

Laruelle: Against the Digital

ALEXANDER R. GALLOWAY

Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014; 304 pp.; \$27.50 (paperback)

doi:10.1017/S0012217315000761

In Herman Melville's short story, *Bartleby, the Scrivener: A Story of Wall Street* (1853) Bartleby's obstinate response to every request made of him is that 'I prefer not to.' Bartleby withholds participation in his environment and gradually recedes from society altogether thus fostering a curious indeterminacy in his outright refusal to do anything at all. Yet Bartleby emerges as an unlikely figure of resistance. Is Bartleby's withdrawal, revolutionary and an effective act of protest? Or is his solipsistic and ultimately infuriating behaviour a symptom of the overall social and political malaise of neoliberal society.

Alexander Galloway invokes Bartleby's abstention from society in the second chapter of *Laruelle: Against the Digital* likening his withdrawal to the Occupy movement's demand of having no demands. Slavoj Žižek and Antonio Negri (among many others) have also connected Bartleby's attitude of passive resistance to the Occupy movement. In *Laruelle: Against the Digital*, a critical analysis of self-styled, so-called non-philosopher, François Laruelle, Galloway also connects the Occupy movement with Bartleby. Bartleby

seems a fitting archetype to embody Laruelle's non-philosophy, despite Laruelle's disdain for representation, metaphor or allegory. Laruelle privileges homogeneousness rather than a hybridity as espoused by phenomenology, psychoanalysis, existentialism, deconstruction and identity politics; he dismisses those schools of thought as mere "therapeutic crusades" (85). Rather, Laruelle seeks a generic state setting him apart from most continental philosophers' theories, with the exception of Gilles Deleuze. In particular, Deleuze helps us understand the theme of digitality in Laruelle. In order to illustrate this, Galloway cites Deleuze's famous short essay from 1992, "Postscript on the Societies of Control." According to Galloway, the Postscript demonstrates that historic "periodization ... defines today's mode of being" (100); furthermore it asserts "historical breaks" (109) as tropes that increasingly define society and culture.

Galloway draws distinctions between the 'analogue' and 'digital' as conceptual infrastructures that are based on a binary system. However, Laruelle disdains the root of all digitality: zeroes and ones. In addition, technology is repulsive to Laruelle. Laruelle sees technology as "provide[ing] little more than an avenue for transit or meditation in and out of things" (134). For Laruelle, philosophy is "all technology wrapped into one" (134). Laruelle prefers to abstain and withdraw. Yet Galloway vehemently claims that Laruelle's inaction is revolutionary. One of the ways Galloway supports this claim is by citing our collective inaction on climate change. Climate change serves as an example of the abject failure that indifference can herald. In Chapter 7, *The Black Universe*, Galloway's discussion of darkness in Laruelle's writing provides a perspective that *may* be categorized as revolutionary. Beginning with Plato's "Allegory of the Cave," fluctuations between light and shadow have driven philosophy. This fascination with light and shadow has also been the focus of art history. A genealogy of attempts to depict true darkness has followed *Black Cross* (1923), in which Kasimir Malevich sought to represent the irreducible core of painting. Galloway states that work by artists such as Malevich, Ad Reinhardt, Mark Rothko and Stan Brakhage are "no more black than a bright summer day" (135). This is because works of art are simply images mediated by the hand of the artist. They are and will always be mere representations, not actual darkness. For this reason both Galloway and Laruelle privilege artwork by James Turrell, a contemporary artist whose material of choice is not paint, or film, but light itself.

How do these musings on art relate to climate change? In *The Black Universe* Galloway, by way of Reza Negarestani, articulates the following:

Oil petroleum is black, of course, in color if not also in moral decrepitude. But oil is also light, because it is a transmutation of the light of the sun. Oil is the geological product of sunlight, first via photosynthesis into vegetable matter, and second via the decomposition of ... matter over time. In this sense oil is ... the black corpse of the sun (139).

Laruelle does betray himself from time to time with inconsistencies. For example, although he abstains from binaries, just because Laruelle is against the digital (which is based on a binary system), it does not follow that Laruelle somehow "finds refuge in the analogue" (89). The sheer irony of the "speaking using existing philosophical language even if the goal is something other than philosophy" (89) is not lost either. Furthermore, when Laruelle, or Galloway, cite Revelation 9:2, or 16:10 Matthew 20:16 or the Book of Genesis, gnostic undertones are revealed even while railing against transcendence.

Returning to Laruelle's generic black universe and its relation to climate change, this conceptualization represents the most valuable nugget to be mined from this work. Laruelle's darkness represents not merely a world gone dark, but rather the complete blackness of a world without us (144). "Oil is the darkening of sunlight. Oil is thus literally dead: oil is death ... Oil is the shadow of black being—wh[ich] annihilates societies by tear[ing] them apart ..." (145). According to Laruelle "oil is understood not simply as dark but as radical blackness" (145). Black is never defined in terms of its' relation to light. So when Galloway touts Laruelle as "the great thinker of radical equality" (47), in this respect he succeeds in making his point. Although some critics "view Laruelle[']s stance] as a license to do nothing," (85) Laruelle's attitude of indifference is often dismissed as too stubbornly rooted in indecision. Galloway defends this attitude as being equally assertive as it is passive, as disruptive as it is peaceful (86). For a supposed "non-philosophy [that] declines to reflect on things" (xxiv), Laruelle, like *Bartleby*, resolutely 'prefers not to.'

CARMEN VICTOR *York and Ryerson Universities*