

Making a Mess with Method^{*}

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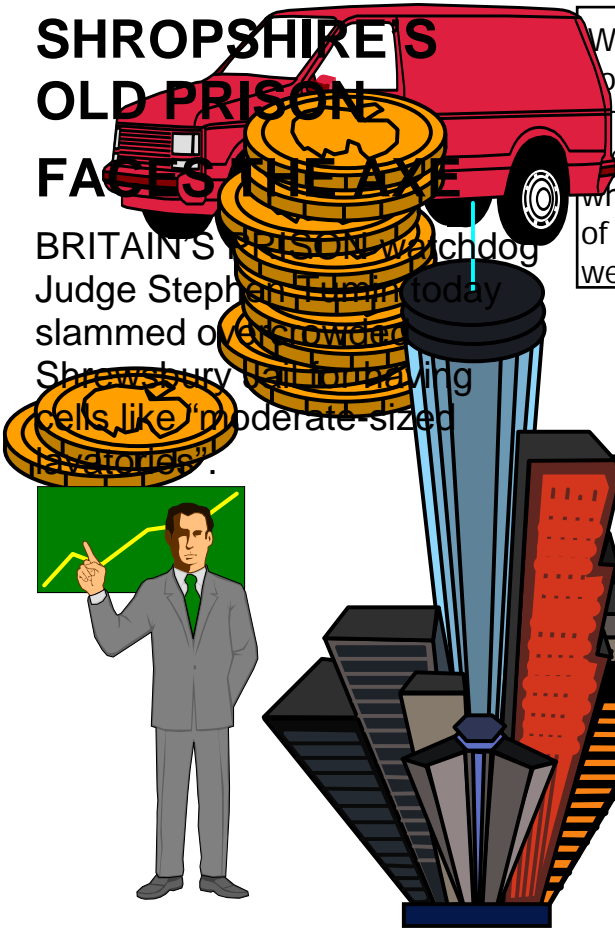
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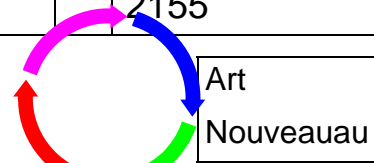
SHROPSHIRE'S OLD PRISON FACES THE FUTURE

BRITAIN'S PRISON watchdog
Judge Stephen Funk today
slammed overcrowded
Shrewsbury jail for having
cells like 'moderate-sized
lavatories'.



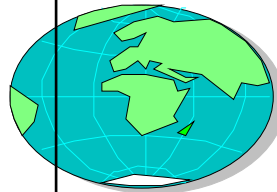
When does one have the thought: the possible movements of a machine are already there in some mysterious way? — Well, when one is doing philosophy. And what leads us into thinking that? The kind of way in which we talk about machines. we

Birmingham	Amsterdam
0715	0920
0910	1140
1000	1205
1100	1310
1405	1610
1510	1735
1635	1840
1950	2155



*Time present and time past
Are both perhaps present in time future,
And time future contained in time past.
If all time is eternally present
All time is unredeemable.
What might have been is an abstraction
Remaining a perpetual possibility
Only in a world of speculation.
What might have been and what has been
Point to one end, which is always present.*

Let them
eat cake.



Type Your Caption



If this is an awful mess...
then would something less messy make a
mess of describing it?

Introduction

The presenting symptom is easily shown. Look at the picture and then reflect on the caption: 'If this is an awful mess ... then would something less messy make a mess of describing it?' This is a leading question. I'm looking for your agreement. Simplicity, I'm asking you to say, won't help us to understand mess.

So my topic is mess, messy worlds. I'm interested in the politics of mess. I'm interested in the process of knowing mess. I'm interested, in particular, in methodologies for knowing mess. My intuition, to say it quickly, is that the world is largely messy. It is also that contemporary social science methods are hopelessly bad at knowing that mess. Indeed it is that dominant approaches to method work with some success to repress the very possibility of mess. They cannot know mess, except in their aporias, as they try to make the world clean and neat. So it is my concern to broaden method. To imagine it more imaginatively. To imagine what method – and its politics – might be if it were not caught in an obsession with clarity, with specificity, and with the definite.

The argument is open-ended. I don't know where it will lead. I don't know what kind of social science it implies, or what social science inquiry might look like, methodologically or indeed institutionally. Here then, too, I find that I am at odds with method as this is usually understood. This, it seems to me, is mostly about guarantees. Sometimes I think of it as a form of hygiene. Do your methods properly. Eat your epistemological greens. Wash your hands after mixing with the real world. Then you will lead the good research life. Your data will be clean. Your findings warrantable. The product you will produce will be pure. It will come with the guaranteed of a long shelf-life.

So there are lots of books about intellectual hygiene, about methodological cleanliness. There are books that offer access to the methodological uplands of social science research. No doubt there is much that is good in these texts. No doubt it is useful, indeed, to know about statistical significance, or how to avoid interviewer bias. Tips for research are always handy. But to the extent they assume hygienic form they don't really work, at least for me. In practice research needs to be messy and heterogeneous. It needs to be messy and heterogeneous, because that is the way it, research, actually is. And also, and more importantly, it needs to be messy because that is the way the largest part of the world is – messy, unknowable in a regular and routinised way. Unknowable, therefore, in ways that are definite or coherent. That is the point of the figure. Clarity doesn't help. Disciplined lack of clarity, this may be what we need.

This is a big argument, and I can't make it properly in a short chapter¹. Actually, since I live in a world without warranties, I can't make it all full-stop. What I can do, however, is pick at a few strands of the argument to try to give a sense of its flavour. So this is what I'll do:

¹ The argument is developed more extensively in Law (2004).

- I'll start with a real research example of mess. I want to persuade you that this is a real problem, at least for me and some of my colleagues.
- Then I'll go philosophical on you, and talk a little about the common-sense realism of research and what I think this implies. What I'll try to do is to show that realism, at least in its conventional versions, has a highly prescriptive version of the nature of the real which rules that reality cannot be a mess. I beg to differ.
- Then I'll then make a post-structuralist detour. I'll say that method may be understood as the simultaneous enactment of presence and absence. In post-structuralism (but also in common sense) presence by itself is impossible: presence necessitates absence. In research practice this suggests that some things (for instance research findings and texts) are present but at the same time other things are being rendered absent. But what? The answer is: two kinds of things. One: whatever we are studying and describing, our object of research. And two, other absences that are hidden, indeed repressed. Othered.
- What does this imply for the common-sense realism of social science method? The answer, I'll suggest, is that method Others the possibility of mess. In which case the nice clear research findings which fill the journals rise from an Othered bed of confusion, paradox and imprecision. Perhaps this is fine: perhaps we want to Other mess. But perhaps it isn't, and this is my view. My interest, then is in rehabilitating parts of the mess, of finding ways of living with and knowing confusion, and of imagining methods that live, as Helen Verran puts it in a very different context, with disconcertment².
- I'll conclude by hinting at what this might mean for research by returning to my original empirical example.

Empirical Mess

A few years ago Vicky Singleton and I were asked to investigate the way in which a local hospital trust handled patients suffering from alcoholic liver disease³. They thought that they weren't doing this very well, and as a part of this they were also worried about the drain on resources. In a phenomenon that they called 'the revolving door', the professionals described the way in which patients would be admitted, dried out, treated, and released back into the community, only to turn up again in Accident and Emergency (A&E), very seriously ill a few weeks or months later.

We said we'd look into the organization of treatment within and beyond the hospital. Blithely, we told the consultant commissioning the research that we would map out the 'typical trajectories' of the patients as they moved through the health care system. How did they move in and out of the hospital? How did they move across the organizational divides between (for instance) the acute hospital trust, the community trust, general practice, and social

² See Verran (2001).

³ Our findings are more fully explored in Law and Singleton (2003; 2005).

services? When we said this we should have known that something was wrong: the ghost of a smile passed fleetingly across the consultant's face and he gently intimated that he wasn't sure that there was such a thing as a 'typical trajectory'. But we agreed to go ahead with the study on this basis anyway, and set off to interview some of the professionals: consultants; ward sisters; general practitioners; nurses; and social workers.

The interviews were mostly fine, but in due course two problems began to take shape. First, it indeed proved difficult, indeed arguably more or less impossible, to map the trajectories of 'typical patients'. Often our interviewees were willing to play the game. They'd say that there was probably no such thing as a 'typical trajectory', but if there were it would, perhaps, look like this or that. But the real difficulty came when we came to try to map the different trajectories onto one another. It turned out that often they didn't, or they wouldn't. Trajectories offered by one interviewee didn't plug into trajectories suggested by another.

Here's an example. There was an alcohol advice centre in the middle of the city. People were counselled here if they had an alcohol problem, and in some instances they were entered into alcoholism treatment programmes. But they could only go to the centre with an appointment, and if they were sober. Some people in the hospital knew this but many didn't, imagining, for instance, that it was a drop-in centre. Trajectories imagined and enacted in the hospital were inconsistent with those imagined and enacted in the advice centre. There was, so to speak, no 'system'. Trajectories and movements were badly co-ordinated.

This is a small example (though not for those with an alcohol problem), but there were dozens of other similar instances. It is, of course, tempting to say that this is a case of bad organisation. That the various bodies should simply have co-ordinated themselves better. But if we look at it methodologically another and parallel possibility emerges. This is that we were finding it impossible to map what was going on precisely because it was a mess. And, somewhat strangely in a way, our instinct was to ask reality to adjust itself so that it could indeed be properly mapped.

I said we encountered two problems. That was the first. The second, which dawned on us somewhat more slowly, was that we were trying to study something that was turning out to be a moving target. Actually it was becoming a shape-shifting target too. It was something like this. We had been commissioned to study the treatment of alcoholic liver disease, ALD as we called it. But it didn't take long before we found that we were talking about other phenomena that had something to do with ALD but weren't the same. For instance in some interviews we found that we were talking about liver disease (in general, without the alcohol). Or we found that we were talking about alcoholic cirrhosis. Or, again, about alcohol abuse. Or (and this is not necessarily the same thing) about alcoholism. Or, indeed, sometimes about the overall quality of life in relation to substances including alcohol.

Here we had moments of concern that sometimes edged towards panic. What on earth, we wondered, was it that we were actually studying? Why couldn't we hold it still? Why did it keep on going out of focus? Why, when we were 'supposed' to be finding out about the treatment of ALD did we end up talking

about other things? These were related things perhaps, but nevertheless they were not what we were supposed to be talking about.

As you can tell from what I have just said, some these questions were posed in a spirit of self-moralising. Why were we such shoddy researchers? Why couldn't we get a properly focussed set of interviews? Were we asking the wrong questions? Misleading the interviewees? Why did the interviewees want to talk about the wrong things? We certainly quite often felt that we were failing and weren't up to scratch. As time went on, however, we started to be kinder to ourselves. This is because it started to dawn on us that the object we were studying might be a shape-shifting reality. Textbooks are able to distinguish nicely between (say) cirrhosis of the liver caused by alcohol, and alcoholism 'in general' which includes a whole range of other symptoms (but by the way, those who abuse alcohol do not necessarily suffer from cirrhosis). It is in theory – and sometimes in practice – possible to make distinctions between the various relevant entities, and then to relate them together. But maybe, we slowly came to believe, it wasn't actually like that in reality. Maybe we were dealing with a slippery phenomenon, one that changed its shape, and was fuzzy around the edges. Maybe we were dealing with something that wasn't definite and didn't have a single form. Perhaps it was a fluid object, or even one that was ephemeral in any given form, flipping from one configuration to another, dancing like a flame.⁴

To sum up, we'd made two discoveries. One, was that there did not appear to be a way of mapping this part of the healthcare system in a consistent and coherent way. And the other was that it wasn't easy to pin down the object of study and make it unambiguous and clear. In addition, in the face of this vagueness, we'd also uncovered two possible responses. The first was methodological moralising: that things should be clear, either because they needed to be put right, or because they really were clear all along and our methods weren't understanding them. And the second, which is where we ended up, was that things are at least sometimes vague and can only be known vaguely.

What to do about this? I'll put the question on hold while I talk a little about realism.

Realism

I have neither the space nor the expertise, to offer a well-developed critique of philosophical realism. My interest is much more pragmatic. I want to unearth what I take to be certain more or less common-sense realist assumptions that inform both a good deal (no doubt not all) of natural and social science research, and talk about natural and social science method by more or less professional methodologists. In particular, I want to be a little clearer about what it is that we are buying into when we think about 'reality' and talk about things 'out there' in our research reports. I'm interested, in short, about what it is that counts as 'out-there-ness': its form or forms.

⁴ There is a small literature in the discipline of science, technology and society, on topologically complex objects. See de Laet and Mol, (2000), Law and Mol (2001) and Law and Singleton (2005).

In order to make progress quickly, I will offer a number of different versions of out-there-ness in the form of a brief and more or less dogmatic list and offer comments on each⁵.

1. I'm going to call the first version of out-there-ness primitive out-there-ness. Here the claim is very simple. In Euro-America most research, and no doubt most of life, seems to be organised around the intuition that there is indeed a reality out there and beyond ourselves. That is all. Nothing more. All I want to say about this (apart from noting that I buy into this myself both in research and in everyday life) is that this isn't saying very much. Certainly it isn't, by itself, very specific. This is the important point. It doesn't commit us to anything very definite about the character of out-there-ness. So what might be added that would make it more definite? That would specify it? That actually specifies it in most research practice?
2. I think that most of the time Euro-American common-sense realism assumes that whatever is out there is substantially independent of our actions and especially of our perceptions. (I say 'substantially' because it is, of course, also obvious that sometimes our actions and maybe even our perceptions make a difference, but right now I'm interested in the general case – what critical realists would call the 'intransitive'.) I will call this, then, a commitment to independence. Note that this is not the same as primitive out-there-ness. In principle a reality might be out there, but not independent of our actions or our knowledge of it: parts of Quantum mechanics certainly work on that assumption, as does post-structuralist metaphysics. Parts of social theory also note the performative character of parts of social science.
3. I also want to add what I will call anteriority to the list. This is the sense that whatever is real out there in general precedes any attempt to know it. (Again one can think of exceptions.) Like independence, this is not entailed in a primitive commitment to out-there-ness. It is a possible specification of it, yes, but one can be committed to primitive out-there-ness without being committed to anteriority. No doubt this is the basis for some versions of philosophical idealism.
4. Fourth there is definiteness. Perhaps more than anything else, this is what we were wrestling with in our study of alcoholic liver disease. We thought we should be writing about something definite because we thought it was our duty to represent something that was indeed definite. But this is a specific metaphysical commitment rather than something that has to be so. It is certainly not entailed in primitive out-there-ness. So it might, instead, be assumed that whatever is out-there is often (or always) vague, diffuse, uncertain, elusive and/or undecided. But the common-sense realism of social science doesn't readily entertain the possibility. If findings are vague then it isn't reality that is vague, but those doing the research. They've failed.
5. And finally I want to add what I will call singularity. Here the sense, the assumption, and the commitment, is that the world is a single reality

⁵ Again this list is discussed more fully in Law (2004).

that more or less shared, held in common. This is a more or less standard plug-in in common-sense social science realism, but once again it is not implied in primitive realism. So it is possible to entertain the possibility that there are different and not necessarily consistent realities. I need to be clear about what is at stake here. This is not an argument that there are different perspectives on (a single) reality. We all know that this is possible. It is not, in other words, an argument about epistemology – about how to see (a single) reality. Instead it is about ontology, about what is real, what is out there. Mostly Euro-American metaphysics works on the assumption that there is a single reality. Different perspectives, but a single reality. I suspect that even the social worlds literatures work that way. The assumption is that while we may live in multiple social worlds, we live in a single natural or material reality. But, as philosopher Annemarie Mol has shown in The Body Multiple, it does not have to be that way⁶.

Let's review. We've got five versions or possible features of a common-sense realist metaphysics of out-there-ness (one could add more, but this will do): the primitive sense that there is something out-there; and then, more specifically, that whatever is out-there is independent, prior, definite and singular. My sense is that most of the time most of us work in practice around and through this metaphysics. I also think that this sets the conditions of possibility for most natural, and more important in this context social science, research. Finally, it seems plausible to suggest that contemporary philosophical realism is a sophisticated expression of these sentiments in a reflexive and self-conscious world where it is a commonplace that uncontexted foundational knowledge is a will-o'-the-wisp, and social knowledge alters its objects of study. But that is by the way. Because the list also suggests

1. that we can be primitive realists without necessarily committing ourselves to the package deal. Contrary to our first instincts, realism doesn't have to come as a single tightly specified package.
2. that it could be very interesting, to put it no higher, to pick through the list and wonder when, where, why, and whether any particular commitment is appropriate or useful.
3. that most of what we think of as 'research methods' in social science are committed to the full package. In practice research methods don't buy into realism à la carte. It is the full set menu, or nothing. And as you can tell, I think this ought to change.

The Post-Structuralist Detour

For me a post-structuralist detour is not a detour but an obligatory point of passage. This is because it helps us to think about the so-called 'metaphysics of presence'. I'm not going to follow Derrida closely here but I don't need to. What I need is an argument that is simple – indeed almost embarrassingly so, as, indeed, are its consequences for social science. The argument runs so.

⁶ See (Mol: 2002).

As we seek to know the world not everything can be brought to presence. However much we want to be comprehensive, to know something fully, to document or to represent it, we will fail. This is not a matter of technical inadequacy. (There are always, of course, technical inadequacies). Rather it is because bringing to presence is necessarily incomplete because if things are made present (for instance representations of the world) then at the same time things are also being made absent (the world 'itself'). Necessarily. The two go together. It cannot be otherwise. Presence implies absence.

This is not a complaint: it is how it is. So what's the problem? One answer is that it's a problem when we imagine or pretend that everything can be made present and known by the all-knowing subject, the all-seeing eye, or the all-representing database. This can only be a pretence because, as I've just said, the knowable is dependent on, related to, and produced with the unknowable, that which is elsewhere and absent. So the problem does not have to do with the attempt to know. There are many reasons for trying to know in one way or another. Rather it lies in the failure (or refusal) to understand the logic, the character and the politics of the project of knowing. It lies in the failure to think through what is implied by the fact that knowing is constitutively incomplete.

There are three points I would like to tease out of this:

- First, in a metaphysics of presence, Othering, making absent, repressing, making unrepresentability, are all repressed in what amounts to a politics of systematic exclusion. The problem is not exclusion as such. As I have just noted, Othering is always implied in making present. Rather it is about the denial of that exclusion. It is the refusal to acknowledge that this is going on, except, perhaps in the most practical, technical sense. It is the refusal to recognise what is sometimes (though in a different register) called 'invisible work'.
- Second, and as an aspect of this, the fact that practice is productive also disappears. The productivity of practice is crucial to my argument. This is because the great representational trick of a metaphysics of presence, at least in the context of natural and social science, is to attribute its present representations to an absent reality that is pre-given. Reality determines representation. The common-sense realism of natural and social science assumes that its representations are warranted in one way or another by special reporting rights on that reality. Good method creates a reliable representational conduit from reality to depiction. It is a one-way street. Nature is made to speak for itself, end of story. But this is a sleight of hand. This is because realities are being done alongside representations of realities⁷. It follows that anteriority and independence do not hold. Instead realities are being enacted with more or less difficulty into being. Here, then, we have a version of the turn to performance.

⁷ In STS the classic study which works this out is (Latour and Woolgar: 1986). It is developed in another version in the work of Donna Haraway. See (Haraway: 1991a; Haraway: 1991b; Haraway: 1997). The implications of this position for multiplicity and singularity are explored at length in (Mol: 2002). For related arguments in somewhat different idioms see (Hacking: 1992), (Pickering: 1993), (Verran (2001) and Barad (1999)).

- So then we get to the crucial question. Which realities? This is the crucial question because it is also political in character. Here is the opening. Realities are not fixed in concrete. It is not simply a matter of reporting them. Instead they might be otherwise. With difficulty, yes. No-one is saying they can be invented at whim. Nevertheless, we find ourselves with a new possibility – in the domain of an ontological politics⁸.

How does the post-structuralist critique of a metaphysics of presence fit with the various versions of realism? The answer is that it is entirely consistent with primitive realism. Actually, putting it this way is too weak. An argument about absence-presence is precisely a version of primitive realism. It is an articulation of it. In this way of thinking of course there is out-thereness as well as in-hereness. If we are engaged in representation at all, then that is how it has to be. Presence implies absence. But what of the other parts of the common-sense realism package? The answer is: they don't fit very well. I'll repeat myself a little in order to make the list.

- Is out-thereness independent? The answer is: no, at least not in any simple way. If making present means making absent, then whatever is out there is also being done though not (I need to add again) arbitrarily. It may take a lot of effort. An absent 'hinterland' has to be crafted⁹. Some representations and realities may turn out to be undoable. But it is nevertheless being made.
- Is out-thereness prior? Again the answer is no, and for the same reasons. Not obviously. Particular realities-as-absences are made at the same time as representations as presences. (Scientific truths, let us remind ourselves, exist only in rarefied and rather special environments.¹⁰)
- Is out-thereness definite? The answer is: not necessarily. Perhaps it can be made definite – after all, some representational practices produce definiteness. But there is no particular reason to think that out-thereness is in general either definite or indefinite.
- Is out-thereness singular? Is there only one of it? Again, and finally, there is no particular reason to think so. Sometimes it is made singular in practice. But since there are many practices and many methods it is probably better to assume that there are multiple and more or less different out-therenesses. This is what Mol calls 'the problem of difference'. Note again that to say this is not to say that anything goes. It is not a relativist argument. No doubt the 'hinterlands' of different out-therenesses overlap and interfere with one another. No doubt they often have to be co-ordinated or held apart. No doubt (and we all

⁸ All the writers in the previous footnote, in one way or other, work in ontological politics. Perhaps this is clearest for Haraway, for Mol, and for Verran. See in addition, Verran (1998), Mol (1999), Moser (2000), Law (2002) and Singleton (2005).

⁹ The notion of the hinterland is discussed in Law (2004, 27ff).

¹⁰ This is the point of some of the work in early versions of ANT. See, for instance, Latour (1987).

experience this) making them is extremely hard work, particularly if we would like to make them differently.

In sum, if we take on board a post-structuralist critique of the metaphysics of presence then we drive a coach-and-horses through the standard package of common-sense realism. Realities can be made independent, prior, definite and singular, but that is because they are being made that way. It could be otherwise. Actually it is worse than that. If they are being made that way, then it is because the alternative – that they might be dependent, simultaneous, indefinite and/or multiple – is also being systematically Othered.

Things That Don't Quite Fit

If absence is made together with presence then different forms of absence are made with different forms of presence. But now I want to distinguish two senses or versions of absence. Call these manifest absence and Otherness. Manifest absence would be what presence acknowledges or makes manifest. If Singleton and I describe the treatment of a patient with ALD in a ward – or a ward sister describes this to us – then that treatment is being made manifest. It is absent but explicit, a manifest absence. Otherness is absence that is not acknowledged. Here the list is endless. Indeed (the point is a logical one) Otherness cannot be brought to presence and listed. But we can hint, or we can look at other practices and notice out-therenesses that they don't acknowledge. Such, indeed, is the standard procedure of critical social science. It works to manifest what were Othernesses, and then to complain that they were inappropriately or unjustly Othered. What I am doing does not, of course, escape this logic.

Nevertheless we can imagine different styles of Othering.

- There is the invisible work that that helps to make a research report.
- There is the uninteresting, everything that seems to be not worth telling.
- There is the obvious, things that that everyone is taken to know.
- And then, to ratchet up the metaphor and what is at stake, there is everything that is for one reason or another being repressed.

Stick with repression. What is being repressed? Well, we don't know, do we? Not very well! But here is one suggestion. In much social science writing everything that fails to fit the standard package of common-sense realism is being repressed, everything that is not independent, prior, definite and singular.

We have reached the core of my argument. Predominantly, I want to say, our research methods work to Other that which does not fit a metaphysics of common-sense realism. It does this (a stronger claim still) even as it depends on it. The argument can be illustrated empirically, but it is also logical. Independence depends on lack of independence. Anteriority depends on simultaneity. The definite depends on the vague. And the singular depends on the multiple. Both are there. Both are always there. The only question is this: how do we choose to handle them?

Perhaps we can see it as a matter of policing, of how the border between the two forms of absence as manifest, and absence as Otherness is or should be regulated. Here are two questions that arise:

- First step: do we acknowledge that there is a border: that inconsistent things are being Othered? Or do we prefer to police our methods to repress that possibility, to Other it itself? Common-sense realism tends to the latter. This is its version of the limits to the conditions of possibility.
- Second step: how do we regulate the traffic across the border? Do we do it knowingly or unknowingly? Let's be clear. We will always do the latter. This is built into the iron logic of Othering. Most of the policing will be unwitting. So the question is: what should or would we like to try to regulate more knowingly? What would we like to try to make manifest?

I think you can see where I am going. If I switch back the alcoholic liver disease study, we can now see that we were floundering around about whether or not to police the border between the manifest and the Othered using the assumptions of common-sense realism. If things seemed vague or multiple, perhaps this was bad research? That's the policing policy of common-sense realism and the larger part of social science method. Let's repress the mess, that is the policy. Let's Other it. So in our study we tried quite hard to enact this policy, to work within the package of common-sense realism, and to police and re-enact the border. But we found it was just too difficult. We found we couldn't make a story of a clear clean single reality – and the reality to match. A coherent object, a consistent set of trajectories, or a single condition? No! Our failing? Yes, if we buy into the standard package. No if we don't. And in the end, as I've noted, we didn't. We stopped policing the borderlands of Otherness as defined in the standard realist package. We came to believe and argue instead that this was a reality that was multiple, slippery and fuzzy. Indefinite.

But, it turns out, this is not a very good research strategy in practice. Why? The answer is that the politics of research doesn't work that way. There is a lot at stake, a lot of investment, in holding the border between the manifest and the Othered steady, in re-enacting the Othering of the indefinite, the multiple, and all the rest. It is possible to make this argument by turning it into a critique of the institutions of social science. In my experience conference organisers, journal editors and referees, and grant-giving bodies all tend to buy into the full package of common-sense realism. They don't much care for the vague, the imprecise, the multiple. These become technical flaws and failings, signs of methodological inadequacy. But though we can complain about the institutions that Other research metaphysics that don't reproduce the common-sense realisms, more interesting is a larger question. What would be it to practice a research metaphysics that did not do so? How would one represent the vague, the multiple and all the rest? The interest in this question is in part that it doesn't offer a ready answer. But here are some thoughts.

Within the conventions of the academy, the moment we set pen to paper we are being caught up in arrangements that reproduce the metaphysics of the

full realist package. As those who work with performance have argued, it is partly a matter of textuality. Can the ephemeral or the elusive be translated into and made present in textual form? Well, possibly so, but possibly not. It's a matter for debate, isn't it? And the answer is bound to be: it depends.

But if it is a question of textuality tout court, then it is also a matter of the forms of textuality. As is obvious, the academic conventions of writing push us into reproducing versions of common-sense realism. Notwithstanding the aporias it is difficult to remake the real, whatever is out there, in ways that do not re-enact its singularity, its anteriority, its independence and its definiteness. So where else to look? Straws in the wind. Poetry doesn't depend or produce a manifest out-there-ness. There is no premium on singularity. Its warrant is different. So it is, too, with the novel. I guess that the realities these manifest – if indeed they may be said to do so at all – are 'imaginary'. So we read novels or poetry for other reasons but not as reports about the state of the world, about out-there-ness. So we might ask: should there be space for poetry within social science? Or novels, short stories? I don't know where I stand on this. Or, more to the point, I don't think it makes much sense to take a general stand at all. Sometimes: this surely is the most plausible answer if we want to nibble round the edges of common-sense realism. So let me end, instead, by suggesting that we might think more about the possibilities of allegory.

So what is allegory? Here's a quick and dirty set of suggestions. Allegory is the art of meaning something other than, or in addition to, what is being said. It is the art of decoding meaning, of reading between the literal lines, to understand something else or more. It is the craft of making several not necessarily very consistent things at once. It is the art of crafting multiplicities, indefinitenesses, undecidabilities. Of holding them together. Of relaxing the border controls that secure singularity¹¹.

Allegory might not come in the form of text. But then again, it might. Listen, then, to this:

'Finding the door is difficult enough. In a terrace, between two cheap store-fronts in a run-down part of Sandside. The kind of street only three blocks from the big store that doesn't make it. That doesn't make it at all. That smells of poverty. That speaks of hopelessness.

It is a nondescript door. Unwelcoming. A tiny spy glass. An inconspicuous notice. Nothing very obvious. Nothing very appealing. We are ringing the door-bell. Is anyone listening? Has anyone heard? Dimly we hear the sound of footsteps. We sense that we are being looked at through the spy glass. Checking us out. And then the door opens. And we're being welcomed through the door by a middle-aged woman. To find that there isn't a proper lobby. Instead, we're facing a flight of stairs. Carpeted, cheaply. Yes, shoddily.

¹¹ This, to be sure, is a particular understanding of allegory which, I am happy to see, is slowly being rehabilitated. Walter Benjamin is, surely, the most prominent social science allegorist. See (Benjamin: 1999). But I read much of Donna Haraway's writing with its talk about split vision as (her term I think) ironic play, or allegory. And I have dabbled on knowing in tension too. See (Law: 2002).

So we've been admitted. We are, yes, Vicky Singleton and John Law from Lancaster University. And now, we're being led up a flight of stairs. And the building is starting to make an impression. An impression of make-do. Of scarce resources. Of inadequacy. For we're being told people have to come up all those flights of stairs. Some of them can hardly walk through drink. And some can hardly walk, full stop. Up this long flight of stairs. For we're in the kind of Victorian building where the rooms on the ground floor are twelve feet high. Big fancy three-story houses. Built at a time of optimism. At a time of some kind of prosperity. Which, however, has now drained away.

So the clients need to negotiate these stairs, turn around the half landing, up a further short flight, and then they are on the first floor. Next to the room that is the general office, library, meeting room, leaflet dispensary, the place with the filing cabinets, the tables, the chairs. People are milling about. At the moment no clients, but a researcher who is smoking. Several social workers, the manager, community psychiatric nurses coming and going.

The leaflets and the papers are spilling over everything. Brown cardboard boxes. Half drunk mugs of coffee. New mugs of coffee for us. Clearing a bit of space. Not too much. There isn't too much space. Files and pamphlets are pushed to one side. Two more chairs. And the numbers in the room keep on changing as clients arrive, or people go out on call, or the phone rings. One client hasn't turned up. Relief at this. The pressure is so great. And then there's another with alcohol on his breath. A bad sign.

The staff are so keen to talk. Keen to tell us about their work. Keen to talk about its frustrations and its complexities.'

What to make of this? Here is the suggestion (and I thank Vicky Singleton for letting me use our joint work here): that this building, and this account of it, can both be imagined as an allegory of health care for patients with alcoholic liver disease. What is happening? The answer, I think, is that organisational multiplicity (together with inadequate resources) are being brought to presence in this run-down building and the events within it. An alcohol advice centre up a long flight of stairs? An incoherence. No meeting room? Another incoherence. The fact that those working here work for several different organisations with different charters and conditions of work? A not-very coherent multiplicity. The chaos of leaflets from twenty-plus sources? A further multiplicity enacting a criss-crossing plethora of locations, organisations, facilities, and policies that don't quite fit together. The argument is that the building brings to presence an out-there that is multiple, vague, shifting and non-coherent. It may be read – it needs to be read – in different ways. These cannot be summed up, caught, or made neat and tidy.

Here then, both in the building, and in our text, we are helping to make manifest a real that is not definite or singular. (Neither is it independent or anterior). It is real, but it doesn't fit the package deal of common-sense realism. We could try to pretend that it does. But my conclusion, our conclusion, is that if we do so we are missing out. The argument, of course, is that it is better, instead, to find ways of enacting non-coherence. Notice this: it

is not necessarily incoherence that's being done here either. Incoherence is a common-sense realist way of putting down something that doesn't fit the standard package. (This is the problem of talking about 'mess': as Lucy Suchman notes, this is a put-down used by those who are obsessed with making things tidy.) My preference, rather, is to relax the border controls, allow the non-coherences to make themselves manifest. Or rather, it is to start to think about ways in which we might go about this.

And the reason that I feel passionate about this is quite simple. It is not just a matter of the politics of research (though this is important). It is also a matter of the politics of reality. I've tried to argue that the making of what we know in-here goes along with the making of what there is out-there, that our methods are performative¹². So it is, for me, a point that is simultaneously a matter to do with method, politics, ethics, and inspiration. Realities are not flat. They are not consistent, coherent and definite. Our research methods necessarily fail. Aporias are ubiquitous. But it is time to move on from the long rearguard action which insists that reality is definite and singular. The long rearguard action conducted in many locations including what counts as good social science method. 'There is more in heaven and earth, Horatio, than is dreamed of in your philosophy.' We need new philosophies new disciplines of research. We need to understand that our methods are always more or less unruly assemblages.

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¹² For the performativity of social science see, inter alia (Osborne and Rose: 1999), (Callon: 1998), (Porter: 1995) and MacKenzie (2003).

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