

Introduction. Trafficking in Five Obstructions

Object Lessons

This book proceeds from and elaborates on an argumentative framework whose central lineament is deceptively simple: certain experiential phenomena prevalent at the turn of the twenty-first century, of which I highlight five—embarrassment, laziness, slowness, cynicism, and digressiveness—are almost always taken to be incompatible with and detrimentally obstructive to scholarly inquiry, but they may, if properly directed, be conducive to critical work and valuable, more broadly, for intellectual life. If embarrassment, cynicism, and the like obstructions are routinely identified as detriments, then that is because they really are, or at any rate, really can be and probably most often are, damaging to the critical inquiry and to the intellectual life that I have just invoked and in whose advocacy I write. That these obstructions need not, however, be felt and understood merely as detriments to intellection, especially to intellection's cultivation in writing—that the obstructive may, rather, and rather paradoxically, form the basis for and sustain material manifestations of generative thinking—is the key claim for which the book *Obstruction* itself is offered as a kind of token, emblem, or proof. In order to give that claim texture, weight, color, and force; in order to determine how, exactly, the obstructive, properly regarded, inflected, and deployed, may have value; and in order to announce the delimitation of obstruction, in a special sense of critical blockage that I have in mind, from other kinds of obstacle or blockade, I have had to work both locally and globally: at once to consider particular objects that could teach me in a fine-grained way about digressiveness, slowness, and so forth, and to meditate at a more abstract level about particular qualities, available for theoretical privileging, in which the potential benefits of obstruction inhere. Where the local is concerned, each of the five obstructions named

here is theorized through and illuminated by a consideration of an exemplary, contemporary “case study” (circa 1990 to 2010) whose artistic contours are instructive for related critical enterprise. Thus I limn an account of embarrassment’s richness by meditating on the corpus of a paradigmatically embarrassed and embarrassing popular musician, Tori Amos; redeem laziness and lounging through a confrontation with the performances of a lazing, lovingly parodic neo-lounge act, The Dream Express; uptake slowness as it has been likewise taken up in recent, magisterial—and slow—films directed and cowritten by Kelly Reichardt; challenge cynicism to be usefully mobilized as I ruminate on the cynically fashioned MTV animated series *Daria*; and encounter the merits of digressiveness in the digressively styled yet strangely encyclopedic blog of journalist and cultural commentator Rich Juzwiak.

Why do I begin with the assertion that the constitutive argumentative scaffolding on which these more discrete essays build is a deceptively simple one? First, there is nothing simple or straightforward about the use and valuation of terms like *generative*, *directed*, *work*, and even *value* itself, begun in this book’s opening gambit and extended and refined over the course of its pages. To be sure, no determination of value is separable from the coordinating movements of capital through which all value gets routed at one point or another; yet to observe only as much is to absorb at best half of the lesson articulated in a well-established critical tradition—one in sympathy with which I write—that alights on the constitutive indeterminacies in any chains of value.¹ Among other effects, these indeterminacies complicate the very notion of value’s determination as strictly answerable to or captured by capital and make provisions, however fleeting or fragile, for eccentric, sometimes nonce forms of value whose uses may accord with an equally fleeting or fragile *extrinsicness* to capital’s seizures, one echoed lightly in *eccentricity*. (Certainly, no one who has read even casually about the ostensible “crisis” in academic publishing—a condition perhaps better understood as a chronic response to the ongoing fabrication, no less real for the fabricating, of crisis rhetorico-logic and attendant production strategies and distribution platforms—would be likely to nominate *exchange value* as the primary analytic through which to understand the rendering and circulation of often overpriced, under-purchased scholarly monographs.)² Likewise, another critical tradition with which I write in sympathy and solidarity has advocated not simply or easily for the repudiation, abolition, or supersession of work but rather for the renovations of work in its various forms, because of or en route to which careful affirmations of work may be entailed, sometimes (but not only or best) under the rhetorical banner of *post-work*.³ So to remark, as I do here,

that I stand for locating value in intellectual work is to make an assertion as slippery as Portia's when she declares her standing for justice⁴ or as Tammy Wynette's when she advocates standing by your man.⁵ Like the participation in a recursive masquerade that thickens the former and the cracking of plaintive voice that cuts through the latter, this stand has layers, some of whose edges are also fault lines, measuring, again, the eccentricity whose capacities home my project.⁶ Such eccentricity is akin (in the distantly intimate—which is to say, queer—manner that kissing cousins are kin) to the sort that Judith Jack Halberstam enacts in his performance of “fail[ing] spectacularly”;⁷ where that performance makes a success, indicated for instance in blurbs and reviews, of failure's in every sense winning embrace, this not quite obverse one aims to pressurize its substance beyond the terms or forms described in the binary suturing of success with failure.

Returning to the question of deceptive simplicity, I must also mark that to value work in the funny way that I suggest in the preceding paragraph means to wield or render each of my obstructions in ways neither straightforward nor transparent. How, for instance (and to invoke and restage performance elements of the sort used in classic psychology experiments), to be neither the subject who runs from the room in extreme embarrassment—nor the one who coolly designs an experiment in which a simulation of that scenario unfolds—but, strangely, both? How to “do” real laziness or cynicism yet not thereby capitulate, merely and banally, to the norms connoted in the worn phrases *goofing off* and *selling out*, respectively (and how, in the process, to answer for not *dropping out*)? How to slow down without also sliding into what Lauren Berlant calls, in an evocative phrase, a dance with “slow death” or related versions of immobility?⁸ And how to digress in a fashion that avoids distraction (of oneself, of one's interlocutors), a source of no small amount of recent critical despair, by rather manifesting attention (to twinkling details, to the larger constellations that they may star)? Ensuing chapters provide answers to these and related questions; and, as the manner and matter of their posing here begins to intimate, the project that they animate does not endorse getting over—or sidestepping—obstructions but instead champions taking them up as complexly comprehended obstructions and, in the process, activating their potential, often surprising energies.

This insistence raises the further question of what, exactly, and for the present purposes, defines an obstruction that has the particular valence(s) I prize. Far afield as its object may be from the contemporary archive in which this book invests, Paul Fry's writing on Wordsworth, among the very few scholarly efforts to deploy the word *obstruction* with precision, may for this

reason offer an inroad to the question's answering and model a version of the different but closely related precision with which the term becomes a keyword here. Tracing the way in which Wordsworth routinely "replaces" an "epiphany sense of 'clearing'" with "a blockage or obstruction," Fry accounts for what (else) this sort of obstruction does as it "throw[s] a barrier across the path" of the poet: "In many cases, at least, that is what it does; but what it does yet more notably in nearly all cases . . . is simply to intensify the experience of being on the path itself, radically undermining the before-and-after structure on which epiphany had traditionally depended."⁹ An obstruction "experience[d]" in the full, "intensif[ied]," and nonteleological way that Fry, following Wordsworth, conceives might be further theorized not through an emphasis "on the path" but rather through a redirection to "the barrier [thrown] across the path" that Fry describes more briefly: the barrier whose encountering we understand well—via a cliché that merits its exhaustion because of its exhaustive usefulness—when we metaphorize it as hitting the wall. One response to hitting the wall is to climb over it, constituting relatively uncomplicated achievement and perhaps an epiphany (depending on what is more or less Romantic—but not, in this way, Wordsworthian—about the experience). Another response is, with equally uncomplicated cleverness or facility, to circumvent it: to refuse to stay "on the path" by finding another that rounds the wall. Yet a third is to hang—dwelling, prolonging, and thereby suspending—in the impasse that the path, no longer a path, has become and that this word, *impasse*, has conjured so vividly in the recent writing on affect that discloses with appropriate ambivalence the simultaneous promise and peril occasioned by hanging (out) in the impasse.¹⁰ Distinct from all three of these modes—and perhaps most crucially distinct, in our current critical climate, from the complex impassivity shading into impassion that affect studies has imagined in the impasse—is the embrace of obstruction that I affirm and anatomize. To embrace obstruction is to scale the wall not in order to surmount it but to cling to it, in such a way that the subject of this "intensif[ied]" obstruction and the obstructive wall itself change, perhaps move, precisely because of the clinging and the more granularly textured feeling of, up, and against the wall that the clinging enables. In the process, the moving wall might become a dance floor. And, as this torquing of a common metaphor suggests, the character of such an obstructive phenomenon is not only spatial but also temporal, given the (decidedly nonepiphany, but also nonimpassive) interval that it would take to cling thus.

To think of these spatial and temporal qualities together, less metaphorically, and in a more prosaically definitional way, I would add that an ob-

struction or blockage is both durable and durational—and, in these ways, different from a mere obstacle or blockade, which is passing and passable. Turning to a literally more concrete example of an obstruction than the Wordsworthian barrier—one also more directly consonant with this book’s focus on the contemporary—may help to clarify further the distinction drawn here between such obstruction and related obstacle. The example comes from Matthew May’s *In Pursuit of Elegance: Why the Best Ideas Have Something Missing*, which alights briefly and celebratorily on a design experiment that Dutch traffic engineer Hans Monderman implemented at a busy intersection in the village Drachten (formerly troubled by a high number of accidents for a crossing of its size). Guided by a vision of “shared space” and a speculation that drivers, cyclists, and pedestrians will be more mindful in the absence of traffic’s ruling and regulation, Monderman removed all lights and signs from the hazardous intersection—with the following results, as described and interpreted by May:

There are no road divisions, no white lines, no curbs to separate cars, bikes, or people. Finally it dawns on you that what is missing is the conventional prescription for order at a traffic crossing: right-of-way.

If you were to observe the action for a few hours, you would soon see that something else associated with most intersections is also missing: obstruction. The wheeled and walking traffic through [the four-way intersection] Laweiplein flows continuously in all directions across an equally shared space.¹¹

In his interest to locate and praise examples of elegant simplicity, May asserts that “obstruction” is signally “missing” from the intersection in Drachten—but it takes only a slight, albeit crucial, semantic recalibration to interpret the traffic phenomenon along different lines. In the terms that I have established here, we could say instead that Monderman has capitalized on the difference between an *obstacle* (any given, particular traffic jam) and an *obstruction* (the ongoing existence of traffic as such) in a way that exploits the obstructive “problem” of traffic and calls into question traffic’s very status as a problem. In other words, the “problem” of traffic is not exactly, elegantly solved: “wheeled and walking traffic,” as May calls it, still abounds in Drachten. Rather, this traffic itself is accepted as a constitutive condition of intersectionality; no longer construed as a phenomenon to eliminate, it may alternatively be taken up as a useful and usable obstruction, one whose adjusted embrace enables the “continuous” “flow” of subjects who, together, make the space a valuably, “equally shared” one.

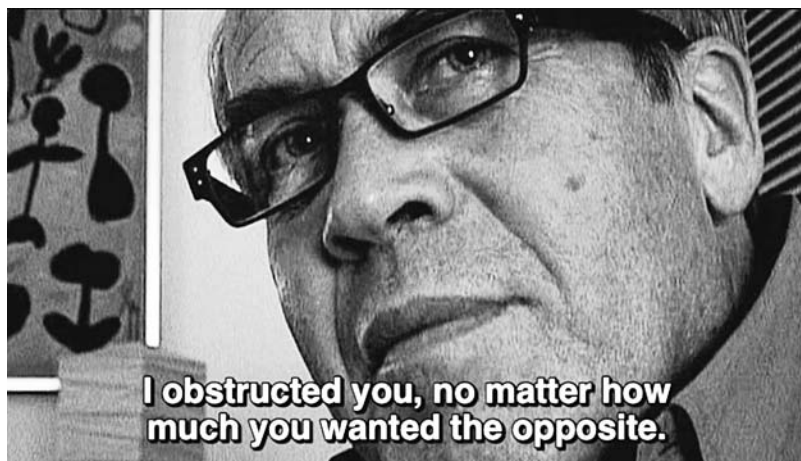


I.1 and I.2 Drivers, cyclists, and pedestrians cross through heavily trafficked intersections designed by Hans Monderman.

A similar example of obstruction's difference from obstacle could emerge from a reading of the 2003 film *The Five Obstructions* (an artifact veritably begging for a gloss in a project fashioned as this one is and whose introduction is titled and styled in this one's way). Conceived by *auteur terrible* Lars von Trier, the film documents a series of five agonistic challenges in which von Trier invites mentor Jørgen Leth to remake his 1967 short *The Perfect Human* within various sets of constraints that are, in von Trier's estimation and language, "perverse" and even "sadistic."¹² On his own, initial (and predictably Oedipal) understanding of the contest, the sadism will have a therapeutic value and force a shattering of the cool, calculated methods with which Leth

approaches filmmaking—and with that shattering, a like one of what von Trier takes to be the cool, calculated performance of persona beneath which Leth supposedly hides his deep “depression” and rage. For his part, Leth rejects von Trier’s model of surface and depth and dismisses the cathartic goal toward which von Trier aims to drive the project as “pure romanticism”—yet, all the same, he accepts the challenges for the “sophistic game” he understands them to comprise, one whose playing yields pleasure and the besting of whose obstacles allows him to render thoughtful, indeed beautiful remakes of *The Perfect Human* (a feat that makes von Trier “furious” rather than producing the intended effect of unleashing the fury that he supposes unflappable Leth to conceal). Characterizing von Trier’s challenges as *obstacles* rather than, as in his own estimation, *obstructions*, I not only look to develop further the premise established above but also attend to Leth’s interpretation of the first challenge as consisting in “quite a few obstacles for an obstruction”: that is to say, with only minor tweaking, quite a few obstacles that simply make for a multifaceted obstacle. When von Trier responds impatiently to the gamesmanship and artistry with which Leth greets the second challenge—“You always try to be too good: this is therapy, not a film competition with yourself”—what von Trier fails to grasp is that the “competition with yourself” is all too available a way for Leth to embrace the challenges as a series of discrete obstacles, not as an overriding obstruction.

The embrace, rather, of “therapy” might have landed Leth in the space of the impasse, as discussed above and as theorized in affect studies; but to direct Leth thus is an outcome over which von Trier has no “control,” a key term animating a pivotal conversation between Leth and von Trier (in what may at first blush seem like an obversion of their expected positions, “pure romantic,” von Trier admits to panic in the face of filmmaking conditions that he cannot control, whereas Leth revels in the paradoxically “out of control” effects that carefully arranged and manipulated filmic inputs can yield). Indeed, alongside the obstacles that Leth navigates deftly and the therapeutic impasse that fails to obtain, *The Five Obstructions*’ actual obstruction turns out to be von Trier himself: that is, his fantasy of hypercontrol as manifested in his obduracy, which creates precisely the conditions for the circumvention of the impasse and the gaming of the obstacles that Leth performs. Von Trier is at once too controlling, too obsessed with the details of the game, and too sure of his ability to break down Leth to produce an actual theater or laboratory of cruelty. Instead, the great, initially unintended gift of *The Five Obstructions* is the array of *Perfect Humans* that von Trier’s obstruction to his own agenda positions Leth to create.¹³ It is an obstruction, moreover, that



1.3 In *The Five Obstructions*, Jørgen Leth's face is imaged in close-up as we hear "his" words (penned by Lars von Trier) in voiceover.

von Trier belatedly and complexly positions himself to accept, when, for the final challenge, he asks Leth to read in voiceover a letter from "Leth" to "von Trier" hinging on "Leth's" line, "I obstructed you": von Trier's reflexive translation of the admission, *I obstructed myself*, where *myself*, multiply "constructed" and "mediated" and thus highly contingent,¹⁴ may nonetheless be the (non) feeler of a pathos central to a final short "film that leaves a mark on [that self]"—and perhaps also on otherwise "unmarked" Leth and on the film's audiences.¹⁵ In ceding control by accepting obstruction, von Trier draws, finally, nearer than we might expect to *Monderman*, who forgoes the more usually engineered forms of traffic regulation in order to reanimate the subjects of the intersection, no longer also the wearied subjects of congestion but instead the nimbler ones of possibility. Similar modes of control's relinquishment will animate this book.

So much, then, for theoretical and material differences between obstacles and obstructions: what unites rather than distinguishes *obstacle* and *obstruction* (as well as words like *obversion*, *obtain*, *obduracy*, and *obsessed* that I deployed with deliberation in the preceding paragraph) is their shared prefix; and the special force with which that *ob-* combines with its stem in the case of *obstruction*—indeed, the special force of *ob-* as such—draws me to privilege *obstruction*, here and throughout, over the *blockage* that Fry, for instance, reasonably understands *obstruction* as synonymizing. Retaining "classical Latin . . . senses" and "reflect[ing] [them] in English use," the prefix *ob-* may

mark the paradoxical conjuncture of seemingly opposed meanings: an *ob-*position can be oriented both “toward” and “against” an object; likewise, an *ob-*movement may obtain as a “fall down” (not incidentally, the final physical act in *The Five Obstructions*) or as a “complet[ion]” in intensification (ditto, a final physical act that, repeating and reframing footage from earlier in the film, also spikes it).¹⁶ *Obstruction* emerges as the most apt descriptor for the experiential phenomena that I investigate, in no small part because it carries within it these countervailing connotations. To dispose, to face a subjectivity toward that which would seem to run against or even deface it—or, more processually, to collapse into a heightening—is to work the aslant value of ostensive impediment that I have otherwise been tracking in this introduction. As for *obstruction*’s stem, derived from the Latin *struere* (to build, to assemble), we may well *build* on this account itself by asking, with the paradox of *obstruction*’s embrace in mind: What is the “manner of building” opened in *obstruction*’s grip?¹⁷ How does an *ob-*structed building or assemblage differ from a more typical *con-*struction, and how does it relate to pedagogical *in-*struction?

In framing a couple of key questions in this way, I owe a debt to Martin Heidegger’s *Being and Time*, the most careful English translation of which lingers emphatically, as I do here, over words prefixed by *ob-* as it also unfolds ideas about making and teaching. In a passage concerned with the “conspicuousness,” “obtrusiveness,” and “obstinacy” of things, Heidegger uses these three concepts to delineate when, how, and why (otherwise) useful things become no longer (merely) useful things: that is, when, in a “breach” or “disruption,” they announce themselves as impedimental to or unavailable for use. This interval or gap marks a time for learning, insofar as it measures a moment in which “noticing” may happen and at which the abeyance of typical makings allows worldliness to “make . . . itself known.”¹⁸ In other words, *ob-*like inutility is the condition for insight, for the apprehension of the worldliness of the world—with the implication that so-called inutile things have an intellectual use value, precisely in their blockage of “use,” that we could call *obstructive* in a philosophically positive sense. Following this logic, I see the kind of instruction entailed by *obstruction* as fundamentally reorienting the phenomenal—and with it the intellectual—perspective of the subject of both the *obstruction* and its implantation of instruction. If a more concrete construction (for instance, a writing) proceeds and develops from this instruction, then it, too, will be marked by the trace of reorientation, as an effort of, in, and through redoubling: call it, if you’re Lars von Trier, and to (re)name one example of such a redoubled effort already invoked, *The Five Obstructions*.

Contre Temps

Circling back to *The Five Obstructions* has a further purchase because of the way in which continued interpretation of the film is uniquely well poised to launch us toward some claims about the contemporary, a term that I have already used here to describe the archive—and, indeed, the impetus—to which *Obstruction* owes its fabrication. More specifically, the film enjoins us to consider and differentiate a recently passed “present”—captured in the times and spaces of the film’s making (and in the repeated remaking of *The Perfect Human*)—from an older postmodernity, which is residually aligned with that more recent past and of which the original *The Perfect Human*, with its coolly devastating indictment of the white bourgeois subject’s claim to transcendent being and mastery, offers an exemplary chronicle. Contradistinct from that quintessentially postmodern 1967 film, *The Five Obstructions* announces its difference, its contemporaneity, in meditations on globalized manipulations of capital and the brutal, racialized inequities that those manipulations produce; in a reflexively marked reliance on digital technologies; in a turn to and wrestling with overtly ethical questions; and in a dissonant collision of von Trier’s new—which is to say, old and renewed—articles of (Romantic, Freudian, religious) faith with Leth’s abiding skepticism.¹⁹ At the level of form, another dissonant collision irrupts in the juxtaposition of Leth’s sleek, crisp, exquisite, and comparatively expensive short films with the footage of conversational encounters between Leth and von Trier and with behind-the-scenes footage of Leth’s shoots, both of which are noteworthy for shaky shots from handheld cameras, confessionally oriented close-ups, and crude wipes between shots—in short, elements we would find at play in almost any example of slapdash reality television. Despite the juxtaposition of these reality television–styled portions of the film with Leth’s variegated shorts, each of which is rendered in a different, referential style (including expressionist split-screen, surrealist animated, and hyperrealist travelogue works), *The Five Obstructions* is not a pastiche of the sort that Fredric Jameson famously identified as one of postmodernism’s signatures.²⁰ Rather, the deliberately labored, repetitively contrasted movements between these respective portions of the film position it, as a whole, to do a different kind of cultural work, neither pointedly parodic nor catholically pastiche but exhaustively—and exhaustedly—eclectic. As for the reality TV–like scenes, the weird, winking rigor with which the film refuses to deviate from an “unvarnished” (that is, elaborately citational), populist-documentary approach to their making renders these scenes candidates for what José López and Garry Potter call “criti-

cal realism” in their introduction to an assertively periodizing anthology, *After Postmodernism*.²¹

In itemizing what features *The Five Obstructions* asks us to recognize as constitutive of contemporaneity, I draw near to a list of keywords generated by Terry Smith when he argues that *multeity*, *adventitiousness*, and *inequity* are the “three antinomies that have come to dominate contemporary life.”²² This list forms Smith’s partial answer to a question italicized and made a refrain both in his introduction to the anthology *Antinomies of Art and Culture* and in a shorter preface cowritten by Smith with Okwui Enwezor and Nancy Condee: “In the aftermath of modernity, and the passing of the postmodern, how are we to know and show what it is to live in the conditions of contemporaneity?”²³ Sympathetic as I am to what both von Trier and Smith show us about “globalization’s thirst for hegemony in the face of increasing cultural differentiation, . . . accelerating inequity among peoples, classes, and individuals,” and “a regime of representation . . . capable of . . . potentially instant yet always thoroughly mediated communication,” I wonder at the same time whether Smith’s catalogue of distinctly contemporary antinomies runs the risk of defining an era, even as he argues elsewhere in the same essay that he wants to resist both the definitional and periodizing impulses of modernity.²⁴ To remain open in the face of the difficult, refrained question about contemporaneity that Smith and his collaborators pose is an effort that he models more closely when he deemphasizes his three master antinomies and pauses instead over “the actual coincidence of asynchronous temporalities,” oscillating before and behind the political and aesthetic ossifications that antinomously limn the contemporary for him.²⁵ Moreover, that pausing over the untimeliness of time itself—in and as the contemporary—aligns Smith with other thoughtful commentators on the temporal textures that make and mark the contemporariness of contemporaneity. In a comparatist framework, Natalie Melas conceptualizes such untimeliness—to borrow her words, “a contemporaneity that would not be premised on the exclusion of the non-contemporaneous, but that would instead take critical account of non-contemporaneity”—precisely as an antidote to the “terminal presentism” that haunts so many (and such worn) arguments about the end of history.²⁶ Similarly concerned with how to attend to historicity without sliding into a mode of positivist historiography tethered to epochal thinking, Paul Rabinow affirms of the contemporary (which is to say, of its temporal slipperiness and the perhaps estranging curiosity that we need to attend with precision and care to that slipperiness) that it is “a moving ratio of modernity, moving through the recent past and near future in a (nonlinear) space that gauges modernity as an ethos already becoming historical”; in the face of this

ratio, critics must “find . . . means to remain close to diverse current practices producing knowledge, ethics, and politics, while adopting an attitude of discernment and adjacency in regard to them.”²⁷

Concurrent and recurrent times out of joint with themselves (and each other), historicity without certain epochality or proscribed telos, responsiveness to these conditions through methods animated by simultaneous dwelling in and dwelling apart or aside from them: these common motifs, uniting work by Melas, Rabinow, Smith, and others,²⁸ come arguably into most acute focus in Giorgio Agamben’s meditation on what is noteworthy about the contemporary (as a temporal phenomenon of ostensible presentness riven by “disjunction” and “anachronism”) and about a contemporary (that “rare” and “courage[ous]” subject who forges “a singular relationship with [her] own time, which adheres to it and, at the same time, keeps a distance from it” precisely in order to comprehend what is anachronistic or disjunct about it).²⁹ Agamben’s compelling theorization of contemporariness pivots, without finally depending, on an invocation of Osip Mandelstam’s 1923 poem, “The Century” (or, as it is more typically rendered in English, “The Age”), whose speaker—in Agamben’s argument, closely identified with the poet himself—accomplishes what Agamben takes to be a “singular,” if also temporally disorienting and self-splitting, act of becoming contemporary through his “ability” to “hold . . . his gaze [firmly] on his own time”: a prelude to the yet more active achievement of “weld[ing] with his own blood the shattered backbone of [that] time.”³⁰ Yet to understand “The Age”—and its stakes for thinking the contemporary—in this fashion means to predicate the poem’s interpretation on two yoked assumptions about its opening question, “My age, my beast, who will ever / Look into your eyes / And with his own blood glue together / The backbones of two centuries?”:³¹ first, that the question is a rhetorical one; and second, that by asking it, the poet has also answered it, and the answer is ipso facto none other than himself.

Yet a counter-reading of the poem (again, with implications for thinking about the contemporary) is palpably available. After the introduction of what would appear to be a bounded subjectivity in the poem’s first line (“My century, my beast”), that subjectivity, already indirect (“my,” not I), is immediately decentered or diffracted: “who” will do the work that the question asks? What if this question is not rhetorical but uneasily open-ended, and what if that which makes the poet contemporary is that he asks the question rather than that he is its answer? Regarding the question’s open-endedness, one possibility is that the answer is *nobody*, as the final lines of the poem suggest strongly: “Cool indifference pours, pours down / On your [the age’s] mortal

injury.” On this understanding, the movement of the poem is almost a non-movement, stuckness, perhaps an obstruction: the beastly age, an animized monster looking backward with a “cruel and weak” “smile” and a “broken” “backbone,” is neither ocularly engaged nor haptically, viscerally “glue[d] together” with curative blood; instead, it is met passively with “cool indifference.” The alternative posited in the third stanza—“To wrest the age from captivity, / To begin a new world, / The knees of gnarled and knotted days / Must fit together like a flute”—is imagined but unperformed and, for that reason, appropriately conceived in a sentence without an explicit subject: a syntactical move (inherent to Mandelstam’s Russian as well as to this English translation) matched by the other figural ways in which the poem brackets, almost entirely, agential human endeavor and highlights instead the motility of nonhuman actants: the blood of “things,” not people, “gushes” and “build[s]”; “buds” (a word whose Russian equivalent evokes semantically, only then to deny the copresence of, lungs) will “swell,” not breathe; and the sea’s “cartilage,” replacing that of a now-bygone infant whose similar, “tender” cartilage is also imaged, “splashes ashore.”

Agamben is correct that the poem’s proposed, hopeful measure—knotting together the gnarled bones of the age like a flute—is an “impossible,” or at least “paradoxical,” task; far less certain is his conjoint claim that the poet accomplishes this gesture, paradoxically.³² What he accomplishes instead is (at least) twofold: the asking of his age a question that has as yet no definite answer, and the making of a poem that can lyrically fit together (“like a flute”) words that point to the age’s “gnarled and knotted” bones, not the fitting together of the bones themselves. If this poet is indeed, as Agamben asserts of his relationship to the broken time that he inhabits, likewise a “fracture,” then he remains one; he is not the healer of his age, he is not a prophetic seer and a welder, and he is not merely or simply possessed of what Agamben calls “capacity”; instead, he may be thought as an analyst of his age, as a suffering searcher and a maker of secondary or second-order things (that is, poems), and as endowed with the capacity to embrace an incapacity of a piece with—yet also apart from—the age’s own.³³ The analysis constitutes his movement with the age, the making of the poem its apartness, a critical mark, a meta-language; for that making, he is legible, in Agambenian terms, as “a” contemporary, if in his minor, modest activity and unmitigated misery not quite as heroic a contemporary as Agamben would portray him. Yet to the side of that more or less plausible (when tweaked) reading, and in keeping with the disbursal of subjectivity toward which the first stanza of the poem gestures—a disbursal shored up by the third—the contemporariness

on offer here could be comprehended not as the poet's but the *poem's*. To be sure, some of its magnetic attraction to contemporary readers, like Agamben, stems from its strange imagining of a century that is sutured to the one that precedes it and that must, brutally and intractably, carry that other century forward with it (in Russian, a portion of that brutality and intractability is conjured acoustically in the relentless repetitions of harsh, guttural sounds).³⁴ Yet, just as Agamben de-privileges the idea of century in favor of age—and thereby moves away from strictly epochal or flatly chronological thinking—so, too, may we de-privilege the conceit of “the poet” and take up instead the untimely timeliness of the artifact left behind him (as Melas does, for instance, with *The Black Jacobins* rather than with its author, C. L. R. James): an assemblage of words at once poised on the modern “threshold of new days” and sutured to the archaic “age of the earth’s infancy,”³⁵ possessed of or endowed with “a multidirectional aspect in which there is a complex interplay between contemporaneity and noncontemporaneity.”³⁶

Without aspiring to the agonized beauty of Mandelstam’s poem or pretending to the longevity of its contemporariness, *Obstruction* does, in a few key ways, move in (perhaps gnarled and knotted) sync with its timely, untimely rhythms. The book’s attention is lavished on now-contemporaneous objects that it aims to understand both tenderly, on their own terms, and pointedly aslant from them. Those objects include the five obstructive phenomena themselves, which saturate the politics and aesthetics of the present; with and simultaneously against their saturation in those spheres, *Obstruction* works by torquing the phenomena toward the project of rethinking thinking itself. From time to time, the book collides its contemporaneous objects, phenomena and artifacts alike, with noncontemporaneous ones whose traffic with the former affirms the principles of multidirectionality and complexity that Melas advocates. And, as the next section of this introduction explores in greater detail, it foregrounds the shaping eye and hand of its author precisely as the basis (to repurpose a generative term of Agamben’s) for his “fracture” or fraying.

Homing (I)

By anatomizing the manner in which von Trier himself becomes the signal obstruction of his film—but in such a way that the self in question is contingently, even phantasmatically, rendered—and then turning to Mandelstam’s poetic giving of subjectivity, which is also its taking away, I have endeavored

to lay some groundwork for a more explicit accounting of the role that the author's inscription, or "I," plays in this book. Embarrassment, laziness, cynicism, slowness, and digressiveness are the more discrete obstructions that I examine in the following chapters, but the principal obstruction whose blockages—which is also to say, in the context of this book's argument, whose conditions of possibility and value—prompt the five reckonings to come is just this authorial I. Indeed, it is an I that, for a contemporary critic writing after the poststructuralisms of the mid- and late twentieth century, must occupy the status of a problematic—a status for which I ask you to take my warrant that I have thought carefully about how it must be implied in every deployment of I in these pages, even when the status and the thinking are not explicitly marked as such. At the same time, such explicit marking, in the forms for instance of reflexive meditation and metacommentary, will also emerge over the course of the ensuing pages. Mostly located in the introductory sections of each of the book's five chapters, these anecdotal—in Jane Gallop's precise sense of "anecdotal" as eminently theoretical³⁷—exfoliations provide keen evidence; without it, the fleshly, reflexive (and thereby, if it works) refreshing phenomenology of obstruction to which I aspire would not have its constitutively proper subject, however impeded and improper a prop that proper constitutes. After a fashion, then, the authorial I also becomes a "case study" here, an obstruction not dodged but embraced in order to enable alertness to the loopy significance of language and the ruses of intentionality and to demonstrate the continued generativity of a criticism whose archive is thickly experienced, powerfully lived. In short, risking the I makes for a valuable working with obstruction, insofar as it highlights that which we cannot, finally, dislodge—but out of which and in which we can make our lodgings. On the question of this risk, I can think of no better assessor than Amy Villarejo when she writes of the sharp difficulty we encounter in rising to the level of "engaged intellectual work, linking the self to the process of study, linking one's own political and intellectual investments to the writing-work of cultural criticism":

While I happen to be of the opinion that very few authors of academic monographs successfully sustain that fragile balance between autobiography and critical argument, I do find useful those deictic gestures that disclose the production of the value of a given work. . . . The more clearly one lays out the stakes of a given inquiry—the value of the study undertaken—the more one might avoid the twin dangers of taking the self as an adequate measure of the readership and, more perilously, of the topic at hand.³⁸

To attempt to “sustain [the] fragile balance” that Villarejo describes is, then, not to indulge in I for I’s sake but to frame that I with regard for you and with a like regard and affection for the objects of contemplation to which that I will sometimes be hitched or stitched.

It is also, as Villarejo makes plain, to return to and redouble the question of value with which this introduction began. Perhaps one value of obstruction (and in *Obstruction*)—whether or not the precise obstruction in question is the I and the body that it cannot help but conjure, ephemerally—is indeed a value inseparable from the question of embodiment, one to which the word *obstruction* makes a “deictic gesture” in its medical sense as “blockage of a body passage, esp[ecially] the gastrointestinal, urinary, biliary, or respiratory tract; an instance of this.”³⁹ One such “instance of this” sort of bodily obstruction, transformed metaphorically in its brief yet potent invocation in the queer theoretical tradition in which both Villarejo and I have worked, comes from the pen of the late, great Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick in collaboration with Michael Moon. They write of the “fat female body,” which has historically been “visible on the one hand . . . as a disruptive embolism in the flow of economic circulation,” that it has, on the other hand, “function[ed] . . . more durably” as that flow’s “very emblem.”⁴⁰ Doing the inside/out work so central to some practices of queer theory,⁴¹ Sedgwick and Moon make out of the body an embolism that we would more ordinarily expect to find in the body in order to demonstrate, via a rhetorically performative enactment, how one kind of body in particular, the unpredictably unruly and/or ruling “fat female body,” has itself flip-flopped between its status as a signifier out of and in sync with the flows of capital. Enlivened by this gesture and the argumentative work that it supports, I perform a modified version thereof and ask you not to think consecutively about *Obstruction* that it is “here and now” an “embolism” and “there and then” an “emblem” but rather to identify one aspect of its value in its simultaneous and coconstitutive figuring as emblematic and embolistic: emblematic of the “engaged intellectual work” that Villarejo salutes—precisely because I have engaged and twisted five obstructions supposed to be embolistic to “the writing-work of cultural criticism”; embolistic “in the flow of economic circulation” that Sedgwick and Moon describe—precisely as a monograph emblemizing densely felt intellectual endeavor, activity that has a number of potent opponents, to be sure, but also an oppositional potency of its own to value and to fight for.

When, in the prior paragraphs of this introduction, I emphasize (and will now redouble an emphasis on) what is “thickly experienced,” “powerfully lived,” “densely felt” work, I make those moves in part to pave the way for an

ampler explanation of my archive's shaping. The objects under close consideration here may strike some readers as minor, eccentric, and eclectic (and to a certain, limited extent, they may be construed as such), but they also appear here out of necessity—albeit a cleaved, ambivalent necessity. On the one hand, these objects grabbed me, durably, as much as I fastened onto them, and thus became obstructions demanding that I grapple with them. On the other hand, I only chose to meet that demand, after great care and deliberation, because of the special and highly specific pedagogical purposes in whose service the objects are enlisted. To be sure, they form just one cluster among a range of fascinating contemporary artifacts, which likewise hail me and which offer their own lessons about embarrassment, laziness, cynicism, and so forth; but these other, related artifacts do not model the *exact* lessons about the book's five obstructions in which I could find the most compelling value for myself and for the colleagues whom I seek to address. At the most general and abstract level, I would say about the process of homing in on the music of Tori Amos, the films of Kelly Reichardt, and the like that, to make my obstructions work in the paradoxical ways that they do, I needed to learn about them by moving in sync with texts, broadly construed (and the creators of those texts), as they are animated by precise admixtures of privilege and precarity, fragility and force: blockages not so wholly blocked that they could not also become building blocks. Yet to submit this global proposition for meaningful consideration demands in turn a closer, local set of investigations of where the precarious may intersect with the privileged, how the fragile may exhibit force, why the blockage builds. In order to explain more fully, then, what my case studies offer—and en route to likewise offering a fuller and more shimmering context in which to appreciate them alongside contemporaneous objects that I have also contemplated with curiosity and regard—I use this moment to break down the arguments and (re)introduce the key players of the chapters that follow *Obstruction's* introduction (or, road-map time!).

(1) Though a rich tradition of American cultural studies has worked to dislodge the embarrassment that may attend work on such elements of mass culture as pop music (for instance), an Adornian countertradition reveals the value in continuing to privilege intellectual sophistication. Aligning chapter 1, "Embarrassment," with this countertradition, I highlight a further complication: sophistication may now, itself, constitute a source of embarrassment, placing in a double bind any critic who would set aside neither the objects producing embarrassment (for the critic as sophisticate) nor the sophistication that is in its turn embarrassing (for the critic as champion of

the popular). That obstructive double bind bespeaks a failure—perhaps, if positively embraced, a refusal—to engage in precise role segregation, an (in)ability that has been conceptualized by thinkers like Erving Goffman as central to the production of embarrassment.

Building on sociological ideas about role segregation, as well as drawing on work from a variety of other disciplines, I offer a provisional definition of embarrassment: one that begins by distinguishing embarrassment, a strong feeling, both from the affects that Sianne Ngai theorizes as weak in *Ugly Feelings* and from another strong feeling, shame, with which it has been all too often confused or to which it has been errantly attached as a subspecies. Unlike singularizing shame, embarrassment has a collectivizing potential and is fundamentally relational, figuring the place of the other as one that could be or become the place of the factitiously produced self. Factitiously produced in its own right (as, for instance, adolescent “in nature”), embarrassment’s exposure of the environmentally situated, divided self—as divided—manifests in such somatic markers as the blush and cringe, the latter of which has had more cultural traction and visibility in recent years than in earlier historical periods. Alighting on the cringe in (or as) criticism alongside its recent artistic mobilizations, I see this gestural sign as in fact more helpful than the blush (so indelibly associated with transparent ideas about subjectivity and the interiority on which such subjectivity is supposed to be predicated) for a project that would comprehend the dance of self and other in embarrassment’s manufacture, given the cringe’s movement of a self from another or from a part of the self as other. Situating the cringe in this way inaugurates a movement en route to a more robust, poststructuralist-informed account of subjectivity and feeling (foreshadowed in this introduction), which, like Rei Terada’s work, affirms pathos as the paradigmatic emotion constituting the split or even nonself—and embarrassment as the corollary, paradigmatic emotion experienced by that split self in the field of relationality.

In turn, I consider what distinguishes a specifically critical version of embarrassment from this more generally relational form of the feeling. Via an engagement with Henry James’s “Figure in the Carpet,” as well as recent critical work on Rousseau’s *Dialogues*, I identify critical embarrassment as undergirded by and bound to a sense of stupidity—moreover, a basically inchoate sense that does not direct the senser to a strict categorization of stupidity as either a thought or a feeling. The critical embarrassment founded on category-upsetting stupidity is itself turbulent, offering the critic no safe ground from which to work but rather a moving terrain in which what can be counted stable is precisely the endurance of the stupidity that confounds

the critic's thinking self with her or his feeling self. To embrace this critical embarrassment means then to share, carefully and caringly, such confounding and the curious kinds of insight to which it may lead critics and their interlocutors. Understanding as much emerges, in this case, not just from a reckoning with Goffman, James, and Rousseau, for instance, but also and more fundamentally from pressing on and pressing through my embarrassed experience of Tori Amos's music: Amos, long recognized as a cultivator of shame in her work, is just as much if not more a purveyor of embarrassed feeling, corresponding thinking, and the blurring of the two. Indeed, the sometimes shrewd management of this blurring or coextensivity makes Amos herself a critic as well as an artist of embarrassment, who capitalizes instructively—because reflexively—on the proliferation of “conflicting” roles and their oddly desirable nonsegregation. The instruction is particularly apt for the critic who would keep generatively in tension and at play a paranoid mode of engagement, its reparative obverse, and (in the process) a reparation of paranoid criticism itself.

(2) Chapter 2, “Laziness,” begins with an anecdotal meditation on the obstructive experience of finding oneself unable to bring a critical project to fruition—yet just as unable, or unwilling (or unable to embrace willingness), to relinquish the project. Befitting the essay on laziness that the anecdote inaugurates, the realization of what to do with such a stymied critical project—how to (re)do it—comes not epiphanically but in a gradual, trickling way: that is to say, liquid and lazing. Conceiving an active form of lazing, distinguished from a more passive or even ossified state of laziness, as also crucially fluid in its active movements is one key to finding value in such a mode of intellection.

Indeed, for a long and varied line of writers working in a still underrecognized tradition of lazing thus (one inviting us to read its players' efforts as constituting a genealogy of “laziness studies”), what unites their historically, politically, and aesthetically diverse projects is the liquid set of styles that they all embrace, as well as the liquidification of the contingent norms governing work and value that all of their liquidly expressed writings affirm. Far from “doing nothing”—permutations and contestations of which phrase illuminate many of these writers' works—their cumulative, abundant pages constitute precisely the proof that slacking, in the sense of un-tautening thought, is not coeval with thought's abandonment or, less dramatically, with the abandonment of its concretion. For the contemporary scholar aiming to work in such a lazing mode, to do so responsibly means, as I endeavor here, to situate such work in both the narrower context of critical university studies and the

broader context of postwork studies that constitute the necessary horizons for contemporary academic work and value. More far-reaching, any contemporary thinker angling toward lazing writing does well to address Hannah Arendt's still-timely concern that the concretion of thought constitutes its instrumentalization and, in the process, its deadening. In fact, it is the very loosening of the lazing writer's grip on her or his product, the liquid or light emphases on process that she or he is uniquely poised to generate, that offer such writing the potential to align with Arendtian ethics and politics.

Less obvious yet just as compelling, such projects in writerly lazing may also align with a superficially, often quite different tradition of artistic lounging. Within a longer history and broader geography, *lounge*'s various forms—adjectival, verbal, and nominal—converge with special potency on a set of postwar, American performance practices (lounge musics) enacted in a lazing manner (loungeily) in a series of spaces marked by their disruptions of normative time and work (hotel and motel lounges). Though critics like Sigfried Kracauer read such spaces and related ones, like lobbies, as sites of perniciously wayward, (self-)indulgent contemplation, the vivid attraction with which Kracauer alights on such sites in order to condemn them suggests the value of reading his attraction against the grain and, per Villém Flusser's celebration of (a slightly misnamed) leisure, as indicating the value in the idling thought and related expressive behavior that the lounge, or lounging, conduces.

Because the politics of some of the preeminent practitioners of such lounging, like the paradigmatically “lazy” Dean Martin, are inhospitable to progressively committed scholars, the genuinely if trickily instructive lessons inhering in performances like Martin's have been critically underattended. More palatable and arguably more relevant to the twenty-first century are a set of pointed, contemporary reckonings with the lounge idiom, parodically reincarnated precisely so that the idiom may initiate progressive movement. Among such reincarnators of lounge, the playwright/actors performing as *The Dream Express* (and performing a set of meta-lounge pieces likewise called *The Dream Express*) generate work with particular pedagogical value for their lazing critical allies. Championing an anti-neoliberal restructuring of work and value within the diegeses of their performance pieces, they are also lazing developers and archivists of those pieces, and these efforts model an eccentrically apt way of making and maintaining work that relinquishes the toxic pretension to mastery and that embraces instead the boons that come from relaxation.

(3) To approach the topic of the book's third chapter, “Slowness,” re-

quires at the outset a clarification of what its title indexes. Though sometimes used interchangeably in both everyday and critical contexts, two different meanings of *slowness* or *slow time* may be profitably distinguished from each other: the long (slow) experience that takes time, and the stretched or dilated experience that makes time feel slowed. Following a theoretical tradition that has directed much more attention to the former phenomenon, chapter 3 fastens on the latter as it asks: When encountering the obstacle that there is not (enough) long time to take, how best to make what time there is arresting? That is, how to embrace the obstruction of arresting time in such a way that time is not impassively and impoverishingly arrested but pleasurable and full? In the process of answering these questions, I also investigate what further articulation may obtain between acts of taking (long) time and making time (slow).

To begin that investigation requires an engagement both with a prominent critical literature of speed, in which a pervasive worry over contemporaneity's accelerations has been powerfully expressed, and with a more minor literature of slowness, in which some forms of slowness (in food preparation and consumption or travel, for instance) are—ironically—harnessed too quickly to the agendas of neoliberal capitalism. Nonetheless, key texts in the two literatures suggest commonly that an ethically and politically viable mode of slowness—one that could imbricate taking slow time and making time (of whatever duration) slowed—may be imagined. As yet, that mode has been imagined imprecisely, raising the question of the exact nature of the relationship between the two kinds of slowness. Engaging in a metacritical act of bifurcating time, I propose that answering this question requires, for a spell, its deferral in a non-Agambenian open: a space not for potential inoperativity but for an alternative operativity, one that keeps implicitly clocking, as it were, the passing of taken time as it makes more explicit time for other addresses and attentions.

Chiefly, that attention is given to two strikingly, if weirdly, overlapping discourses in which the otherwise bracketed phenomenon of slowed time has been intermittently considered: a strand of cognitive psychology, focused on optimal experience and “flow,” and interwoven strands of Eastern and popularizing Western Buddhist philosophy, focused on the dimensionality of time (with an eye trained particularly on its fourth dimension). In the end, neither discourse provides a model for the scholar who would wish to make time feel intensively, valuably slowed: the latter rejects explicitly such a mode of critical intellection as it advocates instead disengagement from the worldliness of the world, a reach beyond speculative inquiry; while the former's

method admits only descriptions of, not prescriptions for, slowing (flowing) time. Tellingly, though, both discourses disclose an attraction to the cinema, some of whose artists do, by contrast, enact a mode of stretching time that may inspire a corresponding critical movement.

One such artist is writer and director Kelly Reichardt, who routes her techniques for the exemplary, pleasurable slowing of time through the stillness of her camera. That still camera is at the center of a cinematic practice defined by long(ish) takes, making time slow even when only a few minutes may be taken for a shot; considerable depth of field, providing compositions with arresting clarity and detail; likewise arresting figure behavior, as actors move pointedly within or across the borders of the still, “static” frame; occasional movements of the otherwise still camera whose very smallness is striking; and recurrent motifs that spike the scenes and sequences of Reichardt’s films. Once time has been slowed through these aspects of production, so, too, may it be slowed in reception for the thinking viewer, who is indeed poised to think further and better in the slowed (though not long) time spent with Reichardt’s films. Likewise, these production strategies provide a model for scholarly thinking and writing, which may develop homologous strategies for time’s slowing. A further lesson emerges from Reichardt’s typically long preproduction periods: taking long time may be the precondition and ground for making time slowed; and, in a further wrinkle, pleasurable experiences of slowed time may (re)fuel and replenish some subsequent endurances of long time’s duration.

(4) Writing in sympathy with those who wish to move flexibly beyond the cynicism in which so many contemporary subjects, especially in academe, have been mired, I nonetheless ask a harder and, to a certain extent, more initially distasteful question in chapter 4, “Cynicism”: Can value be located in some version(s) of cynicism, whose wholesale relinquishment may not, after all, be desirable or even possible? To pose this question of and in academe works well in tandem with an exploration of television, a field that has likewise been thick with and thickly accused of cynicism. Yet in both cases, at least some of that saturating cynicism is multifaceted, and this chapter advocates in its turn just such a multifaceted version of cynicism’s embrace, one animated by three interpenetrating attitudes: cynical accommodation to systems and structures whose navigation is inevitable, but in navigating which tactical accommodation need not become accommodationist strategy; a critical cynicism that works precisely to identify and defend against such accommodationism; and, following yet renovating classical models, a Cyn-

icism (as such classical precedents are orthographically designated) that is defined by risky acts of truth-telling and related, theatrical expressivity.

For all of its dimensionality, the version of tripartite cynicism that I advocate does not confuse cynicism (as some other accounts do) with nihilism or pessimism or, more mundanely, with banally dishonest or evil behavior. Nor does it ignore the trenchant critiques of “merely” accommodational cynicism—or of accommodational cynicism that overwhelmingly compromises the critical cynicism to which it would be hitched—that have emerged recently (for instance, in Alan Liu’s work) and that may be genealogically situated alongside similar postmodern critiques (most famously, in Peter Sloterdijk’s work). Nonetheless, a look yet further backward to antiquity and to modern (alongside postmodern or contemporary) commentators on antiquity discloses a staggeringly longstanding, albeit diverse, effort to understand the relationships among Cynicism and what we may call critical and accommodational cynicisms as not simply or only damaged by transactions with the latter form of cynicism’s experience. Inspired by, yet also wary of, those scholars who would avoid such damage by yoking cynicism(s) to optimism—and so wary because of Lauren Berlant’s stirring account of optimism’s likely cruelty today—I look instead, yet in a related manner, to the perverse and eccentric uptake of classical Cynicism (one that has generative implications for its relationship to other cynicism[s]) in Foucault’s late work. Following his account of how one may responsibly care for other and self, speaking risky truth to power—and just as riskily accommodating oneself to power in nimble, provisional ways—I treat that account as consonant in its aims with projects guided by sanely and sanguinely radical incrementalism (or incremental radicalism).

Arguably, one such project is configured by the MTV series *Daria*, “cynically” fashioned in the tripartite way that the chapter otherwise delineates. Indeed, the cynical-cum-Cynical creators of the series endow its eponymous protagonist with a related version of their cynicisms and Cynicism as she engages in Foucauldian (also Chekhovian) acts of *parrēsia* and related forms of protest and display. At the same time, the mobilization of cynicisms, plural, is registered not just in the diegetic content of *Daria* but also in the very form of the series’ limited cel animation and the movements that it arranges, as well as those that precede it at the level of production. Accommodating some exigencies of global capitalism yet wishing at the same time to espouse a critical, global cosmopolitanism—and, I argue, fulfilling that wish—the series instructs the scholar, working within yet against the baleful features

of the corporatized university, how to embody the gingerliness required to make radical gains incrementally and to ensure that incrementalism retains its radical complexion.

(5) Predicated on the act and idea of stepping aside, digressiveness may inform both a working style and a working strategy—such as those informing chapter 5. Indeed, though veering away from a project (as I did during the writing of this chapter to complete a “side” effort) may appear as an obstruction to the project’s sustenance, the embrace of such obstructive digressing is situated, in turn, to allow a reengagement with the project that benefits from the differently contoured and textured forms of attention that can then be lavished on that project. Nor is *attention* a casually chosen word to describe the renewed activity in question, because digressiveness must, as a valuable obstruction, be distinguished from the distraction that has been the source of so much critical concern, bordering on consternation, in recent years, particularly among literary critics predicting the end of print reading and related interlocutors worrying more broadly over the means and modes of contemporary subjects’ engagements with “new” media.

Taking up key texts from these annals in “distraction studies”—no mere distraction from digressiveness—is rather a generative digression from digressiveness. Not only revealing that distraction may not be as corrosive or pervasive as many commentators would claim and that certain forms of distraction may even lead to insight, some of distraction studies’ dissenters have also aimed, in a more far-reaching way, to redefine distraction: a redefinition, in fact, that draws *distraction* nearer to what I have identified here as *digressiveness*—and that, as a consequence, helps to limn a further and fuller definition of the renovated distraction or, more properly, digressiveness in question. Drawing likewise from the small body of work on digressive practices in early modern and modern literary production, I conceptualize digressiveness as an art of *strolling*, a word whose capacity to echo both *trolling* and *scrolling* begins to index the combinations of pleasure and ambition, waywardness and direction, curiosity and concentration that mark digressiveness as an ongoing practice—and to gesture toward its dialectical interplay with an encyclopedic impulse.

The version of encyclopedism that I advocate is far from the one made objectionable by its rigidly teleological orientation, its fascist insistence on hierarchical ordering, and its morbid fantasy of completism. Looking to Diderot, his contributions to the *Encyclopédie*, and his most insightful critics to pinpoint this alternative encyclopedism, I find that such encyclopedism may instead be inseparable in its constitution—and in its appeal—from its stroll

with digressiveness. And though it would be tempting to “link” the *renvois* of the *Encyclopédie* to the hyperlink as a version thereof *avant la lettre* (as one contemporary critic has plausibly done), the broader Diderotian choreography of digressiveness with encyclopedism has more explanatory purchase when we turn to new media ecologies because of the ways in which that choreography’s combination of movement, modesty, and uncertainty provides a model for how to think of related Web forays at the level of production and at the level of reception: forays, like those of the *Encyclopédie* (itself now translated, with important consequences, into a Web artifact), that are simultaneously freeing and constraining—and, indeed, paradoxically defined by limited freedom’s manufacture through constraint.

Turning to one such Web foray, Rich Juzwiak’s blog *fourfour*—celebrated chiefly for its recaps of the television series *America’s Next Top Model*—I ask how Juzwiak may help us, like Diderot, understand not only the traffic between digressiveness and encyclopedism but also the traffic between “newness” and “oldness”: a traffic that prompts Wendy Hui Kyong Chun to wonder (and me to wonder with her) how the ephemeral endures and what forms of endurance that ephemerality may take. Asking as much means also and inevitably, in this context, to digress from both questions. That digressive swerve leads me instead to take up *remixing*, a term deployed more or less literally by Juzwiak, and to locate in the word’s multivalent, metaphorical meanings its value as an umbrella concept through which to understand Juzwiak’s cross-medial and cross-generic work—and its specifically haptic portions. Indeed, the commerce between the haptic and the optic in *fourfour* helps to coordinate its simultaneous courting of digressiveness and encyclopedism—and to account for part of its ongoing interest as a “touching” object. At the same time, the blog has a different kind of ongoing interest and instruction to offer the scholar who would, like and with Juzwiak, find in dispersion a special form of collection and in meandering an eccentric mechanism for staying an intellectual course.

To stay an intellectual course begun earlier in this section of the introduction, I circle back now, with more information on array, to the question of how and why I dwell with my objects yet also how to understand them as just one part of a larger archive of contemporary culture marked pervasively by embarrassment, laziness, cynicism, slowness, and digressiveness. Where the last is concerned, I am touched by and learn a great deal from work in live performance like *The Provenance of Beauty*, poet Claudia Rankine’s collaboration with The Foundry Theatre to produce a meandering bus ride through—and to use a metatour guide to tell the meandering histories of—the streets of

the South Bronx; as well as from work in television like *Veronica Mars*, which both embraced and eschewed the logic of the procedural as it digressed away from crimes-of-the-week toward baroquely serial, intricately multiseasonal narratives. But in the end, Juzwiak's *fourfour* tells me more about the particular, valuable interplay of digressiveness and encyclopedism, identified above, than could for instance *Provenance* (whose painstakingly calibrated bus route was not wholly digressive, though its catalogue of South Bronx tales approximated neighborhood encyclopedism) or *Veronica* (which "digressed" away from the encyclopedism of its accretive, ongoing storytelling after a network smack-down forced it to comply to more rigidly episodic norms). Likewise, a range of limited cel animations—I think here especially of *The Boondocks*—could help one to understand the uncomfortable marriage of what I am calling accommodational and critical cynicisms; yet that series, for all its wicked satire and pliability to the expectations of cable network programming, does not disclose a pedagogy of renovated Cynicism in the fashion that obtains in *Daria*, rarer for this quality. As for slowness, a weird magic of slowed—yet not very long—time is locatable in a series of YouTube videos in which pop hits by the likes of Aaliyah, Beyoncé Knowles, and Justin Bieber are played eight hundred times more slowly than in their original recordings; but the trancelike upshots may tend more in the direction of the consciousness-effects associated with Buddhist pedagogy than toward the pedagogy of focused thinking to which I turn in moving to the side of Buddhist teachings. Similarly, Occupy protesters performing as zombies have a great deal to teach us about the critical and purposive uptake of laziness—and its stakes in the face of the twenty-first-century capitalism that Rebecca Schneider, following Chris Harman, has called its "zombie" mode⁴²—if less to demonstrate about the cognitive lazing that marks projects like *The Dream Express*. And while I admit (cue the tune, "It Had to Be You") that I have been on a collision course with Tori Amos since I was thirteen, chapter 1's argument about embarrassment's role in subject-formation and relationality pushes through what is merely personal or privatized in order to consider the collective forces and social meanings of cringing, critical and otherwise. What's more, I may—may—have been able to exercise the volition to consider closely other "embarrassing" artists (though the dozens of interlocutors who have sought me out to agree that Amos is distinctively embarrassing and to share their own awkward relationships to her music since the appearance, in essay form, of a version of chapter 1 testifies both to Amos's value in a project like this one and to what is relational, collective, and social about embarrassment), I'm not certain that, say, Paula Abdul or George Michael is all that embarrass-

ing on close inspection. They are cheesy, yes, and even subject to occasional public mortification, but in ways that conform easily to the machinery of the entertainment industry (which is perfectly happy to sell bathroom sex to the tabloids, as Michael well knows and shruggingly accepts); whereas Amos's insistence on her activating of a politics and artistry more laudable than usually found in the pop arena is embarrassingly at odds with the relationship to pop norms and successes that she nonetheless enjoys, one made uneasy by her insistence on exceptionalism. In a further turn of the screw, her sometimes awareness of tensions like this very one, manifest in her marking of them for her audiences, is thus idiosyncratically instructive.

To understand Amos relative to Michael, or Juzwiak in conversation with Rankine, provides a way to ensure that the archive of *Obstruction*, while focused for the sake of detail and clarity, does not emerge as a hermetically sealed one. In part for that reason, other subjects and objects make guest appearances over the course of the five chapters to come (that is, get ready for a parade capacious enough to include Janet Jackson, Split Britches, and Silk Stalkings) and continue the work, begun in this introduction, of situating the book's most closely attended items alongside others. As that effort unfolds—and as will already have been noticeable in a nascent way, here—we will encounter differential ways in which obstructions can and can't, are and aren't, made to work. Recall my mention earlier of obstructions' deployments hinging on "precise admixtures of privilege and precarity, fragility and force." When, how, and why a cultural scene does or does not yield these admixtures is telling, and one of the many things it tells us is how complexly markers of identity—like (but not only) class, ethnicity, gender, race, and sexuality—are set in motion in my case studies and the others in juxtaposition with which they demand to be understood. In other words, meditating on privilege and precarity requires attention to the markers of identity with which they are often in close, though not saturating, correspondence: that is, to the (various) differences that (various) differences make, especially with regard to the inequitable possibilities—or foreclosures of possibility—structured by obstructions in general and by this book's five obstructions in particular.

To start to think along these lines, again a matter for revisitation in the rest of the book, I find helpful a turn to a longish, provocative moment in Hortense Spillers's now-canonical essay on race and psychoanalysis, in which the notion of unease plays a crucial, if only implicit and therefore underattended, role—prompting me to reconsider my own uses of the word *unease* or its cognates in the course of this introduction and later in the book and, indeed, my conceptualization of obstruction:

There is much insistence, at least in our customary way of viewing things, that the professional has little in common with the majority of the population. True enough as far as it goes, this truism is tinged with animus toward activity perceived to be esoteric, elitist, uncommon. But this simplified reading of the social map, sealing off entire regions and territories of experience from the reciprocal contagion proper to them, offers us a slim opportunity to understand how the social fabric, like an intricate tweed, is sewn across fibers and textures of meaning. There is the discourse in which the professional, as de Certeau observes, dares and labors, the discourse of *travail*; but there is also the mark of the professional's human striving in terms of the everyday world of the citizen-person—coming to grips with the pain of loss and loneliness; getting from point a to b; the inexorable passing of time, change, and money; the agonies of friendship and love, and so on. . . . In that regard, the professional's relationship to discourse is tiered, but it is also imbricated by forms of dialects through which she lives her human and professional calling, as work is rent through with the trace of the uncommon and the more common. On this level, speaking is democratically impoverished for a range of subjects, insofar as it is not sufficient to the greedy urge to revelation of motives that the social both impedes and permits, nor is it adequate to the gaps in kinetic and emotional continuity that the subject experiences as discomfort. Psychoanalytic literature might suggest the word *desire* here to designate the slit through which consciousness falls according to the laws of unpredictability. In that sense, the subject lives with desire as intrusive, as the estranged, irrational, burdensome illfit that alights between where she "is at" and would/wanna be. On this level of the everyday, the professional discourses, if we could say so, and the women commandeering the butcher's stand at the A&P have in common a mutually scandalous secret about which they feel they must remain silent, but which speaking, more emphatically, *talking*, about appeases, compensates, deflects, disguises, and translates into usable, recognizable social energy.⁴³

In what appears at first blush to be the key takeaway from this passage, Spillers makes her provisional rapprochement with psychoanalysis through the figure of desire and the process or project—if not exactly the cure—of talking. Yet for those of us who, Bartleby-like, would prefer not to (fill in any number of blanks) with psychoanalysis, we might fasten our attention not on desire as "the slit through which consciousness falls" but rather on what I nominate as unease and Spillers labels "discomfort," the "gaps in kinetic

and emotional continuity” that play just as foundational a role in the forming and deforming of a split, or “slit,” subjectivity (again, comprehended as such after poststructuralisms) as may the “estranged, irrational” vectors of desire. Neither as totalizing as anxiety nor even as locally determinate as worry (about both of which I will say more in this book’s conclusion), unease may designate the low, nagging hum within and conditioning of consciousness as such: a hum intense enough to constitute noise in the circumstances—that is, the encounters with obstruction—in which all kinds of subjects, from the “professional discourser” to “the women commandeering the butcher’s stand at the A&P,” confront the disjunctures “between where [they] ‘[are] at’ and would/wanna be.” Spillers’s generous, delicate effort to imagine what such superficially yet meaningfully disparate subjects may “have in common,” beyond what is “perceived to be esoteric, elitist, uncommon” in the work of the professional discourser—let us call her the scholar—suggests a related imagining that I share, as an invitation, to whatever more and less expected readers may come to *Obstruction*. This book lands squarely in “the discourse of *travail*” at the same time that it takes up such mundanities as “the inexorable passing of time” and “getting from point a to b.” I cannot know precisely in advance, nor would I presume to predict, how the value that I find in strategic embraces of obstruction, enabling the management of time’s passage, the movement from a to b, and the like, will or will not emphasize for each reader what is “uncommon” or what is “more common” about our “everyday world[s]”—especially when at least some of those readers also approach the question of commonness or uncommonness from the perspective of what Stefano Harney and Fred Moten have called the *undercommons*.⁴⁴ In common, then, with their searching work, I ask you, whoever you are, to steal what “translates into usable, recognizable . . . energy” for you, to put aside what does not, and in these ways to test the possibilities and the limits of “reciprocal contagion” that the reading experience may produce.

Coda: Homing (II)

With continued reference to the “everyday world” that I just invoked, and by way of modeling a version of the value to be found in the anecdotal that I affirmed yet earlier in this introduction, I pause here to reflect briefly on a complicated business that demanded my attention and engagement during the years of *Obstruction*’s percolation: the effort to carry on and maintain the integrity of my department’s work after the department’s annual operating budget was slashed by university administrators, part of their multipronged

response to financial precarities engendered by investment losses and endowment attrition amidst the Great Recession. Among other serious consequences of this budget cut, most painful was the departure of wonderful colleagues who lost their jobs in the process of the department's shrinkage. And though, unsurprisingly, the ongoing employment of the department's tenure-track and tenured professors was much more secure compared to the uncertainty—or, again, and more direly, the actual job loss—confronted by lecturers and staff members, the relativity of that security was nonetheless clear: one distinct possibility that my colleagues and I faced was the shuttering of the entire department if we, as its stewards, could not develop a financial, pedagogical, and intellectual strategy for reimagining our work whose coherence and sustainability (and affordability) satisfied our administrators. Mournful a complexion as our response sometimes, inevitably took, we had either to find what value we could in this obstruction or face the wholesale erosion of our collective endeavor. Choosing the former way with as much care for each other and dignity as we could muster, we initiated widespread curricular reform, still in the process of implementation and signaled in part by our name change from a Department of Theater, Film, and Dance to one of Performing and Media Arts: a change meant to index the fuller integration of the study and practice of live performance and of cinema and media that the curricular renovations would entail.

I share this institutional narrative not for the basically personal reason that I would have been less likely to gravitate to *Obstruction's* topics and arguments had my professional lifeworld not been powerfully reoriented in the manner toward which I gesture, but rather en route to making two claims, one political and historical and the other methodological, about the book's artifactual status. First, even under less (and of course under more) extreme circumstances than the ones that I describe, scholarly research and concomitant writing are always inseparable from teaching and administrative labor, as well as from the larger institutional structures and imperatives that coordinate such research and writing (but do not, in my view, simply or strictly contain these efforts so long as academic freedom is a meaningful, activated concept), ones that likewise participate in coordinating the broader "state of the humanities" within whose sphere we operate and circulate our work. *Obstruction* comes aslant at this nexus of issues and concerns, in part because of my desire not redundantly to retread ground covered by other, lucid commentators on contemporary humanities work in the corporatized university (including Louis Menand and Cary Nelson);⁴⁵ and in part because of my hope and warrant that those commentators' efforts may be valuably complemented

by a book that offers a reflexively marked, phenomenal view—from avowedly privileged, even if also shifting, ground—of what research and writing look like as they are “transformed” by (which is just to say, made in) circumstances in which obstruction is a constitutive condition of the work and of the life shaping and shaped by that work.

Second, and as I have argued on other occasions and in different ways (including in my advocacy for the curricular reform and corresponding departmental name change mentioned above), works on and in live performance and media arts *belong* together, however small, still—though growing—the number of researchers and writers whose scholarship moves across the disciplinary boundaries that distinguish performance studies and media studies from one another. To be sure, those disciplinary distinctions have meaning and use, but so, too, and at the same time may have an insistence on what media and performance have in common and thus what may be reckoned by an intellectual approach that draws on the methods that bind the two disciplines as consonant versions of (once more, in Villarejo’s words) “cultural criticism”: commonalities that include the embodiment of expressive behavior (or its proximation), the presentational or representational framing of this behavior, and the likewise embodied effects of this framed behavior on the audient subjects who engage it. As one such audient subject, I traffic, over the course of *Obstruction’s* chapters, with live and recorded popular music, theatrical performance, cinema, television, and new media practices, constituting an archive whose specific uptake here provides one measure of the more general ways in which, over the course of my career, I have moved from earlier training in performance studies to more recent, effortful development of deep competency in media studies. Indebted as one part of my thinking about obstruction has been to Heidegger’s *Being and Time*, as elaborated in this introduction’s first section, I reject that work’s condemnation of curiosity as merely “not-staying,” “never dwelling anywhere.”⁴⁶ My own curiosity to interpret objects different from live performances—and thus my commitment to cultivate the skills necessary for such interpretation—is, by contrast, precisely what enables me to keep dwelling, too, with live performance forms in ways that are enriched, not compromised, by that dwelling’s location in a many-roomed house.

That house may be conceived not only as many-roomed but also as multi-storied—which is to say, I have, for *Obstruction*, been propelled toward a set of objects that (in addition to the other qualities that I highlight in the previous section of this introduction) are distinguishable as respectively “higher” and “lower” than one another according to certain standards of cultural value.

Whatever postmodernity accomplished toward chiseling away at such hierarchizing distinctions, and for all the ways in which much formerly stable categories of taste have been subject to long-standing contestation and fracture, snobberies of various sorts have nonetheless persisted with a weird contemporary vengeance—and in equally weird, untimely, even afterlife-like guises. The promise of nobrow may never have properly or fully obtained, yet it is in part because so much cultural production has for so long flirted (cynically?) with nobrowing promiscuities and volatilities that contemporary subjects respond with desire and need to the call to distinguish themselves from one another along ever more obsessive, particularized, idiosyncratic, and minutiose axes of taste. Some of these subjects have responded with glee when I have told them, for instance, that *Obstruction* takes up *Old Joy* and *Daria*—and (quite opposed to those closet fans who come out to me) with awkwardness or barely concealed disdain at the mention of Tori Amos, thereby exposing the potential for disruption latent in even well-lubricated social dynamics: an issue to be explored further in the ensuing chapter on “Embarrassment.”

At the same time, and from one compelling perspective on capital and its global flows, what I am calling these “afterlife-like” persistences of taste speciation may not be as “weird” as I also call them but rather make perfect, and perfectly morbid, sense. Confronting what Mark Fisher calls “capitalist realism,” a “system of equivalence” which can assign all cultural objects, whether they are religious iconography, pornography, or *Das Kapital*, a monetary value,” subjects snobbishly cultivating more nonce systems of taste, which endeavor to make equivalences and account for value along nonmonetary lines, find one weak, minor way to make the endurance of capitalist realism more bearable.⁴⁷ In the face of this regime, as well as of the contemporary efflorescence of snobbisms that it incites, genuine (if complicatedly arrived at) nobrow deserves a reinvigoration—resistant to the valuative norms both of neoliberalism and of its taste-making “resistors”—in which my archive’s activation participates. This tactic is just one element of the overall strategy, sketched here and elaborated in the pages that follow, whereby *Obstruction* transvalues obstructions as a way to conceive alternatives to the critical routines that capitalist realism tends to produce, encourage, and reward.