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# INTRODUCTION: ASBESTOS AND MODERNISM

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On 14 March 1924, shortly before the writer, Franz Kafka, left Berlin for the last time, a factory worker named Nellie Kershaw passed away in the English town of Rochdale. Kafka would outlive Kershaw by less than three months: after a few days in Prague, he would go on to Vienna and then to Dr Hoffmann's sanatorium in Kierling, where he died on 2 June. The lives of the two 'K's bear little resemblance to each other. Kershaw, a textile worker, began work in a cotton mill in 1903 aged 12. Kafka, a law student in 1903, would go on to take his Doctor of Laws and, later, become an insurance officer, responsible for processing and investigating claims made to the Worker's Accident Insurance Institute for the Kingdom of Bohemia. It is at this point, however, that I might begin to sketch an imagined intersection between the worker and the insurance officer. For, some months after she began to work in the cotton mill, Kershaw changed her employment to Garside's asbestos mill. In 1917, she took up another job at Turner Brothers Asbestos, where she was tasked with spinning raw asbestos fibre into yarn. Around the same time, her attendance began to be 'intermittent'. In 1920, she started treatment for a lung condition that would, in July 1922, see her certified as unfit to work because of 'asbestos poisoning' and, upon her death in March 1924, find her the first person to have 'pulmonary asbestosis' listed as the cause of death.<sup>1</sup> With this final twist, Kershaw's relation to Kafka takes on a different aspect because, of course, Kafka co-owned an asbestos factory, Prager Asbestwerke Hermann & Co.

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Three sets of social relations connect Kershaw and Kafka. First, there is a sympathetic congruity between two patients with respiratory illnesses. William Cooke, Kershaw's pathologist, found traces of tuberculosis in her lungs, the original cause given for Kershaw's death and, undeniably, the pathogen behind Kafka's.<sup>2</sup> Second, professional complementarity ties the worker exposed to an occupational hazard to the insurance officer responsible for assessing such hazards. But Kershaw's cause of death complicates this speculative relation, turning an alignment based on shared illness and professional ethics into an antagonism between labour and capital. For, third, Kafka's capital relied upon the exploitation of women like Kershaw. This scarcely seems a matter for literature or literary criticism. Of the identities listed – Kafka the invalid, Kafka the insurance officer, Kafka the capitalist – Kafka the writer is conspicuously absent.

And yet, it is Kafka's prose that makes this intersection with Kershaw meaningful; indeed, this will anticipate the larger argument of this book, that literature about asbestos can help us to make meaning of our encounters with this strangely wonderful, terrible material. Following her diagnosis of 'asbestos poisoning', Kershaw found herself in the singularly uncomfortable position of being unable to claim health benefits from either her National Health Insurance fund or her employer (via the Workmen's Compensation Act). The fund deemed her ineligible for benefits because her condition was related to her occupation. But she was also denied compensation because, as the board of Turner Brothers Asbestos decided in their minutes: 'We repudiate the term "Asbestos Poisoning". Asbestos is not poisonous and no definition or knowledge of such a disease exists.'<sup>3</sup> In recognising Kafka's 'voice or his habits' in the outrageous dilemma Kershaw's case produced, an 'idiosyncrasy' emerges I might not have perceived 'if Kafka had not written'.<sup>4</sup> "It is characteristic of this legal system," conjectures K. in *Der Prozess* [*The Trial*], "that one is sentenced not only in innocence but also in ignorance."<sup>5</sup> If it is K who is ignorant of the court protocols, Kershaw faced the ignorance of the entire medical-legal-commercial establishment. Falling into the cracks between nonoccupational and occupational disease, Kershaw's circumstances bear all the hallmarks of a differend: 'a case,' observes Jean-François Lyotard, 'where the plaintiff is divested of the means to argue and becomes for that reason a victim.'<sup>6</sup> For Lyotard, a double bind occurs when attempting to testify to both damages (a compensable complaint) and a wrong (a miscarriage of justice): 'either the damages you complain about never took place and your testimony is false; or else they took place, and since you are able to testify to them, it is not a wrong that has been done to you, but merely damages, and your testimony is still false' (5). Kershaw's case offers a third possibility: the wrong occurs because the damages are not recognised by either occupational or public health. Unable to 'establish what is not without criticizing what is',

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Kershaw was left adrift in a situation that ‘Kafka warned us about [...] It is impossible to establish one’s innocence, in and of itself. It is a nothingness’ (9).

Kershaw’s case points to ‘a lack of a common measure’ or incommensurability, when it comes to linking illness, recognition and compensation in the asbestos story.<sup>7</sup> I can recognise this incommensurability because, today, the causal link between asbestos and these conditions has been recognised. They have become commensurable, and in no small way because of Kershaw. By linking the deaths of Kershaw and others to asbestos exposure, medical cases notes, occupational health surveys and epidemiological research paved the way for the legal recognition of liability.<sup>8</sup> As thinking in asbestos medical cases was increasingly accepted in legal case thinking, liability was attributed to the companies, who paid compensation accordingly.<sup>9</sup> The heterogenous concerns of medical findings, principles of legal liability and awards of damages became equivalent as they began to be grasped together as a narrative, a causal sequence.

Of course, Kafka’s own fictions played no part in the process. And yet, the parallels are such that they might have done. This ‘might have done’ opens up the possibility, pursued through this book, that other literary narratives have grasped together the medical, legal, occupational and environmental histories of asbestos. These testify to asbestos’s commensurability with a literary and cultural history extending from modernism to the present. But, Kafka’s work makes literary, medical, legal and economic values seem commensurable, paradoxically, by showing how odd this equivalence is: registering their incompatibility as an occasion for the properly absurd within the narrative, while expecting the reader to reconcile these absurdities as they grapple with the text. In real life, the values of medicine, law and money seldom correlate without a protracted struggle for recognition, as Kershaw’s case teaches us. And yet, when recognition is achieved, many forget the struggle. This may be why asbestos, though still widely mined and used, appears to be yesterday’s problem. It is commensurable with a previous phase in capitalist development, already safely dealt with in the past. This quick resolution misses the point: as much as the equivalence of medicine, law and money seems commensurable to those unaffected by asbestos, the lack of a common measure is all too real for those whose lives it explodes.

When literary plots challenge their audiences, spectators or readers to choose between the values of medicine, law and money, they recall the torsions involved in imagining new relations of commensurability. At the same time, reading in this way impacts our understanding of literature. Textual interpretation is not catalytic conversion. K’s maxim about ignorance and the legal system is striking, but, when one looks closer, one finds it is based on an assumption. Prevented from looking at some books lying on a table in the empty courtroom by the wife of one of the court ushers, K. says ‘they’re probably law books’,

before decrying the legal system's characteristics.<sup>10</sup> When K. does see the books, a page or two later, one contains 'an indecent picture' and the other is a novel. Nevertheless, he follows his earlier assumption, concluding, 'these are the law books they study [. . .] I'm to be judged by such men' (64). From the opening line, where the narrator assumes that 'someone must have slandered Josef K', such assumptions echo through the novel (24). If ignorance is often understood as the absence of knowledge, it may also be understood as an assumption about what is known, 'to deny either its importance or its very existence [or] to overlook it.'<sup>11</sup> Ignorance in *The Trial* plays on both senses: K. might not know very much, but he hardly helps himself with what he assumes to know.

As I trace the history of asbestos use through the twentieth century, I need to address the ignorance that coalesced around it not merely as an absence of knowledge, but as a series of assumptions whose rate of change was slower than circumstance demanded. By the advent of modernism, asbestos was already established as a widely used commodity. This explains why modernist texts can use asbestos objects, without dwelling on them. Its traces everywhere, asbestos itself remains unthought. From theatre curtains in Djuna Barnes, H. D. and Lawrence Durrell to gas fittings in John Rodker, Samuel Beckett and Patrick Hamilton, asbestos emerges in the infrastructure of modernism only to disappear once again, its reference a confident reminder that, for all the anxieties produced in the period by war, illness and social change, 'new' uses for materials like asbestos emerged to offer alternative forms of security and social reliance. After all, it is not simply unthought in modernism because it is taken for granted; as a fire retardant and insulator, it provided protection from fire and from anxieties about fire. In other words, it was meant to be taken for granted.

Paradoxically, these assumptions recall many of the positive, or at least ambivalent, connotations absent in contemporary accounts of asbestos: the sense of wonder it evoked, the security it provided, the social responsibility it implied and the possibility of a better world it anticipated. The image on this book's cover realises these connotations in concrete form. Depicting a man in an asbestos fire suit against a backdrop of flames, the metal relief by the Art Deco muralist, Hildreth Meière, appeared above the main entrance to the Johns Manville building at the 1939 New York World's Fair. *Asbestos – the Magic Mineral* personified the humble function of fire resistance through a noble figure that appeared to manage and defy the elements. But to think of the mural only in terms of its content fails, I think, to appreciate how Meière's bold combination of flowing lines and modern materials encourages the viewer to imagine the mineral's role in building the 'World of Tomorrow'. Transient as it was, Meière's work exemplifies a cultural response excited by asbestos's utopian, world-building possibilities.<sup>12</sup>

Still, overt declarations about asbestos's transformative potential are generally outnumbered by those that demurely mention it in passing, to assure

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without undue emphasis. Calling attention to the manner in which modernism takes asbestos for granted helps us to appreciate the manner in which asbestos, for all its regulations, scares and ‘public awareness’, continues to be taken for granted in the present. Objects that pose possible or actual future risk, from carbon nanotubes and glyphosphate to opioids and AI in healthcare, are often described as ‘the next asbestos’. But, apart from a short précis about asbestos’s dangers, little information is given as to why such an association is necessary or useful. Always the source of the metaphor, never its target, asbestos remains, even when in plain sight, a matter of received wisdom.

As a preliminary step, I need to establish how such wisdom comes to be received. To do this, I identify a corpus of literary works – some traditionally ‘modernist’, others ‘proletarian’, still others in the catch-all category of ‘genre fiction’ – stretching across the twentieth century, that, through use or mention, can help us understand asbestos’s ‘meaning’. These works show how, for all our changing awareness about what it does, the methods used to represent asbestos’s problems remain deeply indebted to early twentieth-century efforts to advertise it. Such formal concerns are not simply a matter of rarefied literary discourse; they determine how activists agitate for action, how doctors inform their patients, how lawyers advocate for their clients, and how policy makers determine when a site is ‘rehabilitated’. This continued reliance on techniques used by the industry to sell its products may constitute an impediment to thinking about asbestos in the future, beyond bans, remediation and medical interventions. But it also helps us track asbestos as a commodity on the world market, extracted to resolve particular problems in machinofactured capitalism, and subject to the laws of exchange.

Transnational traffic inaugurated and sustained the supply-demand, production-consumption cycles that made asbestos endemic in the built environment, as the material passed from mines in Canada, Russia and South Africa, through production centres in Australia, mainland Europe, the United Kingdom and the United States, to its general, if uneven, distribution across the Global North and Global South.<sup>13</sup> In this light, the asbestos mine expands from being ‘a discrete sociotechnical object’ to become what Martín Arboleda calls ‘a dense network of territorial infrastructures and spatial technologies vastly dispersed across space.’<sup>14</sup> For Arboleda, the result is the planetary mine. In finessing this concept, first advanced by Mazen Labban, Martín Arboleda argues that the planetary mine produces relative surplus value at the world scale, with national economies taken as its alliquot parts (6). For Arboleda, the planetary mine emerges not simply through the *long durée* of resource imperialism explained in the work of Immanuel Wallerstein, Giovanni Arrighi and Stephen Bunker and Paul Ciccantell, but the accompanying revolutions in technology (Lewis Mumford) and logistics (Deborah Cowen).<sup>15</sup> Nineteenth-century technological developments in machinofacturing made fire-retardants,

like asbestos, absolutely essential for insulating large machinery, the factories that housed them, and the surrounding housing estates. The global asbestos industry was built on the planetary mine. Profits depended upon disaggregated labour, vertical integration across national borders, and cartelism. Even the process by which asbestos companies divested themselves of responsibility for asbestos torts, through the creation of shell relief funds and the transfer of assets offshore, resonates with a much bigger story about the division of industrial and financial capital in Europe and North America in the latter half of the twentieth century, as the former was redirected to Asia and the Global South and the latter was increasingly deregulated in the Global North.

There is a rich tradition in thinking about how literature can bear witness to these effects. The Warwick Research Collective, for instance, imagines the intersection between ‘a single but radically uneven world-system; a singular modernity, combined and uneven; and a literature that variously registers this combined unevenness in both its form and its content to reveal itself as, properly speaking, world-literature.’<sup>16</sup> Here literature ‘registers’ the impacts of a capitalist modernity, scaled up to account for interactions between geographically distinct polities. By concentrating, in particular, on asbestos, I show how a planetary literature, when responding to the planetary mine, may help to render ‘visible how human bodies become possessed (and often obliterated by uncanny forces and nonhuman objects become animated with powers over life and death.’<sup>17</sup> ‘Crucially,’ writes Arboleda, ‘the shift from the global to the planetary is also understood as a stepping stone towards novel formations of collective consciousness and of collective agency’ (16). In this regard, asbestos is not simply one example amongst others; it already offers a clear model for novel formations of collectivity. Of all the substances that have proliferated through this combination of system, modernity and literature, asbestos has generated perhaps the richest, most detailed scholarship on generalised harm, the most comprehensive judicial remedies for these harms, and, perhaps most importantly, the strongest combination of grassroots and legislative activism. International asbestos activism has produced an exemplary site of community development that could provide a model for transnational praxis, from climate change to forced mass migration, pandemics to plastic pollution. As yet, however, there is no comprehensive, critical account of cultural texts responding to asbestos. This book aims to offer such an account.

But even when framed by asbestos’s extra-literary concerns, literature helps us do some important, if undervalued, concept work. The book begins by showing how these assumptions are encoded in the very genres that seem most appropriate to telling the asbestos story: the utopia and the dystopia; or the mystery, crime novel and horror story.<sup>18</sup> These genres establish a socially accepted understanding of asbestos, which shapes more experimental writing about asbestos, during and after modernism. Experimentalism helps to reframe

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my assumptions about asbestos, but I must be wary of the epistemic virtue it claims.<sup>19</sup> To offset the claim such writing is ‘valuable’ simply because it is epistemically interesting, I consider how it might transform our understanding of asbestos’s movement across the world market, from the mine to the factory, into the built environment, and then to the dump. Although all texts partake in codes and traditions that help us to identify them, reflexively, with genres, many, if not all, develop some minimal difference that marks them as singular and devised for some particular purpose. By dividing these texts according to generic structure, experimental poetics and proletarian outlook, I make distinctions meant to be usefully heuristic, rather than necessary, exclusive and essential. In many cases, the texts transcend these categories, but the categories themselves afford opportunities for learning. Genre teaches me about the assumptions that shape my understanding, experimentalism helps me to challenge these assumptions, and more politically motivated literature can direct my attention to new forms of resolution.

Before I begin these framing analyses, however, I want to bring together modernism and asbestos to show they can be of mutual interest. In this introduction, I follow some asbestos objects in modernist texts, to evidence the presence of asbestos to the modernists and to explain their textual interpretation to asbestos scholars. Following these objects, or, more precisely, their function as metaphors, establishes a much larger semantic set of assumptions about asbestos than their isolated appearance might suggest. Metaphors are not simply substitutes for other words, they are referents that can change our entire understanding of a sentence or paragraph: a metaphor can establish a ‘new semantic pertinence’ that helps to ‘redescribe reality’.<sup>20</sup> When asbestos is used as a metaphor for new forms of reliance in modernist literature or for new threats today, it redescribes the reality in which it is embedded. Unearthing the narrative context for these metaphors might help to make sense of asbestos’s strange temporalities: its slow development over geological epochs, its long latency in the body, the illnesses it causes. Accordingly, I draw on Paul Ricoeur’s work on metaphor, time and narrative not simply to address the new semantic pertinences of asbestos metaphors, but to explain how narrative may order asbestos’s temporalities. His related notions of prefiguration, configuration and refiguration have the added benefit of explaining, in the loosest sense, the processes that define the book’s three sections: genres prefigure our understanding of what asbestos is and does; experimental literature configures these understandings in new ways; politicised literature refigures these understandings to particular extra-literary ends.<sup>21</sup> This work finds its relevance in the ongoing contamination of our environment by asbestos products, and the ongoing burden of disease faced by many, many people. I relate these discussions of asbestos in modernism to its legacy in the present. At the same time, I want to frame these formal concerns by addressing the racial, gendered and classed assumptions that obtain in the small, but not

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unimportant role asbestos plays in the history and philosophy of western science and modernity. So, through a reading of Buster Keaton's *The Paleface* (1922), I consider how knowledge and ignorance play against each other when thinking of asbestos as, in the words of Bruno Latour, 'the last modernist object'. In following the presence of asbestos in modernism through to these consequences, I prefigure the book to come.

#### MODERNISM'S INFRASTRUCTURES

When asbestos appears in modernist literature, it is primarily there to be relied upon. In other words, it fits within a material and metaphoric infrastructure. To understand asbestos as a material of infrastructure, I follow the lead of David Trotter, in his work on Bakelite and vulcanised rubber, and Mimi Sheller, in her examination of aluminium, in considering how asbestos, like the other new materials of modernism, fits into a physical network of exchange across lines of combined and uneven development, in an emotional network, that translates their appearance into affective states like anxiety, hope and insecurity, and in a temporal network, that observes how these spatial and emotional networks shift and change over time, in relation to political, social, and economic pressures.<sup>22</sup> Like most infrastructures, these networks are easiest to identify as and when they fall apart or begin to break down.<sup>23</sup> But certain objects can be shown to exemplify the network, even in peak working order. One such object in modernism's cultural life was the asbestos curtain.

The asbestos curtain was a safety curtain, mandatory in theatres, that was raised at the beginning of a performance and lowered at its end. By virtue of its ubiquity, the asbestos curtain infiltrated the metaphoric language of literary modernism, where it served to signal beginnings and endings. Thus, the asbestos curtain presents an exemplary point of intersection between asbestos's material and cultural histories, as mundane reality becomes figurative device. As a metaphor, it is primarily associated with marking a narrative terminus. It therefore also limns this book's concern with meaning, time, and narrative: namely, how narratives about asbestos, explicitly or implicitly, help me come to terms with the strain the material puts on my relations with time. 'With narrative,' Ricoeur writes, 'the semantic innovation lies in the inventing of another work of synthesis – a plot. By means of the plot, goals, causes and chance are brought together within the temporal unity of a whole and complete action.'<sup>24</sup> By a process of 'grasping together', narrative refigures multiple scattered events into a whole and complete story. In what follows, I 'grasp together' the historical and metaphorical use of the asbestos curtain to illustrate and explain both asbestos's place in modernism's infrastructure and, in parallel, time's relation to narrative.

The relation between the asbestos curtain metaphor, time, and narrative can be found in a letter by the Imagist poet H. D. [Hilda Doolittle] to Havelock

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Ellis, dated 30 August [1933]: 'I am glad now to feel an "asbestos" curtain drop between certain phases of me and my past.'<sup>25</sup> The metaphor describes the outcome of H. D.'s analysis with Freud. The same image appears in *Advent* (1956), the notebook she kept during her analysis: 'an asbestos curtain had dropped between me and my past, my not-so-far-past bitter severance from love and friendship.'<sup>26</sup> Here, the curtain presents a physical, spatial image of division to describe the more complex, temporal process of psychic compartmentalisation. It translates the 'asbestos curtain' to the realm of psychoanalysis. Far from marking the juxtaposition of asbestos and curtain as strange, H. D.'s scare quotes refer to the tendency to label such curtains 'Asbestos' in the theatres where they were to be found. H. D. relies on the image being itself pedestrian enough not to intrude on her reader's understanding of her insulation from 'psychic death'. Finding the right words to describe asbestos and its effects is difficult, not least because asbestos is being used as a metaphoric source to describe other things.

H. D.'s metaphor demands a fuller history of the asbestos curtain. Introduced as a device to separate the stage, and its lights, from the plush (and flammable) furnishings of the auditorium, the asbestos curtain began to replace existing safety curtains in the 1870s.<sup>27</sup> In 1897, Edwin O. Sachs documented more than 10,000 deaths by theatre fires worldwide in the preceding century, largely as a result of stage fires, caused by lighting requirements, that spread to the auditorium.<sup>28</sup> There was, therefore, a pressing need for a non-flammable barrier that could divide the two: the asbestos curtain, which separated the theatre's audience from the stage. Such was the hubris offered by its protection that Chicago's Iroquois Theatre billed itself as 'Absolutely Fireproof' before suffering the deadliest single-building fire in US history (at least 602 fatalities). It was determined that the fire was, in part, due to poor maintenance of the curtain, which failed to drop fully when the fire broke out, and to the poor quality of the curtain itself, which, made mainly from wood pulp mixed with asbestos, was 'of no value in a fire'. This failure, far from curtailing the fortunes of the asbestos curtain, led to its institution in building and fire codes. By 1909, legislation in most US cities mandated that this curtain be made from asbestos.

When I focus on the structural elements of this story, I can use it to explain how narrative works. The casual introduction of the asbestos curtain leads to its haphazard use, culminating in catastrophe. The aftermath of this catastrophe, the *anagnorisis* or moment of realisation that permits narrative resolution, is the codification of the asbestos curtain as a fixed feature of modernism's built environment. The reader is pushed towards a (inevitable) teleology that sees the curtain reign victorious, even as the tragedy immerses them in the accidental and the contingent. What gives this narrative its force, Ricoeur might argue, is its reliance on plot: not only do events follow on from each other, but they affect each other (through cause-and-effect) and may be divided into a

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recognisable beginning, middle and end. Haphazard general use is interrupted by the fire (crisis), which causes a tightening of regulations. This progression, which Ricoeur takes from Aristotle's notion of *muthos* (emplotment), emphasises itself as a single dramatic action. But, insofar as this action must be represented, it demands a *mimetic* action ('the imitation or representation of action' and 'the organization of the events'). This action is not just the action represented within the work (its configuration, or what Ricoeur will call 'mimesis<sub>2</sub>'). It includes the presumption that both storyteller and her audience have the narrative competence to identify the structural, symbolic and temporal features of the work and its represented actions (its prefiguration, or 'mimesis<sub>1</sub>'). For narrative action to be represented, I must apprehend that actions have goals and ethical implications, and that they are shaped by my experience of time. Further, the work must be received by a spectator or reader, which allows its represented actions to be understood in relation to time, their place in the world and their significance (its refiguration, or 'mimesis<sub>3</sub>'). The contents of the work, its production and its reception each rely on their own mimetic actions, which must be thought of as interdependent on one another.

The asbestos curtain was an important material and metaphoric object in modernist culture, but it can also illustrate Ricoeur's thoughts on narrative. Since it marked the beginning and the end of every cinematic or theatrical performance, the curtain separates three distinct periods that map onto the standard division of the performance's time into before (prefiguration), during (configuration) and after (refiguration). My anticipation of the performance to come, like my memory of the performance just seen, is as much a part of the overall action as my attention to the performance itself. This, my experience of time, is anchored to the movements of the asbestos curtain, which announces the material breaks or puncta in that experience.

The history of the asbestos curtain serves as preamble to a further narrative that follows it through modernism's literary canon. Its prosaic importance is indicated by the givenness with which these texts use it, without dreaming it might need further explanation. In a human-interest story on a fireman, Djuna Barnes imagines him spending his evenings 'supervising the rising of the asbestos curtain of the last act.'<sup>29</sup> As befits the vox-pop-profile nature of her piece, Barnes marginalises the excitement of the theatrical production to emphasise the necessary, repetitive functionalism of Michael Quinn's work as a fire warden, overseeing the curtain as a feature of fire safety. Barnes's actual curtain serves to remind us of cultural modernism's reliance on emerging forms of materiality, and that the sources of these metaphors were real objects, whose initial phase of marvel were quickly dampened by the expectations of habit.

Most metaphoric asbestos curtains in modernist literature target associations with the end of performances. In Lawrence Durrell's *The Black Book*

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(1938), the quasi-autobiographical protagonist, Lawrence Lucifer, reminisces on his sexual exploits with the prostitute, Hilda, by imagining their coupling as a theological-theatrical performance. Durrell extends the metaphor by referring to a non-existent audience ('it was a wonderful house tonight'), whose approval warrants 'seven calls before the curtain' before 'the curtain slips down giddily, bearing one apocalyptic word: Asbestos.'<sup>30</sup> Asbestos, Greek for inextinguishable, perhaps also implies a heat of passion absent from Durrell's description of the sex itself. Qualifying the word as apocalyptic (Greek for 'revelation') suggests it uncovers what the curtain so decorously attempts to disguise: that sex with Hilda, even evocations of Hilda as the Virgin Mary, do not slow the relentless narcissism that characterises Lucifer's narrative voice.

e. e. cummings also uses the asbestos curtain to disclose sexual practices it is meant to censor. In his memoir, *The Enormous Room* (1922), cummings discretely turns his gaze away from the sexual exploits of his fellow prisoners by invoking this physical feature of the theatre: 'Now let the curtain fall, and the reader be satisfied with the significant word "Asbestos" which is part of all first-rate performances.'<sup>31</sup> Ostensibly a factual account of cummings's internment at La Ferté Macé in 1917 for anti-war behaviour, contemporary reviewers qualified their praise for *The Enormous Room* by regretting 'its crudities'.<sup>32</sup> It presented a 'calculated indecency' that might be seen to be a feature of Modernist texts more generally.<sup>33</sup> Drawing down the asbestos curtain, then, signals a metaphoric self-censorship against even more graphic descriptions. In a text, however, that, as Hazel Hutchison has argued, 'presents the struggle for self-expression and freedom of conscience [. . .] as the real war within the war', both curtain and signal become part of a performance: a wink acknowledging that activities have been covered over, which should have been eliminated entirely.<sup>34</sup> For cummings, the asbestos curtain presented the distinction between what one can say, and what one can't, to highlight the latter.

For Durrell and cummings, the asbestos curtain marks a divergence between narration (the act of telling the story or utterance) and narrative (the story being told or statement). In both novels, the curtain punctures a realist narrative with an allegorical turn, since it is substituted for more graphic descriptions of sexual acts. The asbestos curtain acts simultaneously as censoring device and as marker outlining, more or less explicitly, what is being censored. In acting for both, however, the curtain implicitly stands for the time each takes to be completed: therefore, it sutures together the times of narration and narrative. The result is what Ricoeur calls

a three-tiered scheme: utterance-statement-world of the text, to which correspond a time of narrating, a narrated time, and a fictive experience of time projected by the conjunction/disjunction between the time it takes to narrate and narrated time.<sup>35</sup>

When Durrell's 'apocalyptic' and cummings's 'Now' signal an intrusion of the narrator that splits narration from narrative, they rely on the curtain to stand in for this divergence: a reliance that reinforces the curtain's role as a marker of time.

It still marks time in Elizabeth Bowen's final novel, *Eva Trout; or Changing Scenes* (1968). Here, the asbestos curtain signals the end of Eva's time at the 'experimental' castle school, after her roommate Elsinore attempts suicide: 'With the coming-into-the-room of Elsinore's mother, all here ended. From that instant, down came oblivion – asbestos curtain. Whether Elsinore died or lived no one told Eva.'<sup>36</sup> Again, the asbestos curtain announces a moment of transition. It censors what the baffled, inarticulate Eva knows, or knows to ask, peremptorily foreclosing both the narrative about the school experience and any questions it might have caused. The difficult questions that might be asked about Elsinore are dismissed; like death itself, the episode concludes pre-emptively, without plot resolution and in 'oblivion'. And yet, Bowen gives us an asbestos curtain to mark that it has ended, however unsatisfying that end might be. Ending doesn't just happen, as a teleology might imply; it is marked, staged or otherwise performed. As in H. D., Durrell and cummings, the asbestos curtain functions as a *cordon sanitaire*, separating the consequences of events in the narrative from their prosaic narration. It functions as a liminal marker that discloses those same occlusions it is meant to obstruct from view.

When modernist writers call on a tradition of theatre-going that accepts the asbestos curtain as the physical end of a performance, they use this tradition to disrupt the reader's expectations about how the scene will unfold. The scene ends, and yet it goes on. The consequence is a radical foreclosing of the future: not, as was usual in the nineteenth-century novel, with a death, a marriage or an inheritance, but as the announcement that a narrative arc has been abandoned to 'oblivion', a death, in other words, to narration. Historically, the asbestos curtain offered modernist writers a metaphoric source that allowed them to draw moral or temporal lines, marking moments of transition in their works. Crucially, it also highlighted the drawing of lines as a narrative gesture, self-reflexively incorporating the physical curtain to relate the plot to 'all first-rate performances'. Since the asbestos curtain marked the beginning and end of performances, it materialises the boundaries of Ricoeur's three mimetic divisions: the configuration of the work itself or what Ricoeur calls *mimesis*<sub>2</sub>, as separated from the prefiguration of narrative (*mimesis*<sub>1</sub>) and its refiguration (*mimesis*<sub>3</sub>) through reception. The different permutations of the asbestos curtain mentioned above serve as fitting examples of a material object absorbed into a cultural imaginary. They demonstrate asbestos's unacknowledged presence as an infrastructure of modernism. Tellingly, these examples all make use of the asbestos curtain as the source, rather than target, of their metaphoric conceit: they rely on their reader knowing what an asbestos curtain is, in order

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to concretise more complicated arguments about censorship, memory and narrative.

The use of asbestos curtains, even as a metaphoric source, provokes thoughts about their discursive meaning, even if, perhaps especially if, that meaning is assumed to be fixed and stable. It blurs material history into cultural history. It introduces a concern with time and narrative that will prove very useful in the chapters to come. But, thought textually, the asbestos curtain also foregrounds a narrative will-not-to-know. Its intrusion marks a conscious refusal to elaborate on a scene, effectively disqualifying any narrative resolution. The result is a sticking point; even as I continue to read, I return to these moments as unresolved and irresolvable.

### ENTANGLEMENTS

By now, I can say that modernism's relationship with asbestos is more significant than its absorption into the infrastructure might suggest. I argued that, in its curtain form, it played a metaphoric role in describing time and narrative. But these casual observations gain their real significance only in retrospect, as knowledge about what asbestos does becomes general. Moreover, where asbestos in modernist texts plays the role of the ordinary object, more recent writing about asbestos, literary and theoretical, draws on modernist techniques to highlight asbestos's resistance to ordinary description. Or, to adapt Dora Zhang's discussion of Henry James, when ordinary description encounters asbestos, it becomes 'about something other than how things look [. . .] but it is quite specific with respect to qualities and effects.'<sup>37</sup> After all, the distortions of time and space now associated with asbestos fibres and their attendant diseases – its microscopic scale; the long latency periods – lend themselves to consciously experimental writing, which seeks, like Zhang's James, 'to imagine what it is like to feel an atmosphere.'

For Montana-based nature writer, Rick Bass, the story of asbestos 'is a big story comprised of millions of tiny parts. It defies structure. It drifts along the breeze, settles and lands where it may.'<sup>38</sup> This accounts for Bass's structural choices in 'With Every Great Breath: Living and Dying in Lincoln Country', his essay about asbestos contamination at the vermiculite mine in Libby, Montana, the alleged cover-up by the mine's owner, W. R. Grace & Co., and its eventual acknowledgement as a public health disaster by the Environmental Protection Agency.<sup>39</sup> Told as a series of vignettes, anecdotes, observations and accounts, ranging in length from a paragraph to a few pages, the essay imagines itself 'identifying safe paths and sealing over old wounds', 'just as the scar tissue in a body seeks to isolate an infection, attempts to seal the pustulous wound'.<sup>40</sup> It exemplifies 'the rhetoric of exposure' that Steve Schwarze identifies in earlier responses to Libby: a rhetoric that juxtaposes evidence credited with different epistemic value – personal experience, scientific studies, official press releases

– to overcome ‘*uncertainty*’ about material conditions and relationships and *inertia* on the part of institutions responsible for investigating and addressing those conditions.’<sup>41</sup> Juxtaposition brings together competing temporalities in Bass’s essay: the risks to his own life, the illnesses in his neighbours and his dog, the culpability of the corporations, and the fibres’ effect. Although Bass claims the story of asbestos defies structure, the vignette offers him a form that simultaneously isolates its ‘millions of tiny parts’, even as it grasps these together through juxtaposition. But what matters, Bass decides, is not the number of people affected at Libby, but ‘the fact that our story is new and use-able by others’.<sup>42</sup> This rhetoric motivates public action about the specific concern, and about comparable concerns in the future.

When describing the forms of uncertainty and inertia that emerge with comparable asbestos contaminations in Northern Italy’s Balangero Mine and the Eternit factory at Casale Monferrato, the São Félix mine in Bahia or the Jeffrey Mine next to Asbestos, Quebec, cultural critics and anthropologists like Serenella Iovino, Agata Mazzeo, Sasha Litvintseva and Enrico Cesaretti turn to Rob Nixon’s work on ‘slow violence’: ‘a violence’, Nixon explains, ‘that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all.’<sup>43</sup> The slow violence of asbestos is measured, first and foremost, in the long latencies of diseases like mesothelioma. Iovino, Litvintseva and Cesaretti agree that asbestos diseases open up pathways for understanding asbestos’s other forms of slow violence, which they characterise as a series of ‘intra-actions’ (Iovino), ‘haptics’ (Litvintseva) or ‘entanglements’ (Cesaretti) that connect fibre to flesh on a cellular level, exposure to illness on a personal level, and contamination to communities on a historical level.<sup>44</sup> Asbestos’s rate of change, measured in geological epochs, jibes against the moment needed by a breath to bring the fibre into the body, while, between them, the decades it takes a fibre to generate mutations in a human cell spar with the months or years these cells then take to kill you.

The three critics find inspiration in Feminist New Materialism: in particular, Karen Barad’s ‘entanglement’, which suggests ‘individuals emerge through and as part of their entangled intra-relating’, and Stacy Alaimo’s ‘trans-corporeality’, in which ‘the human is always intermeshed with the more-than-human world’.<sup>45</sup> The human and the more-than-human, too often thought of as distinct entities, are intimately related and ethically intertwined. Still, this relationality risks leaving something out. ‘[R]ather than focus on an ethics based on relationality and entanglement,’ Eva Haifa Giraud wonders whether ‘it is important to more fully flesh out an ethics of exclusion, which pays attention to the entities, practices, and ways of being that are foreclosed when other entangled realities are materialized?’<sup>46</sup> Or, as Giraud and others have argued elsewhere, as interesting as Barad is on entanglement, too little attention is paid to her work on ‘agential cuts’: the

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determinate boundaries that apparatuses produce, and which are necessary for turning phenomena (the ontologically inseparable intra-agents of entanglement) into meaningful objects of knowledge.<sup>47</sup> Asbestos, after all, was once thought of as a substance that could produce boundaries, freeing us from touch or attachment. This irony needs to be remembered, to appreciate fully why it was that people came to invest time and life in its production.

At the same time that asbestos performs agential cuts, it is clear that attempts to trace 'the alliances through which stone's long temporality enmeshes with human story' become more fraught when those alliances kill.<sup>48</sup> The lithic alliance may register human ephemerality in the vertiginous terms of the geologic, but it renders some humans more ephemeral than others. Here, Mazzeo offers a more complex account of how people come to terms with time. Mazzeo, an anthropologist working with Brazilian anti-asbestos activists, uses 'time' to elaborate on 'the lack of synchronicity between asbestos mining, human and environmental temporalities, and the Brazilian anti-asbestos activists' practices and narratives.'<sup>49</sup> Her attention remains on the human. This reminds us of the tension in the relation between the more-than-human focus of New Materialism and Nixon's slow violence, which, after all, Nixon developed to articulate an 'environmentalism of the poor'. Not parsing this tension risks recapitulating precisely the problem Nixon and, before him, Johan Galtung sought to diagnose with 'slow' and 'structural violence' respectively: when multi-species being is invoked, at the expense of the human, it is usually the poor who are excluded first. In structural violence, Galtung 'sought to foreground the vast structures that can give rise to acts of personal violence and constitute forms of violence in and of themselves'.<sup>50</sup> For Nixon, slow violence elaborates on the stasis of structural violence 'to foreground questions of time, movement, and change, however gradual' (11). Expanding on the static determinism of structural violence, slow violence projects itself from the past through the present into the future, but it is measured, mainly, through its effects on communities, and in the writings of people trying to make those effects more visible.

If witnessing slow violence offers a nuanced understanding of asbestos's effects on human communities, it is not, in and of itself, sufficient. Slow violence could be, and was, used by the asbestos industry to justify inaction. In a memo, the Johns-Manville medical officer at Asbestos, Kenneth Smith, would note of the 708 workers he surveyed in 1948:

It must be remembered that although these men have the X-ray evidence of asbestosis, they are working today and definitely are not disabled from asbestosis. They have not been told of this diagnosis for it is felt that as long as the man feels well, is happy at home and work, and his physical condition remains good, nothing should be said. When he becomes disabled and sick, then the diagnosis should be made and the



claim submitted by the Company. The fibrosis of the disease is irreversible and permanent so that eventually compensation will be paid to each of these men. But as long as the man is not disabled it is felt that he should not be told of his condition so that he can live and work in peace and that the Company can benefit from his many years of experience. Should the man be told of his condition today there is a very definite possibility that he would become mentally and physically ill, simply through the knowledge that he has asbestosis.<sup>51</sup>

Smith is aware that asbestosis is a slowly violent, disabling disease; he is also concerned, sincerely I must imagine, that anxieties may provoke their own illnesses. In contrasting asbestosis to the ‘possibility’ of becoming ‘physically ill’, his document is certainly cynical. But it also shows how slow violence can, and has, been used against its own activist ambitions, for the ‘peace’ of the worker and the ‘benefit’ of the Company. Its concern with feeling well, happy and good trades on something like Lauren Berlant’s ‘cruel optimism’, a desire that obstructs people’s flourishing. In its visceral ordinariness, cruel optimism represents a zone ‘where life building and the attrition of human life are indistinguishable’.<sup>52</sup> Paralleling Rob Nixon’s ‘slow violence’, Berlant identifies these zones with ‘slow death’ ‘the physical wearing out of a population in a way that points to its deterioration as a defining condition of its experience and historical existence’ (95). Indeed, awareness of asbestos’s role in the creation of conditions of ‘slow death’ is almost exactly coincident with Nixon and Berlant’s tendency to focus on ‘the present’ of late capitalism, from the 1960s and 1970s onward.

Both Berlant and Nixon insist that they describe conditions of violence and attrition that rely upon ‘ordinariness’ to become invisible. The processes of slow violence and slow death depend upon tenacious fantasies: misrecognitions involved in ‘seeing selves and worlds as continuous’, whether motivated by profit or other attachments (122). These fantasies cover up the effects of slow violence and slow death, while motivating people to keep these effects covered up. We only see this violence, they suggest, when we look at it twice: the first time, for how it appears, and the second, for how it really is. This double look invests my first impressions of the ordinary with a catalogue of horrific effects. The asbestos curtain presents just such an ordinary image. Suddenly, its glib associations with apocalypse and closure take on frightening and oppressive connotations. My sense of it is destabilised as I anticipate future consequences for those unsuspecting theatre workers who might have been exposed, on the basis of my memories of other victims of exposure.

On the basis of my discussion of ‘slow violence’ and ‘slow death’ I can return to Ricoeur’s preoccupation with time and narrative with a better sense of its consequences for history. In other words, the cultural history of asbestos

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combines with the formal dimensions of Ricoeur's argument to create a materialist poetics.<sup>53</sup> Ricoeur, remember, brings together the 'completeness' and 'wholeness' of plot to its discordant counterpart, temporality:

the world unfolded by every narrative work is always a temporal world [. . .] time becomes human time to the extent that it is organized after the manner of a narrative; narrative, in turn, is meaningful to the extent that it portrays the features of temporal experience.<sup>54</sup>

Ricoeur's gambit is that Aristotle, in order to preserve the concordance of plot, forgets time in his *Poetics*, while Augustine, Ricoeur's other point of departure, provides a reciprocal aporia when he insists on the discordance of time, at the expense of plot, in his *Confessions*. In keeping with his hermeneutic method, Ricoeur uses this circularity as the starting point for establishing how time and narrative become mutually constitutive: my desire for the concordance offered by narrative remains in tense relation with the discordance provoked by my experience of time passing. This insight suggests that narrative might recuperate the alien time scales of asbestos itself for narrative, but, more importantly, it does so for the experience of asbestos-related disease. Indeed, narrative medicine might be said to rest upon this basic assumption: narratives provide solace ('concordance') after an illness upsets my normal experience of time passing ('discordance').<sup>55</sup>

Whether apprehending the effects of slow violence and slow death or simply addressing the metaphor of the asbestos curtain, I need to bring my appreciation of phenomenological temporality (past, present, future) together with a more standard progression of linear or cosmological time (before, during, after) to form a third, 'historical' or 'narrative' time. Like the clock that determines the play's duration or the calendar its assignation, the asbestos curtain does not simply define different periods in the production; it sutures my experience of the production to physical markers of time passing: my expectation before the curtain is raised, my attention when it is raised, and my memory after it falls. To address this in greater detail, I turn, with Ricoeur, to Augustine.

When Augustine describes the human experience of time, he suggests it is best understood as a threefold present: the present of past things, or memory, the present of present things, or attention, and the present of future things, or expectation.<sup>56</sup> Whereas cosmological time measures itself against the movement of material things, like the sun, temporality is time as experienced by human subjects, who, locked as they are in an unfolding present, must experience both the past and the future as mediated through this present. By recasting temporality into a threefold present, Augustine raises the possibility of thinking about time experience as a set of actions, wherein I attend to a present in

negotiation with an expectation of that which is coming and a remembering of that which is past. Time's extension relies on this distention of the soul (*disentio animi*) into the past or the future, a distention that will provoke time's discordances. Whether I am impatient for the curtain to be raised, or distressed when it falls, my concern with the past and future disturb my sense of equanimity in the present.

Speculations about the movements of cosmological time and the actions of temporality demand some stable point against which these dynamics might be measured. For Augustine, this limiting idea is eternity, not simply registered as God, but as that which is not, or outside, time. But this also provides a hinge that Ricoeur will use to introduce what is absent from Augustine's speculation about time: narrative emplotment. If the temporality of illness causes discordances through a distension of the soul, narrative provides a concordance through its engagement of a plot. Behind the internal discordances of the plot that impel me towards its telos, resolution or conclusion, lies narrative's concordant security: like Augustine's eternity, the narrative presupposes the story is already finished, the page is written, the world is complete. My experience of temporality as the plot unfolds relies upon an expectation that this plot will resolve itself by the final page. Thus, as I read forwards, experiencing the within-time of the characters as they try to make choices constrained by circumstance, I also understand the plot as an achronic structure that stabilises my sense of within-time with a completeness provided by its 'sense of an ending'. Here Ricoeur finds, in narrative temporality's complement, the concordance necessary to make sense of its discordance.

Ricoeur's argument clarifies the narrative purpose of apprehension in contexts of slow violence and slow death. When I become 'aware' of the underlying violence of ordinary life, I am forced to distend my attention on the present into my memories of contiguous catastrophes, while extending these consequences, through anticipation, to future, as yet undiagnosed events. Meditating on the limits of his attempt to reconcile time and narrative, Ricoeur wonders whether narrative can ever truly come to terms with the forms of 'deep temporality' with which Nixon is concerned. Narrative can originate in the deep temporality of within-time, proceeding in due course to the historical understanding offered by tradition, but can it reverse this direction, he wonders, moving from historical repetition back to phenomenological experience of time? Berlant would say it can't; that our means of coping must simply navigate the affective disposition we adopt to history. Nixon finds more hope in the potential for communities who, in enacting political change, refigure our responses to the time of events. As I detail in my conclusion, I favour Nixon's optimism to Berlant's, since asbestos activism provides a compelling case study in the power of communities to enact change. But the substance itself has shifted our sense of the world in strange ways we may not see at first. After all, it is a measure of

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asbestos's psychosocial success that we no longer associate cinemas or theatres with the possibility of a fiery death. In this, asbestos proved itself a vanishing mediator, the means by which society transitioned from a pervasive fear about fire to a confidence about the built environment.<sup>57</sup> Like most vanishing mediators, it imperfectly erased itself when, task done, time came for it to disappear. Today, we bear the material costs for that imperfect vanishing act.

#### STAGING IGNORANCE

By now, I have established the stakes of this vanishing mediator for modernism and the present. What has been assumed, thus far, is the reflexive approach I have taken to cultural interpretation: a reflexivity that allows me to recuperate a past knowledge that, without being entirely aware of its consequences, cannot simply be dismissed as ignorant. This approach situates my study in a recent turn in modernist studies that encompasses notions as distinct as Aaron Jaffe's 'second modernism', Paul K. Saint-Amour's 'subjunctive historicism' and Elizabeth Outka's 'absent present'.<sup>58</sup> Each finds a latent concern within modernism whose subsequent manifestations are explained and enriched by their juxtaposition with these hidden origins. Are these not simply cases of presentism, where the historical circumstances of today dictate searches of yesterday for a fictive cause? Not if we can identify in yesterday a prevailing cultural logic that signals this cause, argue Jaffe, Saint-Amour and Outka. For Jaffe, this is the logic of second modernity, when social concerns shifted from monitoring the distribution of wealth to the distribution of risk.<sup>59</sup> Saint-Amour finds it in the sense of anticipatory catastrophe that accompanied the interwar's 'real-time experience of remembering a past war while awaiting and theorizing a future one'.<sup>60</sup> Outka traces its effects in the miasmatic atmospheres that surround silences about the 1918 influenza pandemic, nowhere spoken about but everywhere present.<sup>61</sup> A comparable cultural logic emerges when the racialised narratives of technological advancement that characterise capitalist modernity intersect with a substance that, at first, exemplifies modernist advancement, before becoming a signature of humanity's hubris. To illustrate this intersection, I turn to Buster Keaton's *The Paleface*, a film that, despite, or perhaps because of, its racist use of redface and stereotype, and its occlusion of Indigenous subjectivities, exemplifies the assumptions bound up in asbestos use.

In the film, an oil company tries to take over the land of a peaceful Native American 'tribe'. Keaton, a naïve lepidopterist, is caught in the midst of the escalating hostilities. Two scenes, in particular, turn on asbestos's properties as a fire-resistant fibre that can be woven into a fabric. Keaton, pursued by men in the tribe, finds his way to a log cabin. In the cabin, there is a roll of asbestos cloth, which Keaton, intuiting his eventual capture, sews into a set of underclothes.



**Figure 0.1** Arriving in the Cabin



**Figure 0.2** The Asbestos Roll



**Figure 0.3** Donning the Asbestos Suit

After the men capture him, they try to burn him at the stake. As the ropes fall away, an unharmed Keaton steps out of the fire and nonchalantly lights a cigarette. The awestruck men immediately bow down before him.

The film repeats what Daniel Heath Justice calls the ‘corrosive’ story of ‘Indigenous deficiency’ by relying on the old, racist trope that peoples, coexisting in the same time and space, may be differentiated by their ‘stages of development’ or the degree to which they have realised a (Western) modernity.<sup>62</sup>

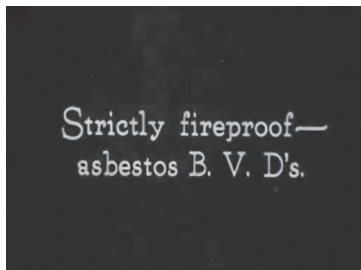
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Without discounting the film's overt racism, an increased attentiveness to its use of asbestos helps to puncture the hubris of this trope. To understand why, I must reckon with the film's use of asbestos as a gimmick, 'an *ambivalent* judgment', writes Sianne Ngai, 'tied to a *compromised* form'.<sup>63</sup> For Ngai, gimmicks, from the word's first appearance in 1926, are 'overrated devices that strike us as working too little (labor-saving tricks) but also as working too hard (strained efforts to get our attention)' (1). Keaton's asbestos clothes are gimmicky because they short-circuit other, more reasonable methods of resolving his lepidopterist's dilemma, while depending on a developed sense of what asbestos does. In this regard, they join a rich tradition of gimmickry that brought the substance to the attention of potential consumers: the comic book supervillains, Asbestos Lady and Asbestos Man, whose asbestos suits made them uniquely impervious antagonists for Fantastic Four member the Human Torch; asbestos cigarette filters, designed to protect against lung cancer; a limited edition of Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* bound in asbestos, to protect it against the book-burning censors described within. The degree to which I understand these examples as gimmicky or not reflects the position of judgment I occupy: gimmick 'is what we say when we want to demonstrate that we, unlike others implicitly invoked or imagined in the same moment, are not buying into what a capitalist device is promising' (5). If it 'does not strike us as suspiciously over- or underperforming, we will not perceive it as a gimmick but as a neutral device'. Like the asbestos conceit, or, indeed, 'every made thing in capitalism', devices can turn into gimmicks at any moment, or vice versa. The judgment process that Ngai observes in the gimmick might well describe my retrospective understanding of mass-produced asbestos, not simply in villains, filters, book covers or underwear, but the entire history of its use.

Obviously, asbestos was not, in the vast majority of cases, used as a gimmick. Still, Ngai's argument can help me to address asbestos through aesthetic modes of judgment, and this is valuable for three reasons. First, gimmickry is an aesthetically coded manner of seeing and judging objects that is produced by, rather than alongside, capitalism. Second, when people make use of the gimmick, they acknowledge its ambivalence but pursue it anyway because it helps them cope with capitalism's depredations, especially those that capitalism renders vulnerable through racial, gendered or classist differentiations. Finally, physical objects may drift in and out of its frame of reference, depending on individual or historical circumstance. Gimmicks aren't gimmicks all the time and forever. Even if I don't see or judge asbestos to be a gimmick in all cases, it encodes forms of seeing and judging that are shaped by capitalism, forms that linger even as public understanding changes. *The Paleface* captures something of these lingering forms as they relate to asbestos, ignorance and capitalist modernity.

In the film, asbestos indexes a standard, if exaggerated, correspondence between twinned dialectics: knowledge-ignorance and civilisation-barbarity. Replicating the discursive soft power of Empire, the white male subject finds some asbestos, turns it into underwear, and thereby ensures that he is immune to fire. The foolish barbarians, ignorant of the fire-retardant qualities of asbestos, elevate the white subject to the position of minor godhead. As the film ages, however, so do responses to the material object, asbestos, that sits at its heart. Today's viewers know something that Buster Keaton and his audience did not: asbestos has toxic qualities. I can map my own knowledge on to their ignorance, as a demonstration of scientific progress.

How, then, does this change my relationship with those who came before? Does this make the people of the past my 'barbarians'? One might well think so. Then I must sit with an uneasy speculation about the future, when my judgment about the audience is, in turn, judged, when I, laughing, am in turn laughed at. Such ironies are anticipated in the film itself. Between the scenes of Keaton sewing the asbestos and finally putting it on, the audience is presented with a short text: 'Strictly fireproof – Asbestos BVDs'.



**Figure 0.4** Explanatory Intertitle

For the film to make sense, it needs to make certain that the audience knows what, only two minutes later, they will be laughing at Native Americans for not knowing. The audience may laugh at the apparent ignorance of the Native Americans, but, whether they realise it or not, they are also laughing at themselves, at their own implied need for a cue.

The film imagines an epistemic break between the modern understanding of material cause and effect and a pre-modern reliance on magical thinking. The break is contingent on the knowledge it assumes of its audience. As a result, in each successive stage of its reception, the modern is recast as now, the pre-modern as the stage immediately preceding it. From the Native Americans watching Keaton within the film, to the 1922 audience, to the audience of 2022, each audience treats its predecessor as ignorant. I laugh at the audience

of 1922 as they laughed at Keaton's Native Americans. At the same time, the laughter that erupts from the modern in judgment over the pre-modern presumes a knowledge of the present moment whose ignorance becomes apparent in the future. Here, the Native American response, grossly stereotyped as it is, proves the most sophisticated. Rather than taking asbestos to be an inert natural phenomenon, whose social implications are measured only in its capacity to shock and awe, they attend to it as magical object, or, in other words, a concern coproduced by nature and society.

Almost 100 years later, American comedies are still using the asbestos gimmick. In a 2018 episode of *Schitt's Creek*, for instance, the long-suffering Jocelyn Schitt stages an asbestos festival to raise funds for her dilapidated town.<sup>64</sup> When the ignorant owner of the town, Moira Rose, offers to perform at the festival, the play she proposes is, in her words, 'a tale of perseverance, much like your quest to bring asbestos back to the town.' 'We're trying to get rid of the asbestos, Moira,' replies an exasperated Jocelyn. Asbestos's significance has, by now, undergone a full inversion, from miraculous object to well-known contaminant. Behind this change in content, however, I detect formal continuities: the reliance on a knowledgeable audience that understands this significance, the assumption that the position of ignorance is risible, even the subtle inclusion of the knowledge the audience is assumed to know (at the end of the episode, Moira will say, 'nothing is colder than the chill I get when I think of the dangers of asbestos poisoning.'). The form of the asbestos joke still distinguishes between the ignorant and the knowledgeable.

The subdued genealogy that runs from *The Paleface* to *Schitt's Creek* depends upon a persistent formalism that maps across the knowledge divide, from the prior understanding that asbestos secured its users from enmeshment, entanglement and attachment to the subsequent understanding that it enmeshes, entangles and attaches. But if, like all art objects, *The Paleface* and *Schitt's Creek* are both implicated in capitalism as commodities, *The Paleface* does at least entertain a reading wherein asbestos creates an epistemic crisis that mere knowledge won't fix. Alternative readings are more difficult to spin from *Schitt's Creek*, where the schema of knowledge and ignorance is fixed. When the former, however unintentionally, pushes the limits of its own epistemic position, it acquires an artistic autonomy that complicates its inexcusable racism.

In arguing about the possibility of autonomous art objects after modernism, Nicholas Brown avoids differentiating art objects (*The Paleface*, in my example) from mere cultural products (*Schitt's Creek*) by their implication in, or resistance to, capitalism.<sup>65</sup> Both are implicated. Rather, the object differentiates itself when it manages to push the formal limits previously set for it by genre or social expectation. Brown tries to resuscitate the possibility of an artistic autonomy as a matter of philosophical aesthetics. Earlier efforts by modernists and their critics had asserted the art object's autonomy by claiming



it was external to commodification. The materialist turn of the New Modernist studies has confirmed what earlier work on the institutions of modernism already knew: modernism's intimate relation with commodification. Brown rescues the art object by separating its formal concerns from its position within a social commodity chain. Although art objects are commodities, they are not commodities like any other: their engagement with each other as part of a developing aesthetic tradition demands interpretation, which grants a meaning separable from mere market desire, and therefore implies an intentionality (i.e. autonomy) distinct from the conditions of their production.

This replicates for aesthetics a similar claim made by Bruno Latour about modernism in its sociological sense, where the 'fabulous dissonance' in modernist culture lies 'between what modernists say (emancipation from all attachments!) and what they do (create ever-more attachments!).'<sup>66</sup> 'Modernism', in Latour's reading, claims to attenuate the conditions of risk, while embroiling its subjects the more squarely within them. Based on Brown's argument, *The Paleface* might acquire an aesthetic autonomy, while still illustrating Latour's sociological concerns. The arguments open up parallel, semi-autonomous reflections on art and social life. Even so, I want to bear in mind that my response to asbestos is primarily a matter of making aesthetic judgments about a commodity in aesthetic and scientific texts. Indeed, it is insofar as asbestos serves as a hinge between the aesthetic, the scientific and the social that it concretises the concerns raised by Ngai apropos the gimmick, a nonaesthetic object determined through aesthetic modes of seeing and judging. The gimmick ultimately undercuts Brown's argument about artistic autonomy, since it shows that aesthetic judgment, upon which he bases his distinction between formal innovation and mere marketing, may itself be compromised by its intimate relation to value, time and labour. But it complements his general sense that interpretation matters when making meaning. At the same time as these theoretical positions lend credence to the idea that asbestos can be understood aesthetically, this judgment must be reconciled with its distinctly nonaesthetic status as an object of science.

To this end, I want to return to Latour and his seminal 'anthropology of science', *We Have Never Been Modern* (1993). Principally an account of seventeenth-century science, which consolidated divisions between the human and the nonhuman, *We Have Never Been Modern* also invites us to think of the connections, up until now only hinted at, between modernism as a literary period and Western Modernity as reflexive sociological condition. We have, Latour argues, been blinded to the co-production of society with nature. When Robert Boyle and the Royal Society set down the first principles for the study of nature, they freed it from human influence by suggesting that observation might be made independent of any consideration of the observer. At the same time, Thomas Hobbes developed a method for studying society as characterised

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by human conflicts and agreements that could be distinguished from nature. The studies of nature and society purified themselves of each other, reciprocally expunged the other from their purview. Thus, for Latour, modernity insists on an artificial distinction between the two in the discourses of the natural and human sciences, which 'we' do not recognise in actual life because 'we' have never been modern. For the audience of 1922, Keaton's asbestos underwear follows rules of nature, which don't, in themselves, change their understanding of Keaton as a bumbling extra on the pathway of progress. For both Keaton's Native Americans and the audience of today, the unknown qualities of the asbestos (whether its fire-resistance or its negative health effects) reflect back on to Keaton, granting him the powers of either all-knowing god or unknowing fool. In either case, this reflection breaks the barrier between the natural and the social by implicating the natural qualities of asbestos in social concerns, either of magic or public health.

The historical break Latour marks between sociological modernism and postmodernism may be compared to the epistemic break he observes between matters of fact and matters of concern. In *Politics of Nature*, Latour describes asbestos as 'probably the last objects that can be called modernist'.<sup>67</sup> For Latour, modernist describes a particular epistemic orientation towards scientific facts that insists on their objective, apolitical truth value. Likewise, an object, here, means something closer to the 'object' in 'an object of inquiry' than a regular thing. Latour, in his discussion of the modernist orientation towards asbestos as an object of inquiry, understands both its qualities and its effects as 'matters of fact'. Matters of fact insist on scientific objectivity in four ways: they have clear boundaries defined by 'strict laws of causality, efficacy, profitability, and truth'; the researchers and technicians who produce them remain invisible and therefore excluded from the social understanding of the objects themselves; whatever expected or unexpected consequences the object may bring, 'these [are] always conceived in the form of an impact on a *different* universe' (23); and, because of this apparent translation, the objects' 'cataclysmic consequences [have] no retroactive effects on the objects' responsibilities or their definitions' (24). Indeed, if, like asbestos, they have cataclysmic consequences, such matters of fact often shore up a collective belief in scientific progress by insisting that these effects have been discovered through further scientific inquiry.

He then contrasts such matters of fact with the emergence of 'matters of concern', which, by inverting these four characteristics, lead the natural sciences into crises of objectivity. To find a pertinent matter of concern, we need only think of the early stages of the Coronavirus pandemic in the United Kingdom. Ongoing assurances that political decision-making 'followed the science' meant that 'the science' was reciprocally politicised. As the pandemic progressed, politicians would present daily press briefings flanked by

scientists whose ostensible role as informants seemed far less important than their implicit role as supportive authorities. Since these presentations were often performing the unfolding of scientific information about the virus as it was happening for scientists themselves, scientific understanding of the virus became politically entangled. The proliferation of stories about the possible origin of the virus, at the wet markets in Wuhan or the military complexes outside, suggested that the public were not ‘surprised’ by the virus, even if they were taken aback by its virulence and scale. It was, after all, continuous with the coronavirus pandemics with earlier respiratory syndromes (SARS, MIRS), not to mention ‘predicted’ by cultural products ranging from Albert Camus to Dean Koontz. Matters of concern trouble the society/nature division, which is why they become the sites of an emergent political ecology, or the relationship between political, social and economic factors in environmental issues.

For Latour, asbestos never transgressed the society/nature divide and never coopted its scientists as a social force. When it became known as a public health risk, this didn’t retrospectively affect scientific understandings of its definition or substance; rather, it was taken as a precautionary lesson in how natural objects might have unintended consequences for society without transgressing the divide between the two. In a sense, this is true. Both the companies defending asbestos use and the activists seeking bans rely on scientific authority to underwrite their concerns. Even the scientific studies designed to deflect or dissimulate the links between asbestos and its diseases are often patiently picked apart, rather than simply dismissed as junk science.

At the same time, this fails to acknowledge how asbestos also operates as perhaps the prototypical matter of concern. Scientists raising the health concerns about asbestos were immediately politicised and either vilified (Irving Selikoff) or coopted (Richard Doll; J. C. Wagner).<sup>68</sup> Strict laws of causality appear to be suspended in the etiology of asbestos diseases itself: no one knows who will get it, or why.<sup>69</sup> The increase of risk for people with greater exposure, in this respect, should not obscure that less exposure still produces surprising illnesses, and it was the illnesses of the least exposed that did most to raise public concern. In this sense, the last modernist object becomes the first post-modernist object; a matter of fact that is also a matter of concern; its ‘lastness’, the hinge upon which an ambiguous change may already be charted. Or, paradoxically, we might say that asbestos itself becomes proof that we have never been modern.

#### ON FORMALISM AND THINKING DIFFERENTLY

For Walter Rukeyser, mining asbestos meant contributing something useful. Treated historically, I might consign this understanding to the dustbin of failed ideals. But to do so fails, I think, to appreciate how the form of such ideals continues to hold us, even when their content becomes manifestly different,

even contradictory, to that original sentiment. Adrienne Rich's famous observation about formalism, that 'like asbestos gloves, it allowed me to handle materials I couldn't pick up bare-handed', serves both to illustrate this irony and explain it.<sup>70</sup> Rich sources asbestos gloves for her simile because they offer a material protection (insulation) that she parallels with the psychological security of depersonalised formalism in her poem's 'objective, observant tone' (22). Rich remains ambivalent about this protection, however, since the tone creates distance that threatens to disconnect her from her 'materials': the split 'between the girl [. . .] who defined herself in writing poems and the girl who was to define herself by her relationships with men' (21). The gloves' associations with female domesticity capture Rich's anxieties about formalism, not simply because they remind us of her alienated self, defined 'by her relationships with men', but because both gloves and formalism rely upon a disconnection that reinscribes the split itself.

Rich regarded her use of formalism to be transitional, allowing her to weather psychological disconnection to establish more clearly the terms of this disconnection. For us, Rich's asbestos gloves recall the paradox that, in protecting ourselves from touching dangerous materials, we ended up touching asbestos. But, if I am to take Rich's lesson seriously, then I must reflect on the material effects of such formalism, both in the writing before, where the disconnection remains unacknowledged except at the level of form, and the writing after, where a new honesty about disconnection means that the form can be surpassed but only at the cost of everything that form offered. This explains why I have framed this as a book about modernist culture, while ranging across texts from more than two millennia. To understand what asbestos means for modernism, culturally, materially and socially, I have considered not only narratives that emerge within modernism, but those whose trajectories pass it by the way, beyond its traditional boundaries.

As a consequence of following asbestos from modernist literature to the contemporary moment, I find a formal continuity in literary uses of asbestos. Asbestos's meaning changes, but, as a mediator, its function is consistent. This is clearest when tracked in genre fiction, whose 'strategic value', I recall from Frederic Jameson, 'lies in [their] mediatory function [. . .] which allows the coordination of immanent formal analysis of the individual text with the twinned diachronic perspective of the history of forms and the evolution of social life.'<sup>71</sup> To make sense of this, I turn, in Part 1, to the two genres that parallel the two social narratives that accompany asbestos's use: the utopia and the mystery.

In Chapter 1, I consider how asbestos facilitates the future-oriented sociology implied by the utopian genre, by tracking those moments when it appears in the infrastructure of utopian texts. This, I argue, allows us to appreciate the way that asbestos use was, and remains, characterised by an orientation

towards the future, even if, on the one hand, that orientation historically signified open and reliable possibility and, on the other, now signifies the foreclosure of such possibility. In Chapter 2, I contrast the appearance of asbestos as given, in the infrastructure, with asbestos as a clue or sign of some mystery. Following asbestos as it appears in mystery novels that move towards either the detective genre or the horror story, I consider how asbestos also came to be used as a marker of a past that troubles the present.

Part 1 makes ‘strategic’ use of genre to correlate the use of asbestos in literature (‘the history of forms’) with its historical use in the built environment (‘the evolution of social life’). But, as the horror genre demonstrates, some kernel of significance remains in asbestos that this socially-oriented understanding fails to grasp. Moreover, recognising that asbestos has a functional continuity in genre cannot, in itself, make sense of asbestos as a mediator: it simply testifies to a residual impact. In Part 2, then, I consider how asbestos takes on a life of its own, assuming a vitalism that might explain both its excess of meaning and its mediating role. Accordingly, I track asbestos through the resurrection of early modern science writings about asbestos and salamanders in late modernist lyrics by Marianne Moore, Yves Bonnefoy and Octavio Paz (Chapter 3), the genesis and establishment of asbestos illness writing (Chapter 4), and the consideration of traditions of justice and compensation in late modernist work by Alan Bennett and James Kelman (Chapter 5). The ways in which writers mediate discussions of asbestos, through salamanders, their individual responses to their illnesses, or even Kafka’s factory, become the means of articulating concerns about asbestos that more direct responses can’t quite seem to catch.

Finally, in Part 3, I attempt to synthesise the social uses of asbestos with its excess vitality by considering how asbestos’s inhuman, ‘lithic’ temporality impacts on certain semi-porous sites of sociality: the mine (Chapter 6), the factory (Chapter 7), the built environment (Chapter 8) and the dump (Conclusion). In places where asbestos use prevails, as it did for my grandfather, in the whole purpose of the enterprise, such use is, necessarily, underwritten. To insist overly on its function is to open up the possibility of questioning ‘use’ when such a question is, for practical reasons, foreclosed: when my job, my livelihood and my purpose are wrapped up in producing asbestos, when, but in the dark moments of the early morning, will I question its usefulness? By tracking these sites through texts that share a proletarian impulse, I implicitly rely upon recent efforts by Kristin Bluemel, Michael McCluskey and Nick Hubble to expand my understanding of modernism, not simply by including pulp or genre fiction (as in Part 1), but to consider it against the contemporaneous literary emergence of a ‘rural modernity’, in new forms of ‘proletarian literature’.<sup>72</sup>

Whether or not tracking the use of asbestos in literature is, ultimately, useful, I hope this book offers some useful reflections on asbestos’s imbrication within modernism, an imbrication for which, no doubt, modernism is guilty, but whose

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presence also enjoins us to find, in modernist literature, the possibility of thinking, and living, differently.

## NOTES

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- (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016); Eric Hayot, *On Literary Worlds* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).
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