

PLANET M
THE INTENSE ABSTRACTION OF
MARILYN STRATHERN

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Introduction

Marilyn Strathern's work is what the 'crisis of representation' would look like had she been in charge of its management. To show how this is so, in this article¹ we seek to elucidate the character and role of comparison in her work. It is the manner in which Strathern conducts comparison, we argue, and not least comparisons between what others might call 'self' and 'other', that accounts for both the commonalities and the differences between her approach to anthropology and that associated with the 'crisis of representation' literature and its aftermath (e.g. Clifford & Marcus 1986; Marcus & Fischer 1986; Tyler 1987). Following to its ultimate consequence the reflexive injunction to treat the 'self' as an object as well as a subject of scrutiny, Strathern effectively comes out on its other side. At whatever scale one might choose to recognise it (ranging from the individual to 'the West'), the 'self' is eliminated as the subject of analysis and features only as its object. In exploring how this is so, our aim is not to point out the affinities between Strathern's anthropology and the 'death-of-the-subject' anti-humanism of structuralist and post-structuralist thought.² Rather, our question is this: If the 'self' features only as an object of analysis, alongside what one would take as its 'other' (English kinship alongside Melanesian kinship, commodity alongside gift, etc.), then what takes the place of the subject? If Strathern treats herself (her thinking, her society) as just another topic for anthropological inquiry – no different from, say,

¹ This article is the result of many hours, if not years, of sustained collaborative friction between the two authors. We thank Morten Nielsen, as well as the two editors of this special issue of *Cambridge Anthropology*, for their insightful and challenging comments. A less condensed version of the article is available from the authors on request.

² Such affinities are no doubt there, and arguably go to the core of her divergence from the American-liberal humanism of the literature on the crisis of representation in anthropology.

the people of Mount Hagen in PNG –, then who is doing the inquiring? Our answer is, Planet M.

Both the comic intent and the initial are taken from Alfred Gell's notorious essay 'Strathernograms' (1999), in which Gell describes his account of Strathern's argument in *Gender of the Gift* as an account of 'System M', leaving it to the reader, as he says, to decide whether 'M' stands for 'Melanesia' or 'Marilyn'. The tease being that Strathern's argument is, in Gell's terms, 'idealist', so the question of whether her analysis represents things as they are in Melanesia or how she imagines them to be is ontologically moot. One of the motivations of this article is to explore this further, although we may warn in advance that distinctions such as idealism versus realism hardly capture what is at stake. Indeed, crasser than Gell's, our own tease of calling 'M' a planet is only partly meant to evoke the sense of outlandishness that Strathern's sheer originality can produce. Our less facetious intention is to use the image to convey one of our central claims in what follows, namely that Strathern's peculiar way of *absenting herself* from her analyses is a constitutive feature of what comparison amounts to in her work.³

I

It is obvious that getting a handle on Strathern's concept of comparison is an exercise that instantiates the problems it addresses. Comparison permeates her works as a recursive concern, so that discussing it inevitably becomes a comparative exercise in its own right – a comparison of comparisons, as it were. Mindful of the frustrations with reference to which she herself gauges the stakes involved in the intellectual task of comparison – the dizziments of disproportion, arbitrariness, and assorted variables, levels, contexts, dimensions and so on running riot, we start our discussion from the most glaring example

³ The planet image may also bring to mind the Kantian metaphor of the Copernican revolution. Indeed, the coordinates between subject and object that this image sets up can serve to articulate the core move that the crisis of representation literature sought to perform in the 1980s, when Strathern was also formulating her own thoughts on comparison. If Kant's Copernican revolution consisted in rendering the objectivity of the world relative to the transcendental categories that structure its subjective experience, its American 'reflexivist' counterpart involves making anthropologists' accounts of ethnographic others relative to the cultural categories of the self. So-called positivism is to the reflexive turn as heliocentrism is to Copernican astronomy. Strathern, we think, occupies a third position – one that exceeds the Copernican coordinates altogether. Her's is the planet in permanent eclipse, if you like, from which Earth and Sun can be seen alike but which cannot itself be seen from either.

of Strathern's thinking on comparison, namely *Partial Connections* (2004 [1991]).⁴

Plural and postplural comparison

So what notion of comparison does Strathern have in mind in her discussion of 'partial connections'? The point is put recursively at the book's outset by way of a comparison of commonplace strategies of comparison in anthropology, cast in terms of the concept of 'scale'. We give a gloss.⁵ In line with modern Euro-American metaphysical intuitions, anthropologists imagine the world as consisting of many many things – an inordinately large field of 'data'. So the most basic methodological question for anthropology (as for any other 'discipline') is how to bring this 'plural' data under some kind of control. Put in very general terms, this must involve deciding which data go with each other and which do not. In this general sense all descriptive activity is comparative, although there is also a sense in which the anthropological challenge of cross-cultural comparison is 'exemplary' (2004: xvi), since the things compared – societies or cultures – are fields of phenomena that are defined precisely by the fact that their constituent elements somehow go together, the problem being to work out what these elements are and how they relate.

Strathern argues that, in response to this challenge, anthropologists tend to plot their materials against different 'scales', understood as particular ways of 'switching from one perspective on a phenomenon to another' (ibid.: xiv). This anthropological 'scaling' happens in two principal ways. The first can be glossed as quantitative, since it involves switches in size. Like, say, Bateson, one might devote a book to a single ritual performed by a particular group living on the Sepik River in PNG, or, like Lévi-Strauss, one might devote it (well, four

⁴ One of the motivating premises of *Partial Connections* takes the form of a tragic irony: one may think that by changing one's viewpoint on one's material (e.g. scaling up to gain an overview of its general contours as opposed to scaling down to limit the amount of data considered, or shifting between different terms of reference altogether) one may reduce its complexity, but in doing so one soon realises one is playing a zero-sum game. So, presumably, no matter whether one sets out to compare Strathern's comparisons across her many books and articles, or just in *Partial Connections*, or even – as in we shall mainly do here – in just its first section ('Writing Anthropology', pp. xiii–xxv), the 'amount' of complexity should be expected to remain constant.

⁵ For another treatment of 'scalar theory' inspired by Strathern, see Wastell 2001.

of them) to hundreds of myths from across the American continents. One might say that the switches for which this quantitative scaling allows depend on keeping the terms of comparison (i.e. its 'form') constant while shifting its scope (i.e. its 'content'), by scaling either 'down' to include more detail or 'up' to gain more purview. This then suggests a second, obverse way of thinking of scale, which depends on the possibility of maintaining stable contents while shifting forms, and could therefore be glossed as qualitative. Here viewpoints on a given body of data switch by changing the terms of reference one brings to bear upon it, as one does when one compares different cultures (or different elements within one) from the point of view of economic arrangements, or ritual practices, or cosmological reckonings, and so on.⁶

Now, these articulations of the act of comparison (themselves apparently forming a two-place qualitative scale for the comparison of different kinds of comparison) may seem already to describe the partial nature of the connections on which comparisons rely. The point can almost be put theologically. Faced with the infinite plurality of the cosmos, the finite anthropologist is forced into the false containments of scaling – false because no finite scale (two-place or more) could ever contain the whole. The tragedy of culture itself, as Lévi-Strauss would have it (Lévi-Strauss 1990). This, however, is not Strathern's point. For her the real tragedy – if such it is – would lie in the way infinity replicates itself *within* whatever scale purports to carve it. As indicated by the absurdity of saying that by virtue of its narrower ethnographic focus Bateson's *Naven* is simpler or an easier read than Lévi-Strauss's *The Naked Man*, the irony is that the potential for complexity remains constant no matter what the scale. To stick to the theological rendition, it is as if the notion that scaling can cut the cosmos down to size involves forgetting that infinity can be intensive as well as extensive, with angels dancing on the head of a pin just as well as in the ethers.

It is the irony of this logical palindrome that forms the basis of what Strathern calls a 'postplural perception of the world' (2004: xvi, cf. 1992), in which the notion that scales can act to carve finite, manageably simple parts out of an infinite, debilitatingly complex whole dissipates. If infinity goes both ways, both outward and inward, so that the scales that would purport to limit it end up acting as its conduits, then the very distinctions between plurality and singularity, whole and part,

⁶ Naturally, any attempt at comparison in anthropological practice will involve multiple combinations and mutual adjustments of both quantitative and qualitative scaling, and its success will depend on the skill with which this is done.

complexity and simplicity, as well as infinity and finitude, lose their sense. And this because the basic 'plural' assumption upon which each of these distinctions rests, namely that the world is made up of an infinite multiplicity of 'things' which may or may not relate to each other, vanishes also. If of every thing one can ask not only to what other things it relates (the plural project of comparison) but also of what other things it is composed, then the very metaphysic of 'many things' emerges as incoherent. Everything, one would conclude, is both more and less than itself. 'More' because what looks like a 'thing' in the plural metaphysic turns out, postplurally, to be composed of further things – infinity inward; and 'less' because at the same time it too contributes to the composition of further things – infinity outward.

This raises the question: in what might comparison consist in a world without 'things'? And if there are no things, then on what might comparisons even operate? In *Partial Connections* Strathern presents a number of suggestive images: Donna Haraway's 'cyborgs', 'Cantor dust' and, more abstractly, the image of the fractal. Here we want to stay with the paradoxical formulation: things that are what they are by virtue of being at the same time more and less than themselves. The virtue of the paradox, we suggest, is that just as it renders incoherent the plural metaphysic of things, it serves as a coherent rendering of the postplural alternative. Sure, we may assume, *things* cannot be both more and less than themselves. 'More' and 'less' are comparatives after all, and it is hard to see the point of comparing something to itself, let alone of finding it different. But this is just to say that the postplural alternative to 'the thing' is, precisely, *the comparison*. Stripped of the assumption that it must operate on things other than itself, that is exactly what a comparison would look like: something that is both more and less than *itself*. Which is just to say that on a postplural rendition, the differences that plural comparisons measure 'between things' now emerge as constitutive of those very same 'things', and can therefore best be thought of as residing 'within' them. This, lastly, implies also that the plural distinction between things and the scales that measure them also collapses into itself: saying that differences are to be thought of as internal rather than external to comparisons is also to imply that there is no 'outside' point from which comparisons could be viewed, measured or, indeed, compared. So comparisons are things that act as their own scales – things that scale and thus compare themselves.

This line of thinking takes us fairly directly to a conceptualisation for which Strathern's work is perhaps most famous, and on which she herself pins her flag most firmly, namely 'the relation'. That comparisons are relations in the Strathernian sense goes without saying. For example, the thought that places Strathern most obviously in the

vicinity of post/structuralism, namely that relations are logically prior to entities, would be one way of rendering her point about scales and their relationship to things. Here, however, we want to stick to the apparently narrower notion of comparison, and this partly to argue that rendering Strathern's relational universe 'comparative' adds something to it. In particular, a focus on the notion of comparison in Strathern's work redresses one potential source of dissatisfaction with the concept of the relation, namely its apparently inordinate malleability; the virtue it appears to make of a complexity that can 'run riot', to recall one of Strathern's own formulations.

Consider a contrast of images. On the one hand, depicting the drive to control complexity from which plural modes of comparison draw strength, Strathern presents two images that correspond to what we have called 'quantitative' and 'qualitative' scales of comparison: respectively, the map and the tree (2004: xvi–xvii). The two images are themselves laterally related (on a tree they would be siblings) inasmuch as they both make the control of data possible by virtue, in Strathern's words, of the 'constancies'⁷ they imply:

[The map] implies the existence of certain points or areas, like so many villages or fields seen from the air, that will remain identifiable however much their features are replotted; all that changes is the perspective of the observer. [The tree] implies some kind of closure that defines a system of concepts and their potential transformation from within, insofar as only particular trajectories are 'genetically' possible from the principles one starts with (ibid.: xvii).

Both images are to be contrasted to the imagery with which Strathern depicts postplural comparisons – cyborgs, fractals and so on. While Strathern puts these metaphoric depictions to all sorts of uses in her argument – thus displaying, one might say, the sheer malleability of the concept of comparison itself – one also gains the impression that a notion of a *lack* of control or, put more positively, an inordinacy of potential, acts as their cumulative effect. If, for example, maps and trees rely on the constancies of identity and closure to contrive a sense of control over data, the cyborg suggests an image of inconstancy, or even incontinence: it 'observes no scale', being a 'circuit of connections that joins parts that cannot be compared insofar as they are not isomorphic with one another'. (ibid.: 54) Indeed, the image of the fractal itself, with its 'not-quite replication' (ibid.: xx) that generates a 'proliferation of forms' (xxi) inward and outward all the way, may produce in the reader a sense of asphyxia as well as one of beauty, vertigo as well as

⁷ 'Control' married to 'constancy' would be their parents!

wonderment. Equally, it may provoke a typical quip made against 'postmodernists' at the time *Partial Connections* was originally written, namely that of anything-goes 'flatness'. The impression could be borne out by the punch line 'postplural realisation' that gives the book its name: 'The relativising effect of multiple perspectives will make everything seem partial; the recurrence of similar propositions and bits of information will make everything seem connected' (ibid.: xx).

Still, considering that the postmodernist message about multiplicity, partiality, pliable connectivity and so on, as well as the tetchy rebuke made of its levelling effects, are by now well-digested in anthropology, we suggest that something more interesting lies in Strathern's characterisation of postplural comparison – an extra dimension to her thinking which remains largely implicit in the way in which she conducts comparisons. This 'eclipsed' aspect of Strathern's thinking pertains to the peculiar role that something akin to 'abstraction' plays in her work; what is at stake here is something different than the logical operations one ordinarily associates with that term.

Plural abstraction

The closest Strathern comes to an explicit statement of her concern with abstraction in *Partial Connections* is not as part of characterising her own concept of comparison, but in the course of a commentary on the 'plural' comparisons it displaces. This is her discussion of attempts to provide an integrated frame for comparing societies from the entire Highlands region of PNG with reference to a theme they are meant to have in common: the association of the use of bamboo flutes with male power (e.g. Hays 1986). The problem with such cross-cultural comparisons, she argues, is that while they pick out significant ethnographic connections, they also, necessarily, involve a slippage of levels. From where, one may ask, do they draw the features of the common theme whose variations they wish to chart? If, for example, in some cases flutes are focal to male initiation while in others less so or not at all, or in some cases the flutes themselves are conceived as male and in others as female or as both, while elsewhere bamboo flutes are absent altogether, then from which of these cases does the putatively 'common' notion that flutes are an important element of male power draw its strength? Strathern writes:

The difficulty with this comparison is that our supposed common regional culture is composed of the very features which are the object of study, the 'meanings' people give to these instruments, the analogies they set up. [...T]he common cultural core, the themes common to the variations, is not a context or level independent of local usage (2004: 73).

At issue here is the familiar charge of essentialism: mistaking ethnographic categories for analytical ones. The 'difficulty' of essentialism in the plural take on comparison can be described as a failure of abstraction. As a 'scale' for comparing Highlands societies, flutes and male power are not abstract enough, i.e. they do not constitute a 'level' of analysis that is consistently of a different logical order from the cultural 'contexts' that are meant to be compared. Indeed note that abstraction is integral to the plural notion of comparison: for scales to be able to measure things they have to be more abstract than them.

How is conventional, plural abstraction *supposed* to work? Consider the verb: 'to abstract' something involves isolating from it one of its predicates. Take, say, a dog and isolate from it its quality of being a 'quadruped'. Or take the flutes PNG Highlanders use and isolate the quality of being 'associated with male power'. As we have seen in relation to Strathern's comments on scale, such acts of isolation afford a battery of techniques that are supposed to help bring data under control for purposes of comparison – not least, quantitative scoping by analogy to maps and qualitative ordering by analogy to genealogical trees. To take the most rudimentary example, we assume that abstracting from a dog the quality of being a quadruped allows us to make analogies between it and a cat, or to study it from the point of view of its locomotion, or placing it within the class of mammals, and so on. Abstraction increases the agility of comparison, one might say.

Strathern's central paradox regarding the notion of control – the idea that no matter what the scale the degree of complexity stays constant – is integral to this way of thinking of abstraction. Just as 'isolating' a particular predicate would suggest a reduction of complexity (a dog is so many things other than a quadruped), so the very same act gives rise to new orders of complexity. But thinking of the paradox in terms of abstraction, we argue, serves to reveal further features of the constancy of complexity that make it seem less than a riot. Two hold particular interest.

First, the idea that abstraction entails isolating predicates of objects allows us to emphasise one aspect that Strathern's characterisation tends to leave mute, namely the idea that what she calls scales can be said to *originate* in the things they serve to compare. Indeed, the manner of the origination is just as interesting as the fact. While the thought of comparing things 'in terms of' or 'with reference to' scales conjures a notion of application (as, one might say, a rule applies to instances), the obverse thought of originating abstractions (scales) from more 'concrete' objects brings to mind a notion of extraction: to isolate a predicate is to *cut it away* from the denser mass in which it is initially embroiled, that is,

what looks like 'the thing'. To use the sculptor's figure/ground reversal, it involves cutting away the mass to make the abstraction appear – a metaphor that is integral to the imagery of 'Cantor's dust', in which scalar effects are replicated by the creation of intermittencies and gaps (Strathern 2004: xxii–xxiii).

This brings us to a second characteristic of abstraction, which has to do with notions of removal and distance. We have already seen that such notions are foundational to Strathern's characterisation of the metaphysical assumptions of plural comparison, since 'distance' is precisely what is imagined to separate not only things from each other but also things from the scales that are brought to bear on them. It is just such distances that images of maps and trees conjure – scaling up or down on an axis proximity and distance, or branches and stems that are related vertically and horizontally by degrees of inclusion and exclusion. For scales to offer a vantage point from which things can be compared they have to be posited as being separate from them – perspective implies distance. Thinking of comparison in the key of abstraction, however, foregrounds movement as a condition for both. If abstraction involves cutting predicates away from the things to which they belong, the distance it achieves can be conceived as the result of an act of *removal* – a trajectory that *cuts open* a gap.

Two thoughts about abstraction, then, are embedded in Strathern's account of the plural metaphysic of comparison: the notion that the things can scope their own comparisons by being cut (multiplying their comparative potential by being divided) and the notion that this involves a trajectory of movement. Both of these features carry over to Strathern's characterisation of 'partial connections' – i.e. her account of what comparisons involve when one shifts to a postplural metaphysic, in which the distinction between scales and things is dissipates.

Postplural abstraction

We call the postplural inflection of abstraction that we detect in Strathern's work 'abstention'. Abstention is what happens to abstraction when the distinction between abstract and concrete itself is overcome, as it does in Strathern's postplural universe. One way of characterising abstentions is to say that they are what abstractions become when they are no longer thought of as generalisations, i.e. as concepts that group together in their 'extension' things that share a particular feature. Rather abstention is what happens to abstraction when it turns *intensive*, to borrow the Deleuzian terminology (e.g. De Landa 2002, and see Viveiros de Castro, in press) – and hence the neologism. Abstention, then, refers

to the way in which comparisons are able to transform *themselves* in particular ways.

Considering our rudimentary example once again, abstention is what happens to a dog when it is considered *as* a quadruped. To think of a dog as a quadruped does not involve positing a relationship between two elements – a dog (deemed as a ‘particular’) that ‘instantiates’, as philosophers sometimes say, the concept of quadrupedness (deemed, in this sense, as a ‘universal’). Rather, to consider a dog as a quadruped ‘postplurally’ is just to turn it (or ‘scale it’) into something different, namely, that thing-come-scale that one would want to hyphenate as ‘dog-as-quadruped’. This new ‘third’⁸ element is a self-comparison in just the sense outlined earlier: it is ‘more than itself’ because, *qua* dog-as-quadruped, it is a full-blown dog; and also ‘less than itself’ because, again *qua* dog-as-quadruped, it is merely an ‘abstracted’ (though we want to say *abstended*) quadruped.⁹

To bring out the peculiar ‘sharpness’ of abstention, we may supplement the range of images that Strathern uses to convey her notion of comparison (the fractal, the cyborg and so on) with what one could claim is their most rudimentary form – the shape of a cone laid on its side:

⁸ There are echoes here of Charles Peirce’s notion of ‘thirdness’; ‘Thirdness is the mode of being of that which is such as it is, in bringing a second and third in relation to each other’ (Peirce 1958: 328).

⁹ It is important to note that one’s intuitions about what counts as ‘more’ and as ‘less’ here must also be inverted unto themselves. To imagine the dog as being more than the dog-as-quadruped (‘more full-blown’) and the quadruped as being less than it (‘merely an abstraction’) is to think of the dog-as-quadruped as a thing-like abstension, by analogy to the dog. But abstensions are, as we have seen, defined as the kinds of things that are also, at the same time, scales (and to make this point is, if you like, to abstend the notion of the abstension itself – the abstension of the abstension). But if one thinks of the dog-as-quadruped as a scale, by analogy to the quadruped, the coordinates of ‘more’ and ‘less’ flip over. Now one wants to think of the dog as being less than the dog-as-quadruped (‘merely a particular’) and of the quadruped as being more than it (more ‘general’ or ‘universal’). Indeed, if one could say, very broadly, that the former way of imagining, thing-like, expresses an aesthetic that is characteristic of, say, phenomenology, while the latter one, scale-like, expresses an aesthetic of formalism (or even formal logic), then Strathern’s thinking is their ‘third’ too.

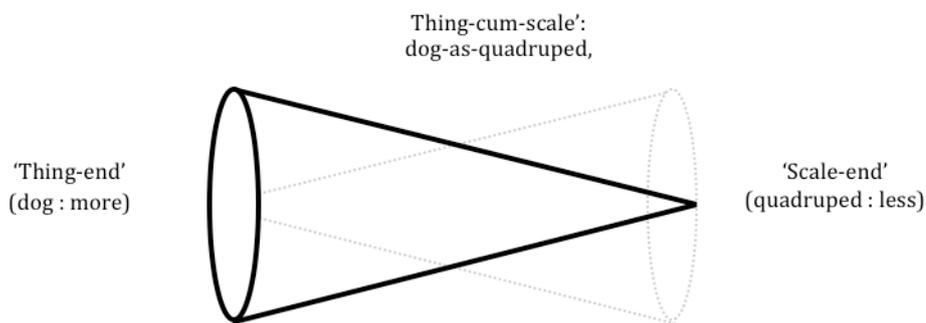


Figure 1: Abstention: dog-as-quadruped
(the grey penumbra indicates that the correlation between, on the one hand, 'thing'-likeness and 'scale'-likeness and, on the other, 'more' and 'less' can be inverted, as explained in footnote 9)

Imagining abstentions in this way serves to illustrate the crucial differences between postplural abstraction and its plural counterpart, which Strathern depicts with the twin images of the tree and the map. Plural comparisons posit distances (or 'gaps') that separate both things from one another, and things from the increasingly abstract generalisations in whose 'extensions' they are included. Moreover, the latter relationship (i.e. between things and their generalisations) is irreducibly hierarchical or 'vertical', since what makes generalisations suitable as scales for comparing things is that they are more abstract than the things compared. As seen in Fig. 1, however, abstentions are devoid of both these characteristics of conventional abstractions. What in plural abstraction look like extensive gaps 'between' things (and between things and scales) in the postplural mode figure as intensive differentiations 'within' abstentions, indicated in Fig. 1 by the asymmetrical proportions of each of the 'ends' of the abstention – the broad 'thing'-like end and the sharp 'scale'-like one. Furthermore, this asymmetry on the vertical axis of Fig. 1 indicates that hierarchy is absent here. Laid on its side, as it were, the hierarchical dimension that marks the distances between things and scales dissipates into the internal self-differentiation of abstention.

This correspondence between the 'verticalisation' of ordinary abstraction and the lateral self-differentiation of abstention gives clues as to why Strathernian comparisons are sharper than just 'relations.' After all, it is the loss of the ordering principles that hierarchies of abstraction (and their corollaries in terms of inclusion and exclusion, connection and disconnection, similarity and difference, and so forth), that critics of the postmodernist penchant for profligate relations lament. So the formal correspondence between hierarchy and self-differentiation raises the

prospect of retaining, if not a set of ordering principles as such, then at least a principle of a (no doubt new) kind of order, that may show why Strathern's postplural universe is more than just a magma of relations (cf. Scott 2007: 24–32). The asymmetry of self-differentiation does the trick.

Plural abstraction, we saw, involves the idea that scales of comparison can be said to be derived from the things they compare in two moves. First, deriving predicates (e.g. 'quadruped') from things (e.g. dog) by 'cutting' away from them the denser, 'thingy' mass in which they are initially embedded. Second, creating a distance between them and the mass from which they are extracted by placing them at a different level of abstraction, thus creating a gap between predicate and thing by a step of 'removal.' Each of these moves has a direct equivalent in postplural abstention. First, when the difference between thing and scale is 'internalised' in the abstention, the latter is still derived from the former. Only now, the sculptor's figure-ground reversal (viz. cutting the mass of the thing 'away' to make the abstract predicate appear) is reversed back: the mass of the thing is retained, but chiselled into a sharper, scale-like shape – still the same mass, that is, but 'less' than itself at its scale-like end (to visualise this, imagine how the cone of Fig. 1 might be sculpted out of the mass of a right circular cylinder). Second, while this 'internal derivation' of the scale from the thing does not involve opening up an (external) distance between the two, it does still turn on an act of removal, namely the 'internal' removal of the self-transforming proportions of the cone, as one moves from its broader end to its sharper one (again, to visualise this, imagine the motion of the sculptor's gouge as it cuts into a cylindrical mass to give it the shape of a cone). So what in the pluralist image were distances 'between' now become formal transformations 'within' (*trans-formations*, to emphasise), that can be conceived as 'internal motions' – motions perhaps not unlike the ones classicists appreciate in the 'rhythms' of ancient columns.

This conclusion, itself intensely abstract perhaps, may seem scholastic in its insistence on the contrasting metaphysics of plural and postplural comparison. We argue, however, that it goes to the heart of one of the most compelling characteristics of Strathern's manner of conducting comparisons, namely its sheer originality. While it goes without saying that one hardly needs to be Strathernian to be original, we argue that the work of abstention is inherently oriented towards originality. For, one way to express the contrast between plural abstraction and postplural abstention is to say that while the former involves an 'upward' (as in the tree) or 'outward' (as in the map) move from the particular to the general, the latter moves sideways, as it were, from particular (-cum-universal) to particular (-cum-universal), by

means of the peculiar capacities for transformation that it reveals. The effect of such transformations is to provide, not a point of more general vantage, but rather one of *further departure*. As thing-like (*and* scale-like) as the dog from which it was derived, the dog-as-quadruped presents further possibilities for comparative transformation in a host of directions, including cats, locomotion, mammals and so on. Hence, comparison is no longer a matter of identifying general scales that may act as 'common denominators' that relate things. Rather it is oriented towards revealing 'uncommon denominators', if by that one means the peculiar and highly specific capacities for transformation that things (-cum-scales) hold so contingently within themselves.

II

Having established our overarching regarding the logic of 'intense abstraction' in Strathern's comparative project, we now turn to consider two 'remainders' (in her sense) to which this argument gives rise. The first relates to the peculiar role of time in Strathern's analytics. The second addresses her no less unusual writing techniques. Thus Strathern may be said to be doing the same with time as she does with all other mediums of abstention, namely making a virtue out of its failure to act as a more general or 'abstract' scale of comparison. By treating time as just another thing-cum-scale of analysis – one that is no more context-independent than, say, flutes – she allows for a comparison between societies across time. In line with the above analysis we argue that the originality of these comparisons comes down to Strathern's ability, evident in her writing as well as in her thinking, to avoid drawing the most obvious connections between her Melanesian material and its Western analogues by 'cutting open' the least obvious (most original) lines of comparison.

Trans-temporal comparison

Strathern's original fieldwork in Mount Hagen occupies a special place in her thinking (e.g. 1999: 6–11). Given that the bulk of her fieldwork was carried out in the 1960s and 1970s, one might see this as a problem: does the increasingly 'historical' nature of her data not render her comparative project progressively more dubious? Surely one cannot as part of the same analysis compare two different places (such as Melanesia and 'Euro-America') and two different periods (Hagen of the 1970s and contemporary Britain). Either axis – the temporal or the spatial – must be kept stable so as to compare like with like. Strathern's response to objections of this kind (e.g. Carrier 1998) has been

characteristically indirect. Instead of seeking to counter the claim that her material is not contemporary (with reference, perhaps, to her more recent fieldwork), she has pleaded guilty as charged, happy to admit that many of the practices she originally observed in Hagen have since changed or disappeared altogether (e.g. Strathern 1999: 142). This is not to say that Strathern accepts the premise of this critique. On the contrary, her response to Carrier and others reveals key assumptions about the nature (and in particular the temporality) of conventional anthropological comparison, which remains invisible to itself:

[T]he knowledge anthropologists have made out of their encounters with Melanesians ... does not cease to become an object of contemporary interest simply because practices have changed. I would indeed make it timeless in that sense. Carrier's argument is that historical change is crucial ... Yet, from another perspective his own categories of analysis remain timeless, as in ... his notion that there is such a thing as 'the relationship between people and things'. By contrast, my interest is directed to the historical location of analytical constructs, for none of the major constructs we use is without its history (1999: 143).

Indeed, to describe Strathern's concepts as 'historical' is not, perhaps, sufficiently precise a characterisation of the work of temporality in her thinking. To illustrate this, we may raise a question grounded in our earlier discussion of her postplural metaphysics. What would a comparison of socio-cultural phenomena look like, if the dimension of time itself were not assumed to be independent from these phenomena – that is, if time were not assumed to constitute (as plural metaphysics would have it) a 'scale' that occupies a transcendent, vertical position with respect to the 'things' whose comparison it facilitates? We suggest that certain writings by Strathern represent concerted attempts to facilitate socio-cultural comparisons *across* time, providing an alternative to both the synchronic project of cross-cultural comparison and the diachronic comparison of different historical moments of one society.

To understand the role of time in Strathern's thinking it is useful to consider the veiled critique she makes of George Marcus's (1993) method of multi-sited ethnography (Strathern 1999: 161–178). The problem with Marcus and others' attempts to 'modernise' the ethnographic fieldwork is the pluralist assumptions that lie behind the notion that the supposedly limited scale of 'the local' is automatically overcome by conducting fieldwork in several different places. The assumption seems to be that, by 'following the people', the multi-sited ethnographer gains a new perspective from which different 'local' phenomena can be brought together into a single, albeit fragmentary

narrative, by someone whose perspective (scale) is sufficiently 'global' to do so.

Now, if the multi-sited approach involves the 'tracing [of] cultural phenomena across different settings' to 'reveal the contingency of what began as initial identity' (1999: 163), the goal of Strathern's comparisons between Melanesian and Euro-American property arrangements is very different. Rather than tracing 'global' connections between dispersed 'local' phenomena, Strathern's

avoi[ds] discursive connections, making a story, in order to avoid both the false negative appearance of stringing surface similarities together and the false positive appearance of having uncovered a new phenomenon. *For what the locations presented here have all in common has not necessarily happened yet ... (Only) the potential is present* (1999: 163).

One could describe this approach as 'trans-temporal comparison' – an analytical method that differs both from the modernist ideal of cross-cultural comparison, and from the postmodernist preference for multi-sited fieldwork. The term 'trans-temporal' draws attention to the fact that Strathern's units of comparison are neither outside time nor prisoners of a certain historical period. Instead, we suggest, trans-temporal comparison proceeds according to an abstentive logic by which the anthropologist's knowledge about certain (Melanesian) pasts is brought to bear on certain (Euro-American) futures. As an abstract mode of comparison, it turns on a peculiar 'intensification' of the act of fieldwork, namely what Strathern calls the 'ethnographic moment.' While Strathern does not fully draw out these implications of her comparative project, she does offer important hints on a number of occasions. One such is where she discusses different ways of thinking 'about historical epochs as domains from which to draw resources for analysis' (1999: 145). 'In certain respects [she writes] "traditional" Melanesian societies belong much more comfortably to some of the visions made possible by socio-economic developments in Europe since the 1980s than they did to the worlds of the early and mid-twentieth century' (1999: 146). Hence her confident response to the critiques made by Carrier and others: when seen from a trans-temporal perspective, her Hagen fieldwork has 'not cease[d] to become an object of contemporary interest simply because practices have changed' (1999: 145). Rather, for certain analytical purposes (such as her study of intellectual property rights in these passages) it is the other way round: the comparative purchase of her Hagen material within a contemporary Euro-American context to some extent hinges upon its non-contemporary status within a Melanesian context:

One of the times Euro-Americans may find themselves in has so to speak only just happened for them. But it may have 'happened' long ago in Papua New Guinea. I wonder if some of the considerations ... with their roots thoroughly in Hagen's past – might not *anticipate* certain future economic directions in Euro-American quests for ownership (1999: 150–151).

Thus, 'the knowledge anthropologists have made out of their encounters with Melanesians' is indeed 'timeless' (1999: 145) – not because such knowledge belongs to a context-independent dimension of general truths that transcends history, but because Strathern's recollections of her original Hagen fieldwork may continually be mobilised in order to make productive analogies with emerging property forms in Britain and elsewhere. So, if the plural analytics advocated by Marcus treats ethnographic knowledge as general but not abstract (enabling a narrative to bring together otherwise dispersed phenomena), then Strathern's postplural approach treats ethnographic knowledge as abstract but not general. Trans-temporal comparisons reveal links between societies, which, far from being made possible by multi-sited scale shifts, works by collapsing the distinction between the local and global, and other (post)modernist fictions,

In support of this conclusion, consider another instance where Strathern discusses the work of time in anthropological analysis, namely in her musings about the 'scandal' of its holistic method (1999: 3–11). It is precisely because of the holistic ideal (the scandal) of wanting to know 'anything' – as opposed to 'everything' (1999: 8) – that the fieldwork exercise is 'an anticipatory one ... being open to what is to come later ... The result is a "field" of information to which it is possible to return, intellectually speaking, in order to ask questions about subsequent developments whose trajectory was not evident at the outset' (1999: 9). Once again, we here see how the 'timelessness' of ethnographic knowledge emerges as a paradoxical effect of its very historicity. In fact, Strathern seems to go as far as to suggest that the longer the span between fieldwork and the subsequent analysis, the bigger the possibility that germane connections can be drawn by making recourse to one's 'field of information'.¹⁰ In that sense, her concept of the ethnographic moment 'transverses' history by *cutting away* what may

¹⁰ Notice the anti-phenomenological tenet of this conclusion. For Strathern, it would appear, the inherent potential in the ethnographic fieldwork experience for producing 'dazzle-effects' increases as the years pass by. This flies in the face of established phenomenological wisdom concerning the tragic but inevitable loss in terms of the sensuousness of the ethnographic fieldwork experience as one's memory of it is assumed to gradually fade in intensity over time).

appear as the ‘most evident’ connections between fieldwork observations and a given object of ethnographic comparison. To understand how trans-temporal comparison involves an intensive process of self-transformation (in our earlier terms, ‘removal’), we return to our pictorial outline of the logic of abstention:

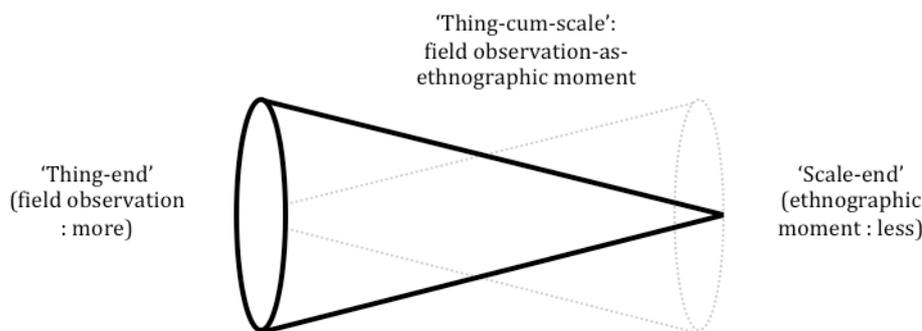


Figure 2: Trans-temporal comparison

As earlier explained, the logic of intense abstraction refers to how things-cum-scales transform themselves in specific ways. As we depict in Fig. 2, the ‘ethnographic moment’ can be said to constitute just one such abstentive transformation, namely a self-scaling of the ethnographic fieldwork observation or, more accurately perhaps, fieldwork encounter. This is the implication the holistic ‘method’ (or lack of it): the fact that the ethnographer vaguely senses that unknown future connections could one day appear, effectively transforms her ‘field of information’ from being a historical artefact confined to a certain point in time (when the fieldwork took place) to a trans-temporal scale of comparison (from which analogies may be drawn at any given time). In that sense, the ethnographic moment is both more, and less, than the fieldwork encounter. As a postplural, *abstract event*, it simultaneously effectuates a ‘sharpening’ of the anthropologist’s field of information (on account of drawing on what is only an insignificant amount of her data), and a ‘widening’ of the fieldwork material at hand by making visible the ‘less evident’ analogies in it.

Now, if trans-temporal comparison involves an act of intensification in which some ‘thing’ (the fieldwork observation) is ‘scaled’ into a different version of itself (the ethnographic moment), we may also ask: Which scale is being ‘thinged’ in the same process? We suggest: time itself. One radical implication of Strathern’s analytics is that it undermines the transcendent – or even, in Kantian terms, transcendental – status of time in Western knowledge traditions. As noted, ‘time’ is not different from ‘flutes’ in its capacity to act as a

conduit for comparison: both can act as postplural scales that allow for specific kinds of relational transformations. On the abstentive logic of trans-temporal comparison, time is reduced to just one of many (in fact, countless) possible scales for the identification of analogies between actual and potential forms. Thus the normally transcendental medium of time is brought down from its Kantian pedestal. For if the ethnographic moment is a certain scaling of a 'thing-like' observation, it is also a certain thinging of (otherwise 'scale-like') time.

Thus time in Strathern's work assumes a rather different role than in other forms of anthropological analysis. If it makes sense to say that, on the Planet M the only time is 'now', then this is because of the ethnographic moment's self-scaling capacity to extend itself to any event of the future (or indeed the past), along a transversal, trans-temporal vector with no end point, yet bursting with directional thrust. This inherent tendency for intensive temporal proliferation in one's fieldwork material makes it all the more important to obey the key requirement of Strathern's postplural approach: that of removing all the most evident connections in one's 'field of information' to ensure that all one is left with are odd pairings of phenomena ('uncommon denominators'), which would otherwise be separated by history. For the same reason, anthropological comparison requires unusual interpretative patience – a sort of 'deep hesitation', which enables one *not to* make connections (start comparing) before the moment is right.

This requirement for hesitation also expresses itself in Strathern's peculiar way of writing, and the challenges this style presents to her readers – the second 'remainder' of our discussions in Part I about the role of comparison in her work. As we shall now show, her writing style can be seen as a reflection of the realisation that the capacity to add to thoughts by narrowing them down is not an ability that she or other any anthropologist is automatically imbued with. On the contrary, abstaining from drawing the most obvious connections from one's material requires constant abstract work.

Deep hesitation

Why is it so difficult to read Strathern? Musing over this same question, Gell recalls how he

used to think it was her writing style, and that something could be done by dividing each sentence in half, then attaching the first half of each sentence to the preceding one, and the second half to the succeeding one, and in that way one could produce a series of sentences each of which was on the topic, rather than each being precariously suspended between two topics (1999: 30).

Although Gell later ‘changed [his] mind’ and concluded that it is ‘not the manner in which [Strathern] writes, but the content of what she says, that is difficult to understand’ (ibid), we believe that he was, in fact, on to something important. There really *is* a sense in which Strathern’s sentences is ‘precariously suspended’ between two poles: surely we are not alone in often having to pause after finishing one of her sentences, unsure about whether we can move on to the next.

Does this reflect a deliberate strategy? Certainly, Strathern is deeply reflexive about her own and others’ writings, even if she considers anthropology’s ‘literary turn’ an impoverished alternative to the obsolete conventions of modernist representation (2004: 7–16). In the foreword to the updated edition of *Partial Connections*, she explains how it was composed with the intention that ‘every section is a cut, a lacuna: *one can see similar themes on either side, but they are not added to one another*’ (2004: xxvii; emphasis added). Note the characteristic sense of ‘cutting’ here, which is used not in the sense of reducing complexity (its conventional, ‘plural’ sense in the context of making an argument), but as a particular conduit for (scale of) complexity:

Partial Connections was an attempt to act out, or deliberately fabricate, a non-linear progression of argumentative points as the basis for description ... I wanted to experiment with the apportioning of ‘size’ ... The strategy was to stop the flow of information or argument, and thus ‘cut’ it (2004: xxix).

While denoting a particular experiment this rare self-description might be extended to Strathern’s entire oeuvre. Indeed, one may speak of a distinct ‘aesthetic form’, which is arguably replicated – fractally, so to speak – at every scale of her work, ranging from the partial connections between her books to a certain friction between her sentences, if not between her words. This might explain Strathern’s tendency for indirect reasoning and for using what sometimes comes across as unnecessarily cumbersome syntax. If her style accords to the criteria of a postplural aesthetic that dictates that self-similar ‘cuttings’ must recur across all dimensions of text, then she could perhaps be said to be always writing the same text twice (Riles 1998). Is there a sense to which invisible remainders are always present within or between her sentences, like propositional ‘shadows’ whose ghostly clauses are themselves not-quite replications of their visible doubles?

Recalling the lacuna-inducing strategy that informed the composition of *Partial Connections* (‘one can see similar themes on either side, but they are not added to one another’), and inspired by Adorno’s metaphor of the colon as the green light in the traffic of language (cited

in Agamben (1999: 223), we may say that, on Planet M, there are only orange traffic lights, the latter image indicating the doggedly persistent, obviously deliberate, and sometimes irritating *hesitation* that Strathern's writings evoke in readers like Gell and, indeed, the two of us. Between Strathern's sentences, a gap must be crossed that is much wider than in the pleasant breathing space produced by a conventional full stop (let alone the eager pushing-ahead of the colon); indeed, it is here, in the intensive 'passage' created by cutting all the most obvious implications of the previous proposition away, that Strathern's abstentive thinking most clearly shows in her manner of writing.¹¹

Conclusion

This paper has explored what the 'crisis of representation' debate in anthropology might have looked like had it had not remained trapped within a plural metaphysics, but had instead unfolded according to the postplural alternative developed by Marilyn Strathern. To fully understand the radical character of Strathern's comparative project, as well as the subversive (if not downright disturbing) analytical and rhetorical forms this entails, we may return to the contrast between Strathern work and the 'crisis of representation' literature, with which this paper began.

One way of articulating the contrast between Strathern and the reflexivists is to point to the way she avoids the charge of navel gazing, which has so often been levelled on the latter. The key difference relates to how Strathern decouples a pair of binary oppositions that the reflexivist argument conflates, namely the epistemic distinction between subject (as knower) and object (as known), and the identity distinction between self (or the 'us') and other (or the 'them'). For the charge of navel gazing depends precisely on such a solipsistic conflation: taking the call to examine the self as tantamount to examining the epistemic subject as such (and thus to raise concerns about the conditions of possibility of its knowledge).¹² The self can certainly be the object of

¹¹ The awkward relationship between any two given units of writing in Strathern's work calls to mind what she has described as the 'doorstep hesitation' (as opposed to barricades) between feminism and anthropology: 'Each in a sense mocks the other, because each no nearly achieves what the other aims for as an ideal relation with the world' (1987: 286).

¹² One could understand the 'crisis' of anthropology in the 1980s as an attack of self-consciousness. Imagining earlier generations of anthropologists as having ignored in the name of positivistic objectivity the influence of their own personal, cultural, political (etc.) outlook on their research, the idea was to re-invent anthropology by making these influences explicit. What made this

ethnographic scrutiny, also when this 'self' is anthropological reasoning itself. However, in coming under scrutiny in this way the self must cease to be the epistemic or hermeneutic 'subject', which was the centre of the reflexivist turn. For if the 'self' is to be scrutinised in the same way as all other things are scrutinised, then it cannot be scrutinised as a subject, since to scrutinise things is to treat them, precisely, as objects – the old philosophical chestnut.

So, instead of the well-tried (and we would submit impossible) 'inter-subjective' method of reflexivity, where the 'subjectivity' of the self is turned into a transparent object for its own introspection, Strathern offers an 'intra-objective' alternative, where the 'objectivity' of the self is transformed onto less stable intensifications of itself. Unwilling to serve as an instrument of disciplinary auto-therapy, Strathern's comparative project allows for the ethnographic self to be analysed through a logic of sustained 'extrospection' (our term), which, to paraphrase from *Partial Connections*, works by letting 'the centres of others become centres for [the self]' (2004: 117).

These reflections about the eccentricity of Strathern's position take us back to Planet M, and to our introductory comments about the half-comical, half-serious intent of this metaphor. In a sense, our argument has left this initial image in a somewhat battered state. After all, we have argued, Strathern's 'position' (inasmuch as it makes sense to say that she takes one at all) hardly can be described as a specific *place*. Rather, Strathern's thinking amounts to a particular form of controlled movement, which we have tried to convey by introducing concepts like postplural comparison, the internal 'removal' of abstention, deep hesitation, and sustained extrospection. But perhaps, then, there is also a sense in which, as an ironic effect of the motility of our object of analysis, the planetary metaphor now comes back with a vengeance, full orbit. Only now Planet M does not so much refer to the vanishing point from which Strathern conducts her analysis, but rather to a position we have needed to occupy in order to carve a comparative scale out of her.

move a 'crisis' was that it had the potential to bring down the entire project of modern anthropology, understood as the endeavour to arrive at accurate representations of social and cultural phenomena which could provide the basis for theoretical generalisations. But for its detractors (not least in Britain), the real crisis resided in the reflexivist remedy itself. The call to problematise the conditions of possibility of anthropological knowledge is subject to an apparently debilitating infinite regress. If these conditions of possibility are themselves part of the object of knowledge, what are the conditions of possibility of that? Which is just a formal way of expressing the charge of navel gazing.

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