

## PART ONE INTRODUCTION

### CONFESSIONAL

#### I.

I begin my approach in confession. True, it is a manipulative rhetorical ploy. And this is very close to the subject. For literary discourse is always manipulating us into false consciousness.

I begin in a confessional, the *space* of confessions. Discourse is always the space of confessions, mostly accidental confessions. Discourse is concealment through the imperative of consecution – the endless play of confession and counter-confession and inter-confession. May I convince you of my sincerity?

May I convince you of that which is always in greatest doubt to myself? This is, then, the space of my lack of conviction in my own conviction – or my conviction of myself as convict. The crime is incompleteness. The crime is incapacity for completion, my incapacity. I must confess before the crime is committed, because the crime has already been committed – it is the *a priori* crime for which there is no suitable punishment or penance, because there is simultaneously no crime. Incapacity is the crime of discourse, and as I now construct myself in this discourse of writing, I always construct myself in a discourse of some sort. The crime is always there, yet it is never there, because I have no knowledge or awareness outside of the crime. There is no norm against which I can weigh this criminality.

My penance is my crime – they are the same thing. They are inseparable – the binding ignorance of subjectivity. As close as I get to *knowing* that there is the possibility of the objective and the object, the greater their ungraspability. The sentence is harsh – life imprisonment, or more properly, imprisonment in life.

*Confiteor*. Beyond my crime I see nothing. I confess my incapacity. Beyond my sentence I see nothing. And already the rhetorical trick of discourse is at work. For this is precisely the topic at hand. Beyond my crime and my sentence I see nothing *but* my crime and my sentence, for the workings of discourse have constructed before my face a veil so thick, so intricate, that I can only see this veil. And it is a veil of my own weaving as well. Layer upon layer of effusion which is my history and all our histories and the history of literature as well. A veil so cunningly embroidered that I believe I can find a point of exit, but as I move closer, the dropped stitch, the worn fabric betrays it to me again. It is the same veil Zygmunt Bauman describes in terms of “a massive and continuous cover-up operation...a thin film of order that is continuously pierced, torn apart and folded up by the Chaos over which it stretches”<sup>1</sup>. Bauman’s metaphor calls to mind a barely-functional veil, one woven from the implicit postponement of the project of Reason in modernism (“the perpetual not-yet...the *elsewhere* of any place and the *some other time* of any moment”<sup>2</sup>) and destroyed by the Chaos he sees confronted in postmodernism (“little is left to galvanize the old creed...and to keep alive the old hope that at the far end of the development saga an orderly, rationally designed and managed world awaits”<sup>3</sup>).

I confess that I am unable to proclaim nihilism with the confidence of Bauman, although I have admittedly oversimplified his statement and the particularities of his argument<sup>4</sup>. Yet, in my view, what Bauman fails to account for from the outset, is that a discourse of Chaos (or of nihilism) is still a discourse. The tearing of the veil is merely an action embroidered with an unusually persuasive thread (a painting of a window is not a window, regardless of how convincing it seems to be). I confess I am unable to see nothing. I am unable to imagine the unimaginable or express the inexpressible. And this sole challenge is, as Simon Critchley suggests, “a matter of finding meaning to human finitude”<sup>5</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> Bauman, Z. 1995. *Life in Fragments: Essays in Postmodern Morality*. p14.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* p21.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.* p33.

<sup>4</sup> Which is a most relevant and excellent one, and to which I shall return in subsequent argumentation.

<sup>5</sup> Critchley, S. 1997. *Very Little...Almost Nothing: Death, Philosophy, Literature*. pp24-25.

Confined within discourse, we are bound to a certain inevitable series of possibilities. We may accept blindly the constructions of discourse, the theism of countless generations, placing our faith in an imminent exit. We may form a reactionary thesis such as Nietzsche's doctrine of *eternal recurrence*, that "everything becomes and returns for ever, – *escape is impossible!*"<sup>6</sup>, that we are confronted by our confinement in discourse and it is the task of the human spirit to overcome this nihilism. Or, as Critchley suggests, "it is a question of *delineating nihilism*"<sup>7</sup>, of exploring the limits of this discourse within which we fluctuate, for ultimately, it is the experience of this limit that may be the most honest activity of living.

Which is to say, at the limits of the fluctuations of discourse, we do not find silence. We find the limit. And beyond – who knows? But, perhaps there is an increased awareness, an increased pleasure in the flux. And this, also, is paradoxically the nihilism and the hope of writing, for which I confess a particular fondness.

## II.

In my mid-teens I was profoundly inspired by the writings and music of John Cage. I discovered in his art a total conception for the first time – a continuous pushing of aesthetic limits through an unwillingness to acknowledge the liminal, evidenced in his summation of himself: "get out of whatever cage you're in"<sup>8</sup> – an inspired utopianism! I do not recall how or when I first encountered minimalism, but I do remember listening to Philip Glass' opera, *Einstein on the Beach*, incessantly during my final school examinations. I also remember responding to the sound of the term *minimalism* and a vague identification with monochrome canvases, as bizarre as it may sound.

## IV.

The relationship between minimum and maximum is a complex one, and one which

<sup>6</sup> Nietzsche, F. 1964. 'Eternal Recurrence'. In *The Will To Power*, Vol. II, Book IV. Translated by A.M. Ludovici. p424.

<sup>7</sup> Critchley, S. 1997. *Very Little...Almost Nothing: Death, Philosophy, Literature*. p12.

<sup>8</sup> John Cage. In Kostelanetz, R. 1989. *Conversing With Cage*. p284.

III. ally, we need to conjure an awkward (but necessarily so) understanding of meaning. In the master-discourse of metaphysics, meaning emerges as the product of our highest ideals (which

I shall presently return to the question of minimalism or Minimalism, but an initial departure may be more properly sought through the term *minimum*. The Latin root *minim-* indicates the superlative form of small or little. Having ostensibly dispensed with the polarity of masculine-feminine gender, the English noun *minimum* presents an abstraction of the adjectival function which dominates its Latin usage. It is noteworthy that the neuter form (-um) is adopted for this function, for *minimum*, in proper usage, suggests slipping away – that is, the slipping away not only of gender, but of a certain specificity as well. *Minimum* comes to us in language as the smallest recognisable presence. But, to acknowledge the powerful prescriptions of the word, we must move beyond the idea of abstraction. *Minimum* may, theoretically, be reached in many ways, including both radical reductions from complexity as well as an immediate conception *as* minimum. And what is at stake in the idea of a minimum is really everything – that is, the minimum is the *least possible*, so it is the most subtle and evasive point we can fix before everything ceases to be. It is the eternally approached negative limit of possibility, the last miniscule marker we may grasp before total ungraspability.

It seems reasonable to expect a connection between minimalism (or Minimalism) and the rather vague idea of minimum suggested above. Or perhaps I assume too much? I do not think so. So when the term *minimalism* comes into play in art (in its broadest aspect), we are really talking in terms of the potential relationship of art to the minimum. Now, this is a position which art rarely occupies, despite many claims to the contrary. In fact, I suspect that nowhere is the veil referred to above more keenly constructed than in art: the veil as art, or the art of the veil.

#### IV.

The relationship between minimum and meaning is a complex one, and one which I shall not pretend to fully comprehend, for I have ready access to neither minimum nor meaning, as such. However, I shall suggest a few guiding postulations.

Firstly, we need to conjure an awkward (but necessarily so) understanding of *meaning*. In the master-discourse of metaphysics, meaning emerges as the product of our highest ideals (which both Nietzsche and Heidegger criticise<sup>9</sup>), ideals which are typically identified as some preexistent and preminent *logos*, in Derrida's terms<sup>10</sup>. According to such a *logocentric* view, which (it must be stressed) is still, in practice, the dominant one, meaning has an eternal source, whether it be located in the religious notion of theism, the Kantian definition of *Reason* and the *Idea*, or a phenomenological notion of *essences*, either *essential dialectics*, as in Hegel, or the Husserlian notion of *essences*. Of course, this is a vast oversimplification of the terms.

In the confines of this reasoning, meaning is imparted, like a magical gift, in fact, like a gift of magic – meaning *is* reality. The various semiotic systems (to which Derrida's deconstruction is related, if not explicitly part of) have served, to some degree at least, to destabilise the incontestability of meaning and the assumption of its presence<sup>11</sup>. What then does meaning *mean* today? The question, ironically, provides a possible answer. In asking for a meaning of meaning, we strike upon its essential nature, that is, the inextricable entanglement of meaning and discourse. It would be an oversimplification to say that discourse *is* meaning, but certainly it may be concluded that discourse involves an interminable exchange of meaning, that is the exchange of signs for meaning, signs for signs and hence meanings for meanings, from a semiotic perspective.

And twinning the master-discourse of presence emerges another, the master-discourse of the imperative of communication – as Barbara Gail Hanson concludes in her discussion of general systems theory, “because everything is related to everything...all forms of behaviour are communication...[and] there is no such thing as noncommunication”<sup>12</sup>. Inasmuch as discourse serves the imperative of communication, communication is equally definable as the dispersion of

<sup>9</sup> See, for example, Vattimo, G. 1988. *The End of Modernity: Nihilism and Hermeneutics in Post-Modern Culture*. pp20-21.

<sup>10</sup> David West provides a particularly succinct summary of Derrida's critique of *logocentrism*. (West, D. 1996. *An Introduction to Continental Philosophy*. pp178-179).

<sup>11</sup> It suffices to note, at this point, that Derrida's deconstruction is not the only philosophical system associated with dispelling the presence of meaning, but this is a trend in twentieth century philosophy and literary theory which can be noted in the work of philosophers/theorists as diverse as (later) Merleau-Ponty, Barthes, Deleuze and Guatarri, to name but a few of the more celebrated of these.

<sup>12</sup> Hanson, B.G. 1995. *General Systems Theory: Beginning With Wholes*. p97.

meaning. Related to this point is the question of the Subject and its relation to meaning. Of course, the Subject is probably amongst the most difficult terms to define (I shall not attempt a definition, as such, but, again, rather make a few remarks on which I hope to expand later). In purely syntactic terms, the simplest understanding of the subject is as the agent or actant within the sentence: that part of the sentence which acts, or enables action. Taking this very limited understanding as a starting point, what seems significant here is that action always implies a subject. In syntax, the communication of action is the work of the subject, then. It is not too far-fetched to associate action with communication, certainly from Hanson's perspective referred to above, since every action communicates something. And the overarching system within which all communication can take place is discourse – that is, discourse is the system which allows us to experience communication as such.

What I wish to suggest then, from this very rapid elision, is that discourse – that which constitutes the veil which is our only view of reality – exists as the System of the Subject, the communications which are simultaneously the grounds for the possibility of communication<sup>13</sup>. There is, as Merleau-Ponty demonstrates in *Phenomenology of Perception*, no possibility of an objective perception, since perception is ultimately a dynamic and constructive process<sup>14</sup>. Similarly, the sign is not equipped with a mythical, metaphysical power. The sign is able to operate through a process of subjectification, that is, it is equipped with the power to act, or to signify and be signified and to repeat this process, through being empowered with the active potential of the subject. According to my understanding of the term, the fabric of reality (the veil) is irreducible to objectivity. Thus, when I perceive the veil, regardless of whether I choose to call it reality or *the veil*, I experience an endless play of subjects and of subjectivity.

<sup>13</sup> In relation to this point, Bauman notes that "we make roads – the only roads there are and can be – and we do this solely by walking them". (Bauman, Z. 1995. *Life in Fragments: Essays in Postmodern Morality*. p17). If one translates this metaphor to the one of discourse as the veil, then, essentially what Bauman proposes is that we are always involved in discourse, but that the only way we can construct discourses (and hence perceptions of reality) is through discourse. Thus, discourse exists as communication, but also as the grounds for communication.

<sup>14</sup> According to Merleau-Ponty's philosophy, perception constitutes our basic contact with reality. In talking of how meaning is experienced, he says that "memories do not by themselves project themselves upon sensations...one admit[s] an original text which carries its meaning within itself, setting it over and against that of memories: this original text is perception (21). A principal concern remains the purposiveness of perception, according to which, "the word perception indicates a *direction* rather than a primitive function"(12). (Merleau-Ponty, M. 1962. *Phenomenology of Perception*. p12, 21). It is important to note that the notion of perception as a *direction* necessarily reestablishes its dynamic, active nature and incompleteness.

To restate the case another way: according to Critchley's analysis of Hegel, "the Subject...is the power of the negative"<sup>15</sup>...which is able to dissolve that which stands over against it as an object in-itself and translate it into something for-itself"<sup>16</sup>. Now, clearly this is one of the methods whereby Hegel is able to construct such powerful oppositions such as that between true subject and true object. However, if for a moment we consider how the self as subject is simultaneously a complex constitution of signs, then the central paradox emerges. On the one hand, I can only ever perceive from myself outward, so I affirm myself, in this way, as the active subject. On the other hand, I am undoubtedly acted upon, and so I am the object of other subjects, and these not necessarily living subjects (technology, for example, is certainly not living in a biological sense, and yet its active role in contemporary life is indisputable). The argument can be duplicated on a semiotic level. Thus, the constitution of the individual as both subject and object is achieved in a reality of continuous dynamism. I would argue, that really, this dynamism affirms the position of the Subject and disqualifies the object. As Derrida demonstrates, there is no such thing as a transcendental signified, that is, a super-inert object which is not an actant.

To return to Critchley, "the Subject produces itself through a relation with death"<sup>17</sup>. In terms of the veil-metaphor, what constitutes death is that which we assume lies beyond the veil, the utterly alien. Thus, the Subject, according to Critchley, is that which is able to maintain itself in the face of the annihilation promised by the radically unknowable. And, since we place everything we know or experience against this impenetrable alterity, and we situate everything we know within the discourse of the *meaningful*, it is possible to assert, with mild confidence, that discourse is both the System of the Subject and the System of Meaning.

<sup>15</sup> The 'power of the negative' which Critchley identifies is related to our negative ontological foundation in language and will be explored in some detail later.

<sup>16</sup> Critchley, S. 1997. *Very Little...Almost Nothing: Death, Philosophy, Literature*. p53. Since Levinas' idea of the *il y a* will later emerge as a central term in the present discussion, it may be pertinent to note that it is precisely this ethical position of the subject which Levinas criticises in *Totality and Infinity*: "Hegelian phenomenology, where self-consciousness is the distinguishing of what is not distinct, expresses the universality of the same identifying itself in the alterity of objects thought and despite the opposition of self to self...The difference is not a difference; the I, as other, is not an 'other'" (Levinas, E. 1969. *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*. Translated by A. Lingis. pp36-37).

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.* p53.

What, then, is the relation of the concept of *minimum*, which I have identified as the principal concern of this study, to this system of discourse. As I said above, minimum is the final mark in the recession of discourse before it passes into the radical alterity of the unknowable, or non-existence, which is the unconfrontable with which we are all inevitably confronted. Critchley suggests<sup>18</sup> that there are certain conditions under which discourse may become “a question of establishing the *meaning of meaninglessness*, making a meaning out of the refusal of meaning that the work performs without that refusal of meaning becoming a meaning”<sup>19</sup>. What Critchley suggests here is the potential of certain discourses to embrace the impossible. If one is to delineate nihilism (as Critchley suggests) as the only appropriate response to the problems it proposes in contemporary life<sup>20</sup>, then it becomes apparent that the refusal of meaning becomes discourse’s principal work. Yet, simultaneously, the work of discourse is always already tied to meaning, since the work *is* discourse (following the argument above). But what is the meaning of this *unworking*<sup>21</sup>? The meaning is the promise of meaninglessness, which emerges most clearly in the concept of *minimum*. Since the minimum is the last vestige of meaning, it points clearly in the direction of meaninglessness. So, when we talk of the minimum of work in discourse, we are effectively saying that the concept of *minimum* is the meaning of meaninglessness, the furthest possible limit of meaning – the promise of meaninglessness, although it cannot be reached.

## V.

As I mentioned earlier, the expectation of the term minimalism/Minimalism is that it calls to mind the potential relationship of art to the minimum. I have previously described the relationship between minimum and meaning as the promise of meaninglessness. Somewhat at odds with my theory is Perreault’s statement that “there is nothing minimal about the ‘art’...What is minimal about Minimal Art...is the *means*, not the end”<sup>22</sup>. Implicit in this

<sup>18</sup> His comments here are in relation to Beckett’s work, which will be discussed subsequently.

<sup>19</sup> Critchley, S. 1997. *Very Little...Almost Nothing: Death, Philosophy, Literature*. p151.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.* p12.

<sup>21</sup> The term *unworking* is used extensively by Critchley in relation to romanticism. (*Ibid.* pp85-138).

<sup>22</sup> Perreault, J. 1967. *Minimal Abstracts*. In *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology*. 1968. Edited by G. Battcock. p260.



statement is a recognition of meaning in the Minimalist work<sup>23</sup>, which would imply that it has little to do with *minimum* as I have defined it above. Perreault's Minimalism seems, rather, to engage actively the expanding discourses which constitute reality, to present itself as an active subject, a beautifully embroidered figure in the fabric of the veil which conceals that inevitability which is unimaginable.

However, this concern with meaning or meaninglessness need not be the concealed lacuna into which all attempts to approach minimalism are fated to fall. Rather, I would suggest that the intelligent approach of minimalism towards minimum involves a disengagement of meaning. Now, this disengagement is obviously not something which can be achieved easily. It has already been suggested that to escape the veil of meaning which constitutes reality is impossible. There can therefore be no conscious decision on the part of those who construct the discourses which surround minimalism to disengage meaning. What is required, then, is something in the structure of the minimalist work (or unworking) that operates, irrespective of the intentions of those involved in the discourse, to disengage meaning. It is this *something* which I hope to demonstrate as the Minimalist Sublime and the radical nature of the minimalist object, and particularly the literary object.

## MAPPING

### I.

I use the term *mapping* in a very specific sense, recalling the sea-faring Renaissance explorer mapping a shoreline for the first time. These explorers had no recourse to satellite technology or any of today's modern methods of mapping. Every cartographic inscription, was, for them, a new one. Now I cannot claim the same innocence, since nihilism, minimum and minimalism (or

<sup>23</sup> I would like to draw the reader's attention to the fact that minimalism is written here with an upper-case *m*, as Minimalism, referring thus to the sanctioned and critically recognised movement in art.

rather, historical Minimalism) are fairly well-documented, inasmuch as such purposefully evasive terms can be. However, in attempting to determine to what extent the concept of minimum and Minimalism coincide, and whether or not it is appropriate to consider Minimalism and minimalism a singular term, I attempt to recall this naïvety. For it is into the face of the utterly alien which this exercise in mapping must ultimately lead, and as such, a radical insecurity is as pointless as a zealous confidence.

Traditionally Minimalism has been associated with a certain radicalism<sup>24</sup>. It has also been accused of being mediocre and, at the hands of certain formalist critics, even bad art<sup>25</sup>. Minimalist music has had a similar reception: Strickland reports how La Monte Young's lecturer refused to grade his *Trio* (which has since acquired beatified status)<sup>26</sup> and how "during a 1988 performance...people still walked out on Young's work"<sup>27</sup>. Minimalist literature fared little better. Hallett reports that John Aldridge labeled the minimalists "talentless albeit technically proficient...writers"<sup>28</sup>. It is possible to compile massive volumes chronicling such reactions, but the point here is to demonstrate the unwillingness of the contemporary aesthetic consumer to acknowledge the viability of radical reduction in the arts, and even less, the inevitability of human finitude.

This radical tendency, which has resulted in a great deal of controversy and critico-theoretical debate, emerges perhaps most clearly in the work of the historical Minimalists (that is, Minimalism as an artistic movement). However, it resides much deeper than in the limitations of an historical movement, in what may be described as a philisophico-aesthetic reductionist trend – dynamic and continuing within the work of art. It is in light of this trend that Vattimo is able to assert that "the accomplished nihilist has understood that nihilism is his or her sole opportunity"<sup>29</sup>, although his identification of this nihilism with "a fictionalized experience of

<sup>24</sup>This radicalism may be construed from Strickland's description of its "once-outrageous vocabulary". (Strickland, E. 1993. *Minimalism: Origins*. p4). A similar tendency is remarked upon in Colpitt, who suggests that art critics were unable "to deal with the radical new [Minimalist] work", which she claims is often used as an explanation as to why Minimalists were keen to express theories concerning their art. (Colpitt, F. 1990. *Minimal Art: The Critical Perspective*. pp4-5).

<sup>25</sup>Colpitt, F. 1990. *Minimal Art: The Critical Perspective*. p125.

<sup>26</sup>Strickland, E. 1993. *Minimalism: Origins*. p121.

<sup>27</sup>*Ibid*. p122.

<sup>28</sup>Hallett, C.W. 1999. *Minimalism and the Short Story: Raymond Carver, Amy Hempel and Mary Robison*. p3.

<sup>29</sup>Vattimo, G. 1988. *The End of Modernity: Nihilism and Hermeneutics in Post-Modern Culture*. p19.

reality which is also our only possibility of freedom”<sup>30</sup> is highly dubious, since in what way is this any different from the current fictions of reality constructed through the discourse of the Subject?

Nonetheless, it is significant to note a similar dynamic urgency in both Minimalism and Vattimo’s nihilism. It is in the inscription of Minimalism in an urgency similar to Vattimo’s call for accomplishment, that the paradox of the artistic Movement becomes intolerable, and requires a semantic substitution of Movement for movement – that is, a methodical search for the limits of the veil, to recall the metaphor, rather than a blind running in circles, as the wind of annihilation blows the veil this way and that, and we stumble eternally in a vain attempt to grab hold of it.

## II.

Two of Minimalism’s most respected critics, Frances Colpitt and Kenneth Baker, begin their respective accounts as follows:

*Minimal art describes abstract, geometric painting and sculpture executed in the United States in the 1960s*<sup>31</sup>.

*Think of ‘Minimalism’ as the name not of an artistic style but of a historical moment, a brief outbreak of critical thought and invention in the cavalcade of postwar America*<sup>32</sup>.

In contrast to these vigorous limitations of time and space, Edward Strickland suggests a far more liberal chronology:

*[Minimalism] is in a sense transhistorical, but to discuss it as an artistic movement...requires some chronological framework if it is to have any meaning at all as a cultural phenomenon. To call the builders of Stonehenge Minimalists is to evaporate the term; on the other hand, to date Minimal art from the 1960s is rather like dating British Romantic poetry from Tennyson*<sup>33</sup>.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.* p29.

<sup>31</sup> Colpitt, F. 1990. *Minimal Art: The Critical Perspective*. p1.

<sup>32</sup> Baker, K. 1987. *Minimalism: Art of Circumstance*. p9.

<sup>33</sup> Strickland, E. 1993. *Minimalism: Origins*. p4.

Now, these three definitions provoke a necessary examination of the role of the critic or theorist of art. The most obvious function of criticism (or critical theory) is to present, within discourse, or the System of the Subject, a pattern of meaning designed to grant both the specialist and non-specialist a greater appreciation of the artistic idea or product. In such a promotion of meaning, the critic does not essentially differ from any other person, indeed from any other information-processing system<sup>34</sup>, since our universal position<sup>35</sup> within the System of the Subject is also always a position within the assumption of meaningful discourse. What the critic can legitimately claim is a particular concern with constructing systems within which meanings may be examined. One of the dominant among these critically constructed systems emerges in the idea of the artistic *School* or *Movement* – the active and constructive grouping (or projection) of works demonstrating similarities of various kinds into a unifying and often (sadly) singularising conceptual category.

The idea of the Movement has several advantages. Firstly, it enables comparative access to gradual trends and sudden shifts in aesthetic production and theory and may make the postulation of reasons for these changes simpler, and could also serve a predictive function. The idea of the Movement often offers a practical (although ethically dubious) ideological tool which may be deployed to foster certain attitudes, allegiances and oppositions.

But there remains something highly paradoxical in the idea, although many would argue that it is a necessary paradox. The study and discipline of semiotics have demonstrated that structures of some kind are highly beneficial in discourse, arguably indispensable<sup>36</sup>. However, when these boundaries become confining and serve no purpose other than an oversimplification of the terms

<sup>34</sup> It is quite possible to consider non-human information processing systems as producing meaning as profound as any person. This is not to suggest that the human is reducible to a human machine, which renowned system theorist Bartelanffy sees as one of the “dangers of this new development...[in which we are] not concerned with people but with ‘systems’; man becomes replaceable and expendable”. (Von Bartelanffy, L. 1968. *General Systems Theory*. p10). Rather, I make this analogy to demonstrate how meaning is inescapable and that discourse, or the System of the Subject, acts as the principal condition of reality.

<sup>35</sup> And this is probably the only position I am willing to describe as universal.

<sup>36</sup> Jonathan Culler, for example, claims that “in attempting to describe the literary work, ‘structuralists’ deploy various theoretical discourses...then critical attention comes to focus...on the conditions of signification, the different sorts of structures and processes involved in the production of meaning”. (Culler, J. 1983. *On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism After Structuralism*. p20). Within the System of the Subject (discourse), a common focus on the structures underlying a work introduces often contrasting (but not necessarily conflicting) discourses. Consequently the theorist or critic is able to arrive at certain ideas concerning the role of a particular work in an otherwise overwhelming clamour of subjects.

which they initially sought to elucidate, they become problematic. In the case of Minimalism, there are several problems with the identification of the Movement which require elaboration before we are able to continue an examination of the relationship between Minimalism, minimalism and minimum.

The first and central problem is that the categorisation of a Movement as such, almost always occurs *post facto*, which would imply the artificial imposition of boundaries concerning time and space, and which (boundaries) attempt to present the Movement as incontestable historical fact. This can be clearly observed in the case of Minimalism, where, according to Strickland, some of the most minimal of the aesthetic products of the last century were created either before or after the 1960s, the period Colpitt isolates in her discussion of Minimalism<sup>37</sup>. In the case of Minimalist literature (or that literature which has subsequently been defined as Minimalist) the movement is inaugurated only in 1970 with Joan Didion's *Play It As It Lays*<sup>38</sup>. Raymond Carver, although his stories had been published since the early 1960s, only released his first collection in 1976<sup>39</sup>. According to Hallett, "minimalism as a definable literary style seems to have emerged as part of the phenomenon seen as 'the renaissance of short fiction...in American literature in the 1980s'"<sup>40</sup>, but it is evident that Alain Robbe-Grillet, whose efforts foreshadowed both Minimalist writers and visual artists<sup>41</sup>, had been considering radical reduction since the 1950s (and his writing is, ironically, more minimalist than any of the canonised Minimalists).

In terms of space, Baker's restriction of Minimalism to America<sup>42</sup> seems to be as absurd as Colpitt's rigid restrictions of time. The Movement, as such, is clearly already underway in the work of Robbe-Grillet in France, and I will subsequently argue that Beckett's connections to minimum – regardless whether one traces these to Ireland or France – are far greater than any

<sup>37</sup> For example, Strickland notes how the most austere and reductive of all twentieth century artists, Ad Reinhardt produced minimalist works between 1940 and his death in 1967, dispelling the notion that Minimalism can be rigidly chronologically restricted with any accuracy. (Strickland, E. 1993. *Minimalism: Origins*. p40). He later claims that "if Reinhardt's...work does not qualify as Minimalist, the term has little meaning other than as a journalistic trendmarker". (*Ibid.* p22). Similarly, Strickland reports the much-celebrated Minimalist composer Philip Glass saying "'for me, minimalism was over by 1974'" (*Ibid.* p234), clearly moving beyond Colpitt's restriction.

<sup>38</sup> Strickland identifies this novel as "the prototype of the Minimalist novel". (*Ibid.* p12).

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.* p12.

<sup>40</sup> Hallett, C.W. 1999. *Minimalism and the Short Story: Raymond Carver, Amy Hempel, and Mary Robison*. p9.

<sup>41</sup> This connection is made apparent in Strickland's association of Stella's work with Robbe-Grillet's nonreferential novel. (Strickland, E. 1993. *Minimalism: Origins*. p106).

<sup>42</sup> Baker, K. 1987. *Minimalism: Art of Circumstance*. p9.

American Minimalist's. Perhaps the best example to illustrate the incapacity of the idea of the Movement is in relation to Anton Chekhov's short stories, which demonstrate a clear attempt on the part of the writer to reduce language to its simplest, meaningful elements<sup>43</sup>. What disqualifies Chekhov from the Minimalist movement has nothing to do with his writing, but rather with the fact that he is already *in* a Movement, he is a Russian Realist<sup>44</sup> or Naturalist<sup>45</sup> of the late nineteenth century, and so the destructive restrictions of Minimalism as a Movement have resulted in the limitation of his role to that of an historical precursor, regardless of the content of his work. The restrictions of time and space impose, in this way, a false linear historical causality, which very seldom proves to be as reducible as the hegemonic pressure to conform (embodied in the idea of Movement) suggests.

In addition to the problems concerning time and space, the canonisation of a Movement requires the assumption that ideas can be indissolubly linked by surface commonalities, with the result that important differences which may often define the uniqueness and importance of a particular contribution are downplayed. It is perhaps very telling that many of those artists who were barricaded behind the generalising banner of Minimalism objected to the classification. Strickland reports how the now-celebrated Minimalists<sup>46</sup>, Morris and Judd, objected to the term and that composer Steve Reich "preferred the term *musique répétitive*" (of course, one could not simply employ the English term, *repetitive music*)<sup>47</sup>. In literature, the term was rejected by both Carver and Hempel<sup>48</sup>.

<sup>43</sup> Consider Chekhov's short story, *Questions and Answers*:

*QUESTIONS: 1) How can you tell what she's thinking? 2) What can an illiterate man read? 3) Does the wife love me? 4) When can you sit and stand at the same time? ANSWERS: 1) Search her premises. 2) A heart. 3) Whose wife? 4) When you're sitting in jail.*

(Chekhov, A. 2002. 'Questions and Answers'. In *The Undiscovered Chekhov: Fifty-One New Stories*. Translated by P. Constantine. p194). Chekhov's use of language is clearly remarkably economic, yet incredibly insightful. That Chekhov was a master of probing the human condition through incisive, acerbic accounts of logical flaws, the innate ambiguity of words and the probability of miscommunication is demonstrated in this short story. In many respects, Chekhov's writing explores precisely the same problems Hallett suggests as characteristic of the writing of the American Minimalists. (See Hallett, C.W. 1999. *Minimalism and the Short Story: Raymond Carver, Amy Hempel, and Mary Robison*. pp25, 28-31). It is difficult to tell how Hallett's identification of "a plotless design...a delicate yet intricate pattern of tone...an objective presentation which...distances the narrative voice...and the trivial, mundane, and middle-class as subject" (*Ibid.* p31) as typical characteristics of Chekhov's short stories, differ from those demonstrated in much of Carver's (particularly early) writing.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.* p23.

<sup>45</sup> Fraser, G.S. 1964. *The Modern Writer and His World*. pp51-52.

<sup>46</sup> And we must remain acutely aware of the irony of this term here.

<sup>47</sup> Strickland, E. 1993. *Minimalism: Origins*. p23.

<sup>48</sup> Hallett, C.W. 1999. *Minimalism and the Short Story: Raymond Carver, Amy Hempel, and Mary Robison*. pp8-9.

Now, as Hallett suggests, this rejection may be largely the result of the extensive negative critical attention Minimalism received<sup>49</sup>. However, equally plausible is the suggestion that many of the artists involved simply could not associate with one another's work, and consequently rejected the forced association implied in the canonisation of the movement. Robert Morris' work, for example, is often described as having a distinctly Dadaist sensibility<sup>50</sup> (thrusting into artistic space objects which could arguably exist in real space as functional items), in contrast to a sculptor like Carl Andre, whose floor-pieces "succeed[...] in squeezing out sculptural space to the point of two dimensionality"<sup>51</sup>, since their setting into the actual space of the gallery floor effectively dispenses with the base<sup>52</sup> and the expectation of three-dimensionality related to the work. A sculptor like Dan Flavin, on the other hand, experimented with light, effectively "dispers[ing] space"<sup>53</sup>, since if the light is seen as the principal space of the sculpture, it exists in the intangibly three-dimensional, and is confined only in terms of the limits of the space in which it is displayed. Similar examples of profound difference can be sited between the music of La Monte Young and Terry Riley, for example.

Although Strickland's statement that, for the cultural phenomenon of Minimalism to have value... But the point here is that statements such as Strickland's – "the first and foremost criterion for my description of the work under discussion as Minimalist...is its appearance as opposed to anyone's pronouncements about it"<sup>54</sup> – should not be blindly conflated with the Minimalist aesthetic position expressed by painter Frank Stella in an interview with Bruce Glaser – "My painting is based on the fact that only what can be seen there *is* there...What you see is what you see"<sup>55</sup> – in order to arrive at a *true* minimalism. In other words, the fact that appearance *is* reality, in Minimalist terms, while it implies a similar focus on the objecthood of the artwork, does not insist that all these art-objects are identical in their internal and external relationships, which may be assumed by too narrow a reading of Minimalism and the imposition of inflexible boundaries in the concept of a movement.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.* pp8-9.

<sup>50</sup> Colpitt, F. 1990. *Minimal Art: The Critical Perspective*. p12.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.* p39.

<sup>52</sup> The base of a sculpture traditionally sets it apart from normal space and is a marker for the sculpture as artwork.

<sup>53</sup> Colpitt, F. 1990. *Minimal Art: The Critical Perspective*. p82.

<sup>54</sup> Strickland, E. 1993. *Minimalism: Origins*. p8.

<sup>55</sup> Frank Stella. In Glaser, B. 1966. 'Questions to Stella and Judd'. In *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology*. 1968. Edited by G. Battcock. p158.

In current debate it is necessary to proceed with great caution regarding the concept of the artistic Movement. The reported “death of the academic”<sup>56</sup>, to my mind, does not necessarily imply the death of thinking, philosophy, theory or criticism, as such, but more a necessary rethinking of those phenomena we once considered certain. One of these phenomena must surely be the idea of the movement, which operates in such a way as to limit rather than allow progression. The “irreducible plurality of language games”<sup>57</sup> West notes in Lyotard’s theory of the postmodern, reverberates strongly through this argument, since the idea of the fracturing of metanarratives is also the fragmentation of the artistic movement (as a metanarrative). In this state of flux, it is precisely the semantic and dynamic sense of movement which is restored to the artistic movement. If progress is still possible, then it is the delineation of impermanence, flux and the inevitability of death and obliteration<sup>58</sup> towards which we must progress. It is the same progress both Bauman<sup>59</sup> and Vattimo<sup>60</sup> optimistically predict is enabled by the currency of postmodernity, although these arguments may differ in many respects.

Although Strickland’s statement that, for the cultural phenomenon of Minimalism to have value, it requires some chronological restriction<sup>61</sup> is valid, I question the solidity of the system on which Minimalism’s cultural currency is established. Essentially, this is a re-presentation of my central argument. Minimalism, represents, or should represent, the active delineation of *minimum*, the least possible before annihilation, and hence occurs as an attempt in aesthetics to delineate human finitude. Thus, a clear distinction needs to be made between minimalism (that is, the use of the lower-case *m*), which is this same attempt at delineation, and Minimalism (with the use of the upper-case *M*) as an historical movement, the implicit stasis of which is highly problematic, as I hope I have demonstrated adequately above. Because nihilism always presents itself as the utterly alien *other*, the unknowable other, it seems impossible that it can ever be reached and

<sup>56</sup> Storey, J. 2001. *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: An Introduction*. p151.

<sup>57</sup> West, D. 1996. *An Introduction to Continental Philosophy*. p200.

<sup>58</sup> As Critchley suggests. See note 7.

<sup>59</sup> See Bauman, Z. 1995. *Life in Fragments: Essays in Postmodern Morality*. p27.

<sup>60</sup> According to Vattimo’s commentary on Heidegger, “metaphysics...is not something which can ‘be put aside like an opinion’...metaphysics...may be lived as an opportunity or as the possibility of a change by virtue of which both metaphysics and the *Ge-Stell* [world of technology] are twisted in a direction which is not foreseen by their own essence, and yet is connected to it”. (Vattimo, G. 1988. *The End of Modernity: Nihilism and Hermeneutics in Post-Modern Culture*. pp172-173).

<sup>61</sup> See note 32.



overcome, in the way an artistic movement claims to be able to place itself in opposition to whatever else opposes it, as a final, established and closed system. Rather, it is in the movement of minimalism, that is, a transhistorical and *unfinished* (always unfinished) approach to minimum, that I suspect we may find an effective method of delineating that terrifying and ineffable alterity of nothing which seems to torment human existence.

However, I am getting ahead of myself. Since the powers of time and space are undeniably present in every movement we undertake, it seems only proper that I (the comical and hopelessly inept cartographer) complete my mapping of the past before I propose a new course. In what follows I will briefly attempt to sketch the essential concerns of Minimalism as it occurred and occurs today, before attempting to restore to the Movement its dynamism, its movement.

### III.

The whole Minimalist endeavour, particularly in the visual arts, was accompanied by a virtual explosion of theory<sup>62</sup>. However, as Strickland emphasises<sup>63</sup>, it is important not to rely too heavily on these critical and theoretical pronouncements at the expense of the actual works produced under the Minimalist banner. A responsible approach, therefore, has to achieve a balance between the two, and it is such a balance for which I strive.

Most discussions begin with an historical contextualisation of Minimalism as an aesthetic reaction to the often overburdening demands of Abstract Expressionism<sup>64</sup>. Although there is undoubtedly a connection here, explaining Minimalism's frequent classification as a radical or

<sup>62</sup> Colpitt notes that "many Minimal artists...devoted a good portion of their time and creative energies to explaining their ideas, examining broad, theoretical issues normally left to art historians and aestheticians". (Colpitt, F. 1990. *Minimal Art: The Critical Perspective*. p101).

<sup>63</sup> See note 54.

<sup>64</sup> For example, Kenneth Baker notes how "American Minimalism looks like a classicizing reaction against the Romantic exuberance and self-celebration of 1950s Abstract Expressionism". (Baker, K. 1988. *Minimalism: Art of Circumstance*. p13). Although there are many problems with Baker's over-simplistic use of certain terms, his discussion is nonetheless relevant. (See, also *Ibid.* pp29-31). The connections between Abstract Expressionism and Minimalism are discussed further by Strickland (Strickland, E. 1993. *Minimalism: Origins*. p24) and Colpitt (Colpitt, F. 1990. *Minimal Art: The Critical Perspective*. p1).

counter-cultural movement to some extent<sup>65</sup>, our present concern lies less in historical categorisation than in those characteristics which are specific to the history of Minimalism in particular, since we have already taken the (dubious) decision to isolate it so squarely.

Probably the most important characteristic of all Minimalist art – and if there were one characteristic which could be used as the binding quality for the definition of Minimalism as a movement, it would be this one – is the condition of *objecthood*. Colpitt provides the following definition: “to refer to the work of art as an object...meant that it was a nonrepresentational, concrete, and real thing existing in the world, without illusion or formal prototype”<sup>66</sup>.

Amongst the techniques employed by Minimalist visual artists to achieve this objecthood were the reduction of external and internal relations of the artwork in question. The internal relational elements of art “specify the ordering of pictorial or sculptural parts”<sup>67</sup> within the work itself. In Minimalism, the emphasis on nonrelational internal composition stipulates that “individual parts and elements play a subordinate role to the overall form of the work. It is not that elements are necessarily eliminated, but rather that the idiosyncratic or dynamic relationships between them are expended”<sup>68</sup>. The increased use of symmetry in place of the usual concerns for balance mark much Minimalist painting. Frank Stella’s *Delaware Crossing* (1961), for example, uses a chevron design which, because it is used perfectly symmetrically and pointing inward, serves not to complicate the painting, but to focus the perceiver’s attention onto the centre of the canvas, reinforcing the singularity of the art-object. Similarly, the black monochrome canvases<sup>69</sup> of Ad Reinhardt<sup>70</sup>, which Strickland describes as “the most austere reductivism imaginable”<sup>71</sup>, contain no parts which may relate to each other, demonstrating the monochrome’s ability both to provide a sense of unity as well as to reinforce the objecthood of the minimalist work.

<sup>65</sup> See notes 23-26.

<sup>66</sup> Colpitt, F. 1990. *Minimal Art: The Critical Perspective*. p107.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.* p41.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.* p43.

<sup>69</sup> One could also include the monochromes of painters Frank Stella, Robert Mangold and many others in this nonrelational category.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.* p43.

<sup>71</sup> Strickland, E. 1993. *Minimalism: Origins*. p44.

In Minimalist sculpture, Donald Judd explicitly stated that “the parts are unrelational...when you start relating parts...you’re assuming you have a vague whole...and definite parts, which is all screwed up, because you should have a definite whole and maybe no parts, or very few”<sup>72</sup>. What Minimalist sculptors were concerned with, then, was the creation of autonomous, self-contained objects<sup>73</sup>. If there was more than one part, as in Judd’s serial sculptures which often included identical forms repeated in different materials or colours, these remained nonrelational in the sense that their relationship (to each other) is one of duplication, and their differences do not imply a dynamism.

In Minimalist music, similar traits are observable. La Monte Young’s *Trio*, for example, uses a miniature arch-form<sup>74</sup> which is structured so as to allude to minimum differentiation between its parts, using the smallest possible number of notes in that particular setting, thus the strictest symmetry, in musical terms. A similar observation can be made of Steve Reich’s phasing technique (first used by Terry Riley), which involves two (or more) instruments/tape recorders beginning an identical melody in unison and gradually shifting out of phase at specific intervals creating a series of unexpected and (if I may express so personal an opinion) exciting melodic and pulse variations. In the case of Reich’s phasing, the sense of nonrelationalism is reinforced in the active process of the composition – the phasing technique implies the compositions’s self-productive position – where the two (or more) identical fragments evolve so gradually that the relation between the parts, although the temporal displacements involved technically constitute new relationships, appears to be negligible. The composition is experienced as a unitary whole.

The internal concerns of literary Minimalism prove quite different from those espoused in either music or art. According to Hallett, Minimalist writing employs a “blunt, uncomplicated prose...[and] lack of editorial commentary”<sup>75</sup>, which would, indeed, suggest a definite reduction in the internal structural relations from those governing many earlier fictions. She further maintains that Minimalist writers show a “preference for discontinuous devices, arbitrary and

<sup>72</sup> Donald Judd. In Glaser, B. 1966. ‘Questions to Stella and Judd’. In *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology*. 1968. Edited by G. Battcock. pp153-154.

<sup>73</sup> A view expressed by sculptor Robert Morris. (Strickland, E. 1993. *Minimalism: Origins*. p267).

<sup>74</sup> Strickland provides an account of the form, performance and reception of the *Trio*. *Ibid*. pp119-121.

<sup>75</sup> Hallett, C.W. 1999. *Minimalism and the Short Story: Raymond Carver, Amy Hempel, and Mary Robison*. p13.

open endings, interplay of surface details, narrative omissions, and anti-linear plots”<sup>76</sup>. Yet, there seems to be a certain paradox at work. If it can be maintained that Minimalism can be asserted as the search for minimum, it follows that the nonrelativity of the internal elements of the work are vital for its success in approaching objecthood, in attempting to escape what was earlier called the System of the Subject. Yet Hallett notes in the canonised Minimalists an “interplay of surface details”, which would seem to suggest that, far from Judd’s ideal of few, if any, internal relations, the Minimalist writer seems to thrive on disguised complexity.

In examining Raymond Carver’s short story, *One More Thing*, this interplay is quite evident. The domestic squalor and discord is overtly stated in the words, “she came home from work and found L.D. drunk and being abusive to Rae”<sup>77</sup>, but several suggestive structural patterns later allude to the fact that the seriousness of the situation far exceeds the blandness with which it is presented. The abusive male character, L.D., twice hits the table violently<sup>78</sup> and later, as he leaves, we are told that “he drew himself up and faced them. They moved back”<sup>79</sup>, which would suggest a genuine fear, quite possibly resultant of a progressive pattern of extreme violence which is not directly alluded to in the narrative, aside from a brief mention that “He’s violent. Get out of the kitchen before he hurts you”<sup>80</sup>. These implications are effected by an interplay of internal structural relations and contrived exclusions. Of course, the case could be stated in a much simpler way: Minimalist prose is bound by the conventional principles of narrative, and, although it may subvert some of these, there is no attempt to dispense with narrative altogether. Since narrative is comprised of complex interactive structural elements<sup>81</sup>, for Minimalist writing to be nonrelational in any way which could satisfy the demands stipulated in the visual arts and music, it would have to abandon many of the literary conventions Hallett seems to assert are fundamental to it.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.* p16.

<sup>77</sup> Carver, R. 1989. ‘One More Thing’. In *Where I’m Calling From*. p147.

<sup>78</sup> “He hit the table with the flat of his hand. The ashtray jumped. His glass fell on its side and rolled off” (*Ibid.* p148). “He slammed down his hand on the table”. (*Ibid.* p149).

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.* p151.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.* p148.

<sup>81</sup> Specifically in systems such as Barthes’. (Barthes, R. 1977. ‘Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narratives’. In *Image, Music, Text*. Translated by S. Heath).

To return to the external relations of the artwork – the ways in which the artwork exists in space and time and in relation to the perceiver – several specific techniques are observable. In music, the medium is particularly problematic, since, of all the media of art, sound is probably the most abstract and consequently most resistant to translation into concrete terms of objecthood. Perhaps the best example to illustrate the tendency of Minimalist music in this regard is found in Alvin Lucier's *I am sitting in a room*:

*I am sitting in a room, different from the one you are in now. I am recording the sound of my speaking voice, and I am going to play it back into the room again and again until the resonant frequencies of the room reinforce themselves so that any semblance of my speech, with perhaps the exception of rhythm, is destroyed. What you will hear then are the natural resonant frequencies of the room articulated by speech. I regard this activity not so much as the demonstration of a physical fact but more as a way to smooth out any irregularities my speech might have<sup>82</sup>.*

Lucier's composition ranks amongst the best examples of Minimalist tape music. The procedure involves the recording of the text quoted (in full) above, which is then looped and recorded at the same time, with the result that the overlaying of the recorded text eventually ends in white noise – which is precisely what the text claims it will do (and hence is auto-reflexive and auto-productive). The external relational issues in this most extreme form of self-reflexive Minimalism are therefore intimately related to issues of process. As Strickland notes, “in its ambient conversion of speech modules into drone frequencies, it [*I am sitting in a room*] unites the two principal structural components of Minimalist music in general”<sup>83</sup>. In its repetitive modular development, Lucier's composition (and many compositions of Steve Reich, Terry Riley and Philip Glass<sup>84</sup> which employ similar techniques) seeks to present the listener with the simplest constituent elements of music, of sound as an object. As the looped repetitions intensify, so their specific parts dissolve into oneness, and white noise becomes the pure sonic object, ultimately attempting to disengage the listener<sup>85</sup>.

<sup>82</sup> Alvin Lucier. Libretto for *I am sitting in a room*. (*Ibid.* p199).

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.* p199.

<sup>84</sup> It is worth mentioning the particular advancements in modular repetition which Philip Glass introduced. Glass began to use additive and subtractive modules around 1967. A hypothetical module could consist of the notes C-D-C. In additive modular form, the following sequence could then occur: C-D-C-E, C-D-C-E-C, C-D-C-E-C-F, etc. A subtractive version of the same modular pattern would simply reverse the process. Strickland reports that, “Glass's subsequent pieces [after 1967] were constructed entirely out of this sort of modular repetition, additive/subtractive structure, and figural displacement. His conclusion is a subversion of the entire narrative of western music”. (*Ibid.* p213).

<sup>85</sup> Admittedly, there are many other complex issues involved in the external relational aspects of Minimalist music, but for the sake of the present study I have purposefully excluded these. Very important, for example, would be

External relational issues serve, in many respects, as portals to several of the other significant philosophico-aesthetic conditions for objecthood in the visual arts. Colpitt describes these concerns as “a new focus on relationships struck across and within the space between the spectator and the object of perception”<sup>86</sup>.

A chief concern of Minimalist artists was the idea of *presence*, that the art-object is able to convey clearly a sense of its objecthood and a status separate from its environment. Colpitt maintains that “there are no exhibited, formal clues to signal the existence of presence, since it is felt, *responded to*, rather than *recognised*”<sup>87</sup>. Evident in the concept of presence is a contract of sorts which exists between the Minimalist work and the perceiver. However, despite several claims to the contrary, Minimalist presence was never intended to engage some hazy metaphysical sense of Being. As Fried claims<sup>88</sup>, Minimalists “want[...] to achieve presence through objecthood, which requires a certain largeness of scale, rather than through size alone”<sup>89</sup>. What a sense of Minimalist *presence* requires, then, is a certain acknowledgement of the work within the time and space of the perceiver which draws maximum attention to the work. In Minimalist music, although the concerns are somewhat different, presence is conveyed through a sense of immediacy achieved by presenting extremely simple works and by use of sustained drones or repetition. In this way, Minimalist composers are able to reduce the time between the perceiver’s reception of the music and consequent perception, processing and reflection. Because there is little variation in the music – and when there is, it tends to be a gradual evolution – the perceiver is able to experience the composition as being present, existing in the same time as the apparent immediacy of its perception.

Related to this rather vague demand for presence in Minimalist visual arts, are extremely stringent demands concerning the scale of the work. As suggested by Fried, the issue of scale is intimately related to the sense of presence conveyed by the work in question. “Like presence, the

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issues of the space in which the music was performed and the acoustics involved, and related to this, the duration of the composition and the various psycho-acoustic elements involved.

<sup>86</sup> Colpitt, F. 1990. *Minimal Art: The Critical Perspective*. p67.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.* p70.

<sup>88</sup> He refers here specifically to the work of Morris, but the statement holds true for the majority of Minimalist art.

<sup>89</sup> Fried, M. 1967. ‘Art and Objecthood’. In *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology*. 1968. Edited by G. Battcock. p126.

ingredients of scale cannot be *prescribed*<sup>90</sup>, but it was generally agreed upon that the appropriate scale for a work, “the relationship of the spectator to the object”<sup>91</sup>, was one that maximised the sense of the presence of the actual object, in other words, which drew attention to the object-status of the work in question. Tony Smith’s response when questioned about the scale of his sculpture, *Die*, perhaps best summarises the indefiniteness and yet insistence of the Minimalist demands in this regard:

*Q: Why didn't you make it larger so that it would loom over the observer?*

*A: I was not making a monument.*

*Q: Then why didn't you make it smaller so that the observer could see over the top?*

*A: I was not making an object*<sup>92</sup>.

Interestingly, Smith claims not to be involved in making objects, and yet, the condition of objecthood is the very pivotal condition of Minimalism. Perhaps what Smith was trying to indicate in this case was a counteraction to Fried’s criticism of the theatricality implicit in the condition of objecthood. According to Fried, theatricality involves “the beholder know[ing] himself...as *subject* to the impassive object on the wall or floor”<sup>93</sup> which results in the claim that the Minimalist object “*depends on* the beholder, is *incomplete* without him”<sup>94</sup>. By asserting that he was not creating an object, it is plausible to suggest that Smith was really counteracting this supposed theatricality Fried was suggesting. Smith’s concern with the appropriate scale for the work in question attempts to elevate the Minimalist object to a status equal<sup>95</sup> – not superior or inferior – to that of the perceiver. If Minimalists were successful in this respect, which I believe they were, it is difficult to comprehend how this theatricality Fried refers to can be achieved.

In Minimalist literature, the question of scale is particularly problematic. Hallett proposes a parallel poetics which exists between Minimalism and the short story, claiming that “both minimalism and the short story privilege the singular, focus on surface images, and speak

<sup>90</sup> Colpitt, F. 1990. *Minimal Art: The Critical Perspective*. p77.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.* p75.

<sup>92</sup> Tony Smith. In Fried, M. 1967. ‘Art and Objecthood’. In *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology*. 1968. Edited by G. Battcock. p128.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.* p128.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.* p140.

<sup>95</sup> It may be argued that this equal status results in the reversion of the Minimalist object to the System of the Subject, since, if it is to exist on the same terms as the perceiver, it is implicitly re-empowered as an active Subject, since it maintains this equality itself, even though it may initially have been dependent on various Minimalist techniques to achieve this status. This paradoxical position will be developed in subsequent argumentation.

sparingly...both have been subjected to the worst sort of literary bias: accused of lacking capacity and substance”<sup>96</sup>. It is precisely in identifying this “worst literary bias”, that Hallett’s investigation, I believe, moves away from minimalism. In fact, much of Hallett’s argument is based on an attempt to reinvest Minimalist literature with some dignity and respect, hence her identification of Minimalism as “concrete details which reflect complex states of being and which correlate with elements of the universal human condition”<sup>97</sup>.

What Hallett proposes is very far from the ontological neutrality which was sought by both Minimalist composers and artists. In terms of scale, it is difficult to marry Hallett’s emphasis on brevity as a means of containing compressed (and hence Minimalist) meaning with concerns of scale in the visual arts or music. While artists emphasise an appropriate scale in order to deduce maximum presence and a sense of nonrelational unity in the art-object, Minimalist writers’ concerns seem to be considerably less rigorous, governed by some vague notion that either a tiny or monumental scale will result in an increased potency of their message and some (rather bizarre) connection to a mysterious “universal human condition”. In other words, while the scale of Minimalist art and music emphasises the objecthood of the work in question, Minimalist literature’s view of scale reinforces its position within the System of the Subject (which again ties in with the fact that Minimalist prose makes no real attempt to escape the representational and illusional [allusional?] shackles of narrative).

In attempting to evoke the optimal presence of the art-object, Minimalists further insisted that their work was totally nonreferential – “released from representation, they further remove themselves from allusion by being in themselves new and unique objects, referring to nothing (except, some might argue, to the theories upon which they are based)”<sup>98</sup>. In sculpture and painting this resulted in an overt rejection of the ideas of traditional abstraction, “art whose forms have a basis in the real world”<sup>99</sup>. Similarly, anthropomorphism (“the appearance of human feelings in things that are inanimate or not human, usually as if those feelings are the essential

<sup>96</sup> Hallett, C.W. 1999. *Minimalism and the Short Story: Raymond Carver, Amy Hempel, and Mary Robison*. pp20-21.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.* p47.

<sup>98</sup> Colpitt, F. 1990. *Minimal Art: The Critical Perspective*. p102.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.* p101.



nature of the thing described”<sup>100</sup>) was “displaced in this art (Minimalism) by the nonanthropomorphic quality of ‘presence’”<sup>101</sup>. Minimalist art is characterised by a vigorous eschewal of mimesis – this is implied in the professed ‘realness’ of Minimalist objecthood – and the substitution of geometry for the qualities which would normally be considered mimetic<sup>102</sup>. For Minimalists, the shapes of their works were therefore seen as geometric deduction rather than a mimesis of something preexistent.

This essential condition, implied by the dynamic combination of appropriate scale, presence and nonanthropomorphism, resulted in the ideal Minimalist work being entirely nonreferential to anything other than itself. Being nonreferential, the artwork is supposedly liberated within the System of the Object to be a pure object. As Richard Wollheim notes in reference to Minimalist art: “the identity of a work...resides in the actual stuff in which it consists”<sup>103</sup>, or in Fried's summation “the shape [art] is the object”<sup>104</sup>. The Minimalist aesthetic theory of the object implies that the art-object exists as a unitary whole, with a specific and autonomous status. It is thus not surprising to find that Robert Morris referred to his works as *unitary forms* and that Donald Judd described his sculptures as *specific objects*<sup>105</sup>.

Unity and wholeness were achieved in Minimalism by what may be awkwardly described as various surface techniques. In music, for example, the use of repetitive modules<sup>106</sup> drew attention to the fact that the constituent elements of the composition were, in fact, extremely limited and thus could be perceived as unifying the sense of wholeness in the composition. Similar techniques were deployed both in sculpture and painting. Donald Judd produced several serial sculptures, establishing repetition as a viable Minimalist sculptural tool. In painting this trend emerges most clearly in the *hard edge* painting of Ellsworth Kelly, which consists of repeated (usually) vertical bands or panels of highly contrasted colour, to which Judd ascribes “some...earlier purity, idealism, and oblique but directly descriptive reference to nature”<sup>107</sup>.

<sup>100</sup> Donald Judd. In Colpitt, F. 1990. *Minimal Art: The Critical Perspective*. p67.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.* p70.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.* p71.

<sup>103</sup> Wollheim, R. 1965. ‘Minimal Art’. In *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology*. 1968. Edited by G. Battcock. p391.

<sup>104</sup> Fried, M. 1967. ‘Art and Objecthood’. In *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology*. 1968. Edited by G. Battcock. p119.

<sup>105</sup> Quoted in Colpitt, F. 1990. *Minimal Art: The Critical Perspective*. p110.

<sup>106</sup> See note 84.

<sup>107</sup> Judd, D. 1975. *Complete Writings: 1959-1975*. p130.

Strickland highlights the unifying function of Kelly's repetition, which he associates with the immediacy of the inevitable contrasts of Kelly's panels<sup>108</sup>, and their significance in exploiting the effectiveness of replication within modular patterns of structural uniformity<sup>109</sup>.

Minimalist literature also makes use of repetition, but often to completely different ends. In Joan Didion's novel, *A Book of Common Prayer*<sup>110</sup>, repetition is used frequently to draw the reader's attention to specific phrases. For example, in the fourth chapter, the following modular repetition occurs: "the draining of the artificial lake did not go unremarked upon at the Jockey Club...Elena's resignation did not go unremarked upon at the Jockey Club...The presence...of this conspicuous *nortamericana* was not likely to go unremarked upon at the Jockey Club"<sup>111</sup>. However, this employment of repetition has nothing to do with the objecthood of the text<sup>112</sup>, since Didion's position is so clearly founded in the conventions of narrative. Rather, it is a rhetorical device used to draw attention to the (narrative) fact that "the Jockey Club is less than it seems"<sup>113</sup>, a reflection of the general situation in Boca Grande (the setting of the novel), a place which "defeated the imagination of even its first visitor"<sup>114</sup>.

A more satisfactorily Minimalist use of repetition may be found in L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poet Steve McCaffery's extended poem *Panopticon*. At the end of the third part the phrase "and

<sup>108</sup> Strickland, E. 1993. *Minimalism: Origins*. p73.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.* p70-71.

<sup>110</sup> I should mention that Joan Didion cannot be described as a Minimalist. This proves to be a limitation of her techniques. However there is a certain directness and reduction in her writing which makes it associable with Minimalist aesthetics.

<sup>111</sup> Didion, J. 1979. *A Book of Common Prayer*. p20.

<sup>112</sup> A similar use of repetition is encountered in the novels of Hemingway, whom Hallett identifies as a "stylistic genitor of contemporary minimalist prose" (Hallett, C.W. 1999. *Minimalism and the Short Story: Raymond Carver, Amy Hempel, and Mary Robison*. p37). Consider the following extract from *A Farewell to Arms*:

*then there was a flash, as a blast-furnace door is swung open, and a roar that started white and went red and on and on in a rushing wind. I tried to breathe but my breath would not come and I felt myself rush bodily out of myself and out and out and out and all the time bodily in the wind...The ground was torn up and in front of my head there was a splintered beam of wood. In the jolt of my head I heard somebody crying. I thought somebody was screaming. I tried to move but I could not move.*

(Hemingway, E. 1935. *A Farewell to Arms*. p46). Here, the repetition of certain words dramatically increases the 'reality effect' of his writing, the confusion which surrounds the entire explosion-incident which leaves the protagonist severely injured. Hemingway's use of motivic repetition and elaboration – such as the repetition, intertwining and consequent visual development of the "plain" and "trees" in the opening page of the novel (*Ibid.* p7) – display only a surface resemblance to Minimalist repetition, however, since it is more involved in narrative illusionism than in any process which could lead to the state of objecthood.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.* p20.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.* p11.

on”<sup>115</sup> is repeated no less than four hundred and forty times! Essentially, McCaffery’s deployment of the phrase, although it originally alludes to the previous content of the poem, becomes a prime example of how language repeated *can* be regarded in terms of Minimalist objecthood. By the time we reach the two hundredth repetition (assuming we chose to read these lines, rather than appreciate them in terms of a purely pictorial aesthetic – in which case language nonetheless still dissolves into a state of objecthood) the contents of the poem are far gone, and what the reader is left with is a self-reflexive literary object. The language does exactly what it says it will do – it goes on and on – and, in so doing, points to itself as an independent object which reinforces itself in the repetition of its autonomy.

Were it not for the nagging drone of Minimalist literary critics, the exercise in amateur cartography would be complete. However, from Hallett’s argument, it would appear that the concept of reduction (the different forms and nature of reduction) is central to Literary Minimalism. Consequently, I shall attempt to discuss, in some detail, the Minimalist use of reduction in the following paragraphs, particularly as it relates to literary discourse.

#### IV.

In the following extended quotation, Hallett identifies nine principal characteristics of Minimalist writing:

*1) a blunt, lean, apparently uncomplicated prose; 2) a compact prose that by individual artistic design effects a complex pattern of trope which expands from what first appear to be trivial matters into universal concerns; 3) more dialogue than exposition with no evident auctorial intrusion, and little, if any narrational intrusion; 4) non-heroic characters who resemble everyday people...; 5) a sense that all ‘action’ either appears to have occurred a while ago, or occurred just moments before the story began, or occurs later...; 6) implications of an existential, often absurd universe in which ‘real’ communication is impossible and action useless...; 7) a recognition that words are useless, for most things are unsayable; 8) a perception that time passes without resistance or that characters exists as an audience rather than as participants...; 9) a universe in which no one thing appears innately important, so all worth is artificially conferred, decided by individual values*<sup>116</sup>.

<sup>115</sup> McCaffery, S. 1994. From ‘Panopticon’. In *From the Other Side of the Century: A New American Poetry 1960-1990*. Edited by D. Messerli. pp1024-1025.

<sup>116</sup> Hallett, C.W. 1999. *Minimalism and the Short Story: Raymond Carver, Amy Hempel, and Mary Robison*. p25.

Although, in this specific quotation, Hallett does not explicitly mention reduction, several of her points imply a connection. In the first, the word “lean” points to a certain largeness which preceded this lean state, and “apparently uncomplicated” suggests a rather vague outward movement, both a prior and future state of complexity. Hallett’s emphasis on the expansion of the “complex pattern of trope” in the second point, together with the subversion of narrative time in points five and eight, suggest that Minimalist literature is intensely concerned with presenting a narrative world devoid of any excess and in which time is reduced to an essential necessity, an assumption rather than a reality.

Elsewhere, Hallett addresses the issue of reduction directly. She maintains that “the minimalist produces a partial version...contained in a space so carefully condensed that one must infer from the part exposed exactly what has been omitted, what lies beneath”<sup>117</sup>, later referring to Minimalist short stories quite bluntly as “containers of condensed meaning”<sup>118</sup>. Implicit in this imagery of condensation are the ideas of simplification and reduction. Yet significantly, Hallett’s model does not stipulate any sort of Minimalist objecthood, the condensed writing from this reduction resulting, instead, in a rarified account of the same mysterious “universal concerns” (waiting to explode forth from this condensed state) that Hallett identifies in the quotation above. In this poetics of “maximal exclusion of extraneous...words”, critics such as Saltzman are able to identify Minimalist writers as “diligent refiner[s] of sentences”<sup>119</sup>.

The issue of reduction is dealt with quite differently in the visual arts. Whereas Minimalist literature tends to view reduction as an imperative, perhaps the primary technique of producing these containers of “universal concerns”, Colpitt specifically states that “while simplicity *implies* an intentionally reductive process...it does not demand it. For many artists there is a difference between the conception of a work of art as simple and the process of reducing from complexity to arrive at that simplicity”<sup>120</sup>. It seems that the keyword to consider in Colpitt’s statement is “implies”, which is further emphasised through its italicisation. Not only does the word open up the possibility of the construction *usually, but not necessarily*, but it further suggests the inherent

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.* p9.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.* p11.

<sup>119</sup> Arthur M. Saltzman. In Hallett, C.W. 1999. *Minimalism and the Short Story: Raymond Carver, Amy Hempel, and Mary Robison*. p45.

<sup>120</sup> Colpitt, F. 1990. *Minimal Art: The Critical Perspective*. p114.

concerns of the perceiver, addressing the questions: ‘who or what implies?’; ‘to whom is this implication addressed?’

Essentially, what I wish to suggest is that the extremity of reduction which seems evident in Minimalist art, is as much a projection of the assumptions of the perceiver as it is an active and traceable process. Colpitt proceeds to note “simplification or reduction are conceptual...if elements were to be eliminated, they were done so in the artist’s mind”<sup>121</sup>, a consideration necessitated by the condition of objecthood, since the Minimalist art-object requires that it be accepted on its own terms. If the perceiver or critic claims to be able to note an active reduction, then it is because recontextualising the Minimalist work in the conventional discourse of the aesthetic requires an elaboration, an *act* of perception (that is, active perception) or of paying attention, of the kind noted by Merleau-Ponty<sup>122</sup>, which is, in this sense an active (act of) expansion. Thus, it seems that there is a tremendous tension between reduction and expansion, where any overt commentary on reduction actually already implies a reconstructive<sup>123</sup> expansion.

As mentioned, objecthood in art was achieved by numerous methods, but the conception of the art-object as devoid of traditional complexities was sought, in Colpitt’s words, “by using materials as they were, without adulteration”<sup>124</sup>. Now, as soon as the possibility of a literary work is placed within the traditional structures of literary discourse – in talking, then, of Minimalist poetry, prose or drama, for example – then it is clear that we are no longer talking of

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.* p115.

<sup>122</sup> Attention emerges as an important concept in minimalist aesthetics. Colpitt observes how many Minimalist artists considered the value of art to be synonymous with the interest it elicits from the spectator. She associates Judd’s statement that work only needs to be interesting with the Kantian notion of interest as taking pleasure in a thing’s existence. (Colpitt, F. 1990. *Minimal Art: The Critical Perspective*. p123-125). An interesting parallel emerges in Merleau-Ponty’s view of attention. While the Kantian notion of interest can be easily allied with the empiricist notion that attention, that is, the subject’s paying of attention to a specific object, occurs as a result of the imminent qualities of the object, Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological stance differs considerably. He finds fault in the empiricist and intellectualist notions that “attention creates nothing”(p28), asserting the phenomenological view that it is the very act of perception, although contingent on the preexistence of the world, that is responsible for the construction of reality. On this basis, Merleau-Ponty is able to assert that “to pay attention is not merely further to elucidate pre-existing data, it is to bring about a new articulation of them”(p30). (Merleau-Ponty, M. 1962. *Phenomenology of Perception*. p27-32). Merleau-Ponty’s views seem quite distinct from Colpitt’s or Judd’s. The presupposition of Colpitt and Judd is that an art object can, of its own accord, command interest or draw attention, whereas Merleau-Ponty seems to suggest that attention is constructive in and of itself.

<sup>123</sup> And it should be noted that these reconstructions are inevitably going to be disputable, since they rely on the referential framework of the ‘reconstructor’ which will invariably be nonidentical to that of the artist.

<sup>124</sup> Colpitt, F. 1990. *Minimal Art: The Critical Perspective*. p114.

material language “as it is, without adulteration”. I recognise, immediately, that the equation is not a simple as this. But what *is* important to emphasise is that regardless of whether or not it is assumed that genre precedes the compression of language into genre, or whether or not these two have an inter-dependent relationship, the resultant system of literary discourse, as such, is always already a complication, an active complication (which is, I think, in some respects, the condition for communication).

This position accounts for Verhoeven’s observation of two apparently opposing forces operating in that literature which has been canonised as Minimalist: “one of the problems with the label ‘minimalism’ is that there has been a tendency among critics and reviewers to use the term rather one-sidedly, that is, with an emphasis on the *aesthetics* of the writing: foregrounding form, style, vocabulary, syntax, imagery, structure, plot, and characterisation, at the expense of content, meaning, effect, and vision”<sup>125</sup>. It is possible to recognise in Verhoeven’s criticism the essential paradox of Minimalist literature, the paradox that is perhaps responsible for the failure (which I shall subsequently attempt to demonstrate) of this literature to approach the concept of *minimum*, and to be defined as *minimalist* (with a lower-case *m*), or prone towards minimum. This paradox may be briefly defined as the implicit problem of a formal, technical reduction of particular genres which are expected somehow to approach minimum while still containing all the elements of content and meaning expected of these genres. There is no doubt that Raymond Carver (the great American literary Minimalist) achieves a remarkable condensation – that was never in dispute – but it is impossible to define his writing in terms of objecthood or minimum. Apart from demonstrating that Carver’s later writing rejects even these surface characteristics of Minimalism<sup>126</sup>, this position may explain why Verhoeven eventually classifies Carver’s writing as “post-postmodern moral realism”<sup>127</sup>.

The fact that Minimalist literature is clearly involved in an active reduction of quite a different order to that of Minimalist art, can be accurately attributed to the differences in the demands of the respective discourses. However, while the Minimalist artists demonstrated a willingness to

<sup>125</sup> Verhoeven, W.M. 1995. ‘What We Talk About When We Talk About Raymond Carver: Or, Much Ado About Minimalism’. In *Narrative Turns and Minor Genres in Postmodernism*. Edited by T. D’haen and H. Bertens. pp43-44.

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.* pp47-49.

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.* p58.

subvert and even radically alter the expectations of their discourse – which accounts for frequent criticisms of Minimalism as non-art or anti-art<sup>128</sup> – the literary Minimalists seem less keen to abandon the privileges traditionally assigned to literary discourse<sup>129</sup>. It is necessary to acknowledge that they are Minimalists – it is far too late to counteract this label. However, as I shall presently argue, while many of the efforts of Minimalists in the visual arts and music can be considered as yearning for the dynamic movement I have alluded to as minimalism, or the System of the Object, the resistance (whether intentional or emanating from the structure of the discourse) of literary Minimalists leave them somewhat stranded in *the upper-case*, the System of the Subject.

What is this imprisonment in life I alluded to earlier? It seems an all too obvious paradox, but having been born, death is the only element of existence I can be sure of. How can I be imprisoned in that which I know (with as much certainty as it is possible to possess) must end? As Giorgio Agamben reports of the tragic knowledge in *Oedipus at Colonus*, "since man is born...the best thing is for him to return as soon as possible whence he came, to ascend beyond his birth through the silent experience of death"<sup>130</sup>. If this is the grand realization of the tragic tragedy – a realization which Critchley might call an active nihilism, one which "seeks to grasp and comprehend the phenomenon of nihilism in its name's desire to overcome it"<sup>131</sup> – then it may appear that there is more seriousness to this imprisonment than may first seem evident. It is certainly something profoundly more problematic than the simplistic exit sought by Oedipus.

The problem, in short, is this: I cannot think, speak, or write<sup>132</sup> either my birth or my death. Only two things my being-in-the-world (to borrow from Heidegger), my *Dasein*, makes me aware of. To be sure, I am alive, and so I was born and I must die. Yet these certainties are totally alien to my present condition. As certainties, they are also the infinitely superfluous, the entirely irrelevant. And yet I must think, speak, write – I am compelled that, for I am trapped in the moment.

<sup>128</sup> See Colpitt, F. 1990. *Minimal Art: the Critical Perspective*. pp125-132.

<sup>129</sup> I shall expand on these subsequently.