm of the companies whose products they are meant to review. Via friendly and accommodating PR representatives, the pervasive sense of being “on the same side” as the journalists is maintained.

How is a journalist meant to resist when the whole institutional force of the PR industry comes in the guise of a human being, with a human face attached? Even if I truly hate the PR industry (or the fossil fuels industry for that matter), when facing the representatives of these groups I am forced to deal with their human delegates, treating them as equal humans. This problem of ‘what to do’ when faced with the human either representing or entangled with an irresponsible or detrimental nonhuman is the question taken up the next chapter, Network Activism, since it is a question that faces activists intimately. But before getting to that chapter I want to define this problem – which I give the name of the nonhuman with a human face – a bit more clearly. The question, and it is a difficult one, becomes in other words: how can one assume an antagonistic relationship with a deleterious nonhuman, while also taking seriously the importance of treating humans as human?

Subjectification and Ezell’s closing remarks – the nonhuman with a human face

Returning now to the joint MMS/USCG inquiry, and the final section of Miles Ezell’s testimony, an important perspective is revealed when we ask who, and what, was actually in that room? Like the ontography of objects brought together by BP’s PR video earlier, we can look and see what has been brought together here in the inquiry room. We could take an inventory of all the people in attendance: Jason Matthews of the MMS, Captain Hung Nguyen of the US Coast Guard, Miles Ezell, and Mr Kohnke the attorney for Transocean, plus several others I haven’t mentioned all appear in the C-SPAN video of the inquiry. We can also note the nonhumans

present: tables, chairs, whiteboards and markers, television cameras, microphones, podiums, notes, paper, pens, the clothes people are wearing, the carpet of the room, the room itself... and also somehow, or so we are told, a number of multinational corporations: BP, Transocean, Cameron, and so on. Unlike the tables and chairs that represent themselves when we look around the room, the corporations are represented by people – real human delegates, with human faces able to speak for and be spoken to, to look and to be looked upon on behalf of themselves and the network objects they represent. The final task of this chapter is to explain what it means for a network object to be represented by a human, and to elaborate why it is a problem – a problem that the subsequent chapter will address in greater detail.

There are two ways of looking at this issue, which I am describing as a nonhuman with a human face, the first is a problem of subjectification, the second is the troubling of the useful concept Nicholas Mirzoeff calls ‘the right to look’.65 As a human, these delegates are the recipient of the process of subjectification as it is problematized by Slavoj Žižek. It is important to note that we can agree with Žižek’s assessment of the problem of subjectification without necessarily endorsing his answer or political program. Describing the effect of Jonathan Littell’s novel Les Bienveillants (The Kindly Ones), which presents the internal subjective narrative of a fictional Nazi guard at a concentration camp during the holocaust, Žižek argues that the book challenges the humanist assumption that we ought to subjectivise all others when assessing their moral situation. Littell’s story, according to Žižek,

has a key Freudian lesson to teach us: one should reject the idea that the proper way to fight the demonization of the Other is to subjectivise him, to listen to his story, to understand how he perceives the situation (or, as a partisan of Middle East dialogue puts it: “An enemy is someone whose story you have not yet heard”).66

Of such operations we have to ask whether there is some sort of limit on this imperative. As Žižek asks rhetorically, ‘is one then ready to affirm that Hitler was an

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enemy only because his story had not been heard? Do the details of his personal life “redeem” the horrors that resulted from his reign, do they make him “more human”? In other words, are there any possible exculpatory circumstances or personal details which excuse, or even merely mitigate, the morally horrendous extermination of millions of Jews, Roma, the disabled, as well as communists and other political dissidents under Hitler’s regime? Obviously the answer must be in the negative, and we could conversely ask, does the capacity of the human for inhumanity mean that one can give up one’s “humanity”? Human rights, for all their creation in response to the horrors of the twentieth century, are treated by most advocates as absolutes: universal and unassailable. Indeed we can see something in the nature of human rights type discourses in what Angela Mitropolous has described as ‘neocontractualism’:

neocontractualism is not only a signal of the much-touted rise of neoliberalism or the shift to post-Fordism, but also of the prevailing recourse in oppositional social movements in the same period to a politics of rights and recognition (that has amounted, overtly or not, to the expansion of contractualism in its most uncertain of instances)… whatever else they accomplish, contracts are preoccupied with the transformation of contingency into necessity as a specifically capitalist problem.68

Mitropoulos’ broader argument against contractualism is a complex and nuanced one, beyond the scope of the current discussion, but hinges upon an understanding of contract as a reallocation or revalorisation of risk – borne out, most frequently, by people instead of corporate entities or the state. However her point remains that the absolutes of human rights do not escape a discourse that reinforce this contractualism, even as human rights remain an area beyond the realm of contract, as in the inability to give away ones human rights, for instance by selling oneself into slavery.69

67 Ibid.
69 For more on contractualism see: Ibid., especially pp.22-3 on slavery and contract.
The problem of subjectification is a significant one from our networked object perspective, since BP in its distributed fullness can never be encountered in sum total—and instead lurks behind the human which is the only significant element of it we encounter in the room. BP has a leg-up in this space, and in other similar ones, in that it is able to present an amicable, competent, perhaps even attractive human face, rather than its various other faces; BP as oil-slicked and poisoned gulf waters; BP as seabird sickening and toxic dispersant spraying; BP as negligent and worker killing; all these ‘faces’ are hidden away through time and space.

It is an issue of composition at relative scales - Timothy Morton has coined the term ‘hyperobject’ to describe objects that are (relative to humans) massively distributed in space and time, arguing they present unique philosophical and practical problems.\(^{70}\) BP and other multinationals are hyperobjects according to Morton’s definition (though the examples he gives are even more extensively distributed, as in radioactive isotopes with half-lives of thousands of years) and he mentions the Deepwater Horizon spill specifically as hyperobject.\(^{71}\) What is the effect of our only encounter with the hyperobject BP mediated through another human? The nonhuman scale of BP the proprietary limited company manifests as comprehensibly human-sized by delegating its presence to humans who stand in the same space as us. And because we are compelled to subjectivize these humans, prohibited from simply treating them as synecdoche for the worst oil-slicked surfaces of BP, we end up with something of a problem. If Žižek’s conclusion to his discussion of 20\(^{th}\)-century ethics is that it is necessary to resist the subjectification of some humans, I disagree, finding alternative answers elsewhere.

The conclusion of Ezell’s testimony gives a graphic illustration of this problem of subjectification, as the final remarks that he chose to share with the inquiry after the official line of questioning was completed described the very real pain of having to watch the Deepwater Horizon burn from the safety of the supply ship Bankston which remained on station to conduct search and rescue:

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\(^{71}\) Morton, *Hyperobjects*, p.33.
Lord I don’t know how to tell you guys this, but that was one of the most painful things we could have ever done… is stay on location, and watch the rig burn. Those guys that… [pained sigh] were on there… were our family. It would be like seeing your children or your brothers or sisters perish in that manner. And that put some mental scarring in a lot of people’s heads that will never go away. I wish that we could’ve, at barest minimum, moved away from the location or something… so we didn’t just have to sit there and review for that many hours, that was extremely painful.\textsuperscript{72}

Ezell is referring here to the orders given to the captain of the Bankston to stay on station to conduct search and rescue operations, until the Coast Guard or other vessels could arrive to relieve them and search for the 11 missing men. At that point it was still unknown how many people had perished in the explosion on the Deepwater Horizon, and the Coast Guard was unwilling to let the Bankston leave while others could still be in the water awaiting rescue. Ezell continued, adding the following comments:

I guess the only other thing is… you’ve gotta keep in mind, the Horizon, I don’t care what anybody said, the Horizon was an exemplary rig with excellent personnel. It won all kinds of records, from MMS awards, to our own company excellence award. Those peoples were not… they were not losers, by any means. They paid the ultimate price – they gave their lives – to try to minimise the damage that was done to people, property, environment. And I hope at least that message is clear, that they paid the ultimate price.\textsuperscript{73}

There is a lot to unpack in this statement, but primarily we find the USCG/MMS board now placed in a tricky situation. Unless they want to minimise or trivialise the subjective experience of Ezell and other survivors, they are left with little choice but to acknowledge the real pain and anguish of the situation. It would indeed be cruel and

\textsuperscript{72} Miles Ezell, in \textit{C-SPAN}, “Investigation of Deepwater Horizon Explosion, Haire and Ezell Testimony,” http://www.c-spanvideo.org/program/293776-4, time approx. 1:34:00.

\textsuperscript{73} Ibid.
unfair at this point to blame individuals for the explosion, or use whatever their eventual culpability might be later determined to be as justification for the mental anguish brought about by having to watch the Deepwater Horizon and their 11 missing crewmembers go up in flames. But equally, the board cannot let that impede their ability to assess responsibility, or let it distract them from their purpose of getting to the bottom of the causes of the accident, whether errors of judgement, process, or management of the operation. They must somehow be respectful of the humanity of Ezell and other Deepwater Horizon survivors, affording them the fullness of their subjective experience, while also being fairly clinical and detached in their assessment of causes and responsibilities.

Nguyen’s reply and justification for why the Coast Guard ordered the Bankston to stay on station is extremely awkward, full of hesitancy and discomfort at being in such a difficult situation, as partially evidenced by the repeated trouble he appears to have communicating his meaning, which the following transcript does not quite fully capture but which is obvious in the video recording of the event. Speaking both for the board and himself, the best Nguyen can manage is to say:

Yes sir, we… acknowledge that… we believe that the heroic actions contributed to the saving of the 115 survivors of the Horizon… at the same time, we didn’t know what the fate of the missing 11 members was and the Bankston was the only one on scene that have [sic] the capability to conduct the search and rescue at that time… until appropriate resources from Coastguard [sic] and other entities were on scene was when the Bankston was relieved.74 [sic]

What this transcript does retain, however, is his use of managerial speak – the use of “resources” to refer to boats and other watercraft serves to distance Nguyen personally from the subjectively callous results of Coast Guard protocols. Likewise, speaking as a ‘we’, on behalf of the Coast Guard rather than merely on behalf of himself helps to spread around and distribute the responsibility for the protocol which caused such distress, around and away from Nguyen, towards what might be considered the ‘Coast

74 Nguyen, in Ibid., time approx. 1:35:00.
Guard’ object. Here Nguyen benefits to some extent by being attached to a network object of his own, with the Coast Guard object and its protocols able to absorb and distribute some of the responsibility for policies causing anguish. In a sense, it’s the same process at work: it’s not me, it’s the coast guard and policy and rules and regulation and… Ezell, we can speculate, probably would have wanted to express more anger at the coast guard for the anguish this policy caused, but in an unexpected reversal, he is subject to the same problem – he cannot face the Coast Guard object, just the Captain himself, unsure how (or if he is able) to make him personally responsible.

Another remarkable feature of Ezell’s testimony is the description of the victims as having paid “the ultimate price” – a curious popular aphorism, perhaps, but one worth exploring. Nguyen does not (perhaps wisely) dispute the characterisation of the actions of those who lost their lives as heroic – though there does not appear to be any evidence that they were being particularly heroic. In fact Lustgarten’s narrative of the events suggests they were largely oblivious to the danger they and their fellow crewmembers were in until it was far too late. But again, the use of “heroic” is partly a marker of the process of subjectification – it is natural that Ezell would want to think highly of those he considered family. We don’t want to disagree with people who, in some sense have become victims. Likewise, ascribing heroism or greatness to the departed helps mitigate the meaninglessness of their deaths. This is an understandable psychological reaction.

Yet this is another problematic aspect arising from the (usually laudable, but here problematic) commitment to accept and validate real lived experience, which easily shades into accepting (particularly victim’s) explanations. I want to stick with the rhetoric of “paying the ultimate price” which further illuminates this issue. What was it precisely that the lives of Jason Anderson and the other 10 Deepwater Horizon victims are meant to have ‘bought’? Was it the safety and escape of the other 115 workers, or was the whole situation – the whole Gulf oil spill ‘bought’ with their lives, and by whom (or what) was this transaction undertaken, and on whose behalf? This all depends greatly on how we assess causes and assign causal responsibility, which I have already shown to be a fraught process, riddled with political assumptions and

75 Lustgarten, Run to Failure, see chapter 16.
implications, and perhaps best left open, aesthetic, and in some senses necessarily indeterminate. In his explanation to Ezell for why the Bankston had to stay close to the burning rig, Nguyen ends up endorsing the strangeness of Ezell’s “paid the ultimate price” rhetoric, which, taken to its conclusion is a gross reduction of the situation. It must be possible to interpret it non-literally, but still sympathetically.

Though I began this discussion by looking at the issue through the lens of subjectification as a means of resisting the demonization of humans, there is another way of looking at this problem which I find preferable. This is through the lens of what Nicholas Mirzoeff has called ‘the right to look.’ According to Mirzoeff,

The right to look is not about seeing. It begins at a personal level with the look into someone else’s eyes to express friendship, solidarity or love. That look must be mutual, each person inventing the other, or it fails. As such, it is unrepresentable. The right to look claims autonomy, not individualism or voyeurism, but the claim to a political subjectivity and collectivity.\(^76\)

I find Mirzoeff’s concept a powerful, and important one in the context of human and nonhuman relations. But there is a difficulty associated with wishing to affirm the right to look, a rationale for which I will elaborate in a moment. Mirzoeff draws on Spivak (who is in turn borrowing Derrida’s reference to looking at one another), describing the right to look as

an exchange of looks in which all parties both look and are looked at in the mutual pursuit of an understanding of the other. In Spivak’s terms, “we stand outside, but not as anthropologist; we stand rather as reader with imagination ready for the effort of othering, however imperfectly, as an end in itself.”\(^77\)

How can we exercise the right to look when the other person is at once both human and entangled in a nonhuman, working on its behalf? In one sense, when faced with the human face on a nonhuman – in the inquiry room, at the petrol station, at the

protest rally – we look for the human and both find them and do not find them. The look becomes both mutual (when a human looks back at us) and not-mutual, if or when we find more than just another human. The right to look is profoundly challenged by the entanglement of the human and the nonhuman.

The point or purpose of the right to look, according to Mirzoeff, is the challenge it presents to visuality, ‘an early nineteenth century term for the visualisation of history.’\(^{78}\) It is not a literal depiction of history, Mirzoeff claims, but instead:

> this practice must be imaginary, rather than perceptual, because what is being visualised is too substantial for any one person to see and is created from information, images and ideas. This ability to assemble a visualisation manifests the authority of the visualizer.\(^{79}\)

The right to look challenges status quo visualisations and the authority of dominant constructions of history, broadening our ideas of what is even there to see. In An Introduction to Visual Culture, Mirzoeff describes visuality in terms of Jacques Rancierre’s political project and a commitment to radical forms of democracy. Unlike humans sharing the reciprocal right to look, the police (again, not necessarily literal police so much as authorisers and enforcers of the status quo) ‘understand us – see us – not as individuals but as part of traffic, which must move on.’\(^{80}\) Police (often humans, but just as often not) cannot reciprocate the look, for this reason. The right to look is then a political project that resists (in Rancierre’s terms) accepted distributions of the sensible by looking at that which is not to be seen, becoming a decisive act of political resistance, and an important ethical precept for human-on-human relations in a context of entangled humans and nonhumans.

But as mentioned already, this presents a unique problem. The effect of giving a network object – a nonhuman – a human face in the context of the right to look is then to impose two things: first, a tactically useful confusion (useful for the network object, that is) as to the nature of the human who is both there, not to be seen (instead

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\(^{78}\) Mirzoeff, The Right to Look, p.2.

\(^{79}\) Ibid.

\(^{80}\) Mirzoeff, An Introduction to Visual Culture, p.20
to be regarded like *any other object* in the network) and, as mentioned repeatedly now, to also impose a certain standard of action and behaviour to those of us who exercise the right to look. This latter imposition often effects a constraint on what can reasonably be done to or about a network object without consideration of the human cost associated with such actions. Erving Goffman, in a series of essays on face-to-face encounters and interactions, describes the social expectation placed upon humans when faced with another person. It is worth quoting at length as it captures the sense of the bind that one is in when the activist, the aggrieved, the creditor, or anyone *angry* with the network object BP, is presented with a human face:

> Just as any member of any group is expected to have self-respect, so also he is expected to sustain a standard of considerateness; he is expected to go to certain lengths to save the feelings and the face of other present, and he is expected to do this willingly and spontaneously because of emotional identification with the others and with their feelings. In consequence, he is disinclined to witness the defacement of others.\(^8^1\)

When the activist agitates for some change, the effect of the expectation of considerateness means any *inconsiderate* action taken towards those ends risks delegitimising the moral force behind the action. David Graeber has described, for instance, the way that images of property violence circulated by the mass media have served to legitimise violence against the Occupy Wall Street activists.\(^8^2\)

Ezell’s remarks, and our commitment to be *reasonable* towards him, to read his comments in good faith as earnest expressions of real distress or trauma, makes plain the difficulty that we as activists have when navigating complex issues of responsibility that involve humans and nonhumans: humans who have their own lives, emotions and the fullness of cognitive interiority, and nonhumans who strategically represent themselves with empathetic human faces. This demands then that we treat them with a context of respect and the same careful regard we would offer to *any human*. A human’s association with a disastrous accident with horrific and far-reaching

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consequences, even the worst examples of negligence or wrongdoing, cannot and
should not erase or diminish their ‘humanity.’ This is perhaps one of the most
important and valuable conclusions of twentieth century human rights theory,
whatever other downsides it brings, and the human face presents a unique problem
for feminist activists online as I discuss in chapter 4.

I have focussed heavily on ‘the face’ of the human because it stands out as something
unique – something that resists being made ‘nonhuman’ unlike, for instance, bodies
which are routinely dehumanized. The figure of the face in the context of
subjectification and of the right to look represents something like a minimal-sum
extension of the recognition of another’s humanity. The right to look, in other words,
mutually constructs both humans, through the potential to be recognised as human. It
is not an ontological category, certainly not for object-oriented ontology, but it is
nevertheless an important recognition. Deleuze and Guattari describe the face in A
Thousand Plateaus as the following:

The head is included in the body, but the face is not. The face is a surface:
facial traits, lines, wrinkles; long face, square face, triangular face; the face is a
map, even when it is applied to and wraps a volume, even when it surrounds
and borders cavities that are now no more than holes. The head, even the
human head, is not necessarily a face. The face is produced only when the
head ceases to be a part of the body, when it ceases to be coded by the body,
when it ceases to have a multidimensional, polyvocal corporeal code—when
the body, head included, has been decoded and has to be overcoded by
something we shall call the Face.83

In the inquiry room, the network object BP delegates the responsibility of
representation to a human delegate who is in possession of a face and acts as a
mediator or agent for the company. By contrast, in the space of the inquiry room the
blowout preventer valve that failed will not present itself – though it may be made
to present, being represented in absentia by BP or its manufacturer’s delegates. Speaking
and acting on its behalf could comprise of several people and their faces, as in the case

83 Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia
of a full legal defence team, but it always remains humans. For Deleuze and Guattari, ‘the face is produced in humanity’\textsuperscript{84} even as ‘there is… something absolutely inhuman about the face.’\textsuperscript{85} Their allusion as I understand it here is precisely to the overlapping nature of the human and nonhuman in the face, a feature that OOO captures and expresses so well. This most human of things – the face – is constituted by other things that are nonhumans themselves: the individual cells of the face are not equivalent to ‘the human,’ likewise the eyes including the cornea and the optic nerve, the mouth and the teeth and the tongue, the skin and the warm blood flowing under it, even the entire ecology of the body does not, whether taken individually or together, add up to ‘the human,’ which remains irreducible, indivisible. The face, perhaps the most quintessentially human of all bodily features, is only ever encountered amongst a crowd of nonhumans – from the cells and components that make it up, to the very light that is illuminating it and allowing us to ‘see’ it. And yet still we are somehow able to peer into this crowd of objects and discern some irreducible, indivisible humanity in the face: we are able to look and be looked upon, making one another in mutual recognition of our humanity.

Conclusion

This chapter opened with an ontography of BP, listing the network-object constituents that are assembled by one BP promotional video, and concluding with a discussion of the problems presented by the entanglement of human beings in nonhuman network objects. Along the way I discussed two competing attempts at apportioning responsibility, through the lens of attempts at constructing responsible objects – the first Captain Nguyen’s failed rhetorical object that was responsible for having ‘full visibility’ for the drilling operation, and the second Matthews’ antagonistic orientation towards Transocean for their questionable reporting of a lost time incident. These two discussions of the composition of responsible objects, along with the problem presented by the nonhuman with a human face, determine the constraints for the problem of activism in a world of both humans and nonhumans. The chapter that follows takes up the issue by uncovering how internet activists online engage with the

\textsuperscript{84} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{85} Ibid.
problem of the nonhuman with a human face, and of recomposing responsible objects that are entangled with human beings.
Chapter 4 – Network Activism; The Nonhuman With a Human Face

Huge efforts are expended in personalising and branding corporate objects like BP, as we saw in the ontography that opened the previous chapter. A corporate identity offers a face to the outside world – an image of how the corporation would like itself to be seen, often employing literal faces of human employees to represent them in, and to, the world. In the promotional video, Safety Officer Jon Parker took on this role, acting in a manner that BP found useful, embodying a sense of safety and responsibility which to some degree is then incorporated into the networked object that is BP. In the inquiry room, however, lawyers and officials for BP present a different image of the corporation, a different human face of the corporate object, and for a time act in a way that embodies the sense of the seriousness (or the presentation of seriousness) with which BP wishes to treat the joint MMS/Coast Guard inquiry.

These humans and their faces are employed by BP, deliberately chosen as its representatives and agents – their use is strategic, on the behalf of the network of interests that partially comprise BP. Smaller objects like desks, chairs, and automobiles are rarely given a human face, but will sometimes receive one for marketing purposes – Brad Pitt as the face of Calvin Klein underwear, for instance. A Google search for “the human face of” reveals a plethora of results, indicating popular familiarity with the concept or image of a ‘human face’ on a wide range of objects. But what of more pernicious network objects, particular ones with a much harder to establish existence, such as ideology, cultural complexes and social structures, along with those subconscious or ungraspable values and systems that configure and confine our very thinking, approach and outlook on the world? This chapter engages with the dynamic of problem and opportunity revealed by instances of the human face of patriarchal sexism and the possibilities for activist response.

The feminist author and cultural critic bell hooks outlines in her powerfully evocative essay ‘Understanding Patriarchy’ a vision of patriarchy as one “political-social system” entangled within another, larger complex she calls ‘imperialist white-supremacist
capitalist patriarchy.”¹ Her definition of patriarchy itself, however, is disarmingly simple:

Patriarchy is a political-social system that insists that males are inherently dominating, superior to everything and everyone deemed weak, especially females, and endowed with the right to dominate and rule over the weak and to maintain that dominance through various forms of psychological terrorism and violence.²

But despite the disarming clarity with which diagnoses its nature and manages to describe the concept, the list of things she explains as contributing to, or going into making up and perpetuating patriarchy leads to a highly networked collection of objects and practices. Patriarchy, she says, is instilled by particular set of patriarchal values from a young age, reinforced by friends, family and institutions;³ it is patriarchal ‘scripts’ and ‘stories’ that promote those patriarchal values;⁴ it is beatings and violence done in the service of reinforcing patriarchy;⁵ it has elements that are both ‘psychological and concrete;’⁶ it is particular patriarchal gender roles, expectations and an entire ‘value system;’⁷ it ‘determined how [bell hooks and her brother] would each be regarded by [their] parents;’⁸ and perhaps most worrying of all, ‘patriarchy promotes insanity.’⁹ And yet, in spite of the manifest evidence of patriarchy as a social-political system, and the incredible damage and harm that it does,

radical feminist critique of patriarchy has practically been silenced in our culture. It has become a subcultural discourse available only to well-educated elites. Even in those circles, using the word “patriarchy” is regarded as passé.

¹ bell hooks, “Understanding Patriarchy” (No Borders, Lousiville’s Radical Lending Library: No Date), available online: imaginenosborders.org/pdf/zines/UnderstandingPatriarchy.pdf, p.4.
² Ibid., p.1.
³ Ibid.
⁴ Ibid., pp.1-2.
⁵ Ibid., p.2.
⁶ Ibid., p.6.
⁷ Ibid.
⁸ Ibid., p.1.
⁹ Ibid., p.5.
Often in my lectures when I use the phrase “imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy” to describe our nation’s political system, audiences laugh. No one has ever explained why accurately naming this system is funny.\(^{10}\)

Outside of subcultural discourses the inaccessibility, even *unthinkability*, of patriarchy, which has no readily graspable or recognizable face to provide it with an easy (sur)face unlike the previous examples of BP and Calvin Klein underwear, contributes to its invisibility and the treachery with which one attempts to galvanize a response, or in other way get a solid handle on it. If it is difficult to even name or point at what precisely one is being so direly affected by, how much harder is it to respond?

In the previous chapter I introduced the analytic perspective of the nonhuman with a human face, and aligned it with imperative that Nicholas Mirzoeff has called ‘the right to look’. It forms a way of considering the network object such as BP, but also the manner in which international clothing brands, and complex systems of oppression, work. It recognises the bind that activists find themselves in when facing strategic placements of human faces on a nonhuman. This perspective allows us to acknowledge that, in many instances, any interaction we wish to have with the network object can become constrained, strategically and often at the discretion of particular parts or ‘interests’, by the limits attendant with confronting a human to which we ought to treat both *humanely*, and exercise the critically important right to look. Together this presents as a particular problem for action or activism, which I call the problem of the nonhuman with a human face.

This chapter is concerned less with systematizing the process of how a nonhuman gains a human face (which is more about articulation and presentation of a network object) than with examining its implications for action, activism and attempts to find someone or something somewhere responsible. This focus is particularly pertinent for activists, as the human face on a nonhuman actually presents as alternately a *problem* and *opportunity* at different times. For anyone seeking to accomplish some kind of reparative corporate action, whether an admission of guilt, apology, procedural change, etc. outside of the injunctive power of the court system (which may well be

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\(^{10}\) Ibid., p.4.
impossible or greatly difficult to access), the human face on the nonhuman presents as a problem, as a constraint on legitimate action. For those seeking to name and direct a form of activism towards a largely intangible ideological complex such as patriarchy, giving the network object a human face – an obvious and visible object for others to look and see – presents an opportunity to challenge invisibility.

The chapter begins with a consideration of the complication that the internet presents to the right to look, as well as questions hanging over it about effective political activism, before turning to examine a genre of activist tumblr website that highlights the problem of the nonhuman with the human face. In the tumblr practice of ‘shaming’, exemplified by activist sites such as Nice Guys of OK Cupid, I find a practise that involves shaming the human faces of patriarchy and sexism, and to varying degrees acknowledging the problem and opportunity this presents. Needing to treat humans responsibly, shaming is offered in a context of reconciliation and reintegration that exercises the right to look and offers the individual caught up in the network object a place in a more accepting community. Further, as an opportunity to identify more clearly or challenge the invisibility of these problematic network objects like sexism and patriarchal social systems, this shaming practice puts a useful human face on these complexes, turning human faces into clearly visible examples of patriarchy. I conclude by reaffirming the important of the right to look, and to not take lightly either the problem or the opportunity that putting a human face on a nonhuman network object presents.

**Questions about internet activism**

Focussing on activism on the internet might initially seem a counter-intuitive choice for examining the way that human and nonhuman relations reconfigure our notions of activism. It might seem strange to consider internet activism through Mirzoeff’s reciprocal recognition and mutual constitution of humans that he calls the right to look, and this for the simple fact that, aside from a few internet technologies such as webcams and video calls, very little online interaction could be considered face-to-face interaction. But the internet is one of the most contentiously debated network objects of recent times, and the question of how, or even if, activism is possible through or
with the internet remains an open one, with the right to look contributing an important consideration.

There are two main objections that frequently arise when the internet is considered a place or space for politics. First, the ‘slacktivism’ critique that suggests the internet encourages a kind of laziness, via signing petitions, sharing links, etc, and as a result forestalls more meaningful democratic participation (presumably, in person or face-to-face activism and demonstrations). Secondly, that the internet and its potential anonymizing, non-face-to-face aspect undermines and rules out the civil discourse required for deliberative democracy. But these assumptions don’t seem to play out in practise. Both positions reject the possibility of meaningful, face-to-face type interaction across the internet, a fetishizing of the ‘IRL,’ and further consideration of each reveals that neither stands up to scrutiny. But first it is necessary to establish that the possibility of the right to look, or rather, the ability to encounter the human face online.

In his famous essay ‘Post-script on the societies of control’, Gilles Deleuze offers the following diagnosis of the conceptual shift that occurred in tandem with the shift from disciplinary societies (in the Foucauldian sense) to the control society, closely associated with the rise of computerisation and the network as a conceptual frame for society. It’s worth quoting at length, because it captures something of the sense of the changing nature of the human, brought about by this new control regime enabled by internet and network technologies: ‘We no longer find ourselves dealing with the mass/individual pair. Individuals have become “dividuals,” and masses, samples, data, markets, or “banks.”’

Principally the shift from the related pairs of mass/individuals to the new pair of dividual/individual represents a change to a more ‘networked’ and distributed approach associated with the internet, networks and computerisation. Segments of what would treated as ‘mass’ become carved up as market niches, and individuals become abstracted into dividuated components – my individual demographic information collected by Facebook, my individual YouTube video watching habits, my unique individual Twitter UserID. But the irony is that as these two poles exacerbate – with more and more refined and targeted marketing

techniques based on dividuated information – the more the one side reinforces the other. As dividuated information proliferates, so too does the sense of individuals existence.

Commentary on internet social media has long been recognised as a source of (at least potentially) meaningful connection with other humans, and often doing so deliberately, aiding the right to look by offering the option to create and display a ‘profile:’ a picture, a collection of status updates, a series of ‘posts,’ video uploads, or any other kind of self-identification. Admittedly, this is a collection of dividuated traces, but equally this reinforces the tendency to assemble from the digital profile a metaphorical ‘picture’ (including, as is often the case, literal pictures) of an individual user. Social media itself trains or invites us to see the profile as a user, one single person behind the profile, and to look through the refracted information that is assembled by the profile to see a ‘me’ or ‘you’ behind the profile and responsible for its construction. This act of recognition of the ‘you’ behind the profile is reminiscent of the ‘right to look’, for its recognition of a human face (here, metaphorical) representing the individual in the midst or surrounded by network traces of their online activity. While the digital profile represents something of a departure from Mirzoeff’s right to look, as we have no way to synchronously reciprocate the look, nevertheless the awareness of a ‘you’ through the traces left by your interfacing and interacting with technology (such as the profile) can be felt. The sense of one’s awareness of this process acting upon me and my profile, just as it happens to yours, gives this something of the reciprocity of the right to look.

Further, the possibility of felt presence through media has a long tradition that stretched back far prior to the internet, as can be seen through in Esther Milne’s work. In *Letters, Postcards, Email*, Milne suggests the following:

Presence is a term that need not always refer to material, corporeal presence. Rather, presence is an effect achieved in communication (whether by letters, postcards or email, for example) when interlocutors imagine the psychological or, sometimes, physical presence of the other.12

Every day online, the right to look is exercised as people mutually acknowledge and constitute each other online via a mediated right to look. The right to look online consists in something like this sense of presence, adding a dimension of recognising a ‘you’ as a locus of human agency behind the fragments and traces left behind by your online activity. On Facebook a sense of a ‘you’ is built up from traces of your activity: your Facebook ‘likes’, the pictures tagged as ‘you’, and the comments you have left. On twitter, your tweets, your twitter avatar, and your twitter bio add up to someone. Elsewhere on the internet your blog, your website, your unique entry in the otherwise anonymous database give someone reason to believe a ‘you’ exists – an extrapolation from the dividual to the individual, a simultaneous one and multiple human.

The right to look online conjures up the comparisons to the Turing test, that famous formulation of the problem of recognition of the human as posed by mathematician and computational scientist Alan Turing, and the possibility of being ‘fooled’ by a nonhuman pretending to be a human. Ian Bogost proposes an interesting alternative reading of Alan Turing’s famous paper ‘Computer Machinery and Intelligence’, in which he proposes the test designed to separate humans form machines. Bogost suggests a radical rethinking of Turing and his test. He suggests a reading of Turing as a philosopher of camouflage and imitation, saying that Turing:

really skirts the question of intelligence entirely, replacing it with the outcomes of thought – in this case, the ability to perform "being human" as convincingly and interestingly as a real human. To be intelligent is to act like a human rather than to have a mind that operates like one. Or, even better, intelligence – whatever it is, the thing that goes on inside a human or a machine – is less interesting and productive a topic of conversation than the effects of such a process.\(^\text{13}\)

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I agree with Bogost’s assessment that most questions about what human intelligence “is” are far less interesting or important than the outcomes of the process. This is a more performative definition of the human, one that largely makes irrelevant the possibility of being ‘fooled’ by a nonhuman pretending to be a human because, ultimately, the question of what a human is retains some element of undecideability (as I established in the introduction). In other words, the recognition of a human (and their ‘face’ – envisioned through the right to look online) is to see the human behind the network, behind the objects and fragments that amass into an online profile – to extend my recognition to ‘you’ and your humanity on the other side of the screen. In Chapter 2 I discussed the ‘extended mind’ hypothesis that finds the human mind distributed through objects, outsourcing functions and connections to technological nonhumans. The right to look represents a bundling together of these traces and distributions into a perceived ‘you’.

Jane Bennett has a wonderful phrase that she uses to describe humans in *Vibrant Matter*, saying that, “we are walking, talking minerals.”¹⁴ But if we are just walking, talking minerals then recognition of humanity has to be performative, at least in some sense, rather than automatic, given, and ontological (here OOO’s agnosticism about the ontological existence of a ‘human’ as a separate category or type of object is appropriate). Since we’ve also seen the horrific results of the closure or the shrinking of ‘the human’ throughout the twentieth century (as John Gray has discussed,¹⁵ and which I outlined in the introduction) then I suggest that it may be an important imperative to commit to extending recognition of ‘the human’ as wide and as far as it will possibly stretch. Importantly, this remains an exercise of recognition of the performance of the human.

The possibility of mis-recognizing a nonhuman becomes a non-problem, instead reconfigured as a question of how well one performs being human. What we consider human, however, remains a complex question, one shot through with ideology and habit, not to mention prejudice, and I will return to this question in chapter 5. For the

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moment it is important to recognise that it is possible to recognise the human online – a human individual correlated to the kind of dividuated and distributed information associated with ‘profiles,’ data mining, marketing and aggregation – which enables an online form of Mirzooff’s right to look, the seeing of the human face and the human presence in the network.

**The first question of online activism: the slacktivism critique**

One of the most common perspectives on the internet and its potential political effects comes in the form of a critique, principally attributed to Evgeny Morozov, that the internet produces or encourages a form of ‘slacktivism.’ Morozov describes the effect as one of creating a situation in which ‘our digital effort make[s] us feel very useful and important but [has] zero social impact.’\(^\text{16}\) The crux of Morozov’s critique – and the variations that have been forwarded by others since – involves the following pertinent observation:

Take a popular Facebook group "saving the children of Africa." It looks very impressive – over 1.2 million members—until you discover that these compassionate souls have raised about $6,000 (or half a penny per person). In a perfect world, this shouldn't even be considered a problem: better donate a penny than not to donate at all. The problem, however, is that the granularity of contemporary digital activism provides too many easy way-outs: too many people decide to donate a penny where they may otherwise want to donate a dollar.\(^\text{17}\)

Morozov’s reaction here is informed by the sheer amount of writing and opinion reflecting the mainstream or accepted view that the internet is some inherently liberating force for good, and that it presents a unique democratising force in the world. Examples of this view abound, from authors such as Clay Shirky, Jeff Jarvis, and others, as well as books such as David Kirkpatrick’s *The Facebook Effect*, which


\(^{17}\) Ibid.
takes specific examples of protests enabled by the organising features of the Facebook platform and generalises a specific new ‘effect’ that this technology has upon the world and the possibilities for democratic protest. Likewise, the Internet’s democratizing and liberating effects were frequently touted in the wake of the so-called Arab Spring period, including the revolutions in Tunisia, Libya, Iran and Egypt, in the pages of magazines and news reports around the world, as Morozov himself has noted. Morozov describes this as the “Google Doctrine,” diagnosing it as tied to the post-Cold War ideological complex that saw the West’s victory and supremacy as ‘inevitable’ and a result of its use of technology, over-emphasising the relatively minor part played by Western propaganda efforts often involving media technologies such as free radio. Even now Wikipedia describes Radio Free Europe in the cold war era as playing “a critical role” (without including any citations for such a claim), noting the size of its audience and its ability to criticise communist regimes. One attempt to justify such claims can be found in Arch Puddington’s Broadcasting Freedom: The Cold War Triumph or Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty, however the book attracted at least one review that noted, despite Puddington’s assertion that ‘the freedom radios proved to be one of democracy’s most powerful weapons,’ a full assessment may not be quite so simple:

Puddington prefers to place the highest value on results, crediting RFE/RL with winning the ideological war… In the end, however, the impact of the broadcasts is difficult to measure against other forces that ultimately led to a restructuring of Europe.

20 Ibid., pp.5-7.
This lack of a coherent theory of media or technological efficacy is a key hallmark of the ideological complex that Morozov sets out to critique, and which encourages slacktivism. Associated with Francis Fukuyama’s *The End of History* argument, this ideology has grown into the dominant mainstream discourse on and around technology in the West, and according to Morozov, led to precisely the kind of thinking he sets out in the slacktivism critique:

So, what exactly plagues most “slacktivist” campaigns? Above all, it’s their unrealistic assumption that, given enough awareness, all problems are solvable; or, in the language of computer geeks, given enough eyeballs all bugs are shallow. This is precisely what propels many of these campaigns into gathering signatures, adding new members to their Facebook pages, and asking everyone involved to link to the campaign on blogs and Twitter. This works for some issues — especially local ones. But global bugs - like climate change - are bugs of a different nature. Thus, for most global problems, whether it’s genocide in Darfur or climate change, there are diminishing returns to awareness-raising. At some point one simply needs to learn how to convert awareness into action — and this is where tools like Twitter and Facebook prove much less useful.23

Morozov, in his book *To Save Everything, Click Here*, goes on to define the ideology behind slacktivism as this same ‘solutionism,’ but the effect of the ‘slacktivism’ critique — or perhaps meme, given the departure it has taken from Morozov’s rather more pointed formulation in popular redeployments — loses its specificity and becomes a generalized criticism of the internet tout court as ineffective site for action. The argument that the internet has an unintentional depoliticising effect, or is inefficacious as a medium of activism and political action has been addressed in a review of the literature review essay by Henrik Serup Christensen. He largely construes the critique as seeing the internet channelling political action away from more traditional democratic protest and ‘in the streets’ type actions.

23 Morozov, “From Slacktivism to Activism.”
Christensen notes the popular slacktivist critique, which results from a redeployment of Morozov’s idea, is often used ‘to belittle activities’\textsuperscript{24} that don’t conform to the traditional offline democratic political activism model (street protests, etc). And yet he also notes that,

to some extent this critique is overstated. Many traditional acts of political participation do not necessarily require great efforts on behalf of the participants, nor are they necessarily efficient ways to further political preferences. It is hard to see why signing a petition or even voting in real life should be seen as a great sacrifice — at least in democracies where threats of retributions from authorities rarely occur — whereas doing it online is meaningless and effortless.\textsuperscript{25}

The popular version of Morozov’s slacktivism critique, then, suffers from an unacknowledged assumption in the form of privileging face-to-face protest action, assuming that this form of protest is a) effective and b) somehow significantly different in kind to mediated action, taken on the internet. Christensen’s summary of the literature addressing the slacktivism position concludes with a practical assessment of the many political activism websites that engage in electronic petitions, fundraising and community building. He notes that ‘many of the campaigns accused of being slacktivistic are almost certainly never able to fulfil their stated goals, nor were they necessarily meant to.’\textsuperscript{26} For Christensen then, the expression of political preference itself counts as a kind of action which we can assume will have some kind of particular effect, even if it does not topple a government, or immediately intervene in the same way blockading a bulldozer might. He also importantly adds that,

Most evidence in recent years suggests that being active online promotes offline participation as well. Although this link is not necessarily very strong, there is certainly no evidence of a negative effect from Internet activity.\textsuperscript{27}

\textsuperscript{24} Henrik Serup Christensen, “Political Activities On The Internet Slacktivism or political participation by other means?” First Monday 16, no. 2 (2011), http://firstmonday.org/article/view/3336/2767
\textsuperscript{25} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{26} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{27} Ibid.
If Christensen’s conclusions are correct, and at the very least so-called ‘slacktivist’ type activities are not the cause of political disengagement (unlike Morozov’s claim that members of the Facebook group “saving the children of Africa” are more likely to give a penny than the dollar they would have otherwise – never a particularly realistic prospect to begin with), then the critiques strength somewhat evaporates. And quite to the contrary of the slacktivist critique, many internet activist strategies often labelled slacktivist are highly participatory, communal, and demanding of time and effort, in no way characterisable as ‘slack’.

It is possible, and even important, to accept that not all activism must be about changing governments or enacting state-based change, a fact that even Evgeny Morozov, original proponent of the ‘slacktivism’ critique, would probably agree with given his stated opposition to the liberatory discourses that tech discourse is so often burdened with. In the second half of this chapter I introduce a theory of discursive activism which has been extensively theorised and documented by Frances Shaw. In her work on feminist online communities, Shaw found that the activities these communities engaged in did not fit into older classifications of politics or social movement theories, and instead conformed to different patterns of activity. Specifically, their activism consisted largely of discursive activism that sought to intervene in the very ways that people discuss issues, construct problems, or think about and frame issues. This discursive activism also presents an intervention into the activist tactic of deploying a human as the face of a nonhuman object like patriarchy, offering an appropriate response to the flattening of context that occurs when one person becomes ‘the face’ of a terrible systemic issue (or network-object) like patriarchy.

I return to this in more detail in the second half of this chapter; because there is first another issue with which the question of internet politics repeatedly gets entangled, and that is as a question of whether the internet itself has a politics. I mentioned this approach in chapter 2, with a brief discussion of Langdon Winner’s ‘Do Artifacts Have Politics?’28 But here I want to unpack this question somewhat further. It turns

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out that much of what gets asked about the internet are questions about internet discussion, discourse, civility and reasonability. In other words, the question of “Does the internet have a politics?” is frequently construed as the question: “Why is online discourse so terrible, and so plagued with trolls, racists, sexists, and bigots of every stripe and colour?” This problem of civility online is also a problem of reasonability, with implications for the claims I made in chapter 3 about its importance. If the internet, or anonymity as a condition, somehow makes humans unreasonable, then it would be worthless to advocate for anything like reasonability in causal assessment, particularly those engaged in on the internet – I would simply be arguing for the impossible. But I do not believe this to be the case, as it turns out that both the internet and the question of anonymity are by no means that straightforward in their effects.

The second question of online politics: civility, anonymity and reasonability

It has become something of an internet meme or truism that, following John Gabriel’s ‘Greater Internet Fuckwad’ theory of anonymity that ‘Normal Person + Anonymity + Audience = Total Fuckwad,’ and debates over enabling or disabling comment threads on internet blogs and news stories have reached something of a consensus in the past regarding the problem of internet comments. John Suler has called this the ‘online disinhibition effect.’ A great deal of research has been done on anonymity, pseudonymity, trolling and online discourse, and its impact on online civility and reasonability, much of which does not support such clear and determinate “effects” of the internet on discourse or behaviour.

In the late 90s Gary Marx outlined 7 distinct categories of identifiability, ranging from inclusions of a person’s legal name and location, to the use of pseudonyms, ‘patterns

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of knowledge’, ‘social categorisation’ and even ‘symbols of eligibility/non-eligibility.’

Marx’s conclusions were highly specific and nuanced, resisting the kind of programmatic answers that would lead one to assert that anonymity causes or necessitates unreasonability.

More contemporarily, in 2011-12 Google’s decision to require users to attach their real names to their fledgling Google+ social network sparked copious debate across the technology blogosphere. danah boyd has argued that the debate’s very framing, by Google and others, as an issue of the ‘accountability’ provided by real names is insufficient, as these situations are “complex socio-technical questions with no clear technical or policy solution.”

Addressing the problem from a cultural criticism perspective, in Networks without a Cause internet critic Geert Lovink speaks to the issue of anonymity within the context of cultures of self disclosure engendered and propagated by social media platforms like Facebook. Providing a brief overview of internet identity theory from Sherry Turkle’s landmark Life on the Screen, published in 1995, to the dual effects of the dotcom bubble bursting and the September 11 attacks in 2001, as well as critiques of the contemporary cult of the presentation of the self, Lovink arrives at an approach to internet anonymity that values its power without an associated moral panic over its effects on discourse:

The question is how to re-imagine anonymity not as an attainable categorical state, but as a way to recoup an energy of metamorphosis, the desire to become someone else.

Likewise, PJ Rey and Nathan Jurgensen argue, in ‘The Fan Dance, How Privacy Thrives in an age of hyper-publicity,’ for a conception of online privacy, building on

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33 Sherry Turkle, Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet (Simon and Schuster, 1995).
Sarah Michelle Ford’s argument for the conception of the public/private division to be seen not as a dichotomy but as a spectrum, placing an important emphasis on user agency and control. Rey and Jurgensen’s argument about anonymity is not one of a clear facilitation of ‘privacy,’ which as a concept resists such on/off distinctions, but instead articulates user practices of revelation and omission as a careful, controlled and strategic activity that resembles the burlesque ‘fan dance,’ hinting at exposure even as it conceals. Doubtless there is, amongst the multiple hundreds of millions of users of social media sites such as Facebook, a large range of users that would fall, to varying degrees, within a range of masterful performances of ‘the fan dance’ even as many more less-skilled and less competent users engage in a farm more ‘inelegant’ form of the dance. Regardless of the broad range of such variability, this construction of anonymity and privacy surely frustrates a simple translation of anonymity into cause-and-effect such that it guarantees the ‘unreasonability’ of online discourse.

This is again borne out in the wake of the early Google+ decision to enforce users “real names” on the social media platform. In the technology press, much was made of a paper co-authored by Carnegie Mellon University researcher Daegon Cho and Google’s own employee Soodong Kim, which analysed the South Korean Government’s internet regulation requiring real names to be attached to internet posts and comments on major websites (in which any website with over 100,000 daily views was counted as such). The paper found that while the incidences of incivility and abuse were impacted by regulation requiring real names, it was in a rather complex way, and one that did not affect all users equally. Their key finding suggested that, for the most frequent users of websites,

the enhanced identification process reduced the number of messages containing swear words and slanderous comments... swear words and anti-

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38 Ibid.
normative expressions significantly decreased among more-frequently participating users, whereas no substantial similar changes were found for less-frequently participating users.\textsuperscript{39}

In other words, only the most active and engaged users (arguably those most likely to develop some form of persistent profile, even a pseudonymous one) were impacted by the identification requirement – the occasional and infrequent site users were, presumably, just as uncivil and unreasonable as before. This is an important finding since the most popular constructions of online incivility as a problem usually invoke the spectre of the faceless, anonymous “troll,” embodying the crowds of outsiders who come in and undermine or destroy the conditions for productive debate and discussion for the rest.

In fact, the basis of the argument for the inevitable incivility of the anonymous commenter is challenged by many manifest examples of the unreasonable identified commenter – proving that by itself having ones face visible, and identifiable is no guarantee of civility, even if it does open other possibilities as we shall see in the latter half of this chapter. A case in Australia from October 2012 illustrates this well, in which an Australian Facebook user called Australian Prime Minister Julia Gillard a “slut” in a Facebook comment thread that she was participating in as part of a Q&A event. The story was covered by American media outlet Vice on their Motherboard blog:

Drew Boyer is a young man, just 19 years old. He went to Wanneroo Senior High School in Perth, Australia. And he just called Australia’s prime minister a “slut” to her face. But the Australian media hasn’t made much noise about Drew Boyer, because he did it on Facebook.\textsuperscript{40}

The response by Vice is illustrative of the kinds of efforts that are made to fill the gap or push back on this identifiable incivility – naming him and shaming him are

\textsuperscript{39} Ibid., p.3041.
\textsuperscript{40} Brian Merchant, “An Australian Facebook User Called the Prime Minister a ‘Slut’ to Her Face,” Vice - Motherboard, October 9, 2012, http://motherboard.vice.com/blog/an-australian-facebook-user-called-the-prime-minister-a-slut-to-her-face
important tactics that, in the right circumstances – can have powerful results. I will
discusses more of this in a moment, when I turn to discuss the social media shaming
tactics of feminists and other activists online, but the Vice commentary on the event is
curious as well. With the headlines claiming that he said it “to her face” in stark
contrast with the fact that the article makes it clear that she was at a computer
responding to the Facebook thread as Boyer posted his comment. Vice also proffers the
familiar explanation based on the “semi-anonymity” or felt sense of detachment or
distance resulting from the internet’s (and Facebook’s) mediation, the computer
screen’s separating distance preventing the two parties from coming ‘face to face’ in
person. But then why stress Boyer’s supposed status of having uttered the comment ‘to
her face’ in the headline? I suggest this is precisely because of an understanding of the
importance of face-to-face interaction, and the power of the human face in eliciting
emotion, response, empathy and humane treatment – especially sympathetic ones.
Equally, it reflects the understanding that I described earlier, the process of
recognition that there is a human being, with a human face, on the other end of the
Facebook profile, at the other end of a chain of connections ending in the other’s
computer screen. Mirzoeff’s right to look acknowledges this dynamic online.

Referring to frequently derogatory tone of the comments, the author of the article
claims that,

in a town hall or a real-life Q+A with Gillard, none of these people would
have had the gall to say a word of the above. In fact, in any other forum, many
of those comments would qualify as straight-up sexual harassment. Yet the
semi-anonymity of the internet, the inherent sense of distance and disconnect
from other real live organ-filled people, and the unreality engendered by
staring alone into the reflective abyss of the laptop screen had, for a bunch of
dirtbags, once again turned the act of responding to actual events into a
fantastical video game. An ugly, juvenile, and sexist video game; the sort
played on Facebook by millions of idiots every day.\footnote{Ibid.}
Curiously, Drew Boyer’s Facebook profile as linked to in the *Vice* piece has since been deleted. While there is no way of knowing for sure when exactly this deletion occurred, it is reasonable to suspect that the public response to the *Vice* article precipitated this deletion.\(^{42}\) Anecdotally, on the day that the article began disseminating across the internet, out of curiosity I myself followed the link *Vice* provided to Boyer’s Facebook account and noticed that his profile had begun to be filled with posts from outraged strangers offended by the conduct *Vice* highlighted.\(^{43}\) Curiously, Boyer was only one of a number of individuals leaving disparaging comments in the thread that *Vice* chose to highlight, and this dynamic presented in the way and the context that it was, I suggest, corresponds with Boyer being made the ‘human face’ of incivility and sexism directed at the Australian Prime Minister. As other cases have frequently shown, harassment and other forms of naming and shaming can be the cause of significant acts of retreat (even from public, or semi-public life) from encounters with angry or incensed groups, often taking the form of account deletions, name changes, etc.\(^{44}\) Though I will in a moment argue for the efficacy of these type of tactics, they come with important considerations, not least of all, the important consideration of the right to look, concomitant with a commitment to treat these humans we make the ‘human face of sexism’ as humans themselves.

Another example of this naming-and-shaming dynamic comes in the form of the case in which notorious Reddit moderator and troll Violentacrez was ‘outed’ publically by Gawker blogger Adrien Chen in 2012. Brutsch gained notoriety as a particularly shocking troll and for creating the Reddit subforum ‘jailbait’ which existed to share provocatively sexualised images of underage teens, as well as the utterly reprehensible and eventually deleted subforum ‘Creepshots’. This latter subforum of the popular content aggregation site Reddit consisted of covertly taken photographs of women in

\(^{42}\)Typical users are not in the habit of deleting their Facebook accounts, and the URL location of their profiles which, like Boyer’s, once set cannot be changed without creating a new account.
\(^{43}\)This is an observation that I made at the time, having followed the Vice article link to Boyer’s profile and seen at least half-a-dozen posters commenting to this effect.
\(^{44}\)See, for one notable example, Kathy Sierra’s several years long retreat from publishing on the internet following violent and intimidating threats made to her. A brief account of her period of absence can be found here: http://onstartups.com/tabid/3339/bid/100597/Welcome-Back-Kathy-We-Left-The-Internet-On-For-You.aspx
public, shared online for the gratification of fellow creepshot forumgoers without the knowledge and permission of the subjects themselves. A popular outcry against the creepshots subforum gained some attention across the blogosphere, resulting in at least one tumblr site ‘Predditors’ attempting to turn the tables on these men by posting their names and faces online, resulting in at least one case in which a US High School Teacher was prosecuted. Creepshots was eventually shut down by Reddit, but there seemed little to prevent the creation of other subreddits identical in purpose and scope (an example of which appeared almost immediately, in the form of a ‘Creepshots’ subreddit) without the perpetrators behind it being somehow stopped or held to account.

Eventually the public attention culminated in Adrian Chen’s much publicised ‘outing’ of the main individual behind Creepshots, one ‘Violentacrez’, as Texan software engineer Michael Brutsch, which proved (at least temporarily) successful in halting the worst of his excesses. Brutsch himself later admitted in an interview with CNN that had he not been publically named and exposed in the way that he did, he would not have stopped, adding to an argument for the utility, perhaps even necessity, in certain cases of ‘outing’ individuals like this.

The kind of naming and shaming experienced by both Boyer and Brutsch falls explicitly within the problem of the human face on a nonhuman – justified or not, by naming them and shaming them activists and individuals like Chen and the author of the Vice article make these two individuals into the face of very systemic, problems. They become the face of culture of horrible behaviour online, or the face of patriarchal resistance to the first female Australian Prime Minister. Responsible deployment of this technique demands a nuanced understanding of what is at stake when one attempts to critique the permissiveness of patriarchal sexism online (Boyer), or mount a case for the utility of naming someone as online deviant (Brutsch) in the

45 http://predditors.tumblr.com
47 Ibid.
process making them both into more than they are. This is not, however, an argument against the tactic, or in any way shape or form meant to excuse their behaviour—rather it is to acknowledge the attendant responsibility to look and see a human face, to recognize the nature of the problem as the problem of the nonhuman (patriarchy; sexism; online culture) with a human face (Boyer; Brutsch). These individuals are a problem—but they are not the only problem, being also local manifestations of larger, more deleterious network objects which they have been undoubtedly influenced by, but which they have now come to represent: institutionalised patriarchy and sexism, and the culture of white-male libertarian permissiveness that surrounds much historical constructions of “online” behaviour. They are both problems of individuals and network objects.

What both these incidents demonstrate is that the removal of anonymity from the internet is an insufficient answer to the problem of internet unreasonability. There will always be sociopaths, the abject, and others who care little for legal or social consequences and will not be dissuaded from unreasonability, incivility, dangerous behaviour. But it is reasonable to rule out the internet as some kind of special or significant cause of this unreasonable behaviour, a kind of “political implication” of this aggregation of humans and nonhumans. Adding the nonhuman, and an analysis of network objects to the picture adds depth to our understanding of these situations. I now offer an analysis of a series of feminist activist sites and the tactics they use to navigate, disentangle, and potentially recompose network objects like patriarchy and institutionalised sexism to begin to deal with the problem of a nonhuman that presents to us a human face.

**The tumblr shaming genre: giving a faceless object a human face**

The past several years have seen the rise of a kind of activist tumblr on the internet, which follows a certain pattern of action, which like the aforementioned examples of Boyer and Brutsch, deploys the human face onto a nonhuman network object to some kind of activist ends or effect. Several examples of this genre exist, for instance, the tumblr sites *Men Taking Up Too Much Space on the Train,*[^49] *Men of Tinder Holding Fish,*[^50]

[^49]: http://mentakingup2muchspaceonthetrain.tumblr.com/
[^50]:
Humanitarians of Tinder,\textsuperscript{51} Nice Guys of OK Cupid,\textsuperscript{52} Should You Wear That Fedora,\textsuperscript{53} and Fedoras of OK Cupid\textsuperscript{54} which I discuss in more detail in a moment. All these sites operate by taking a human face, whether from a dating site or app such as Tinder and OK Cupid, from a public place, or from somewhere elsewhere and placing it onto or in a network object. This usually occurs by collecting enough similar images so that a pattern begins to emerge which we could see as a network object itself. Scrolling down through the collection of images on any of these sites makes plain the prevalence, possibly the cause, and certainly the ubiquity of a particular appearance, practise or behaviour.

For an example, take the site Men Taking Up Too Much Space on the Train, which utilises this very premise, displaying discreetly taken pictures of men taking up “too much” space on public transportation. Sometimes the faces of the men are identifiable, sometimes they are not. The details of their “taking up too much space” frequently varies. Sometimes it’s as simple as a too-wide spreading of the legs causing others to shrink away from them, sometimes it’s an overly-broad posture that reduces the available space on a seat in such a way as to impose on other’s (usually women’s) personal space within the limited confines of public transportation.

The tumblr Men Taking Up Too Much Space on the Train calls the behaviour it identifies ‘a classic among public assertions of privilege’,\textsuperscript{55} and news stories at sites like The Huffington Post as well as others have interpreted the site as an example of the gendered differences in expectations that women and men unequally face when in public:

The issue here isn't that women feel physically threatened or fear asking someone to move over. It's just interesting to observe the very clear difference between men and women when it comes to how much space they feel

\textsuperscript{50} http://menoftinderholdingfish.tumblr.com/
\textsuperscript{51} http://humanitariansoftinder.com/
\textsuperscript{52} Now defunct, http://niceguysofokcupid.tumblr.com
\textsuperscript{53} http://foreveralonedefedoras.tumblr.com/
\textsuperscript{54} Now also defunct, formerly at http://fedorasofkc.tumblr.com/
\textsuperscript{55} This is the site’s subtitle or ‘tag line.’
comfortable taking up in public -- especially when they are inadvertently inconveniencing someone else.\textsuperscript{56}

Much of the ‘point’ of this type of site is to connect with others who can identify with, or who have shared the same observation, experience or realisation about the probable causes of such behaviour (‘male privilege’), and who ‘get it’ without the need for much further elaboration or explanation, which could involve lengthy, distracting, and hard to articulate answers. The minimal commentary beyond the powerfully persuasive visual collection of images, and their context as a collection, makes a visual argument about male behaviour and expectations on public transport.

Unlike with the earlier examples of naming and shaming – especially the case of Brutsch – it is not always the case that the purpose of this site is to get these men individually to stop their behaviour. Rather, as the site notes, it’s more about creating a realisation, or an awareness, of the existence and the extent of male privilege. Giving a concrete example or instance of ‘male privilege’ in this way – attaching it to a human face doing this act which expresses or embodies their privilege – is an incredibly useful exercise, and gives us a handle on a formerly faceless object that is difficult to describe. The ability to look and see, even point at it as an instance of privilege is incredibly powerful.

But equally, there is an important dimension worth noting. It is worth asking whether or how can we even be sure, however, that each and every instance documented on this tumblr is actually an example of asserted bodily privilege through the postures afforded men but not women. Another way of asking this question is to ask, how do we know that this is not just this particular guy having a bad day, or some other reasonable, contextual explanation? This might even be a question of intersectionality – one photo on the \textit{Men Taking Up Too Much Space on the Train} site depicts an Asian man with his legs wide in order to corral and protect a large object in a shopping bag. Can the tumblr itself account for the fact that he may have no choice but to carrying shopping

home via public transport (thus taking up too much space) primarily as a result of inequality of access in some other aspect of life – for instance discriminatory employment practises, or housing prices, something preventing him from earning enough to own a car in a large city like New York?

In one sense, these men and these images, collected and arrayed in such a way, provide activists with a useful and important opportunity for activism and consciousness raising. Formerly “faceless” objects like patriarchy and the institutionalised privilege of male posture in public space are difficult things to discuss, and having examples to point to and say this is the problem can be more than just a rhetorically powerful act. For example, another tumblr along similar lines is Men of Tinder Holding Fish, which catalogues via screenshot the profile pictures of men from the online dating app Tinder. This tumblr takes a rather more tongue-in-cheek swipe at the number of men who present themselves on Tinder with pictures in which they are holding up fish. Full of non-sequiturs that seemingly point towards the social cluelessness of these men, the site implies they have (probably) not thought about how to appeal to women likely to be using the dating app. Perhaps more charitably, it could be interpreted as suggesting that they are appealing to a certain kind of woman who might be impressed by fishing prowess and outdoorsman-like activities. But the site’s tagline gives an indication of the orientation of the critique:

    do you like my fish?? i'ts so cool.
    please go on date with me57

The lack of capitalisation and the presence of typos echoes a communicative aesthetic that we will see again in a moment when I turn to examine the site Fedoras of OK Cupid, but here it is used for parodic effect. The speaker of the grammatically broken ‘please go on date with me’ [sic] is being parodied as barely literate (perhaps technologically as well as linguistically) and somewhat simple – perhaps suggesting a connection with the familiar image of a cat which holds up a dead animal it has caught as a prize for its owners. In this case, the site provides a graphic record of the (perhaps largely innocuous) thoughtlessness of men, making them the face(s) of this habit or tendency.

57 http://menoftinderholdingfish.tumblr.com/
The trouble with all these types of site – and as we shall see through a lengthy case study of *Fedoras of OK Cupid* – is that there is no context to aid assessment of this dimension of the individual situations depicted in sites like *Men Taking Up Too Much Space on the Train*, or the decision-making process that went into choosing a profile picture in which one is holding a fish. They collapse the personal down into *examples* and bury an efficient, unspoken causality that decides that *this is what they are*. In the case of the former, they are “simply” expressions of privilege, in the latter the instantiation of thoughtlessness. However using them as the ‘face’ of patriarchy or male privilege, and shaming them for it, does not compare favourably to shaming the human corporate face. The latter (usually) takes up their role as face of BP knowingly, and in exchange for payment. While the former also certainly accrue benefits from their association with patriarchal structures and habits, there is no telling whether they do so *knowingly* or not, and while this is not exculpatory, it does change the context of our engagement with them.

For these reasons it becomes even *more* important to exercise Mirzoeff’s right to look – to *resist* the temptation to reduce these people to just ‘examples’ or ‘products’ of overdetermining nonhuman structures, no matter how useful an example they present. This genre of tumblr, when it fails to exercise the right to look by not treating these ‘profiles’ as also individuals even as they remain manifestations of male privilege, runs a risk of stigmatizing these men unfairly. In the following extended look at the tumblr *Fedoras of OK Cupid*, I examine in greater detail the specifics of these dynamics at play, and possible avenues to sidestep the problems encountered when dealing with the human face on a nonhuman object.

*Fedoras of OK Cupid*

In October of 2012 in a piece of cultural criticism for the popular website *Boing Boing*, journalist and critic Leigh Alexander attempted to explain ‘Why the Fedora Grosses Out Geekdom.’

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Fedoras of OK Cupid (henceforth FOOKC), Alexander explained that the fedora hat is at the crest of a series of cultural waves with some worrisome characteristics. Through no fault of its own, the fedora hat has become a symbol closely associated with a particular kind of young, socially awkward “geek” male, frequently aligned with some of the more openly misogynistic portions of the internet.

The conceit is extremely simple: the author (who goes by the pseudonym “misandristcutie”) trawls the popular dating site OK Cupid for pictures of men in fedora hats and posts them to the site, often including excerpts from their dating profile highlighting some undesirable, frequently sexist, and occasionally downright worrying aspect of their stated views and attitudes. These frequently include responses to OK Cupid’s hundreds of profiling questions, as well as sometimes elaborate comments that the profile owners have left to elucidate their responses to questions like "Do you feel there are any circumstances under which a person is obligated to have sex with you?" or their responses to whether “no means no” (The common answer: “A No is just a Yes that needs a little convincing!”). These images displayed on the Tumblr are often accompanied by some form of commentary or reaction, frequently expressions of fear, dismay, etc, expressed by misandristcutie herself at some aspect or another of the profile.

The site’s success in garnering viral attention tapped into a widely shared reaction to wearers of the hat, and through the sheer persuasiveness of its plentiful examples of fedora wearers who exhibit ‘red flag’ attitudes, suggests to its readers the existence of (for lack of a better term) something akin to a fedora culture. The site points towards a troubling correlation between wearers of the hat and holders of regressive, sexist or dangerous attitudes towards women, elaborating a network object with some troubling characteristics. Towards the beginning of the site’s somewhat controversial existence, however, it was common enough for the posts to limit themselves to criticisms of the appearance of the fedora, as the fully developed critique of the fedora-cultural complex took time to emerge. While the tone of the site has remained constant (it has always maintained that fedoras ‘look bad’), it took time and the appearance of similar site Nice Guys of OK Cupid to clarify and deepen the criticism to more than just one based on superficial appearance. The now-deleted latter site, which existed from late 2012 to January 2013 oriented itself explicitly towards an
activist and consciousness-raising role, highlighting the disparity between the self-professed “nice guy” statements of young men on dating sites with their regressive and often sexist attitudes, all while downplaying and attempting to mitigate the ‘individual’ nature of the problem by obscuring identifying information and so on. This is a key component of the site’s attempt to get around the problem of the human face—targeting a nonhuman object itself as the culprit. *Nice Guys of OK Cupid* also used the same ‘image and caption’ technique, as did other lesser-known fedora-focused tumblrs that appeared around the same time including *Fedoras: Forever Alone*, and *Should You Wear That Fedora?* (the resounding answer being, no you should not). The emergence of these sites coincided with the rise of the tumblr shaming genre, outlined earlier, and FOOKC provides an early formative example of how the trend emerged and developed.

How the fedora came to be associated with a very distinct “type” of young male with such negative or regressive attitudes towards women is likely to be related to an increased awareness and popularity of Pick Up Artists (PUAs) and their strategies, following publication of Neil Strauss’ *The Game: Penetrating the Secret Society of Pickup Artists* and its numerous cultural spin-offs, including a VH1 television series *The Pickup Artist*. The quintessential image of the PUA is the swaggering, middle-class and white, geeky male, between 18 and 30, who imitates the dress code and flair of a pimp (in PUA terminology called ‘peacocking’) and “negs” (a form of calculated, back-handed compliment) his way into the bed of the many women who would otherwise be uninterested in him, or entirely “out-of-his-league.” Negging and the PUA ethos in general represents a resurgent strain of misogyny that views women as fair game for psychological and emotional manipulation, seeing them as the gatekeepers to sex, which the PUA views himself as entitled to. Consideration for the women targeted by these tactics is never entered into beyond a highly calculated *will they or won’t they sleep with me*. Highly ranked in Google searches for “pickup artist style guide” is a 2009 post on a Pick Up Artist forum in which the author gives the following “peacock tip”:

If you wear a hat, make it memorable, easy to spot, and something to work with your style. This is usually easier than it sounds. Try the fedora...it

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portrays you're a stylish man that knows what he's doing, and it's a great lock-in prop.\textsuperscript{60}

FOOKC picks up on this connection, and as Leigh Alexander notes, draws humour from the emerging consensus that FOOKC taps into: ‘that the fedora-wearers think they look much more suave than they do.’\textsuperscript{61} It’s a form of cultural push-back that has a deliberate activist impulse beneath its seemingly silly or relatively innocuous fedora-shaming surface. Alexander also crucially locates the meaning of this type of site within a larger phenomenon, describing the cultural storm into which the Fedora has entered as one in which:

\begin{quote}
a peculiar subculture of love-entitled male nerds whose social inexperience and awkwardness manifests in a world rocked by a gender revolution—a tectonic shift in the makeup of formerly cloistered, rule-bound clubs.\textsuperscript{62}
\end{quote}

To get a sense of the consensus which FOOKC is tapping into and the explicitness of criticisms of the fedora, it’s necessary to look at a number of the “questions” that other Tumblr users and anonymous readers have sent into the site. This is the primary method of feedback and communication with readers, and the following comments illustrate an awareness of negative connotations associated with fedora culture (all comment are as written, with their particular spellings and capitalizations retained).

For example, fellow Tumblr user “wretchedoftheearth” left the following comment for FOOKC: ‘I have yet to have someone who likes fedoras, frequents reddit, and is a bron\textsuperscript{63} message me and not be horrible.’\textsuperscript{64} FOOKC’s owner misandristcutie posted this question to the tumblr adding only a simple ‘yes thank you’ by way of

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{61} Alexander, “Why the Fedora Grosses Out Geekdom.”
\item \textsuperscript{62} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{63} A portmanteau of ‘bro’ and ‘pony’ invented to describe male fans of the television program ‘My Little Pony.’
\item \textsuperscript{64} \textit{Fedoras of OK Cupid}, 2012b, http://fedorasofokc.tumblr.com/post/32479179607/a-lot-of-the-guys-have-really-douchey-things-on-their
\end{itemize}
agreement.65 Another comment FOOKC responded to asks, ‘omg what is it with these guys calling themselves "gentlemen" or "classy" because they own a fedora?? I can smell the benevolent sexism from here’ to which misandristcutie offered the following telling reply: ‘trade secret: i find a good amount of fedoras from searching keywords and “gentleman” is a goldmine.’ 66 A similar comment expressed bemusement at the fedora type: ‘It's funny how many people think they're chivalrous, yet wear hats from the 1900's. I'd like to see one woman want to live out those years.” 67

Here we catch a glimpse of the motivation behind FOOKC, thought one only made explicit by a reader, in a process of communal clarification of purpose that was repeated when, a few months into FOOKC’s existence, Nice Guys of OK Cupid gained an even greater level of attention in the media. The activist impulse lies in forging a connection between fedoras and the sexist attitudes held during historical periods, and by claiming it is not incidental but central to the fedora culture and why women are turned off by it. This is a challenge to the construction of the fedora as ‘cool’ or ‘suave’, and an attempt to shame those who wear them, which I suggest can be viewed as an attempt at recomposing ‘suave’ as a semantic object excluding the fedora. Holding fedora culture up to the light of a fairly critical and engaged community, highlighting the visual appearance (the fedora) alongside the statements of men on OK Cupid and offering judgement on them, becomes an effective form of criticism and a way of resisting or contesting the construction of the fedora culture network object.

In the following section I position this shaming-as-recomposition as a novel form of what Frances Shaw calls feminist discursive activism, a form of political action that she finds has a prominent place in the activism of the Australian feminist blogosphere, before I move on to discuss the question of the appropriateness of shame’s utility and the way it assists us in addressing the problem of the nonhuman with a human face. I argue that shame (and particularly a form of shaming that is reintegrative) can work to

65 Ibid.
detach the human from the nonhuman they are entangled with – here a community, cultural complex, or even an identity – and offer a place into another, better (in this case, feminist) community. In this way, FOOKC and other sites like it, offer a form of activism that goes some way towards dealing fairly and humanely with the humans that become the evidence or the examples of this deleterious culture, or network object.

**Shaming as feminist discursive activism**

As discussed above, the question of how to ‘do’ activism online post-slacktivism critiques is an open and ongoing one. Frances Shaw’s research into the Australian feminist activist blogosphere provides important insight into the areas fruitful and productive activism is taking place online, and she pairs her observations with a number of pertinent critiques of the dominant social research paradigms of the past several years. In two papers, ‘The Politics of Blogs: Theories of Discursive Activism Online’ and ‘Hottest 100 Women; Cross-platform Discursive Activism in Feminist Blogging Networks,’ she makes persuasive claims regarding online practices that demonstrate a need to revise theories of deliberative democracy, as well as arguing for a turn towards conceptions of social movements (especially feminist activist blog networks) as counterpublics. According to Shaw, a more agonistic understanding of online discussion that can incorporate and account for the inevitabilities of power disparities is needed and these critiques form the basis of her argument for a discursive activism. This concept she describes as:

speech or texts that seek to challenge opposing discourses by exposing power relations within these discourses, denaturalising what appears natural (Fine, 1992: 221) and demonstrating the flawed assumptions and situatedness of mainstream social discourse.70

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69 Frances Shaw, “Hottest 100 Women; Cross-platform Discursive Activism in Feminist Blogging Networks,” *Australian Feminist Studies* 27, no.74 (2012), pp.373-387.
From her research into the strategies employed by the Australian feminist blogosphere, Shaw suggests that public sphere theory suffers from a lack of awareness of ‘the inevitability of power relations and inequality in social life.’ This lack is only exacerbated online, as according to Shaw, ‘internet researchers must exclude from analysis debate that takes place in non-universal, or non-heterogeneous publics’ or else fail to meet the criteria for deliberative democracy. Shaw’s crucial objection is that, whilst desirable, the normative openness of deliberative democracy fails to reflect conditions as we find them actually existing online, and indeed the unequal power relations reflected in who is listened to online is a major concern, and a discursive target, for feminist activists. These concerns present a far more compelling frame for discussing internet action and activism than the presumption of a participative democracy frame of the ‘slacktivism’ critique and its opponents.

Somewhat more practically explanatory than her published papers are the results of her PhD research, which detail the techniques of discursive activism themselves. Presented most accessibly as a talk delivered on 27th of August 2013 at the University of Sydney’s Online Media Group meeting, Shaw detailed a number of activities and strategies that the feminist blogosphere had developed to combat certain types of repeatedly encountered arguments. Many of these techniques have been widely taken up outside the Australian feminist blogosphere, and there is a strong sense of cross-pollination across international lines. Shaw lists five strategies which she found the Australian feminist blogosphere to be employing. She describes them as: “Play Bingo”, “Disemvowelling”, “Splaining”, “Concern Troll”, and “Fauxpology”. Each strategy involves some form of subversion, or the creation of new terminology that reveals the ideological or normative content of mainstream discourses. The first two, ‘Play Bingo’ and ‘Disemvowelling’ are extra-discursive strategies that target discourses, while the latter three are specific words or phrase coined in order to give a name to repeated tropes or tactics frequently employed by those arguing for sexist or

71 Ibid., p.43.
72 Ibid.
73 Ibid.
74 Frances Shaw, “Australian Feminist Blogs and Online Discursive Activism,” Talk given to the Online Media Group, Sydney University, August 30, 2012, http://fillmeupwith.info/2012/08/30/australian-feminist-blogs-and-online-discursive-activism/
bigoted positions. For the sake of brevity, I will only describe the first tactic “playing bingo” however each performs a unique discursive activity that highlights or challenges some otherwise hidden feature or function of sexism in mainstream discourses. Importantly, though Shaw does not discuss it explicitly, these tactics frequently also invoke tacit, oblique, or explicit shaming strategies, and are often most effective when they involve the participation of a network of individuals, in the form of some kind of community, being less effective when employed individually. ‘Playing Bingo’ illustrates this point.

To “Play Bingo” means to metaphorically tick off squares on a bingo card image (often in a comment thread, or on social media) that was created before an argument or discussion begins, featuring common or stock phrases, rhetorical devices or techniques typically employed in the defence of sexist, misogynistic or bigoted positions. Shaw gives examples of phrases included on such cards: ‘Patriarchy hurts men too,’ ‘We gave you the vote now shut up,’ ‘You’re being silly and overemotional,’ ‘You’ve just got a victim mentality,’ and ‘Is it that time of the month.’

The purpose of this activity, is twofold: a critique is embodied in the prior creation of the card object, a ‘pre-empting’ of the clichéd oft repeated sentiments of the sexist interlocutor, and which itself goes some way to demonstrating its unoriginality by dint of its existence. Its use or activation (via written comments or other noted ‘ticking off’ of the boxes) sends the message that an opponent’s argument for a sexist or bigoted position is neither novel nor as clever as they think it is, having been pre-empted. In this way the feminist discursive activist makes a powerful rhetorical case for the opponent’s lack of originality, and the wearying banality of these arguments – so repetitive are they that they have ossified into a bingo card, ready at hand to be mocked and discounted whenever the need arises.

The importance of this type of discursive activism as communal is not to be overlooked. As in many of Shaw’s examples of discursive activism, for the proprietor of FOOKC her work building a community, presumably largely composed of feminists or sympathetic individuals, is an important element of the activism she engages in. Again, comments in the form of ‘ask’ questions reveal this aspect: ‘You are a treasure
and your blog is a delight. These men are nightmarish and shameful and I can't even with any of it.\textsuperscript{76} [sic] was one such comment, FOOKC replying, 'you are just a peach!! i hope you have a lovely evening or whatever time it is where you are.'\textsuperscript{77} Similar sentiments crop up, with an ‘i luv u’\textsuperscript{78} comment (‘luv u 2\textsuperscript{79} comes the reply), and ‘no questions, just adulation: pages like this are pretty much the saving grace of Tumblr.'\textsuperscript{80} Misandristcutie herself here replies with a beatific, ‘bless u have a great day.’\textsuperscript{81} Recognition, as well as expressions of love and solidarity, form a large part of the positive comments FOOKC receives, and contributes to the sense of fun, playfulness and inclusiveness, contrasting strongly with the language she uses to describe the profiles of the men in fedoras, frequently described as ‘scary’ or ‘creepy’.

The importance of the communal dimension might not entirely be evident, however, even from these examples. Partially, the presence of a community serves to enable some of the social dimensions of Shaw’s discursive activism – ‘Playing Bingo’ for instance doesn’t carry quite the same persuasive force if done on one’s own, and the solidarity extended amongst activist communities seems to be an important component. But even more importantly, it constitutes an important pre-requisite for what John Braithwaite describes as reintegrative shame, which will be discussed in a moment, and which offers something of an answer to the apprehensions or misgivings one might have at what is seemingly such an exclusionary activity as shaming.

There is also evidence that the Tumblr site’s efforts are having some real impact in this regard, with a number of so-called ‘testimonials’ to the effects of fedora shaming. One anonymous questioner left the following comment:

\textsuperscript{76} Fedoras of OK Cupid, 2012i, http://fedorasofokc.tumblr.com/post/32775729096/you-are-a-treasure-and-and-your-blog-is-a-delight
\textsuperscript{77} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{78} Fedoras of OK Cupid, 2012g, http://fedorasofokc.tumblr.com/post/32762847590/i-luv-u
\textsuperscript{79} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{80} Fedoras of OK Cupid, 2012h, http://fedorasofokc.tumblr.com/post/32763805834/no-questions-just-adulation-pages-like-this-are
\textsuperscript{81} Ibid.
Oh hey I made the site. I'd like to confirm with you that I removed my fedora from my household months ago. Just never got around to up-dating the old page. <3 you guys for spreading the truth, ashamed I ever wore one in the first place.  

FOOKC’s response was characteristically enthusiastic: ‘!!! testimonials r so inspiring.’ It is a gesture of enthusiasm for having achieved some level of influence, as well as an extension of acceptance and beneficence. The tumblr author is “inspired” and her language is a clear departure from her usually dry commentary on the site. Like the previous commenter’s testimonial, another former-Fedora wearer featured on the site wrote in simply, ‘I’m one of the recently-posted fedoras. Happy to say I’ve seen the light.’ FOOKC replied with a jubilant ‘hallelujah’. It is plain that misandristcutie derives more fun engaging with her fans and like-minded readers than from shaming Fedora culture, which is more like a chore. Further, she seems genuine in her excitement at the possibility of the ‘conversion’ of those she criticises. But to be effective at this exercise of a form of cultural criticism, being highly critical of the trappings and tropes of PUA and ‘nice guy’ culture, and the sexism of OK Cupid users, the site relies on the persuasive power of shaming.

**Shame’s reintegrative or stigmatizing potential**

There is a moral question hanging over this use of ‘shaming’ worth examining in some detail, namely whether it is appropriate to use shaming as an activist strategy at all. Shaming tactics appear to have reached a level of mainstream awareness beyond the tumblr shaming genre, with a July 2013 Wired editorial in which Laura Hudson argues somewhat hyperbolically that, ‘shaming, it seems, has become a core

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83 Ibid.
competency of the Internet, and it’s one that can destroy both lives and livelihoods.” Hudson discusses the unfortunate result of the incident at Pycon 2013 in which Adria Richards shamed two men via Twitter, posting a picture of them and their faces, which were swiftly identified, for making inappropriate jokes at the conference. In classic Wired fashion the editorial foregoes consideration of the power disparities involved based on historical, gendered, or racial factors instead focusing solely on the more technical power resulting from one party possessing a large network of followers on Twitter, in this case, Richards herself. There is a sense in which this focus is understandable – as I outlined above, the victims of such instances of public shaming, particularly those who pose no immediate danger to others and who do not need to be stopped so much as corrected, are reasonably justified in asking why they are made an example of. Richards’ actions at Pycon join other instances of shaming that Hudson’s editorial mentions, identifying what appears to be a growing movement among women and minorities more widely cultivating agonistic activist strategies online, everywhere from Twitter to Tumblr, and even in the online gaming service Xbox Live, somewhat surprising given its player culture that is notoriously hostile to women and minorities.

Most critical in her appraisal of the use of shaming is Jill Locke (2007), who brings a deliberative democratic perspective to the issue of the deployment of shame, asking valuable questions about its appropriateness. She begins by noting that shaming tactics, particularly those involved with protest and activist movements,

[have a] long and proud tradition within feminist, gay and lesbian, civil rights, and labor politics. From muckrakers to lefty bloggers to progressive marchers, shaming occupies a well-established place in the activist’s toolkit.

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88 Ibid., p.146.
Condensing a wealth of somewhat divergent scholarship on the issue of shame, and particularly shame as experienced by women, Locke cautions against shame’s unilateral utility, for ‘complicating this… is the extent to which shame has been deployed against [feminist activist] concerns.’ For Locke, all forms of shame appear implicated by this history of hegemonic deployment, and she cites a number of occasions in which shame was used to undermine progressive goals, such as by supporters of the (US) Defense Against Marriage Act, during certain state level bans on same-sex-marriage and she notes that it’s often deployed by anti-welfare and anti-gay activists.

Here it is worth introducing the theory of shame proposed by the criminologist John Braithwaite, as elaborated by Elspeth Probyn:

The core idea in Braithwaite’s articulation of shaming is that shame can be either reintegrative or stigmatizing. It all depends on the context in which shaming takes place. Braithwaite took the idea originally from a New Zealand legal initiative that had been based on Maori traditions. It is argued that within close communities, shaming the offender works better than other more formal sanctions, because individuals care about what their family and friends think about them.

Braithwaite’s conception of both the positive potential of reintegrative shaming and the dangers of stigmatizing shame comes from a pragmatic position on human behavior and criminality that is rare in a climate of extremes. His approach has a clarity and surprising lucidity to it, as according to Braithwaite, ‘people comply with the law most of the time not through fear of punishment, or even fear of shaming, but because criminal behaviour is simply abhorrent to them.’ Braithwaite also maintains there is a powerful connection between shame and socialisation or moral conduct, citing

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89 Ibid., p.147.
90 Ibid.
the moral-symbolic content of shame as a powerful socialising force in an individual’s development. This is a critical point about the effect of shaming:

Shaming is more pregnant with symbolic content than punishment. Punishment is a denial of confidence in the morality of the offender by reducing norm compliance to a crude cost-benefit calculation; shaming can be a reaffirmation of the morality of the offender by expressing personal disappointment that the offender should do something so out of character, and, if the shaming is reintegrative, by expressing personal satisfaction in seeing the character of the offender restored.

Braithwaite maintains that, when possible, shaming is actually a better mechanism for maintaining a moral order than punishment. So powerful is the effect of shaming on maintaining this order that Braithwaite observes it in action in Japanese ceremonies that perform reintegrative shame: ‘the moral order derives a very special kind of credibility when even he who has breached it openly comes out and affirms the evil of the breach’. This echoes the above comment from a former ‘fedora wearer’ who was ‘happy’ to have sworn off wearing this cultural indicator of sexism, only too happy to have ‘seen the light’.

The reintegration occurs via apology, and what Goffman calls disassociation, in which one splits from and repudiates the former offending self. Similarly, I would suggest that this disassociation from the self also extends to the things and habits that the past self was associated with, from wearing fedoras to holding sexist attitudes – a form of self-recomposition via repudiation.

However Braithwaite acknowledges that ‘shaming can be both reintegrative and disintegrative, and... much turns on this distinction.’ Indeed, Braithwaite emphasises the importance of the offer of reconciliation and the possibility of

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93 Ibid., p.72.
94 Ibid., pp.72-3.
95 Ibid., p.74.
97 Braithwaite, Crime, Shame and Reintegration, p.76.
reintegration in avoiding stigmatizing shame, dependent on a context of respect. Probyn summarises the conditions for reintegrative shame, noting that:

The capacity for interdependency is crucial to a good outcome of shaming, as is a context of respect. In this way, “reintegrative shaming communicates disapproval within a continuum of respect for the offender: the offender is treated as a good person who has done a bad deed.”

Misandristcutie’s criticisms of the fedora wearers, it should be noted, rarely extend to necessary judgments of character – usually instead limited to relational descriptions and emotive reactions, such as finding their appearance ‘scary’ etc. This perhaps holds open the door to reintegration, in which the ‘offending’ Fedora wearer repudiates the trappings of a dangerous or deleterious culture and all the objects associated with it. I want to suggest that it may be this very important and contingent extension of reconciliation is which is what Locke is recognizing and reacting to, with the alternative being a stigmatizing shame – precisely the kind of shaming that feminist activists would be most likely subject to. Especially since the moral regimes of these anti-gay, anti-welfare and anti-feminist cultures cannot countenance – cannot reconcile, and therefore cannot reintegrate – the existence or presence of women without ‘repudiating’ their feminist beliefs. Adding to the case for the utility of a feminist reintegrative shame, Probyn notes that:

it makes a certain sense that the subordinated may have more nuanced skills at shaming than the privileged. The common sense of this proposition is evidence in shaming slogans used by queers and feminists: from the queer epithet “breeders,” directed at straights (and indeed the appellation “straight”), to the more complex equations familiar to feminism, such as “porn is the theory, rape the practise” and “a woman needs a man like a fish needs a bicycle.”

It is worth taking on Locke’s appropriate concern for the shamed, as the generosity of her attitude of care represents an important component of the context of respect so

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99 Probyn, Blush, p.87.
important to establishing Braithwaite’s ‘reintegrative shame,’ rather than the often toxic and exclusionary ‘stigmatizing shame’. Similarly, this strategy precisely appears to get around the problem of the nonhuman with a human face. Insofar as the human face presents a practical and ethical restriction on what actions are appropriate or justified in taking against a deleterious nonhuman, reintegrative shaming potentially reconstitutes a nonhuman (here fedora culture, elsewhere other network objects) by singling out the human, extracting them to a degree from the network object, and by in this case managing to extend the opportunity of reintegration it thereby completes the disentanglement of the human. The approach is to some degree generalizable to other human and nonhuman entanglements, like the case of Miles Ezell who is still part of Transocean/BP and who might (and here we must speculate somewhat) be shamed out of his attachment (in both emotional and employment senses) to the company if a compelling moral argument could be marshaled that was able to find purchase within his conscience. This type of activism maintains the right to look, seeing a real human entangled within this network object and, through a context of respect and by expressing real concern, suggests the repudiation of, for instance, the fedora wearing self, extending the opportunity of reintegration. Reintegrative shaming, then, when successful plucks humans like these young men from their deleterious cultural environs, the network object trappings of PUA/fedora culture, and ideally offers them a place in a better community or network. Without denying the possibility of attachments and affinities that are not as susceptible to shaming, the same process seems generally applicable whenever we encounter a nonhuman with a human face.

**Shaming the human face of the nonhuman**

It’s worth emphasising that, in light of the above discussion, the impetus behind the shaming FOOKC engages in does not seem to be one of retaliation, adding credence to my reading of the shaming it engaged in as reintegrative. When asked whether anyone ever writes in with angry comments or asks for their image to be removed from the site, FOOKC replied, ‘never had a request to be taken down but i’d certainly honor their wishes if they asked!! ofc it would be sad cuz i treasure my
nerds.\textsuperscript{100} While this response could be interpreted as condescension, in the context of her other comments it reads to me as earnest, if cloaked in the particular typo-strewn mode of writing prevalent on Tumblr which tends to mimic slang, orality and play,\textsuperscript{101} as well as earlier forms of ‘text speak’. Eschewing capitalisation, this mode of writing seems to prefer personalisation and immediacy over carefully crafted and cultivated expressions (fitting with theories around microblogging in general as oriented towards ‘real time’).\textsuperscript{102} In the context of the blog and the rest of FOOKC’s comments, I read misandristic’s comments about ‘treasuring’ her nerds as sincere, as an expression of care, an extension of the possibility of reintegration – in other words, as an exercise in the right to look, personalising her writing in order to heighten the sense of a real human – a human face – behind the site.

Similarly, when informed (again, via anonymous question) that someone had been visiting the profiles of the people FOOKC had featured, expressing that they seemed ‘like solidly decent people’, and asked whether FOOKC thought the blog was bullying, FOOKC replied (again, in the particular Tumblr speak) ‘I don’t mean 2 hurt anyone I just want 2 laugh at bad hats.’\textsuperscript{103} This comment, posted in the period towards the beginning of FOOKC’s existence and perhaps before the full critique of fedora culture was worked out (led in part by the more explicitly activist educational work of \textit{Nice Guys of OK Cupid} as mentioned above) perhaps explains the retreat into insistence on ‘laughing at bad hats’. I understand her comment as possibly being an expression of not quite understanding her own project in FOOKC, resulting in a poor apologia for the shaming of their wearers and the complexities involved with the

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item \textsuperscript{100} \textit{Fedoras of OK Cupid}, 2012a, http://fedorasofokc.tumblr.com/post/31061899179/do-people-ever-get-mad-and-ask-you-to-take-their
\item \textsuperscript{101} Brenda Danet, \textit{Cyberpl@y: Communicating Online} (Oxford: Berg, 2001), p.6.
\item \textsuperscript{103} \textit{Fedoras of OK Cupid}, 2012d, http://fedorasofokc.tumblr.com/post/32648228858/i-go-to-the-profiles-of-some-of-the-people-you-post-on
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responsible treatment of other humans online, but nevertheless one that retreats from commentary on the person (and stigmatising shame). It can be read as an attempt to objectify the shaming, so that the object itself (the fedora hat, the nonhuman) becomes the target of shame, and not the people themselves, but the difficulty and contingency of expressing this argument is great, requiring a more complex articulation than simply wanting to laugh at bad hats. The late FOOKC seemed to better grasp this issue, and located the source of shame as being the sexist fedora culture, a different and much more tenacious nonhuman than merely the visible hat. As expressed above, I view the attempt at shaming the fedora wearer out of their sexist habits as an explicit attempt to detach them from this context more than the hat. It is an activism attempting a recomposition of objects – recomposing ‘sexism’ and patriarchal culture without them, and ushering them into a new object, a reintegrative feminist community.

The relative failure of the ‘bad hats’ explanation also serves as a reminder of the potential human cost of shaming, the importance of the right to look – to see and mutually acknowledge one another – further underscoring the tenacity of the problem of the nonhuman with a human face. For these ‘faces’ who appear as instances of the network objects of patriarchy and institutionalised sexism, and who appear in some sense to frustrate our immediate access to these network objects that are the true cause of so many problems, the experience of those shamed is likely to be, at the very least unpleasant, and acknowledging Braithwaite’s critique, potentially stigmatizing. Notwithstanding the earlier commenter who ultimately agreed with the critique and was ‘happy to say [they’d] seen the light.’ Indeed for those reintegrated into the community, there appears to be significant benefits (as we shall see below) to offset those ‘lost’ in a sense by no longer associating with patriarchy, and fedora culture. Misandristcutie’s withdrawal into ‘just wanting to laugh at bad hats,’ as well as her other comments regarding ‘treasuring [her] nerds’ seem to reflect the same kind of concern Jill Locke extended to the victims of shame above, even those ordinarily considered the enemies of or hostile to feminism.

It is also difficult to see how one could criticise fedora culture to the same extent without holding up individuals as examples, and this is perhaps the most pernicious aspect of the nonhuman with the human face. Even *Nice Guys of OK Cupid* with its brand of activist criticisms of the ‘nice guy’ trope closely aligned with fedora culture, attracted milder criticism (likely due to its comparatively more successful orientation towards shaming *behaviour*) from, for example, feminist author and critic Laurie Penny, who added that,

> there has to be an answer to these guys that isn’t just pointing and laughing. Calling out rapists and online predators is a more than legitimate strategy for dealing with abuse. But how are we supposed to handle common-or-garden sexist dickwaddery when it puts photos on the internet and asks to be loved.\(^\text{105}\)

Here Penny is getting at the problem using human faces as examples of nonhumans like sexism and patriarchy – her cognisance of the necessity of treating these men with more than just derision is a recognition of the responsibility we have towards other humans, and to treat them with a degree of humanity. Even she, however, couldn’t resist ending her criticisms of the site on a conciliatory note, wondering whether she herself ‘should stop being such a Nice Girl’ in light of the dubious obligation impressed upon women to “be understanding” with these often problematic men.\(^\text{106}\)

What I am suggesting here is that, whether deserved or not, reintegrative shaming as described by Braithwaite might be a partial “answer” to what Penny and similarly concerned activists are seeking; a partial answer to the dual nature of the problem of the nonhuman with a human face. Reintegrative shaming has the potential for hugely important and transformative reintegration for the shamed men, and the recomposition of otherwise “faceless” objects such as sexism and patriarchy, such that it no longer contains these individual men as they swear off sexist tropes and habits. It also does so in a way that is, crucially, relatively humane, hopefully neither traumatic nor stigmatizing.

\(^{106}\) Ibid.
The following comment demonstrates some of this potential. Shortly after the comment mentioned earlier that questioned whether FOOKC was bullying the young men featured on the site, another anonymous commenter, presumably male, wrote in the following, responding to the allegation:

the blog isn't bullying its a fucking mass intervention. i used to dress like an awful shitty nerd with mutton chops and a soul patch in college, then one time at a party i got taken to task by a sassy designer dude that was big into fashion. it stung a little at the time, but i took his advice and now i look like and actually am a guy that manages to get laid on occasion, so I owe you and the rest of the world's fashion police a debt of gratitude, much respect.\textsuperscript{107}

This comment makes something of a claim for the long-term practical \textit{benefit} or transformative value for the shamed, and his expression is coming from one that, presumably, is now reintegrated into the broader feminist community.

More general shaming tactics, such as the tumblr shaming genre described earlier, perform an important conceptual or rhetorical role, assembling a highly persuasive catalogue of instances and examples of tenacious network objects like sexism. But they do so with a certain risk – a risk of unjustly decontextualizing and flattening these individuals into ‘examples’, dehumanizing these individuals even as it makes them into the human face of some larger network object. The context of respect offered throughout the discursive activism of FOOKC and its reintegrative shaming remains a crucial component in making this a viable activist practise. Returning to Mirzoeff’s right to look, he quotes Gayatri Spivak explaining that,

The right to look is not voyeurism. It is an exchange of looks in which all parties both look and are looked at in the mutual pursuit of an understanding of the other. In Spivak’s terms, “we stand outside, but not as anthropologist; we stand

rather as reader with imagination ready for the effort of othering, however imperfectly, as an end in itself.”

Digital culture may somewhat temporally desynchronise the right to look, the act of looking, but as I have maintained throughout this chapter, we can still look and see as if we are being, or could be, looked back upon – constructing the other as we imagine they would do us. When they come and look at the tumblr they are featured on, looking upon what we have done to them, we should imagine them not as stigmatized, but as potential allies reintegrated into an imaginative, accepting community. It is important to uphold our responsibility to exercise the right to look, even on the internet.

**Conclusion**

This chapter has attempted to offer a theory for certain current tactics for action directed against deleterious nonhumans. Beginning by returning to the right to look, which entreats us to ‘look and see’, mutually constitute each other in our gaze, I described it as becoming troubled by the internet. But I maintain that it remains applicable when we recognize the performative nature of any recognition of the human, as behind the digital profile we can still decide to recognise the human being, the human face, even if the reciprocation of that look may not be immediately forthcoming. The right to look, I suggest, presents a unique problem however, for action directed at nonhumans bound together and entangled with humans themselves. Framed as a question of activism, in the first half of the chapter I discounted both the slacktivism critique, and the misleading truism that sees anonymity as prohibiting civility in anonymized publics. The nature of the relation between the internet and politics, I argued, was much more complex, and the nature of ‘politics’ much more than just questions of expressing individual preference.

In the second half of the chapter I read the site Fedoras of OK Cupid as an attempt at dealing with the problem of the nonhuman with a human face – acknowledging the

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person behind the fedora, so to speak, engaging in reintegrative shaming. I positioned this as a practise of recomposition of a network of objects that includes the human fedora wearer along with nonhumans such as figures that would otherwise be ‘faceless’ such as patriarchy, institutionalised sexism, etc. By ‘wearing’ a human face, however, a certain standard is imposed on activists and others who would like to act against network objects like BP, the patriarchy, etc. This is the problem of the nonhuman face, and Fedoras of OK Cupid addresses it by recomposing the object – through reintegrative shaming, extracting the human from their cultural network and offering them a place in another, a more accepting community – depriving the object of a human face while criticising the object itself. I concluded by contrasting this successful recomposition with other examples from the tumblr shaming genre which maintain less of a context of reintegrative shaming, and which suffer in contrast – failing, perhaps, to exercise their right to look, these other sites instead reduce the men featured in them down to examples, instances of the ‘privilege’ or ‘thoughtless’ complexes they are attached to. The failure of the right to look and see these men as more than just instantiations or examples, no matter how illuminating, comes at an unfortunate and perhaps avoidable human cost. The right to look is perhaps not just a right, but also something of a responsibility. In the following chapter I return to the theme of responsibility and examine a feature of the current condition that affords responsibility a particularly elusive and problematic character, an issue which has been lurking in the background of the problems described thus far but which is now brought out into the open. I diagnose responsibility as essentially permitted to circulate as a feature of contemporary capitalist realism, adding to an understanding of both how and why nonhumans and network objects – as we’ve seen in the case of both BP and patriarchal culture – avoid or escape responsibility.
Chapter 5 – The Circulation of Responsibility

In the 2013 Guillermo Del Toro film *Pacific Rim*, an exchange happens between the American scientist Newton Geiszler whose research eventually stops the Kaiju monsters and Ron Perlman’s character Hannibal Chau, a shady black-market salesman, one of the few figures seemingly thriving in the world of *Pacific Rim* – a world that is swiftly becoming hostile to all human life. Observing a religious service in the street, the exchange goes like this:

Chau: Look at ‘em! They believe that the Kaiju was sent from heaven! That the gods are expressing their displeasure with our behaviour… the silly bastards.
Geiszler: And what do you believe?
Chau: Well… I believe that kaiju bone powder is 500 bucks a pound.

What does it mean to believe in the *price* of kaiju bone powder? What is Perlman’s rather clichéd character expressing? And what type of person or view is he meant to represent? A similar exchange from a slightly earlier film, the first of the Daniel Craig James Bond films, 2006’s *Casino Royale* directed by Martin Campbell, depicts a moment involving the profession of a similar belief. Bond’s principle antagonist Le Chiffre is asked by the criminal facilitator who connects him with African warlord clients whether or not he believes in God. Le Chiffre replies that, no he doesn’t, instead he believes ‘in a reasonable rate of return.’

The following chapter is about this rather peculiar phenomenon – a belief in money above all, or money as the most reliable extant thing. Mark Fisher has described something similar to this attitude as the abiding ideology of our era, giving it the name capitalist realism. I am specifying the phenomenon slightly differently to him, however, describing a particular ontological expression of capitalist realism in the form of ‘money ontology’: literally believing or acting as if money is the only thing that exists, or the only thing that can tell us (or guarantee) what exists. This chapter is about the effects of this apparent “belief” in money, the effects of which are massively felt in the area of responsibility, but also have an impact on the other themes raised
throughout this thesis. This chapter is titled ‘the circulation of responsibility’ because this is precisely what occurs under the auspices of a ‘money ontology.’ Responsibility circulates ceaselessly, never fixing or attaching to anything permanently, and most importantly, never compelling or eliciting any kind of response as a result.

Accepting responsibility means accepting consequences – this principle is the entire basis of an activist conception of moral responsibility, which takes as a given that responsibility (when accepted, owned, assigned, etc.) entails some kind of consequential action in response. The nature of that response can always be negotiated and contested, but some response is assumed to be necessary. But frequently, and one doesn’t have to look far for examples, when we look around today we find that responsibility is instead shifted from one person or thing to the next, without any sense or possibility of finality which would allow for compelling consequences. We have seen a preview of this, to a degree, with the Deepwater Horizon, where corporate representatives argued that their corporate object was not responsible for reporting an accident because of a technicality, and when the responsible object that Captain Nguyen tried to assemble was strategically disassembled by the rhetorical defense that consisted of the eminently reasonable phrase, “a captain sleeps sometimes,” having the effect of arguing that this was not their responsibility and that it was unreasonable to expect it to be so. The result looks as though responsibility disappears, having evaded location in the object of Ezell or the two other supervisors, but examined from the perspective of money ontology, it is revealed that actually responsibility was circulated elsewhere. The problem that ensues from network responsibility and from this dissolving of responsibility into a network-object, and the inability to locate a single responsible object is, I argue, possible to view from another angle, by reconceptualising it as a problem of the circulation of responsibility and focusing on movements or shifts of responsibility. I argue that such a conception has the effect of reconfiguring what previously looked like an irresolvable dilemma, seeing as network objects persist and always will,¹ and hence responsibility will always possess the potential for dissolution into the network. When viewed from the perspective of circulation, however, we gain a new frame for examining this problem, one that opens

¹ See, for example: Bruno Latour, We Have Never Been Modern (Harvard University Press, 1993), particularly his discussion of the dual impulses to ‘purify’ what he calls hybrid objects into either ‘pure culture’ or ‘pure nature.’
up new responses besides capitulation and defeat in the face of the inevitability of the
network object.

The first half of this chapter takes up the task of describing the circulation of
responsibility, both symptomatically and in some sense causally. I draw heavily on
both David Graeber’s thesis in Debt, The First 5,000 Years, which outlines a particular
historical narrative and argues for a certain systematic relationship between money
and human sociality and civilization over the past several thousand years, as well as on
Mark Fisher’s Capitalist Realism which wonderfully diagnoses the ideology that a
money ontology is an exacerbation or culmination of (Fisher calls capitalist realism a
‘business ontology’ instead). My examples and my discussion draw on an eclectic
range of sources – the 80s electronica band The KLF and the artworks they produces
in their post-musical period focusing on the role and nature of money, an anonymous
journalist’s defense of ambulance chasing tactics in the media industry, and a
challenging theory about the influence of money on the rise of materialist philosophy.
In all, the first half of the chapter reconceptualises the problem of the responsible
object, attempting to demonstrate the role and foundation of circulation under money
ontology.

In terms of the three themes this thesis has so far discussed, money ontology and the
circulation of responsibility has a significant impact on all in a complex way. Most
obviously, however, money takes over as primary authorizing agent, becoming a trump
card for a certain kind of causality that excludes anything non-convertible to money
from the realm of legitimate causes and consideration, relegating all others to second-
class status. From any perspective other than that of money ontology, some thing must
be responsible – things do not just happen for no reason. But under money ontology
all claims of causality become provisional, never final, with the promise that
responsibility can just as easily shift elsewhere at any given point, and continue to do
so until it becomes inaccessible, obscured, or mired in so many shifts and
transformations that it is impossible to follow. Thus it is the ability to circulate
responsibility that becomes the defining problem of the network object. This

\[2\] Mark Fisher, Capitalist Realism: Is There Really No Alternative? (Winchester, UK: Zero
perspective is visible in part due to the specific nature of OOO, which is able to conceptualize and grant existence to objects and things in all types, sizes and scales.

Reconceptualised from the perspective of the movement or shifting of responsibility, we gain the ability to see that, far from responsibility disappearing in the network, it instead circulates, being shuffled around from object to object. From Transocean, or from BP, or from Ezell and his co-workers, to literally any other thing, often a thing that is either unnamed, difficult to pin down, or invisible. Since moral responsibility requires some degree or element of causal responsibility, which money ontology monopolizes, it can therefore never be properly affixed to any one thing with certainty. Instead it takes on money’s quality of endless circulability, forestalling any consequent action that would flow from attendant moral responsibility. This is the contemporary impasse that the circulation of responsibility represents.

While the reconceptualisation of the network object here does not ultimately “solve” the problem presented by money ontology, in the second half of the chapter I offer a response that is partial and somewhat speculative. What I propose is an odd sort of ritual, one that both aims to engender an increased awareness of the problem of the circulation of responsibility and alternative ways of conceptualizing the dissolution of responsibility that occurs whenever responsibility spreads or dissipates across a network-object.

The first component of this speculative project involves looking at the way in which popular ideas about the animacy of the world as vital and populated with animated agencies were systematically and deliberately eradicated during the historical period that saw the rise of what Silvia Federici calls ‘Mechanical Philosophy.’ According to Federici, the witch hunts and trials of the late middle ages (or the period of ‘primitive accumulation’ in Marx’s terms) coincided with a growing bourgeois drive towards mechanical ideas about the world and the human body. Both were reconceptualised as mechanical in order to create a regular and disciplined social body from which to draw a reliable workforce. Federici argues that this was a precondition for the emergence of early capitalism. I take this as a compelling reason to consider renewed

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visions of the world as vibrant and animated by different kinds of agencies, both human and non-human, rather than a material substance that conforms to various forms of human mastery. I pick up this line of analysis later in the chapter.

This chapter culminates however in a speculative imagining of a ritual which involves the earnest and sincere censuring or condemnation of an ‘animate’ nonhuman for the genuine harm it has caused. Taking inspiration from the truth and reconciliation commissions of South Africa and Sierra Leone, I present a speculative event in which, many years hence, the residents affected by the building of a dam (here imagined as the Three Gorges Dam) place legitimate blame and responsibility upon the dam itself for the serious ecological and social damage that it has caused. The ritual refuses the circulation of responsibility and the money ontology that it is underwritten by, instead reconsidering the nature of responsibility and multiplying it, rather than rationing it, apportioning it, and attempting to pass it around like the proverbial hot-potato. The ritual offers a useful outlet for the sense of being wronged or harmed in situations in which it is not possible to find any one responsible, in a manner similar to Ellul’s description of the impossibility of finding anyone responsible for the dam bursting. Through the ritual, a speculative justice is upheld for the human victims of the dam without causing further harm, and without capitulating to money ontology’s pernicious circulatory effects.

**Capitalist realism and the circulation of responsibility**

It seems obvious today that one cannot talk about moral responsibility at all without engaging with the curious contemporary development that finds it seemingly forever circulating in a restless pattern of constantly shifting blame and culpability. A corporation accepting moral responsibility for an environmental disaster, say, might bear quite a high cost both literally and figuratively, and in wishing to minimize or mitigate this cost (financial or otherwise), resort to a tactic of shifting this responsibility. This practice we might call an outsourcing of responsibility, one mirroring the outsourcing of labour to cheaper countries or workforces. I am giving this movement the name ‘the circulation of responsibility,’ and my first task is to explain how and why it occurs, and in what context.
An important idea informing this concept of the circulation of responsibility is Jodi Dean’s observations about the nature of contemporary ‘communicative capitalism’ and the way that circulation features prominently in the current highly technologized and mediated environment. Her emblematic example is the failure of democratic protest, specifically the Iraq War protests of 2003 which elicited no adequate or meaningful ‘response’ from the Bush administration:

Even when the White House acknowledged the massive worldwide demonstrations of February 15, 2003, Bush simply reiterated the fact that a message was out there, circulating – the protester had the right to express their opinions. He didn’t actually respond to their message. He didn’t treat the words and actions of the protestors as sending a message to him to which he was in some sense obligated to respond. Rather, he acknowledged that there existed views different from his own. There were his views and there were other views; all had the right to exist, to be expressed – but that in no way meant, or so Bush made it seem, that these views were involved with each other.4

What is important about Dean’s concept of communicative capitalism is that circulation becomes a force undermining all claims, deferring all judgment or comparison. Dean connects this with the power that financial markets (nonhumans, even the quintessential network-objects of our age) ‘acquire the capacity to discipline national governments,’5 and, she claims, ‘politics has become a domain of financially mediated and professionalized practises cantered on advertising, public relations and the means of mass communication.’6 If the logic of the market has come to dominate the contemporary landscape then it is no coincidence that responsibility would circulate in the same way that money circulates in the marketplace.

The ideology behind these changes has been diagnosed by Mark Fisher. He explains in his 2009 book that capitalist realism has installed a “business ontology” according

5 Ibid., p.55.
6 Ibid.
to which “it is simply obvious that everything in society… should be run as a business.”\textsuperscript{7}

According to this thinking, capitalism is the only possible organising principle of society, having been proven both successful in its victory over alternatives (such as communism and socialism\textsuperscript{8}) and even to some degree inescapable, unavoidable or inevitable. According to capitalist realist thinking, capitalism is not just one particular system or approach for organising society and distributing goods, but is in fact ‘the only game in town.’\textsuperscript{9}

This lack of ‘alternatives’ is a key feature of capitalist realism. Fisher borrows the slogan attributed to both Frederic Jameson and Slavoj Žižek – ‘that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than it is to imagine the end of capitalism’\textsuperscript{10} – to describe this limit. There are no alternatives. Unlike prior eras in which capitalism’s existence was at least challenged by strong social movements including not just the vague possibility, but the threat of existing communism, now ‘capitalism seamlessly occupies the horizons of the thinkable.’\textsuperscript{11} Indeed, it has become so ordinary, so unconscious to think and speak in the manner of capitalist realism, bandying phrases like “economic realities”, etc. that ‘the fact that capitalism has colonized the dreaming life of the population is so taken for granted that it is no longer worthy of comment.’\textsuperscript{12} It has become simply part of the intellectual furniture.

According to Fisher, capitalist realism is ideological, and on the whole invisible. We can’t point to any one thing and say “that’s capitalist realism,” instead we can only point to and observe its effects. In this way, it is remarkably similar to other contemporary objects which defy traditional analytical and descriptive frameworks. It is like climate change which itself becomes known entirely through abstract analysis of climate models and the massive data calculations involved. No single instance of warm weather counts as “evidence” of climate change (much as these events might sway

\textsuperscript{7} Fisher, \textit{Capitalist Realism}, p.17.
\textsuperscript{9} Fisher, \textit{Capitalist Realism}, p.15.
\textsuperscript{10} Ibid., p.2.
\textsuperscript{11} Ibid., p.8.
\textsuperscript{12} Ibid., p.8.
nonbelievers\textsuperscript{13}) even as climate change itself \textit{produces} more instances of felt-warm weather. Only the increased frequency and intensity of extreme weather counts as evidence for the changing in the climate. Timothy Morton has described climate change as a ‘hyperobject,’\textsuperscript{14} massively distributed in time and space, and such is the case with capitalist realism – instead of being distributed throughout the atmosphere of the planet it is deeply embedded in the psyche, within the discursive limits and assumptions held by millions – in what might usefully be thought of as our very \textit{common sense} of the present. It is also imbedded in a particular \textit{ontology}, an ontology of money which I shall return to in a moment.

This radically distributed, networked, even cybernetic nature of the capitalist realist system presents a problem for responsibility, and Fisher lauds Deleuze’s recognition of Kafka as the supreme theorist of this aspect of it.\textsuperscript{15} Fisher claims that,

\begin{quote}
The supreme genius of Kafka was to have explored the \textit{negative atheology} proper to Capital: the centre is missing, but we cannot stop searching for it or positioning it. It is not that there is nothing there – it is that what \textit{is} there is not capable of exercising responsibility.\textsuperscript{16}
\end{quote}

This centerlessness is ‘radically unthinkable.’\textsuperscript{17} Its utter inability to exercise responsibility is not, however, a form of \textit{irresponsibility}, such that it could be successfully accused or shamed in any way. Instead,

\begin{quote}
A moral critique of capitalism, emphasizing the ways in which it leads to suffering, only reinforces capitalist realism. Poverty, famine and war can be presented as an inevitable part of reality, while the hope that these forms of suffering could be eliminated easily painted as naive utopianism. Capitalist
\end{quote}


\textsuperscript{15} Fisher, \textit{Capitalist Realism}, p.22.

\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., p.65.

\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., p.64.
realism can only be threatened if it is shown to be in some way inconsistent or untenable; if, that is to say, capitalism's ostensible 'realism' turns out to be nothing of the sort.\textsuperscript{18}

But what does this view consist of? How did we get to the point in which capitalist ideology makes successful claims as to the nature of the world, the universe, and everything? What leads to the ‘realism’ of inevitable poverty, war, and famine? Under capitalist realism, accepted thinking now gives money \textit{the power to decide} what is and is not real, functioning as the standard against which reality is measured. This is new, even for capitalism, which had no (or far less) trouble acknowledging ‘realities’ external to capitalism prior to the free market fundamentalism that arose in the 80s now commonly known as neoliberalism.\textsuperscript{19} Marx’s writing acknowledged this as a contradiction in the nature of capitalism itself, a conflict between the need for continual (and hence, limitless) growth and the inevitably limited and finite nature of markets. Since the turn to neoliberalism in the west begun around the 1980s, former ‘common sense’ attitudes towards money and the nature of economies have been overturned, with much of the Keynesian and Social Democratic orthodoxies overturned and undermined by figures like Milton Friedman and the thinking coming out of the Chicago School of Economics. What has replaced it is what I am calling money ontology.

\textbf{Money ontology}

A money ontology, like any ontology, is a system of describing or explaining \textit{what exists}. Money ontology then, not unlike Object-Oriented Ontology in a way, makes the claim that \textit{money} is really what exists, and that it is, in some sense, \textit{reality itself}. In a less strong form we could say that money ontology grants money the power to be \textit{arbiter} of what exists. In this way money is often treated as containing some kind of unique power to describe or decide what reality is. This is the basic impetus of capitalist realism which Fisher identified, with the impersonal power of money or capital treated as having precisely this manner, hence the claimed ‘realism’ inherent to it. But there are good historical reasons to consider an explicit connection between

\textsuperscript{18} Ibid., p.16
\textsuperscript{19} See: David Harvey, \textit{A Brief History of Neoliberalism} (Oxford University Press, 2005).
money and metaphysics, if not necessarily to endorse a money ontology so much as to exhume its source. Specifically, the emergence of money (and specifically *coin or bullion* money, as distinct from credit money, in David Graeber’s terms) in what has been given the name ‘the axial age’ by philosopher Karl Jaspers, can be argued to have had a significant impact, even the primary cause of the rise of certain philosophical tendencies, particularly early forms of materialism.

But what actually is money, and particularly why would one conception of it lead to a particular philosophical perspective on the nature of the universe? This is admittedly only a small portion of Graeber’s overall thesis, and difficult to do justice to in summary. But in short, Graeber’s argument is that throughout human history we have experienced cyclical periods in which common conceptions of money – that is, what money is or consists of – have oscillated between seeing money as coin/bullion (a valuable object in and of itself) and money as credit (an abstract representation of a debt owed, an account kept, upheld by social agreement or convention, by trust, etc.). The former is represented in the modern economic orthodoxy since Adam Smith, with the latter position of credit money theorists known as ‘chartalism’ (the Latin word *charta* means ‘token’) which has been typically afforded a rather more fringe position in mainstream economics. The modern discipline of economics, which Smith effectively created has allowed us to separate human activity into distinct spheres, with economic activity separate from and of a distinctly different order to others like politics, lovemaking, play, labour, etc. Graeber argues that,

> it’s money that [has] made it possible for us to imagine ourselves in the way economists encourage us to do: as a collection of individuals and nations whose main business is swapping things.

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22 Graeber goes into more detail about the origin myth of economics, dedicating a chapter to discussing the complete lack of any historical basis to Smith’s logic that money superseded ‘inefficient’ primitive barter economies (for which there is no historical or anthropological evidence). This is unfortunately beyond the scope of the current chapter, however see Chapter 2 of *Debt: The First 5,000 Years*.

However money by itself was not enough, and Graeber argues that the role played by state and government policy in encouraging and fostering this imagining was crucial.\textsuperscript{24} A less orthodox perspective on the nature of money, however, has existed in the form of ‘chartalism’ or state and credit theories of money which,

insisted that money is not a commodity but an accounting tool. In other words, it is not a “thing” at all. You can no more touch a dollar or a deutschmark than you can touch an hour or a cubic centimeter. Units of currency are merely abstract units of measurement.\textsuperscript{25}

To summarise the competing views – economic orthodoxy sees money as a commodity, a valuable object that acts as the \textit{medium of exchange} (explaining the importance of the myth of barter to modern economics) whereas the state/credit theory of money treats is as an abstraction. It was this tension between object and idea that Graeber argues influenced early materialist philosophers.

While it might seem implausible to think that there is something fundamental about the nature of money that changes the way we think or behave, Graeber, articulating the argument of a number of prior researchers including British historian Richard Seaford,\textsuperscript{26} actually suggests that there is some strong evidence to believe this might be the case. In his discussion of the rise of coin during the axial age, roughly designated as the period from 800BC to 600AD, Graeber describes the social-political structures that arose and which facilitated, and to a degree necessitated, the first conceptions of coin money, and the effects that this new way of conducting transactions had on philosophers and conceptions of the world. Following the spread of coinage throughout the Greek cities of Lydia, Ionia and eventually Miletus, Seaford notes that we find the emergence of the first materialist philosophers – Thales, Anaximander, and Anaximenes. All lived in Miletus, which Graeber notes, ‘was also the commercial center of the region, and, perhaps, the first city in the world where everyday market

\textsuperscript{24} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{25} Ibid., p.46.
transactions came to be carried out primarily in coins instead of credit.27 In perhaps the most illuminating anecdote, Graeber notes that coins themselves, in their axial age context seemed to suggest a certain way of viewing the world. For the early Greeks,

[money] was something that could turn into everything... Gold, shaped into coins, is a material substance that is also an abstraction. It is both a lump of metal and something more than a lump of metal – it’s a drachma or an obol, a unit of currency which (at least if collected in sufficient quantity, taken to the right place at the right time, turned over to the right person) could be exchanged for absolutely any other object whatsoever.28

It’s easy to see how a materialism might emerge from such a context, since coin seems to embodying the very tension between object and idea mentioned above. Not only do you now have an object that seems to instantiate an incredible creative power – becoming almost anything under the right conditions – but this object is also made of precious stuff (gold, silver, etc.). Graeber summarizes Seaford’s argument about Greek philosophy and materialism:

A coin was a piece of metal, but by giving it a particular shape, stamped with words and images, the civic community agreed to make it something more. But this power was not unlimited. Bronze coins could not be used forever; if one debased the coinage, inflation would eventually set in. It was as if there was a tension there, between the will of the community and the physical nature of the object itself. Greek thinkers were suddenly confronted with a profoundly new type of object, one of extraordinary importance – as evidenced by the fact that so many men were willing to risk their lives to get their hands on it – but whose nature was a profound enigma.29

But the effects of the shift in thinking in this period, as described by thinkers such as German philosopher Karl Jaspers who initially gave it the name ‘the axial age,’30 was

27 Graeber, Debt, p.245.
28 Ibid.
29 Ibid., p.246.
30 Jaspers, The Origin and Goal of History.
larger even than simply inspiring materialist philosophy. Graeber argues this period’s resolute materialism (in both the philosophical sense and the more ordinary sense of material gain) saw ‘a new way of thinking about human motivation, a radical simplification of motives that made it possible to begin speaking of concepts like “profit” and “advantage” – and imagining that this was what people are really pursuing, in every aspect of existence.’

Graeber notes that ‘a striking feature’ of the surviving written work produced during this period is its resolute materialism. Goddesses and gods, magic and ritual status systems all either disappear or are sidelined, no longer treated as ends in themselves but yet as mere tools to be used for the pursuit of material gain.

Throughout this period, and largely as a result of these new materialist conceptions, oppositional intellectuals and movements were forced to either ‘adopt the reigning terms of debate, or try to come up with a diametrical inversion’ of these new materialist conceptions and Graeber offers examples of the new religions and philosophies of transcendence that unavoidably ‘[provided] a mirror image of market logic’ of the materialists.

If there was some function played by coin money in facilitating the creative potential of impersonal transactions giving rise to the early materialist thinking, it’s easy to see how something similar might exist in our current historical context. Money remains some kind of stuff which can become any other object (provided certain conditions are met, as in Graeber’s example above of taking it to the right person, having the right amount, etc.) and a similar temptation exists to start thinking of money as the ultimate real substance in the world – or that in a similar way one might index the stuff that does make up the world using the same abstraction or system of accounting that money represents. Capitalist realism seems especially effective at encouraging this. What does the phrase “economic realities” suggest except that economics is in fact reality; that it is some kind of privileged object or metric of reality.

31 Graeber, Debt, p.239.
32 Ibid.
33 Ibid., p.241.
34 Ibid.
The fundamental experience of modern consumerism also still conforms to the contours outlined by Seaford. If anything the dimension of abstraction has only expanded, and I need not provide examples of how the value of money remains paramount, with contemporary culture remaining so worshipfully oriented towards it. Money, in western society, still has the ability to become almost anything given a) enough of it, and b) the ability to find what one wants it to become, and which has greatly aided by globalization and the processes of increasing connection and networking driven by the internet. The experience of turning $799 worth of money into a new iPod at the counter of an Apple store remains the same. The fact that we never even see the stuff itself, whether gold coins or paper money, instead moving around figures in databases, only seems to reinforce its abstract power.

The effect and significance of capitalist realism and this money ontology now should be obvious – if money is allowed to decide what is ‘real,’ becoming the final arbiter of what counts under capitalist realism then causality and causal responsibility will be more than greatly affected – they become effectively enslaved to money and economic perspectives. Anything that lies beyond the realms of finance is then relegated to, at best, secondary or provisional status, forever awaiting the pending final assessment of economically viability etc. At worst, other causal regimes and their assessments will be castigated as unreal, inauthentic or impossible. Even if money ontology is not consistently applied or always invoked, the specter of ‘economic realisms’ lurking behind other kinds of explanations will always have some kind of skewing effect – in light of this I’d even argue that much of the machismo of certain contemporary explanations, scientific or otherwise, become viewable as so much desperate jockeying for status and legitimacy, a squabble for second place beneath the overwhelming ideological surety of money as determinant. Scientific causality itself bends over backwards at times to conform to the logic of economic rationality, explaining its utility and use in these terms. Take for instance the kinds of defenses marshaled for expensive scientific projects like the Large Hadron Collider. The CERN organization which operates the machines has a website called ‘The LHC Machine Outreach’ listing reasons which are counted for the LHC machine and it’s generative or

productive function. It notes under the heading ‘investment’ that ‘a lot CERN’s budget is spent on hardware produced by European industry.’\(^\text{37}\) Granted, this is the second last item on the list, but the very existence of a need for “outreach” and justification of the LHC speaks to the nature of these times. The fact that an internationally renowned research organization like CERN needs to justify its activities – that the pursuit of knowledge itself is no longer enough, and no longer marshals the kind of authority to automatically attract funding – speaks volumes about the current political economic climate, what the real authority is today (capital), and the ideological dominance of capitalist realism.

In other words, the effect of money ontology is to, in the very last instance, dictate the conceptual limits of both causal and moral responsibility by adding the suspicion that money or capital will always be lurking somewhere behind any otherwise sufficiently strong cause. This type of suspicion afflicts even those on the left, who as a result are now tempted to jump to conclusions of capitalism’s actual totalising power, rather than it’s contingent, ideological one (that is, a diagnosis of capitalist realism). It is important to acknowledge that no matter how totalizing the capitalist system may seem to be, there are limits to its ability to capitalize or financialise all human relations. Graeber’s Debt offers us a more realistic and anthropologically grounded understanding of this dimension to human life and existence. As part of his grand thesis on the nature of human moral–economic relations he finds throughout the past five thousand years of human civilization three broad categories or types of social relations amongst people, grouping them under the headings of communism, hierarchy and exchange. Exchange, according to Graeber ‘is all about equivalence’\(^\text{38}\) whether that be equivalence of words, goods, money, or whatever, and that ‘there’s a sense that both sides are keeping accounts, and that, unlike what happens in communism, which always partakes of a certain notion of eternity, the entire relationship can be cancelled out, and either party can call an end to it at any time.’\(^\text{39}\) There is no necessary sense of ongoing social ties associated with exchange type relations, and Graeber notes that it also ‘implies formal equality – or at least the potential for it’ noting that, ‘this is

\(^{37}\) Ibid.

\(^{38}\) Graeber, Debt, p.103.

\(^{39}\) Ibid.
precisely why kings have such trouble with it.’ 40 Hierarchical relations, on the contrary, ‘do not tend to operate by reciprocity at all.’ 41 These are more like the typical relationship between a lord and a vassal, though in different times and places the nature of these relationships have been quite varied.

The most interesting and pervasive of the three general types of human relations Graeber describes, however, is a notion of ‘communism’ that he rehabilitates and differentiates from the communism of the Soviet Union which he dubs ‘epic’ or ‘mythic’ communism (i.e., state based communism). He notes that,

“Communism” is not some magical utopia and neither does it have anything to do with ownership of the means of production. It is something that exists right now – that exists, to some degree, in any human society, although there has never been one in which everything has been organized in that way, and it would be difficult to imagine how there could be. All of us act like communists a good deal of the time. None of us acts like a communist consistently. 42

Communism means, then, simply acting in accordance with the maxim: “from each according to their abilities, to each according to their needs” and in fact, one of the most striking examples of communism in action is found within the capitalist workplace: ‘If someone fixing a broken pipe says, “Hand me the wrench,” his co-worker will not, generally speaking say, “And what do I get for it?” – even if they are working for Exxon-Mobil, Burger King, or Goldman Sachs.’ 43 This startling insight into ordinary day-to-day interactions presents a powerful corrective to the pervasive sense of capitalism’s totalizing power.

But there is one final feature of money, important to note as it is the final piece in the puzzle of the circulation of responsibility. Money, more than anything else, and in spite of its tendency under capitalism to accumulate, needs most of all to circulate – or at least, it needs the potential, the context in which it is possible to circulate. At any

40 Ibid., p.109.
41 Ibid.
42 Ibid., p.95.
43 Ibid., pp.95-6.
time a majority of the money that exists becomes concentrated in one place or one person’s hands, a kind of crisis would occur. Money would cease to function as money as we know it and other methods of conducting and conducting transactions would emerge. Under money ontology it is this dimension of money that is extended to everything (since according to this view money is representative of reality) and which results in a situation amenable to and enabling of the circulation of responsibility. The unlikely story of Bill Drummond and Jimmy Cauty, a Scottish and British art duo involved with a series of strange music and art rituals throughout the 1980s and 1990s demonstrates this.

Money, circulation and ‘the band that burned a million pounds’

In 1994, two musicians turned artists decided to burn a million British pounds. Bill Drummond and Jimmy Cauty, who had made their millions as the chart-topping experimental band ‘The KLF’, had recently given up on the music industry and briefly turned to more explicitly artistic ventures, exhibiting a number of eclectic works in galleries and other, more unlikely places. Drummond and Cauty had already gained a reputation as media manipulators through their antics in the music industry, and they were treated with some ambivalence by an art world that treated their attempts at transformation into serious artists with a mixture of wariness and bemusement. Exasperated with the art world in a manner similar to their exasperation with, what they saw as the increasingly money dominated UK music industry of the early 90s, in their final act as art-focused ‘K Foundation’ the pair took a briefcase containing a million pounds to the island of Jura in the Scottish Highlands. Holed up in an abandoned boatshed, the two men burnt the whole amount, having invited a filmmaker and friend along to document it all on video. The film of the act, ‘The KLF burn a million quid,’ was shown around the UK for the next several months eliciting varying degrees of outrage, confusion, revulsion and even disgust as

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44 Graeber notes that throughout history whenever Kings would recall all the money in the kingdom for reminting, economic transactions hardly ceased as a result. Instead, and in keeping with his thesis, elaborate credit systems seemed to take its place as a result. See: Graeber, Debt, Chapter 3, and also pp.282-83.
people failed to see the point, the purpose, the merit, or the art of the action (the video can currently be viewed on YouTube\textsuperscript{45}).

In his book \textit{The KLF: Chaos, Magic and the Band that Burned a Million Pounds}\textsuperscript{46}, John Higgs retells the story of Drummond and Cauty and The KLF, attempting to put this almost radically unthinkable or unimaginable act in context. Responses to the screening of the film tended to confirm a suspicion about the pair that had developed in the public’s mind after their many attention-grabbing stunts, rituals and generally bizarre behaviour – namely, that they were a pair of ‘attention seeking assholes.’\textsuperscript{47} As Higgs notes, however, this explanation doesn’t really make sense or explain why they burnt the million pounds. There are, of course, plenty of attention seeking assholes who don’t go around destroying one million pounds in hard currency. But even more importantly, it misses the ambiguity and uncertainty that Drummond and Cauty themselves had about their own actions.

Higgs’ answer, indeed his whole approach to telling the mysterious, uncanny tale of the KLF of the 80s and early 90s is a bizarre one, and it takes the full length of the book to explain, developing a truly \textit{weird} thesis: a thesis about the truly agential, active and creative power of the nonhuman we know as an idea, a story, or a narrative:

I started to wonder if there was such a thing as a story that no one knows they are in – least of all the main characters. Could a complete narrative develop by itself with no one guiding or steering it? You would instinctively think not, yet whenever I thought about the KLF story and Cauty and Drummond’s confusion about their actions I couldn’t shake the idea that there was nobody involved who could hear the story being told.\textsuperscript{48}

Higgs narrative is full of odd approaches – causality in the form of a narrative, gripping and taking hold of two willing subjects (or acolytes), Cauty and Drummond,

\textsuperscript{45} “Watch the K Foundation Burn a Million Quid [KLF],” Youtube, January 9, 2012. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q33LPpx0QsY
\textsuperscript{46} John Higgs, \textit{The KLF: Chaos, Magic and the Band who Burned a Million Pounds}, (Phoenix, 2013).
\textsuperscript{47} Ibid., p.7.
\textsuperscript{48} Ibid., pp.14-15.
a story that culminates in the burning of a million pounds. Higgs withholds his own conclusion as to the purpose of the pair’s burning of money, saving its explanation for the denouement maintaining a classically suspenseful mystery, letting important context and history be established first. But the actual reason for burning the million pounds is entirely relevant to the circulation of responsibility and the dual nature of money as both medium of exchange and also powerful object in its own right.

At the time of the burning, the KLF had consciously left the music industry behind, and begun calling themselves ‘The K Foundation’, trying to have their artworks exhibited in galleries. The focus of their art was only clear in hindsight, and it was entirely about money. Drummond, interviewed a few years after the burning, confirms as much:

> I was only able to articulate it to myself afterwards with hindsight. They [the art world/the press/the public] thought we were using our money to make a statement about art, and really what we were doing was using our art to make a statement about money.49

Higgs argues that this line of thinking echoes and confirms comments made by Cauty about an earlier project prior to the burning of the million pounds in which the pair nailed money onto planks of wood and tried to have the results exhibited in galleries. This other project was explicitly (but again, only consciously in hindsight) an attempt at stopping money from being money, or more specifically, stopping money from working properly in its circulatory function:

> ‘We nail [the money] to a bit of wood so that it can’t function as it wants to. It’s to do with controlling the money. Money tends to control you if you’ve got it, it dictates what you have to do with it, you either spend it, give it away, invest it… We just wanted to be able to control it.’50

Higgs argues, somewhat facetiously though I am inclined to take it more seriously than him, that the pair burned the million pounds in an attempt at revealing and

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49 Bill Drummond, quoted in Ibid, p.237.
50 Jimmy Cauty, quoted in Ibid.
ritually dispelling the power of what is essentially capitalist realism. Higgs summarizes the symbolic meaning of their act, and the importance of destroying the money rather than simply giving it away, contrary to many of the outraged responses from the viewing public who could hardly countenance the immense waste that the burning of a million pounds represented when compared to, say, donating it to a charity. Demonstrating an understanding that is decidedly aware of the nature of capitalist realism, Higgs notes that:

They couldn’t give it away or spend it, because that’s what money wants. It wants to circulate. That’s what gives it power. Even if you nail it to a piece of wood, someone will come along sooner or later to steal it and set it free. Physically destroying it is the only way to stop it. But before it can be stopped there first needs to be the idea that it can be stopped, and that it is not invincible. Up until then, this was largely unthinkable.  

The burning of the million pounds, then, was a powerful and almost ritualistic attempt at stopping the circulatory power of money the only way possible – through its utter destruction. For Higgs, it was the first such attempt at dispelling money’s power. Taking money out of circulation, stopping it from doing the one thing that it most wants to do, was the only response that Dummond and Cauty saw. Giving it away or donating it to a worthy cause wouldn’t have sufficed because even if they give it to a homeless shelter or some other charity the money could conceivably (and somewhat inevitably) find its way back to the hands of a capitalist entity such as a bank or the ultra-wealthy. There’s a truth to their reticence to circulate money, as well, in the inevitability that the money eventually would, by the very nature of capital’s tendency to accumulate, return to someone less scrupulous or ethical than them. The burning presented a unique response to this, a systematically informed rejection of the nature of capitalism itself. The end calculus is that no matter what The KLF did with their million pounds of money, it would almost certainly be used against their interests (or their ideals) and that there was absolutely no way to stop that happening… except by destroying the money, stopping its circulation.

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51 Higgs, The KLF, p.238.
Think of this – how often do we consider where our dollars will go after we have spent them? Whose pockets will they end up in, circulate through, and what will they do with them? This is almost never considered because we have been inculcated into the belief that what others do with their money is none of our business – being instead a matter of individual responsibility and discretion, and not one to be decided or interfered with collectively. This is in the DNA of capitalism. The ability to dissemble and dismiss any impulse to the kind of networked, systemic analysis that would reveal the ecology of associations and responsibilities is not the exception but the rule. Capitalist realism, overturning the previous post-war settlement that saw so much of the accumulated gains of the richest western citizens returned and distributed (circulated) according to social democratic notions of equality and fairness, has promulgated a new notion. Now, the faceless network object called ‘the market’ (which is never a ‘natural,’ or apolitical object-phenomenon, and which always emerges in tandem with the state and state policy\textsuperscript{32}) should decide what is right to do with one’s money (or what is rewarded). Ironically, the KLF’s decision about what to do with their money so fundamentally broke with the rules about the use or circulation of money as established by capitalist realism that it became a scandal, evidenced by how many people on both the left and right regularly reacted to it with outrage (and still do). It can barely even be countenanced or comprehended because it so utterly fails to conform to the circulatory market logic of exchange. Had the KLF bought a million pounds worth of assault rifles, landmines, or tanks\textsuperscript{33} instead they would have faced not nearly so much outrage.

The received view that what we do with our money is no one else’s concern is, of course, a lie. It fits with the Adam Smith and modern economics model of humans as disconnected, rational selfish calculators, disinterested in anything we don't own or have no interest in owning. But it does not gel with any vision of humanity as interconnected and social, or any view in which our destinies are tied up with one

\textsuperscript{32} See: Karl Polanyi, \textit{The Great Transformation} (Beacon Press, 2001); Graeber, \textit{Debt} (particularly Ch’s 2 & 3); and Nikolas Rose, \textit{Powers of Freedom: Reframing Political Thought} (Cambridge University Press, 1999), chapter 2.

\textsuperscript{33} In fact, according to Higgs, the KLF did buy at least one army surplus armoured car using it as part of an open-air art exhibition in which they ‘drove around blasting ABBA’s \textit{Money, Money, Money.}’ (Higgs, \textit{The KLF}, p.223) Higgs does not mention any reactions to this purchase, but it is safe to assume there was no outcry the burning of the one million pounds.

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another: a vision that has become increasingly obvious and readily apparent due, in part, to the nature and scope of certain problems (like climate change) that the limiting perspective of the individual utterly fails to address. This is captured memorably by Timothy Morton’s conception of these objects as hyperobjects; hyperproblematic.

The KLF hyperobject-like justification of the money-burning goes a bit like this: If I spend money on anything today, whether an essential item or a luxury, a frivolity or a necessity, some or all of my money will be appropriated by an entity (a corporation, an individual – it makes little difference) who may not care about carbon emissions and the importance of safeguarding the planet from dangerous climate change. Boycotts and divestment strategies get at a similar sense of this problem, and their rise in popularity as tactics for the left has led to some significant victories. But even they have a limit – globalized capitalism is so ultra-connected that any connection to the marketplace will potentially, even inevitably given enough time, lead to the eventual accumulation or circulation of the money that I possess today (if not necessarily the bills themselves, then certainly the abstract unit of account they represent) which will eventually pass through the metaphorical hands of an unethical or merely indifferent person or thing. With no way to safeguard against my money ever being used in this way (this means choosing not to forget that it was my money at one point, which is what we do when we say it becomes your money when I pay you and give up responsibility for it), then the only obvious course of prevention is to stop its circulation, which the KLF first attempted through art and nailing it to wooden planks, and finally, when that still proved insufficient, through its final destruction in the purifying ritual obliteration by fire.

The circulation of responsibility in action

Let us return and connect this to the circulation of responsibility. I am claiming that responsibility circulates, and that it does so as a result of a money ontology which is concomitant with capitalist realism. Circulation as we saw above, is a defining feature of money itself, and when taken as representative of some essence of the nature of the world, everything then becomes suspected of either secretly being and behaving identically to money at the most fundamental level, or of being convertible into
money (which is essentially the same thing). Responsibility, this view asserts, must in some way conform to the same rules as money – having a particular effect on responsibility, in some sense rationing it and treating it as an index of a certain quantity in a similar fashion to the dollar bills we hold in our hands index a quantity of money. This is a rationalisation, and Angela Mitropoulos has described in similar terms the way contractualism does something similar. She explains its effects as: ‘ratiocination, in the sense one may speak of ratio as calculation and of rationing as… apportionment.’ \(^{54}\) Money ontology performs a similar ‘ratiocination’ of responsibility, allowing it to be rationed and apportioned – distributed in part or in full, often ‘elsewhere’ or distributed amongst a network.

In this way, responsibility becomes at once infinitely divisible (like money) but at the same time zero-sum, in that any process of division or apportionment will crucially never be able to expand or contract the sum total pool of responsibility to be shared around. Responsibility can be split or apportioned in any way imaginable, but as it does so it loses any meaningful purchase on conscience or demand for a response. This is because (and here keep in mind much of chapter 3’s discussion) moral responsibility cannot behave like this and loses its efficacy whenever it is split – we say that a human being is either morally responsible or they are not, and it loses all meaning to say that someone is a certain amount of responsible. It is completely nonsensical to assess someone as, say, 23% responsible for the death of the person they struck with their car in the dark and the wet. What is needed, and this section proposes, is a reassessment of responsibility.

It is important to be able to distinguish the circulation of responsibility, as an invalid or pernicious response to responsibility, from more reasonable responses and arguments for responsibility mitigation lest we find in favor of all claims for responsibility no matter their basis. Clearly, not all claims to innocence are invalid for instance. Likewise, in a courtroom context, the presentation of mitigating factors, or pleading innocent because one simply wasn’t causally responsible for the things one stands accused of, both effect the same result (in that responsibility is avoided) but are not instances of the circulation of responsibility. This is because they do not reflect a

money ontology and ground their avoidance upon it, and upon its ratiocination. When one admits in court that one lost control of a vehicle under wet conditions, one does not take ‘half’ the blame with the road, the tires, the rain, etc, taking on the rest – for that would be absurd, largely for attempting to quantify responsibility.

While the circulation of responsibility often proceeds directionally away from humans, and towards nonhumans, this is not fundamentally a necessity; rather it is just politically expedient. Shifting responsibility from humans to nonhumans, and particularly to network objects, amongst which responsibility quickly diffuses like a fog in the heat of the sun, is clearly an attractive and tempting prospect for any who are able to use it. Part of the power of the shift of responsibility from humans to nonhumans, after all, comes from the seeming lack of any point or purpose in claiming that they are responsible. What would be the point of blaming a piece of concrete for damages, or a toaster for murder? The average nonhuman – machine or material – remains indifferent to human rebuke, no matter how passionately it is made.

Furthermore, it is increasingly commonplace to find situations where apparently ‘no one is responsible,’ as Jacques Ellul said, but less for reasons of the specialised nature of work and more from the circulation of responsibility. Bridges collapse and crush humans, and the relatives of the victims blame engineers charged with maintaining the bridge. These same engineers pass the blame on to city councilors who failed to heed warnings from the engineers, instead cutting back important integrity testing. These same councilors in turn blame state regulatory or legal changes that resulted in necessary budget cuts mandated by the state politicians. “The cuts had to be made, the market demanded them!” the state leader argues, passing blame upwards to national politicians in charge of managing something as amorphous and unwieldy as “the economy” by which point anyone involved is, crucially, safely insulated from the dangers to their immediate person attendant with driving over structurally unsound bridges. Situations get out of hand and no one is left to blame but systems and networks themselves – networks of objects, things, rarely people.

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Adding to the difficulty the circulation of responsibility represents, in addition to undermining moral responsibility through ratiocination as described above, under these same conditions responsibility even when kept ‘whole’ or complete does not stick and cannot be made to, so long as the conditions always exist for circulation. This is part of the money ontology itself, as even when we finally reach money as the ultimate or root cause we are, consequently, left with no recourse. For how could we hold money accountable for its responsibility, moral or otherwise? It would be like asking the colour blue to be responsible, expecting a response from something that is categorically incapable of it, an abstraction itself.

In the following example, we find the circulation of responsibility in action – both the network object distribution that undermines responsibility via ratiocination, and the sense in which no final assessments of responsibility are even possible until money is reached as the final cause. In this instance, from the Australian independent news organization *Crikey!*, an anonymous journalist attempts to defend the practice of ‘door-knocking’ friends and relatives of someone killed or involved in a recent accident or tragedy. The context that provoked the defense was a post made to the Facebook page of mainstream Australian news outlet Channel 7 by the mother of then recently deceased child Molly Lord. The mother’s post, which had recently gone viral expressed disgust and disdain that the Channel 7 news helicopter had hovered over the rural property on which the young girl died in a quadbiking accident and was eventually deleted by the page’s moderators, but not before it attracted tens of thousands of likes and hundreds of comments. A screenshot of the post was made at some point before its deletion and began circulating in social media, eventually making the jump to the mainstream media.

The *Crikey!* piece – titled ‘TV current affairs hack: why we’re bastards to grieving families’ – begins by framing the question of the ethical nature of ‘doorknocks’ and other practices around reporting personal tragedies in particularly ‘realist’ language and terms. Taking the position that journalists intruding on grieving families is quite literally ‘standard operating procedure,’ it defends the status quo by undergoing a series of blame shifting exercises that distributed (and circulated) the responsibility for maintaining ethical standards:
The trouble with “door knocks” is that you never know what reaction you are going to receive. Sometimes the families seem genuinely grateful to share their stories. They want to pay tribute to someone they may have lost. They bring out the photo albums, they search for video and they openly share their grief. This happens more than you would think. Other times, people are shocked and angry you would even approach them and you walk away feeling like a sack of shit, knowing you have just added to their pain.\(^{56}\)

Their explanation or justification for the practice of ‘doorknocking,’ in spite of their awareness of the obvious ethical questions surrounding the practice, is that there is a force that compels the journalist, they say, to this kind of behavior beyond what their own ethical preferences might ordinarily permit. After all we might ask, what’s to stop the journalist making the decision to leave the family alone on their own? The answer, the article’s author suggests, is a network object – and it should come as no surprise that it comes with a distribution (or circulation) of responsibility. The unnamed author notes that:

No one wants to see someone at the centre of a story popping up on a rival network. Even if the boss doesn’t criticise you directly when this happens, everyone knows you have failed and there will be no shortage of journos in your newsroom whispering under their breath that they could have got the “talent” to talk (in TV we usually refer to the people in our stories as “talent”).\(^{57}\)

This is the entry of the market logic of competition as a justification – as a network object to which responsibility is circulated. Because of the fiercely competitive media environment, they argue, therefore it’s not entirely their fault, and it is more a result of the distributed market pressures and forces across the entire media industry or workplace. The author circulates responsibility, previously held by the individual journalist, to point it at the entire industry. They do this by saying, and quite explicitly,


\(^{57}\) Ibid.
something like “See? We’re bastards, but because we’re all bastards, to put a stop to this you’d have to get us all to stop being bastards.” The unstated assumption behind this particular articulation of the problem being that this would be practically impossible, and furthermore unfair, to expect any one particular journalist to behave ethically and still retain their job. This helps explain why they are happy to denigrate their own profession in the title – it’s telling that it’s “why we’re bastards” not “why I am a bastard.” It’s partly a rhetorical argument, but one that appeals to a fairly reasonable suggestion that one shouldn’t ideally have to lose one’s job. But as a result, the responsibility is shifted away from any particular journalist, with a new responsible object taking the blame, a network object without a face, impossible to gain a purchase on.

This is an invocation of the same logic behind the so-called “prisoner’s dilemma,” a classic ‘game theory’ style experiment which places two individuals into a situation in which cooperation results in a good outcome for both, but in which the temptation for one to take advantage of the other to achieve a better individual outcome is often taken as being too much for anyone to resist. The catch, however, is that if both attempt to cheat the other they both result in a worse outcome – leading to a similar series of related problems, which are construed as structural problems like, for instance, ‘the tragedy of the commons.’ The author of the Crikey! piece notes that, in their industry ‘those willing to push the boundaries usually benefit, creating more pressure on those who want to act ethically.’ Again, what this statement does is provide a ‘reasonable’ justification for the circulation of responsibility from the individual actor to the network object – the overall structural effects of boundary pushers are (structurally) imposed on all, and therefore no one can be blamed or responsible. Responsibility is quite literally structurally designated, shifted, or circulated away.

What’s more, this type of view reflects an increasingly common (probably due to the saturation of capitalist realism and money ontology perspectives) inversion or revision of previous positions on the way that individual actions have been interpreted as implicating groups, as demonstrated by the change in meaning and use of the phrase ‘a few bad apples.’ This phrase has meant, in the past, the incrimination by association of a

58 Ibid.
whole network or group, based upon the bad actions of a few: the full saying is ‘a few bad apples spoils the bunch’ but so often today it is deployed in a sense more fitting with the circulation of responsibility, taken to mean: ‘it’s just a few bad apples, a few exceptions, the rest are fine.’ The Abu Ghraib incident is a case in point: when John Kerry spoke about the pictures from the prison, he had to reject the ‘few bad apples’ explanation, in essence admitting to its new meaning as exculpatory. Kerry had to argue (a much more difficult case!) that the Abu Ghraib pictures were not just the result of a few bad apples, but the result, explicitly or implicitly, of Bush administration policy. His statement did nothing to challenge the potential, or exceptional, meaning of the phrase – that it could ever be just ‘a few bad apples’ was never questioned. This is as if to say, were the actions of Lynndie England and co. merely self-directed and spontaneous, it would somehow lessen the responsibility held by the rest of the military organization; her superior and fellow officers included. The figure of the ‘rogue X,’ from the rogue cop to the rogue solider, or even the rogue banker, is clearly the only one implicated here – exonerating their affiliated group by defining the actions of the individual as exceptional, definitional and essentially always already outside the organization. There is no longer any implication of the failure of the group, the network, or the organization as a whole whenever one actor can be identified and pinpointed. It is only via both the logic of the individual as disconnected, independent market actor – the hallmark of modern economics conception of the human – and the money ontology that makes this an explicit, universal perspective that allows for such a view. It is a view that cannot conceive of responsibility being sensibly shared by any more than one thing or person – the ratiocination of responsibility.

Returning to the *Crikey!* article, the circulatory efforts also extend further, with the author stating the following: ‘let’s not forget the audience also plays a part. If they didn’t watch, this stuff wouldn’t get to air.’ Again this strange line of reasoning represents an all too common shifting of responsibility from an accountable, individual journalist to a distributed, faceless network object (the very definition of an ‘audience’). Not only does it ignore and obscure the unequal relationship between audience and producer in terms of power and responsibility, it represents a circulation of responsibility away from any one and to a network, placing responsibility beyond

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59 Ibid.
reach once again. Attempting to blame the audience, whose individual actions are statistically insignificant but as a whole converge to demonstrate a ‘demand’ for this kind of reporting, is a familiar strategy and one that reflects the unspoken logic of the market as ultimate authorizer. If there were anything truly wrong the market, so this reasoning claims, would either decide – in true Adam Smith style – not to watch it, or at the very least, would be to blame. This is truly a case of having it both ways: the market decides what is ethical, but if it doesn’t then the market itself (a network object) is unethical and is to blame.

The shift in the functioning of responsibility which sees it circulating endlessly, never settling such that claims for justice or redress could ever be substantiated and acted upon, echoes the alignment in western governmental policy over the last 30 years towards ‘neoliberal’ modes of operation which involve outsourcing and privatizing formerly public services, making the mechanism of exchange and the logic of the market appear to pervade ever more realms of life. Warwick Funnel has described this transformation in the Australian government as the ‘retreat from responsibility.’\(^\text{60}\) He describes a transformation of the structure of citizen expectations from a situation in which voters have relations with the state in such a manner that the latter is treated as responsible both for and to them, to a model that resembles far more the client/consumer relationship prevalent in business and commerce. Formerly sacrosanct avenues of redress and restitution, not to mention simply the lines of communication themselves, are cut off or made prohibitively difficult to access according to the imperatives of privatizing profit and the drive to ‘efficiency.’ In Australia, access to unemployment benefits, while not politically possible to be stripped away entirely, become practically impossible to access with documented wait times to receive a call for assessment of one’s eligibility for welfare lasting into the hours. This type of bureaucratic stonewalling is a deliberate tactic to save money at both ends – fewer call center staff means public money is ostensibly ‘saved,’ and the longer wait times make only the most truly desperate apply. Responsibility for the adequate provision of welfare support or other public services is likewise shifted from the state to privately owned entities who bid for the lucrative contracts. When these organizations fail to deliver the same standard of service, or fail outright, the responsibility falls back upon

governments, as incensed citizens demand basic services that we have come to expected in western society. The private contractor, meanwhile, escapes responsibility as does the government will likely have changed by the time these services collapse.

So let us recapitulate the argument of this chapter before moving on to offer some sort of response. Capitalist realism’s exacerbation leads to a money ontology, in which money is held to determine or to index something functionally true about the nature of reality. Money itself exhibits a tension between form and substance, and primarily needs to circulate, only stopping with its utter destruction or at a point of crisis of accumulation such that circulation becomes impossible, wherein money stops functioning as money and is instead just so much stacks of paper. As a result of this aspect of its nature, when applied in to the realm of ontology, as brought about by the exacerbation of capitalist realism, the result is a perception of everything as the same as money, and thus able to circulate similarly. Responsibility comes to embody the epitome of this circulation, with responsibility easily and frequently circulated away from individuals who might be accountable and towards network objects which become the new responsible objects – conveniently, unable to respond or be assigned responsibility meaningfully, as we saw in chapter 3.

How might we prevent the circulation of responsibility? Perhaps the answer is that we cannot actually prevent it, without at minimum the total collective disavowal of money ontology and capitalist realism that it relies upon. While adding yet another argument against the capitalist system, and particularly capitalist realism, this doesn't precisely give us a clear plan of action.

But perhaps there is another element required, a sort of step on the way to that goal, and this is a reconceptualisation of the way in which responsibility itself works. While we may not be able to stop the circulation of responsibility, per se, we might be able to change how we view its distribution. A more generous, additive, or multiplicative sense of the responsibility might provide useful – a sticky responsibility that clings to all it touches and cannot quite cleanly be wiped off no matter how much one tries to circulate it. I shall return to this idea of a sticky responsibility in the final section of this chapter.
But are there other responses we could engage in which might assist not just the broader, crucial task of a dismantling and unpacking of the capitalist realist ideological complex, but particularly the circulation of responsibility itself? I believe there is, and the task of the second half of this chapter is to formulate some kind of response, something that we can do in the meantime to either encourage the reduction or the illegitimacy of the circulation of responsibility, or increase our awareness of it as a problem. This involves a symbolic ritual act, which refuses or rejects the impetus behind the circulation of responsibility, multiplies responsibilities, and assigns or allows meaningful moral responsibility to be held by nonhumans. I now turn to outline the theoretical justification for such a response.

**Responding to the circulation of responsibility**

Let’s return to Jacques Ellul’s emblematic formulation of the problem of the distribution of responsibility, and the scenario of the dam that bursts and the great difficulty, even inability, for anyone to be responsible. Ellul’s illustrative articulation of the problem was as follows:

> In a society such as ours, it is almost impossible for a person to be responsible. A simple example: a dam has been built somewhere, and it bursts. Who is responsible for that? Geologists worked on it. They examined the terrain. Engineers drew up the construction plans. Workmen constructed it. And politicians decided that the dam had to be in that spot. Who is responsible? No one. There is never anyone responsible. In the whole of our technological society the work is so fragmented and broken up into small pieces that no one is responsible. But no one is free either. Everyone has his own, specific task. And that’s all he has to do.61

This is a persuasive articulation of the problem discussed previously – the distribution of responsibility across a network of actors and objects that previously seemed utterly insurmountable, like a fact of life: *When responsibility is diffuse, distributed, therefore no one is responsible*. But there is another way of seeing the problem now, as one of the *circulation*

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61 Ellul, *Betrayal by Technology*, ~6 mins 50 secs.
of responsibility which I have argued above. But there is a difficulty elaborating this perspective, as Ellul’s formulation, by the second sentence, has already begun from the logic of the circulation of responsibility – looking for a ‘who’ or a ‘one’ to be responsible in excess or instead of the dam. I advocate lingering at the first sentence: a dam has been built somewhere, and it bursts. We ought linger because, from this point onwards, Ellul is already tracing a causal chain of transformations and shifts from one responsible object to another – the very pattern and process of the circulation of responsibility as it shifts from one thing to another. The original decision is left hiding in plain sight, never really considered. Who is responsible? In some way, somehow – the dam itself. A dam has been built somewhere, and it bursts. Because it burst, it is responsible. This is, or rather could be, one valid conclusion of the assessment.

Now stopping at this point in the analysis might seem either absurdly at first, or completely banal – yes the dam is responsible, but only causally, since it is impossible for a nonhuman to be morally responsible. This objection is the beginning of the circulation of responsibility. Once one has already decided and dismissed from consideration the dam itself as a responsible object then one automatically begins to search for the ‘real’ cause. But what has happened? The dam certainly did ‘cause’ the result (bursting; flooding; devastation; death and destruction) but we do not consider it a responsible object, capable of holding or exerting (moral) responsibility. Sometimes this is because there are actually irresponsible humans and they are easy enough to find responsible, and I will return to this point in the next section when I argue for a multiplication of responsibility rather than a circulation – a sticky form of responsibility that does not suffer from the logic of ratiocination and quantification of an ‘amount’ to be passed around. But first I want to outline some of the good reasons to consider nonhumans – like the dam – responsible objects themselves.

Mostly when we reject nonhuman as responsible objects, we do so because we reject the possibility that nonhumans can be morally responsible – but why can’t they be? Why the reticence to extend moral culpability to nonhumans? Is it because only humans are truly moral? Why is a tree less moral than a human? Or a fox? Or an atom? From whence does this idea originate? In periods before the rise of capitalism humans often had little to no trouble describing nonhumans as either moral or immoral, and E.P. Evans work The Criminal Prosecution and Capital Punishment of Animals
details the history of the middle ages system of punishments and trials of animals quite clearly.

Evans, writing in 1906, responds to the suggestion by an earlier author (from 1868) who suggests that the history of criminal prosecution and punishment of animals was a form of symbolism or personification, a reasonable interpretation given that often ‘domestic animals were regarded as members of the household and entitled to the same legal protection as human vassals.’ But Evans argues that this assessment is not satisfactory noting that,

symbolism and personification, as applied to animals and inanimate objects, unquestionably played an important part in primitive legislation, but this principle does not account for the excommunication and anathematization [ecclesiastical destruction] of noxious vermin or for the criminal prosecution and capital punishment of homicidal beasts, nor does it throw the faintest light upon the origin and purpose of such proceedings.

In other words, the ancient practices which treated nonhumans as morally culpable entities were not merely a personification in which the ‘thing’ was treated as a ‘person,’ but was representative of some other completely different attitude towards nonhumans and their capacity for responsibility. Evans argument is that instead,

the judicial prosecution of animals, resulting in their excommunication by the Church or their execution by the hangman, had its origin in the common superstition of the age, which has left such a tragical record of itself in the incredibly absurd and atrocious annals of witchcraft. The same ancient code that condemned a homicidal ox to be stoned, declared that a witch should not be suffered to live.

63 Ibid., p.11.
64 Ibid., p.12.
In other words, pre-modern views of nonhumans such as animals and what we would now call ‘inanimate objects’ were quite radically different, admitting to an older tradition that no longer exists, reflecting in some sense a more superstitious view of the world, but also one more in touch with a sense of the animacy of things. A finer and more detailed perspective on this question of the inanimacy of matter is offered by Silvia Federici, who makes a highly convincing argument as to why this view of the world died out – or rather, was stamped out quite expressly as part of the transition to modern industrial capitalism. In her Marxist-feminist reexamination of the end of the feudal period and the concomitant rise of capitalism, Federici focuses on certain features of the period, including its increasing philosophical revisions of previous attitudes toward the body and to women, and in particular she focuses on the persecution of witches. A crucial element of her thesis is that ‘the persecution of witches was the climax of the state intervention against the proletarian body in the modern era.’65 She grounds this claim by describing it as an effect of the rise of enlightenment philosophy, and what she describes as Mechanical Philosophy in particular, focusing on Descartes and Hobbes:

In Mechanical Philosophy we perceive a new bourgeois spirit that calculates, classifies, makes distinctions, and degrades the body only in order to rationalize its social utility. (Foucault 1977: 137-38) Far from renouncing the body, mechanical theorists seek to conceptualise it in ways that make its operation intelligible and controllable.66

The purpose and focus of this process of rationalization (a theme which I have already touched on at the start of chapter 3 in my discussion of conceptions of reasonability and rationality) was the subordination of the unruly proletarian body, with its belief in magic, omens and signs, lucky and unlucky days, days appropriate for travel, and days in which work is to be studiously avoided. These habits presented a problem for the bourgeoisie, needing elimination in order to create a more disciplined social body amenable to the capitalist mode of production.67 In essence, Federici argues, magic

65 Federici, Caliban and the Witch, p.144.
66 Ibid., p.139.
67 Ibid., p.142.
and any sense of the vitality of matter (instantiated in popular ideas about the body in particular) presented a threat to the new social order and the rise of capitalism:

at the basis of magic was an animistic conception of nature that did not admit to any separation between matter and spirit, and thus imagined the cosmos as a living organism, populated by occult forces, where every element was in “sympathetic” relation with the rest… Eradicating these practices was a necessary condition for the capitalist rationalization of work, since magic appeared as an illicit form of power and an instrument to obtain what one wanted without work, that is, a refusal of work in action. ‘Magic kills industry,’ lamented Francis Bacon, admitting that nothing repelled him so much as the assumption that one could obtain results with a few idle expedients, rather than with the sweat of one’s brow (Bacon, 1870: 381).68

Here we have a further explanation for the disappearance of the idea of the animacy of nonhumans, and the early legal prosecution of animals, which Evans described above – one that directly references ideas of magic as inimical to work and capitalist industry. Federici notes also that Hobbes himself was just as explicit in his assessment of the importance of the eradication of magic to obtain a docile and governable social body; “[Hobbes] added that if these superstitions were eliminated, “men would be much more fitted than they are for civil obedience.””69 In the shadow of Milgram’s work, highlighted at the end of chapter 2, Hobbes words take on a rather more chilling inflection, given what we now know about just how terrifying and destructive the results of unquestioned obedience to authority can be. The legacy of the second world war and ordinary Germans complicity in the holocaust is the example that we cannot ever forget.70

It is clear, then, that the dominance of ‘Mechanical Philosophy’ and the conditioning that it has brought about, having become such a core feature of modern life and assumptions, has resulted in a loss of almost all sense of the animacy of ‘matter.’ The views of, for instance, Jane Bennett, which I outlined in the introduction, represent a

68 Ibid., pp.141-2.
69 Ibid., p.144.
return to an orientation that admits to a similar animacy. I am also tempted to tentatively draw a line from the Mechanical Philosophy which Federici describes to a current money ontology, which if anything further regularizes and prescribes a mechanical function, in the form of obligatory circulation and exchange.

Federici’s argument seems to suggest an entirely pragmatic reason to redeem or rejuvenate some elements of pre-enlightenment thinking and to resist mechanical philosophy, if, as she indeed claims, ‘[t]he course of scientific rationalization was intimately connected to the attempt by the state to impose its control on an unwilling workforce.’\textsuperscript{71} This seems to lead to the conclusion that any anti-capitalist philosophy and activist program might need to admit some element of magical or vitalist thinking, and this is an exciting prospect. However, at least as regards the former, Federici also notes that,

the revival of magical beliefs is possible today because it no longer represents a social threat. The mechanization of the body is so constitutive of the individual that, at least in industrialized countries, giving space to the belief in occult forces does not jeopardize the regularity of social behavior. Astrology too can be allowed to return, with the certainty that even the most devoted consumer of astral charts will automatically consult the watch before going to work.\textsuperscript{72}

If magical thinking, then, presents little to no threat to the social order and the ideology of the present – then what would? This seems to be the same, or a very similar question, to the question of how to respond to capitalist realism, money ontology, and the circulation of responsibility. Mark Fisher has noted that less important to capitalist realism than sincere belief is the idea that sincere belief matters more than our actions. In the context of the increasing bureaucratic managerialism that appeared under Tony Blair’s New Labour in the early 2000s, Fisher notes that the efficacy of the policies themselves did not hinge upon their implementers sincere belief, and this is typical of capitalist realism itself:

\textsuperscript{71} Federici, \textit{Caliban and the Witch}, p.145.
\textsuperscript{72} Ibid.
There was an acceptance amongst managers of the inevitability that education would increasingly be modelled on business... We didn’t have to believe it, we only had to act as if we believed it. The idea that our ‘inner beliefs’ mattered more than what we were publicly professing at work was crucial to capitalist realism.\textsuperscript{73}

In other words, under capitalist realism belief becomes a distraction that allows the real work to happen – changing workers behaviors, and accepting increased management surveillance and quantification, etc. Consider the ‘watch checking’ example that Federici gives – whatever one’s professed belief about astrology or magic – this habit betrays a form of temporal realism. It reflects precisely a capitalist realist pragmatism, in which what one professes to ‘believe,’ whether that be the power of magic, the vitality of matter, or something else entirely is practically subordinated to another ontology, under a regime of quantification (here the quantification of time).

Federici explains the importance of magical thinking in pre-capitalist periods as relying upon an important, differing conception of the nature of what existed, noting that ‘[magic], moreover, rested upon a qualitative conception of space and time that precluded a regularization of the labour process.’\textsuperscript{74} Again, this regularization and quantification is reflected in money ontology, which is perhaps the ultimate epitome of a quantitative conception of space and time. As mentioned earlier, money being the ne plus ultra of instantiated or embodied abstraction, money being sheer quantity itself, while also admitting to a certain tension between form and substance in the ‘body’ of the money object: the coin, etc.

So what is the solution, then, or the most productive and useful path of resistance if a revival of magic and magical thinking is, as Federici astutely notes, no longer a threat to the capitalist order? Perhaps a vitalism then, as distinct from modern forms of ‘magical thinking’ like homeopathy, which is more like a form of wishful thinking than anything resembling an animate view of the world and an invocation of natural magic. Any solution, as already noted earlier, will consist in nothing less the concerted

\textsuperscript{73} Mark Fisher and Jeremy Gilbert, “Capitalist Realism and Neoliberal Hegemony: a dialogue,” \textit{New Formations} 80/81, (May, 2013), p.91.
\textsuperscript{74} Federici, \textit{Caliban and the Witch}, p.142 (emphasis mine).
overthrow, the dismantling, and the un-thinking of capitalist realism and of money ontology. I hazard not a solution to this problem, but instead a response. Perhaps we could take inspiration from some other traditions of anti-capitalist theory and thought – for instance, the Italian autonomist tradition. What about ontological autonomism – adapting the Italian Marxist anti-authoritarian and self-determination impulses to ontology itself, by perhaps letting things themselves decide their ontology – as a response to the problem? In fact, that’s not a terrible description for the position of OOO itself, which remains perfectly content in letting things themselves – and all things, rather than just one thing, namely money – decide their own ontology. That, however, is not precisely my argument for the remainder of this chapter, which instead focuses on a more speculative response.

This speculative response requires some crucial imagination, in the same way in which any vision of the future different from the present requires imagination. It also requires imagination and some faith in the sense that it is almost impossible – even undesirable – to trace a clear, causal line from here to the scenario I propose, certainly not without invoking a closed, and mechanical sense of causality. By now I trust that the undesirability of such a form of argumentation has been demonstrated.

Nevertheless, let us imagine a ritual that could be undertaken in the near future. The ritual is informed by the idea of the truth and reconciliation commissions that had such important results in South Africa and Sierra Leone, involving three phases: the first a truth telling phase, in which witnesses come forward and describe the harms that have befallen them, the crimes and atrocities they had witnessed, and detail the effects on their lives and the lives of their loved ones; the second, a cross examination phase, in which guilty parties are asked questions about their involvement in the actions testified to by the witnesses, and in which they offer an explanation or an admission of guilt and personal responsibility; and then finally, a ritual phase incorporating both local and religious traditions, ultimately offering the offenders forgiveness that unites and reintegrates them back into the community in a outpouring of communal spirit, grief and restitution. In presently existing cases of this truth and reconciliation commission and its powerful concluding ritual, all those involved are humans – real people who have either actually witnessed or committed atrocities. In our imaginary ritual, there are still real humans, but there is also a real
nonhuman. We can imagine it as Ellul’s damn, the one that burst, or similar. Before we get to that, however, let us look at the existing Truth and Reconciliation Commission, at what it does, and what it results, before I suggest my speculative version that takes in nonhumans who create similar harms. The nonhuman version of the reconciliation ritual presents an opportunity to respond to nonhuman harms, an opportunity which does not exist at present, and has the added benefit of introducing a new attitude towards responsibility, one that multiplies and enlarges, rather than circulates, responsibility.

**Truth, lies, and nonhuman reconciliation**

The West African nation of Sierra Leone was rocked for most of the 1990s by bloody civil war, leaving over 50,000 dead and many more survivors with deep wounds and scarring, both literal and psychic, stemming from the actions of both sides of the conflict. Decapitations, mutilations, amputations, rapes and murders were in many places throughout the decade commonplace, leaving at the conclusion of the war a civilian population traumatised, and a government facing the hugely challenging prospect of reintegrating those responsible for war crimes and atrocities into a functioning society. In line with the model begun in South Africa following the end of apartheid, a truth and reconciliation commission was established to hear claims of victims, both to extract the ‘truth’ and confessions of guilt from perpetrators, and to enact a ritual display of reconciliation that would symbolically prevent future conflicts over past wrongs, allowing the country and its population to move on.

In his remarkable article ‘Truth, Lies, Ritual: Preliminary Reflections on the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in Sierra Leone’ Tim Kelsall tells the story of one meeting of the commission, in a town by the name of ‘Magburaka’ in the Tonkolili District, Northern Province, that occurred in mid 2003. Tim Kelsall’s narrative blends highly descriptive passages with an attempt to critically understand the proceedings both theoretically and at the level of personal experience – he is an active and engaged audience member, including in his observations impressions of the

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atmosphere of the room and the way attention seemed to ebb and flow during testimony. The ultimate conclusion he reaches, however seems at first highly counterintuitive, given that it is a truth and reconciliation commission and he finds in particular little truth telling with the witnesses using their testimony to position themselves as victims in need of ‘help’ and the perpetrators rarely, if ever, admitting personal responsibility for their actions. Kelsall maintains in no uncertain terms, however, that ‘in certain circumstances ritual may be more important to reconciliation than truth.’

This is a key point – and it requires some elaboration – because it comes with some rather incredible implications for ideas about our responses to tragedy, wrongdoing, and harm (particularly regarding nonhuman harm).

The main expectation a reader, and indeed Kelsall himself, might have is that the charged atmosphere of the truth and reconciliation commission, which featured testimony from known war criminals and perpetrators of some of the worst crimes humans can commit upon one another, would eventually result in some cathartic admission of guilt, however this was surprisingly not the case. Kelsall details the long process of the commission, beginning with the first day, which left him feeling ‘physically and emotionally tired,’ as did the following days of victim testimony. The proceedings were re-invigorated by the appearance before the commission of the perpetrators who, somewhat bizarrely, all protest their innocence, much to the annoyance of those present – some of whom had even testified earlier having witnessed their crimes first hand. There was little doubt among the audience and the commission that the perpetrators were guilty, yet to a person, they all avoided accepting responsibility for the actions they carried out during the civil war. Many agreed with the commission’s suggestions that they might have been ‘forced’ to become a perpetrator, either because of threats of violence or through other forms of coercion (a form of circulation of responsibility). Most confounding of all, Kelsall notes that:

All of the perpetrators apologized to the community, sometimes under pressure from the Commissioners, for their involvement in armed factions that

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76 Ibid., p.361.
77 Ibid., p.369
were known to have committed atrocities. However, except in the case of [one of them], none of them admitted to individual responsibility for their actions, and none of them appeared genuinely contrite. Because their statements had been empty, their apologies rang hollow.\textsuperscript{78}

Kelsall admits his surprise at the failure of the perpetrators to take advantage of the apparent opportunity to wipe the slate clean, as it were, through the expected form of truth telling or confession. However, Kelsall explains that a ‘special court’ in the Sierra Leonean capital of Freetown which was charged with prosecuting those with “the greatest responsibility”\textsuperscript{79} for war crimes, etc., left some confusion and fears about the admissibility of confessions heard in the truth and reconciliation commission.\textsuperscript{80} A further important explanation for their reticence to admit personal responsibility, as Kelsall explains it, was a failure by the commission to enroll the population in the distinctly Christian tradition of confession, underscoring the importance of adapting to or integrating with local cultures, traditions and practices:

\begin{quote}
The drama of healing through public confession and grief, which enlists a number of tropes in the Christian imaginary, such as suffering, martyrdom, and resurrection… was a story in which most participants seemed reluctant to be enrolled.\textsuperscript{81}
\end{quote}

Kelsall notes, however, that a change came over the commission and the attendees on the final day. This was not because anyone had confessed or admitted guilt as such. Instead, he claims,

\begin{quote}
the change was due to the addition of a carefully staged reconciliation ceremony to the proceedings, a ritual that created an emotionally charged atmosphere that succeeded in moving many of the participants and spectators, not least the present author, and which arguably opened an avenue for
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{78} Ibid., p.372.
\textsuperscript{79} Ibid., p.381.
\textsuperscript{80} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{81} Ibid., p.371.
reconciliation and lasting peace. Insofar as this was the case, it suggests that ritual may be more important to reconciliation than truth.\textsuperscript{82}

Kelsall describes the ceremony that led to this reconciliation in detail, involving community elders including the paramount chief. Religious leaders offered Christian and Muslim prayers before the commission’s regional coordinator spoke about the purpose of the ritual:

We want to hear some of our excombatants come to this community and ask for forgiveness. We have witnessed the tussle between them and the Commissioners as they were cross-examined. They have come to realise that there is no information that is hidden from the Commission… We trust that the religious leaders and the traditional rulers will work with the people and the ex-combatants so they can be properly reintegrated and accepted in their communities.\textsuperscript{83}

The combatants then came forward one by one and asked for forgiveness from the paramount chief – the first acknowledging the role the community leader played in symbolically offering collective forgiveness and reintegration: “I… am standing here, confessing these things, and asking the people of the community through the paramount chief to forgive me.”\textsuperscript{84} The scene is repeated for a number of the perpetrators, with many moving demonstrations of contrition and reconciliation:

[A perpetrator named] Tactical stood up, looking downcast, taking the microphone: “Ladies and gentlemen, what happened during the war…”\textsuperscript{85} Suddenly he started to tremble, the microphone shaking violently in his hands. As he spoke, his voice seemed to catch in his throat, emerging only as a small squeak. Once he had recovered himself, he made his apology in a steady,
solemn voice, and then hurried to receive a blessing from the elders. “I’m sorry, I’m sorry,” he said to them.\textsuperscript{86} It appeared that moment that the collective weight of the community had torn through the tissue of lies he had wrapped around his life, compelling him to confront his past in a spirit of remorse… After the confessions, the Bishop brought together Base Marine [another perpetrator] and the witness who had impugned him. They smiled and embraced to applause.\textsuperscript{87}

This is a remarkable story, and an incredible tale of the power of ritual, forgiveness, reconciliation, and the importance of ritual – stepping outside the bounds of ordinary or rational experience and causality – which resulted in a resolution and closure to a truly devastated community.

But let us imagine a future, alternative version of the truth and reconciliation commission – one that emerges from a future context that is more aware of the vitality and active role played by nonhumans, as this thesis has been engaging with throughout. In keeping with Ellul’s dam problem, let’s place this speculative reconciliation in Southern China – in the area around the Three Gorges Dam, one of the largest in the world. This dam, however, hasn’t burst – yet it has caused significant harm to a large enough community that it might conceivably result in the same situation of community unrest, social disintegration, and a sense of being visited upon by injustice, with the dam itself felt to be the culprit in a range of ills from earthquakes to landslides to relocated houses and the loss of traditional ways of life.

The Three Gorges Dam rests upon a bedrock of granitic materials, making the dam itself exceptional well founded, an important consideration for a dam of its size, with a reservoir containing some 40 km\textsuperscript{3} worth of water. However upstream of the dam, the reservoir stretches for 1000 km\textsuperscript{2}, itself resting largely on porous karstic type terrain. This is an important detail because the carbonate rocks (such as limestone, dolostone and gypsum) that make up this terrain react chemically with water, changing the chemical composition of the ground itself, in turn increasing the likelihood of geological disturbances including landslides and earthquakes. In a research paper

\textsuperscript{86} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{87} Kelsall, p.379-80.
published in 1998, Linyue Chen and Pradeep Talwani outline the likelihood of this kind of reservoir induced seismicity (henceforth RIS) arising from the Three Gorges Dam and the similar Xiaolangdi Project:

Two large hydroelectric projects, the Three Gorges Project on the Yangtze River and the Xiaolangdi Project on the Yellow River are currently under construction. When completed, they will be among the largest in the world and in view of the incidence of RIS in China, it is important to understand and assess their seismic potential.88

The Three Gorges Dam began impounding the Yangtze river beginning in 2003, with Chen and Telwani’s predictions proving highly accurate. The dam’s filling triggered a number of quakes in the following years with, according to one Chinese geological survey, ‘epicenters of earthquakes concentrated along the reservoir shore of the Yangtze River and its major tributaries.’89 However, most of these shocks were quite minor, with many in the 1.0-2.0 range on the Richter scale – mostly below the threshold of human apprehension. The greatest tremor recorded in the Three Gorges Dam reservoir was a quake of magnitude 4.1, characterised as a ‘light’ quake, and hardly causing anything approaching the devastation of, say, the 2008 Sichuan earthquake which measured 8.0 killing approximately 70,000 people with another 20,000 still missing.90 In starker contrast, the Sichuan quake also made nearly 5 million people homeless, and destroyed numerous homes.91 The US Geological Survey describes a 4.0 quake as only:

Felt indoors by many, outdoors by few during the day. At night, some awakened. Dishes, windows, doors disturbed; walls make cracking sound. Sensation like heavy truck striking building. Standing motor cars rocked noticeably.\textsuperscript{92}

Dam reservoirs do not seem to be causing particularly significant earthquakes on the scale of the tectonic quakes like the 2008 one in Sichuan. However, some reports from the period following the 2008 quake suggested that the Zipingu reservoir, which was 4.5km from the epicenter, had increased the likelihood of a quake occurring. These reports were often described as being raised by “some experts,” with only one named credible source, Fan Xiao a ‘chief engineer at the Sichuan Bureau of Geology and Mineral Resources,’\textsuperscript{93} stating that the presence of a large reservoir over an active fault could increase the likelihood of a quake by 30 or 40 percent.\textsuperscript{94} So the question of whether the increasing number of dams being built in southern China to meet its ravenous demand for hydroelectric power directly causes earthquakes is an open one, but it remains quite plausible to imagine a growing sense of unease around these features of modern China and its development.

Several landslides in the area of the Three Gorges reservoir have been the more clearly related life-threatening impacts of the Three Gorges Dam, with the increases and decreases in water level of the reservoir triggering instability in cliffs and hillsides around the edge of the 1000 km\textsuperscript{2} region. In November 2008, one such landslide occurred in which the ground collapsed near a tunnel entrance close to a tributary of the Yangtze, crushing a bus and killing at least 30 people on board.\textsuperscript{95} In addition to these more causally related effects however, the dam has had a significant ecological impact. In a feature for \textit{Scientific American}, Mara Hvistendahl outlines the broad range of ways in which the Dam has impacted the environment, by displacing people from

\textsuperscript{94} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{95} Mara Hvistendahl, “China’s Three Gorges Dam: An Environmental Catastrophe?,” \textit{Scientific American}, March 25, 2008, http://www.sciencemag.org/content/321/5890/1395.c1
their homes in the area flooded by the reservoir, destroying the habitats of a number of water plants and aquatic animals – and in particular, the Yangtze River Dolphin, the ‘baiji,’ very possibly made extinct because of the dam.\textsuperscript{96} The cumulative effect of the dam on those living in some proximity to its huge geographic footprint is difficult to anticipate or to quantify. But it is entirely conceivable that already a growing number of people might feel in some way victimized, or affected by these impacts of the dam – from the invisible threat of earthquakes, to the clear impact of landslides, the forced relocation of homes and entire cities, and the loss of important cultural sites that the dam has caused. Much of the area flooded by the filling of the reservoir had been inhabited by humans for thousands of years, and is acknowledged as one of the most scenic and beautiful parts of China.

Let us imagine then, that at some future point in time it becomes politically or socially necessary to have a truth and reconciliation commission concerning the harms incurred upon humans by the Three Gorges Dam. The same broad outline takes place, with the commission calling witnesses to testify to the impact that the dam has had on their life, and their inability \textit{\textsuperscript{pace} Ellul} to locate anyone responsible for the dam to hold to account. Next the commission calls the perpetrator – but here the commission calls the dam itself. Now, the dam cannot make an appearance itself, clearly, so perhaps the commission goes to the dam, and further, gives the dam a human face. Who is the human face? It could be, naturally, someone that shares responsibility for the construction of the dam – a politician who can be found, an engineer, or a worker perhaps. The human face of the Three Gorges Dam gets to give their testimony, faces cross-examination. But finally, the human face of the dam is offered the opportunity to ask for forgiveness on behalf of the Three Gorges Dam. The community, affected by landslides, earthquakes, resettlement, etc. comes together and offers forgiveness to the dam as well as the humans, with a number of significant effects that result from the ritual.

Firstly, the circulation of responsibility and the \textit{rationing} of responsibility do not occur, because the reconciliation ritual reflects a reconceptualisation of responsibility and how it is determined, treating it almost like an object in its own right – but an object

\textsuperscript{96} Ibid.
that is, as in Bogost’s ‘tiny ontology,’ completely dimensionless. Consider the overall ‘responsibility’ for all the cumulative harms and tragedies of the Three Gorges Dam, a messy and distributed and impossibly tangled network object. The ritual embraces this messiness, and rather than trying to disentangle it, in order to rationally apportion it piecemeal here and there in a Sisyphean effort, instead the ritual encapsulates responsibility or compresses it into a dimensionless dot in order to then forgive it. But an object that is dimensionless resists all apportionment or ratiocination, as those concepts quite literally do not apply. It can then be drawn upon and shared around to an unlimited degree because it is no longer quantity, or quantifiable. It can be both here and there, touching or leaving traces on both the whole entangled network of the Three Gorges Dam in its most expansive network-object sense, as well as leaving its sticky residue on the smallest most individual humans caught up within it. It is tempting to say that the responsibility is ‘shared’ around, but if it is, it is done so without diminishing the total responsibility which was such a problem with the distribution of responsibility, which makes partial responsibility so unsatisfying. Responsibility remains whole, but also shared. There seems to be more of it than there first appeared, and it can be stretched out and shared around without thinning out and losing its moral purchase – like the biblical parable of the loaves and the fishes, or Norman Lindsey’s Magic Pudding, there just always seems to be more of it until everyone has had their fill. In this way, the reconceptualisation of responsibility that the ritual offers seems to short-circuit the quest for one, single ultimate responsible object, and the circulatory relationship to responsibility that this impetus brings. There can now be many ‘ones’ responsible.

Unlike in Ellul’s story, in which individuals from geologists to engineers to politicians all circulate responsibility away or onto the dam, in the scenario of the ritual the dam itself is seen and admitted as an end cause, and as responsible as the politicians and engineers who contributed to building it. While recognizing the dam itself as an active and vital nonhuman that acts in its own right, as opposed to simply inert matter that resists or reacts, the dam is recognized as in some way responsible for the harms that it has caused. The ritual demonstrates a different approach to responsibility entirely, leading to the multiplication of responsibility, and an openness about the total sum of responsibility that exists, avoiding the ratiocination of responsibility that treats it as
‘zero sum’ and then tries to (inevitably unsatisfactorily) apportion it according to merit.

Not insignificantly, the ritual also offers an important outlet for the sense of injustice and of having been wronged that have been caused by dam, and which under the current regime of the circulation of responsibility have currently no outlet or possible target whenever a nonhuman is responsible for harm. The forgiveness portion of the truth and reconciliation process is itself useful in that it offers a partial response to the obvious fact that once it has been built there may be no use to an approach like that of the destruction of the nonhuman, *a la* the deodand, and middle ages trial of animals. The culmination of a determination of guilt and responsibility under such a regime was often the complete destruction of the object in question. But such a finding may be impossible in cases where the nonhuman in question cannot be dealt with in this way – and this applies from the Three Gorges Dam to even more distributed (hyper)objects like climate change. Destroying the Three Gorges Dam dramatically and spectacularly might be a wonderfully cathartic act for those it has affected, but it would not bring back the extinct ‘baiji’ dolphins, and might further precipitate an even worse disaster than the dam’s initial creation. Likewise, destroying it in a careful or considered way, even allowing time for its gradual emptying so as to be removed safely, presents its own problems – since the dam contributes a great deal to China’s renewable power generation capacity, and has other benefits as well, easing flooding further downstream on the Yangtze. This testifies to the exhausting complexity of the situation, and the difficulty, even perhaps impossibility, of *solutions*, and the context into which this imagined, speculative ritual response is offered.

To conclude, the circulation of responsibility needs to be challenged if not stopped. However this requires a huge shift in cultural attitudes which are underwritten by capitalist realism and the circulation of money. What the reconciliation ritual conceives of is a future in which responsibility itself is treated differently. Compressed enormously down to a single dimensionless point, it then appears to explode into an excess and an overflow of responsibility which had been hiding within it all along. The reconciliation ritual I conceive of overtops or short-circuits the prevailing contemporary script that is the search for one single, final or ultimate responsible object – a fetishized pattern underpinned by money ontology and the circulation of
responsibility. Instead, it replaces it with a near-infinite responsibility, and the many responsible objects which the messy distributed network object touches. The ritual gestures towards a different relationship to responsibility, one which admits responsibility across both humans, nonhumans, and the many network objects that are made out of both. The vision that this speculative exercise presents is ultimately a hopeful one. But it is a strange hope, like Quentin Meillassoux’s bizarre and almost untenable desire for the emergence of a virtual God–to–come which exists in a context dominated by your average po-faced materialism. The speculative ritual and the world that such hope may usher in, though currently fictional, seems to simply be waiting for the right moment in which to emerge and to find a receptive audience of those willing to admit or acknowledge something more like the magic or the strangeness of the world, made up of both humans and nonhumans.
Chapter 6 – Summary of Contribution to Knowledge

This thesis began with the situation emerging from the increasing complexity of the nature of the problems facing humanity itself. It set out to investigate three themes and the complex problems that the increasing apparentness of human-nonhuman relations brings to light. Those three themes were authority, responsibility and activism. This thesis’ original contribution to knowledge consists primarily in the novel specification and reconceptualisation of an entailed series of problems that stems from human-nonhuman relations, focusing on the three themes.

I began with the theme of authority, in chapter 2 introducing the idea of the network authority, a kind of nonhuman authority that does not emerge from anything traditionally associated with traditional notions of the concept – charisma, expertise, experience, etc. – instead working itself out, or making itself known, as a function of the arrangement of a network. Wherever one is close to the center of a network, close to an important source or element of then network, or has gathered a large network of followers (in other words an audience), there we find network authority operating. Consequently it is more like a property of a thing (the network itself) than it is a particular person or institution as it was for much of the twentieth century. But the network authority admits to a certain kind of problem, namely a question of obedience to nonhuman authority – and the role of a nonhuman as authority, or authorizing agent, was returned to in chapter 5. There we saw money itself take on the authority to decide what is a legitimate causality, and what can be really counted – as it enforces a money ontology that treats all things as fungible or convertible into money. These are but major two effects of nonhuman authority, and both underscore the necessary reconfiguration of the concept of authority that must continue to occur in light of human-nonhuman relations.

Addressing the second theme of responsibility, I began with what I see as a necessary distinction in the term, to some degree separating out from one another causal and moral claims to responsibility while still maintaining their necessary and intimate connection – causal responsibility being a necessary precondition for moral responsibility. This thesis claimed however at a number of points throughout that
causal responsibility is liable to be co-opted by strong positions and powerful interests in their attempts to ‘trump’ other competing causalities, and following Timothy Morton’s diagnosis and analysis of the question of causality, that a certain ‘machismo’ frequently characterizes these efforts. I theorized this impetus as a rather desperate contest for second place in an enforced hierarchy of causality; a hierarchy in which all other causal orders are subordinated under the overwhelming dominance of capitalist realism and the manifest, demonstrated ‘realism’ of money. Science and other materialist approaches, in their strongest objections against non-mechanical causalities, can be seen as near-hysterical responses to the dominance of capitalist realism and the unquestionable power of money-as-cause. In light of this situation, this thesis also made a claim for the importance of a certain degree of reasonability in all assessments of causality, an acknowledgement of the necessity of human involvement in causal assessments, and an injunction to counter the machismo of mechanical causality and its problematic history with traditions of rationality, command, and male patriarchal dominance (a theme returned to again in chapter 5 following Silvia Federici’s analysis).

This thesis’ contribution to a reconceptualisation of moral responsibility consists of a paired set of conclusions. The first is the analytical tool that is the network object, and the manifest difficulty that it presents, as a distributed object and a nonhuman, for the adequate assessment or assignment of moral responsibility to a network object, whether that be BP or a similarly networked cultural-historical object like the patriarchy (following bell hooks diagnosis). The network object’s nature as a network of objects lends itself to a state of affairs in which responsibility is distributed across a network, diffusing before our very eyes as it loses its power to compel or elicit a response, inevitably diminished as it is partially apportioned or distributed across an inaccessible, mute and unresponsive series of objects. This theme was returned to in chapter 5 where I described it as the circulation of responsibility, a major theoretical contribution to an analysis of the effects of capitalist realism and money ontology on conceptions of authority, responsibility and activism.

The second contribution to the reconceptualisation of moral responsibility consists in the recognition that whenever a network object would be morally responsible we almost inevitably end up encountering the incommensurate difficulty attendant with
being unable to come face-to-face with the object in question, often only ever able to confront its delegates – both human and non. To engage this problem I introduced the perspective of the nonhuman with a human face. This concept applies when corporations and other nonhumans are represented by human faces: from the lawyers and other representatives present in the Deepwater Horizon joint-inquiry room, to the voice of the young woman in the call center who is there to both absorb and limit our expressions of frustration and anger at the bureaucratic maze, itself designed to prevent or discourage access to welfare and other government services in the neoliberal era. I adapted Nicholas Mirzoeff’s concept of ‘the right to look’, taking it as a powerful compulsion that directs us to mutually recognize the humanity of others, even those entangled with nonhumans such as BP, Transocean, or public-facing government departments.

In chapter four I engaged in a theoretical discussion of the dual problem and opportunity that the nonhuman with a human face presented for activists, elucidating a contribution to the reconfiguration of notions of activism in a context of the networked internet and new forms of discursive activism. The human face places a limit on our legitimate actions insofar as it requires us to recognize the humanity of the actually existing human beings entangled with deleterious network objects like BP or patriarchy. My examination of the genre of Tumblr shaming website, and Fedoras of OK Cupid in particular, showed how some activists are discursively dealing with this problem, by shaming the human faces of patriarchy, in the process reconfiguring the network objects these humans are the face of and offering reintegration into feminist communities and networks. While the nonhuman with a human face at times appears as a problem and limitation, at others it presents as an opportunity, as activists manage put a face on faceless objects like patriarchy, giving us the opportunity to see and confront these objects more clearly and directly, challenging their very invisibility outside of subcultural discourses, while also maintaining that we deal with these human faces humanely.

This thesis’ final contribution was the introduction of the concept of the circulation of responsibility – a reconceptualisation of the problem of distribution of responsibility – which provides a opportunity for resisting the exculpatory effects of moral responsibility as it is found today: forever evaporating into the network in a process of
perpetual circulation, never able to gain significant purchase on a distributed network of people and things. This feature of contemporary life, I argue, is in large part due to a money ontology, an exacerbation of the concept Mark Fisher has introduced under the name ‘capitalist realism.’ Money, by nature, both circulates and is racioned and similarly, under a money ontology, all things (including responsibility) are treated as existing in the same manner or possessing the same characteristics as money. This ontology of money then leads to the infinite and debilitating circulation of responsibility that, once it is calculated, rationed and apportioned (the ratiocination of responsibility) loses all its moral power to demand a response. I argue, in response to this situation, for a revision of the concept of moral responsibility itself, involving a resistance to the rationing or ratiocination of responsibility via a ritual involving a nonhuman that has done harm. The ritual provides an opportunity to forgive the nonhuman – I suggested the Three Gorges Dam, for an example both befitting Jacques Ellul’s hypothetical scenario in which ‘no one is responsible’ due to the apportioning of responsibility. The imagined ritual of reconciliation stimulated participants to extend a spirit of generosity and reconciliation that resisted the rationing and apportioning of responsibility for the harms it has caused to a network of people and things. Instead, it acknowledges a model of responsibility as excessive, near infinite in its dimensionless, and able to be shared around without rationing or apportionment and with no diminution of its moral force. It is a strange approach to responsibility, multiplicative and generative, in which responsibility remains whole while also wholly shared across a number of objects and people, with the end result being a refusal to participate in both the circulation of responsibility and the questionable search for ‘one’ final ultimately responsible object.


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**Tumblr Sites**


*Men Taking Up Too Much Space on the Train.*


*Nice Guys of OK Cupid.* (Deleted) http://niceguysofokcupid.tumblr.com/.

*Predditors.* (Deleted/Password Protected) http://predditors.tumblr.com/.

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