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MA Illustration

Confirmative Praxis (M7X02024)

Depths of the Unreal

Submission Date: 12/01/2023

Word Count: 4947

The linear nature of this report, required for digital submission, is unrepresentative of its formation, its intended reading practice, or of the praxis in general. The praxis developed from multiple fragments, constructed layers, changed perspectives and selected moments. All depended upon representation, reassembly and re-emergence. This was to question the preconceptions of visual narrative, while creating a sense of dislocation from the familiar. The reader is invited to move as a mark upon a surface, exploring, searching, and to make anew.
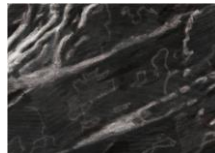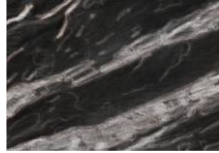
In the beginning…

The Holy Bible

(The Holy Bible: Genesis. 1:1)


Midway, upon the journey of our life…

Inferno

(Alighieri and Longfellow: Inferno, Canto I)

One of these days, we will die too, in the end: but right now, it has nothing to do with us.

Being and Time

(Heidegger and Stambaugh, 1996, p297)

A text consists of multiple writings, issuing from several cultures and entering into dialogue with each other, into parody, into contestation; but there is one place where this multiplicity is collected, united, and this place is not the author, as we have hitherto said it was, but the reader: the reader is the very space in which are inscribed, without any being lost, all the citations a writing consists of. (Barthes and Howard, 1967, para. 7)
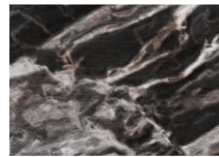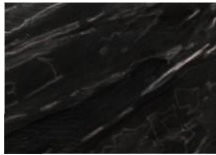
It is difficult to define illustration as being *illustration* without the inclusion or accompaniment of language. Illustration engages in an inter/intra relationship with language; *inter* being that which is between, among, or amidst, and *intra* being inside or within. Illustration becomes, essentially, the articulation of language through visual aesthetic means, a visual narrative.

The creation of a holistic narrative. What cannot be articulated through language is articulated through illustration, and vice versa. All is in the interpretation of a mark.

The interpretation of a mark implies conversation, a social act, between a mark maker and viewer, who, straining for shared meaning and understanding, turns to other means to aid them. Through smears, scratches or daubs upon a surface, an explanation is formed. The concepts of past, present and future gain a foothold. A visual narrative forms. An interpretation of reality is begun.

Language began as visual narrative between creative beings. In mark marking, is the beginning of the human.

> [...] the power that we see expressed [...] for the first time is the power of anticipation: the forward-looking imagination. In [...] paintings the hunter was made familiar with dangers which he knew he had to face but to which he had not yet come. (Bronowski, 1990, p. 54)
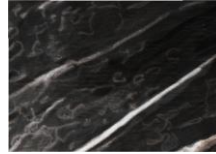
With the creative narrative and the power of anticipation came the human. To be human meant to have a degree of knowledge of present and future, and to reside in that space between the two. Liminality, an in-between state, became the realm of the human. To reside between birth and death, between a beginning and an end. A further narrative emerges.

To be human meant to be becoming, to change over time.

> […] transition as a process, a becoming, and in the case of *rites de passage* even transformation. (Turner, 1967, p. 94)

> The subject of passage ritual is in the liminal period, structurally, if not physically, 'invisible'. (Turner, 1967, p. 95)

Within ritual, liminality is defined as a threshold, an area of ambiguity and disorientation. The subject is neither one thing nor the other once the ritual has begun, or before it is complete. They enter a transitional state, the 'betwixt and between.' (Turner, 1964, pp. 4-20)

Consider a mark upon a surface becoming a drawing. Once it has begun, it is in transition, ambiguous and disorientated until it has been completed. Separate, transforming, before reincorporating and returning to reality. Drawing resides in liminal space.

Mark making gains the status of ritual, existing in the 'invisible' space that questions the nature of reality. Where there is reality, there can be unreality.

> Unreality no longer resides in the dream or fantasy, or in the beyond, but in the *real's hallucinatory resemblance to itself.* (Baudrillard and Poster, 1988 – Harrison and Wood, 2002, p.1018)

The texts by Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,* and Jean Baudrillard, *The Hyper-realism of Simulation,* provide examples on the notion of ritual and the reproductive medium. Benjamin argued that 'mechanical reproduction [the photograph] emancipates the work of art from its […] dependence on ritual' [Benjamin and Zohn, 1973 - Harrison and Wood, 2002, p.522]. It can be questioned if, within illustration, the ritualistic is reintroduced by the practice of working from reference photographs, whilst at the same time emancipating those photographs into new works of art. This creates tensions with the concept of the original. Is the finished drawing the original, or a step in a mechanical method, a step that can be manipulated, duplicated and worked upon to produce new steps? Should these steps be in turn manipulated to produce a finished artwork, where is the authenticity if the steps were never shown? Benjamin answers:

> The whole sphere of authenticity is outside technical – and, of course, not only technical reproducibility. Confronted with its manual reproduction, which was usually branded as a forgery, the original preserved all its authority; not so *vis a vis* technical reproduction. The reason is twofold. First, process reproduction is more independent of the original than manual reproduction […] Secondly, technical reproduction can put the copy of the original into situations which would be out of reach for the original itself. Above all, it enables the original to meet the beholder halfway […] (Benjamin and Zohn, 1973 – Harrison and Wood, 2002, p.521)

Any illustrator who has ever used a means of reproduction faces an ongoing conflict with this statement, particularly with the idea that the manual reproduction of the original is somehow a forgery. It is just a tracing, and not an artwork at all. Is art being produced, or simply manipulation of a photograph in an unnecessarily convoluted process through drawing and painting?
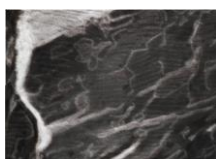
Benjamin asks:

> How does the cameraman compare with the painter? […] The painter maintains in his
> work a natural distance from reality, the cameraman penetrates deeply into its web.
> There is tremendous difference between the pictures they obtain. That of the painter is
> a total one, that of the cameraman consists of multiple fragments which are assembled
> under a new law. Thus, for contemporary man the representation of reality by the film is
> incomparably more significant than that of the painter, since it offers, precisely because
> of the throughgoing permeation of reality with mechanical equipment, an aspect of
> reality which is free of all equipment. And that is what one is entitled to ask from a work
> of art. (Benjamin and Zohn, 1973 – Harrison and Wood, 2002, p.523)

What of the aspect of reality? And the notion of ritual within a changed reality?
Baudrillard offers a definition for the real as 'that for which it is possible to provide an
equivalent representation' (Baudrillard and Poster, 1988 – Harrison and Wood, 2002,
p.1019), while also noting that:

> Reality itself founders in hyperrealism, the meticulous reduplication of the real,
> preferably through another reproductive medium, such as photography. From medium
> to medium, the real is volatilized, becoming an allegory of death. But it is also in a sense,
> reinforced through its own destruction. It becomes *reality for its own sake*, the fetishism
> of the lost object; no longer the object of representation, but the ecstasy of denial and
> its own ritual extermination: the hyperreal. (Baudrillard and Poster, 1988 – Harrison and
> Wood, 2002, p.1018)

In producing images of the beyond through representation of the real, and then
through the subversion of those images, the hallucinatory aspect of the real becomes
evident. There is that sense of a destruction of reality, a ritual extermination, in the
physical practice of putting pencil to paper, whereby the physical reality of the world is
defined by a mark.

> [A] blatant disregard for aesthetic categories is nowhere more apparent than in the reciprocity which allegory proposes between the visual and the verbal: words are often treated as purely visual phenomena, while visual images are offered as script to be deciphered. (Owens, 1980, pp.74)

Craig Owens, in *The Allegorical Impulse: Towards a Theory of Postmodernism* notes that modernist art theory blocks allegory as a mode of artistic signification, its aesthetic potential deemed exhausted and frivolous, whilst in postmodernist art theory, there is a re-emergence of allegorical modes. Owens stated that throughout the modernist period, allegory had been 'condemned […] as aesthetic aberration, the antithesis of art' (Owens, 1980, pp.67), a device of only historical rather than critical interest. He regarded this attitude to allegory's waning historical status as paradoxical as the proper capacity of allegory was 'to rescue from historical oblivion that which threatens to disappear,' (Owens, 1980, pp.68) and that its place was within that space between present and past. Allegory existed in a shifting liminal space, and it was this that gave it a revitalised aesthetic importance in the postmodern period. It had a metatextual quality, a structure that allowed one text to be '*read through* another however fragmentary, intermittent or chaotic their relationship may be.' (Owens, 1980, pp.69) Commenting on allegory's reemergent aesthetic status, Owens writes that:

> Allegorical imagery is appropriated imagery; the allegorist does not invent images but confiscates them. He lays claim to the culturally significant, poses as its interpreter. And in his hands the image becomes something other. He does not restore an original meaning that may have been lost or obscured […] Rather he adds another meaning to the image. (Owens, 1980, pp.69)

He goes on to say:

> Allegory is consistently attracted to the fragmentary, the imperfect, the incomplete – an affinity which finds its most comprehensive expression in the ruin, which Benjamin identified as the allegorical emblem par excellence. Here the works of man are reabsorbed into the landscape; ruins thus stand for history as an irreversible process of dissolution and decay, a progressive distancing from origin. (Owens, 1980, pp.70)

Ruin became an emblem for transience, and in the contemporary, was being preserved only in photographs, Baudrillard's volatilized real. As Benjamin put it in *The Origins of German Tragic Drama*:

> An appreciation of the transience of things, and the concern to rescue them for eternity, is one of the strongest impulses in allegory. (Benjamin and Osborne, 1994, pp.84-85)

Consider a structure in a landscape. Should it not belong, have a sense that it is a *something* in a space that should have *nothing*, it takes on the qualities of the weird. The structure gains a presence, as if reality is somehow being challenged by its being. What was once certain is now uncertain, what came before potentially rendered obsolete.

Consider the structure falling into ruin. In its collapse and decay, it will be subject to agencies outside that of the human, those of planetary forces and the passage of time. The structure's presence will dissipate, become a failure of presence, become *nothing* when there should be *something*. It will fall into silence and take on the qualities of the eerie.

The weird and eerie are subject to becoming, and reside in liminality, betwixt and between.

The eternal silence of these infinite spaces fills me with dread. (Pascal and Krailsheimer, 1995, 19)

Is horror truly the most adequate attunement to the discoveries of the Anthropocene? The Pascalian dread of the infinite void is perhaps, we might surmise, only a temporary reaction […] If we replace the void with nothingness, we may need to replace horror. Nothingness is not intrinsically horrible. It is intrinsically *weird.* (Morton - Weinstein and Colebrook, 2017, p.283)

The beginning of the human, the becoming of the human; both terms imply the end of the human. Throughout the modernist and postmodernist period, such a concept could be seized upon by those envisaging a means to *supersede* the human. Consider Gilles Deleuze's exhortation that 'the forces within man enter into a relation with the outside, those of silicon which supersedes carbon, or genetic components which supersede the organism.' (Deleuze, and Hand, 1988, p.131-132) It is now, in the era being termed the Anthropocene (Carrington, 2016) in which human activity has become discernible as a geological epoch, with the detritus of plastic pollution, radioactive elements, aluminium and concrete particles settling as strata, that the possibility of an actual end of humanity is being considered. As Jami Weinstein & Claire Colebrook, writing in *Posthumous Life: Theorizing Beyond the Posthuman*, state:

There will be a *post*human time, a world without and after humans. Such a sense renders many of the other senses of the posthuman enigmatic, if not null and void. (Weinstein and Colebrook, 2017, p.X)

The sense of horror implicit in the Anthropocene is that human activity has so scarred, so marked the Earth that those marks, scratched deep into our planet's geology, will be the only evidence that our species ever existed. A greater sense of horror is found in the possibility that it could be the only evidence that *any* species existed.

If the posthuman gestured at one time to a world of cyborgs […] and "inorganic" life, that past sense of a life posed beyond life has been countered by a future of post-Holocene world where the Earth as a living system is beginning to fail and instead promises a future inhospitable to all living forms. (Weinstein and Colebrook, 2017, p.XI)

Humanity will not leave a void, the empty vacuum of space, but we could leave *nothing*.

It is this spectral Earth that would be our legacy, haunted by the structures that survive us. A *post*human epoch, distinct not only in the fact that humanity has ceased to exist, but because our having existed will have irrevocably scarred the planet's surface. Our presence will remain only in our marks.

Projects have recently been started around the world to gain even the most basic of vocabularies for the experiences of life and death in the Anthropocene. These stuttering attempts to speak what it is we are doing have generated ugly new terms for an ugly epoch: 'geotraumatics,' 'planetary dysphoria', 'apex-guilt'. […] Only one of these recent coinages resonates with me: 'species loneliness', for the intense solitude that we are fashioning for ourselves as we strip the earth of the other life with which we share it. (Macfarlane, 2020, p.113)

The emergence of basic vocabularies infers an emergent language. Should illustration be accepted as the articulation of language and vocabulary through visual means, then it faces the prospect of having to provide a new visual narrative for an emergent geological epoch.

This is a significant task. Fredric Jameson, writing in *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* noted the complications of articulating the conditions of a contemporaneous moment while conveying the sense of something new or emergent. Such a sensibility exists at an intersection, bound to the sensibilities of that which came before it, whilst also seeking to define itself anew.

The very concept of a narrative thus faces a significant problem while bound to postmodern sensibilities. Jean-François Lyotard, in *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge,* noted that the Postmodern was entirely defined by mistrust of narrative. He noted profound scepticism, even incredulity, within Postmodernism for metanarratives, any narrative *about* narratives of meaning, experience, or knowledge.

This disconnect from metanarrative was also noted by Jameson. Jameson perceived that embodied within Capitalism's cultural logic, there was a whole new system of language being developed to explain the innovations of the digital, technological, capitalist marketplace and that existing language was becoming inadequate to explain this emergent market sensibility. He identified a feeling of 'depthlessness' as the supreme formal feature of this culture, in which language had begun to lose all meaning. This feeling resulted in the contextualizing of everyday experiences into disconnected image-obsessed 'moments', without story or sense, all serving as a further disconnect from reality.
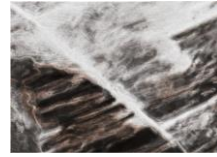
Baudrillard had suggested all that was being left was hyperreality, the real's hallucinatory resemblance to itself rendered hyperreal by its own ritual extermination, and simulacrum, where all image was becoming devoid of meaning under the replaced and destroyed reality. Baudrillard stated that the simulacrum occurred when there is no longer a distinction between reality and the counterfeit. This raises the question of whether capitalist society had lost the ability to make sense of, or to differentiate, between nature and the artificial.

There is an integral danger to these developments. Should the capitalist marketplace become the driver of new language, then any language that does not relate to that marketplace would be held to be no longer relevant and become lost. When the language to describe the natural world, as opposed to the artificial, digital and technological, becomes lost, there is the risk that the natural world itself would lose all meaning to the denizens of a capitalist society, and that they would lose all sense of it.

Illustration faces having to articulate a new language through visual aesthetic means, to provide a new narrative for an emergent geological epoch, into a capitalistic culture that remains sceptical of metanarrative, and comes armed with its own visual aesthetic cultural logic. Illustration's inter/intra relationship with language could be advantageous to this task; becoming part of the language system through use of imagery that would not, necessarily, present a hierarchal challenge to the digital, technological, capitalist marketplace, and having the means to provide an equivalent representation of reality, defined by a mark. The question becomes whether illustration can be folded between language and narrative, bring connectivity, story and sense to an emergent language network, and bring new depth to contemporary culture.

It is no longer a matter of starting with a blank slate or creating meaning based on virgin material but finding a means of insertion into the innumerable flows of production. […] The artistic question is no longer 'what can we make that is new?', but 'how can we make do with what we have?' In other words, how can we produce singularity and meaning from this chaotic mass of objects, names and references that constitute our daily life? Artists today program forms more than they compose them. (Bourriaud, 2001, p.7)

Writing in *Underland*, Robert Macfarlane describes a particularly arresting event. He and his companions are trekking across the Knud Rasmussen glacier in Greenland when they witness a colossal collapse of the glacier's calving wall that sends hundreds of thousands of tons of ice cascading into the fjord, creating a massive impact wave. Macfarlane writes, vividly:

> And then something terrible happens, which is that out of the water where the city has fallen there up-surges, rising – or so it seem from where we are standing – right to the summit of the calving face itself, a black shining pyramid, sharp at its prow, thrusting and glistening, made of a substance that *has to be* ice but looks like no ice we have seen before, something that resembles what I imagine meteorite metal to be, something that has come from so deep down in time that it has lost all colour, and we are dancing and swearing and shouting, appalled and thrilled to have seen this repulsive, exquisite thing rise up that should never have surfaced, this star-dropped berg-surge that has taken three minutes and 100,000 years to conclude. (Macfarlane, 2020, p.377-378)

They have witnessed the emergence of a volume of true black ice; ice so deep and so starved of oxygen that is barely reflective, not rock nor light, the ice of deep time. A piece of the dynamic Earth that predates humanity and has never been influenced by it. Reflecting on this experience later, Macfarlane writes of awe and horror.

He describes his physical shock in these terms:

> My stomach lurched too as the ice came up: the sublime displaced by a more visceral response to this alien display. I have often sensed the indifference of matter in the mountains and found it exhilarating. But the black ice exhibited another order of withdrawnness, one so extreme as to induce nausea. Camus called this property of matter its denseness. Confronted by matter in its raw form, he wrote, 'strangeness creeps in'. (Macfarlane, 2020, p.381)

He then quotes from Camus' *The Myth of Sisyphus* noting the lines, 'the primitive hostility of the world rises up to face us across millennia […] the denseness and strangeness of the world is the absurd.' (Camus and O'Brien, 1955, p.19)

The 'denseness' of the black pyramid was so strong that for Macfarlane it drove language aside. To attempt to describe the black ice as 'ice' was absurd. This was matter that refused to fit such a preconceived concept. To attempt to describe what could not be communicated in human terms or forms was to enter the realm of the weird.
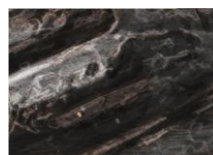
Art can never be so well served as by a negative thought. Its dark and humiliated proceedings are as necessary to the understanding of a great work as black is to white. (Camus and O'Brien, 1955, p.103)

[…] negating on the one hand and magnifying on the other, is the way open to the absurd creator. He must give the void its colours. (Camus and O'Brien, 1955, p.103)

Humanist thought has held since the Age of Enlightenment that the human subject is the origin of all experience. The principle espoused by Immanuel Kant was that human consciousness was not detached from the world but within it and actively engaged with it, and that the structure of human experience and the structure of the world are one and the same, an interrelationship between mind and reality. A mind and body dualism that placed the human at the centre of experience also placed the human at the centre of a nature and culture dualism as well, a development that marked separation of concepts.

The contemporary condition, the societal progression since the Enlightenment through the rise of capitalism, industrialisation and digitization and on into Anthropocene has seen a dark developmental shift, in which the human has moved away from the dualism of natural and cultural. The human has become binary, locked in culture, a product of culture in which culture and the human have become interconnected, and nature has become the 'other'. The structure of human experience has divorced itself from the structure of the world.

The implications that this has for a visual aesthetic acting as a new language are profound. Kant argued that human aesthetic judgement, positioned between reason and imagination, was essential to an understanding of the world as we are driven, as human beings, to seek purposiveness. It was possible to make sense of the subjective purposiveness of nature; that is, the sense that nature *has* a purpose, by aesthetic appreciation. As such, while sensations were subjective and particular, aesthetic judgement must be universally communicable. A contemporary condition that rejects metanarratives and the universal creates a landscape where aesthetic judgment, language and a notion of a shared identity of the human have all become subjective.

When it comes to narratives of the human […] it seems […] that humanist narratives continue to determine its past and future direction. As long as this is the case, we never seriously question the human or recognize the role of concepts. Caught up in such narratives, the posthuman as a concept runs the risk of being but a catchall phrase for our anxieties about the human. If we want to be truly open for thinking about life as being cut out in the shape of the human, or the posthuman, or in shapes that do not yet have a concept to determine them, we must find ways of understanding narrative itself differently. (Beckmann - Weinstein and Colebrook, 2017, p.60)

An extreme form of expressivity, allegory seems to be manifested by giving voice to rhetoric usually associated with the lament, namely a language that carries its own teleological undoing. Allegory stands for what the lament articulates: an affirmation of a lack-to-be, a desire for a communion without community, which marks both the allegory and the lament's invalidation. Much like the lament, rhetoric or image exhausts itself whenever allegory appears, to the extent that one could understand it as one version of the death drive. (Reitman, 2018, pp.1367)

Art practice must question whether it should be forced in new directions, articulate new subjective experiences and deflect itself away from pre-supposed narratives. One questions whether subjectivity itself would become central to the aesthetic experience, creating intensive effect rather than representative meaning, a quality that finds parallels in the writing of Deleuze. But there is a problem with this approach. It is the dependence on subjectivity in the post*human*, posthumanism based upon silicon and genetic augmentation, not in the *pos*thuman, a posthumanism devoid of human existence. This notion of the *pos*thuman *is* a pre-supposed narrative, and one that the evidence within the Age of the Anthropocene is forcing us to confront.

The growing challenge in the Anthropocene is not to think as post*humans*, but to think as humans facing the possibility, probability, and eventual certainty of *post*humanism.

This allows the adoption of allegory, as a humanist tool, within artistic practice, means by which to explore that which cannot be understood by us directly, a visual adoption of the timelessness of that beyond the human.

There are challenges. It has been noted that both humanist understanding and allegory have a tendency to fall in line with teleological narrative. This is the shared quality that both seek an explanation of phenomena in terms of the purpose that they serve. A sense of purposiveness in the Age of the Anthropocene is becoming problematic, with the destructive aspects of the era being, essentially, the consequences of the purpose-driven notion of human progression based on reason. It is enough to make one despair, to lament, of the very notion of human reason; where reason itself becomes a death drive, moving us to our destruction. We must question the purposiveness of the allegory, whether a means of expressing our inevitable non-existence will serve as a brake or a motor to the Age of the Anthropocene.

In recent contemporary art practice, the notion of the death drive inherent in posthumanism has become acute. The emergence of digital, algorithmic-based image generators creates a fresh area for the 'depthlessness' characterised in the digital, technological capital marketplace to emerge, and for the concepts explored by Benjamin and Baudrillard to take on ever darker meaning.

While mechanical reproduction negated the ritualistic from human expression, the mechanism of photography still allowed the human the act of decision, to be responsible for the capture of a moment and the paralysis of time. Algorithmic reproduction takes this act from the human, arguably negates the concept of decision altogether. There is no discernment of choice nor any moment of action for the algorithm, no single instance that has been taken from the duration of experience, the algorithm being incapable of experience. In scouring the internet, in the sampling of billions of already paralysed moments, the concept of a single moment is both subsumed and consumed. The image, already a timeless simulacrum, loses all human connotation. All meaning becomes void, and all concept of further meaning, any allegorical interpretation, becomes entirely subjective.

The danger emerges of posthuman imagery coming to creation while the human still exists, with no sense of the ritual of art, the construction of an image through tools and intent. It is merely the following through of a pre-set algorithm, without a measure of aesthetic meaning, indecision and exploration.

Posthumanism is becoming a further example of a teleological narrative based on reason, and is one that would destroy us before it destroyed our species.

Human beings have made images in the face of our fear, our fury and lamentation of our non-existence, to show that, for a finite moment, we existed. We create something to outlive us, and it is this that marks out our humanity. The creation of an 'independent' algorithmic generator, potentially an artificial intelligence, would be to create something that could be, potentially, infinite and immortal, absent of fear or fury. To this we would surrender our creativity, the thing that makes us human, the process we live for and live by?

These images come from lived experience, signified by representation made by mechanistic means, means that allow experimentation, erasure, discernment, exclusion and mistake. Sampled images abound but they are images that have come from the artist's own experience. The deconstruction and reconstruction of photography is to invite the sense, the process, of duration back into the images, to make the experience of the artist an integral component to the praxis. These are images without the human, about the human, in which the human is central to their creation.

What was the beginning? Where did the human start? Only when we could tell, did the story start.

If there is an end, it will be one that we do not tell.

A story without the human. The rules of narrative will be over, as it will be a story that we cannot shape, be around ourselves or around our experiences.

We can tell only the middle of our stories. All else is folded around us.
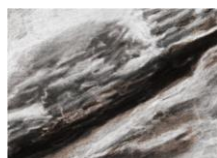
Things and thoughts advance or grow out of from the middle, and that's where you have to get to work, that's where everything unfolds. (Deleuze and Joughin, 1995, p.161)

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