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The Intervals of Habit

Abraham Geil

In our lives, we constantly experience this ambivalence of habit. Janus bifrons working like time towards growth and expansion as well as degradation and erosion. Without habit, no maturing of intelligence, of taste; but as a result of habit, how many sources dried up, freshness lost, enthusiasm buried under the grey shroud of routine.

—Dominique Janicaud¹

When we look at living creatures from an outward point of view, one of the first things that strike us is that they are bundles of habits.

— William James²

If the very notion of influence tends to provoke ambivalence by the threat it poses to a certain ideal of autonomy, habit is a peculiarly ambivalent form of influence. Habit is external to conscious thought—its influence happens behind our backs—but it is nevertheless intrinsic to subjectivity. For Kant, this makes habit an internal enemy of an autonomous subject whose freedom is grounded in reason. In the *Anthropology*, he defines it as “a physical inner necessitation” toward mechanistic routine, and, whereas for the Aristotelean tradition habit is aligned with virtue, for Kant there is no such thing as a *good* habit. By impairing the “the freedom of the mind,” habit “deprives even good actions of their moral worth.” Hence Kant’s summary judgment: “As a rule all habits are reprehensible.”³ There are of

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course any number of counter-examples to this decidedly negative view of habit in modern Western philosophy. Most famous perhaps is Hume's dictum that habit ("custom") is "the great guide of human life."⁴ For Hume, habit is the foundation of the most basic beliefs about self and world. In its encounter with experience habit goes beyond what is present in experience by fashioning such essential fictions as personal identity and causality that give shape and consistency to life; and habit alone can pull reason back from the edge of maddening skepticism by returning it to the natural disposition of inhabited human existence.

Autonomy's undoing or its necessary precondition: habit has long been available to these converse interpretations. But the oscillation between those two pictures of habit points to something more than another illustration of the clash of orientations in a readymade history of modern Western philosophy (e.g. idealism vs. empiricism, or whatever). As Dominique Janicaud suggests in my first epigraph, this doubleness in the apprehension of habit in fact reflects a constitutive ambivalence in the concept itself. One of the subjects of Janicaud's essay, Félix Ravaisson, formalized this ambivalence as the "double law" of habit in his 1838 treatise *Of Habit*. On a basic phenomenological level this law refers to the fact that, as our actions—mental acts as well as physical—become more fluent through repetition, we become less aware of them. Diminishment of attention is both the reward and the price of habit's fluency. Less than a decade before Ravaisson's treatise, Hegel would describe this dynamic in terms of a dialectic between "indifference" and "dexterity" in his definition of habit in the *Encyclopedia*.⁵ At another level, this "double law" of habit marks a normative split between two categories of habits—"passive" versus "active"—with the former tending toward automatism, mechanical tics, and addiction while the latter leads toward mastery and grace. In his recent effort to "restore" habit's "ontological dignity" as one of modern humanity's essential modes of existence, Bruno Latour posits this distinction as a nearly self-evident axiom: "No touchstone is more discriminating than this one: there are habits that make us more and more obtuse; there are habits that make us more and more skillful."⁶ But the ambivalence is not so easily resolved once we move from the position of judging this or that collection of particular habits to trying to think a single

concept of habit that would unite both sides of the distinction. It is perhaps unsurprising that the formulation of such a concept has led a number of contemporary theorists to characterize habit as a *pharmakon*, an undecidable supplement in Derrida's conceptualization, at once poison and remedy.⁷

This constitutive ambivalence persists as both a theoretical and a practical problem in the current revival of interest in habit. It provokes the question of whether and how it is possible, if to not sever the two sides of habit, to at least open an interval between them so as to direct habit toward more desirable ends—not least toward the eradication of undesirable habits. In his recent political history of habit, Tony Bennett describes this as a matter of opening an interval in the repetitions of habit itself. Having first emerged in late medieval Christian theology and early modern Western philosophy, he argues, this idea of an interval in habit became central to an historically distinctive *dispositif* he calls the modern “habit system”:

the mechanisms comprising the modern ‘habit system’ operate through the gap or interval that is produced when the force of habit-as-repetition is stalled, thereby opening up a moment in which a capacity for freedom might be exercised by subjecting habit's unthinking repetitions to review, and, as a consequence, to the possibility of reformation—not in the sense of leading to a habit-less existence but rather to a new set of habits.⁸

For Bennett, the entire political history of habit since at least the early-19th century consists of the various ways this gap “has been interpreted and made actionable” by scientific, philosophical, moral, and aesthetic authorities.⁹ Whatever differences and even antagonisms might exist between the avowed aims of these authorities, what unites them in Bennett's (broadly) Foucauldian picture is this “habit system” itself and the essential logic of liberal governmentality driving it. Through its central mechanism of the interval, the “habit system” produces the capacity to intervene in and redirect one's habits as a technology of governing through freedom.

Bennett's concept of the "habit system" is nothing if not a paranoid theory in Eve Sedgwick's now classic sense of the term. Its strength lies in its very reductiveness and can be measured by the "size and topology of the domain that it organizes."¹⁰ And the domain of the "habit system" is large and various indeed. The range of authorities who are seen to operate its interval includes not only classical liberal theorists such as John Stuart Mill, but also the entire post-Darwinian organic memory tradition from Théodule-Armand Ribot to Herbert Spencer, Henri Bergson's transformative critique of that tradition in his philosophy of life, Pierre Bourdieu with his concept of habitus, as well as Catherine Malabou and her Hegelian appropriation of neuroplasticity. Despite all of their manifest differences, each of these thinkers of habit is revealed finally to be yet another agent of liberal governance, a figure whose essential formula is not "be free" but rather "I am going to see to it that you are free to be free."¹¹

But as Sedgwick points out, this strength of a paranoid theory also entails a specific weakness. Namely, that in its drive to discover at work everywhere and always the phenomenon it anticipates, a paranoid theory is "weak" insofar as it precludes the possibility of obviating that phenomenon or disrupting its workings. Let me say up front that I have no interest here in enlisting the question of habit in what is often a facile "critique of critique." If anything, I'm interested in trying to extend the possibilities for critique that Bennett's concept of the "habit system" so powerfully suggests. In a sense, I would say the problem with the concept is not that its application is too broad but rather that the way Bennett construes its key discovery—the interval of habit—is too narrow. What this forecloses, most fundamentally, is the possibility of opening an interval at the level of thought between habit and its imbrication in the "habit system."

I

Having undergone a period of relative dormancy since its modern highpoint in scientific and social discourse of the late 19th and early 20th century, the question of habit has re-emerged in the past decade or so as a locus of interest across a range of disciplines: including neuroscience, social psychology, sociology, cultural anthropology, media studies,

aesthetics, and philosophy.¹² One index of how far this revival of interest in habit has permeated the broader culture is the recent upsurge of popular self-help and business books that adopt the term as a buzzword. In just the past few years, bestsellers have appeared with titles like *The Achievement Habit* (2015), *The Habit Blueprint* (2016), *Habit Stacking* (2017), *High Performance Habit* (2017), *Hack Your Habits* (2017), and so on—a veritable cottage industry for which Stephen Covey’s now classic *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People* (1989) appears but a quaint precursor. Each of these texts lays claim to cutting-edge insights from the empirical disciplines to reveal habit as a site for transformative intervention into the conduct of conduct. They offer techniques of *self*-influence that purport in effect to operationalize Hume’s idea of habit as life’s great guide.

Perfectly in line with Bennett’s modern “habit system,” this literature presents habits as “hackable” inasmuch as an interval of reflection can be introduced into their chains of unconscious repetition, bringing them into conscious awareness long enough to interrupt and redirect the mechanism toward a more productive end before allowing it to slide back into automaticity. This awareness is typically accomplished by some method of self-monitoring that exteriorizes a person’s habits in a representation that can be brought under retrospective review. In one sense, such exteriorization is necessary because habits are those behaviors so internalized as to escape notice; in another, *as* behaviors habits are already “outside” of conscious awareness, embodied rather than thought, and so exteriorization is a matter of catching habit where it lives. A pairing of book titles published in 2017 by different authors nicely illustrates the reversibility of this spatialized metaphysics of the habituated subject: *Unfuck Yourself: Get Out of Your Head and Into Your Life* and *Unfuck Your Habitat: You Are Better than Your Mess*. When it comes to habit, you unfuck from the inside out *and* the outside in. Here too Hume might supply a maxim with his observation that “the mind has a great propensity to spread itself on external objects.”¹³ Or, from the other direction, we might recall Foucault’s definition of the soul as “the seat of habits.”¹⁴ As for the means of exteriorization—the relative granularity and accuracy of habit-data made available for review—it hardly needs mentioning that the

self-help books listed above trade in a wholly outdated technology compared to the rapidly proliferating world of self-quantification apps.¹⁵

This cottage industry of books and apps organized around habit as a newly (re)discovered technology of the self can be seen, in one aspect, as an emergent sector of the so-called “attention economy.” That is, the idea popularized since the mid-1990s that in the overdeveloped world attention has assumed the status of a scarce commodity.¹⁶ As demands on attention proliferate, habit can be said to serve its traditional function of automating routine tasks so as to preserve attentive mental capacity to meet these demands. But as with any number of time or labor-saving technologies, this instrumentalization of habit tends to transform in its own image that which it aims to preserve. As attention thins out and scatters under the pressure of incessant solicitation, it comes to resemble distraction—attention’s definitional opposite in canonical accounts of modernity—and distraction of course is the native cognitive domain of the habitual. Or, to put it a bit differently, what was once defined as the lapse or absence of attention is increasingly seen as its new cognitive mode (“hyper-attention”).¹⁷ So efficiently directing this newly scarce resource of attention-cum-distraction can now mean bringing it under the management of habit. To revise a well-known line from Walter Benjamin’s *Artwork essay*: even attentive people can form habits.¹⁸

Or rather they *must*; and this imperative points to a broader economic logic or form of rationality behind the resurgence of habit, one that is probably still best captured under the rubric of neoliberalism. In this understanding, habit provides a lever whereby individuals can take hold of their lives as self-governing enterprises with the aim of maximizing their own value as human capital. As such, habit is a vector for “responsibilization,” the practice of “forcing the subject to become a responsible self-investor and self-provider.”¹⁹ And the capacity to intervene in and productively direct one’s habits becomes yet another basis for distinguishing winners from losers.

The critique virtually writes itself.²⁰ Indeed, the heuristics of neoliberalism (and the cognate concepts of governmentality and responsibilization) explain the contemporary rehabilitation of habit only *too well*, so that the problem becomes one of frictionless circularity

between analytic and object. The experience of frictionlessness itself being a classic hallmark of habituation and the threat it poses to reflection.²¹ It is entirely understandable therefore that attempts in the humanities to appropriate habit as a critical concept should tend to reflect its constitutive ambivalence in a certain meta-critical anxiety over whether the theorization of habit might do little more than mime its neoliberal uses. If habit is a *pharmakon*, the fear haunting critical rehabilitations of the concept in the context of its neoliberal resurgence is nicely encapsulated in one of Derrida's definitions of writing from "Plato's Pharmacy": "to repeat without knowing."²² The question then is how to establish a difference—an interval of reflection at the level of theory—between habit's deployment as an instrument of neoliberal governance and a concept of habit that would exceed such instrumentalization and thus offer the means for a (potentially redemptive) critique.

II

By way of illustrating the difficulties involved in this critical task, I want to consider the example of a recent attempt to rehabilitate the concept of habit in the field of media studies. Wendy Hui Kyong Chun's latest book, *Updating to Remain the Same: Habitual New Media*, brings the question of habit to bear on her ongoing inquiry into what she calls the "founding paradoxes of new media."²³ Habit is readily adaptable to such a project because its ambivalence as a concept oscillates between a set of standard metaphysical dichotomies—active/passive, mind/body, freedom/necessity—which provide generic coordinates for Chun's investigation into the contradictory affordances specific to new media and networked society. In *Updating to Remain the Same*, Chun turns to habit to make sense of the interplay between stability and disruption (or security and vulnerability) produced by the incessant demand to update in the so-called "permanent beta" condition of digital culture. On the one hand, new media industries depend on the habituation of users to machines and software, aspiring to the condition of their full integration into the daily, unconscious life of habit; on the other, as "forms of accelerated capitalism" new media constantly "seek to undermine the habits they must establish in order to succeed in order to succeed [*sic*]."²⁴ The settled temporality of habit is thus

disrupted by the temporality of crisis, which is then momentarily resolved by the next update, installing a new habit, which, in turn, is disrupted by a subsequent crisis and so on. Chun provides a formula for this perpetual motion machine in which crisis becomes as ordinary as habit and we are forever updating to remain the same: “Habit + Crisis = Update.” In our habituation to this “constant updating of habits” we come to experience habit itself as a state of permanent dependency on the next update. This production of dependency, she argues, drives “‘networked society’ and its logic of capture, crisis, and optimization.”²⁵

In placing habit at the center of her diagnosis, Chun directly confronts the critical ambivalence involved in making recourse to habit in this moment. She voices skepticism about the current revival of habit in the social sciences and humanities, even as she draws from and participates in that revival.²⁶ As I’ve already suggested, managing this ambivalence means establishing some minimal difference or interval between the valorization of habit under neoliberal rationality and the theorist’s own use of habit as a revitalized critical concept for gaining a purchase on the effects of that rationality. Chun attempts to open this interval through a kind of double-operation. She first surveys a wide variety of theories of habit in order to establish it as a phenomenon characterized by contradiction. “Habits are strange, contradictory things ... they are mechanical and creative; individual and collective; human and nonhuman; inside and outside; irrational and necessary.”²⁷ In this way she preserves the structural ambivalence of habit as a concept capable of grasping the constitutive paradoxes of new media—“its enduring ephemerality, its visible invisibility, its exposing empowerment, its networked individuation, and its obsolescent ubiquity”—while also keeping them in play. At the same time, however, Chun argues for a radical shift in the nature of habit itself under the conditions of perpetual crisis and update she describes. “Habit + Crisis = Update reveals the extent to which habit is no longer habit.”²⁸ And several pages later: “something very strange is happening cloaked within this *apparent* renewal of habit. Habit is becoming addiction: to have is to lose.”²⁹ However perspicuous this is as a social diagnosis, the opposition Chun introduces here between habit and its falsification or bankruptcy as addiction depends upon a normative rather than a strictly historical

distinction. (As we've already noted, addiction has long been understood as an effect of habit's ambivalence, seen to belong to its negative pole of machinic repetition. And, as we'll see in more detail in a moment, this negative pole fully coexisted with the positive one in 19th century conceptions of habit.) Nevertheless, with this second move Chun aims in effect to sever the toxic side of habit's *pharmakon*-like nature from its curative side. In so doing, she would neutralize the political ambivalence of habit (its purported complicity with neoliberal rationality) while sustaining its conceptual ambivalence as a means for grasping the paradoxes of new media.

Beyond simply grasping those paradoxes conceptually this redeemed notion of habit becomes the normative basis for their transvaluation. I won't attempt to do justice to the force of Chun's normative claims nor to the subtlety and range of the technical/social analyses that support them. For our purposes, it is enough to sketch one of the main threads of her argument. To begin with, what appear as paradoxes are in the fact the myriad consequences of new media's tendency to undermine and scramble conventional social binaries, the most far-reaching being the public/private distinction.³⁰ Chun argues that even the most well-intended attempts to preserve older habits of privacy against new media's profound blurring of public and private end up furthering neoliberalism's simultaneous expansion and evisceration of the private ("privatization"). In this context, privacy is reduced to "house arrest" and acts of publicity to "leaking and outing."³¹ Therefore, rather than seeking security in the shelter of privacy from the exposure of networks, "we need to focus on modes and modalities of publicity" enabled by networks.³² Fostering such habits of publicity means willingly "inhabiting networked vulnerabilities."³³ The wager is that in risking this sense of vulnerability we will discover a new source of collective belonging to counter the atomizing effect of neoliberal habits (i.e. habit as addiction and loss). "It means," Chun concludes, "inhabiting and discovering how our habits collect, rather than divide, us."³⁴

But what warrants the cut between "true" habit and its neoliberal imposter in the first place? Chun illustrates the transformation from habit to what is "no longer habit" through a comparison between the 19th century concept of habit developed most prominently by Ravaisson with an early

21st century definition of habit formulated by Charles Duhigg in his best-selling book *The Power of Habit: Why We Do What We Do In Life and Business* (2012). Chun's reading of Ravaisson closely follows the one given by Elizabeth Grosz in her reconstruction of a vitalist ontology of habit running through the work of Ravaisson, Bergson, and Deleuze. Grosz sees this as a counter-tradition to the dominant Cartesian-Kantian line of modern philosophy which regards habit as "that which reduces the human to the order of the mechanical." Against this view, Grosz wants to affirm a conception of habit "as a fundamentally creative capacity" by which "we can organize lived regularities, moments of cohesion and repetition, in a universe in which nothing truly repeats."³⁵ This is the picture of habit against which Chun measures its contemporary degradation into addiction, epitomized for her in Duhigg's formulation of habit as an automatized circuit between behavioral cues, routines, and rewards—what he dubs the "habit loop."³⁶

These are indeed very different pictures of habit, and it is true that the latter is virtually indistinguishable from a model of addiction. The question, however, is whether these pictures can be so easily severed from one another as such a stark opposition would suggest. For one thing, this opposition depends upon a rather one-sided reading of Ravaisson. As Catherine Malabou puts it in her reading of *Of Habit*, the genius of Ravaisson's treatise lies in his insistence upon sustaining both sides of the *pharmakon*:

It is a matter of bringing to light their common ground, to demonstrate that there can never be one without the other, to affirm that it is one and the same force, one and the same principle, which produces habit at once as grace (ease, facility, power) and as addiction (machinic repetition).³⁷

Moreover, if we shift from a philosophical to an historical register the desire to sever the two sides of habit is even more problematic. As we've already seen with the example of Bennett's work, the current rival of interest in habit in the humanities includes the effort among cultural historians to trace its history as a "protean variable of political thought"

within a broader genealogy of liberalism.³⁸ Mary Poovey, for example, argues that habit came to function in the late-19th century as a “switchpoint” or mediator for the animating tensions of liberal political thought.³⁹ Most saliently, habit was thought to manage the tension between individuals and the social by mediating between “isolated actions on the one hand, and those collective laws and regularities which were thought to govern society and the economy on the other.”⁴⁰ Habit’s duplicity—its “double law” or *pharmakon*-like nature—is activated in this context as the means for drawing a division in the body politic between those who qualify for self-government and those who do not. Severing the two sides of habit here means distinguishing between those who “combine thought and habit and are therefore able to reflexively monitor their own conduct, and those who, subject entirely to the regimes of habit, are to be governed through mechanisms which reinforce its rigours of unreflective repetition.”⁴¹ It is the former category of subjects that John Stuart Mill, for example, is addressing when he proclaims, in a clear echo of Kant, that a “person feels morally free who feels his habits ... are not his masters, but he theirs.”⁴² Whereas this category of persons is thus thought equipped for liberal governance, the latter category is assumed to require older, more coercive techniques of government. The social production of this distinction following all too predictably along the lines of race, gender, occupation, class, and projected as well onto colonial relations.⁴³

Whatever mutations the concept of habit has undergone during the history of its political uses since the mid-19th century (and no doubt there are many), these mutations are best understood as different configurations of its constitutive ambivalence. In other words, as I’ve already suggested, the normative cut between “positive” and “negative” notions of habit cannot be accomplished by simply contrasting two historical moments—e.g. a mid-19th century “liberal” iteration of habit with an early-21st century “neoliberal” one—because the question of how and upon whom to make that cut is the very thing that constitutes habit *as* a political concept in each of those moments.

It could certainly be argued that the contemporary notion of habit formulated in, for example, Duhigg’s “habit loop” depends upon the same essentially negative conception of habit found in the 19th century liberal

configuration. The difference perhaps being that the relative freedom associated with liberal governance has given way to the generalization of a more nakedly coercive relation to habit. But regardless of how we might choose to characterize these changes, it is fair to say that this entire trajectory in the political history of habit remains more or less within the Kantian line against which Grosz enlists the Ravaisson-Bergson-Deleuze lineage as a radical alternative. And unquestionably, these constitute two significantly different pictures of habit, most fundamentally because the latter poses habit as an ontological rather than epistemological matter. For our purposes, however, the question is whether and how this ontological approach alters the way that the interval of habit is conceived—and to what effect. While the Kantian or “liberal” conception of habit sees the interval as a moment of conscious self-reflection on the part of (certain) subjects, the ontological conception attempts to think the interval as an *immanent* break within the processes of habit itself. In the following section, I will consider this latter conception of the interval, first by briefly tracing its passage from Ravaisson to Bergson and then seeing how it functions through the distinction Bergson draws in *Matter and Memory* (1912) between what he calls “habit-memory” and “true memory.”⁴⁴ As we’ll see, the Bergsonian interval of habit is finally no more immune to the critique of Bennett’s “habit system” than the Kantian line it ostensibly opposes. At the same time, my following reading of Bergson—and particularly the status of habit in his theory of the comic—will seek to demonstrate a certain limit or impasse in this line of critique and to suggest a way past it.

III

Whereas Grosz stresses the continuity in Ravaisson’s and Bergson’s respective philosophies of habit, there is a strong case to be made for a significant break, one that complicates any simple opposition of Bergson’s thought to a Kantian devaluation of habit as mechanistic necessity. In short, as Mark Sinclair convincingly argues, “Ravaisson challenges the philosophical dualism underlying the classically modern determination of habit as a ‘mechanical’ principle of action, whereas his successor Bergson reverts to it, and in so doing establishes a form of mind-body dualism.”⁴⁵

To set up this contrast, let me first briefly sketch Ravaisson's anti-dualist approach to habit. For Ravaisson, habit performs the role of mediating between conscious will and instinct. According to his "double law" of habit, as an action which is initially performed consciously becomes habitual through repetition it is transformed by degrees into something closer to an instinct. That is, it becomes a spontaneous action that is no longer immediately directed by conscious will. But—and this is the crucial point—this process always remains a matter of degree and does not terminate in a difference of kind. It is on this basis that Ravaisson rejects the dualism that opposes a mechanical principle to a rationalist principle of action in the classically modern conception of habit. In a key moment in *Of Habit*, he writes:

although movement, as it becomes a habit, leaves the sphere of will and reflection, it does not leave that of intelligence. It does not become the mechanical effect of an external impulse, but rather the effect of an inclination that follows from the will.⁴⁶

The thread that links habit back to an originating intelligence is never completely severed no matter how "obscure" or thin it becomes ("O so thin!" Emerson might say).⁴⁷ In fact, the image Ravaisson settles on is not a thread but a "spiral." As a "second nature," habit descends this spiral "from the clearest regions of consciousness," carrying with it "light from those regions into the depths and dark night of nature."⁴⁸ In Ravaisson's understanding, habit is not the object of an interruption from outside of itself; it is not a zone of non-thought into which reflective consciousness opens an interval. Rather, we might say, here habit *itself* performs the role of the interval, though in a distinctively mobile, mediating form:

habit is the dividing line, or the middle term, between will and nature; but it is a moving middle term, a dividing line that is always moving, and which advances by an imperceptible progress from one extremity to the other.⁴⁹

With this (finally) spiritualist conception of habit, Ravaisson posits a transcendent principle of “Spontaneity” that is “equally opposed to mechanical Fatality and to reflective Freedom.”⁵⁰

In his 1904 discourse on Ravaisson, Bergson follows his processual account of habit formation: “our inner experience shows us in habit an activity which has passed, by imperceptible degrees, from consciousness to unconsciousness and from will to automatism.”⁵¹ Once a habit is contracted, however, it becomes in Bergson’s oft-repeated phrase “the fossilized residue of a spiritual activity.”⁵² For Sinclair, this line epitomizes Bergson’s misinterpretation of Ravaisson because, in his insistence that habit always terminates in a rigid automatism, Bergson cancels out the “natural spontaneity” which infuses Ravaisson’s conception of habit. The consequent mind/matter dualism of Bergson’s picture of habit is worked through in the distinction he draws between “habit-memory” and “true memory” (or simply memory proper), in *Matter and Memory* (1912).⁵³ These two modes of memory respectively name the two “distinct forms” in which the past persists: “first, in motor mechanisms; secondly, in independent recollections.”⁵⁴ The first *acts* the past by repeating it in the form of bodily habits in the present; the second *imagines* the past by representing it to perception as singular, unrepeatable instances.

Whether Bergson’s view of habit is seen as positive or negative turns, in large part, on how the relation between these two forms of memory is construed. In Grosz’s fully affirmative reading of habit in Bergson, for example, habit-memory provides the background stability and conserves the energy necessary to enable the free, creative acts of memory-proper. “Without habits and their tendency to automatism, living beings would not have the energy and singularity of purpose that enables them to survive and to create, to produce the new, to live artistically.”⁵⁵ Moreover, habit-memory stores the past as a vast virtual resource that can be opened up and actualized in the present by the recollection in memory-proper of a singular instance. This opening—or interval—that memory-proper introduces into habit-memory is what Grosz dubs in a previous work “the nick of time,” which, by activating a moment of contingency in the past, frees the present and future (à la Nietzsche’s idea of the untimely) from the teleology of causal determination.⁵⁶ For Sinclair, in contrast with Grosz’s

reading, the negative evaluation of habit dominates over the positive one in Bergson, especially when considered within a larger span of his work. Although Sinclair acknowledges that habit-memory can be seen to form the “ground of human freedom” for Bergson, he stresses those moments when it returns in the form of “mechanical rigidification” to pose “a deathly danger and resistance to life itself.”⁵⁷ In *Creative Evolution*, for example, Bergson remarks of “life” (as the *élan vital*) that

Even in its most perfect works, when it seems to have triumphed over external resistance and over its own resistance, it is at the mercy of the materiality that it had to give itself. ... Our freedom, in the very movements by which it is affirmed, creates nascent habits that will smother it if it does not renew itself by constant effort: automatism menaces it.⁵⁸

Bergson articulates this antagonistic relation between habit and life (automatism and the *élan vital*) in especially sharp terms in his work on laughter and the comic, as we will see in more detail shortly.

Let us return for a moment to Bennett’s concept of the modern “habit system” from the beginning of this essay. We can now appreciate the concept’s strength through its ability to encompass both the above readings of habit in Bergson. Whether freedom is understood to result from the collaboration between habit-memory and memory proper (as Grosz has it) or from their antagonism (as Sinclair sees it), what matters is the production of the interval that enables them to be put into relation in the first place. In both interpretations, the “distinction between the past as ‘acted by matter, imagined by mind’ opens up a space within the person in which a capacity for freedom can be developed and exercised.”⁵⁹ This interval, crucially, is something not everyone is thought to possess. A key insight that Bennett brings from Foucault’s account of liberalism to his concept of the “habit system” is that the freedoms it produces are unevenly distributed. More pointedly, “[t]heir denial to some sections of the population constitutes the condition for their exercise by others.”⁶⁰ Bennett attempts to demonstrate this dynamic in Bergson by referring to his example of an “African savage” in *Matter and Memory* whose

“spontaneous memory” is presumed by Bergson to outstrip his “intellectual development.” According to a missionary report, this “savage” was able to perfectly imitate a long sermon he had heard “textually, with the same gestures, from beginning to end.”⁶¹ Bennett takes the appearance of this anecdote in Bergson’s text as an empirical example of the hypothetical person Bergson posits a page later whose capacity for freedom is supposedly compromised by his lack of memory-proper. Such a person, Bergson writes, “would be continually acting his life instead of truly representing it to himself: a consciousness automaton.”⁶² For Bennett, this example is symptomatic of the fact that the Bergsonian interval—as an instantiation of the “habit system”—preserves the racist aspects of the 19th-century organic memory tradition even as Bergson attempts to critically transform that tradition.⁶³ What’s more, Bennett rebukes contemporary theorists who have “slipstreamed in [the] wake” of Deleuze’s revival of the Bergsonian interval—including Grosz but also Jill Bennett and Brian Massumi—for their apparent ignorance (or omission) of this “discriminatory political history.”⁶⁴

Clearly, this is a rather damning bit of exposure that Bennett’s genealogical approach to the political history of habit accomplishes. It complicates, to say the least, any simple opposition vis-à-vis the capacity for freedom between the Kantian conception of habit with its 19th century liberal uses and the philosophical lineage that Grosz champions. But once Bennett puts the knife in, once he punctures the emancipatory pretensions of that latter tradition and its contemporary proponents, then what? With his genealogy in view, how might we proceed to think a concept of habit at a distance from its imbrication in the “habit system”? Bennett hints at a possible direction when he remarks that Bergson’s example of the imitating “savage” transforms “what might otherwise have presented itself as a rare talent for mimicry into a deficit.”⁶⁵ In keeping his focus is on the inexorable workings of the “habit system,” however, Bennett does not pursue the potential implications of this neglected interpretation.⁶⁶ But in fact the phenomenon of mimicry, and imitation more generally, opens up the possibility of another approach to the question of habit. What imitation introduces is a picture of habit from what James calls “an outward point of view.” It does so by producing an image of habit *as* repetition. Here the

interval exists not between habit and some version of its other—e.g., between habit and thought as in Kant, between habit and addiction as in Chun, between habit and memory or habit and life as in Bergson, all of which oppositions fall within the logic of Bennett’s “habit system”—but rather between habit and itself.

We can begin to see how this might work through a reading of a Bergson text I’ve already alluded to, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic* (1900), in which habit and imitation play a central role. Here Bergson presents his celebrated one-line formula for the comic: “*Something mechanical encrusted on the living.*”⁶⁷ Among his many examples of this comic effect is the imitation of gestures. “[R]eally living life,” Bergson asserts, “should never repeat itself. Wherever there is repetition or complete similarity, we always suspect some mechanism at work behind the living.”⁶⁸ Imitations are funny precisely because they amplify this aspect of mechanical repetition at work in the original by demonstrating its *repeatability*. Life itself, especially inner mental life, “is ever changing” so that

if our gestures faithfully followed these inner movements, if they were as fully alive as we, they would never repeat themselves, and so would keep imitation at bay. We begin, then, to become imitable only when we cease to be ourselves. I mean our gestures can only be imitated in their mechanical uniformity, and therefore exactly in what is alien to our living personality. To imitate anyone is to bring out the element of automatism he has allowed to creep into his person.

The same creeping, impersonal element is also what makes certain faces humorous for Bergson and accounts for the comic effect of caricature. “Automatism, *inelasticity*, habit that has been contracted and maintained, are clearly the causes why a face makes us laugh.”⁶⁹ This comical rigidification which we encounter in exaggerated form in imitations and caricatures is in fact the consequence of habit’s natural course. It is, to repeat Bergson’s (mis)interpretation of Ravaisson, nothing other than “the fossilized residue of a spiritual activity.” This process of fossilization is allowed to proceed by virtue of a “*fundamental absentmindedness*,” as

though the spirit were “fascinated and hypnotized” by its own instantiation in matter.⁷⁰ For this reason, Bergson’s *Laughter* is not only a formal account of the comic but a theory of its social function. That function is to wake one another up from the state of absentmindedness which allows unchecked habit to calcify our living vitality. As Bergson readily acknowledges, this entails a certain callous (not to say sadistic) rectitude in his theory of the comic: “Laughter is, above all, a corrective. Being intended to humiliate, it must make a painful impression on the person against whom it is directed.”⁷¹ Here the interval is opened (painfully) from the outside; for the target of laughter, ridicule does the work of exposing and prying off habit’s mechanical encrustations.

Obviously on its own terms Bergson’s theory of the comic does not seem to offer much in the way of an alternative view of habit and the interval. Indeed, as we’ve seen, it presents a crystallization of his dualistic approach to habit which fits so perfectly within Bennett’s concept of the modern “habit system.” But what happens if we suspend this dualism from its function as the ontological ground of the comic, as the presupposition, that is, of two pre-existing elements or substances—the living and the mechanical—that are afterwards juxtaposed in the comic? And what if, instead, we see this dualism as the retrospective effect of the comic? This is precisely the approach Alenka Zupančič proposes in her ingenious reading of Bergson’s *Laughter*.⁷² Her suggestion is that the “mechanical” dimension of the comic does not in fact constitute one of its two poles, with “life” being the other, but can instead be understood as referring to the relation itself; that is, the “mechanical” describes a relation which is “perceived as purely external” between *any* two elements.⁷³ To demonstrate this aspect-shift she takes up Bergson’s example of imitation. As we’ve just seen, Bergson argues that imitation shows us what is “alien to our living personality” because it is only in their mechanical repeatability that gestures can be imitated. “Contrary to this,” Zupančič asserts:

does it not ring more true to say that comic imitation reproduces all there is, yet by doing so—that is, by relating a habit to itself, by introducing something like a relationship in which this habit (when

imitated) refers to itself—it produces pure life at its most obvious, as an object to be seen, as a thing?⁷⁴

By producing what William James calls “an outward point of view,” imitation introduces an internal interval in habit.

What appears to be mechanical (habit) on the one side, and a pure fluid life on the other, are effects produced in this movement in which a life is referred back to itself, confronted (by means of imitation) with itself as seen from the outside.

This external vantage offers a radically different standpoint on habit than we have thus far considered. Crucially, it is a position of externality that does not function as a moment of reflexivity—or gap for the interpolation of liberal governance, as Bennett has it—to be fed back into habit construed as a subjective tendency or disposition. Nor is the production of the interval in this case predicated on any internal partitioning between habit and other components of personhood (such as will, memory, reason) that is supposed to constitute the difference between those who possess a capacity for freedom and those who do not. Indeed, the outward point of view suggests a notion of habit and the interval that is disarticulated from any metaphysics of the subject. Instead, it suggests that habit might best be apprehended as a matter of aesthetic form. That, at any rate, is the approach I will explore for the rest of this essay. Doing so will first require distinguishing such an approach from the way modern aesthetics has tended to deal with the problem of habit.

IV

If the Kantian line of modern philosophy takes habit as a threat to reason and morality, much of modern aesthetics has positioned it as the enemy of sensibility and experience. “Our habits have long been at work,” Proust writes in *Time Regained*, “and it is the task of art to undo this work of theirs.”⁷⁵ Art on this understanding assumes a Sisyphean task of unconcealment, forever breaking through the sedimentations of habit to

retrieve an originary and spontaneous level of experience, which, all the while, is being covered over again by its ceaseless ossification into habitual perception. The 19th century English essayist and art critic Walter Pater offers an especially vivid expression of the aesthetic sensibility behind such a view of art's vocation:

Not the fruit of experience, but experience itself is the end. A counted number of pulses only is given to us of a variegated, dramatic life. How may we see in them all that is to be seen in them by the finest senses? How can we pass most swiftly from point to point, and be present always at the focus where the greatest number of vital forces unite in their purest energy?

To burn always with this hard gem-like flame, to maintain this ecstasy, is success in life. *Failure is to form habits*; for habit is relative to a stereotyped world; meantime it is only the roughness of the eye that makes any two persons, things, situations, seem alike.⁷⁶

This critique of habit as a process of abstraction from the singularities of experience found one of its most influential early-20th century expressions in the work of the Russian Formalists and their attack on the Potebnia-Symbolist school of criticism. The canonical reference here is undoubtedly Victor Shklovsky's 1917 text "Art as Technique." In Shklovsky's application of a broadly Bergsonian paradigm to the critical distinction of literary from "practical" language, we once again encounter a variation of Ravaisson's "double law" of habit.⁷⁷ Practical language reflects the "general laws" of ordinary perception whereby habituation affords "the greatest economy of perceptive effort" by abstracting ("algebritizing") the objects of perception and automating our responses.⁷⁸ The price of this efficiency is famously an impoverishment in the vitality of experience. Literary language wins objects back for experience through techniques that introduce some disturbance or friction into the fluency of habitual perception (Shklovsky uses the word *zatrudyonny*, literally "made difficult").⁷⁹ His master term for the collective effect of these techniques on perception is of course defamiliarization (*ostraneniye*). This idea that art's

vocation is to open an interval in the habits of perception has had any number of 20th-century afterlives, most notably in its political recasting in Brechtian aesthetics as the V-effect (*Verfremdungseffekt*), the “estrangement-” or “alienation-effect,” which was so influential in the discursive formation of 1970s film theory since dubbed “political modernism.”⁸⁰

Although Bennett does not reference this specific aesthetic lineage, his theory of the modern “habit system” could easily be extended to encompass it. Indeed, Bennett considers more or less the entire tradition of modern Western aesthetics as “a form of disciplinary authority” that produces the capacities for freedom it claims merely to uncover:

The historical *modus operandi* of this discipline is one which constructs the relations between the subject and the artwork as a zone of guided freedom superintended by the authority of the philosopher-aestheticians who function as freedom’s navigators in this regard. This is, however, an authority which usually occludes itself by interpreting the freedom associated with the aesthetic encounter as inherent to the art-subject relationship ... rather than a product of its own activities.⁸¹

In this aesthetic deployment of the “habit system,” the gap opened up by interrupting the repetitions of habitual perception creates a site for the authority of aesthetic philosophy to insert itself through interpretation and guidance. As is true of Bennett’s critique of the political history of habit in general, the ruse he would expose here is of a piece with Foucault’s critique of liberalism as governing through the production and uneven distribution of freedoms. Even the most dialectically nuanced aesthetic philosopher (Bennett’s examples include Adorno and Rancière) is shown finally to be another agent of liberal governance.

In my view, it is here in its application to the domain of art and aesthetics that Bennett’s theory of the “habit system” becomes its most reductive and least convincing. Nevertheless, it invites the question of how we might conceive of an aesthetic interval of habit that would not only complicate the reductions of Bennett’s habit system but evade its logic altogether. I’ve already begun to suggest the direction such a conception

might take through the idea of imitation as producing an internal between habit and itself. Now I would like to extend that idea and give it a formal consistency through a certain concept of gesture. Specifically, I will take up Brecht's idea and method of *Gestus* as a way to think an aesthetic interval of habit that at least partly escapes both the subjectivizing and the ontologizing approaches I sketch above—both of which are all too easily captured in the concept of the “habit system.”⁸²

A brief etymological detour will help clarify the proximity of gesture to a now somewhat archaic sense of habit, which, I want to suggest, is reactivated in Brecht's concept of *Gestus*. Both the Greek term *hexis* and the Latin *habitus* are derived from the verb “to have” or “to hold” (*ekhein* and *habere*). Thus, habit can be defined “most broadly, as the way in which a being has or holds itself.”⁸³ In 18th-century English usage this broad sense of habit came to assume two distinct meanings. One definition concerned the outward appearance of individuals, their “demeanor, bearing, bodily condition or constitution, and style of dress.”⁸⁴ (This last connotation is echoed in the etymological link between “custom” and “costume” and persists in certain specialized contexts, as, for example, when we refer to a “nun's habit.”) The other definition is the more lasting and familiar one: habit as a subjective tendency or disposition acquired through repetition. This latter meaning of habit came to predominate over the former in the 19th century due in no small part to it becoming an obsessive object of reflection in the theory and practice of liberalism.⁸⁵ The former definition, by contrast, is not bound up with the problematic of freedom and the capacity for self-governance; it does not concern the place of habit in the internal arrangement of “architectures of the person.”⁸⁶ Rather, it is strictly concerned with the level of physical appearances and what we might call the intelligibility of social comportment.

Conceptualized via this more archaic definition, habit can be understood to name the entire domain that Brecht's method of *Gestus* in Epic Theater is designed to apprehend. In “A Short Organum for the Theatre” Brecht defines *Gestus* as the “realm of attitudes adopted by the characters towards one another.” These include “[p]hysical attitude, tone of voice and facial expression.”⁸⁷ The task of *Gestus* is not to crack through the sediments of habit to reveal a zone of spontaneous freedom

underneath, but instead to render habit visible in a heightened, crystalized form. This is what Benjamin calls “making gestures quotable” in his reading of Brecht.⁸⁸ Quotability means several things here. It signifies a form of typicality that distinguishes *Gestus* from expressive gesture (or mere “gesticulation”) and lifts it out of its embeddedness in a particular context. Thus, like a literal quotation, it can be extracted from its original context for inclusion in another montage. Indeed, Benjamin sees Brecht’s entire conceptualization and use of *Gestus* as an appropriation of the “method of montage decisive in radio and film” for the functional transformation (“*Umfunktionalisierung*”) of theater. Most importantly for our purposes, quotation and montage are understood as functions of *interruption*. In distinction from Aristotelean theater, the purpose of epic theater is “to portray situations, rather than develop plots. It obtains such situations ... by interrupting the plot.”⁸⁹ Benjamin presents the following hypothetical example:

Imagine a family scene: the wife is just about to grab a bronze sculpture and throw it at her daughter; the father is opening the window to call for help. At this moment a stranger enters. The process is interrupted. What appears in its place is the situation on which the stranger’s eyes now fall: agitated faces, open window, disordered furniture.⁹⁰

Interruption here performs an “organizing function.”⁹¹ The epic dramatist stages the “usual scenes of present-day existence” from the vantage of this interrupting gaze of the stranger, crystalizing the elements of the situation into a kind of tableau. “What emerges is this: events are alterable not at their climaxes, not by virtue and resolution, but only in their strictly habitual course, by reason and practice.”⁹² In the terms of this essay, this method of interruption produces an interval in habit. Crucially, though, this interval is not (or not primarily) located in the habituated perceptions of a spectator but rather in the scene itself; it is the fulcrum around which the depiction of the situation pivots.

It is worth recalling in this connection that Brecht’s use of the term epic “by no means involves the lofty and classical associations of the Homeric tradition but, rather, something as humdrum and everyday as

narrative or ‘storytelling.’”⁹³ This prosaic character of Epic Theater is directly linked to its comedic aspect. “[T]here is no better trigger for thinking than laughter,” Benjamin writes. “In particular, convulsion of the diaphragm usually provides better opportunities for thought than convulsion of the soul. Epic Theater is lavish only in occasions for laughter.”⁹⁴ This role of laughter in Brecht begs a brief comparison to Bergson’s theory of laughter. We could say that what these two ideas of laughter—“Brechtian” and “Bergsonian”—have in common is that both are provoked by the spectacle of habit made visible from the third-person perspective. For Bergson, as we’ve seen, this perspective exposes habit’s mechanical encrustation upon the *élan vital*. And the laughter it provokes is aimed at freeing, through the pain of humiliation, the vitality of the habituated subject from his absentminded automatism. (Read through Shklovsky, Bergsonian laughter is a device of defamiliarization by mockery.) For Brecht, on the contrary, this third-person perspective triggers thought by making habit visible as gesture, as *itself* repeatable or “quotable.” And it would be hard to find a better example of what it would mean to translate Zupančič’s idea of comic imitation (habit referring to itself) into an aesthetic device than Brecht’s famous idea of third-person acting in which actors are said to quote their characters.

V

I want to conclude by turning to an especially masterful example of a scene of habit staged from the vantage of a “stranger’s eyes.” It is James Baldwin’s opening passage to his essay “They Can’t Turn Back,” originally published in *Mademoiselle* magazine in 1960. The essay recounts Baldwin’s experience traveling in the American South earlier that year on assignment covering the student movement. Baldwin begins:

I am the only Negro passenger at Tallahassee's shambles of an airport. It is an oppressively sunny day. A black chauffeur, leading a small dog on a leash, is meeting his white employer. He is attentive to the dog, covertly very aware of me and respectful of her in a curiously watchful, waiting way. She is middle-aged, beaming and powdery-faced,

delighted to see both the beings who make her life agreeable. I am sure that it has never occurred to her that either of them has the ability to judge her or would judge her harshly. She might almost, as she goes toward her chauffeur, be greeting a friend. No friend could make her face brighter. If she were smiling at me that way I would expect to shake her hand. But if I should put out my hand, panic, bafflement, and horror would then overtake that face, the atmosphere would darken, and danger, even the threat of death, would immediately fill the air.

On such small signs and symbols does the southern cabala depend, and that is why I find the South so eerie and exhausting. This system of signs and nuances covers the mined terrain of the unspoken—the forever unspeakable—and everyone in the region knows his way across this field. This knowledge that a gesture can blow up a town is what the South refers to when it speaks of its “folkways.” The fact that the gesture is not made is what the South calls “excellent race relations.”⁹⁵

Like the scene that Benjamin presents in his account of Brecht’s concept of *Gestus*, here too the appearance of a stranger interrupts and freezes into place the constituent elements of the situation to organize it into a scene—an “optical machine” of knowledge.⁹⁶ What distinguishes Baldwin’s scene, however, is not simply its real historical specificity with all of its repressive violence, but the way in which that violent reality is rendered visible through the image of a gesture *not made*. No small part of the genius of this scene lies in the way it thwarts the sort of readings one might expect according to a certain, let’s say, “liberal” conception of habit. We might expect, for example, to interpret this as a scene of mutual recognition blocked by the racist habits ingrained in the Southern white woman. A pernicious but all too familiar horizon of such a reading would involve Baldwin helping the woman to unlearn these racist habits so as to uncover a natural, spontaneous instinct for mutuality with which he, as a black man, is fantasized as having retained some originary contact. Another reading that would take habit as the locus for a different kind of uncealment might interpret this scene as about exposing the white woman’s powdery smile and genteel manner as nothing more than a mask for the murderous

violence underneath. But contrary to either of these readings, the true force of Baldwin's passage lies in the way it shows that there is nothing to reveal because nothing is hidden. The scene unfolds, after all, on an "oppressively sunny day." The habits of white supremacy and the apparatuses of violence that support them are inscribed in the surface of things, in the smallest of gestures, for all to see. That is what Baldwin's scene gives us to see: "The knowledge that gesture can blow up a town..."

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Notes

- 1 Dominique Janicaud, "L'habitude selon Maine de Biran et Ravaisson," *Revue philosophique de la France et de l'étranger* 158 (1968): 67. Qtd. in Alberto Toscano, *The Theatre of Production: Philosophy and Individuation between Kant and Deleuze* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 110-111.
- 2 William James, *The Principles of Psychology, Vol. 1* [1890] (United States: Dover Publications, 1950), 104.
- 3 Immanuel Kant, *Anthropology from a pragmatic point of view in Anthropology, History, and Education*. trans. Robert B. Louden and Günter Zöllner (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 261.
- 4 David Hume, *Enquiries Concerning Human Understanding and Concerning the Principles of Morals* [1748/1751] (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), 44.
- 5 G.W.F. Hegel, *Philosophy of Mind* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 131-132.
- 6 Bruno Latour, *An Inquiry Into Modes of Existence: An Anthropology of the Moderns*. trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013), 269.
- 7 See for example Markus Gabriel and Slavoj Žižek, *Mythology, Madness, and Laughter: Subjectivity in German Idealism* (London: Continuum, 2009), 100; and Catherine Malabou, "Addition and Grace: Preface to Félix Ravaisson's *Of Habit*" in *Félix Ravaisson*, trans. Clare Carlisle and Mark Sinclair (London: Continuum, 2008), xix.

- 8 Tony Bennett, "Mind the Gap: Toward a Political History of Habit," *The Comparatist* Vol. 40 (October 2016): 31-2.
- 9 Ibid., 32.
- 10 Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 134.
- 11 Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978-79* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 63. Bennett quotes these lines in his paper "Guided Freedom: Aesthetics, Tutelage, and the Interpretation of Art," *Tate Papers*, 15 (Spring 2011).
- 12 For a useful survey of this resurgence of interest in habit and the various disciplinary stakes involved, see Tony Bennett, Francis Dodsworth, Greg Noble, Mary Poovey, and Megan Watkins, "Habit and Habituation: Governance and the Social," *Body & Society* 19: 2 & 3(2013): 3-29.
- 13 David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature* [1740] (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), 167.
- 14 Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Pantheon Books, 1977), 128.
- 15 The phenomenon of digital self-quantification has already attracted a good deal of attention in the burgeoning subfield of "App Studies." See, for example: Deborah Lupton, "The diverse domains of quantified selves: self-tracking modes and dataveillance," *Economy and Society* Vol. 45:1 (2016): 101-122; Phoebe Moore and Andrew Robinson, "The quantified self: What counts in the neoliberal workplace," *New Media & Society*, Vol. 18:11 (2016): 2774-2792; Rachel Sanders, "Self-tracking in the Digital Era: Biopower, Patriarchy, and the New Biometric Body Projects," *Body & Society* 23:1 (2017): 36-63.
- 16 See Yves Citton, *The Ecology of Attention*, trans. Barnaby Norman (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2017).
- 17 N. Katherine Hayles, "Hyper and deep attention: the generational divide in cognitive modes," *Profession* (2007): 187-199.
- 18 The original line is of course: "Even the distracted person can form habits." Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility, Second Version," *Selected Writings Vol. 3, 1935-1938* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 120.
- 19 Wendy Brown, *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution* (Brooklyn: Zone Books, 2015), 84.
- 20 For a representative sample of how this approach already characterizes much of the scholarship on self-quantification technology, see note 8 above.
- 21 "Reflection, in the physical as in the moral sense, requires a point of support, a resistance: but the most common effect of habit is to take away all resistance, to destroy all friction." Pierre Maine de Biran, *The Influence of Habit on the Faculty of Thinking* [1802], trans. M.D. Boehm (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1970), 47.

- 22 Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 75. As Clare Carlisle points out, Derrida's definition of writing here applies perfectly well to habit itself. I owe this connection and much else of my understanding of the philosophical history of habit to her work, especially her excellent book *On Habit* (New York: Routledge, 2014).
- 23 Wendy Hui Kyong Chun, *Updating to Remain the Same: Habitual New Media* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2016), 19.
- 24 Ibid., 2.
- 25 Ibid., 10.
- 26 "[T]he return to habit and to nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century theories of habit within sociology, psychology, and philosophy should make us pause. Why is habit ... resurging in the era of neoliberalism, in which we are all individuals; in which, as Margaret Thatcher declared, 'there is no such thing as society'? Are habits what endure as society within collectives in which there is no society? What ideology remains as in allegedly postideological, post-class-based networks?" Chun, *Updating*, 8.
- 27 Ibid., 6.
- 28 Ibid., 4.
- 29 Ibid., 8. Emphasis added.
- 30 Among the other distinctions new media is thought to erode, Chun also names: "the revolutionary and the conventional, ... work and leisure, fascinating and boring, hype and reality, amateur and professional, democracy and trolling." Ibid., 12.
- 31 Ibid., 172, 13.
- 32 Ibid., 171.
- 33 Ibid., 19.
- 34 Ibid., 172.
- 35 Elizabeth Grosz, "Habit Today: Ravaisson, Bergson, Deleuze and Us", *Body & Society* 19: 2 & 3 (2013), 219. Chun quotes this passage twice in *Updating to Remain the Same*, at p. 6 and p. 89.
- 36 Charles Duhigg, *The Power of Habit: Why We Do What We Do in Life and Business* (New York: Random House), 19.
- 37 Catherine Malabou, "Addition and Grace: Preface to Félix Ravaisson's *Of Habit*" in Félix Ravaisson, *Of Habit*, trans. Clare Carlisle and Mark Sinclair (London: Continuum, 2008), viii.
- 38 Tom Crook, "Habit as Switchpoint," *Body & Society* 19:2&3 (2013): 279.
- 39 Mary Poovey, "The Search for *Habit* in Classical Liberalism," *Body & Society* 19: 2 & 3(2013): 269.
- 40 Crook, 276-277.

- 41 Tony Bennett, "Habit: Time, Freedom, Governance," *Body & Society* 19: 2 & 3 (2013): 108.
- 42 John Stuart Mill, *A System of Logic, Ratiocinative and Inductive: Being a Connected View of the Principles of Evidence and the Methods of Scientific Investigation*, Vol. II (London: John W. Parker, 1843), 486. Qtd. in Crook, 277.
- 43 Bennett, "Habit: Time, Freedom, Governance," 108. On the role that conceptions of habit have played in a variety of colonial practices see: Tony Bennett, "Habit, Instinct, Survivals: Repetition, History, Biopolitics" in *The Peculiarities of Liberal Modernity in Imperial Britain*. Eds. S. Gunn and J. Vernon (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011); Christine Helliwell & Barry Hindess, "The 'Empire of Uniformity' and the Government of Subject Peoples," *Cultural Values*, Vol. 6: 1-2 (2002): 139-152; and Barry Hindess, "The Liberal Government of Unfreedom," *Alternative* Vol. 6, No. 2 (2001): 93-111.
- 44 Henri Bergson, *Matter and Memory* [1912] (New York: Zone Books, 1991), 86, 151.
- 45 Mark Sinclair, "Is Habit 'The Fossilised Residue of a Spiritual Activity'? Ravaisson, Bergson, Merleau-Ponty," *Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology*, Vol. 42, No. 1 (January 2011), 41. In this section of my essay I'm strongly indebted to and closely follow Sinclair's erudite argument regarding Bergson's misinterpretation of Ravaisson's *Of Habit*. As Sinclair readily acknowledges, this reading develops and extends Dominique Janicaud's critique of Bergson's interpretation of Ravaisson in Dominique Janicaud, *Ravaisson et le métaphysique: une généalogie du spiritualisme français* (Paris: Vrin, 1997).
- 46 Félix Ravaisson, *Of Habit*, trans. Clare Carlisle and Mark Sinclair (London: Continuum, 2008), 55.
- 47 Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Experience" in *Essays and Lectures* (New York: The Library of America, 1983), 475.
- 48 Ravaisson, *Of Habit*, 59.
- 49 Ibid.
- 50 Ibid., 55.
- 51 Henri Bergson, *The Creative Mind: An Introduction to Metaphysics*. trans. Mabelle L. Andison (New York: Dover Publications, 2007), 252.
- 52 Ibid.
- 53 Henri Bergson, *Matter and Memory* [1912] (New York: Zone Books, 1991), 86, 151.
- 54 Ibid., 78.
- 55 Grosz, 225.
- 56 Elizabeth Grosz, *The Nick of Time: Politics, Evolution, and the Untimely* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004).
- 57 Sinclair, 43-44.

- 58 Henri Bergson, *Creative Evolution* [1907], trans. Arthur Mitchell (New York: Dover Publications, 1998), 127. Qtd. in Sinclair, 43. Here I use Sinclair's slightly modified translation.
- 59 Bennett, "Habit: Time, Freedom, Governance," 122.
- 60 Ibid., 109.
- 61 Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, 154.
- 62 Ibid., 155.
- 63 The work of the French psychologist Théodule-Armand Ribot (1839-1916) played a pivotal role in the development of the organic memory tradition. Bennett provides the following explanation of how Ribot translated a theological notion of the interval of habit into a naturalistic one: "championing a naturalist psychology against religious conceptions of consciousness, [Ribot] gives this interval a neurophysiological location by identifying two routes through which external stimulæ reach the brain, one taking longer than the other and thus opening up a temporal gap—no more than a millisecond or two—in which the "suspensive action of the brain has time to take place and to moderate the reflexes" (Ribot, *Diseases of the Will*, 57). However, the capacity for will and the intellect to modify the force of inherited reflexes that this affords—thus also opening up a space for freedom—is denied those who lack this gap: those afflicted with abulia, children, women, "savages" and unpolished men, all of whom are denied the capacity for self-mastery that derives from the ability to suspend the operation of unthinking repetition." Bennett, "Mind the Gap," 35.
- 64 Ibid., 39.
- 65 Bennett, "Habit: Freedom, Governance," 122.
- 66 It's worth noting at least two ways in which Bennett's reading of Bergson here is partial and even slightly inaccurate. First, he does not mention the fact that Bergson also presents, as the logical counterpart to his hypothetical case of a "conscious automaton," the idea of a person who possesses *only* memory-proper and therefore could never "rise above the particular." Bergson's point is to show that (other than in "exceptional cases") both of these forms of memory are "interpenetrating." Secondly, Bennett attributes to Bergson an observation that is not, as far as I can see, actually in *Matter and Memory*. He claims that Bergson points out that the "savage" is able to perfectly imitate the sermon "without ... understanding any of it." But in fact Bergson makes no particular claim here about whether understanding accompanies the imitation. Moreover, with respect to idea that this imitation displays a "talent for mimicry," we should point out that the text Bergson cites as his source for this missionary report is actually a popular educational book by David Kay entitled *Memory: What It Is and How to Improve it* (1888).
- 67 Henri Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic* (Copenhagen and Los Angeles: Green Integer Books, 1999), 39.
- 68 Ibid., 35.

- 69 Ibid., 28.
- 70 Ibid.
- 71 Ibid., 176.
- 72 Alenka Zupančič, *The Odd One In: On Comedy* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2008), 114.
- 73 Ibid., 115.
- 74 Ibid., 117-118.
- 75 Marcel Proust, *Time Regained: In Search of Lost Time*, vol. 6, trans. Andreas Mayor and Terence Kilmartin (New York: Modern Library, 1999), 300.
- 76 Walter Pater, *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* [1873] Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 119-20. Emphasis added.
- 77 For a careful elucidation of the “Bergsonian paradigm” in Russian Formalism, see: James M. Curtis, “Bergson and Russian Formalism,” *Comparative Literature*, Vol. 28, No. 2 (Spring 1976): 109-121.
- 78 Victor Shklovsky, “Art as Technique,” *Russian Formalist Criticism: Four Essays* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1965), 11-12.
- 79 Ibid., 10.
- 80 The definitive study here remains D.N. Rodowick, *The Crisis of Political Modernism : Criticism and Ideology on Contemporary Film Theory* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1988). The term “political modernism,” at least in reference to film theory and practice, was apparently coined by Sylvia Harvey in “Whose Brecht? Memories for the Eighties,” *Screen* vol. 23, no.1 (May/June 1982): 45-59.
- 81 Bennett, “Mind the Gap,” 44.
- 82 Until relatively recently, estrangement (the *Verfremdungseffekt*) has overdetermined the uptake of Brechtian aesthetics in contemporary discourse around art and politics, especially in film and media studies, with *Gestus* playing a merely supporting role, if any. Lately, however, the question of gesture has been revitalized as a source of critical interest, due in no small part to the influence of Giorgio Agamben writings. For an especially insightful and far-reaching discussion of the links (via Benjamin) between Agamben’s notion of gesture in cinema and Brecht’s concept of *Gestus*, see: Nico Baumbach, *Cinema/Politics/Philosophy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018).
- 83 Carlisle and Sinclair, 5.
- 84 Ibid. See also Crook, 275-76.
- 85 See Poovey and Crook.
- 86 Bennett, 109.
- 87 Bertolt Brecht, “A Short Organum for the Theatre” in *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*. ed. and trans. John Willett (New York: Hill and Wang, 1964), 198.

- 88 Walter Benjamin, "What Is the Epic Theater? (II)," *Selected Writings Vol. 4, 1938-1940* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), 305.
- 89 Walter Benjamin, "The Author as Producer," *Selected Writings Vol. 2, Pt. 2, 1931-1934* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 778.
- 90 Ibid., 778-779.
- 91 Ibid., 778.
- 92 Ibid., 779.
- 93 Fredric Jameson, *Brecht and Method* (New York: Verso, 1998), 43.
- 94 Benjamin, "Author as Producer," 779.
- 95 James Baldwin, "They Can't Turn Back." *Mademoiselle*, August 1960. This essay is also collected in *The Price of the Ticket: Collected Nonfiction, 1948-1985* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1985), 215.
- 96 I take this phrase from Jacques Rancière's description of what constitutes his notion of a "scene" in *Aisthesis: Scenes From the Aesthetic Regime of Art*. The full passage in which it occurs might offer a fine elucidation of what Baldwin's scene accomplishes in its imagining of a gesture not made: "The scene is not the illustration of an idea. It is a little optical machine that shows us thought busy weaving together perceptions, affects, names and ideas, constituting the sensible community that these links create, and the intellectual community that makes such weaving thinkable. The scene captures concepts at work, in their relation to the new objects they seek to appropriate, old objects that they try to reconsider, and the patterns they build or transform to this end. For thinking is always firstly thinking the thinkable—a thinking that modifies what is thinkable by welcoming what was unthinkable." Jacques Rancière, *Aisthesis: Scenes From the Aesthetic Regime of Art*. trans. Zakir Paul (New York: Verso, 2013), xi.