

# UTOPIA/DYSTOPIA

A Paradigm Shift in Art and Architecture

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AFFIRMATIVE ETHICS,  
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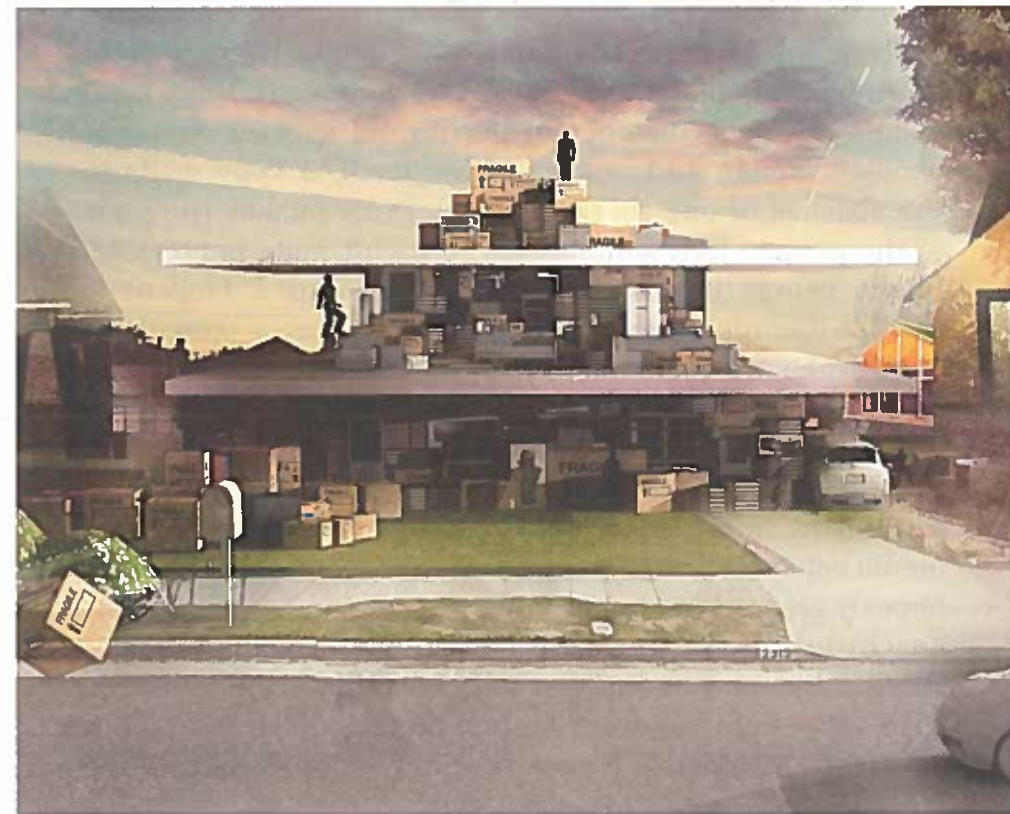
Utopia was to the humanist vision of Western modernity—and its emancipatory politics—what affirmative ethics is to the posthuman project. The former rests on a linear notion of time and a teleological view of human progress, whereas the latter works by nonlinearity and a multidirectional vision of the future.

Let me start with the observation that in the era of globalization, live coverage, perpetual digital connectivity, timeless time, and virtual presence, all semblance of spatiotemporal linearity has left our lives. Time is structurally out of joint. The speed and complexity of the globalized world—fast technological developments, plus the social pressures of neoliberal economics—induces different forms of desynchronization. Subjects of advanced capitalism live in a state of constant jet lag, systematically behind schedule, and getting synchronized with the actual “here and now” becomes a real challenge. The disjointed temporality linked to such desynchronization effects is due to a multiplicity of factors. The first is the unprecedented degree of technological mediation. The technological apparatus, whose alleged *raison d'être* is to help us save time, actually costs us extra time and tends to absorb all of our time. The ubiquitous presence of multiple technological interfaces induces both the promise and the betrayal of intimacy and presence.

Second, the unhinging of temporal continuity is built into the political economy of advanced capitalism, which spins around the imperative “I shop, therefore I am.” This consumeristic injunction supports a system that saturates our social space with quantitative accumulations of commodities, rather than qualitative modes of relations. Coercive consumption leaves us suspended somewhere between the “no longer” and the “not yet” of unfulfilled and self-replicating desires. Consumerism is an addictive regime of serial repetitions without release, which frustrates the very desires it fuels. The elusive enjoyment of objectified commodities leaves us unsettled but hooked.

Our active desire quantified into the compulsive pursuit of commodified non-necessities induces the stupor of repetitions without difference. This cycle of presence-absence of fulfillment sets the frame for the desynchronization of lived time, or the theft of the present. The same political economy is at work in the macro-political structures of our system.

Technologically advanced capitalism is a highly mediated, re/de-territorializing, spinning machine that actively produces, multiplies, and quantifies deterritorialized differences for the sake of commodification and profit. It promotes the proliferation of quantified options in consumer goods and engenders an affective political economy marked by the manic-depressive logic of overexcitement and under-titillation, euphoria and anxiety. These schizoid loops of schizophrenia and paranoia<sup>1</sup> mark the affective temperature of our times. Being nothing more than this all-consuming entropic energy, advanced capitalism lacks the ability to create anything new. It can merely recycle spent hopes and repackage familiar longings. It steals time from us.



This system not only erodes the present, but also “eats up” the future. Whatever other trademarks may characterize our era, the simultaneous occurrence of contradictory phenomena is definitely one of its defining features. The coexistence of hyper-modernity with neo-archaism also blurs the time sequence, reinforcing the schizoid temporality at the heart of our system. Let’s take as an emblematic example of the disjointed temporality of our technological culture the iconic figure of Dolly the sheep. Very much in keeping with Donna Haraway’s notion of “the promises of monsters,”<sup>2</sup> Dolly embodies the contradictions of regenerative politics. It is that sex which is not one—a collective entity repackaged as a bounded self. She/it is simultaneously the last specimen of her species—descended from the lineage of sheep that were conceived and reproduced as such—and the first specimen of a new species. It is the stuff that science fiction visions are made of, from the dystopian narratives of early cyber-fiction to the advanced AI experiments and cultures of today. Cloned, not conceived sexually, a heterogeneous mix of organism and machine, Dolly simply changes the name of the game. Severed from reproduction and hence divorced from descent, Dolly is no daughter of any member of her/its old species—simultaneously orphan and mother of her/itself. A copy made in the absence of one single original, Dolly pushes the logic of the postmodern simulacrum to its ultimate perversion. She/it brings immaculate conception into a biogenetic third-millennium version. The irony reaches a convulsive peak when we remember that Dolly died of a banal and all-too-familiar disease: rheumatism. After which, to add insult to injury, she suffered a last indignity: taxidermy. She was embalmed and exhibited in a science museum as a scientific rarity (shades of the nineteenth century) and a media celebrity (very twentieth century!). Dolly is simultaneously archaic and hypermodern. A compound of multiple anachronisms situated across different chronological axes, she/it inhabits different and self-contradictory time zones. Like other contemporary techno-teratological animals or entities—OncoMouse comes to mind<sup>3</sup>—Dolly shatters the

linearity of time and exists in a continuous present. This bio-techno-electronic timeless time is disjointed and structurally unhinged.

Thinking about Dolly blurs the categories of thought we have inherited from the past. She/it stretches the longitude and latitude of thought itself, adding depth, intensity, and contradiction. Because she/it embodies complexity, this entity which is no longer an animal but not yet fully a machine is *the* philosophical figuration, or conceptual persona, of today.





Posthuman critical theory refers to these biogenetically and informatically mediated practices as radical neo-materialism, which forces a reconsideration of “bodily natures.”<sup>4</sup> To support this vital neo-materialist move while avoiding essentialism, I propose a switch to a monistic political ontology that stresses processes, vital politics, and becoming. Posthumanist ethics traces transversal connections among human and nonhuman actors and assemblages, assuming, with neo-Spinozist monism, both the unity of matter and the definition-vision of matter as intelligent and self-organizing. This transversality asserts that thinking is the stuff of the world,<sup>5</sup> and it actualizes an ethics based on the primacy of the relation, of interdependence, which values nonhuman or a-personal Life.

The most striking methodological feature of a monistic approach is the dislocation of difference from dialectical binaries to complex rhizomatics. The latter redefines the dialectical relationships between the traditional axes of difference—sexualization/racialization/naturalization—offering complexity as the alternative. The posthuman turn<sup>6</sup> pushes this dislocation further. Brian Massumi refers to the posthuman as “Ex-Man,” “a genetic matrix embedded in the materiality of the human” and undergoing significant mutations.<sup>7</sup> Haraway describes it thus: “This is Man the taxonomic type become Man the brand.”<sup>8</sup> It is a massive hybridization of the species that topples the sovereignty of the anthropocentric Human and triggers a sort of “anthropological exodus” from the dominant configurations of the human.<sup>9</sup> What emerges from this is the vital politics of life, which I call *Zoe* itself.<sup>10</sup>

This approach is meant as the antidote to the entropic and self-destructive aspects of advanced capitalism, defined as a system that entitles it to disregard the conditions of its own sustainability.<sup>11</sup> It bears heavily on the issue of the Anthropocene, which turns timeless time into the short-circuiting of sustainable futures for the planet as a whole.<sup>12</sup>

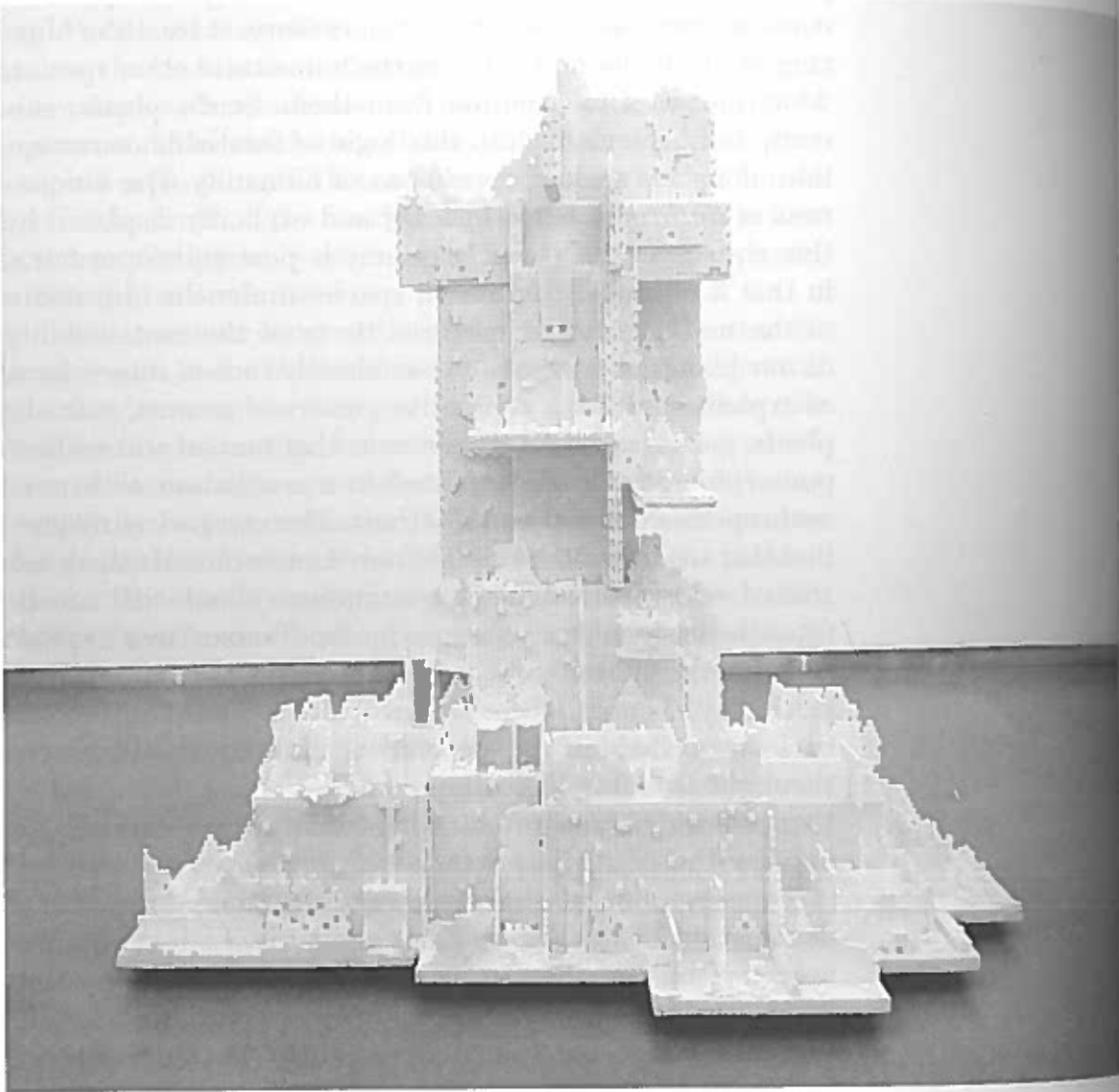
The biogenetic character of advanced capitalism reinforces this destructive trend. In an opportunistic posthuman turn of its own, contemporary capitalism invests in “life itself.”<sup>13</sup> What constitutes capital value today is the informational power of living matter itself, transposed into data

banks of biogenetic, neural, and mediatic information about individuals, as the success of Facebook demonstrates at a banal level. The focus is on the accumulation of information itself, and on data mining its immanent vital qualities and self-organizing capacity. Advanced capitalism profits from the scientific and economic control and the commodification of all that lives. Life, as it happens, not being the exclusive prerogative of humans, this opportunistic biogenetic political economy induces, if not the actual erasure, at least the blurring of the distinction between the human and other species, when it comes to profiting from them. Seeds, plants, animals, and bacteria fit into this logic of insatiable consumption alongside various specimens of humanity. The uniqueness of *anthropos* is intrinsically and explicitly displaced by this equation. The global economy is post-anthropocentric in that it ultimately unifies all species under the imperative of the market, and its excesses threaten the sustainability of our planet as a whole. It has already turned into a form of exploitation of the generative powers of women, animals, plants, genes, and cells. This means that human and anthropomorphic others are relocated in a continuum with non-anthropomorphic or “earth” others. The categorical distinction that separated the Human from its naturalized others has shifted, taking the humanist assumptions about what constitutes the basic unit of reference for the “human” into a spin.<sup>14</sup>

Furthermore, some grand narratives of human perfectibility through technological intervention have come back into fashion. A project of human enhancement through a technologically mediated quest for a selective evolutionary leap has gained widespread currency. It betrays the nomadic potential of contemporary science<sup>15</sup> and corresponds to what Haraway calls “the informatics of domination.” Considering the extent to which contemporary capitalist economies depend on the commodification of life itself, there is a perverse form of posthuman condition emerging from the very post-anthropocentric opportunism of advanced capitalism. The biogenetic structure of advanced capitalism is such that it is not only geno-centric,<sup>16</sup> but also ruthlessly and structurally unjust. In response, my nomadic, neo-materialist, critical, posthuman theory<sup>17</sup> stresses the relevance of an ethics of affirmation in support of the co-creation of sustainable futures.

The question of how to actualize and explore alternative modes of relation and resistance to the dislocation of time and the theft of the future and the present is central to the posthuman critical project. The neo-materialist posthuman position I defend is a critical response to the ravages of biogenetic and cognitive capitalism. Relying on a neo-Spinozist monistic approach,<sup>18</sup> I take “living matter” as a process ontology that interacts in complex ways with social, psychic, and natural environments,<sup>19</sup> while holding us collectively accountable for its sustainability. Instead of over-coding all this through the profit principle—and the structural inequalities it entails—human subjectivity in this complex field of forces can be redefined as an expanded relational self, or extended nomadic subjectivity. This assumes that our relational capacity is not confined within the human species, but also includes non-anthropomorphic elements. This is what I call *Zoe*, the nonhuman, vital force of Life as the transversal entity that cuts across and reconnects previously segregated species, categories, and domains.<sup>20</sup> *Zoe*-centered egalitarianism is, for me, the core of the posthuman predicament: it is a materialist, secular, and ethical response to the opportunistic trans-species commodification of Life that is the logic of advanced capitalism. A monistic ontology inspired by Spinozism is the most suitable theoretical framework to rethink processes of affirmative becoming. The epistemological analysis intersects with the political one: because the self-replicating vitality of living matter is targeted for consumption and commercial exploitation of biogenetic culture, environmentally based political struggles have evolved into a new global alliance for sustainable futures. Haraway recognizes this trend and pays tribute to the martyred body of OncoMouse as the farming ground for the new genetic revolution and manufacturer of spare parts for other species.<sup>21</sup> Vandana Shiva’s critique of “bio-piracy” also stresses the extent to which the bodies of the empirical subjects who signify difference (woman/native/earth or natural others) have become the disposable bodies of the global economy.<sup>22</sup>

A firm ethical focus on the construction of sustainable futures requires a shift of critical grounding away both from





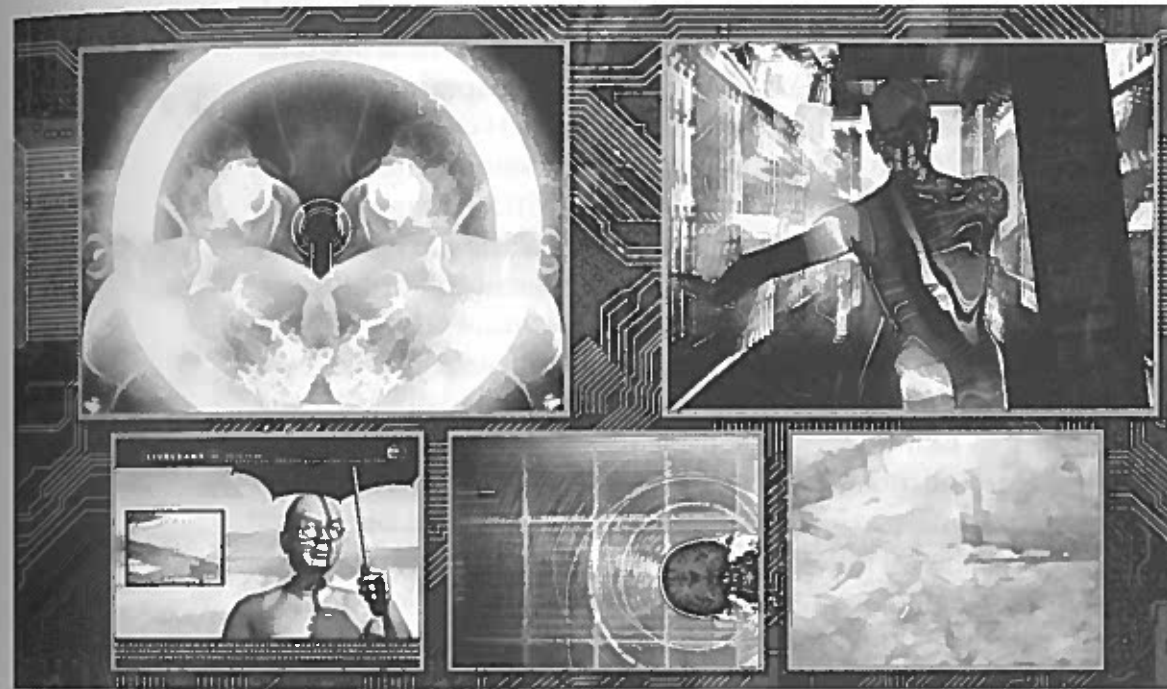
humanism and from anthropocentrism, defined as a habit of thought based on implicit species supremacy and human exceptionalism. The assumption that "Man" as *anthropos* is the measure of all things is also a core tenet of European humanism. This sovereign position was represented in a universal mode as Man, but this pseudo-universal has been widely criticized<sup>23</sup> precisely because of its partiality. Far from being universal, this Man, in fact, is masculine, white, urbanized, speaking a standard language, heterosexually inscribed in a reproductive unit, and a full citizen of a recognized polity.

Over the last thirty years, claims to universalist humanism have been critiqued as being exclusive, androcentric, and Eurocentric. They support masculinist, racist, or racial supremacist ideologies that turn cultural specificity into a fake universal and normality into a normative injunction. Feminists such as Luce Irigaray, who wrote the groundbreaking essay "Equal to Whom?," point out that the allegedly abstract ideal of Man as a symbol of classical Humanity is very much a male of the species: it is a he.<sup>24</sup> Moreover, he is white, European, handsome, and able-bodied. Further feminist critiques of patriarchal posturing through abstract masculinity<sup>25</sup> and triumphant whiteness<sup>26</sup> argue that this Humanist universalism is objectionable not only on epistemological, but also on ethical and political, grounds.

Anticolonial thinkers adopt a similar critical stance by questioning the primacy of whiteness as an often implicit assumption in the humanist ideal as the moral as well as aesthetic standard of perfectibility and beauty. Rereading the lofty claims of European Humanism with the history of colonialism, antiracist and postcolonial thinkers explicitly question the relevance of this Humanistic ideal, in view of the obvious contradictions imposed by its Eurocentric assumptions. They hold the Europeans accountable for the uses and abuses of this ideal by looking at colonial history and the violent domination of other cultures. Postcolonial thinkers have explicitly suggested that we should rescue Humanism from its European perpetuators, arguing that we have betrayed and misused it. Many alternative forms of non-Western humanism are available, and they open important perspectives for the future. What gets targeted

for criticism is the Eurocentric bias of classical humanism and its inherent methodological nationalism,<sup>27</sup> and calls into question the Europeans' self-representation. Edward Said reminded us that Humanism must shed its smug Eurocentrism and become an adventure in difference and alternative cultural traditions.<sup>28</sup> Monocultures of the mind must be questioned.<sup>29</sup> The new critical task that Europe has to embrace entails the criticism of narrow-minded self-interests, intolerance, and xenophobic rejection of otherness. Symbolic of the closure of the European mind is the fate of migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers, who bear the brunt of racism in contemporary Europe.

The post-anthropocentric turn follows from the critique of humanist Man. This Man has been called to task as the representative of a hierarchical, hegemonic, and often violent species that dominates, uses, and abuses animals, plants, and the environmental resources of the planet as a whole. What gets deconstructed is any lingering notion of human life—*bios*—as categorically distinct from the life of animals and nonhumans, or *Zoe*. What comes to the fore instead is a nature–culture continuum in the very embodied structure of what has become known as “the extended self.” The consensus about “Man” as the basic unit of reference for what constitutes the human has long been lost, and this generic figure is in trouble. This change is not met with equal enthusiasm in all quarters, as shown by the fast-rising social-theory literature of anxiety about the humanist legacy, as expressed for instance by Jürgen Habermas, Francis Fukuyama, Peter Sloterdijk, and Jacques Derrida.<sup>30</sup> Although it is undeniably true, as Haraway wittily put it, that the machines are so alive, whereas the humans are so inert,<sup>31</sup> my argument is that the evidence provided by the growing posthuman scholarship indicates that there is no “crisis” here, just a remarkable upsurge of inspiration.



To sum up my argument so far: the disjunction of time, and the theft of the present, which are built into our internally contradictory system, produces a political economy that oscillates between euphoria and depression, utopia and dystopia, in the framework of the Anthropocene and of cognitive capitalism. In response, I have proposed a monistic neo-Spinozist approach, which resolves a number of problems. First, it bridges the gap between nature and culture, or rather “naturecultures,” as Haraway put it,<sup>32</sup> and by extension it also reconnects the poles of the opposition “materialism versus idealism.” A contemporary monistic approach moves toward a nonessentialist brand of materialist vitalism. Gilles Deleuze’s critical Spinozism<sup>33</sup> offers a contemporary philosophy of Life as differential becoming within a common matter, which is perfectly attuned to the challenges of our era.<sup>34</sup> This monistic approach combines discourses about “life” and living matter/bodies with a strong ethical platform that organizes these living entities according to an ethology of forces ruled by the ethics of joy or affirmation. Based on this approach, the question of timeless time in advanced capitalism, its internal fractures and cruel contradictions, can be reframed affirmatively. This posthuman subject is moreover marked by the structural presence of practices and *apparati* of mediation that inscribe technology as “second nature.” This eco-sophical “milieu” is our living habitat, which Félix Guattari reformulated in terms of the multiple ecologies of ‘machinic autopoiesis.’<sup>35</sup> Non-unitary subjectivity stands to gain the most by being recast today in the Spinozist mode of radical immanence and monistic materialism, enhanced by high technological mediation and technology. By choosing to bypass the binary between the material and the cultural, these process-ontologies focus on their interaction, the better to interrogate the boundaries between them. A “mediacultural” continuum,<sup>36</sup> also known as “medianatures,”<sup>37</sup> also affects “humanimals” and their multiple activities, including the production of knowledge. Posthumanists of many dispositions agree that there is no “originary humanicity”<sup>38</sup> but only “originary technicity.”<sup>39</sup> Posthuman critical thought has settled into a productive, nonlinear relationship to time, and labors to turn it into

active processes of becoming. We need to collectively construct flows of empowering desire that activate the subjects out of the gravitational pull of addictive consumption and its disjointed temporality. We need to fight the stasis, but also escape the schizoid velocity. What needs to be reassembled is a collective plane of composition of a transversal subject formation geared to the social construction of horizons of hope. A fundamental gratuitousness and a profound sense of grace is part of it.<sup>40</sup> Hope is a way of yearning for<sup>41</sup> and dreaming up possible futures: an anticipatory virtue that permeates our lives and activates them. It is a powerful, motivating force grounded not only in social and political utopias, but also in the political imaginary, unconscious desires, affects, and creativity. Hope for change and transformations for mobility and becomings—that is to say, for sustainable futures—is the key to twenty-first-century affirmative politics. Critical thinking is a sort of time travel, borrowing energy and vision from the future. This means that the conditions for renewed political and ethical agency cannot be drawn from the immediate context or the current state of the terrain. They have to be generated affirmatively and creatively by efforts geared to creating possible futures, by mobilizing resources and visions that have been left untapped and by actualizing them in daily practices of interconnection with others. Moira Gatens and Genevieve Lloyd rightly call them “collective imaginings.”<sup>42</sup> This project requires visionary power or prophetic energy, qualities that are neither especially in fashion in academic circles, nor highly valued socially in these times of commercial globalization. Yet the call for more vision is emerging also in Deleuze and Guattari’s definition of philosophical thinking as the creation of new concepts.<sup>43</sup> Feminists have a long and rich genealogy in terms of pleading for increased visionary insight. From the very early days, Joan Kelly typified feminist theory as a double-edged vision, with a strong critical and equally strong creative function.<sup>44</sup> Faith in the creative powers of the imagination is an integral part of feminists’ appraisal of lived, embodied experience and the bodily roots of subjectivity, which would express the complex singularities that feminist and LGBTQ subjects have become. Donna Haraway’s work provides the best example of this mix of creativity and visionary power.<sup>45</sup>

Prophetic or visionary minds are thinkers of the future. The future as an active object of desire propels us forth and motivates us to be active in the here and now of a continuous present that needs to get actively involved in the production of affirmative praxis. The yearning for sustainable futures is the force that can construct a livable present. It is a present-based practice, which reactivates both past and present into producing sustainable possible futures. The future is the virtual unfolding of the affirmative aspect of the present, which honors our obligations to the generations to come. This is not a leap of faith, but an active transposition, a transformation at the in-depth level.<sup>46</sup> A prophetic or visionary dimension is necessary in order to secure the one element that advanced capitalism is systematically depriving us all of: the present, as the launching pad for sustainable becoming or transformations. A qualitative and creative leap induced by a prophetic, visionary dimension is the only way to repair and compensate the negativity of the present. Critical posthuman theory works toward a more affirmative approach and helps subjects synchronize themselves with the changing world in which they try to make a positive difference. Co-synchronizations constitute communities across generations. Fitting-in-with-the-world in order to help it along the horizon of hope and sustainability expresses an evolutionary talent. It is about the ability to adapt and develop suitable navigational tools within the fast moving techno-, ethno-, and gender-scapes of a globally mediated world. Against the general lethargy on the one hand and the rhetoric of selfish genes and possessive individualism on the other, hope rests with a non-rapacious ethics of joyful insurrection and gratuitous acts of becoming. The frame of reference therefore becomes the world, in all its open-ended, inter-relational, transnational, multi-sexed, and trans-species flows of becoming. It is a native, terrestrial form of cosmopolitanism grounded in monistic affirmative ethics in a post-anthropocentric world order.

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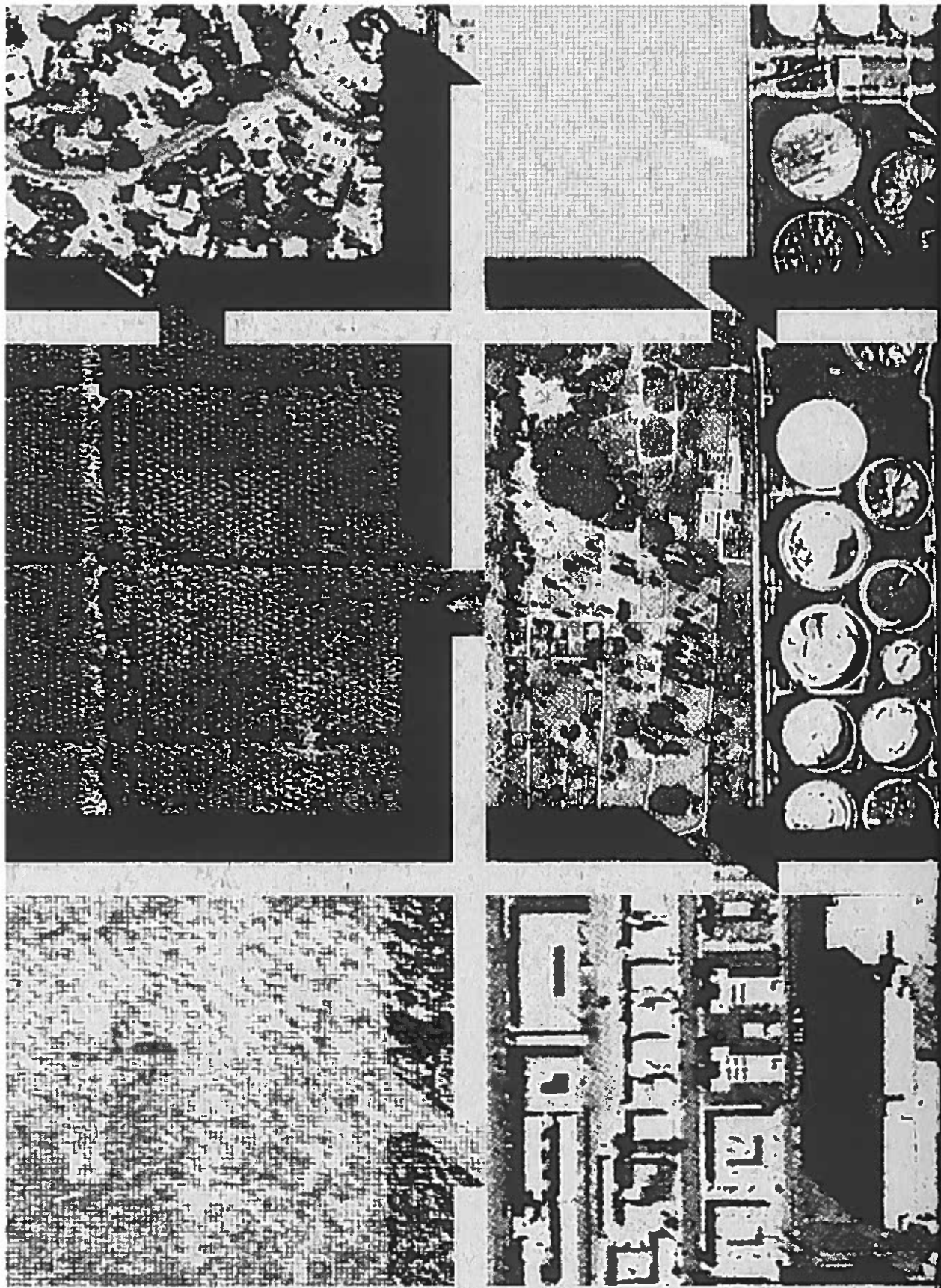
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