

# **Postmodern fables: correlationism and fiction**

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- An investigation of the interplay between Imagination (fiction, stories) and Reason (Bachelard)
- A critical work putting emphasis on the role of imagination in science (archives of scientists, Gödel, Wiener; the idea of a brain decoder in neuroscience)
- A speculative use of fiction in philosophy

*Mon zombie et moi, 2010 :*

- is an attempt to give a theoretical function to fictions

(fiction in the sense of a story that works)

- considers fiction as opening up the 'possible' with which philosophy is concerned

Example : The 'invisible man'

He sees but can not be seen.

Can we imagine an intangible man, who could touch but not be touched?

No such intangible character in fiction.

It shows difference between touch and sight, the tangible and the visible.

- An investigation of our possible bodies
- Under the hypothesis that the possible with which philosophy is concerned is given by fictions (fictions which work).

A philosophical form of intuition. In the same position as the intuition of space for the Kantian geometer

My aim is to investigate the speculative dimension of  
fiction

With regards to the opposition between  
« correlationism » and « speculation »  
(Q. Meillassoux, *After Finitude*, 2006)

To what extent can a fiction be said to describe the  
universe “in itself” ?

J.-F Lyotard's « Une fable postmoderne », 1992

Fiction is speculation in Meillassoux' sense.

In fact, a correlationism based on fictions bears none of the limitation that Meillassoux attributes to correlationism.

It eludes the opposition that Meillassoux stages between speculation and correlationism

Because Meillassoux' refusal of correlationism  
(and his own attempt to get out of correlationism)  
is based on a principle of presence:

(A) What is “given” is co-present,  
contemporaneous to the “givenness”

(B) Whereas fiction considered as a form of  
“givenness” introduces a temporal difference: it  
opens up to a possible past, or future, times that  
are not contemporary to its enunciation

# I. Correlationism

A thing, the world is only as given as the object of some subjective act (perception, thought)

I only know myself as feeling something, thinking about something external. Thus

« By correlation, we mean the idea according to which we only ever have access to the correlation between thinking and being, and never to either term considered apart from the other »

Kant, Husserl, Wittgenstein are correlationists

Meillassoux' aim is to go out of correlationism and come back to « the great outside of precritical thinkers, that outside which was not relative to us, and which was given as indifferent to its own givenness to be what it is, existing in itself regardless of whether we are thinking of it or not. »

Meillassoux refers to 'ancestral' statements in order to illustrate the inadequacy of correlationism.

Statements referring to the universe before human beings

Science produces 'ancestral' statements. Correlationism cannot accept these statement at face value. In order to accept 'ancestral' statements, we must break away with correlationism. **(part II)**

The problem, for Meillassoux, is then to break away with correlationisms **(part III)**

Fiction also produces ancestral statements  
(Lyotard's postmodern fable, Calvino's  
*Cosmicomics*, the genesis in the Bible)

Postmodern fictions stage the human as a  
transitory phenomenon (not a central character)

What privilege, difference of status have science  
in the production of ancestral statements with  
regards to fiction ?

## **II. Correlationism and ancestral statements**

Why can't correlationism accept ancestral statements ?

What is is as given to my consciousness  
(Husserl)  
as correlated to some subjective act

So how could anything be before I was ?

“the self contradiction [...] of the givenness of a being anterior to its givenness” (p.28, my translation).

“What is given to us, in effect, is not something that is anterior to givenness” (p.31)

One can only have access to something that is present

A “retrojection of the past on the basis of the present”:

“In order to understand the fossil, it is necessary to proceed from the present to the past following a logical order, rather than from the past to the present following a chronological order”.

(Kant, antinomy of pure reason, *Métaphysique, spéculation, corrélation*)

“the self contradiction [...] of the givenness of a being anterior to its givenness” (p.28, my translation).

“What is given to us, in effect, is not something that is anterior to givenness” (p.31)

The principle of presence: what is given is contemporary to givenness

I can only have access to something that is present

« That which is given in the present ... retrojects a seemingly  
ancestral past » (31)

Memory : the postcard theory

Bergson's theory of memory as relationship to the past, a  
perception in the past

If correlationism is associated with the principle of presence, it cannot accept ancestral statements

But is the principle of presence insuperable?

Bergson's theory of memory shows that there is no contradiction in accepting a given anterior to givenness.

Can we somehow extend this idea?

We tell stories about the past. Can we consider fiction as an intuition, the “givenness”, of a possible past?

## Conclusion of part II

Meillassoux' refusal of correlationism is based on the principle of presence, according to which nothing can be given that is not contemporary to the givenness

Fiction, if it can be considered as a differant relationship (a relationship that differs, makes a temporal differance), may be a speculative correlation

## **Part III**

### **How does Meillassoux break away from correlationism**

The crucial moment is an experiment in thought:

I can think my possible annihilation, and know that my annihilation is possible.

If so, the possibility that I may not be is an absolute. It is not only the object of an correlation.

“I must think my capacity-not-to-be as an absolute possibility, for if I think this possibility as a correlate of my thinking, if I maintain that the possibility of my not being only exists as a correlate of my act of thinking the possibility of my not being, then I can no longer conceive the possibility of my not being.” (p.94)

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## Two claims

- (1) I can conceive, and know as a possibility, my own annihilation.
- (2) This possibility is an absolute (not only a correlate)

(2)

“This capacity [not to be] cannot be thought as a correlate of our thinking, precisely because it harbors the possibility of our own non being”

(p.94)

If this capacity not to be is a correlate of my thinking, then I need to be in order to think of it. So I cannot not be.

Or rather I cannot not be now, at the moment  
when I am thinking of my capacity not to be. But I  
can not be at any other moment.  
But I can well be annihilated tomorrow.

I can conceive now the possibility of my not being  
tomorrow. This possibility (tomorrow) exists as a  
correlate of my thinking (now)

« Could this possible [the possibility to be annihilated] depend on our thinking? Of course not. For, if our mortality was only possible on the condition that we exist in order to think it, then we would cease to be mortal. We would not even be able to think ourselves as mortal.”

“Est-ce que ce possible, en particulier, est *dépendant* de la pensée que nous pouvons en avoir? Bien sûr que non: car si notre mortalité, notre cessation possible, n’était elle-même possible qu’à la condition que nous existions pour la penser, eh bien nous cesserions d’être mortels, et même d’être capables de nous penser comme mortels. »

*(Métaphysique, spéculation, corrélation)*

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Thus my capacity not to be does not have to be an absolute. It can exist as a correlate of my thoughts. This only implies that I cannot not be now (but, now, I do exist anyway). But it remains that I could be annihilated tomorrow.

(1)

How do I know that I could be annihilated ? How do I come to this capacity of not being ?

If one considers fiction, as opening up the philosophical possible, it should be an invariant of all good stories concerning my future

The transhumanist picture

Descartes, immortality of the soul,  
God's continuous creation

# Conclusion

(A) The limitations that Meillassoux attributes to correlationism (inability to accept ancestral statements, inability to take into account our capacity not to be) are all based on the principle of presence:

The co-presence of the given and the givenness

Accepting the principle of presence: since correlationalism identifies what is with what we can somehow reach, then there is no past and there is no death for correlationalism.

(B) Meillassoux' own attempt to get out of correlationism depends on the principle of presence

Accepting the principle of presence, the possibility of my annihilation can not be only the correlate of my thinking.

If one refuses the principle of presence, the possibility of my annihilation (someday) may be considered as the correlate of my present thinking

(C) It is possible to refuse the principle of  
presence

(C1) with reference to the future

(C2) with reference to the human past

(C3) with reference to an ancestral past ?

(D) If we consider fiction as a form of intuition, the “givenness” of a possible, then fiction is not submitted to the principle of presence.

We can tell stories about different times, times when we are not. Thus we can produce ancestral statements or conceive our annihilation.

Lyotard, Calvino describe a universe where the humans do not exist yet, where the humans could have not been

We can adopt a correlationist principle:  
what is, and what may be, is given in fictions  
(as the correlate of a fiction)

And yet speculate :  
describe a universe anterior to humans, indifferent  
to humans.

If one refuses the principle of presence, there is  
no alternative between correlationism and  
speculation

## Why science ?

- Science, in Meillassoux' book, does not describe the real universe.
- Philosophy gives meaning to ancestral statements in science but does not make them true (give them a foundation).

### So why science and not fiction?

- Two arguments (no reference to experiments in science) :
    - Rational discussion
    - Unity
    - Science as if it was finished:
- « accord to science that what it says is indeed the last word about what it says »

If Meillassoux considers that our capacity not to be is an absolute, and not a correlate, it is on the same grounds that he took ancestral elements to be out of reach for a correlationalism.

## The principle of presence

If one can only think of something that is present (neither of the past nor of the future), then indeed

- (1) Fiction may be speculative in Meillassoux' sense
- (2) Fiction may be speculative and yet be considered in a correlationist framework. Thus, the opposition between correlationism and speculation is inadequate.
- (3) Meillassoux' refusal of correlationism is based on a “principle of presence” which fiction shows to be wrong.
- (4) Meillassoux seems to, or should, use this speculative power of fiction in his own materialism.

Meillassoux' refusal of correlationism is based on a principle of presence according to which

I can only think of, have access to, something that is present, or co-present with me.

But I can tell a story about the past, or the future, or a universe where I could have not been.

Thus fiction does not verify the principle of presence that Meillassoux associates with correlationism. Thus it can be both a correlation and a speculation