It is certain that all bodies whatsoever, though they have no sense, yet they have perception; for when one body is applied to another, there is a kind of election to embrace that which is agreeable, and to exclude or expel that which is ingrate....It is therefore a subject of very noble inquiry, to inquire of the more subtle perceptions; for it is another key to open nature.¹

I remember when I was a child, running through the forest that surrounded my south-eastern New Brunswick home. I would break branches, position rocks, carve shapes in the trees with a knife and leave marks in the dirt with sticks. I was marking territory, organizing Nature in such a way that it made sense to my young mind. By marking Nature, by structuring it thus and so, it became easier to navigate.

The Canadian arctic primarily consists of tundra, meaning that the soil is frozen and treeless. These plains of snow, ice, water and frozen soil are difficult to navigate and so the inhabitants have marked the land for generations with identifiable symbols known as inuksuit (singular: inuksuk or inukshuk) and innunguat (singular: innunguaq). The former is perhaps best known through its use in the official flag of the Canadian territory of Nunavut while the latter is probably

known mostly to non-Canadians through its recent use as the official symbol of the 2010 Vancouver Winter Olympics. These cairns built by the Inuit function as indicators, informing travellers of the land of danger, of thin ice, of safe places to camp, etc. Similar cairns can be found all over the world, marking burial sites, memorials, sacred places, or in the Canadian Maritimes, used to hold fire in order to function as lighthouses.

A stray cat in my neighbourhood will frequently mark his territory using scent glands in order to indicate regions where his mates live and for defending food sources. This behaviour is seen in other territorial animals in the wild, including wolves and leopards which spray urine to mark territory. These scent markings are used to convey different information, for example, to communicate in the case of the non-territorial deer or to ward off potential conflict. These pheromones can convey territorial claims, status, mood, or sexual desire.

Off the west coast of Greenland, more than thirty thousand icebergs are calved annually. These chunks of ice, ranging from a few meters in size to thousands of kilometres, then drift in the ocean, arriving off the coast of Newfoundland after approximately two years. From there they continue to break up and melt, with growlers (the smallest pieces from the iceberg) washing ashore. Tiny ecosystems of bacteria, fish and birds depend on these melting chunks of ice. Some clever apes have even had the idea of using this glacial water in the process of making beer, vodka, rum and gin. Made up of thousands of years of snowfall from the last ice age, these ice mammoths are twelve thousand years old and contain untold information of our world’s history.

We’re comfortable discussing communication in human-intended ways, and even to some extent in terms of animal life. It seems reasonable enough to say that a dog’s bark or a bird’s song communicates in the sense that it conveys meaning of some sort to other similar beings. Some of these forms of animal communication are even understood by humans, like when my cat cries to be fed or when one encounters
a roaring beast in the mountains. There is still a tendency however to assume these animal forms of communication are somehow lesser than human-to-human communication, for instance via human language. Animal communication is seen as an approximation of human language, as if it were striving to become human, as if human language is perfect or even better and not simply different. In this essay, I will move farther than this, towards a general theory of communication. In opposition to structuralism, which I will define as a broad metaphysical tendency in contemporary philosophy and not simply as a linguistic theory, I will argue that language is a type of communication among many. Further than this however, I will present the work of Michel Serres on the subject of communication and information as part of a broader realist metaphysics. Serres remains virtually untouched by the speculative realist movement: speculative realism, in its haste to move away from the linguistic idealism that has dominated continental philosophy, has yet to approach language as a serious issue. My hope is to begin to show that a philosophy of communication or a philosophy concerned with communication is compatible with realist metaphysics. By turning to Serres, and along with him, close allies like Deleuze, Guattari and Peirce, I will present a metaphysical view that argues that communication is part of the very being of things.

Ultimately, we should attempt to understand communication not in terms of language, but as a part of what it means for something to exist. The universe is made up of communicative beings, the cosmos being in some way an information exchange system. This is not to reduce or equate Being with Language. Rather, communication should be thought of as how things relate to one another. Wherever there is Two, there is communication. Language is simply a subspecies of communication generally understood. This will become clear in subsequent sections as I present both one of the dominant metaphysical systems today, structuralism, with its emphasis on language and anthropocentrism, as well as the opposing view, which will be termed semiotics. While
structuralism as an historical, linguistic system is really a part of the larger philosophy of language known as semiotics, this essay will show that the metaphysical offspring of Saussure differ from those of Peirce, and it is in these offspring today that the metaphysical issues arise. From a universal theory of communication we will return to the problem of structure-as-such, or more accurately, the concept of structuring in order to present communication as an existential process of territory-making.

What is Structuralism Today?

It is an honest question, both in the sense of what do we now call structuralism as well as in the sense of what structuralism has become. In the first sense, we are dealing entirely with an historical phenomenon, something which clever French thinkers had done away with by the late 1960s and which therefore has little concern for us today. We’re all postmodern, post-structuralists these days. If we look at the question in the second sense though, of just what structuralism is today, then we may find that this first view is entirely wrong. Structuralism is not some jettisoned relic, it is alive and well, but it has metamorphosed from linguistics to metaphysics.

The origins of structuralism are simple enough. Beginning in 1907, Ferdinand de Saussure began giving his Course in General Linguistics, the work being published posthumously in 1916. From there, his work influenced thinkers like Roman Jakobson who decisively influenced both Claude Lévi-Strauss and Roland Barthes, leading to a general ‘structuralist’ tendency as Saussurian concepts and ideas melded with other fields (in the case of Lévi-Strauss and Barthes, anthropology and literary theory respectively). Saussure’s basic insight is the linguistic sign as composed of both signifier and signified. The former is the phonetic designator, the word, while the latter is the conceptual object, the idea. A sign is the connection and relation of the word to the idea, the two being inseparable. The reader will note that the actual thing is nowhere to be found. Saussure is explicit when he says that linguistics is
not nomenclature, that it is not simply the system by which we attach names to objects. Rather, structuralist linguistics operates whether or not any object actually exists, working at a purely human level between speech and concepts. Signs have their own ecosystem, producing a system of pure difference: since signs have no attachment to particular real things (they are arbitrary), what they ultimately designate is their difference from other signs. What makes a thing a table has nothing to do with the actual physical constitution of the thing, simply the fact that it is not a chair, house, dog, stone, etc., etc. The system of signs that we inhabit as linguistic beings is one of alterity.

This system of alterity, of signs existing in opposition, is the linchpin of Lévi-Strauss’ structural anthropology. Lévi-Strauss claims that we can read mythology structurally, in the same way we understand language systems according to Saussure. More than this, Lévi-Strauss extends structuralism across all culture, maintaining that human culture and society both function as symbolic systems of meaning in opposition to the meaningless chaos of nature. This truth is revealed in the fundamental structure of mythology, as evidenced in the relationship shown to exist between humans and nature in the mythology of American tribes. The clearest examples of this are given in Lévi-Strauss’ Introduction to a Science of Mythology, beginning with The Raw and the Cooked. Lévi-Strauss will tell us that the division between nature and culture begins with that of raw and cooked, where the latter has been “cultured,” given relevance or meaning within the symbolic system in which we reside. Raw meat must be cooked before it can be

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3 This Introduction spans four volumes: The Raw and the Cooked, From Honey to Ashes, The Origin of Table Manners and The Naked Man. Most of what concerns us is found in the first of these volumes, though the dichotomy of raw and cooked as a means of understanding nature and culture appears throughout the series. See for instance the further development of the culinary triangle in The Origin of Table Manners, trans. John and Doreen Weightman (London: Harper & Row, 1978), 471-495.
consumed, being both literally and symbolically dangerous in its raw state: it is unpredictable and potentially harmful.\footnote{This claim that the raw has no cultural value is also empirically false. Besides the more well-known counter-example of Japanese sashimi, Inuit hunters will regularly eat raw caribou, fish and seal. This consumption certainly has cultural value beyond the biological necessity of food and warmth. There is nothing impure or horrific in eating a freshly field dressed caribou's liver.}

Cooking, say by curing, also allows one to stockpile meat, aiding against the unpredictable availability of those elements of nature which are consumed. This ‘culturing’ is necessary for animals in general, as evidenced by domestication, but is also the case among humans. Lévi-Strauss will tell us for instance of the example of pregnant women who are sometimes considered too ‘natural’ in their condition. After giving birth, they will be required to lie on a bed under which was a small fire, as a means of ‘cooking off’ the excess of nature.\footnote{Ibid., 335.} Lévi-Strauss will also tell us of Pueblo women who would give birth over hot sand as a means to “transform the child into a ‘cooked person’—in contrast with natural creatures and natural or manufactured objects, which are ‘raw persons.’”\footnote{Ibid., 336.}

These are preventative measures aimed at keeping out the excess of nature, which is also true of the body. Those who need ‘cooking’ (the pregnant, the newborn, the pubescent girl) are “those deeply involved in a physiological process,”\footnote{Ibid., 337.} with these bodily excesses functioning in the same role as other natural ones. Just as raw foods must be mediated by cultural cooking before they may enter the logic of society, so too must the raw body. This can work the other way as well, with someone being too cooked. Lévi-Strauss uses the example of those who have been struck by lightning, “that is, those who have been struck by celestial fire,”\footnote{ Ibid., 337.} who must be...
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treated with raw food. Cooking in this way also transforms the object (food, persons) in such a way as to prevent them from becoming rotten (moldy, corrupt).9 Underlying the logic of raw/cooked and nature/culture, there is a logic of transformation and mediation.

It is clear from this brief summary that Lévi-Strauss is presenting us with a dichotomy between a chaotic, horrifying nature on the one hand and a safe, meaningful culture on the other. Nature is irrational, terrifying and excessive while culture is organized, structured, ordered and rational. It is only the rational human being who is able to make sense, to create meaning, out of the inherently irrational stuff of nature. The legacy of structuralism is not in the linguistics of Saussure, but in this Lévi-Straussian variant which emphasizes both this anthropocentrism and the accompanying position that nature is meaningless or somehow unorganized. When I speak of structuralism as a dominant position within continental philosophy, this is the position I mean. It is that taken up by Lévi-Strauss, Lacan, Badiou and Žižek.10

All of these thinkers are concerned with the subduing of trauma; they advocate that thought, rationality, humanity is under constant threat of being overwhelmed by a traumatic world, that we could be annihilated by it at any moment. In Lacan and Žižek this is the problem of the Real as those places where the Symbolic Order does not exist, the gaps in rationality. For Badiou, it is the overwhelming effect of the event which has the capacity to devastate the structured order of Being. The Real is both the body as well as the excess of nature.

than as part of nature.


10 I would add that I suspect both Badiou and Žižek to be influenced by Neo-Kantians like Rickert and Cassirer, who both contend that value and meaning are purely human. This is in opposition to thinkers like Dilthey, Nietzsche, Bergson and Uexküll who contend that life is inherently meaningful or Peirce and Serres, who see meaning everywhere. Badiou and Žižek are both certainly contemporary heirs to Kantian philosophy. For more on Žižek’s relation to both structuralism and Kantianism, see my forthcoming essay “The Question of Lacanian Ontology: Badiou and Žižek as Responses to Seminar XI” to appear in The International Journal of Žižek Studies.
This perhaps explains the antagonism between Badiou and Žižek on the one hand and Deleuze and his ‘mystic vitalists’ on the other.11 This theme of trauma dominates structuralist metaphysics, including their appropriation of Descartes, who is made to discuss the topology of the unconscious, as well as their devotion to Kant (giving new, terrifying substance to the thing-in-itself that would cause even Schopenhauer to have nightmares). It is only within the rational, human realm that there is meaning and order; outside of this human-exclusive, Symbolic realm of culture, language and Being, there is nothing but excessive meaninglessness. This is also why structuralism is the true heir of Kantianism today: it is not the case that there is nothing outside of humanity, but that whatever is outside of us is not communicable except in recoil. Like Kantianism, structuralism maintains that there is a structuring apparatus, something which orders the world, and in both cases, it is the human being. The only structure to be found in the world is supplied by the human, either through the rational mind or language. Society/culture/humanity is not grounded in nature (Aristotle), but as Badiou will say of politics, “is a supernatural event.”12 This view of humanity as fundamentally alienated from the natural world is clear enough in the above description of Lévi-Strauss, seen most recently in Žižek’s writings on ecology, with his image of nature being some terrifying mess that we can’t even begin to comprehend, and extends at least as far back as Rousseau. In Rousseau’s Second Discourse for instance he will tell us that humanity existed in a perpetual state of fear prior to the event of human society and culture.13 All of nature is alien

11 Badiou distinguishes between philosophies of life (Bergson, Deleuze, Foucault) and philosophies of the concept (Lévi-Strauss, Althusser, Lacan), maintaining that he belongs to this latter group. See Alain Badiou, “The Adventure of French Philosophy” available online at http://lacan.com/badenglish.htm as well as Badiou’s Logics of Worlds, trans. Alberto Toscano (London: Continuum, 2008), 7-8.


13 Jean-Jacques Rousseau, “Essay on the Origin of Languages,” in The Col-
and unfamiliar to “savage man” until he or she is able to apply names to things, to create “meaningful signs,”¹⁴ that is to say, the human being divorces itself violently from the chaos of nature when finally able to create a stable environment in the womb of language.

Few thinkers exert as much influence on the contemporary terrain of continental philosophy as Lacan, Badiou and Žižek. The logic of structure is perhaps the central point of Lacanian structural psychoanalysis, from his early writings on the mirror phase to his late writings on topology, knot theory and locks. As I have argued elsewhere,¹⁵ Lacan’s work moves essentially from the problem of structuralism to structure-as-such. What he is interested in at a fundamental level is the structure of relation and the logic of signs. His work in the 1970s that appears so alien is the logical conclusion of his initial inquiries. While it seems the dominant reading of Lacan is one in which language is given centrality, this is not really the case at all. When Lacan said famously that the unconscious is structured like a language, this is often interpreted to mean that we should view the world as a language, in much the same way many read Derrida’s “there is nothing outside the text” as a sign of linguistic idealism, of reducing the world purely to our linguistic grasp of it. What Lacan really means by this famous phrase is simple that the unconscious is structured. The unconscious is structured, just as language is also structured. All along, Lacan is interested in structure. The problem for Lacan is really his structuralist heritage, from which he is never able to escape. His view of structure-as-such is shadowed even in the late works by structural linguistics and the Lévi-Straussian structuralist myth which says that the human being only comes into being in

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¹⁵ What follows is a brief summary of my above-referenced essay “The Question of Lacanian Ontology: Badiou and Žižek as Responses to Seminar XI” where I raise the issue of structure in Lacan, Badiou and Žižek. Interested readers are encouraged to consult this essay as a means of fleshing out the issue.
the origin of language, that in the primal utterance the human is ripped from the horror of nature and forever wrapped in the net of signification. This is why the Real, even as it is further investigated in the seminars of the 1960s appears as either excess or lack, is always encountered as a trauma. The fascinating aspect of Lacan’s topological studies is that they are united by the centrality of lack, the torus, the Mobius strip, they are all empty. They are structured entirely on this gap.

Alain Badiou’s metaphysics share in this Lacanian structure, his mathematical ontology being structured on a gap, on the nothingness of the event. The importance of structure really shows itself in Badiou’s *Logics of Worlds*, through his discussion of *appearance*. Badiou is concerned with the logic of presentation, of how existence shows itself. It is a *revelatory act*, an unfolding or unveiling. It is essentially a reworking of the concepts which make up the subject of German Idealism, as the subject of freedom is transformed into the mathematical function, with its own logic of necessary unfolding.\(^{16}\) For Fichte, the world is the necessary unfolding of freedom, with the construction and positing of the object by the subject as a necessary hindrance to be overcome in the name of universal justice, while for Hegel history is the revelation of *Geist* before itself. What is key for both thinkers is the necessity of such grand presentations, which is also the case for Badiou. In his discussion of Leibniz for instance, we discover that one of the points of agreement between Badiou and Leibniz is on the *impossibility of nothingness*, at least as it is usually understood.\(^{17}\) This is a point which provides us with a new understanding of *Being and Event*, where it seems that *being* and *event* are other names for *existence* and *nothingness*. We

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\(^{17}\) Badiou, *Logics of Worlds*, 328-329.
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learn here that they are closer to appearance and possibility. The void of the event is an injection of possibility into a world of necessity, allowing for novelty to arise out of a system of the same.\(^{18}\) Events are moments of contingency. From these bursts of possibility arise new situations, new worlds, as they appear and present themselves, unfolding from possibility to actuality. Appearances follow the same necessary structure as freedom and Geist for Fichte and Hegel, but are secularized and modeled on machines, following Frege and Wittgenstein on functions.\(^{19}\) A function is an automatic transformation. A machine or equation receives input and transforms it according to the assigned function. A function is a system of mapping, an appearance or representation, but always a transformation. Events serve as sites of transformation, of appearances possibilities, and the unpacking or actualizing of these possibilities.

Truth-procedures are truth-functions, serving as singular sites of productive transformation. As John Mullarkey has pointed out however, events for Badiou are always only ever human-events.\(^{20}\) Events and subjects are equiprimordial. Since structure arises through the unfolding of events through faithful subjects, then structure arises only as a consequence of human activity and existence. Badiou will maintain that the arrival of politics is a supernatural event (and we could add that the same is true for science, art and love) but we must remember the supernatural is not the divine, it is simply another word for ‘the human,’ which stands as a traumatic

\(^{18}\) The subject is alienated for Badiou, but unlike Lévi-Strauss, this isn’t because of the inherent traumatic churning of the world. The world appears traumatic to the Badiouian subject in its unchanging nature. Being, Nature, never changes according to Badiou, but is smooth, static. Novelty cannot arise naturally, but must come from elsewhere. Such creative capacity exists only in the human being.

\(^{19}\) For Frege, functions refer to ‘unsaturated entities.’ For instance, concepts are ‘unsaturated’ until they are actualized in an object. While this references a correspondence theory of truth and knowledge, it also gives us a structure with an emphasis on mapping and naming, central for Badiou.

break with the rest of the universe and all of history. We get
glimpses of this when he discusses his allegiance to Rousseau
and Descartes, both of whom become mouthpieces for the
structuralist myth, telling us of the fundamentally alienated
existence of the human being as speaking, thinking things
in a world devoid of sense. Non-human reality, whether it be
the brutality of nature or the secret will in the heart of the
mind, present themselves, thrust themselves upon us in an
unending series of traumas. The only escape from a senseless
world for Badiou's subjects is through continual re-invention,
unending novelty in the utopian quest for a more perfect
world, a more beautiful art, a grasp of the workings of real-
ity, and the comfort of love. Like Fichte, Badiou presents us
with this quest as optimistic and hopeful, failing to see the
tragedy of the search, and the fact that reality may not be so
human-centered or traumatic as he would have us believe.

Žižek is concerned primarily with this traumatic aspect of
reality, finding it at the heart of subjectivity as well as outside
of it! Žižek's writings are almost entirely wrapped up with
his fascination for the Real, from his works on subjectivity
(The Ticklish Subject, The Parallax View), to those on German
Idealism (The Indivisible Remainder, Tarrying With the Negative),
and his reading of film (How to Read Lacan, The Fright of Real
Tears). Žižek is concerned with the limits of perception and
coherence. He revels in those things which break with our
ability to grasp and comprehend, seeing such moments as
glimmers of insight into reality, not to mention his fascina-
tion with both video games and quantum theory for their
ability to show this lack of structure beyond a certain point.
In the case of the former, he will frequently address the limi-
tations of three dimensional programming, that in a video
game, no matter how realistic, there are places one cannot
go simply because they have not been programmed into the
game. In the case of quantum physics, he will stress the fact
that at a certain point the universe stops making sense, as if
God created the world like we create video games, with their
being a point at which the creator shrugs his shoulders and
assumes there to be a point where the user/creature will not
be able to go. Žižek will joke for instance that God assumed we would never be clever enough to look inside an atom so at that point there is just some junk that makes no sense.\textsuperscript{21} The Real presents itself always as horrifying, either as excessive junk, as that which does not belong, or as a gap from which we recoil.\textsuperscript{22}

Is this the case though? Is the world meaningless without us? Let us recall the examples which opened this discussion and the plethora of meaning-conveyors conjured. From the structuralist perspective, some of these examples function as carriers of meaning, specifically those of human origin or those able to be brought into the realm of humanity. Surely things \textit{don't mean anything} to my cat in the same way they mean something to me. Or if we want to say that Pickles the cat is able to grasp any sort of meaning it is only on the level of instinct. We could say perhaps that edible items have meaning for him, that certain smells attract his attention in so far as he perceives them to be edible. Things like computers, cairns or cookbooks don’t factor into his life in the slightest. The question then becomes, what exactly are these items to him? Are they anything? The structuralist model only speaks of human interaction with that which has been made human, that which is outside of the human sphere appears only as meaningless, chaotic or traumatic. According to the structuralist, \textit{structure only arises via the human}, whether through language, rationality, or truth-procedures.

Structuralism remains undefined within speculative realist discourse. Badiou and Žižek are lumped together with countless others as ‘materialists’ but this is problematic for several


\textsuperscript{22} The clearest examples of the Real in Žižek are the analysis of the Kinder Surprise in \textit{The Puppet and the Dwarf: The Perverse Core of Christianity} (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2003), 145, and his reading of Ridley Scott’s \textit{Alien} in \textit{How to Read Lacan}, available online at http://www.lacan.com/zizalien.htm.
reasons. For one thing, materialism remains a very difficult school to define, spanning thousands of years and competing iterations. The form of materialism they embody is really a reactive one, positioning itself in opposition to the perceived idealism of postmodernity, but itself remaining within the purview of post-Kantian critical philosophy. It could also be said that Badiou and Žižek represent a form of correlationism and should be dismissed from the realist discussion out of hand. I think this designation is dubious at best and possibly flat-out wrong. If we take correlationism to be the position defined by epistemological limitations, specifically concerning knowledge of things-in-themselves, then I contend that we cannot simply lump Badiou and Žižek with Kant, Husserl, Hegel or Heidegger as either weak or strong correlationists. The weak correlationist defends an agnostic position, claiming that while things-in-themselves very well could exist, we cannot know anything about them and so cannot maintain a position of knowledge one way or the other, neither claiming they exist (realism) nor that they do not (strong correlationism). The structuralist position is quasi-realist or possibly even transcendentally realist depending on how strong the claims are made. Things have existence in-themselves for the structuralist, and we have experiences of them, it is simply the case that our knowledge of things without us is meaningless; we know only traumatic experiences. We could then distinguish two possible positions within structuralism, the first would contend that the world is simply traumatic, that existence outside of the human realm is really horrifying and that human culture serves a therapeutic function to allow us to maintain our rationality or even our sanity. The other, weaker position, is that the world appears traumatic, but is not traumatic as such. This latter position would contend that it is only traumatic to cross from the human-realm to the non-human, and it is likely that a crossover in the other direction would seem just as traumatic. I should stress that

23 A third position is also possible, that of absurdism. From this perspective, all is horror.
this is not an arbitrary distinction, nor is the category of structuralism an arbitrary designator. This view of that which is most real as traumatic and/or meaningless is emerging both within speculative realism as well as outside of this contemporary group, among many forms of materialism, some scientific naturalists, and those who claim influence from psychoanalysis.

My contention is that both aspects within structuralism are wrong-headed, that the split posited by structuralism, the rift between nature and culture, does not exist, nor is the world ever experienced by any being as traumatic. There are then two things at issue for us now: First, we should question this traumatic structure that the structuralists maintain is constitutive of reality, and second, we should question whether or not this structure is applicable to other beings, or whether it is not the case that communication and structure are part of the reality of non-human entities as well. Is the world nothing but pure, incoherent sensation for Pickles as structuralism tells us, or does he inhabit a world filled with meaningful objects? Beyond this, what is the world for the objects?

Against Anthropocentrism

I spend a lot of time thinking about animals. Growing up, my family always had dogs. After a couple of years with a parrot and several fish, I now have cats and my girlfriend and I foster kittens, taking them in and finding them homes. Besides this, we’ve also rescued stray or abandoned cats. It becomes very difficult, having spent my whole life surrounded by animals of different sorts, to imagine how Descartes or Heidegger among others, not to mention their innumerable followers, could see these creatures as deficient, mechanical, or without world. For our purposes, this boils down ultimately to saying that animals exist without meaning, both in the sense that they are simply mechanical physiology as well as the sense that they experience no meaning in the world. How could my childhood dog Jasper not find meaning in the world, this animal who mourned the death of my mother as much as I did,
who was changed by this event, affected by it until her own death years later? How can so many claim that animals, not to mention non-living entities, have no world, no meaning?

There is a tradition which stands in opposition to structuralism, itself a metaphysical system with strong roots in the philosophy of language. In opposition to the anthropocentrism of structuralism, semiotics presents a system of universal meaning. For our purposes, I am using semiotics in this looser, metaphysical way, to include thinkers like C.S. Peirce, Jakob von Uexküll, Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari, and Michel Serres. What these thinkers have in common is an extension of meaning beyond the human world. More than this, these thinkers all see the importance of structure for non-human beings. As we will see, some of these thinkers go further than others: while some semioticians will limit meaning as a category to the living, others will see it as a universal system of meaning and communication. In the next section, I will explore examples of attempts to move structure and communication beyond the human (and beyond the scope of structuralism), but which for different reasons fail to fully universalize them as ontological categories. In the final section, we will approach a truly universal theory of communication.

In order to understand this theory of communication, we must attempt to rethink the concepts of structure, sense and territory. These three concepts are closely related, possibly essentially so. While it is indisputable that human beings structure their world through language, concepts, culture or politics, I contend that this structuring is an existential feature of all beings and is not a privilege of being human. This way of seeing structure will come from our reconsideration of sense or meaning. By sense I mean something like affect, but stripped of the necessary implications of power. It is closer perhaps to signal, with its own relation to noise being essential to our study. Communication is vague, with signals emerging

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24 There are of course many examples of animals mourning, notably elephants, who react strongly to elephant bones when encountered, and chimps who appear to comfort their dying relatives and mourn them when they have passed on.
from the clamour of noise surrounding things. Sense is the combination of signal and noise. Sense is directed outward towards other beings, who then structure it into cohesive sense systems, creating the category of territory. Communication is thus the process of creating territory by structuring sense and signals. Territory is any structured ecosystem of signs and sense. This conceptual outline is the base structure of existence, as all existents are communicative beings that project outward their very existence in a show of noise.25

Jakob von Uexküll presents us with a significant attempt to escape the problem of anthropocentrism when it comes to meaning and communication. His biosemiotics, along with what could be described as an animal phenomenology, gives us an idea of how meaning operates amongst the non-human, as he finds that all living things relate to objects and forces on the level of significance. That is to say, living beings grasp objects as carriers of meaning, rather than simply in terms of mechanical response to stimuli. The mechanist position is the chief antagonist for Uexküll, as the mechanist sees no meaning operating in non-human animals, nor do they allow for the category of environment (life-world, Umwelt)26 in the realm of the non-human, which he sees as essential to the understanding of all animals. Animals are more than simple causal means, but use judgment and affect and interact with objects, that is to say, they are subjects in the sense usually reserved for humans. Just as our subjectivity is connected to our sense-perception and our central nervous system, but is not thereby limited by it, so too are all living things, but this does not mean that animal subjectivity is identical to human subjectivity. A spider, a parrot, a cat and a person are all subjects for Uexküll, but we operate within different worlds of meaning because different objects are meaningful in different ways depending on our physiology, evolution and history.

25 We will come to say that communication is an expression of existence, an attribute of existents.

Uexküll will use the example of a room of objects as grasped by a human being, a dog, and a fly. All three beings grasp the same room, but do so differently, detecting different ‘tones’ or ‘shades’ in the objects which make up this environment. Picture a room containing a table with plates and glasses atop it, with chairs, a couch, a bookcase filled with books, a lamp and a small angled writing desk. The human being sees meaning in the environment as such: seating maintains a sitting shade; the table a food shade; the plates and glasses, eating and drinking shades respectively; the desk a writing shade; the bookcase and books a reading shade; the lamp a lighting shade; the floor a walking shade; and finally the walls appears as obstacle shades. The dog will grasp the objects for sitting, the floor for walking, the lamp as a source of light, and the plates and glasses as sources of food and drink, with the other objects appearing only as obstacles. The fly however sees the light source and the food sources as unique objects, with all else appearing as a possible surface for walking. Each creature encounters a world of meaning, the meaning simply shifts from creature to creature. From this view then, Pickles the cat encounters meaning in the world, contra the structuralist position, but he does not encounter the same meaning that I do. This is why he will happily walk across my keyboard or sleep on my books, while I see productivity and reading tones in such objects. The overall point being that Pickles encounters an environment made up of objects and not some mad flurry of light and sound. The two positions are phenomenologically at odds with one another.

Like Kant, Uexküll maintains that form is relational. In the Transcendental Aesthetic, Kant will distinguish between the matter and form of appearance with the former corresponding to sensation and the latter being that which allows an appearance to be so ordered. There is then a distinction in the realm of appearances between the raw sensation and

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27 Von Uexküll, A Foray..., 96-98.
the ordering of that sensation by human cognition, devising meaning, making sense of the situation. Specifically, form arises, sensations are ordered, by the formal intuitions of space and time. Uexküll parts company with Kant on the basis of his anthropocentrism, that it is human cognition (viz. intuition) which provides form. Intuition is the experience of sensation as a complex unity, an experience of sense as organized all at once into a single object of experience. 29 The animal’s environment, according to Uexküll has this same Kantian feature, viz. the appearance as a unified world. The animal is not bombarded with a kaleidoscope of sense data, responding to the barrage out of pure survival instinct. Rather, the animal encounters a world made up of objects, carriers of meaning, which it then navigates and interacts with. All Uexküllian animals are Kantian subjects. 30

The problem I find with Uexküll’s otherwise admirable attempt to move beyond anthropocentrism, is that he remains committed to the idea that the categories of meaning and life are forever married. While certainly an improvement on the Neo-Kantian inspired structuralist position outlined above which maintains that meaning is only to be found in the human constructed worlds of language, culture and politics, Uexküll is trapped in a fantasy that sees not only easy divisions in regards to who or what possesses an Umwelt (a hermit crab does but a sea anemone does not for instance), based first on a distinction between animal and non-animal (“there are no carriers of meaning for the plant” 31), then connected to various iterations of a nervous system. In other words, subjectivity is conditional on various biological factors, and is limited to a select number of beings. While I too maintain that cats and dogs are subjects, I would extend subjectivity, in the sense of organizing and interpreting information or

29 Kant, Critique of Pure Reason, A32/B47.
30 Von Uexküll, A Foray…, 52.
31 Ibid., 146. While the plant encounters no meaning, it still has a dwelling-world since it lives and therefore experiences stimuli to some extent. My contention is that this is still meaningful if we reconsider what it means for something to experience meaning.
sense, to all objects. This does not make all objects identical, nor does it make them ethically equal, it is simply to state that all things experience and organize on some level. We will return to this premise in the final section when developing a universal metaphysical system of communication, we will first continue our assessment of anti-structuralist theories of meaning and communication.

Gilles Deleuze presents us with a complicated case when it comes to structuralism, structure and meaning. On the surface, he feels revolutionary, standing against the sea of post-Kantian, post-phenomenological linguistic philosophy that dominated 20th century continental thought. While I will readily embrace Deleuze as a realist metaphysician and as a significant figure, there are serious issues with his work when it comes to our present study. First, his relationship to structuralism is not cut and dry. We would perhaps instinctively say that Deleuze stands opposed to the structuralist movement since he feels very much to be against the linguistic turn, but this would be to ignore the frequent references to structuralist thinkers in his writings. The first two works written in ‘his own voice,’ Difference and Repetition and The Logic of Sense are rife with references to Lacan, Lévi-Strauss and Saussure, all positive references. Anti-Oedipus, often thought to be a break with Freudo-Lacanian psychoanalytic theory praises Lacan, and nods to Lévi-Strauss’ early work on kinship. Guattari himself remained always a Lacanian, albeit a heterodox one (much as Lacan was a heterodox Freudian). Deleuze’s position on the philosophy of language seems to teeter between ‘undisclosed’ or ‘inexistent’ on the one hand and outright praise for structuralist theory on the other, the only criticism coming up in A Thousand Plateaus as the two thinkers move closer to a semiotic stance. In The Logic of Sense, Deleuze seems to readily accept the alien quality of language, that it is apart or distinct from bodies.32 These earlier (pre-Guattari) works seem to be providing an ontology to compliment structural-

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ism, tackling the concepts of sense and non-sense, identity and difference, structure and genesis, the very concepts that underlie the work of Saussure, Lévi-Strauss and Lacan.

This Deleuzian ontology itself remains antagonistic to the universal system of meaning that I am attempting to outline. It seems odd to say and remains counter-intuitive, but Deleuze is far too reductionist for the study of things with which we are presently engaged. The task at hand is to understand the attributes of existents, the essential qualities of all beings, or said another way, the uncovering of what it means for things to exist. One of the significant prongs of this study is a theory of communication, along with a study of conatus and causation. Deleuze allows for no such complex study of things, his ontology being composed of nothing but bodies and force, with the former being the constitution or actualization of the latter. The bird of prey is the will to kill the lamb and cannot be otherwise. Deleuzian ontology is the relation of forces on one another, active and reactive, creativity and affect being other common terms for the same principle: reality is, at bottom, a swirling mass of forces which align themselves in bodies and assemblages. This reduction means that communication is always tinged with the taste of power. My chief contention is that communication exists as an expression of existence, and that to exist means more than to will, or perhaps that ‘to will’ cannot be reduced to force.

Of course Deleuze and Guattari approach something akin to our proposed project in their discussion of codes and coding. In *Anti-Oedipus* however, this remains under the sway of structuralist linguistics. Codes remain signs in the structuralist sense. It isn’t until *A Thousand Plateaus*

33 “Every relationship of forces constitutes a body—whether it is chemical, biological, social or political. Any two forces, being unequal, constitute a body as soon as they enter into a relationship.” Gilles Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, trans. Hugh Tomlinsons (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), 40.

34 Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, 122-123.

35 “The nature of the signs within [the code] is insignificant, as these signs have little or nothing to do with what supports them.” Gilles Deleuze and
when language is connected to the early Deleuze’s work on expression and affect in any meaningful way. Here we learn for instance that language (semiology, regime of signs) is simply one mode of expression among many, “and not the most important one.”36 Here we are told (finally) that signs should not be privileged above other modes of expression because all signs are simply signs of other signs which refer not to things, but simply to other signs.37 This critique of structuralist linguistics is compromised however when Deleuze and Guattari make a seemingly fundamental distinction between content and expression, bodies and events. While content and expression are on the same plane (flat ontology), Deleuze and Guattari write as if the relation between the two is haphazard and unnecessary, as if bodies are not expressive. Of course they are; there is a necessary connection between objects (taken in the broadest possible sense) and their own expressivity. The qualities of things and the interaction of objects express something about existence, about what it means for that thing to be what it is. It is not enough to maintain that “forms of content and forms of expression” operate “in the other.”38 What this ultimately means is that there are two orders of things, bodies and language, and that while they interact on some level and impact each other, they remain fundamentally different. What I am instead saying is that language as a form of communication is derivative of things (causal expression, qualities are unleashed by the thing) but also that they attain some level of autonomy once expressed. That is to say, expressive objects cause new objects to arise in the form of autonomous sense-objects or signals.

There are two thinkers we should turn to in order to see how to fully oppose structuralism, C.S. Peirce and Michel Serres.


37 Ibid., 112.

38 Ibid., 88.
Speculations II

Both Peirce and Serres present us with a metaphysical priority placed on communication and relation, while opposing both the therapeutic view of order and the anthropocentrism of structuralism. Both thinkers remain outside of the purview of speculative realism, neither included as realists, nor excluded as correlationists, but simply unknown, like a continent lying dormant just out of view and waiting to be explored, excavated and re-inhabited. Consider this the first transmission from this foreign land.

Peircian semiotics open us to a world of significance, a presentation of the cosmos in which all things are continually engaged in the exchange of information. His triadic structure of object, sign and interpretant give us a way of understanding not only human language, but the structure of all relations, from epistemology and the human mind, to causality and the relation of material things to one another. Like Graham Harman, Peirce maintains that all relations are mediated, and that all things are capable of playing either of the three roles of semiotics depending on the circumstances. Unlike structuralist linguistics (and its offspring in deconstruction and, arguably, hermeneutics), signs have a real relation to the things they represent. While Saussure claims that all language and communication is based on the structure of signifier-signified (word-concept), Peirce will emphasize that the sign is an expression of the object, which is always vague and never entirely expressible.39 It is this vagueness inherent in the object which means the sign is more an expression of it than a representation. Communication is about the activity of expression and not repetition, copying, or representing. Rather, a sign stands for the thing,40 representing the thing in a similar way to the way our politicians represent a whole swathe of people, even those who did not vote for them and do not agree with them. Put another way, the sign mediates

between object and interpretant, standing in for the thing imperfectly. Signs invite interpretation through their vague nature, signs being only possibilities for the thing which is itself irreducible to any particular presentation, signification or interpretation. It should be noted as well that interpretation as Peirce uses it is not reserved for human minds, but exists outside “the psychological or accidental human element.”

There is an immense power at the heart of Peircian objects, as they exceed all nomination through the power of resistance, but also cultivate meaning through all interaction, conveying sense and information. Something as seemingly basic as brute physical interaction is really an information exchange, as trajectory, speed and location translate into new possibilities and meaning for the objects that collide, interacting at certain levels and ignoring others.

Peirce may feel stodgy when compared to the more contemporary Uexküll, but the former is superior in his semiotics precisely because he does not affix the prefix bio- to his task. Peirce sees communication and semiosis occurring in and between all things, including the working of matter and the laws of nature. Unlike Uexküll, Peirce does not suggest that communication happens only among higher organisms, denying meaning to a tree simply because it has no nervous system. The wind does indeed have meaning for the tree, it conveys information, and expresses something that the tree then receives, and the wind encounters something significant in the tree as well, namely resistance. This physical interaction operates through signs and interpretation just as much as humans and language do.

Michel Serres is perhaps the most under-rated thinker in contemporary metaphysics, presenting us with an incredible depth and holding a unique position today among metaphysicians by emphasizing communication and relation above all else. Not only this, but he gives us a clear philosophy of

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42 Ibid., 419.
communication that does not fall into the correlationist/anthropocentrist trap of maintaining that reality is directed at human beings. Instead, he gives us a thoroughly realist metaphysics, as evidenced in his dialogue *Angels: A Modern Myth*, where Pia will respond to Pantope’s charge that “Humans are the only beings that communicate with language” with

That’s rather arrogant! Dolphins and bees communicate, and so do ants, and winds, and currents in the sea. Living things and inert things bounce off each other unceasingly; there would be no world without this inter-linking web of relations, a billion times interwoven.\(^4\)

Pia goes on to say that for the Ancients, angels (carriers of information, transmitters of meaning) often took the forms of humans, but also “resembled waves, winds, the sparkling of light, or twinkling constellations”\(^4\) going on to include contemporary technology. To easily divide between human subjects and mere objects is to ignore the structure of reality. Pia uses several examples, one of the clearest being a group of children playing with a ball. It is not the case that the children manipulate the ball, forcing it to conform to their rules like all-knowing subjects, rather, the best players know that they must anticipate the ball’s movements, that it is the ball that determines the game, and structures the game as well as unites the team, creating a new unit. “It is the ball that is playing.”\(^4\) Furthermore, it is only the world of objects that give rise to the very idea of ‘subjectivity,’ produced by “biros, writing desks, tables, books, diskettes, consoles, memories,” with Serres noting that “certain objects in this world write and think.”\(^4\) Against the narrow anthropocentric view that dominates much of continental philosophy, Serres insists that subjectivity (if we can continue to use that word) is found

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\(^4\) Ibid., 47.
\(^4\) Ibid., 48.
\(^4\) Ibid., 48, 50.
throughout the universe and can be seen in the exchange and organization of information.\textsuperscript{47}

Objects grasp order in a sea of noise, navigating a bustling universe and selectively embracing qualities and things which they can relate to. Comparable to music, which can jar someone who is not used to certain styles (like the free jazz of Ornette Coleman), it can be difficult to detect any sort of order and not simply be overwhelmed by a churning ocean of nonsensical noise. But the ear can grow to appreciate such music if it does not already, over time developing a taste for the seeming chaos that is filled with creativity, power, emotion and meaning. For Serres, the cosmos is a bustling cloud, with all things generating swarms and storms of information, the excess of meaning gathering in “innumerable murmuring multitudes.”\textsuperscript{48} Returning to the example of music, Serres will speak of the seeming chaos of a universe overflowing with angels, bumbling and bumping into each other, occupying all space, noting that angels are also the keepers of order, presenting them as a union of opposites. “They are invisible and visible, silent and thunderous, concealed and light-bearing,” both creating order out of chaos in their communication, their music, their message-bearing, as well as destroying that order, “unstitch[ing] harmony.”\textsuperscript{49} The universe is made up of both chaos and order, with Serres arguing that it is possible to see the world as either good and ordered or evil and chaotic, or, as he holds, as both as well as seeing the movement between these two extremes.\textsuperscript{50} The myth of angels allows us to better understand our world, providing not only theological insight, but social and (meta)physical as well. The world of contemporary physics is both chaotic and ordered, the human body and consciousness are the same. Things are neither entirely fluid and dynamic, nor are they old-timey unchanging substances. Like light, angels are both particle (solid, ordered)
and wave (transient, chaotic). This is how we should begin to think objects; things are neither reducible to their subatomic structures, nor are they entirely fixed, but possess properties of both simultaneously. Objects strive for unity while being pulled apart from all sides by those things around them. Or is it the other way around, with objects striving for dissolution but everywhere being formed into unities by their relations? We need a “philosophy of communication” to understand the networks and noise, the order and chaos of the cosmos.\footnote{Michel Serres, Angels, 93.}

The call to an understanding of noise, the reference to the concept of chaos, succeeds for Serres for two important reasons. He neither references noise and chaos as synonyms for horror or trauma (structuralism), nor engages in a reductionism whereby everything is shown to be nothing more than noise, chaos or flux (Deleuze). Noise is “in the subject” and “in the object,” in “the transmitter and in the receiver, in the entire space of the channel.”\footnote{Michel Serres, Genesis, trans. Geneviève James and James Nielson (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995), 61.} In this way, the noise of existence echoes in and out of things, allowing for meaning to rise up from the churning sea and rain down on the solid land of substance. The world is made up of different kinds of things just as language is made up of different kinds of words: unchanging nouns stand firm in their substance, able to take on all change in the shape of verbs and adjectives while remaining what they are just as I remain who I am despite my location or garb; while in between these solid masses of land flow prepositions, appearing and disappearing in an instance as they magically flutter and transform their surroundings, like angels, elves and elementals in the Renaissance, bursting into being and giving rise to movement and meaning.\footnote{Serres, Angels, 140.} These objects remain invisible to most; like fairies and goblins, their importance remains unseen, as wind and time affect the world of things like apparitions. Objects can function, like angels, on the level of “transparent abstraction and of visible
concreteness.”54 Angels work to unify and stitch together a world of significance, connecting networks and things of different kinds: artistic, scientific, physical, imaginary, human, animal, neurological, sexual, living and non-living.

With this lineage of thinkers in mind, both the agreeable and the disagreeable, we should begin to construct a philosophy of communication that does justice to the world. Meaning and sense flow from things, between things, washing over them. Sense pours forth from things, expressing their inner lives, the way a volcano, in spewing ash, rock and lava, overflows, revealing the molten core at the heart of the planet. While appearing dormant, our world is overflowing with inner activity, with combustion and productive desire. Clouds of ash signal the awakening of the volcano-thing, revealing dangerous new possibilities, unveiling the existence of the towering being for what it is, and always has been. In this same way, my speech, gestures and style express something of my inner life. Expressivity is not confined to the realm of human beings, as all animals, even cats named Pickles, can’t help but express something of their being in the act of being. More than this, we should rethink what it means for something to exist along these lines, taking it not to be some simple and singular light-switch activity of presence or absence, but see existence as the activity of future presencing. What this means is that to exist means to exist temporally, with an eye to future existence, and existing in such a way as to maximize this possibility by resisting extinction. Physical and imaginary things resist and persist. I exist above and beyond my relations, not because of some withdrawal at the heart of my being, but because I am always in excess to them, generating more noise than other beings can make sense of. The very fact of my existence means I am a productive being, transmitting noise which is interpreted as containing signals (is organized) by different beings in different ways. To other humans, I exhibit significance in the form of moods, intentions, words, feelings, beliefs, ideas, and so on. My existence is meaningful in a different way to a

54 Ibid., 163.
cat and different still if that cat is a beloved pet or a frightful stray. Beyond this, my physical being contains meaning in its brute physicality: when I type on my keyboard or grip a pen I am making sense to these things. The pen grasps physical causality and responds through movement (say by writing smoothly) or by resistance (in refusing to break when force is applied to it). Meaning is not limited to poetry and art or to rhetoric and song, but exists in the interaction of any two entities, from the light between the sun and a flower to waves crashing against rocks to a song between performer and audience. This excess is in no way frightening or traumatic; I don’t need to be shielded from the fact that an elephant or tornado interact with a house differently than I do. We also cannot say that outside of my relation to things lies meaninglessness. Pickles the cat clearly interacts with things in a way that makes sense to him. He does not engage in random acts, but understands the world of objects in a way different than I do. Likewise, a rock interacts with things on a different level than I do, existing as a purely physical being, but engaged with a world in a meaningful way nonetheless.

Put simply, we have the following structure to communication: Objects generate noise around them, buzzing with possibilities. Other objects, in interacting with the thing, grasp part of this noise, finding signals of sense in the atmosphere of objects. When I hear sounds, I listen, I am trying to organize this flurry in such a way that it makes sense, and in this rumble I may very well find music twinkling amongst the excess of sound. In the same way, a physical interaction occurs on one level, force. When a ball collides with another, the balls interact only with that that makes sense to them, physicality. The smell or colour of the ball has no meaning, while the size, shape, speed and direction are meaningful attributes to such a happening. Objects interact on this level of signals, while ignoring the rest as simple background noise. In this way, I interact with other people on different levels depending on our relationship, be it that of teacher-student, parent-child, significant others, friends or acquaintances. These other possibilities exist only as noise around the significant relationship in
question, giving rise to its very possibility by generating the noise which is so ordered in the first place. The noise generated by one object is organized, signals are found, by another object. From this, networks of relations can arise, developing what I term (with reference to Deleuze and Guattari), territory. Territory is a system of sense, the systematization of signals into a coherent world of possible interactions. We could also compare this term to the ‘environment’ of Uexküll, but with the potential for reform (de- and re-territorialization) found in Deleuze/Guattari. Structure belongs not only to the human or the living, but to all things. From here we see clearly the opposition between the proposed system and that of structuralism. Outside of meaning and order is not horror, but disinterest and ignorance, and outside of the human are worlds of meaning, objects interacting with one another as significant sources of information.

Returning to the examples which began this investigation, we can say that as a child, I interacted with the forest around my home in a meaningful way. I created trails and saw characteristics in places and things. The world around my childhood home was teeming with meaning, and not simply that invented by a child’s imagination, but real significance. In carving marks in trees, I was organizing the area, making it my own through force and meaning. The Inuit who inhabit the Canadian North likewise see great significance in communicating their surroundings, and those of fellow travelers, through the construction of cairns. These rocks communicate the very landscape they populate, expressing the language of the land. Communication is more than words and vague gestures. Animals who communicate with smell give us a glimpse of other possible modes of communication. While I see no significance in the foul odour, it is not a flight of fancy to say that other animals find significance in such signals or marks. Indeed, why stop here? The trees which I marked, the rocks that are stacked and the fence that is sprayed all convey meaning on their own, whether or not a human or animal provides it. There is a flow of information in the melting of the iceberg, as information thought to have
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been non-existent unveils itself, revealing something of the inner life of the iceberg, from its temperature, to location, to history. Something of its past is always carried forward through the ages, and while much of its expression may be noise to us, we can see through its lifecycle that it provides essential sustenance to bacteria, fish and birds. Beyond this, we cannot say what networks this noise makes up, nor can we then conclude that the answer to such a question is nothing. There is more to things than our own relation to them reveal, and through a superior empiricism we can perhaps arrive at a clearer understanding of the rich and complex inner lives of objects.

Beyond this, we should take note that it is possible to have a metaphysical system which takes communication and relation seriously while not falling into the twinned pits of correlationism or structuralism. The options confronting the contemporary metaphysician are more numerous than ‘linguistic philosophy’ and ‘contemporary science.’ We need not evacuate all talk of language and communication in order to be realists, for communication is a fact of existence. Things express themselves in myriad ways and interact in this order of expressions, structuring their worlds through their very existence, interpreting signals in a sea of noise and thus communicating. Semiosis happens everywhere around us and between us. Contemporary realism must take into account the way things relate, and should not shirk at the mention of ‘meaning’ or ‘interpretation’ as if encountering some ghastly monster. What such things reveal, what things ‘mean’ to one another, their expressivity and relation, the way they make territory through structure, by making sense, is precisely the real we set out to understand. The real is noisy, humming within things and all around them. This noise goes deep into the hearts of things, both human and non-human. The depths of things have yet to be excavated in the same way Freud plunged the depths of human beings, but such a task cannot begin until we acknowledge first that such things have depth, and second, that something of this great depth is expressed in the act of existence itself.