Amphibian Demons (Not Yet for 3-D Printer)

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I.

Amphibian Demons Ca.09.09.1942 (link to video)
The title of the film *Amphibian Demons* is the official 1942 title by Ford Motor Company in the public domain. The silent film footage is of the testing of the Ford amphibious GPA Jeep manufactured at the Ford Rouge Plant. It was shot in the Rouge River. The Jeep, as it sounds, was half-boat, half-land vehicle.

The GPAs were manufactured during World War II for only one year, from 1942 to 1943. They were used in the Sicily landings of September 1943, and in action in North Africa, France, Holland and the South Pacific. The GPAs did not perform well in the field. At 3,520 lbs, "the production craft had become much heavier than the original 1,200 kg (2,640 lbs) specified in the design brief, but its volume had not been increased accordingly. As a consequence, a low free-board in the water meant that [it] couldn't handle more than a light chop, and certainly couldn't take much cargo." The GPAs intended purpose “to ferry soldiers to and from ships off-shore, to trundle up the beach and continue inland” was therefore unmet. Many of the Jeeps that were used in battle sank if there were any significant waves. The GPA's were therefore leased instead to Russia.

II.

The amphibious demons did not function well. They did not produce their planned effects and thus were not pragmatic, not practical. Pragmatism is a philosophical tradition that emerged in the U.S. at the turn of the 20th century and that, in the common usage, is a philosophical approach that assesses truth, meaning, theories, and beliefs in terms of the success of their practical application. What works is what's true; what has practical effects is what matters. Or more carefully, C.S. Pierce's pragmatic maxim: "Consider the practical effects of the objects of your conception. Then, your conception of those effects is the whole of your conception of the object." The effect of the amphibian demon was supposed to get troops on the land in a fast and efficient manner from the ships' landing on the shore. Its failure to do so was a part of the effect of the object.

In an interview with Belgian philosopher Isabelle Stengers, she explains the manner in which she discovered that she is a pragmatist:

> Effectively, [my] encounter with pragmatism has been very important in the sense of, "So this is what I do!" [laughs] Here is what animates me! This pragmatism, which I take from William James, from his more speculative dimensions (meaning the concern for consequences, in terms of invention, of speculation on consequences), this is what pragmatism, in its common usage (which is an insult), passes over in silence. We don’t know how these things can matter. But we can learn to examine situations from the point of view of their possibilities, from that which they communicate with and that which they poison. Pragmatism is the care of the possible. Stengers here emphasizes the less common usage of pragmatism, stressing not what works effectively, but that which is possible. Although she ultimately declares that pragmatism is the care of the possible, she also points out that approaching it includes looking at that which the possible poisons.

To think of that which might poison us, like lead in the drinking water, is a practical act for the drinker. But to care for the consequences of the possible is to have concern for thinking through
the effects of the objects of our conception, both the effective, defective and poisonous results. The concern for the effects of invention circulate differently.

Perhaps there is always something that can be dangerously implanted and irrational within the possible, i.e, the pharmakon. The pharmakon is an amphibian demon, something that oscillates in between a possible solution and a terrible problem. Stengers says of the pharmakon:

I would maintain that the question of what the commoners need – have a crucial need of – is a particular version of the art of paying attention. It is a matter of the art of what the Greeks called the “pharmakon,” which can be translated as “drug.” What characterizes the pharmakon is at the same time both its efficacy and its absence of identity. Depending on dose and use, it can be both a poison and a remedy. The type of attention that their milieu can lend to user movements is a pharmakon. It is capable of both nourishing and poisoning them. And the same “pharmacological” uncertainty prevails with regards to what these movements themselves can produce. That they might be dangerous thus goes without saying – every pharmakon can be dangerous. What it is a matter of putting into suspension, through referring to the instability of the pharmakon – remedy or poison – is the way this danger functions as an objection.

Stengers says that the objection to a possible poison is itself a danger because the objection becomes an act of exclusion. At the same time, we might also ask- does a care for the possibility of poison imply a care for the already poisoned? Before the aftermath, before the consequence — how can we think about what is already a failure and that poisons us? What would it mean to care for the perpetually contaminated? How do we approach that which has been poisoned at the moment of its conception, and in perpetuity?

While pragmatism is, in the common sense, connected with the notion of problem solving, prediction and action, the amphibian demon is a technological deformity that, once deemed an ineffective vehicle for war, is thereby leased out to (or upon) others. Why, if it was meant to be a practical object for transport, did Ford reference the supernatural ‘demon’ in its testing phase of the GPA? What practical effect is produced from the demonic? A demon at the outset is different than an ineffective design or undesired outcome or a possible poison. Here, the demon as effect is no longer a possible consequence, but is created with a notion of a supernatural predator embedded within it, whose effect is to willfully brew poison at its very beginning. It is demonic already in its inception. Its unknown poison in this case is given away to someone else, the Russians, when it does not work for the makers. What of the unknown effects of such amphibious demons? Perhaps to conceive of possible effects alone here is misleading without considering the purposeful corruption of the waters.

III.
It is perhaps well-known that the Rouge River was polluted the most by Ford, not only with the imaginative demons of war, but with its actual chemical pollutants. At a certain point, there were no more fish found in the Rouge near Dearborn's Ford Field Park. Although in the last decades, efforts have begun to restore the Rouge, the corruption of the local waters persists. The water that you drink mixed with factory chemicals mixed with the war machine mixed with the unknown poison of the possibility of amphibian demons - to borrow from anthropologist, critical theorist, and professor of Gender Studies, Elizabeth Povenelli,

Corruption is like this. Not ultimately or originally about abstract values, bills stuffed into an unmarked envelope passed from hand to hand, but about the materially figurating effects of public secrets. One knows something is up but not what. One can’t specify what quasi materialities and quasi events are transforming the small inlets into a social milieu and diverting the architectures of existence elsewhere.

*The materially figurating effects of public secrets* — that’s the other definition of amphibian demon. The figuration of possible poisons before their consequences are made public, or before they even can be publicly thought, because they were secrets — power changes the pharmakon in this way. Public secrets are tested in the local waters as demons, poisoning the water before the public can object. Such an act preempts the possible before we can know it, precluding the ability to care for the possible. Corruption does not allow us to care for the possible because it forces us to only be able to care for the already poisoned.

IV.

**Amphibian Demons (Not Yet for 3-D Printer)**

*Amphibian Demons* begins with poisons of possible corruption. Instead of the possible as a future possible that is ‘yet to come,’ I look at the possible poison yet to surface, and the possibly already corrupted. This looking is not on a timeline of the past, present, future, but more so related to the ‘over there, that puddle of sludge in the corner.’ Why should we wait for the already-formed poison of corruption to come forth?

The process begins by looking to something already failed, a residue, a streak across the surface, an amphibian demon. It is not to remember what is possible for the hope of new futures, but to look for the ways in which the poisons of the possible have lingered below a threshold, generated and figured through latent corruptions.

*Untitled Amphibian Demon #1:*
1. It begins with a photo from the archives of the Detroit Public Library. The back side of a GPA vehicle, parked.

2. The photo is transformed into a 3-D surface.
3. The surface is transformed into a mutated seashell, a (not yet) 3-D printable river artifact.
4. The poison of the corrupted is re-surfac
e, pushed from the Ford plant, to the digital recombinatory processes on
desk, into a 3-D model, into a (not yet) 3-D printable file.
5. The process is repeated with different images, different initial toxins, and a new species of 3-D river mutant emerges with the possibility to be printed, but are not printed.

V.

Corruption is the sub-clinical persistence of something readily willing to mix with an-be-toxic, not necessarily toxic, but willing to transport poisons below the perceptual threshold and along a chain of commands. Corruption gives us a pre-figured sludge. From corrupted power, possible poisons have no where to go but perhaps into the public, either into the skin of the public or in front of public eyes.

1. It begins with an image of Sphaerotilus natans, commonly known as ‘sewage fungus.’ It is a sludge that forms in polluted water.
2. When other organisms can’t survive in the water from pollution, the sludge can.
3. The sludge is not the pollution itself. Its appearance is (not) an effect. It may or may not appear. The conditions for its appearance may possibly allow it to appear.

4. The image of the sludge is sent to the digital recombinatory processes on a desktop, into a 3-D bump map, for creating a surface texture, for becoming a possible 3-D model texture, not yet a printable file.
5. The files are not (yet) 3-D printable.

The sludge is pre-figured. Ready to print already, before the conditions of pollution for it to emerge even appear. A pre-emptive poison from the possible corruption within it.

VI.

All creation must incorporate the knowledge that it does not risk itself in a friendly world, but in an unhealthy milieu.

These are materials for 3-D models, textures for a possible 3D object, or a possible 3D printed object of a future that is not yet printable. Failure is produced from the corrupted object at the outset. The possibility of their being printed, their printable-ness, poisons them also. Going back to Pierce — the effects of the object are a part of the concept — but the effect of corruption is that it produces a rogue and formulated poison at the outset. Can we even chart the consequences of such corruptions?
Art is like a possible poison. The effects of art are usually unknown, if not purposely un-knowable. But can art be like corruption, a pre-figured poison? Instead of an effective use or a pragmatic goal, art as a corrupted poison works with (teases out, and/or releases) corrupted failures at the outset. In this way, art is able to include the poisoned as an effect already formed. In other words, art can acknowledge that corruption is involved in its own process, even when imperceptible. Stengers notes of creative processes, that “there exists only one certitude – that the process of creation of possibles must protect itself like the plague from a utopian mode, which appeals to the surpassing of conflicts, which proposes a remedy whose interest should, finally, be respected by all.”

A contemporary art practice may therefore be one that looks not just at
the possible future to come, not in the sense of modernity or utopia, nor from a stance of innocence, but as incorporating corruption processes into its own form.

Such a process is not to further proliferate corruption, but to understand itself as embedded within an unhealthy position: “The only generality that holds is that all creation must incorporate the knowledge that it does not risk itself in a friendly world, but in an unhealthy milieu, that it will have to deal with
protagonists – the State, capitalism, professionals – who will exploit all weaknesses, and which will activate all processes capable of poisoning it.”

Looking to how the imperceptibly corrupted has been turned into the poisonous already, art can be a method for the terms of how we mine the poisons that we have inherited, that are already there within.

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2 Ibid.


4 Bordeleau, Erik., “Care of the Possible,” Interview with Isabelle Stengers, Scapegoat Journal. 1:1 (2011) <http://www.scapegoatjournal.org/docs/01/01_Stengers_Bordeleau_CareOfThePossible.pdf>


6 From the University of Michigan Global Change working group blog: “As the largest industry in the region, notably situated on the banks of the Rouge River special attention must be paid to the Ford Automotive Plant in Dearborn, Michigan. Heavy metals are frequently used in the automotive industry and such carcinogenic compounds have been regularly documented as present in Ford’s discharged waste (Murray 1997)” <http://www.globalchange.umich.edu/globalchange2/current/workspace/Sect005/s5g4/index3.htm>

7 “FOTR [Friends of the Rouge] has . . . trained volunteers to participate in annual frog and toad surveys. Their presence is an indicator of quality wetlands, vital to the health of the river. Thus far, the group has documented eight different species. And, in 2012, the group launched a survey team to determine what kind of fish are calling the river home. They have documented several new species not seen in the past. And one of the biggest surprises was finding 20 species in Dearborn’s Ford Field Park, where not so long ago biologists found no fish at all.” <http://www.hourdetroit.com/Hour-Detroit/May-2015/Reclaiming-The-Rouge/>


10 Ibid.