

PHILOSOPHY

The underlying questions of existence and the human condition have fueled the actualization of various answers via human quest within the archive of all recorded history. This ongoing search to the edge of oblivion for deep intellectual and (potentially 'supernatural') answers leads the exploring individual to form experiential conclusions on one's life purpose within (historically progressing conditions). "Now it seems that the [Avant-Garde] artist defines himself off by breaking away from what precedes him, by means of a slow and purposeful self-conquest"(11, 31). For the imagination, optical technologies created a paradigm shift of cognitive understandings toward thought basis on image/info communications. How do telepathic image-makers intuitively err their way into making art that challenges archetypes, alchemically manipulating to open aperture on their own questing psychology?

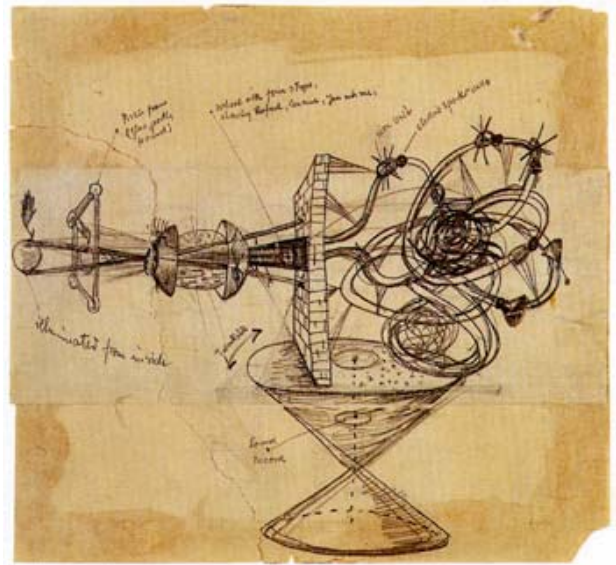
ONTOLOGICAL FRONTIERS

Mid-nineteenth century revolutions (optic/electric/mechanical) offered new territory for experimenting with neuro/psychic phenomena toward finding concrete forms for abstractions (of the visual imaginary realm). 'Truth' searching photochemical experimenters produced fantastic image artifacts. Some efforts were but representational farces created within existing archetypes, but others were so passionately innovative that they no longer require authentication beyond existing in themselves. "Fluids emanating from the medium- the *vital force*, the soul, and also thoughts, feelings, and dreams-were directly captured on the photographic plate, without the use of a camera"(10, 15).

In his extended theory, Poggioli explains that "however we may judge avant-garde art when we meet it, for us the phenomenon and idea are so present and evident that we do not stop, even momentarily, to wonder if we might be dealing with an illusion of an appearance rather than a reality, with a myth or superstition rather than a concept"(11, 13). While the visible world is accepted as an ensemble of commonly sensed material things, "we cannot situate ourselves in relation to aspects of [the invisible] the way we can take our distance from objects in the visible world"(15, 5). The idea of unseen forces "is both very much inside us and very much outside us. [Although] the spatio-temporal continuum does not seem to apply to it[,] the two worlds ... are not in a state of radical discontinuity vis-à-vis one another. There is a medium that connects the two, the medium of *symbols*"(15, 5).

Symbols become everything when searching to express for the disconcertingly ineffable. "Man is conscious of being surrounded by the wall of the Unknown, and at the same time he believes he can get through the wall and that others have got through it; but he can not imagine or imagines very vaguely, what there may be behind this wall"(9, 22). Late 19th century inquiry into the *vital force* reveals cultural clues about our progressing human predicament and ongoing search to comprehend the unknowns of our inner selves. Explorations of meta-physical (or otherwise *occult*) photography were logical (though fundamentally *symbolic*) routes for uniting our mental (hidden, unconscious, unknowable) and physical (manifest, material) worlds. "Magical or occult knowledge is knowledge based upon senses which surpass our five senses and upon a capacity for thinking which surpasses ordinary thinking, *but it is knowledge translated into ordinary logical language, if that is possible or insofar as it is possible*"(9, 24).

“Rimbaud spoke for all avant-garde artists when he said ‘I ended up finding the disorder of my spirit sacred.’” Like Alfred Jarry’s premise of *pataphysique*, “the science determining the laws that govern [are] the exception, not the rule”(11, 56).
 “The first aesthetic appreciation of occult photographs occurred in an avant-garde context”(10, 13).



Frederick Kiesler, *ci-contre à droite*, Study for Vision Machine 1938-1942
 Illus. from *Vision Machine*, p.141.

The ideologies of philosophical idealism and rational realism conflict on the point of ‘truth’. Are literal and figurative realms of truth always divided? How has photography been involved in the pursuit of knowledge? What are the aesthetics of wonder and awe, terror and horror; and how do they lead to the artistic creation of socio-psychological ‘evidence’?

INSTANTLY REAL

Following Daguerre’s 1840 revelations, the rapid and exponential rise of photography ushered revolutions of realism leading to logical positivist worldviews focused on provable fact and obvious practical reality. “[Daguerrotypes] captured the popular imagination in the United States [and] ...people were astonished, overwhelmed, enthralled by the camera’s terrible objectivity and scientific exactitude”(13, 54). In the United States, “photography offered civilians the most accurate representation of war’s horrific death ‘reality’ than any prior conflict...People fell silent upon seeing the black-bordered photographs of ‘grim-visaged war’ displayed in [Matthew] Brady’s New York gallery during the fall of 1862”(13, 54).

Besides changing perceptions of space and time by providing “a magical new means of enlarging the realm of the visible and thereby [defining] public perceptions of reality”(13, 96); the advent of photography also struck upon core issues of life permanence and material existence in an era that had been rich in spiritualist and magical thinking. The mass appeal and role of photography as journalist evidence “reflected the public’s passion for visible facts. People demanded documentary evidence of their own selves and times”(13, 96) and, largely believing that the camera could not lie, began to rate truth, *the real*, and authenticity on photographic renderings.

Defining photography “as a recording on a sensitive surface, either with or without the use of a camera, of a phenomenon visible or invisible to the human eye”(10, 14), photographs of invisible forces and related mental/mechanical image manifestations are the subject of recent art historical exhibition, both at The Metropolitan Museum (*The Perfect Medium: Photography and the Occult*) and Musée des Beaux-Arts de Nantes (as a part of *Vision Machine*). Outside the realm of the mental rational worldview but engrained in the search for truth, “the *occult* [broadly] designates that which is hidden, unknown, inaccessible to all but the initiated”(10, 14). Within the museum context, this historical relevance allows *occult* and otherwise questionable claims of phenomena to be now seen as *art* that poetically describes the influences on and passions of visual imagination forces around the turn of the 19th-20th century.

As explained by a “League of the Just” dissident researcher in Craig Baldwin's *Spectres of the Spectrum*, Samuel Morse's telegraphic inventions shifted the understood realm of electricity as energy to include perceiving *electricity as information*- potentially as transmitted *intelligence*. “The moment you crack open the social imaginary with a new kind of communications technology, all these ghosts and utopias rush in.”¹ Most ground breaking inventors are motivated by fantastic imaginations to discover new technologies that could also open doors to their deepest questions and concerns: unimaginable understandings of philosophical unknowns. By 1870, French avant-garde sociopolitical and artistic movements were driven to live purposefully, actively, and with a radical “emotional fascination of adventure” (11, 25). With similar anarchist attitude, Louis Darget's ‘photograph of a thought’ made a cognitive leap to representing mental image. Tapping into the subliminal “electro-magnetic imaginary”¹ and creating a new “spiritual language,” fluidic artifacts such as “Anger” (right) include “one of the most important aspects of avant-garde poetics-...what is referred to as experimentalism; ...the anxious search for new and virgin forms, with the aim not only of destroying the barbed wire of rules, the gilded cage of classical poetics, but also creating a new morphology of art” (11, 57).



Louis Darget (France), Fluidic Photograph of thought “Anger” 23 June 1896, Institut für Grenzgebiete der Psychologie und Psychohygiene, Freiburg im Breisgau. Inscription reads: “Thought photograph created by Mrs. A who was looking at a celestial atlas with a plate on her forehead.” Illus. From *The Perfect Medium*, p. 151.

Marcello Truzzi explains the marginalized credibility of “perspectives labeled *occult* (by anyone), [as due to having] in some way concerned themselves with things anomalous to our generally accepted cultural storehouse of ‘truths’”. The occult is often too strange to confront because, “it deals with dissonant knowledge claims” (10, 14) that contradict common sense or institutionalized (scientific or religious) knowledge. Because the “artist gives his work unique, imitable embodiment” (3, 118-119), fine art is acceptably associated with divinity. Describing the psyche of the classical alchemist, Jung explains that “Everything unknown and empty is filled with psychological projection; it is as if the investigator’s own psychic background were mirrored in the darkness. What he sees in matter, or thinks he can see, is chiefly the data of his own unconscious which he is projecting into it” (8, 42). Fluidic photo experiments materialized this projection with a degree of separation, thus creating new visual metaphors for philosophy of mind (thought/emotion/idea). “Whatever can arise as true Imagination is a reflection of the World of Archetypal Images” (14, 163).

TRUTH

Poet and physician, Oliver Wendell Holmes (1809-1894) concluded camera views so fantastically full of detail that “the mind feels its way into the very depths of the picture” (13, 56). As the photographic industry established itself, common sense popular acceptance of the photographic image contributed to the belief that photography was a way to determine what is *real* (and matter/material). Philosophical idealists “were put on the defensive by a mindless mechanical instrument grounded in the science of chemistry and optics” (13, 96-97). Not thinking yet of the photographer as an artist, it was also thought that “the monocular view of the camera could never match the breadth, complexity, or ambiguities of human vision” (13, 97). The camera lens acted as mechanized authority on obvious, true material reality. “True art, some critics [of the time] contended, included the development of the inner reality of the subject as well as its external description” (13, 97).

Having grown up in a visual overload culture, my thoughts are quite visually layered and generally are what I try to find a way to represent in my creation of ‘art’. How fantastic would it be able to

experience each other's mental visualizations/thoughts and how has consumer photo/video and ubiquitous media given us such a theoretical paradigm?

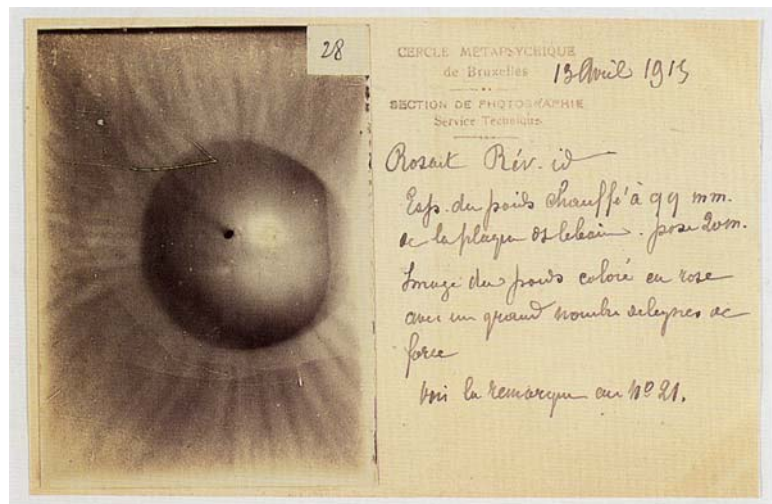


Anonymous, *The Portable Radiographer*
Illustration in Fernand Girod, *Pour photographie des rayons humanism*
(Paris: Bibliothèque générale d'Éditions, 1912), p.149

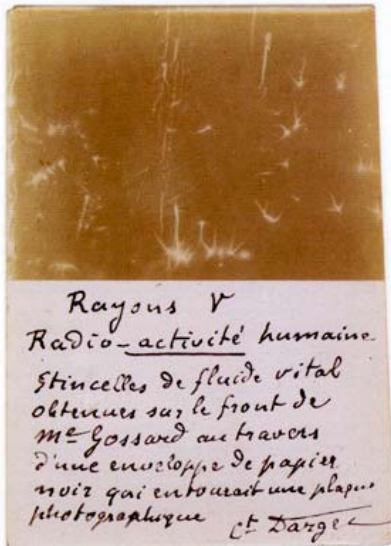
Wim Wenders' ominous millennial adventure *Until the End of the World*¹⁷ is most engaging because the plot's tragic addiction is so easy to relate to- addiction to the video playback of one's recorded dreams. Running out of time to take in waking life, Claire so needs to tangibly observe a device-recorded version of what her thought and dream space could be, that her final expiration of batteries induces psychotic break.

Responding to the telepathic impulse and the opacity shattering discoveries of atomic radiation and x-ray imaging, experimenters such as Adreïn Guébard, Hippolyte Baraduc, and Louis Darget worked within visionary belief systems to reinvent alchemical mysticism through photographic chemistries. Baraduc and Darget investigated exposing film on the forehead as the physiological transference often referred to by practitioners as *radiography* (figure at left). "For Darget, 'thoughts are creative, radiating, almost tangible, forces. When the human soul produces a thought, it sends vibrations through the brain, the phosphorus it contains starts radiating, and the rays are projected out'. While Baraduc only produces shapeless swirls, stains and blurs, Darget obtains precise and even figurative forms"^(5, 3).

The drive is so strong that countless people attempted to transfer their thoughts into various evolving photographic technologies, including a card catalogue of phenomenological anomalies created and documented (as in figure at right) by the Metapsychical Club in Brussels. Prefacing an anthology of essays on sociology, the esoteric, and the occult, Edward Tiryakian suggests that the significance of esoteric and occult flourishing "might, conceivably, be an indicator of a very advanced state of decadence; [but] it is conceivable also that it may be a harbinger of a new cultural paradigm." Mass responses to normative crises, cultural revolutions, and/or other conflicts challenging the existing world-view include "changes in the structure [of the] cultural paradigms, [allowing] greater sensitivity to periods of transition... It is in these crucial periods that esoteric doctrines, and occult groups and practices, surface from their covert level in society and attain public visibility"^(15, 31).



Collection du cercle métapsychique de Bruxelles, photographies, fluidiques, 1914-1918, Collection particulière, Paris. Illus. in *Vision Machine*, p. 14.



As a model, the *radiograph* was not limited. “The life force images and those produced by X-rays have the same heuristic function: the point is, in both cases, to reveal an invisible inside, and especially, to reach some conclusions”(5, 3-4). Examples of fluidic photographic experiment can be seen in “the pioneering efforts of Karl von Reichenbach in the early 1860’s”(10, 16), but efforts reached peak in the 1890’s when they “claimed the scientific legitimacy of research into radiation, specifically x-rays and radioactivity”(10, 16), because “Roentgen’s discovery [of x-rays] provide[d] a very rational explanation for clairvoyance -literally, the ability to see through opaque bodies”(5, 2).

Louis Darget (France), Photograph of fluids “V-rays. Human radio activity” c.1900. Handwritten caption reads: “Sparks of vital fluid obtained on Mme. Gossard’s forehead through an envelope of black paper wrapped around a photographic plate. Illus. in *The Perfect Medium*, p.119.

ERRING

The individualized visionary inventor confronts indefinable issues, in a world united by common acceptance of the rational/ reasonable. Within a *symbolic* ideology of information communication, photo-fluidic image-makers created (either accidentally or intentionally fraudulently) an *art* in the spirit of the avant-garde. They used a medium associated with optical realism to present personal fictions laden with deep socio-cultural psychological meanings. Breaking assumptions about life, the Zeitgeist of the period embraced a fantasticism of what *could be true*.

Theories of erring, have, over the years, offered uncanny challenges to logical positivism. Sometimes, the outcomes of particular combinations of error ‘variables’ produce an unexpected ‘miracle’ otherwise non-reproducible via systemic procedure. Is this a reflection of the quantum universe? Whether examples of confrontational *occult* claims are obviously absurd or the uniquely compelling, we can better understand the perceptive cultural conditioning that masks visionary viabilities by studying media artifacts.



Adrien Guébhard, <<plaque de nourrice>> expérimentation destinée à démontrer les causes d’erreurs de la photographie fluidique – Illus. in *Vision Machine*, p.21.

“By the end of the positivist nineteenth century, [mystical and spiritualist] practices [were] being strongly challenged. Some already [knew] that the signs do not come from gods or muses, but from themselves, not from out there, but from within, from what Sigmund Freud names, around the same time, the unconscious”(5, 7). Viability the most important validation at the time, scientists refuted images made via meta-physical claims as “artifacts arising out of the experimental conditions themselves”(10, 13) and explained that spontaneous effects were literally caused by unique combinations of subtle technical ‘mistakes’/coincidences’.

‘The issue of scientific learning must be considered in terms of hurdles’, Gaston Bachelard writes in *La Formation de l’esprit scientifique*. In emanation photography, as it is practiced at the turn of the century, two major hurdles cause both a diversion and a perversion of the discovery experience, at the time of conducting the experiment, first, and then when interpreting it. They amount to a mishap and an error of appreciation, serving experts to refute emanation theories (5, 4).

In conversation with Bill Moyers, Joseph Campbell explains, "Time and space form the sensibilities that bound our experiences. Our selves are enclosed in the field of time and space, and our minds are enclosed in a frame of the categories of thought. But the ultimate thing (which is no thing) that we are trying to get in touch with is not so enclosed. We enclose it as we try to think of it"(4, 62). In this way it is not possible for any *true* supernatural artifact to exist, but rather an artifact questioning *reality*- and such is a passionate perspective and purpose of authentic art.

Reflective relation enables the explicit consciousness of what was, until pause, merely implicit and preconscious- time and self. Whether based in Freudian 'secret desire' (wishes or fears) or some



Hippolyte Baraduc. (France) "Electro-vital balls (with electricity, without a camera, with a hand)" c. 1895. Illus. in *The Perfect Medium*, p. 129

unexplainable quantum impact of focused consciousness, we see what we want to- or can see. We are grounded, but also somewhat limited, by historically accumulated memory matrices and neuro-chemical patterns of expectation (collective and personal).

"The magician, the priest, the scientist, and the prophet/charismatic leader...share in common an extraordinary consciousness of reality, a vision of a dimension of reality other than that experienced by the ordinary sense; each is a sort of visionary who does not operate under the constraints of the 'natural attitude'"(15, 9). Honest attempts to manipulate developing photochemical technologies toward recording spiritual and nether realms seem an evolution of hermetic mystical alchemy, and also a natural media for the projection of metaphysical concepts. I think artists similarly have to metaphorically make unknown leaps and combinations to attempt to reflect viable transformations.

Science is always in a phase of redefining itself, but we only see such upon a shift/revolution. When one is truly experimenting with something never before tried, everything is scientifically possible. Having introduced wholly new diagrammatic models to represent non-Euclidian quantum particle scattering, Richard Feynman observed [of himself]: "I see all the time visual things in association with what I am trying to do"(6, 192). Their work also a function of the visual imaginary, fluidic photo makers had to take "the daring and risky leaps of speculation that are often the crucial ingredient, or even the initial impetus" for any uncharted scientific endeavor. Additional to "the use of one's rational faculties while forming and testing hypotheses, ...[t]here must be a second, complementary set of forces at work –an *art* of the imagination"(6, 184) to see beyond opacities of habitually assimilated standards.

All tools and technologies have developed of a quest for valuation. As manifestations of our human desires to empirically know and share, these tools and technologies that we integrate into our lives seem always a few steps ahead of our collective ability to grasp what they mean to our condition. They are, after all, exactly what we have striven toward passionately for the centuries. Using the gadgetry of human achievement for *media* expressionism, the lens both as the eye of optics and as vehicular eye to the psychology of the questing creator. Such *artists* document specific moments in time/space by reflecting position in the continuum of technical innovation and sociological opinion.

To aestheticize the imagination- What is real? While popular Russian scientist Narkiewicz-Jodko (*below*) captured very tangible and intriguing phenomena in his photo-plate recordings of an electrically externalized *vital force*,

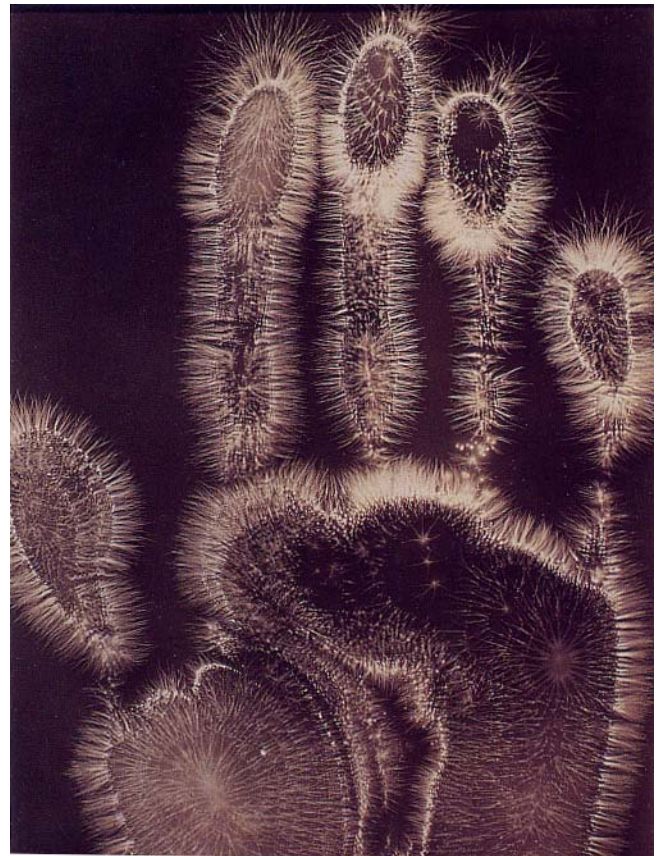
the same image can help confirm the existence of life forces for some, and, for others, indicate a hoax. In such a context, similar images can support diametrically opposed views. Such stark contrast is imputable to the totally different approaches of occultists, on one hand, and technical rationalists, on the other, when considering the hurdles in the discovery process. The experts cause mishaps so that they can analyze them, while the emanation people meekly endure them and bungle their interpretation. The latter's images proceed both from an accident and an error; they are the "hybrid product of chance and imagination". Compounding those two hurdles led to their amazing conclusions (5, 8).

When Moyers states to Joseph Cambell that "All metaphor suggest potential", he replies, "yes, but it also suggest the actuality that hides behind the visible aspect. The metaphor is the mask of God through which eternity is to be experienced"(4, 60).

*This long quarrel I judge: tradition-invention
Order- Adventure
You whose speech is made in the image of God's
speech
Speech equal to order's own self
Be easy on us when you are comparing
Us and those who were the perfection of order
Us looking all around for adventure*

*Us not your enemy
Who want to present you strange mighty lands
Where flowering mystery surrenders itself to the takers
Where new fires and colors unseen
Phantasm by the thousands weightless
Which need to be given reality
And we want to explore bounty's enormous land all
stillness
Where time is to banish to call back
Pity us battling always at the limits
Of limitlessness and tomorrow
Pity our errors pity our sins.*

*-Guillaume Appolinaire from "La Jolie Rouse,
translated by Gerald Fitzgerald (LL, xviii)*



Jacob von Narkiewicz-Jodko, (Russia) Effluvia from an electrified plate resting on a photographic plate, c. 1896. Illus. in The Perfect Medium, p.110

Within early 20th century crises, confrontational avant-garde movements eventually led to the paradigm of art/thought opportunities we see now as our oscillating and conflicting concepts of contemporary art. Occult experiments in fluidic photography attempted to shift the paradigm of the 'real' to include the psychic within a unique turn of the century window of evolving crises and frontiers of scientific and technological modernization. Fluidic photographers were on quest- in a time when such wasn't viable as art and in an age when the method of scientific standards was only beginning to structure itself.

At “various historical points, [esoteric] conceptions and modes have come into play in the larger society so as to provide vehicles of social and cultural change”(15, 268). Such are human expressive efforts, and, like avant-garde values, are articulations of protest and radical freedom. Between early and late phases, Greek *magicians* evolved from cataloging “astronomical, physical, and natural science” to become alchemists with “the language of philosophers [that] have applied philosophy to art by mean of science”(Z, 239). Now, thanks to 20th century ‘*advance guard*’ revolutions, I can have a chance encounter that is artistically viable as the document for which it is- an isolated set of possible circumstances leading to one specific visual or media manifestation. But what could art become?

Our ongoing logical concept of the ‘real’ comes in conflict with what we are achieving with several layers of integrated technocratic communications networks. While we have difficulty thinking of quantum particles as potentially existing in multiple positions at once until ‘observed’, we can *rationally* create a ‘real’ on many levels, as our **culture** is based on a dependent hierarchy of information signification:

INFORMATION>,
 {we are always} SENSING>,
 {to comprehend} MEANING>,
 {which lets us understand} SIGNIFICATION>.²



Hippolyte Baraduc (France), *Electrograph of the Vital Fluid*. c.1895, Illus. in *The Perfect Medium*, p.128

While *occult* practices traditionally refer “to the more comprehensive cognitive mappings of nature and the cosmos, [and] the epistemological and ontological reflections of ultimate reality”(15, 265), our *mediated* contemporary moment requires an artist/activist embrace of impossible possibilities in the face of futility. How else can one live a life of contentment that is both ethical and pleasurable? How else can one be a creative force outside the mediocre offerings of capitalism? How else can we work from a political, ecological, and mass cultural (digital pharmaceutical/technocratic commodity) position of despair -- and not be overwhelmed by it?² “Contemporary nihilism exposes the drama of an aesthetic of disappearance that no longer involves the domain of representation exclusively (political, artistic, and so on) but our whole vision of the world: visions of every kind of excess”(16, 46). *Passions and imagination are bound vantage of another*. “Some [human minds] can open up entirely new worlds and discover hints of the ultimate laws of nature”(6, 207). Quoting Einstein, “Here[in] lies the sense of wonder, which increases ever more-precisely as the development of knowledge itself increases”(6, 207).

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