

Laruelle: Against the Digital

By Alexander R. Galloway

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Alexander R. Galloway has taken the opportunity of the recent spate of translations of the work of François Laruelle, not to provide a *précis* or explanation of his "genuinely weird way of thinking" (xi), but rather as an extremely creative springboard to recast any and all thinking around "the digital." This is not so much in the sense of the digital as opposed to the analog, although this comes into play, but in the especially capacious definition Galloway employs variously throughout the book. The digital is "the basic distinction that makes

it possible to make any distinction at all. The digital is the capacity to divide things and make distinctions between them. Thus not so much zero and one, but *one* and two" (xxix). In this view, "digitality is an autonomous field able to encode and simulate anything whatsoever within the universe" (xxxiv). Having defined the digital thus as the "media principle"—what is real can be communicated, and "the communicational is real" (xix–xx)—Galloway has aligned his aspiration to rethink digitality from a primordially cleared slate with the "non-philosophy" of Laruelle. Laruelle proposes a similar exit from philosophy (whose project is thus superimposed upon that of digitality) and what Laruelle stigmatizes as the "philosophical decision" (45), an auto-positioning or doubling enabled by the making of distinctions. Through this use of Laruelle, Galloway seeks to show that the "computerized world . . . never was determining in the first place" (xxxv).

Laruelle worked for thirty years before his first English translation, and though he is quickly filling the placeholder for latest Continental thinker of import, he remains in many ways a forbidding and odd choice; even his advocates, such as philosopher John Mullarkey, admit that Laruelle's formulations can at times seem to simply border on nonsense. Though Laruelle promises resolutions of apparently timeless, circular dilemmas of the philosophical enterprise by refusing on principle to enter them in the first place, proposing instead to make such cogitations "materials" for a "unified theory" of science and philosophy,¹ one may sympathize with Jacques Derrida's exasperated questioning of Laruelle in a 1988 exchange, that if not from philosophy, where did Laruelle obtain his ideas? Despite his insistence on a generic *a priori* "one" of immanence so radical that it cancels all previous philosophical activity, Laruelle does have a (strong) relationship with aspects of previous projects—with those of Johann Gottlieb Fichte for instance, or Edmund Husserl's attempted grounding of a scientific philosophy in the early twentieth century, as well as Karl Marx, Louis Althusser, Emmanuel Levinas, Jacques Lacan, and the quantum mechanics that provide much of his current terminology.

Galloway's concern is not with situating Laruelle in any such contexts (though Galloway embeds him nicely in debates with Alain Badiou and Gilles Deleuze), but with demonstrating the whys and hows of Laruelle's newfound relevance.

Part of a profound shift in French philosophy that Galloway (like Mullarkey) locates in the mid-1980s, Laruelle is only perhaps the most radical among other nonrepresentational exponents of an immanent universe, a movement also mapped, albeit in different manners, by philosophers like Deleuze and Michel Henry. Laruelle isn't so much "against the digital," as the title would imply, since, as Galloway argues, the analogical is also a form of distinction; rather, in "his withdrawal from digitality, Laruelle is charting an exodus out of representation more generally . . . The ultimate withdrawal from digitality will lead to the generic" (89). This generic "one" that is a something-or-other, without either any "attributes" or "epithets" of being (28), an immanent "real" unidirectionally and unilaterally "determination-in-the-last-instance" (xxvi–xxvii), a concept Laruelle borrows from Friedrich Engels and Althusser, exercises this determination irreversibly. Laruelle's "one" is thus completely foreign to relationship, reversibility, and exchange, and is therefore "autistic" (27). The rich result of this "non-standard" conception when applied to computers is the elucidation of computation as "*process*" (112), since "*the computer is a machine that can actuate events, provided they are reformulated in terms of the transcendental*" (italics in original, 111). That is to say, computation can only take place within being, and therefore partake of a computational decision; within this "standard model . . . anything co-thinkable is also computable. The mere existence of something is sufficient grounds for its being computable (co-thinkable)" (111). Laruelle helps us realize, Galloway argues, that "presence itself is subject to a computational condition" (111), as the only type of being available to us. What Laruelle does with this computational decision is treat it as a "raw material" for non-philosophy, whose operations reveal it as another mode of non-computation or non-computer, since computation in this view is only another kind of auto-processing or positioning, another example of identity and cloning. Laruelle's goal is to produce a completely immanent concept of computation, and Galloway argues its great significance:

This is a form of computation entirely subtracted from any kind of conscious will or causality, from any kind of metaphysical representation or manifestation, from the typical distinction between hardware and software, from the classic debate in Artificial Intelligence about whether or not computers can think like humans (111–12).

Yet this withdrawal from computational and digital "decisionism" (111) achieved by thinking in the generic has far broader ramifications. It is why for Galloway, Laruelle, however ironically, contributes "one of the most profound critiques of capitalism hitherto known" (118). This is ironic, since Laruelle produces this through using Marxism as another set of "materials" to work on, with the goal to "philosophically impoverish" it by universalizing its contents via a "scientific mode of universalization" (qtd. 118). Through describing a universe that follows from a radically nonreciprocal relation with the

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determining-in-the-last-instance "one," Laruelle thereby shows how relations can exist that are not in any way relations of exchange. So Laruelle provides a basis for a "rigorous anticapitalism" rooted "in the prohibition of exchange at the level of ontology" (119).

For Laruelle, any relations are a matter of "cloning" of the "one," and as such can only exist alongside the "real," never "of" or "in" it, yet are nevertheless in strict identity with it. In this view, as Galloway explains, "the things formerly considered real (you, me, my body, this place) are now transcendental, for they are transcendental clones of the one" (18). These necessary "transcendentals" are also a priori, as is the project of "non-philosophy" itself. Most of the "materials" of philosophy are accepted as a priori, yet converted into a field of data, of an empirical world that is subjected to Laruelle's operations of "dualysis" and cloning, that are themselves digital data (46). For all this, Laruelle's discourse is full of warning and condemnation against "mixing": "What we shun first and foremost are any kind of transcendental mixtures of the One and the Two. . . . The interplay of Idealism and Materialism presuppose some kind of transcendental operator as means for dividing the One and unifying the Two" (qtd. 46). It is Galloway's contention that however far removed and combative Laruelle may be of various discourses of supplementarity, hybridity, and excess that have fueled poststructuralism and identity politics alike, his positing of the generic "addresses many of the same concerns . . . in a way more viable and appropriate to our times" (46–7).

Laruelle's forcing of the generic or generic condition becomes analogous to what Guy Debord called "the unity of poverty" hidden by the spectacle (qtd. 186), the anonymous commons of Giorgio Agamben's "the coming community" or Maurice Blanchot's "unavailable community." This evocation of unifying immanence is evoked by Laruelle's language of "Man-in-person,"² humanity as Stranger or generalized victim.³ This entails, writes Galloway, a "moment when all positions merge into equality with themselves" (188), or as the collective Tiqqun wrote, "I need to become anonymous. In order to be present" (qtd. 189). For Laruelle, humanity is revealed in the fragility of this finite generic, insufficient rather than sufficient, "as the non-standard clone of the one . . . immune to the principle of sufficiency" (193). This recourse to the generic not only preserves a shred of the ethical (or political) tactics—Tiqqun's advocacy of becoming invisible,

Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's of desertion), but this "generic fidelity to the insufficiency of matter" (215) shows the way that "digitality is not destiny" (221). That this withdrawal into the "same kind of indecision shown to philosophy" (221) is far from a simple impoverishment is demonstrated by the examination of the "aesthetics without representation" of James Turrell installations and August von Briesen drawings, as well as Laruelle's two books exploring a "non-standard" photography. Here light, for instance, is examined as an immanent, even nonperceptual phenomenon, "in which nothing is philosophically revealed to anything else" (172)—what Laruelle calls a "uchromia" or color utopia. This "light discovered in its radical identity" (qtd. 156) is a light without source or other emanation. As such it forms part of what Laruelle has described as his "insufficient or negative utopia" (qtd. 160).

Despite the shakiness of many of Galloway's generalizations (is the indistinction of Laruelle's generic really the same arena as Deleuze's virtual?; does Deleuze not partake of metaphysics?), and the absence of taking up Laruelle's many problems (his version and prioritization in many phases of "science" for one thing), their warp and woof demonstrate why, due to the very extremity of the "black universe" it outlines, Laruelle's nonrepresentationalism is likely to remain a fruitful lodestone for some time. Galloway argues that given the vagaries of post-Fordism, in which difference enters directly into production, "it is no longer possible to conceive of utopia as difference. Rather, the chief challenge of utopian thinking today is to force the generic condition in the here and now . . . of an impoverished and finite common real" (174). Laruelle becomes essential not through bypassing (previous) thinkers,⁴ but through elucidating, however high the risk of fallibility, what adequate nonrepresentational stances might look like.

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NOTES 1. See François Laruelle, *Principles of Non-Philosophy*, trans. Anthony Paul Smith and Nicola Rubczak (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013). 2. See Laruelle, *Future Christ: A Lesson in Heresy*, trans. Anthony Paul Smith (London: Continuum, 2010). 3. See Laruelle, *General Theory of Victims*, trans. Alex Dubilet and Jessie Hock (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2015). 4. In this regard it is revealing that some of Galloway's most tightly argued and focused pages, in his "Computers" chapter, is where he aims at developing a political stance adequate to the current conjuncture, and here the crucial texts are from later Deleuze writings, not Laruelle.

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