Skimming the Surface:

Critiquing Anti-Critique

Benjamin Noys (2017)

Roland Barthes, in his essay ‘Soap-powders and Detergents’ from *Mythologies* (1957), offers a witty critique of the language of advertising. He remarks on the claim made to ‘clean in depth’ that this is ‘to assume that linen is deep, which no one had previously thought’ (1973, p. 41). This amusing act of sarcasm chides petit-bourgeois ideology with the production of false depth by the surface effect of the linguistic sign. Barthes claims the surface as the point of traction, arguing that the secret of ideology is the production of depth, the production of a sense of naturalness, out of the mere surface effects of language. Such claims are to be countered not by an account of the real depths concealed, so much as by an embrace of the theatricality and provisional form of the sign itself. Hence Barthes’s delight in the world of wrestling, which presents itself as a semi-deliberate play with signs (1973, pp. 15-26), rather than the spurious claims to emotion and veracity that characterise ‘historical’ film (1973, pp. 27-30).

I open with this brief account of a classical gesture of critique, which Barthes would later disavow (1973, pp. 9-10), to suggest that our usual images of surface and depth in critique might not be as simple as we think. The common narrative of contemporary anti-critique, which ranges across the humanities and social sciences, is to chide critique for taking-up a position of critical distance that presumes mastery over the material it confronts by revealing hidden depths beneath the surface (Best & Marcus, 2009). In Bruno Latour’s influential characterisation critique begins from disbelief before its ‘wheeling [in] of causal explanations coming out of the dark depth below’ (2004, p. 229). This position of distance is seen to correlate with mastery over the objects. The critic knows what’s really going on beneath the mere appearance of things. At the same time, anti-critique suggests that this position of mastery is reactively dependent on what it negates. This is evident in Jacques Rancière’s recent *cri de Coeur*:

If there is a circulation that should be stopped at this point, it’s this circulation of stereotypes that critique stereotypes, giant stuffed animals that denounce our infantilization, media images that denounce the media, spectacular installations that denounce the spectacle, etc. (2007, p. 266)

Here the knee-jerk critical gesture merely repeats the terms of the problem it faces and proximity shades into complicity. The failure of critique is a failure of critical distance.

The alternative anti-critique offers is the suggestion that we get closer. We should give up the smug security and superiority of critical distance by getting our hands dirty in tracing the actual construction of things, or, better, in the affirmative practice of adding or reconfiguring, rather than subtracting and defiguring. We should not assume a distance that grants a position of mastery. At the same time as we are called to get closer, we are also called to be more careful. What Latour calls the ‘sledge hammer’ of critique has to be replaced with new tools, more suited to building than destroying (2010, p. 475). Our role is not so much to intervene, but to compose, to develop, to describe. I want to describe this mode as one of skimming the surface, which at once abolishes distance and then re-inscribes it. We can get close to anything, but never too close to any one thing.

This inscription of anti-critical proximity and distance can be mapped across a spectrum of various forms of anti-critique. Here I will focus on the version of this spectrum offered in contemporary literary studies. At one end, there is the messiness of getting as near as possible to objects, which always recede from our grasp (Harman 2012a). We then pass through the neutrality claimed by Heather Love (2010), with her “descriptive reading”, before we reach the ‘distant reading’, in which we count books rather than read them, suggested by Franco Morreti (2013). This is a spectrum of increasing distance, but we should note that in each case the aim is to get closer by having the *right kind* of distance. All these instances of anti-critique mix both distance and proximity. There is no closing of the distance completely, but neither should we refuse to get close, at least to the surface. This double inscription of proximity and distance is designed to answer critique’s inscription of mastery through distance, and its closeness to its own objects of critique. While critique is both too distant and too close, anti-critique aims to be distant enough to be close enough: what Heather Love (2010) calls ‘close but not deep’.

My aim here is to dispute this collapsing or displacing of critical distance in contemporary thinking. I first want to challenge the originality of these forms of ‘skimming the surface’ and to develop the irony, suggested by my opening, that surfaces have been a longer term concern and that various theoretical gestures had already engaged with anti-critique. In his polemic against Alain Badiou, François Laruelle notes that a taste for planes, or layers, or surfaces, ‘is a “modern ideal”, which can serve proliferation or the stratification of instances’ (2013, p. 33). This sense of the surface as ‘modern ideal’ is crucial, I think, to positioning anti-critique within a longer narrative that it disavows. Here I will be using the ultra-modernist 1970s work of Jean-François Lyotard as one prefigurative example of the early turn to surfaces. There is nothing like the modern, or modernist, to produce the ire of anti-critique, yet the emphasis on surface does not not necessarily imply escape from the modern. Critique, I would say, is a rarer and more contested gesture than some of the new heroic accounts of anti-critique suggest.

To dispute anti-critiques characterisation of critique I will focus on the two central targets for anti-critique: Marxism and psychoanalysis. These are treated as classic instances of what Ricoeur called the ‘hermeneutics of suspicion’ (1977, p. 32), with Freud, Marx and Nietzsche as the three ‘masters’ claiming the ability to dissolve the surface appearance of things and reveal the true and hidden depth beneath. It is difficult to find an instance of anti-critique that does not, at one point or another, take aim at psychoanalysis and Marxism. Nietzsche is often omitted, because although he can be read as a “master of suspicion” his orientation to an affirmative thinking provides one of the major resources of anti-critique as well. In fact, both Marxism and psychoanalysis, as modes of critique, have been heavily involved in critiques of the ‘hermeneutic’, and dispute claims to critical distance by stressing our immersion in social and psychic relations. It is by denying this that anti-critique can make a claim to novelty.

This will then lead me to an attempt to change the stakes of critical distance through the problem of negativity. The suspicion of suspicion is often predicated on a suspicion of negativity and the negative. Whereas critique operated through a negativity that binds the “object” of critique to the subject, anti-critique regards this as getting too close. The irony is that mastery by means of critique actually results from a miring with what is being criticised. Although identified with high-critique, Louis Althusser (with Étienne Balibar) had noted in *Reading Capital* (1968) that Marx’s early work was trapped in ‘the ambiguity of a *negation* which still clings to the universe of the concepts it rejects, without having succeeded in adequately formulating … new and positive concepts’ (2009, p. 42 n.18). For anti-critique the alternative is affirmative or ‘affirmationist’ thinking (Noys, 2010, pp. ix-x), that precisely formulates the new and positive against the ‘ambiguity of negation’. In contrast, there is still something useful in this ‘ambiguity of negation’, which suggests an inscription of critical distance that does not necessarily imply mastery. The very closeness of negation to what it negates offers a return to critique as a messier, but more engaged, form of ‘critical distance’.

**Flaying theory**

One of the many ironies of anti-critique is that the attention to the surface, which is articulated against theory, has eminently theoretical origins. Of course, contemporary anti-critique takes as one of its targets the moment of ‘theory’, usually treated under the familiar and inaccurate cliché of the moment of linguistic imperialism. If, as we saw in Barthes, theory remains on the surface, it remains on the wrong surface – the surface of language or the signifier, which is taken to determine the signified or even the referent. The result, for anti-critique, is something idealist and not materialist, something coolly abstract rather than hotly involved, and something too clean and not messy enough.

I want to select one moment of theory that suggests the failure of anti-critique to read history: the libidinal works of Jean-François Lyotard. Lyotard’s work was always far from any linguistic imperialism, being concerned to integrate the insights of phenomenology, especially the work of Merleau-Ponty, to explore a depth that complicates the surfaces of structuralism (Bennington, 1988, p. 57). What concerns me here are the ‘hypertheoretical’ libidinal works, especially *Libidinal Economy* (1974), which refuse the ‘white terror’ of critique for the insurgent ‘red cruelty’ of singularities (Lyotard, 1974/1993, p. 242). My aim is not to celebrate Lyotard as a more successful example of anti-critique, but rather to trace a disavowed history of anti-critique *within* theory and to suggest the problems that beset Lyotard also haunt contemporary forms of anti-critique.

Lyotard’s *Libidinal Economy* begins with the bravura scene of the flaying and unfolding of the body into a libidinal surface in which depth is only produced through the twisting of the surface into a Moebian band (1974/1993, pp. 1-3). All that is left after this flaying is the task of following the intensities as they pass across the band or film. There is no place remaining for any critique, because there is no depth or interiority on which it could stand to judge. If critique requires a minimal position of exteriority or distance this is abolished in the ceaseless flux of libidinal intensities, leaving only one option: ‘*be inside and forget it*’ (Lyotard, 1974/1993, p. 3; italics in original). Of course, critique does exist, and so therefore has to be accounted for. In Lyotard’s libidinal economy critique is the result of a libidinal de-intensification or cooling off – a studied “distance” that tries to canalize the libidinal into mere representation. In the libidinal schema critique embodies an intensity, but an intensity that forms a cold passion, disguised within an appearance of distance and mastery it can never actually achieve.

This kind of anti-critique is clearly set-out in Lyotard’s 1974 introduction to Anton Ehrenzweig’s *The Hidden Order of Art* (1967), tellingly titled ‘Beyond Representation’. Lyotard’s target, like many at the time and since, is psychoanalysis as a mechanism of critique and normalization. For Lyotard psychoanalysis performs a de-libidinization by turning the unconscious into a theatrical space, structured by the forms of stage, spectators and actors, which allocates roles and contains and canalizes libidinal energy into static forms (Bennington 1988, pp. 10-14). It is this theatrical set-up that for Lyotard is central to the apparatus of representation and critique.

His alternative libidinal analysis is predicated on the affirmation of art, rather than its critique, and it seeks no hidden meaning. For libidinal analysis ‘There is only surface’ (Lyotard, 1974/1989, p. 158)’ Psychoanalysis cannot function as a master discourse because it cannot impose a plane over and above art – they are both on the same surface. Instead of critique and its object we instead only have ‘transformations of libidinal energy’ that ‘are all on the surface’ (Lyotard, 1974/1989, p. 160). This is why he is interested in Ehrenzweig’s ‘hidden order’, because although this seems to incarnate the classical operation of a psychoanalytic hermeneutics, Lyotard reads it against the grain. There needs to be no decryption of some ‘hidden order’, because everything is already on the surface. The operation that interests Lyotard in Ehrenzweig is that of ‘scanning’ (Lyotard, 1974/1989, p. 160), which characterises the ‘organization’ of the drives. Far from the primary processes being merely disorganized and chaotic, Lyotard argues that this form of ‘scanning’ suggests a proto-organization that underlies and exceeds the ‘cooling’ order of representation. The unconscious does not need ordering from outside, but ‘orders’ itself in a way that ruptures representation.

Therefore, for Lyotard, we need to trace how ‘the waves of the libidinal drives meet the rigid secondary structures’ (Lyotard, 1974/1989, p. 161). The ‘space’ of libidinal analysis is the ‘endless and anonymous film of primary drives’ (Lyotard, 1974/1989, p. 159). This is also the space of art, as ‘*all art is flat*, as it were, pellicular, like a film’ (Lyotard, 1974/1989, p. 166; italics in original). Crucial here, and this will be taken-up by anti-critique, is a commonality between art and the process by which we read art. Against distance we have a common level, with ‘theory’ becoming another art. The desire to turn this similarity into a critical distance is, for Lyotard, merely ‘one of the adventures that befalls the libidinal skin’ (Lyotard, 1974/1989, p. 167) In response, he suggests a descaling that places everything on the same level, while at the same time inscribing this ‘level’ as a flux of intensities. To get closer, in this case, is to get closer to these intensities without the mediation of representation.

The difficulty that constantly besets Lyotard is the extraction of the libidinal from the apparatus of representation. While libidinal economy is supposed to account for all representation as merely cooled-off intensities, this can be reversed to argue that libidinal economy is merely another representation (Bennington, 1988, p. 50). From the relaxed position of anti-critique *Libidinal Economy* remains too locked in conflict with critique, takes it too seriously. The alternative Lyotard proposes of a libidinal monism risks repeating the gesture of critique by discovering yet another ‘underlying’ force. Contemporary anti-critique, however, has little time for the anguish that besets Lyotard, who would later reflect that ‘The readers of this book – thank God there were very few – generally accepted the product as a rhetorical exercise and gave no consideration to the upheaval it required of my soul’ (1988, p. 13). The dispersion of contemporary anti-critique resists identification of any ‘underlying’ force, and departs from the inscription of intensities. We might say it takes seriously Lyotard’s injunction to ‘be inside and forget it’, precisely by forgetting this anguished engagement with critique.

It is for this reason that I don’t want to generate a false genealogy by linking contemporary anti-critique to Lyotard’s libidinal economy as if these were one and the same thing. What I want to stress is a parallel in the search for an affirmative, non-linguistic and ‘material’ form (and Gilles Deleuze would be another case). I also want to stress that the impasse Lyotard encounters in trying to detach himself from critique and enter a ‘purely’ affirmative discourse does not disappear, even if contemporary anti-critique styles itself in a more relaxed mode. Lyotard’s attempt to abolish completely critical distance onto one affirmative band or skin suggests the difficulty of a discourse that evacuates itself of any distance or tries to re-inscribe distance in a non- or anti- critical fashion.

Lyotard relentlessly targeted psychoanalysis and Marxism as *the* forms of critique, hence one of his collections of articles from his ‘libidinal’ period is called *Dérive à partir de Marx et Freud* (1973). This set a programme that many would follow. Virtually all instances of contemporary anti-critique take aim at either or both psychoanalysis and Marxism. This targeting serves a number of purposes. First, it homogenises the theoretical and critical field of the past under these banners. It is not true that Marxism and psychoanalysis have exactly been hegemonic in the humanities, and certainly not in the U.K. or the U.S.. To claim that once we were all Marxists or all influenced by psychoanalysis is an exaggeration that serves the claim for resistance and novelty of contemporary anti-critique. It also, which is my concern here, homogenises Marxism and psychoanalysis into stable bodies of knowledge that are exhausted by the usual clichés of critical mastery. The result is that anti-critique can claim novelty, obviously a core value in the contemporary context, and dismiss as beneath concern previous ‘critical’ work. This serves the purpose of permitting benign or hostile neglect of how these two forms of critique insist that ‘critical distance’ is only ever a tentative and fleeting moment and that we are primarily embedded in the contexts we criticise. Anti-critique borrows or steals this insight, but in ways that generate a far more free-floating discourse than critique ever was. I now briefly want to explore two moments in Marxism and psychoanalysis that probe the tension of critical distance.

**The view from Mount Olympus**

Remarking on Perry Anderson’s editorial for the *New Left Review* titled ‘Renewals’ (2000), Gregory Elliott noted that Anderson’s failure to evince much enthusiasm for the ‘anti- (or alter-) globalisation movement’ left critics concluding that this ‘rendered his habitually Olympian perspective positively intergalactic and his posture of reality instructor irksome’ (2008, p. 105). The history of accusing Anderson of such a perspective is a lengthy one. Perry Anderson, as a Marxist historian and editor of the *New Left Review*, is not a figure usually identified with theory, if we give that word its usual sense to refer to currents of structuralism, post-structuralism and later trends. Anderson has been a notable critic of theory (Anderson, 1983), preferring to articulate his work in terms of sociological analysis. Despite not being an obvious example the fact he is regarded as a signal example of an ‘Olympian perspective’ offers a useful diagnostic on the issues surrounding critical distance.

In 1964, Peter Sedgwick wrote an essay ‘The Two New Lefts’, which targeted the writers around the then nascent *New Left Review*, including Anderson. What interests me is the metaphorics that Sedgwick deployed in his criticism. He argued that their historical work, at that point largely focused on Britain, evinced a ‘lack nostalgia; when they survey the past, it is with a time-machine’s traverse, plotting the orbit of elements in the historical ensemble, rather than registering sensuously the impact of men and events’ (1964, p. 15). The distance Sedgwick chastises is temporal (‘time-machine’s traverse’) and spatial (‘plotting the orbit of elements’). The fatal flaw of this critical distance is that it lacks the capacity to register the impact of humans and events in shaping history.

In an aside on intellectual history, we might note that the grounds of the later ferocious battles concerning Althusser’s anti-humanism were already laid here. The problem was not simply a matter of a desiccating structuralism – as Derrida noted the design of structures appears more easily when living energy is neutralised, as in ‘the architecture of an uninhabited or deserted city, reduced to its skeleton by some catastrophe’ (1978, p. 5). Already the kind of historians gaze these critics used was regarded as a form of practical anti-humanism, rendering history as empty of people and events, before that charge would be made again against Althusser, most venomously by Thompson (1978). This is perhaps why Perry Anderson (1980) would write a measured response to Thompson’s charges, which primarily targeted Althusser, but also took in the style of Anderson’s own earlier work. I’d even suggest that his practical anti-humanism might have been more disturbing than Althusser’s theoretical anti-humanism, the latter being easier to dismiss as an ‘excess’ of theory, while the former operated on the ground of history.

For Sedgwick, this ‘Olympian distance’ had a class origin. In a memorable characterisation, he suggested that the second New Left ‘is an openly self-articulated, self-powered outfit, an Olympian *autogestion* of roving postgraduates that descends at will from its own space onto the target-terrains of Angola, Persia, Cuba, Algeria, Britain …’ (1964, p. 15). It is class-analysis, of a fairly brutal type, which is used to explain the critical mastery claimed by this form of Marxism. This would be a recurrent trope for those defending a more ‘humanist’ historical Marxism derived from the lineage of Thompson. Linebaugh, in his 1986 review of Perry Anderson’s *In the Tracks of Historical Materialism* (1983), uses a conceit of reading the book on a flight to literalise the usual metaphoric condemnation of the ‘Olympian’ perspective. In this case Anderson’s work belongs to the ‘stratosphere’, cruising above the abode of production and class struggle (1986, p. 143). His style is ‘Ultramontane’, and so ‘authoritarian and unresponsive to pressures from below’ (Linebaugh, 1986, p. 143). Not content with a critique of spatialised authority, Linebaugh also makes the temporal (and class) point as well: ‘[Anderson] lives in an interesting time-warp: partly Baroque, partly public-school Bohemian, partly 60s-style Trotskyism’ (p. 143).

My aim is not to decide between these perspectives, but to indicate an internal debate within Marxism concerning critical distance, and many other examples could have been used. At the heart of Marxism as a critical practice is an insistence on historical embeddedness, which includes Marxism itself. In the ‘Theses on Feuerbach’ (1845) Marx famously displaced the concept of ‘human essence’ by declaring it ‘in its reality’ to be ‘the ensemble of social relations’ (Marx, 1845/1975, p. 423). We live in, and even as, an ensemble of social relations, but relations that are fractured and divided by conflict and antagonism. The necessarily historically situated nature of thought puts pressure on its ‘critical’ function. In the debate I have just traced this emerges between Anderson’s traversal or tracking of positions, which seems to exit history, in opposition to those who stress the role of those who make history in their struggles. This recapitulates the tension Anderson himself probed between structure and subject in Marxism (Anderson, 1983, pp. 33, 34). Certainly this tension of analysis is not resolved by Marx or Marxism, but it’s hard to see how it could simply be accused of assuming a mastery that dissolves this problem – except in its most scientistic and mechanical forms. It is an effect of being in close relation to the historical that generates the tension with which Marxism tries to work to gain critical traction on its material.

**Navel Gazing**

Much the same, of course, could be said for psychoanalysis. Again, it is easy enough to multiply instances of theoretical mastery or knowledge claims that would instantiate a critical mastery over the ‘depths’ of the psyche. On the other hand, through concepts like fantasy and projection psychoanalysis also insists we are embedded within relations that are themselves fractured and divided. It is a typical irony that the critics (or anti-critical critics) of psychoanalysis use the tools of psychoanalysis, such as projection, to condemn psychoanalysis.

Jacques Derrida has indicated that there is not only a resistance to psychoanalysis, which is self-evident in the forms of anti-critique, but a resistance to psychoanalysis *internal* to psychoanalysis (1998, p. viii). The moment that Derrida selects, which marks the extreme point of psychoanalysis as ‘*hermeneutic reason*’ (1998, p. 4; italics in original), is Freud’s discussion of the ‘Dream of Irma’s Injection’. One of the moments Derrida touches upon is Freud’s invocation of the ‘navel of the dream’ – a moment that, in Freud’s words, admits that ‘There is at least one spot in every dream at which it is unplumbable – a navel, as it were, that is its point of contact with the unknown’ (1976, p. 186, n. 2). Derrida probes the moment of resistance as a site that both calls forth the desire for meaning and refutes it.

What Freud seems to concede with the “navel of the dream” is a point beyond which analysis cannot pass. Returning to this concept in *The Interpretation of Dreams* Freud (1976, p. 671, 672) describes it as a ‘knot’ or ‘network’ that, as Derrida adds (1998, p. 15), resists the unbinding action of analysis. Derrida’s discussion does not so much stay with psychoanalysis as develop from this point the distinctiveness of ‘deconstruction’ as a mode that tries to displace the tension in psychoanalysis between the desire to find meaning and certain moments of interminability. From Derrida’s point of view the moment of resistance cannot be fully inscribed in or by psychoanalysis.

I do not wish to re-open the debate between deconstruction and psychoanalysis. While Derrida inscribes psychoanalysis, implicitly, within deconstruction, which in turn offers another way of enduring resistance, I want to remain a little longer within psychoanalysis. As Derrida mentions in passing (1998, p. 11), it was Lacan who was one of those who made most out of the resistance of psychoanalysis to hermeneutics precisely through the ‘navel’ of the dream. Despite the claims that Lacan offered a ‘linguistic Freud’, I think his work also suggests an internal debate within psychoanalysis that resists certain figures of hermeneutic mastery. This is evident in his virulent objection to Ricoeur’s attempt to turn psychoanalysis into a hermeneutics, after an initial impression that Ricoeur might be an ally (Roudinesco 1990, pp. 391-398).

In *Seminar XI*, which Derrida quotes, Lacan states the navel of the dream ‘is simply … that gap of which I have already spoken’ (1986, p.23). For Lacan the unconscious is a ‘gap’ which opens up to that dimension of the Real, by which he refers to the ‘reality’ of the drive (1986, p.60). This is not a substantial domain of sense, however, and the unconscious can only be understood as a ‘discontinuity’ (Lacan, 1986, p. 25). In fact, Lacan chides the psychoanalytic movement for constantly trying to cover over or repair this gap (1986, p. 23), whereas there is no ‘*closed one*’, but only ‘the *one* of the split, of the stroke, of the rupture.’ (Lacan, 1986, p. 26; emphases in original) Lacan’s suggestion is not so much that there is a resistance to psychoanalysis, but this “gap” forces the overturning of a mode of psychoanalysis oriented to sense and to repair or filling the gap with meaning. This suggests, I think, that psychoanalysis cannot be reduced to mastery over the gap but, as Lacan proposes, a certain practice working with the gap, with this moment of negativity that is irreducible.

What concerns me in these two brief examples is a common point of reference: the stress on immersion in relations and that these relations are not exhausted by their positivity, but are riven with negativity and antagonism (in different forms). In neither case am I simply saying Marxism and psychoanalysis have solved this problem of critical distance, but rather that they work upon it by assuming an essential historicity and immersion in that problem. This, I think, is what makes them appear as unsatisfactory procedures from an anti-critical or post-critical standpoint that would claim to simply have got beyond critique as this miring in antagonism. Before returning to conclude on the question of negativity I want now to deepen my characterisation of the particular form of relation and distance that anti-critique deploys as its solution.

**The Aesthetics of Relation**

While the anti-critic abolishes critical distance in the name of getting close to things, they also reinscribe an autonomy and distance in their capacity to skim over many things. In the set-up of anti-critique, critique remains bound to the object of its critique, in a reactive and limited fashion. The drive of critique to negate leaves it mired, as if in bird lime. In contrast anti-critique gets close to things, but in doing so affirms its distance from things. To get close, to endorse, is also to escape any particular tie. Jordana Rosenberg (2014) characterises this as a ‘theoretical primitivism’, in which involves ‘the occlusion of the dynamics of social mediation’. This kind of detachment is well-captured in Rancière’s description of the nature of contemporary art: ‘The Idea of the contemporary artist, on the contrary, is withdrawn, hovering in survey over the work of its realization’ (Rancière,, 2010, p.104).

The reference to art is apposite because the role of the contemporary anti-critic merges with that of the artist. Bromberg (2013) describes the convergence between contemporary forms of speculative realism and object-oriented philosophy, realist currents that have emerged within ‘Continental’ thought, with art. This convergence, as she notes, is not simply by chance as aesthetics plays a crucial role in this thinking for the affirming of extra-human objects. It is aesthetics, in an impoverished form, that makes the ‘bridge’ from ever-receding objects to humans. The relation of thinker or philosopher to their material is an aesthetic one, which inscribes both closeness and distance. It’s not surprising that such thinking appeals to artists, who are humans making (usually) objects. Both artist and, in this case, philosopher, trace an aesthetic that affirms the non-human through affirming the multiplicity of objects that escape any control, including the control of capitalism. They do so through an aesthetic appreciation of the possibilities of objects that are irreducible to capitalist capture. In this way this affirmative discourse, which also draws on currents of anti-critique, displays a politics that affirms fluidity and escape through constant attachment and detachment.

There are two things to draw out here. The first is that a commonplace critique of anti-critical and speculative currents is that they treat their material in a reductively technical fashion. This is a re-statement of what, with irony, we can call ‘traditional’ critical theory: the danger of intellectual work mirroring the instrumental and positivist rationality of contemporary capitalism (Horkheimer, 2012). This is the claim made by Alexander R. Galloway in a recent article on the currents of ‘speculative realism’. He argues that ‘mathematicization’ is not only at the heart of some of these tendencies, and we should stress some, but also at the heart of a contemporary capitalism of financial instruments and computerization (Galloway 2013a, p. 359). In his critique of Franco Moretti’s *Distant Reading*, Galloway argues that Moretti treats literature as a technical object. The result, Galloway suggests, is that due to the arrival of the computer ‘everything becomes computational’ (2013b). While not objecting to this per se, Galloway himself has worked extensively on computational structures, he argues that the result is a ‘techno-mimicry’ (2013b). The need, instead, is to grasp critically the algorithms that make such research possible, rather than to accept them as given. This is the substance of Galloway’s own work *Protocol* (2004), which interrogates the substrate of the Internet.

While not dismissing this re-statement of critique I want to re-iterate that the relation to objects is not so much technical as aesthetic. It is not so much a matter of instrumental rationality per se, but the aesthetic appreciation and use of material to form a counter-relation that will be warm and not cold. In fact, anti-critique can evade critique on its own ground, by claiming to rework the technical from the cliché of cold use into a relation of warm contact, which is the substance of Bruno Latour’s work (Noys 2014). In this swerve, the scientist becomes another creative figure, allied with the artist, while the critic is condemned, as usual, to a purely negative form. All the negativity in the world, it sometimes seems, is to be found in the critic or, I would say, projected on to the critic.

The second point I want to develop is that this aesthetics of relation, at once close and distant, is not purely an aesthetics of the spectator. In his critique of Western aesthetics Giorgio Agamben argues that the dominant aesthetic model, primarily instantiated by Kant, is an aesthetics of the spectator. It presumes a distance and a possibility of judgement upon a work, and it is not hard to make the same point in regards to the anti-critical distance anti-critique takes. Agamben’s suggested alternative, derived from Nietzsche, is an aesthetics of the creator (1970/1999, p.11). What interests me is how anti-critique bridges and synthesizes these two positions. It is, at the same time, an aesthetics of the spectator and the creator, partly because the creator takes a spectatorial role in relation to the material they use. This is why anti-critique offers a particular appeal to artists, because both theorists and artists insist on being constructive and creative to make something out of this capacity to skim over many things.

In the terms of literary criticism the convergence I am tracing here on the aesthetic takes the form of an alliance between currents of anti-critique and the continuing and developing emergence of ‘creative writing’ in the academy, especially in the U.K.. The history, and tensions, of the ‘integration’ of creative writing in the US academy has recently been traced by Mark McGurl (2009). McGurl has pointed out the performative function of creative writing on the university campus, as the means to personify and instantiate ‘creativity’. This marks a convergence with currents of anti-critique, which also affirmatively insist on their creativity. The accepted antonym of ‘creative writing’ is ‘critical writing’, and the fact that this critical writing is in the process of abandoning critique indicates the possible convergence. Critics become creative at the same moment as the creative writer establishes a position in the academy. The creative writer treats literature and theory as potential material to be integrated into creative writing, as the anti-critique treats objects as things to be skimmed over to produce a satisfying aesthetic reading.

**Negative Moments**

I have suggested that the category that anti-critique rejects is negativity, and this is at the root of its re-inscription of critical distance as skimming the surface. The reason for this rejection is one consonant with a general theoretical trend that predates contemporary anti-critique. I have already mentioned Althusser’s assertion, and we could add to this Jean Baudrillard’s gesture of rejection of “this negativity subtly haunted by the very form that it negates.” (Baudrillard, 1973/1975, p.52) Subtle hauntings are out, we could say, with a tendency to replace them with instances of brute material horror. This is evident in current theoretical interest in the writer H.P. Lovecraft, whose monstrous alien beings are, as Michel Houellebecq has indicated in regard to Lovecraft’s Cthluhu, material: ‘What is Great Cthulhu? An arrangement of electrons, like us. Lovecraft’s terror is rigorously material’ (2005, p. 32). This excessive or weird materialism, or ‘weird realism’ as Graham Harman (2012b) prefers, probes a matter in excess of any determination, rigorously *positive* (even if cast as horrible) in its existence.

This speaks not only to the rejection of negativity, but to the rejection of the negative in the name of the concrete or material. It is not only that the negative is too close, too tied to what it rejects, but this proximity is what forbids the finding or affirming of a materiality that escapes capture. What I want to suggest as an alternative is a return to critique and negativity without the clichés and assumptions that anti-critique has brought us. This involves being very close and very deep, in the sense of recognising our immersion in forms of capitalist value and state power. It does not assume an irreducible point of resistance, or the aesthetic capacity both to take a distance and rely on a superior creative power.

In particular, as I have previously suggested (Noys, 2010, pp. 165-69), this immersion is one way to grasp the particular function of capitalist value as a mechanism of abstraction. This is a ‘materialism’ that does not simply reach for the concrete, but one which recognizes that, as Marx put it, ‘individuals are now ruled by *abstractions*’ (1973, p. 164; emphasis in original). Marx also argues that: ‘The abstraction, or idea, however, is nothing more than the theoretical expression of those material relations which are their lord and master’ (1973, p. 164). I would suggest that these “real abstractions”, the form of value, cuts across the alternatives of abstract / concrete, or material / ideal, in ways that anti-critique prefers not to consider (Sohn-Rethel 1978; Toscano 2008). Instead, they turn to the concrete or material as antidote, without being able to grasp the function of abstraction that might also generate forms of the concrete or material.

To get close would involve grasping these forms of abstraction through abstraction, in the very proximity and haunting that negativity implies. At the same time tracing negativity does not simply mire us in abstractions, but suggests the antagonisms and tensions that run *through* these forms. Werner Hamacher has suggested the risk run by conventional forms of Marxism is that they might reproduce the teleology of labour implied by capitalism: ‘the true unveiling of its theo-economic secrets – of the sacrament of labor’ (2008, p. 179). But he also suggests that a Marxism re-thought as a mode of critique might also allow us to grasp the ‘internal disjunction of labor and its autoteleology’. (2008, p. 180) I would like to stress this ‘*internal* disjunction’ as the site of traction and intervention, which is given form by negativity.

Much the same point could be made regarding psychoanalysis. Alain Badiou has insisted that the singular virtue of psychoanalysis is its discovery of ‘bare sex and its radical absence of meaning’ (2007, p.78). This radical negativity, which again disputes the hermeneutic reading, also implies a grasping of sex, or what Badiou calls ‘the real of sex’ (2007, p. 80), through a logician’s grasp. The ‘gap’ or negativity here cannot simply be subsumed under meaning nor transformed into a consolatory force of desire, or material positivity.

For Heather Love the new methods of skimming the surface that favour description are more rigorously anti-humanist than ‘traditional’ forms of critique (2010, p. 375). This is because they displace more radically, she contends, depth and a religious relation of meaning by departing from human concerns. My argument, in contrast, is that attention to the forms of negativity and abstraction in relation disrupts the theological hermeneutic, without abandoning political questions. In place of an aesthetic contemplation of surfaces, or an aesthetic creativity of new forms, we need to attend to a ‘critical distance’ that places us in contact with these moments of negativity, as distance, embedded within relations. This is not to smuggle back in a claim to critical superiority, but to understand how ‘we’ are riven by these forms of relation and negativity. It is to suggest there is no safe haven from which we can skim and select.

The ‘messy proximity’ I have traced should also include the relation between critique and anti-critique. These categories can be overly homogenising and result in a reduction that aims to counter a reduction. If the skimming of surface also includes the characterization of critique, then complexity and messiness should also be restored to the forms of anti-critique. To take some initial starting points, Walter Johnson’s recent reconstruction of the ‘Cotton Kingdom’ in the Mississippi Valley attends to the materiality of slavery: ‘The Cotton Kingdom was built out of sun, water, and soil; animal energy, human labor, and mother wit; grain, flesh, and cotton; pain, hunger, and fatigue; blood, milk, semen, and shit’ (2013, p.9). In this case the attention to materiality and networks is concerned with tracing the process of transformation of these materialities into abstractions. Similarly, Timothy Mitchell’s *Carbon Democracy* (2013) also pays attention to networks of carbon extraction, especially the transition from coal to oil, but also as a means to complicate and provoke reflection on possibilities of political intervention. These works rightly distance themselves from some of the abstractions of critical discourse, but also attend to the emergence and constitution of ‘real abstractions’ as forces and forms that act-upon and transform materiality.

We could also add that in terms of reading critique recent work has started to probe some of the most reductionist and problematic forms of critique. Glyn Salton-Cox (2013), for example, has explored the writing of the British Marxist Edward Upward, who is often taken as one of the most reductionist and Stalinist writers of the British Left. While not diminishing the problems of Upward’s critical discourse and his own experiments in writing ‘socialist realist’ novels, Slaton-Cox sensitively registers the complexities within socialist realism and within Upward’s own ‘leftist self-fashioning’. The critique of anti-critique should also include or even demand this attention to critique as itself a problem, from both positions. The restoration of more complex genealogies of critique and anti-critique requires that we do not simply impose another flattened narrative, in which we can skim amongst methodologies and select at will.

The lack of a safe haven for critique requires thinking through in all these dimensions. In particular, it re-inscribes the notion of critical distance to refuse the consolation of a safe affirmative distance from which we can sally forth. Instead, the “distance” we have emerges out of the rupturing effects of negativity *within* forms of relation and abstraction. The tendency to abandon or distance ourselves from this thinking literary criticism or literary theory is a particular matter of concern. This is because questions of form and fiction, the traditional domain of literary studies, are crucial to grasping the seemingly paradoxical conjunction ‘real abstraction’. This is a pressing need at exactly the moment when it is self-evident to all the real damage that ‘real abstractions’ have inflicted and continue to inflict. A cursory reading of any daily newspaper, of virtually any political persuasion, should be sufficient. The consolatory resting in contemplation or creation of the material, vital, or concrete is an evasion of this need at the moment of the abandonment of many to a material destitution through the voiding of value.

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