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The Cosmic Stain in Jean-Luc Nancy's Thought of the World

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Abstract

The article aims to highlight the cosmic dimension of Jean-Luc Nancy's thoughts on the sense of the world. It argues that his thought of the world is deeply touched by "cosmic stains." The cosmic dimension is to be understood as "stain" rather than as dimension insofar it is about the moment in which the sentiment that existence is really existing incides upon existence. It is about being touched by the there-is of the there-is itself. The cosmic stain of Nancy's thoughts of the sense of the world has to do with existence being "exscripted" from ontology when, in the state of the acosmism of the world today, the only thing to hold on to is the existence of existence, which opens a transitive sense of existence and being.

Keywords

acosmism – hypercosmism – cosmic stain – transitive existence – there-is

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No entanto às vezes adivinhava. Eram manchas cósmicas que substituía entender

CLARICE LISPECTOR



One of Jean-Luc Nancy's most quoted passages on the sense of the world is about the acosmism that marks the today experience of the world. The passage, found in his seminal book *The Sense of the World* from 1993, reads as following: "There is no longer any world, no longer a mundus, a cosmos, a composed and complete order (from) which one might find a place, a dwelling, and the elements of an orientation."¹ Here, Nancy speaks about a common sensual understanding of the world as "composed and complete order," as unity of a totality and as totality of a manifold of ones, which corresponds to the Greek word *kosmos*. The world of today is acosmic insofar as it no longer gives itself as "complete order," harmonious and close, in which and from which elements of orientation could be found. The world presents itself today rather as dispersion, dis-appropriating everything and everyone from whatsoever attachment and belonging. Hence, no unity, total fragmentation, and scattering: everything becomes whatsoever, dwelling everywhere and nowhere, everybody losing the bodies and the capacity of embodiment. The hegemony of market economy and of the economy of merchandise is the world of fragmented existence wandering astray as refugee. No unity, and everywhere broken hegemonies, recalling the title by Reiner Schürmann.² On the other hand, the world has never been so homogeneous and one-dimensional, so total and totalitarian. This corresponds to the becoming worldwide of the world, to the planetary expansion of global-techno-mediatic-financial-new-liberal capitalism: the global order of global disorder, the totalization of fragmentation. The world emerges today as the excess of the world. In this sense, the acosmism of the world is at the same time the hypercosmism of the world. Excess of world, loss of world, a loss through excess, the excess of the loss of the sense of the world and of the world of sense. The ancient lines of Sophocles' *Antigone* sounds more than ever actual when singing in rhythmic parataxis: *pantopóros; áporos*, all resourceful; resource of nothing [verses 359], *hypsípolis; ápolis*, over political; apolitical [verses 370].³ At stake is the loss of the sense of world when the world of sense is lost. As Nancy stresses, to speak about the end of the world,

1 Jean-Luc Nancy. *The Sense of the World*, Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press; 1997, 4.

2 Reiner Schürmann. *Broken hegemonies*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press; 2003.

3 Sophocles. *Antigone. The women of Trachis; Philoctetes; Oedipus at Colonus*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press; 1998.

cannot mean that we are confronted merely with the end of a certain “conception” of the world, and that we would have to go off in search of another one or to restore another one (or the same). It means, rather, that there is no longer any assignable signification of “world,” or that the “world” is subtracting itself, bit by bit, from the entire regime of signification available to us – except its “cosmic” signification as *universe*, a term that for us, precisely, no longer has (or does not yet have) any assured signification, save that of a pure infinite expansion.⁴

Hence, the acosmism of the world by means of its hypercosmism, the loss of the sense of the world through the excess of the becoming worldwide of the world seems to leave as its only available significance the cosmic signification of universe, in the scientific physical meaning of pure infinite expansion. *Hypercosmism; acosmism* – to formulate it in Sophoclean grammar, means the reduction of the sense of the world to pure infinite expansion, and in this sense to a cosmological signification of cosmos. Pure infinite expansion – of the universe, of capitalism, of a world without world – means in fact the infinitization of the infinite, and thereby the eclipse of the experience of finitude in a world overshadowed by its own expansion. If the world had been, since ancient times, understood and experienced as encompassing unified totality – *he to holon periokhé*, as Pythagoreans once formulated it, as one world for everyone, neatly enclosed around us, now, as Nancy writes “the cosmos has gone beyond all enclosure, expanding beyond measure, enumerating, galaxies, dead stars, spaces curved in on themselves to infinity: in other words, an explosion in all directions, yet similar to an immense invagination, a folding and fractal repetition of a return on oneself without self and without limits.”⁵ The expansive infinitization of the world, its becoming worldwide seems to only be possible as a “return of oneself without self and without limits,” as self-repetition in all directions which dissolves the self of the world. What Nancy sees here is how the becoming worldwide of the world eclipses the world as encompassing closed totality, as the shelter or system of orientation capable to guide existence from and towards ends, meanings and signification. It is totality itself that eclipses. It is oneness itself that eclipses. Indeed, at stake is the eclipse of finitude itself, of limits and margins, when, in pure infinite expansion, the center is everywhere and periphery nowhere. Nancy proposes, even if *en passant*, the necessity of developing an “acosmic cosmology.”⁶ I understand this

4 Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Sense of the World*, 5.

5 *Ibid.*, 38.

6 *Ibid.*

title rather as a “cosmic a-cosmology,” insofar as it is about the task of thinking finitude in times of expansive infinitization of the infinite. In an exchange of emails about the cosmic dimension of the sense of the world in his thoughts, Nancy wrote to me: “When we speak of the cosmos, we speak of such a pulsation” [*Quand on parle de cosmos on parle d'une telle pulsation*]. To say something about cosmos is to say something about the pulsation of finitude within the infinite, something that exceeds the excess of infinitization, and hence the cosmological signification of the world. That is why I propose to change his own expression “acosmic cosmology” into “cosmic a-cosmology.” It is all about a listening to the infinite beatings and pulsations of finitude within the eclipse of finitude. It is about an extreme listening, as someone who listens with ears glued to the floor, which listens at the edge of listening to infinite spots and stains of finite existence existing. In a short dialogue from 2020,⁷ in which Nancy insisted on the necessity of reverting bad infinity into good infinite, we can read that “true infinite is this moment when we have the sentiment of the own existence as really existing” [*Le véritable infini est ce moment où on a le sentiment de sa propre existence comme réellement existante*]. Inspired by the Brazilian writer Clarice Lispector, we could call “cosmic stain”⁸ this true infinite of the moment in which the sentiment of the own existence really existing takes place.

There is no diagnosis in Nancy’s thoughts. And even less any remedy understood as an attempt to give a new meaning to the acosmic world of today. Nancy repeatedly affirms that it is not about any “crisis of sense,” since discourses on the crisis of sense can still be intentioned from its directions, “can always be analyzed or surmounted,” and aims to “arrive at the constitution of an ordinary signification.”⁹ However, the problem is, as Nancy phrases it, that “today, we are beyond this: all sense has been abandoned.”¹⁰ The question is no longer that of trying to resignify the world either as “the sense of an infinite quest” or

7 “L’infinité du progrès est un mauvais infini,” interview with Élodie Maurot, (Paris: William Blake and Co., 2020), 13.

8 See Clarice Lispector. *An Apprenticeship, or, the Book of Pleasures* (New York: New Directions; 2021), 57. “But sometimes the unbearable anxiety would come: she wanted to understand enough so that she’d at least become more aware of everything she didn’t understand. Though deep down she didn’t want to comprehend. She knew it was impossible and every time she had thought she’d understood herself it was because she’d understood wrongly. Understanding was always a mistake – she preferred the largesse, so wide and free and without mistakes, of not-understanding. It was bad, but at least you knew you were in the full human condition. Yet sometimes she’d guess right. There were cosmic streaks that substituted for understanding.”

9 Jean-Luc Nancy. *The Sense of the World*, 2, 11.

10 *Ibid.*, 2.

as “passage toward another world” nor to insist on sense assuming the nihilistic position issued from the observation that “the becoming worldwide [*mondialisation*] of the world, which comprises our element and event – that is, cosmopolitanism, teletechnics – disappropriates and de-signifies sense, tearing it to shreds.”¹¹ His proposal is radically different. For him the challenge is rather to remain in “the very opening of the abandonment of sense, as the opening of the world.”¹² He proposes a thought of suspended steps. The abandonment of sense is itself an opening, indeed, it is the opening of the very “open” which “tightly woven and narrowly articulated, constitutes the structure of sense qua sense of the world.”¹³ When all sense is abandoned, the sense of the open opens itself. In question is thus to understand “*how the end of the world of sense opens the praxis of the sense of the world.*”¹⁴

The praxis of the sense of the world has therefore nothing to do with trying to find a new sense of the world which would be capable to overcome the acosmism of the hypercosmism of the world. This becomes even clearer when considering that it is not even about loss or lack of the sense of the world. Nancy speaks rather about a chance for sense, which resides in the experience of how the abandonment of sense opens the very opening that sense is. The abandonment of sense *is* the opening of the world. If the world appears both as overloaded of sense and as senseless, if the world can no longer *have* sense, it is only because the world *is* sense.¹⁵ Sense is not something else than the world, sense is not beyond the world. Sense *is* world and world *is* sense. Everything is about this tautology, a tautology that speaks *from*, *of* and *to* itself, being rather a *tautegory*, a term that Nancy receives from Schelling,¹⁶ than a category. How to understand the tautegory that the world *is* sense, that the abandonment of the world of sense *is* the opening of the sense of the world? It is no longer about something that can be said on something, maintaining a system of referentiality to – something that could be said about, on, of or to the world; indeed, something else than the world. It is neither about a subordination or coordination of contraries, nor about paradoxes and contradictions or even about dialectics, either positive or negative. If Georges Bataille’s notion of “atheology”

11 Ibid., 3.

12 Ibid.

13 Ibid.

14 Ibid., 9.

15 Ibid., 8.

16 Schelling first account on tautegory is to be found in his lectures on the Philosophy of Art from 1802–03 and more extensively in his late works on the Philosophy of Revelation and of Mythology. See Deborah Casewell. “Rewriting Mythology; Tautegory, Ontology, and the Novel” in *Epoché: A Journal for the History of Philosophy*, Volume 27, 1, Fall 2022: 119–141.

is related to approaching or seizing a “paradoxical object,”¹⁷ what I am calling Nancy’s “acosmology” is rather committed to this tautegory. It is about a radically different sense of the “is,” of being, which has no determination, neither positive nor negative. It is about thinking sense without the referentiality of meanings and significations. It has to do with the “is” of an oscillation and hovering, working not to fall into the abyss of new overdetermination of significations or of nothingness and nihilism. The annihilation of the regime of signification in which every meaning, signification and sense becomes empty the more it exacerbates, an annihilation that exposes the self-destruction of the world of sense leaves “perhaps” only one thing to hold on. Quoting Nancy: “Perhaps only one thing remains, that is to say, one thought with some certainty: what is taking place is really happening, which means that it happens and happens to us in this way more than a history, even more than an event. It is as if being itself – in whatever sense one understands it, as existence or as substance – surprised us from an unnamable beyond.”¹⁸

The only thing to hold on is the taking place – not of something, not a history or of an event, but the taking place of the taking place. This thought is the core of the tautegorical sense of the “is” – which “surprises us from an unnamable beyond, [ailleurs],” exceeding any economy of signification. It is a sense “exscribed”¹⁹ from the annihilation of significance, not as another meaning or sense of being but as its excedence, and not transcendence. Thus, it has no meaning. “The taking place is really taking place,” the is is, these phrases say nothing about what is taking place albeit saying all about a change of the sense of sense. Nancy uses often the French verb *passer*, “to pass” which in French and other Latin languages means both to pass and to happen; no search for surpassing sense but attention to its happening. The passing brings to the ears *the step, le pas*, in French. Nancy is an *auricular* thinker, and his thoughts are listenings rather than views; his thoughts arise from a very close listening to the differentiated sounds of multivarious existence. The tautegorical thought that *ce qui se passe se passe* – the taking place is taking place emerges as the only “thing” steps of thought today can hold on, since this, precisely this somehow empty sense still touches us in the stillness of the almost imperceptible. Marcel Duchamp coined the word “*inframince*” in a sense that helps us to seize this almost imperceptible but nonetheless overwhelming way the happening

17 Georges Bataille. *Oeuvres Complètes*, VI, v II, Paris. Gallimard, 1973, Annexes, 374.

18 Jean-Luc Nancy. *The Creation of the World, or, Globalization* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2007), 35.

19 “Excsription” is a key term in Nancy’s thought, see Jean-Luc Nancy. “L’excsription” in *Yale French Studies*, No. 78, On Bataille (1990), 47–65.

of the happening touches us. It is also in this “sense” that we may understand the importance for Nancy’s thought of a quote by Pascal which reads: *l’homme passe infiniment l’homme*, a difficult phrase to translate also due to its ungrammatical grammar, meaning more or less: man passes/happens infinitely man. The difficulty lies in understanding Pascal’s use of the verb *passer*, to pass, as transitive verb. “That the taking place is really taking place,” this says perhaps nothing more than that *existence is existing*. Only that, and thus everything. Everything happens as if being itself – which for Nancy means existence existing – surprised us from an unnamable beyond, *ailleurs*, he says. *Ailleurs* is not really a “beyond,” but rather a “moreover,” *alias*, following the movement of thought when a “moreover” emerges in a sentence, thus it emerges as an excess of sense and not as an over-significance. It is no longer a thought of the event but, as he precises, a thought of the urgency to “owning up to the present ... including its strange absence of presence.”²⁰

The only “thing” that remains to hold on is the existing of existence. Some verses of a poem by the Polish poet Wisława Szymborska can be quoted here to help clarifying this “only thing” remaining. For Szymborska, this only thing is indeed the sky of the open. The verses come from the poem “The Sky”:

One should have begun with that: the sky.
A window without the sill, without the frame, without the panes.
An opening and nothing beside it,
yet wide open.

No need to wait for a clear night,
nor crane my neck,
to take a look at the sky.
I have the sky at my back, at hand, and on my eyelids.

The sky wraps me snugly
and lifts me from below.²¹

The taking place of a taking place, the *existing of existence*, this and only this is “an opening wide open, and nothing beside it.” The tautegorical “is” such as in phrases like the world *is* sense, the abandonment of sense *is* the

20 Jean-Luc Nancy. *The Creation of the World*, 35.

21 I want to thank Krzysztof Ziarek who translated these verses from Polish and read them aloud beautifully during my lecture course at the *Collegium Phenomenologicum* from 2023.

opening of the open sense of the world exposes this “only thing” left, namely, that the taking place is really happening. Here there is no longer a project of sensing otherwise than being. When the experience of the world today is the experience of its becoming-worldwide, of its infinite expansion as global-techno-mediatic-financial capitalism, in which infinite fragmentation annihilates every attempt to find a ground for the co-existence of infinite fragments, what this annihilation of the signification of ground opens is precisely that the world is groundless, a creation *ex-nihilo*, of nothing, meaning that the world is nothing but co-existence. In the abyss of the groundlessness of the world, it is groundless co-existence which opens itself. This thought shows how the “without reason” can assume the double face of the capital and the mystical rose.²² When capitalism turns everything into resource and merchandise, rendering everything generally equivalent to everything, when each value is reduced to monetary value, turning everything exchangeable and redundant, to a degree that nothing needs a reason either to exist or to be destroyed, emerges an opening to listen to the absolute open value of the “without reason,” sung in the verses by Angelus Silesius so often repeated by Heidegger:

*die Rose ist ohne Warum / sie blüht weil sie blüht. /
Sie achtet nicht ihrere selsbt, / frag nicht, ob man sie sieht*

The rose is without why / it flowers because it flowers /
It pays no heed to itself / does not ask if it is seen.

It is paying attention, that is, listening to how the world says: “without reason,” *ohne Warum* when recalling the answer Primo Levi received in the camps to the question “Why?” [*Warum?*], “here there is no why” [*hier gibt es kein Warum*], to how this “without reason” aims to destroy the there is of existence, precisely in this listening it is also possible to listen to the urgency to think the absolute open value of the “without reason” of the existing of existence, like the mystical rose.

If every limit between nature and technique, matter and spirit, body and soul is eclipsed by determinations and decisions, physical or moral, individual or political, what opens in this eclipse of the very limit are “the confines of the multidirectional, plurilocal, reticulated, spacious space in which we take place.”²³ What opens in worldwide disorientation and fragmentation is the

²² Jean-Luc Nancy. *The Creation of the World*, 53.

²³ Jean-Luc Nancy. *The Sense of the World*, 40.

open “compossibility of a constellation of a plurality of the worlds,”²⁴ of a pluriworld, of a multiverse.²⁵ Global disorientation, which exposes the world as the subject of the world, the world abandoned to the world, precisely when technique appears as the only subject of history, opens that “we do not occupy the originary point of a perspective, or the overhanging axonometry, but we touch our limits on all sides, our gaze touches its limits on all sides.”²⁶ Nancy has insistently affirmed that he is not a phenomenologist. Maybe it would be coherent to speak of his a-phenomenology. It has to do with the way he breaks with correlationism, without claiming any ur-materialism or antihumanism, either pre-human or post or transhuman. What breaks with correlationism is that “there is some there is”: “there is something, there are some things, there is some there is.”²⁷ It is the touching of the there is – that the there-is is which renders possible to say that:

“... the world beyond humanity – animal, plants, and stones, oceans, atmospheres, sidereal spaces and bodies – is quite a bit more than the phenomenal correlative of a human taking-in-hand, taking-into-account, or taking-care-of: it is the effective exteriority without which the very disposition of or to sense would not make ... any sense.”²⁸ It is neither a larger world than nor an infinite expansive world but more than one ... world. “One could say that this world beyond humanity is the effective exteriority of humanity itself, if the formula is understood in such a way as to avoid constructing the relation between humanity and world as a relation between subject and object.”²⁹

Rather than a thought about the two sides of a limit, Nancy draws us to the limit which is neither inner nor outer, nor inside nor outside, a limit which is a continuously moving confine, margin, edge, border, end. This line is where each thing, everything exposes itself to everything: a stone to the road, the road to a field, the stone to the rain, to the earth from beneath, to the air and to the sky, to human and animal feet, and so forth. Existence is for Nancy exposition, but an exposition to be understood from the margin and borderlines or contours of every existence existing in this or that manner, indeed from the skin

24 Ibid., 155.

25 Ibid.

26 Ibid., 40.

27 Ibid., 55.

28 Ibid., 56.

29 Ibid.

of the eachness of everything. Nancy's builds an untranslatable verb, the verb *expeauser*, which in French sounds as *exposer*, to expose, but which comes from *peau* meaning, in French, skin.³⁰ Existence is *expeausition*, how the taking place of the taking place is under the skin of everything that exists. The world is "the place of existence," as Nancy writes,³¹ not because it would be the container of existing things – of whatsoever thing; but insofar as it is the place of existence existing; the place of the taking place of existence. It is important to keep in mind that this exposition of the skin of existence, *expeausition* opens the world as "fragile skin,"³² insofar as the world is nothing other than the touch of all things. It is the world as the place of the there-is, of existence existing, that disengages thought from phenomenological correlationism and anthropocentric perspectives; but also from its inversions in anti-humanistic perspectivism, which aims to turn the Copernican turn against itself. As the place of the there-is, of the taking place of the taking place of existence, the world is the extension of co-existence itself; is co-existence of existences existing, a co-existence devoid of any given composition, system, synthesis, or final assumption. *Comparution*, comparing, is the term coined together with his friend, the writer Jean-Christophe Bailly which inspired his thoughts on community.³³ It is hence the thought of the thing itself that disengages from the phenomenological desire to go "back to things themselves," "*zu den Sachen selbst*."³⁴ The thing itself is nothing more than the world as the place of the there-is there-is-ing,³⁵ forcing the language into the dimension of the gerundivity of these thoughts by Nancy. *It is not the event of the thing, or of things – but whatsoever thing as the event of the event*, which is the core of these thoughts. As he says in *The Heart of Things*: "The event is the taking place of the 'y-être' [the being-there] of the heart of things."³⁶ Nancy insists very much on the

30 In Librett's translation *expeausition* was rendered with un hiding: Unhiding [*expeausition*]: signature along the surface of the hide, the hide of being, Existence tans its own hide, Jean-Luc Nancy. *The Sense of the World*, op. cit., 58.

31 Ibid., 56.

32 Jean-Luc Nancy. *The Fragile Skin of the World* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press; 2021).

33 Jean-Luc Nancy & Jean-Christophe Bailly. *La comparution* (Paris: C. Bourgeois, 1991).

34 The question is about the thing itself, a question that links Nancy's thoughts of the sense of the world with his re-readings of Kant, opening the "in itself" as the *heart* of things. See the very beautiful and difficult text, *The Heart of Things* whose English translation is to be found in the book *The Birth to Presence* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993).

35 With this odd expression, I allow myself to bring my thoughts on gerundive existence into conversation with Nancy.

36 Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Birth to Presence*, 172. On the adverb "y", see Littré: Ce mot est l'objet de la même discussion que *en*. Le Dictionnaire de l'Académie le nomme adverbe relatif; M. Jullien y voit un nom de lieu qui, rationnellement, est le cas attributif du nom abstrait

“y,” the upsilon, this untranslatable adverb of place proper to the French language, which has extended its meaning to signify whatsoever relation. He does not only follow its semantic and grammar, its sonorous presence but also its drawing – which differs from the x of a chiasm and its Heraclitean harmony of contraries. Like a comet, it has a tail, and points toward a sense of place that shares the way a comet takes place and a coma respires. Thus, it is closer to such a sense, that the y says and writes the place of existence in the heart of things, a place that is nothing but spans, but timing-spacing, as butterflies’ wings. It is the own “there-is” that occurs to things. Again, with his words: “There is something” occurs to everything – and to no thing, giving away [preceding] to all things, without preceding. The world of things is without precedent. It is the world.³⁷ These thoughts are deeply a-phenomenological both in the sense of not following the no-thingness of the world – the world is no-thing, and in the sense of the precedence that does not precede of things. The there-is precedes without preceding everything, it is always an already open that opens everywhere. This is why, “Before/after all possible significations (that there is a world for this or for that, for a certain end of for no end ...), ‘there is’ gives the meaning of that whose meaning is not to be given. The world is passible to this in every thing and in all things. Such is the *sense of things*, the sense of existence at the heart of things.”³⁸ These thoughts shake phenomenological convictions about the no-thingness of the world and the apriori as a precedence that precedes and last but not least about the place of human consciousness in the world.

It is all about the there is being there, about the there is there-is-ing, and about the world as “the totality and sameness of beings-there.” Of course, there is a thinking connection with Heideggerian thoughts on the “*Es gibt*,” with Levinas’ and Lacan’s thoughts on the “*Il y a*.” But what differs Nancy’s thoughts on the there is is the duplication, or more precisely, the resonance of the taking place of the taking place, the there-is of the there-is. “*Il y a l’il y a*.” It is this tautegoric resonance that opens the sense of *cosmic stains* of his thoughts of the sense of the world. Thus, this very resonance aims to express how this only thing on which hovering and oscillating thought can hold, namely, that existence is existing diffracts in everything. This is the basis of Nancy’s excendental materialism [as already observed, excendental is to be seized in opposition

ce, ceci, cela. Le fait est que y, représentant le latin *ibi*, est, d’abord et étymologiquement, un adverbe de lieu, ou, si l’on veut, plus exactement, un nom de lieu pris adverbialement. Après cette signification primitive, y, par extension, est employé à exprimer toute sorte de rapports.

37 Ibid.

38 Ibid.

to both transcendental [Kant] and paradoxical [Bataille]], which according to Nancy shares to a certain extent the language of ancient atomists in terms of *clinamen* and claims their rereading. “It is thus necessary to reread, in the work of the Democriteans, the *fall* of atoms into the void and the *clinamen*: as the distance, contact, assembling, separation, tangency, interval, and interference of the singular, diffracted there is.”³⁹ That the there is is there is-ing, this is already diffraction, the timing-spacing of an opening opening its singularity as plural, as one which in itself is more than one. Nancy underlines that: “In itself, the thing is ‘toward’ the other things that are close, proximate, and also very distant because these are several of them.”⁴⁰ There is not a thing in itself, or it could be said that the there is of each thing shows how in itself things are toward everything, all things, being in itself nothing but the “weight of the contact,”⁴¹ which “touches on,” even if with a “passive transitivity” as in the case of the stone – this “dead” and “worldless” thing of Western Philosophy, the touch tone of Western difficulty and sometimes even impossibility of thinking the singular, the cosmic “nature” of the singular which would allow us to see how the stone is the weight of the contact “with other surface and through it with the world as the network of all surfaces.”⁴²

Hence, a first and decisive dimension of the cosmic stain in Nancy’s thought of the sense of the world is connected to his thoughts on how the there-is-ness of “something,” of “everything,” of “whatsoever” thing, opens in its “absolute” open sense precisely when all things, when every form of existence becomes more and more reified, a whatsoever, used, misused and abused wherever, whenever and by whosoever. It emerges when the only thing left is that existence is existing, and we should add today, that existence is *still* existing⁴³ as much as the taking place is *really* happening – that it is *still real*. As such, the there-is, the taking place of the taking place, this “cosmic stain” is about an exscription of ontology, since it is the “in-itself” that breaks down, opening the being singular plural of things, of everything, of whatsoever thing, the weight of each thing, its material difference, as a touching toward and toward touching, and thereby exposing the world as nothing other than the touch of all things. Thus “everything that touches, brushing up against, penetrating, distancing, knocking into, absorbing, presenting, kicking itself, hiding away,

39 Jean-Luc Nancy. *The Sense of the World*, 58.

40 *Ibid.*, 6.

41 *Ibid.*

42 *Ibid.*, 61.

43 For a discussion about the “still,” see my “Still/Encore” in *Existential Utopia: New Perspectives on Utopian Thought* / [ed] Patricia Vieira and Michael Marder, London: Continuum, 2012, s. 51–62.

simply leaning against, all that makes up the world.”⁴⁴ And if it is possible to speak of a “self” of each thing, it should be understood as “... the universal relation of sense that runs through everything, from atom to man, from chlorophyll to plasma, from stone to iron and from grain to flesh, the relation that endlessly relates itself without ever relating anything more than what is exposed to what is exposed: the interiority of an infinite exterior.”⁴⁵

At stake is another sense of being, for sure, as ex-sistence, that is, as an in-itself which is already outside itself, as much as the skin which is the interiority of an infinite exteriority. Nancy admits a certain metempsychic aspect of these thoughts, of course in a non-psychic, non-subjective and non-destinal version, when considering that “everything is free to be a stone, a tree, a ball” [*quelque chose est libre d'être pierre, arbre, balle*]. In his last works, Nancy develops a more paratactic style of thought, leaving behind syntactic imperatives. It becomes very common to read phrases in which he enumerates things, as in the last phrase of the coda of *Finite Thinking*: “Foam, erase, tooth, canvas, synapse, liquid crystal, tentacle, scale, plank, spume, fingernail, hail, neutron, lymph ... and so ever indefinitely on. The time of modernity is followed by the time of things.”⁴⁶

In one of his emails concerning our conversation on the sense of cosmos in his work, Nancy wrote: “When we say ‘the cosmos,’ we see worlds rising up, among which our own is only a possibility, perhaps unique in its kind, but uncertain of its being and above all uncertain of the kind it assumes to be: carbon, life and thought spinning within pulsations, contractions and deflagrations whose violence and intoxications leave us exhausted, panting, as if we were already projected at random across infinities. For it would be an overstatement to call them worlds; they have neither form nor consistency, they are fragile and provisional sprays of parameters that are themselves labile, ductile and, to put it bluntly, muddy or boiling. We have gone away, acosmic, into the magma of the distant. No proximity remains. There are only intersections or blends, collisions or confusions. No more cosmography, but we continue bravely before ourselves.”⁴⁷ This paratactic style confirms that, for Nancy,

44 Jean-Luc Nancy. *A Finite Thinking* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 316.

45 Ibid., 317.

46 Ibidem, 318.

47 “On dit ‘les cosmos’ et on voit se lever des mondes parmi lesquels le nôtre n'est qu'un possible, peut-être unique en son genre mais incertain de l'être et surtout incertain de ce genre qu'il se suppose: le carbone, la vie, la pensée tournoyant au sein de pulsations, de contractions et de déflagrations dont les violences et les ivresses nous laissent épuisés, haletants, comme si déjà nous étions projetés au hasard à travers les infinis. Car se serait trop dire que les nommer des mondes: ils n'ont ni forme ni consistance, ce sont des gerbes

contingence is to be thought from contiguity, from the non-coincidental co-occurrence of each thing with several things, in which all attempts to build a logic of difference and identity, of unity and multiplicity evanesces. It is about *comparution*.

We could be tempted to say that this “cosmic stain” has to do with a non-dual experience of things, with a parallax difference of angle when a star is seen from two different places or position, or with Eugen Fink’s idea of ontic proximity between day and night, the perspective of daylight in which the unlike knows the unlike and the night-obscure light in which the like knows the like as in sleep and touching.⁴⁸ We could also bring the topology of a moebius strip. All that would fit to a certain degree to describe the cosmic stain in Nancy’s thoughts of the sense of the world. But what is decisive here is to think together with him that the cosmic stain shows itself when we are touched by the there is of the there is in everything. The most radical aspect of this was presented by Nancy in his thoughts of *sexistence*, of existence existing itself, *s-existent*, *s’existence*, that is, in the transitivity of existence. That existence is existing means that to exist is a transitive verb, that to exist exists everything that exists and not exist, that existence exists this and that, you and me, us and you and them. The there is is there-is-ing everything.⁴⁹ It incides everywhere.

Stains are formed by chance. They have much more to do with chance than with change and the arche-teleological physics of transformation and metamorphosis, which chains every new form to former old forms, either as their continuity or as their discontinuity, either as tradition or innovation, following either genetic laws of formation or epigenetic paths of deformation and mutation. Stains are expressions of chance, disrupting the arche-teleological scheme of formation since they are *incidental* and never intentional. They fall upon. But they fall upon in such a surprising and unknowing way that with them what one perceives as in a chock is that there is comes toward: the

fragiles et provisoires de paramètres eux-mêmes labiles, ductiles et pour tout dire vaseux ou bien en ébullition. Nous voilà partis, acosmiques, dans le magma des lointains. Aucune proximité ne subsiste. Il n’y a qu’intersections ou mêlées, collisions ou confusions. Plus de cosmographie, mais nous continuons bravement devant nous. ...” These lines Nancy sent to me evoke thoughts he discussed with the astrophysicist Aurélien Barrau. See their dialogue in Jean-Luc Nancy and Aurélien Barrau, *What’s these worlds coming to? (Forms of Living)* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014).

48 Fink presented these thoughts in conversation with Martin Heidegger about Heraclitus, see Martin Heidegger and Eugen Fink. *Heraclitus Seminar* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1993).

49 Here, Nancy’s language becomes surprisingly close to the Brazilian writer Clarice Lispector’s language, above all in her *Água Viva*, where existence is conjugated as a transitive verb.

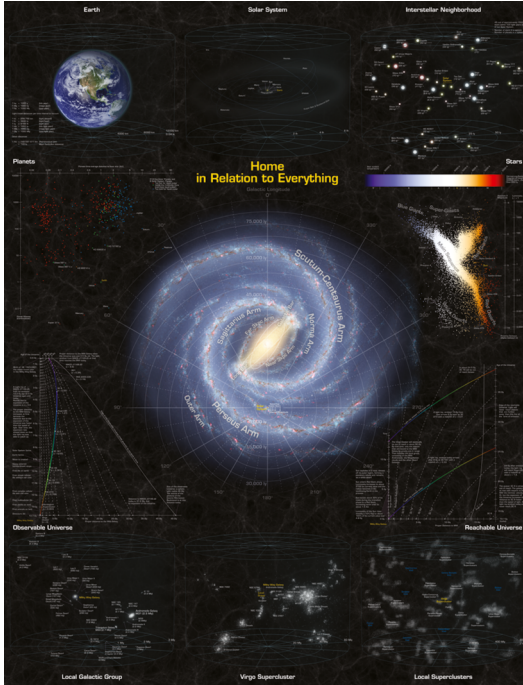


FIGURE 1

Note: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Home_in_Relation_to_Everything.png

there-is, which is more than one, which it is stronger than all strength to control and dominate the coming toward. A stain is the coming toward the skin of existence, much more than something that falls upon it, however not knowing in which side, where *Ça tombe*, as Nancy used to say,⁵⁰ where the there-is falls. It is the outside that falls upon the skin of existence. An outside that says there is more than one, indeed that the one is always more than one. There is more than human existence, a saying that reverts the common saying “only human existence ...”; it says the contrary: not only human existence. The falling of stains tells about the incidence of the non-human upon the human, tells about what it means to be at “home in relation to everything,” to have as home the relation of everything with everything, as Nancy wrote to me sending this image from the Internet.

The there-is of the there is falls upon existence, touches the skin of existence as a stain touches a surface. It is cosmic. And it opens the contact of everything with everything, the “cosmic contact of all things.” It falls, as rain and snow falls, as stars fall, as the West is a setting and falling down, as fallen

⁵⁰ Jean-Luc Nancy. *Corpus III: Cruor and Other Writings* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2023).

idols, as pressure drops, as sleep is something the living has to fall into, as one falls pregnant as it is said in French, as one has to fall in the real, as we use to say in Portuguese when someone suddenly does not turn the gaze and surprises oneself in the happening of the happening. It falls like one falls in love, as bodies fall, and as living bodies die, falling on the ground. Tombs and falls, cadences and decadence.

Stains and spots or blots incide, and this is “cosmic” as meteors and comets. They show the falling of the falling, the incidence of incidence itself, the far away from where they come, a far away without origin or destination; they show that existence is existing, what touches the skin of existence more intimately than the intimacy of any interiority. The incidence of incidence touches the skin of everything that exists as stains and spots and blots, as the absolutely unforeseen landing of birds on *this* branch, of raindrops on *this* surface, of comets passing in *this* path. The landing of a bird: the incidence, this co-incidence, this is what a stain, a spot, a blot tells us.⁵¹ In a very close way to Virginia Woolf who sees spots and stains in things and not things in spots and stains, Nancy observes in Cy Twombly’s painting how he paints gods without faces, made only by stains and spots.⁵² They tell about the coming toward of the coming toward, about the falling upon of the falling upon. Gods, things, birds – so many and multivarious cosmic stains and spots in the world.

Stains and spots are lessons of the emergence which precedes things without precedence; they are *lessons about the emergence of emergence itself*. They demand that “we must come to terms with the silence and the darkness at the heart of every convulsion and emergence – whether of the collision of particles, the birth and death of living beings, our meditations, or our deliriums [... whether] folding, cracking, breaking, articulating.”⁵³ And the task is “... to watch its invisibility, since it is within this invisibility that it comes toward us.”⁵⁴ Thus it is this stain or spot-like way of the emergence emerging that makes us open our eyes and our mouth, and then begin to talk from a listening, that

51 Virginia Woolf begins her beautiful text called *Solid objects* writing about things and beings as “spots” falling on the world. “The only thing that moved upon the vast semi-circle of the beach was one small black spot. As it came nearer to the ribs and spine of the stranded pilchard boat, it became apparent from a certain tenuity in its blackness that this spot possessed four legs; and moment by moment it became more unmistakable that it was composed of the persons of two young men”, see Virginia Woolf. *The Complete Shorter Fiction of Virginia Woolf*, edited by Susan Dick, Ny: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Publishers, 1989, 102.

52 Jean-Luc Nancy. *Lieux Divins* (Mauvezin: Editions Trans – Europ – Repress, 1987), 44.

53 Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Fragile Skin of the World*, 5.

54 Ibid.

allows us to become a gaze and a voice. An opening within the opening of the taking place of existence.

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