



Towards an Ecology of Attention: Considering Human and Environmental Vulnerabilities (Embeddings, Embodiments, Interdependences)

Jean-Michel Ganteau

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Towards an Ecology of Attention: Considering Human and Environmental Vulnerabilities (Embeddings, Embodiments, Interdependences).

Jean-Michel Ganteau

EA741-EMMA

Université Paul-Valéry Montpellier 3

Speaking about attention nowadays implies in more ways than one speaking *against*, as many of the studies devoted to the subject are reactions to what is generally perceived as a state of permanent distraction that may be associated with the 4th industrial revolution in more ways than one and that points at a vulnerability that is both ingrained and constructed, individual and collective, universal and situated. The ascendance of distraction has been well documented and this category has been the focus of critical and theoretical enquiry for quite a long time. Distraction is generally understood in derogatory terms as constituting the major effect of what has been defined as “the economy of attention.” The phrase is widely used and has become the title of an influential collection of essays edited by Swiss philosopher and literary scholar Yves Citton: *L'Économie de l'attention. Nouvel horizon du capitalisme ?* (2014), which could translate as *The Economy of Attention: Capitalism's New Horizon?*, and which was followed by his *The Ecology of Attention* (2014, published in English in 2017). Of course, Citton invented neither the phrase nor the concept which, according to Jonathan Crary, emerged in the late 20th century in Silicon Valley. Another theorist of the

economy of attention—not an insider, this time—is clearly Richard A. Lanham who, as early as 2006, published the path-breaking *The Economics of Attention. Style and Substance in the Age of Information* in which he pithily accounted for the groundswell that he saw as affecting our way of consuming and, at best, processing information. He described in unambiguous terms a paradigm shift affecting what had been known till then as the information society:

Economics, as we all remember from *Introduction to Economics*, studies the allocation of scarce resources. Normally we should think that the phrase “information economy,” [...] makes some sense. [. . .] But information is not in short supply in the new information economy. We’re drowning in it. What we lack is the human attention needed to make sense of it all. It will be easier to find our place in the new regime if we think of it as an economics of attention. Attention is the commodity in short supply. (Lanham vi)

From its earliest definitions, the attention economy is described in extreme terms, pointing at an inbuilt crisis on which it seems to thrive, opposing over-abundance to structural penury and pointing at human limits, incapacities and vulnerabilities.

What appears in such commentaries is that attention, considered collectively, is in the process of losing its use value even while its exchange value is rising, as made explicit in Citton’s pointed observation that we are now embedded in an “economy of visibility whose *currency* is fame” (Citton 2017; emphasis added). One step further, not only information, attention and fame have become

commodified but the intimation is that we, as collectively enthralled computer users and screen gazers, have become products. “[... *If*] *a product is free, then the real product is you!* More precisely, your attention” (Crary 2017, 22; original emphasis).

When addressing the various aspects of collective attention, most commentators insist on attention economy’s thriving on visibility, which is itself dependent on vanity. They provide analyses of such classification systems as PageRank described by Pasquinelli as “a parasitic apparatus designed to capture the value produced by common intelligence” to transform it into “the unofficial currency of the global economy of attention” (Pasquinelli 171–72; translation mine). Necessarily, such devices rely on the users’ craving for fame, which Citton describes in terms of “an ontology of visibility” (Citton 2017, 69), a radical claim that points to the no less drastic sweeping change that he sees as affecting contemporary subjectivities. The over-production of information and the correlated excessive soliciting of attention are, of course, made possible by the digitalisation of information and culture, which Katherine N. Hayles, among others, has described as the hallmark of the posthuman age. This is what Franco Berardi denounces when he inveighs against the “electrification” (Citton 2017, 91) or digitalisation of experience whose consequence is that screen users no longer experience the world directly but “through data that are already experienced and relate to objects that are no longer objects of *your* experience,

but mere references to a pre-conditioned world” (Berardi 157; original emphasis; translation mine).

Inherent in the digitalisation is a “standardization” (Citton 2017, 97) of experience. It rests on the collective consumption of the same data that format and homogenise our attention, by providing frames of perception that are also imposed on the viewers. This ties in with the process of “de-singularisation of experience and orientation” that Berardi sees at work in the mediasphere (Berardi 155), since the capturing of collective attention on a quasi-global scale leaves little or no room for originality and jeopardises any initiative. Such uniformisation goes along with a culture of the same that entraps the singular viewer into more attention to similar data as the tracking devices identify his/her preferences and consumption habits, select corresponding information and feed it to the same pair of eyeballs, more surfing involving more notifications in turn entailing further reading and solicitation.

Of course, other views on the situation are not necessarily as dark as those evinced above. For instance, some commentators have described the contemporary changes affecting attention as characteristic of the posthuman age. In the conclusion to her path-breaking study, N. Katherine Hayles, for one, takes store of the situation, draws conclusions similar to those broached above, stating that “the scarce commodity is human attention” (Hayles 1999, 287). But her attitude differs from that of the opponents to the attention economy as she sees

positive developments in this, appearing in this way as an early advocate of the Fourth Industrial Revolution:

It makes sense, then, that technological innovation will focus on compensating for this bottleneck. An obvious solution is to design intelligent machines to attend to the choices and tasks that do not have to be done by humans. The programs work along lines similar to neural nets. [. . .] If we extrapolated from these relatively simple programs to an environment that [. . .] supplies synthetic sentience on demand, human consciousness would ride on top of a highly articulate and complex computational ecology in which many decisions, invisible to human attention, would be made by intelligent machines. (Hayles 1999, 287)

In Hayles's vision, not only do machines provide information and attention, but they are also delegated the attentive capacities to process some information and leave humans to attend to more specific matters. Contemporary British fiction has taken a keen interest in such issues, with such canonised authors as Ian McEwan, with *Machines Like Me* (2019) and Nobel-prize winner Kazuo Ishiguro with *Klara and the Sun* (2021) thematising this point, precisely. Klara is the protagonist and unique first-person narrator of Ishiguro's novel, which produces the feat of providing the internal presentation of an artificial, sentient being's perspective. The device makes the reader attend to the character's attending to various aspects of the world that she is discovering and that are presented in a defamiliarising

way. This is a way not only to thematise attention but also to make the readers enact the attentional gestures in a more incarnated way, thereby foregrounding the a system of interdependences and vulnerabilities both human and non human. In Mc Ewan's novel, the android robot Adam is admired for his gobsmacking capacities of concentration, memorization and data processing and endowed with ethical capacities (the incapacity to lie) that humble the human characters in the cast, providing an ambiguous vision of the man-machine relationship and competition. In contrast to the apocalyptic evocations above there may arise a quasi-utopian vision of machine-assisted attention that would enhance human capacities and power and would become a landmark of our "posthuman" age.

Still, the crisis of attention that has been diagnosed as a salient specificity of late modernity by such commentators as Citton (Citton 2014, 10) or Crary, among others, goes along with a shift in attentional practices arising from massive industrialisation and targeting the dangers of distraction in a context in which functionality and productivity were at stake. This is thoroughly documented by Crary, but also by earlier commentators, among whom French philosopher Simone Weil who concentrated on the tyrannical requirements affecting factory workers in the first part of the 20th century in her "Factory Work" (Weil 1946) or her "Spiritual Autobiography" (Weil 1959, 61–83). The critique of distraction as jeopardising productivity thereby appears as intrinsic to the advent of late capitalism, even while pointing at its inherent embedding in the rise of new,

fabricated forms of attention, both contributing to the crisis of attention that helps define the specificity of the period:

Inattention, especially within the context of new forms of large-scale industrialized production, began to be treated as a danger and a serious problem, even though it was often the very modernized arrangements of labor that produced inattention. It is possible to see one crucial aspect of modernity as an ongoing crisis of attentiveness.” (Crary 2001, 13–14)

Attention therefore appears as a capacity and a richness whose production and use have been at stake since the second industrial revolution.

Additionally, many studies underline a move from denunciation to downright pathologisation as, of course, the last few decades have been marked by a strong interest in pathologies that affect specifically attention, as is the case with ADHD (Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder) which has thrown into visibility some disabilities affecting children and has made Ritalin—the drug prescribed to attend to hyperactivity disorders—ubiquitous.

All these developments clearly contribute to defining attention as problematical and as both a modality and amplification of human vulnerability. In contemporary discourse, it is more often than not considered in terms of penury, impairment, exhaustion. More than being envisaged as a capacity—which it *is*—, it has come to be apprehended through the prism of incapacitation, as people are too tired or too busy to attend, since their experience of everyday rhythms has

generally come to translate as “I have no time.” And from this point of view, I would argue that a great deal of contemporary literary production, even the type that thematises the strains that attention has to bear in the contemporary period, invite the readers to find the time to attend, as is the case with Raynor Winn’s *The Salt Path* (2019), for instance, that narrates the wanderings of a ruined, middle-aged couple along the coastal path, as they find the pluck and desire to attend again to others and to various elements of the social and natural environment that they trudge through.

Attention was not the focus of a great deal of scientific interest since the 19th century. It is a rather recent category, from this point of view, that had been absent from older sciences like philosophy and garnered a great deal of relevance with the rise of psychology, but also, later, phenomenology. Among contemporary phenomenologists that have made it their subject of predilection are Bernhard Waldenfels and Nathalie Depraz, who envisage attention as a proto-ethical category that helps the subject tune to the outside world and is both a lever and a proof of his or her orectic nature: “Far from being a mere projector on the phenomenon that would leave him/her scot free, it produces effects that affect him/her deeply. [. . .] Attention, triggered off by its affective dynamics, turns to the red light of the ethical drive” (Depraz 2018, 108; translation mine). For Depraz and other commentators, joint attention (when two people are aware of attending to the same thing) or communal will entail the emergence and maintaining of empathy, care and solidarity, qualities and activities that are intrinsic in the

expression and practice of ethics. Clearly, there appears a continuum between individual attention and joint attention of mutual awareness, or collective attention that is based on the invariant of openness to alterity, hence vulnerability to exteriority. And I am using the term—vulnerability—here in a positive acceptance, as the capacity to open oneself to otherness, to accept one’s needs for what is outside us (including the other), hence our relational capacities. It should be noted that such dispositions and capacities condition and buttress the social nature of attention, as indicated by many commentators.

The spectrum of attention, running from the individual to the social, relies not only on the common tenor of openness, but also—and as importantly—on that of concrete experience—possibly incarnation. In fact, even if attention implies a change in consciousness through selection, hence focus, hence intensification, it also goes along with a modification of perception and the bodily perceptual apparatus. Depraz insists on the incarnated reality of attention when she speaks of “the attentional gesture,” implying that the exercise of attention mobilises the body before any other element of subjectivity: “attention is a relational and tangible bodily experience, not an invisible, internal mental activity” (Depraz 2018, 49; translation mine). What accrues from this definition is the concrete and practical nature but also effects of attention that cannot be envisaged independently of their applications. In other terms, attention is intrinsically compatible with a praxis that finds its ground and expression in relational

exchanges—be they inter-individual or more collective, even social in orientation and scale. The study of attention, whether in real-life situations or in fictional representations, is precisely of interest because it allows for the observation of ethical, social and political relations and phenomena. In the case of the narrative of fiction, this is often made through various types of focalisation, and through telepathic access to the consciousness of characters. Such devices allow for the sharing of perception and attention from the singular, incarnated perspectives of characters, which favours the sharing of intimacy and experience. Ultimately, the conception that I draw on most regularly hails from what Depraz calls “vigilance,” which she defines in contradistinction with the more traditional model of what she terms “attention concentration.” For her, this special quality of attention, vigilance, implies “being present to the other” (as opposed to being closed in on oneself, in the case of attention concentration), “being temporally open to the unknown”, which implies the quality and experience of waiting for the unknown (vs. being closed off in memories), “hope” (against a preference for mastering what is known), and, last but not least, “a precarious relation to the other in which risk-taking is an index of authenticity (as opposed to the stability and security found in possession)” (Depraz 2018, 320; translation mine). Once again, this is tantamount to seeing vigilance, hence attention, as a modality of vulnerability to the other (in Nussbaum’s acceptance) and as a means of dispossession in Athena Athanassiou and Judith Butler’s acceptance of the term, i.e.: a “fissuring of the subject” (Butler and Athanassiou ix) that finds its origin in the perception of the

other's vulnerability, positing that the subject is non-sovereign, relational and embedded in a system of interdependences. In such vulnerability, precariousness and dispossession of the self lies the ethical imperative of attention that it is the responsibility of contemporary narrative to (re-)present. An I would contend that it is this type of vulnerability to one's environment that characterises a great deal of new nature writing, or post-pastoral, and possibly of climate change fiction, when attunement to the natural world and its inhabitants goes along with an un-locking of the self that attends to the humble, ordinary elements of landscape and daily life, as is the case with most of Sarah Hall's novels and more particularly *Haweswater*, her first publication (2006) or of most of Welsh novelist Cynan Jones's novellas, among which his first one, *The Long Dry* (2006) that humbly opens itself to the mundane micro events of one day on a farm, an interest that is echoed on quite a different temporal scale by Jon McGregor's *Reservoir 13* (2017).

Psychology and phenomenology, admittedly, do not have a monopoly on the study of attention, and I would now like to turn to the field of analytic philosophy and, more specifically, of Ordinary Language Philosophy (or OLP). The ordinary has mobilised critical discourse for decades. Leading journals have included this issue among their concerns, devoting special numbers to it. The ordinary is also at the heart of certain investigations in the domain of political philosophy, as indicated by such works such as *L'Invisibilité sociale* (*Social Invisibility*) or, as

the title makes clear, *Vies ordinaires, vies précaires* (*Ordinary Lives, Precarious Lives*), by French philosopher Guillaume Le Blanc. It is also one of the touchstones of the ethics of care or, more broadly, the ethics of vulnerability, feminist-inspired currents that have endeavoured to bring to the fore the daily and invisible practice of care workers, revealing a system of dependencies and interdependencies that are still lacking visibility. Its perception also requires a humility that asks the human subject to consider—in the sense developed by French philosopher Corine Pelluchon—not only others but also all living being by renouncing any “dominating or overhanging view” (Pelluchon 32; translation mine) and placing oneself at the level of things, other animals and the environment in which one evolves.

Through these theoretical currents, an ethical constant emerges, which calls for responsibility in the face of various forms of otherness (human or otherwise). By referring to care, social invisibilities, neo-materialism or, more broadly, the consideration of vulnerabilities, researchers in the field of literature and, more broadly, the humanities, are invited to work with theoretical approaches and to invent critical practices that place the societal and environmental dimension at the heart of their work. The latter is based on the observation that certain invisibilities affecting entire sections of ordinary life are insufficiently perceived, whether defined in opposition to precariousness in a social framework (Le Blanc 2007, 35) or, more broadly, in terms of entanglement or interdependencies that French philosopher Baptiste Morizot concretely envisages through the metaphors of

weaving and grafting with/onto the living (Morizot 233) and which are given pride of place in the novels by Hall, Jones or McGregor that I have just alluded to. However, if these emerging currents, among others, are based on attention to various qualities of the ordinary, they seem to leave insufficient room for the modalities of expression of this ordinary.

OLP is a typically Anglo-Saxon theoretical current concerned with taking into account the opacity or linguistic texture in order to account for the way in which discourse, particularly literary discourse, is ordered in relation to the ordinary and seeks to account for it. This is perhaps what Cora Diamond suggests when, in *The Realistic Spirit*, she defines what she means with the “realist mind” as presented in literature:

habits, turns of speech, turns of thought, styles of phrase as morally expressive of an individual or of a people. The intelligent description of such things is part of the intelligent, the sharp-eyed, description of life, of what matters, makes differences, in human lives. Martha Nussbaum’s Aristotelian specification of ethics leaves room (or is intended to leave room) for attention to these things; an account of ethics, or of moral philosophy, which takes action as definitive [. . .] does not. (Diamond 375)

It is therefore quite natural to turn to Ordinary Language Philosophy, of which Diamond is one of the most respected representatives, in order to define the contours of an ethics of the ordinary, which would take into account the ordinary

as an object of attention but also as a means of expression. We can indeed remember that Cora Diamond is, alongside Stanley Cavell and Hilary Putnam, one of the most influential exponents of this theoretical trend, whose origin is attributed to the works of G.E. Moore, J.L. Austin and Ludwig Wittgenstein. The latter is credited with having proposed, in the second part of his work and career, a warning against the abstraction and “craving for generality” that, in his view, have taken hold of philosophy and that he attributes to the use of the scientific method (Wittgenstein 1965, 18).

The definition of philosophy as a space of description constitutes a fundamental orientation of OLP, which focuses on “facts” and not “truths” (Murdoch 2005, 159; translation mine) and which, according to Sandra Laugier, in addition to proposing a descriptive tool is characterised by its perceptual utility: “ordinary language is not to be envisioned only as having a descriptive, or even agentive function, but as a perceptual instrument that allows for subtlety and adjustment in perceptions and actions” (Laugier 2015a, 232). It seems to me, precisely, that this question of language as an instrument of perception and attention lies at the heart of the ethics of the ordinary. On the one hand, because it makes it possible to speak out against what is seen as “a denial or undervaluation of the ordinary as a general phenomenon in contemporary thought” (Laugier 2015a, 217), thereby opposing a corrective force to a generalised reallocation of formatted objects of perception imposed by the economy of attention (Citton 2017, 7–18). On the other hand, because it proposes a creative vision of the ethics

of the ordinary by developing our perceptive capacities, and in particular our attention as readers.

In this regard, Sandra Laugier reminds us that “OLP is from the outset oriented towards social matters and *attention to the unseen, to neglected reality*.” (Laugier 2015a, 228; emphasis added). OLP thus invites us to take into account a context (social, natural) in order to detect what, precisely, is not identified, what, being part of ordinary objects or practices, is struck by invisibility. It is therefore an education in perception and an apprenticeship in attention to what is unseen that an ethics of the ordinary inspired by this branch of philosophy proposes to develop. In accordance with Wittgenstein’s prescriptions, it issues warnings against generalities and abstractions in order to promote the consideration of ordinary objects in their concreteness. More precisely, it calls on the necessity to describe them and thus, beforehand, to perceive them so as to be in a position to *attend* to them. A humble ethical stance is thus proposed, which does not consist in referring to a set of rules or a system of virtues, but in opening our eyes, both as citizens and as readers, to perceive the world in its banal aspects, privileging what is “important” over what the prevailing norms define as what is “right” (Laugier 2015a, 221). As Sandra Laugier points out, OLP proposes a redefinition of ethics: “OLP is the basis for redefining ethics as attention to ordinary life and care for moral expressivity” (Laugier 2015a, 218). In another article, she takes up Stanley Cavell’s reflections on cinema by recalling that this art proposes above all not only knowledge but also an experience of the ordinary: “Cinema,

answering the Emersonian call for democratic and ordinary art, is able to describe everyday reality. Our experience as spectators comes out of an ordinary shared culture-access to the ‘physiognomy’ of the ordinary” (Laugier 2012, 1001). This descriptive activity is coupled with an experiential function, insofar as it is the spectators’ experiences—sharing the existence of ordinary people in the film but also in the projection room, around them—that are nourished both by the perception of ordinary activities and objects and by an immersion in them and a sharing of them. Describing, but also sharing, making people feel: far from abstractions and decalogues, an ethics of the ordinary consists in learning how to achieve very concrete perceptions, in a daily practice of attention to detail that has to be sustained. This expresses beautifully the sustainable dimension promoted by the advocates of OLP, which ties in neatly with the ethics of attention as predicated on the consideration of singular vulnerabilities with a view to attend for vulnerable subjects (of all ilk), embedded as they are in an environment, social and/or natural hence care for them. This is tantamount to defining, practising and calling for an ecology of attention that the novelists writers whose works have mentioned so far (and many others) greatly contribute to.

Narrative arts have an immense superiority in this domain because, whether they promote a participatory practice, such as cinema, or a more solitary one, such as the reading of literary texts, they turn their backs on abstractions to set in motion singular lives and activities, to which readers bring a particular reaction.

For Cavell, cinema—like literature in its various forms for Iris Murdoch and Martha Nussbaum, or television series for Sandra Laugier, for instance—is the space for the emergence of experiences and uses. Indeed, as Toril Moi reminds us, it is usage that allows language to function in an unlimited and open way, opposing any possibility of closure dictated by an ideal of abstraction (Moi 198). Above all, she points out that it is the prerogative of the humanities to work on the particular: “In the humanities, our love for the particular case—the specific poem, novel, or film, the specific artist, painting, or composition—fuels our work” (Moi 202). This is precisely what the arts in general, and narrative arts in particular—and among them, prominently, fiction—allow: to perceive and attend to the ordinary in its singularity, beyond screens and appearances. In other words, narrative constitutes an essential lever in our perception of the ordinary and its invisible aspects because, embarking us in an embodied experience, it makes us carry out an “investigation,” in the sense that the ordinary is never given but is the fruit of an effort to access and inventory it (Laugier 2015c, 72; translation mine). It is precisely this practice of investigation in search of the ordinary singularities struck by invisibility that literary narrative allows us to conduct.

Still, one of the essential challenges of OLP is to learn to perceive the ordinary not only when it is invisible, but also when it is *visible*, i.e.: to acquire the capacity to see what is in front of our eyes and which only begs to be perceived, described and taken into account. This is what Wittgenstein indicates in an often-quoted passage from the *Philosophical Investigations*: “What we are

supplying are really remarks on the natural history of human beings; we are not contributing curiosities however, but observations which no one has doubted, but which have escaped remark only because they are always before our eyes” (Wittgenstein §415, 125). Far from curiosities, which would be by definition exceptional or at least rare—and therefore would logically escape perception—, it is indeed observations of the observable that are at stake here. They address objects that are always present before our eyes and, as a result, demand that we make an effort to notice them. To perceive the ordinary in what is visible, precisely, requires work and the training of perception, it also requires a pre-attentional disposition and the exercise of attention in order not to go beyond appearances but to take them into account, as Sandra Laugier reminds us, drawing on Foucault’s *Dits et écrits*: “The ordinary exists within this characteristic difficulty of access to what is right before our eyes” (Laugier 2015b, 1044). It is thus a work of attention with the aim of considering the visible that is required: one of the responsibilities of narrative in general and of fiction in particular is precisely to describe this work and to share an experiential content that makes us open and vulnerable to an ordinary that escapes the tyranny of the economy of attention as characteristic of the fourth industrial revolution.

Sharpening perceptions and attention is one of the modalities of OLP whose proponents emphasise its creative capacity. In the tradition of the English Romantics generally, and more specifically Coleridge, attention to the ordinary has the capacity to renew perception and unclutter the ethical subject—and, in a

literary context, the readers—in order to make the ordinary happen. Such recourse to the realist spirit favoured by Cora Diamond contributes to setting into motion an ethics that is based on “an attention to the particular” (Laugier 2015a, 221) and makes it emerge in an appreciation of what is right. Such an activity places the subject of attention at the heart of the process of creating a singular ethical judgement adapted to a particular situation. Moreover, as mentioned above, it is the role of literature to enable this kind of creative apprehension of the ordinary and to order it into a practice of right living, which it does by “drawing attention to the facts” (Murdoch 2005, 159; translation mine), which are new—as opposed to received truths and other catalogues of moral prescriptions.

Moreover, the perception of the ordinary, visible or invisible, allows for the exercise perhaps not so much of the just as of the important, which is in line with Cora Diamond's indications that “moral capacity lies in an attention to what matters” (Diamond 375). This is what Sandra Laugier confirms in an article devoted to life forms. Taking a detour through care as “sensitivity to the details that matter in lived situations” (Laugier 2015c, 70; emphasis added), she comes to formulate the particularistic essence of care as attention to the other (whatever its status and nature):

The perspective of care is part of the particularist turn in moral thought: against what Wittgenstein in *The Blue Notebook* called the ‘drive for generality’, the desire to enunciate general rules of thought and action, to assert in morality attention to the particular(s), the ordinary details of human

life. It is this descriptive will that modifies morality and weakens it: learning to see what is important and not noticed [...] (Laugier 2015c, 71; translation mine).

Such particularism is based on the singularity of a perception that is not conditioned by pre-established norms of recognition and that is exercised on a particular object or situation grasped and attended to in its ordinariness. It implies that ethical responsibility lies with the individual who, at the cost of a work of perception giving rise to an investigation, decides what is important and pays sustained attention to it, so that what is important/what matters becomes the condition for the emergence of what is right, since the latter cannot precede the former. We can thus see how literature, which privileges singular and embodied situations, gives a concrete account of and promotes the sharing of experiences. In this way, it is able to do ethical work by sharpening attention to what matters and by inviting readers to decide what matters in turn after whetting their capacities to perceive the ordinary. It thereby contributes to an ecology of attention that reacts against the limits imposed by the digitalisation of experience characteristic of the fourth industrial revolution that condemns the contemporary subject to feel frail and incapacitated and re-arms him/her by extolling the power of opening out and fissuring out, accepting interdependences, rejecting sovereignty and embracing vulnerability.