

Opaque windows: a theory of the minimalist literary object

by

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation reconsiders the term *minimalism* and its aesthetico-philosophical implications, which have been frequently misapplied. The nihilistic project's radical challenge to the idea of a stable origin or end serves as a point of departure. The conditions of contemporary nihilism point to the construction of Being within the profound negativity of language. This condition implies that *nothing* (the polar opposite of *something*) exists in the same discourse which provides meaning. Consequently, experience and perception of meaning and reality are tied to discourse. And language, or discourse, in turn is returned to Being. This condition is embodied in Levinas' concept of the *il y a* (there is), which maintains that Being is mediated by and through language and that attempts to overcome nihilism are bound by the limits of discourse and language, and consequently returned to Being.

In light of the *il y a*, minimalism emerges as an attempt to embrace the impossibility of nihilism. The discussion traces this attempt through the visual arts, music and literature. However, because the *il y a* returns the question of nihilism not only to Being, but also to the place of language, literature (the privileged place of discourse) emerges as the principal medium for asking the questions: 'what is minimalism?' and 'what is minimum?'. The study goes on to identify a literary-theoretical operation homologous to the romantic ideal of the Literary Absolute, the Minimalist Sublime. An initial distinction is established between the System of the Subject (the mediation of reality through active language) and the System of the Object (the impossibility of total alterity to the subject, under the conditions of the *il y a*). The Minimalist Sublime, by operating as a literary operation which deconstructs literary structure, demonstrates a radical unworking, which is an approach to minimum. In short, minimalist literature presents itself in the midst of an irresolvable paradox: the work which is simultaneously a literary presentation and an unworking of literature.

This claim is investigated in relation to the idea of literary *genre* as a principle of order. It is argued that the minimalist work is also the unworking of *genre*, explored in relation to Robbe-

Grillet's prose, Samuel Beckett's drama and L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poetry. It emerges that Robbe-Grillet's prose fails to qualify as minimalist writing precisely because it does not escape the binding conventions of narrative and hence also of *genre*. Beckett's drama, which is an excellent exploration of the conditions of nihilism, fails similarly, since it represents the conditions of nihilism within *genre*. It is only in certain instances of poetry, which seek to radically subvert their generic roots, that literary minimalism is identifiable.

The study aims to demonstrate that minimalist literature (as defined in the argument) presents a radical alternative to the discourse of nihilism, by unworking discourse and constructing a presentation of these conditions, which is simultaneously their deconstruction. It is thus able to exist paradoxically as the positivity of negative ontology.

KEY TERMINOLOGY:

System of the Subject: this term is used to describe the basic reality function of language. In other words, the System of the Subject is used as a synonym for reality. In the argumentation of the present dissertation, reality is seen as a construct of language or discourse. The condition of Being is mediated through language, and hence the System of the Subject is also used to denote the human experience of Being.

System of the Object: the term is used to denote the conceptual polar opposite to the System of the Subject. Since the System of the Subject is used to denote reality or Being, the System of the Object denotes that which is not related to Being or the experience of subjective 'reality'. Under the conditions of the *il y a*, the System of the Object turns out to be a term for the entirely *other* and a synonym for impossibility.

Minimum: following the assertion that reality is constructed through language or discourse, minimum emerges as the point closest to the deconstruction of discourse, and hence the

delineation of the nihilistic condition through discourse. Minimum, in this light, emerges as a part of discourse which is no longer involved in the so-called *work* of discourse which is the construction of reality. Minimum is therefore the closest we may come to the impossibility of the System of the Object.

Minimalism: the process within language or discourse which attempts to approach minimum, or the conceptual place of closest proximity to the System of the Object. Because it is a process, it exists as an unworking of the System of the Subject from within the work of the same paradox. Minimalism is thus a paradoxical operation based on an attempt to deconstruct discourse while still belonging to that same discourse.

Nihilism: the project in the philosophy of Being, or existing in the world, which seeks to demonstrate that the identification of an indisputable origin or end is ultimately unfounded. Consequently, all knowledge which is based on such an identification proves to be unsustainable and implies that it is based in a profound negativity.

Il y a/There is: a central term in the early philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas relating to nihilistic ontology. According to the idea of the *il y a* (there is), we are unable to accomplish or adequately express an 'outside' to Being, and we are thus riveted to existence. Levinas describes this condition as an atmosphere of the profoundest dread and horror which is simultaneously all-pervasive and absent.

Dasein: the German term for Being-in-the-world (being-there). In Martin Heidegger's phenomenology *Dasein* or Being is closely associated with language. According to this view, *Dasein* finds its expression in the negative foundations of language.

Da: according to Heidegger's phenomenology, *Da* indicates the place of language. According to this philosophy, *Dasein* or Being, is always already thrown into *Da*, or the place and taking-place of language.

Unworking: in contrast to the constructive work of the System of the Subject, which is the construction of reality through language, unworking refers to the deconstructive process by which the System of the Subject's constructive position, or work, is called radically into question.

Literary Absolute: a romantic literary operation which attempts to establish a literature which is simultaneously within and beyond the traditional systems, structures and genres of literature achieved through the exposition of a complex paradox relating to the unworking of literature.

Minimalist Sublime: a literary operation similar to the romantic Literary Absolute in its foundation in radical paradox and its emphasis on the unworking of literary structures, but identifying itself primarily as a approach to minimum in addressing the question of sublime presence, 'is it happening?'.
A THEORY OF MINIMALISM

Constituent Media of Literature/Writing: an idea based on Marshall McLuhan's claims that all media are constituted by a complex imbrication or intertwining of other media. In the case of literature, the media of syntax, words, and so forth, are made up simultaneously of phonemic sounds as well as letters (positive space) and blank space (negative space). These, in turn, are made up of physical media such as ink and paper, in the case of printed literature. These are thus the constituent media of literature or writing which literary minimalism attempts to isolate and present at their most elementary level as an unworking of discourse.

PART FOUR:
OPAQUE WINDOWS IN-CONCLUSION
Questions page 168
Opaque Windows page 171
PART FIVE

KEY WORDS:

Literary theory; minimalism; nihilism; negative ontology; systems theory; System of the Subject; System of the Object; Literary Absolute; Minimalist Sublime; Critchley, Simon; Robbe-Grillet, Alain; Beckett, Samuel; L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poetry; Concrete poetry; Carver, Raymond; Blanchot, Maurice; Levinas, Emmanuel; Derrida, Jacques; Lyotard, Jean-Francois; Lacoue-Labarthe, Philippe and Nancy, Jean-Luc; Agamben, Giorgio.

CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	page i
FOREWORD	page ii
PART ONE:	
INTRODUCTION	
Confessional	page 1
Mapping	page 9
PART TWO:	
A THEORY OF MINIMALISM	
Nihilism, Minimum and the System of the Subject	page 32
The Minimalist Sublime	page 53
The Minimalist Literary Object and the System of the Object	page 73
PART THREE:	
MINIMALISM AND GENRE	
Beyond Genre	page 89
Minimalism and Prose: Alain Robbe-Grillet	page 104
Minimalism and Drama: Samuel Beckett	page 122
Minimalism and Poetry: The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Poets	page 143
PART FOUR:	
OPAQUE WINDOWS: IN-/CONCLUSION	
Questions	page 168
Echoes	page 175
Opaque Windows	page 176
REFERENCES	page 178

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FOREWORD

The following study represents an attempt to re-approach the topic of minimalism from a theoretical as opposed to a largely critical perspective. It is my observation that past studies of minimalism have mostly been centred in surface aesthetic qualities, at the expense of establishing so-called ‘deep’ or theoretical homologues between works. The principal aim of this study, then, is to establish a viable theoretical model for minimalism, that is, a philosophico-aesthetic model which takes into account the principles in which minimalism may be founded, as well as the realisation of these principles in works of art. In particular, this study will focus on literature, or the search for what I will later define as the minimalist literary object.

Due to the scope of the study, certain omissions have been necessitated. Although it would arguably be better to focus on the literary products of a single language group – in this case English – due to the nature of the theory being proposed, I have turned to a somewhat wider linguistic spectrum of texts. However, I acknowledge, first, my greatest incapacity: I am largely monolingual. Consequently, I have had to turn to translations of certain key texts, including those of the philosophers Blanchot, Derrida, Levinas and Agamben, as well as certain literary texts by Alain Robbe-Grillet and François Dufrêne. Due to the nature of the study, which, in many respects, exists as a study of literary ontology, or ontology through literature, I consider the original language of the text less important. The main concern at hand is a radical reinterpretation of the basic stuff of literature, which certainly has trans-linguistic and transnational implications.

PART ONE
INTRODUCTION

The study is divided into four sections. The first, an introductory discussion, aims to introduce the pivotal issues relating to the present intersection of nihilism and literature. It goes on to address some of the key concerns of the canonized Minimalist movement which emerged between 1950 and 1970, relating these concerns to the nihilistic project. The second section proceeds rapidly with a theoretical discussion of what the term minimalism has come to mean in relation to what it could potentially mean. This section aims to provide a theoretical model for the establishment of a contemporary literary minimalism in both critical and creative terms. The third section aims to deal with the implications of this theory within existing literary discourse, and consequently undertakes a selective examination of the three main genres of writing, prose, drama and poetry, with an accompanying examination of selected literary works deemed relevant. The fourth, and concluding, section provides a brief summary of some of the key issues discussed in the study.

A rigorous study of the foundations and implications of literary minimalism as a philosophico-aesthetic movement is long overdue. It is my sincerest hope that this study will at least begin to expose some of these issues and their (largely unexplored) possibilities.

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