Towards an Existential Pluralism

Reading through the Philosophy of Etienne Souriau

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How did our representations of the world become hard and dry?

Paul Carter[1]

A call has gone out in Australian cultural studies over the last five years for practices of criticism which engage with the world in more fluid, dynamic, even speculative ways. Paul Carter asks this question of representations in his seminal *Dark Writing*. In putting forward an experimental critical practice, one which offers a subversive form of place-making, Carter plays with narrative practices of constructing landscape in a non-temporal and non-linear context. Emily Potter responds to Carter's work in discussing forms of place-making in contemporary Australia. She is anxious about 'one-dimensional' and 'self-fulfilling' designs on contemporary Australian landscape, and calls for a 'poetics' of place-making which embraces connection and nuance within constructions of space.[2] She cites the design practice of Carter, highlighting his awareness of the subtleties of connectivity; in particular

'the phenomenological, ambiguous and highly interdependent "thisness of things" that cannot be apprehended by linear reason.'[3] Carter's *Dark Writing* is an evocation of what is absent as much as what is present in our constructions of land and country. His work is suggestive of a desire to speculate in forms of creative or poetic connection and interaction with landscape, just as Potter's adoption of his ideas illustrates the desire for a similar exploration to be taken up in criticism. Both Carter and Potter are inherently challenging critical practices in the Australian tradition. Furthermore, they are doing so from a position of unease with regards to existing forms of criticism. Lyn McCredden voices a desire for 'new discourses'.[4] Her article 'Haunted Identities and the Possible Futures of "Aust. Lit."' discusses the nature of white Australian identity as 'riven, needing to be understood always in relation to what [it is] not', in order to understand and face the larger question of 'what future-oriented discourses might be possible in this haunted context'.[5] Her emphasis is not on what these theories of white Australian anxiety suggest in relation to literature, but how we might move forward through them. She calls for:

> developments in Australian literary critical debate that seek to negotiate
> and think through this rivenness, not to cure or placate it, but to discourse
> it towards the future. 'Future' here is meant to imply, amongst many
> things, individual and communal identity, new ontological and social
> possibilities.[6]

Ultimately, McCredden calls for us to '*re-imagine and re-write* the nation in ways that offer vital alternatives'.[7] Speculation is actively encouraged.

There is a rising desire thus for subversive and radical practices in contemporary critical thought. But what might these practices look like? Different approaches have been put forward by various academics—take for example the work of Ross Gibson and Alison Ravenscroft.[8] I want to examine a 'chain of reference' which would see our representations of the world revitalised, given agency and a greater respect.[9] In his recent work, Stephen Muecke draws on French philosophy, specifically that of Etienne Souriau and Bruno Latour, to argue for a 'non-judgemental' practice of criticism.[10] Muecke reaches towards a criticism which goes beyond the subject–object relationship in constructing its world view and thus aims to participate in the world(s) it considers. Etienne Souriau's text *Les différents modes d'existence* has featured little in critical studies since it was released mid last

century.[11] But recent developments in cultural studies and philosophy—both in France and here in Australia—have returned attention to Souriau's thought and brought it into relevance with current critical debate. In particular, the work of Latour with regards to Souriau has generated much interest. His latest book, the enormous *An Inquiry into Modes of Existence*, draws directly from Souriau's philosophy.[12] It follows from *We Have Never Been Modern* in describing itself as 'an anthropology of the moderns', an effort 'finally to learn what "we" Moderns have really been', in order to 'renegotiate that "we" from top to bottom—and thus also renegotiate what we might become with the "others"'.[13] Alongside Muecke's engagement with Souriau, this points to the manner in which Souriau's thought might be reactivated in contemporary studies. In challenging the subject–object relationship as definitive in critical discourse, Souriau's existential and ontological pluralism has potential within Australian cultural studies to meet with the challenge raised by Carter and McCredden. Developing a general understanding of Souriau's philosophy could further research in this direction. The purpose of this article is to do just that, simultaneously acknowledging and responding to Latour's critical analysis of Souriau's work and suggesting the relevance of various elements of both within Australian cultural studies.

Souriau wrote as a professor of aesthetics at the Sorbonne, during the turbulence of the era surrounding World War II. Luce de Vitry Maubrey suggests that he 'has always been a lonely thinker' and that 'contemporary French philosophers are [or were] far too taken up with decentralisation, deconstruction and the ontic nihilism of post-structuralist game playing … to find time to look into Souriau's seemingly "quaint" undertaking'.[14] *Les modes* was first published in 1943 during the Nazi occupation of Paris. Perhaps it was the timing, perhaps the difficulty of classifying his work or the opposition he met with from the philosophers of his day, but regardless of the reason, he became subject to an obscurity that Isabelle Stengers and Bruno Latour lament and label 'radical' in the introduction of their 2009 edition of *Les modes*.[15] They describe it as the 'forgotten text of a forgotten philosopher'.[16] It cannot have helped that his texts have not been translated into English, nor that Souriau's language is ornate and complex, his writing prone to detours of thought.[17] Even Stengers and Latour see him thus: '*Les différents modes d'existence* is a constricted book, concentrated, almost jumbled together, in which it

is easy to lose oneself, so dense are the movements of thought and the vertiginous perspectives which ceaselessly threaten to derail a reader.'[18] From publication up until the 1970s, when Vitry Maubrey took an interest, *Les modes* was largely ignored. Writing in 1985 (and having released her *Le pensée cosmologique d'Etienne Souriau* a decade earlier in 1974), Vitry Maubrey called for a revival of critical interest in Souriau's philosophy, admonishing the tradition which had thus far overlooked his writings and his project, which she describes as 'the rehabilitation of a knowledge rooted in being'.[19] She concludes: 'Whatever the reasons … it is time for this passing over to cease. Not for Souriau's sake, but for our own, for the sake of the new direction his cosmological vision offers…'[20] Vitry Maubrey sees Souriau's project as valid, therefore, not only in its reconfiguration of Kant and Descartes, but in its application within contemporary philosophical studies. Stengers and Latour similarly see Souriau as holding currency with a contemporary audience.[21] Since the release of their edition of *Les modes*, awareness of Souriau's philosophy has been growing. Various critics have taken interest, including Stephen Muecke, Frédéric Fruteau de Laclos and Adam Miller.[22]

Half a century after its original release, *Les modes* still holds various philosophical positions which might be seen as radical. The opening sentences to the second chapter quietly reveal the underpinnings of his wider philosophy:

> To exist wholly, intensely, absolutely, what an ideal! To escape this incertitude of one's self, the constant search in vain for certainty in the fogs of unreality, on the very edge of nothingness! … Is it true that one can only exist in half-measures? That all things, a stone as much as a soul, from the moment of entering it, are equal in their existence?[23]

These lines reveal his insistence on questioning the nature of existence, and the history of ontology in philosophy. They culminate in an idea central to Souriau's thought: the concept that all forms of existence are equal in their autonomous capacity to produce. It is from this position that Souriau offers 'his own brand of decentering' in his rationalisation of existence as moving beyond subject and object.[24] *Les modes* posits, as the title suggests, that there are multiple, interrelated modes of existence. In doing so, it distinguishes between existing and being: 'One can see … what a profound distance there is between an ontic pluralism (posing the multiplicity of beings) and an existential pluralism (posing the multiplicity of modes

of existence)'.[25] It is the movement into being which Souriau uses to trace the modes of existence. Latour, in taking up Souriau's work, notes the manner in which diversity is regularly relegated to language rather than ontological being. 'Through a somewhat perverse mental restriction, on the one hand we acknowledge the most extreme diversities among these representations ['manners of speaking'], while on the other we deny them any access to reality.'[26] We may, he suggests, 'benefit from an ontological pluralism that will allow us to populate the cosmos in a somewhat richer way'.[27] But for his inquiry to function, he notes, 'language has to be made capable of absorbing the pluralism of values'.[28] The value of Souriau's philosophy, for Latour, is that it opens the way for this to happen.

Souriau coins a term—*instauration*—to describe the movement into being which marks a modal existence. Vitry Maubrey defines instauration as the 'ensemble of processes which lead to the moment wherein the presence, assurance and autonomy of existence conferred upon a certain being are incontestable'.[29] It is used, she suggests, in place of words such as invention and creation. 'But creation,' she notes, 'if one uses it in the strictest sense, indicates the act of drawing a being from nothing, an act which can only be understood in reference to a divine power.'[30] Instauration, then, is a movement into being which has the advantage of signifying an autonomous, anaphoric progress. Frédéric Fruteau de Laclos describes it as all-encompassing: 'neither the subject nor the object, neither the form of the thought nor the worked material, pre-exist the act of instauration. The subject is no more assumed than the object is pre-determined.'[31] Subject and object, he suggests, are 'born' coterminously, of the same instaurative act.[32] Fruteau de Laclos differs slightly here from Latour's response, in the emphasis he maintains on subject and object as configuring being. Latour calls it Souriau's 'most important innovation in philosophy', in that Souriau connects thus 'questions of language to the question of being'.[33] As Latour suggests, 'we are usually in the habit of either asking questions about language or about ontology, a habit which is obviously the consequence of that bifurcation we want to bring to an end'.[34] In *An Inquiry*, Latour considers the act of 'maintaining oneself in existence' as forcing us to acknowledge networks of beings in relation, and thus reconsider the distinction between minds and things.[35] 'A knowing mind and a known thing are not at all what would be linked through a mysterious viaduct by the activity of knowledge; they are the progressive result of

the extension of chains of reference … they both indeed arise from the same operation as the two sides of the same coin.'[36] This is where Souriau's philosophy takes shape for Latour:

> Here is where we are going to begin to understand why our inquiry bears on modes of *existence*. At first glance, the idea of attributing the term 'existence' to the two trajectories [those of chains of reference alongside reproduction] that cross paths can be surprising, because the tradition passed along to us asserts, rather, that there are 'existents' on one side— Mont Aiguille, for example—and knowledge on the other … it is precisely this *division of tasks* whose relevance we shall have to challenge. The distribution is awkward on both sides…[37]

Latour uses the metaphor of a map of Mont Aiguille to describe the composite networks in which subject and object are implicated. The bifurcation of map and mountain as subject and object is challenged as over-simplifying the existences they supposedly represent. A lot more is involved in this network, not least 'tourist offices, hotel chains, hiking boots [and] backpacks'.[38] To describe the relationship ongoing here, 'we can never limit ourselves to two extreme points, the map and Mont Aiguille, the sign and the thing'.[39] Instead, the two are '*both* products arising from the lengthening and strengthening of the chain [of reference]'.[40] Latour later connects the steps and leaps through which this chain of reference exists to the notion of instauration in Souriau's work.[41]

Ultimately, Souriau seems to suggest, instauration does not demand a subjective and objective position, but instead emerges as the natural process of existential agency:

> Instauration and construction are clearly synonyms, but instauration has the distinct advantage of *not* dragging along with it all the metaphorical baggage of constructivism—which would in any case be an easy and almost automatic usage in the case of the work so obviously 'constructed' by the artist. To speak of 'instauration' is to prepare the mind to engage with the question of modality in quite the opposite way from constructivism. To say, for example, that a fact is 'constructed' is inevitably (and they paid me good money to know this) to designate the knowing subject as the origin of the vector, as in the example of God the potter. But

the opposite, to say of a work of art that it is the result of an instauration, is
to get oneself ready to see the potter as the one who welcomes, gathers,
prepares, explores and invents the form of the work, as one discovers or
'invents' a treasure.[42]

Souriau uses a description of the work of the potter in explaining this process, and
suggests not only the power of the potter over the clay, but the power of the clay
over the potter. The relationship between both agential forces is equal: 'if there is an
instauration by the scholar or artist, then facts as much as works come together,
resist, oblige—and their authors, the humans, have to be devoted to them, which of
course doesn't mean they act as simple catalysts for them'.[43] Instauration then
requires involvement, but does not demand that existence-to-come be defined in
relation to this involvement, nor need that involvement be human or exist only in
the subjective mode. In this sense, Latour points out, instauration holds risk as well.
The outcome cannot be predetermined, or the existence would be as well. No, for
Latour, 'there is one condition: the act of instauration has to provide *the opportunity
to encounter beings capable of worrying you* ... Beings whose continuity,
prolongation, extension would come at the cost of a certain number of uncertainties,
discontinuities, anxieties, so that we never lose sight of the fact that their
instauration could fail if the artist didn't manage to grasp them according to their
own interpretive key...'[44] This suggestion of an 'interpretive key' also signals the
respect which must be afforded to the existence-to-come.

The notion of instauration is met by Souriau's understanding of the plurality of
modes. Without suggesting a relationship of power—there are no stronger or
weaker forms—Souriau does differentiate between two different 'genres' of
existence: that of aseity and that of abaleity.[45] This difference is in *how* the being
comes into existence: 'With aseity, one speaks of existence in and of itself,
independent, absolute in its mode; with abaleity, referential existence.'[46] But the two
function interactively: 'In the relationship of one to the other, that can be discerned
in all beings and which I can discern in myself, the existential responsibility can be
carried by either ... changing the balance of the being.'[47] Thus, we understand our
own human existence as aseitic, biologically independent, in responding to our
empirical experience of reality. But these experiences and the world around us have
their own abaleitic existence, which supports ours in our relations to them. We can

see then just how abaleitic existence holds agency and the power to instaure. This is what Fruteau de Laclos refers to as the 'co-birth' of subject and object through instauration.[48] Latour picks up a similar idea in approaching the 'beings of fiction', noting that 'they need our *solicitude*' to maintain existence.[49] But this does not deny them agency: 'Without any doubt, there is some *exteriority* among the beings of fiction: they impose themselves on us after imposing themselves on those responsible for their instauration.'[50] At the same time, they offer to our existence:

> If the work needs a *subjective* interpretation, it is in a very special sense of the adjective: we are *subject* to it, or rather we *win* our subjectivity through it. Someone who says 'I love Bach' becomes in part a subject capable of loving that music; he receives from Bach.[51]

In Souriau's terms, then, while the beings of fiction are abaleitic in their instauration, they contribute to the continuation of our own (aseitic) instaurations as subjective beings. The relationship is equal and dynamic, and in the case of the beings of fiction, becomes reciprocal—their existence 'depends in their being *reprised*, taken up again by subjectivities that would not exist themselves if these beings had not given them to us'.[52]

The multiple modes, whether abaleitic or aseitic, function thus in relation rather than comparatively to each other. Souriau further emphasises that these two genres are equal in that 'all beings find themselves initially in a given situation, which they do not have a choice of refusing or accepting. This is what constitutes existence.'[53] Each and every mode of existence 'has the same dignity as all the others'.[54] Because without this equality across modes, without taking each mode in its own right, there could be no existence, 'no more than there would be Art pure without the statues, the paintings, the symphonies, the poems. Because Art, that is all the arts. And existence, that is each of the modes of existence.'[55] In choosing to consider existence as instaured, the alternative possibility that it must instead proceed directly *from* something or someone is undermined. What falls away, Latour suggests, is:

> the idea, which in the end is pretty preposterous, of a spirit at the origin of the action and whose consistency is then carried by ricochet onto a material which has no other maintenance, no other ontological dignity, other than that which one would condescend to give it.[56]

Instead, instauration suggests the movement into being of 'an existence considered in and of itself'.[57] Further, as a non-isolated process of being, instauration is universal, constantly ongoing and interminable. For Souriau, as Fruteau de Laclos suggests, '[the] world was not there before instauration, it [the world] is produced by it [instauration]'.[58] Everything is being instaured and forming new instaurations in turn—even the consideration of a certain mode or form of existence, for example, is a collusion within the instauration of it, not physically but ontically participating in its being. Existence thus functions within a network of ongoing relations and interrelations, each of which 'come together' to continually produce and redefine modal forms; a network predicated on the equality of different modes, each of which are independently instaured.[59] This is Souriau's *multimodalism*, a state of existing across several of these modes coterminously. Latour describes quite poetically the difference between taking modes of existence in isolation and modes of existence within relation as 'a bit like moving from a piano tuner who tries the notes one by one to the piano player who makes them all resonate in a melody'.[60] The autonomy of each mode is not compromised but reconfirmed, in that it is the relations between modes which sustain multimodal existence. As such, multimodalism offers Souriau the grounds to argue against philosophers who insist on a single mode as dominant—'who continually exaggerate their preferred mode of existence'.[61] There is no hierarchical structure of existences. Rather, the multimodal is continually making new relations, or recreating old ones, through instauration as an ongoing process. Souriau suggests that one 'could flatter oneself on having outlined a complete tableau of the modes of existence … [but note] this essential fact, precisely that the tableau is open'.[62] In this sense, then, interaction with a mode is a formative relation—'the structure obtained [in such a tableau] depends above all on the order adopted for this research, this course of action'.[63] It is this relational state that Souriau emphasises, entering into an investigation of various modes in their complicity as well as their ontological uniqueness.

Both Vitry Maubrey and Latour comment in detail on Souriau's description of the phenomenon as a mode as essential to understanding his concept of modal being. To examine the phenomenon is to move towards the patuity that he indicates as essential to defining existence, in that the phenomenon in Souriau's philosophy *is* patuity, to a greater or lesser extent. Souriau himself suggests the importance of

understanding the phenomenon as implicated within the multimodal: 'what does [the phenomenon] become when placed in relation to other modes? ... Can one conceive of beings that have no relation with the phenomenon?'[64] Latour sees this mode as important in that it reconfirms this non-subjective status in Souriau's thinking. He makes an effort to illustrate the manner in which Souriau's philosophy goes against phenomenology:

> Let us recall that Souriau, like James, like Whitehead, is not moving in a bifurcated nature. What he calls the phenomenon has nothing to do with matter, with the plain empty object, used as a picture hook for the sickly subjectivity of the modernists. No, he just wants to capture the phenomenon *independently* of the badly-formulated notion of matter, and without immediately engaging it in the eternal question of how much of it belongs to the object and how much to the subject.[65]

The phenomenon then for Souriau is felt only 'when one feels it as supporting and upholding in itself that which leans on and consolidates itself in it, with it and through it'.[66] As Latour describes, 'the phenomenon [is] well and truly freed of its Procrustean bed; it can reply to its own terms of reference, it can finally lead to relations one could call *lateral* as opposed to only transversal relations'.[67] Within this, we can feel Souriau's insistence on the autonomy of each mode, and its nature as unique; but also the potential for multimodality.

This movement towards an individual mode is thus characterised by that which Latour refers to as Souriau's intent focus on 'obtaining being *by way of the other*'.[68] As Souriau describes his method, one must 'depart from a given ontology that is as restrained as possible, and seek out by what shifts and what links (representative of new modes of existence) one might pass into otherness'.[69] Latour compares this notion of otherness to a set of individual constraints within each mode, an ontic 'pattern' felt out in granting each mode 'the capacity to produce in its own way the assemblage of ontological categories which are its very own'.[70] Souriau contrasts his position in this way to a 'phenomenological reductionism', which 'puts the phenomenon itself in parenthesis', rather than focusing on it in its own right.[71] Phenomenology, he argues, is the last place one will find the phenomenon itself. He describes it as:

a bastardised form of thinking, where one looks for the phenomenon at the same time as leaving it behind. It supposes the phenomenon dissected. Drained of its blood, and surrounded by its organs. To take it in living form, the phenomenon posits in its phenomenal state its intentions and other factors of its reality.[72]

His project is to focus on the phenomenon as agential. 'One can inversely centre all this ['the existential shifts and morphemic attachments which drive, from the pure phenomenon, towards other realities in other modes'] systematically on the pure phenomenon, and install it at the centre in order to feel it support and respond to the rest'.[73] This 'othering' that Souriau calls on us to attempt is key to his philosophy: the attempt to hold a mode other than our own subjectivity as centred within the mapping of that same mode's existential tenor.

Vitry Maubrey sees much of Souriau's philosophy as bound in a reconfiguration of thought as a phenomenon; one running against traditional schools of philosophy, and 'searching for ways to disentangle the phenomenon of thought from the logocentric and anthropomorphic assumptions which have traditionally either bound it into subservience to the *thinking* subject or exalted it into an ultimate equation with Being'.[74] In this, we begin to understand the manner in which Souriau emerges from a radicalisation of the Kantian reversal, going beyond the notion that thought is a strictly earthly phenomenon to suggest that it is 'a phenomenon *sui generis* (of which man is only the occasional cause) which draws both its form and its content from the existential complex from which it emanates'.[75] This leads into a reconfiguration too of the subject, refuting Descartes' 'I think, therefore I am' as too heavily centred on the self. 'According to Souriau, Descartes should not have taken for granted that existence posits the I as common subject of the *I think* and the *I am*, because it implies looking at evidence from the viewpoint of a historicised Ego.'[76] For Souriau, thinking does not constitute the existence of the 'I', but represents 'the plurality of ontological acts which posit and concretize the individual existence'.[77] This is the foundation for Souriau's modal discourse of ontology, but it leads us also to appreciate the radical empiricism at play within his work. The patuity which Souriau sees as signalling existence is necessarily based within experience, as a manifestation within a certain moment in time. Vitry Maubrey, in somewhat grandiose terms, supports this notion. The 'experience of the *patefit*' is 'empirically

grounded … This lived instant, in its actuality of "instant-that-is", Souriau perceives as the cosmic opening where the "noumenal" makes its "phenomenal' entrance".[78]

Latour similarly engages with Souriau's work from a position of radical empiricism. He explores Souriau's notion of prepositions, via Whitehead and James, as central to the concept of modal existence. The opening passages of Latour's 'Reflections on Etienne Souriau's *Les differents modes d'existence*' take from James' *Principles of Psychology* to support the weight of prepositions in the radical empiricist version of experience.[79] Latour suggests that:

> the relations are numberless, and no existing language is capable of doing justice to all their shades. We ought to say a feeling of *and*, a feeling of *if*, a feeling of *but*, and a feeling of *by*, quite as readily as we say a feeling of *blue*, a feeling of *cold*.[80]

These relations, then, assert that normative empiricism is limited in taking into account only elementary sensory data, giving rise to 'a "bifurcated" nature' insisting on the 'strict separation of subjectivity and objectivity'.[81] Latour describes this as a 'huge *reduction* on what is accessible to experience', scathingly describing subject and object as 'the two hooks used to suspend a hammock destined for philosophical snoozing'.[82] Rather than taking the preposition as an indication *of* that patuity which he sees as signalling existence, Souriau suggests its capacity to point *towards* the 'patefit'. He allows them 'true existences', but their agency is held in their power to infer or lead towards the appreciation of a mode of existence in that which the preposition modifies:[83]

> here the preposition does not indicate an ontological domain, nor a region, a territory, a sphere or a material. The if or the and has no region. But, as its name perfectly indicates, the preposition prepares the position that has to be given to what follows, giving the search for meaning a definite inflection, which will allow one to judge its direction or its vector.[84]

This, it can be assumed, is born of his 'respect for experience as given through prepositions'.[85] In aligning himself to James's representation of relation, Souriau suggests the potential of prepositions to provide a 'grammar of existence' to be decoded in approaching modality. The radically empirical 'feeling of *by*' that James highlights is not lost, but seen in its potential for multimodal relation.[86] As Latour describes it, the preposition 'defines a way to *make sense* that differs from the others

… to identify the tonality in which we must take what follows'.[87] Souriau's project is to follow these relations towards unique modes. The aim Latour suggests in his work is to ask whether one can 'carry out serious research on relations':[88] 'if relations, and in particular prepositions, are given to us in experience, *where then are they leading us?*'[89] Souriau's understanding of prepositions paves the way for Latour to make further developments in radical empiricism. He moves through Souriau to see prepositional relations as signalling existences 'without requiring them immediately to align themselves in one and only one direction leading either towards the object (away from the subject) or towards the subject (away from the object)'.[90] He follows this in *An Inquiry*, suggesting early in his work that prepositions 'are neither the origin nor the source nor the principle nor the power, and yet they cannot be reduced, either, to the courses to be followed themselves'.[91] They offer instead the 'interpretive key'[92] of the mode to follow, determining how we are to approach each unique existence.

Approaching unique existences—this is the shape contemporary applications of Souriau's thought are beginning to take. Latour's *Inquiry* seeks to populate the world of the moderns with a vast array of existences, each in their own key. In Australia, Stephen Muecke has applied the ideas of both Latour and Souriau in critique of contemporary practice. In 'Motorcycles, Snails, Latour: Criticism without Judgement',[93] he reads their philosophy alongside Indigenous philosophy and Australian cultural studies to suggest the manner in which judgement might be challenged as a critical practice. Muecke takes issue with the prevalence of the subject–object relationship in criticism as decisive or definitive, and seeks to move away from 'phenomenological orthodoxy … co-relating self and other'.[94] His article directly responds to Latour's engagement with the existential pluralism of Souriau's philosophy. Muecke's writing embraces multiplicity in connection and emphasises the experiential over critical judgement. He demands a criticism which 'participates in worlds',[95] rather than one which situates itself as uninvolved. Like Souriau and Latour, he suggests that 'it is in the compositions, not the entities, that the power lies',[96] thus resisting the manner in which Australian political and cultural aesthetics 'work towards the intensification of relationships between subject and object'.[97] Muecke understands Souriau as part of a wider 'Vitalist' school which 'emerges from its roots in Spinoza, Bergson and Diderot, continues via Deleuze and Guattari, then

William James and A.N. Whitehead'.[98] His application of their thought seeks to offer an 'experimental' criticism, seeing Vitalism as 'an alternative thread in continental philosophy which seeks to provide (hopefully) a more realistic vision of collective assemblages of life-forms, where the human (paradoxically for the humanities) finds itself less centred.'[99]

This in part takes the form of a creative practice: exploring his relationship with his own motorcycle, Muecke offers a writing which is 'actively engaged in creative [*sic*] assemblages or compositions as it goes along'.[100] He puts forward an appreciation of the world wherein the abstract and the concrete touch, make friends, hold hands. Denying the singularity of the subject–object relationship, he celebrates 'a feeling of the immanence of life in and through worlds that fold in and through each other again and across time, life being movement and growth'.[101] This immanence informs his creative practice, which he refers to as '*object-oriented writing*', writing in an awareness of relation, writing from within a multimodal network.[102] He attempts to allow for the agency and evolution of modes other than the self, and overcomes the distance of critical judgement. This returns us once again to the notion of participation—not far from the process Souriau puts forward for the exploration of a mode, an understanding based on the 'existential shifts and morphemic attachments', which ultimately depends on our participation in the mode's existence and our perception of its agency.[103] Muecke combines this 'object-oriented writing' with an awareness of Indigenous Australian philosophy to offer an alternative, non-judgemental form of criticism. He highlights the manner in which Indigenous thinking 'allow[s] for non-human modes as of existence and radical transformations from the human to the non-human, and vice-versa'.[104] Even while it engages directly with Australian culture, then, Muecke's work indicates the manner in which Souriau's multimodalism offers various possibilities as a critical framework.

The emphasis on participation moreover ties in with Muecke's wider project. In 'Can You Argue with the Honeysuckle?', Muecke challenges critical constructions of landscape. He underlines a mode of being which is sustained not in the dialectic—the 'Honeysuckle' place 'does not produce an argument about something'—but in poetic connection, flowing incessantly and thus producing as well as sustaining life.[105] In this, he emphasises a construction of landscape that is nonlinear: an

'atemporal "space"', wherein existence is no longer purely ontological but based in a poetics of doing.[106] 'Ultinteraka is working away continually ... *Instead of being*, he does. *In the place of his existence*, an event is always happening.'[107] For Muecke, this way of seeing the world 'works because of a connectivity that releases a possibility'.[108] He is taking up, in his words, the manner in which 'Aboriginal cosmologies incorporate a non-human-being-centred view of the world, which also tends to be an ecological one. "Man" is just one living being among plants, animals, even the inanimate environment ... whose encounters create surprising relationships full of potentiality.'[109] Muecke also points to a conceptualisation of construction of place which takes up the double meaning of the French verb '*faire*'— to do and to make. This reaches towards the exploration of instauration in 'Motorcycles, Snails, Latour: Criticism without Judgement'. His emphasis on action— 'doing'—as offering identity subverts the relationship between subject and object in that neither can be passive. Constant action similarly constitutes a form of instauration, in the manner in which it embraces, encourages and even sustains relations with other modes of being. It has the capacity too for making new relations, 'a life force, going out and increasing, and not closed in on itself'.[110] As a vision of the world, this application of Souriau's philosophy opens new possibilities in criticism for Muecke.

For example, Muecke's latest work, 'Reproductive Aesthetics: Multiple Realities in a Seamus Heaney Poem', a chapter in Chris Danta and Helen Groth's *Mindful Aesthetics: Literature and the Science of Mind*, applies Souriau's vitalism within the sphere of a literary reading. He argues that 'a literary work is not a kind of *language bridge* between subject and object. Rather, its tentacles extend in all sorts of directions where the text's relations expand into an *empirical multi-realist* world.'[111] Ultimately, he is taking up Latour's questions as to how we might interact with the beings of fiction: By what relation can we know them? What continues their existence in the world? These are particularly pertinent questions when considering texts with immediate social and cultural impact—like Richard Flanagan's *Narrow Road to the Deep North*.[112] As a Man Booker Prize winner, the text has developed an existence in Australian society that encompasses all sorts of things in its network, from publicists on morning television programs to war veterans, international publishing to family history. While Latour considers these questions from a

philosophical standpoint, Muecke develops a practice before the text. He describes the complex ecology surrounding a text as a 'space of negotiation and transformation that does not privilege either subject or object. The story or poem does not exist *primarily* in relation to human subjectivities (phenomenology), nor *primarily* in relation to objects (materialism). It has its own existence not reducible to either of those privileged poles in the modernist conceptual architecture.'[113] His reading retreats from human centrality in the poetic experience, following Latour's notion of the equality in the relation between the subject and the beings of fiction: 'isn't there always devilish language getting in the way, triangulating and threatening to make English speakers, in this case, the centre of everything? In order to say no, I have to elaborate the claim that *some poetic relations are not linguistic.*'[114] The text is no longer made object by this reading, it is allowed vitality—readings cannot be understood by 'metaphors of depth or transcendence, just a ceaseless trying of things out with others'.[115]

Flanagan's *Narrow Road* offers an example. Where Muecke focuses on the chain of associations possible in reading Seamus Heaney's 'Fosterage', Flanagan's novel offers a poetic relation which conveys a sensation of splitting. In the structure of the text, in the starkness of its prose, in the recurring theme of the inexpressible, the movements of the text offer multiple moments of divergence and separation. For example, the poetic experience of the image of a shin, ulcerated, the bone 'starting to rot and break off into flakes', is made stark by the immediacy of the image closing, the white space which follows shortly after the brief episode.[116] Muecke focuses on tracing the specific relations a poem makes with other existences, 'virtual humans, things, other texts, history and even the sacred';[117] in *Narrow Road*, the writing enters into relation with social narratives, silences and physical sensations all through this poetics of splitting. The reactions the text invokes within the subject are felt through the body: it *moves* me, it makes me breathe deeply. With each split, each break, the text invokes failure in existence, splitting in its literal sense as a break in relation and/or instauration. Latour points out in his reading of Souriau the capacity for failure in vitality. Ontological networks encapsulate a 'fragile *set of connections* that has value only provided that it is regularly maintained'.[118] When Muecke asks what 'are all the heterogeneous things that make a poem come into existence and then help it stay alive?', he is in effect tipping his hat to this possibility

of failure, of losing the status of existence.[119] Perhaps, then, this sensation offers an interpretive key, a modal characteristic—manifestation of 'life's tendency towards splitting and diremption'.[120] Claire Colebrook sees this as one capacity of art, 'there is something that is mindless and countervital in the aesthetic, a potential in the art object for detachment'.[121] Reading *Narrow Road* in this light emphasises the manner the writing pulls away from the reader. The narrative builds through gaps and fragments. And in the notion of the inexpressible, 'the mystery', the constant suspicion that to life 'no meaning could ever be attached', there is an active denial of subjective relation with the reader.[122] The text is paradoxically 'kept alive' in its refusal to live out the existence expected of it, entering into relation with a wider discourse of the inexpressible in the social and historical narratives which surround the POW experience. When Dorrigo notes the 'biographies, plays and documentaries … veneration, hagiographies, adulation', the text is opening to narratives and beings which energise it, sustain it.[123] The building of these as a list points to a larger narrative again, a network of social relation. There is something more in this than the linguistic representation of life. There are experiences which have their own ontological status—the text met with 'as traces of life engendered by partners'.[124]

Reading practices which engage with an ontological pluralism are attempting to renew, re-energise, critical practices in generating vitality. This is about feeling out 'specific, working and perhaps unexpected partnerships [with the text] (which have nothing to do with *representations* which imply a gap, between referent and sign, for example)'.[125] Muecke's writing illustrates a concerted effort to speculate in and on criticism as a practice. He offers the 'new ontological and social possibilities' and the 'new discourses' that Lyn McCredden calls for—answering her challenge to '*re-imagine and re-write* the nation in ways that offer vital alternatives'.[126] And the alternatives that Muecke offers are 'vital' in the sense that they engage with a vision of the world based in an appreciation of existence as an instaurative force, constantly generating new relationships between heretofore unacknowledged actors. He seeks out 'unique pathways in and among the multiply-real', recognising, as Latour and Souriau have, that 'things can exist without being a function of the way humans look at the world, as if everything hung off that relationship'.[127] His work thus is ultimately based in the equality of modes that Souriau insists on. This is the relevance of a 'forgotten' French philosopher—not only in the potential of his

thought, but in the manner in which the unexpected relations it invokes force us to rethink criticism as a practice. Souriau makes clear that we are participating in an instauration in engaging with his work. Our criticism too, then, is instaurative. What avenues, what relationships does it open up? What relationships can we actively seek to open?

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—NOTES

1 Paul Carter, *Dark Writing: Geography, Performance, Design*, University of Hawai'i Press, Honolulu, 2009, p. 8.

2 Emily Potter, 'The Ethics of Rural Place-Making: Public Space, Poetics and the Ontology of Design', *Cultural Studies Review*, vol. 16, no. 1, 2010, p. 16.

3 Carter, p. 2, in Potter, p. 21.

4 Lyn McCredden, '(Un)Belonging in Australia: Poetry and Nation', *Southerly*, vol. 73, no. 1, 2013, p. 40.

5 Lyn McCredden, 'Haunted Identities and the Possible Futures of "Aust. Lit."', *Journal of the Association for the Study of Australian Literature*, Special Issue: *Spectres, Screens, Shadows, Mirrors*, 2007, p. 13.

6 Ibid., p. 17.

7 McCredden, '(Un)belonging in Australia', p. 42.

8 See Ross Gibson, *South of the West: Postcolonialism and the Narrative Construction of Australia*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1992; Ross Gibson, *Seven Versions of an Australian Badland*, University of Queensland Press, Brisbane, 2002; Ross Gibson, *26 Views of the Starburst World: William Dawes at Sydney Cove 1788-91*, UWA Publishing, Perth, 2012; Alison Ravenscroft, 'Dreaming of Others: *Carpentaria* and its Critics', *Cultural Studies Review*, vol. 16, no. 2, 2010, pp. 194–224; Alison Ravenscroft, *The Postcolonial Eye: White Australian Desire and the Visual Field of Race*, Ashgate, Farnham, UK, 2012.

9 Bruno Latour, *An Inquiry into Modes of Existence: An Anthropology of the Moderns*, trans. Catherine Porter, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, 2013, p. 79.

10 See Stephen Muecke, 'Can You Argue with the Honeysuckle?', in Jennifer Rutherford (ed.), *Halfway House: The Poetics of Australian Spaces*, University of Western Australia Press, Perth, 2010, pp. 34–42;

Stephen Muecke, 'Motorcyles, Snails, Latour: Criticism without Judgement', *Cultural Studies Review*, vol. 18, no. 1, 2012, pp. 40–58.

[11] Etienne Souriau, *Les différents modes d'existence; suivi de De l'œuvre à faire,* eds Isabelle Stengers and Bruno Latour, Presses Universitaire de France, Paris, 2009. Text referred to from here as *Les modes*.

[12] Latour, *An Inquiry into Modes of Existence*.

[13] Ibid., p. 14. His work in this field won the 2013 Ludvig Holberg International Memorial Prize, p. 15; Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, trans. Catherine Porter, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, 1993.

[14] Luce de Vitry Maubrey, 'Etienne Souriau's Cosmic Vision and the Coming-Into-Its-Own of the Platonic Other', *Man and World*, vol. 18, 1985, p. 325.

[15] See Isabelle Stengers and Bruno Latour, 'Le Sphinx de l'œuvre', in Etienne Souriau, *Les différents modes d'existence*, p. 2.

[16] Ibid., p. 1.

[17] All translations are my own. Citations of translated text refer to the French texts in the most recent edition, where multiple versions exist.

[18] Stengers and Latour, 'Le Sphinx de l'œuvre', p. 4.

[19] Vitry Maubrey, 'Etienne Souriau's Cosmic Vision', p. 325.

[20] Ibid., p. 326

[21] Stengers and Latour, 'Le Sphinx de l'œuvre', p. 3.

[22] See Muecke, 'Can You Argue with the Honeysuckle?'; Muecke, 'Motorcyles, Snails, Latour'; Stephen Muecke, 'I Am What I Am Attached To: On Bruno Latour's "Inquiry into the Modes of Existence"', *Los Angeles Review of Books*, 28 December 2012, at <http://lareviewofbooks.org/review/i-am-what-i-am-attached-to-on-bruno-latours-inquiry-into-the-modes-of-existence>; Frédéric Fruteau de Laclos, 'Les Voies de l'Instauration: Souriau chez les contemporaines', *Critique*, vol. 775, 2011. Adam S. Miller, *Speculative Grace: Bruno Latour and Object-Oriented Theology*, Fordham University Press, New York, 2013.

[23] Souriau, *Les différents modes d'existence*, p. 89.

[24] Vitry Maubrey, 'Etienne Souriau's Cosmic Vision', p. 327.

[25] Souriau, *Les différents modes d'existence*, p. 81

[26] Latour, *An Inquiry into Modes of Existence*, p. 20.

[27] Ibid., p. 21.

[28] Ibid., p. 19.

[29] Luce de Vitry Maubrey, *La Pensée cosmologique d'Etienne Souriau*, Klincksieck, Paris, 1974, p. 219. It is worth noting here that Frédéric Fruteau de Laclos inadvertently paraphrases this quote from de Vitry Maubrey in discussing a comparison between Latour's concept of 'faitiche' and Souriau's instauration. 'Faitiche', a term 'coined by Latour to qualify the character of objects', is a composition of the 'supposedly primitive belief "of pre-moderns"' in fetishes and the 'robust' knowledge of moderns

constructed as facts, as in the French « faits », Fruteau de Laclos, 'Les Voies de l'Instauration', p. 934. (A discussion might emerge here with Paul Carter's 'thisness of things'.) Fruteau de Laclos continues to expand his discussion out towards the Frankfurt school of critical theory, a movement that de Vitry Maubrey does not make, but which bears an interesting discussion of criticism in modern philosophy. He also questions the position of Stengers and Latour as compromised in their qualifications of instaured existences.

[30] Vitry Maubrey, *La Pensée cosmologique d'Etienne Souriau*, p. 219.

[31] Fruteau de Laclos, 'Les Voies de l'Instauration', p. 934.

[32] Ibid., p. 934.

[33] Bruno Latour, 'Reflections on Etienne Souriau's *Les Différents modes d'existence*', trans. Stephen Muecke, in Graham Harman, Levi Bryant and Nick Srnicek (eds), *The Speculative Turn: Continental Materialism and Realism,* re.press, Melbourne, 2006, p. 309.

[34] Ibid.

[35] Latour, *An Inquiry into Modes of Existence*, p. 86.

[36] Ibid., pp. 80–1.

[37] Ibid., pp. 86–7.

[38] Ibid., p. 78.

[39] Ibid., p. 79.

[40] Ibid., p. 80.

[41] Ibid., p. 162.

[42] Latour, 'Reflections on Etienne Souriau's *Les Différents modes d'existence*', pp. 310–11.

[43] Ibid., p. 311.

[44] Latour, *An Inquiry into Modes of Existence*, pp. 161–2.

[45] Souriau, *Les différents modes d'existence*, p. 103.

[46] Ibid., p.103

[47] Ibid.

[48] Fruteau de Laclos, 'Les Voies de l'Instauration, p. 934.

[49] Latour, *An Inquiry into Modes of Existence*, pp. 242, 238.

[50] Ibid., p. 240.

[51] Ibid., p. 241.

[52] Ibid.

[53] Souriau, *Les différents modes d'existence*, p. 110.

[54] Latour, 'Reflections on Etienne Souriau's *Les Différents modes d'existence*', p. 332.

[55] Souriau, *Les différents modes d'existence*, pp.110–11.

[56] Latour, 'Reflections on Etienne Souriau's *Les Différents modes d'existence*', p. 311.

[57] Souriau, *Les différents modes d'existence*, p. 98.

[58] Fruteau de Laclos, 'Les Voies de l'Instauration, pp. 934–5.

59 Latour, 'Reflections on Etienne Souriau's *Les Différents modes d'existence*', p. 311.

60 Ibid., p. 330.

61 Ibid.

62 Souriau, *Les différents modes d'existence*, p. 160.

63 Ibid., p. 160.

64 Ibid., pp. 119–120.

65 Latour, 'Reflections on Etienne Souriau's *Les Différents modes d'existence*', p. 316.

66 Souriau, *Les différents modes d'existence*, p. 119.

67 Latour, 'Reflections on Etienne Souriau's *Les Différents modes d'existence*', p. 317.

68 Ibid., p. 316.

69 Souriau, *Les différents modes d'existence*, p. 88.

70 Latour, 'Reflections on Etienne Souriau's *Les Différents modes d'existence*', p. 316.

71 Souriau, *Les différents modes d'existence*, p. 116.

72 Ibid. p. 116.

73 Ibid.

74 Vitry Maubrey, 'Etienne Souriau's Cosmic Vision', p. 327.

75 Ibid., p. 328.

76 Ibid., p. 331.

77 Ibid., p. 330.

78 Ibid., pp. 331–2.

79 Latour, 'Reflections on Etienne Souriau's *Les Différents modes d'existence*', p. 304; William James, *Principles of Psychology*, vol. 1, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, 1890.

80 Latour, 'Reflections on Etienne Souriau's *Les Différents modes d'existence*', p. 306.

81 Ibid., p. 305.

82 Ibid., p. 306. This is an idea Muecke has also taken up. See Muecke, 'Motorcyles, Snails, Latour', p. 42.

83 Ibid., p. 308.

84 Ibid., pp. 308–9.

85 Ibid., p. 308.

86 Ibid.

87 Latour, *An Inquiry into Modes of Existence*, p. 237.

88 Latour, 'Reflections on Etienne Souriau's *Les Différents modes d'existence*', p. 309.

89 Ibid., p. 306.

90 Ibid., p. 309.

91 Latour, *An Inquiry into Modes of Existence*, p. 58.

92 Ibid.

93 Muecke, 'Motorcyles, Snails, Latour'.

94 Stephen Muecke, 'Australian Indigenous Philosophy', *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture*, vol. 13, no. 2, 2011, np. <http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol3/iss2/3>.

95 Muecke, 'Motorcyles, Snails, Latour', p. 42.

96 Muecke, 'Australian Indigenous Philosophy', np.

97 Stephen Muecke, 'A Landscape of Variability', *The Kenyon Review*, vol. 25, no. 3, 2003, p. 83.

98 Muecke, 'Motorcyles, Snails, Latour', p. 42.

99 Ibid., pp. 41–2.

100 Ibid., p. 42.

101 Stephen Muecke, *Ancient and Modern: Time, Culture and Indigenous Philosophy*, Sydney, University of New South Wales Press, 2004, p. 4.

102 Muecke, 'Motorcyles, Snails, Latour'*,* p. 47.

103 Souriau, *Les différents modes d'existence*, p. 116.

104 Muecke, 'Australian Indigenous Philosophy', np.

105 Muecke, 'Can You Argue with the Honeysuckle?', p. 41.

106 Ibid., p. 38.

107 Ibid., p. 40.

108 Muecke, 'A Landscape of Variability', p. 288.

109 Muecke, *Ancient and Modern*, p. 70.

110 Muecke, 'Can You Argue with the Honeysuckle?', pp. 41–2.

111 Stephen Muecke, 'Reproductive Aesthetics: Multiple Realities in a Seamus Heaney Poem', in Chris Danta and Helen Groth (eds), *Mindful Aesthetics: Literature and the Sciences of Mind*, Bloomsbury, London, 2014, p. 169.

112 Richard Flanagan, *Narrow Road to the Deep North*, Vintage Books, Sydney, 2013.

113 Ibid., p. 169.

114 Ibid., p. 164.

115 Ibid., p. 171.

116 Ibid., p. 459.

117 Muecke, 'Reproductive Aesthetics', p. 164.

118 Latour, *An Inquiry into Modes of Existence*, p. 62.

119 Muecke, 'Reproductive Aesthetics', p. 161.

120 Claire Colebrook, 'Vitalism and Theoria', in Chris Danta and Helen Groth (eds), *Mindful Aesthetics: Literature and the Sciences of Mind*, Bloomsbury, London, 2014, p. 31.

121 Ibid., p. 31.

122 Flanagan, *Narrow Road to the Deep North*, pp. 450, 463.

123 Ibid., p. 17.

124 Muecke, 'Reproductive Aesthetics', p. 170.

125 Ibid., p. 170.

[126] McCredden, 'Haunted Identities and the Possible Futures of "Aust. Lit."', p. 17; McCredden, '(Un)Belonging in Australia: Poetry and Nation', pp. 40, 42.

[127] Muecke, 'Motorcyles, Snails, Latour', pp. 45, 46.

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