

**KRZYSZTOF ZIAREK (2013) *LANGUAGE AFTER
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For those who follow the ebbs and flows of cultural theory, over the past decade it has been hard to ignore the shift in current towards *ontology*, fed from theoretical quarters that range from affect theory to vital materialism, and from actor-network theory to object-oriented philosophy. Whether seen as new direction for research or the latest post-structuralist fad, the turn to ontology is marked in fields like cultural anthropology, geography, media studies, and other cognate disciplines. Were one concerned to better understand the term *ontology* itself, however, to see how some 'turn' to it might substantially alter the tenor of thinking in these fields, then a dive into Continental philosophy would be in order. Debates and conversations in this tradition turn on the slightly more specific term *differential ontology*, which the Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy describes as

[approaching] the nature of identity by explicitly formulating a concept of difference as foundational and constitutive, rather than thinking of difference as merely an observable relation between entities, the identities of which are already established or known [...]. Differential ontology understands the identity of any given thing as constituted on the basis of the ever-changing nexus of relations in which it is found, and thus, identity is a secondary determination, while difference, or the constitutive relations that make up identities, is primary. (Cisney: 2013)

Readers of *Culture Machine* may recognize this type of thinking at work in Braidotti's posthumanism, Latour's flattened ontologies, or further back in Deleuze's virtualities and actualities, Derrida's *différance*, Simondon's individuating operations, or Whitehead's process philosophy. Perhaps less well known is the fact that a key

precursor for this style of thinking ontological difference is the work of Martin Heidegger, especially his writings about language from the mid-to-late 1930s, following the 1927 publication of *Being and Time*. As if it were possible, Heidegger was notoriously more allusive and enigmatic in later writings, an issue exacerbated for English readers by early mystico-poetic translations of books from this period, like *Contributions to Philosophy (From Enowning)*. That said, it was also in this period that certain crucial 'post-metaphysical' themes involving difference get laid out in his writing. Those seeking full and robust exposure to the conceptual architecture of such themes will greatly appreciate Krzysztof Ziarek's recent book, *Language After Heidegger*. Ziarek's contribution is a careful synthesis of Heidegger's output during this time, one that follows certain key lines of his thought around language and signification to develop their insights and consequences for a contemporary audience. In what follows, I discuss some of the main themes and merits of the book, before concluding with some speculation on its possible broader relevance for life in a digital age. A regular eavesdropper on Continental philosophy, but coming from a perspective of media and technology studies, I will only be able to scratch the surface of Ziarek's rather tightly woven exposition.

Anyone who's spent time with Heidegger's philosophy will know that it turns foremost on the ontological question of being. Its basic point of departure is a critique of traditional metaphysics, which for centuries has given a kind of question-begging answer to the problem of being, by overlooking a contradiction at the heart of philosophical representation. Things, or beings, exist in the world—they have identity, permanence and substance—and yet, though we may take it to, being itself does not accord with this unassuming factuality. Heidegger's criticism is that we thoughtlessly comprehend being on the basis of *beings*, justified too easily by the application of an anthropocentric conceptual difference that determines beings on the basis of what philosophers call their quiddity, or 'whatness'. Differential ontology argues that we focus on this aspect at the expense of a more prefigural difference in things themselves—what philosophers call an individual's *haecceity*, its singular 'thisness'.

We rely, for example, on the predicative 'is' in language to describe so many things in the world: the weather outside is frightful, the dog is asleep, the lock is broken. We recognize these things on the basis of their conceptual difference, too: the dog is not a lock. But what can it mean to describe being itself in this way; to say 'Being is...?' In

contradistinction to what? And why? For Heidegger, posing the problem in this manner inaugurates an entirely different way of thinking about identity, difference, and being-in-the-world. Being is not a question of what something is, but must be understood rather more like a process, a question of *how* something is. Heidegger describes this as an eventuating structure of 'being-there', or *Dasein*, which unfolds existence through language. As Miguel de Bestegui writes of his phenomenological approach,

Such, then, is the ambiguity of Da-sein that its adverbial form will have always already slipped into the nominal; the pre-individual or pre-ontical will have always already begun to transform itself into its opposite: the being of the there is at once the coming into being or the individuation of a here and now, of an individuated being the origin of which is, because of its non-apparent character, soon if not immediately forgotten. (2004:127)

Taking up these themes in *Language After Heidegger*, Ziarek is keen to show just how, in later works, Heidegger's reconfiguration of *Dasein* leaves off from the existential, anthropocentric language of *Being and Time* to focus more on language as constitutive of being as an *impersonal event*; a clearing or 'making-room' for any conceptual determination of beings.

To help the reader comprehend the difference, Ziarek's early and consistent strategy is to thematize Heidegger's hyphenation of words. Deliberately using hyphens in his own exposition, Ziarek explains at length the significance of prefixed words like Da-sein and Er-eignis (the 'event' of appropriation, or 'en-owning'), and then later, more detailed and sophisticated terms from Heidegger's account of difference, like Ab-grund (the 'abyssal nonground') and Unter-schied (a 'twofold of nearness and differentiation'). The goal is to call attention to the individuating, differential dimensions of language and signification that, following Heidegger's thinking, occur prior to how we typically comprehend signs and words in their grammatical or logical form. Alongside Heidegger's texts, Ziarek wants to think outside of traditional linguistic philosophy, according to language's 'inceptive' and manifestational registers, which he sometimes describes as a 'back draft' movement: a drawing-open and parting. The movement is elsewhere marked in the difference between *stating* (the propositional view of language) and *saying* (a prior 'folding' of language that enables the possibility of the

propositional view) (52). Relatedly, for Heidegger *spatiotemporalization* occurs in this unfolding movement in language, instead of being an a priori condition of sensibility. In other words, language constitutes being in its movement, with linguistic prefixes and hyphens offering clues or hints to an overall process of establishing a 'clearing' momentum.

Ziarek writes in the introduction that "what" language is, how it happens, is described by Heidegger first not as an idea or a concept but as the relatedness opened up in its design (*Aufriss*) by the constellation enacted by a set of prefixes' (7). A few pages later the consequences become clearer, where Heidegger's approach amounts to a wholesale reconceptualization of thinking itself: 'instead of being guided by conceptual grasp and definition, it is steered and molded by what listening to language discloses, by what insights and avenues it opens' (15). Still later, Ziarek turns to more evocative words like 'rifting' and 'fissuring' (97) to give a sense of the eventual unfolding of language and its connection to thinking. Recalling the examples of predication given above, he writes that 'Since the event *is* not, nothing can be predicated about it' (25). Rather, language 'grants' thinking an *interval*, shaping and constituting our many notions of space, time, power, specificity and generality (3). The power of language is to enable a relation of difference as it withdraws from signification, in an 'oscillation' or resonance that Ziarek goes on to describe in subsequent chapters, turning next to an admirably lucid, but still challenging-to-parse interpretation of Heidegger's infamous 'four-fold'.

Setting to one side the term's theological overtones, Ziarek organizes and develops some of the less high-flown, but still figurative topological metaphors at work in Heidegger's writing concerning the four-fold. This involves putting words like weaving, meshwork, and (suggestively in today's context) networks into play, to describe Heidegger's event of folding, or more specifically, a one-fold that occurs in the four-fold. Ziarek specifies and clarifies this plastic dynamic of being 'in' and 'one' simultaneously, which trades on the ambiguity of the German prefix 'Ein-' in *Einfall*, suggesting the possibility of relation *and* a spatiotemporalizing span, in-one. The sheer complexity of it all comes out in an upshot passage concerning the philosopher's use of co-folding and un-folding as philosophical concepts. According to Ziarek, these must be

taken in a triple sense: uncovering, unveiling, bringing out, revealing; extending, stretching out; and opening,

spreading out. The uncovering at issue here, that is, the unconcealment literally issuing from the event, is not an unveiling of something existing or preexisting but constitutes instead a revealing that brings about beings by letting them be. (29)

This account of relation in turn bears on our sense of the ‘proper’ (German prefix *eigen-*), as philosophers usually understand it. Correct reference, or one thing belonging with another according to some conceptual determination, cannot be based solely in the objective presence of self-sufficient things; for Heidegger, things are rather defined by their mode of being through time, ‘granted from the event’ (29). Representative of this shift in his thinking, Heidegger goes so far as to adopt an archaic variation of the word being, *beyng*, effectively inventing ‘a new verb *isten*, or “to is” in English’. As Ziarek lays out, Heidegger is ‘trying to find a way to write the folding of being (*Sein*) into *beyng* (*Seyn*), to illustrate how the verb *sein*, “to be”, already comes too metaphysically laden and trapped into a repeated saying of beingness’ (45).

Turning to this ‘evental’ account of language, where time emerges with the mode of being of things, requires that Heidegger appeal to singularity, entailed by his critique of philosophy’s reliance upon the predicative ‘is’, or copula. The ‘is’ hypostatizes being according to the ontic, or factual relations of extant beings, thereby privileging the generic over the non-generic. Software structures like knowledge graphs or an emerging Internet of Things, which now automatically stamp language in the mold of its factuality, are but the most recent examples of this perspective in action, structuring one’s relation to the world in significant ways. Heidegger’s concern, writes Ziarek, is that ‘Propositional statements are not obstacles in themselves but instead become obstacles to the extent they have come to monopolize truth and to discount the importance of or even deny truth to other forms or modes of thinking and saying’ (47). The link between the predicative copula and singularity is that for Heidegger, *being can never be an ‘it’*, and so thinking the ‘is’ via traditional metaphysics only ever leads to thinking the word as ‘each time the same’, whereas Ziarek strives to illuminate the philosopher’s focus upon ‘the one-time word’ as poietically singular (39).

This focus carries forward into the second chapter, where understanding the significance of the one-time word entails developing a counterintuitive distinction between the word and the

sign. Most accounts of signification conceive of the sign as only designative, within a code or system of language that establishes the relational differences between signifiers and signifieds. In other words, right along with propositions, signs are treated ontically, as representational objects that can be referred to as with dictionary terms, or via sounds as in the Saussurean, structuralist account. What the author draws out of Heidegger's work in this period is a different understanding of the sign, more primordially connected to the things they represent through what Ziarek calls a 'saying showing'. In the saying showing, the word is distinguished from the sign as involving a prior disposition of relations that *rises into* the sign-as-term, and yet escapes it, in a movement evocatively configured by words like parting, traversal, withdrawal, leap and rift. What might this arrangement augur? Ziarek writes that, 'Rather than gaining new knowledge or a controlling grasp over the situation, this thinking aspires to stay alert to the way the event guides it with "the silent force of the possible"' (99).

The role that this silence plays as an inventive *poietic* force of the word gets further developed in chapter three. Echoing the terminology of the saying showing, poietic force, Ziarek writes, 'does not refer specifically to verse, poetry, or literature, but instead indicates the inventive momentum of artworks' (130). Further, poietic thinking, 'opens thought to the unprethinkable contours of the event, not taken as something that thought needs to recuperate or define anew but as what moves and guides thinking' (155). As the chapter proceeds, there is a return to emphasizing hyphens as indicators of this movement; but this time they are one among other graphematic devices found in actual poetry: 'one must gauge the resonance of scriptural marks, hyphens, colons, prefixes [and] how they displace or modify the lexical and grammatical functions of linguistic signs...' (163). Graphic marks imaginatively gesture to silence as poietic interval and hallmark of the event in poetry, drawing attention to the resonance or attunement that the word brings to sign-words. Particularly intriguing is Ziarek's turn to the work of Myung Mi Kim, whose writing makes use of graphemes like square brackets, double colons and slashes, to mark out silence, space-time and signs in its unfolding.

Ziarek concludes the book with a chapter entitled 'Language after Metaphysics', where he spends some time rehearsing Heidegger's critique of language-as-information in helpful ways. The focus gives the book greater interdisciplinary traction, discussing the insights of prior chapters in light of the relationship between language, power

and technology. For Heidegger, the formalisms of logic, structural linguistics, mathematics and information theory—all conceptual touchstones for modern computing—establish a certain relation to the event of language. More specifically they *order* the event, transforming language into a calculable and controllable resource, while in the process covering over its poietic momentum, in a recurrent moment of forgetting that Heidegger famously calls the *Gestell*, or *enframing*: ‘the foil for Heidegger’s attempt to think the poietic specifically as that dimension of being and of language which remains free, released from power’ (131). Generations of graduate students have by now encountered the term through the English-language reader *The Question Concerning Technology And Other Essays* (1977); *enframing* is certainly a compelling way to understand life in a bioinformational age, although its invocation is sometimes prone to totalizing nihilism and/or appeals to a nostalgic humanism.

In Ziarek’s hands, language-as-technics gets more subtly described in its relation to poietic thinking, and the ‘spacing’ of language in Heidegger’s corpus: as one possible determination of the signification relation, between power and the ‘power-free’. Here the poietic ‘does not constitute simply the opposite of the technic or signify its negation but instead signals the subtle inflection of the *enframing* and its prevalent modalities of power from the active and power-ful to the “middle voice”, power-free’ (203), suggestively opening up the possibility of a freer relation to technology, not premised on the possession and manipulation of beings (210). The notion was more fully sketched out by Heidegger’s pupil Herbert Marcuse, with his account of technological rationality in *One Dimensional Man* (1964), and developed with still greater clarity by Marcuse’s student Andrew Feenberg, in books like *Questioning Technology* (1999). The possibility of a power-free relation to *enframing* and technics, says Ziarek, involves a ‘letting be’ that, while not passive, does not involve mastery but instead a *bearing* for being, which introduces a fault in the workings of power (203).

With differential-statistical operations now shaping daily life through driftnet surveillance programs, consumer databases, search engines and social networking services, we can say that there is indeed great power in determining the conditions of possibility under which signification and thinking *repeat*, as information. Steering the one-time word’s singular dimensions into more recognizably structured networks of signs inevitably ignores, and yet continually relies upon its non-repeatability—transforming signs

into an endless resource, to be exploited by technique in the word's withdrawal. In a telling correspondence, Heidegger's focus on 'appropriation', and the event of the proper are reflected in popular *eigen*-vector and *eigen*-value calculus techniques in computer science, which enact differentials of change on formal entities in algorithms, as they form the basis for inducing identitary significance for human beings online. Heidegger's ontological account of difference and language may represent a unique 'way in' to characterizing and critiquing these techniques.

In a tone suggestive of Heidegger's post-metaphysical thinking about difference, for example, Brian Cantwell Smith challenges some foundational assumptions in computer science, for relying on a priori schemes that purport to represent the world, asking:

What would it be for *the very notion of distinction* to be won, at a price, from a partially regular, partially turbulent, noisy and critical background—rather than a formally first-order critical region to be defined on top of, or hung from, a perfectly structured infinite silence? What would our theories of dynamics look like if, top to bottom, assumption were interchanged with achievement? (1996: 333)

Elsewhere, Smith calls out different theories of computation in ways that have a certain resonance with Ziarek's discussion of hyphens and graphemes. The theory of effective computability as it is currently understood through Turing machines, for example, is for Smith less a theory of encoded numbers than it is a more basic one of automatically *making marks* (2002: 41). How might Ziarek's analysis of Myung Mi Kim's poetry, where abstract typographic marks produce a withdrawing saying-showing, extend to conversations about the function and role of different computational logics? After all, these too produce a momentum that, to adapt a lyrical description from the book, pre-scribes and ante-writes a 'silent vectoring' (170), in their generic organization of the world. To put it more simply, the book develops certain resources for asking anew questions like, what might a 'power-free' relation to computers look like? How might we break out of our current arrangement, where the rifting and fissuring of language seems constantly recuperated to a metaphysics of intentional choice? As computers capture the event of language through their interfaces, and restructure singular, one-time spacing under the aegis of the

Same, Ziarek's book offers some thought-provoking directions back into Heidegger's work, to drive further inquiry.

Last year's release of Heidegger's *Black Notebooks* has undoubtedly set a bleaker horizon for teaching and studying his philosophy. With their dark and repeated moments of anti-Semitism, which link *Machenschaft* (machination) and 'rootless calculation' to world Judaism, what could this now-more thoroughly deposed Nazi intellectual possibly have left to tell us? For some the answer is clear: nothing whatsoever (Fuchs 2015). But for those still willing to carefully demarcate and contextualize Heidegger's biographical-historical context from his philosophy proper, the answer is a great deal more indeed. Krystof Ziarek's latest book is a challenging, complex and rewarding example of Heideggerian scholarship. It pushes our understanding forward by returning to the philosopher's work in full detail—arcane argumentation, extended etymological disquisitions and all—retrieving and polishing important insights on the future of language and thinking in technoscientific societies. The strength of the book lies in its careful extraction of Heidegger's theorization of ontological difference, over the course of his later writings on language. It will be helpful to anyone who wants broader exposure to the lineage of philosophies of difference, as these continue to proliferate in today's post-Continental environment.

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