Cosmo-Erotic Humanism, Love and Negation

A Response to Zak Stein's "Love in a Time Between Worlds: On the Metamodern 'Return' to a Metaphysics of Eros"

Let me first give a brief summary of the sphere of contemporary thought in which Zak Stein's work is situated. The "metamodern" sphere coming to be known as "Game B," the "Emerge network," the "Emergentsia," etc. etc. (we'll see what ends up sticking but I'll call it Game B here) is hard to pin down. Its nodes are Daniel Thorson's podcast "Emerge: Making Sense of What's Next," David Chapman's blog "Meaningness," Hanzi Freinacht's blog "Metamoderna" and his book *The Listening Society*, and Jonathan Rowson's and Tomas Bjorkman's research platform Perspectiva. Being "metamodern" (that is, alternately modern-ish and postmodern-ish), this sphere's most alert members employ a certain deferment in their styles even as they ooze earnestness, so it's hard to trace a single social-organizational trajectory from any of it. We can, however, point to a few proposals that most of them endorse: a robust role for meditation and Dharmic philosophy in daily life, ecological thinking, moving away from the nation-state system toward distributed governance, Holochain technologies, a universal basic income, and building institutions that nurture authentic relating and mitigate reification, misalignment, and alienation. The basic problem they see: a global "meta-crisis" (which stands behind countless mini-crises) wherein the structures of organization that people have used since the Agricultural Revolution[1] are no longer adequate to structure our globalized, digitized world. In our modern era of exponentially increasing human power (the "Anthropocene"), the negative externalities of our long-held organizational structures sum into a debilitating mass. So, coming right down to it, this is basically a next-gen New Left picking up where the hippies fizzled out in the last century. They understand the fault of the hippies' naïveté and so spurn drop-out, escapist woo-wooism, but they are no less fanatical. In fact, new urgency infuses the dialogue, particularly on the prospect of human-caused climate disaster.[2] Centrally, they reject Enlightenment liberalism, or

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[1] The notion of an agricultural "revolution," signifying a rapid, lasting shift in agricultural practices and a concomitant development of government in ancient Sumeria, has lately been cast into doubt. The process was probably slow and constantly backsliding. This, however, is the starting point evoked by Frenacht and it makes no difference for his purposes whether it's literal or symbolic.

[2] See Jem Bendell's influential works on "inevitable near-term social collapse due to climate change."

the foundational primacy of the discrete individual, because (1) people are crucially intertwined (2) foundationalism is rejected altogether except for use as a provisional tool. On economics, from what I can tell, Game B would include the abandonment of the global-capitalist world system, but these are certainly not socialists in any conventional understanding. They don't use any Marxian terminology. What their post-capitalist structure would look like is kept sketchy except that it would be highly organic and highly peer-to-peer. So Game B thinkers, as distinguished from the hippies, whose counterculturalism was transgressive but not transcendent, really do embody a "New Left" as envisaged by Herbert Marcuse. They are beyond class-thinking, beyond (im)materialism, and concerned with Eros proper, not merely Eros's signs.

With his essay "Love in a Time Between Worlds: On the Metamodern 'Return' to a Metaphysics of Eros" (2018), philosopher and educational theorist Zak Stein tries to give this sphere a metaphysics. He expounds on the work of Marc Gafni, a New Age guru and integral theorist,[3] and presents us with "cosmo-erotic humanism" as a metaphysical foundation for a new, metamodern world order. What cosmo-erotic humanism boils down to is that we have to start relating the self to everything else, the cosmos, in an *erotic* way—not necessarily sexual or romantic *per se* but a way that centralizes Eros, or "the force that drives reality itself towards greater contact and larger wholes" (201). Now, proposing any metaphysic at all certainly seems dubious if this thing really is "metamodern." Metamodernism integrates postmodernism, and one of postmodernism's defining features is that it assumes the impossibility of making metaphysical truth-claims. (It extrapolates this from the subjectivism of modernism.) Stein sees this. As such, he dedicates the first part of the essay to an explanation of just how, exactly, we can start doing metaphysics again after postmodernism. He writes, "Believe it or not, there are metaphysical systems that survived postmodernism and popped out of the far end of the 1990's with 'truth' and 'reality' still intact" (187). Among these, Stein counts object-oriented ontology and dialectical critical realism, both of which function by attempting to move beyond the strong subject/object dichotomy of (post)modernism. The subject/object dichotomy, problematized explicitly by Descartes and Kant during the Enlightenment but already central to the West's intellectual constitution since Hermes Trismegistus' esoteric writings, is of course what has to be addressed. It catalyzed modern science and serves as the foundation of the world system that

[3] Meaning he subscribes to Ken Wilber's integral theory. The essay, in fact, was published through Gafni's "Center for Integral Wisdom," which is all about integral theory.

we've built. (Post)modernism[4] understands the subject to be, at minimum, radically and qualitatively separated from objects, should objects even really exist outside of the mediation of subjects. In Kant's terminology, the subject is *transcendental*. It is *different* and *apart* from the world "out there." If we, as subjects, are different and apart from objects in the world, then we cannot hope to understand the world by doing metaphysics. And from this comes the stance of relativism, nihilism, and skepticism that defines postmodern culture. That stance is the hurdle for building metamodern metaphysics. For Stein, metaphysics after postmodernism must therefore "detranscendentalize the subject" (195) and bring it down to earth. The hard divide between us subjects and the world out there has to be discarded so that we may partake in the meaningfulness of a complete, integrated existence.

Now what would that look like exactly? In an email, Stein told me that cosmo-erotic humanism could be viewed as a kind of "'religious transhumanist' position, like Aurobindo or Teilhard." Now, this is telling. Let's look first at Teilhard—Pierre Teilhard de Chardin—a 20th-century Jesuit priest whose work the Church had roundly denounced until Pope Francis's subversive 2015 encyclical, *Laudato si'* (Praise Be to You), which cites it positively. In that encyclical, Pope Francis seems absolutely Game B, writing that humanity's many crises, social and environmental, all stem from one general crisis, which is our relationship to the world. The solution, writes Francis, is to admit that humans do not "hold dominion" over the earth but exist in a "kind of universal family" with nature. This, of course, is a (sneakily) radical break from Catholic doctrine. The cosmology laid out by Teilhard de Chardin informs Francis's controversial take in both its panentheism and its progressivism. An evolutionary scientist by training, Teilhard held that the universe constantly evolves toward its completion from matter to consciousness and from consciousness toward the "Omega point," when each "participated being [will be] totally united with God through Christ in the *Pleroma*, when God will be 'all in all' (1 Cor. 15:28)." [5] Creation, according to this cosmology, was not really completed on the seventh day but must wait until "Christogenesis" is finished here on earth, a time when all of our consciousnesses will have merged together mystically (Teilhard calls this "unanimization") into the fullness (*pleroma*) of the Godhead. Just about every aspect of this is anti-Catholic. It makes sense, then, that prior

[4] I will use this formulation when referring to modernism and postmodernism as one genus, insofar as they don't differ from one another. I do not mean to imply there aren't any meaningful differences between the two on a species level.

[5] Lyons, J. A. (1982). *The Cosmic Christ in Origen and Teilhard de Chardin*

to Pope Francis it was pretty much only the New Age movement that held up Teilhard's writings. New Agers find kinship in Teilhard's attempt to de-otherize, de-negativize, and bring home the divine. Now moving to Aurobindo, who discusses many of the same ideas that Teilhard does except in a Hindu context. (Syncretists often pair these two writers together.) Sri Aurobindo was a 20th-century yogi and philosopher whose philosophy sought to integrate ancient teaching and modern evolutionary thought. Aurobindo's essential thesis is, like Teilhard's, that existence is trying to evolve out from matter, through consciousness, and toward its self-manifestation in a union with the divine. For Aurobindo, the material world wants to unite with Brahman via the "Supermind," an intermediary between the two. "By the supermind," he writes, "is meant the full Truth-Consciousness of the Divine Nature in which there can be no place for the principle of division and ignorance; it is always a full light and knowledge superior to all mental substance or mental movement."[6] Like Teilhard's Omega point, this would be a world-mystical state. Both cosmologies certainly do try to "detranscendentalize" the subject, placing the human subject squarely along an axis stretching from matter to divinity, not separated off by itself. These are *positive* cosmologies. Insofar as there is a role for *negation* or *emptiness* in each, it is only that we ought to negate our lesser beings (incomplete as they are; not yet in-themselves) by emptying out all of those under-integrated aspects of ourselves: an instrumental sort of self-negation. Not at all like the more profound emptying of, for example, Meister Eckhart, the 13th-century Christian mystic for whom union with the Godhead is not merely emptying-out-worldly in order to fill-up-Godly but rather is negation through and through. Implores the Meister, "Love [God] as [you are]; a not-God, a not-spirit, a not-person, a not-image; as a pure, clear One, which [you are], sundered from all secondness; and in this One let us sink eternally, *from nothing to nothing*."[7] [Emphasis added.] And it is also a far cry from śūnyatā (emptiness) as that concept is treated in the wisest works of the Dharmic tradition, e.g., the Heart Sūtra, which has it that "form is no other than emptiness, emptiness no other than form," or the works of Dōgen, the 13th-century Zen Buddhist mystic: namely, emptiness as opposed not merely to māyā, or illusion, but emptiness as opposed *also to itself* (a paradox).

That these "religious transhumanist," mystical cosmologies insufficiently take negativity into account, imagining the negative only contra God instead of contra the Godhead, casts doubt as to the completeness of cosmo-erotic humanism, which is apparently in that same class (so says

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[6] *The Integral Yoga* (65)

[7] End of the sermon "Renovamini spiritu" (Eph. 4:23)

the email). Let us look, then, to the more secular metaphysics that Stein mentions, i.e, those that have allegedly "survived postmodernism" like object-oriented ontology. OOO, as it is catchily known, was developed by Graham Harman and Levi Bryant beginning with Harman's 1999 dissertation on tool-being. It tries to "detranscendenralize" the subject by considering it as an object among other objects, or, more precisely, as a thing among other things.[8] The human subject is taken to be qualitatively distinct from other things (it seems pretty special)[9] but ontologically the same, or equal, with them. Harman takes inspiration from Heidegger's concept of readiness-to-hand, the way in which objects sometimes "withdraw" from conscious perception when we use them. This happens when we are immersed in our activities. Since we know that things still exist when they are ready-at-hand and unreflected upon by any subject, we can reject the "correlationist" view of Kant which says we have access only to the *correlation* between our subjective thinking and objective being but neither subject nor object in themselves. There is a solid point somewhere in here. Where objects disappear ("withdraw") in ready-to-hand, subjects disappear in present-at-hand, the mode of subject/object that (post)modernism takes as its point of departure.[10] Each mode fills each other's holes, so to speak, so that what's paradoxical in one gets unraveled in the other. But even if we break from (post)modernism and start taking the ready-to-hand mode seriously, this does not necessarily imply that it should get elevated over the present-at-hand mode when we do metaphysics. In doing metaphysics, trying to say something about *noumena* (what's out there), why should we expect that the logic of ready-to-hand would mean anything at all vis-à-vis the logic of present-at-hand? Granted, the two modes complete one another logically—but should we not take their mutual exclusivity *in consciousness, in time,* to mean that they are, like us and the Godhead, rooted in each other's nothings?[11] That the subject *qua* subject is *qualitatively* distinct is precisely its *ontological* difference: the fact that it is a real *negativity* for the object-world and

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[8] The term "object" of course presupposes that it exists contingent on a subject. OOO rejects this, so "thing" is a better, less loaded term.

[9] Granted, OOO does try to *orient* elsewhere from the subject, but it is not, on its face, just another subject-eliminative or subject-reductionist worldview.

[10] Here I am thinking of Sartre's notion of intentionality.

[11] A neuropsychological correlate might be telling. Humans are literally blind during saccade movements of the eye, which nonetheless allow us to see. Without saccade movements blinding us in the moment, we would be stuck with a reptilian kind of motion-only vision (mediated along the dorsal stream as opposed to ventral) and would never be able to build a theoretical picture of the static world, which, from the point of view of the dorsal stream, consists merely of stacked-up nothings. In detecting movement we blind ourselves to the still, and vice versa. Just as blindness inheres in seeing, nothingness inheres in existing.

not just a “withdrawal.” It is only in this conflation of negation with withdrawal that OOO can build its subject-obscuring system. Granted, OOO succeeds in recognizing objects *qua* objects, but it then oversteps by *orienting* toward them, away from the subject, without any real philosophical justification except to react against (post)modernism’s opposite and equally incomplete ontological orientation. Its “flattened ontology” is uncovering one eye to cover the other. What we’d really need to do for a complete vision would be to open both eyes by closing both eyes.

That is to say that a person cannot actually *be* in the state that we’re looking for... if what we’re looking for is indeed a *state of being*. In *living* it, one ceases to *be*. Therefore, our models are essentially paradoxical: Jesus Christ and the Buddha, whose resolutions are predicated on a central breaking of the Law of Identity, a self-negation. As for love, it’s telling that both of these figures were celibate. Strange indeed that Christianity’s and Buddhism’s respective exemplars for the perfect fulfilment of *humaness* refrained from marriage and sex, which are very human, yet wholly necessary to their workability as symbolic linchpins. Mere mortals can love only blindly, lodging ourselves in some particular, but love itself is the principle of departicularization and so is fundamentally inhuman, meaning we perfect our humanity in loving precisely to the degree that we negate our humanity. If Jesus is supposed to be a “both/and” symbol on which a systematic religion can be built, then his having a soulmate would simply seem too ordinary, too inscrutably scrutable, even though it actually would have further radicalized the mystery of the incarnation for that very reason. Although the historical Prince Siddhartha Gautama was probably never married, early Buddhists felt it necessary to construct a life story in which he abandoned his wife and son upon his Great Renunciation, so central is the point of cutting particular ties. Now, if love is inhuman, then there are a hundred ways of formulating cosmo-erotic humanism that are incoherent. When I read Stein’s essay for the first time, I thought that the last section, “Love in the Anthropocene: Life Without Externalities,” revealed that it was incoherent. Love needs externality so cosmo-eroticism taken as unconditioned world-communion is wrong. But Stein does not actually speak of *love* without externalities, as in subject/object dissolvement in “an indiscriminate love-fest” (216). Rather, he speaks of *life* without externalities (a life *in* love, not a life *of* love). This is an important distinction. Living in love, or living a life without externalities, also means *being* external. So cosmo-erotic humanism does not have to reject externality wholesale. Such a rejection would just be a rejection of postmodernism, essentially a souped-up regression to modernist mysticism (a.k.a. hippie thinking). As I choose to understand it, cosmo-erotic humanism actually tries to push externality

back toward Being, or the origin, in authentic recognition of the radical otherness of the external, because the alternative is to keep inviting the external further and further into living. The latter is the undesirable path of "hypermodernism"[12] and Nick Land's Accelerationism, which Stein points to as a "dark" form of metamodernism that resurrects metaphysics only to supplant the human with so-called machinic desire, or an artificial intelligent space assembling itself from our parts. The former path, the one in which we understand externality and otherness as simultaneously fundamental and not, is the one we want. It is a theological path. Metamodernist theorist Justo González notes as much, writing that "to the degree that postmodernity is the rediscovery of the radical, irreducible otherness of the other, it can be argued, as David Tracy does, that postmodernity may lead the path away from 'religion' as a general abstraction and back toward a theology that takes seriously the otherness of revelation and recovers the prophetic core of the Judeo-Christian tradition."[13] But you can't just *tell* your metaphysical system to take something seriously and it automatically obeys. It only works if what's axiomated is actually metaphysic-able. Metaphysics is a positive enterprise (so that its beginning and end are both right there in Parmenides where the positivity of all axiomatic thought resolves, or dissolves, in monism). In other words, metaphysics is the practice of setting something as a positivity and working from there, ultimately in negativity, whereas metamodern thinking as I understand it is supposed to entail setting something as a negativity and then floating blindly into positivity, your hands working in the dark, lost in the hands of the cosmos.

Now from here I think we can start tracing out what cosmo-erotic humanism *can* and has to be. At this point, let's turn to the real-world crisis that Game B theorists typically center their writings on, which is the ecological crisis. For Stein, what the ecological crisis comes down to is our failure to love the natural world. Instead of loving it, we externalize and toolify it. We have alienated ourselves from the natural world and so we abuse it, maintaining systems that harm the ecosphere. Now, this is true in some sense. The systems that structure our modern world certainly do operate in that way—parasitically, disconnectedly, without any real regard for the ecosphere as such. As Land argues, techno-capitalism as it exists today is a runaway system whose M.O. is machinic desire and whose pressing concerns are not even *human*, much less

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[12] Albert Borgman discusses the bifurcation of postmodernism into either hypermodernism or metamodernism in his 1992 essay "The Postmodern Economy," one of the earliest works naming and endorsing metamodernism.

[13] "Metamodern Aliens in Postmodern Jerusalem" (1996)

natural. But Stein's characterization of us humans vis-à-vis systems seems not exactly right. For the *people* who live under the yoke of (post)modern systems (i.e., almost everyone) and whose cooperation is necessary for the survival of those systems, the embodied feeling is not alienation and disconnection. People as individuals don't litter and contribute to pollution because they feel disconnected from the ecological webs in which they reside. They do so because they feel themselves hopelessly entangled in *all* webs together, including the ecological. It is really a *deficient* internal locus of control or sense of holding dominion over the ecosphere and feeling special and empowered in relation to it (not an *excess* thereof as Pope Francis implies) that makes us abuse Mother Earth. Industrialization has reified us, corporatisation and economic globalization have shrunk us, and digitization and techno-consumerism have seized us in a "hyperreal" "precession of simulacra,"[14] virtualizing us. We feel little, powerless, and lost in post-truth meaninglessness, like flies buzzing back and forth along a window dully uncomprehending as to why we can't move forward. We no longer feel the revolutionary conviction, the one that started the Enlightenment, that we can stand apart from and overtop the systems we reside in, watching and working them. (OOO theorist Timothy Morton would call our modern systems "hyperobjects," huge and impersonal, particularly conspicuous during times of ecological crisis when they turn around and ensnare us.) In other words, it is not that the "transcendental" consciousness has gotten too overbearing in its catalyzing of science and technology, poisoning Mother Earth as it strengthens in influence, but rather that this very consciousness has gotten so *weakened* by its very own products, the runaway systems of our modern world, that we can barely access it anymore and use it to fix the mess. Ironically, modernism's transcendent consciousness created structures that ended up dragging us right back into a learned helplessness or immanence-thinking, what we imagine as the defining trait of *premodernism*.

One should note, too, that it's not even in the postindustrial and postmodern world ("the West") where we find the battleground of the ecological crisis. It's in postcolonial and still industrializing places. The United States and European Union have (nominally) curbed their carbon emissions while India and China are projected to be this century's primary polluters. Africa will probably join the club too as that continent industrializes. Rich countries in the West export their waste, often hazardous, to developing countries, which are forced by economic circumstances to

[14] Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation* (1981)

receive and deal with it. These countries often have insufficient waste management infrastructure which means the trash gets burned or dumped in the ocean, although the rich countries of origin still happily count that waste as technically “recycled.” And, of course, it’s the poorer countries at lower latitudes that are heating to temperatures hostile to farming and living while rich, temperate-latitude countries deal with effects that are less direct. Where I live in West Timor, Indonesia, littering is simply the usual mode by which one disposes of trash, naturally and qualmlessly. The reason Indonesians here mistreat the environment does not seem to be because they’re operating anthropocentrically with the “undifferentiated and one-dimensional paradigm” that Pope Francis speaks of, i.e., the technocratic-modernist one that “exalts the concept of a subject who, using logical and rational procedures, progressively approaches and gains control over an external object.”[15] Littering happens here for precisely the opposite reason: the natural environment is taken as just an extension of the techno-consumerist plane in which the potentially influential subject is totally shrunken and defeated, powerless to do anything but pitch the empty water bottle wherever. In postcolonial and still industrializing contexts like this one, a long legacy of exploitation and forced resource extraction mixes with still-present global systems of marginalization and ultimately pressures people to think this way as a go-to. More or less the same outward projection of techno-consumerism happens, in different ways, everywhere, and this indeed is what “subjectivism” is: not *sharpening* and *centering* the distinction between subject and object to a point of callous dominion-holding but rather *muddling* that distinction so thoroughly that the notion of an ecosphere is naught but another artifact. That the *transcendence* of the subject is a necessary part of the solution after all is demonstrated in the mundane fact that even the most seamless of green architecture requires a standing apart, a world-virtualization by blueprint, in its design and construction, so that the feeling of ecological enmeshment that we get when living and working inside green buildings always comes with irony. The ironic truth: the development of a truly ecological consciousness has to include a *clarified sense of our separation* from ecosystems. Accordingly, in order to address the climate crisis with any effectiveness, we will need focused technological thinking and green innovation, not a detranscendalizing of the very consciousness that allows for it. Although carbon reuptake systems and other such provisional technologies have next to nothing to do with an embodied sense of ecological enmeshment, they are probably the only kinds of things that can slow or stop global warming. And in the short term, the best frames to

[15] *Laudato Si’*, Section 106

activate people to address the crisis have little to do with building new “structures of feeling” around world-enmeshment and the sanctity of nature. The frames that work are practical, involving no paradigm shifts at all: avoiding crop failure, avoiding mass refugee crises caused by famines and droughts, avoiding the loss of our coastal cities and resorts, avoiding epidemics of new diseases released by melted permafrost and/or exacerbated by warmer temperatures, avoiding a bump in Russia’s power caused by the opening of the Arctic Ocean and agricultural zones sliding northward, etc.

So we need to examine and clarify our sense of separation from the webs that we’re involved with. All well and good. But we can’t be satisfied with just un-muddling subject and object and unleashing human agency upon the earth and cosmos as was modernism’s original aspiration. The paradigm that the Pope describes, subject-exalting and world-dominating, would be just as bad as this muddle that we find ourselves in. What we need, what would be the actualized loving or “erotic” stance, is a way to recognize and harmonize three things: subjects, objects, and the emergent subject/object relation. We must therefore reject three foundationalisms: that of the subject (the one that Pope Francis condemns), that of the object (anything that looks like Nick Land), and that of the subject/object as a unit only and not also as an oscillation of inter-rooted nothings (I have referred to this one as “fushionism” before and it’s rampant, basically any attempt at constant flow-state, mindless dynamism). I believe Stein basically gets this. He discusses with approval how pragmatist philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce considered Kant’s transcendentalist account of consciousness, or consciousness as the “world constituting power,” to be “only one third of the story” (197). That means, paradoxically, that the subject’s status as transcendental and fundamental is both completely true and only partial. Partial because it’s also the reverse: the world also constructs and constitutes consciousness. Moreover, the subject/object relation loops back around to construct and constitute both of its constituent parts. Like the Holy Trinity, each part is wholly reducible to the other two while also being wholly other than the other two, demonstrating how self-negation is right there at the very core of the cosmos just like love is. I am confused, then, as to why Stein referred me to those 20th-century religious transhumanisms and why he mentions OOO, the former of which are trivial in their treatment of negativity, leading to straight-up magical thinking,[16] and the latter of which makes ontological statements that are as arbitrary as those of (post)modernism and equally as

[16] In other words, they are cases of fushionism.

problematic. These are failed metaphysics because they want to mug themselves, centering the concept of negativity (however they may name it) even though the truth, as Jacques Derrida observed, is that metaphysics is axiomating positivities to fill the negative hole that is the center.[17] Since two negatives cancel out, these metaphysical systems produce a positivity of the most useless kind, just a wiggle-waggling of the hands, a total dud. Which is to say: I am confused as to why Stein wants to try to give us a metamodern metaphysics at all instead of just a metamodern way of being. All the more confusing because the integral theory that he endorses is pointedly *not* a metaphysics. Integral stops short of centering, privileging, axiomating, etc. It's just a typology of different reality types, all of which are irreducible to one another and irreducible to any one fundamental, cognizable substance or axiom. So why is Stein claiming to break from the postmodern insight that metaphysics is really and truly bunk, an insight that for all intents and purposes he seems to actually accept? I guess he's confused too. Or he's trying to inch his readers and email communicants toward understanding using incremental steps that are each one dimension short of the real thing, like Wittgenstein's ladder or a Zen kōan. Regardless, the point is obviously not to detranscenetalize the subject if that means robbing it of its one-third due. The point is to live in such a way that all the parts can shine and synergize. Since the parts all deal in the same stuff (one another), we will need overlays.

Now here I look to an early metamodern essay, "The Postmodern Economy" (1992) by philosopher of technology Albert Borgman, which talks about overlays. Writing about nature versus the "artificial" (one might say technical or virtualizing) schemes and models that we use to work our world, Borgman recommends that we strike a subtle balance. I dare say this stance is subtler than the one that Stein evokes. Borgman speaks about moments when we pause and recognize the real objective wonder of the natural world minus *techne*, the aspect of human consciousness that toolifies and dominates:

> To a metamodern sensibility [these moments] are focal points of engagement and orientation, nothing more or less: nothing more, for to strip away entirely the artificial overlay would be irresponsible were it even possible; nothing less, if we allow the revelations of reality to center and grace our lives. In the latter case, our task is to keep artificiality from thickening to the point where it overlies and suffocates all that is real. We must reduce the artificial surface to a marginal and subservient position. It will still be a

[17] Jacques Derrida, "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences" (1966)

> broad and powerful margin where we spend much of our everyday life. But the final function of the artificial must be to set off the real in its simple and unforethinkable splendor.[18]

Here oscillation seems properly understood. Inside the mind, integration never happens. There's only mutual but residual enrichment of the other by the other. As Borgman writes: "not only do focal concerns attain their proper splendor in the context of technology; the context of technology too is restored to the dignity of its original promise through the focal concerns at its center" (247-248). This stance of *focal realism* vigorously and pointedly distinguishes the subject, object, and subject/object. Only on this condition of really affirming and recognizing those distinctions can we achieve something like a *complete stance*. This is the stance (note: it is not a "view" as it involves an affirmation of blindness) in which Eros is allowed, out in a realm beyond our vision and control—dancing there with our negations and channeling into our realm through our living—to do its thing, to drive reality toward greater contact and larger wholes. Simultaneously this is a stance of provisional surrender and enormous power.[19] It is also what blogger David Chapman calls the "fluid mode," a kind of living that takes inspiration from the way in which the Dzogchen tradition of Vajrayāna Buddhism understands emptiness and form.[20] [21] Unlike Mahāyāna generally or Advaita Vedānta Hinduism, Dzogchen doesn't cordon off emptiness and form into different realms, e.g., "apparent" versus "ultimate," but rather places both of them here in our realm together and celebrates the meaning that spontaneously arises from their interplay. Chapman's fluid mode embraces that spirit of free play, enabled by a non-metaphysical stance that resists the temptation to cancel out negativity by placing it off in a negative space. In fluid mode, we would keep systematizing like good modernists except we'd do it with a constant, felt understanding of systems' nebulosity. That is, a relativized and non-metaphysical use of systems, or to bring it back to Peirce: a *pragmatic* use of systems. Not coincidentally, this stance maps onto how mature people think about love and romantic relationships. Stein seems to get this quite clearly and the best part of the essay is his discussion of the historical progression toward a paradigm of mature, "whole mate" relationships

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[18] Page 54

[19] Johnathan Rowson put it this way in a tweet.

[20] Chapman, "Emptiness, form, and Dzogchen ethics" (2015). *Vividness* blog: https://vividness.live/2015/11/27/emptiness-form-and-dzogchen-ethics/

[21] For my money, Chapman is one of the two most incisive and useful metamodern theorists writing today, along with Daniel Schmachtenberger. I highly recommend reading his blogs: *Meaningness*, where he endorses the fluid mode in a parlance familiar to Western readers of any kind of theory, and *Vividness*, where he does the same in the parlance of Buddhism.

out from the paradigms of “role mates” and “soul mates.” *Role mates* is the traditional, patriarchal, homophobic, and role-determined kind of partnership; *soul mates* is the modern paradigm where couples are supposed to fall hopelessly, obsessively, and exclusively in love, with the lavish honeymoon as the centerpiece; and *whole mates* is the hoped-for alternative where soulmate love or the fantasy thereof is used as a template for how we should relate to everything. (That Stein manages to rhyme these terms is splendid.) Now, if we are to move into whole mate territory while maintaining what came before, including the soulmate idea (integralists like to use the phrase “transcend and include”), then again that means a kind of oscillation between different modes. We might call these modes I-It versus I-Thou (Martin Buber) or we might call them “the who” versus “the what” as Derrida says here: “The difference between the who and the what at the heart of love, separates the heart. It is often said that love is the movement of the heart . . . So fidelity is threatened by the difference between the who and the what.”[22] Then love is the movement, the oscillation, between the heart’s parts. It’s an emergent property of our living unreservedly in two ways and learning to switch back and forth in tune. When Tinder-swiping to and fro, we cannot reasonably be expected to wholly love every profile. Swiping on Tinder is sticking one’s head squarely into the overlay, Borgmann’s “device paradigm” in which the real is forestalled, deferred, swiped quickly to the side, possibly to be enriched later by that very forestalling in the serendipity of a true connection appearing from the vacuity of a rightward flick. When you break up with me because the bond between us is toxic, it is a Herculean feat precisely because of the stoic self-virtualization you need in order to view our lives objectively. Yet that, too, is love even though it’s love crossing out love. Holding your hand and trying to feel you feeling me is love even if the you that I feel is a trace, a not-quite, a construction of my own gaps and nostalgia, etc. In truth, love lies in the not-there as well as the there. So by an enlightened ungrasping, which is an untangling of the self but never a dissolvement of it (i.e., never a stance of throwing oneself into something), or by affirming the binary while simultaneously negating it, we might sometimes catch wind of love and sense with certainty that it really is holding us up.

[22] “Derrida,” documentary directed by Kirby Dick and Amy Ziering Kofman (2002)