To Do Justice To This Moment: Between Exhaustion and Totality

John Muckelbauer and Tim Donovan

Perhaps it is the case that the humanities have always existed in a state of crisis. At the very least, we can be certain that there have consistently been voices within various fields that have portrayed the moment, this moment, as a crucial one, as a decisive point for humanistic inquiry. If these collective voices are to be believed, this moment would exhibit a curiously dual character: not only would it function as a kind of bifurcating hinge on which the future of the humanities somehow depends, but it would also—and at the same time—become an interminable moment, a promise that constantly refuses to fulfill itself. Perhaps we, as scholars and teachers in the humanities, will all have been paralyzed within the endless repetition of such critical moments, suspended by the very changes we hope to encourage. That is, perhaps the condition of stasis finds its greatest ally in these decisive moments and the transformative dynamics that structure them.

But what, precisely, are these transformative dynamics? And what conceptual structures enable us to imagine such decisive moments and to announce their recurrence? Or, more directly, is there actually something called “the humanities” that can experience a crisis or even something like a decisive moment? Of course, this is not merely a problem of size, as if the question would make more sense if we asked it about “English departments” or “composition studies” or “John Muckelbauer and Tim Donovan.” Instead, this is a question about the structures that enable us both to distinguish and to demand specific changes (regardless of how big the object is). It is, in other words, a question about the conceptual field implicit in any diagnosis of this moment—a question that, for reasons we will indicate below, we hope to pursue hesitantly if not just elliptically.

First of all, to raise such questions about a conceptual field—or to begin, as we have just done, with the familiar motif of dialectical stasis—conveniently ignores the distinctive quality of each critical moment. For instance, while one might accept the structural image of perpetual stagnation, it is nevertheless the case that some of these moments may have actually turned out to be decisive. And further, that this moment (whenever it occurs) might very well be one of them. So in order to attend to the distinctiveness of each critical diagnosis, we would eventually have to undertake the traditional task of separating the false prophets from the real ones, distinguishing those who were right about this moment from those who were not.

While this might seem like a relatively straightforward assignment, it would soon become altogether confusing. For instance, in order to proceed with our separation, we would be forced to distinguish between the accuracy of the diagnosis and the effects produced by the very act of diagnosing. To take a popular example, in the movie, *The Matrix*, the main character, Neo, visits an Oracle in order to determine if he will be the chosen one, the one that will master the matrix and lead the humans against the machines. At the end of their brief meeting, the Oracle tells Neo that he is not the chosen one, though an hour or so later, we discover that he is. Was the Oracle simply wrong? Or did she, as Morpheus later implies, simply tell him what he needed to hear so that he could, in fact, become the chosen one? Or was the Oracle actually right—at least at that moment?

Even in this simple cinematic example, how can we distinguish between the accuracy of the Oracle’s diagnosis and the effects produced by her act of diagnosing? If we cannot make this distinction in a rigorous fashion, then regardless of what actually occurs, our ability to separate the false prophets from the real ones will be immeasurably delayed. Indeed, because what is at issue in the diagnosis of this moment is the image of temporality itself, we must face a further, more disconcerting possibility: that any of our attempts to engage the distinctiveness of these diagnoses will always arrive too late. We will have no way of knowing—whether in this moment or even much later—whether those who announce the decisiveness of this moment for the humanities will have been madmen or messiahs. And, of course, the same logic of postponed arrival would also apply to the announcements themselves. In their attempt to engage the distinctiveness of the moment, the arrival of these diagnoses will always be overdue. That is why, for instance, Jacques Derrida writes that “the moment of decision, of responsibility as such, is not a moment of
knowing” (“Genome” 200). For Derrida, the capacity to respond to the decisiveness of this moment is not the same as knowing this moment, or of recognizing its importance and forecasting alternatives. Such knowledge and recognition will always arrive too late.

But perhaps such tardiness is not really a problem. After all, nothing is easier than to dispense with these tiring concerns and get on with the act of separation. We do it all the time. Once the movie is over, for instance, who would hesitate to say that the Oracle was wrong? But even earlier, even within the moment itself, the separation moves just as swiftly and decisively into the form of an argument: one side champions the diagnosis as prophetic; another decries it as absurd; still another thinks that it is a little of both. And because programs committed to social change are deeply involved with the positional structure of argumentation, any delay in the process of separation tends to sound indecisive and perhaps even retrograde. In other words, deferral, hesitation, or elliptical engagements (such as the one we are attempting here) often sound a lot like an unwillingness to become involved in the ongoing struggle for social justice. Why not simply proceed with the separation as scheduled? Why not make our pronouncements and formulate our arguments about this moment? After all, the humanities are in a state of crisis. This is a decisive moment.

Ask anyone.

For instance, there is the generally recognized economic crisis. No single issue aligns such disparate political tendencies in English departments as an aversion to the perceived incursion of capitalism. Not only do we tend to believe that the corporate university is a relatively new phenomenon, but according to both high culture apologists and revolutionary radicals, this new university is clearly not committed to maintaining a space for humanistic inquiry. Budget cutbacks and hiring freezes amplify our sense that in a world increasingly accountable to an economic bottom-line, the humanities are increasingly expendable. In order to continue to exist at all, individual departments are being asked to amplify their fund-raising initiatives, generate endowment money, or acquire grants from federal and state coffers that shrink with each passing election. In a milieu that is already skeptical about the intrusion of naked economic concerns, such requests are often indistinguishable from veiled threats.

Or there is the emerging theoretical crisis, the growing sense that the conceptual trajectories of the last few decades have become tiresome if not entirely exhausted. In Timothy Brennan’s symptomatic words, “theory
has become a code word for relatively predictable positions in the humanities and related social sciences” (1). To be sure, deconstruction, cultural studies, and various strains of psychoanalytically inflected identity politics have not disappeared. They still continue to reproduce their critiques of various totalizing structures through the academic presses; yet it is difficult to escape the impression that their once-innovative resources have been used up. Even such seemingly novel endeavors as visual culture, body studies, or disability studies frequently sound too much like discount Hollywood clones than innovative blockbusters. The characters may have different faces and even different names, but we have all seen the plot many times before: the heroic quest to fragment the paralyzing and deadly forces of totalization. And because it has been some time since a new problematic appeared on our conceptual horizon, we are constantly confronted with the recognition that all our newest ideas are “always already” worn out.

This growing theoretical disenchantment is, of course, directly tied to the recognition that we are increasingly dispensable to many of the constituencies we are supposed to serve—whether university administrators, unsympathetic legislatures, or cynical students. It is no longer the case that we simply need to strategically invent the best arguments to justify humanistic inquiry. Instead, for many of us in the humanities, it has become a question of whether we actually have anything useful or productive to offer the contemporary world at all (other than the fact that we happen to like reading certain books and think that others should therefore like them too). In a culture where our daily lives (and even our bodies) are becoming increasingly technologized, where people are constantly poised between the dual threat of both terrorism and the “war on terrorism,” and where pressing domestic economic concerns seem to be inseparable from global military actions and political unrest—what do English teachers have to offer? After all, we’re not even really convinced that we can actually teach students to write more effectively . . . or even that our traditional notion of writing is really as important as we want to say it is. Even those voices that summon the energy to defend humanistic inquiry tend to repeat the same routine arguments about traditional values, critical thinking, or democratic citizenship. Maybe we have simply become too weary to keep pace with a social world that seems to be changing at an unprecedented rate. Like Nietzsche’s last man, perhaps we are just plain tired of it all, and so we continue to perform our conceptual routines knowing full well their general irrelevance.

Perhaps.
In any case, such is the tenor that engineers a growing number of recent efforts to redirect and reinvigorate humanistic inquiry. Each of these efforts shares the sense that various theoretical trajectories have been exhausted and worn out, that their standing reserve has been used up and hence that they have failed, in some way, to keep up with cultural transformations. Because of the unprecedented character of these cultural shifts, this moment has become a crucial one for the future of the humanities. In order to respond adequately to this moment, to do justice to it and to ourselves, we have to somehow change. For instance, we need to change our theoretical trajectories and embrace a new, more supple conceptual model. This new model will not be able to rest satisfied with simply critiquing totalizing structures (that has been done endlessly for the past thirty years). Instead, it must be capable of responding to the chaotic exigencies of the contemporary world, to the imbrications of thinking and capital, and to the unpredictable economic, political, and technological flows circulating the globe.

**Exhaustion**

One symptomatic instance of this effort to develop a new theory appears as Mark C. Taylor's remarkable work, *The Moment of Complexity*. Of the many things that we will have to say about Taylor's project, the one that seems most evident is that it is genuinely innovative. Not only does the book offer a distinctive amalgam of theoretical tendencies in the sciences and the humanities, but this fusion occurs on the terrain of an inquiry into novelty itself, into the conditions for producing novelty. From one end of the book to the other, Taylor is relentless in his efforts to open up closed systems, to transform walls into webs and grids into networks.

The demand to which Taylor's project responds is immediate and clear: our sociocultural existence has altered dramatically in the last thirty years, and our theoretical tools have been unable to keep up. While we are immersed in what Taylor terms "network culture," our analytic tools are surprisingly grid-like: "The theoretical resources informing social and cultural analysis for more than three decades have been exhausted, and alternative interpretive strategies have yet to be defined" (47). Pointing to Foucault, Derrida, and Baudrillard as representative examples of these exhausted theoretical trends, Taylor claims that what were once "innovative perspectives [...] have been repeated and routinized until they yield arguments that are utterly predictable and familiar" (47). In order to adequately respond to the changing cultural scene, these worn-out theoretical models need to be abandoned, and new
ones fashioned in their place, simply because “the creative possibilities of network culture cannot be understood unless new interpretive trajectories are fashioned” (72). For Taylor, these new interpretive trajectories are available in the amalgam of scientific thought known as “complexity theory,” and Taylor’s infusion of complexity theory into the arts and humanities shows the productive ways in which it can be used to engage contemporary art, architecture, and even curricular and institutional design.

Oddly enough, one of the most compelling aspects of this project is the familiarity of its narrative. There is, for instance, the typical opposition between repetition and innovation: theories that were once innovative have been repeated and routinized and no longer offer the insights they once did (hence, new theories are needed). And there is the customary epistemological distinction between the world and our theoretical interpretation of it: the world has changed, but our tools for understanding it have not (hence, new theories are needed). Or there is the traditional logic of linear temporality that governs the project: once there were grids, now there are networks (hence, new theories are needed). And even a linear teleology: “it seems clear that development—personal as well as natural and historical—has a direction: things tend to move from lesser to greater complexity” (4). Indeed, Taylor’s “moment of complexity” continues in serial form the state of contemporary crisis that should, by now, be almost comforting: the end of grand “metanarratives,” the obliteration of reference, the event of the “hyperreal,” the triumphant “end of history.” In short, while the interpretive trajectory that emerges from Taylor’s project is undoubtedly innovative, it is born of a surprisingly familiar, predictable, and, on its own terms, perhaps even an “exhausted” logic—a logic that renders this moment as a decisive point in which we might awaken from our conceptual slumber.

Our point here is not to critique Taylor, or to indirectly accuse his work of not being sufficiently innovative. The fact that the work is structured by a logic that, on its own terms, may be exhausted, does not indict the novelty of this intervention. Indeed, it would seem that such exhaustion might actually allow the novelty of the work to emerge. That is, maybe exhaustion harbors a generative force—not because it compels its own overcoming (whether that overcoming is rendered as an awakening, a revitalization, or a new theory), but because of some attribute of exhaustion itself.

Of course, this is not exactly an original observation. Maurice Blanchot, for instance, begins The Infinite Conversation by demonstrat-
ing that a certain dimension of what he calls “weariness” is the condition of possibility for interaction and engagement. For Blanchot, it is not that weariness must be surmounted in order to enable an interaction, but that any interaction only occurs within and through the impersonal, indifferent, and yet entirely generous milieu of weariness (xiv). This weariness is not merely a liminal, subjective state that exists somewhere between sleep and wakefulness (or between order and chaos). Such a rendering of the unlocatable “between,” while seemingly disorienting or confusing, would be entirely oriented by the poles that it presumes. Instead, Blanchot’s weariness is a generative movement that produces the very distinction between—and subsequent sublation of—such recognizable states as sleep and wakefulness. He writes, “I do not really speak, I repeat, and weariness is repetition, a wearing away of every beginning” (xx). If Blanchot’s weariness is generative, it is not generative in the sense of producing something new. Indeed, what this weariness wears away is the very distinctions that would enable one to recognize some kind of new beginning or some decisive point: “the moment of decision, of responsibility as such, is not a moment of knowing.” Hence, weariness would enable one to respond to this moment only through a kind of nonrecognition of the moment.

But even this formulation remains too wakeful, too vigilant, since Blanchot’s weariness does not merely attempt to encourage us to recognize that any diagnosis of this moment will necessarily arrive too late (or, in other words, to recognize our inability to recognize—infinite conversation is not the same as infinite regress). That is why Blanchot explains that weariness is not only “what does not arrive, the field of non-arrival” but that it is, “at the same time, that which, arriving, arrives without gathering itself in some definite or determinable point” (xvii-xix). Weariness is not a presence, an absence, or a sublation of these poles: it is both the field of non-arrival and a constant arrival that is nevertheless not present as a point (indeed, according to this logic, it cannot have properties or attributes of its own at all). This weariness, then, is not something that either can or should be overcome. Its indifferent, indiscriminate nature (indifferent to Being and to a dialectics of recognition—indifference, of course, is not the same as refusal) is precisely what enables it to function along a different register than the simple linear chronology of change. In other words, weariness’s indifferent, indiscriminate nature is what allows it to harbor an inventive force, but an inventive force that remains indifferent to novelty.
Earlier we alluded to Nietzsche's last man as a possible illustration of hopeless repetition, but it is no accident that this figure, the one who is "too weary even to die" (133) is, in many respects, indistinguishable from the one who wills the Overman. Just as in Blanchot's rendering, for Nietzsche, there is something about the character of exhaustion itself—and not its overcoming—that promises the possibility (or perhaps even the necessity) of a certain nondialectical intensification: the Overman. Hence, for Nietzsche, it is important to distinguish between affirmative movements of intensification and negative movements of recognition (such as "transformation" or "change"). While these two dynamics are certainly not opposed, and necessarily function simultaneously, they also function through different rhythms. For instance, in their efforts to demonstrate this logic of rhythmic intensification, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari have recourse to the notion of the "transversal" rather than the transformative. While, like Taylor, they locate this transversal function in the non-place between things, their "between" functions in a very different way. As they explain, "Between things does not designate a localizable relation going from one thing to the other and back again, but a perpendicular direction, a transversal movement that sweeps one and the other away" (*A Thousand 25*).

**Innovation**

But perhaps we have moved too quickly. Perhaps, in our haste to make certain distinctions within the order of exhaustion, we have risked another kind of non-arrival. It wouldn't be the first time that questions of speed interfered with programs of social justice. At the very least, if we have raised the possibility that the milieu of exhaustion might harbor its own generative force (even if that force cannot be called "its own"), then we will have demonstrated that we are not attempting to indict Taylor's productive engagement with complexity theory.

But neither are we trying to defend it. Instead, we are simply interested in the fact that Taylor's engagement with complexity theory makes the problem of doing justice to this moment—to decisiveness and to temporality—all the more timely.

In fact, it is our suspicion that if, as we have claimed, Taylor's work is enabled by a certain exhausted logic, the problem is that this logic isn't exhausted enough, meaning that it never relinquishes a certain faith in the new and the innovative, nor in the mode of temporality that engineers these concepts. For instance, in his engagements with the supposedly "exhausted" theoretical perspectives of Foucault, Derrida,
and Baudrillard, there is much that strikes us as far too energetic and too alert.

To take one instance of this tendency, Taylor’s analysis of Foucault (and, more particularly, Foucault’s relationship to structuralism) orients itself toward the same question of temporality that is our principle concern here. He quotes an extended passage from *The Archaeology of Knowledge*:

> A task is thereby set for thought: that of contesting the origin of things, but of contesting it in order to give it a foundation, by rediscovering the mode upon which the possibility of time is constituted—that origin without origin or beginning, on the basis of which everything is able to come into being. Such a task implies the calling into question of everything that pertains to time, everything that has formed within it, everything that resides within its mobile element, in such a way as to make visible that rent, devoid of chronology and history, from which time issued. Time would then be suspended within that thought, which nevertheless cannot escape from it since it is never contemporaneous with the origin; but this suspension would not have the power to resolve the reciprocal relation of origin and thought; and as it pivoted upon itself, the origin, becoming what thought has yet to think, and always afresh, would be forever promised in an imminence always nearer, yet never accomplished. In that case, the origin is that which is returning, the repetition toward which thought is moving, the return of that which has always already begun, the proximity of a light that has been shining since the beginning of time. (qtd in Taylor 56)

There is much to comment on in this “complex” rendering of temporality, and we reproduce it at length largely because we will have done nothing but repeat its sense throughout this essay. Our purpose here, however, is to attend to the way that Taylor reads this passage, to take note of the way that he configures Foucault (or at least this passage from Foucault) in order to render such thinking as a symptomatic example of an exhausted theoretical approach that needs to be replaced.

Shortly after this passage, Taylor summarizes the point that he is making by including this quotation:

> It should now be obvious why Foucault insists that his archaeological investigations should not be labeled structuralist. The structures, patterns, and systems through which knowledge is ordered are not universal but are historical a priori, which emerge in specific circumstances. With the recognition that interpretive grids are temporally contingent and histori-
cally relative, it becomes evident that things might always have been otherwise. The grids that form the codes of language, perception, and practice are neither hardwired nor natural but are both instituted and constructed. (56)

This summary of Foucault’s thinking is certainly familiar, and it is what has allowed many scholars to associate Foucault with a series of intellectual and political projects that are often loosely grouped under the title of “constructivism” (whether social, discursive, or otherwise). Taylor is no doubt alert to these associations, which is why he deploys this passage from Foucault in order to discuss the problems with various constructivist critiques of objective scientific knowledge (57–61).

But Taylor’s gloss also produces a rather disorienting luster, especially considering the passage that he has just quoted. Nowhere in this passage does Foucault speak of (or even allude to) the concepts that, in Taylor’s description, warrant the insistence of italics: “instituted,” “constructed,” or “specific circumstances.” And nowhere in this quotation does Foucault demonstrate an even passing interest in “language, perception, and practice”; the task that he calls for is rather explicitly a task for thought: “A task is therefore set for thought [. . .].”

Of course, one might justifiably excuse such apparent discrepancies by attributing them to the fact that Taylor is more interested in developing a general sense of Foucault’s theoretical approach (and the constructivist thinking associated with it) rather than in offering a close reading of Foucault. Perhaps, one might argue, “language, perception, and practice” are actually forms of thought, or perhaps these emphases are implicit in the passage (or maybe even explicit elsewhere in Foucault’s work). This seems entirely likely. And yet to read this passage as claiming—or even as in any way supporting the claim—that “interpretive grids are temporally contingent and historically relative” not only does a striking violence to the passage, but, more importantly, to the very questions of temporality with which Taylor’s analysis is concerned. For instance, to explain a phrase such as “devoid of chronology and history” as indicating that structures are “temporally contingent and historically relative” requires a rather extraordinary kind of innovative logic, one that, in its hasty, assimilative translation, integrates the quotation into a recognizable figure—a figure that is instantly subject to a dialectics of recognition. Further, since one already knows that Foucault is opposed to universals in favor of the historical and the contingent, there is no need to hesitate over the “complexity” that one might discover in the surpris-
ingly universalizing final line of the quotation: “the proximity of a light that has been shining since the beginning of time.” In fact, if being awake and alert enable an encounter of this kind—and we agree that they might—this would explain why we are so tired of encountering such readings (regardless of whether they are critical or admiring).

But far more important than this innovative reading or even our polemical reactions to it is the fact that Taylor’s analysis explicitly anticipates our response. In the paragraph prior to the one we have been discussing (and immediately following the long quotation of Foucault), Taylor clearly demonstrates the conceptual stakes offered by Foucault: “This ‘rent’ or tear is ‘devoid of chronology and history’ because it is the trace of the withdrawal that releases the emergence of chronology and history. Not present but always near, the receding origin repeatedly approaches as the eternal return of what never arrives. [...] The space opened by this strange origin fascinates Foucault” (56).

So it is not merely the case that Taylor doesn’t understand the Foucauldian project, or that he has made a mistake or performed a misreading—the point here is not to either disparage Taylor’s reading or to salvage some more interesting version of Foucault (as important as such projects might be). But neither is it simply the case that Taylor doesn’t share Foucault’s fascination with strange origins—the entire book is heavily invested in articulating a logic of non-locatable origins that exist “between” things.

In fact, the disjunction that occurs between Taylor’s two responses to Foucault is entirely irrelevant. It doesn’t matter. But it doesn’t matter for an extremely important reason: because the process of translation as integration is far more significant than Foucault or any other point along the innovative path that is being marked out. What is at stake here is not Foucault, Taylor, or indeed any particular thing, but the very possibility of a new theory—not just a new complexity theory, but novelty itself. Points of distinction must be formulated and integrated into its movement. Theoretical trajectories must be overcome because they are exhausted, dangerous, whatever. Of course, one can only mark such a path by engaging singular instances, but in this movement (the movement of innovation itself) these instances function as integrative points, meaning that they are immediately translated into figures or positions (they have been recognized). In this case, Foucault’s quotation is integrated into the unveiling of a new complexity theory by translating it into constructivism. Hence, not only is the disjunction between the two readings irrelevant, but, strictly speaking, it does not exist. The movement of innovation is
indifferent to such distinctions (though, as we have tried to indicate, this indifference functions in a very different way from the generous indifference to recognition and dialectics that characterizes Blanchot’s weariness).

So while we want to insist on the fact that Taylor’s encounter with Foucault does not simply result in a misreading, this is because the encounter is symptomatic of the attentive movement of innovation being offered, a movement that begins from the premise that the moment, this moment, must be recognized regardless of the cost. And as we have been hinting, the cost may well be significant. In fact, it would not be an exaggeration to claim that, in a certain sense, the cost may be this moment itself (though, of course, we will not be certain of this until much later).

**Totality and Integration**

But perhaps we have again leapt ahead of ourselves, maybe remaining too “theoretical” in our attempt to resonate with and respond to Taylor’s project as a project of this moment. It might do, for instance, to turn to some of the concrete artistic examples that Taylor finds so telling. For Taylor, these displays of architecture and art point toward the emergence of nascent forms and notions that are on their way to becoming formative sociocultural concepts.

For example, in Chuck Close’s paintings, Taylor finds a pivotal example that illustrates the transformation of the defining artistic and sociocultural principles of order. Just as Frank Gehry’s architecture signifies the transformation of architecture and urban space from the traditional, symmetrical grid to an unusual, heterogeneous network, similarly Chuck Close’s paintings illustrate a network that actualizes the book’s primary theme of complexity. Taylor’s contrast of Close’s two paintings from the late 1960s and early 1990s demonstrates the book’s major rhetorical claim that natural and cultural life-systems progressively emerge anew toward greater levels of complexity throughout history. Most important, the artist’s Self-Portrait, 1997 serves as an introductory example for various complexity theories based on the organizing concept of self-integrated totalities.

In the late 1960s, Taylor reports that Close’s work, particularly Big Self Portrait, 1968, actualized a photo-realistic style that was organized by a symmetrical grid of squares that seemed to eliminate the vestiges of the paintbrush. Working from photographs, his exclusive portrayal of the head and neck is organized by a squared, symmetrical network that accomplishes one of Ad Reinhardt’s twenty-five working maxims on art:
"The most universal path to the most unique. And vice versa" (131). This maxim is not just advice about maintaining technical simplicity. The claim seems to presume that using a fundamental basis of order will concentrate an artist's perception in a way that will allow novelty to emerge. The stunning sense of tactile presence that Close's early work stirs implies that regulated order is the proper means toward complexity. Taylor argues that Close's aesthetic principles will undergo a change that indicates more than a change in style or the influence of new technologies. The transformation of his 1990s paintings is focused on presenting a sense of presence quite different from the earlier portrait.

For Taylor, Close's work illustrates the dynamic interactive process of discrete parts that emerge into a whole, a temporary unitary system that forms and transforms with the pressure of different connections formed internally. When comparing Close's early and later work, what little that remains consistent is the startling affect it produces. The tactile immediacy of Close's early portraits, a presence that seems to command the viewer's attention with threatening disregard, is utterly opposed in the portraits from the 1990s. The obvious difference between the two is the latter painting's disinterest in realist representation. The seemingly clear realism actualized in the early work contrasts with the seemingly distorted viewpoint represented in the latter. And unlike the depth actualized in the early paintings, Self-Portrait, 1997 is striking in its attention to surface structure. The human face—so prominent in the earlier portraits—is now diminished and only emerges at a distance from the plane of interacting forces. As Taylor notes about this current work, "the grid is foregrounded," and such a modification is telling (133).

At first glance, the recent painting brings to mind the pixels of a television, atomized bits at close range, yet quite coherent at a distance. The square, Cartesian symmetry that conceptualized the earlier self-portrait is transformed into a diagonal grid. For Taylor, this recent network represents a renewed understanding of complexity within a system that illustrates the asymmetric, random integration of dissimilar elements and distinct regions. As a fragmentary whole, the recent portrait is an assemblage of various geometric patterns that contain discrete, internal paintings, combining color and shade to form the painting. These discrete segments form territories connected in a milieu of mosaic-like clusters that shape the trace of a figure out of formless background. Even at a distance, when the human figure emerges more clearly in view, the portrait emphasizes a surface of interacting components as opposed to the substantial presence and depth of the earlier portraits. As the painting
makes clear, the concept of an individual is divided; the self emerges from a network of heterogeneous division that ultimately accumulates and connects these singularities. More important, Close's painting further concentrates Taylor's theoretical polemic directed at the crisis of this moment of complexity: a dynamic understanding of totality emphasizes his ongoing critique of what poststructuralism leaves unthought [ . . . ] a non-totalizing structure that nonetheless acts as a whole. Such a structure would neither be a universal grid organizing opposites nor a dialectical system synthesizing opposites but a seamy web in which what comes together is held apart and what is held apart comes together. (12)

Such are the stakes of Taylor's engagement with Close. In order to respond to these intriguing suggestions and, perhaps, redirect the problem of a non-totalizing whole, we turn again to the work of Gilles Deleuze who, in his study of Francis Bacon's painting in Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation, offers an analysis that resonates in certain ways with the direction of Taylor's analysis of complexity.

Throughout this comparison, we will be interested not only in Deleuze's (and Deleuze and Guattari's) conceptual matrix, but also in the relationship of forces that activates Bacon's painted bodies, producing the kind of transversal intensification we mentioned above. As we hinted earlier, this transversal intensity is distinct from a movement of transformation or change, whose logic remains within an integrative diagram of the same; while an individual is subject to personal change, and the force of recognition compels a certain difference, such a conversion is a difference in kind that continues a basic continuity of self-integration. In effect, the structure of change never changes.

Hence, Deleuze and Guattari's use of terms such as "transversal" and "intensity"—and their recourse to a nondialectical rendering of "becoming"—indicates an important distinction within a logic of transformation that is based on recognition, resemblance, or imitation. As Deleuze and Guattari state, such intensive becoming does not "affect the passage from one lived state to another" (What 173). While this becoming does indeed occur "between things," it is a convergence of multiplicities that affects a transformation beyond simple recognition (A Thousand 25).

Of course, all of these complex definitions raise an important question: what is this nature of the relationship between things that produces this intensive becoming—and how is it distinct from the "between" of Taylor's network? To phrase this question in Deleuze and Guattari's terms, what defines a thinking that instantiates the complex "logic of the and?" (A Thousand 25).
For Deleuze and Guattari, the common conceptualization of human beings—characterized as a unitary individual invested with intentional agency—is only active as a “molar” unit. Making clear their break with the pervasive tradition of the philosophy of the subject, they argue, “The HE does not represent a subject but rather marks a diagram of an assemblage” (A Thousand 265). The more conventional understanding of an integrated human subject that undergoes ongoing self-transformative development is opposed by their emphasis on the indeterminate, multiple phenomenon of a body that is structured by a complex field of forces. The body’s coordinates form an “individuated assemblage” within an “haecceity,” a milieu of latitudinal and longitudinal lines that compose a territory (A Thousand 261). The territorial coordinates of the body are delineated by intersecting lines of force that territorialize, as well as lines that extend outward along continuing pathways that de-territorialize. Thus, the body is merely a unit of condensation in alliance with numerous human and nonhuman lines within various adjacent assemblages. Intensive becoming, then, names the movement of de-territorialization (and simultaneous reterritorialization), a movement that affects exchange between multiple lines throughout the territory.

The distinctiveness of Deleuze and Guattari’s thinking about bodies emerges in their definition of a relationship that cannot be understood as simply a form of assimilation, integration, or transformation. The relationship of intensive becoming brings together different forces, velocities, and volumes in an encounter that traverses one and another, generating movement projected not toward recognition, but toward a “zone of indetermination” (What 173). The alliance that characterizes an intensive becoming does not identify, imitate, or reconcile; the convergence of different points affects force and velocity “that sweeps one and the other away” (A Thousand 25). Hence, the order of intensive becoming is not productive of new things, but is productive only in the complexity of its involuted intertwining (A Thousand 238).

Deleuze’s analysis of Francis Bacon’s painting illustrates the circulation of this intensive becoming and its involutions. Like Close, Bacon also focuses on the figure, though they each do so in a different fashion. Close’s paintings, for instance, explicitly operate within the boundaries of representation, even as they insightfully challenge this perspective. Within the swirling matrix that forms Self Portrait, 1997, the figure gradually emerges as an integrated presence. At a distance, the viewer recognizes the appearance of a regulated form. Bacon’s work, on the other hand, deforms the standing of this integrated figure. His paintings
seem captivated with the intensity of forces that disfigure the body, sending it into spasms and contortions that nearly obliterate it as a recognizable figure. As Deleuze explains, “Bacon’s bodies, heads, Figures are of flesh, and what fascinates him are the materials and forces; to make these forces visible through their effects on the flesh. [...] What fascinates Bacon is not movement, but its effect on an immobile body” (7).

In his series of portraits studying the figuration of different heads, Bacon’s painting embodies the forces that carry the body toward this “zone of indetermination.” The intensities traversing Bacon’s figures effects a catastrophe that renders them grotesque, deformed, or, more important, active and indiscernible.

For Deleuze, Bacon’s painting expresses the work of an artist with an acute aesthetic perspective compelled to present the raw, violent activation of the body’s sense. Here, the body is a transitory unit of intensive potential, both located and dislocated in relation to itself: “[T]here is a very peculiar feeling that arises from within the body, precisely because the body is felt under the body; the transitory organs are felt under the organization of the fixed organs” (Francis 44).

This strange sense of activity within the housing of an organism occurs simply because bodies are nothing other than a multiplicity of intensive forces, nothing other than responses to the lines of force that have converged upon and taken hold of them. Hence, Bacon’s smearing or wiping technique renders this broad sense of distortion and deformation as the intensive movement characteristic of his figures. These figures certainly differ from what Taylor refers to as the “variegated organism,” of the experimental realism of Close’s later work (134). Indeed, art historians detect a sense of “ravaged” and “regenerated beauty” in Bacon’s painting (Trucchi 18). And this combined sense of ravage and regeneration is continued by Deleuze when he interprets these figures of distortions as the emergence of forms swept off to a “zone of indiscernability” (Francis 27). The head seems grotesque in themselves, but often this distortion comes from the outside force “sweeping over” the head, intensifying the sense in ways that make the head appear to be “shaking” off its face: “It is as if the invisible forces were striking the head from many different angles. The wiped and swept parts of the face here take on a new meaning, because they mark the zone where the force is in the process of striking” (50).

Bacon’s two portraits, entitled Head of a Man, 1959, render an agitation that appears between the ravages and regeneration. Bacon has
claimed "that the human visage has not found its face" (42). The anticipatory sense of an undetermined outcome is evident in these portraits. The face, one of the primary regions that would identify the normal characteristics of a human, seems to be passing, yet to emerge fully from one state to another form. Bacon has also remarked that "I want to paint the scream more than the horror," (51) which implies an urgency to render the lines of force that take hold of the senses (rather than merely condition them). Bacon's subtle point is to register how lines of force activate the senses, which then, in turn, fall, vibrate, and shriek.

From a Deleuzian perspective the two portraits might be entitled the Becoming Face of Man, 1959. In each of the portraits, the figures' presence are minimal entities dissipating into a larger field of forces that illustrate what Deleuze calls the "powers of the future"—not powers that may finally be realized at some future point, but the powers of the future immanent to the lines of force (52). For instance, the borderline that demarcates an outer field from the region of the head is difficult to discriminate, forming a series of exchanges. The skin is not just a membrane, but a slight outline of demarcation between the play of forces where the outside field penetrates the figure's interior region to form contour lines and blocks of emphasis. This Becoming Face of Man forms a bloc, a condensation of forces formed by the combined pressure of an exterior field of force that meets the interior corporeal region of the senses and visage. And while we have provisionally had recourse to such terminology, the dissipation depicted in these portraits does not indicate ruination or deformation; rather the deformed features suggest the sweeping movement of an intensive becoming that activates a visage—one that has yet to find its face (42).

As mentioned earlier, the point of our lengthy discussion of Close and Bacon is to foreground an analysis of Taylor's argument about the concept of a non-totalizing whole. By contrasting Bacon's composition with that of Close, we can distinguish between two types of complexity: 1) a transformation that occurs by means of integration; and 2) a tranversality that occurs by means of intensity.

Returning to Close's portrait, the network of independent, atomic parts are gathered by internal forces that hold the parts together within the boundaries of the whole. Certainly, any changes of the individual parts will transform the territorial clusters and the contour of the system because no hierarchy maintains an order within the system. Furthermore, Close's portrait is more than the conventional assumption that a whole is the sum of the parts. Close's portrait offers an introduction to Taylor's
point that "complex adaptive systems" are not preprogrammed, nor are they merely the mechanism of single parts (226). In complex adaptive systems, parts enter into networked relations subject to indeterminate changes resulting from composition and interaction within the system. Nevertheless, even the preliminary example of Close's portrait indicates the primacy afforded to the internal restrictions of the system's boundaries (even as that system is in ceaseless transition, with no single governing body). The movement between the alliances that comprise an exterior field will only be figured in terms of their relation to the confines of a self-integrated totality. Hence, compare these systematic restrictions of Taylor's approach to totality with the range of the conceptual field in Deleuze's approach to the same problem:

The frame or the picture's edge is, in the first place, the external envelope of a series of frames or sections that join up by carrying out counterpoints on lines and colors, by determining compounds of sensations. But the picture is also traversed by a deframing power that opens it onto a plane of composition or an infinite field of forces [...]. The painter's action never stays within the frame, it leaves the frame and does not begin with it. (What 187-88).

Taylor's complexity, on the other hand, generally remains local to the system, where emergence occurs through integration within its expanding confines. While life may be lived on the shifting margin, boundary, edge, between order and chaos, that border is an internal expansion or an incorporation of other nodal networked points, thereby presuming a linear telos of origin and ongoing transformation. Ultimately, as we saw in the case of Taylor's encounter with Foucault, Taylor's alliances will have been figured (at this moment) as assimilation and integration. His introductory examples, for instance, theorize difference and emergence as blasts of static that repeatedly interrupt the regularity of information. And while Taylor will demonstrate that such noise "comes from the outside," and that it is "always unexpected," this exteriority and unexpectedness remains restricted to a domestic economy that establishes the capacity for audibility within a system (Taylor 121). Nothing exceeds the restricted, but internally open economy of the system. For Taylor, the unconditioned chaos of noise disturbs the order of information in an ongoing and ever-complex development of formation and reformation. Of course, the negativity of noise may give rise to new orders, but those future orders, regardless of polarities, result from integration.

This integration is most evident in the formulaic series of balance
versus imbalance that outlines Taylor's understanding of emergence and increased complexity throughout the book: "[...] Order—Complexity—Chaos—Complexity—Order" (146). Even when Taylor turns to the concepts of complex adaptive systems, screening, or nodes, the priority of the system and its ability to integrate into other networks remains essential. Despite his attempt to distinguish his complexity theory from a dialectical mode of engagement—or, more likely, because of it—the emergence that Taylor theorizes continues a synthetic movement of integration.

And this movement of integration is precisely what allows Taylor to both attend to this contemporary moment (as a recognizable point in the emergence of complexity) and always arrive too late, simply because the moment itself is finally not what matters here. Or, more precisely, this moment is derivative, a necessary point in a far more expansive movement of transformation as integration.

And perhaps this is a kind of justice, or at least an indispensable dimension of justice. Perhaps, that is, this integrative movement of innovation is somehow necessary to this moment and to the very possibility of doing justice to it. But while Taylor shows us that everything can, and perhaps must be integrated into this movement, this movement is finally not everything. And this is another question of justice, or at least the question of an other justice.

Notes

1. As Taylor describes it, the moment of complexity is not merely the exhaustion of our ways of knowing or simply the threat of change, but more the relentless velocity of transformations that occur at speeds that disorient and dislocate any stable focus: "With the onslaught of information, many people have lost a sense of direction and purpose and long for security and stability" (4).

2. Such logic is inscribed in a complex field of eschatological force that Derrida summarizes as "the West's agreement with a powerful program that was also an untransgressible contract among discourses of the end" ("Of" 20).

3. In terms of a philosophical lineage, the spectre of Hegel insinuates itself, in subtle ways, throughout Taylor's critique.

4. See, for instance, Deleuze's book on Nietzsche, which reads Nietzsche's work as organized against the negative spirit of dialectics.
5. See Derrida's "No Apocalypse, Not Now" for an analysis of speed, politics, and temporality that engineers the direction of much of our response in this essay.

6. In terms of timeliness, we are thinking here of a certain movement of kairos, a qualitative dimension of time that circulates through the otherwise dialectical movement of chronos.

Works Cited


