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Grégory Chatonsky: the art of an archaeofiction without history?

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abstract

In the wake of postmodernist experiments, Chatonsky questions both focalization and narrativity: he aims at elaborating a form of fiction without narration, that is to say without any diegesis or narrative instance, for it is anonymous, machinic and collective: "It is as if a fiction, a machine here, dreamt up our lives and used the very stuff of our existence in its sleep," claims the artist in a textual manifesto. Now, to what extent do the discretization and the semi-random montage of flows captured on the Web, be they visual, textual or made of sounds, contribute to the emergence of a new fictional imagination aiming to do away with the causal principle, and hence with any narrative logic?

Keywords

apocalypse, archive, contingency, fiction, Meillassoux pareidolia

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> Time passing as chronology and history is superseded by a time which exhibits itself in the instant. On the terminal's screen a span of time becomes both the surface and the support of inscription. Time literally (or rather, cinematically) surfaces. Due to the cathodic-ray tube's imperceptible substance, the dimensions of space become inseparable from their speed of transmission.
> Paul Virilio[1]

Grégory Chatonsky, interviewed by Dominique Moulo,[2] explains how he attempts to "recompose time through space" in his work *Readonlymemories*,[3] that is, give form to time by flattening out the succession of instants as though to spread them over the surface of the screen. By placing each image from the scene of a film side by side, composing a fresco, Chatonsky was playing on the déjà-vu of the detail which he weaves back into the whole, a whole which is virtually present in our memories, but which we have never seen recomposed in this way. The result appears less human, especially as not all the images are filmed from the same angle. In fact, the result reflects the look of no one, it is a fiction without a point of view.

This distortion of the cinematographic viewpoint through the synchronic projection of the sequential composition of edited film clearly resembles modernist and postmodernist fiction's experimentations with focalisation. The originality of Chatonsky's work is displayed in this freeze on multiple images, which spatialises time, and is reminiscent of the narrative experimentations of the early 1990s in the USA (for example, electronic hyperfictions), and of cubist pictorial explorations, which the 3-D images of *Readonlymemories II* and *III* prolong in an even more radical way. Chatonsky, as a worthy heir to postmodernism, challenges viewpoint and narrativity, to the point of envisaging a fiction without narration, that is, without diegesis, and also without narrative voice because it is anonymous, machine-generated and collective. As Chatonsky declared in a text-manifesto, "it is as though a fiction, here a machine, dreamed our lives, and used the very substance of our existences in its sleep."[4] Hence the following question, which we shall address first: to what extent does the cutting-up and semi-random reassembly of the visual, textual or sound flows captured from the Web, contribute to new ways of imagining fiction, as a surface of projection which could escape the principle of causality and the logic of narrative?

Archives to come

This question emerges from my research into the notion of apocalypse,[5] and reveals a specific temporality, not an eschatological temporality marking the end of time, but an apocalypse in the sense of an end infinitely deferred by the transmedia loop in which Chatonsky's work is situated. The loop signals the beginning of the time of the end, represented in Chatonsky's attempt to exhaust forms, by imagining, for example, a fossilisation of technical objects, as in his exhibition *Télofossiles*.[6] This is not a return to chaos, but a time close to eternity on a cosmic scale, which is beyond human temporality. Chatonsky seeks to figure the time remaining before the end of the universe, the interval which intervenes after the end of man. The fossilisation of technical objects appears as the future of technology without man, on a non-human scale which surpasses human understanding. Chatonsky's work points to an irreducible remainder, which is nevertheless not yet ash, that is, the remains of what is no longer. The loop of this archaeology of the future, which returns into the present in the form of an impossible testimony, retains time, dilates it, and defers what would be its real

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1. Paul Virilio, "The overexposed city," *Zone* 1/2 (1986) 19.
2. Grégory Chatonsky and Dominique Moulon, "Grégory Chatonsky. Une esthétique des flux (après le numérique)," 2007. [Online] http://www.moulon.net/pdf/pdfin_08.pdf [accessed on 1 November 2016].
3. Grégory Chatonsky, *Readonlymemories*, 2003. [Online] http://chatonsky.net/readonlymemories/ [accessed on 1 November 2016].
4.   Grégory Chatonsky, "La fiction sans narration (FSN)," 2012. [Online] http://chatonsky.net/fsn/ [accessed on 1 November 2016].
5.   Sylvie Allouche, Rémy Bethmont, Hélène Machinal, Monica Michlin and Arnaud Regnauld (dir.), *Formes d(e l')Apocalypse*, Saint-Denis, Bibliothèque numérique Paris 8, 2017. [Online] http://octaviana.fr/document/COLN20_1 [accessed on 30 January 2018].
6.   Grégory Chatonsky, "Telofossils," 2013. [Online] http://chatonsky.net/telofossils/ [accessed on 30 January 2018].

end. Narrative is thus suspended by the crystallisation of time in the fossil-object of which soon only images will remain, on the net and elsewhere, since exhibitions are by definition ephemeral. What *Télofossiles* obliges us to think is the possibility of an archaeological fiction on the basis of what already no longer constitutes a world, as we understand it, because no human being remains alive to bear witness to it. It is a radical imagining of the impossibility of narrative.

As Chatonsky explains, following Derrida, "archaeology, despite appearances, does not primarily concern the past, but the future. It consists of anticipating the conditions of transmission at the instant when memories are inscribed, and thus it speculates on our own disappearance."[7] Chatonsky thus moves from highlighting the anonymity of mass flows to what he calls the «ahuman», playing on scales of time and space, and exploring the fiction of a post-apocalyptic viewpoint which can allow us to postulate our own non-existence. These ideas are developed particularly in speculative fictions such as the exhibition *Télofossiles,* of which it is worth noting that nothing remains, except some online digital traces. This exhibition reflects on the mediation of its own demise, as a sedimentation of flows obeying varying temporalities: the installation "Archives of Disappearance"[8] consists of 3-D digitally scanned fragments of the monumental sculpture entitled "Télofossiles," from which the exhibition takes its name. It explores the *haunting* by the fossil imprint yet to come (in opposition to the Romantic idea of the ruin, which presupposes a spectator), generated from the transmedia loop whose end is already contained in the ephemeral nature of the exhibition. As Chatonsky writes, "there remains only turbulence sweeping over a surface from which we are absent. These flows reconfigure the aesthetic as what is placed without us on a planet which has returned to its original mineral state."[9] Chatonsky is beyond a typically 19th-century aesthetic of decadence, recast after Auschwitz and Hiroshima in the theme of the twilight of humanity, which he explores further in *Extinct Memories.*[10]

This later work treats the theme of archaeological excavations in the light of the following question: what would a non-human consciousness read—if one can still talk of reading—in the traces left in a data centre discovered after the extinction of the human species? "In a few thousand years," Chatonsky writes, "after the human species has become extinct, something will dig below the Earth's surface and find a computer cluster. By some miracle, it will be able to access the content of the hard drives and discover the traces of our world." This is the story the exhibition tells, if one can put it that way. The fine line between the fiction of an obscure computer scientist whose memories have been preserved on a hard drive after the end of the human species, and the reality of the museum installation, becomes even more difficult to place because video images edited together are integrated into 3-D virtual sequences: the digital and the analogical, the technological object and the stone sculpture echo each other, since they are both part of the same aesthetic of the fossil. The recomposition of fragments captured semi-randomly from the flows of data produced by our online activities is one of the artist's major interests, with a view to divesting the narrative of any trace of intentionality and showing how the emergence of meaning is inherently affected by contingency. Just as, according to Chatonsky, machines make a translation of the world into lines of code beyond meaning, so this idea of a non-human consciousness, a "something" which discovers the ruins of our world, in other words, this fiction, also attempts to think the world without humankind. This conception is endebted to Quentin Meillassoux's work, but Chatonsky additionally seeks to think beyond narrative in discarding its causal logic. The excavation of a data centre poses the question of the archive in the perspective of a problem specific to the architecture of databases which only produce sense if there is a computer programme interface to allow the previously atomised data to to be linked up, and this in turn immediately poses the problem of potentially absurd combinations, in a non-human context.

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7. Grégory Chatonsky, "La fiction sans narration (FSN)," 2012. [Online] http://chatonsky.net/fsn/ [accessed on 1 November 2016].
8. Grégory Chatonsky, "Telofossils," 2013. [Online] http://chatonsky.net/telofossils/ [accessed on 30 January 2018].
9. Grégory Chatonsky, "Flux (Après le numérique)," 2015. [Online] http://chatonsky.net/flux-apres/ [accessed on 1 November 2016].
10. Grégory Chatonsky, "Telofossils," 2013. [Online] http://chatonsky.net/telofossils/ [accessed on 30 January 2018].

The end of the world will not take place

These flows are beyond our grasp. They exceed our powers, claim their independence, and challenge the principle of the necessary relation between cause and effect. Through the semi-random treatment of the network's flows, Chatonsky is actually championing contingency as the only necessity, insofar as it constitutes the driving force behind the linkage of elements with no relation to each other. In a text entitled "Des relations ahumaines"[11] ["On a-human relations"], Chatonsky describes an other end of man, marked by the undecidability which characterises the absolute contingency of this type of relation, from which the human being is absent: "[A-human relations] can be related, which is both necessary (in so far as it takes place), and is contingent (insofar as no rationale can ultimately justify it)." In another brief text by Chatonsky written in 2015, called "*Les destructions du monde*,"[12] [The Destructions of the World], Meillassoux's approach seems to be a radicalisation of Derrida's deconstruction of the concept of "end", as Chatonsky interprets it. In an implicit echo of the concept of messianism, Chatonsky explores the idea of an end that is not one, and does not take place, which he requalifies as a dislocation. This term should probably be understood both in the sense of the movement in space which it produces, and in the sense of temporal disjunction, in relation to Derrida's reflections on the spectral logic of *Hamlet*, and the words "Time is out of joint." As Derrida explains, "it is a question of the impossibility of thinking or rather of conceiving the contemporary, synchrony: time is disjointed. At the same time, there is more than one time in the time of the world ('time' here is also history, the world, society, the epoch, these days, etc.)."[13] Incidentally, these ideas are echoed in Giorgio Agamben's discussion of the Apocalypse of Paul, understood as the most internal disjunction of time which we can grasp, and ultimately accomplish,[14] perhaps by means of the world as image. Actually, the issue of dislocation perhaps does not affect the object as much as it affects the position of the viewing subject,who hallucinates his own end through post-apocalyptic images produced by the dream machines which feed the network. Who actually looks at the empty rooms of the museum where *Extinct Memories* is exhibited under blinking neon lights?

Let us quote Chatonsky again in order to understand his intentions better: "destruction is not an accident that befalls substance, it is necessity as contingency. No thing necessarily exists. A politics of destruction is a politics of solitudes."[15] Yet Chatonsky's critique of correlationism, in the wake of Meillassoux's, and his conception of absolute contingency, do not seem entirely applicable here. If one maintains the possibility of an aesthetic, even if it is extra-terrestrial and a-human, one retains the idea of an object placed under the gaze of a subject. In other words, aesthetics cannot do without a mediation. The theoretical substratum of Chatonsky's work is here out of line with its realisation. His extra-terrestrial viewpoint, even if it is conceived as non-human in this speculative fiction, shifts the ontological question posed by phenomenology towards the possibility of another relation to the object, and the contingency of the world in general, yet without conceiving an absolute non-relation, that is, a world in which the appearance of the object would not be conditioned by its perception by a thinking subject. This time after the end of man—the flip-side of Meillassoux's "ancestral" time[16]—is also a time after all life on earth, a time without thought or consciousness. Yet when Chatonsky posits the end of man as inescapable, he is still thinking of apocalyse as a form of eschatology, which is assimilable to what Meillassoux calls "precariousness," or empirical contingency, in the sense

11. Grégory Chatonsky, "Des relations ahumaines," 2013. [Online] http://chatonsky.net/relations-ahumaines [accessed on 1 November 2016].
12. Grégory Chatonsky, "L'époque des destructions du monde," 2015. [Online] http://chatonsky.net/les-destructions/ [accessed on 1 November 2016].
13. Jacques Derrida and Elizabeth Roudinesco, *De quoi demain…*, Paris, Fayard/Galilée, 2001, p. 34.
14. Agamben, Giorgio, *The Time that Remains*, translated by The Board of Trustees of the Leland Stanford Junior University, Stanford University Press, 2005, p. 72: "Saturday—messianic time—is not another day, homogeneous to others; rather, it is that innermost disjointedness within time through which one may—by a hairsbreadth—grasp time and accomplish it."
15. Grégory Chatonsky, "La destruction et la chose," 2012. [Online] http://chatonsky.net/destruction-2/ [accessed on 1 November 2016].
16. Quentin Meillassoux, *Après la finitude*, Paris, Seuil , 2006, p. 26: "We call 'ancestral' any reality prior to the appearance of the human species—and even prioir to any recorded life on Earth."

of "a destructibility which is destined to come to pass sooner or later,"[17] as against an absolute contingency which is an openness of pure possibility.

The point is that as soon as there is a programme, there can no longer be pure chance. There may of course be randomness that exceeds our understanding, but not an infinite in the metaphysical sense. Incompletion, most certainly. Chatonsky, starting from the idea of a fiction without narration, wants to explore the *without relation*, something absolutely contingent that could exist outside of any consciousness I may have of it, in a gesture which seeks to leave behind subjectivity, or at least the constituted subject, in order to make apparent a non-human substrate which haunts the network. This is what *Dance with Us*[18] attempts to show in a playful way by linking images of Fred Astaire to images of stock market rates which keep changing (one is tempted to say, which keep "acting on the world"). They are generated by algorithms in an inhuman temporality which does in fact escape our control, because they are infra-empirical. One could entitle it "how the human being becomes the phantom limb of a machine driven by the logic of an absurd recurring loop." But what do these images actually narrate? A certain relation to time and history, which is set on a continuous loop, making no progress, where repetition can never constitute an event, that is, a deviation from its trajectory like the atom in the theory of the clinamen.

Divination by dreams

In Chatonsky's works, the juxtaposition of fragments from online sources or databases is generated only by the blind logic of a programme whose idiocy guarantees its malleability. *Memories Center*,[19] whose title once again refers to the data centres where the traces of our online activities are stored, uses 20,000 narratives of dreams put into a database by two Californian researchaers. Chatonsky describes his work as follows: "a computer programme [which] produces new dream sequences, reads them and captures images on the Internet corresponding to chosen keywords." The relevance of the keywords is determined by the length of the chain of characters, and not by any semantic filter. These words determine the choice of three images through Markov chains: the associations produced depend on a semi-random process similar to the logic of dreams, characterised by juxtaposition or assembly unconstrained by intentionality or respect for the principle of non-contradiction. This set-up resembles the game of Consequences, in that the Markov chains are a memoryless system open to the maximum number of possible links. The idea is to transform the fragments of source texts selected at random into probabilities of possible linkages with other fragments, themselves also chosen arbitrarily in order to build new sentences. The fragments which can give rise to only one linkage are excluded. Each fragment thus opens up a potential series which is redistributed in a multitude of other fragments, and so on, without taking into account the preceding ones. If a narrative nonetheless emerges, it only does so at another level.

This game of Consequences is echoed by what Chatonsky calls an intersemiotic translation outside of meaning, between fragments of dream narratives, and the images supposed to illustrate them. Although the link made between the two is strictly meaningless, the choice of images is not as arbitrary as it may appear because it is orientated by the tags which identify the images online.[20] Image and text converge in the written trace, which constitutes the beginnings of a story (an image's title or the description of a scene linked to the image). However, given that noone knows which keywords are "meaningful" for the machine, the keyword search tool has an inbuilt opacity, which works against the construction of meaning. At the same time, the construction by the spectator of a narrative out of the fragments cannot

17. Quentin Meillassoux, *Après la finitude*, Paris, Seuil, 2006, p. 97.
18. Grégory Chatonsky, "Memories Center," 2014. [Online] http://chatonsky.net/memories-center/ [accessed on 30 January 2018].
19. Grégory Chatonsky, "Dance with Us," 2008. [Online] http://chatonsky.net/dance-with-us/ [accessed on 30 January 2018].
20. Grégory Chatonsky, "See&Wait, descriptif de 'La Révolution a eu lieu à New York' (exposition), [s.l.], [n.p.], 2002. [Online] http://www.lieu-commun.fr/spip.php?article61/ [accessed on 1 November 2016]: "It is commonplace to think that our hyper-industrialised societies have become exclusively visual; but with Internet, the word dominates the image. In order to exist physically in a digital medium, each image must bears a name, which is the criterion for its indexation."

be entirely arbitrary, that is, without any logical relation. Just as a programme can only be semi-random, so the dream of the machine can only be semi-arbitrary, even if the way the data is processed indeed produces an *effect of contingency*.

As such, this work, which is generated by a probabilistic method, cannot be classed as a fiction outside of knowledge, as Meillassoux—Chatonsky's mentor here—defines it, even if it shares some of its characteristics. The narrative dream fragments which come together while bearing no relation to each other produce a plethora of breaks and clashes in the fabric of an embryonic narrative, reminiscent of the randomness of the succession of dream sequences described by Kant in the scene of the cinnabar.[21] However, as Meillassoux points out, Kant uses a probabilistic logic to demonstrate that such a world is precisely impossible, as is this fiction, because the continual instability and inconsistency of this environment would prevent the emergence of a consciousness and the construction of a world. From the point of view of the reader/spectator, it is narrativity that is destroyed, with the result that he or she either supplements the absent logical links with the logic of filmic *montage, post hoc ergo propter hoc* ("after this, therefore because of this"), or else the sequence is abandoned to meaninglessness.

In order to expand on how the work creates not contingency, but *an effect of contingency*, I shall return to the issue of the atomisation of data involved in the construction of a database. The linking of dream fragments with images is not the product of chance in the sense of something totally undetermined, but rather of an unfathomable determinism. The way in which the selection of elements proceeds through an arborescence is comparable to Lucretius's theory of the clinamen, or swerve, of atoms, which occurs in too short a time to be thinkable: it is an infra-empirical "event." Deleuze's analysis in *Logic of Sense* is relevant to the new relation to time proposed by Chatonsky: "the clinamen is utterly different from a sideways movement which happens to alter the path of a vertical fall. It has always been present […]. The clinamen is the originary determination of the direction of the atom's movement."[22] This is why the flow has neither origin nor end, or at least the non-totalisable circulation of data on the network tends to produce this interpretation.

Moreover, due to the combinatory capacities of the machine, and its generative power, which seems infinite to us because it exceeds our powers of comprehension, every dream becomes potentially the equivalent of all the others. To which should be added that whereas the database of dream narratives contains 20,000 sequences, the quantity and nature of the images stored online is unlimited. *Memories Center* thus paradoxically proposes a narrative without memory, and in fact without history either, in that it is constantly renewed by a logic of flow, just like the ultra-prolific rock band "Capture"[23] which Chatonsky created. Although derived from a logic of the archive, the massive accumulation of machine-structured data clearly destroys the artist's individual authority, but more importantly, it destroys the very possibility of the archive as a receptable or a sanctuary of memory. The archive develops in real time, like Wikipedia, linking up human and non-human agents; an updated, fluid version, as befits our liquid epoch, of Derrida's conception of the archive.

The work entitled *The Revolution Took Place In New York*[24] (2002), with a reference to Alain Robbe-Grillet's *Project For A Revolution In New York*, helps elucidate the project of a fiction without narration by situating it in the context of literary history, and particularly the subversion of narrative codes introduced by advocates of the *nouveau roman*. In Robbe-Grillet's fiction, "the succession of scenes does not follow a temporal line, the scenes are organised into networks rather than trajectories, and they are repeated as they are, without ever really being completed,"[25] such that the narrative can never achieve a logico-temporal coherence, and leaves behind only phantom traces. Chatonsky devises new mediations for,

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21. Emmanuel Kant, *Critique de la raison pure* [1781], translated by Alain Renaut, Paris, Flammarion, 2001, p. 100 *sq*. Grégory Chatonsky, "Des relations ahumaines," 2013. [Online] http://chatonsky.net/relations-ahumaines [accessed on 1 November 2016].

22. Gilles Deleuze, *Logique du sens*, Paris, Minuit, 1966, p. 311.

23. Grégory Chatonsky, "Capture," 2009. [Online] http://chatonsky.net/capture/ [accessed on 30 January 2018].

24. Grégory Chatonsky, *La Révolution a eu lieu à New York*, 2002. [Online] http://chatonsky.net/revolution/ [accessed on 1 November 2016].

25. Donata Meneghelli, "Le texte et son ombre ou le lecteur supplicié dans *Projet pour une révolution à New York*," *Interférences littéraires/Literaire interferenties*, "new serie," no. 6, May 2011, p. 171-181.

and radicalises, Robbe-Grillet's idea of fiction. His work is produced by a text generator that imitates Robbe-Grillet's style, and this text is the basis for an infinite number of associations, as Chatonsky explains:

> Some words have been associated with fragments of video, others with sounds gleaned from the network, still others were translated into images using Google. The structured association of these heterogeneous elements produces a narrative flow simultaneous with the network's flows.[26]

The screen is divided into a triptych, and in its central panel words appear in succession, forming a narrative. This raises the question of the logico-temporal links between the panels. Some words seem then to migrate to the left, illustrating the images there, captured online, while fragments of sentences are superimposed on video sequences in the right-hand panel, to the rhythm of a typewriter—a self-reflexive emblem of how the narrative is composed— against a background of electronic sounds without reference, of voices blurred by noise, and of telegraphic pulses which regularly pattern the work. Some images come from videos of Ground Zero, although 9/11 does not play a major role in the work otherwise. Each fragment appears at random, but each appearance weaves a link with the other fragments. The work's principle is therefore a continuous process of filmic *montage*. The process of reading, the time of narration and the fictionalisation of the whole, are produced only at the moment of reception. The relation between the different intermingling flows is immediately problematic. It is impossible to embrace in a single look the narrator as he tells a story which interferes with the reconstitution of sentences from the single words which emerge in the centre screen, and at the same time the moving images distract the viewer laterally. The atomisation of data, which is an inherent property of databases, together with the multiplication of narrative flows—written, visual and sound—quickly saturates the reader's/viewer's perceptual and cognitive capacities, producing a hallucinatory effect, as though the work were a form of machine-driven divination. The decontextualisation of the fragments of texts which appear on the right frustrates any attempt to reconstitute a complete or coherent narrative. Like the words which appear separately, one after the other, in the centre of the screen, the sentences are truncated, the visual sequences are interrupted, and the whole work is punctuated by blank screens which appear at regular intervals, like so many "wounds that will not heal,"[27] to use Jean Ricardou's metaphor describing the *Nouveau roman*'s suddenly forking narrative paths, which destabilise it. Besides, if, for the sake of simplification, we say that each panel is the source of a unified flow (which is evidently not the case because there are multiple streams), then the question of narrative temporality also arises: certain words or parts of sentences seem to appear at different moments in the different panels, producing an effect of recognition—something one has already seen or read—which reinforces the impression of a permeability between text, image and sound, and thhis effectively produces an in-finite narrative with no single spatio-temporal anchorage.

Yet, when a machine works, "it creaks, it goes wrong, it creates little explosions: its malfunctions are part of its functioning," as Deleuze and Guattari say in a different context (concerning the social machine). Let us take this analogy a bit further and introduce the notion of a "glitch," a term used by Chatonsky, to designate how every programme is affected by time, and is, as such, corruptible. This imperceptible weakness has palpable effects, and can give rise to a true aesthetics of the accident. When this machine happens to encounter a world conceived as an oracle, it carries out a kind of translation outside of sense, resulting from a pareidolia which would be, in Chatonsky's words, "the meeting-point between computing and divination."[28] In other words, we hallucinate what is not there, namely meaning, on the basis of what the machine "dreams," since we enter into an aesthetic relation with a visual work which *bears no relation* to what we are able to draw from our own analogical memory.

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26. Grégory Chatonsky, *La Révolution a eu lieu à New York*, 2002. [Online] http://chatonsky.net/revolution/ [accessed on 1 November 2016].

27. Jean Ricardou, "La fiction flamboyante," *Pour une théorie du nouveau roman*, Paris, Seuil, 1971, p. 231.

28. Grégory Chatonsky, *Esthétique des flux (après le numérique)*, doctoral thesis in artistic theory and practices, UQAM , 2016, p. 445.

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