# AUTISM AND THE EMPATHY EPIDEMIC

JANET HARBORD

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# Autism and the Empathy Epidemic

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*For Alfie (2002–2018)*

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# Introduction

Books often begin with a connection, when one thing recalls another and gradually or rapidly a set of associations begins to form. This book began with reading the work of autistic writers, volumes of short stories, poetry, life-writing and nature writing, and finding that I was reminded of something from an earlier moment in my life. I had studied English Literature as an undergraduate, and the variously textured qualities of autistic writing recalled a course that I had taken on the topic of the sublime in literature. The features of the sublime that had resurfaced in an autistic voice were these: an attunement to the environment that is both sensed and sentient, a struggle to find a language for 'inflows' of impression that elevate and disturb the subject, forces that act on a self that is porous and open to the non-human world against which it nonetheless endeavours to take shape.[1] In returning to the sublime, the influence of German aesthetic philosophy is pronounced; from the mid-eighteenth-century concern with sensible cognition through to the late nineteenth-century turn towards psychological processes, perception and apprehension, the debate ripples out from a German centre. In the rich speculative materials of this discourse, there is one term that is pivotal, that of *Einfühlung*. Translated literally, its meaning is in-feeling, and the cross-currents between this term and autistic writing, I suggest, are multiple.

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[1]The concept of the sublime is historically and thematically related to (yet distinct from) the uncanny, which appears in the writing of a number of autistic authors. Joanne Limburg in her epistolary book *Letter to My Weird Sisters* writes in the uncanny as first-person effect, 'I unsettle people. I'm uncanny' (2021: 4).

The momentum of exploring the relation between autism and *Einfühlung* gathered pace with further realizations: that *Einfühlung*, when translated into English, was the root of the English term 'empathy', and that this translation had taken place (the moment when empathy entered the English language) in 1909,[2] two years before Eugen Bleuler had coined the term autism. Bleuler's contraction of 'autoeroticism' brought into intelligibility the 'first' autism, referring to states of hallucination and detachment from reality that are significantly different to the second diagnostic period of the 1940s. Yet these events (of translation and contraction) taken together mark a confluence of interest in the relation of perception to consciousness and their possible disarticulation across the domains of medicine, psychology, psychoanalysis and aesthetics. Methodologically, *Autism and the Empathy Epidemic* is an archaeological project about a then and a now, about *Einfühlung* and an autistic sensibility, restoring a relation that had become buried under a twentieth-century obsession with symptomology and clinical classification. My interest is in how the 'then' illuminates the 'now', of how (in Walter Benjamin's model) history flashes up in the present like an image to reveal something new that had paradoxically existed all along. Or to borrow from Elizabeth Freeman's lexicon, the anachronistic shows us how meaning becomes enclosed in folds of time (Freeman, 2010). The 'new' that I write about here is not only the proposed affinity between *Einfühlung* and autism but also the manifold implications of this.

The wager of the book quite succinctly is this: first, that the translation of *Einfühlung* as empathy in the years that followed this act was paradigmatic in shifting attention from the model of transindividual experience to one of interpersonal relating. It redirected the flow of conversation away from how humans engage

[2]The translation of *Einfühlung* into English as 'empathy' by Titchener was not in fact a singular incident but, as Susan Lanzoni writes, can be mapped to at least three different translation paths within this period: James Mark Baldwin, in composing an entry for his *Psychological Dictionary* in 1902, suggested 'semblance' as a definition of *Einfühlung*, and in the same year as Titchener, James Ward at Cambridge University translated the term as empathy with an emphasis on its anthropomorphic aspect. Titchener had retained some aspects of kinaesthetics in his use of the term, but as Lanzoni notes, 'Over the next decades, empathy came most often to denote motor mimicry, especially for behaviourist psychologists, who would eventually dominate American psychology' (Lanzoni, 2017: 291).

with the more-than-human and the less-than-visible (atmospheres, sensations) towards a more narrowly human focus, and within that, the face becomes paramount. Second, I argue that such a contraction laid the ground for the pathologization of autism as a 'condition' that signalled a deficit in empathy, once empathy had been designated as an intra-human exercise. Third, drawing on Critical Autism Studies (CAS) scholarship, I hope to show that autism and its relation to *Einfühlung* reveal something to us of the invaluable ways in which we might 'know' the world as pervasive modulating forces, influences and sympathies rather than a corollary to human thought. Finally, there is something that I'm calling an autistic aesthetic that is characterized by a sensitivity to the form of things and able to 'grasp' (mimic, test, reproduce) the features, qualities, characteristics of language, images, weather systems. This list is not exhaustive, but the point here is that an autistic aesthetics is aligned with not only late nineteenth-century aesthetics but also twentieth-century modernism and its obsessive formal reflexivity (McDonagh, 2008; Quayson, 2010; Rodas, 2018), and more recently with neuro-philosophical approaches to experience (D'Aloia and Eugeni, 2014; Gallese, 2017).

What I am calling the 'now' is a moment in which autism is in ascent in multiple ways, not only 'looming in the public consciousness', in Remi Yergeau's words (2018: 11), but also the catalyst for a reconceptualization of cognitive 'style', as we might think of it in Nick Walker's terms: 'Just as there are ethnic minority groups and gender minority groups, there are neurocognitive minority groups, and that's what autistic people are' (2021: 13). Walker's Neurocosmopolitan website has been widely influential and decisive in the forming of a vocabulary appropriate to the task of exploring autism from the position of being autistic and embracing its difference. Autistic theorizing, collectivized as CAS, and autistic presence in the broader neurodiversity movement, has been an endlessly energizing force in the thinking and writing of this book. Perhaps the most powerful effect of this work has been the recognition that neurodivergent ways of thinking present new forms of insight that transform the thing (discourse, policy, perception) they encounter. As disability scholar Tobin Siebers puts it, 'disability enlarges our vision of human variation and difference, and puts forward perspectives that test presuppositions dear to the history

of aesthetics' (2010: 3). Beyond aesthetics, an autistic contribution to neuropsychology has shifted the field towards an understanding of the importance of embodiment and situation in cognition, which travels under the banner of enactment theory (De Jaegher, 2013), and in philosophy, aspects of phenomenological thinking are reforming around an autistic account of experience. Autism, that is, does not operate as an additional feature of an existing system of thought but challenges its terms; David Ekdahl states that 'phenomenology must cultivate an awareness of its own assumptions of normativity in its transcendental or structural ambitions' (2023: 17). In research broadly across the humanities and social sciences, Robert Chapman argues that neurodivergent perspectives are necessary to the design of research agendas and research institutions (Chapman, 2020).

Neurodivergence moves the disability debate beyond the appeal for inclusion and equal rights to an assertion of the value and necessity of divergent thinking for the renewal of allistic models. This book is indebted to and engaged with the debates of the neurodiversity movement, CAS and disability studies. I come to this work as a non-autistic writer pursuing the tendrils of thought that grow out of autistic accounts of experience and across and into subject areas of philosophy, literature and film. I adopt the terminology from autistic accounts that brings challenge to the assumptions embedded in a language of right and wrong ways of thinking and being. Allism and allistic modalities refer to non-autistic ways of being and doing. The term 'neurotypical' appears in the pages that follow in reference to an ideological concept or fantasy of a majority cognitive condition rather than a belief that such a thing exists. An impulse in this work is to open ways of thinking about neuro-states as multiply given, with the so-called neurotypical spectrum being as broad or broader than the autistic scale. Indeed, one way to rethink the current panic discourse that buttresses the reporting of increased diagnoses, inclusive of autism, ADHD, generalized anxiety disorder (GAD) and more, is the elusive nature of the 'normal'.[3]

[3]For a further discussion of the prevalence of diagnoses related to attention and cognition, see Jonathan Crary's introduction to *Suspensions of Perception: Attention, Spectacle and Modern Culture* (1999).

There is a requirement in introducing this book to say something about empathy, a term that continues to be ubiquitous in social and political discourse. Many commentators have traced the ascent of empathy in political discourse as a cure-all for discord, an unchallengeable call for an end to conflict and inequality through the adoption of a psychological skill. Carolyn Pedwell opens her book *Affective Relations* with the observation that empathy 'has become a Euro-American obsession', citing not only Barak Obama's appeal to the citizens of America to cultivate empathy in the face of its national paucity but also the philosopher Roman Krznaric who attributes empathy with the powers of political transformation so great that 'empathy can create a revolution' (Pedwell, 2014: xi).[4] Empathy, as Pedwell astutely states, 'is everywhere and is viewed, by definition, as positive' (2014: xi). There are also notable detractors, such as Paul Bloom, professor of psychology at Yale University, whose cross-over book argues against the fusional aspects of empathy arising from the intuition of an other's feelings, and for its replacement with what he terms rational compassion (Bloom, 2016). Clio di Nicastro argues that a fine-grained examination of empathy in online fora reveals that 'we tend to empathize more with those whose needs are salient, who are similar to ourselves, and who are close by in space and time' (2018: 79). In summary, Abraham Geil formulates the current debate effectively when he states 'the empathic imagination is the process by which a political relation to alterity is staged' rather than resolved (2020: 331).

Empathy, however, has a problematic history with autism. Beyond the cliches of empathy 'in our time', it operates as a concept and a clinical practice of testing for empathy capacity that has determined the way in which autism is understood.[5] While acknowledging nosologically that medical descriptions of autism are in a constant state of revision, certain interpretations have obtained a prominence that endures: namely, that autism is a disorder of social communication anchored in the incapacity to infer the mental states

[4]Barak Obama's appeal to empathy was made in a speech at Xavier University in New Orleans in 2006, when he was senator.

[5]Empathy testing, originating in the 1950s, continues today as the Empathy Quotient Test, developed by Simon Baron-Cohen at Cambridge University: https://psychology-tools.com/test/empathy-quotient.

of others, the shorthand for which is an empathy deficit. This account continues to be effectively challenged in activism, advocacy and the work of CAS scholarship. Remi Yergeau critiques the deficit model as a 'medicalised storying of lack' and at other times, poignantly, as 'an autism God theory' (2018: 47). Damian Milton's designation of a 'double empathy problem' (the subject of Chapter 1 in this book) presents a case of mutual misrecognition, a challenge that pushes back at the idealism inherent to models of 'effective communication' and catalogues the difficulty of the autistic subject in everyday encounters (Milton, 2012). And yet as David Ekdahl observes in his overview of the field, dominant autism research continues with its claim 'that autistics lack empathy in some form or other' (2023: 1). Situated in a landscape in which empathy is valorized as the prize reserve in the pursuit of social equality, autism is particularly vulnerable to misrecognition and hostility. Coupled with this is the use of the language of epidemiology (noted above) to describe the rise in autism diagnoses. In Steve Silberman's best-selling and positively reviewed historicization of autism, *Neurotribes*, the opening pages recount a conversation Silberman has with a special education teacher that captures the tenor of epi-panic. 'Do you realize what is going on?' she asks. 'There is an epidemic of autism in Silicon Valley. *Something terrible is happening to our children*' (Silberman, 2015: 5, original emphasis).

The historian of science Ian Hacking has argued that the clinical descriptions used to name trends or conditions is not without influence over that which it names. Critical to his analysis is what he terms a looping effect whereby those described by a diagnostic category transform its meaning through the multiple ways in which they inhabit it. Hacking has called this process dynamic nominalism, and autistic advocacy, activism, scholarship and creative endeavour, an influential part of the broader neurodiversity movement, have significantly redrawn what autism looks like, how it is described and how it is inhabited. Hacking cites Nietzsche's aphorism in *The Gay Science*, that 'there is something that causes me the greatest difficulty, and continues to do so without relief: unspeakably more depends on *what things are called* than on what they are' (1892, original emphasis). Nietzsche picks up on the potency of words and also that 'what things are' exists as a remnant on the outside of a

system of language that continues nonetheless to give it shape. In addition to naming, what information and experience registers as knowledge in a medical context is also a cause of the greatest difficulty. Remi Yergeau describes it thus: 'At a time when we know more about autism than we've ever known, what we know is very little, and what we know is decidedly nonautistic' (2018: 11).

Taking my cue from Yergeau's observation, this book speculatively produces 'knowledge' in dialogue with autistic viewpoints, observations, concepts and scholarship. It emerges from a larger project, Autism through Cinema, that staged an enquiry into the commonalities of autism and cinema as a set of formal capacities. The notion of an autistic aesthetic that I arrive at in Chapter 3 draws on the many conversations and debates that took place in workshops, podcasts, conferences and practices of co-curation and co-writing over a period of five years (Eastwood et al., 2022). The question of whether there is something to be called an autistic aesthetic is seeded in Steven Eastwood's article 'Cinemautism' (2016), which speculates upon how certain ground rules of filmmaking, such as bodily distance between characters and eyeline matches, conform and reproduce a normative code of bodily conduct. The question was given wider treatment over the course of fifty *Autism through Cinema* podcasts hosted by a group of autistic and non-autistic discussants – Georgia Bradburn, Lillian Crawford, David Hartley, John-James Laidlow, Ethan Lyon, Alex Widdowson and myself – wherein autistic aesthetics were located variously in certain genre, set designs, actors and filmmakers. David Hartley drew on this work in his article 'Autism, Film and Estrangement' (2022), making a distinction between *autism film*, a term referencing representation of autistic characters, and the more neurodivergent term *autistic film*, suggestive of a form of film that is 'suffused with an autistic sensibility' of cognitive estrangement (Hartley, 2022: 223). The exploration of an autistic aesthetic is additionally in dialogue with the work of Project Artworks, where a number of workshops facilitated the exploration of affect and film. A collective of neurodiverse artists and activists, Project Artworks' film *Illuminating the Wilderness* (2018), exploring an autistic sublime in a remote Scottish Glen, is another important influence.

The mention of autism and collaboration invokes a project from a different historical moment that remains singular in its instantiation,

led by the figure of Fernand Deligny, for whom landscape was a critical feature of a life lived communally with autistic children and co-workers. The commune where Deligny spent the longest time was located in the rocky Cévennes region of southern France, a landscape that inflects thought and prose as Leon Hilton notes, 'his deeply impressionistic writing surveys this landscape for its minor stirrings, and strives to imagine new arrangements for a common life' (Hilton, 2015). Deligny is a key thinker for autistic scholar Damian Milton (whose work is the subject of Chapter 1), and he figures in many places in the pages here. It could be said that Deligny strikes a tone that sounds the provisional, the responsive, the creative over practices that aim to arrive at a destination or conclusion. His writings and film works (the latter being something that he preferred to call 'camering'), which are inseparable from the physical environment in which they are produced, inform the connection between an autistic aesthetic and *Einfühlung*.

What then are the features of *Einfühlung* that have what I have termed an affinity with an autistic sensibility? For a start, *Einfühlung* invests in the corporeal as a mode of apprehending the world that is inseparable from cognition, describing a mode of intense experiencing of sensory affects that resonate the inner life of the subject with the material world: architectural columns, furniture, patterns and lines, natural phenomena could all be vested with *Einfühlung*. Both *Einfühlung* and autism question an anthropocentric account of the world common to classical humanism. To trace a connection between *Einfühlung* and autism is to take a detour around the binaries of mind-body, and the division of processing as either cognition or somatizing, arriving at the figure-that-experiences as an organism within a milieu rather than a figure in landscape or a subject apprehending an object.

One of the key works for my thinking about a different lineage of empathy from *Einfühlung* to autism was *A Different Childhood* (2012), by Iris Johansson, an account of her early life growing up on a farm in Sweden. The young Iris frequently sits under the table in the kitchen, a place from which she observes and imbibes all that surrounds her. The following is part of her description of a Saturday evening when guests and family would gather around the kitchen table to listen to the radio and to talk: 'I liked the atmosphere that arose in the room. It was like Bengal fire with colored smoke that filled the room with coils

that curled around each other and that I could float around in. That was fun', she remarks, continuing: 'Everything that streamed out of the radio, and everything that was said by the listeners continually changed the atmosphere and I got new ways I could float around' (Johansson, 2012: 82).[6] The attention to atmospheres is a strong feature of her writing. Atmospheres rise and evaporate, they change colour and re-form, rather like the feelings that stream out of people to make 'pretty braided patterns'. The writing offers descriptions of a world of complex ecologies of people, animals, houses, furniture and weather systems characterized by fluidity, synaesthesia as rubric for the way in which one thing appears in the form of another: the flow of conversation in the room changes the atmosphere, which in turn changes the form of the listener into a being that can float.

Johansson's writing captures the powerful apprehension of the self-in-relation to what Erin Manning names the 'more-than' (2013: 157) that characterizes much autistic writing and sensibility, an apprehension that, I argue in this book, shares affinities with this term at its peak in the late nineteenth century: *Einfühlung*. Although its meaning was parsed and modified, debated and applied and ultimately marked by a fluidity, its central tenet described a mode of 'feeling-into' a milieu, a sensory apprehension of the more-than-human world that has a strong affinity with autism. The project of this book is the tracing of the connections between two moments and two models of sensible registration, yet this hypothesis is not without risks, namely the potential invocation of autistic stereotypes: the figure with magical powers of apprehension, or the child-like purity manifest in a pronounced relationship with nature. Additionally, the states of fluency achieved through an autistic circuitry of flow between stimuli, apprehensions and affects may reinforce pathologizing claims of autism as a 'condition' partially defined by a lack of interhuman boundary and the capacity to distinguish the real from the imagined. These models lie like traps for thought, but what is more compelling than these problematic formulations of autism is the pull of self-defining autistic writing and thinking that swerves around these detractors to present something more insightful and original.

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[6]Bengal fire is the name for a type of blue intense flame that is thought to come from the saltpetre of Bengal and possibly a marker of British colonial presence in Bengal.

In more recent autistic writing, the mode shifts from explanations of autism for the benefit of a non-autistic readership to a more forceful assertion of the value of autistic apprehension of the world, elucidating the phenomenological insights inhering in an autistic perception and sensibility that have political import. Revising and repurposing labels such as 'nature writing', Anna Stenning writes about the British landscape and the poets who historically have been fascinated by its subtle layers and textures, such as John Clare and R. S. Thomas, connecting this source of creativity with the discourse of ecocriticism and disability studies in the contemporary. Stenning exercises caution in noting the binary distinctions that prohibit thinking with the more-than-human world, such as the nature–culture opposition and human–animal division. Proposing a different way of examining the more-than involves learning to listen and to see the subjectivity of non-human others to reveal that landscape is a dynamic process more than a 'thing', an act of paying attention in which the human body becomes instrument, a device for receiving and attending to. Within this mode, 'sensation turns inwards to the body and sense-faculties themselves', where imagination's grasp of external sensory and informational flows is a meeting point, overriding a clear-cut definition of what is the external world and what is internal thought, image and sensation. Describing the work of two nature writers – the scientist Richard Mabey and poet Annie Dillard – Stenning establishes the role of the imagination in perception. This is her three-fold summary of their writings. There is a temporality to seeing in that sight establishes a relationship with the non-human world over time ('seeing' is not photographically in the moment): sensation in turning inwards mixes up the categories of the body and the world, and third, 'the act of seeing becomes "visionary" when perception is grounded on what are presumed to be external stimuli, but is, in part, constituted by our own imaginative powers' (2013: 46). Stenning's account could be part of a late nineteenth-century debate on perception, aesthetics and the body conducted under the banner of *Einfühlung*.

A further thesis in this book is that cinema shares much of the affinity that exists between *Einfühlung* and autism.[7] Coming

[7]The turn from empathy to *Einfühlung* is to be found in a presentation by the German filmmaker Harun Farocki, who recalls he had once believed that 'in my adult life,

into being in the late nineteenth century, cinema was born into the moment of *Einfühlung*'s transition from psycho-aesthetics to psychology. For some commentators invested in the history of film, it is a medium that in its initial iteration apprehended the world to reveal the sensuous agency, the textures and rhythms of the non-human world, without the limitations of human perspective. One version of its history is that film rather rapidly lost this potential as it was shaped by an anthropocentric drive to focus on the more familiar terrain of human drama, developing a language of shots, camera positions and editing techniques in addition to the standardization of script formats that privileged this direction of development. More recently, cinema too has been caught up in the empathy debate, most notably when the American film critic Robert Ebert named cinema the empathy machine. Ebert was the first film critic to be awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Criticism. In what follows, film is considered through the different lenses of empathy and *Einfühlung*.

The final task here is to scope briefly the three chapters. The first of these examines the double empathy debate in which Damian Milton's influential challenge to the framing of autism as a deficit draws on a sociological model to explore what exactly is meant by the term 'breaching'. Chapter 2 opens onto questions of *Einfühlung*, both in the landscape of late nineteenth-century Germany and in contemporary reinvigorations of this term from a number of disciplines. Chapter 3 brings together autism and *Einfühlung* in the domain of cinema, a medium that exposes its viewer to a sensory apprehension of the world that is also estranging.

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I would never again have to deal with a kind of acting that required empathy'. Farocki's comment appears in a speech written for the centenary celebration of Berlin's Hebbel am Ufer theatre in 2006. Dedicating only six short paragraphs to the topic, the speech nonetheless has the appeal of a manifesto, to recover a term which, it turns out, 'is too good a word to leave to the other side' (Farocki, 2008: 21). The word Farocki uses here, however, is *Einfühlung* rather than empathy (or empathie), a choice that sets empathy and *Einfühlung* apart.

# 1

# Autism and the double empathy problem

One of the notable features of Damian Milton's reframing of empathy in 'On the Ontological Status of Autism: The "Double Empathy Problem"' (2012) is the relocation of the term from the theatrical stage of politics to the domain of everyday life. Empathy has in recent years been drawn into a discourse of dramatic proportions by politicians and orators as a cure-all of social conflict and dysfunction, from Barak Obama's *The Audacity of Hope* (2006) to Jeremy Rifkin's *The Empathic Civilization* (2009). As Carolyn Pedwell summarily contends, empathy 'has become a Euro-American political obsession' (2014: ix). In approaching empathy on the undramatic terrain of the quotidian, Milton employs a sociological approach that denaturalizes the terms of social engagement. Amidst the ordinary hum and bustle of daily routine, he suggests, empathy surfaces as a question of what people comprehend of each other, of presumptions made of the other's motivations and sometimes of offence given and taken. In questioning how social codes of behaviour operate in everyday life, Milton has several points to make: that the rules of engagement are more often obscure than explicit, that 'established' behavioural norms, when subjected to scrutiny, are fundamentally arbitrary, and that the event of social encounter is implicitly given to misfiring. If autism and empathy have been addressed foremost through the prismatic qualities of minds, the concept of double empathy begins with establishing the complex ambiguity of all social encounter, an address that in the first instance externalizes cognition as an act spatially manifest and socially embedded.

Sociological research of the 1960s furnishes Milton's argument with examples of communicative exchanges that demonstrate both the complexity to social encounter and the contingency of the rules that govern these acts. Drawing on this work, he demonstrates that rules are not typically imposed or consciously followed but tacit agreements. The 'agreement' evolves from multiple encounters in which the improvised responses of the actants become sedimented into a mode of response that is routine and that eventually come to pass as 'natural' conduct. The sociologist Harold Garfinkel has a particular significance in Milton's account of double empathy: the main proponent of ethnomethodology, Garfinkel, in his major work *Studies in Ethnomethodology* (1967), demonstrates the existence of implicit social codes of conduct through experiments in breaching codes, thus making intelligible the assumptions embedded in any encounter by acting against the grain of expectation. One notable example is a situation in which a passenger boards a bus that is empty except for one passenger who is seated. The boarding passenger makes their way towards the one seated passenger, who they do not know, and sits down next to them. The example presents a common-place activity (travelling on public transport) to demonstrate how a minor departure from expectation evokes a powerful sense of discomfort between people. In the process the unspoken rules of social etiquette acquire visibility. In this instance the implicit rule is that to sit next to a stranger on a bus is acceptable only if the bus were full or almost full, while the same choice of seat in an empty bus would be likely to generate suspicion. Garfinkel regularly conducted breaching experiments as a pedagogical tool, advising his students to 'start with familiar scenes and ask what can be done to make trouble' (1967/1984: 37). For the autistic subject, trouble arrives without solicitation.

The double empathy problem has gained considerable traction across disciplines since its publication in 2012, the subject of journal special editions and re-evaluated in a conference in 2018. The most parred-back formulation of the double empathy problem is 'a disjuncture "in reciprocity between two differently disposed social actors" who hold different norms and expectations of each other, such as is common in autistic to non-autistic social interactions' (Milton, Heasman and Sheppard, 2018: 1509). The breach in expectation, in

other words, occurs for both parties. This archaic term, 'breaching', appears at regular intervals in Milton's text and more broadly in the discussion of empathy and autism. It is a word comprised of rich historical layers, combining the Teutonic root *brek* (related to the Old English *brǣc*), which adheres to the contemporary meaning of the act of breaking, with the French term *breche*, meaning gap. Breaching gathers the meanings of the act that both produces a rupture and its consequence, the resulting gap or void: stepping into the breach meaning to fill the void is derived from the rhetoric of combat when walls are violently ruptured; the resulting gap poses a threat. It is a term that in recent years has enjoyed a renaissance in political discourse as a conscious act of dissent, sharing Garfinkel's sense of making trouble. For example, the practice of collective freezing describes a moment when a group of pedestrians simultaneously and suddenly stop moving in a busy public concourse for no apparent reason. The acts of collective die-ins in environmental protest, or the more precise freeze for 8 minutes and 46 seconds in protest at the death of George Floyd, are examples of the disturbance, and thus elucidation, of unspoken rules of public conduct. Steven Stanley argues that such acts are effective 'in making visible the everyday production of social "normality" by disrupting, and thus exposing, shared background expectancies and methods at play in the accomplishment of commonplace activities' (Stanley et al., 2020: 1162). If ethnomethodology has been transposed into the political domain as a mode of protest, as Stanley argues, in the double empathy paradigm, ethnomethodology practises an equally political disturbance of the concept of a singular neurological apprehension of world.

The political import of the double empathy argument is brought keenly into view when considered in the context of disability history. The French cultural anthropologist Henri-Jacques Stiker, known for his sustained interest in the symbolic value of disability across centuries of Western representation, captures what he argues are the main paradigms through which disability is understood in different eras. First published in 1982 (English translation 2000), *A History of Disability* (*Corps Infirmes et sociétés*) considers the religious, moral and medical frameworks through which disability has been parsed, identifying as the characteristic approach of the twentieth century a

model of disability as rehabilitation. Proffered as a mode of progressive integration coinciding with the closure of institutional incarceration and care, differently abled subjects are offered conversion in the form of special education, training and support. Rehabilitation, argues Stiker, is a conversion of disability differences into an economy of the same. 'There is no better way to escape the fear of strangeness than by forgetting aberrancy through its dissolution into the social norm' (1982: 136).

Milton's argument is in part a resistance to the socially explicit demand that Stiker names, for neurological minorities to adapt to a framework that is against an autistic sensibility. Autistics may attempt to adapt and conform, yet inevitably autistic behaviour will be seen to have disturbed social etiquette, transmitted to the autistic party as a breach wherein '[autistic] people are put under a state of stress and [will] do anything in their power to repair the breach' (Milton, 2012: 4). For the autistic subject operating within an alienating frame of reference, the breach of their frame of reference is a common experience, underscoring the experience of 'a contested and constantly reconstructed social reality'. In the instance of a breakdown in interaction, the rarity of the event for one party (the allistic actor) sediments as a position from which the contours of normality can be retrospectively drawn, projected onto the other as the problem in a situation of mutual communicative failure. The difficulty common to the intersubjective encounter as an event, Milton argues, is erroneously (and conveniently) attributed to the failings of one party. From the vantage point of the allistic agent, the surprise unintelligibility of the autistic other advances as the modelling of the other as neurologically incomplete. For the autistic subject, the exposure to gaps between allistic and autistic comprehension of a situation is a regular feature of experience.

In the works of first-generation autistic life-writers, breaching incidents are common features of the narrative, frequently recounted as sudden visceral disturbances to a sense of self. Consider a scenario by the autistic writer Donna Williams, whose book *Nobody Nowhere* (1992) was one of the first and best-selling autobiographies of the decade and the first of several successful publications. Having struggled at school, Williams, at the age of fifteen, obtains a job in a department store where she is able to fully apply herself to activities for

the first time. The system of the shop – its organization of commodity types into groups, themes and departments, its framework for the arrangement of objects according to size and colour – offers Williams great pleasure and no small satisfaction in maintaining institutional order. 'Surrounded by racks and shelves of coloured garments, shiny shoes, rows of numerically ordered packages, and everything … arranged in aisles', she writes, 'it seemed that I was in paradise' (1992: 77). Williams's reputation spreads beyond the circle of her immediate colleagues. She is borrowed by other heads in the department store to 'tidy the mess', which she would do with an unseen efficiency. Restoring order is both a satisfying pleasure and the enactment of personal security in the mapping and maintenance of an environment of vast and complex proportions. Her role as stock-keeper, however, comes with an ambiguity. 'Sometimes the customers would tap me on the shoulder', she writes, an act that surprises and shocks. To the customers, it is a 'mere tap on the shoulder'. To Williams, it is a demand that intrudes on her immersion in an activity that is her occupation, and a breaching of personal space: uninvited and unexpected tapping 'tried to take away my choice at being touched' (1992: 78). She writes, 'I'd tell them to wait a minute, as I continued compulsively to sort out racks and shelves', giving herself time to adjust to the demand to change her focus (1992: 78). Williams reflects on her own 'failure', the irritation with which she responds to customers who intrude on her state of immersion, coupled with her tone of voice which would 'fluctuate between accents and pitch'. This leads to her removal from the shop floor and her relocation to the storeroom: autism is placed in the closet.

The consumer context of this communicative misfiring exposes something more deeply seated than a particular discord between two people with different apprehensions of world; it is the operation of what Robert Chapman names 'the conflation of health with both normality and productivity' (2023: 149). Chapman argues that disability, far from being an inconsequential minority position, evidences the functioning of an economic system that produces an outside to worker productivity. The notion of disability is closely bound to the value of labour. Historically the concept of 'disability' emerges during the nineteenth century in the statistical recording of body types, their movements and capacities, cleaving a distinction

between bodies and minds that are 'capable' of labour and those that are unproductive. In this he is aligned with the visual studies historian Jonathan Crary's reading of the economic significance of cognitive states, in Crary's case an account of the demand, since the late nineteenth century, that perception 'function in a way that insures a subject is productive, manageable, and predictable, and is able to be socially integrated and adaptive' (2001: 4). States of attention and modes of apprehension are narrowly defined by the services of a nascent industrial capitalism to which they will be subjected. The pathologization of diverse neurological states, Chapman argues, 'arose from and in turn functioned to naturalise the shifting relations of capitalism as it continually developed', a naturalization secured through its biopolitical investiture (2023: 13). Returning to the vignette of the shop floor, the late twentieth-century iteration of this paradigm is the removal of the autistic person from the domain of exchange in order that the scene of consumption can continue to move smoothly through its gears.[1]

There is more to say of the setting of a communicative encounter, following the trail of Milton and Williams, which turns back on the term itself, of what is meant by 'setting' exactly. Like context, setting implies a background against which the action of protagonists is thrown into relief, characteristically presented as the activity of humans in contrast to the inert, non-agential material world. The breach that Williams recounts, however, is an articulation of a different composition of those relations: the background, so called, is in fact the foreground, or rather there is no perspectival shift between foreground and background. Patterns, colours, textures and shapes are not *within* an envelope of space but constitute the environment of which she is a part. The etymology of the term 'context' reveals a different order of meaning where it is not the marker of a canvas against which activity occurs, but the event of making in itself, a forging of *con* (with) + *texere* (to weave, to make). To reframe the scenario through this different comprehension, Williams's activities on the shop floor might be understood as a form of weaving, a bringing into being of the fabric of which she is a part. Her actions produce rhythms and patterns as an interaction with what the cultural theorist

[1]For further discussion of autism and commodification, see Mallett and Runswick-Cole (2012).

Erin Manning has called 'the wider ecologies that co-compose the world' (2013: 151). Recognizing what is being *practised* rather than what is *not being attended to*, Manning asks poignantly, 'Does this attunement to life as an incipient ecology of practices, an ecology that does not privilege the human but attends to the more than human, demonstrate a lack of empathy?' (2013: 152).

Manning's question surfaces in a debate titled 'An Expert Discussion on Autism and Empathy', moderated by Christina Nicolaidis for the journal *Autism in Adulthood* (2019), featuring Damian Milton, the autistic rhetorician Remi Yergeau and non-autistic psychologists Noah Sasson and Elizabeth Sheppard. Milton and Yergeau tease out the ways in which empathy is assessed and valued in clinical discourses as implicitly human-oriented, discounting engagement with the non-human world. 'If an autistic person empathizes with an object', or with animals and the broader surroundings, Yergeau enquires, 'why is this not seen as empathy?' (Nicolaidis et al., 2019). This comment, like Manning's, not only questions the delimitation of empathy to the human but also exposes the place of empathy in systems of classification that set human above non-human categories of being and matter. Within this formulation of empathy as a singularly human attribute, the term functions to cleave the figure of the human from the non-human environment, another form of foregrounding the (human) figure against an insignificant background. Empathy's guarantee of 'normalcy' is simultaneously the designation of the empathizing subject as human, marked out from the lower forms of non-human animal and material world. To empathize beyond the realm of humanity, as autistics prominently do, presents a provocation to such a hierarchy. Autistic empathy operates on a horizontal/flat plane of association, or what theorist Mel Y. Chen names chains of connection, rather than vertical/hierarchical system of differences (Chen, 2012).[2]

[2]In *Animacies*, Chen posits the term animacy to capture a form of enlivening and animating forms of existence across conventional boundaries, recognizing connection where in previous times it has been denied. The book's particular focus is the connection between non-human animals and the animalization of certain kinds of humans. Chen's point is to critique the new materialist accounts of human–non-human connectivity that occlude racialized forms of connection/disconnection.

This sense of an ecology of practices in which a life is woven *as* rather than *in* environment recalls the work of Deleuze and Guattari when they write in *Mille Plateaux* (1980) of the smooth and the striated, of the practices of knitting, crotchet and patchwork as the deft movement between structured space and smooth affective space, breaking down the distinction between human and geological forms. For all the philosophical brilliance of their two co-authored volumes, however, their work barely mentions a key influential figure for their philosophy: Fernand Deligny.[3] Deligny is a figure who recurs throughout the literature of autism scholarship and in accounts of the history of European anti-psychiatry in the post-war period. Notoriously difficult to define, he has been described as a 'primordial communist, nonviolent guerrilla, weaver of networks' (Hilton, 2015), who abandoned the work of psychiatric care to set up collectively run residential programmes for autistic children and adolescents in rural France.[4] Through Deligny, the idea of an attunement to life as an ecology of practices rather than the development and nurturing of individual egos and identities begins to take concrete form. Deligny is a significant thinker for Milton, who connects to his work through the trope of 'tracing', the making of over three hundred diagrams figuring the movement of children around the indoor and external areas of the sites of the commune. Tracing, along with filming and writing, was one of Deligny's many methods of participating in the co-creation of the environment. Bertrand Ogilvie calls the maps 'image-concepts' that 'constitute the place into which other practices are woven, including writing, but also the organisation of the gestures of everyday life, and the films that bear witness to this' (2015: 407). Given his thought

[3]In *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deligny is referenced once in the introduction, referring to his method of map-making as interchangeable with the rhizome; further into the book in two paragraphs on the autistic children's actions as lines which anchor Deleuze and Guattari's concept of lines of flight; and finally Deligny is mentioned in a footnote. The key terms of the philosophy that Deleuze and Guattari become known for are arguably derivations from the collective work of *tentatives*, the iterations of the commune that Deligny has set in motion.

[4]Deligny referred to himself as 'a very, very insufficient communist' in the account of Sandra Alvarez de Toledo. She continues, 'torn between his rejection of post-Stalinian ideology and his mistrust of anticommunism. His suspicion concerning the spirit of May 68 may be summarized in one phrase, that can be heard during the credits of the film entitled *Le Moindre Geste*: "Why should speech belong to someone, even if he takes to the floor?" ' (de Toledo, 2013: 5).

experiment that was empirically focused and collectively construed, 'placing the maps under the sign of an essential, out-of-language common space', Deligny published this 'project', including maps, in 1976 in three special editions of the journal *Reserches* (founded by Felix Guattari).

In 'Tracing the Influence of Fernand Deligny on Autism Studies' (2016), Milton distils from Deligny's prolific yet scattered output three principal concepts: the network as a modality of life, the practices of mapping and tracing (rather than representing) and the 'primordial communism' through which a shared way of life is produced. Deligny offers a spatialized approach to being, where cartographic practices of inscription, following and mark-making translate action into a visual form, not as a document that secures the truth of an event but as an end in itself, a practice that is part of the ecology in the making. To this sense of the propagation of a network of activities he gives the name Arachnean, famously postulating that it is no more the spider's intention to weave a web than it is the web's intention to be woven. 'What the Arachnean teaches us is that for the spider, it is not about wanting to have, through the weaving of the web, the fly', he states, but 'what matters is weaving' (Deligny, 2015: 75). We might think of Donna Williams weaving a web among the array of commodities, forming maps and lines as she moves back and forth across the floor, carrying and arranging and connecting things, her actions forming the environment: in contrast, the shopper who taps on her shoulder sees a figure against a background, a person who represents the servile shop assistant against a world of inviting commodity objects.

This manifestly materialist description of being supplants intention with something that emerges in the doing or *is* in fact the doing. 'Deligny envisioned these maps as inscriptions of a way of being and acting in the world, the mode of being of the Arachnean network, a pure form of humanity acting without the purpose of a "thought-out-project"' (Milton, 2016: 286). This was a term that Deligny crafted as a description of an allistic way of doing things: thought forging the path, action following in the wake of reasoned planning. The Arachnean method, in contrast, refuses the linearity of past-present-future, lending itself to practices that are not in pursuit of a future goal: *tentatives* was the term he gave them, which is translated either as attempts or experiments, to give form to 'the

real'. 'If the real is that which eludes language', he argues, 'certain aspects of it might appear in images' (Deligny, 2015: 79). This statement is a compression of psychoanalytic ideas of the post-war period, particularly those pertaining to the work of the analyst Jacques Lacan, whose tripartite structure of the symbolic, imaginary and real created the term symbolic for social infrastructure such as language, the imaginary as a version of the unconscious and the real as the matter that cannot obtain representation within the symbolic. When Deligny writes that the real is that which eludes language, this statement coincides with Lacan's model. Yet when Deligny posits autistic experience in the real, he meets confrontation with Lacan who 'defined the constitution of a subject through the access to the symbolic or to language, and who similarly defined autism by the failure of this symbolic formation' (Krtolica and Silbertin-Blanc, 2019: 215). Deligny's real is not a momentary flash of what is excluded from or impossible for representation but a modality that fails to register within a symbolic that is language or structured like language. In this, argue Krtolica and Sibertin-Blanc, Deligny 'saw in Lacan the emblem of the exclusivity that psychoanalysis had wrongly conferred on the subject, or the tribute psychoanalysis had continued to pay … To the violence of civilization, (im)properly anthropological, in which language constitutes both the instrument and the field of deployment' (2019: 217).[5] Deligny's commitment to images and image-making, including the practice of 'camering', is vested in an immanence that is in service not to a subject in language but to the shifting modality of *beings*.

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[5]Krtolica and Sibertin-Blanc plot Deligny's ongoing engagement with Lacan through writings that were not published until after his death. In his essay from 1978, Deligny takes up the same problem – what does it mean to reflect 'in the real'? How could an elephant 'cross the threshold' and be brought into the room? However, in the essay, the instance of the discourse is no longer that place whose access is regulated by the gateway of symbolic domestication; it is a labyrinth that, appropriately, has no entry or exit door: 'In reading Lacan … One is caught up in vertigo. One knows that one will not escape from it. One follows all the same. I take the risk: Janmari's presence allows me not to lose the thread' (Deligny, 2015a [1978], 208, translation amended). The essay allows Deligny to make his own reading even more autistic, and a new entryway attests to this: 'I follow the labyrinth with no way out, and I find something: "A door …"' (2019: 223).

Marlon Miguel describes the mass of tracings, camerings and jottings produced in the Cévennes as the production of a 'living archive aimed not at representing the children, but at multiplying perspectives' (2022: 31). Such a radical revision of the meaning of context, at once a movement away from the foregrounded human-figure-against-an-inert-background and towards a context in which the human is but one feature, has implications for how the human is conceptualized. Drawing on the figural Arachnean, Milton is drawn to the radical revision of action and agency implicit to Deligny's project. If, in traditional psychological terms, the human agent initiates events through the expression of intention, a purposeful setting in motion of a sequence that begins at point A and arrives, all being well, at its destination, no such agential origin exists in an Arachnean (and autistic) *unwelt*. Rather, the environment is a richly suggestive topoi of materials, agents and affects whose qualities and affordances present opportunities, entry points, detours. An act does not set in motion as a determination or intentional gesture but animates its milieu. As Anne Sauvagnargues suggests, 'The act has no moral or psychological value in itself, and becomes exclusively a function of the ethological milieu, in which it can be made to resonate favourably by transforming a few components of the milieu' (2016: 173). Possibilities for acting emerge within and remain part of the topoi; intention and conclusion (how things started and where they land) are here radically downgraded, or indeed rendered irrelevant.

Intention, argues Remi Yergeau, is not a side-issue in debates about the mind but a key feature in normative modelling of an operative humanity. Normatively speaking, intentionality is bound to the concepts of agency *and* sociality; therefore, to exclude the intention of the communicator (as per Deligny's experiments in alternative modes of living) is to detract from the agential and social status of the act. In socio-psychological scripts, intention communicates a meaning to an other, which in turn demands a mutuality of recognition: 'Intentionality only becomes rhetorical when it is social', and again intention apparently 'requires a theory of one's own as well as other minds' (Yergeau, 2018: 37). To focus on intention and inference as the twin foci of the communicative environment reduces not only the rich tapestry of milieu but also the physicality of correspondence that operates 'through speech, through gesture,

through gaze, through paralinguistic cues such as throat clearing, or feet shuffling, or kiss blowing' (2018: 37). The ontology of autism belongs to a register that is markedly different to that of psychological testing and conceptualization: autism 'harbors different stories, stories of nonintention at worst and failed intention at best' (2018: 37).

The diagnostic drive to identify behavioural indicators to classify and intervene, Milton's title suggests, is to describe a particular ontological mode as a disorder. If, historically, ontology is the provenance of a metaphysical enquiry into the nature of being, time and consciousness, Milton's inclusion of the term in the title of his article underscores the reach of medical definitions of autism into the lifeworld of the autistic subject. 'Such views are informed by research that champions the use of the randomised controlled trial', writes Milton, 'yet discounts the subjective experiences of those who identify as being on the autism spectrum themselves.' Anna Stenning, in search of the same recentring of autistic experience as Milton, argues that autistic life-writing is one of the few locations through which autistic experience is deemed a source material, a genre that 'contrasts with dominant science writing on autism and empathy' (Stenning, 2020b). Stenning notes that, in addition to the Autism Self-Advocacy Network, autistic life-writing has powerfully appropriated a genre that discloses and situates experience in its singularity. Complicated by address, the question of who is being spoken to, she proposes that there are loosely three generations of autistic life-writers, the first of which bears the burden of educating the non-autistic. This generation would include Temple Grandin, Donna Williams, Dawn Prince-Hughes and Iris Johansson. Each of these auto-ethnographies is punctuated by the relay of experiences in which a schism exists between an autistic apprehension of the world and a socially sanctioned version from which they are largely excluded.

In Iris Johansson's reflective description of her childhood on a farm in Sweden, she recalls in her own terms the sense of this duality: the allistic she names the 'ordinary world', while the autistic she describes as 'out in the real reality'. 'The real reality is like the wind, is the wind', she writes with vivid attention to the sensory affects, 'when the wind is blowing you feel it or see its effect on the tree leaves, hearing them rustle; you can feel its draft on your face and can be certain that the

wind exists' (2012: 206).[6] In this passage, and many others, there is a distinct resonance with Deligny's writings on life in the Cévennes, for example, when he asks: 'And what if the real … were not the terrible chaos that functions as a threat?' Language is not a neutral category but, potentially at least, a gatekeeper in definitions of reality, such as when he asks in the same paragraph, 'what if language … knew perfectly well how to keep everything that comes from nature on the other side of the threshold?' (2015: 134). The real reality in Johansson's account is circumscribed not by language but by the demeanour of the listener. The real reality is possible to describe to anyone who has an open mind, yet she cautions that such openness is rare as she goes on to enumerate the problems arising from the disparity of worlds. The first difficulty is that of translating or mediating between modalities: 'I did not know how to convey my knowledge from the real world to the ordinary world' (2012: 207). The second difficulty is that 'I didn't realise that others were not aware of the real world', and third, 'I wasn't participating in the ordinary world' (2012: 207).

The observation that there is nothing that is true or false, but 'only phenomena that are perceived' (2012: 207), is a view that meets incomprehension and 'caused me to seem strange to the people around me' (2012: 208). Johansson's gradual awareness of her difference is simultaneously an understanding of the other's incomprehension and the necessity to speak into 'a language which is already established … social norms and cultural rituals, fixed opinions about right and wrong' (2012: 209). The texture and grain of autistic experience is expressed powerfully as a real reality that is an experience of vitality and 'life', set against the socially validated world that appears sterile, a 'specific time-bound and culture-bound cage'. Johansson as an adult continues this bifurcated sense of being a mediator, a translator between worlds, working with groups: she rejects the title of therapist as she states that no one can be helped by direct communication. A writer who had not spoken until the age of twelve, she collaborated with the artist filmmaker Imogen Stidworthy to explore non-verbal languages. The work that is made,

[6]Johansson's description of the wind in the tree leaves echoes the fascination of early film theorists such as Siegfried Kracauer, with the capacity of film to give form to forces invisible to the human eye, aspects of cinema that were named 'incidentals' (Schonig, 2018: 30).

a film installation titled *Iris [A Fragment]* (2019), might be described as a repertoire of gestures, indiscernibly slow or rapid movements, rhythms, pulsations that Stidworthy describes as an 'atmosphere of being' (Haq and Stidworthy, 2023), an attunement to images rather than language that recalls Deligny's camering.

Given the historical association of autism and image-making and non-verbal forms of language, how might autistic literary autobiography be understood as something other than a forced form of rhetoricity, a response to the demand that autistics 'explain' themselves? Anne Whitehead notes that 'the publishing phenomenon of autistic memoir or auti-biography has been influential in voicing experience and provides an important underpinning for research and activism on neurodiversity' (2017: 55). It is also the case that autobiography is limited in its claim to present a reality beyond the personal and, therefore, singular experience. A counter-argument could be made that autistic writing is reproduced as an outsider text, reporting on a modality that is obscure to the mainstream. Yet the appropriation of the term and its remaking as auti-biography suggests that it shares a degree of affinity with minor literature, the writing within a major language of experience that falls outside of that language. Remi Yergeau remains circumspect, arguing that such auti accounts risk being subjected to 'symptom hunting', approached as 'textual exemplars of impaired ToM [Theory of Mind] modules' (2017: 278). But what is perhaps most striking about the account of a life that Iris Johansson writes is the awareness of two incommensurate ontological ways of being in the world, which returns to Milton's contention: the burden of this recognition rests on the autistic subject who ongoingly experiences the breach between modalities.

Milton's reconfiguration of the autism-empathy axis as the double empathy problem has been widely influential in the disciplines of psychology, neuroscience, sociology, philosophy and linguistics, and revisited 'ten years on' in a series of seminars funded by the British Psychological Society. Both in Britain in the work of Gemma Williams and Nick Chown, and in the United States in the research of Remi Yergeau and Alyssa Hillary Zisk, autistic scholars have modelled double empathy as the framework through which autistic speech and its reception may fruitfully be parsed. Williams conjoins the

notion of double empathy with relevance theory, a cognitive account of utterance interpretation, to explore and complicate the scene with what she names mutual misunderstanding. Relevance theory combines theories of cognition with a social account of communication as an economy: crudely put, communication as process aims for minimal cognitive effort to attain maximum understanding. Citing Wilson and Sperber, Williams describes the cognitive dimension as the pursuit of meaning along a path in which interpretations are considered (disambiguations) in order of accessibility, concluding when expectations of relevance are satisfied, or indeed abandoned. The cognitive process models possible interpretations in pursuit of sense-making, according to the subject's particular schema; in this framework, double empathy refers to a form of expedient selection out of a range of possibilities. In a differently angled approach, Nick Chown takes Wittgenstein's concept of language games as a model for working through the features of double empathy: the medicalized language games pertaining to autism, according to Chown, are created through a neurotypical perception and vocabulary. What is essentially an arbitrary relationship to descriptions of apprehension become workable for one group and not another (Chown, 2020).

Another way in which double empathy has been influential in communication models is in its corollary with cross-cultural communication. Alyssa Hillary Zisk makes the argument that the individual who is minimally immersed in a cultural milieu is disadvantaged in an exchange that presumes the values of a host culture and its language (Zisk, 2014). Zisk poses the question of why cross-cultural miscommunication is conceptually understood as interpersonal, a schism that defers to the interactional aspects of encounter as the scene of explanation, while neurological miscommunication is regarded as an individual problem; why, in other words, is difference not a feature of a perceived difficulty in understanding. Ralph Savarese moves this argument in a different direction when he discusses the diversity of neurotypes in the mode of cultural difference, proposing the term neurocosmopolitan for a type of journeying towards hybrid forms of comprehension akin to postcoloniality. Autistic autobiography testifies to the degree in which the direction of travel has been from autism towards an allistic comprehension. Savarese's point is that the allistic constituency

needs to journey towards neurodiversity, to adopt a neuro-mobility that is also necessarily a leaving home, a process of self-estrangement (Savarese, 2014).

The language and recognition of neurotype diversity has yet to match, and value, the more nuanced understanding of cultural diversity. The emphasis on the variables of speech acts and cross-cultural exchange extends double empathy into the debates of linguistics and an anthro-sociology of interaction, yet the concept of empathy in the double empathy problem is itself undefined. David Ekdahl writes, 'In prioritising an emphasis on the interactional and neurodiverse nature of empathy, the theory of double empathy does not explicitly align itself with any one definition of empathy' (2023: 7). Ekdahl's is a detailed engagement with Milton's ideas from a phenomenological perspective. He cites a discussion in which Milton reflects on his intervention in the empathy debate, which is instructive to reproduce here: 'Despite using "empathy" myself, in the "double empathy problem" theory, I do have some difficulty with what that concept is really referring to. It seems to mean different things to different people' (cited in Ekdahl, 2023: 7). What then is the empathy of the double empathy problem? The pursuit of an answer to this question risks, in the first instance, reproducing the medical paradigm wherein the model of autistic identity is deemed deficient in several fundamental ways. Yet scoping the path that leads to the double empathy problem exposes some of the paradoxes implicit to the medical account and works towards a dissolution of the binary structure upon which claims of empathic typicality and apparent empathy deficit are founded.

## Theories and minds

In an impressive overview and distillation of the topic across affiliations and historical eras, Sigrid Weigel describes the multiple iterations of empathy as constellations, clusters of intradisciplinary ideas that draw on different legacies and methodologies (Weigel, 2017). Of the four constellated areas that Weigel sets out, psychology and neuroscience, aesthetics and *Einfühlung*, sympathy and affect,

sympathy and moral philosophy, Milton's engagement is largely with the first, an approach that has influenced classifications of autism and its stabilization as a diagnostic category. Of the vast range of work in psychology and neuroscience that pertains to autism, Ekdahl narrows the horizon to three approaches that are problematically pathologizing and influential in the designation of autism as a condition with deficits. First, the executive function approach claims autistic deficits in attention; second, the weak central coherence approach claiming autistic problems in integrating information (both from the environment and from others); and third, the Theory of Mind (ToM) approach that attends to an imputed lack of social cognition and the capacity to infer the mental states of others (Ekdahl, 2023). It is this last model of how minds comprehend other minds that is most prominent in distinguishing normative capacities and behaviours from those that are deemed 'deficient'.

Historically, the ToM debate originated in the immediate post-war period in Britain, with the publication of *The Concept of Mind* (1949) by the British philosopher Gilbert Ryle, who argued against mentalist conceptualizations of being. But its development in the disciplines of primatology and subsequently psychology brings the subject of mind into a more empirical context. The origin story widely accepted for the ToM approach to social cognition begins with research into the behaviour of a primate named Sarah, conducted by psychologist David Premack and primatologist Guy Woodruff (Premack and Woodruff, 1978). The title of their article doubles as the research question, 'Does the Chimpanzee Have a Theory of Mind?', a title that came to be repurposed seven years later as the article 'Does the Autistic Child Have a Theory of Mind?', published in the journal *Cognition* by the psychologists Simon Baron-Cohen, Alan Leslie and Uta Frith (1985). This rhetorical move that substitutes the chimpanzee with the autistic child is an effective tool in swiftly establishing a relationship of developmental hierarchy: in a ToM approach, autistic children are always already within a category that is closer to the non-human animal than the human. In a related example, Remi Yergeau notes that the placement of a comma between 'children' and 'autism' in the subtitle of a book by Peter Mitchell, *Introduction to Theory of Mind: Children,*

*Autism, and Apes* (1997), effects the same categorization (Yergeau and Huebner, 2017: 277).

Within the ToM discourse, while there are fine-grained differences between accounts, the prominent debate takes place between theory-theory and simulation approaches. Broadly, theory-theory research asserts that the capacity to mentalize the unobservable states of mind of others draws on certain concepts and beliefs and advances hypotheses on reasons for acting and predictions for future acts (Baron-Cohen, 1995: Carruthers and Smith, 1996). In contrast, simulation theorists, in Karsten Stueber's account, 'challenge the claim that theory-rich mechanisms are at the centre of our folk-psychological practices' (Stueber, 2006: 111). The first use of the term simulation appeared in Robert Gordon's 'Folk Psychology as Simulation' (1995), while in Jane Heal's 'Replication and Functionalism' (1996), the familiar image of putting oneself in another's shoes as a motif for empathy is given prominence. Dan Zahavi glosses the difference in this way:

> Whereas the theory-theory argues that our understanding of others mainly engages detached intellectual processes, moving by inference from one belief to the other, the simulation theory of mind denies that our understanding of others is primarily theoretical in nature, and maintains that we on the contrary use our own mind as a model when we understand the minds of others. (2010: 2)

The two approaches are methodologically different: a theory-theory approach proceeds from the outside in (working from a contextual situation to a model of the thoughts in a mind), and in reverse for a simulation account with the focus on experience leading outwards.

David Ekdahl writes, 'In philosophy and cognitive science, what unifies all of these theory of mind-oriented frameworks is the ambition to account for how social understanding comes about altogether', as though the original premise of theory of mind research is to account for the unobservable. Its remit asks 'how a subject, supposedly with no direct access to the experiential lives of anyone but themselves, can come to recognize and understand the inner, hidden-away "beliefs, intentions and desires" of other subjects' (Ekdahl, 2023,

4, citing Spaulding 2014: 197). Karsten Stueber argues that the simulation approach takes the self as the model for the experience of the other (to which he attributes the term 'egocentric'): the observing agent reads and interprets the other taking their own experience and thought processes as primary. 'In predicting another person's behavior using empathy and simulation', he writes, 'I use myself in a very specific manner as a predictive tool.' Importantly, he continues, 'this assumption minimally presupposes that I am *psychologically similar in the relevant aspects* and that my cognitive system mirrors the functioning of your cognitive system' (Stueber, 2006: 180, emphasis in the original). Conceptualizing mind-reading abilities starts from a platform of general assertions, principally the view that (in Stueber's words) 'nature has provided all human beings with a mind that is structured and functions psychologically in a similar manner' (2006: 111).

There is however an exception to shared cognitive capacity and mind-reading abilities that is named at frequent intervals in Stueber's account and more broadly across the TT-simulation debate. In the introduction to *Rethinking Empathy*, Stueber opens the book with the statement, 'Typical adult human beings have developed the ability to understand other persons as minded creatures', continuing further down the page, 'severe deficiencies in our ability to read others' minds such as exemplified in autism not only diminish our ability to pursue our individual interests in a social context' but are 'shown to be associated with fundamental restrictions in our ability to form social bonds and to be initiated into social practices such as the speaking of a common language' (2006: 1–2). In all the theorizing and modelling of mental activity, there is no address of the possible diversity of minds but the reproduction of a binary logic in which autism resides as the outside to typical development and behaviour. It would be an error to conceive of autism as an incidental marker of the outside, argues Bonnie Evans in her history of autism in Britain. 'Autism is not, and never has been, a minor esoteric subject', she argues, 'but one that has a significant bearing on how we think about social identity' (2017: 8).

A further development of and impetus to the debate of how minds conceive of other minds was the discovery of mirror neurons in 1992, research that again entertained the similarities between non-human

animals and humans. Conducted by Italian neuroscientists Rizzolatti and Gallese, the research identified mirror neurons in the brain images of macaque monkeys as a low-level skill across primates. This informs the empathy debate in a particular way, as Sigrid Weigel comments: 'In the light of the fact that our neuronal system is activated whether we enact a sensorimotor action ourselves or whether we only perceive it as the movement of the other, the mirror paradigm has led to a re-conceptualisation of the relationships between "self" and "other" and has driven scientific attention to their shared emotional system' (2017: 1). That empathy is rendered a form of mental imitation has led, Weigel argues, to an epistemological shift in which cognitive modelling of the brain as computational entity has given way to an understanding of embodied cognition, an integrated sense of recognition as intersubjective resonance. Gallese, whose writings about neurology are increasingly engaged with theories of aesthetics, describes the neurological model thus: 'The discovery of mirror neurons gives us a new empirically founded notion of intersubjectivity first and foremost conceived as *intercorporeality* – the mutual resonance of intentionally meaningful sensorimotor behaviors' (2017: 188). Perhaps unexpectedly, Gallese's account of embodied empathy provides a fruitful loop back to autistic experience in its expansiveness. Embodied simulation, he argues, is not primarily or singularly a form of resonance and connection with humans but 'connects us to *our* world, a world populated by natural objects, man-made objects with or without symbolic meaning' (Gallese, 2017: 189, emphasis in the original). This form of bodily resonance with a world conceived of as extending beyond the realm of humans is what Gallese traces back to *Einfühlung*, an expression of feeling-into a range of phenomena (which we come to in Chapter 2). The contributions made by neuroscientific understanding of empathy are not without their critics, however, not least in the view of neuro-philosopher Patricia Churchland, who argues that the neuron is not a complex enough module to establish empathy through (cited in Whitehead, 2017: 34).

In the mapping activities (respectively) of empathy and the mind sciences, and empathy and autism, there is something of a curious convergence of interest at the site of what Gallese calls the empathic body, and autistic scholarship names either enactivism or

phenomenology (Jurgens, 2020). Alan Jurgens argues not only that cognition is dependent on embedded and embodied experience, but that these 'are also necessary for it to arise in the first place' (Jurgens, 2020: 74). The critiques of developmental, decontextualizing models of social cognition and empathy have come through one of two routes: a sociological analysis of roles, scripts and institutions (Chapman, 2023; De Jaegher, 2013; Jurgens, 2020; Milton, 2012), and a phenomenological philosophy of intersubjective encounters (De Jaegher, 2013; Ekdahl, 2023; Heasman and Gillespie, 2019; Zahavia, 2014). A precedent for a phenomenological turn to autism and empathy, and a key figure in many accounts, is the work of Edith Stein, a phenomenologist philosopher from the first half of the twentieth century who also edited the work of Husserl. Anne Whitehead scopes the development of 'radical empathy' in the work of a number of scholars that derives from Stein's postulating 'that the other's experience of, and orientation towards, the world differs from my own' (2017: 43). Ekdahl draws on Stein's extension of beyond the human to the wider material world where 'it is still possible to empathize in emptier grades with non-human bodies' while acknowledging Stein's pathologizing tendencies in her deployment of a concept of 'normal' human embodiment (2023: 11).

Ekdahl's consideration of the double empathy problem brings to the discussion the view that while phenomenology may enlighten the breakdown in empathy between autistic and allistic people, phenomenology stands to gain 'in nuance and depth' from including autistic perspectives (2023: 1). The phenomenological emphasis on the embodied nature of the encounter stresses the need for reciprocal relationality; when this is not in occurrence, the difference in embodiment styles is evident. In Ekdahl's reading, autism lays bare the failing of a universal notion of embodiment and mind through its difference rather than its deficit: the matter of empathy failure rests with co-bodily apprehension and indeterminacy for both parties in an autistic-allistic encounter. Sofie Boldsen argues that there has been a distinct shift of focus in autism research away from 'a focus on the structure and processes of the mind to a focus on autistic behaviour as grounded in the body', drawing on phenomenology to read the autobiographical work of the writer Tito Mukhopadhyay (Boldsen,

2018: 893). Bolsden traces through Mukhopadhyay's description of daily routine, in which meaning is produced through, and as the 'sensible', the ways in which autistic ontology is an ongoing choreography with the world. Phenomenology has increasingly entered the framework of exploring autistic ontology as a philosophy that historically refused a disembodied model of cognitive function (Brincker and Torres, 2013). Autistic scholarship reflects the shortcomings in approaches to cognition that address mind and body as related yet operatively separate entities. 'As such', writes Milton et al. ten years on from the original article, 'an alternative account of autistic development is needed that is not rooted in notions of a-social communication disorder, but of a different embodied way of being that can lead to effects on social interactions and understanding' (2022: 1901).

## Simulation

The parallax effect of considering the ToM debate through autistic writing emphasizes the mobility of both the position of articulation and the object articulated. That is, both autism and empathic cognition are mobile figurations, shifting form around one another. At certain points of contact, the stakes become visible. The drive in an analytical psychology is to establish principles of similitude, to extract and abstract knowledge from hypothetical situations. In autism scholarship, the drive is to expose and establish the multiplicity of neurological form and to situate knowledge through the parsing of experience. Given these contradictory currents, the question of cognition is less of an interrogative and more of a demand. The demand speaks with forked tongue: either the misrecognition of a projective mechanism (you are like me), or the implicit instruction (you will become like me). It is a double articulation that arises from the term simulation itself. Following one branch, its history leads to a familiar root of the Latin form *semol*, meaning 'together' (*sem*) or of the same kind. The contemporary expression of empathy as a matching of feeling (*being in the shoes of another*) is an obvious derivation from this root. But from a different direction, simulation takes meaning from the Medieval Latin form *similis*, referring to a dissembling form of imitation: to assume a false

appearance, to feign. The mimetic faculty in this lineage is less secure in its purpose and effect, opening the possibility that simulation may be performed with undetectable intention and uncontrollable outcome. The thesaurus provides a list of synonyms for simulate that press this ambiguity further, ultimately into the realm of comedy: to *act* and *ape*, *bluff*, *borrow* and *cheat*, leaning into similitude's potential for a theatrical clownishness.

Whether the approach is made through experimental psychology and diagnostic testing of the capacity to simulate a mind, or autistic critical commentary articulating the cost of masking, simulation makes an appearance. It connects to the historical accounts in critical race studies of the demands on the colonized subject to simulate the colonizer, and the reverse, the colonizing master's simulation of the 'feelings' of the colonized. Simulation, perhaps more than any other concept, brings us close to the complex knot of the term empathy, of the various contradictory, idealized and violent aspects of its deployment. The exercise of ambiguous similitude is played out effectively in the account that Homi Bhabha offers of mimicry in the context of colonizer and colonized. Mimicry, rather like autistic masking (which we come to shortly), responds to the command to adapt through imitation, yet it is what Bhabha calls the 'sign of a double articulation'. The colonizer's command to the colonized (to adopt the dominant culture) is an instruction to reproduce the paradigm of the colonizing culture through its replication. But such a strategy opens onto a split: the mimicry of the colonial power upholds its status as the authentic term in the encounter, just as the copy testifies to an original. Yet simultaneously, as an iterative act, it reveals differences between the colonizer and the colonized; the effects of mimesis as it is practised are uncontrollable, risking in repetition a performance of authority that 'mocks its power to be a model'. 'From such a colonial encounter between the white presence and its black semblance', Bhabha writes, 'there emerges the question of the ambivalence of mimicry as a problematic of colonial subjection' (1984: 131). The question of intention is of no use in this scenario in which gesture reigns: whether the performance is conducted in earnest or in ironic manner is impossible to determine.

There are, I contend, interesting cross-currents to autism and the practice of 'masking' that intersect with the colonial history of

mimicry and the command of a performed similitude. 'I have spent much of my life practicing nonautism, or what my autistic comrades call allism', writes Remi Yergeau, exercising the term 'practice' to reveal its multiple meanings of rehearse, exercise, attempt many times. Practising allism is perhaps like the mimicry of colonial culture in that it responds to an implicit command, yet it cannot control its effects. To simulate from an autistic perspective is an act operating within the register of normative command, the outcome of implicit or explicit exhortation to behave in a certain way. The writer Katherine May, in her book *The Electricity of Every Living Thing*, describes the double articulation of her world: her performance of allistic behaviour is necessary to live among others, and yet it distorts her sense of her own needs. She is able to identify with precision the different moments in which she learns how to perform a particular behaviour, 'I learned to ask after people's children from a woman on a train. I learned to crack self-effacing jokes from a colleague who always got away with murder. I was a parrot, a mynah bird' (2018: 61). But the mimesis of allism is not only a covering over of an autistic way of being but also the destruction of her coherence; beneath the 'carefully learned set of gestures was raw, boiling chaos' (2018: 61).

If, in the psychological and philosophical models of empathy, the relation is one of minds and cognitive capacities, it is notable that the various iterations of empathy as it is practised historically foreground the body: similitude, that is, cannot be properly detached from its physical manifestation. The eloquent descriptions of autistic ontology provided by Nick Walker explore the autistic practices that masking is required to disguise. The most notable of these is the act of stimming, the 'repetitive physical movements or other actions that provide specific forms of sensory stimulation'. The medical terminology of *self-stimulatory behaviour* and *stereotypy* are hereby cripped and queered in the coining of the term 'stim'. Against the association of autistic repetition as meaningless, Walker argues that the expansive horizon of stimming includes activities oriented by proprioception, tactility, vestibular movement, auditory effects, olfactory effects and verbalizing.

Presented as a form of parsing and integrating the sensory world, Walker associates stimming, surprisingly, with Jean Piaget's sensorimotor stage of child development, yet refusing the teleology

of the developmental account by focusing on the life-long qualities of autism. To approach stimming only as a mechanism for coping in situations of sensory overwhelm, she argues, reproduces the narrative of deficiency and obfuscates the complex engagement with a world that stimming enacts. In addition to self-regulation and the integration of experience, 'stimming can also function as a way of exploring and relating to the sensory world, and as a means of accessing not only a wide range of cognitive and emotional capacities but also exceptional human capacities such as flow states or experiences of profound communion and ego transcendence'. Walker adds to this description that while neurotypical individuals perform self-regulatory behaviours of various kinds, to qualify as stimming 'an action must necessarily fall outside the bounds of neuronormative performance'. The reference to the performance of the neuronormative draws attention to the way in which normativity appeals to an ideal form that requires learning and ongoing rehearsal (or what Yergeau refers to as 'practice', at the end of this chapter).

In her book *Autism and Sensing: The Unlost Instinct* (1998), Donna Williams cleaves a distinction between autistic and allistic modalities of parsing the sensible world, the former through sensory apprehension and the latter through interpretation. The description of this difference is notable for its reversal of the developmental model: the allistic also begins life in a predominantly sensory modality but relinquishes this, learning to select certain sounds and gestures over others including the auditory dominance of speech over sounds. In contrast, the autistic is attuned to patterns and rhythms. Ralph Savarese describes the implications of Williams's analysis, observing that autistics perceive much more of the world than allistics, and their reception is more direct. Williams, he notes, encouraged allistics to recover this mode of apprehending the sensible. She could recognize and respond to their distinct ways of being that were different to her own.

## Empathy failures

Carolyn Pedwell argues that 'efforts to generate empathy might be less important or productive in some contexts than examining the potential causes and implications of empathetic "failures"' (2016: 18).

In attending to the situations in which empathy has 'antithetical consequences to those intended', is refused or makes no sense, the political and historical dimensions of an encounter are brought into view. In a similarly critical stance, Clio Nicastro argues that despite the lack of consensus regarding a definition of empathy, the term typically refers to a 'process of emotional and psychological projection, understood as a shorthand for affective ability to "put oneself in the other's shoes"' (2018: 79). Nicastro identifies this mode as a drive for what she calls (following Harun Farocki) fusional empathy, a movement towards the other that erodes all distance and effectively erases the identity of the other by subsuming them into the same identity economy. As an alternative, she models an 'erratic empathy', a mode of encounter that recognizes and addresses the difference between the subject and other: potential incomprehension, historical divergences and conflict implicit to encounters between subjects of unequal providence. Nicastro's model simultaneously breaks down the unidirectional force of empathy (the empathizer's feelings directed towards the empathee) into an inconstant movement between distance and proximity, divesting empathy of its fusional power.

Nicastro turns to a film by the German artist Philip Scheffner, *Havarie* (2015), in which empathy, the audience's empathy, is put to the test. The film extends a three-minute video of migrants at sea filmed from a cruise ship and uploaded to YouTube simply as 'refugees'. Scheffner reworks the footage into a ninety-minute film, tracing the footage to a Northern Irish tourist aboard a cruise ship in the Mediterranean who had filmed the attempted crossing of Algerian refugees when the ship's captain alerted passengers to the drifting boat. Scheffner's film slows the speed of the footage and stays with the sequence for the duration of a feature film. Staying with the refugees, Nicastro argues, is a refusal to move towards or away, setting up for the viewer a static position from which to observe and watch a sequence in which little happens and nothing is concluded. The discomfort created by the extended duration of the footage, imposing perhaps a disorientation for the viewer, defamiliarizes an otherwise familiar trope regularly broadcast on news channels across Europe: refugees risking their lives in attempting to reach Europe. The film denies the viewer the comfort of a burst of short-lived empathy, the cliché

of a momentarily felt response to a tragic scene. Staying with the boat and its passengers in their plight, she argues, 'dismantles the temporal structure of the process of empathic identification as such', as this is no longer a vignette of tragic proportions but the 'image of a sort of daily routine in the Mediterranean Sea' (Nicastro, 2018: 85). Like Milton, Nicastro identifies empathy as a difficulty that recurs within the rhythms of the everyday. What she adds to this argument is the complex relay of distance and proximity, and then and now, that informs the modulating contours of affect.

The reading of empathy as an act conducted by the privileged towards the socially disadvantaged informs Carolyn Pedwell's work on transnational axes of feeling. In reading the literary works of the Antiguan American author Jamaica Kincaid, Pedwell interprets empathy as it is cast from a postcolonial perspective: the reinforcement of the distinction between the privileged, whose empathizing is an act of choice, and the object of their empathy, the disempowered. Rather, in the cast of sympathy and pity before it, empathy reinforces a relation of inequality through a shift in register that translates the political into the emotional. Pedwell argues that in the novel *A Small Place* (1988), Kincaid obstructs this dynamic. The narrator imaginatively enters ('sees through the eyes of') the white Western tourist visiting the island of Antigua. The narrator's telling maintains a knowingness of the tourist's frame of reference: the island imagined as a paradise of breath-taking beauty and 'natural' simplicity. But this white Western version of place, and any attempt by the tourist to impose it upon the island's inhabitants, is met by a confrontational empathy, as Pedwell describes it: 'This empathy works *not* to enable "privileged" subjects to put themselves in "the other's shoes" … instead, it is a mode of affective perspective-taking adopted by those usually viewed as the postcolonial "objects" of empathy' (2016: 16). The narrator refuses and deflects the tourist's projection by recounting the daily hardships in a place that has been ravaged by colonialism, a practice that tourism reproduces under different conditions in the present time of the novel.

In drawing attention to the historical vectors through which empathy is conducted, Pedwell brings another quality to an understanding of empathy as it is practised: the dynamic of fixity and fluidity. Her point is that 'the repeated mapping of categories of

"empathizer" and "sufferer" onto traditional social and geo-political hierarchies can function to fix such hierarchies and the privileges they uphold' (2016: 15). Here, empathy belongs to social groups whose repertoire of 'affective capacities and skills' may be 'cultivated, honed and tested' through encounters with less-privileged others (2018: 15). Saidiya Hartman pursues and extends this dynamic historically in her study of the complex operations of empathy in accounts of chattel slavery. In *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery and Self-Making in Nineteenth Century America* (1997), Hartman parses the nineteenth-century language of rights and affect, of 'protection', 'sympathy' and 'understanding', to reveal a complex operation of desire and displacement. Particularly striking is the story that opens the first chapter, a story that is not fiction, of John Rankin, a white subject whose outrage at the enslavement of Black subjects was expressed theatrically in a letter to his brother in 1836. In it, Rankin describes a slavery procession as it moves through a town in vividly spectacular terms. The stated aim of the procession is to convey the horror of human incarceration and its public display: the procession is replete with musical accompaniment, a mobile spectacle. In Rankin's vivid evocation of the scene, she argues, the letter re-enacts the violence of the original event, so detailed and florid is the description. 'By bringing suffering nearer', writes Hartman, 'the ties of sentiment are forged.' In perhaps the most disturbing of the surviving letters, Rankin imagines himself and his wife and children are enslaved and whipped by their master, a fantasy that she artfully describes as 'complicated, unsettling, and disturbing', a 'flight of imagination and slipping into the captive's body [that] unlatches a Pandora's box'.

The 'difficulty' and 'slipperiness' of empathy that Hartman captures lie in the fluidity of positions within this scenario, or rather their liability for reversal. The simulation of the slave's position on the part of Rankin facilitates the projection of himself into the place of the other, which in turn produces the reversal of position in which 'Rankin begins to feel for himself rather than for those whom this exercise in imagination presumably is designed to reach'. The position of the slave becomes emptied out, reproducing the conditions of slavery in which the Black body is a commodity in the service of others, exercising the fungibility of the slave, of all slaves. Hartman asks of this phantasmatic projection of the white man, 'Does this

not only exacerbate the idea that black sentience is inconceivable' except through a conversion of the other into the same, an act whose swiftness evidences 'the very ease of possessing the abased and enslaved body'. There are many questions that Hartman brings to this scenario: why should pain be the conduit of identification, and does identification with the slave's suffering further subjugate the slave? Ostensibly, Rankin's identification is an exemplary act of empathy for the other. The white man evidences his capacity to read and feel the situation of another by imaginatively taking up that position. That this reproduces the relations of imperial power once again is an evident effect. Hartman provides what Abraham Geil has named 'one of the most trenchant critiques of empathy' in current scholarship, incisive in its demonstration of empathy's negativity, its power of displacement through acts of 'crossing over'.

Returning empathy to the material particularity of situations paves the way for a more far-reaching critique of the work of empathy in action. Putting oneself in the shoes of another, the clichéd phrase that turns and returns in the literature, is a projective mechanism of complex psychic motivation that lands upon or evacuates the position of the other. As autism studies and critical race studies each demonstrate in different ways, an analysis of the enactment of empathy reveals the material differences between bodies and their histories that complicate and divert anything as direct as 'intention'. For Nicastro, there is a connection between the compressed time/space of online experience that communicates suffering almost simultaneous to its being experienced by the other, and a form of empathy that is an immediate reflex. 'Is there a link between the presumptions of simultaneous interaction and the dominion of the fusional type of empathy, in which one's own lived experience is projected onto the other, thus cancelling out all differences?' (Nicastro, 2018: 80). A more prescient turn for empathy is for scholarship to attend to empathy failures as the sites where relationships to alterity are complex and conflicted (Nicastro, 2018).

The double empathy problem is a politely worded empathy failure of a particular and protracted kind that Yergeau locates in the model of rhetoric rather than Milton's social context. Autistic rhetorics of echolalia and stimming, rather than expanding the normatively defined range of expression and communicative relay, are clinically managed

as symptoms of failure. Rhetoric 'presumes a shared rhetoricity, or a shared understanding of language, culture, and communication', yet, they argue, the specific modalities of autistic rhetoric are discounted from the field of communication. Considered 'elliptical machinations', autistic expression is productive of gaps in social exchange that are interpreted as symptoms of mindblindness and lack in 'social symbolic thought'. Such a tightly bound association between autism and communicative deficit invites the question not of origins but of its moment of arising: how and when, in other words, did it become possible to think *that*. Chapter 2 moves back in time to place an autistic sensibility anachronistically in the late nineteenth century to trace its affinities with the German term *Einfühlung*, the word that is translated by a British psychologist into English as empathy in the early twentieth century.

## The final rhetorical word

The end story of the double empathy problem comes from Remi Yergeau, and it is called The Curious Incident of the Vote in the Book Club. It is the tale of Yergeau attending a book club at the suggestion of their disability services counsellor who has said that joining the club will enable them to 'practise' social etiquette. The pedagogic expectation for autistics to learn allistic behaviour could not be more overt in this encouragement to rehearse. The counsellor has advised that the book club is a 'forgiving' environment in which any number of social faux pas would be acceptable. In other words, what is being offered is a 'soft' form of social alignment therapy, operating under cover as a hobby-club. Yergeau nonetheless attends.

The book group members comprise eleven autistic and four non-autistic people who huddle around a table in a Barnes and Noble bookstore, where 'the lights are very loud, the autie voices and coffee machines even louder'. The time comes for the selection of the next book for the group to read, and after much discussion the choice is between Joseph Heller's *Catch-22* and Mark Haddon's *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*, the latter 'being the autism novel du jour, complete with a teenage savant (Christopher) who

hates yellow cars, melts down in London and recites prime numbers' (Yergeau 2018: 89).

Three autistic members of the group reject it, maintaining that the book is ridiculous, vile and simplistic. The group does not listen. The vote takes place and two autistic members abstain in objection to the proposed text. This results in the allistic votes dominating and the book being voted as the next read. Yergeau's pithy comment paints the catastrophic response thus: 'And so, with the exception of those who call themselves neurologically typical, we all practice melting down in public' (2018: 89). The story, for all of its funny rhetorical acuity, stages the cross-currents at play in the relationality of this situation where the book's problematic rendering of autism is misunderstood by the allistic members as the opposite. The allistic subjects are unable to hear the autistic objection to the book since in this situation the inference of who can read whose mind is asymmetrical. The non-autistics' over-riding of the views and feelings of the autistic members of the group is conducted without there being a notable trace of neurotypical imposition. In the weeks that follow, Yergeau must tolerate the group moderator referring to the character of Christopher as a model of autistic learning.

# 2

# From empathy to *Einfühlung*

An exhalation of 'Ah empathy!' opens Timothy Burn's exploration of the term. 'Perhaps', he continues, 'no other concept in philosophy and psychology has experienced such tumult in the past 100 years' (2017: 1). The defeated sigh echoes that of another text, the closing line of Herman Melville's story of Bartleby the scrivener (1853). 'Ah, Bartleby! Ah, Humanity!' closes out the tale of the taciturn scrivener who refuses to write, to speak, to conform, who appears to operate in another register altogether, a position that has attracted the label of 'iconic autist, a literary representative who anticipates the clinical identification of autism by almost a century', in the words of the literary scholar Julia Miele Rodas (2018: 117). Rodas, however, expresses reservation about reading Melville's tale as an autistic one, arguing that its 'conventional anxiety about a queer figure, a person who does not respond in expected ways' renders Bartleby unknowable and ultimately leads to his death (123). Yet the story lends itself to another reading. Bartleby's enduring opacity to the allistic world and its failure to comprehend his experience, mindset and motivations is played out to its fullest as an instance of the double empathy problem. Robert Chapman might also point out that Bartleby's fate, and the driving force of the narrative, is sealed in Bartleby's refusal to work. As a copyist of legal documents, Bartleby stops obeying the command to reproduce the script of enforced productivity which is simultaneously enforced normalcy.

Bartleby's iconic status as autist rests on the retrospective diagnosis of historical figures, literary and non-fictional, a practice that is not without its critics. In an essay on the relationship of autism to modernism, Patrick McDonagh argues that such speculation is a 'conceptual anachronism'. 'If the social circumstances allowing us to

perceive autism did not exist before some point relatively early in the twentieth century, and if the perception and articulation of autism is an important part of its being', he speculates, 'then to what extent can we say the condition existed previously?' (2008: 100). McDonagh references Ian Hacking's influential work on how medical classification takes place. The model of a looping effect describes the dynamic in which certain characteristics and features are mapped and plotted paradigmatically to obtain a diagnostic label. This in turn operates as a description for a group who not only are collectivized by the label but also iteratively modify its terms through discussion and commentary, activism and cultural representation. McDonagh's point is that autism cannot be thought of as autism without its production through a socio-looping mechanism of this kind, a process rather than a socio-historical background; Hacking's term for this is dynamic nominalism. Autism is defined through not simply its medicalization but its collective social manifestation, an argument developed further by Robert Chapman, who contends that 'the diagnostic criteria only get us so far', proposing that greater coherence is afforded to the term when it applies to a marginalized minority (2020: 800). McDonagh, in the manner of Michel Foucault, Ian Hacking and Damian Milton, is interested in the practices of taxonomy and classification. Taking distance from a clinical approach whose aim is to grasp the 'reality' of autism, he writes, 'autism makes most sense if we consider it as something other than a diagnostic category, a mere act of nosology'.

Famously definitions of autism (as with many other clinical diagnostic classifications) have changed throughout the twentieth century, to which the iterations of the *DSM* attest. My interest falls less upon changing definitions of autism, and more on wiring connections between moments in the history of autism that disregard linear time. Media archaeologist Siegfried Zielinski describes this approach to history as exercising deep cuts in time, forging together two ideas, practices or methods that are temporally distant from one another to illuminate something new of each.[1] By putting into relation

[1]Zielinski's work has broadly inspired the field of media archaeology, characterized by the method of inserting cuts and joins across time to allow the past to illuminate the present in a manner that contrasts with a historical approach of reading the past through the present (see Harbord 2016).

the late nineteenth-century term *Einfühlung* and an autistic sensibility as it is described in autistic life-writing, art practice, scholarship and film, this chapter burrows into the affinities of these two versions of aesthetic and psychological apprehension. What they share perhaps above all is a way of attending to world that does not privilege the human figure against an inert backdrop but weaves activity (human and non-human) as a cloth. In a manner that antagonizes the current obsession with boundaries and borders, *Einfühlung* describes a porosity of the subject in experiencing the environment. In a sense, *Einfühlung* in the late nineteenth century marks the search to find a vocabulary for the impression the world makes on the subject; sensations, shapes, movement are 'in-feeling', reaching into the subject who may momentarily adopt its form. To recall *Einfühlung* is to complicate the meaning of empathy, and to uncover an autistic sensibility in the history of aesthetics and philosophy that predates and prefigures the movement of phenomenology.

Nosologically, autism has travelled through the twentieth century as a clinical term with multiple meanings and a number of notable dates. In 1911, Eugen Bleuler, a Swiss psychiatrist, published *Dementia Praecox or the Group of Schizophrenias*, creating the term autism as a contraction of Freud's 'autoeroticism' to describe a particular category of schizophrenic patient whose behaviour was characterized by dream-like thinking and a withdrawal from external reality into an excessive fantasy world, a world of affects and sensations. Bleuler's designation of autism is what the historian Bonnie Evans names the 'first autism' of excessive affect, contrasting markedly with what autism was to become in the mid-twentieth century in diagnostic texts such as Bruno Bettelheim's *The Empty Fortress*: a state of emptiness. Bleuler's book was not published in English until 1950. In the post-war period it was widely influential in English-speaking countries forty years after its initial publication, reprinted five times in a short succession and influencing the first *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (Moskowitz, 2011). Other notable dates are 1925 when Grunya Sukhareva published her study of six boys, and perhaps the most well-known of these, the year 1943 when Leo Kanner published the findings of his study of eleven children, followed in 1944 by the publication of Hans Asperger's 'Autistic Psychopathy in Childhood'.

Archaeologically, autism and empathy (initially retaining its association with *Einfühlung*) enter the English language within three years of each other (1911 and 1909, respectively). In what follows, I draw selectively from the history of the term as it has been examined in Germanist scholarship in its emergence from German Romanticism and Pantheism, and from the work of the figure most often credited with the development of *Einfühlung*, Theodor Lipps. Although a highly influential figure in the field of philosophical aesthetics at the turn of the twentieth century, Timothy Burns argues that his contributions to philosophy are largely forgotten. Lipps appears a somewhat neglected thinker whose work has remained untranslated in the English-speaking world. Here, I explore one of his translated essays, 'The Knowledge of Other Egos' (1907), that engages many of the questions in circulation and is significant to the expansion of *Einfühlung* from primarily a concept of feeling-into to the experience of other minds.

## Einfühlung

*Einfühlung* has become something of a celebrity term in certain disciplines, attracting significant attention from humanities scholars and neuroscientists in the past decade. In her account of the history of the term, Robin Curtis, a scholar of audiovisual media, claims: 'In an unbroken succession since 1970, no fewer than fifteen to twenty texts per month have been published in the fields of psychology and sociology which contain the German term *Einfühlung* or its derivative *Empathie*' (2014: 355). The film philosopher Gregory Flaxman brings *Einfühlung* into the history of early cinema to restage a 'missed encounter' between psycho-aesthetics and the new medium (2016: 174). Film historian Scott Curtis argues that the debates of *Einfühlung* provide the context for cinema's binding of two terms that are otherwise opposed during this period: psychological contemplation and the bodily response to sensation. The art historian Juliet Koss turns to *Einfühlung* to question the tenets of modernism and to complicate models of viewing and spectating. Historian of science Susan Lanzoni has emphasized the imbrication of amateur and professional interest in *Einfühlung* experiments of the late

nineteenth century and attended to the problems of its translation (Lanzoni, 2018). For Timothy Burns, *Einfühlung* prefigures much of the work of phenomenology that follows in the first decades of the twentieth century, arguing that Theodor Lipps is often credited wrongly for his historical rather than philosophical contributions (2021: 261). From a psychological perspective, Mark Solms draws on the term to establish the foundation of theory of mind psychology (Solms, 2017). Bringing the topic into a contemporary framework, neuroscientist Vittorio Gallese draws on *Einfühlung* to elaborate the role of the body in the processing of experience, facilitating a model of mirror neuron functioning that is foundationally intercorporeal (Gallese, 2017).

*Einfühlung* references a moment in which intense sensory apprehension of non-human features of world was at the centre of aesthetic, philosophical and psychological debate. The complex questions mobilized by this subject in the last third of the nineteenth century in Germany are what Robin Curtis summarizes as 'the powerful engagement with the world that was suggested by *Einfühlung*', a discourse that overlaps with the movements of Pantheism and Romanticism (2012: 426). The antecedents of *Einfühlung* reach back into romantic thinkers, particularly Johann Gottfried von Herder, although other figures frequently accompany the description of his thought, in particular von Hardenberg, who wrote under the name Novalis (mentioned in the accounts of Karsten Stueber and Robin Curtis), Arthur Schopenhauer (Susan Lanzoni) and Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten (Mark Jarzombek). Alison Stone positions Novalis's work on nature as a parsing of the fundamentals of monism, the debate of whether the absolute is the 'unknowable unity of being', or the absolute is the unity of nature, a rational and intelligible substance that precedes divisions of subject-object, physical and mental. She writes: 'Romantic monism would be defensible if it were supported by some kind of apprehension of reality as a unity, where this kind of apprehension lacks the status of knowledge' (2008: 144). The question that arises from this postulation is whether in feeling and sensing the unitary substance we can epistemologically grasp it.

Von Herder is frequently cited as the thinker whose work reached from aesthetics and feeling-into knowledge and science to produce a discourse that was at times described as subject-objectification,

an experience of the forms of the world as apperceptions. Karsten Stueber cites von Herder's text 'Vom Erkennen und Empfinden der menschlichen Seele' (1774) as the argument for an analogy between nature and humankind in which the boundary between the two terms appears fluid: humans have the capacity to recognize 'the interior of things', to 'feel into everything, to feel everything out of himself' (1774: 7–8, cited in Stueber, 2010: 6). Von Herder's achievement, suggests Mark Jarzombek, was to set out a new equation that realigned thought and feeling: new couplings of aesthetics and knowledge, and feeling and science, remodelled their traditional relations, situating the imagination as the central mediating function of sensory affects as experience. The studied interaction with objects of art or nature become, in von Herder's vision, an explanatory science. Here is von Herder, in an earlier short essay titled 'On Picture, Poetry and Fable' ('Ueber Bild, Dichtung und Fabel', 1767), describing in greater detail the processing of the sensible:

> In the forest of sensible objects that surround me, I only find my way and become master of the chaos of the sensations that press upon me by separating objects from others, by giving them outline, measure and form, in short by creating unity in diversity, and animatedly and confidently appropriate them with the stamp of my *inner sense* as if this were a stamp of truth. (Cited in Jarzombek, 2000: 68, emphasis in the original)

The way in which the individual subject knows the sensible world is through a bodily modelling and assimilation of discrete objects, attending to the form of each through a type of internal mimicry. In this passage, there are a number of points that are synonymous with autistic experiences of world: manifold sensations that are chaotic and overwhelming, the 'mastering' of chaos through deep focus (perhaps sharing affinities with monotropism), attention to the detail of form, a relatedness that leads to an animation of the self ('animatedly and confidently') and not least the external world producing a form of inner resonance in the beholder.

Against this background of romantic thought, it is Robert Vischer who 'has to be credited with introducing the term "*Einfühlung*" as a noun and as a technical concept in the context of philosophical

aesthetics' (Stueber, 2010: 6). Vischer's dissertation 'On the Optical Sense of Form: A Contribution to Aesthetics' (1873) brought to the concept of 'feeling into' a new focus on the spatial, where the concept of 'into' was as significant as 'feeling'. The spatial character of *Einfühlung*, as Vischer presented it, gave emphasis to two aspects of feeling-into as a process. First, the non-human world in its many forms is promoted to be on an equal level as the human subject; in Sigrid Weigel's description, *Einfühlung* 'is conceptualised as a capacity of the imagination that leads us to behave towards objects in the same way we would behave if they were living beings', commenting further down that 'the understanding of the "other" [human] plays an astonishingly marginal role' (2017: 12 and 13). Second, the concept of *Einfühlung* proposes a form of animating the non-human world. Weigel suggests that the boundary separating living matter from dead or inanimate matter is called into question in the imaginative crossing over into the object. This in turn recalls older manifestations of animism that were to resurface in the early twentieth century in anthropological and art historical works, and later in surrealism. Mark Jarzombek suggests that the description of a feeling-into spatial forms as it was taken up by experimental psychologists has a dreamlike sensation, influenced by Karl Scherner's *The Life of the Dream* (1861), a work that Freud was later to credit as a source for his *The Interpretation of Dreams* (2000: 32).

We come to the critical figure in this history, philosopher and psychologist Theodor Lipps, widely credited with the development and establishment of *Einfühlung* theory as a bridge between earlier aesthetic theories and the emerging discipline of psychology (Curtis, 2012: 428). His work falls into three main periods of research, first at the University of Bonn where Lipps published the compendious 'Fundamental Facts of the Inner Life' (1883), a period of four years at the University of Breslau and a lengthy tenure at the University of Munich (1894–1914), during which time he published his most significant works including *Spatial Aesthetics and Optical-Geometric Illusions* (*Raumästhetik und geometrisch-optische Täuschungen*, 1897) and the two volumes of *Aesthetics: Psychology of Beauty and Art* (*Ästhetik: Psychologie Des Schönen Und Der Kunst*, volume 1 1903b, volume 2 1906). Recent anglophone debate of Lipps's contribution to the development of *Einfühlung* has given particular

treatment to two papers: 'Empathy, Inner Imitation and Sense-Feelings' ('Einfühlung, innere Nachahmung, und Organempfindungen', 1903a) and 'The Knowledge of Other Egos' ('Das Wissen von fremden Ichen', 1907). Lipps, as many commentators have noted, proffered a shifting concept of *Einfühlung* over the course of his career, creating challenges for those attempting a summary overview. Timothy Burns provides a plot of three key features. First, Lipps's preoccupation with perceptual anomalies, such as those pertaining to optical illusions. An example of this work is the illusion that two geometric lines of the same length but varied angles or end flourishes appear to be of different lengths. Second, the study of responses to works of art, and third, the attribution of inner states to other people. Gustav Jahoda states that Lipps was not always clear in his distinction of the term 'sympathy' from *Einfühlung* and empathie: it is also the case that Lipps used the term sympathy almost synonymously with *Einfühlung* (Jahoda, 2005: 158). The fact that Lipps translated into German David Hume's *A Treatise of Human Nature* (1739/1904) suggests that Lipps worked across the domains of psychology and a moral philosophy.

Robin Curtis names the process at the heart of Lipps's *Einfühlung* an 'automatic form of sympathetic experience', the automatic quality a 'psychological fact' as far as Lipps is concerned. Key to this process, she argues, is the experience of vitality 'based on an involuntary, instinctive mimicry of others', including the object world. Every object, for Lipps, is a potential 'agent' (2012: 429). Curtis describes a state in which 'one is occupied with characteristics of one's own embodied engagement with that world and its things, in short: with sensations, activities, and atmospheric moods that come about through this engagement' (2012: 430).[2] As for his contemporaries in the late nineteenth century, perception is not a predominantly optical event for Lipps, but an imaginatively somatic one, so that *seeing* the object is grasping its volume, weight, form and texture through a bodily apprehension. His descriptions of such an apprehension cite a form of *transport into*, a mode of perception characterized by

[2]Robin Curtis cites Robert Vischer's description of the senses acting in concert: 'It is about nothing less than the whole body; the entire human organism is affected. For in reality there is no strict localization within it. Every pronounced sensation therefore leads to either an increase or a decrease in the general *Vitalempfindung* (sensation of vitality)' (2014: 365).

movement. In the following citation from '*Einfühlung*, Inner Imitation, and Organic Feelings', several elements of his thesis are in play, namely vitalism, kinaesthesia and imitation:

> In a word, I am now with my feeling of activity totally in the moving figure. I am also spatially, insofar as there can be question of a spatial extension of the ego, in the place of that figure. I am transported into it. As far as my consciousness is concerned, I am totally identical with it. While I feel myself active within the perceived figure, I feel myself to be at the same time free, light, and proud. That is aesthetic imitation, and it is at the same time aesthetic *Einfühlung*. (Lipps, 1903)

There is considerable debate as to what exactly 'imitation' in Lipps's writings may be describing. Imitation appears initially to perform an act that is a form of affective resonance of the other, but it may also describe an imaginative projection of the self into the object that is then introjected. Lipps uses the word imitation to describe a form of embodied simulation of the object, but when his work turns to the problem of comprehending other 'alien' minds as he would write, the process is more intricate.

Lipps writes in an analytical, logical manner, setting forth on a series of disquisitions. His essay 'The Knowledge of Other Egos' (1907) is a work that moves with momentum from an opening question, 'How is it that I come to know of other individuals?', to a series of logical propositions. The work sets out the main features of an argument that, in the following decade, Edith Stein would critique in her doctoral dissertation 'On the Problem of Empathy' (1917) written under the supervision of Husserl. What Lipps's work shares with Stein's account, however, is a refusal of the knowledge of other minds through inference. The argument Lipps mounts in this work, famously taking the example of anger (it is also the essay where Lipps offers the well-known example of the yawn as an instinctively imitated gesture), is that there is not a commensurate sense of anger in the self and other: the 'I' of which Lipps writes is the subject who feels their own anger, which is different from the visible registration or 'grasp' of the other's anger, manifest in gestures such as a clenched fist or physiological change of a face that becomes flushed. He continues, arguing that as

the 'I' does not visually witness their own anger, this feeling remains a kinaesthetic gesture, a feeling 'lived through' from the inside. The two manifestations of anger are differently registered for the observing 'I'. Lipps then asks, what binds my feeling of anger to the other's gesture? The argument of analogical relation posits two similar states that are tied through a recognition of similitude. For Lipps this is not an answer, for the concept of analogical inference is tautological, he argues, in that it presupposes what it is meant to demonstrate, that the other is like 'me': I do not know that the other is like me as I know only of my internal experience of anger, not anger in the other.

In place of inference, Lipps posits imitation. In his introduction to the essay, Timothy Burns posits that Lipps here separates expression from imitation, expression being the process by which the feelings of 'I' tend towards expression in a gesture. The process by which the 'I' connects with the feeling of the other is through imitation: when 'I' sees the gesture of the other it is not a moment of recognition but something closer to a vitalistic enlivening that leads to imitation: 'The sensible seems to excite the non-sensible in us.' This enlivening of the emotion in the self produces a form of resonance or mirroring. Lips describes it in this way:

> I see the other's gesture and grasp it mentally, or I am grasping in it. And while being in it, there is a tendency in me to produce this gesture, i.e., the tendency to carry out a particular bodily activity. However, this tendency is again, as was just said, one and the same thing as the feeling of anger, it is immediately tied to this emotional state. (Cited in Burns 2017: 7)

What is particularly interesting in this discussion is Lipps's argument that the bodily imitation of the other's gesture is the act that is suggestive of the emotion of anger. In Lipps, such resonance and mimicry of the other's gesture is a grasping of something perceived, which is not a direct recognition of the other's emotional state but an intracorporeal response.

If Stein is critical of Lipps's model, she does at least share with Lipps the dispute of an inferential understanding of the mind of the other, and second, an insistence that the mind–body relation is not causal but expressive. The 'I' regards the other's emotional state

through their embodied gestures, and not through the inference of the other's 'interior' thoughts in need of hypothesizing and decoding. In Lipps's essay and in Stein's work there resides a sense of the other as irreducibly different, the fundamental grounds for the other's experience being distinct from that of the 'I'. As Ekdahl argues, thus far, the historical phenomenological account of the self–other dyad is in accord with a contemporary enactivist and indeed autistic model of the autonomy of agents within a social encounter. He goes on to argue, however, that the phenomenological account ushers a problematic element into the model of encounter: its insistence on a similar mode of embodiment. For an iterative type of empathy to take place in phenomenological terms, he states, it is necessary for there to be 'an overlapping or meshing sense of experiencing another similarly embodied self that likewise experiences oneself as similarly embodied' (Ekdahl, 2023: 11). Phenomenology appears to position the body at the centre of an account of empathy only to radically delimit the form of embodiment by making it conditional upon co-recognition. Thus, phenomenology foregrounds the embodied nature of encounters (avoiding the problematic model of inference that leads to theory of mind accounts of interaction) while simultaneously operating a type of exclusion through the clause that styles of embodiment must correlate.

The question of difference repeatedly disturbs the conceptualization of empathy like a stone in the shoe in the project of trying to step into the shoes of the other. The different features of embodiment (skin colour, comportment style, expression) and cognition (types of perception and attention patterns) appear to throw off-track the desire for empathy to be universal ('Ah empathy!'). From the time of its emergence into English, empathy appears to shed its complex formulation of the subject as potentially alienated from the self in the moment of a vitalistic apprehension for a more reductive version of empathy as a mode of recognition and affirmation, pivoting on sameness and difference. In contrast, the nineteenth-century revisions to and applications of the concept of *Einfühlung* draw on the vocabulary of 'alien' states that apply to the self-experience as much as self–other relations. In parsing the question of the knowability of the minds of others, Lipps's description arrives at a position that is proximate to an autistic description of encounter as

a double empathy problem. If the other's style of comportment and gesture is prima facie alien, 'bodily unfamiliarity might well… leave indeterminate the life of the mind of the other' (Ekdahl, 2023: 13). In the grain of Lipps's text is a residue of an affect from the Romantic valence of *Einfühlung*, in which the interplay of self–other provides for the possibility of a disjuncture of the subject's sense of self. The affective alienation implicit to the imaging of the mind of the other is the experience of self as one among other subject-objects, an uncanny instability in the identity of things as either objects or subjects, or the interchangeability of the object–subject classification.

Rhodri Hayward and Susan Lanzoni include in their accounts of *Einfühlung* the female amateur practitioners of introspective research who admired and followed Lipps, the occult novelist Vernon Lee (Violet Paget) and her lover, Clementina Anstruther-Thomson. In Lee's fascination with self-estranging 'ideas of spiritual possession and identification' in her novels, she regarded, argues Hayward, a parallel to the psychic processes of aesthetic transfer in *Einfühlung* (Hayward, 2005). In the recent flurry of interest in *Einfühlung* from film and visual culture scholars, the common thread to the reclamation of the term is similarly its potential for estrangement at the heart of the operation of empathy. Robin Curtis returns to the period of early cinema via *Einfühlung* to argue that 'the moving image offers access to a kind of kaleidoscopic space in which the viewer may lose his privileged status as subject and may be permitted to move as object among other objects' (2012: 426). In this sense, *Einfühlung* releases the subject from the dilemma of the subject–object binary and the *making subject* of the object; on the contrary, *Einfühlung* 'permits' or releases the subject into the position of the object. It is a proposition that is suggestive of an uncanny self-estrangement; in this sense, it prefigures the debates of the following century in which the dangers of becoming absorbed into the image as surface-spectacle are regarded (by Brecht most famously) as the loss of criticality. Abraham Geil suggests that the tensions compressed in *Einfühlung* are suggestive of the 'apparent oxymoron' of 'empathic estrangement', which turn to questions of form (2020: 331).

In the recent so-called turn to *Einfühlung*, the concept offers precisely a conflicted and straining mix of affect and alienation: to *be moved* and to move as an object among other objects decentres

the privilege of the perceiving subject. Yet implicit to a restructuring of the subject–object dyad is the question of agency, or rather, in the oscillation of positions, does the subject-as-object become passive? Gregory Flaxman argues that this is a question that has haunted film studies since its inception. The theorization of the film spectator has historically modelled a viewer who is affectively engaged and yet also active, creating a kinship of affect and agency as though spectatorship could only be thought of as a participatory (in contemporary parlance, 'interactive') encounter with the moving image. Against this orthodoxy, he mobilizes the weird proximity of cinematic affect that operates powerfully on the viewer but as an irreducible alterity. He offers the view that 'with cinema, we see, hear, feel, and finally think on the basis of an alien intelligence', and it is precisely the history of psychoaesthetics, another term for the debates generated by *Einfühlung*, on which he stakes this claim (2016: 186).

The many involutions of *Einfühlung* circulate similar themes: how does the ego know the other, how does the subject remain distinct from the other/object, how does the self/subject sustain relation without incorporation into a circuit of affects? That *Einfühlung* historically represented a staging of these debates in the domain of aesthetics lent a speculative, philosophical tone to its enquiry. In other iterations, such as the nineteenth-century American discourse of impressibility, the processing of sensory information is imaged in starker racial terms. Kyla Schuller argues that the term's particularity in the late nineteenth century was to cleave a division between subjects who were responsive and adapted to sensible stimuli, on the one hand, and those who were simply arrested in its wake, on the other. 'Impressibility', she contends, 'was understood to be an acquired quality of the refined nervous system that accrues over evolutionary time through the habits of civilization that transform animal substrate into the cultural grounds of self-constitution' (Schuller, 2018: 7).[3] Sensory impressions require further work of processing to become an integral part of self, to reinstate the borders of autonomous

[3]See also Jessica Riskin's detailed account of sentimental empiricism in the earlier period of eighteenth-century France, wherein she demonstrates that the emotions were a critical part of scientific work in fields as diverse as chemistry, electricity and economics.

subjecthood, a process that begins to distinguish – by way of race, and I would add neurological typology – some subjects from others.

## Translation and diagnosis

The translation of *Einfühlung* into English as the term 'empathy' is both a continuation of German nineteenth-century psychoaesthetics as it moved across borders, and a departure from its tenets, suggesting a new orientation of research towards human psychology. It signals the foreclosure of the subject conceived as one part of a sympathetic circuit of affects, and the consolidation of the conceptual imaging of the human figure against a background from which it remains distinct. Before arrival at the moment(s) of translation and engaging the agents of that particular exercise, there are two features of this moment to acknowledge that otherwise are backgrounded to the acts of human endeavour. The first of these is the recognition of the historical discourse of sympathy in Britain, a diffuse yet significant account of moral and psychological theorization that had obtained influence following the publication of David Hume's 'A Treatise of Human Nature' (1739–40). Sympathy in the eighteenth and into the nineteenth centuries, as it is pursued through literary texts by Seth Lobis, is the capacity to be affected by the feelings of others and to enter into the other's feelings (Lobis, 2015). The second feature of the moment of translation that tends to be occluded is the material context in which the practice of translation takes place, its milieu: the laboratory for psychological experimentation as a new form of knowledge production at the fin de siècle.

The transmission of ideas and terminology from a German context into English-speaking contexts is inseparable from the material practices of the experimental psychology laboratory, a symbol of new approaches to the study of the mind and that is also a new form of architectural enclosure for the testing of ideas. As Timothy Lenoir and Robert Brain have evidenced in their materialist histories of science, the late nineteenth-century proliferation of laboratory work successfully reproduced from the sciences of chemistry and biology a model for the production of psychological knowledge (Lenoir, 1998: Brain, 2012). Wilhelm Wundt had proposed the first psychological laboratory in

Leipzig in 1879. Wundt's students and assistants, acting as apostles, continued the work beyond Germany: G. Stanley Hall created the first experimental laboratory at Johns Hopkins University in 1883, and James McKeen Cattell at the University of Pennsylvania in 1888 (publishing influential works on experimental method, notably, from this early period, 'Mental Tests and Measurements', 1890). William James's laboratory, established in 1875 at Harvard University, predated the Leipzig model by four years, but its purpose was aligned with pedagogy rather than experimental research, a difference of emphasis that distinguished German from American and British counterparts. As though to testify to the imbrication of aesthetics, psychology and experimental research, James was succeeded by the German philosopher and psychologist Hugo Münsterberg, widely regarded as the author of the first theoretical examination of the medium of film. Giuliana Bruno argues that the same instruments used for psychological experiment were applied to experiments in film apprehension, an experience that Münsterberg regarded as the psychic processing of sensation (Bruno, 2009: 92; the subject of Chapter 3).[4]

The laboratory as a relatively new institution for an emerging psychology in the late nineteenth century is obscure without a description of the practices, instruments, methods and costs that constitute its work. In the last decade of the nineteenth century, a practice of describing the laboratory of psychological research becomes fashionable. In an account by Edward Titchener, a British-born psychologist who had studied physiological psychology with Wilhelm Wundt in Leipzig and who, by 1892, was director of the Cornell Laboratory and an editor for the British journal *Mind*, the first footnote refers to fifteen publications between 1892 and 1898 that are accounts of laboratory work in different national contexts. The account that Titchener provides is extraordinarily detailed in its accounting for the material forms: a ground plan of the laboratory sets out the interconnected rooms, their furniture, their designated focus (auditory experiment, rhythmic testing and so forth). This is followed by detailed descriptions of the furniture, supplies of gas,

[4]Münsterberg's laboratory is the subject of a number of illuminating accounts of the intersection of cinema and psychology at the turn of the twentieth century. See Brain (2012) and Blatter (2015) for further debate.

water and electric services, and fixtures, books and instruments. Titchener also provides an account of conduct of the laboratory in which he describes the importance of a standardized practice: the aim is to 'conduct a laboratory upon the lines of a determinate psychological system', he writes, 'we had a standard of reference for every new investigation'. The laboratory is in itself 'a machine' whose systematic procedures can be repeated to provide the same results; researchers are depersonalized employees whose work practices can be reproduced in the same conditions in a different location: the laboratory is a closed system, a controlled atmosphere in which it is possible to isolate and extract sensible affects from larger ecologies. The laboratory foreclosed the sense of a sensible world of landscape and nature about which the earlier *Einfühlung* had been elaborated. In Harry Marks's history of the experiment as a conceptual procedure, he names this development as an 'emergent rational therapeutics', a term that bridges scientific investigation with the ethically sounding purpose of psychological research in which the human had become the object of investigation (Marks, 1997).

The moment of the translation of *Einfühlung* is not in fact one but several. Susan Lanzoni charts the various attempts to usher into the English language something of the psycho-aesthetic debates of *Einfühlung*, identifying the efforts of American behavioural psychologist James Mark Baldwin to register the term as 'semblance' ('to make like by imitation') in his *Dictionary of Philosophy and Psychology*, a work composed between 1902 and 1905. Baldwin, who had trained under Wilhelm Wundt in experimental psychology at Leipzig and had set up his own laboratory at the University of Toronto in 1889, was, according to Lanzoni, 'convinced that a new language was necessary for the new science of the mind – psychology', in part to enforce distance from vitalist terminology (2017: 292). Baldwin's effort with the term 'semblance' was refused by the committee of psychologists collaborating on the project, and the term 'aesthetic sympathy' proposed in its place, with a competing definition, 'animation'. None of these terms proved sufficient for the purposes of a nascent psychology attempting to instate psychological research on a scientific rather than aesthetic footing, continuing the trajectory that Theodor Lipps had mapped.

The translation of *Einfühlung* that is accepted into English as empathy is made by Edward Titchener. Titchener's interpretation of the term retained the experimental introspective dimension of its history in psycho-aesthetics, a kinaesthetic feeling into objects and situations:

> All that I have to remark now is that the various visual images, which I have referred to as possible vehicles of logical meaning, oftentimes share their task with kinesthesis. Not only do I see gravity and modesty and pride and courtesy and stateliness, but I feel or act them in the mind's muscles. This is, I suppose, a simple case of empathy, if we may coin that term as a rendering of *Einfühlung*. (Titchener in Lux, 2017: 116–17)

Titchener's translation of *Einfühlung* utilized the Latin etymology of em (in) + pathos (feeling). Lanzoni emphasizes Titchener's adherence to movement of the mind's muscles as imitation or replay and his continued commitment to the method of experimental introspection in laboratory work. According to Vanessa Lux, for Titchener there existed a clear distinction between empathy as feeling into an object or event, and sympathy, which 'for Titchener described the emotional response of *feeling together with* somebody' (2017: 117). Lux argues that while the translation of *Einfühlung* as empathy was widely adopted, Titchener's conceptual distinction was not. Empathy became adopted into an emerging psychology in which human perception and consciousness, and intrahuman cognition, was the motivating force. By the 1930s, empathy had lost its polyvalence and was being put to work in definitions of human personality by the social psychologist Gordon Allport. Both Lux and Lanzoni trace the shift in meaning that occurs in the two decades after *Einfühlung's* translation: Lanzoni writes that '"empathy" lost its connection to things and the world of objects and became exclusively a social phenomenon' (2017: 307).

Lanzoni documents the further translation of *Einfühlung* made by the British psychologist James Ward at Trinity College Cambridge. Ward had also studied sensation and physiology at Leipzig, where he had encountered the ideas of Carl Luwig and Hermann Lotze. The provenance of Ward's translation, around the year of 1909, is less

secure than Titchener's, credited in a footnote by a colleague and one of his students, but nonetheless it provides a third vantage point. Lanzoni suggests that Ward's translation is influenced by his friendship with the anthropologist James Frazer, with whom he conducted a weekly ambulatory discussion documented in letters between them. Frazer brought to the discussion an interest in comparative culture and the rituals of personification, a feature of non-European cultures that amplified the psychic and bodily mimesis implicit to *Einfühlung*. In the context of anthropology, mimesis was an enacted ritualized form of imitation associated with acquired potency through enactment.

Yet the conclusions to be drawn were quite consistent: the achievement of a coherent, unified apprehension of the external world depended less on the exigent material forms of that world than on the processing capacities of the individual. The historian of visual culture Jonathan Crary explores the subjects of attention and perception in this period through impressionist paintings. The three paintings upon which the argument rests are not treated as representational objects, however, but as components of a larger field in which perceptual norms were being revised and reconceptualized through psycho-scientific scrutiny of how perception takes place, and in the production of a proliferating series of mass-produced visual technologies, modernity's excessive visual stimuli. The proposition is this, that in the wake of Kant's abandoned a priori principle of unity, the quest was to understand how cognitive synthesis occurs within a rapidly transforming visual and sensory field, itself unfolding and mutating. Crary writes, 'What took shape in the last two decades of the nineteenth century, however, were notions of perception in which the subject, as a dynamic psychosocial organism, actively constructed the world around it through a layered complex of sensory and cognitive processes, of higher and lower cerebral centres' (1999: 95). The recurring motifs of enquiry in this landscape are the individual's capacity for 'binding' disparate sensory experience (or synthesis), the capacity for 'reality maintenance' as a result of synthesis and the modulating rhythms of differently attenuated attention receptive to the call of stimuli (be that in contexts of leisure or labour).

The study of attention and perception taking place in laboratories in Germany and France reveals states of consciousness that are far from even: daydreams, reveries, absent presence, absorbed states,

lack of recognition of features of the environment, (automatistic) motor behaviour lacking cognitive engagement and fixations, each subsequently reappearing in the psychosocial medical designations of monotropism, aphasia, agnosia and hallucination. Agnosia, a form of impairment in which objects are seen but not recognized in their symbolic or meaningful role, is a type of integrational failure by which objects are not embedded within their environment but stand alone, isolated in their strangeness. The incremental identification of behaviours and tendencies, observed or self-expressed, is a process of accrual, a sedimentation of detail that forms into something like an identity effect, or, in Ian Hacking's terms, a looping process in which naming brings into being an identity that did not exist before that moment but also comes to change the designation in the process of inhabiting the newly established category.

The precarious management of cognitive states is a feature of modern life in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a precarity that Crary regards as continuous up until, and intensifying within, the present day. Critical to this account is the presence of a so-called failure to maintain a precarious plasticity of states as called for. The intense practice of the newly founded discipline of psychology, in its production of normative apprehension, simultaneously produced and defined pathologies within this system. Crary says, 'out of the empirical study of perception and cognition (including so-called pathological manifestations) emerged powerful *normative* models of subjectivity' (1999: 97). He continues, 'A society recognizes itself and its own positivity through the morbid and pathological forms it identifies or invents.' Out of an observational science that is transitioning in the late nineteenth century into a laboratory of experimental science, the study of perception produces a model of cognitive capacity that is only brought into view by the definition of its boundaries. What is produced beyond the boundary becomes the limit case, the external features of a model of apprehension that designates a deficit to what is beyond, setting in motion a framework for sorting and sifting. What is remarkable about the forms of perception beyond the line of demarcation – those, that is, designated by terms such as 'morbid' and 'deranged' – is their prefiguring of features that come to define autism during the twentieth century.

Autism is brought into view here not as one diagnostic category out of many but as a figure central to the designation of modern subjecthood. Autism sits at the edge of language and of systems of representation, invoking that which cannot be fully articulated in these systems although at this point autism is not fully elaborated but a facet of schizophrenia (or dementia praecox). In her account of the emergence of autism in Britain, Bonnie Evans argues, 'Autism is not, and never has been, a minor esoteric subject but one that has a significant bearing on how we think about social identity' (2017: 8). Autism's signature becomes visible in 1911 only through its relation to the other components of a philosophical-scientific paradigm produced in the previous two decades. The work of this late nineteenth-century paradigm, which operates neither inductively nor deductively but analogically, is to produce the conditions for the examination of the human apparatus of sensory apprehension and its relation to cognition to make something visible for the first time. The art of this paradigm is to pose the question as a seemingly natural enquiry into how a human being sees, experiences and processes sensory information, resulting in a model of modern subjectivity attuned to an industrialized modern world. In this sense it is possible to understand Evans's statement that autism was 'and has always remained, the kernel of all descriptions of the development of modern subjectivity and self-identity' (2017: 4).

Another way of phrasing this would be to say that autism is not a by-product of modern experimentation in psychology in a simple sense, but a particular set of attributes arising from experimentations and observations that collectively become newly intelligible. The conjoining of these features takes place along a perceived fault-line that was the focus of concerns about perception, sensory apprehension and cognition. A significant concern was how the individual can process complex informational signals in environments increasingly saturated by spectacles of display and exhibition. As Crary has argued in his study of the patchwork of conscious states evident in paintings of the time, the ideal sensibility in accounts of the late nineteenth century was a newly identified capacity for modulated attention, flexible in its shifting beam of focus, and an ability for selection and synthesis. At the other end of the scale, in contrast, is the individual who is overwhelmed, liable to display automated

behaviour of involuntary reflexes leading to responses of withdrawal from reality into disassociated states. Autism is named as a marker in a field that broadly measures and maps individual processing and synthesizing capacities, although it is not yet a term properly attached to self-stimulatory techniques (stimming) in situations that induce sensory overwhelm. Rather, and to draw on Pierre Janet's lexicon, autism is theorized as *La perte de la fonction du réel* (1903). Janet regarded the function of reality to be the synthesis of diverse yet hierarchically ordered psychological functions ranging from automatism and nervous features at the lower end to complex logical inductive processes. Bonnie Evans summarizes Janet's theoretical account thus: 'If the nervous system was weak, psychological tension would drop and an individual would lose the ability to synthesize these complex functions and also lose the sense of reality. He or she would then revert to a form of thinking which preceded the individual's ability to conceptualize the sense of self' (2013: 6).

When the Swiss psychiatrist Eugen Bleuler contracts the word 'autoeroticism' to form the term 'autism', the proposition is clearly in dialogue with Janet's work. Bleuler names a new condition that is a subset of schizophrenia (also a term that Bleuler devises for the splitting of psychic functions in Emil Kraeplin's *dementia praecox*), proposing that autism is a state in which contact with reality is weakened, referring to 'hallucinatory dreamlike imaginary thought that preceded the establishment of realistic thinking' (2017: 189–90). Evans argues that while autism was part of Bleuler's framework of schizophrenia, which pertained to disturbances of attention, the intellect and the will, autism was of critical importance for its description of a lack of contact with reality. As part of a schizophrenic diagnosis, autism described the frustration when affective drives conflicted with so-called reality, leading to the withdrawal and substitution of reality with fantasy life. 'By blocking off the perceptive-sensory stimulations of the outside world,' she writes, 'autistic thinking then came to obey its own special laws, which were no longer bound by the rules of logic. It was thinking that took place "in symbols, in analogies, in fragmentary concepts, in accidental connections", and it was the source of both delusion and "crude offenses against logic and propriety"' (Bleuler 2017: 66–7). The casting of autism as a primitive state, a regression in developmental terms to infantile processes, is subtended by an evolutionary model

of human development that had been evident in Wundt's work in the 1880s. The higher integrating functions of the mind, according to this model, were dependent on a form of repression, a subduing of affects in the achievement of selective attention and synthesis (Crary, 1999: 40).

The translation of *Einfühlung* into English as empathy marks the passage of a series of questions through a nineteenth-century discourse of philosophical and psychological enquiry and into a twentieth-century enquiry into psychiatric practice and psychopathology. Lanzoni traces its trajectory into the work of the psychiatrist E. E. Southard, a practitioner at Boston Psychopathic Hospital, who in 1918 published the article 'The Empathic Index in the Diagnosis of Mental Diseases' in the *Journal of Abnormal Psychiatry*. The proposed index was essentially a tool in the taxonomy of disorders, extending the introspective examination of thought processes to the role of the psychiatrist in a practitioner–patient encounter. Southard's article is a discussion in dialogue with Theodor Lipps and Vernon Lee as the proponents of an aesthetic application, and with a full awareness of the history of the term, arguing for its application beyond the remit of 'art'. 'How far can you read or feel yourself into the patient?', he asks speculatively while aware simultaneously of the dangers implicit in this stance: 'A moment's reflection will show how many motives in human thought are implied in this idea of reading or feeling oneself into an object' (1918: 207). Of the various motives that Southard lists, both narcissism and solipsism make an appearance, and yet he concludes, 'the degree to which one can read or feel oneself into a fellow-being, particularly a patient, is a matter of common and everyday observation', curiously delivering empathy to the domain of everyday comprehension at the same time as admitting it to the realm of psychiatric diagnostics (1918: 213).

## Autistic *Einfühlung*

Archaeologically speaking, late nineteenth-century *Einfühlung* is not a distant point of reference but a term that connects with and is articulated through a current autistic sensibility as an incision in time that produces a relation between two previously unconnected

terms: an autistic apprehension of world connects directly to *Einfühlung* and vice versa. In what follows, there are four channels through which *Einfühlung* comes calling, the first of these the intense sensory apprehension of the world. Described by autistics as a qualitative experience that may be a pleasurable place to dwell or an unpleasurable overstimulation that produces discomfort in its intensity, the intensity is also a question of form, of what might be called the ontology of autistic processing. The multiple modes of experiencing sensory intensity is captured by the writer Katherine May, in a book that details her life in the year following an autism diagnosis, as a form of electrical current: 'My world is made up of tiny electric shocks. Every living thing carries its own current, and this finds its earth through me. Every unexpected touch, every glance, has a charge' (2018: 64). In this passage the sensation that is experienced as an electrical current is both connecting and animating, the world making an impact on the body in a way that can only recall Benjamin's description of experience under modernity as 'innervation' in the way that Miriam Hansen writes of it as the reconverting of psychic energy through the body (eloquently given as 'the precarious boundary or rind of the bodily ego'), which has no shield against stimuli but operates rather as a matrix, a mode of recovering split-off (repressed) energy. Innervation is a two-way street, 'a porous interface between organism and the world that would allow for a greater mobility and circulation of psychic energies' (Hansen, 2012: 137).

Such porosity is evident in autistic writing with varying degrees of pain and pleasure. In a description of ambulation among nature, the writer Helen Carmichael recounts the suddenness with which she comes upon and registers one of the first flowers of spring, a show of bluebells. Her description is of a similar transmission of energy from the flowers that animates the field of vision: 'My visual field vibrates and pulses – the flowers themselves are almost an ultraviolent hum', a synaesthetic movement between or animation of senses as intense colour becomes acoustic. She continues 'in close-up, they are shards of intense energy pulsating together to form a chorus with a definitive, clean tone' (Carmichael, 2020: 137). Yet innervation also brings pain in its intensity. For Katherine May, the formal contexts of social encounter and institutional settings are the sites of unpleasurable shocks discharged by tiny details and affects

distilled by the enclosed environment. Detail is not the problem, she states, 'It is a life lived without it, among flat, modern surfaces – that is making me sick' (2018: 251).[5] In non-urban environments, the effect is enlivening. Innervation registers differently, 'a counterpoise in which my level of detail is glorious' (2018: 250). The teeming life-world experienced in solitude, with a degree of control over what is being attended to and for how long, provides the gravitational pull of the writing.

The question of form inheres to Erin Manning's account of autistic feeling-into, which is like a leaning into the pliability of expression, to make it bend, flex and torque with intensity in contrast to the allistic tendency of separating thought and expression (as in 'expressing a thought'). The physicality of autistic intensity bubbles through Manning's text in multiple guises, not least in what she calls the dance of attention. Recalling Crary's tracing of attention as a troublesome feature of the late nineteenth-century model of psychic life, Manning's dance of attention is neither an act by a subject nor the world but a colluding activity of both. 'The dance of attention of experience in the worlding is brought to expression by autistics in an infinity of ways', she writes, most commonly 'is its capacity to make felt the intensity of attending, of participating in a worlding that never stops dancing' (2013: 157). In the account that Katherine May gives of her ambitious walk along parts of the coastline of England, the intensity of worlding is an ongoing consideration for which there are various analogies. The map is one, but the map of experience as a representation cannot capture the intensity in any analogous way. Imagine, she instructs the reader, that the world is not divided into areas and regions but paths through. Her next instruction is to imagine that the path cannot be drawn because the 'depth, the weight of the information contained within your path is too great to be drawn. A line cannot contain it' (2018: 111). The path pushes at the borders of expression, at the possibility of representation because of its fullness, 'too rich to be drawn, you must speak it' (2018: 112). From writing, to drawing, to speaking and ultimately to singing, the movement of the text attends

[5]A similar sentiment is made by the protagonist Witty Ticcy Ray in the essay by Oliver Sacks. Ray chooses not to repress his Tourettes as it offers him an enlivening 'superabundance' of relations to world, and the task of the therapy is to explore how to retain rather than repress Ray's expressions.

to form itself, searching for shapes and density to meet the dancing intensity of world. The song recalls not only Deligny's *lignes d'erre* but also Bruce Chatwin's encounter with the Aboriginal songlines of experience passed on through generations, which is also a singing-into-being of the land and the human figures passing through, a route 'encoded in your song' (2018: 112). The song that is a map, that is a memory, is also a gift, to be passed on.

The second feature of an autistic *Einfühlung* resides in the porosity of the self, a mode that Jane Bennett identifies in the work of the nineteenth-century American poet Walt Whitman, to which she gives the terms influx and efflux. Like May and Carmichael, Whitman's verse sings 'a direct affective transfer, as a spark along an electrical current' (Bennett, 2020: 30). Whitman's poetic efforts derive from his version of himself as a sensitive receptor, 'liable to myriad "sympathies"': Bennett cites many lines from Whitman's famous poem 'Leaves of Grass', including this one, 'I have instant conductors all over me whether I pass or stop' (2020: xiii). Whitman's ingestion of sensory data is an influx that she describes as comingling with all that it encounters, and an efflux, analogous to exhaling and excreting a matter that has in turn been modified. The crux of Bennett's reading of Whitman, the reason why he matters at this moment she argues, is his modelling of an unusually porous 'I', a shape rather than identity that is open to the influence of what she has named in another of her works, vibrant matter, the non-human world that can be measured in terms not of intentionality but of influence. It is a curiously autistic sensibility that is being described, one that contributes to this discussion without the demand that Whitman needs a diagnosis.

The porosity in Whitman that attracts Bennett employs a mode of writing that lacks the force of intention and is instead animated by the 'press of the outdoors' (2020: xxii). In what she describes as 'writing up' with Whitman (the subtitle of the book), there is something of Bennett stepping into his momentum and being animated across time by the forces that 'pressed in' on the poet. Like Manning, Bennett draws on the vitalist thought of Alfred Whitehead to describe the effects of being animated; like Whitman, Whitehead invented terms to describe feelings and sensations at the edges of language. Of particular note is his term 'prehensions', designating a responsiveness to the milieu that may register cognitively or indeed

fall outside of this registration. Famously, Whitehead is interested in the capacity for prehensions to impress upon awareness to different degrees; those that barely enter consciousness' virtual unactualized potentialities. Certain prehensions are screened out as experience is a subtractive process, a point that Manning also makes in her discussion of autism and attention. Yet even the prehensions screened out have left a mark of sorts. If Whitman is useful for his poetic descriptions of prehensions, the porosity that he brings to the discussion of *Einfühlung* offers a new way of thinking the binary of projection-introjection. As psychoanalytic terms concerned with the maintenance of boundary forms, notions of psychic health attend to an image of bodily integrity as well as the inverse, a pathology of porous thresholds. Whitman's poetry, in contrast, images bodies in states of affective transfer, as 'sympathetic circuits' of affects. Whitman, argues Bennett, inflects an older moral sentimentalism towards 'a physics of attractions (and antipathies) between porous bodies, an impersonal network' (2020: 32).

The third mode of an autistic *Einfühlung* resides in the concept of mimesis and echo. Both Jane Bennett and Sigrid Weigel identify in *Einfühlung* 'aspects of the echo or resonance between the Self and the other/the objects/the nature that were lost since the Early Modern Age' (Weigel, 2017: 20). Related to the porosity of self, the relation of feeling-into or being open to affective transmissions of world, a matter about which Lipps and his contemporaries could not come to agreement, is the term 'resonate', which allows for a shuttling back and forth of sensation between Self and other/object/nature without resolution. Resonate, derived from the Latin *resonare*, meaning echo, draws on the Greek myth in which resonance is converted into a form of repetition: subject to Hera's curse, Echo famously is committed to the act of mirroring, destined to repeat the last words Narcissus has said to her. The term 'resonance' gathers into itself diverse historical threads through the synonyms of echo, repetition and mimesis, terms that take different features of the same act.

The mimetic is a fundamental aspect of autistic experience that manifests in at least two ways: linguistically in what Yergeau names echophenomena (in a reclaiming of the medicalized iteration of echolalia), and in the bodily echoes and rhythmic parsing of milieu in the act of stimming. In Yergeau's experiential account of

echophenomena, the autistic repetition of certain words, phrases or scripts is reclaimed in its fullness: they claim that 'the inventional possibilities are many' (2018: 196). Not simply an appropriation or queering of the term, the appearances of echophenomena in various passages of *Authoring Autism* elaborate its variegated meaning as a practice. Yergeau remarks that the same phrase or text can signify different things in different contexts, but further than this, the word or phrase may take on a culminative meaning as it registers across several events, potentially its contextual mismatch energizing its affect. 'Echophenomena do not symbolically represent so much as they immediately, and acontextually, signify', they write, adding a sense of exhilaration through the temporal immediacy. Echoes are creative, inventive.

The example that Yergeau refers to is their own preponderance for the script of the film *Airplane!* (Jim Abrahams, David Zucker and Jerry Zucker, 1980), a disaster comedy alternatively titled *Flying High*. The film makes an appearance six times in the book and is described as a script for many emotional moods (allaying anxiety, registering upset or making a social impression) and multiple occasions. 'Just like Gerald Ford' is an invitation to dialogue, a resource placed in a space of communicative possibility with another. Yergeau writes: 'At one relative's funeral, for instance, I found myself absent of verbal thought and immediately devolved into the entirety of Stephen Stucker's lines from the film' (2018: 196). The script is also a placeholder, a punctuation mark in the midst of a full flow of sensory experience. The echoed script cannot be dismissed as an empty meaningless repetition of unanchored words, but is a source material with strong potential for social improvisation: 'The inventional possibilities of echoing are many' (2018: 196). A further critical intervention into the medical designation of echoing attends to the timing: 'Echoing need not immediately follow an original event in order to be properly conceived an echo', they write, claiming the salience of echo across time when the source may have been lost or forgotten by others (2018: 198).

Julia Miele Rodas's account of autistic poetics embraces forms of autistic echo as ricochets and patterns that push meaning in a playful, experimental and intelligent way (Rodas, 2018). Rodas finds common ground in autistic preponderance for 'word collecting' and

the avant-garde list-making practices of the mid-twentieth-century writer George Perec. Rodas draws correspondences between the use of repetition in nineteenth-century Gothic literature and autistic textual repetitions as they are reported in clinical accounts through the twentieth century, from Kanner to Asperger to Bettelheim. Peppering her text with quotations from Kanner's study, the analysis performs its own ricochet of inserting meaning through unexpected interjection: '*The butterfly is snowed, snowed with snow*' (Rodas's emphasis). Noting the paradoxical reception and interpretation of echo in clinical contexts, she writes: 'Autistic repetition is at once an indication of vacancy and a torrent, an overpowering, intimidating eruption of language' (2018: 44). The autistic echo is suggestive of the taking on of form without comprehending content. This description performs its own ricochet of a practice associated with *Einfühlung*, of the introspective mimicry of architecture, of lines and shapes, of furniture or repetitive acts of echo that are not directed at human recipience.

Nick Walker's account of stimming usefully sets out the different manifestations of the stim, which include proprioceptive movement (rocking, pacing, seeking physical pressure), touch (such as stroking), vestibular (swinging or spinning) and visual and auditory (being captivated by movement or sound) (2021: 105). Far from being a utilitarian feature of behaviour that operates to regulate and integrate sensory influences, Walker argues that stimming provides access to 'exceptional human capacities such as flow states or experiences of profound communion and ego transcendence' (2021: 107). Stimming is also the way in which autistics 'author the conditions of their rhetoricity', according to Remi Yergeau (2018, 200). Stimming is a language of the body that can be thought of as an autistic semiosis, which infers that the neuronormative paradigm of communicative inventory is in need of updating. This practice is also, I contend, the meeting point for late nineteenth-century experiments in aesthetics and autistic ontology. The act of stimming belongs to a modality that is closer to the physics of physiognomy than the hermeneutics of semiotics; the meaning of an activity emerges in and through its repeated practice, in contrast to the hermeneutic model of an intentional thought subsequently enacted.

The fourth affinity of autism and the discourse of *Einfühlung* takes root in landscape and phantasmagoria, in the familiar made unfamiliar: 'I unsettle people. I'm uncanny', writes Joanne Limburg of the sense of her own autistic presence. In the opening of her book *Letters to My Weird Sisters*, Limburg addresses the reader in epistolary form from 'Uncanny Valley', a term used by game designers and animators to refer to the discomfort of a human figure that does not quite pass as human, existing on a liminal edge of indiscernibility (Limburg, 2021). This, she writes, is the experience of being autistic, aware of not only others' discomfort but also the recipient of their hostility to not comprehending her difference. It recalls the uncanny self-estrangement that (earlier in this chapter) Robin Curtis identifies with both early cinema and *Einfühlung*: 'The moving image offers access to a kind of kaleidoscopic space in which the viewer may lose his privileged status as subject and may be permitted to move as object among other objects' (2012: 426). Conceptually, the becoming object of the subject in *Einfühlung*, however, is more ambivalent than Limburg's personal association with the uncanny. It holds the possibility of experiencing *into* a thing rather than being projected *onto* as a thing.

Recalling the history of *Einfühlung* in German Romanticism, the sensory apprehension of the natural world is a relationship to landscape in its scale, dimensions, weight and mass, a somatic analogy of feeling-into a non-human world of forces and forms. As though summoning these traditions, the film *Illuminating the Wilderness* (2018) by the neurodivergent collective Project Artworks explores a remote Scottish Glen (Glen Affric) over the course of a week. The film offers no particular journey to or from the location but opens with the sounds of the landscape and the voice of one of the camp's residents, Sharif. The film is made on location with neurodivergent artists and their families, a number of artist-support workers and the project's co-leads and directors of the film, Kate Adams and Tim Corrigan.

The film situates the viewer in the soundscape of the environment in a manner that invites meditation on what is being experienced. The film's mode is gradual accumulation of detail: sounds, voices, changes in weather, small transitory journeys within the landscape. The discussion is whether to walk or drive to a bothy further up in the

hills. There is a game of finding hidden items in a wooded area dense with undergrowth. There is a discussion of boredom in the bothy and the lack of television. The camera movements are at times sedentary and still, and at others erratic in following the rhythm and roll of a body moving through the landscape. Sonia Boué writes of the film as an experience that is in itself a form of porous spectatorship: 'We hear the rain in the way it sounds in your head as it drops on your hood or umbrella … This is immersion. When it rains, I am inside it, and the rain is inside me' (Boué, 2020). The soundtrack also meanders to the gentle humming of a voice, while the image cuts across a landscape, moving between small acts and statements and the mountainous forms that dominate, too large for the frame. There is a patterning to conversations as words and phrases are repeated, passed on and picked up, as though linguistic terms are to be considered and tried on. Like Deligny's films and photographs of the commune in the Cévennes, these film images make intelligible the gestures that usually escape the attention of the camera, of the viewer, of the allistic world. Here, in cinema, they are writ large.

# 3

# Cinema: *Einfühlung* machine

In this last chapter of the book, I take something of a speculative approach to autism through a reading of its affinity with cinema, gathering parts of a shared history through which a signature of autism aesthetics becomes intelligible. That both autism and cinema are immersed in the world in a way that is immanent to it, rather than reflecting upon and documenting 'reality' from a position that can be separated from world, illuminates the manner or style of each. The first part of the chapter explores moments in which theoretical commentary on the formal capacities of film and the photographic arts refract and echo an autistic sensibility. The second part explores two instances in which cinema and autism formally coincide, not as a representational practice of filming autistic characters and stories but in ways that reveal the imminence of the cinematic within autistic apprehension and conversely the autistic within a cinematic aesthetic.

I want however to begin with a figuration that both binds and troubles the perceived properties and qualities of cinema and autism: that of the automaton. The automaton is a type of spectre that haunts both cinema and autism throughout the twentieth century. That cinema's uniqueness resides in its automated form of image registration free of human intervention is suggestively celebrated in the writings of early filmmaker Jean Epstein, while the same capacity has been regarded as its qualification as an industry rather than an art. André Bazin, credited with producing the first extensive theory of cinema in the mid-twentieth century, describes the notable features of cinema thus: 'For the first time, between the originating object and its reproduction there intervenes only the instrumentality of a non-living agent. For the first time an image of

the world is formed automatically, without the creative intervention of man' (Bazin cited in Trehair, 2014: 132). In the history of autism, the figure of the mechanized human or robot is scattered across clinical observations and classifications, from Hans Asperger's description of autistic children in his study as 'autistic automata', to more frequent references in popular culture to the flute-like tone of autistic voices and rigid and repetitive behaviour patterns like those of a machine. Such analogies are generative of research agendas that deepen the association; as Jeff Nagy states, 'the "machine-like" metaphors that autism research has often deployed for autistic individuals and behavior, describing individuals as unfeeling and computer-like and their behavior as robotic, are themselves dehumanizing' (2024: 3991). Autism presents a particular fascination, Stuart Murray argues, in its 'allure of potentially unquantifiable human difference and the nightmare of not somehow being "fully" human' (2008: 5). The elision of difference with deficit, furthermore, becomes established as a lack of expressive capacity (cinema and autism are aligned as repetitious reproductions of what is given) and of creative or cognitive intention. Remi Yergeau describes as a leitmotif in clinical and popular literature the autonomic autist who lacks agency, 'a kind of being and moving that exists tragically at the folds of involuntary automation' (2018: 11).

The over-familiar account of the threats posed by the automatism however (notably continuing through the fear discourse of AI's prevalence) is disrupted by the work of autistic artist Lindsay Seers in the practice of mixing human with mechanical form. One of the modes that Seers has inhabited for over twenty years is the making of Optograms, a series of mouth photograph works created by the artist by inserting a small piece of photographic paper into her mouth and using her lips as a shutter mechanism to control light exposure.[1] The results are singular, contingent on the features of the environment and Seers's looped interaction with its features, the placement of

[1]Seers supplies this historical footnote to her use of the term on her website: 'Optograms were images that were believed to be etched into the retina at the point of death (particularly a dramatic death) forming a kind of photograph in the eye which could be recovered through dissection. There was a scientific foundation to this belief, which was prevalent in the Victorian period)' (https://lindsayseers.info/work/320, accessed 1 October 2023).

her body (often the images are made by the artist lying down) and the photographic paper used: many images are tinged red with the light transmitting through the blood-latticed 'walls' of Seers's cheeks. Optograms, we might venture, appropriate a formerly mechanical process of 'camering' into a repertoire of human activity, changing the register of what is considered human expression in the process. The act of making images in this way brings attention to the composite chemical matter of analogue photographs formed through alchemic interactions. In placing the process of chemical registration inside of a body, the human form appears less an envelope of identity and more an organism formed by the elements of its environment: oxygen, carbon, hydrogen, nitrogen, calcium and phosphorous.

The making of Optograms is anchored within the biographical nexus of the artist's life that began in Mauritius, a story described in a book of short essays titled *Human Camera*. An early-life event is recounted in which the artist, at the age of eight, spoke her first words. 'For the child the transformation is calamitous: the onset of language shatters her immersion in the rich manifold of undifferentiated Being.' What unfolds is that Seers had up until this time been mute and gifted with an eidetic memory. Commonly known as a photographic memory, it is, she notes, quite unlike the 'flat frozen blink' of the shutter, and more intensely experienced as an 'overabundance of detail' involving all the senses (2007: 36). 'I didn't need to speak in those years', she writes. 'There was simply nothing to say and no time to say it: there was no space to speak – that would halt the next unfolding moment' in which 'everything was immediate and present' (2007: 36). Like Whitman, Iris Johannsen and Joanna Limburg, Seers describes herself as a being that is imminent within an evolving scene: I was 'a bead', she writes, 'in the mesmerising and constantly shifting pattern' (2007: 36).

The transition from processing the world without speech to one where language parses and mediates experience is one of immense loss. Language puts the child Seers into time, but at the cost of losing the intense experiencing of world that can be recalled and re-experienced. In a further disruption of the normative story of the autistic child automatism coming to life through acceding to language, Seers names an event that complicates the binary that opposes muteness to speech, engagement in world to withdrawal: the event

of having her photograph taken, which happens in the studio of a professional photographer. The studio is located within a colonial-style house in Mauritius where Seers was born and is soon to leave. In this moment the child smiles, the shutter snaps shut, but the image is delayed: the processing meets a problem, the stock is sent to Africa and returned on a ship that is then wrecked. It is months later that the child sees the image, and it is in this moment of recognition that 'a rupture occurred', an experience of being discarded from the kaleidoscope where everything was equivalent to everything else and being thrown outside of the tube. The rupture entails the loss of time as a vivid perpetual present, replaced by a vague awareness of the present that is suddenly eclipsed by other moments. 'Even the moment I was in hardly existed', she recalls, 'blocked out by thoughts of other things; imaginings, anxieties, half-phrases repeated and answered in new ways' (2007: 41). Her parents are pleased by the turn towards normativity, yet for Seers, language and its accession to a structured time and identity are difficult to bear. Her father gives the child a camera by way of compensation, but the act of photographing becomes obsessive, and the camera is taken away.

Later, as an adult, Seers returns to the matter of images and imaging by transforming her body into a darkroom. She buys lengths of dark fabric from a market stall and makes a sack 'like a half body-bag', covering her standing figure from the head down to the waist, covering herself with a dark fabric while she cuts up and loads the film into her mouth. Outside of the bag she becomes the optical mechanism, and inside the bag, the processing room. Becoming-camera instantiates Seers within the process of image-making, not as sovereign creator but as an element of a process that refuses to separate a human body from the effects of light and chemical registration. Other works by Seers extend the integration of the human body into the world that is seen, such as *Extramission*, a film in which Seers uses a head-mounted apparatus to project beams of light onto objects, enacting an ancient belief (from Plato and Euclid) that the eye projected rather than received visual information.[2] In a

[2]An exhibition in Amsterdam titled 'Swallowing Black Maria' again mixed the form of cinematic production with ingestion. Seers constructed a to-scale model of Edison's Black Maria studio within which she projected the film *Extramission* (2007).

further manifestation of human–machine blending, Seers creates a two-headed ventriloquist dummy named Sailor Bill whose mouth opens to reveal two cameras that take an image of the unsuspecting viewer. A method of substitution – a mouth in place of a camera, a camera in place of spoken language, a dummy in place of a human – displaces the referent to the effect that things become part-players in a larger process. In this sense, Seers displaces the conventional philosophical focus of ontological being with that of doing, aligning her practice with a more Whiteheadian processual philosophy.

There are multiple lines of thought emerging out of Seers's practice as it pivots on the relations of autism-imaging-automatism: one of the most striking of these is the emphatic pull to engage with form (or process) over content.[3] In the history of autism, the subject of form has attached to spoken language to create an enquiry into the singular aspects of autistic speech. This in turn has generated interest from literary scholars in 'autistic dynamics' (Glastonbury, 1997), aspects of autistic language use that align with aesthetic modernism (McDonagh, 2008) and mid-twentieth-century avant-garde practices (Rodas, 2018). Julia Miele Rodas's study of autism, literature and language reads currents of influence moving between clinical accounts of autism, notably Kanner's 'Autistic Disturbances' and the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (*DSM*), and modernist literary tropes. She argues that a poetics of autistic language present in clinical studies of autism, such as repetition and echolalia, points to autism's apparent preference for 'form and no substance', a thoroughly modernist mode of expression. Rodas, along with other scholars of modernism and autism, notably Patrick McDonagh, Marianne Glastonbury and Ato Quayson, argues that there is a relationship between clinical and aesthetic critiques of autistic language that are not exclusive to each domain. Pointing to Kanner's

[3]Another line of thought arising from Seers's practice as camera that I don't have space to go into here is the parody of the idea endemic to much of film theory, that the camera operates in the place of the human eye, of the spectator. Daniel Morgan plots the way in which the autonomy of the camera and its movement has never properly been understood outside of an imitative machine–human model. The reason for such an omission is perhaps that we 'have been so struck by the intuitive force that the moving camera is about point of view, that the camera functions as our eye, that we have been unable to see anything else' (Morgan, 2021: 19).

fascination with metaphor and the force of repetitions in the speech of the autistic children in his care, Rodas locates the same autistic practices in avant-garde literary works of the twentieth century, from Gertrude Stein's word play and Georges Perec's taxonomic essay lists, to Warhol's language games, practices that bring a 'consciousness of word-as-thing, using semantic satiation and "verbal cubism" as calculated aesthetic maneuvers' (2018: 104). Language, in autistic and avant-garde literary practice, takes on a concrete form akin to an architectural structure or a sound pattern that, in becoming visible, may be distorted, pressured and plied. Content, or meaning, arises as a secondary effect.

Making visible of the form of language has a corollary in avant-garde cinema of the 1926. Marcel Duchamp's *Anémic Cinéma* (1926) is a seven-minute film created from a static camera that is recording two-dimensional spirals that rhythmically spin, drawing the viewer's attention from the edges to the centre of the image and back again. The movement of the spiral is lulling, yet the movement simultaneously tricks the eye into reading depth into the image through the placement of smaller circles at the centre of the plane. The film alternates between abstract patterns and other circling discs that carry text of erotically suggestive words that pun and playfully alliterate. Devoid of human characters, a linear form and a story arc, the 'content' of the film – if indeed there can be said to be one – is perception itself, manifest in the shifting qualities of depth and surface, line and circle, stillness and movement. Writing in *Artforum* in 1973, Annette Michelson described Duchamp's film as utilizing an 'autistic economy', put to the service of 'art and speculative thought … recasting of natural laws into highly artificial and controlled codes'. The autistic economy of the cinema as a play on form is taken up in later decades by Stanley Cavell, Giles Deleuze and Jacques Rancière, who, in Lisa Trehair's telling, 'focused their investigations of cinema on understanding the power of this automatism', which could also be understood (in Cavell's words) as a 'desire to escape subjectivity and metaphysical isolation'. Cast in this way, cinema as automaton presents the possible suspension of, or relief from, the project of being human, allowing the spectator to relinquish the position of being the site of a commanding gaze, centred and egocentric. The cinema as automaton releases the

individual subject into a milieu where abstract visual forms are agential, animated and vibrant (Bennett, 2010; Chen, 2012).

An observation of non-human presence by the late autistic writer and activist Mel Baggs sounds a startlingly similar note: 'Everything is alive in its own unique way: that has nothing to do with human thoughts and feelings, and everything to do with each thing having its own unique way of being in the world, totally independent of humans. This goes both for traditionally animate and traditionally inanimate things.' In 2007, Baggs made an eight-minute YouTube video, titled *In My Language*, a film so widely viewed that Baggs was 'elevated to the status of autism celebrity, with appearances on mainstream television' (Murray, 2008: 43), and the film had been widely written about through the optic of art brut (Fleming, 2017), as the exposition of a porous 'leaky self' (Manning, 2013) and as the assertion of autistic interiority (Rodas, 2018). A film in two parts, the first three minutes and sixteen seconds captures the attentiveness of Baggs's communion with their world. The recording is made in a domestic space. The room comprises a desk, shelves holding books, papers and other objects, some drawers and a sofa. A large window opens onto a view, of branches swaying in the foreground, a flagpole with a flag moved by the breeze and further away some roofs of houses. The context however is not a setting in the sense of a *mise en scène*: it is not a coded arrangement of indices of character. The room is a series of object-events to be explored or excavated by way of smell, texture, a potential for sound and movement, a capacity to stir the air. A face is rubbed up and down between the pages of a book, a finger strums across a piece of corrugated plastic, a body rocks back and forth towards the light from the window, fingers orchestrating the currents of air. The camera at times focuses on Baggs and at other moments provides a view in close-up of what Baggs might be seeing: the spiralling inside of a slinky as it is bounced up and down, a hand rhythmically caressing the handle of a drawer in a circular motion. The audio track is Baggs's humming voice which shifts between registers, a rhythmic undulating hum that, as it rises to a higher pitch, is suggestive of a greater intensity of communion. The aesthetic of *In My Language*, over a decade later, is grainy, washed out, a low-resolution swimmy feel to the images as they move. As the video

ages, its material properties begin to surface in a manner entirely appropriate to the material interests of the filmmaker.

The second part of the film, titled 'A Translation', is implicitly addressed to the neurotypical viewer who is inducted into the 'meaning' of the film, which is to say, the viewer is instructed to abandon attempts to translate the film into a neurotypical paradigm. Remi Yergeau writes that the film 'rebuffs the allistic desire to interpret, to root out symbolism and social meaning in autistexts'. The translation necessarily uses the language of the dominant group to whom it is addressed, yet its delivery through automated voice software cleaves a gap between the words and their naturalized form as expression. In using 'your language', the voice infers, I do not, however, support its privileged position within a hierarchy of signification. Rejecting the notion that verbal language is a more complex engagement with the world than the sensory language of communion that the film documents, Baggs writes, 'the thinking of people like me is only taken seriously if we learn your language'. Baggs makes intelligible the politics of recognition that operates selectively in designating verbal and written acts as communication, while other correspondences fail to register as a communication at all. 'It is only when I type something in your language', Baggs writes in the translation, 'that you refer to me as having communication.' Confronted with non-verbal communication, which is a confrontation with difference itself, the neurotypical subject falters, finding itself illiterate in this 'other' language, a language of autism and a language of film.

The risk inherent to any discussion of *In My Language* is the tendency to focus on the translated section; that is, a discussion that takes place 'in words' (as I am conducting here) gravitates to the worded section of the film. What tends to be overlooked, ironically or perhaps predictably, is the non-worded acts of communication in the first part. Importantly for this chapter's consideration of autism and cinema, it is the medium of film that provides the language of choice for this expression. That film's capacities as a medium are attuned to sensory affects is a feature to be found both in early film theory of the twentieth century (which we will come to in a moment), and again in recent accounts of cinema as 'a sliding relationship between haptic and optical' processes in Laura Marks's

formulation (although Marks ultimately privileges the parsing of this experience in language).[4] Film reveals a world of correspondences that take place outside of verbal language. If *In My Language* stages the neurotypical non-comprehension of autistic embodiment, it also, simultaneously, evidences an alliance between autistic and filmic modes of apprehension.

The work of early film theorists who saw in cinema a new apprehension of the non-human world evidences an excitement in film's capacity to act *on* and *with* the viewer's body, accessing modes of sensorial response that bypassed cognitive control. Gregory Flaxman writes that the experience of film in the first few decades of the twentieth century was articulated as a language of provocation, possession and illusory disturbance that invites comparison with the psycho-aesthetic:

> Natural perception is gripped by a waking 'dream' (Vuillermoz), a 'hallucination' (Goudal), the flash of pure 'photogénie' (Epstein), the 'kinetics' of machine age (Vertov), the fantastic 'modulations' of cineplastic matter (Faure), the 'explosion' of images (Benjamin), and the variable 'stimuli' of montage (Eisenstein). (2016, 181)

The pure vibrance of these theorizations in their articulation of the potency of moving images takes a direct line from German aesthetics and *Einfühlung*. Flaxman draws on this work to furnish an argument that images can take hold of a spectator or, as he calls it, 'vehicularize' its viewer. Drawing on Worringer's *Form: Problems in the Gothic* (1911), Flaxman goes so far as to suggest that an independent experiential logic operates within human perception: 'The moving image moves us, affects us, because it moves *in* us', he writes (2016: 180). This is a step change from the commutative reversibility that Vivian Sobchack (2004) describes for the experience of watching a film as a shuttling back and forth between viewer and image. For Flaxman, film is an alien incorporated. For Baggs, film is 'an opening, in perception, to the uncategorized, to the unclassified' (Erin Manning in Yergeau, 2018: 55).

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[4]Laura Marks however privileges a linguistic parsing of sensory apprehension.

The commitment to sensory experience as a complex form of knowledge, one that exceeds anthropological parameters, is expanded by Baggs some years later in a blog post addressing the topic of animism mentioned earlier in the chapter. They write:

> Everything is alive in its own unique way: that has nothing to do with human thoughts and feelings, and everything to do with each thing having its own unique way of being in the world, totally independent of humans. This goes both for traditionally animate and traditionally inanimate things. My recognizing the aliveness of things does not mean I think they're similar to me. In fact, to recognize that things are alive, you have to be able to step out of the way and stop using yourself as a mirror to measure the rest of the world by.

The profoundly unanthropocentric sentiment of this comment recalls Yergeau's observation that 'autistics might resonate with each other, but so too do they resonate with the non-human', and I would add to this a resonance with the cinematic. André Bazin contemplates cinema as 'a set of moving images that stages humans, animals and things all alike yet never the same, in the "centrifugal" space of the screen where "man is no longer the focus of the drama"'. According to John Mullarkey, Bazin thought cinema suggestive of a new democracy between things human and non-human: such a levelling of viewer and viewed, Bazin speculated, was both comic and frightening (Mullarkey, 2013: 15). Notably, and as Vivian Sobchack argues, comedy and horror are the genre of film most likely to create effects on and through the body of the viewer, manifesting the haptic touch of cinema that makes the skin crawl, the heart to beat faster or the body ripple with laughter.

## The more than human

Disability theorists David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder identify disability and animality as 'strange bedfellows', with disability 'serving as the distinguishing partition between rationality and instinct-driven existence'. Disability operates as a threshold, a

porous border in which a clear delineation of the human-animal from the so-called primitive is at risk. The flight from animality, as they name it, refers to the desire to escape the racist evolutionary paradigm in which the animal is figuratively the lowest point on an evolutionary scale, and the disabled subject only one step above in the hierarchical arrangement. It is worth noting here that if the conjunction of autism and animality presents a danger in the zone of human–animal differentiation, the affinity of autism with the object world conjures a different but equally problematic trope of autism: an attachment preference for things over people, the visual shorthand for which is the figure that opened this chapter, the automaton or robot.

A growing body of work in autism studies has contributed to the unsettling of stereotypes of autism and its relation to the more-than-human. In Anna Nygren's persuasive account of autism–object relations, she points to a 'rhetorical phenomenon' in which the autistic attention to objects undergoes a reversal with the 'neurodivergent subject being spoken about as an object', the machine-like automaton (2022: 94). From a different angle, Anna Stenning contends that a prevalent sense of autism as particularly 'gifted' in apprehension of non-human materiality risks affirming the 'positive prejudice' of autism as a condition with magical powers while simultaneously casting autism as a condition of limited human sociality compensated by extraordinary sensory powers (2020b: 4). The demarcated sensitivity, she argues, risks once again the trap of autistic difference being marked as a non-human capacity. 'The idea that autistics may experience greater environmental empathy', she writes, 'may contribute to the "othering" of neurodivergent people, through the assumption that we are somehow closer to nature than those who consider themselves to be neurotypical' (2020b: 4). Stenning counters this reductive interpretation of environmental apprehension through her close reading of Greta Thunberg's autobiography, *No One Is Too Small to Make a Difference* (2019). Thunberg, she argues, exercises an extension of care, typically limited to humankind, to the more-than-human. Her reading lucidly reveals human 'empathy' to be a limited resource that is richly rewarded for its application to fellow humans, while the (autistic) extension of 'empathy' to non-human animals and the non-human aspects of world is regularly regarded by

the allistic world as at best eccentric, and in clinical contexts, a sign of social incapacity.

Anna Nygren argues that there is a self-protective dimension to an autistic orientation towards the more-than-human, which is 'a response to the oppressive view of the autistic as less-than-human – a way of finding one's allies outside of the realm of human civilization', and furthermore, a forceful argument that an 'autistic worldly spiritualness' attends to the non-human world as an ethical practice that 'does not segregate one life form from another'. Yet the same switch from positive attribute to pathological symptom remains a potential hazard. Stenning identifies a similar stereotyping of an autistic 'moral or intellectual intensity or purity' that, like wordly spiritualness, is out of step with 'majority' opinion, in the work of psychologist Uta Frith (2020b: 4). In the medicalized model, such observations of autistic qualities and sensibilities undergo translation (passing through the anthropological machine) into symptoms, and subsequently diagnostic criteria. In writing about autistic relationships to the non-human, Nygren's account of autistic-nature-relating and Stenning's environmental life-writing suggest that what is being attended to (the human, non-human, more-than-human) is a contested matter and therefore a political act. From a clinical point of view, autistic attention is diagrammed in terms of a spectrum of flexibility-rigidity. The extent to which autistic attention is considered problematic is evident from its position at the centre of a network of educational and behaviourist psychological approaches of intervention and rehabilitation that purport to remedy attention 'deficits' in autistic people. Titles such as *Flexible and Focused* and *Autism Demystified: Disclosing the Mysteries of Autism and Attention Deficit Disorder* present a surprising degree of certainty about the need to remedy and adjust what it is that autistic people give their attention to and how they do it.

There are other ways of thinking about attention outside of a medical or economic model. Anat Pick's anti-philosophical concept of attention, harnessing the work of the mid-century French philosopher, mystic and political activist Simone Weil to practise 'reading through a creaturely prism … beyond an anthropocentric perspective', is one that acknowledges vulnerability as a 'universal mode of exposure' (2011: 160). Pick posits Weil's attention as a form

of exposure manifest in the substance of bodies, the location of a common vulnerability. Through the modality of a bodily vulnerability, the subject senses, pays attention to the world. Attention is the moniker of a process that orients the subject *towards*, or *brings into focus*, aspects of environment in the common sense of attending to something (*ad-tendere*), a process that is neither interpretative nor projective. Pick cites another Weil scholar, Sharon Cameron, to give name to this form of attention: 'regard without motive'. Cameron continues, 'seeing like this – without identification – is seeing that resists "reading"' (cited in Pick, 2020: 5).

Pick's comment that 'attention is antiphilosophical; it does not produce arguments or truth claims about its object' provides an alternative version of attention to that proposed by theorists of visual culture, such as Jonathan Crary, whose approach situates attention as the prize within the paradigm of a capitalist economy: the capacity 'to attend to' is a form of affective labour and consumption although such acts are rarely connected to their economic value. 'As the opportunity for electronic transactions of all kinds becomes omnipresent, there is no vestige of what used to be everyday life beyond the reach of corporate intrusion', he writes. The overwhelming success of capitalism in harnessing attention '24/7', he argues, 'dissolves the separation between the personal and professional, between entertainment and information, all overridden by a compulsory functionality of communication' (Citton, 2017: 144). In a further augmentation of this argument in *The Ecology of Attention*, Yves Citton demonstrates how competition for and command of attention is not only a form of affective attachment binding individuals to forms of labour and consumption but is also productive of the model of individuality itself. What he names 'individuation effects' are sedimented forms of an identity produced through our attentional praxis; 'we become together the individuals that we are depending on the paths along which our attention is stabilized' (2017: 172).

The act of stabilization, however, is open to contingent effects: the subject as it travels is caught in a relay of echoes and responses, a site of unpredictable potential reaction to stimuli. The degree to which each of us experiences ourselves as open to currents of contingent sway, or, conversely, controlled by regimes of attentional determination, may be a way of describing the difference between

autism (the former) and neurotypicality (the latter). Yet there is both a risk and a lure to this description of onto-tendencies: that autism may be positioned as an outside to a capitalist attention capture, a radical exteriority to the neurotypical neurofunctioning, a rebellion against the injunction to 'pay' attention. If Weil's anti-philosophical attention presents a type of underbelly to the attention economy, it is important that it is not mythologized, along with autism, as a mode of 'uncontaminated' receptiveness. The terms of Pick's account of attention, derived from the work of Simone Weil, are not those of capture/resistance but the experience of a vulnerability shared across the domains of the human animal, the non-human animal and the inhuman world: her definition of creatureliness as 'material, temporal, and vulnerable' extends to and binds each (Pick, 2011: 5). The importance of creatureliness is not only the shared exposure to power that renders humans, and non-human animals and things, vulnerable, but also the residing of that vulnerability in material form, in the evident exteriority of life. This distinction, dividing an explicit external vulnerable semiotic from an implicit internal invulnerability, echoes a point made by Remi Yergeau, that pathologizing accounts of the autistic describe an external identity anchored in tangible relations of time and space, whereas allistic identity is given as metaphysically foundational yet nowhere explicitly exposed to power: 'autism is figured as a relation with nature and object and place', whereas allism is figured as the 'intangible, the invisible, the social' (Yergeau, 2018: 140).

'What might it mean', asks Pick, 'to speak about *cinematic attention*?' For one thing, to speak of the visual relay of looks in cinema as *attention* is to replace the psychoanalytic vocabulary of classical film theory with a different register unconcerned with the intrahuman power-play endemic to terms such as voyeurism and scopophilia. As a mode of regard, attention is a disinterested look, uninvested in an economy of recognition or looking back, and 'thus moves beyond the power play of subjectivity and personhood as the threshold of morality and representation'. Released from the paradigm of exchange, attention is, importantly here, a mode of regard that is open to other, perhaps non-human, ways of communicating. Citing Benjamin, Pick presents an expansive notion of communication: 'The nonhuman world communicates without looking back, just as the

human can sometimes give way to sightlessness and muteness and still speak' (2011: 160).

In the following section I take forward this debate in the exploration of two aspects of an autistic affinity with cinema to tease out what might be named an autistic cinaesthetic, or, as Steven Eastwood has termed this correspondence, cinemautism (Eastwood, 2016), Erin Manning's 'autistic perception' (Manning, 2013) and David Hartley's cinematic alliance with autism which he names 'cognitive estrangement' (Hartley, 2022). My approach borrows from each of these suggestive terms in order to outline a form of 'disinterested' attention that is located in the camera's framing and capture of what is before it, and in the invitation to the viewer to attend to the audiovisual image without predefined purpose or investment. Disinterested attention regards with curiosity without expecting a return. This is explored in the practices of what became known as 'camering' developed by Fernand Deligny and the network of autistic children and co-workers to whom he gave the name of close presences (*présence proche*), and among whom he lived in the form of a commune from 1967 onwards in the mountainous region of the Cévennes. Deligny redescribed film making as camering in order to depart from conventions of filmmaking that are future-oriented, driven towards and conditioned by a concept of the time of completion. Camering, in contrast, attends to the world and weaves relations in its documentation of things, finding affinities through patterns made by water and smoke, and by the movement of children and dogs through the frame. It is an unfinished process and one whose purpose is located as much in the doing of using the camera rather than in the subsequent viewing of film materials.

The second aspect of an autistic cinaesthetic might be named automatistic sensory apprehension, a use of the apparatus of cinema to operate within a register of the more-than-human, bringing into visibility the transmission of tensions, the play of matter and light and the micro-patterns produced by differences of scale. This quite abstract cinaesthetic is worked through a fictional film exploring a mythical story of sensory difference in the Iranian Danish director Ali Abbasi's film *Border* (*Gräns*, 2018). A film that situates characters within a fictional context of a border control station, conventional notions of character, narrative and dramatic conflict are integral to

the film. Yet its exploration of an automatistic sensory apprehension of world is more than thematizing the topic: it is the calling up of cinema's potential to reveal the world differently, with what Donna Williams has elsewhere named a 'sensorial purpose rather than a functional or significant one'.

## Autistic cinaesthetics

The two films for which Fernand Deligny is most well-known, *Le Moindre Geste* (*The Slightest Gesture*, 1971) and *Ce gamin, là* (*That Kid, There*, 1975), were collectively made with co-workers, autistic children and in dialogue with French thinkers and writers who made and wrote about film makers, including André Bazin, Chris Marker and François Truffaut. As Marlon Miguel notes, cinema was both central and marginal to Deligny's work, present to different degrees throughout his life as 'a space of practice as well as one of conceptual speculation' (2022: 15). Filmmaking was part of an ongoing provisional experiment in living collectively with children who were neurologically different, most often autistic, constructing spaces of habitation outside of psychiatric institutions. Deligny is typically described as an educator, a pedagogue, a writer, a Marxist critical of liberal institutional procedure, a non-violent guerilla, weaver of networks and visionary (Hilton, 2015). He was not aligned with the more formal and loud articulations of social critique but attuned to what Leon Hilton calls the lower frequencies of lives lived on the margins. Marlon Miguel notes that at La Grande Cordée, 'there were those who considered him to be a "very insufficient communist"' (2022: 20).

Deligny's film works had lengthy gestations for several reasons; perhaps the most significant was that the purpose of filming for Deligny was not the production of a film but praxis, the process of making and doing. Filming was a way for Deligny's co-workers (the 'close presences') to learn how to 'be human' around autistic and some severely psychotic children, he writes in the essay 'He's Still One of Us', a reflection on *Le Moindre Geste* from 1971 (Miguel, 2022: 65). The map-making of repeated actions and activities was first conceived as a mode of therapeutic distraction for the carers

at moments of heightened tension, when the children had crises. 'Instead of actively doing something', Miguel argues, 'he proposed that they back away and "trace" the children's movements, wanderings, and gestures in space' (2022: 30). Being a close presence meant not intervening in the behaviour of the children but being alongside them, following and mapping their actions and their use of space, both the interior and the extensive outside areas. The early essay 'The Camera, a Pedagogical Tool' (1955), however, presents a different purpose for film. The camera, in following the routine of the children's typically secluded lives, would place them 'in view', in effect bringing visibility to their singular mode of living. 'With the camera', he writes, 'the world looks at them, the world of Others who had nothing to do with them' (2022: 60).

Miguel suggests three ways for thinking about Deligny's use of cameras. First, to document the children's lives in the commune for their families (often on Super 8 stock) with the sense that the techniques for living or 'therapeutic machines' of the network could be enacted elsewhere, if the children were to return to their familial home. Thus, film is a transmission, a medium for modelling and sending information. The second use, perhaps the most significant here, is the use of the camera as a tool, in parallel to cartography; to film is to practise one activity among others, which is not to document for a future date. The camera is a tool with properties to be discovered and put to work through autistic ways of doing.[5] For Deligny, the camera is valuable only in its capacity to produce unintentional images unmarked by subjectivity and devoid of ego. The third use of the camera is for shooting images that could give the network visibility beyond its borders. *Ce gamin, là* was the most influential of these.

The film took three years to prepare during which there were various currents of influence at play in terms of what kind of film it should be. It was shot by Renaud Victor, a twenty-five-year-old working-class plumber who was studying sociology and film at the Centre Universitaire Expérimental de Vincennes and who had written

[5]For a contemporary formulation and practice of the camera as autistic, see the work of Georgia Kumari Bradburn in the film *The Stimming Pool* (Steven Eastwood and the Neurocultures Collective, 2023) and in Kaufman (2024).

to Deligny after seeing *Le Moindre Geste* in 1971, with a desire to make a film about the commune. Deligny created the conditions for the film. Victor was invited to join the commune for three years as a participant rather than observer. A proposal was made for a film of three to four hours in length recording the way of life of the network with minimal intervention or staging. François Truffaut was to produce it. The form of the film, however, was not known in advance but remained imminent to the process of recording. Catherine Witt, in a discussion of the film's contribution to a practice of documentary as care, writes about an exchange of letters between Deligny, Victor and Truffaut which reveal tensions about the film's accessibility to audiences outside of the network. Truffaut had reservations about the length of *Ce gamin, là* and the lack of contextualizing commentary or formal explication. Yet, as Witt suggests, the introduction of explication into the film, and in the form of spoken language, moved against the ethos of the *tentative*. She writes, 'a recourse to language in the film was inevitably vexing if not completely antithetical to the whole principle underlying the *tentative*, namely, opening a space devoid of language and the linguistic strictures of subjectivity in order to explore a new mode of living and being together' (Witt, 2022). To 'translate' this experience into a linguistic register threatened to reinstate the normative perspective on autistic alterity.

Deligny had influenced Truffaut's first film, *Les Quatre Cents Coups*, about a young 'delinquent' boy for whom formal institutions provide no support, and Truffaut's later film, *L'Enfant sauvage/The Wild Child* (1970), an historical film recalling the story of the child of Avignon, found in the woods, having been raised among wolves. The film's presentation of the rehabilitation of the child, starring Truffaut as the principal saviour, was problematic in many ways, as commentary has widely asserted. Pooja Rangan reads the film as a fable of the abandoned or disabled child saved by the emissaries of civilization (Rangan, 2017). Rangan's argument extends further beyond this fictional film to critique the movement of participatory documentary as a whole during this period; the signature method of 'giving voice to the other', she argues, constructs the victim that it claims to redeem, a position that finds resonance with Deligny's insistence that the other should not be forced to speak 'our' language but should remain in what Bertrand Ogilvie names 'the circle of common life' (2015: 16).

Deligny appeared to give ground to Truffaut's request to provide some form of explication, yet the commentary that he speaks does not offer the assurance of the documentary voice-over but a poetic style of philosophical rumination. Deligny ostensibly complies, but his mode of compliance undoes the gesture. Catherine Witt describes the mode of commentary using the technique of Brechtian distanciation in foregrounding its own terms of enunciation. The film opens with the image of a typed script with Deligny's voice narrating the words which are a psychiatric description of autistic children. This is followed by a photograph of the child Janmari, and his arrival in the network, and a map of the area. Twelve minutes into the film Deligny appears after we have heard the sound of a clapper-board to cue his speech. The sequence is shot in front of maps attached to the wall at Granier with Deligny off-centre and poorly lit. Leaning forward, not directing his address to camera but rather the floor as though he is searching to find the words, Deligny begins to speak. In slow deliberate steps, he delivers a series of observations about 'this kid' and language. What does it mean, he asks, to be using language to explain 'this kid, there' who does not live in language? The weary manner of address conveys a sense of futility in pursuing this line of thought, that language has value or power of explication for these children. 'What can we rely on', he asks rhetorically, 'when it fails, language'.

If the film has a meta-relation to spoken language, the language of cinema is similarly foregrounded. The structure or more accurately the *shape* of the documentary might be described as comings and goings, wanderings that include animals crossing the landscape, a parent visiting, drifts of smoke obscuring the view of the camera, the children and adults crossing left to right and again, this time right to left, groups of people gathered around tables or buckets, making and doing things in the rural context. The sequences are not organized episodically to accumulate meaning but appear as shot clusters that share the same timeframe or location. As Witt observes, the shot choices are often medium shots with two people in the frame, often attending to the same matter of breadmaking, sawing, sanding, washing dishes, weaving or collecting. There are few close-up shots of faces; mostly the images document activity. One such moment is the filming of one of the close presences and Janmari sanding

the circular disc of a rotary saw. Filmed hunched over the metal disc which is laid flat on a stone table in the open air, the two figures concentrate on rubbing the metal surface with sandpaper until it is gleaming. The movement of their hands seems to draw the camera closer, and as the sequence is shot with a zoom lens, the effect is a flattening of dimension. The sun bouncing from the metal disc, the rhythmic movement and sound of sandpaper drawn across its surface, these are the features towards which the camera gravitates.

Catherine Witt argues of *Ce gamin, là* that 'the image seems to diffuse and amplify the phenomenality of what the camera and sound recorder capture of the real, thereby privileging the embodied relations underlying the filming and viewing of the image over signification'. The specific techniques extend beyond the use of camera to the practices of editing and sound design: 'The use of shot scale, audio-visual textures and discontinuous editing are three concrete means by which Victor foregrounds the primacy of embodied space.' In a particularly detailed analysis of a sequence filmed at Le Serret, Witt describes the way in which these three aspects coincide to invest the image with sensory qualities beyond sound and vision. The sequence features the 'black speck' of a boy within a large landscape, the audio track capturing the sound of bells from the movement of goats and sheep (off-screen) and smoke rising from nearby bonfires tended to by two of the close presences. The boy is next seen in close-up, again shot with a zoom lens that flattens the detail of the environment behind him, as we watch him inhaling the air, the atmosphere with closed eyes. The smoke continues to move across the image creating a 'smoke-saturated image', drawing attention to the dense quality of what the viewer is seeing (Witt, 2022). The camera's focal shift simultaneously brings an awareness to the apparatus of looking and immerses the viewer in the textures of the image, eliciting the atmosphere across the range of senses.

Deligny's use of the gerund camering rather than filming brings attention to the camera-object and its use. Like pens, crayons and pencils, the camera is a tool put to use to see what can be done. He writes, 'Just as tracing is not drawing, camering is not filming' (2015: 78). The camera does not seem to be a privileged tool with specific qualities, but what is to hand and a suitable tool to follow the highly mobile children in their pursuits. Every mode of inscription,

whether they were maps, filmed images or drawings, could become sedimented into meaning, the terms of a new lexicon of ready-made interpretations. The task was to keep attention on the move, to resist its falling into observational clichés that then begin to drive what is filmed and documented. 'Why care about a documentary film that makes so clear it has "nothing to say"?', asks Witt in the conclusion to her account. The answer is formed in negative, about what the film does not try to do: to critique contemporary psychiatry, to represent a radical version of care, to give voice to autistic children. What it does offer, she suggests, is a sustained attention to alterity that does not speak in its place.

In an examination of a second film that concludes this chapter, the approach to autism is in many ways the inverse of *Ce gamin, là*: a thematization of autism as a fable of sensory apprehension. In Ali Abbasi's film *Border* (2018), the border is both the literal designation of national territory and a thematic encounter with the other. Its mode of operation, however, is not straightforward, for the border that the film pursues is one that concerns categories of being or species, an exploration of the encounter with otherness that thematizes not only the coding of alterity but also the questions of what constitutes knowledge of an other being. Meta Mazaj, writing about the film, names this a drive to examine 'an epistemological ground or "border effect"' (2020: 35). The film's depiction of 'otherness' foregrounds the presentation of world through sensory affects over conceptual knowledge. It engages the viewer's sensory apprehension to experience characters and a world in which acute sensory apprehension dominates comprehension and leads thought. With attention to the specific grammar and phrasing of film language, I argue, questions of cinema, sensory apprehension and alterity are brought provocatively into dialogue.

The film's opening is worth dwelling on for two reasons: the establishing scenes of the film use camera placement to undermine expectation and viewer knowledge, and, second, the national border as given in the film's *mise en scène* is foregrounded as an aesthetic form rather than a sociopolitical fact. The pre-credit sequence opens unremarkably in the port of Kapellskär, Sweden. The first shot frames part of a large ship (*Liverpool Seafare*) and the indiscriminate area of rough land next to it; a figure stands in the

middle ground with their back to the camera. The position of camera prevents us from properly seeing the character, and in the following shot, the position of the camera is again significant. The sequence cuts to a shot that is over the shoulder of the figure we have seen in the middle ground, a view that directs attention to an insect held on the palm of a hand. Importantly, the camera placement does not suggest that we are in the place of the figure observing the insect, but in a position to the side of the character. The camera then pans up to capture a partial view of a face, returning to the insect as it is placed carefully on the stem of a plant. This is an opening that prioritizes ethology over human contact, perhaps, and uncultivated land over officially demarcated territory.

The following sequence opens onto the interior of the port's main building, an audibly jarring transition into the echoing noise of animated voices and footfall. A crowd of people move through a long corridor towards the camera and past a group of customs officers. In the interior of the customs hall, the figure from the previous sequence stands in uniform as a customs guard at the port. The sequence cuts between a long shot of the corridor with people walking in the direction of the camera and a mid-shot of the guard, Tina. In this first image of Tina, the viewer is able, for the first time, to observe her face, the details of a scar above her left eye, a protruding brow and an overbite. The editing as it alternates between approaching crowd and the guards constructs a sense of drama, an expectation that something is about to unfold. This is played out through the minute movements of Tina's face: a twitch of the upper lip that is repeated, and a distracted searching movement of her eyes as though she is processing what she can sense. On her command, a young man is stopped, and his bag is searched, an act that reveals an illegal amount of alcohol being carried by an underaged passenger. It is apparent that Tina's reading of the crowd is incisive and accurate, and that she is held in respect by her fellow-workers. It is also notable that Tina's physicality is the subject of abuse: the boy whose smuggling she has detected launches verbal insults at her appearance.

If the port, according to Darragh O'Donoghue, in the opening sequence, takes the appearance of 'a liminal, amphibian space between civilization and nature', its interior space is curiously formatted: plastic-coated materials coloured in a neutral palette of

beige and skin tones to produce a bureaucratic aesthetic of official business of the state that obtains authority through its depersonalized style (O'Donoghue, 2019). Meta Mazaj suggests that the film's attention to the aesthetics of the border diverges from the genre of films that treat migration as a topic of social realist enquiry where the border is a location of either despair or hope. Abbasi opens his film with a gesture to the social realist genre in valuing the detail of a topos that is not in any conventional sense attractive or meaningful (waste land, corridors, institutional blandness). The expectation, if there is a stable expectation to be had in the opening of the film, is of the border as a place of confrontation, migrant anguish and inequality. More specifically in this Swedish film, the border is the location of official exclusions where an officious ritual of 'entering' and 'crossing', or indeed failing to accomplish those acts, performatively establishes a definition of Europe as fortress. Yet, having set up an expectation of a social realist treatment of borders, the film, with subtlety, destabilizes the form with shifts in its generic register. Majav argues convincingly that 'at stake here is not just a new way of defining relations between real borders and historical circumstances and ideologies, but the possibility of a film form to rearrange our sensory perception when speaking to a social problem whose causes are outside of it' (2018: 38). The film's rearticulation of the border as a threshold of meaning, or what Majav names a 'border effect' rather than a 'geographic fact', brings into view the operative dimension of borders as arbitrary structuring devices that support definitions not only of nation states but also of sexual, gender and racialized identity, as well as film genre.

The film proceeds in this venture cautiously as it allows the viewer to 'sense' Tina aesthetically through a mode of following and being with, a proximity that is not ever a pretence to be in-the-shoes-of the character. Camera work is critical to Abbasi's structuring of viewer–character relations and is worth detailing in its initial unfolding. If in the first sequence we regard Tina from a distance and an oblique angle, and subsequently in shots that alternate between the customs hall and her face, the following sequence is equally instructive although occupying neither of these positions. The third sequence opens with a shot of the back of Tina's head without revealing its placement in 'real terms'. It becomes apparent that the camera is located in the

rear seat of a car capturing the effects of the current of air entering, via the driver's open window, lifting and streaking through her hair. The viewer is behind and with Tina but not seeing what she sees, that is, not seeing in the place of Tina. This is followed by a free indirect shot of the sun as a flickering shaft of light apparent through the tops of pine trees, establishing the environment through which we are travelling as a forest. This rich sensory landscape contrasts sharply with the privations of the customs hall. In the preceding section of the film, Tina's heightened sensory powers are on display but routinized through their application to an institutional agenda. In the following sequence, tracking Tina's journey into the forest that reveals her home to be a cabin remote from other dwellings, the nature of home as *habitat* begins to forge associations between the character and non-human animals.

Darragh O'Donoghue writes of the film's approach to knowledge and knowing as its defining feature. Abbasi, he argues, does not offer the viewer more information than Tina, but conversely generates a momentum in which ways of knowing are increasingly made evident. Tina's occupation as a border guard foregrounds (and thematizes) the question of what we can know of others and the process, furthermore, of how we come to know: what knowledge is gained through observation, or verbal exchange? To what extent is knowledge dependent on physical proximity, or on the duration of an encounter? As *Border* lays out these questions in narrative form, in the explicit actions of a character working at a national border, the film's apparatus stages these questions for the spectator, that is, presenting these questions for the viewer's relationship to the film. Of the many techniques Abbasi uses, the placement of the camera is the most critical in this enterprise. The camera is not necessarily at the service of the spectator, yet nor does it appear to work in antithesis. Its position in scenes offers an unusual framing; the camera is not close enough to a character to operate as a point-of-view shot, yet neither is it distant enough to suggest an objective view of the scene.

The positioning of the camera works to undermine the epistemic security of the spectator, the knowledge of where they are in relation to the features of the scene and with whose viewpoint they are aligned. Daniel Morgan argues that 'few things in the history of film and film theory are as conceptually overdetermined as the

point-of-view shot' that has come to be relied upon as the critical component that anchors meaning in a sequence, a fantasy that 'drives psychological theories of the "natural" function of cinematic techniques'. The non-alignment of camera with a character's point of view in *Border* is not explicit enough to signal a state of alienation or 'unnaturalness'; rather, it sets in play the question of where we are seeing from and indeed whether this position is the location of a human perception. As a formal technique, it sounds the note of the film's main thematic, which is the question of what can be known about an other, an interrogative that the film repeatedly exercises through its non-standard use of cinematic form. In sensing that the camera is not located in a familiar set-up, the viewer is relying on a form of sensory knowledge, not unlike the border guard protagonist of the film. The film sets in motion the primacy of sensory knowledge over the experience of narratological explication, a thematic that replays during the course of the film. If the viewer is unsure of where they are watching from and who or what is the object of their curiosity, it is a figurative not-knowing that repeats throughout the plot as the film moves deeper into the territory of the unknown.

If many reviews of the film have expressed states of perplexity and shock, this in part is due to the tentative shift in the meaning of the film's title: the border. The opening sequence suggests that the referent is a national border, but this is misleading. Meta Mazaj argues that the film operates a catachresis, an improper use of a word that lures us into the film on an understanding that is upended. The effect of the catachrestic naming of the border is, they argue, to destabilize the resolute power of the term to reveal slips, ambiguities and, ultimately, a proliferation of its meaning. A term from postcolonial theory in the work of Homi Bhabha and Gayatri Spivak, the catachrestic as a strategic tool aims to draw into question and ultimately displace the system of value coding. Catachresis in *Border*, Mazaj argues, 'serves as an aesthetic strategy that unravels conventional approaches to the border as a topographical category with self-evident social consequences' (2018: 35). In the course of the film, the meaning of the term border shifts ground with the shocking presentation of new referents, invoking borders that exist in literature, folk lore, the unconscious, genre and gender. The film's granting of a familiar subject only to set it off-key produces

an 'uncanny imaginary' that disturbs in its upending of expectation. Yet through its invitation to the viewer to experience this through a sensory rather than cognitive apparatus, the film serves 'a catachrestic topos that forges new sensory cognition of the world' (Majav, 2020: 35).

One might argue, furthermore, that the viewer of *Border* is placed in the position of border guard to cinema, and that through anticipation of familiar visual patterns and points of entry into scenes the viewer is keeper to cinema's ground rules or unofficial laws. The affinity between the main character and the viewer as guards and guardians of certain institutional rules is maintained with regard to the epistemological rupture in the film's world. The viewer, that is, obtains critical information (or the reveal) at the same time as the main character. There are certain intimations of the potency of Tina's sensory faculties that both set her apart from others and enable her vantage in the workplace. Tina's physicality has also been marked by an insult in the opening sequence, shortly after compounded when she describes herself as 'an ugly, strange human being with a chromosome flaw'. The dramatic tension rises with Tina's encounter at the border with a visitor who induces a heightened sensory reaction in her, but one that she is not able to rationally comprehend. At this point, the viewer is aligned with Tina's state of heightened awareness and disorientation. The visitor is Vore, a man with similar physical features to Tina, and who appears equally engaged by her as she is by him. On the second crossing Tina acts on her sense of discrepancy or difference; Vore is ordered into the backroom of the customs hall and searched, an event that delivers the surprising information that Vore has female genitalia and a scar at the bottom of the spine. Having seen Tina swim in a vernal pool in the forest, the viewer knows that Tina bears the same scar on her lower back. The singularity of this traveller in comparison to the crowds passing through is evident: at the same time, the traveller's singularity registers with Tina as an affinity. Vore is not intelligible to her, she cannot smell his thoughts and anxieties, but he registers forcefully on her radar of intense affect.

The unexpected turn of the film is a formal turn, a shift in paradigm that removes the epistemological ground beneath the viewer's feet. By the midpoint, it is apparent that Tina, like Vore, is not human. Vore

informs Tina that they are both trolls. The manner of revelation is not one of horror but romance: Tina is drawn to Vore through curiosity and desire, allowing herself to be seduced by his various unorthodox offerings and his ease with his own appetites. When she finds him absorbed in the microworld of a tree bark, he offers her a maggot to eat. It is a filmic moment in which her initial repulsion shifts to inquiry, and to the adventure of tasting the larva on her tongue which is surprisingly pleasurable. It is bodily experience, rather than a conceptual shift, that moves Tina into a different experience of herself as desiring and in turn desired. In an earlier scene, Tina's relationship with her partner, Roland, is not sexually mutual. When he approaches her in her bed, his attempt to initiate sex combines a drunken ineptitude bordering on abuse; he is rebuffed as she throws him onto the floor. In contrast, the coupling of Tina and Vore is tentative, exploratory and sensuous. The queerness of Vore's masculine appearance and female genitalia is met in Tina when her arousal culminates in the discovery of a thin penis that grows from her vagina. In a scene that queers definitions of humanity, gender and sexuality, Tina and Vore appear shocked and delighted as they insert the thin protuberance into Vore to achieve an ecstatic coupling.

The *mise en scène* of a location in the forest where Tina and Vore engage in sexual activities against a mound of moss and bracken brings the pair close to nature symbolically. But more than this, it is a sequence in which the textures of the landscape are blended with the bodies of the characters: as 'the physicality of the forest merges with Tina's physicality, the soil, the skin and the screen matter merge and become indistinguishable' (Majav, 2020: 45). The standard narrative trope of sexual awakening is both invoked and revised: the encounter is a performative act that brings into being an unscripted mode of bodily pleasure, one that refuses to abide by a typical ('intelligible') definition of gender, sexuality or species. It recalls Erin Manning's description of ontogenetic choreography, 'that does not begin with existing form but seeks to create speciations – new forms/forces of live-living' (2013: 200). Tina is both female and male, or neither-nor, and so is Vore. Their designation as trolls equally swerves the question of where ontologically they reside: the film prospects the possibility that they are humans fused with non-human animals, or that they are something else entirely, moving the question of ontology onto

unknowable ground. To attempt to make intelligible the characters' action and identities in conventional terms is to follow a zigzagging path through the film that leads to unexpected locations, but not to answers. For the positing of characters as trolls is not an endpoint but the grounding of the film on a different plane, the terrain of mythology that obtains its power by the weaving of the supernatural through the real.

The conceptual framework of borders, which in this film began at the scene of guarding and upholding the rules of the nation state, expands exponentially to multiply difference. There is a double play, a resonance in the back and forth between the character arcs and the film form, punning on the etymology of genre that splits open to reveal genus, *generem* from Latin and from Middle French, *gendre,* of gender kind, kin and style. Abbasi's pluralization of species and gender is produced through the film's shifting generic form, moving from social realism to fantasy to romantic mystery and historical mythology: whatever 'kind' of film the viewer thought that they were viewing is open to an ongoing revision for the film's duration. The invocation of a national mythology, in Majav's telling, spins the story back towards the politics of the nation state. In Nordic folk law, according to Majav, 'trolls are "nature beings", "otherworldly beings" who look much like humans, live away, yet not too far from human habitation, and have their own form of social organization'. In Holmlund's account, which is focused on the 'Nordic roots' and Scandinavian reception of the film, he writes of trolls in a manner that is jovially reminiscent of Kafka's untiring assistants: 'They are communal: they bake, wash clothes, churn butter, give birth, marry, raise families, and die, and they are, again like Tina and Vore, afraid of lightning' (Holmlund, 2021). Majav reads Abbasi's appropriation of Nordic troll mythology as an act with political significance in the wake of 'the weaponization of Nordic mythology in the service of far right nationalism'. Harnessing the troll, the film 'reclaims the troublesome, the half-human, the other', reconfiguring it 'within the very framework of a primal originary space', which in this account is nature or the natural scene of mythical becoming that predates the formation of the state.

The figural quality of the Troll in Icelandic literature, Daniel Sävborg argues, instantiates a different relation from that of the

human–non-human. Trolls operate along an axis of the supernatural–real, belonging to what he calls a 'possible reality'. But what is notable in this literary account is the conjunction of questions of reality with distance. In place of a bifurcated choice of truth versus reality, Sävborg argues that 'it is rather a matter of stories about events in the vicinity vs. events abroad' (2018: 203). In other words, Trolls are credible when articulated through a spatial paradigm, one that has in the contemporary world morphed into strict border-crossings that demarcate the near and the distant with greater stringency than a generalized sense of the distant as other (and the other as distant). If, historically, the troll is a long-standing trope for what is feared and fascinated, Majav reminds, it is 'not a real phenomenon but the work of our own imaginary', one that reflexively returns the enquiry on to the viewer and the activity of their own projections. Abbasi's shift in genre, from realism to fantasy to police procedural and more, presents to the viewer a film as a series of frames through which we catch sight of the characters and their worlds. The film's generic slide across categories does not come to rest; rather, it remains a force-field of relations, a text taking form.

If the troll has a traceable lineage in Nordic traditional storytelling, its operation in this film, and in this discussion of the film, assumes a different tenor. More explicitly, despite Abbasi's affectionate treatment of his troll protagonist, the film identifies alterity with physical and cognitive difference. Furthermore, in attributing special sensory powers of smell to Tina, the character's alterity moves into the register of the non-human animal. In conceptual terms, this is a familiar arrangement of anthropocentric ordering whereby the human-animal and the non-human animal distinction is remade endlessly in order to assure the (never secure) division of the former from the latter (simplified as human-animal). The codification of difference including race and disability through this schema reinvests a prior ontological distinction between human and non-human animals, facilitating what Etienne Balibar names 'the systematic "bestialization" of individuals and racialized human groups'. The space between human animal and non-human animal is replete with gradations of subjects for whom accession to a full humanity is not (yet/ever to be) granted.

The artist and writer Sunaura Taylor extends this diagram of human–nonhuman into the field of animal rights and disability scholarship.

She formulates it in this way: 'Animals, in their inferior bestial state, can be used by us without moral concern, and those humans who have been associated with animals (people of color, women, queer people, poor people, and disabled people, among others) are also seen as less sophisticated, as having less value, and sometimes even as being less or non-human.' The instability of the category of human, she argues, is steadied and secured through the fine-grained distinctions between certain physical and cognitive 'capacities' and different forms of embodiment and cognition. She continues, 'In fact, certain abilities and capacities are central to definitions of the human; they are thought to mark the boundaries between humanity and the rest of the animal world. In this way ableism gives shape to what and who we think of as human versus animal' (2017: 59). The binary human–nonhuman is the machine that can reproduce the distinction across multiple domains to territorialize alterity.

Giorgio Agamben famously describes this process of separation of the human from the non-human as the workings of an anthropological machine, an apparatus that tirelessly and ongoingly works to differentiate the human form from the backgrounded world of non-human animals and things, a separation that is never fully achievable or complete.[6] Cinema, despite its natural affordances of pattern detection, the capture of incidental detail and an evenly distributed attention to all that is within the frame, is put to the service of separating figure from background, human from non-human forms, and allistic from autistic perception. Yet there is a cinema, I have argued here, and a mode of apprehending that disrupts the workings of that machine, that sets its motor to idling perhaps only for intervals, but long enough to leave an impression of seeing differently, of *attending to* without paying attention, of apprehending without the conditioning strictures of the human ego.

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[6]For John Mullarkey, however, the power of cinema is the power of the animal that we always are when we think in images. He writes that the force of cinema 'simply is the power of the animal that we (always) are when we think in images, or when images think immanently within us' (Mullarkey, 2013: 12). Or, to express this differently, both autism and cinema are integral at the beginning of the twentieth century to a production of the category 'human', which relies on an expulsion of the non-human to secure the identity of humanity.

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# Filmography

400 *Blows* / *Les Quatre cents coups* (France, 100 minutes: 1959). Directed by François Truffaut, produced by Les Films du Carrosse, distributed by Cocinor.

*Anemic Cinema* (also known as *Anémic Cinéma*) (France, 7 minutes: 1926). Directed by Marcel Duchamp in collaboration with Man Ray and Marc Allégret.

*Border* / *Gräns* (Sweden, 110 minutes: 2018). Directed by Ali Abbasi, produced by Nina Bisgaard, Peter Gustafsson, Petra Jonsson, distributed by TriArt Film.

*Ce gamin, là* / *That Kid, There* (France, 96 minutes: 1975). Directed by Renaud Victor, produced by François Truffaut.

*Extramission* (UK: 2005). Written and directed by Lindsay Seers.

*Havarie* (Germany, 93 minutes: 2015). Directed by P. Scheffner.

*Illuminating the Wilderness* (UK, 40 minutes: 2018). Directed by Kate Adams and Tim Corrigan, produced by Project Artworks.

*In My Language* (USA, 8 minutes: 2007). Directed by Amanda Baggs.

*Le Moindre Geste* / *The Slightest Gesture* (France, 96 minutes: 1971). Directed by Fernand Deligny, Jean-Pierre Daniel and Josée Manenti, produced by Inger Servolin SLON.

*The Stimming Pool* (UK, 70 minutes: 2023). Directed Steven Eastwood and the Neurocultures Collective.

*The Wild Child of Avignon* / *L'Enfant sauvage* (France, 85 minutes: 1970). Directed by François Truffaut, produced by Marcel Berbert, distributed by United Artists.

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