Research-in-action community

Withdrawal to the 'always already there'

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I began to notice in my work some time ago that I had got into the habit of letting go of my moorings, of being at home being adrift, trusting that other faculties of sense-making would come to the fore (Daly, 2021).

Preamble to the Triptych

Central Panel: Social inquiry as dislocation by Luigi Russi

This panel proposes the term 'withdrawal' as a useful description of the passage when repetitive ways of accounting for experience (which I will denominate 'atmosphere') slip away, perhaps unpredictably. At that moment, new capacities for observation (that will be called here 'minoritarian apparatuses') become available, through which a researcher-practitioner is able to ask new questions of his or her familiar surroundings. This terminology, originally drawn from the work of a legal geographer, Andreas Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos (2015), is contrasted with a phenomenologically inspired description of the same moment: when new 'organs of perception' are called forth to observe the 'spontaneous responsiveness' of bodies to one another, in order to account for and access new action potentials ('organisational moments').

Side Panel: Meeting the 'reflexive demand' by Patricia Shaw

In this side panel, I offer several brief accounts of how the passage of 'withdrawal' is negotiated in different scenes in the life of a community of practice-based researchers that work with their first-person experience in the midst of social and ecological community projects, to explore some of the 'research questions' that those projects raise for them. These scenes take place in individual, small, or larger group, supervision with those practitioners. I experiment with addressing readers directly, inviting them to 'visit' with me these scenes, as I point out certain features within them. My goal in doing so is to offer a flavour of the experiences and the questions that arise in approaching research as repeated experiences of 'withdrawal'. I invite a way of seeing the 'reflexive demand' of practice-based research in a certain way: understood as the practice of shifting attention within our immersion—as co-participants—in our existing circumstances, expressly to meet these circumstances for 'another first time'. This, and the companion side-panel by Daly (2021), intentionally

stay with forms of narration that draw on the already referenced discussion by Russi (2021), rather than introducing new references.

Side Panel: A narrative on wandering without the map by Martin Daly

In this piece, I offer an account that is intentionally written as a narrative to draw you, the reader, in. I give an account of supervising someone who approaches their experience very differently to me, and I describe what this demands of me as I change tack in my approach. In offering this account, I want you, the reader, to think more about your experience of what is involved in getting your bearings in unfamiliar territory without a map. This, I suggest, entails a level of withdrawal from one's own taken for granted premises, a divesting of one's ready-at-hand reference points for understanding and, instead, being able to endure wandering around in the other's land and developing an acute sense of the cues he or she gives you that may render it less strange, though still not one's own. One has to cultivate capacities in oneself, and between oneself and the other, that enable both parties to develop new understandings. Much has been written about defamiliarising oneself as a supervisor/researcher, but what I offer is an experiential account of the withdrawal that becomes necessary for me, the supervisor, as I accompany the supervisee. In turn, if he is to research into his practice, he must also make this move of withdrawal and I describe what this involves for both of us.

Note to the Reader

What should you expect from a 'triptych'? We have chosen this term to describe a piece that consists of a central panel framed by two side panels. Each side panel intensifies an aspect—from the Latin *a-spicere* (to behold)—of the 'moment' that the central panel begins to sketch. The moment we are talking about is that of 'withdrawal'. We are proposing that 'withdrawal' can be a useful word to describe the passage through which one's circumstances become 'strange again'. For any practitioner, negotiating this passage comes with the promise of accessing renewed curiosity towards what earlier seemed entirely predictable in his or her circumstances, and invites the exploration of new ways of moving in those.¹

This triptych also grows out of our practice of individual and group supervision. This means that we have written it in the attempt to articulate and observe the very passage we tentatively describe here as 'withdrawal'. This is a passage through which we find ourselves accompanying the practitioners we supervise. Our work is located within an experimental community of practice-based inquiry called the [Research-in-](#)

[Action Community](#). This is a community that's premised on the idea that the beginnings of social scientific inquiry are to be found in the researcher's everyday professional circumstances (Russi, 2021). The community's membership consists of practitioners involved in different collaborative projects with an ecological and community focus (where 'projects' describes a broad range of activities by members of the community, for example: small-scale prototyping of sustainable approaches to social and community housing, exploring what it means to be 'attentively present' to the conversations that take place in various educational settings, setting up local experiments to meet the gap between a community and its landscape, or between established and migrant populations in a rural area). Our work specifically involves cultivating their capacity to observe their practice in a discerning way. That is: as a place where they have experiences *they are able to account for*, in such a way that others—to whom these accounts are presented—might be able to appreciate them, as experiences *with a recognizable character*. The value of this work comes, we believe, from the fact that accounted-for experience simultaneously provides a resource, which others may use to 'observe' their own experience—that is: to become more aware of its contingency and of its latent potential for inviting different choices. In this triptych, we offer different takes on that passage, when observation of one's experience first becomes possible. We choose to call it 'withdrawal', a felicitous term that has hitherto been common parlance primarily in legal geography.

How might you read this triptych? We recommend you approach it as an occasion to experience 'withdrawal' itself. Look less for the continuity between one piece and the other. Read and re-read contemplatively, and notice the questions. Pay particular attention to any moments in which the text seems to relate to a memory from your own practice. There! That's when you are beginning to 'withdraw' into a new way of observing your experience. We recommend you begin from the central panel, and then let yourself wander into either or both of the side panels. We have included links to help you navigate your own way through the triptych, so that you may easily move where your attention is drawn. We also advise you to experiment with re-reading an earlier panel after having visited the others. This is what makes it possible for the three pieces to 'illuminate' each other. Hopefully, this might give you a flavour for the vistas that can be gained by 'withdrawing' from one to the next, as you are asked to cross the gap from one panel to another.

Social inquiry as dislocation by Luigi Russi

Figure 1: *Macellum* (Roman market) also known as Temple of Serapis, Pozzuoli (Italy). Photo: Enzo Abramo. Reproduced in conformity with CC0 licence.

Introduction

Pozzuoli is silently undergoing an earthquake. All the time. A town neighbouring Naples—not far from the Vesuvius volcano that stopped Pompeii in a frozen moment—Pozzuoli displays a geological phenomenon known as *bradyseism* (Cannatelli et al.,

2020), from the Greek, meaning 'slow movement'. Local acquaintances have described it to me as the continual, barely perceptible rising and falling of the city on a swelling chamber of magma. It's as though Pozzuoli rested on the moving diaphragm of the Earth's belly—a movement that can be registered by tracking the cyclical immersion/emersion from water of the base of the columns of its old Roman market (Figure 1). There is something profoundly evocative about a city that has sprung up in such an unusual position. The empty houses of the '*Rione Terra*' quarter, hastily evacuated in 1970 after an earthquake swarm, bear testimony to the precariousness and volatility involved in making one's home on shifting grounds.

I suggest that Pozzuoli's bradyseism can be a fitting metaphor for the kind of unstable terrain practitioners need to enter to find the beginnings of their inquiries, as *researcher-practitioners*. As with Pozzuoli, the possibility of practice-based social inquiry also springs up where ground seems to give away: in those passages of dislocation, which first unlock for the researcher the possibility consciously to observe and question experience that was hitherto rationally invisible to them. Entering such a place, a bit like entering Pozzuoli, means accepting the possibility of being unsettled by sudden tremors. If that rings intuitively true, how might we begin to describe those moments of 'dislocation' that 'prepare the ground for' the researcher's questioning, while at the same time 'unsettling' the supposed predictability of the forms of organisation the researcher has been inhabiting as practitioner all along?

This triptych explores what the term 'withdrawal' is able to illuminate, in this difficult terrain. This is a term that has been systematically developed by a legal geographer, Andreas Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos. We believe it hits very close to home, when one tries to describe that 'moment' in which a researcher finds him-/herself able to ask questions of the circumstances he or she is already immersed in as a practitioner. I believe it is this passage that turns a practitioner into a *researcher-practitioner*.

Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos' talk of 'withdrawal' activates a set of additional terms to play around with—like 'atmosphere' and 'minoritarian apparatus'—in order to inhabit and account for this experience of dislocation more incisively. For this reason, 'withdrawal' is not being proposed here as a 'method' one ought to follow. Instead, it is offered like a rough direction on a sidewalk, spoken to a fellow passer-by. It helps so long as it 'does work' for you, in terms of helping you see where you might already be, and suggest possible choices for how to proceed next.

1. Withdrawal and prototyping 'minoritarian apparatuses'

'I don't like the atmosphere here'. This commonplace use of the word 'atmosphere' conveys a speaker's inclination to 'withdraw' from a milieu that feels ... confining? stifling? suffocating? These word associations I find helpful for introducing Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos' theoretical vocabulary (2015). He has coined a useful terminology, through his creative use of the expressions 'atmosphere', 'withdrawal' and 'spatial justice'. In this section, I attempt to make his terminology my own by seeing what I can try to say with it. I am foregrounding the unique moment of 'withdrawal', which would otherwise go unnoticed, as precisely the passage when something interesting or unusual is first noticed, in such a way as to catch the researcher's attention.²

Withdrawal is always withdrawal *from* an atmosphere. Still, I do not wish to approach withdrawal as a purely negative passage—as 'not' an atmosphere. Rather, let me add further experiential flavours to make this movement of 'withdrawal' more recognisable. Withdrawal begins in the sense of things not being 'quite right'. Dissociation. A certain resistance to 'playing along'. Not knowing exactly whether what one feels *called* to do is 'fitting', or 'prudent', or 'proper'. This sense of dissociation stems from the presence of a conflicting feeling: of an internal assent—and a matching desire—to indeed 'play along'. To not cause a stir. To stay safe and sound. This centripetal 'pull' one might feel in oneself: that's the *hug* of the atmosphere. If withdrawal is a jarring, dissonant *call*; atmosphere is the *hug* one wants never to leave (Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos, 2018).

Withdrawal is therefore simultaneously heeding a call and unclasping a pull, both active in oneself at the same time. In common parlance, one often speaks of leaving one's 'comfort zone'. However, Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos stresses how what one withdraws from isn't a purely individual enclosure, but a collectively sustained orbit. The pull is the pull of atmosphere, of an 'inside' that exerts gravitational force on all the bodies in its interior.

Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos draws this notion of 'atmosphere', I believe, from his original deconstruction of Niklas Luhmann's systems theory (Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos, 2009). For Luhmann, systems come into being when a form of organisation develops two capacities: the capacity for 'operational closure', and that for 'selective openness' (Moeller, 2006). In my understanding, 'operational closure' involves the development of a stable communicative code to enable the routine operation of the system. For example, in Luhmann's definition of the legal system, the

code legal/illegal is what enables coordination in relation to normative evaluations of behaviour (Moeller, 2006, p. 25). Another example would be the economic system, where, for Luhmann, the logic of payment/non-payment guides the making of decisions concerning production and trade (Willke, 2007, p. 47). 'Selective openness' has to do, instead, with some filtration of the outside—which is apprehended by a system only in terms of the parameters required by the system's operations. For the legal system, this would mean that those realms of organization that exceed an evaluation in terms of legality or illegality are not approached with curiosity, but as an undifferentiated 'beyond' of the legal order. Equally, in the economic system, everything that cannot be mobilised to trigger payments in the economy is a non-commodified 'outside', to which the economic system is at best indifferent.

In either case, the 'beyond' only exists as a negative 'of' the system. It is an 'outside' that has been 'reinserted' inside, but in a way that strips it of interest beyond its potential impact on the system's continued operation: 'the outside is marked as a negative space' (Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos, 2016, p. 159). I find great similarity between Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos' use of the term 'atmosphere', and an autopoietic system that apprehends the outside world only as a deviation from the 'sameness' of the system. The 'outside' is always *terra incognita*.

However strong the pull towards standardisation might be within a system, 'glitches' nevertheless happen:

Just as every body is summoned in the service of atmosphere, every body's failure is a potential atmospheric failure too: people get bored, things break, the weather changes, technology lets us down, governments fall, accidents happen and disasters hit (Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos, 2016, p. 162)

What happens then? That's when withdrawal simply occurs. Withdrawal means moving for the 'outside'—hitherto viewed solely as a negative of all one ever knew—by leaving (or being removed from) the comforts of the atmosphere. From the perspective of social inquiry, this dislocation to what might initially seem a 'non-space' means that 'something' is eventually found, where there appeared to be nothing of interest and relevance—*before* leaving the atmosphere. However, *after* leaving the atmosphere, other bodies (human and other-than-human)—that had 'always already' been dwelling in the 'outside'—meet us nevertheless, and we enter the delicate work of getting to know one another 'for another first time' (Russi and Rothfjell, 2020). An example helps. In his contribution to an edited collection on research methods edited by Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos and Brooks (2017), artist Mirko Nikolic offers a

particularly lucid illustration of what work is needed to undertake research, by seizing opportunities for withdrawal. Nikolic (2017) describes being struck by the invisibility of plants from the legal mechanism of carbon trading. He clarifies how the 'right' to pollute presupposes the work of carbon capture performed by plants. Yet, this work does not 'exist' within the 'atmosphere' of carbon trading. So, Nikolic recounts his experiment with building what he calls a 'minoritarian apparatus'. By this, he gestures to the work of *assembling* some 'machine' or prototype that makes it possible to observe the work performed by plants. His 'minoritarian apparatus' consists of an artistic performance, as part of which he carried enough plant-bodies to account for one tradable 'carbon credit', and of moving them on a trolley in the city of London from one financial house to the other—amongst those involved in carbon trading. This performance exemplifies what it means to 'withdraw' from carbon trading, by developing some capacity to observe the work of bodies that would otherwise disappear in the background of this trading system.

'Spatial justice' is another unusual term used by Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos. I rephrase it for myself as 'moving in a way that acknowledges and responds to the bodies, alongside which we always-already find ourselves'. Moving in this way, of course, presupposes a prior ability to observe what is 'always already there'. This is what I believe Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos (2016) means when he calls for a return to 'ontology'. There is more 'there' than our atmospheric systematisations might tell us. Withdrawal entails putting those systematisations aside, in favour of undertaking the work of corresponding, on a case-by-case and singular way, with the bodies we are always already brushing against.

If my understanding is correct, the return to 'ontology' advocated by Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos cannot then be divorced from the craft of prototyping suitable 'minoritarian apparatuses'³ to observe and respond to the bodies (human, plant, animal, geological formations, pollution flows) that are always already there, even as we were still under the spell of atmospheric illusions. I will suggest in the next section that this work of crafting 'minoritarian apparatuses' might be translated as growing suitable 'organs of perception'. This is a term Goethe used (Bortoft, 1996), which for him came close to the heart of a phenomenological style of inquiry.

Like every translation, this one is imperfect, and takes some risks. Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos explicitly distances his work from phenomenology. Yet, I concur with Radu (2019) that there is a phenomenological aspect to it. Rather than embark on the impossible attempt to define what 'phenomenology' is, in philosophical terms, in the

next section I simply try to describe some of the coordinates that inform the style of inquiry colleagues and I have been trying to develop in an experimental community of researcher-practitioners at the Schumacher Society. This work exemplifies one possible form 'phenomenological' inquiry might take, in a way that perhaps reduces the distance—in practice—from what Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos (2016) calls a return to 'ontology'.

2. Growing 'organs of perception' to notice the 'always already there'

Before the pandemic started, I attended a mandolin concert, featuring pieces authored by 'modern' composers. We were a group of three (in order of seating): a pianist/philosopher in training, myself, and a friend finishing his Ph.D. in law. Twenty minutes into the performance, I wasn't quite sure how to listen to what didn't sound at all like the Vivaldi-like mandolin concerts I had in mind. In contrast, the pianist/philosopher was agitating in his seat. The law Ph.D. had fallen asleep. The music was the 'same', but our responses to it betrayed different abilities to 'hear' it. During the intermission, the pianist/philosopher couldn't stop talking about the irregular, deconstructive 'style' he could hear in the composition. I was mostly confused from having been met by a difference too far from my musical coordinates. The law Ph.D. was apologetic about having fallen asleep. This vignette exemplifies the close connection between 'what is in the process of appearing' (that's how, following Bortoft (1996), I understand the etymology of the word *phenomenon*) and the 'capacity to observe', by which one is able to discern different textures in the phenomenon—instead of a dull sameness before which one can do little else but fall asleep. Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos' critique of phenomenology, and his choice of the word 'ontology' as a descriptor for his approach, seems to arise from his assumption that the researcher's 'capacity to observe' in relation to 'what is in the process of appearing' always remains constant. At the risk of simplifying, it's as though he argued that the law Ph.D. could never come to hear music in the way the pianist/philosopher does.

If my understanding is correct, this description of phenomenology would take away the greatest fun of undertaking phenomenological inquiry: that of being *transformed* by that which meets us, growing 'organs of perception' one did not previously have, in such a way that hitherto invisible aspects of the world might come to light. The researcher does not remain unchanged. Instead, the work lies precisely in cultivating a capacity to observe a phenomenon in which we are always already entangled (Shotter, 2005b).

At the same time, this capacity to observe always grows *through* the meeting with an 'other or otherness' (Shotter, 2005b, p. 104).⁴ One isn't entirely 'in control' when it comes to learning to listen for the hitherto inaudible.⁵ Shotter had a term to describe this condition of ever-present entanglement, of proximity and exposure to calls coming from one's surroundings. Namely, he spoke of 'spontaneous responsiveness' (Shotter, 2004) to describe what goes on all the time between bodies—their incessant correspondence with one another (Ingold, 2017).⁶ He was quick to clarify, however, that bodies' responses to one another are first registered silently, pre-linguistically, without automatically finding articulation in language. We 'feel' more than we are able to put into words.⁷

As our capacity to observe grows, so does our ability to articulate for others the different textures we are able to 'hear' ourselves responding to. One way Shotter presented this process is by referring to Giambattista Vico's distinction between 'sensory topics' and 'imaginative universals' (Shotter, 1991, 2017). Vico gave an example of how 'Jove', the God of thunder, provided a form—the 'imaginative universal'—to account for the pre-linguistic experience of what 'thunder' had felt like:

[A] sensuous totality linking thunder with the shared fears at the limit of one's being, and with recognition of the existence of similar feelings in others because of shared bodily activities (Shotter, 1991, pp. 386-7).

Thunder, as a jointly experienced phenomenon that is 'felt' before it is articulated in language, exemplifies Vico's notion of a 'sensory topic'. 'Jove' is the account—the 'imaginative universal'—whereby a 'sensory topic' can come to the notice of others as well, so that they too may become conscious of undergoing the experience.

Shotter also argued that bodies respond to one another all the time, yet without being able consciously to account for it. In a way, we don't really choose what our body responds to. It just does, and all we feel is perhaps a mute quickening. On this basis, Shotter went on to ask himself what ways of speaking might be needed to track this 'unbroken flow of responsivity' (p. 385). He was adamant to point out that certain abstracting forms of talk can make the actually present features of the world, to which our bodies are already responding, 'rationally invisible' to us (Shotter, 2015). This, for example, made him sceptical—in a way not dissimilar to Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos'—of 'systems talk' (Shotter, 2014a), where the irregular background of 'spontaneous responsiveness' between bodies tends to be categorised by force into a set of self-same, operational 'patterns'.

Furthermore, if bodies are always already compromised with one another in singular configurations, then what one needs are ways of observing the ephemeral arising of 'organisational moments' (Shotter, 2011). These would be moments where a temporary island of coordination occurs between bodies. Despite our being caught up in 'systematising' ways of speaking, 'organisational moments' just happen. Oftentimes, they catch us by surprise. Namely, when the dissociation between what our bodies are already orienting to and what we are able to account for reaches breaking point. These intense passages of 'felt disquiet', like the breaking of Viconian 'thunder' or Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos' 'withdrawal', afford unexpected occasions for noticing in a new light what is actually happening to us.

This work of coming to observe and account for the experiences to which our bodies have been spontaneously responding to, Shotter called a 'poetics of relational forms' (Shotter, 1991). 'Poetics' describes the process through which a sensing, so ephemeral we were able to ignore it for so long, can finally be brought to notice, as if for another first time. Furthermore, after we have met it once, it opens up a 'place' we might revisit, affording a point of reference for developing further our awareness of different textures—our capacity to observe. 'Poetically' is how we grow a repertoire for describing more acutely the 'others and othernesses' that meet us. This, I argue, is what it means to grow an 'organ of perception'. It is a work the participant/researcher 'joins in', without however being able to carry it out apart from correspondence with the alterity of an unfolding phenomenon that catches him or her interest. It is not one-way. An 'organ of perception' is conjured by 'poetic' moments when the hitherto inarticulate comes to visibility. This is not dissimilar to what happens, when a 'minoritarian apparatus' intensifies the capacity of observation that is first accessed through an act of withdrawal.

Conclusion: noticing what's 'always already' moving

So, we come back to Pozzuoli, the city built on shifting grounds. Social inquiry involves taking up residence in a Pozzuoli-like situation. That is, in a space that can only be dwelt in, by putting up with constant dislocation—and the more or less intense 'jolts' that accompany it. This is the space where the researcher-practitioners I help supervise often find their calling. It is the shifting ground where they are asked to do more than just belong, as participants, to everyday scenes from their projects (whether prototyping innovative forms of social and community housing or taking a lead in ecologically-minded educational experiments). Here, 'withdrawal' from everyday-ness becomes a ground they need to negotiate, for the sake of inquiring into the very experiences that struck, jolted, or puzzled them. Their willingness to stay available to

this precarity of position rejuvenates their capacity to observe their everyday, through a focus provided by 'research questions' that make everyday circumstances interesting again—beyond the immediate circle of direct participants. Thinking about this work of re-entering the everyday with a new curiosity, Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos stresses the passage of 'withdrawal' into an outside beyond out atmospheric conditioning, while Shotter seems to say we're always already being called upon by 'others and othernesses' in our proximity.

For either of the two thinkers, then, social inquiry begins by following through what is initially noticed through a risky first 'move'. Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos might move outside atmospheric delusions, whereas Shotter moves deeper inside the unspoken commerce of bodies responding to other bodies. Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos might then become curious about the 'presences' that are encountered on the (ontological) continuum, and invite work into the prototyping of 'apparatuses' to make it possible to observe them (and re-learn to move responsively with their moving). Shotter's approach would invite a 'poetic' work of growing suitable 'organs of perception' on the back of our encounters with an unthematisable 'other or otherness'. This work isn't entirely centred in the researcher, since an organ of perception can only grow against the friction of an uncomfortable proximity, one that invites sharpening one's capacity to observe (Shotter, 2005b, p. 112). As a pre-condition, Shotter also cautions to 'bracket' (cue phenomenology) those ways of speaking that fool us into thinking of a world of already formed parts, rather than to enter an unstable world where we continually re-learn to become 'participant parts' (Shotter, 2003, p. 12) in a moving confluence of organized activity.

This piece continues an exploration that started, for me, in 2016, and which began with the sense that Philipopoulos-Mihalopoulos' theory of 'spatial justice' and Shotter's philosophy of 'relationally responsive' communication were natural conversation partners (Russi, 2016). Today, this sense is reinforced by a deeper conviction that what is central to the 'posthuman' project (this is the intellectual current where I situate Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos' work) is, in fact, less an aversion towards 'humanity', and more a deconstruction of hierarchies (e.g. human/animal; human/natural; mind/matter) that serve to justify various control strategies (Balibar, 1990). I concur with Hartfield (2013) that this is what 'posthumanism' really tries to puncture, foregrounding in its stead the vulnerability of the embodied subject, positioned on a continuum with human and other-than-human bodies (Gear, 2017). This project finds a natural ally in Renaissance humanism, of the sort pursued by Vico and picked up in Shotter's work. Renaissance humanism was 'uninterested in the

construction of systems based on the definition of essences' (Hartfield, p. 279), and was rather a pedagogical pursuit striving to cultivate '*ingenium*'. That is, an ethically-sensitive 'responsiveness to the particular demands of the here and now ... incompatible with the hierarchical tendencies and anthropocentrism that have emerged as a consequence in the rise of Platonic metaphysics' (Hartfield, 2013, pp. 286–287)—and not too far from the aspirations of contemporary participatory art (Zacarés, 2017).

On this basis, the piece you have just read was my attempt to probe this confluence further, by trying to engage the terminology used by Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos and Shotter, respectively, as 'prompts' to help researchers observe and consciously enter those ephemeral moments of rupture in which something unexpected might first be picked up for further exploration. For Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos, inquiry sets off from a withdrawal that opens a richer appreciation of the bodies with whom/which we 'take place' together. For Shotter, one 'never walks alone', as the body 'always already' orients to the 'others and othernesses' that meet it in its surroundings. In a way, inquiry into organised activity needs ways to reckon with the awareness that we can never fully account for what it is we are 'always already' responding to. Our islands of organised activity invariably stand, like Pozzuoli, within a fluid milieu that prepares a ground for them—at the same time as it dislocates them.

As you, the reader, might now feel drawn to peruse the accompanying panels by Shaw (2021) and Daly (2021) I believe expressions such as 'atmosphere', 'withdrawal', and 'minoritarian apparatuses'; or 'organs of perception', 'spontaneous responsiveness', and 'organisational moments' might nourish your capacity to observe the scenes my colleagues offer. Such terms might now make you alert to the ever-present possibility of dislocation, and the promise that something of interest might first be observed through that dislocation, carving an opening for a creative response.

Meeting the 'reflexive demand' by Patricia Shaw

Introduction

In this side panel, I invite you to peer with me through windows, onto the ways of working of a community of practice-based social researchers who attempt to construct their home on tremulous, always moving ground: they are each immersed in complex projects—such as creating opportunities for migrant livelihoods among existing communities in a depopulated region of Spain, or developing the possibility of building affordable homes by cultivating local capacities, using local materials, and negotiating new forms of land ownership in South West England. As practitioners, they face puzzling, even bewildering terrain in which they must constantly re-orient themselves; as researchers they work in conditions that cannot be held steady, where explanatory theories wobble precariously, and claims to knowledge production can seem flimsy.

This may sound all very worrying, but not if you share our interest in working with forms of social inquiry that are at home in the flux of the 'always already there', the always already happening. For practitioners it is often not generalised knowledge claims that have primacy, but the soundness and credibility of 'next moves' they must argue, or account, for in a field of activity in which they are immersed. From this vantage point, research becomes the ongoing *experience of participating*, in an inquiring manner, in the quotidian complexities and perplexities of whatever endeavour for social innovation the researcher may be involved in. But ... you can sense the difficulty right away. Mundane experience can seem to be an impenetrable thicket. *This* happens, and then *that* happens ... exhausting, humdrum, and endless.

Who cares? How to care? What to care about? Mostly we are encouraged to escape the perpetual messiness to somewhere contemplative, in order to think about it all and achieve some useful order, often of a formalised, representative, explanatory kind. Armed with such maps we think we can return to impose some order on the fray. What would it be, instead, to work out how to stay where we are, and inquire within our circumstances—with all the experiential disorderliness and frayed edges this entails? This is how I translate for myself Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos' (2016) focus on 'withdrawal' (as opposed to an escape to the contemplative) as an aid to thinking about practitioner research. Practitioners must remain engaged in the daily unfolding of events, while meeting the reflexive demand, again and again, to observe how they are orienting themselves there.

Losing our bearings, as an entry to inquiry

M, a researcher-practitioner, has been working for some time in the professional discipline of 'ecological design'. He has been designing the form of exhibitions that will

provide visitors with an educational experience, often highlighting environmental or social concerns, as they explore the exhibits. He left this work troubled by the mismatch he saw between these educational aspirations and the practices that underpinned the design of those exhibitions.

A scene: here is M offering a first draft of what might elsewhere be called a 'research proposal'. *Draft?* It looks so pleasingly laid out, nice illustrations, well argued, clear direction—the allure of the glossy finish. Frankly, I itch to scratch at that polished surface ... complain about the sprinkling of quotable quotes, the blah blah blah of the critique of Descartes, the 20 years of practice written off in a few paragraphs, and this tiresome octopus diagram with a circle in the middle with its wavy lines connecting phrases such as 'A dynamic way of seeing' and 'Problems, paradigms, worldviews and cosmovisions'(What?!).

So when I first meet M in supervision, I risk this kind of sharp teasing in the hope it might tickle more than hurt, that a probing finger might touch a live wire rather than press a bruise. I wondered if I could reach through the earnest sincere man before me to provoke a less well-moulded personage.

He wrote to me afterwards:

Since we met and spoke frankly about my draft I have been attempting to get off the well-trodden paths I find myself habitually taking and go find that 'rough ground' we spoke of. I have caught glimpses of this territory and it resembles something akin to an overgrown scrub of land, with no clear path through it, littered with old concepts that once had meaning for me. Your quip about quotable quotes made me laugh to myself and cringe a bit. After 20 years of designing, I find myself asking what is it and who am I? Truthfully I feel like giving up 'design' altogether. That includes giving up this polished way I present myself and my ideas. And that prospect both excites me and scares me. Where do I go from here? Honestly I don't know. I can't go back the way I came, that I am sure of. But I sense finding my way, as I go, won't be neat, in fact it will more likely be messy and difficult.

It is at such moments that I feel the full force of the risk we take with each other in a research community that continually re-orient attention to the 'always already there', away from polished certainties concocted in seclusion from the grain of actually occurring activity. I had invited M *off-piste* and he veered off his current track with unmistakable relief and trepidation. Is this irresponsible? Nudging people off course of

what looks like sensible work. Not encouraging people to complete the book for which they already have the chapter plan, or picking up on the direction they began on a master's course. Instead, we invite the risky experience of losing our existing bearings, and take that as our style of inquiry. Are we then lost? What guidance can we find out here?

Taking 'felt disquiets' seriously

What do we do when we do not know which way to turn? Where to look? What to prioritise? I am remembering what it is like, that experience—when taking a long walk—when the possibility of being lost is just hovering, still repudiated, but gathering as an uneasiness. Do you know that poem of David Wagoner (1999)? Let me find it.

*Stand still. The trees ahead and bushes beside you
Are not lost. Wherever you are is called Here,
And you must treat it as a powerful stranger,
Must ask permission to know it and be known.*

John Shotter (2014b) would say: All our inquiries start with felt 'disquiets' (p. 118).

So this is where we ask our researchers to start. Give us the lived scenes of practice—we say—where vague doubts and uneasy feelings stir, faint alarm bells ring, stabilities seem to slide, disturbing or enticing perceptions flash, things do not seem quite right. Resist the temptation to push the slight queasiness to one side and keep going; instead turn towards the disturbance and invite others to do the same. Invite faint signals to become arresting moments: 'Look at this!' 'Did you notice that?' 'What just happened?' 'There is something odd here.' 'Wait a moment ... do you sense something too?'

We suggest treating this dislocation of the ordinary as if an intriguing stranger knocked at the farther outskirts of what you know, inviting a closer encounter with whatever is still indistinct. One of our researchers, J, puts it like this: 'How are we to become more active participants in scenes *whilst a possible 'some-thing' is still scarcely a sense?*'

This kind of detailed *noticing* in the midst of everyday encountering is not a conceptual process: it is a mute quickening of perception that registers viscerally and imaginatively. Our approach to social inquiry is to learn to attend to these clues and cues in our own and others' bodies, catching them, registering them, in ever finer nets of gestural and verbal communication before they flow by and are gone. This research skill takes much practice.

This is not enough in itself, we must also compose precise expressive accounts of these noticings that can serve as evocative reminders able to re-activate those perceptual shifts, in ourselves and amongst fellow practitioners in their own specific circumstances. E, another researcher, puts it like this: 'I am exploring ways to write so that my writing evokes in the reader a memory of something that feels like the thing I'm writing about ... and then ... they're taken by it.'

And that's not enough either. We must weave the noticings, the shifts, into credible—yet striking—reflexively critical accounts that 'ring true', and so *become relevant cultural resources capable of reshaping social practices*. Such accounts must move others, not sentimentally, not nostalgically, not even by persuasive advocacy; rather, they must literally re-orient, change the prospect ahead, and disclose openings for novel actions, which previously seemed hardly plausible.

Shotter (1993) describes this kind of inquiring work as the art of changing practices 'from within' the joint action that constitutes the practice. A form of endeavour he calls a 'social poetics' because it relies less on developing shared mental representations or maps that can be used to aid collaboration, and more on the creation of imaginative receptive/expressive resources that call forth mutual responsiveness (Shotter, 1996).

Back to those disquiets and how they may or may not become fertile.

Another scene: here is A, working in ecological approaches to forestry. He reads to his small peer group a short piece about a recurring moment in his experience as a practitioner—one that bothers him:

The moment that I make a decision, which leads to a physical intervention into the woodland ecology. The moment where a tool goes from resting in my hand, to cutting natural fibres. The moment where I deem that a tree should no longer grow, and the associated species should lose that habitat, or conversely, that a tree should live, and flourish. What guides the decision in that moment? What makes that decision ok?

There is a disquiet here, but it is arriving as a general conceptual conundrum and A is overwhelmed trying to think 'about' and research into this:

Why are we doing the things we're doing as foresters? And what reliable evidence is there in the world to suggest we are right to decide these things? It feels daunting. I find the complex and unending reasoning and causality of human action and interaction overwhelming, as is living within this miasma, which is

compounded by opinion, fake news, politicisation, reductionism, emotion, generational trauma, herd mentalities.

A is bothered but he is ploughing terrain he knows well and which offers no new directions for his work as a researcher. How can A 'withdraw' from the familiar maze of rationalities and counter-rationalities in which he turns, and instead observe what he has already seen as a poignant moment that arises in his practice? Rather than describing its general character, start describing *with patient precision what actually happens in a number of particular, unique scenes* that unfold around the action of 'making the cut'? Where would he start and where would he stop such description? Who are the co-participants in the scene? What is happening between him and them? What discernments and distinctions and judgments can he notice arising as the scene unfolds? Doing this kind of inquiring when disquiets appear is what develops in researcher-practitioners the organs of perception to encounter the phenomenon that interests them *as it appears*. This helps disclose previously overlooked or invisible aspects around which research can find new purchase.

Paying attention to the 'always already there'

Let's peer in at a few researchers further along in their inquiries: take for instance G who began his research with very generalised concerns about his advisory work with various companies attempting to move towards 'regenerative economics'. G knows a lot about all this, but is frustrated with the difficulty of changing systemic patterns of power relations involved. Reading a high level report from the OECD on including consideration of 'trust' as an element of 'social capital', G was struck by their suggestion to measure trust, defined as 'a person's belief that another person or institution will act consistently with their expectations of positive behaviour'. Is this, he wonders, an adequate understanding of how trust is gained and lost along the trails of the complex work he is engaged in?

A moment of withdrawal occurs for G as he says the following in group supervision: 'I suddenly realize I am spending my time thinking *about* the relational field I am navigating, rather than *living* intensely what I am interested in.' It as though new scenes swim into view for him where the phenomenon of trusting/not trusting is in play. He describes feelings of pity and fear, as he engages with those hustling for meagre livelihoods by washing the windscreens of idling cars at the traffic lights in a big city. Or his frustrations in his weekly dealings with the local man who tends his garden.

For G to drop the thoughts *about* the phenomenon of 'trust' that interested him—and instead start paying attention to what was actually occurring on many occasions—meant risking the sudden loss of the mental landmarks he was using. In the case of his gardener this meant *waking up to the features of the garden they were both standing in*, noticing the spontaneous arrival of a self-seeded plant that produces tiny cucumbers. Sharing this surprise—'look here, have you ever seen this before?'—was the first time G stepped out of repetitive employee-employer conversations with his gardener. Tentatively, they found themselves moving into exchanging stories of the experience of being stopped by the police when driving: the stories showing to both of them as they spoke and listened, the difference in their social positioning—, not as a 'theoretical' perspective, but as a mutually grasped understanding enabling participants to become aware of their position and thereby begin shifting. These experiences of withdrawal—and *the re-living, re-expressing and re-accounting of these experiences*—are beginning to change how G perceives the relational field he works within professionally, and the accounts he is beginning to offer as part of his research into 'regenerative economics' in land ownership.

One last scene: here is the whole community meeting together to develop their capacities as researchers. Here, a simple strategy makes the ordinary strange. People are sitting around, chatting easily, before a regular open dialogue session begins, where any material can be introduced for exploration to yield research themes. T opens the session by striking a hollow bowl, sounding it so that it rings clearly. The vibrations only slowly attenuate, leaving us all acutely aware of a lively pause, a not-yet, the impending possibility of action—as word and deed. The uncertainty of what may come next: who, how, with what, yawns between us. Not as a void, because it is precisely the experience of the 'always already there', always already happening from which any next gesture emerges. Not a stillness or a silence even, as there are rustlings and sounds all around, a scrabbling on the roof, a throat cleared, a sigh, a body shifting weight. A glance is exchanged and dropped, perceptions of tension rising and falling, a voice raised in speech, searching for a beginning, listening to the listening that is already influencing how that voice continues. 'I have been wondering about something that W said yesterday, that has been bothering me ...' or 'I want to see if I can tease out a connection between the ideas S introduced right at the start of this week, and something that cropped up as I walked with Y this morning and we passed an immaculately fenced empty lot'.

This is *one* of the forms of regular practice we undertake, just as a dancer must stretch and flex muscles, an artist look and sketch, a potter sit at the wheel. We immerse

ourselves again and again in a period of open-ended dialogue, returning to the core experience of orienting ourselves to be responsive within currents that are continually shaping this research community as a form of life. This is not a support group, a form of therapy, a problem-solving clinic, or an encounter group. This is a form of social reflexivity. Over time we hone the ability to pay and draw attention, to listen to and articulate multiple themes, new and recurrent, that emerge between us and are simultaneously in play, to narrate in ways that leave fresh tracks in an apparently well-trodden terrain. Thus we learn to listen, *really* listen for how we are patterning our participation ethically, politically, and culturally. The 'reflexive demand', and it is demanding, is to keep checking the lure of our own 'atmosphere'—the paradoxical pull towards the familiar that this generates for each of us. Our regular return to this 'practice' is key to researchers' ability to inquire from within the messy circumstances of their own projects as they unfold.

A narrative on wandering without the map by Martin Daly

Figure 3: W57. Photo: Angus McIntyre. Reproduced in conformity with the CC BY-NC licence.

Setting the context

I easily get lost in foreign cities. I can't read maps. Or I won't? I get up the first morning full of anticipation and head out of the hotel in search of the city ... and then I wander. I permit myself to be unfocussed, to 'just' head off and be prepared to get lost, to have no idea where I have ended up and to be stopped in my tracks for no apparent reason except that something catches my eye. What gets in the way of my feeling at home in this foreignness is if I begin with a plan for what I want to see, a clear set of directions for getting from place to place. Then I remain apart from it, unable to immerse myself in its otherness.

Some years ago, I was found by W.G. Sebald's writing.⁸ He spent his time wandering around Norfolk and other places until something would appear in his peripheral vision and he would stop, look, muse and then go on. His writing was apparently aimless and yet for me it shed light on my practice as a supervisor. His practice was not to make a virtue of aimless mooching about, but to release and depend upon his highly cultivated radar that enabled him to forage a path for himself while ostensibly going nowhere in particular. Then things appeared in his vision, presented themselves to him, gave him pause for thought—and feeling.

My way of supervising is to do with relying on faculties, what Russi (2021) earlier refers to as 'organs of perception', that I can't draw upon intentionally, but have to dispose myself to free them to do their work through me, and sometimes, despite me.

How am I to cultivate such faculties in myself and in others whom I supervise? How am I to develop the capacity to be a conduit for that within me, which enables me to see more of the other and less of the same? How am I to divest myself of my preconceived maps at hand, so that I can be led by the other to respond anew? How can the other person be led to hear a different sound to their own speaking, to be open to a different take on their own writing? My colleague, Patricia Shaw (2021), refers above to 'social poetics' (Shotter, 1996) as this cultivation of imaginative, receptive, expressive faculties in me and the other person that call forth mutual responsiveness. What I wish to do below is to describe what is *actually* involved in the cultivating of such responsiveness.

Supervising: Withdrawing to see more

I began to notice in my work some time ago that I had got into the habit of letting go of my moorings, of being at home being adrift, trusting that other faculties of sense-making would come to the fore. This is what I take 'dislocation' and 'withdrawal' to

mean: I get lost and released into myself, and then I begin to make sense differently, to hear and see things anew, to behold afresh. Being dislocated and finding my way, withdrawing and re-entering, are intimately connected in my experience.

When I meet people and their work, I have no wish to collect information about them in advance. I want to meet their foreignness. I use the only markers I have: my experience of myself-with-them, how it is similar and different, how I read them in response to how I feel read by what, in their telling, they disclose to me. Their 'text'—be it in words, gestures, or silence—gives me more than cues to ask questions. It addresses me, tells me something about me and about the other who is not me. Most powerfully, some note will hit my senses and, in my reaction, will reveal something about me—and them. The other enables me to find my way around his/her world, directs me to what is most important to see and hear. In the moment they show something of their practice to me, I can get it 'enough', so that through the response they evoke in me, they can better read between their own lines. Layers of meaning are more clearly disclosed to them. They show me clearly what appears occluded from their vision. *As long as I can stop looking for what is familiar to me and instead wait to get my bearings from them, we both begin to see differently and more.* I begin to see them, and recursively myself from their perspective, and they begin to see themselves from mine.

An account of supervision

P is in the early stages of a research endeavour. He works as a management consultant and facilitator. He has already written a book and hopes this research might issue in another. He tends to work with large groups and group processes, where he will often make a surprising intervention to shake up a discussion, or inject movement where he senses stuckness. When he speaks of his work, I am not able to discern if there is more to it than that and, if there is, what the 'more' is. This affects my capacity to relate to his research. I am trying to help him figure out what his inquiry is. I am trying to figure out *how* to figure that out with him. He thinks he knows what he wants to inquire into, but I am not sure when I begin to supervise him with a colleague (L), if there is any genuine question meriting research. His surefootedness feels foreign to me and his positive thinking permits no disquiet.

P feels foreign to me. I gear myself up to 'work' with him. I have to make the effort because I don't get him. He thinks in very different ways to me and expresses himself in forms that are alien to me.

How do I notice this? He uses various technologies with which I am unfamiliar. He draws cartoonish figures to show his thinking, which I don't understand. I want to ask him to explain to me what he means

He maintains that his practice to bring out the best in everyone and that people are basically good. To someone like me, who begins with the basic assumption that there is a shadow side to everyone and to every organisation, this seems highly dubious. P is other.

I begin to act like a stern parent/I revert to my previous professional incarnation as a headmaster. I tried to get to grips with his work, to put some order on his thinking, to get him to structure his writing, to explain himself more, to write about what the cartoons mean, to explore the shadow side of his practice.

All in vain! I was meeting him in the way I don't want to encounter a new and foreign city. It is as though I had a set of prescriptions or coordinates in my head that I believed would enable me to find my way around his foreign city. I don't have a feel for him, and I notice how little he responds to what I say or takes up my suggestions.

Then something began to change. What prompted the change? I realised that my map was redundant. I felt dislocated and lost. I gave up trying to get him. This felt different to giving up on him. I had to withdraw from my preferred and well-worn paths and be prepared to go astray. I had to wander.

Getting my bearings from the supervisee

Snippets began to strike me. Paragraphs alighted on me.

This man extolled positive thinking and quoted liberally from books that championed such thinking. All of a sudden, I began to hear another note:

Now I am fed up. Every time I work with a group now, it feels like lifting people over a hedge. Whether they like it or not. And in the night these same people appear in my bedroom. Being there, without voices, just looking at me. I would cry ... I cannot do anything for you now: leave me alone.

In these lines, P seems dried up, at a low ebb and requesting something to irrigate his practice. The tone is so different to his usual accounts of what he does. I hear a different voice: actually, I hear P, for the first time.

Two research meetings lasting a week happen each year for the whole group of researchers and for someone as apparently extrovert as P, this should enthuse and enliven him. Instead, I notice that he is very quiet for much of the week. He speaks of being unable to get his bearings all week, of feeling out of his depth, wondering what he is doing amongst us and what he has to contribute.

I find myself listening to a different tone—well, actually, listening with a different ear so that I hear *more*. The tone is of disappointment. P begins to write about disappointment. And this apparent negativity doesn't negate his experience. It lifts his writing out of a mire of accounts of meetings and seminars filled with buzz words and positive outcomes that are of no interest to me—or I suspect to him. Why? There is no inquiry, no seeking in such accounts. P's disappointment grounds him, makes it possible for him to park his positive premises. It enables him to try out slippery wet ground—an experience that dislocates him. He spends most of the week withdrawn into himself. What happens in his writing is that he begins to give cues, landmarks, points of interest to something more, layered, other.

He writes an account of a difficult meeting with a partner at which he is trying to negotiate a price for work he has done while risking a rupture. I could lose myself in the details of the toing and froing, but instead drift off wandering around in my head until his disappointment with his partner registers with me and a question discloses itself to me: 'what is a fair price for staying in a relationship when you are disappointed?'. I voice it to him and he recognises it as his, though it does not appear in his text. *It has to be read back to him by another.*

He sends a further account of a business conference that has mixed outcomes. Again I lose interest—or rather I stop trying to figure it out. I read the first paragraph aloud again and again to myself. Something has caught me: his description of his driving to the conference:

At daylight we saw a parking lot across the river. There was no bridge just a general sign saying: slippery when wet.

I was arrested by it. P was showing me the lack of contours of the landscape of his practice as he was experiencing it. I was reminded of Sebald wandering in his books and alighting on such a sign. Like a beachcomber, I picked it up and got a feel for it. A landmark that didn't give a clear direction, but disclosed something about the person who put up the sign. P's foreign city gives me cues to lead me on, into his mind and practice, gives me my bearings. Or at least bearings that I can say that remind me

analogously of something in my own world, a tone that is a trail that I can follow without knowing exactly where I am going or where it will lead me. All I sense is that it is of interest. He suggests analogies to my imagination. What I offer in response is something along these lines: 'Let me tell you what I have read into or out of your text about me-in-relation-to-you, how you have enabled me to find my way around your world. What do you make of what I have made of your writing?'

Recently, encouraged by L to try free writing in a more random manner, P wrote a piece that at one point he called 'low tide':

The leaders in the media are totally focussing on the disease and velocity of its spreading, the possible cures and the immediate relief for those whose livelihood are at risk. They are fighting the corona virus. The crisis caused by corona. *Once corona is over, the crisis is over. My friend K is not afraid of dying. To him the corona times are a window. A window allowing us to look deeply at what we do.* The habit disrupting disease uncovers habits we have built up over time. *Corona is low tide. Corona uncovers ...* we have all become researchers in action.

My colleague L had begun the session speaking to P about doing a resume of his work to present to the research community. I found myself disconnecting from the conversation and pulled into this paragraph. I muted my computer and began to read it aloud to myself particularly the lines I have italicised. And then I interrupted and began to read lines out to P. Fragments, taken out of context, that addressed me. P, I sense, has begun to do something different. *As the tide went out on his practice, a landscape of inquiry began to appear.* Writing while the tide is going out discloses what is below the surface, and has hitherto remained obscured from view. For me, reading the lines aloud made them more apparent to me—and to him.

Disappointment, disillusionment, dislocation: all appear when the tide has gone out. P is not the same when the tide comes back in. He is beginning to know now what is underneath and uncovered, what is disquieting and, thus, of interest to inquire into.

When I read these lines aloud, it felt like I was pointing out what was uncovering for me in the text, what I was seeing or rather what P was giving me eyes to see. The effect of L's invitation to P to write more freely was to dislocate and unsettle him. What I do is I try to trust that if I remove my spectacles, my trained gaze, I will see what P wants me to, but what is at the moment—even when he has written it—not in his view. As I lose interest in what is on the surface, what presents itself to view, I am available to have my interest piqued, caught. I have to manage my anxiety that in wandering

around, I may just go in circles, find nothing and feel a sense of having no bearings. This wandering is my lowering of my tide, so that what is beneath can appear. When listening to L and P speaking, I had to discern when to come in and what to read out. Again that involves waiting until some gap suggests an entry point, some crack appears where I can come forth. It isn't a feeling of 'I must say this'. It is more a sense that I feel that what has struck me, has alighted on me, become visible to me—maybe to do with P, his research and his practice.

P has begun to see there is *more* to his practice than initially meets the eye. He writes about what he is noticing about himself as a researcher and about what he values about this research community. It is still infused with his energy, his desire to bring out the beautiful and the best in people. The encouraging of this is dear to his practice. Then he strikes a different note:

I have learned to appreciate the need to observe. To observe more carefully what is happening inside of me. To observe more carefully what is happening outside of me. Instead of immediately starting to create, I have learned to replay the tape and listen to it again. To slow down. To allow for different voices in me to express themselves. Sad voices, serene voices, serious voices.

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Footnotes

1. What we are attempting to describe is the moment when one's experience becomes visible as 'an experience' of *this* or *that* kind, i.e. when a person first finds a place from which to ask questions about the nature of the experience they are having. This sort of passage is often implicit in discussions of Vygotsky's concept of *perezhivanie*, in the context of cultural-historical activity theory (Blunden, 2016; Gonzalez Rey, 2016). We are proposing the term 'withdrawal' as a description of the moment in which a person first finds the ability to observe him-/herself 'having an experience'. A more in-depth exploration of this connection, in relation to the different nuances of the term *perezhivanie*, is beyond the scope of this piece, and will form the topic of a follow-up article. [↵](#)
2. 'Withdrawal' is, at the same time, one in a broader constellation of heuristic 'moves' that place the beginning of inquiry right at the moment of the researcher's heightened vulnerability and exposure, *beyond* his pre-conceptions and sense of the normal (Gear, 2017). Indeed, Hartfield (2013) argues that vulnerable positionings are a central marker of scholarship that might call itself 'posthuman' (where, as I will argue in the conclusion, what's left behind is less 'humanity' and more *a priori*, metaphysical 'hierarchies' of being). In order to situate 'withdrawal' in this broader 'posthuman' constellation, I only have space here to name other terms that seem to gesture to such 'delicate' passages in which something unusual first becomes observable: in the negotiations involved in 'translation' in actor-network theory (Latour, 2005), in the contrasts emerging through 'diffraction' in Karen Barad's agential realism (Barad, 2007), in the vibrant potential of 'lines of flight' in Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) post-structuralist philosophy. This is by no means an exhaustive list, it's simply the suggestion of an open-ended family, in which I notice fertile edges for mutual exploration, rather than fully worked out commonalities! [↵](#)
3. The term 'apparatus' comes from the work of Karen Barad (2003, 2007). By 'apparatus', Barad (2003) means 'specific agential practices/intra-

actions/performances through which specific exclusionary boundaries are enacted' (p. 816) so that a phenomenon can be distinguished. [↵](#)

4. Shotter (2004) chose to speak of 'others and othernesses', as opposed to 'other persons' and 'objects or things', in order to avoid thematising 'others' in relation to the observer's point of view, and acknowledge instead an enduring incommensurability that accompanies any spontaneously responsive involvement with them. [↵](#)

5. The fact that the researcher is dependent on his/her orientation towards an 'other or otherness' in order to develop his/her capacity to observe bears echoes of Levinas' primacy of the ethical orientation towards the Other. For Levinas, at the core of subjectivity is 'responsibility for the Other' (which I understand as the ever-present orientation, in oneself, towards a 'real presence' that calls for one's attention). A researcher grows his/her capacity to observe not in isolation from a vulnerable proximity, but *because* of the ineradicable 'foreignness' (Pinchevski, 2005, p. 148) of an 'other' presence that can never be fully assimilated. [↵](#)

6. Analogous attention towards this fundamental predicament of entanglement transpires in the work of Merleau-Ponty, to whom Shotter acknowledges a debt (Shotter, 2003). For an accessible discussion of Merleau-Ponty's notion of 'flesh', presented via a contrast with the Buddhist notion of 'emptiness', see Mazis (2009). I am indebted to Tim Crabtree for alerting me to this work that makes Merleau-Ponty accessible through an unconventional re-reading in Buddhist terms. [↵](#)

7. The presence of an excess that cannot be 'fit' into language resonates with Lyotard's (1988) notion of the '*differend*', which evokes the friction arising when experience that asks to be put into words cannot find articulation. [↵](#)

8. W.G. Sebald was a writer of what he termed 'documentary fiction' or prose fiction. His books experiment with a form of writing that appears to be somewhere between fact and fiction and are disorienting to read. One has to be prepared to lose one's bearings in reading Sebald, in order to find one's ways into his writing. I refer the reader to *The Rings of Saturn* (Sebald, 1998) and *Austerlitz* (Sebald, 2001) as an introduction to his work. [↵](#)