

**Panel Two: Surveillance, Sensation, and the Social**

**“William James, Michel Foucault, and Aliens?”**

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**ABSTRACT**

*In Slaughterhouse-Five Kurt Vonnegut tells the story of an alien society from the planet Tralfamador who view the human perspective as a type of cage. In the Principles of Psychology, William James asserts that habit, which is typically understood as confined to rote and mechanical actions, in fact extends into the realm of perception. Like the Tralfamadorians, who are shocked at the narrowness of human perspective, James asserts that habits of attention narrow each human’s field of vision. For James, experience appears first as a chaotic undifferentiated mass. Habits of attention shape this chaotic mass into the world that one perceives, narrowing the perceived world into what one habitually selects out of the chaos of pure experience. In Discipline and Punish, Foucault’s writings on Bentham’s Panopticon illustrate how controlled perception can be a trap, a prison and a form of power. A fusion of James, Vonnegut and Foucault’s writings illustrates the dangers of habitual attention, how the Panoptic structure can become internalized and how we can become imprisoned in our own habits of perception.*

In the *Principles of Psychology*, William James asserts that pure consciousness is a chaotic undifferentiated mass which is only made sense of after it has been categorized, cut up and named. This mass, this “big blooming buzzing confusion,”<sup>1</sup> is ultimately shaped by habits of attention. These habits, unlike the activities that one typically considers habitual, do not simply control mundane and basic tasks but actually mold the very world that one perceives. In his chapter on Habit, James claims: “Habit is thus the enormous fly-wheel of society, its most precious conservative agent,”<sup>2</sup> insinuating that habits are extremely effective at keeping farmers as farmers and lawyers as lawyers, serving as a successful means of preventing movement between different social strata.

James’ comments about the controlling powers of habit are particularly interesting if one considers the power that might lie within habits of attention. Like Bentham’s Panopticon, habits of attention control our lines of sight, what we can and cannot see. Foucault’s writings on Panopticism illustrate how manipulated vision operates as a form of power and a means of imprisonment. Kurt Vonnegut’s novel *Slaughterhouse-Five* provides yet another example of how vision can take the form of a cage. In his novel, Vonnegut describes an alien race from the planet Tralfamador who view the limited human perspective as a type of prison. Vonnegut’s critique of human perspective, taken together with Foucault’s writings on Panopticism, illustrate the potential for human perspective to become a trap. A fusion of James, Vonnegut and Foucault’s writings highlights the dangers of habitual attention, how the Panoptic structure can become internalized and how we can become imprisoned in our own habits of perception.

In his anti-war, science-fiction novel *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Kurt Vonnegut provides an interesting example of the way that one can become trapped within one’s perspective. *Slaughterhouse-Five* tells the story of a soldier named Billy Pilgrim who is captured by the Germans during World War II. During the course of the novel, Billy is abducted by aliens from the planet Tralfamador and exhibited in one of their zoos. The Tralfamadorian perspective differs from human perspective because the Tralfamadorians have already seen every moment of their lives. While they cannot change any aspect of their fates, they can travel to different periods of their lives,

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<sup>1</sup> James, William. *The Writings of William James*. Ed. John J. McDermott. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1977. p. 233.

<sup>2</sup> James, William. *Principles of Psychology*. Volume I. New York: Dover, 1950. p. 121.

experiencing what they choose out of the spectrum of time. Because of their ability to travel through time, the Tralfamadorians have difficulty understanding the limited perspective of humans. The tour guide at the Tralfamadorian zoo uses the following metaphor to explain the plight of earthlings:

The guide invited the crowd to imagine that they were looking across a desert at a mountain range on a day that was twinkling bright and clear. They could look at a peak or a bird or a cloud, at a stone right in front of them, or even down into a canyon behind them. But among them was this poor Earthling, and his head was encased in a steel sphere which he could never take off. There was only one eyehole through which he could look, and welded to that eyehole were six feet of pipe.

This was only the beginning of Billy's miseries in the metaphor. He was also strapped to a steel lattice which was bolted to a flatcar on rails, and there was no way he could turn his head or touch the pipe. The far end of the pipe rested on a bi-pod which was also bolted to a flatcar. All Billy could see was the little dot at the end of the pipe.<sup>3</sup>

To the Tralfamadorians, the human perspective is a trap. While the Tralfamadorians are capable of seeing any aspect of time humans are stuck on a one-way railcar with their head fixed in a steel cage, forced to look at the richness of experience through the narrow window of a six foot long steel pipe. Vonnegut's fantastic description, involving aliens and time travel, ultimately illustrates the narrowness of human perspective. His insights reveal that perspective can, in fact, be a cage in which one is trapped.

For Vonnegut, the true trap of humans is that they do not realize that they are imprisoned. They are unaware of the limits of their perspective. As the narrator says: "He [Billy Pilgrim] didn't know he was on a flatcar, didn't even know there was anything peculiar about his situation...Whatever poor Billy saw through the pipe, he had no choice but to say to himself, 'That's life.'"<sup>4</sup> What is most disturbing about Billy's plight is that he has no idea that he is caught in any sort of a trap. Human perspective has the capacity to operate in much the same way. Just as Billy Pilgrim is strapped to a train car and forced to look at the world through a fixed perspective, human attention can become trapped by habits of perception, forcing one to look at the world through the narrow window of subjectivity.

James' account of pure experience and attention suggests how it might be possible for humans to become caught in their own perspectives and, like Billy Pilgrim, to become unwittingly entangled in the trap of perception. James believes that the world appears first as a chaotic mass of elements that can only be comprehended after it is categorized and named. The ultimate categorization of the world is caused by the amount of attention that one pays to different parts of experience. The selection of certain parts of pure experience over others eventually becomes habitual, allowing one to select the same world over and over again with little thought or effort.<sup>5</sup> Habitual selection of a limited world restricts the scope of what one perceives, imprisoning one in an environment that does not reflect the depth of pure experience. Like Billy Pilgrim, it is possible to become unwittingly trapped in perspective.

An understanding of James's psychological account of habit will help clarify how one can become trapped within one's own perception. The word "habit" most often calls to mind activities that one accomplishes with little thought or care. Habit is often thought of as confined to the movements of the body- as only capable of influencing simple, everyday and common actions. James, however, recognizes that habit has effects that go beyond simple motor activity and, in fact, influences perception, thinking and willing. For James, the effects of habit reach into many different realms of activity and ultimately play a large role in shaping the world in which one lives. In short, habit guides what one does, what one sees, and how one sees it.

James begins his explanation of habit by examining how it works on a neural level. Habits are nothing more than neural pathways that become strengthened through repeated use. Each time a person commits a new action, a new neural pathway is created. With every repetition of the action the neural pathway deepens, making

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<sup>3</sup> Vonnegut, Kurt. *Slaughterhouse- Five*. New York: Laurel, 1991. page 115.

<sup>4</sup> Vonnegut 115

<sup>5</sup> While James asserts the human tendency to become trapped within habits, he does not want to condemn humans to a life of automatism. Habits may be difficult to change, but they are not permanent. One can combat the trend towards entrenchment in a narrow perspective.

it easier and easier to complete the action. Eventually, the neural pathway becomes so deep that the action associated with it occurs with little effort- habitual action occurs almost automatically. Just as a stream cuts grooves deeper and deeper into the riverbed along which it runs, our actions cut grooves deep into our brains, allowing the current of activity to flow without resistance.

The neural law of habit, namely that “our nervous system grows to the modes in which it has been exercised,”<sup>6</sup> applies to the realm of perception in addition to the realm of our daily simple actions, like opening a door or getting dressed in the morning, James also asserts that we have habits of attention that shape the very way we perceive the world. For James, perception is active, is fueled by attention and is subject to the force of habit. Habits of attention ultimately shape the perceived world, caging us in the automatic flow of habitual action.

James describes attention as the active selection of an environment out of the chaotic flux which is pure experience. For James, primary experience is an “infinite chaos of movements”<sup>7</sup> that must be sorted in order to be understood. Since this primordial experience is so overwhelming, one must select certain elements out of the flux in order to make sense of one’s experiences. The world that one lives in is selected from this undistinguishable, swarming continuum of pure experience. What one selects is powered by what one attends to, what one considers interesting and important.

Attention, like everyday and simple actions, is subject to the effects of habit. What one pays attention to out of the stream of consciousness is often a matter of what one has always seen. Because of this habitual selection of one part of the stream over another, certain parts of the primordial stream simply disappear. Habit’s effects are not limited to action but also extend to perception. The perceived world is shaped by habits of attention, what one tends to see and what one tends to ignore. The more one pays attention to certain things, the more stably they become fixed as the experience which occupies one’s consciousness.

While attention may be subject to the effects of habit, it is not completely habitual. Attention, at least at first, involves a choice. James believes that one is sensibly affected by many things at once, by an entire spectrum of experience. However, one is only capable of attending to specific aspects of this sensible spectrum. Attention, in this scenario, is not completely passive. Instead of outside experience shaping what one perceives, attention shapes what one experiences, selecting what, out of pure experience, one will appropriate as one’s own. As James puts it: “*My experience is what I agree to attend to.*”<sup>8</sup> The undifferentiated stream of consciousness left in its chaos is something that one never actually experiences. Instead, this stream is carved up by attention, by what one chooses to emphasize and notice out of experience. There is a certain amount of consent necessary in perception. However, once an activity of attention becomes habitual, that part of experience becomes cemented; it becomes something that one always chooses. Just as Billy Pilgrim is trapped in the cage of his human perspective, habits of attention trap us in the prison of selective perception, making it impossible to view the full richness and depth of pure experience.

When viewed in concert with Vonnegut’s story about the Tralfamadorians, James’ theory of attention assumes a troubling tone. Just as humans, according to the Tralfamadorians, are incapable of viewing the full richness of their environment, James’ account of perception suggests that perspective can lock us into a cage of our own choosing. This cage leaves out a large part of pure experience, limiting our ability to see the world in its full chaotic multiplicity. While James focuses on the necessity of habits of attention instead of their detriment, in fact claiming that they are essential for making sense of our experience, his writings, when read with the echoes of Vonnegut’s Tralfamadorians, do suggest the limiting aspect of our perceptive faculties.

While James’ writings are mostly limited to a subjective account of habitual attention, he does admit that society plays a huge role in the formation of perceptive habits. A consideration of society’s role in the creation of habits adds another layer of concern onto the worry surrounding the trap of habitual perception. Michel’s Foucault’s writings on Panopticism in *Discipline and Punish* illustrate how controlled vision can be a trap, a prison and a form of societal control. While Foucault’s theories are concerned mostly with vision that is controlled externally, in the form of prisons and observation, James’ psychology is concerned mostly with the way that habits and attention operate internally. When considered together, these two thinkers illustrate the co-dependence of

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<sup>6</sup> James, *Principles of Psychology*. 112

<sup>7</sup> James, *Principles of Psychology*. 284

<sup>8</sup> James, *Principles of Psychology*. 402

societal influence and internal habituation. The two rely on one another: society influences habit and habit influences society.

While it is tempting to read James as espousing a theory which is overly-concerned with the subjective, comments that invoke the social are peppered throughout his writings, indicating a halo of interest in the external. In his account of attention, James acknowledges that the world one selects out of pure experience is not completely autonomous, not entirely unique, but is largely influenced by history and society.

But in my mind and your mind the rejected portions and the selected portions of the original world stuff are to a great extent the same. The human race as a whole largely agrees as to what it shall notice and name, and what not. And among the noticed parts we select in much the same way for accentuation and preference or subordination and dislike.<sup>9</sup>

While the majority of James' account of attention in the *Principles of Psychology* focuses on the neurological and the subjective, this comment, buried at the end of his section on the "Stream of Consciousness," suggests that society is a significant component in the formation of habits and attention. James acknowledges the effects that society has over perspective, implying that the power of habitual perception is subject to external influences.

In his chapter on habit in the *Principles of Psychology*, James notes that society not only influences habit but that habit has the ability to regulate and control society. Habit is a successful social regulator because it keeps individuals from straying from their chosen vocations, preventing individuals from challenging the ranks of predetermined social strata. James refers to habit as "the enormous fly-wheel of society, its most precious conservative agent."<sup>10</sup> By this, James means that habit keeps people in their places, preventing most from making radical changes in their lives. Habit's ability to regulate society stems from our unwillingness to change. Once we have become a fisherman or a farmer we are hesitant to change our vocation. As James says: "It [habit] dooms us all to fight out the battle of life upon the lines of our nurture or our early choice, and to make the best of a pursuit that disagrees, because there is no other for which we are fitted, and it is too late to begin again."<sup>11</sup> Our resistance to change contributes to the regulation of society; it keeps us all in our original places. While James does assert that the mind has a certain plasticity, a certain capacity for change, he also asserts that the mind becomes increasingly hardened with age. After a certain time, our vocation, mannerisms and habits are set and, while not impossible to change, require extreme amounts of effort to reverse the effects of time.<sup>12</sup> Habit, then, regulates society because we become conditioned to a certain mode of living. Modes of normalcy are regulated by the law of habit, by the fact that we tend to do what we have always done.

Foucault's *Discipline and Punish*, illustrates how controlled vision can be used as a form of power. Unlike the Tralfamadorians, who simply observe the limiting qualities of human perspective, Foucault investigates how an active control over vision and perspective can result in political power. In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault uses the architecture of Jeremy Bentham's Panoptic prison as a starting point for an examination of the power structures existent in modern society. Foucault's writings deepen the problem of habitual vision raised by Vonnegut and James. His insights reveal how controlled vision can itself be used as a form of imprisonment. The Panoptic prison, originally conceived by Bentham, relies on the control of lines of sight, on the manipulation of visibility. Controlled vision, when internalized, takes on a similar form to habits of attention. One no longer requires the heavy walls of a prison to control behavior; instead, prison walls become internalized, enforcing power with habitual precision.

Bentham's Panoptic prison operates by controlling what prisoners can and cannot see. The Panopticon is round in shape and contains cells along its periphery, with a single guard tower in the middle. The angle and construction of these peripheral cells makes it possible for the guard in the center tower to see the prisoners but impossible for the prisoners to determine what is going on in the tower. As Foucault says: the prisoner "is seen, but he does not see."<sup>13</sup> The peripheral cells of the Panopticon eliminate the prisoner's ability to see his captors as well as his fellow prisoners. His vision is strictly controlled. In Foucault's words: "They [the prison cells] are like so many cages, like so many small theatres, in which each actor is alone, perfectly individualized and constantly

<sup>9</sup> James, *Principles of Psychology*. 298

<sup>10</sup> James, *Principles of Psychology*. 121

<sup>11</sup> James, *Principles of Psychology*. 121

<sup>12</sup> James, *Principles of Psychology* 105

<sup>13</sup> Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and Punish*, trans. Alan Sheridan. New York: Vintage, 1995. p. 200

visible.”<sup>14</sup> Cages become theatres, transforming a place of imprisonment into a place of observation. Thus “Visibility is a trap.”<sup>15</sup> When vision is cut off and regulated, so is behavior.

The prisoners’ controlled vision enables the Panopticon to be run efficiently and simply. An entire prison requires only one guard because the prisoners’ lines of sight are held captive by the architecture of the penal complex. This economy of power is enabled by an architectural structure that is *visible* and *unverifiable*.<sup>16</sup> In an ideal Panopticon, the central guard tower is always *visible* to the inmates, reminding them of the fact that they are under constant observation. Yet, from the vantage point of the prisoners, whether or not there is actually a guard in the tower is *unverifiable*. The inmate knows that he is being watched, but he does not know by whom, or by how many. The power of the Panoptic structure lies in this relationship of seeing to being seen. A Panopticon does not require heavy bars or chains because the see/being seen dyad creates a self-inflicted regulation of the power structure. The knowledge that he is being observed is enough to keep the prisoner in his cell, eliminating the need for heavy artillery. This control over the prisoner’s lines of sight ultimately leads to self regulation. Controlled vision leads to controlled behavior.

Foucault extends this Panoptic structure to society at large, invoking the power of observation as its regulating force. The individual in the guard tower is replaced by “the teacher-judge, the doctor-judge, the educator-judge, the ‘social worker judge.”<sup>17</sup> These individuals serve as judges of normalcy throughout society. Their gaze is everywhere, pervading our schools, homes and playgrounds. The power of the Panoptic guard tower invades all of society. Each individual is held captive within the cage of his own perspective, all the while knowing that he is being observed. In the end, we all become judges, caging our neighbors with our gaze and replacing the walls of a prison with the power of vision.

Much like habits of attention, Bentham’s prison attempts to lock prisoners in cages of limited perception. While Foucault locates the power of Panopticism in observation, in the force of being judged by others, his account could be strengthened by an examination of habitual attention- by understanding the way that judging functions from within instead of from without. William James’ account of habit, attention and perception provides an interesting account of how Foucault’s Panoptic structures may operate from within. Panoptic observation, judgment and self regulation may be as automatic as our typical habitual activities like tying our shoes or getting dressed in the morning. It is possible that the Panoptic structure operates not simply out of fear of being observed, but as a result of our ingrained habits of attention. For James, habit not only regulates our basic and daily action, but also controls what we perceive. His psychology suggests that the power of Panopticism may not rely completely on the power of observation, but that it also rests on our habitual powers of attention, on the habitual internalization of society’s power structure.

While each individual’s world is bound to be different, reflecting certain nuances of attention, a large portion of the world that individuals select is determined by society. Like the Panopticon, habitual lines of sight may be controlled by an outside force, by the observation of others. Thus we have formed a circle. On the one hand, Foucault seems to underemphasize the internal, he downplays the impact that habits can have in regulating society, instead locating the power of Panopticism in the external. James, on the other hand, provides only a partial account of the social and external. While habits become automatic, they do not begin that way. They must be formed and conditioned by something and it is likely that this something is society. Thus, James and Foucault can benefit from talking to one another. They both realize that there is a link between perception and behavior, emphasizing that what we see is as powerful as what we do.

The resonance of Vonnegut’s fictional tale of the Tralfamadorians with the psychology of James and the social critique of Foucault, paints a somewhat disturbing picture of habit and attention. The majority of human action, while capable of controlling habits through the force of the will, is automated by the force of habit. Habits, once formed, are difficult to change and require extraordinary amounts of effort to reverse their effects. James also acknowledges that our habits of attention are, for the most part, determined by societal and historical forces. What we choose to attend to is largely a reflection of what society chooses to acknowledge and name. Thus, the panoptic structure has the capacity to be internalized. The gaze of society’s judges can become internal, shaping

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<sup>14</sup> Foucault 200

<sup>15</sup> Foucault 200

<sup>16</sup> Foucault 201

<sup>17</sup> Foucault 304

the world that we see and the actions we commit. In short, the dangers of habitual perception are real. We must vigilantly guard against becoming trapped in dangerous habits if we wish to safeguard ourselves against the plight of being strapped to a rail car, with our head in a cage, capable of looking only through the narrow view of a six foot long pole. While habit certainly contains positive as well as negative connotations, the combination of James' habits of attention with Vonnegut's Tralfamadorians and Foucault's Panopticism paint a bleak picture of human existence. This paper does not intend to depict the entirety of human perception in such a bleak light. Instead, it hopes to illustrate the implications of habitual perception when taken out of a strictly subjective context, invoking social critiques and fictional accounts of aliens.

**“Collective Conviction: Krzysztof Wodiczko’s *Inner Public*”**

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In the fall of 2005, the large inner space of a New York City Chelsea district gallery is darkened; the tall floor-to-ceiling windows that face the street have been repeated in the interior so that when I enter, I also have the impression of being about to leave, drawn to the exterior light that filters through these frosted panels but fails to fill the gallery space. Figures, silhouetted behind the haze, move in and out of the window frame giving me the impression of watching workers taking a cigarette break outside. Instead I am viewing Krzysztof Wodiczko’s interior, high definition, life-size projection: *If you see something...*

The sidewalk cigarette break is a common sight in New York City since Mayor Bloomberg passed stringent no-smoking laws; it is as ubiquitous as the slogan peppered for the last few years throughout the transit system: “If you see something, say something.” Now an occupant of the interior, I begin to overhear the exterior conversations that penetrate the glass boundary. Just as when moving through the city, I pick up little snippets of conversation here and there and make an effort to identify its source and its subject. The conversations are as mobile as the figures on the other side of the windowpanes so I decide to lean against a pillar to stabilize myself and focus on the dialogue and gestures of those individuals who remain just out of reach but not out of earshot beyond the veil of glass.

The conversations are anxious, human dramas – conflicts produced when an individual finds him- or herself at odds with the system whether political, social, or economic. Two women speak of a marriage that is ending; a man confesses of his inability to care for his aging mother; two other men share the problems their children are having in the playground. Seemingly mundane, the edge in their voices belies the nature of the snatches of conversation I have just described. A sense of urgency holds me voyeuristically, a solitary observer who listens. In a conversation in Punjabi, English words slip through: “deportation,” “nine eleven,” “Muslim” and slowly the weight of the anxiety clarifies the visual haze that renders the identities of the speakers anonymous. The woman’s marriage is collapsing because her Middle Eastern husband cannot take the racial isolation that has suddenly become the norm at his workplace; he is returning home to an environment in which she, as a Western woman, feels uncomfortable. The son has not been able to care for his aging mother because he has been wrongfully held in detention for five years and is now in deportation hearings. The children in the playground have shunned their Arab playmates. A man cries because he is under investigation for sending money to Pakistan and hasn’t been able to feed his family since his accounts were frozen.

*If you see something...* divides interior and exterior space as well as listeners from speakers. I am the one intended by the system to say something. I am the one who might possibly call the authorities based on a conversation overheard while taking a cigarette break at work. I might also be the one who recognizes the fragile circumstances of these people who are, because of a turn of events, suddenly highlighted for all to notice. I am the one unexpectedly lurking in the shadows, actively listening, as if someone’s life depends upon it. Their voices are private, my accountability is made part of the public system but circumstances also reverse these positions. The pronoun ‘I’ becomes tenuous; it yields to the pronoun ‘You.’

Implicit in the haze that hinders the glare and impinges a mirrored reflection, that softens the hard edge of a framed division and prevents direct contact with the projection, is a wound. If you fail to recognize it in the body language then you shall certainly hear it in the cadence of the voices. The wound as an act of incision, a cut, a disruption – Derrida’s *trace*, Barthes’ *punctum* or Lacan’s *cut in the real* – also, the originary trauma of the subject or the violence of interpretation. Cultural production is an active process, aggressive and demanding, but the controlled management of conflict can at times relieve the escalation of tensions that often leads to traumatic events. To (ad)dress the wound can initiate healing. But in the case of trauma, that wound is often invisible, buried in the deepest recesses of the psychic fabric – hidden and seemingly forgotten

but ultimately manifested in alternate behaviors and visions. We will therefore begin with invisibility – the site of the wound – we will begin with Krzysztof Wodiczko's *inner public*.<sup>1</sup>

Throughout his career as an artist, Krzysztof Wodiczko (b. Warsaw 1943) has been a cultural facilitator as much as a cultural producer. With his vehicles, instruments, and projections, he has sought both to highlight the conditions that inhibit speech and to create alternate conditions that facilitate speech. In response to Michel Foucault regarding *parrhesia*, the practice of open speech in a democracy, Wodiczko points out that technically *parrhesia* belongs to the *polis*, the privileged participants of a democracy.<sup>2</sup> How does one listen to those who are denied democratic process, those who by their very movement find themselves *in-between*: in-between countries, in-between legitimacy, in-between jurisdictions? In a recent conversation, Wodiczko presented a new question: "What was the position of this project in the lives of those who animated the interiors and exteriors of my projections? Isn't it that they are the public themselves? ...This *inner public sphere* of the project is the way the project is being used by the group as a transitional object."<sup>3</sup>

He refers to D.W. Winnicott's term 'transitional object' as a process of development, of healing, and of taking control of one's own life.<sup>4</sup> Wodiczko was willing to relinquish control of his project to his subject group: immigrants whose lives were traumatized by the fall-out of fear generated after September 11<sup>th</sup>. He worked with fifteen different human rights and social organizations to reach the participants. The entire project took over 2 years. Wodiczko describes his initially tentative position in relation to these organizations: "It is a complicated process. I met with potential participants who then convinced their support organizations to take part in the project because they started to trust my intentions and see their own benefits. This took six or seven months: to be rejected, to be mistrusted, to be put into tests... Psychologically speaking there is the destruction of the project; the project has to survive and be reconstructed as something useful." In this way they became co-artists, actors (active) in their own lives, reconstructing traumatic memories as therapy, as cultural work, and as artistic work. This *inner public* used the project as a means to reintegrate intimately personal and politically public worlds far removed from the exigencies of the art market.

The *inner public sphere* is, for Wodiczko, a kind of meeting place: the operations of the project and the reverberations that emanate beyond the project. As the artist explains: "I have not organized this...as a theory; I just watch and notice that something else is being created that stays longer than the project itself...These co-artists make use of the kind of set-up I propose: their supporters – case workers, psychotherapists and activists whom they trust, also their lovers, their friends, researchers, and media people who are connected to the various groups, and the technical crew who is often committed to the project – all these people reinforce their political links and collective identity." He also explains that this *inner public sphere* is not a closed system, that "art critics, filmmakers, and others intersect and connect" depending on their level of commitment and engagement. Yet the permeability of the social system must remain a critical question and so Wodiczko creates a division between *those who know and those who don't*.

By denying full visual access to the participating public, Wodiczko emphasizes the strained conditions that democracy has accepted in proposing a distinction between citizens with rights and citizens without them: the economic migrant and political exile in-between the *here* of temporary status and the *there* of untold horrors. Instead of empathizing with individuals whose physical, social, and political experience we cannot possibly know, the viewing public faces its own accountability for the conditions endured by others. In this way, Wodiczko radically shifts focus away from the viewer's empathic experience to that of the *inner public*, whose own act of bearing witness constitutes for the migratory individual not only open speech but also activism. We, the viewing audience, are left in the broad open space of the gallery, a cultural space and a

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<sup>1</sup> The term 'inner public' is exclusive to Krzysztof Wodiczko who coined it as a way of identifying the collective agency that developed through the process of his testimonial projects.

<sup>2</sup> See Michel Foucault, "The Word Parrhesia" and "The Practice of Parrhesia," in *Fearless Speech* (Los Angeles, CA: Semiotext(e), 2001).

<sup>3</sup> Unless otherwise noted all quotations by the artist were recorded in conversation with the author, March 6, April 21, and December 4, 2008.

<sup>4</sup> For a discussion of *transitional phenomena* see D.W. Winnicott, *Playing and Reality* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1971), 2-3.

market place – Benjamin’s arcade – they, the *inner public*, are on the other side of a divide, an uncertain space – the city street. They are, as Judith Butler describes them, “a population...cast out of the polis and into bare life, conceived as an unprotected exposure to state violence.”<sup>5</sup>

We are all under surveillance in this space – the viewer but, above all, the passersby on the sidewalk, framed by the window becoming *tableaux vivants*: part image, part spectacle. But in as much as they are there to be seen, it is not the artist who has positioned them but Homeland Security, America’s Most Wanted, and 1/3 of us who willingly admit (in a recent Stanford University poll) to viewing anyone of a different race with suspicion.<sup>6</sup> The semi-opaque glass protecting the anonymity of the speakers is suggestive of the shadow world to which our surveillance has relegated them. They speak in closed intimacy, the window denying any threshold that might be crossed yet they almost gesture to us, recognizing our presence, perhaps even *warning* us. Just as we are privy to their conversations, they too seem cognizant of this game of cat and mouse.

The game of observation, surveillance, and capture is part of the system of national and colonial expansion that marks the economics of modern migration. It is also the game of the modernist flâneur introduced by Charles Baudelaire and discussed by Walter Benjamin who sets the flâneur as writer in the panoramic space of the marketplace.<sup>7</sup> The panorama – like the arcade and flâneur a nineteenth-century innovation – is a place of entertainment and spectacle. The modernist flâneur interpreted by many in the twentieth century as indicative of a non-conformist creative spirit, an individual set apart from the crowd, alienated by society but as such sufficiently detached to be a more accurate cultural chronicler (Dziga Vertov, Robert Frank, or Jack Kerouac, for example) becomes in the twenty-first century a more dubious individual of questionable intent as public space is redefined by the conceptual perimeters of terror.

This fascination with surveillance now ramped up for the twenty-first century had previously netted 2,500 calls a week from 8 to 12 million viewers on the Fox Television Network’s long-running program America’s Most Wanted (PBS, 1999). Thus it is not only the Foreign Intelligence Security Act of 1978 (FISA) and its amendment the USA Patriot Act of 2001 and 2008 that has widened the government’s surveillance potential but each and every citizen who is authorized to determine perpetrator from onlooker: “If you see something, say something!” Or from Benjamin’s 1938 perspective:

In times of terror, when everyone is something of a conspirator, everybody will be in the position of having to play detective. Flânerie gives the individual the best prospects of doing so.<sup>8</sup>

The question arises: when is the act of observation *surveillance* and when is it *witness*? Wodiczko’s interior projections of 2005 deal with the contentious choices a citizen is asked to make. Tactically, he sets the stage for a profound, philosophical struggle: what is the relation between reality, recognition, and interpretation? Who wields the power of representation? How are they ethically positioned? Judith Butler recognizes the discrepancy in representation as a discrepancy in voice:

The ability to narrate ourselves not from the first person alone, but from, say, the position of the third, or to receive an account delivered in the second, can actually work to expand our understanding of the forms that global power has taken...<sup>9</sup>

After September 11<sup>th</sup> the use of the first person narrative changed dramatically and complicated (if not irrevocably changed forever) both the pronoun “I” and its contiguous neighbor ‘You’ through the question of accountability. Butler, in speaking of the conditions (rather than the causes) of terrorism, claims:

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<sup>5</sup> Judith Butler and Gayatri Spivak, *Who Sings the Nation State? Language, Politics, and Belonging* (London: Seagull Books, 2007), 37; Butler refers to Giorgio Agamben, *Homer Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998).

<sup>6</sup> This poll was taken at the height of the 2008 presidential campaign.

<sup>7</sup> Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, Vol. 4, 1938-1940, ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003), 18-19.

<sup>8</sup> Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, 4:21.

<sup>9</sup> Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London and New York: Verso, 2006), 8-9.

...we have to understand not only how [terrorism] is experienced by those who understand themselves as its victims, but how it enters into their own formation as acting and deliberating subjects.

This is the beginning of another kind of account.<sup>10</sup>

The first person narration is by function incomplete; only can 'You' complete the 'I' – not in the sense of mirroring but as a dialectical debate in which positions of power are inscribed. "I imagine crowds of strangers presenting themselves in such unsolicited disclosures as they make their way through the city," wrote Wodiczko in 1998 about his piece *Aegis: Equipment for a City of Strangers*. Over the next ten years, he would craft situations by which strangers create stories out of their unsolicited disclosures – of the circumstances under which migrant populations manage their day-to-day experiences but also why they came to migrant status in the first place. Their stories serve as a metaphor for movement between the *here* and *there* of being – what Michel de Certeau considers as indicators of the locutionary space of communication - its transience and instability, how it fluctuates, changes, and responds to stimuli.<sup>11</sup> Wodiczko's windows serve as metaphor for the consequences of a failure to perceive such conditions – both a breaking through and a blocking off.

Wodiczko accepts the representational challenge in presenting the conditions of those cast outside the system through the contradictory position his *inner public* performs. "The speaker can speak but can the listener listen?" he asks. A story is told; this is the first step. When it is heard, the pronoun "I" cedes to the pronoun "You." As Slavoj Žižek and Jacques Rancière argue, "political struggle proper is...not a rational debate between multiple interests, but, simultaneously, the struggle for one's voice to be heard and recognized as the voice of a legitimate partner."<sup>12</sup> Krzysztof Wodiczko by visualizing a painful division produces a double effect: on the one hand, he claims "it is the impossibility of real understanding of their situation that is being projected"; on the other hand, he instigates a tessellated reaction generated by the *inner public sphere* that extends out into the city through a larger discourse as a means to formulate the pronoun "We" – *counter-speak* to the isolation of fear.<sup>13</sup>

There is conflict inherent in his projection: it is not so much that he establishes a binary between us (the citizen with rights as viewer) and them (the immigrant as projected image) but that he forces an awareness of the difference between *here* and *there*. Conflict, for Wodiczko, is not an impossible position. Simultaneous to the *If you see something* project, Wodiczko was working on his proposal for a 9/11 memorial whose concept is presented in a 2009 publication entitled *The City of Refuge*.<sup>14</sup> Here the artist offers his vision of a memorial not as a passive monument but as an active democratic forum for contentious debate of the conditions of terror. His design of a floating public agora anchored in New York harbor, accessible via pod-like ferries that form both a metaphorical and physical connection to the city's social, political, and intellectual networks, addresses the complex web of cause and effect in order to foster non-violent resolutions.

The city has become increasingly congested with roadblocks and restricted zones. The barricades no longer serve the purpose of critical resistance, rather political containment. The flâneur is stuck within a maze of unpopulated bureaucratic minefields. Dissent is stymied. Debate has left the classroom. Intervention has withdrawn to the lower hemispheres. Urban space is contested and so the prophetic nomad has abandoned the city streets in favor of the waterways. The concept of Wodiczko's visionary network is "formulated as a political and ethical argument."<sup>15</sup> His philosophical model is Emmanuel Levinas' analogy of the Judaic concept

<sup>10</sup> Butler, *Precarious Life*, 11.

<sup>11</sup> See Michel de Certeau, "Walking in the City," in *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (London, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1984), 91-110.

<sup>12</sup> Slavoj Žižek describing Jacques Rancière's position against Jürgen Habermas in "Afterward by Slavoj Žižek" in Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics* (2000) trans. Gabriel Rockhill (New York and London: Continuum, 2004), 70.

<sup>13</sup> For a discussion of the term *counter-speak* see Jacques Rancière, "Sentence, Image, History" in *The Future of the Image* (2003), trans. by Gregory Elliott (London and New York: Verso, 2007), 33-67.

<sup>14</sup> Krzysztof Wodiczko, *The City of Refuge, A 9/11 Memorial*, ed. by Mark Jarzombek and Mechtild Widrich (London: Black Dog Publishing, 2009).

<sup>15</sup> Wodiczko, *City of Refuge*, 13.

of half-guilt, half-innocence and the founding of ancient cities of refuge to harbor unintentional criminals and safe-guard them from revenge. These safe havens were developed as centers of learning to foster a just, open, and civil society.<sup>16</sup> To this notion of mutual responsibility for crimes committed, Wodiczko adds Chantal Mouffe's agonistic pluralism whose precept is based on an acceptance (even benefit) of disagreement and discord: rather than strive for an unrealistic democratic consensus the goal is to harness the strife of conflict in a constructive rearrangement of social and political programs.<sup>17</sup>

Wodiczko has long adhered to the belief that intellectuals have a responsibility to be active participants in society, contending not only with ideas but also with matters 'on the ground.' To fail to make use of their access to the public is to accept a position the artist extrapolates as "objective innocence' and 'subjective guilt."<sup>18</sup> In other words, we are all responsible for the inequities of the world and the resulting conflicts: our inaction or ignorance only augments our guilt. We must all act as individuals to facilitate and activate collectives. The artist does this through the process of his work. Now in this social model he suggests a means to expand and make more inclusive his own discrete methodology.

Philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein describes a picture as a model of reality – existing states of affairs – out of which larger propositions are built.<sup>19</sup> He builds his argument in a spatial sense, atomically. In much the same way Wodiczko likens his local memorial site to a global proposition, his design a molecular model of interconnecting spherical volumes. The visual metaphor acknowledges both distinct and united forms. The design offers practical plans for facilities and resources logical to the understanding and de-escalation of conflict. We are presented with a model but also a substantial challenge.

Like Wittgenstein, Wodiczko investigates the conditions for the possibility of representation. As designer, artist, and activist, he facilitates those conditions. *City of Refuge* is intended to trigger response, disagreement, but also to create forums for open debate, democratic reform, ethical action and the healing of trauma. Wittgenstein uses the metaphor of slippery ice to evoke our desire for 'conditions [that] are ideal, but also, just because of that, we are unable to walk: so we need *friction*. Back to rough ground.'<sup>20</sup> When urban space is no longer hospitable to open speech and consensus building is like walking on ice, Wodiczko moves to water, alternately smooth and choppy. Let us consider his argument then as friction enough for walking. In his unsettling and provocative proposition of half-guilt and half-innocence Wodiczko creates in his words 'art for the political' rather than political art – catalyst for response rather than resolution – what Simon Critchley would consider the conditions for the making of an ethical subject, individuated through speech, responsible to a larger proposition through conviction.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> See Emmanuel Levinas, "Cities of Refuge" in *Beyond the Verse: Talmudic Readings and Lectures* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994).

<sup>17</sup> See Chantal Mouffe, "Democracy, Power and the Political" and "For an Agonistic Model of Democracy" in *The Democratic Paradox* (London and New York: Verso, 2000).

<sup>18</sup> See Wodiczko, "Afterward: The Intellectuals' Half-Guilt and Half-Innocence (A Self-Critical Note)" in *City of Refuge*, 37-43.

<sup>19</sup> I refer mainly to Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* from 1922.

<sup>20</sup> Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1958), 46e. Quoted in Mouffe, *Democratic Paradox*, 98.

<sup>21</sup> For a discussion of the ethical subject see Simon Critchley, *Infinitely Demanding: Ethics of Commitment, Politics of Resistance* (London and New York: Verso, 2007).



**“Collecting the Frayed Edges: Jean-Luc Nancy and the Knot of Being-With”**

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**ABSTRACT**

*This paper seeks to address the notion of collectivity through Jean-Luc Nancy’s rethinking of being-with in his work *Being Singular Plural* in order to thereby question the limits of the “with” of any collectivity. Nancy’s formulation of singular-plural being-with intends to think through the unthought potential of Heidegger’s being-with, a radical potential Heidegger betrayed by splitting being-with into the two modes of the inauthentic everyday being of “the they” and the authentic being of Dasein. In rejecting this split, Nancy attempts to redeem everydayness as the phenomenon according to which our concept of being must be gauged. In everyday being, we are exposed to a Being that exposes itself to us in what Nancy calls a constant “strangeness”—a strangeness in which we are exposed to ourselves as strange as much as the world exposes itself to us as strange. Being-with in its fullest sense is the constant openness to this strangeness. As a political project shaping a collectivity that is, in its very being, already collected, being-with demands the constant vigilance of keeping this opening open. In and as this collective strangeness, we are tied into the knot of being—a being that could not somehow be without us, or outside of us. Thought to the limits of its own radical potential, Being is the only true collectivity for Nancy. At this point, I believe that Nancy—like Heidegger before him—closes the opening of his own thinking of being-with.*

*In the knot of being-with, strangeness speaks to us, at times from the center of its tightest strands, and at times from its frayed ends, where multiplicities of voices fray off into silence—stranded there, so to speak. I will suggest that these stranded voices of the frayed edges of being-with, the margins of the collectivity, are not and cannot be with us in Nancy’s fullest sense of with, if being-with means having access to the possibility of offering oneself over to exposure. These voices are not only stranger than others, but are also strangers.*

*Following Nancy through his later work on listening and via a brief glance at Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s postcolonial text “Can the Subaltern Speak?,” a different form of listening will be proposed—a listening that hears without grasping, much like a glance that does not grasp in a gaze. As Spivak keenly demonstrates, recovering unheard voices cannot merely be a project of collection, but involves a constant deconstruction of listening. It will be suggested that the voices of literature and art are—as Deleuze keenly recognized—best suited to opening this space of exposure, for is not philosophy, as Nancy himself suggests, a collective disciplined into not listening? Is philosophy, that most closed of openings, a space of collective closure?*

**I. Introduction: Being as Being-With**

The scope of Jean-Luc Nancy’s project in *Being Singular Plural* is recognizably ambitious.<sup>1</sup> Equally rich as an ontological and a political work, Nancy attempts both a deconstruction of all prior political philosophy, as well as a repositioning of the entire question of Being.<sup>2</sup> These two aims are linked by what Nancy sees as the necessity of establishing a political thinking founded upon the proper thinking of Being as radically and irreducibly being-with—the singular-plural being covered over by philosophy. In order to open up the thinking of Being as being-with, the ultimate aim of Nancy’s project is no less than “redoing the whole of ‘first philosophy’ by giving the ‘singular plural’ of Being its foundation.”<sup>3</sup> Nancy’s first philosophy, in turn, is derived from what in Nancy’s view is “the last ‘first philosophy’”: Heidegger’s fundamental ontology. “It is necessary to refigure fundamental ontology,”

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<sup>1</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*, trans. by Robert D. Richardson and Anne O’Byrne. Stanford: SUP, 2000.

<sup>2</sup> Following Nancy’s translators, I employ “Being” as a translation of Heidegger’s “*Sein*.”

<sup>3</sup> Nancy, *Being*, xv.

Nancy writes, “with a thorough resolve that *starts from the plural singular of origins, from being-with.*”<sup>4</sup> *Being Singular Plural* begins this project of re-writing Heidegger’s *Being and Time* by radically reformulating a term that is one of its cornerstones: being-with.<sup>5</sup>

While laying out Nancy’s rethinking of collectivity as being-with, this paper will seek to raise the question of the limits of that very “with.” The question will be one of voice, of listening, of exposure to the margins that we, the collective that we are, always manage to do—and therefore *be*—without. Can a collective at all be with itself among so many silent voices? While Nancy illustrates being-with as a knot, I will ask if being is at all times being unraveled, being frayed at the edges that taper off into silence? This paper will attempt to listen to that silence, to hear with an ear listening like a glance that does not gaze.

## **II. Being Singular Plural as a Phenomenology of the Everyday**

In rewriting Heidegger’s existential analytic as a “co-existential analytic,”<sup>6</sup> Nancy first takes a turn *within* Heidegger’s thinking before the juncture at which Heidegger establishes being-with as the foundation of a fascist collectivity. At this point, Nancy then moves *outside* of Heidegger’s thinking and into Nancy’s thinking of a singular-plural being-with. This passage through Heidegger is essential for first allowing being-with to emerge as a phenomenon, but it is essential only as a passing through, for, as Nancy states, Heidegger’s “existential analytic still harbors some principle by which what it opens is immediately closed off.”<sup>7</sup> Nancy’s task is to open this closure by tracing a contradiction in Heidegger’s treatment of the everyday:

One cannot affirm that the meaning of Being must express itself starting from everydayness and then begin by neglecting the general differentiation of the everyday, its constantly renewed rupture, its intimate discord, its polymorphy, its relief and its variety.<sup>8</sup>

Heidegger first opens being-with through the existential analytic of being-with [*Mitsein*] in § 26 of *Being and Time*, but then closes off this opening in § 27 by splitting being-with into the authentic being-with of *Dasein* (described later in *Being and Time* as fulfilled in the destiny of a people [*Geschick des Volkes*]) and the inauthentic being-with-one-another of [*Miteinandersein*] of everyday averageness and indifference.<sup>9</sup> The principle by which the analytic opens itself up to, then subsequently closes itself off from being-with, can be found at this juncture, the juncture where the branching of being-with into authentic and inauthentic being-with occurs. It is at this point where Nancy takes his turn out of Heidegger’s thinking and into a phenomenology of the everyday, redeeming being-with from the Heideggerian split into authenticity and inauthenticity. If phenomenology is understood in the sense of seeing that which shows itself as it is, then Heidegger must, by necessity, reject any phenomenological analysis of the everyday, for the everyday is a space in which human beings show themselves not as they are, but inauthentically, i.e., *as they are not*. Thus, while Heidegger sees everydayness as “the undifferentiated, the anonymous and the statistical,”<sup>10</sup> Nancy turns away from Heidegger by redeeming the richness of the everyday and opening it up to phenomenological analysis in its everydayness.<sup>11</sup> For Nancy, everyday being is Being in the only authenticity it can ever have and will ever need: our Being-with in a singular space of plural beings opened up through Being’s giving

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<sup>4</sup> Nancy, *Being*, 26.

<sup>5</sup> Simon Critchley offers an in-depth analysis of the parameters of this project or rewriting: Critchley, “With Being-With? Notes on Jean-Luc Nancy’s Rewriting of *Being and Time*,” in: *Ethics, Politics, Subjectivity: Essays on Derrida, Levinas and Contemporary French Thought*. New York: Verso, 1999.

<sup>6</sup> Nancy, *Being*, 93 ff.

<sup>7</sup> Nancy, *Being*, 93.

<sup>8</sup> Nancy, *Being*, 9.

<sup>9</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. by John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson. New York: Harper, 1962. For “the destiny of the people” as described in *Being and Time*’s most politically pernicious moment, see 435 ff.

<sup>10</sup> Nancy, *Being*, 9.

<sup>11</sup> The recent work of Ed Casey, from whom I borrow the notion of redeeming the everyday, can be regarded as a significant contribution to this larger phenomenological project: Edward S. Casey, *The World At a Glance*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007: 267-275.

itself over to itself in giving itself over to us. Through laying out this task of a phenomenology of everyday life, the true scope of Nancy's ambitious project reveals itself.

In Nancy's reading, everyday being-with, at all times singular and plural, is all that Being is. As a result, everyday being is the only proper object of any existential analysis of Being. In this everydayness, we show ourselves as we are and in the only way we can be—as a gathered together in a collectivity that was never apart. The project of *Being Singular Plural* aims to reclaim the richness of everyday experience and establish it as the foundation of a thinking of Being that will ground a politics of being-with as “a being-together without assemblages.”<sup>12</sup> The phenomenological foundation for this ontological-political project is based on opening oneself up to what Nancy calls the constant “strangeness” of Being—a strangeness of rupture, discord and polymorphy in which we are exposed to ourselves as strange as much as the world exposes itself to us as strange. In our polymorphous existence collected together in a singular-plural being, we are with ourselves in strangeness, a strangeness that exposes itself to us, and a strangeness that we expose ourselves to. If care is the “originary being of *Dasein* itself” for Heidegger,<sup>13</sup> then exposure would be the originary being of *Mitsein* itself for Nancy. We exist as exposed and are woven in our exposure into a space of touching.<sup>14</sup> Being is this space of touching and the very act—always continuous and polymorphous—of touching across the space between us. This between is a distance and connection, a space of difference: “it is that which is at the heart of a connection, the *interlacing* of strands whose extremities remain separate even at the very center of the knot.”<sup>15</sup>

In what follows, I will not attempt to untie this knot, but to trace its strands to their frayed ends, not in order to *see* where these ends lead us, but to *listen* to what these ends lead to. I have chosen to ask the question of listening, as opposed to vision, in accordance with Nancy's repeated privileging of *logos* as the primary means of touching and exposure. Through *logos*, Being speaks to us and speaks as being-with in its strange singular-plural voice. This voice emerges at times from the center of its tightest strands, but also *at times* from its frayed ends, where multiplicities of voices fray off into silence—stranded there, so to speak. The stress on “at times” is intentional, for the question is primarily one of access to the possibility of exposing oneself. I will suggest that these stranded voices of the frayed edges of being-with are not *with* us (the we who understand the *logos* of this talk, the we at the privileged center of the collectivities we inhabit) in the fullest sense of Nancy's own use of the word, if being-with means having access to the possibility of offering oneself over to exposure. In turning to Nancy's later work on listening, it will be shown that the phenomenology of everyday life of *Being Singular Plural* can only function if it learns to listen to and not merely hear these voices.

### **III. Being as Exposure and Logos**

As a political project shaping a collectivity that is already collected in its being, Nancy's thinking of being-with demands the constant vigilance of maintaining the opening to strangeness.<sup>16</sup> The strangeness of being never presents itself as a full or finished product, nor as some sort of complete totality. It is always partial, fleeting, retreating, vague, hazy, tapering away into silence. As Nancy writes: “‘People’ are silhouettes that are both imprecise and singularized, faint outlines of voices, patterns of comportment, sketches of affects, not the anonymous chatter of the ‘public domain.’”<sup>17</sup> The task of grasping one's own being as being-with involves, on the one hand, letting these silhouettes be as silhouettes, letting them come to be as faint as sketches, or letting them be, in Ed Casey's words, as “ghostly demi-presences.”<sup>18</sup> Yet on the other hand, grasping one's own being as being-with demands precisely that: at least a certain amount of grasping, touching, reaching out, exposing oneself to exposure. The individual, Nancy writes, is “an exposition both discreet and transitory.”<sup>19</sup> In Being, one makes this

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<sup>12</sup> Nancy, “Confronted Community,” in: Andrew J. Mitchell and Jason Kemp Winfree, eds. *The Obsessions of Georges Bataille: Community and Communication*. Albany: SUNY Press, 2009: 25.

<sup>13</sup> Heidegger, *B & T*, 169 (translation modified).

<sup>14</sup> For a fuller reading of Nancy and touching, see: Jacques Derrida, *On Touching, Jean-Luc Nancy*. Stanford: SUP, 2005.

<sup>15</sup> Nancy, *Being*, 5.

<sup>16</sup> It is in this sense Simon Critchley describes Nancy's being-with as an “ethos and a praxis.” Critchley, 245.

<sup>17</sup> Nancy, *Being*, 7.

<sup>18</sup> Casey, 269.

<sup>19</sup> Nancy, *Being*, 85.

exposition and receives that which is excreted in the discreet and transitory exposure *of* and *to* others. The task of a phenomenology of everyday life is to preserve this discreet and transitory exposure, but to preserve it—paradoxically enough—as discreet and transitory. This discretion must be exercised through the various manners of perceptions: an eye that glances but does gaze, an ear that listens in attunement to what is said, and an understanding that does not conceptualize.<sup>20</sup> Above all, this discretion must be one of a language that, in the words of the later Heidegger, “brushes against the essence of language without violating it.”<sup>21</sup> This language, this vision, this hearing, and this understanding are what the Nancy’s phenomenology is always *on the way to* yet will never, as Nancy is fully aware, arrive at. Leaving aside for now a necessarily immense discussion of the question of vision, the following remarks will focus on Nancy’s treatment of *logos* and listening—a listening attuned to the frayed ends of the knot of being.

Faced with the silhouettes of the strange demi-presences that populate our Being, those strange presences that we ourselves are, we must sketch these beings in some way. We must, as exposed exposers, speak about those presences, expose them to *logos*. For Nancy, this cannot only be done if “we have thought *logos* (the self-presentation of presence) as creation (as singular presence).”<sup>22</sup> Through *logos*, existence is in a process of continual self-creation, presenting itself to itself by speaking of itself to itself. Thus, “existence exposes the singularity of Being as such in all being.”<sup>23</sup> Beings expose themselves *as* phenomena through speaking and expose themselves *to* phenomena through listening. In this flux of exposure, of touching across the space of the between, Being makes itself present to itself in the ever-fleeting demi-presences of its beings. In the play of speech and listening, these silhouettes are sketched out, given weight, heft, and body, a body found and touched. Through *logos*, beings “co-appear,” for as Nancy writes, “Being-social is Being that is by appearing in the face of itself, faced with itself: it is *co-appearing*.”<sup>24</sup> And only if these beings co-appear on the foundation sketched out in Nancy’s first philosophy, only if they co-appear having thought *logos* as the self-presentation of presence, will Being “coincide with itself.”<sup>25</sup> The coincidence of Being with itself is rooted in our comportment and dependent upon our capacity to dwell within language, to dwell without reducing language to a mere tool of conceptuality, labeling, or counting. By dwelling in language in this way, the meaning of the with of the being-with takes full shape: “But the meaning of the ‘with,’ or the ‘with’ of meaning, can be evaluated only in and by the ‘with’ itself, an experience from which—in its plural singularity—nothing can be taken away.”<sup>26</sup> Though nothing can be taken away from this being-with, I would like to ask the question of that which was never there.

Though deeply compelling and worthy of a much more thorough discussion, I regard Nancy’s project as having at least one fundamental flaw—a fundamental flaw that Nancy himself can help us repair. Even while, according to Nancy, “nothing can be taken away” from this self-presencing of presence, one must nonetheless ask about that which has already been taken away by the very assemblages that most deeply structure our everyday experience. To illustrate this question, I will focus on an example that defines our own collective being: silent voices, marginal voices, voices that cannot be made present as phenomena without violating the infinitely brittle messages (not brittle as such, as if they need protection by *us*, but brittle only in comparison to the dominant forms of conceptual grasping) they speak. I take it as a matter that needs no proof that we exist in a collectivity in which many voices either cannot speak or cannot deliver a message comprehensible to the collectivity’s ear. While Nancy may speak of a “singular sharing of voices without which there would be no voice,” or say that language “exposes the world and its proper being-with-all-beings in the world,”<sup>27</sup> the question remains to be asked: *whose* or *which* world is this world presented as? Is it not at the margins of this same world—our first world—where we find everyday being in what Nancy himself referred to as “its constantly renewed rupture, its intimate discord, its

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<sup>20</sup> My understanding of listening is heavily indebted to Heidegger and Derrida, especially: Derrida, “Heidegger’s Ear: Philopolemology (*Geschlecht* IV) in: *Reading Heidegger: Commemorations*. John Sallis, ed. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993: 163-220.

<sup>21</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Unterwegs zur Sprache*. Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1959: 112 (my translation).

<sup>22</sup> Nancy, *Being*, 17.

<sup>23</sup> Nancy, *Being*, 18.

<sup>24</sup> Nancy, *Being*, 59.

<sup>25</sup> Nancy, *Being*, 38.

<sup>26</sup> Nancy, *Being*, 98.

<sup>27</sup> Nancy, *Being*, 85.

polymorphy, its relief and its variety"?<sup>28</sup> And are we at all able to listen to these voices without condemning them as mere cacophony? It is perhaps better not to say that they taper into *silence*, but to say that they taper into *speech* as they approach the center of the collectivity that allows them to speak at times, and always in a certain way.

#### **IV. Is Philosophy List(en)ing?**

On the opening page of *Listening*, Nancy asks these crucial questions regarding the collectivity known as philosophy: "Is listening something of which philosophy is capable? Or...hasn't philosophy superimposed upon listening, beforehand and of necessity, or else substituted for listening, something else that might be more on the order of *understanding*?"<sup>29</sup> While Nancy proceeds to lay out a deeply engaging phenomenology of listening in the remainder of the work, he leaves these early questions unanswered, lingering, exposed to us in our exposure to his work. In order to let these questions resonate more fully, I will briefly turn to another text that powerfully resonates with similar questions: Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's politically charged and theoretically dense text "Can the Subaltern Speak?"<sup>30</sup> Spivak's text appeared in 1985 within the scholarly movement of the "Subaltern Studies Collective," a movement deeply informed by Antonio Gramsci's ideas of dominance and subordination, and originating with a group of Indian scholars attempting to deconstruct traditional historiography by relocating the locus of history to the subaltern classes, the marginalized detritus of history.<sup>31</sup>

As Spivak's later critical intervention into this project demonstrates, such a project of recovery of lost or unheard voices is not one of cultivating a mere sensitivity to the need for their recovery, but of something much more profoundly difficult to address: the possibilities of understanding these voices. *Listening to*, not merely *hearing* subaltern voices is for Spivak much more akin to a constant process of auto-deconstruction through questioning categorical impositions than it is just a mere matter of recovering lost historical sources by hearing them speak. Such an attempt at listening is also, despite the most vigilant rigor of the listener—a listener at all times a translator, even within the same language—both the only possibility for survival of subaltern voices, and the very agent of their destruction. Taken at the most vulgar physical level, the subaltern, of course, possesses a resonate voice, and he or she *can*, without question, *speak*. Taken at the level of a phenomenology of the everyday in which the phenomenon shows itself as it is, the subaltern *cannot speak* because he or she cannot speak to a listening to which it can expose itself as it is. In being heard, the subaltern vanishes to the margins it never left, never attaining even the status of a demi-presence. The subaltern, to employ Nancy's term, is out of touch and, most importantly, we are out of touch with it. Stranger than the strangeness of Being, the subaltern is, in short, a *stranger*, a voice whose silence cannot even be heard.<sup>32</sup>

With the voices of subaltern silence speaking at its margins, Nancy's being-with cannot present itself fully to itself. Gaps remain, gaps which the understanding cannot measure. Yet these gaps must not necessarily be read as calling into question Nancy's *ontological* project of being-with, as much as they may be read as affirming the ethos and praxis of the *political* project of being-with. For do not Spivak and Nancy both re-affirm at least the attempt to hear what is said at the silent margins through an openness to what may be called, with great reluctance due to the delineating power of the word, "strange"? And, could it be asked, do they do so to the

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<sup>28</sup> Nancy, *Being*, 9.

<sup>29</sup> Nancy, *Listening*, trans. by Charlotte Mandell. New York: Fordham University Press, 2007: 1.

<sup>30</sup> Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" in: Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, eds. *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988: 271-313.

<sup>31</sup> For an overview of the collective, see the texts collected in: Vinayak Chaturvedi, ed. *Mapping Subaltern Studies and the Postcolonial*. New York: Verso, 2000.

<sup>32</sup> The example Spivak illustrates is of Bhuvanewari, a young woman of about sixteen who hangs herself in 1926 in Calcutta. In order to avoid her suicide being read as "illegitimate passion," the "sanctioned motive for female suicide," Bhuvanewari waited until her menstrual cycle commenced to hang herself. Her act thus became "absurd," "a case of mental delirium" attributed to a "melancholia" regarding her purportedly bleak possibilities of marriage. A decade later, it was discovered that she was a member of the armed resistance against British occupation and was unable to carry out a political assassination assigned to her. Despite this discovery, her suicide continued to be read as due to an illicit affair. Thus Spivak writes: "The subaltern as female cannot be heard or read." Spivak, 307-8.

extent that they have stepped beyond what is fittingly called the discipline of philosophy? Is philosophy anything but a collective of hearing that cannot listen? Perhaps literature and art are—as Deleuze most keenly recognized in his writings on Samuel Beckett, Witold Gombrowicz, Francis Bacon and others<sup>33</sup>—much more fully attuned to this strangeness fraying at the edges of what the dominant discourses of our collective are always, at the slightest provocation, ready to declare “strange,” or even “mad”? Is not philosophy, that most tediously trained collective of listeners, least of all capable of listening to anything but itself, unless it first collects its other as part of itself? As Nancy himself writes in his own series of ellipses: “[This is the] question of philosophy as ‘literature,’ which is about asking how far it is possible to take the third-person discourse of philosophy. At what point must *ontology* become...what? Become conversation? Become lyricism?...The strict conceptual rigor of being-with exasperates the discourse of its concept...”<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Such a reading of Deleuze is reflected in Fred Evans’ recent work: *The Multivoiced Body: Society and Communication in the Age of Diversity*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2008.

<sup>34</sup> Nancy, *Being*, 33-4.