

# NOTES ON KLEISS

## 1 intro

Kleiss is (as far as nonphilosophers are likely to care) a so-called pessimist. He has what some would call a tragic view of life and the cosmos. He's a grim existentialist. But he's not an antinatalist. Or an anti-antinatalist. He's consciously apolitical or post-political. But we will get to that.

## 2 pessimism

He likes to talk about "The Wheel." This is just the life cycle, the coming and going of generations, the interplay of sex and death. You can find this same stuff in Buddhism. It's an old thought, and Kleiss embraces it as such. He thinks of himself as primarily just another instantiation of the pessimist type. I should note that he's not attached to the label of "pessimism" and is skeptical of labels generally. *Anyway*, to "see the wheel" is to see the drama of our world and our species from the outside (the "balcony"). To do this requires ambivalence. If one is terrified or desperate for the end of one's own life and that of the entire species, one is too biased for the pure perception that Kleiss celebrates. The philosopher is a "death-ready ancient with blazing eyes."

## 3 traditionalism

Those who study philosophy will notice that pure perception is another traditional idea. Recent fads have made a point of challenging this and other foundational pieces of the tradition. Kleiss agrees with Karl-Otto Apel (if I can simplify) that many faddish attacks on philosophy are confused and self-contradicting. I happened to first discover Kleiss through some comments he made on this topic. In retrospect, it's amazing that the self-contradiction in such faddish views is so easy to overlook. But that's where the intimidating and seductive jargon comes in.

And this is why I also connect Kleiss to Burroughs and Bukowski. Kleiss

likes to connect himself to William James and Mach (scientific writers who happened to be great philosophers.) In either case the point is an avoidance of jargon and a determination to know what one is talking about — which is proven by the clarity. Especially after his exposure to Husserl, Kleiss insisted on the centrality of ideas as opposed to their mere instantiations (various expressions of the same idea).

This is one reason Kleiss never wrote a big book but kept writing little pieces. More than most, he was aware that he depended upon being paraphrased and recontextualized by others if his work was going to survive at all. He hoped to move the conversation forward in the sense of others not wanting to leave him out of it (finding, for instance, his name Kleiss to serve as an efficient abbreviation.) He is exactly the kind of thinker who benefits from being summarized or anthologized. Because he wrote clearly, an anthology might be ideal, but I paraphrase here because my anonymous summarizing interpretation of Kleiss is *itself* intended as a small piece of research.

#### 4 Moloch

Kleiss used Moloch as a symbol for the (ugly) basic structure of reality. It's implicitly a biological concept, because (as he intends it) it's from game theory. Moloch is the name of a demon mentioned in the bible, and it's also appeared in the work of Ginsberg. While Kleiss is playing on this dark poetic charge, he using 'Moloch' the way Schmachtenberger, for instance, uses it. Basically it's "the tragedy of the commons" or "the prisoner's dilemma." It's why we can't have nice things. *Nice guys finish last.*

But that's not quite right. Altruism works, *as long as there's an outside to maintain the inside.* **There are friends because there are enemies.** Utopia is indeed nowhere. The cautious and scrupulous are swept aside, at least if they are too cautious, too scrupulous (too good for this wicked world.)

The idea is that only self-assertive patterns persist in the long run. A darker, secondary point is that short-term gain can wreck the system. Certain strains of the AIDs virus kill (or used to kill) the host. But they did this only after outperforming less lethal strains. In the same way, Kapital can wreck the biosphere it depends on, having devoured

and absorbed its competitors by being more ruthlessly **and suicidally** efficient. The “problem” is, in other words, the incentive structure. I must thrive (out-perform) in the short term to have a chance at the long term in the first place. But the best short term strategies might be lethal long term strategies. If winners take all in the short term, the system ends up on a suicidal course, like a bowling ball trapped in the gutter.

Kleiss is frank about being impressed by the transhumanist David Pearce. But Kleiss primarily found Pearce’s Darwinian pessimism convincing – and not the stuff about coming gradients of bliss. Some of my readers may have heard of Schopenhauer. I take Kleiss to be (among other things) a Darwinized post-phenomenological Schopenhauer. And (for those who know the lingo), Kleiss is on the positivistic side of phenomenology. He rejects mystical machinery like the transcendent ego. But he does embrace a flavor of correlationism.

Anyway, Kleiss was forced to see his own philosophy as a mere “parasite.” This is already in Schopenhauer to some degree, and Schopenhauer’s metaphor of an insect laying its eggs so it could die in peace is one of Kleiss’ favorites. But Kleiss is also a dark humorist like Beckett. Unlike Schopenhauer, he rejects Kantian indirect realism as confusion and mystification. He’s also reluctant to take any kind of righteous advice-giving blame-assigning tone. Kleiss was trained as a mathematician, and he explicitly prides himself on a cold theoretical gaze on the brute fact of the world and its structure.

But why would his “pure” (cold, amoral) scientific approach be a “parasite” ? While some truths increase the technical power of a tribe to feed itself and kill its enemies, other truths endanger the ideological glue that holds a tribe together. Kleiss also references *The Iceman Cometh* as an influence. In this play, characters find it impossible to live with the truth about themselves. They soon return to the sanity of their delusions.

Above I sketched the impossibility of Utopia. Kleiss goes on to insist on the wickedness of everyone — that you and I are greedy and not just the scapegoated billionaire. Same with sex and vanity. We are all the same animal in different conditions. Free will is a necessary illusion. The culture of personal responsibility is beautiful. But psychology presupposes the immersion of the ego in the causal nexus (of nature and nurture,

etc.) We can't help rewarding and punishing, for these actions too are determined, evolved responses.

Furthermore, the deepest structure of the world is to "blame" for what everyone complains about. We are haunted by a Utopia that is indeed necessarily nowhere, for *it can't happen here*. While a certain measured altruism is indeed rewarded (effective for replication), tribes are inside-versus-outside structures. Identity is aggressive and exclusionary to the core. To quote Nietzsche, life **is** exploitation. Schopenhauer's will-to-live is just his "primary animal," which is to say an abstraction of the essence of the animal, which is self-loving replication.

Unlike Schopenhauer, Kleiss doesn't make the mistake of mystifying this primary animal. The world was just here, and it is tautologous that fragile forms can only persist if they replicate. Any insufficiently self-assertive form will vanish, get shoved aside. So the so-called wickedness of the world is as deep as Darwin, as deep even as mathematics — because the theory of evolution is (in a sufficiently abstract but still effective form) basically a tautology. The good and sacred things (like the honesty of the philosopher) are *themselves* sustained by the aid they have tended to give a tribe that itself aids the replication of the genes of its members.

I should mention that his rejection of resentment is crucial here. He does not blame or praise the species. Indeed he turns his nose up at that kind of sentimental posturing. (He is sentimental about the purity of the theoretical gaze itself, more invested in the trustworthiness of his results than the results themselves, you might say.) He also writes of the Resentment Industrial Complex and references the famous Slave Revolt in *Morals*. He describes his own approach as a "late, black flower" that grows on the "soil" of a snarling, suspicious chaotic age, eager for a scapegoat, dripping with crude conspiracy theory. Those faddish anti-philosophers mentioned earlier (some called The School of Resentment by Harold Bloom) are of course part of this. With Husserl, Kleiss defends the castle (the idea of science). But he is not an optimist. He fights pointlessly, absurdly. *Yet I will try the last*. This is where he reminds one of Camus. Or some existentialist who clings to telling the truth for no good reason (for no extrinsic reason.)

Now I'll tackle the part that non-philosophers may find less interesting. Apart from his "dark" existentialism, Kleiss is a neutral monist. And he is very much a phenomenologist.

The subject and the object are two sides of the same one coin. **But** on one side we have billions of subjects, actual and potential. And on the other side we have just the one object. All human beings can intend the *same* Eiffel tower in various conversation. Many can look at it, the same one thing, at the same time. But it does not exist "in our heads" simply because we see the same thing differently (from different angles, with different rods and cones). What we *mean* by our talk of such objects is *actual and potential experience of such objects*.

Kleiss credits John Stuart Mill with getting the story straight — or straight enough that only minor adjustments are necessary. The Wittgenstein of the TLP, and Ernst Mach are two other influences. Finally James' *Does Consciousness Exist?* presents the same basic idea. This too is an old thought, known as "non-dualism" and unfortunately associated mysticism. But most philosophy is haunted by a crowd eager to drag anything good into the twilight where it is made "better." But Kleiss agrees with Descartes in the taste for clear and distinct ideas. So his neutral monism is as "positivistic" as his phenomenology.

Husserl is one of his heroes, but Kleiss rejects the transcendental ego. He does acknowledge that the world itself is given perspectively in a streaming that is like the experience of a motivated, visceral sentience. But making experience fundamental is confusing and unnecessary. The world is fundamental. There is only the world. "Deep" subjectivity is simply the (perspectival) being of the world. And the world has no other being. Or none that we can make sense of or talk about without mystification and bluff.

What may surprise some is his rejection of a certain kind of scientific realism. He is a radically direct realist, but he rejects the indirect realism that often smuggled in with scientific realism. For Kleiss, the meaning of a black hole is the complex of actual and potential experiences of that black hole, including all the inferences that might involve that black hole. We can, on the edge of paradox, discuss the universe going on without us. But Kleiss would insist that even here we can only

understand the universe's continued existence in terms of hypothetical possibilities. "If somehow we could be summoned back, we could experience X, Y, Z." The point is to figure out what we are even try to say as we talk (or seem to talk) beyond the limits of experience.

The philosopher, for Kleiss, is courageously honest. This might involve seeing the ugly side of life, and this might involve seeing one's own ignorance or tendency to bluff. One has to look without bias and articulate without vanity or mystification.

## 6 Kleiss on Kleiss

Finally we discuss the anonymity or rather pseudonymity of Kleiss. Because he is such a grim pessimist, his philosophy is simply intolerable and unwelcome. Few indeed will appreciate it. But few appreciate Samuel Beckett and Schopenhauer. Or Husserl.

Is there money to be made ? Unlikely. A novel like *Blood Meridian* might work, but a blunt presentation of philosophy is likely to fail in the age of the Resentment Industrial Complex. Even academics have their crude mother-approved conspiracy theories. What the mob wants is scapegoats. At best, the mob might even want solutions. Kleiss offers neither. Though his ontological cubism may be a solution to a conceptual problem of little interest to the typical replicator (prolific proletarian.)

So why bother ?

Again I appeal to mathematics as a metaphor. If a theorem has been generalized. If a better proof has been found. If only the notation has been genuinely improved. Then there is joy in sharing this. For the lost souls who already love bitter Schopenhauer, Kleiss might be valuable as an intensification of the strange pleasure we take in grim clarity. Perfected cynicism swallows the cynic. Perfect conspiracy theory accuses the theorist, drags him into the conspiracy.