

— Patricia Reed

# MAKING READY FOR A BIG WORLD

**To me the important thing is not to offer any specific hope of betterment but, by offering an imagined but persuasive alternative reality, to dislodge the mind, and so the reader’s mind, from the lazy timorous habit of thinking that the way we live now is the only way people can live. It is that inertia that allows the institutions of injustice to continue unquestioned.<sup>1</sup>**

—Ursula K. Le Guin

Common sense holds that optimism and nihilism are antonyms. They describe opposing dispositions, where optimists typically experience the world with a favourable perspective, while nihilists experience meaninglessness and purposelessness, sometimes with destructive tendencies. Like many antonyms (not least the title of this journal ‘Making and Breaking’), rather than the terms being antithetical to one another, there is a functional co-dependency between the two modes of approaching the world. Let me explain. There is an important connection between nihilism and reasoning argued by Ray Brassier, in that reasoned thought “must assume nothing as its productive condition”.<sup>2</sup> What does it mean to ‘assume nothing’, and why would this be understood as ‘productive’? To assume nothing means that the sets of givens we take as

undisputable truths of the world (particularly social ones), cannot be blindly accepted as real, necessary or good without the activity of reasoned justification; an activity, moreover, that is always social. To reason entails the presumption of no predetermination, whether that concerns what is currently accounted for in the world (epistemology), how it is narrated (history), the direction its going (prehistory), nor our human centrality within it – it is simply the iterative practice of thinking in and with a material world.<sup>3</sup> While the productive condition of assuming nothing seemingly opens up an overwhelming cosmos of instability from the perspective of human experience (one heavily reliant on habits of activity, so in this regard, nihilism is entirely inefficient); this is precisely how it creates space for the construction of, or access to, novelty. Where once things were believed to be fixed absolutely, this understanding of nihilism creates openings to contingency, leading Brassier to frame it “...not [as] an existential quandary but a speculative opportunity.”<sup>4</sup> The premise here, is that to be a materialist optimist today, that is, an optimist with material ambitions beyond hopeful thinking, we require this productively destructive capacity of reason to demonstrate certain properties of the given as contingent, and therefore subject to transformability, conceptually *and* materially. In this regard, optimism

becomes dependent on nihilism for the creation of reasoned re-openings to the world.

This way of understanding nihilism involves two notable features: A) Just because something may currently exist in the world (a particular economic system, dependency on carbon energy, the art world etc.) does not provide sufficient justification for reasoning its status as perpetually immutable or permanent; and conversely B) Just because something may not yet exist in the world (a concept, an artwork, a just social order), does not provide sufficient justification for reasoning its status as absolutely impossible, unrealistic or unnecessary. Nihilism, seen in this twinned capacity, can be grasped as a means for endorsing the pursuit of states of continuity, and/or states of discontinuity. Existentially speaking, when nihilism is parsed from an affective perspective of human attachments to a particular order of the world, it is potentially both distressing (a rupture in the fabric of what was assumed to be true, necessary or good), and/or nourishing (the opening of hopeful possibilities because the assumed givenness of the world, upon which all manner of ordering derives, is demonstrated to be false, unnecessary or malicious). Disavowing of this generative capacity of nihilism to chisel away at assumptions rooting accounts of the world (and accountability within it), amounts to a spurious equation of ‘difficulty’ with ‘infeasibility’. This is the false equation that gets rehearsed in our daily lives, instructing those who explicitly aspire for transformative betterment (socially, climatically and economically), to ‘be more reasonable’. Despite the camouflage of civility, the plea to ‘be more reasonable’ is nothing but shorthand for the conservation of faith in given predeterminations, where under the shroud of ‘being realistic’ we often uncover a tautological defence of the world as it is. Ultimately, ‘being reasonable’ describes a simple temperament, not the activity of reasoning itself; it is not synonymous, nor interchangeable with ‘reasoning being’, and it is for the latter we need to collectively labour.

Now *why* does any of this matter outside the confines of philosophical arguments, and *how* does it matter on a pragmatic and material level? Mark Fisher’s *Capitalist Realism* offers a useful case study, as it plots the ways in which our lives (conscious and unconscious) have become engulfed by the psycho-material machinery of capitalism, specifically neoliberalism. Often through pop-cultural examples of our era (where we increasingly see repeating tropes and the paradigm of the remake at work), Fisher’s diagnosis addresses the inherent violence, dwindling novelty in creativity, and socio-mental degradation that the spectre of an alternativeless world holds over humanity. When the only promise for betterment is confined to a presumed reality lacking in alternatives, we become trapped in a tyranny of relative sameness, where a bulk of pop-cultural outputs serve as artefacts of this plight (not to mention, a protraction of the ‘aesthetics of autotune’, upon contemporary art as well). There are, of course, plenty of particular instances that defy this stultifying mode of practice. Yet, Fisher’s inventory of the aesthetic *symptoms* that make up this alternativeless condition is convincing not least because it confirms what many intuitively feel, see and hear. What I would like to do in the remainder of this essay is not only ask how this model of and for the world came into being, to better understand “how this process of consciousness deflation”<sup>5</sup> works, but also probe its root logic that serves to legitimate the perennial activities and behaviours that sustain it (especially when unsustainably so).

## THE CONCEPT ‘HUMAN’ AND THE EPISTEME

Although Capitalist Realism is the mode of capture, training and moulding our lives, as the polymath Sylvia Wynter has written, none of this is possible without the foundational construction of the “economic conception of being human”.<sup>6</sup> Our existing external conditions are a logical extrapolation of a particular framing of the human, just as other epochs were shaped

by human self-understanding upon religious or political foundations. This assertion would then suggest, that to create new conditions of the world requires not only resistance to the residual *symptoms* of its existing logics as they get materialized (and therefore reinforced) through technologies, systems of classification, cultural production, spatial ordering, economic distribution/valuation models, temporal structures and so on; but that ultimately the target must be set on the transformation of human self-conception itself – or what Wynter more eloquently named throughout her work as the creation of ‘genres of being human’. The argument being, is that to enduringly transform the existing configuration of the world, one must intervene at the root construction of human self-understanding, from which new modes of worldmaking spring forth. This root condition of what is assumed *a priori*, and what subsequently affords/impedes all manner of navigating the world, is what Foucault named as the ‘episteme’. The episteme is the historically situated, discursive backdrop of assumptions that establish conditions of possibility for the adjudication of knowledge (and therefore power), and for what sorts of questions are enabled (or prohibited) within a particular era. It is this latter part of the episteme definition that strikes as the most debilitating, since it discursively excludes certain *genres* of questions we likely need to be asking, as legitimately serious and necessary ones. Since this episteme predetermines what is (perceived as) given, it is also largely insensible to entities operating within it (both by individuals and systems), meaning that its internal mechanisms of discursive prohibition are largely obscure. Due to the pervasive power of this episteme in constructing givens in the world (ones that serve as a space of traction), Wynter postulates that even more fundamentally than regimes of knowledge, this episteme constitutes the very construction of the human itself, the codes governing its conceptual framing, its practices and self-definition.<sup>7</sup> In her words: “...the ‘politics of truth’ of each episteme has to function in a way that enables its social reality to be known in terms

that are of adaptive advantage to the survival, well-being and stable reproduction of the mode of being human that each ruling group embodies and actualizes.”<sup>8</sup>

Through Wynter’s extrapolation of the episteme as embodied in the concept of the human, the human becomes a vehicle for seeing and questioning our own obscured epistemic condition of rooted assumptions. When we hear of new visions of the human that make us intuitively cringe or that we deem as untenable, that is the predetermining force of the episteme at work upon our imaginaries of the possible. Obviously, not all new visions of the human ought to be accepted, taken as good or necessary, deeply and profoundly to the contrary, but they need to be reasoned (assuming nothing given), even, and perhaps especially when that activity of reasoning leads to an utter negation of that new concept, we learn a lot about our human self-picture in the process. When we experience an intuitive rejection from of a different vision of the human, what conventions of our conception of it are we preserving and, crucially, why? Probing the concept of the human becomes equal to an exercise of discursive archaeology, of probing the ground of givens to apprehend the sets of assumptions at work in making sense of the world, our place in it, as well as the cascading array of orders and relations as a result. This is definitely not a suggestion for more anthropocentric narcissism by insisting on the centrality of the human, what is proposed, however, is that *how* we conceive of genres of being human, brings with it fundamental, material consequences on inter-human relations as well as with the non-human world as a result. It’s here, where the destabilizing capacity afforded by nihilism in ‘assuming nothing’ is crucial, as a way to ‘reason being’ anew. Not unlike the deadlock of ‘being reasonable’, when we hear that other ways of being are impossible, this ought to signal the need for deep meditation on the logical (some may say cosmological)<sup>9</sup> conditions that render them impossible *discursively* so, but not *necessarily*, or *realistically* so. The malignant contradiction of our era, is that those who perpetuate the

economic concept of the human as immutably real, as an undecidable fact, impede upon the distribution, access to, and maintenance of life's most necessary resources for real, material life. As it turns out, those who aspire to conditions of betterment, may, in fact, be far more realistic than those who resolutely claim such conditions are untenable. This is not to suggest that aspirations of betterment alone are enough, but it is to reject the smug smear of 'naïve idealism' that squelches possibilities for other conditions of coexistence, as *if* the concept of the human currently rehearsed under the domination of an economic framing, is an adequate, accurate or just one.

Bringing Wynter's 'genre of being human' into relation with Fisher, it can be said that 'capitalist realism' indexes the ubiquitous leveraging of the 'economic concept of the human' as an invariable fact of nature. It's also where the tyranny of socio-material alternativelessness can be seen as a derivative of this naturalized conception of the human as economic being. This 'alternativelessness' does not bare changelessness, our rapidly evolving socio-technical environment is evidence of this, but it only bares change within the parameters of sanctioned possibility delimited by an *epistemic* threshold. From the perspective of reason, this plight is buttressed by the proliferation of what we could call 'inductive stagnation', where inductive logic is when 'truths' about reality are derived from a set of already known, observable entities, and where that generalized pattern is believed to be true. The popular example being that if one only sees white swans, one arrives at the 'truth' that all swans are white...that is until one encounters a black swan and the truth value of that generalization collapses. Historically, this example highlights but one instance of Western bias, wherein all the white swans visible to Europeans were assumed to account for the totality of all swans, until a 17th Century Dutch 'exploration' of Australia revealed this assumption to be empirically limiting, and thereby false. More generally, what this example demonstrates, is the way in which this

particular logical process for reasoning the world, only grants access to what we already (think) we know, while barring access to novelty, or the unknown. Not uncoincidentally, this is largely the type of logic at work in algorithmic machine learning and its automation of categorical generalizations based on existing inventories of our world (data-sets) whose modes of classification and ordering are always a by-product of socio-historical dispositions (the episteme, complete with its baked in, root assumptions concerning given taxonomies in the world). The reinforcement of all that we *think* we know of the world (its constituent parts and the way we order them), now automated in machine learning, reveals an urgent site for intervention by the humanities, to disentangle the fusion of "social categories, as categories of nature".<sup>10</sup>

The reinforcement of the 'economic conception of being human' follows a similarly inductive path on a socio-political level. Simply because hegemonic modes of decision-making at work today derive from this particular concept of the economic human, the habituation of this practice alone becomes justification for its 'truth' or 'necessity' value. Believing something to be true, necessary or real, then performing that logic at scale, without reasoning the foundational assumptions of that belief, instantiates a circular logic or self-fulfilling prophesy – and, as we know from the demand of nihilism, this is definitively not an instance of reasoning being. Now, that said, this is where things get a bit tricky. With the black swan example, one can empirically encounter a novel entity in a fully-resolved way that upturns the established inventories of things in the world, provided we discover the existing world in broader terms and in more depth. When it comes to abstractions like a 'new genre of being human', it is a generic idea and there is no such empirical possibility of encountering this pre-existing entity in a similarly conclusive way. This 'new genre of being human' is a conceptual invention, it cannot be discovered or found, it needs to be constructed. That said, because this abstraction of a 'genre of being human' is performed in reality and its manifestation yields

localized material traces, there are plenty of empirically sensible ‘seeds’ gesturing to this new genre of being human already in practice, demanding attention and nourishment. There are manifold spores of this new genre of being human both within and beyond our immediate situations – geographically and cognitively – calling for astute germination and care, not unlike Fisher’s insistence that the material conditions for socio-political transformation are more in place now, than in previous generations.<sup>11</sup> As Wynter correspondingly notes: “...there can be no utopian saltationism [abrupt leap], whether in politics or in epistemologies [...] discontinuities can erupt only out of seedbeds that have been empirically pre-prepared for them”.<sup>12</sup> The question is, how can we learn to see these instances of a new genre of being human as seeds (and not isolated, self-contained occurrences), a seeing that both accounts for their situated existence, while being accountable to them as potentially extensible and generic, as ones requiring abstractive nurturing to broadly flourish?

The answers (in the plural) to such scalar questions are far humbler than what one may intuitively infer. Humble, yet not unaspiring. There is no desire to repeat the violent precedent of answering to big questions with small-world responses; responses arising from particular conditions that get magnified to a scale forcing the multiplicity of the world into a partial picture of it, conflating the excerpt with the novel. This can be no formula for concepts of the human commensurate with “the measure of the world”.<sup>13</sup> Answering to big questions, in the very least, demands proportionate responses, big-world responses that can account for, and be accountable to plurality, complexity and systems of human and non-human interdependence, without the false (and oftentimes vicious) cognitive comforts of reduction. It’s here where we can note a crucial difference between the aggrandizement of a situated concept to the scale of a big-world, versus situating concept-creation within a big-world perspective. If the ‘small-world’ perspective indexes the tendency for inflating partiality, the

‘big-world’ perspective, at least provisionally for now, marks the rejection of this tendency not only on ethical grounds, but epistemological ones as well, since the small-world perspective is simply a false correlation to reality. Thinking within big-world perspective is an ambitiously humble exercise, demanding reasoned nihilism take aim at given narratives of human centrality, both at the micro-level of the individual as primary agent (coinciding with the ‘economic genre of being human’), as well as the macro level of the species. As an exercise in self-relativization, this humility is not about luxuriating in the turbulence of a decentred narrative picture (a dehumanising tendency, where unreasoned nihilism is arrested absolutely in its chaotic mode of existential deterritorialisation), it is, rather, to see this non-centrality as a seed for new genres of being human and to learn how to see from those vistas, the (representational) geometry for which, we have yet to create.

## BIG WORLD HORIZONLESSNESS

This geometrical lack opens an important space for artistic labor. It’s no mere coincidence that classical perspective was co-birthed with the concept of the humanist human – that is, a human conceived as masterfully exceptional because of its capacity to reason the world. Correspondingly, in classical perspective, the re-presentation of human vision becomes mechanized, delivering world-images wherein extra-local reality vanishes at the threshold of a horizon (but of course, such extra-localizations do not actually withdraw from reality). As Reza Negarestani has argued, the fundamental misstep of the ‘humanist human’ construction, is not due to its emphasising of exceptional human capacities to reason the world, spatially and otherwise (a capacity that, in practice, was not allocated to all humans), but that it stopped short in reasoning its own unexceptional position within the world.<sup>14</sup> Or, as Nina Power more wittily wrote, through the force of reason we can come to see ourselves “... in the end not so far from a piece of fruit.”<sup>15</sup>





Screenshot from the video game *Everything*, where the player takes the form of any object in the game.

In this light, we can come to understand the horizon as marking precisely this moment of stopping short. On the one hand, the horizon is demonstrative of an ‘exceptional’ rationalization and re-presentation of spatial reality, but does so within bounded modes of rationalization in conformance with world-pictures optimized in our own, human image. The horizon, as such, can only belong to a small-world. This is not necessarily a bad thing (everyday life plays out in small worlds), but it can only, at best, provide orientation at and for that scale. This geometric limitation of the horizon, ought to give us pause when deploying the term as an automated metaphor for all things concerning futurity. Without the reductive comforts contained by the relative nearness of the horizon, that is of a world remediated back to us in our own image, the big-world demands novel speculative geometries. How we learn to see from within this big-world perspective underwritten by an unexceptionally situated human, requires we experiment with techniques for accessing its unfamiliar dimensions, for making it experiential and thus shareable.

Beyond the oftentimes grandiose claims behind the power of art as ‘engaging’ or ‘challenging’ this and that – claims that often seem to induce a pervasive cynicism in discursive circles nowadays, perhaps its strength is rather non-heroic, in the ambitiously humble ways art can be seen as contributing to the ‘setting of seedbeds’ for hypothetical worlds to come. There can be no individual heroes in the big-world since there are no singular perspectives commensurate with it; the best we can do is pre-prepare sensible conditions as experiences of a denaturalized small-world, the one optimized in our own image. This entails following the transition of art from the readymade (art that privileges the contextualization and arrangement of that which already exists);<sup>16</sup> to the remake (mirroring of a logic of capitalist realism’s alternativelessness), to what Robin Mackay discussed as a model for ‘making ready’.<sup>17</sup> This ‘making ready’ sees art as a play space for constructing experiences from within the perspective of the big-world, as a way to train and ‘make ready’ our sensorium for its strange geometries and consequential modes of relation-building as a result. Its method is

inefficiently nihilistic, in that it can assume nothing of the givenness of the world as it may manifest itself to us. Its ethos, not inductive, not merely demonstrating what we think we know of what there is in the world, but hypothetical, that is, a reasoning of being accounting for / being accountable to a big-world and its immanent possibilities for configuration otherwise, those extrapolated from a resituated genre of being human.

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3. Suhail Malik qtd. in "Reason is Inconsolable and Non-Conciliatory".
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5. Mark Fisher, "Acid Communism (Unfinished Introduction)," in *k-punk: The Collected and Unpublished Writings of Mark Fisher*, (London: Repeater Books: 2018), 770.
6. Sylvia Wynter, "The Re-Enchantment of Humanism," (David Scott, Interviewer), in *Small Axe* 8, 2000, 119–207. Retrieved here: <https://libcom.org/library/re-enchantment-humanism-interview-sylvia-wynter>
7. For elaborated philosophical accounts on the naturalization of 'Man', please see: Denise Ferreira da Silva, "Before Man: Sylvia Wynter's Rewriting of the Modern Episteme," in *Sylvia Wynter: Being Human as Praxis*, ed.: Katerine McKittrick, (Durham/London: Duke University Press, 2015) 90–105; and Sylvia Wynter "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation—An Argument," in *The New Centennial Review*, Vol. 3, No. 3, Fall 2003, 257–337. Special thanks to Nick Houde for pointing me in this fruitful direction of discovering Sylvia Wynter's body of work.
8. Sylvia Wynter, "The Re-Enchantment of Humanism", 199.
9. See Bentley Allan, *Scientific Cosmology and International Orders*, (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2018).
10. Kate Crawford, "Just an Engineer: The Politics of AI," Lecture at The Royal Society's series *You and AI*, London, 17 July, 2018. Accessible here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HPopJb5aDyA>
11. Mark Fisher, "Acid Communism (Unfinished Introduction)", 770.
12. Sylvia Wynter, "The Re-Enchantment of Humanism", 159.
13. David Scott (interviewer), referring to Aimé Césaire, preamble to: Sylvia Wynter, "The Re-Enchantment of Humanism", 122.
14. This trajectory of thought concerning the human is greatly indebted to Reza Negarestani's concept of the 'inhuman' from "The Labor of the Inhuman," *e-flux Journal* #52, 20014. Accessible here: <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/52/59920/the-labor-of-the-inhuman-part-i-human/>.
15. Nina Power, "Inhumanism, Reason, Blackness, Feminism," in *Glass Bead Journal*, 2017. Accessible here: <http://www.glass-bead.org/article/inhumanism-reason-blackness-feminism/?lang=enview>
16. Robin Mackay, "On Making Ready," in: *Simon Starling, Reprototypes, Triangulations and Road Tests* (Sternberg/Thyssen-Bornemisza Art Contemporary). Special thanks to Bassam El Baroni for directing me to this text. Accessible here: <http://readthis.wtf/writing/on-making-ready/>
17. The term "making ready", was initially coined by artist Simon Starling and further elaborated by Robin Mackay. Mackay's brilliant essay traces the term in a more materialist direction against readymade traditions, following the logic of contemporary objects as 'integrative objects', whereas for this essay I am using it more in an affective or experiential interpretation.

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