

### **Of Non-Vital Interest: Art, Mimicry, and the Phenomenon of Life**

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*My aim in this essay is to explore certain parallels—concerning anthropomorphism—in the work of Roger Caillois, Hans Jonas, Theodor Adorno and Sigmund Freud. Both Caillois (a thinker closely connected to French Surrealism and an important source for Jacques Lacan) and Jonas (philosopher and one-time student of Heidegger) take issue with the ban on anthropomorphism—an anathema that is the legacy of Western science. Part of the thesis in Jonas’ major work, The Phenomenon of Life, is that freedom is not exclusively a human quality but a potential within the simplest organic forms, even within inorganic matter. Anthropomorphism may be the legacy of a primitive stage in human development in which the whole of creation was endowed with a soul, but this attitude, Jonas argues, is the more natural one. Whereas in the early phases of humanity death was the stranger in a world that was fundamentally alive, modern thinking made life the riddle within a world of neutral matter and mechanistic principles. Freud’s own theory of the death-drive (“an urge inherent in organic life to restore an earlier state of things which the living entity has been obliged to abandon under the pressure of external disturbing forces”) seems quite consistent with the primacy of death over life instituted by modern thought. I have a general interest in comparing Freud’s theory of the death drive, the aim of which is the restoration of an original equilibrium, with music, whose traditional structure (via the cadence) is to relieve tonal tension through a restoration of the keynote (Grundton). This bears upon the problem of anthropomorphism in that “classical” music since the seventeenth century has cast expression in terms of simulated human emotions: we hear music and perceive love, longing or fear, not to mention (in the case of pastorale) the “cheer” of birdsong or the “rage” of a thunderstorm. Adorno’s critique of this tradition, in which true expression is replaced by mere images of expression, theorizes what he calls a “tendency of the material,” extolling the composer whose sheer mastery of technique enables the material to go where it “wants” to go. What Adorno means by “material” is not merely the inventory of sounds available to the musician but the historical experience sedimented within musical convention. Nonetheless, I would like to attempt an argument whose parameters are Adorno’s “tendency of the material” and Jonas’ idea that freedom must be conceived as a “genuine potency” within physical substance.*

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In 1974 German director Werner Herzog made the film *Every Man for Himself*, which dramatizes the story of Kaspar Hauser, the simpleton-foundling who in 1835 mysteriously turned up in the city of Nuremberg and quickly became a *cause celebre* throughout much of Europe. Counterpart to the “wild children” of the previous century, Kaspar was greeted as a new epistemological informant—the purported living witness to a vanished state of innocence. At one point in the narrative Kaspar insists that an apple, which he has just seen fall from his caretaker’s arms, is tired and should be allowed to rest. Kaspar’s mentor is adamant that his protégé not ascribe feelings to the insensate apple, and in order to instill in him a more Newtonian understanding of falling fruit and of force and motion generally, the kindly gentleman rolls the same apple along a path, which another man has blocked with his foot. Presumably the apple would strike the foot and stop moving. Instead, it strikes a pebble, bounces over the obstacle and continues down the path, leading Kaspar to exclaim: “What a clever little apple! It jumped over the foot and kept going!” The present essay focuses somewhat less on the human-animal divide (the topic of our conference) and more on the human-*apple* divide, though its deeper concern is with a natural scale along which human, animal, vegetable, even mineral, are continuous. Kaspar’s empathy for the “weary” fruit is predicated on this continuum, as is natural mimicry, wherein an animal or insect assumes the appearance of a leaf, rock, or other creature. Such sympathetic magic stands opposite the disenchantment that is the aim and idiom of modern science, to which Kaspar serves as a foil. The anthropomorphism of which his mentor would disabuse him is the bane of modern epistemology, which sought to purify knowledge of the taint of self-

intuition. Humans themselves are thus effectively implicated in a physical world that science has divested of life. The ambiguous vitality of imitative species attests to the paradox of life, suspended as it is between being and non-being. Biological mimicry, which often entails the simulation of death, is *animistic* in its acknowledgment of the life-enabling potential of an organism's environment. This essay moves within a constellation of trends in twentieth-century thought in which animism, anthropomorphism, mimicry, as well as mimesis, are marshaled as part of a critique of the broad philosophical-scientific attempt to dispel the subject's felt affinity with its natural surroundings.

In a lecture from his *Seminar XI*, Jacques Lacan relates an experience from the season when, in his early twenties, and driven by the desire to "throw [himself] into something practical," he worked on fishing boats along the coast of Brittany. He remarks on the harsh conditions and the stunted life expectancy of those for whom such work was more than a summer's diversion. On one particular day, as the catch was about to be hauled in, a fisherman known by the nickname Petit-Jean pointed to a discarded sardine tin, glinting in the sun as it bobbed on the waves. "You see that can? Do you see it?" he asked, then added mockingly, "Well, it doesn't see you!" This taunt, meant to confront the young Parisian with the fact of his being so utterly out of place, exposed the precise truth it contradicted, for there is a sense in which Lacan was indeed seen by the innocuous object. "It was looking at me," he affirms, "at the level of the point of light, the point at which everything that looks at me is situated."<sup>1</sup> Set off against the foil of self-evidence, this contention rests on the foundational tenet of Lacanian psychoanalysis, namely that the subject is instituted *visibly*, determined by the gaze, under which, in Lacan's words, "I ... turn myself into a picture" (106).

The subject, whose structure Lacan derives with reference to the specular image, is constituted in the awareness of being seen (74). It accommodates itself to this awareness, throwing up a picture—a screen to intercept the light that emanates from every point. Anyone who stumbles or trips and, on instinct, looks around to ensure that no one is watching is conscious of the impulse to withdraw

from the “spectacle of the world” (75). We look *around* because we are “looked at from all sides” (72). Faced with a world that is all-seeing, the subject seeks refuge in the illusion caustically summarized by the fisherman when he says of the floating sardine can: “it doesn’t see you!” The hills have eyes, however. This horror-film commonplace reveals a fundamental cognizance of the world’s panoptical aspect. Its complement is the paranoia whose antidote is the visual self-sufficiency of the small child, innocent of a gaze outside of itself. By contrast, the subject that sustains itself “in the function of desire” (84) encounters a gaze that, by definition, is not seen but “imagined ... in the field of the Other” (85). Freud once explained paranoia with the example of a young woman who, in a state of sexual arousal, suspected that she was being secretly photographed from behind a curtain in her lover’s flat.<sup>2</sup> This illustration is consistent with the general circumstance described by Lacan when he defines the gaze as “the instrument through which light is embodied and through which ... I am *photographed*” (106).

Freud’s particular example, in which the young woman’s guilt is projected as an alien attempt to capture her desire on film, corresponds to the “imaginary capture” wherein the subject, divided between its being and its semblance, eludes the gaze by turning itself into a picture (Lacan 106). The picture is a pose, its contrary the *ex-posure* literalized by the camera in the case reported by Freud. Arrested movement, by means of which the subject adapts to the presence of an eye characterized by Lacan as *voracious* (115), is analogous to *mimicry* in the biological realm—an organism’s manner of assuming the color, texture, shape, and often *stillness*, of its physical surroundings. A reptile may simulate the sand and rock of the desert terrain. An insect may pose as a twig or protuberance of bark. One species of mantis, which resembles a eucalyptus leaf that has died and begun to curl, causes itself to tremble so as to mimic the rustle of a dry leaf in the breeze. In this way, the creature may be thought to elude death by emulating it—a feat it accomplishes by projecting an internal motive as an external force.<sup>3</sup>

Lacan's teaching in this particular area draws heavily on the work of Roger Caillois, a one-time associate of the French Surrealist movement and proponent of what he called "diagonal science." His claim that an insect's ability to produce a likeness amounts to "genuine photography," not to mention his treatment of the eye (such as those that appear on the wings of certain butterflies) as an "organ of fascination," is suggestive with respect to a theory of the subject that freezes before the gaze.<sup>4</sup> Citing numerous examples from the insect world, Caillois disputes the commonly accepted explanation of mimicry as a mechanism for eluding predators or surprising prey. He proposes another instinct—one that "completes the work of morphology" by enabling the organism to assimilate to its surroundings, assimilation being not a means but the true aim of mimicry. Imitation is the result of a susceptibility to the very "lure of space" (98-99). At the level of the human, the organism's tendency to imitate the surrounding world translates into a dissipation of personality. Biological mimicry corresponds to a class of mental disorders in which the mind feels disconnected from a specific point in space, just as the awareness of a distinction between self and world diminishes. Space comes to be experienced as a "will to devour" (100). Mimicry, in which animals assimilate to plant or mineral forms, entails the withdrawal of life to a lesser state (101). This decline in vitality, which Caillois terms an "inertia of the *élan vital*" (102), is not dissimilar from the death drive theorized by Freud—the impulse, inherent in every organism, to return to the original, inanimate condition prior to the emergence of organic life.<sup>5</sup>

That this loss of self has a spiritual application is implied in Caillois' discussion of Flaubert's *The Temptation of Saint Anthony*, in which the hermit, whose state of exile is exposure itself, succumbs to the generalized space of the desert he inhabits. He falls prey to it, succumbing to the desire to "descend into the heart of matter—to *be* matter" (101). Asceticism, which is the way of the saint, is the spiritual correlate of the "death in life" that mimicry achieves.

A comparable kinship between spiritual self-mortification and the reduced existence of imitative species is pursued at some length in Thomas Mann's novel

of 1947, *Doctor Faustus*, the epic account of the life and death of the composer Adrian Leverkühn. A fictional aggregate of Wagner and Schoenberg, this musical autodidact proves himself a precocious master of abstract tonal relations. Indeed, he finds refuge in the disembodied intellectuality of these relations, his methodical evasion of musical key an effect of the detachment that defines his relationships with people. His one true mentor, a certain Wendell Kretzschmar, has acquainted him with what he holds to be music's "inherent lack of sensuality," its "secret bias towards asceticism."<sup>6</sup> Adrian embraces the idea that the arithmetic procedures of Renaissance and Baroque polyphony amounted to a "prior penance" for the sensualism that would reach its apex with the Romantics. He advocates for an "ascetic chilling-off," which leads him to favor "inorganic instrumental sound" over the human voice, whose warmth he characterizes condescendingly as "bovine." Music, he claims, has "always yearned for ... the lawful means of chilling things down" (76). His own compositional practice accords with the frigidity of his social life, as observed at the outset by his doting friend and biographer, the narrator Serenus Zeitblom: "All around him lay coldness" (8).

Adrian's haughty dispassion is on display in the third chapter of Mann's novel, which is taken up with a profile of Adrian's father, Jonathan. A plantsman whose spare time was devoted to the study of natural science, Father Leverkühn sought to acquaint Adrian and his friend with those natural phenomena that, by Zeitblom's estimation, bordered on the occult. On many an evening the two boys crowded behind Jonathan's armchair as he paged through colored illustrations of exotic moths and butterflies, or watched as he demonstrated how intricate figures appeared when, using a cello bow, he would stroke the rim of a disk strewn with sand. Likewise, they examined under his guidance the plant-like patterns precipitated by the hoarfrost that covered the windows in winter. These latter two examples represent, respectively, the music and the cold that would combine in Adrian, whose own early "experiments" with chord structure amount to exercises in apathy. In retrospect, Zeitblom, a confirmed Humanist, characterizes

Jonathan's natural-scientific pursuits as having an affinity with mysticism and sorcery, his fascination being for those phenomena whose *ambiguity* straddled the divide between beauty and poison, and ultimately, between the living and the non-living. Ambiguity is something that Adrian later ascribes to the intrinsic "uncertainty" of tonal relations—the fact that any one note could be "augmented from above or diminished from below"—a quality he would also refer to as "duplicity" (51). Leaving aside that augmentation from above is also the very definition of *grace*, let us emphasize that duplicity is a feature of those butterflies that dissemble by assuming the appearance of something else. With his many illustrated volumes Jonathan explained the "defensive mimicry" whereby the often exquisite markings of these winged insects—markings that sometimes reproduced even the impurities of the leaf they simulated—enabled them to vanish utterly before the eyes of their predators. The following example, which provides Mann's novel with its signature *leitmotif*, is replete with associations familiar from Symbolism proper: "One such butterfly, whose transparent nakedness makes it a lover of dusky, leafy shade, is called *Hetaera esmeralda*, its wings smudged with just a dark splash of violet and pink, so that in flight, with nothing else visible, it imitates a windblown petal" (17). While some butterflies disappear, others float about insouciantly, their ostentatious decor a signal that they are vile to the taste. Yet another species, though perfectly edible, masquerades as its obnoxious cousin, sharing in the security the latter enjoys by virtue of its true indigestibility.

These revelations provoked spasms of laughter on young Adrian's part, while his father, a reverent and brooding melancholic, appeared to empathize with these "sadly secure" creatures (18). Nowhere was Jonathan's empathy more conspicuous than when he displayed the results of a certain chemical experiment: the sand at the bottom of an aquarium had been "seeded" with various crystals which, following the introduction of a solution of sodium silicate, had sprouted into a colorful muddle of "purely inorganic" forms resembling algae, mushrooms, tiny trees, even human limbs. Jonathan sought to instill sympathy in

the hearts of his two novices by demonstrating that these “woeful imitators of life” were heliotropic. When the aquarium was covered on all sides but one and placed in sunlight, this is what the boys beheld:

. . . the whole dubious crew—mushrooms, phallic polyps, tiny trees, and algae meadows, plus those half-formed limbs—bent toward the pane of glass through which the light was falling, pressing forward with such longing for warmth and joy that they literally clung to the pane and stuck fast there (23).

The wretched and grotesque display of limbs straining for the light—a spectacle that inspired amusement in Adrian just as it moved his father to tears—is a veritable diorama of Dante’s *Inferno*, parts of which Adrian will one day set to music. The Humanist Zeitblom recoils at Dante’s “penchant for cruelty and scenes of torture” (173) much as he bewails the horrors of modern German history, which the methodical torments of the *Inferno* seem to rehearse.<sup>7</sup> Zeitblom invokes the theologically inflected schism of body and soul in opposition to the “bio-politics” of Hell—the ultimate state of emergency—where the anguish of the soul is figured as sheer animal suffering. Adrian’s felt affinity for Dante’s great and terrible poem is consistent with his propensity for self-denial. Insulation from human warmth is not only the condition of his deal with the devil, it is the *ideal* by which he lives. Hence the habit of losing himself in thoughts of the cold expanse of intergalactic space, which is so vast as to be available to the mind in numbers alone. The experience of the mathematical sublime is itself commensurate with the “ascetic bias” of Adrian’s music, flight from desire being sublimation’s essential motive. Kant distinguished the subject of sublime experience from the superstitious individual quaking before thundering omnipotence, but the felt inadequacy of human cognition has its counterpart in what Zeitblom finds offensive in Dante: the nullity of man in the face of an inscrutable, unapproachable Good (172).<sup>8</sup> The Humanist credo with which Zeitblom redresses Adrian’s surrender to the physical void is defined, in his words, “by proud awareness that [man] is not merely a biological creature, but rather that a



decisive part of his nature belongs to a spiritual and intellectual world; by awareness ... that [man] has been charged with the duty of approaching what is perfect" (288).

Implicated in Zeitblom's reproach is Jonathan Leverkühn, the object of whose curiosity—even empathy—is the rough natural-scientific equivalent of Adrian's own "inorganic sound." Jonathan is indeed like the God of Creation, his eyes tearing up at the sad sight of those chemical excrescences—those images of organic life before the fact. In reaching for the light, the sprouting crystals seemed to attest to a yearning on the part of matter *to live*. In his summary of Jonathan's amateur endeavors, Zeitblom identifies a monism altogether at odds with the belief, espoused by Zeitblom himself, in the dual nature of man:

If I understood our friendly host, what concerned him was the unity of animate and so-called inanimate nature, the idea that we sin against the latter if the boundary we draw between the two spheres is too rigid, when in reality it is porous, since there is no elementary capability that is reserved exclusively for living creatures or that the biologist could not likewise study on inanimate models (21).

Zeitblom here isolates a kernel of the critique that Hans Jonas, in his book *The Phenomenon of Life*, was to mount against the dualism of body and mind that would cast—and castigate—Jonathan's empathy as anthropomorphic. In fact Jonas, an erstwhile student of Heidegger, advocates for an "empathic study of the many forms of life."<sup>9</sup> At the heart of this "existential interpretation of biological facts," as he calls it, is the contention that mind is prefigured even in the lowest forms of organic life (xxiii). Contesting the view that "subjective phenomena" are but the chance products of a "mechanical permutation of indifferent elements," Jonas asserts that the very possibility of matter organizing itself for life must be seen as a "genuine potency" inherent in the very idea of physical "substance" (1-2). Indeed freedom, which we commonly associate with the "noblest" expressions of the human mind and will, has its first stirrings in the "primeval restlessness of the metabolizing substance" (99). "[E]ven the transition from

inanimate to animate substance,” Jonas ventures, “was actuated by a tendency in the depth of being toward the very modes of freedom to which this transition opened the gate” (4).

The proposal that matter itself is possessed of a capacity for self-organization, coupled with the idea of an “ascending scale” of formal complexity, may put one in mind of Adorno’s theorem, in his *Philosophy of New Music*, of a “tendency of the material.”<sup>10</sup> By “material” Adorno means not some acoustical equivalent of atomic structure—not the sum of all possible sounds. Instead, he is referring to the conventions of pitch, tuning, melody, harmony, key, mode, timbre, temper, rhythm, etc., which a given historical moment makes available to the composer. Denying that music consists in the “mechanical permutation of indifferent elements,” to borrow Jonas’s phrasing, Adorno argues that these conventions are the precipitates of social processes, which endow music with an immanent logic and thus with its own potential for progress. Only the composer whose ear is precisely attuned to the objective demands of the material is able to allow the music to proceed along its course. This entails making *the* correct technical decision—choosing the one note capable of shattering intuitions shaped by ossified habits.

An ideal of expression is supremely realized in the briefest compositions of Schoenberg and Webern, in which the truth of music is tantamount to “an eruption of negative experience” (34). Divested of its standard formulae for simulating human passions, music becomes a medium in which trauma is registered (35). Freud’s *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* is at hand, and not only because of a shared concern with experiences that erode the sovereignty of pleasure, whose psychic antipode corresponds with the dissonance that Schoenberg and his circle liberated. The “relief of tonal tension,”<sup>11</sup> which is the purpose of the traditional cadence, in which provisional discord yields to the primacy of the dominant triad, echoes Freud’s characterization of the aim of the death-drive: “the repetition of a primary experience of satisfaction.”<sup>12</sup> We can say that the restoration of an abandoned quiescence, which Freud understands as

the aim of the death-drive and of drives per se, translates readily into musicological terms as the *resolution of dissonance*. For Adorno, the recovery of tonal equilibrium, and with it the appeal to universal conciliation, runs contrary to the progress upon which the material, properly heard, insists. Likewise, the mechanism theorized by Freud precludes the direct and simple return to the state of reduced excitation: “The backward path that leads to complete satisfaction is as a rule obstructed by the resistances which maintain the repressions. So there is no alternative but to advance in the direction in which growth is still free” (51).<sup>13</sup>

The foreclosure of immediate gratification comes in the service of Freud’s refusal to concede the existence of a human drive toward perfection. He calls the idea a “benevolent illusion” and declares that “the present development of human beings requires ... no different explanation than that of animals” (50). The highest human achievements result from perpetual unpleasure—the inexorable tension born of the discrepancy between satisfaction demanded and that actually attained (51). The great work of art has libidinal frustration etched on its brow, albeit illegibly. Freud’s notion of sublimation supplied Adorno with a means of conceptualizing the movement of musical material—of explaining how “social tendencies are mediated by the creative individual at the level of instinctual drives.”<sup>14</sup> While Adorno’s disagreements with Freud were legion, he was nonetheless able to describe radical music as a register of “corporeal impulses of the unconscious,” the earliest experiments in atonality as “depositions, in the sense of psychoanalytic dream-depositions” (35). Freud wrote very little about music himself, but he states in *The Interpretation of Dreams* that “dreams are not to be likened to the unregulated sounds that rise from a musical instrument struck by the blow of some external force.”<sup>15</sup> Now, if the body of a violin were struck—and some modern compositions even call for this—the result would not be raw sound but the muffled echo of a particular, long-established system of tuning, not to mention the rational calculus that suffuses the instrument’s painstaking construction. But Freud’s loose analogy is fortuitous in that it seems to intuit the music-theoretical import of that later phase of his thought in which the

focus shifts to the effects of trauma and to the ways in which the psyche accommodates blows it can no longer simply absorb. With respect to the avant-garde, Adorno writes that “the seismographic record of traumatic shock ... becomes the technical law of music’s form” (37). Expression that vacillates between convulsive gestures and riveting anxiety renounces all vestiges of unity. Harmonic flow and melodic line are subject to the same fracture that befalls personality itself.

The musical instrument jolted from without models the subject whose experience of trauma recapitulates the aboriginal moment at which, in Freud’s words, the “attributes of life were ... evoked in inanimate matter by the action of a force of whose nature we can form no conception” (46). For Jonas also, the primordial stirring of biological life is beyond knowing—a book with seven seals (3). And much as for Freud the memory of what for him is a “breach” persists in the neurotic mechanism that seeks retroactively to neutralize all such breaches, Jonas summons existential dread and the ever-present prospect of the “imminent no-more” as the trace of what for him was a bold and precarious first step: “The fear of death,” he writes, “with which the hazard of this existence is charged is a never-ending comment on the audacity of the original venture upon which substance embarked in turning organic” (5).<sup>16</sup>

That Jonas so readily employs metaphors of the epic voyage implicates *The Odyssey* itself as an allegory of the circuitousness that, by Freud’s account, is required by an impulse that aims not to thwart death but to ensure that the organism die from *internal* causes (Freud 46).<sup>17</sup> That Odysseus circumnavigates the many hazards along his way comports with the essentially un-tragic course at whose end lies not destruction but rest. The asceticism discussed earlier is not dissimilar from the strategy of minimizing risk through renunciation. For Adorno (along with Horkheimer), the process by means of which Odysseus “survives only at the cost of his own dream” amounts to a “mimesis of death.”<sup>18</sup> It is a process of adaptation wherein the disillusioned subject imitates the rigidity of a nature bereft of life—a nature that has been molded to the requirements of exact

knowledge. The critique of the mathematical subjugation of nature is common to Adorno and Jonas, as is the assessment of the ban on anthropomorphism, which Jonas describes as a “strict abstention from projecting onto [nature’s] image our own felt aliveness” (10). Science sheds the last vestige of animism when understanding is purified of “the force-experience of [one’s] own body in action” (31).

The ideal of objectivity requires, in the tradition of Hume, that internal impressions not be “read into” the record of things. In the name of this ideal, knowledge grounded in the subject’s “inner mode of affectedness,” which enables the mind to map the sequence of disparate events onto a causal nexus, is invalidated (Jonas 36). In the interest of preventing the world from “[intruding] dynamically into its testimony,” *sight* comes to be exalted as the physical sense least vulnerable to the flood of stimuli (30). The power of vision is that of the “distancing of its object from the perceptive function” (30). The organ of subjective self-disengagement, the eye substitutes image for effect (31), the distance inherent in the former being the necessary condition of imitation. In thrall to the visual, imitation keeps its object fixed in space and at a remove. It is distinct from—indeed contrary to—mimesis, which constitutes an involvement with an Other not fully demarcated from the self. Continuous with mimicry and magic, mimesis is closely akin to the animism whose every last trace modern thought had struggled to expel. This expulsion is consistent with the “mimetic taboo” that for Adorno is co-eval with repression as such.<sup>19</sup> The primacy of sight during the Age of Reason completes the isolation of objects from subjects which, in the process of their being objectified, are severed from one another. “[Even] the human being,” to cite once more from *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, “becomes an anthropomorphism for human beings” (45). By excluding force from the field of what can be admitted as knowledge, science neutralizes that by which our own suffering and that of others is known to us. This progressive distancing of the object from us and from each other short-circuits true mimesis, summarized

here by one of Adorno's key interpreters: "Mimesis ... is the affinity of subject and object as it is felt in one's knees on seeing someone else stumble on theirs."<sup>20</sup>

The fisherman who needled Lacan with a floating sardine can's blind indifference ("it doesn't see you") is the unwitting advocate for the detachment afforded by sight and the concomitant removal of the perceiving subject from the field of perception. In its likeness to a far-off star, the twinkling tin is at home in the expanded, mechanical universe of modern cosmology, in which vast physical distance is the guarantor of knowledge untainted by embodied sentience. In keeping with the post-Copernican idea of a universe in which the laws of inertia hold sway over inanimate masses distributed in space, "dead matter [has become] the standard of intelligibility" (Jonas 74). (This is the standard by which Herzog's Kaspar Hauser is judged an "idiot"). At the opposite end of the spectrum is the animism and panpsychism that arose when the subject's "felt aliveness" diffused over the whole range of experience. The first humans plunged their hands into the soil and, finding it teeming with life, found no reason to believe any part of it to be lifeless. Their experience yielded no evidence of lifelessness except for death as such, which had to be accounted for in terms of life. The funeral cult and, eventually, the belief in immortality represent attempts to assimilate death to a world in which life was the rule. In modern, post-Renaissance thought, life becomes the exception, a "subtle hoax of matter" in need of explanation. Inanimacy is the norm. "The conditioning, life-enabling character of [the earthly environment]," Jonas writes, "is an improbable accident of a universe alien to life and indifferent in its material laws. All modern theories of life are to be understood against this backdrop of an ontology of death, from which each single life must coax or bully its lease, only to be swallowed up by it in the end" (Jonas 15).

If biological mimicry truly amounts to an assimilation to the apparently lifeless or less animate, it would corroborate this "ontology of death." But this particular phenomenon may also attest to the felt affinity among the myriad forms of life. Indifference and assimilation crystalize as antonyms; the latter contradicts

the former. To the extent that Lacan composes his argument as an effective rebuke of Petit-Jean, he implicitly aligns the fisherman with the proposition of a physical universe heedless of the human subject. To this he opposes the subject's inherent photo-sensitivity—its manner of adapting to the light that arrives from every direction. It is within this framework that Lacan introduces Holbein's painting from 1533, *The Ambassadors*: The sudden, inadvertent decipherment of the anamorphic skull startles the viewer with the awareness of being caught in the painting's gaze. It sees you, and with a vengeance. It enacts the hypnotic power found in "even those [pictures] most lacking in what is usually called the gaze, and which is constituted by a pair of eyes." Lacan here invokes the tradition of Dutch landscape, and it may be that the presence of the gaze is felt most uncannily in paintings focused on the materials of camouflage—foliage, branches, grasses, vines, undergrowth, etc.—and in which "any representation of the human is absent" (Lacan 101). The subject's very construction accounts for—takes into itself—the all-seeing nature of the world. The eye-spots (*ocelli*) on the wings of certain butterflies suggest that the insect has absorbed the gaze and reproduced it on its surface, deflecting it by seeming to see.

Lacan follows Caillois in claiming that painting is to humans what mimicry is to animals, asking suggestively: "If a bird were to paint would it not be by letting fall its feathers, a snake by casting off its scales ... ?" (114). Caillois devotes a great many pages to what he regards as the homologous relationship of mimicry to painting—a relationship that would indicate, in his words, "an autonomous aesthetic force in the world of biology."<sup>21</sup> Caillois makes this claim frequently, just as frequently anticipating the accusation of anthropomorphism, arguing however that there is a more deeply seated anthropomorphism behind the commonly held conviction that "nature does nothing in vain" (*Mask* 38). Caillois ascribes in fact a certain "vanity" to "the butterfly who plays with his wings, slowly opening and closing them on a flower, by a stretch of water or on the pebbles of the road" (38). This wording exemplifies the self-consciously fanciful character of Caillois' presentation, though he is less capricious in pursuit

of his more basic claim that *natural selection* cannot fully explain the rich and colorful displays that adorn lepidoptera. To be sure, the mechanics of flight may be seen as determining the *structure* of their wings. But function is not the author of the intricate and colorful patterns that embellish those wings. Instead, these colors, which are “enriched by various physical qualities [that] make them deep or glistening, metallic or *moiré*” (36), are striking in their superfluity. When Caillois refers to “electric blue” or “brownish velvet,” to “the enamel, mother-of-pearl and mica of numerous species,” to “crenellated shapes” and to “enormous stiff tails [that] appear to be starched,” it is as if he were cataloguing the excesses of the *ancien régime*—luxuries not subsumed under the “monopoly of the efficient.”<sup>22</sup> Caillois impugns the anthropomorphism wherein humans project their own utilitarianism onto nature, insisting that when we stop doing so, we cannot help but recognize that nature “squanders” its riches: “It is a world where there is nothing ... to indicate that an ostentatious outpouring of resources, with no intelligible end, may not be a wider and more universal law than the strict *vital interest*, the imperative of the survival of the species” (*Mask* 40).

Caillois hazards what Jonas works out rather more systematically, stating that “the intelligence of mankind and the purely biological phenomena ... among the lower orders of life have, in spite of the abyss [that] separates them, a deep-seated relationship” (*Mask* 35). Yet the similarity in their basic claims concerning this “deep-seated relationship” makes a key difference all the more surprising: for while Caillois believes that natural forms are not fully explicable in terms of function, Jonas holds that man alone “indulges in the making of useless objects,” and that *this* is what distinguishes him within the animal kingdom (157, 158). Common to both, nevertheless, is the resistance to the logic of natural selection, which is something they share with the fictional Jonathan Leverkühn. Observing how nature reproduces the external appearance of a leaf on the underside of the wings of a particular butterfly, he wonders: “why give a devious advantage to this one in particular? And though, to be sure, it serves the butterfly’s purpose when at rest to resemble a leaf to a T, what is that purpose from the viewpoint of its



pursuers—the lizards, birds and spiders that are supposed to feed on it, but, whenever it likes, cannot make it out no matter how keen an eye they have? I'm asking you why so that you don't ask me" (18).

This might be the place to stop, but please allow me a brief epilogue and a return to Werner Herzog, whose *Every Man for Himself* I mentioned at the beginning. Kaspar Hauser has many cousins within Herzog's body of work. One of them is Timothy Treadwell, the real-life subject of the more recent film *Grizzly Man* (2005). The eccentric and manifestly naïve guardian of Alaskan brown bears, Treadwell was the practitioner par excellence of domestic anthropomorphism. He spent his summers in the wilderness, "keeping watch" over bears he believed imperiled, addressing them in the voice of a kindergarden matron and giving them names like "Wendy," "Tabitha" and "Downy." Herzog harbors a cautious admiration for Treadwell, whose documentary footage is bejeweled with moments that reveal a kind of "magic of the cinema," and whose bouts of rage verge on incandescence.<sup>23</sup> But he also distances himself from Treadwell's benign view of the bears and of nature at large:

And what haunts me, is that in all the faces of all the bears that Treadwell ever filmed, I discover no kinship, no understanding, no mercy. I see only the overwhelming indifference of nature. To me, there is no such thing as a secret world of the bears. And this blank stare speaks only of a half-bored interest in food. But for Timothy Treadwell, this bear was a friend, a savior.

These sentences accompany close-up footage that Treadwell took of a rogue male only hours before that same bear killed and partly devoured him. It is hard to consider this young man's annual trips into the bear-filled wild without wondering what compulsion brought him repeatedly to this precipice—hard not to recall that "ontology of death," from which," in Jonas's words, "each single life must coax or bully its lease, only to be swallowed up ... in the end." The various commentators, both within the film and without, who insist that Treadwell was "asking for it"—that his childlikeness in the face of mortal danger made him unfit

for survival—may think they are siding with the bears. In fact, they proclaim the brutality of the modern circumstance.

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<sup>1</sup> Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Norton, 1998), 95. All subsequent citations in parentheses.

<sup>2</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Studienausgabe*, vol. 7, *Zwang, Paranoia und Perversion*, ed. Alexander Mitscherlich, Angela Richards and James Strachey (Frankfurt: Fischer, 1982), 207-16.

<sup>3</sup> Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno refer to a “mimesis unto death” (*Mimesis ans Tote*). *Dialektik der Aufklärung* (Frankfurt: Fischer, 1985), 53.

<sup>4</sup> Roger Caillois, *The Edge of Surrealism: A Roger Caillois Reader*, ed. Claudine Frank, trans. Claudine Frank and Camille Nash (Durham: Duke UP, 2003), 93-96. All subsequent citations in parentheses.

<sup>5</sup> Freud, *Studienausgabe*, vol. 3, *Psychologie des Unbewußten*, ed. Alexander Mitscherlich, Angela Richards and James Strachey (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1982), 251-52.

<sup>6</sup> Thomas Mann, *Doctor Faustus: The Life of the German Composer Adrian Leverkühn as Told by a Friend*, trans. John E. Woods (New York: Vintage, 1999), 67. All subsequent citations in parentheses.

<sup>7</sup> See George Steiner, *In Bluebeard's Castle: Some Notes Towards the Redefinition of Culture* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1971), 54.

<sup>8</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Kritik der Urteilskraft*, ed. Wilhelm Weischedel (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1977), 188–89.

<sup>9</sup> Hans Jonas, *The Phenomenon of Life: Toward a Philosophical Biology* (Evanston: Northwestern UP, 2001), 2. All subsequent citations in parentheses.

<sup>10</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Philosophy of New Music*, ed. and trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2006), 31-34.

<sup>11</sup> Claude V. Palisca and Brian C. J. Moore. “Consonance.” *Grove Music Online*. *Oxford Music Online*. Oxford University Press. Web. 5 Mar. 2013.  
[www.oxfordmusiconline.com.janus.uoregon.edu/subscriber/article/grove/music/06316](http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com.janus.uoregon.edu/subscriber/article/grove/music/06316)

<sup>12</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, trans. James Strachey (New York: Norton, 1989), 51.

<sup>13</sup> Shakespeare’s Falstaff, who after cheating death on the battlefield by playing dead affirms that “to counterfeit dying” is “the true and perfect image of life indeed” (*Henry IV*, pt. 1, 5.4.116–18), personifies the principle that Freud formulated: “The circuitous paths to death, faithfully kept to by the conservative instincts, would thus present us to-day with the picture of the phenomena of life” (Freud 46).

<sup>14</sup> Max Paddison, *Adorno's Aesthetics of Music* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1993), 129.

<sup>15</sup> Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, trans. James Strachey (New York: Avon, 1965), 155.

<sup>16</sup> For an extensive analysis of Jonas’ thought against the backdrop of the philosophical-scientific tradition it challenges, see Jazmine L. Gabriel, “The Problem of Life: From Mechanism to

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Surprise,” diss., University of Oregon, 2009. I am indebted to Dr. Gabriel for acquainting me with various aspects of this discussion.

<sup>17</sup> Also: “[Instincts of self-preservation] ... are component instincts whose function it is to assure that the organism shall follow its own path to death, and to ward off any possible ways of returning to inorganic existence other than those which are immanent in the organism itself” (Freud 47). Freud’s view that the simple path backward is blocked is heard faintly in Adorno’s polemic concerning regressive trends within the institutions of music and of the inadequacy of historic solutions to present problems: “The quest for an age past not only fails to indicate the way home but forfeits all consistency; the arbitrary conservation of the obsolete compromises what it wants to conserve, and with a bad conscience it obdurately opposes whatever is new” (Adorno10).

<sup>18</sup> Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, ed. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2002), 44-45.

<sup>19</sup> Michael Cahn, “Subversive Mimesis: Theodor W. Adorno and the Modern Impasse of Critique,” in Mihai Spiriosu, ed., *Mimesis in Contemporary Theory* (Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 1984), 35.

<sup>20</sup> Robert Hullot-Kentor, *Things Beyond Resemblance: Collected Essays on Theodor W. Adorno* (New York: Columbia UP, 2006), 228. At the time of this writing, the world of intercollegiate basketball supplied a dramatic illustration of mimesis as just defined: Kevin Ware, playing for the University of Louisville, landed badly after a jump and shattered his tibia. The sight of the grizzly injury and of the young man’s much apparent agony left his teammates on all fours, unable to stand for weeping.

<sup>21</sup> Roger Caillois, *The Mask of Medusa*, trans. George Ordish (New York: Clarkson N. Potter, 1964), 41.

<sup>22</sup> The phrase is Adorno’s (*Philosophy of New Music* 29).

<sup>23</sup> Indeed, he says of Treadwell that “his rage is almost incandescent,” as if he were describing Homer’s Achilles.

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