Reviews

Symbols and spirits

Erich Hörl, *Sacred Channels: The Archaic Illusion of Communication*, trans. Nils F. Schott (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2018). 344pp., € 52,95 pb., 978 90 8964 770 2

Originally published in German in 2004, *Sacred Channels: The Archaic Illusion of Communication*, Erich Hörl's unorthodox genealogy of thinking about thinking, is now available to readers in English. Beginning with epistemological crises induced by the sciences in the nineteenth century and ending with the convergence of cybernetics and structural anthropology in the middle of the twentieth, *Sacred Channels* recounts the slow triumph of symbolic logic over intuition and representation in the human and physical sciences. In the process, Hörl braids together the formalisation of mathematics, the emergence of electromagnetic field theory, anthropological obsessions with 'primitive' thought and the coming of information theory, offering space for reflection on how intellectual paradigms mutate and exceed the bounds their authors ascribe to them. And rather than point to the limitations of digital logic for capturing the flux of life and experience – as is common in the contemporary humanities roiling in the wake of post-structuralism and world-altering computational ecologies – Hörl builds a picture of the historical contingency of formal, symbolic thought. As he teases out another era's shifting investments in reason and rationality, substance and logic, and thinking and being, he excavates unlikely resonances, reminding readers of what might be gained from greater reflection on the genesis of contemporary intellectual formations.

Hörl's book, which attends to the century of intellectual developments in Europe between 1850 and 1950, is structured into two parts. 'In the Shadow of Thinking: A History of Formalisation' traces the increasing triumph of an episteme of symbolic logic over an older model of intuition and substance. Hörl's protagonists here are the mathematicians Louis Couturat and George Boole, whose advocacy for a formal symbolic algebra un-

tethered to arithmetical quantities or rationally apprehensible phenomena was reinforced by the contemporaneous evacuation of the sensible from electromagnetic fields. While information theory and the operationalisation of Boolean algebra lay in the future, Hörl shows that already by the late nineteenth century, thinkers were forced to contend with a 'real' beyond substance or intuition, selectively recuperating Leibniz as the progenitor of this new calculative thought. As developments in mathematics and physics undermined the dominant Kantian understanding of knowledge as a process by which a rational subject formed meaningful representations, people like Boole and Couturat abandoned 'mind' and rejected the a priori synthetic in favour of a strictly analytic knowledge.

Hörl then turns to the ways in which the human sciences grappled with the emergent crisis in thinking about thinking. As 'substance' slipped away and Aristotelean logic collapsed into the apparent contradictions of Boolean formalisms, an 'opening up' of the question of thinking inaugurated a search for the origin stories of concepts now revealed to be historically and culturally contingent. In this time of destabilisation, Europeans, Hörl argues, turned to analyse other peoples, anachronistically searching for the origins of Aristotelian categories in contemporary 'pre-rational' societies. (Here, *Sacred Channels* echoes and extends Johannes Fabian's classic critique of anthropology's tendency to frame the peoples it studies as living fossils, though Fabian and other historians of anthropology are absent from Hörl's account.) In works like Emile Durkheim's *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* and Marcel Mauss's *Outline of a Theory of Magic*, Hörl identifies an emerging obsession with the primitive sacred, the 'archaic illusion' of the title. People grappling with the spectral qualities of the telegraph and

radio became obsessed with the mysterious flows and forces appearing in ethnographies and histories of religion. Yet Hörl also identifies, particularly in Mauss, first steps on a path heading towards structural linguistics. Relational concepts like *mana* and *hau* seemed to acquire an autonomy from the realm of the sensible and from the murky historic past of society, pointing towards an abstract real which nonetheless structured social formations and towards 'an originary formalism of the human being'.
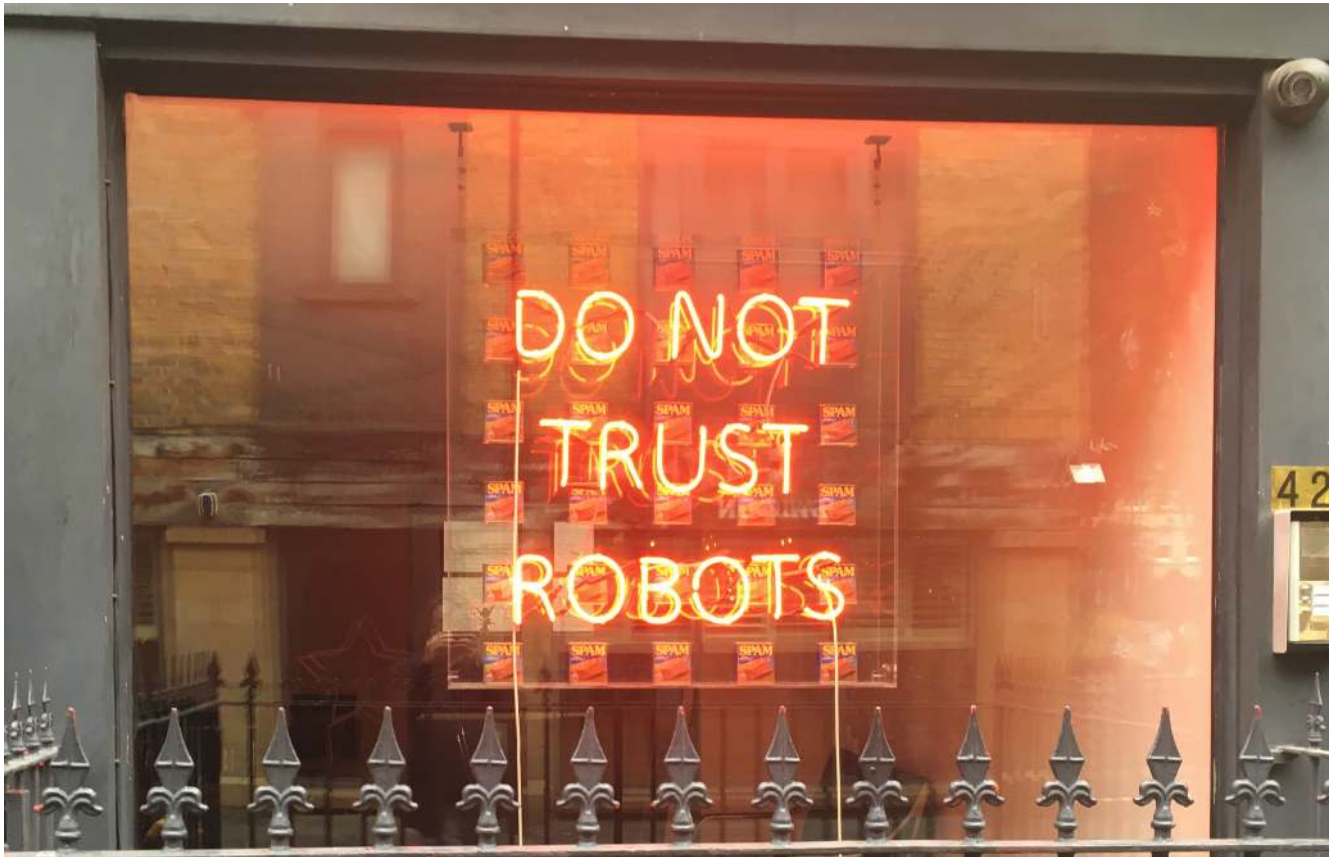
The book's second part, 'The Specter of the Primitive: A Hauntology of Communication', describes the rise of the concept of 'communication' in both anthropology of religion and information theory. Here, Lucien Lévy-Bruhl and Georges Bataille pick up where Durkheim and Mauss left off. Like his predecessors, Lévy-Bruhl went searching for the precategorical and decided he had discovered it in what he called 'primitive mentality'. In his search for laws beyond history and in his notion of participation with spectral forces, though, Hörl sees a significant step towards a more fully-fledged symbolic order. For Bataille, meanwhile, mystic experience and communication left the margins of empire and emerged in the depths of western being, where they 'could be discovered *in oneself* in silent meditation and condensed into an ontological manifesto': 'existence is *communication*'. The reinterpretation of these two theorists of the mystical as proto-structuralists, deeply entangled with an emerging computational episteme and grasping towards a nonrepresentational but immanent symbolic order, is an exemplary instance of Hörl's ability to reframe the past. The book reminds readers of the historical contingency and shifting implications of seemingly entrenched oppositions between the sensory and the abstract or the digital and the analogue. If today the affective is associated with an embodied relationality beyond discourse and logic, Hörl shows that for these thinkers, the affective *was* the abstract, a sort of communicative resonance in excess of the sensible, rationally apprehensible world.

Sacred Channels concludes in the mid-twentieth century with the intersection of structural anthropology and cybernetics, and with the full 'short-circuiting' of the 'pre-logical' and the 'post-logical' in the figure of Claude Lévi-Strauss. Hörl argues that Claude Shannon's articulation of a symbolic theory of information that could account for the invisible currents of communication in which society had become enmeshed finally allowed for the relinquishing of the spatio-temporal projections of the 'archaic illusion'. In this context, and over the warnings and disavowals of people like Shannon and Norbert Weiner, Lévi-Strauss attempted to formalise and algebraise human codes of language and kinship. No longer looking for an origin or a ground to thinking, he turned not to the 'primitive' but to the 'elementary', and looked beyond the content of classifications to emphasise the transcendental fact of classification itself.

Sacred Channels makes a convincing case that the imagined figure of 'the primitive' in the years under consideration was 'a fantastic manifestation of the lack of intelligibility of the age of communication, projected to the margins of the West.' Equally convincing is the more general point that the epistemic ramifications of mathematical formalisation, field theory and information theory emerged slowly, problematically, and in conversation with other disciplines. Hörl's project is ambitious and original, offering an intellectual history which readers are unlikely to have realised they were missing and which intervenes simultaneously into media theory, anthropology, philosophy and the history of computation. Of course, in reframing the past, some thinkers find themselves displaced. Hörl's overarching framework, pitting the intuitionist against the formalist, glosses over important differences among the various heirs of 'intuition' and 'structure', from phenomenologists and historical dialecticians to psychoanalysts. Ending in mid-century, the book leaves important subsequent developments in these conflicting paradigms in the social sciences untouched – the emergence of structural Marxism, for instance, or Pierre Bourdieu's attempts to reconcile structural, symbolic relations with a phenomenological approach to human experience.

While *Sacred Channels* stirs up more questions than one book can answer, it still resonates with other recent attempts to reappraise the influence of computation on philosophy. Orit Halpern's 2014 *Beautiful Data: A History of Vision and Reason since 1945* also situates cybernetics in a wider field of intellectual developments, directing readers not towards anthropology but towards design, architecture and pedagogies of visualisation and pattern-seeking. Where Hörl focuses on the interest in mysticism and possession that accompanied the rise of symbolic notation, Halpern draws attention to the now forgot-

ten discourse of psychosis in cybernetics. Both projects insist on a historical shift from 'reason' to 'rationality', and challenge readers to avoid conflating Enlightenment subjectivity with computational subjectivity, but Hörl demonstrates that debates about networked communication, unreason and the dissolution of classic, intuiting subjectivity began even in the nineteenth century.

Sacred Channels also speaks to continued interest in situating Heidegger's thinking in relation to computation. Heidegger's thought is irreducible to either an intuitionist metaphysics of substance and representation or to a pure symbolic formalism and it therefore lies outside of this story's main arc, but he resurfaces throughout the text, offering Hörl a picture of how philosophers understood their place within ongoing transformations in knowledge. The new English edition includes an appended essay which helps clarify both the inspiration Hörl draws from Heidegger's genealogy of western philosophy in light of cybernetic advances and Hörl's own investment in Heidegger's call to imagine a kind of thinking beyond the distinction between the rational and the irrational.

And what of the relations between ethnology, 'thinking', 'being', and conditions of technological communication since Lévi-Strauss? In the updated preface to the English translation, Hörl indirectly takes note of work in this area taken up since the original German publication in 2004. Presumably referencing Yuk Hui's attempts to marry the concerns of German media theory with those of the ontological turn in anthropology, Hörl optimistically gestures to the 'formation of a nonmodern decolonial counterthinking beyond the archaic illusion' represented by anthropologists like Phillipe Descola, Tim Ingold and Eduardo Viveiros de Castro. Despite a shared interest in thinkers like Heidegger and Simondon, and despite a shared desire to reconceptualise what 'ontology' has to offer after discourse, these thinkers are still rarely discussed within media philosophy. They also, crucially, engage with peoples and philosophies from outside of Europe which only ever appear in *Sacred Channels* as the belle-epoque spectres of solipsistic Europeans. While Hörl's account of obsessive projections onto 'primitive' peoples is damning, developments in western thought appear here (not least of all for Hörl himself) to emerge organically from within the western tradition as computation finally puts the intuitionist paradigm to rest.

Absent is any acknowledgement that many of the most important developments within the social sciences in the past half century have been due to increasingly effective refusals on the part of Europe's former and so-called 'primitive' subjects to play a role in the working out of western anxieties.

A full accounting of the influence of colonial exchange and fallout on European philosophy might fall beyond the scope of this book. But for a historical genealogy which traces the slippage of epistemes across the boundaries thinkers might imagine themselves to obey, and which describes key moments in an ongoing project of imperialist symbolic violence, *Sacred Channels* could have done more to contextualise these epistemic debates and point to the entangled confluence of military, cultural and epistemological encounters. As Hui has shown, scholars of media and technology might learn from contemporary anthropologists' attempts to take up the task of thinking against the modern from both within the western philosophical tradition and through engagement with entirely different intellectual traditions. This is a risky project, but, much like the project of rethinking western thought under the conditions of ecological and technological transformation, it is one that is becoming difficult to avoid.

Since *Sacred Channels*' initial publication in 2004, Hörl, like so many others, has turned his attention towards this latter task and towards the problem of what he has described elsewhere as the 'becoming-environmental of computation'. His concerns with the onticity of communication and with the possibility of a non-intuitionist sense were already present when he first wrote *Sacred Channels*, as the treatments of Bataille and Heidegger demonstrate, but the new preface's retroactive framing of the book's stakes indicates that these concerns have only solidified since:

> Even if reveries about the end of all sense have produced an entire formation of theory in media and cultural studies, it has now become questionable to what extent the concepts and conceptual strategies of this formation can still be used to work through the techno-ecological formation and to what extent this latter task requires entirely different ontological-political sets of tools that stem from a new, neither intuitive nor symbolic but, precisely, ecological-environmental image of thinking. This is what many people are working on in the most varied of ways and where one of the great challenges of thinking in our time is to be situated.

In demonstrating what might be gained from greater reflection on the origins of current frameworks for understanding computation, materiality and communicative entanglement, Hörl's history of epistemic confusion and cross-fertilisation lays valuable groundwork for this project.

Megan Wiessner

Freedom is a constant erasure

David Marriott*, Whither Fanon? Studies in the Blackness of Being* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2018). 448pp., £74.00 hb., £23.99 pb., 978 0 80479 870 9 hb., 978 1 50360 572 5 pb.

Freedom is a difficult matter because sometimes we cannot separate what liberates us from what imprisons us, and sometimes, despite our conscious protestations to the contrary, we simply do not want to. This uncomfortable insight is at the heart of David Marriott's bold book, *Whither Fanon? Studies in the Blackness of Being*, which argues that the black subject (who Marriott refers to in the French as *négre*) 'unconscious[ly] consent[s]' to his or her own unfreedom, and that in the act of decolonial revolution, an emancipation that is not a humanistic re-inscription of mastery or sovereignty can

never be ensured. It is not that liberation is impossible, however, only our traditional conceptions of it. Marriott argues that it is precisely because the black subject unconsciously consents to his or her own unfreedom that blackness allows us to conceive of liberation anew.

Blackness becomes *like* philosophy, insofar as 'philosophy is critical of any simple notion of liberation … or reparation that could deliver it from the contingency that it itself is.' Blackness is another scene of philosophy, inventing 'another relationship to [the] world', which Marriott terms 'tabula rasa' after Frantz Fanon in *The*