Introduction

The ‘concrete abstract’ is a crucial concept within the work of Henri Lefebvre that has only recently been given the critical attention it merits, particularly through the writings of Łukasz Stanek (2008, 2011). Yet, while the ‘concrete abstract’ can be found throughout the work of Lefebvre, he was not particularly clear about what it was or is. The concept does, however, flash up in tantalising ways in texts such as *Dialectical Materialism* ([1940] 2009) and *The Production of Space* (1991).

It is our intention in this chapter to lay out our take on the concept as strongly and as clearly as we can. In its most basic form the ‘concrete abstract’ describes the ill-fitting relationship between reified concepts and everyday social life. It gives an account of the gap between the often-simplified categories we deploy to make sense of our everyday situations and the complex ways in which social life is actually produced. It also recognises how abstractions bear down on the quotidian textures of life in deracinating and malign ways, and how abstractions serve to conceal these very effects.

Lefebvre’s notion of the ‘concrete abstract’ has its philosophical roots in the work of G.W.F. Hegel and Karl Marx, and while recognising its importance for Lefebvre’s foundational work on space, a strong starting place to clearly view the ‘concrete abstract’ in relation to its philosophical roots is via Lefebvre’s 1940 text, *Dialectical Materialism* ([1940] 2009).

In taking up the ‘concrete abstract’ as a critical concept, we also wish to re-insert a philosophical and highly political edge into scholarship on Lefebvre in response to what both Christian Schmid and Stanek have considered to be the increasing ‘banalisation’ of his work through the uncritical and de-politicised overuse of concepts like ‘the production of space’ (Schmid 2008: 28; Stanek 2008: 62).

A key point this chapter seeks to put across is that the ‘concrete abstract’ only gains meaning and relevance in relation to particular moments and particular situations. It is not something that is easily described in conceptual isolation. For this reason, towards the end of this chapter, we will draw out the concrete abstract by example. Our attention will turn most specifically to the ‘British Isles’ and the current political crises taking place there following the United Kingdom’s decision to exit the European Union after a national referendum in June 2016.
The referendum, and the passionate debates leading up to it, exposed deep social and economic fractures within the UK. It exposed divisions between wealth and poverty, young and old, and metropolitan centres and peripheral towns and the countryside. It also exposed regional divides and deep-seated divisions over internal nationalisms within the UK as Scotland and Northern Ireland voted overwhelmingly to remain in the EU while England and Wales voted overwhelmingly to leave. These fractures often overlapped with each other and although they existed before the referendum, they were also exacerbated by it. Yet, at the same time as we recognise these divisions, we must also recognise that a re-emergent national chauvinism glosses them over – as it so often does.

‘The idolatry of the state’, Lefebvre writes in *Metaphilosophy*, is ‘the greatest fetish on earth after God’, and our argument here is that the ‘United Kingdom’, as does the very notion of the nation state itself, becomes reified and taken to be a neutral, natural, and fixed entity at the same time that it is rupturing on the ground (Lefebvre 2016: 143).

The UK, we will argue, is a Fata Morgana – a ‘real mirage’ – a physical form seen out at sea, which turns out to be an illusion. It is a declarative name, but one with a continuing and legally produced history that serves as a disperser for all sorts of social fractures, economic stratifications, and structures of feeling.

We wish to view this dialectically, as a concrete abstraction that often conceals the problems it produces.

**Locating the concrete abstract**

In his key text, *The Production of Space*, Lefebvre turns to the concrete abstract immediately after announcing his maxim, ‘(social) space is a (social) product’ (Lefebvre 1991: 26). He poses the following questions:

> Is this space an abstract one? Yes, but it is also ‘real’ in the sense in which concrete abstractions such as commodities and money are real. Is it then concrete? Yes, though not in the sense that an object or product is concrete. Is it instrumental? Undoubtedly, but, like knowledge, it extends beyond instrumentality.

*(Lefebvre 1991: 26–7)*

The structure of the concrete abstract emerges in relation to Marx and in particular Marx’s writing on the commodity. As soon as Lefebvre declares that ‘(social) space is a (social) product’ (ibid.), we are in the territory of the concrete abstract. This is further qualified by Łukasz Stanek:

> After asserting that ‘(social) space is a (social) product,’ Lefebvre claims that the mode of existence of space is that of money and commodities, which are, together with labor, theorized by Marx as concrete abstractions.

*(Stanek 2011: 137)*

It is crucial to point out that these ideas have their roots in Marx, as Andy Merrifield does:

> Marx makes an analytical distinction rather than a real-life separation and shows Lefebvre how to keep the link between the specific and the general, quality and quantity, use value and exchange value, and the concrete and the abstract in taut dialectical tension. You can’t have one without its ‘other’.

*(Merrifield 2006: 133)*
It is also crucial to point out here that although the concrete abstract is not given a specific work in Lefebvre’s oeuvre, as Stanek puts it, ‘the concept of concrete abstraction brings together the most vital elements of Lefebvre’s theory of production of space’ (Stanek 2008: 62). Stanek explains that ‘social abstraction’ ‘concretizes and realizes itself socially, in social practice’. It has ‘a real existence, that is to say practical and not conventional, in the social relationships linked to practices’ (ibid. 68):

Following Marx’s theorization of labor as a concrete abstraction, Lefebvre demonstrates that space is an ‘abstraction which became true in practice’ – produced by material, political, theoretical, cultural, and quotidian practices.

(ibid. 76)

The concrete abstract is part of Lefebvre’s project to at once defend Marxism and rescue it from those who seek to reduce it to a scheme, a party programme, a dogmatism. It blows open the base and superstructure metaphor to extend Marxism out into culture and space. This has ramifications for the contemporary diaspora of the Marxist tradition of the New Left in the UK and what became codified under the ‘turn to culture’ (Hall 2010).

But in order to arrive at the contemporary moment of the concrete abstract we need to first revisit its roots. Stanek argues that:

a reading of Hegel and Marx, in particular the latter’s discussions on labor, commodity, and money, allowed Lefebvre to examine space as the general form of social practice in capitalist modernities, characterized by distinctive features, such as its simultaneous homogenization and fragmentation and its blend of illusion and reality.

(Stanek 2011: xiii)

What is very useful to cite before we proceed is Stanek’s highly productive explanation of how the universal and particular are at play in Lefebvre’s concept:

Since space is itself socially produced and has historical conditions of existence, its universality can be conceived neither as a Platonic ideal nor as a Kantian transcendental form of sensibility. Rather, Lefebvre argues that space is one of the universal forms of social practice, as commodity and labor are in the analysis of Marx. Like commodity and labor, space has a paradoxical quality of being at the same time, and in many ways, both ‘abstract’ and ‘concrete’: space appears to be a general means, medium, and milieu of social practices, and yet it allows accounting for their specificity within the society as a whole.

(Stanek 2011: 133)

The structure of the concrete abstract is taken from Marx’s analysis of the commodity in Capital, particularly his explanations of use value and exchange value, that the everyday use of something and its abstract value on the market cannot be disentangled from each other:

Space – just like commodity and labor – is a ‘social,’ ‘real,’ ‘actual,’ or ‘concrete’ abstraction; that is to say, its universality is produced by processes of abstraction attributed to a range of social practices and reflected in the specific ‘abstract’ experience of modern space.

(Stanek 2011: 134)

The full breadth of Marx’s Capital was never delivered. But the Grundrisse gives tantalising glimpses of its planned depth. Key to point out here is that the work appeared to be calculated to begin with the least abstract part of Capital, a particular object, the individual product, before working
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outwards to the highest level of abstraction. Some interpreters have suggested that the full Capital was planned to fill nine volumes, working from concrete to abstract (see Shortall 1994: 445).

Therefore the concrete abstract is not only a key part of Lefebvre’s thought, but also of Marx. This concept reaches right down to the roots of both figures and in the philosophy of G.W.F. Hegel. The centrality of the concrete abstract to both Lefebvre and Marx is clear, as is its continued relevance in our time. It seems almost too obvious to point out that the crash of 2008 was a crash caused in part by excessive market abstractions.

Lefebvre’s Dialectical Materialism

Stalin’s narrow Dialectical and Historical Materialism (1938) is the target of Lefebvre’s Dialectical Materialism, published in 1940. The book is attributed to Stalin but appears to have been written by committee under Stalin. Lefebvre was at odds with this work and published his own Dialectical Materialism in order to lay out a new version of the subject. Lefebvre’s book is still fresh.

That we make this return through Lefebvre’s 1940 book on Dialectical Materialism, written precisely to resist reductive Stalinist appropriations of the subject, is apt, as we are still faced with the potential for thin, state capitalist, instrumentalised attitudes to space in the West in 2017. Stefan Kipfer, adding a new preface to the book in 2009, points out that ‘for Lefebvre, Marxism was above all a dynamic movement of theory and practice not a fixed doctrine’ (Kipfer 2009: xiv).

Stalin’s reading was based on a narrow interpretation of Engels’ ‘Dialectics of Nature’, which is largely to be rejected in any case (ibid.: xvii). The dialectic produces movement, in content – which is inevitably held in language – through negation, but it does not operate outside language. There are some problems, then, with Lefebvre’s reading of dialectics. In the forward to the fifth edition, Lefebvre claims it is possible to ‘uphold’ the idea of a dialectic in nature.

We only wish to raise these points before moving on, as they are the subject of another work. Here we need to focus on the moment when Lefebvre states that the concept of alienation cannot merely be confined to bourgeois societies, which was part of the implicitly Stalinist period: ‘Institutional Marxists chose to reject the concept’ of a more widespread alienation which had the effect on Marxism of blunting ‘its cutting edge’ (Lefebvre 2009: 39). It is clear in 2017 that alienation is much more widespread across social strata.

Lefebvre’s Dialectical Materialism has two main sections, dealing with The Dialectical Contradiction and The Production of Man. First, Lefebvre deals with ‘dialectical contradiction’: He lays out how Hegel moves beyond Kant. He then critiques Hegel, moving on to Marx. He then outlines The Production of Man and it becomes very clear how The Production of Space emerges. Here, then, is a handy ladder down through the floor of Lefebvre’s project to its origins in Hegel.

Lefebvre begins with formal logic and Kant. Hegel moved away from the split of object and subject, concrete and ‘meta’: Here are the root tips of the concrete abstract.

The universal of Kantian formal logic is a problem for Hegel as it floats free from the historical and social circumstances of the world. Hegel attempted to reunite a socially and historically specific ‘concrete’ with a knowing subject. But this knowing subject also has the limits of its knowing to face – as well as what it knows – when arriving at the social and historical moment it is inevitably framed by. Kipfer explains that Lefebvre’s:

Dialectical materialism refuses to enclose knowledge within a teleological search for the absolute idea, which for Hegel was eventually actualized in the Prussian state. In contrast to Hegel’s dialectical logic, it [dialectical materialism] is no longer a dogma.

( Ibid.: xxi)
Having read this, it should become clear why Lefebvre aimed his own version of dialectical materialism at Stalin’s instrumentalised version. Dialectical materialism is not some economic or philosophical algebra for Lefebvre. It is a flexible, ad hoc, and negative philosophy. It is interesting that the contemporary Soviet-style Marxist tradition still retains this ‘algebra’ version of the dialectic (see for instance Rees 1998).

Therefore this is an attempt to present a contemporary and particular version of the concrete abstract rooted in the political expediencies of the day: we must of course question Hegel’s claim that the development of society and history entails a progressive search for ‘freedom’, and we must do so precisely through Marx, but we must resist in Marxism the dogmatic institutional or party rhetoric Lefebvre warned of in its Stalinist version in 1940.

The broader point to make here is that Hegel removes the universal of logic in order to re-install a proper universalism that is attached to historical specificity and the concrete social circumstances that arise from that.

But Hegel, too, over-reaches. For Lefebvre, human consciousness reveals his (sic) mastery of things but also its limitations. Perhaps only in this era do we see those limitations more fully. How would Hegel frame the ‘absolute idea’ now? With Europe fragmenting and the head of ‘the geist’ containing convincing evidence of man’s extinction, along with his (sic) own mastery?

This is not a question to try to answer, but it does return us to the need to keep to dialectical materialism as a flexible cluster of very particular methods, techniques, and philosophies, to be applied to very specific contemporary circumstances, to be re-negotiated with each encounter.

But there is an opposite risk to reified dialectical materialism, and that has been the risk of spatial theory after the first two waves: that a concrete politics is sacrificed for abstraction. Lefebvre really begins again properly with the dialectic at Marx’s *Critique of Political Economy* (1857–9) and *Capital* (1867). Exchange sets objects off on a ‘second life’ in which their value becomes abstracted precisely in order to move them through the market process. In Marx’s account of capitalism, this process of abstraction itself becomes further abstracted.

Engels noted that in the Exchange in Manchester, in the late 19th century, traders became transfixed by the signifiers themselves, as the complex and horrible chains of signifieds vanished. The remains of those chains now sit under One Angel Square in Manchester (Engels 1890). Engels and some of the other early social explorers were really the only people from the class of the Exchange traders who were looking to reconnect the concrete and its abstract and to explain what that dieremption of object and meaning was doing to the human social world in emerging industrial cities: we must hold to the specific concrete circumstances of the moment; the philosophy serves this concrete moment, the concrete moment should never serve the production of philosophy.

One big contemporary ‘second life’ for space is real estate, in which we can take the word ‘real’ as a relation between the concrete, literally, in terms of a concrete tower block, but also totally abstract, if one views the way that space appears in the name of its abstraction, in order to shift it into the realm of exchange and ultimately surplus value: ‘In relation to individuals this new social whole functions as a superior organism’ (Lefebvre 2009: 77).

The individuals begin to serve ‘it’ and not the other way around. The very obvious correlation to make for space is that individuals, tenants, begin to serve ‘real estate’, ‘real estate’ no longer primarily serves the tenant. Real estate has become, certainly by the mid-20th century, a ‘superior organism’ (ibid.). The tenant is primarily producing surplus value for landlords and estate agents. This process has reacted to urban population density increases by becoming more fragmented, short-term, and micro. The highly criticised Airbnb phenomenon is one example of this.
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Of course it is perfectly possible to make the opposite claim and estate agents do, but it is clear that a functional alienation has risen, which is often sketched in using the media shorthand of ‘the housing crisis’ in Britain (see Wainright 2017).

Therefore a whole lifted-out alienated life that has become naturalised can be accounted for under the term ‘concrete abstract’. It is real, literally objective, with car parking spaces, elevators, stairs, numbered flat doors and balconies. But it is abstracted, sold through fetishes and aesthetics, rhetoric and cultural myth.

A good example of the latter would be the Hacienda flats in Manchester, built on the site of the nightclub of the same name and sold back to that demographic. A particular generation of nightclubbers – those who went to the Hacienda in Manchester, named after the situationist Ivan Chtheglov’s invocation that the ‘Hacienda must be built’ – were sold mythologised, concrete spaces via the myths they produced themselves within a popular counterculture which was explicitly supposed to resist reification (Ward 2002). It is interesting, then, that the term ‘real estate’ emerges in the mid-17th century with all of its cultural explosions and cultural revolutions. Those explosions and revolutions, it seems, never halt either reification or abstraction.

Via his reading of Marx’s *Critique of Political Economy* (1857–9) and *Capital* (1867), Lefebvre explains how ‘there can be no pure abstraction’: ‘The abstract is also concrete, and the concrete, from a certain point of view, is also abstract. All that exists for us is the concrete abstract’ (Lefebvre 2009: 36).

We all live, then, in a double reality: ‘And it is with this double reality that the categories are linked together and return dialectically into the total movement of the world’ (ibid. 77).

The first social reality is real yet abstract. The second social reality is abstract yet real. These should not be seen as two progressing historical stages, but phenomenological occurrences in the same whole reality. They are constellations, not linear trajectories. Christian Schmidt understands this (2008). Therefore a recourse to Hegelian dialectics is essential to understanding what is at stake in the ‘concrete abstract’.

Use value is concrete, exchange value is abstract: ‘The duplication of value into use-value and exchange-value therefore develops into a complex dialectic, in which we find once again the great laws discovered by Hegel: the unity of opposites and the transformation of quality into quantity and quantity into quality’ (Lefebvre 2009: 79).

Because of these abstractions, inaugurated by wider circuits of exchange, society is distributed ‘with a certain blind and brutal inevitability’ (ibid. 78).

The concrete abstract

Gillian Rose (2009) comments on Hegel that if The Absolute cannot be thought then it is useless to social science. If The Absolute cannot be thought and so is useless to social science, then by extension it is also useless to geography and spatial theory, if, as in Lefebvre, space (espace) is a verb.

The concrete abstract must then always be grounded in the particular, if the particular is an idea or a wall. Even if that particular is shaped in a malign way by an abstraction.

In many ways language itself is a concrete abstraction. But at least in the spirit of Lefebvre – because he didn’t make this clear – the concrete abstract should come together at the crossroads of the particular. In many ways a building is just communication. But it is also the tiny trace of a builder’s mark in even the most flawless facade, and that facade itself and all the hyperbole surrounding it in the media and everyday life, taken in one whole.

But the concrete abstract is not simply the interplay of the subject and object. Kant and Neo-Kantianism cannot handle this interplay. What became referred to as Post-Structuralism cannot handle metaphysics, searching to expunge it, a pointless crusade.
It might be tempting to read the concrete abstract as spatial theory in the 1990s might: if the crossroads is a meeting of four paths then the concrete abstract is the sum total, the fifth place. If the crossroads is a meeting of seven paths then the concrete abstract is the sum of these, the eighth.

But this would return us to second- or first-wave Lefebvre scholarship. This would be to return us to the dialectic as thesis-antithesis-synthesis, a dialectic more attributable to Fichte than Hegel.

To explain this properly it is necessary to return to Marx’s supposed ‘inversion’ of Hegel to reveal the hard rationality in the mystical drift. Yet *Capital*, particularly the opening sections of Volume 1, reveals its Hegelian theological dimensions as it attempts to conceal them. If, as Marx contends, the commodity is at once plastic and mystical, so then is architectural form in use, so then, is the street.

There has been a need to rediscover the idealism in Marx: so to give a fuller picture of Lefebvre is to return the ‘theological niceties’ of space to spatial theory. This has already been laid out:

The ‘third’ wave of Lefebvre readings we propose links urban-spatial debates more persistently and substantively with an open-minded appropriation of his metaphilosophical epistemology shaped by continental philosophy and Western Marxism. In so doing, it also rejects the debilitating dualism between ‘political economy’ and ‘cultural studies’ that in effect marked the distinction between the ‘first’ and ‘second’ waves of Lefebvre studies, making it impossible for us to return to a simply updated or expanded earlier school of thought on Lefebvre.

(Grønmark 2013: 18)

However, we wish to go much further: ‘Untruth’ has been seen as waste material created in the pursuit of Truth and this can be traced back to Kant. Untruth is merely the dark matter of Truth and this revelation can be traced back to Hegel. The diremption of truth and untruth was a bad historico-philosophical divorce. This is work for another day, but it is crucial to state that for us the concrete abstract is always the relation of the Real and the Logos. The abstract cannot exist in any way other than as an abstraction from the Real and that is linguistic. The whole of human history is the gift relation of the symbolic and the Real.

The concrete abstract is not merely ‘false consciousness’ either. It is a real abstraction. You think space and space thinks you. We might bring in Latour’s example here of driving through a series of breath-taking hills. The move through those curves and the perception of them are not to be separated (Latour 2005). Kant’s completion of Enlightenment thought reduces it to human need, perception flattens so that the mobile human can navigate in order to conquer. You are the subject at the centre of an objectified world: Subject drives over object; GPS, now available on many mobile phones, is a good everyday example of this. For Latour, and for Lefebvre, this is not the case. (Nor is Latour Hegelian or Marxist.)

Lefebvre was no structuralist or existentialist. It is not the case that the concrete is the hard, irreducible real and the abstract is the language that inadequately describes it, as this would return us to neo-Kantianism.

The ‘concrete abstract’ is a combination of the two most opposite of words combined in a seething whole bursting with tensions and contradictions: But these internal pressure points are not ‘difficulties’ or ‘problems’ to be erased; they are where negation opens, where it fissures and moves the subject. They are the beginning of philosophy, not an arrival at its limits.

The concrete abstract can be a sort of spectacle in a situationist sense. What disturbed Baudrillard about simulacra was that negation was not possible (1981). This is what disturbed
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Debord and the Situationists. It is surely due to the fact that the concrete abstract becomes surface, pure abstraction, and therefore the dialectic cannot properly move. We have not reached that situation despite Baudrillard’s warnings. But the concrete abstract still saturates human affairs.

A Fata Morgana is a mirage, a physical form seen out at sea, which turns out to be an illusion. The Fata Morgana is a good way to illustrate the concrete abstract. Appropriately, ‘Fata Morgana’ refers to very real mirages, seen in the Strait of Messina, thought to be ‘fata’ or ‘fairy’ castles, luring sailors to their deaths. These mirages were named after the Arthurian enchantress, Morgan le Fay. We can look at Fata Morgana in dialectical terms; the ‘real mirage’, which is perhaps the ultimate Hegelian ‘contradiction embodied’, and again a good illustration of the applied concrete abstract. The island of Britain is a Fata Morgana. This is not just what Britain is in our globalised present, it is what Britain has always been (Ford and Hanson 2015).

Paul Mason’s Channel 4 blog presented the most interesting map after the UK General Election of 7 May 2015 (Ford and Hanson 2015). It split the island into three: Scotland as ‘Southern Scandinavia’; the southeast as the ‘Asset Rich Southlands’, swelling since the 1986 deregulation of financial markets, and, lastly; the ‘Post-Industrial Archipelago’, the Detroitified, abandoned middle, drawn as spiky red islands. What is fascinating about this map is that nation state and sovereignty are of little relevance to it. In some ways, this map is just as real as the standard maps of the island. But both maps are true, they are Fata Morgana, ‘real mirages’ (ibid.).

Paul Mason’s Channel 4 map showed that the nation is not ‘the island’ (ibid.). It is those offshore rigs, pipelines, digital signals, and data cables. It is airstrips, ports, and satellites. ‘Local’ places are refilled everyday with power, petrol, food, and resources, from capital, arbitrarily creating ruin or regeneration. Capital’s flows and circuits are utterly and necessarily hybrid and international. ‘One nation’ Toryism and fundamentalist Localism always conceal this, in order to hide capital’s own interests and power. They are always already ideological (ibid.).

But the nation is also the simmering resentment of the Brexit vote, a vote largely made through emotion rather than hard facts. The concrete abstract, ultimately, is a figure that can help us to reconnect the infrastructural with the ideological. The concrete abstract should itself never remain abstract, it must be applied to the concrete and particular and ultimately the political out in the lifeworld.

Lefebvre’s project itself is concrete abstraction, it resists total systematisation. We understand the need for a less disparate Lefebvrian scholarship – the political expediency is now desperately urgent – as the DSG put it: ‘the post political = the most political’ (DSG 2011).

But Lefebvre’s project itself is concrete – he is dead – it is finite down to the last punctuation mark and yet it is also abstract, open to interpretation – of translators in the first instance – then readers and other academics. It is also lifted out, preserved, transformed, and cancelled in each historical moment, in this constantly collapsing present. It expands, and the arguments, alternative readings, and interpretations are part of that expansion. To slice these off as aberrant in search of a purer Lefebvre would be to return to Kant, not Hegel, and that would not be in the spirit of Lefebvre. It would in fact be to declare miners irrelevant to coal.

We need to take much of the critique seriously though. Gromark questions some of the relevance of Lefebvre’s project, for example, through reading Stanek on Lefebvre, he also questions Lefebvre’s focus on ‘dwelling’ and the domus when theorising space. This must be revised, and we must revise it for nomads. The idea of ‘elective belonging’ is only now owned by the elite, who in any case peripatetically attend to business across the globe.

To add to the critiques of Lefebvre and Lefebvrian thought, a reified version of spatiality is part of popular consciousness: We have had a referendum on space, but to suggest we have a referendum on time seems insane. Gillian Rose (1992) hits French thinkers for seeing the world...
as lack – Lefebvre is an exception – she doesn’t say this, but for us the everyday life work is proof that he is an exception.

Conclusion

This chapter has explained the tricky and often obfuscated concept of the ‘concrete abstract’. It has illuminated its main philosophical roots, in Hegel and Marx, but from there it has gone on to advocate, in the spirit of Lefebvre’s work, an engaged dialectics of the ‘concrete abstract’ of the street, by turning to actual political examples in the world.

These are points to be developed further elsewhere. But what is absolutely clear in this moment is that for what is being described as ‘post-truth’, the concrete abstract is an essential philosophical figure. Ultimately, then, we give you notes towards a contemporary concrete abstract as an orienting litany that might be used to do real political work.

References


