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## The Interpreters

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## UNPLUGGED

### The interpreters

Data we collect and use in organisation and management studies look like 'cold cases'. We want to offer more conversations, interpretations, arguments and even disputes. The 'Interpreters' is a nexus where academics invite colleagues and friends to analyse and discuss freely an argument, raw data, cases and qualitative materials.

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### Observing Godot

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#### I.

We have been here for 48 h, sealed in an airtight bag. Despite being enclosed, we are, nonetheless, releasing CO<sub>2</sub> and allowing our most volatile aromas to escape. Suddenly, we are poured into a funnel-shaped receptacle attached to a base made of metal and plastic. There we stay for a short while. Once in contact with the humidity and oxygen, we gradually begin to oxidise, and our aromas become encrusted on the walls of the receptacle. We then start to move towards the bottom of the funnel and quickly travel through a narrow bottleneck. Two sharpened blades then grind us down and spit us out through the machine. We have gone from beans to powder.

Most of us fall into a hollow chamber firmly attached to a short handle. A small proportion of us fall outside of it, while others remain stuck to the blades. We end up positioned haphazardly in the hollow chamber; some of us are spilling over the edge, so a human has to coax us back inside and spread us out evenly. It is difficult to measure our mass with any precision, so we are placed on a small, flat machine that is square to be measured. We weigh 19.5 grams. We are squeezed against one another in the hollow chamber, but we still allow the air to circulate between us. That air is then squeezed out by a human, who pushes us down hard using a metal weight. Compressed within the hollow chamber, we are then inserted into a large rectangular machine. A jet of hot water is then immediately pushed right through us at high pressure.

Once in contact with the hot water, we become liquid, forced to abandon our solid vestiges. We flow in a thin trickle into a small cup while producing an elastic crema. During the first 10 s, we release all of our aromas and oils. During the 10 s that follow, we produce acidity. And during the last 6 s, we develop our sweetness and our sugar. We have now become 3 cl of a delicate, complex, and aromatic liquid topped with a thick, elastic, and blond crema. As for our solid remains, they stay in the hollow chamber – with the exception of a small proportion, which makes its way up through the conduits of the rectangular machine and into its inner depths. The rest is then unceremoniously dumped into a small bin, all but the most obstinate bits, which remain stuck to the bottom of the hollow chamber. We, on the other hand, are carefully carried away by a human and placed on a table in front of another human, who brings us to her lips three times. And that is how we are destroyed.

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We had come from a faraway land. We grew on a high plateau with a hot climate and abundant rainfall. Our fragility meant that those around us had to be careful at all times. We grew day after day, swelling and reddening under the vigilant eye of our carer. Once we had ripened, we were taken away from our homeland. It happened early one morning. We were seized one by one and torn from our nourishing land. We were then placed in a wooden crate and quickly transported to a

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workshop. The layers we had developed to protect ourselves from external attack were removed. We were placed in containers and left to ferment. Then, spread out on a large cloth stretched above the ground, we gradually dried out. Once we were dry, we were carefully inspected one by one and divided into two categories: the nice, well-proportioned and red ones to one side, and the ugly, malformed and pale ones to the other. Those in the first category were to be shipped away, while those in the second faced the end of the road.

We undergo transformations when we come into contact with the air and light, so a human sealed us in a big bag for preservation. We were thrown into a truck, where we joined other big bags containing more like us. We were repeatedly loaded, transported, unloaded, inspected and exchanged for notes. After a long journey, we arrived in an unknown location. There we were poured into a big machine. The temperature quickly rose; as the inside of the big machine became hotter, we released some of our aromas, became more porous and changed colour. When we had turned golden brown, we were taken out of the machine and placed in small airtight bags.

After our trip through the machine with the rising temperature, we were – wrongly – accused of having become too bitter. Let one thing be clear: we are in no way responsible for this bitterness. The blame lies squarely with the blades in the grinding machine, which are too close together. Whenever the blades in the machine grind us too finely, the jet of hot water cannot pass through us correctly, and we flow into the cup too slowly, automatically becoming very dense, rancid and bitter. But, we are perfectly capable of becoming balanced and pleasant to the taste. In any event, our exit from the machine with the rising temperature precisely marked the beginning of our last 48 h in existence.

## 2.

I have been around a long time. For 2,454 cycles to be exact. Suddenly, my hopper is filled with a kilogram of beans, which is my maximum capacity. My rotary knob is turned slightly to the right. When my ON button is pressed, I immediately begin to consume electricity, hum and heat up. My cast steel grinding discs start to turn at a speed of 1,480 rpm. Some of the beans in my hopper slide into my grinding chamber. I grind them quickly until my OFF button is pressed and I go idle. In just a few seconds, I have reduced a lot to small particles absolutely identical in size. I expel as much of the grind as possible out of my spout, but a small amount stays inside me, trapped between the grooves of my grinding discs. My handle is pressed sharply three times, and I release a little bit of the grind that has remained stuck to the inside of my spout. Then, I begin to cool down. And that is how I complete my 2,455th cycle.

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In the past, I used to grind things other than coffee beans. Thanks to my powerful motor and the fast rotation of my grinding discs, I was able to reduce several different types of grains to powder. Once I even ground some spices. I do not make any distinction between the different inputs that regularly fill my hopper. But, the vast majority of my cycles have, nonetheless, involved reducing coffee beans to small particles. Depending on the chosen setting for my rotary knob, my grinding discs move closer or further apart, and I produce ground coffee of varying coarseness. For example, the particles I produced in previous cycles were much thicker than these ones.

Despite my resilience, my life has been peppered with incidents. For example, I cannot keep grinding for too long without a break, otherwise I am sure to overheat. That is what happened me when I completed a series of grinds without stopping beginning on my 1,682nd cycle. I kept going for 40 min, and at the 41st, I stopped suddenly. My thermostat interrupted the flow of electricity to my motor to protect me from thermal overloading. Afterwards, it took me a good hour to cool down and be able to function again. On another occasion, during my 2,123rd cycle to be exact, my spout became clogged. I kept humming and heating up, but I was not grinding anything at all. My settings had to be changed to 'coarse', and my ON button was pressed so I could grind freely. That way, I was able to spit out what had become trapped in my grinding discs and function properly again.

Before the beginning of my 2,455th cycle, I was completely disassembled. One by one, my parts were inspected and cleaned. My hopper was the first to get this treatment. Its internal surfaces had taken on the odours and oils from the coffee beans that it had stored. These were unceremoniously removed using a clean, dry cloth held by a human hand. Next, it was the turn of my grinding discs. My two discs were separated from each other using a screwdriver. The grooves in these discs are narrow and sharp, and there are many of them, so it is difficult to dislodge foreign objects that get trapped within them. My morphology is such that a brush with long, stiff bristles must be used. These bristles scrape the inside of my grooves in quick strokes, releasing any small particles trapped there. Once the process had ended, I was fully reassembled. And because this is done regularly, I am always clean.

I have at times been accused of making the coffee bitter. This accusation is unfounded. If the coffee is bitter, it is clearly the fault of the espresso machine, which is often dirty and stores ground coffee residue in its conduits that, in some cases, has been there for 80 cycles. So naturally, from time to time, some of this old residue falls into the cup of coffee, giving it a rancid flavour. What is more, the machine expels water that is much

too hot through the ground coffee, burning it and making it even more bitter. It is got nothing to do with me. I am flexible and accurate. The distance separating my grinding discs from one another can be modified to the millimetre. During my 2,455th cycle, I did a clean and accurate job. And after sitting idle for an hour, I completed my 2,456th cycle.

### 3.

I have been around for quite a while, 8,876 cycles to be precise. Suddenly, my portafilter is removed from my grouphead. A tiny residue of ground coffee is stuck to the inside of my filter basket. To dislodge it, the basket is wiped using a clean, dry cloth held by a human hand. Once it is completely clean, my portafilter is placed under the grinder's spout to be filled with freshly ground coffee. Because the grind is scattered a little bit, a human wipe the edges of my portafilter and pushes it all inside. Once it has been filled, my portafilter is placed on a flat machine that is thin and square to check its weight. Before my portafilter is reinserted into my grouphead, I release a small flow of water for a few seconds when one of my buttons is pressed. Next, one of the 40 cups that has been put on top of me is placed on my drain tray. Then, everything happens very fast. My portafilter is reinserted into the grouphead; my ON button is pressed; I expel water at 92°C and at a pressure of 9 bars into the portafilter; and thick liquid pours from the spouts of my portafilter straight into the cup. The whole process lasts no more than 26 s. And that is how I complete my 8,877th cycle.

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I have made espressos, macchiatos, cappuccinos and flat whites. What makes me so adaptable is my steam wand, which expels air at high pressure. I can use it to transform liquid milk into foam. All that needs to be done is to put liquid milk into a pitcher and plunge my steam wand into it. In 15 s, the hot air that I expel turns the milk into a light foam that is supple and shiny. This can simply be poured into the cup containing the espresso. So, I have two jobs: extracting espresso shots and foaming. By combining these two actions in different ways, a whole range of drinks can be made. The way in which they are combined is not up to me. Indeed, their combination can be modified, and I can be made to perform different actions. For example, instead of being poured into an espresso shot, the milky foam I produce has on occasion been poured on top of tea. I have contributed to the production of 46 chai lattes.

I have had many minor incidents in my life. Nothing serious though; I have never completely malfunctioned. These incidents can be divided into two categories: under-extractions and over-extractions. When I under-extract an espresso shot,

the hot water I expel through the coffee placed in my portafilter passes through the grind too quickly. As a result, I produce a clear, watery espresso that gives off little aroma. By contrast, when I over-extract an espresso shot, the hot water I expel takes too long to pass through the grind. The result is an espresso that is very dense, too short and bitter. A small number of these incidents involved me expelling water that was too hot through the coffee. When that happens, I burn the grind contained in my portafilter and the espresso shot I produce has a burnt aftertaste. Such incidents occur frequently, but repeating many cycles makes it easier to adjust my settings.

I am clean. Before each extraction, I systematically release some water to dislodge any coffee residue that has found its way into my conduits. After each extraction, my portafilter is emptied into a bin, and its basket is wiped meticulously. There are also daily operations on top of these pre- and post-cycle cleaning rituals. Every evening, my internal parts are thoroughly cleaned. Because of their shape, my joint and shower screen are difficult to access. A brush with long bristles must be used to dislodge the coffee residue trapped inside. To keep my conduits clean, I complete four 10-s closed-circuit cycles. In other words, I expel water through my portafilter; which is blocked beforehand by a filter without any holes into which 3 g of a chemical product is placed. To complete the process, my filters and portafilters are soaked in a basin of warm water containing a chemical product for 10 min before being rinsed and dried.

I am sometimes blamed when the espresso I extract is too bitter. This accusation is unfounded. It is not my fault but rather that of the human who struggles to adjust my settings properly. I am a complex unit with many different parameters. Each combination of temperature, pressure and extraction time produces a unique result. And the combination varies depending on the coffee placed in my portafilter. The aromatic properties, quantity and coarseness of each coffee require a specific combination that should not be used with others. Five to ten cycles are needed to find the optimum temperature and extraction time. These tests made my 8,877th cycle perfect. And after sitting idle for an hour, I completed my 8,878th cycle.

### 4.

I arrive at Objectif Lune 10 min before it opens. I like to put everything in place before the customers arrive. Before leaving last night, I carefully cleaned the coffee grinder and espresso machine, so the bulk of the preparatory work is done. Now all I need to do is put two clean clothes on the counter and make sure the stools are placed properly in front of the tables. I glance at the little copybook in which I record the details of all

my tests so I can memorise the ideal settings for the Ethiopian coffee we have on the menu at the moment. The first customer arrives just after 9 AM. I give her some time to get settled and then ask what she would like to drink. She does not hesitate for a second, so I do not need to advise her. Then, I go back behind the counter and set about preparing her espresso.

I begin by opening a new bag of roasted coffee beans and emptying them into the grinder. I love the sound of the beans as they fall into the hopper. I adjust the grinder to ensure the right coarseness. I remove the portafilter from the grouphead and clean it with one of the two clean cloths. I fill the portafilter with coffee, even out the grind with my finger and wipe the edges. I love the smell of freshly ground coffee, it is like heaven. Although I have a keen eye, I weigh my portafilter just to make sure that the 'grind quantity' setting is exactly right. The scales indicate 19.5 g. Bingo! I flush the espresso machine for a few seconds. I grab the handle of the portafilter with one hand, while with the other, I take one of the cups from the top of the espresso machine and place it on the tray. I insert the portafilter into the grouphead and immediately launch the extraction. I pay careful attention to the consistency of the thick liquid that pours out of the machine, while keeping an eye on the timer. I love looking out for slight changes in density and colour. At exactly 26 s, I stop the extraction. The crema is shiny and thick, with just the right elasticity. The aroma is just as it should be. It is a perfect espresso.

I bring the espresso to my customer. Because it is quiet this morning, I have time to present the drink to her. I explain with great enthusiasm that the coffee is from Ethiopia, and that it was grown on a farm at an altitude of 1,900 m. It is a washed coffee that was roasted at the Vol 714 roastery. It is a well-balanced, rounded coffee with notes of lime, kumquat and sour orange. I tell her that pitchers of filtered water and glasses are available on the table at the back. I say I hope she enjoys her coffee, smile and leave her to enjoy her drink.

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I have been a barista for 2 years. Before that I used to be an accountant. I used to drink coffee out of habit, without taking much pleasure from it. One day, I went on a holiday with friends to Australia. We arrived in Sydney early in the morning. After a 12-h flight, my friends and I needed caffeine to survive the jetlag, so we stopped at one of the coffee shops in the city centre. That was where I had a revelation. What I drank that day was nothing like the awful stuff they serve in French cafes. The coffee I was drinking was not bitter. It was delicately acidic, and a pleasant flavour lingered for a long time after each mouthful. I took the time to savour it. I returned to that coffee shop every day. Initially, I only paid attention to the coffee itself; I was fascinated by what I was drinking. Little by little, I began to watch what was happening behind the machine. How was

it possible to produce something so good? I observed the barista. She used many different machines, objects and measuring instruments. Her movements were quick and precise. I did not have a clue what she was doing, but I was impressed by the blend of technicality and elegance.

We started to chat. She could see I was interested in the coffee, so she asked me if I would like to learn how to prepare an espresso. I said yes right away. She began by telling me that coffee is a complex set of things. If you want to make the perfect cup, you have to treat all the different phases with equal importance: carefully choose your coffee beans, handle the machines and other objects with care, and be able to share your enthusiasm with your customers. I struggled at first. Half of the grind fell outside the portafilter; I was not able to tamp the coffee evenly in the portafilter; I took too long to serve the espressos, so they were already cold by the time I brought them to the customers. But by preparing more and more espressos, my interactions with both the coffee and the machines became smoother. When it was time for me to return to France with my friends, I decided to stay on in Sydney instead and work as a barista. I stayed there for a year: I was constantly reading up about coffee, and I met loads of other baristas. It was brilliant. Then, I decided I would like to share my passion with my compatriots, so I returned to Paris where I opened Objectif Lune.

Every time I receive a new coffee from my artisan roaster, I carry out some tests to find the right settings. What works for a coffee from Columbia will not necessarily work for one from Kenya. Each coffee is unique, and you have to find a new combination each time. Often, it comes down to a half a gram of grind, one degree Celsius or a single second. You have to listen to your coffee, see how it reacts when you change one setting or another, to understand what it requires. I always say that a good barista is someone who does their best to meet the coffee's expectations. I taste the result of each combination and record everything in a copybook. I feel my way forward until I get an impeccable result. For the Ethiopian coffee I am serving at the moment, the right combination was particularly hard to find. But, the outcome is unequivocal, and I am proud of it. You need only look at what I just served to my customer.

It is often said that the coffee in France is bitter. It is true, for decades, the French have been going to *cafés* and drinking disgusting coffee. So, they think that coffee has to be like that. As a result, of course, the first time they come here they find it strange. Last week a granny came in for a cup of coffee. As she was leaving, she told me that what I had served her was not a 'real' coffee, and that she would not be coming back. Not a 'real' coffee? Seriously? But I understand, she is been drinking robusta for 60 years, so I cannot blame her. I know of coffee shops where the baristas deliberately prepare slightly bitter

espressos to avoid surprising first-time customers. It is a kind of the consumers' fault that it is come to this.

This morning, a Canadian barista posted an article on his blog about the chemical reactions that take place in coffee during the grinding process. I read the article on my phone just after I had served the customer. The author suggests choosing an unusual setting on the grinder and uses the results of his tests to justify this. It is a complex article, and it took me an hour to understand it all. I am curious to see what the result would be if I used the settings he suggests. And that is how I set about preparing the morning's second espresso.

## 5.

It is 9:03 AM by my watch when I enter the coffee shop. A pleasant smell of coffee tickles my nostrils. I look around me. The decor is industrial in style: a dozen wooden and metal tables, stools and bare brick walls. I succumb to the charm of the warm atmosphere and feel at ease. I sit at a table near the window; I am the only customer. Hardly surprising given the early hour. I take a black copybook with a hard cover and a pen from my bag. I open the copybook and write in the top left corner of a blank page: 'Observation session #3. Objectif Lune (Paris). Monday 15 April'. I am ready! From then on, I keep a watchful eye on the entrance, ready to see the first customers pour in. The excitement mounts.

The barista's voice shakes me from my state of concentration. She asks me what I would like to drink. I look at her: she is around 30, she has tattoos and bleached hair. I order an espresso. She nods and walks away. With a pen in hand, I go back to watch the entrance. Suddenly, I hear the dull sound of a machine. I look in the direction it came from: it is just the barista busy preparing my coffee. I return to my observations.

My eyes are riveted on the coffee shop entrance. I become impatient; I cannot wait to see some action!

The barista returns and places an espresso in front of me. As she does so, she gives me a big long explanation. Basically, the coffee I am about to drink comes from Ethiopia and tastes of lemon. I take a sip. Not bad! I was expecting something more bitter.

The minutes go by, still no customers. I start to fidget on my stool. I take another sip of coffee, then a third. I wait for something to happen.

I have been here for an hour. I am beginning to find this tiresome. Only the dull sound of a machine interrupts the silence. I wait for something to happen.

More than an hour and a half now. I am getting seriously bored. To occupy myself, I doodle in my notebook. I wait for something to happen.

I have been here for nearly 2 h. I have lost all hope of seeing someone else come in or of seeing something happen. What a pain to try and make observations on a day when no-one's around! I decide it is time to leave. Before heading off, I write my notes:

*Arrived at 9:03 AM.*

*Actors present: one barista and me.*

*No customer. No action. No interaction.*

*Left at 10:58 AM.*

I close my notebook and return it to my bag. I put three euros on the table, thank the barista and leave the coffee shop. A half-day wasted.

## Question your teaspoons. Short lessons in observation, the sociology of taste and writing

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*How are we to speak of these 'common things', how to track them down rather, how to flush them out, wrest them from the dross in which they remain mired, how to give them a meaning, a tongue, to let them, finally, speak of what is, of what we are.*

*What's needed perhaps is finally to found our own anthropology [...] not the exotic anymore, but the endotic.*

*To question what seems so much a matter of course that we've forgotten its origins.*

*What we need to question is bricks, concrete, glass, our table manners, our utensils, our tools, the way we spend our time, our rhythms. (...)*

*Make an inventory of you pockets, of your bag. Ask yourself about the provenance, the use, what will become of each of the objects you take out. Question your teaspoons. (Perec, 1973)*

Question your teaspoons. They may very well reply. Perhaps they will even give you a lesson in observation, sociology or writing. This could be what Anissa Pomiès' novella teaches us. The story serves as a *mise en abyme* of her own research (see Pomiès, 2015; Pomiès & Arsel, 2018; Pomiès & Hennion, 2021). A researcher – a kind of alter ego for the author – sits at the table of a Parisian *coffee shop*. She takes out her notebook and gets ready to record her observations. Her objective is to understand: what it means to consume a cup of coffee; how one assesses its qualities; or why one might prefer to savour it in the hushed ambience of a coffee shop rather than stand at the counter of the corner café. But, her objective matters little, in truth. Her investigation seems ruined despite her best efforts. Not a customer to be seen upon her arrival. Two hours passes. Still no customers. Nothing happens. Nothing to observe. Nothing to analyse. No story to tell. Half a day lost. A pathetic episode of failed fieldwork.

Are we to conclude that the author gave herself over to a Flaubertian project to write a story about *nothing*? On the contrary. Her project is to reveal to us that which happens when nothing happens.

### The infra-ordinary: A lesson in observation

There are some things that blind us, so evident is their presence. And sometimes a whole investigation has been conducted before the realisation that, like Edgar Allan Poe's purloined letter; the key to the mystery was in plain sight all along. This is the case in the novella in question.

From the outset, the researcher forms a preconception of the scene she will observe. She imagines its cast: one customer; two customers, perhaps more, a barista – characters in flesh and blood, no doubt about it. She imagines its script as well: the customer's arrival, their interactions with the barista, the consumption of the coffee, a few exchanges – social relations in short. Everything else remains offstage. But, because neither the cast nor the script unfold as imagined, her investigation is a flop. She scribbles in her notebook: 'No customer. No action. No interaction'. No avenue to penetrate the mystery of the investigation.

The irony of this story is that the researcher, as narrator, does recount several facts: the location's atmosphere envelops her; the barista offers her lengthy explanations, and the machine emits muffled sounds. All of this takes place, is perceived, but is not recorded. In the literal sense, it is not inscribed in her notebook.

Does this make it insignificant? Most certainly not. This novella invites us to pay attention not to the event, to the unusual or extra-ordinary, but to that which is habitual, banal and infra-ordinary. This lesson in observation is reflected in a text by Howard Becker (2001), where the sociologist evokes John Cage's famous '4'33"' composition, in which a musician walks on stage, sits at the piano, starts a timer, waits for the duration of the composition's three movements and then leaves the stage without playing a single note. This piece aims to make the audience aware not only of the sounds and noises, but also of the silence, that contribute to musical performance. The novella shares this aspiration. The story of a failed encounter is simply a means to give us a sense of what really matters: it is not so much the absence of someone or of something in the

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foreground, but rather the presence of a series of elements hidden in the background.

Howard Becker referred to “4’33” in an article about the sociological scope of Georges Perec’s oeuvre. And this novelist’s work (see Perec, 1979, 1982, 1989) does no doubt contain certain precepts that could be added to the tricks of any sociologist’s trade (Becker, 1998). One of these can be described as follows: sit somewhere, observe what happens; pay attention to people, objects, decor, movements and rhythms; record everything and nothing – *everything*: avoid limiting yourself to certain categories and *nothing*: identify superficial elements; name, enumerate, count and list; do this until exhaustion.<sup>1</sup> Your observation will first of all focus on the most salient elements – that which jumps out at you. These will not be the most interesting. If you find them quickly, it means you were looking for them. There is no surprise, so keep going. After a certain amount of time, your observation will run out of steam. You will make fewer and fewer entries in your notebook. Force yourself to continue: repeat what you have already jotted down; note recurrences; look for variations; use precise vocabulary; break elements down into sub-elements; identify the relationships between elements; ask yourself questions about their presence, etc. Here are the kinds of questions to which such observational asceticism could have given rise: what were the similarities in the preparation of the three coffees? What were the differences? What body movements did they involve? What was the list of objects involved? Why did the first espresso take 26 s (and not two or three more or less)? Why use coffee beans (and not ground coffee or capsules)? Why mention a taste of lemon? Why did the barista offer a glass of water? Why am I surprised by the low level of bitterness? Etc. All of these questions require very detailed observations and descriptions.

### The taste test: A lesson in sociology

Paying attention to objects cannot simply be reduced to an exercise in style. Anissa Pomiès places their description at the heart of her sociological project. Her research falls under the sociological tradition of the pragmatics of taste, inspired by actor–network theory (ANT) (Gomart & Hennion, 1999; Hennion, 2013). She tells us that objects are not only things to be judged in terms of universal taste (Kant, 1790) or resources mobilised as part of distinction strategies (Bourdieu, 1979). In short, they are not passive in the social construction of taste. On the contrary, objects contribute to it fully through their countless mediations.

This pragmatic sociology of taste conceives of taste, whether related to music, sport or food, as a kind of test of the social world in which people attach or detach themselves to or from

the objects subjected to their evaluations (Hennion, 2013). When the researcher tastes the coffee that the barista serves, she tests its qualities so as to judge it, a process that engages her affective states (pleasure of sampling the drink), her social relationships (discussion with the barista) and her consumption practices (loyalty towards the coffee shop). Following on from the work of Antoine Hennion, Anissa Pomiès’s research shows that this test combines various elements: the object being tasted, the body and its senses, the items that accompany the action and the people with whom there is interaction.

The novella tackles each of these elements. It recounts how the *object tasted* (coffee) is presented to the researcher following a long process of qualification, how the *body* (taste buds, eyes, nose, etc.) teases out the product’s qualities, how certain *items* (glass of water, decor in the coffee shop) enable these to be appreciated and how a *third party* (barista) uses words to steer her interlocutor towards their meanings. All of this forms a complex hybrid assemblage, which is made up of countless mediations, and both exercises and contributes to a judgement of taste.

This judgement is a reflexive activity during which the taster considers their own social position, refines their capabilities and ascribes meaning to that which is happening (to them). The novella is most interested in this latter aspect. Time appears to be suspended for a short while. The researcher interrupts her observation. This allows her to pay attention to her sensations, comparing them against prior experiences and her expectations: not bad, she says to herself; she was expecting something more bitter. The assemblage, knowingly orchestrated by a multitude of human and non-human protagonists, allows the researcher to enjoy a pleasant experience.

### Things take sides too: A lesson in writing

How to *represent* these assemblages, in both senses of the word (Latour, 2018)? In other words, how are they to be *described* and allowed to *have their say*?

In the novella, a dual narrative process resolves this problem. Prosopopoeiae lend a voice to speechless objects. They raise them up as agents, witnesses or judges of the different scenes. In parallel, a polyphonic organisation causes these voices to resonate with one another. This dual process is evocative of other ANT studies. Bruno Latour (1992), for example, uses it to analyse the abandonment of the Aramis programme: the engineers, the researcher and even the autonomous metro project itself explain themselves one by one throughout the book. This combination of prosopopoeia and polyphony carries several advantages.

This dual narrative process deploys a principle of symmetry between humans and non-humans. The novella strings together the speech of objects and that of persons. Each gets to have their say. The discourse of the objects – coffee beans,

<sup>1</sup> It may well be that you will yourself be exhausted before you have exhausted all of the material the situation has to offer.



coffee grinder, etc. – is in the active voice. They are neither mere instruments subjected to manipulation by human beings nor vulgar canvas for the projection of human representations. Like human beings, the objects participate fully in the action and make this known (Latour, 2005).

Prosopopoeiae and polyphony also stage different modes of existence. They avoid projecting onto objects the categories of human experience. In the novella, the objects evaluate time and space using their own measurements. They do not express durations in minutes, hours or days. They do not refer to places using the names of countries. Instead, they mobilise spatio-temporal categories inspired by what they do or that which affects them: time is measured by the number of machine cycles and cups served, while space is characterised by climate, altitude or vegetation.

Prosopopoeiae and polyphony also offer a diachronic approach to the formation of taste. Stringing together the different voices is a way to retrace the 'biography of the product' (Appadurai, 1986) by describing its different states and successive transformations, from coffee plantations in Ethiopia to the consumer's taste buds in a coffee shop in the 11th arrondissement of Paris. This dual narrative process thereby recounts the multiple qualifications that fashion the product so as to attach it to the world of the consumer (Callon et al., 2000).

Lastly, this process accounts for the controversies and tensions inherent in the formation of taste. As in *Aramis* (Latour, 1992), where each protagonist denies any blame for the abandonment of the industrial project, the participants in the production of a cup of coffee accuse one another of being responsible for its bitterness. This controversy underscores the fact that the felicitous conditions for the production of a cup of coffee with the right taste are entangled in the multiple mediations of the assemblage. And because the action is dispersed throughout such a complex assemblage, it becomes complicated to identify the causes and sources of failures and successes (Hennion, 2013).

## Conclusion

In summary, Anissa Pomiès has creatively used the genre of the novella to suggest three shifts in the way the social

construction of taste is analysed: observe not only events but also the infra-ordinary; consider not only social practices of judgement but also the mediations underpinning them; represent not only human but also non-human protagonists. Something to think about next time you are savouring a coffee...

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## Minding Godot

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imagine your mind still as can be calm the sea without wind or ripples a coffee shop in paris all alone but not alone becomings in a field of relations things seem objects to subjects in space and time empty of things

but upon closer inspection coffee beans are no longer beans coffee grinders grinders espresso machines machines even baristas are not what they seem events are experience(d) moments occasions actualized yet never determined or feelings full of potential determinable

you notice  
the beans  
emerging  
in long lines of  
sun and soil and plants and  
people toiling for  
little money in  
faraway lands  
rough jute bags carried by hands  
then transported in  
large containers  
over distant seas  
thundering trucks and trains seen  
by little kids  
in awe  
of these  
great machines  
to warehouses  
roasted packed sealed  
tastes and aromas that appear  
when bags  
are  
opened  
then loudly ground in grinders  
emerging in  
other lines of becoming  
brewed in machines  
that are yet other  
trajectories  
until  
the warm brown liquid

glides  
from the cup  
across  
your  
lips  
into  
your  
mouth where  
it  
becomes  
you  
in  
this  
very  
singular  
moment  
and so it goes with  
everything  
from metal mines to  
production lines  
from  
humans to  
other – than – humans  
to molecules  
and atoms  
to the relational fabric  
of spacetime  
itself  
in which all arises  
and

subsidies  
including  
your  
mind  
still as can be  
an  
empty cup  
that is  
anything but  
empty

## Endnote

<sup>1</sup>These are some of the texts that inspired the writing of this poetic essay: Karen Barad's (2007) *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, Fernand Deligny's (2015) *The Arachnean and Other Texts*, Tim Ingold's *Being Alive* (2011) and *The Life of Lines* (2015), William James's *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902/1985) and *Essays in Radical Empiricism* (1912/1976), Erin Manning's (2013) *Always More Than One*, Brian Massumi's (2011) *Semblance and Event*, Eleanor Rosch's 'If You Depict a Bird, Give It Space to Fly' (2004) and 'Beginner's Mind' (2008), Carlo Rovelli's *Reality Is Not What It Seems* (2017) and *The Order of Time* (2018), Shunryu Suzuki's *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind* (1970/2020) and *Branching Streams Flow in the Darkness* (1999), Tarthang Tulku's (1977) *Time, Space, and Knowledge*, Evan Thompson's (2015) *Waking, Dreaming, Being*, Francisco Varela's (1999) *Ethical Know-How*, Francisco Varela, Evan Thompson, and Eleanor Rosch's (1991) *The Embodied Mind*, Henry Vyner's (2019) *The Healthy Mind*, Alan Wallace's *Minding Closely* (2011a), *Stilling the Mind* (2011b), and *Fathoming the Mind* (2018), and Alfred North Whitehead's *Adventures of Ideas* (1967) and *Process and Reality* (1978). The essay's form and style resemble the first author's 'Travels of a Buddhist Mind' articles, both published in *Qualitative Inquiry* (see Brummans, 2007, 2009).

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