The unbearable lightness of a Heideggerian meditation: Hermeneutic failings and the idle content of would-be avant-garde theorising

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I would like to extend my thanks to the editors of assemblage for hosting this peer commentary exchange on Webster (2001), and to both referees who provided very useful feedback. I consider myself fortunate in having Professor Julian Thomas as a referee and then, at his behest, a commentator. As readers of assemblage will be well aware, Professor Thomas has been a key proponent of the post-processual project, hence he is well able to act as a standard bearer for post-processual scholarship.

Professor Thomas enjoins readers of assemblage to treat the 'natural attitude' with a 'hermeneutics of suspicion'; what does this amount to in practice? First, let us note in passing that every hermeneutical project is a manifesto, or a corollary of a political program (cf. Rosen 1987). And the post-processual project clearly shows this to be the case. If any doubt about this claim is held, let us again note in passing a recent posting on the internet by Professor Thomas, on behalf of Archaeological Dialogues. In a call for participation in a very worthy competition, we find the following claim: ‘Yet just like its processual precedent, it [post-processualism] has developed from theoretical avant-garde to academic establishment’. Here we find a leading post-processualist engaging in a politics of reassurance directed at ‘young scholars’ (in Thomas 2001a).

In Webster (2001) I was concerned to offer up a decidedly non-reassuring message with regards to post-processualism, for I endeavoured to trace a brief historical outline of the successive unravellings of the post-processual project, and its subsequent reinvention. First of all, Rathje and Schiffer (1982) compared artefact assemblages with letters of the alphabet. Then Hodder (1989) compared the manufacture of pottery to the expression of a proposition. This was followed in the early nineties by an ‘interpretative turn’ with the publication of the edited volume Interpretative Archaeology (Tilley 1993). From this volume I choose to focus on Yates (1993). Shortly after that came phenomenology (Tilley 1994) and the Leskernick project (Bender et al 1997). Thus landscape archaeology received a post-processual make-over,
the outcome of which was a fascination with ‘places’ (e.g. David and Wilson 1999).

Professor Thomas sees in this too brief a history of post-processualism, a parodic image, but what I went searching for was a coherent discourse at the heart of post-processualism, but sadly, there was none to be found. In the first stirrings of post-processualism there was what I called ‘a confusion of signs’ and relatedly, a disappearance of crucial distinctions (e.g., between artefacts and letters of the alphabet or between pots and propositions). After the interpretative turn, we were told that there is interpretation ‘all the way down’ (e.g., Thomas 2001; Andrews et al 2000: 526). With the recent arrival of phenomenology, it is not at all clear what the ‘message’ is, or indeed, if there is one. Such parody, as there is in Webster (2001), was inspired by the realisation that the so called theoretical avant-garde is not an avant-garde at all, rather, they are a ‘cul-de-sac’. And sadly, Professor Thomas’ commentary on Webster (2001) only serves to underscore my argument for Professor Thomas did not even attempt to engage with the arguments made therein. So, we have been treated to obfuscation, unwarranted accusations, and numerous confusions to muddy the water; on offer, was not a hermeneutics, but simply, suspicions.

Firstly, Professor Thomas is intent on introducing Heidegger (as a supposedly irrefutable authority) into the discussion, but he wrongly attributes to me the citing of Heidegger as an authority for excluding interpretations from the mundane life. It is Wittgenstein, most directly, that I have looked to for a characterisation of the mundane. Secondly, in Webster (2001), I placed emphasis on the phrase ecological information and just prior to that, I had rejected the idea the world sends us messages (or signs). Taken together, these two aspects of my text should alert the hermeneutist that what was at issue here was not the usual connotation of ‘information’ or that understood by communication science (e.g. Shannon and Weaver 1949), but something quite different. And Gibson (1968) specifically warned against confusing ecological information with Shannon and Weaver’s mathematical conception. Thirdly, in Webster (2001) I wrote the following: ‘The rock carvings that Yates...take as anthropomorphic, show that there has occurred in our culture an agreement in judgements regarding the use of descriptions for such pictures; hence ‘interpretation’ is already a culturally accomplished fact’. Now, if descriptive terms such as ‘anthropomorphic’ are culturally associated with certain kinds of picture, but not others, then their use by an individual to describe such pictures is specifically not an interpretation in the sense that Tilley clearly meant when he wrote that ‘we only have to interpret...
if we are puzzled or ignorant about something’ (Tilley 1993: 2, original emphasis).

Let us pursue this point a little further: In the introduction to Tilley (1993) the question is posed, that having counted the number of words in the book, would this be an interpretation of it? Tilley answered his own question by stating that most people would say no. Counting is a meaningful practice with a symbolism, as is the example of addition given in Webster (2001). But if interpretation goes all the way down then must that not mean that we first interpret each number or symbol then word, as being what it is - establish its identity - and then interpret their inter-relation as an instance of counting or of being a book? Wittgenstein (1988) would answer no, for, ‘What this shows is that there is a way of grasping a rule that is not an interpretation, but which is exhibited in what we call obeying the rule, and going against it in actual cases’ (§201, original emphasis).

For in our practice of reading we follow the rules of taking some strings of symbols as words and other strings of symbols as non-words. The rules for this are laid down in spelling tests (i.e. in training) and codified in dictionaries.

Reading is an example of the enactment of a practice which goes to make up our mundane life. In non-literate societies, this practice does not, by definition, exist. In other words the relationships to symbols in non-literate societies does not include the one we have when we read a text. Nevertheless, in whatever other relationship they do stand towards their symbolic forms, they will manifest a natural attitude towards them because whatever stands before them as symbolic, is a culturally accomplished fact and hence in no need of further interpretation - understood in the sense given by Tilley above. Had Professor Thomas paid closer attention to my text he would have seen that in no way was I arguing that the natural attitude is ahistorical in form, though I do claim it is a universal feature of human existence (see below).

It is clear then that in Professor Thomas' commentary hermeneutics lost out to suspicions; suspicions that a natural attitude is 'hard wired' into people, that I have regressed into Cartesianism, that I have simply misunderstood what was being said in the articles that I quote.

Let us address these suspicions in their turn: It seems to Professor Thomas that my ultimate inspiration derives from the transcendental phenomenology of Husserl (which failed), whereas he prefers the hermeneutical phenomenology of Heidegger (but which Heidegger came to abandon, see.
below). It is certainly the case that Gibson was, in the early days, appreciative of Husserl. But Professor Thomas’s has my use of the Husserlian phrase ‘the natural attitude’ in his sights.

Phenomenology, for Husserl, required that we take an attitude ‘above the universal conscious life...through which the world is ‘there’ for those naively absorbed in ongoing life, as unquestioned present’ (cited in Tito 1990: 180, original emphasis). Hence the term ‘natural’ in ‘natural attitude’ connotes an ‘unquestioned present’ or being ‘naively absorbed in ongoing life’. However, Professor Thomas would convince us that ‘natural’ connotes biological (= nature) and hence we (Husserl and I) are assailed with the accusation of construing the mundane (= natural attitude) as being ‘hard wired’ into people (cf. Thomas 2001). To accuse Husserl thus is certainly unwarranted and gratuitous. As for myself, Professor Thomas’s contentions recall a previous debate on Steve Mithen’s book Thoughtful Foragers. (1990).

In Mithen (1994) the mesolithic-neolithic transition is viewed from within the perspective of mental modules. In particular, Darwinian algorithms that underlie the Massive Modularity Hypothesis (MMH) propounded by Cosmides and Tooby (1992). In the MMH, it is argued that:

"[S]pecialized mechanisms enable competencies and actions that would not be possible were they absent from the architecture. This rich array of cognitive specialization can be likened to computer program with millions of lines of code and hundreds or thousands of specialised subroutines" (Cosmides and Tooby 1992: 39)

The model for the MMH is human genes, but unfortunately for the MMH, it now looks as if we only have some 30 to 40 thousand genes - though it is fair to say that the jury is still out and the number will start to drift upwards. But more importantly, the demonstration of developmental plasticity (e.g. birds being developmentally induced to grow teeth rather than a beak) requires the rejection of the Mendelian model of independent and additive genes (i.e. ‘specialized subroutines’). As Ken Richardson notes:

"Phenomena such as canalization, divergent epigenesis, exon shuffling (which modifies gene-products to suit current development needs), and even developmental modification of gene structures themselves, now make nonsense of the idea of a one-to-one relationship between incremental accumulations of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ genes, and increments in a phenotype" (1999: para 15).
In other words, ‘hard wiring’ is simply false and I have never argued in favour of it. This unfortunate term came about through some (many, even) psychologists taking seriously the proposition that the mind is a brain and the brain is a computer (cf. Shapiro 1996). But when Professor Thomas correctly notes that I propose to remove the representational (or algorithmic) element from cognition, he completely fails to see that the mind/brain/computer metaphor goes out along with it.

This is not to deny that there are neural assemblages that are reflexively built to enable specific actions to take place (this is called microgenesis). And as Northoff (1999) explains, using the case of Parkinson’s disease and Catatonics, even the functional relations between functional assemblages (e.g., the Motor loop, and the Orbitofrontal cortical loop) can be reordered by prevailing environmental circumstance. So, for instance, when a Parkinson’s sufferer feels progressively threatened, their akinesis (immobility) is reversed, thus: ‘Brain function can therefore not be regarded independent of the environment, i.e., social isolation, so that the actual functional brain organization is determined by means of the interaction between brain and world’ (Northoff 1999: 204). So even at the level of brain structure, there is no ‘hard wiring’.

Professor Thomas argues that we never experience geometric, Cartesian space: well, I agree. My reasons can be found in chapters one and two of Gibson’s The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception (1986). Professor Thomas argues that we always experience things as something, and again, I agree. In one experiment undertaken with Ken Richardson (see Richardson and Webster 1996) I showed experimental participants a small number of moving points of light set against a pure black background, and they immediately told me that it was a person walking. They were quite correct since the movements of the points of light were mapped from video tapes of people walking. Professor Thomas argues that we never simply achieve the pickup of covariation, and again I have to agree, for there is nothing at all simple about this picking up of ecological information, or of identifying a person walking from a small number of co-varying points of light. So what of Heidegger then?

Heidegger is Professor Thomas’s would-be trump card, but as indicated above, Heidegger came to abandon hermeneutics, concluding that ‘it would never enable him to brake out of the sphere of transcendental reflections’ (Gadamer 1989: 23). It is thus the early Heidegger that Professor Thomas is at pains to promote (and he should have made this clear), for it is the early Heidegger who argues that all our encounters with entities are interpretative.
‘that is, they all have the structure of encountering the entity as something’ (Boedeker Jr. 2001: 67). And as some specific thing encountered, entities are interpreted practically:

"When someone uses a hammer, she interprets it practically in terms of the possibility of hammering, i.e., for hammering. Heideggerian possibilities are thus much like what we might call someone’s capacities" (Boedeker Jr. 2001: 66, original and added emphasis).

The key terms are practically and capacities for they point to a physically grounded activity. Or as Gibson would say, an afforded activity. What I perceive through the configurations of affordance are the activities that are possibilities for me at that moment, and, as I purposefully move through the supporting environment, I change the configuration of affordance available to me. Or to put it in Heideggerian terms, the configuration of the ready-to-handness changes, for as Kadar and Effken note, ‘Heidegger’s explicit ontology has an underlying similarity to Gibson’s implicit ontology’ (1994: 302, original emphasis). The principle difference is that Gibson’s account of ecological information allowed him to avoid the trap of ‘transcendental reflections’ that eventually forced Heidegger to give up on hermeneutics. And: ‘If ’being is perceiving’ as Berkeley said, or if perceiving is being, as a realist might have replied, why has it not occurred to anyone that the equation is really an identity: being = perceiving. The difference is merely one of words’ (Gibson; cited in Reed 1988: 52).

Affordances - as the indication of possibilities for acting - are perceived through our attempts to act in the world, for when we act in the world (our Being-at):

"[T]he universe is in process, and objects may be considered only as more or less persistent regions in an onslaught of spatio-temporal change. The transformations wrought have different time courses, and the slower ones leave what appear from our perspective as stable or permanent properties. Hence the words ‘structure’ and ‘change’ are perspectival terms, for persistence in an event must be defined relative to the time course of the perceiver...Most basically, then, events exhibit some form of persistence that we call an object or layout, and some style of change defined over it" (Warren and Shaw 1985: 6, emphasis added)

Our biology enters into our cultural life in the most fundamental way by setting the upper and lower limits to a temporal scale of persistence and change within which we can operate - from one hundred thousandths of a
second for neurotransmitter synthesis to individual life-spans. For instance, when catching a ball, we are operating within an actional time frame of one tenth of a second (the edge of awareness of the ball) and a number of seconds before arrival at catch point, but not only must we pick up ecological information about where the ball will land, and when it will arrive, but also at what rate energy must be dissipated over our musculature to propel one’s body mass to that space-time locale. In this sense, we do indeed undergo adaptations to our unfolding environment by acting within it, and this is anything but a superficial matter.

The scale of persistence and change also enters into our language, for what we will come to name and describe will be those areas of persistence, which, given our biological constitution (here I regretfully have to ignore the attenuating contributions of instrumentation), can become objects for us, and so the scale of persistence and change generates the ground of the subject-object distinction. The subject-object distinction is less a philosophical issue, and more a fundamental aspect of our Being-in-the-world.

Take the popular Gibsonian example of posting a letter: One turns the corner and at the speed of light (which we cannot be aware of, for it is beyond our scale of persistence and change), a textured array of illumination will reach us, within a hundredth of a second there after our neural organisation will have been re-ordered such that we will have become aware of the possibility of an affordable act - the posting of our letter. We walk down the road, becoming aware of other things but all the while being able to return to the awareness of the possibility of posting a letter. We reach the post box, take the letter out of our pocket and put it through the opening whilst letting go of the letter. Our awareness of the postbox took a fraction of a second as the postbox appeared before us and I think we can all agree that the meaning of this appearance is coextensive with our becoming aware of the possibilities of ‘posting’. The affordance of posting, at this point, is virtual, but no less real for that (as William James put it, what we are aware of, for the moment, is reality). But the completed enactment of this ‘posting’ affordance must wait while we adapt to the unfolding posting environment, that is, walk up to the postbox and place the letter inside it.

However, merely placing a piece of paper in a red pillar box is not in itself the practice we call posting. For posting to be afforded there must be other virtualities present (virtual with regard to our precise locale). There must also be a social institution of posting, supported by other human beings who are, as it happens, hierarchically organised, differentially paid and functionally diverse. Again, there must be a certain distribution of these human
elements, and of equipment as well, all of which must be, dare I say it, in place, before the affordance of the practice of posting can go through to completion. Within every practice we move from the virtual to actual and thus transcend a subject-object divide, but with each act accomplished we return - if but for a moment - to the virtual, i.e., start to become aware of other aspects of the world about us. The spatio-temporal ‘distance’ between the virtual and the actual is the ‘moment’ of the ‘out-there’. Theoria as contemplation is equivalent to Heidegger’s un-worlding (cf. Thomas 2001), that is, rendering the world as a picture, and thus virtual. In the moment of the virtual we ‘constellate’ ourselves (cf. Jones 1999) by picking up new ecological information. Or again, there is William James’s bird analogy; the ‘moments’ of constellation are our ‘perchings’, while our subsequent actions are our ‘flights’.

Social institution, or perhaps we should say cultural institution, lies at the heart of our mutual understandings. Just as I can become aware of the socially sustained affordance of posting a letter, so too can my neighbour advancing on the postbox from a different direction. In this we can come to share in the same physical and social reality, or as Gadamer puts it, come to a fusion of horizons. The social institution of archaeology (as a specific set of historically developed language-games and other practices) means that each and every practitioner can come to share in the same archaeological reality.

Professor Thomas has chosen to counter-pose Gibson to Heidegger but this was an ill fated move. For there is much that it is common between Gibson and Heidegger despite their very different academic roots. But when Professor Thomas argues that we enter into a hermeneutic engagement based on our ‘pre-understanding’, he will look in vain in Heidegger for any comprehensive explanation of this pre-understanding.

To conclude: It has been argued (as reported in Berglund 2000) that post-processualism is diffuse and inherently so. The reason why this might be, in my view, is that post-processualism, for the would-be avant-garde (provide your own list of suspects) had to be reinvented several times over as the incoherences and bluster became manifest in the lack of any progress being accomplished - why was ‘material culture as text’ abandoned?

Claims like (a) artefacts are like letters of the alphabet, (b) material culture is a text, (c) a pot has propositional content, (d) there is interpretation all the way down, and (e) it is not possible to divorce doing from thinking, are either simply incoherent (e.g., a-d) or utterly banal (e.g., e). All of them are, to borrow Wittgenstein vivid image, ‘wheels turning idly’ within the texts of the
would-be avant-garde, and thus incapable of doing any serious theoretical work. Here is another absolutely crucial one: ‘we must seek difference, not sameness’ (**Yates 1993**: 61).

As Professor Thomas pointed out, Yates’s work was (is?) informed by poststructuralism which puts great emphasis on difference. The problem here is that it is impossible to detect change (difference) unless there is something else that is persistent (sameness). This is why I have never argued that interpretation does not intervene, or better, arise, in everyday life. How could I? If there is interpretation all the way down as Professor Thomas and Andrews et al (**2000**) insist, then nothing could count as an interpretation. In other words, interpretation can only be intelligibly identified as a creative practice (creating difference) when set against the ‘rupture’ of the sameness of mundane practices (cf. **Habermas 1988**).

So we find the post-structuralist writ nestling as a contradiction in the heart of the interpretative program. What about the so called ‘phenomenological’ approach to the landscape? Places such as sites and monuments are differentiated and marked as significant, as ‘what is most important for the social reproduction of the group’ (**Chapman 1997**: 33). But we might ask, why is the difference between a henge and a causewayed camp taken to be more important to the social reproduction of a group than the essential sameness of the privy. Is that not too, a place of social importance? Again we find the post-structuralists impulse to accentuate difference over sameness - but then archaeology ‘always already’ had an affinity with post-structuralism, it just didn’t know it.

With each reincarnation of post-processualism something new is brought to the fore (e.g., phenomenology) and something old is down played and made to disappear (e.g., the propositional content of pots). Meanwhile, the socially and intellectually wider issues that were bundled up within post-processual project such as reflexivity, the importance of context (not at all a new idea), the emphasis on gender, and seeing material culture as active and symbolic (when seen in specific circumstances) were appropriated into the processualist canon.

Professor Thomas’s contention that I have lapsed back into Cartesianism is quite unconvincing, if not down right preposterous. Mind, as Collingwood (**1916**) rightly said, seems not so much that which thinks, but the thinking itself, it is not so much an active thing but an activity: We are mindful in as much as we are active.
To be fair to Andrews et. al. (2000), they do seem to sense the incongruity of the claim that there is interpretation all the way down, for they speak of ‘observational interpretation’ (which archaeologists hope are secure) and ‘historical interpretation’ (which will be less secure). The so called observational interpretations refer to archaeological phenomena at the ‘trowel’s edge’, for instance, an horizon. But what will count as an ‘horizon’ or an ‘anthropomorphic figure’ for that matter, only counts as such in being social instituted, that is, where there are agreements in judgements about what will be called what. In other words, seeing-as, is institutionally established and thus rendered mundane for the practitioner. If, for reasons of inexperience, doubt about such phenomenon arises, what we end up with is a reality disjuncture between the student and the institution (See Pollner 1975, for further discussion).

Two further points need to be made about ecological information. First of all, it is our bodies, as perceptual systems, that encounter a field of co-variation (of illumination, sound, chemicals, touch) in an active and reflexive way that renders such covariations informational about the activity underway. Secondly, it is the occasioned accomplishment of a mastery over the deep structure of contingencies carried in a field of co-variation that is manifest in perceiving-as (= the ‘always already’). Seeing an object as a chair presupposes that one has mastered sitting and walking for these are the mundane activities within which it becomes intelligible to speak of chairs rather than lampshades. It is the manifestation of a mastery of the physical and social contingencies of one’s environment that gives expression to human culture.

Ecological psychology may, and indeed, does, draw on Heidegger, but it outstrips him in being able to provide an account of how it is possible at all, that we perceive the world as an accomplished ‘always already’ meaningful one. It matters little whether we think of this as the embodiment of culture or as the enculturation of our biology. Nor is it a retreat into innate instinctual responses to the environment as Professor Thomas claims. Rather, it is the institutionalisation of a part of nature through the collective production of a natural institution - a person capable of a natural attitude that alone can ground their further interpretative endeavours. And as Brushlinskii put that matter, ‘If the biological and the social mediate one another...[then]...a dualism between them is impossible’ (1979: 38).

I hope that this brief debate will prove of some interest to the readers of assemblage. However, it is time I believe, to call time on the seemingly inevitable incoherences inserted into archaeology by the would-be
theoretical avant-garde with their hyperbolic style of writing, and its idle content. Finally, I must thank Professor Thomas for providing a most excellent foil.

Bibliography


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