

ALTMAN SIEGEL

1150 25TH ST. SAN FRANCISCO, CA 94107

tel: 415.576.9300 / fax: 415.373.4471

www.altmansiegel.com

e-flux Journal

Calder Williams, Evan, "On Paralysis, Part 4," *e-flux Journal*, March 6, 2025

On Paralysis, Part 4

Evan Calder Williams



Train wreck in Leavick, Colorado in 1897. License: Public Domain.

Issue #152

March 2025

Continued from “On Paralysis, Part 3”

1. The Crooked Sign

There's an echo between the Gilbreths' sign for “unavoidable delay” and one that comes nearly a century later in a 2006 photograph by the American artist Shannon Ebner. For Ebner, the sign is not an icon or symbol but an actual street sign on a pole that has been badly bent, double-kinked and crumpled into a sharp angle at its middle, just like the abstracted and seemingly exhausted body of the “unavoidable delay” on the assembly line. The similarities continue beyond that angular bend. In place of the blocky feet of the Gilbreths' therblig, a lump of cement still clings to the lower half of the pole, a remnant of the paved ground it was set in and eventually wrenched free from.¹ And instead of a circle suggesting a head, here is the rectangular metal sign itself, with the side closest to us further bent, as though caught in a half-turn to look behind itself. It's a fair assumption that this sign displays information, most likely about parking, speed, or other regulations for cars, pedestrians, and the spaces they unevenly share. But we can't say for certain, because the sign faces away from Ebner's camera and down towards the ground. We also can't say exactly *what* wrecked this thing. Nothing in the frame of the photograph betrays the location of that absent site where the sign had stood before it was wrenched loose. Even the work's title—*The Crooked Sign*—pointedly refuses to offer further information. Yet the damaged sign nevertheless signifies by indexing a tremendous violence in excess of any symbolic order. No matter the when or where or why, we know it was involved in a collision or torsion with a force and velocity beyond human hands, even if those hands may have steered a machine that weighed several thousand pounds, and that did not stop where it was supposed to.

ALTMAN SIEGEL

1150 25TH ST. SAN FRANCISCO, CA 94107

tel: 415.576.9300 / fax: 415.373.4471

www.altmansiegel.com



Shannon Ebner, *The Crooked Sign*, 2006, C-print. Courtesy of the artist and Altman Siegel, San Francisco.

Signs and collisions have run throughout Ebner's conceptually rigorous practice over the past two decades, yet are knotted together even more tightly in this photograph. Two types of signs recur across her work: minimal units of single letters and advertising signs displaying written language. These are sometimes physically constructed by her, but are more often photographed where they are found, on visual materials (such as ads) with particular emphasis on what gets discarded or forgotten, pulled from circulation *because* of collisions, like the wrecked parts of cars involved in crashes. In one regard, the core questions of paralysis appear here in the stoppage of expected routes of circulation for commodities and information, resulting in signs and things that are decoupled from their usual relays, often after brutally colliding in ways that may themselves be corporally or psychologically paralyzing. But to this, Ebner's work adds an acute proximity to an accompanying threat and promise: a paralysis of meaning itself. This is because her photographs articulate the reliance of processes of signification and transmission on often unseen, deep links between symbol, surface, and support, indexing how suddenly fragile these links can be, and at other times, how durable. As a result, Ebner's photographs center on, and worry at, how expected circuits of information, material, and reaction can alternately get severed or established anew—when material damage or wear and tear might cause a billboard to be junked or pulled from use, yet its painted or printed letters still keep signifying regardless.

ALTMAN SIEGEL

1150 25TH ST. SAN FRANCISCO, CA 94107

tel: 415.576.9300 / fax: 415.373.4471

www.altmansiegel.com

However, in *The Crooked Sign*, itself so emblematic of the tensions of paralysis, a different avenue of thinking opens that we can call the paralysis of the inanimate. There is a distinct and unmistakable pathos in this ruined sign, as strange currents of sympathy and melancholy emerge from the difficulty of *not* analogizing it to a human form, even without the therblig as intermediary to make that link more explicit. The sign is abject and broken, “crippled,” hunched low and crawling. It is bent beyond recognition, and cannot be bent back. Though neither human nor living, and instead something designed, fabricated, and perhaps destroyed *by* humans, the sense remains of it as a body, living and wounded, or wounded and dead, and in a way that can't be reduced to the particular phenomenon of pareidolia.²

We can find a similar paradox—the wounding of what has no body—across the fiction of Andrei Platonov, the Russian writer whose life and work spanned the first half of the twentieth century. Platonov is tremendously attentive and attuned to debilitation, exhaustion, and what Oxana Timofeeva sharply identifies as a commitment to thinking “poor life,” as well as the “diligence” and “generosity” it takes to persist.³ In Platonov's writing this often occurs through a profound flattening of divides between humans, nonhumans, plants, and things. Rather than through any philosophical pronouncement, such flattenings are acts of contact and collusion that bridge different existences, however briefly, and are felt in the most fundamental terms. In the aptly titled 1936 short story “Among Animals and Plants,” for instance, a hare is cold, then warmed inside the jacket of a man who brings it inside his small cabin. Later, his wife takes out her frustration at their ongoing poverty by beating the hare and throwing it back outside, where the “hare hid in the grass, lamented a little in his own way, then tidied his fur, crept through a gap in the fence, and disappeared into the forest, putting aside his recent grief for the sake of future life.”⁴ So it is that bodies, things, and earth collide, at greater or lesser speed, with more or less tenderness and violence, before going their separate ways and trying, each in their own way, to keep going in spite of everything. However, as Aaron Schuster points out in his reading of Platonov's novel *Happy Moscow*, one of the elements of Platonov's writing is how this effort to keep going is not some organic, autochthonous vitality emanating from the core of a living being facing scarcity and hazard. Rather, for Schuster,

there is a kind of suspension of the immediate necessity of life, of the inner thrust of the organism to preserve itself and to persevere in its existence. The subject and its life—although one already hesitates here with the “its”—do not form an organic unity. Instead this innermost drive is felt as an external compulsion, as a foreign element in which one has become “entangled.”⁵

Indeed, counter to a more familiar vision of a vitalist animism, which might locate that “inner thrust” widely across entities (including those commonly understood to lack the capacity to be a “subject” or to have “life”), with Platonov we are in the terrain of animation and the problem of the animated—a liveliness always out of place and out of proportion, even when bound to the living. To speak of someone's behavior as “animated,” for instance, already suggests some excess of energy that misfits, remaining somehow off and alien. Because just as the actual process of making animated moving images involves tremendous investments of time, labor, and technique that vanish into an uncanny mimesis of the spontaneously living, to speak of animation is to grapple with what is supposed to remain off the screen, yet without which nothing would happen on it.⁶

ALTMAN SIEGEL

1150 25TH ST. SAN FRANCISCO, CA 94107

tel: 415.576.9300 / fax: 415.373.4471

www.altmansiegel.com

Beyond the narrower analogy of cinema, what are these “off-screen” processes of animation and the animate? They are the supposedly unseen networks, flows, and infrastructures on which I’ve focused throughout this series, those that fundamentally drive and enable the visible and audible—and which, when paralyzed, bring that imitation of life to a halt. These kinds of networks are at the heart of Platonov’s “Among Animals and Plants”: radio transmissions from afar, inscrutable bureaucratic arrangements of one’s days and fate, and, most explicitly, railway networks themselves, organizing human and animal life around their paths while also threatening those lives as trains surge past on their way to anywhere but here. But this story is also fascinating for how far it expands this logic of threat, even beyond Platonov’s usual attention to the frayed means of subsistence and support that constitute the milieu of the living. Much like in Ebner’s photograph, this extends to what never lived, to incapacitation and wounding beyond repair, even to a degree that the connection between intent and action dissolves. In other words, to paralysis.

When he first began to work on the railway, [the railway engineer] Fyodorov had treated metal and machines as he treated animals and plants—with caution and foresight, trying not only to get to know them but also to outwit them. Then he had realized that such a relationship was insufficient. Being with metal and machines required a great deal more sensitivity than being with wild animals or with plants and trees. You can outwit something living and it will yield to you; you can wound it and, being alive, it will heal. But machines and rails don’t yield to cunning—they can be won over only by pure goodness—and you can’t afford to wound them, because they don’t heal. A break is mortal. And so Fyodorov behaved sensitively and carefully at work; he even avoided slamming the door of his little cabin, closing it silently and delicately, so as not to disturb the iron hinges or loosen their screws.⁷

But the network he tends won’t extend the same delicacy to Fyodorov himself in return. By the end of the story, he’ll be paralyzed in one arm for trying to stop a runaway train. The accident is both a radically unlucky chain of circumstances and something that could have been avoided had his same slowness and care for the inanimate been dissipated throughout the entire infrastructure of transport. Yet even without his literally paralyzing accident, here we gain the same minute attention and knowledge that we see in sabotage’s paralyzes, traversing registers, from human to metal to rabbit and back again. Never in the abstract alone, and always in the key of collisions that wear us down, threatening to break the links without which we can’t hold together.

2. Hurl Out of Your Belfries

However, despite the deep links to acts of inhuman damage, stasis, and breakdown, what is at stake here appears to be the obverse of paralysis: an unexpected vitality and animatedness within objects that are assumed to lack any such mobility or response in the first place. In both Ebner's photograph and Platonov's story, this occurs in the negative, in a sign that has been debilitated or a fragile rail, causing both to retroactively, if illogically, appear to have been living, at least enough to be damaged or wounded. I wouldn't suggest this to be a total ontology or animist organization of the world, however. It is instead a sort of stammer, a brief but generative category error that emerges when transposing back and forth between binaries (living and nonliving, animal and inanimate, functioning and paralyzed). So in what remains of this essay, I want to open towards another line of thinking, one we could place under the sign of *de-paralysis*. What would it mean to de-paralyze, to move on from the kind of halting and lost connections I've traced throughout the four parts of this series? And how could this be more than a mere restoration of prior function, motility, and agency?

I've already drawn out at length one of the most striking forms of de-paralysis: the logic of sabotage itself, which activates non-sentient elements, materials, or circuits to bring them into an extension of a person's capacity to negate, disrupt, or paralyze. But the political imaginary of making comrades out of conveyor belts also extends into more speculative ascriptions of agency to those objects themselves. Consider, for example, Alfred Hayes's poem "Into the Streets May First," which was published in 1934 in *New Masses* (where it won a contest to be set to music by Aaron Copland). I'll include it here in full, especially because it deserves to be better known:

Into the streets May First!
Into the roaring Square!
Shake the midtown towers!
Shatter the downtown air!
Come with a storm of banners,
Come with an earthquake tread,
Bells, hurl out of your belfries,
Red flag, leap out your red!
Out of the shops and factories,
Up with the sickle and hammer,
Comrades, these are our tools,
A song and a banner!
Roll song, from the sea of our hearts,
Banner, leap and be free;
Song and banner together,
Down with the bourgeoisie!
Sweep the big city, march forward,
The day is a barricade;
We hurl the bright bomb of the sun,
The moon like a hand grenade.
Pour forth like a second flood!
Thunder the alps of the air!
Subways are roaring our millions—
Comrades, into the square!⁸

ALTMAN SIEGEL

1150 25TH ST. SAN FRANCISCO, CA 94107

tel: 415.576.9300 / fax: 415.373.4471

www.altmansiegel.com

This stunning poem—about the process of stunning itself, of being halted and then returning to motion—makes a distinct conceptual move. It starts in the terrain of both a call to action and a potentially more familiar description of what will come if that call is answered, in the gathering and expanding of working-class power that will shake the city and its objects. Yet if the appeals are at first to demonstrators (to bring banners, to march loud and proud with “earthquake tread”), it pivots to a much more direct appeal to things themselves to join the cause and revolt. The first traces of that are again more familiar, inheriting longer tropes of poetic apostrophe. “Bells, hurl out your belfries” and “Red flag, leap out your red” are descriptions of objects as well as appeals to objects, specifically to ones that transmit information, whether Ebner’s sign, the peal of the bell, or the red flag signifying communism and workers’ power. In addition, they remain in the control of the marchers, things to be used: “Comrades, these are our tools / A song and a banner.” The line that fascinates me, however, is “Banner, leap and be free.” While it obviously functions here as part of the duo (along with the song) of forms that transmit a message, it also starts to move into another register by appealing to the *support structure* of that message itself, to the banner in its fabric tangibility, enjoining it to also become part of the rebellion and to “leap and be free.” This then recodes the bells from before, so that “hurl out your belfries” starts to read less as a joyous pealing and more like a sneak attack on cops down below, as the bell stops keeping time and marking occasions to instead take direct action. And at least in its speculative register, why not? All these objects are themselves the product of the exploited human labor at stake in the politics of May Day, and they are in this way, like all commodities, crystallized records of the hostility, boredom, and coercion that goes into making them.



Open battle between striking teamsters armed with pipes and the police in the streets of Minneapolis. Source: National Archives. License: Public Domain.

As with so much else I've raised with regard to how paralysis moves across registers and blurs boundaries, here too the call to the built world doesn't remain at the level of what can be controlled. Like Mickey Mouse's sorcerer's apprentice commanding a broom to come to pseudo-life and start laboring, animacy is contagious, expansive, and, as he learns, hard to rein in once it starts.⁹ In Hayes's poem, the confusion between an acting subject and a static object, between message and medium, starts to extend radically outwards to a cosmic register (the sun itself becomes a bomb to be thrown, and the moon a grenade) and into the units of time themselves, with the startling line, "The day is the barricade." We should note that it is pointedly not "this is the day for barricades," but an impossible wielding of the day itself, a temporal wedge of not-working that might well expand into that longer paralysis of the general strike that John Spargo disdained.¹⁰ Because rather than a day meaning just "another day," like *the working day* or *day in, day out*, it is the work of barricading—of collectively bringing together all the city's objects of circulation into a mass that blocks circulation and paralyzes the city—that makes the day into something that doesn't just pass by but is instead itself an interval of and for revolt.

3. Deodand

Alfred Hayes's poem is a speculative call to arms. It's an invocation for the things of the earth to join in struggle against the system that conditioned their making, and perhaps their shoddiness and adulteration too. But if his bell signifies the animation of the inanimate towards a revolutionary process in excess of law and order, we should set it against another set of bells, like the one put on trial in 1664 for the death of a man accidentally hanged by its rope, or one in Russia that was banished to Siberia in 1591 for pealing out a signal of insurrection when a prince was assassinated. Because the wider history to which these belong opens onto the other side of Hayes's appeal, of objects that, rather than join in the barricade, enter into a complex matrix of blame, liability, and state accumulation, especially when they are seen to kill or maim a person without having been expressly wielded as a weapon.

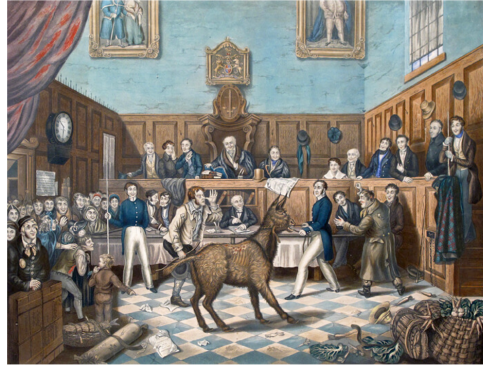
This is, in short, the question of the deodand, in which we can find one of the most extensive cultural and legal negotiations of the trope of paralysis, especially through its seeming negation, in the presence of something that shows itself able to act, and to form connections and points of violent contact in excess of what it was thought capable. "Deodand" is a designation within medieval and early modern English common law that formally persisted until its abolition in 1846, yet informally still undergirds American civil asset forfeiture law, invoked in majority opinions when the state seizes what it does not own from those whom it cannot expressly prove as having criminal intent. Most broadly, the deodand specifies a legal judgment pronounced on chattel property¹¹—primarily an inanimate¹² moveable object or a nonhuman animal, though with crucial exceptions—because of having contributed to the death of a person, potentially the owner themselves, without any express volition of the owner (or any other) to carry out the lethal act.¹³ We can see immediately one of the legal frictions that comes to mark deodand and its futures: the cost—or profit, from the perspective of the king who received the forfeited object, creature, or an "equivalent" monetary sum—of a death will be equated not with any assumed value of the living being, as with life insurance policies, but with the instrument of death itself. That is, it will cost the owner more to own a deadly diamond than a sharp lump of coal.¹⁴

ALTMAN SIEGEL

1150 25TH ST. SAN FRANCISCO, CA 94107

tel: 415.576.9300 / fax: 415.373.4471

www.altmansiegel.com



P. Mathews, *Trial of Bill Burns*, 1838. License: Public Domain.

The little attention given to the deodand outside of legal studies has read it primarily in terms of a bleak, surreal whimsy—particularly in the medieval trials in which accused beehives, cats, bushels of grain, and shovels were put on the stand and asked to explain themselves. When picked up in passing by New Materialist theorists like Jane Bennett, the deodand can also be seen in philosophical terms as evidence of “thing-power” and an opportunity to “begin to experience the relationship between persons and other materialities more horizontally, [which] is to take a step toward a more ecological sensibility.”¹⁵ I don’t think either of these directions are wrong per se.¹⁶ And as my focus on sabotage and paralysis has shown, there is a set of genuinely radical, and often disarming, potentials that come from a kind of tactical flattening that disperses agency outwards through a network of things. However, as with sabotage, what the negotiation of the deodand potentially shows is not a glimpse into the fundamental connectedness of things and beings, but a structure of blame, property, and liability that is thoroughly historical and specifically political, especially insofar as it cannot be separated from legal structures and fictions.

We can see this on two distinct fronts, starting first with the problem of mobility, especially the mobility of what is thought to be inanimate. In his excellent study of the formal abolition of the deodand, William Pietz offers this useful definition: “any moveable material object—more specifically, any piece of personal chattel property—that directly caused the death of an adult human being became deodand and, as an accused thing, was held to be forfeit to God (whose earthly representative in such cases was the royal sovereign).”¹⁷ Along with the absence of intentional malice on the part of the owner, it is this first qualification of mobility that will form the other major legal requirement for deciding on deodand. Indeed, a significant portion of cases across this history hinge precisely on determining what is “moveable” as opposed to fixed or static, to such a degree that Henry de Bracton’s dictum places movement before intent (or even property status): *omnia quae movent ad mortem sunt Deodanda* (“all that moves and kills will be given over to God”).¹⁸ Of course, we might read this requirement of the moveable as a way of asserting negligence, as with a runaway train carriage. But this is hard to maintain given that the owners were frequently themselves the victims of these mobile forces, and, more importantly, would miss the point that the deodand is not pointedly punitive but rather a means of divorcing property from its owner, placing it into a sphere of rogue non-ownership declared escheat and forfeit.

This qualification of mobility also serves to delimit what can and cannot be included in the deodand's range, largely excluding landed property or buildings themselves, which might otherwise open a corrosive reading of the entire environment as inhuman assassin—and hence open to the king's claim. Yet even a cursory glance at what did qualify for seizure makes clear that such an expanded sense of deodand was often operative, and that the division between mobile and static has no set pivot point when it comes to death by furniture/tool/abode. The London Eyre of 1244, for instance, includes no less than four instances where a set of stairs was declared deodand after someone tripped and tumbled to their death, even while the stairs remained stolid.¹⁹ It's a fair bet that Sir Frederick Pollock and Frederic William Maitland's snarky 1895 footnote—"the large number of deodands collected in every eyre suggests that many horses and boats bore the guilt which should have been ascribed to beer"²⁰—would apply here too, given that any functional divide between movement and stability gets blurry when alcohol enters the picture.

But lurking beyond Pollock and Maitland's joke—nothing like a little British common law humor!—there's a serious point. As far as the deodand is concerned, there has been a tendency to focus excessively on the seeming animacy, unlucky mobility, or apparent volition of single pieces of property, in an inheritance of the idea of the accursed object, such as the killing stone that must be cast beyond the border of the city or the Biblical trope of the "ox that gored" that many scholars link to the prehistory of the deodand.²¹ Yet this longer-term focus in legal studies, as well as the kind of readings from recent object-oriented philosophies and their wider reception, misses what is at stake here. Namely, the issue is not one of the surprising recognition of a hidden vitality or sentience, as if that liveliness had been paralyzed and occluded by insistence on an anthropocentric subject/object dualism, but rather of a process that serves to *maintain* regimes of property and law. More specifically, the deodand involves the construction of complicated, often arcane exceptions, tracing contours of culpability and what by the nineteenth century would be understood as risk through chains of accidents and roof shingles that suddenly fall and kill. Yet these are not exceptions to the logic of private property that threaten law's coherence. Instead, they prop it up, and what we see in these histories, especially once the deodand enters common law, is far less a matter of punishing an object cathartically so much as negotiating the boundary where the bonds of property end. When can the state seize it, and how responsible is someone for what they own? What does it mean for a community to be harmed by the actions of corporate property, and who is to blame when pipelines leak? Who's at fault when bodies stray in the path of a train that never used to run across a greenway that's been walked for thousands of years?

Second, we can see the stakes of this negotiation of property even more starkly when we recall that the full range of deodand is not covered by the many instances of inanimate objects that came loose from their fittings or failed at their designed purpose. It also could include living beings, both nonhuman animals and enslaved humans who were legally constructed as nonhuman or less than fully human. We can quickly detect the logical and legal paradox this might involve for those who claimed the right to own other beings, especially humans. On one hand, the kind of deferred responsibility that the deodand enacted—i.e., declaring an owner not guilty of intending the crime by placing the blame on the object—served to protect slaveholders and animal owners from the harm that their living property might inflict. For instance, Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr. notes in *The Common Law* how this could turn on the question of the "supposed nature" of the possessed creature, and particularly its innate "wildness": "If the animal was of a wild nature, that is, in the very case of the most ferocious animals, the owner ceased to be liable the moment it escaped, because at that moment he ceased to be owner."²² On the other hand, if one suggests that the living property, such as a slave, acted on its own volition, and hence did not obey the dictates of its owner who cannot be blamed for what it did, it follows that the slave is entirely capable of free will, autonomous choice, and agency—and hence must be understood as a human being deserving of the same freedoms and rights accorded to the ones claiming to "own" it.

How is this paradox solved, in a way that defended not those rights but only the right to own and to terrorize? Colin Dayan, one of the few contemporary theorists to grapple with the long afterlives of earlier conceptions of the deodand, offers a vital way into this. In her work, she considers the way the deodand both gave a “direct bridge to the legal theory of *mens rea*, a ‘guilty mind’” and played an especially vital role in the context of colonial domination and the plantation system.²³ The concept contributed particularly to what she frames as a “fitful valuation of persons and things,” one that was propped up by the “legal terror” that served to actively construct and enforce the sense of the enslaved as “nonhuman.” This therefore involved the “invention of the slave who has liability but no rights, who remains vulnerable to legal prosecution though deprived of personality.”²⁴ In this history, and the way that the logic of the deodand teeters on the edge of admitting a freedom that should be, yet also gives the legal mechanisms to utterly negate that, we see a crucial sense of the deodand that is far from the unexpected animacy of ladders, or the placing of beehives on trial, and instead concerns the moments where the kind of ongoing legal and physically terrorizing paralysis of subjectivity and collectivity that the plantation system relied on is briefly disrupted, and its heinous categories come into stark view.

This kind of paralysis was, of course, never complete for two reasons. First, it sought only a partial paralysis, preserving and demanding an unending capacity for action one is forced under threat of violence to enact, while paralyzing a person’s ability to bring the action they intend into the world. Second, even with the relentless regime of terror, lethality, and denigration, it was never able to bring about that legal fantasy of the one who is blamable but has no personality or ability to choose. Instead, that was constantly undermined by the kinds of refusal, sabotage, and fugitivity enacted by those who were enslaved as a truly radical, and necessarily often covert, de-paralysis of subjectivity, one that restored the bonds between intention and action that were never truly severed, even as dreams of mastery and domination tried to terrorize into paralysis. I think here of the remarkable tactics of marronage detailed by Sylviane Diouf in her study of fugitive slaves in the American plantation system, and particularly of what she writes of as “borderland maroons,” who escaped and yet stayed hidden on the outskirts and buildings of farms and plantations.²⁵ Those sites especially included the very plantations from which they just escaped, as they paradoxically fled to where they already were. There they lived in its hidden spots, stole from those who stole their freedom, and made use of the intimate knowledge gained of a place they never wanted to be, surviving in its infinitely dangerous interstices.

4. De-Paralyzing

“How will we feed ourselves once everything is paralyzed?” This question I raised earlier, from *The Coming Insurrection*, directs us towards de-paralyzing, or what might come in the wake of paralysis.²⁶ In other words, what to do with the new kinds of relations that an interval of paralysis can help bring about? As vital as paralysis is as trope, as tactic, even as challenge to dominant models of mobility, activity, and vitality itself, it may be too easy to keep within a circuit of clean reversal. It may be too easy to just shuttle back and forth between, on one side, living bodies that are treated as nonliving objects and, on the other, inanimate things, such as those bells, that reveal what seems to be an alarming animation. But as both the co-history of slavery and deodands and the mutual determinations of labor and disability show, these categories are always historical and under tension; they obey their own rules only insofar as they allow for violent exceptions, or for the denigrating subsumption of only certain persons under their frame. Moreover, as I’ve drawn out, the epistemic challenges that the trope of paralysis mounts are also what disrupt the clarity of expected circuits of meaning and matter, function and intention.

In this regard, trying to think de-paralysis in full requires moving away from two forms of thought. First, we must continue to reject the unquestioned use of that breakdown/insight model detailed previously, in which halting is taken to generate an automatic critical knowledge. Second, we must refuse the idea of *restoration*: of restoring the movement, connection, or flow that had been temporarily interrupted so that regular function is reestablished within the terms and expectations already set in advance, allowing things to go on as they had before the break. We can see the persistence of that idea across all the registers of paralysis itself, from the promise of rehabilitating those with paralyzing impairments to the restoration of disrupted shipping channels to moving beyond congressional gridlock. Instead, de-paralysis points towards a dynamic already active in paralysis: the establishment of novel conduits and links *in excess* of those already in place. If paralysis is generated by the temporary severing or decoupling of linkages, it also paradoxically keeps producing a proliferation of unexpected ones, especially through those contagious chains that shift scale and leap across vectors, moving from the failure of a single wire to the blackout of a network to the person who stands in the new dark, frozen with indecision.

We can find a brilliant account of this move—of going beyond the mere restoration of expected flow—from the aforementioned theorist and historian Spyros Papapetros. While many of the examples he details mark a specific tension between animation (especially of the inorganic or the inanimate) and paralysis (particularly under the sign of petrification or devitalization), his reading of the apparent death of the titular vampire in F. W. Murnau's *Nosferatu: A Symphony of Horror* (1922) suggests exactly this turn away from restabilized function and towards something stranger and more porous. In the scene in question, Nosferatu gets done in by the rising sun, like so many cinematic vampires who later follow his inauspicious lead. But when Papapetros attends to just how this is staged by the film, he notes a highly specific relation of gesture and surrounding:

Just before he slips out of the frame, Nosferatu is immobilized by the sunlight. Reflexively, the vampire's right arm starts moving upward, and then his whole body starts rotating toward the opposite side of the window frame. When the 180-degree turn is complete, Nosferatu extends his right arm forward until it is parallel with and above one of the slanting house-roofs visible through the window. Holding the same gesture, the vampire vanishes, leaving the window frame unobstructed.²⁷

Much of the subsequent argument that builds on this close reading rightly seizes on the kind of vital transfer and "covert exchanges between living subjects and inanimate objects" that are at stake, with "the transference of energy from a semidepleted animate subject to its surrounding architecture, which becomes menacingly reinvigorated."²⁸ Moreover, this moment exemplifies a concern central to Papapetros's own thinking and that of the early twentieth-century art historians he engages with, especially Wilhelm Worringer: the way a "circuit"—such as the one accidentally completed by Nosferatu—is both a conduit for animation in excess of the organic and a trap of potentially lethal mimicry, here strong enough to drain the infamous drainer of life himself.

ALTMAN SIEGEL

1150 25TH ST. SAN FRANCISCO, CA 94107

tel: 415.576.9300 / fax: 415.373.4471

www.altmansiegel.com



F. W. Murnau, *Nosferatu: A Symphony of Horror*, 1922.

When *Nosferatu* is held in this snare of imitation and evacuation, it is quite literally paralyzing, neutralizing his ability to escape or move. Any desire to go on un-living doesn't matter, as the precise timing of the sun's rise generates a tiny interval that proves terminal. Yet this moment also generates unforeseen connections and points of contact, through the opening of a flow from vampire to house that wasn't present or active before. It also doesn't end there, as I would add another crucial layer that isn't mentioned in Papapetros's bravura reading of the shot. This is the way that the mimicry and energetic transfer only works for, and is generated by, the viewer of the film itself, as it is our exact vantage point that completes the circuit by making the gestures match the architecture exactly so that "arm and roof communicate. Parallel to one another, they are in correspondence."²⁹ Such correspondences are always possible. You can angle your arm in a way that mirrors a nearby bridge, and even without such a willed act, the world is full of innumerable unwilled echoes between bodies and things, buildings and the forest behind them.

But a full overlay of uncanny mimicry and apparent contiguity requires a point of view that lines up arm and bridge, snapping them into mirrored lockstep only when seen from highly specific positions. In this case, that alignment requires the flattening of a filmed space by the lens and a subsequent registration of that space as a two-dimensional image in which only a single perspective is preserved, in order to fix *Nosferatu* within the cage of imitation that finishes him off. So once again, paralysis doesn't remain a single instance or a discrete event. It unfurls outwards, forging novel connections and crossing between registers: figures and landscapes, foreground and background, a vampire and his city, and a screen and its watcher. These links are not natural or ahistorical; instead, all are mediated through a *technical* form that articulates the conditions of the passages that move back and forth. The unliving gaze of the camera provides the paralytic fixity that freezes *Nosferatu*, the unliving being who too could hypnotize and petrify with a gaze. And then his own paralysis, snared in the angles of a city like a bird in a net of rooflines, generates another halted moment, a shot so still it may as well be a freeze-frame, which paralyzes us too as we watch him fade from view with our breath held.

ALTMAN SIEGEL

1150 25TH ST. SAN FRANCISCO, CA 94107

tel: 415.576.9300 / fax: 415.373.4471

www.altmansiegel.com

This scene allows us start to feel the contours of a de-paralyzing that is not just paralysis rewound, that doesn't restore previous function or flow but instead enacts a process that is multiple and messy, inhuman and transindividual. Paralysis itself, as both an idea and an experience, undermines the stability and sanctity of a sovereign subject by ruining its fantasy of self-mastery and cogent management of the surrounding world. De-paralysis further erodes that, but from the other direction, generating new possible links, circuits, and relations where none existed before. Yet none of this is automatic, given, or stable. If moments of technical, social, and circulatory paralysis can make it possible to detect the structuring relations already at work but often hidden through familiarity, then the instances from art, literature, and film I've raised are all fiercely attuned to how utterly tenuous that can be, and how open that moment is to getting closed off into a mere restoration of function. The lights come back on, the strikes are broken, the port opens again, and the Senate goes back to its usual business of achieving nothing. As Ricardo Piglia describes in Part 1 of this essay, the cops are often the first to break the spell and charge.



Shannon Ebner, *EKSIZ*, 2011. Courtesy of the artist and Altman Siegel, San Francisco.

In this regard, while Shannon Ebner's *The Crooked Sign* and its inhuman pathos is itself an emblem for my whole inquiry, it is ultimately the rest of her practice that I find so exemplary of thinking within and beyond paralysis. Again, what we see in many of her other works is a kind of scavenging for signs amidst the broken, and the creation of a thick passage between symbol, surface, and support. This happens through a process of either selection or provisional construction, both of which remain intimately tuned to the minute, material particularity of what she and the camera find: the slashes of paint on the door of a junked car, the fade of the ink of an "A" from a disused sign, the rough edge of the cinderblocks hung on a grid of nails. However, this dense specificity also flickers, in the way that the paint on that door also forms an "X," and the cinderblocks make one too, coarsely, as if you're standing too close to a pixelated image. She photographs things and symbols, but above all, she photographs the slippage between the two, the way that something is both just a letter *and* a highly particular iteration of texture that must be ignored for it to become that letter—and therefore to belong to a slew of words that start to stream unbidden through the head of whoever sees it. In sum, both Ebner's practice and the process of looking at it makes us traverse this passage between matter and meaning again and again, starting from what has been pulled from circulation and left immobile. It then makes these distillate points of the junked and refound readable in terms of another language, available for a process of new syntax and writing that takes tentative form, spelling out phrases to be read, above all remaining open to we who roam through them and might use them to articulate something, or to being a conduit through which these articulations and connections pass.³⁰

5. Bending the Rails

I will end with one final image that starts to bleed out onto where the track of this inquiry ends, in a moment of de-paralysis that means far more than returning to normal. It comes in *Our Hospitality*, a 1923 Buster Keaton film from the years between when Flynn called for the paralysis of work and Hayes called for the bell and banner to join in revolt. Like so many of the slapstick-derived comedies of the 1910s and 1920s, it is absolutely suffused with these same questions of hostility, hellish work, adulteration, and a built world that never responds the way you expect, and that may very well be out to get you. In one scene, the protagonist, Keaton himself, and a few others are aboard a train, its four cars pulled behind a small engine through a pine forest. The rails seem fresh, raised on supports not yet sufficiently sunken into the earth, and they bend slightly under the weight of the train. This sense of recent construction is amplified further by a sight gag, as the rails run directly up and over a large fallen tree, the carriages humping their way over it and bouncing the passengers inside. The tree itself carries hints of a paralysis intended or adeptly avoided, as though someone sought to sabotage the new route by felling a tree in its place, or, conversely, as though workers too rushed or too badly paid couldn't be bothered to drag it out of the way.

ALTMAN SIEGEL

1150 25TH ST. SAN FRANCISCO, CA 94107

tel: 415.576.9300 / fax: 415.373.4471

www.altmansiegel.com



Buster Keaton, *Our Hospitality*, 1923, film still.

A closer shot of the conductor shows him looking ahead and then bringing the train to a halt before a cut reveals a donkey standing just by the side of the track ahead, quietly eating grass. The conductor approaches the animal, puts his arms around its neck, and pulls, trying to get it to move backwards. No luck. Another man descends from the train and appears to verbally demand the donkey to move, before he crouches low and tries to move its leg. Still, it won't budge. The conductor taps the other man, gesturing to join him on the other side of the line, facing the donkey, where they bend low and grab the rails with both hands and pull. Unlike the donkey, the rails comply in a moment of disarming flexibility, as the metal and wood slide towards the men, shifting the entire path of the rails around the donkey in a serpentine wiggle. A cut to a close-up of the animal shows it standing still, just watching and swatting its tail. Then we're watching at a distance as the train chugs along its new path, missing the donkey and leaving it entirely unscathed. Once the train has passed, the donkey walks away.

The stakes are deceptively high in this little moment, which goes far beyond an easy riff on the storied stubbornness of donkeys. Light as it is, it touches on a history with profound effects, especially in the American context that Keaton's films thoroughly processed. This is the history of the maiming, killing, and paralyzing of both animals and humans by passing trains during the decades of rapid railway expansion in the nineteenth century, particularly following the Civil War. It's hard to overstate how widespread and consequential this reckoning with new forms of mechanized death was, both in rural contexts where trains slaughtered grazing cattle and other livestock, and in urban ones where bloody collisions inevitably followed from prioritizing the paths of railway lines over the lives of humans and animals in the streets. One of the first large-scale "terrorist" plots in the United States was planned in 1850 by farmers in Michigan, who were, in the words of Ann Larabee, enraged at the new fifteen-mile-per-hour rail run by the Michigan Central Railroad, because trains were slamming into their wandering sheep and cows. Resenting the railroad company because it refused to compensate them for their losses, the farmers, led by Abel Fitch, plotted to blow up tracks with powder kegs and percussion caps and carry out other acts of sabotage, including train derailments.

ALTMAN SIEGEL

1150 25TH ST. SAN FRANCISCO, CA 94107

tel: 415.576.9300 / fax: 415.373.4471

www.altmansiegel.com



Burning of Union Depot, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, July 21–22, 1877, engraving from *Harper's Weekly* by M.B. Leiser. License: Public Domain.

Frequent collisions also formed a substantial part of the animus against the railway companies that fed into explosive strikes, like the Great Railroad Strike of 1877, which went far beyond workers in the industry.³² To complete the circuit, it was precisely this tendency towards mechanized death that brought about the formal end of the deodand within English common law in 1846 with the signing of the new Fatal Accidents Act. A number of factors led to this, especially “a new model of the debt liability arising from accidental death,” as William Pietz details.³³ Yet a more simple and abhorrent motivation also led that model to replace and abolish the deodand: more people were now being slaughtered and maimed by something—trains—that cost a tremendous amount of money. And though the ones who had to pay easily could, they also happened to be part of the same ruling class that could bend the law to their will.

ALTMAN SIEGEL

1150 25TH ST. SAN FRANCISCO, CA 94107

tel: 415.576.9300 / fax: 415.373.4471

www.altmansiegel.com

Here I want to draw out this question and logic of bending, because we glimpse in this scene a radically different image of flexibility and what it means to enact it. Yes, there is the surreal pliability that runs counter to the property that Platonov's character Fyodorov was so attuned to, that inability of metal to heal itself. But further, this is a flexibility that asks: What would it mean to build a world designed to bend around a life rather than barrel straight through it? What would it mean to design a flexibility that never burdens single beings with the demand to bear it up, be rehabilitated, be able-bodied and able-minded, keep bending, leap out of the way, or twist to match the contours of a system indifferent to singularities? This would be a flexibility that is articulated, collective, and inorganic, rather than internalized, individual, and supposedly natural. It happens only *between* entities, in the junctures that bring together the donkey, the rails, the humans, and the forest. And crucially, it takes getting off the train and laying multiple hands to a structure that is supposed to be beyond question.

Paralyses of all sorts, from bodily and psychological debilitation to infrastructural disasters to the failure of political process to war itself, can never be separated from the structures that relentlessly generate what is wrongly seen as exceptional accident or error. Yet they so often end in a privacy and privation of experience, set firmly within the frame of the individual who cannot flexibly adapt enough to bring about a response, a change, a motion, a solution—even when the blackout is felt by an entire city all at once. De-paralysis, by contrast, names the inversion of that flow. It moves away from the unit of the solitary and into a kind of collectivity that is not automatically or suddenly generated by breakdown, but that rests on the articulated flexibility and training that “knows how to feed ourselves once everything is paralyzed.” In this way, to de-paralyze might mean something close to what we mean by *de-arrest*, when a crowd intervenes to force the police to release someone who has just been captured. Because de-arresting isn't a simple rewind or return to previous freedom, as if let go without contest. It's constitutively different in that many are required to free even just one. So too is the promise of de-paralyzing, which doesn't go back to what was before, but instead spreads outwards. It happens inhumanly, in our links between and in the open circuits of collectivity. If this process is any kind of restoration, existing in the space after the interval of paralysis, it does not restore me to who I was, but rather restores us to who we were not yet able to become.

ALTMAN SIEGEL

1150 25TH ST. SAN FRANCISCO, CA 94107

tel: 415.576.9300 / fax: 415.373.4471

www.altmansiegel.com

Notes

- 1 See the previous installment of this essay series for an extended reading of that therblig's form.
- 2 In this way, it forms an inversion of Gilbreth's symbol, which signifies the threat—for the accumulation of capital—of a body brought to rest, no longer animated or working but still and immobile when set against the backdrop of the motions judged to be productive.
- 3 Oana Timofeeva, *The History of Animals: A Philosophy* (Bloomsbury, 2018), 156.
- 4 Andrei Platonov, "Among Animals and Plants" (1936), *The New Yorker*, October 15, 2007 →.
- 5 Aaron Schuster, *The Trouble with Pleasure: Deleuze and Psychoanalysis* (MIT Press, 2016), 39.
- 6 I've argued this in my book *Shard Cinema* (Repeater Books, 2017).
- 7 Platonov, "Among Animals and Plants."
- 8 Alfred Hayes, "Into the Streets May First," *New Masses*, May 1934 →.
- 9 Once Mickey Mouse loses control and tries to murder the broom when it does its job too well and refuses to quit, its splinters reform into a multitude, a raw display of animated inanimate proletarian power marching in lockstep, as if on parade themselves.
- 10 See Part 2 of this essay series →.
- 11 That is, as opposed to real property (land) or establishments associated with it (such as buildings).
- 12 This sense of the "inanimate" plays a key role in the history of the deadand: first, insofar as it allows the law to grant the specificity of a vessel that is "animated" by labor, and second, when the deadand runs into a material world increasingly full of decidedly animated nonanimal property (i.e., engines, trains, factory machinery) that sits uncomfortably in its nexus of blame and agency.
- 13 The victim must equally be cleared from express fault of having brought it upon themselves, whether through willful action or undue carelessness, as seen in Edward Coke's definition, paraphrased in William Nelson's 1725 *An Abridgment of the Common Law*: the deadand "causeth the untimely death of a reasonable Creature, without the Will and Default of himself." If so judged, the property in question must then be *Deo dandum*, or given over to God, as the term itself prescribes. And as God is notoriously difficult to locate, the king steps in as His earthly proxy to receive the forfeited object or creature. The owner, who cannot be proven to have intentionally authored the fatal chain of events, is still not considered guilty or personally liable for the death. Still, they are nevertheless required to "give over" the unruly property, whether physically surrendering the rogue item itself or, more commonly, paying to the crown the monetary value assessed in court.
- 14 In this way, even though exculpated of guilt or formal retribution, the owner nevertheless exits the situation socially worse than he entered it, no longer an owner, out the equivalent in cash, or newly indebted for a sum that cannot be paid to stand in for a tool that ruined itself in the process of its murderous accident.
- 15 Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ontology of Things* (Duke University Press, 2010), 10.
- 16 The history of judgement against objects is fascinating, especially given that it should not be read purely as the evidence of an enchanted world now lost, as the 1976 case of *United States v. Article Consisting of 50,000 Cardboard Boxes More or Less, Each Containing One Pair of Clacker Balls* indicates.
- 17 William Pietz, "Death of the Deadand: Accursed Objects and the Money Value of Human Life," *Res*, no. 31 (1997): 97.
- 18 E. P. Evans, *The Criminal Prosecution and Capital Punishment of Animals* (William Heinemann, 1906), 188.
- 19 J. J. Finkelstein, "The Ox that Gored," *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society* 71, no. 2 (1981): 76.
- 20 Sir Frederick Pollock and Frederic William Maitland, *The History of English Law Before the Time of Edward I*, vol. 2, 2nd ed. (Cambridge University Press, 1898), 474.
- 21 See Finkelstein, who uses this phrase for the title of his extensive 1981 study, "The Ox That Gored."
- 22 Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr., *The Common Law* (Macmillan, 1882), 9.
- 23 Colin Dayan, *The Law Is a White Dog: How Legal Rituals Make and Unmake Persons* (Princeton University Press, 2011), 181.
- 24 Dayan, *The Law Is a White Dog*, 142.
- 25 Sylviane Dout, *Sissy's Exiles: The Story of the American Maroons* (New York University Press, 2014), 72–96.
- 26 The Invisible Committee, *The Coming Insurrection* (Semiotext[e], 2009).
- 27 Spyros Papapetros, "Malicious Houses," *Grey Room*, no. 20 (2005): 8.
- 28 Papapetros, "Malicious Houses," 8. I would note here also that this sort of transfer and lethal mimicry isn't unique to this moment: Papapetros identifies its precedence in moments of "parallels" earlier in the film, and, more generally, as one of the preoccupations of an entire orbit of thinking about forms of animacy.
- 29 Papapetros, "Malicious Houses," 8.
- 30 My use of the word "articulation" here is guided by Stuart Hall's conception of the term, which describes what can historically be bound together but is neither a natural unity nor a coherent whole. So in the framework I've sketched throughout, we might read the real epistemic promise of what can be detected during moments of paralysis as a slow recognition of just such "articulation," and of the ability to detect the joints that reveal it to be a composite. It is in those intervals that one might detect how parts are, in Hall's words, "connected to each other, but through a specific linkage, that can be broken" (Stuart Hall, "On Postmodernism and Articulation: An Interview with Stuart Hall by Larry Grossberg and Others," in *Essential Essays*, vol. 1, *Foundations of Cultural Studies*, Duke University, 2019, 235). It is here that the promise of de-paralysis begins, asking how to develop, foster, and defend what moments of paralysis generate: new circumstances and arrangements that prevent the parts from simply being restored into an articulated arrangement that always ends up hiding its links and treating the assemblage as normal and natural, as given and beyond the reach of intervention, as just the way things are.
- 31 Ann Larabee, "A Brief History of Terrorism in the United States," *Knowledge, Technology, & Policy* 16, no. 1 (2003): 24.
- 32 For a study of this, see David O. Stowell, *Streets, Railroads, and the Great Strike of 1877* (University of Chicago Press, 1999).
- 33 Pietz writes, "One was the civilization of such debt, in the original sense of the word 'civilization' the transfer of social controversies that became justiciable cases from the criminal law of the state to the civil law of private individuals. The other was the institutional production of a new kind of (legally) immortal person: the modern limited liability corporation." Pietz, "Death of the Deadand," 106.