

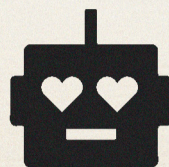
WORLDS WITHOUT PEOPLE

THE “INHUMAN”
IN CONTEMPORARY
PHILOSOPHY AND ART

Ondřej Váša
(ed.)



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**Worlds without People:
The “Inhuman”
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Philosophy and Art**

Edited by
Ondřej Váša

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A Word from the Visiting Editor

Dear reader, you are about to enter with us into a world without people, so we will not keep you long; after all, what can we say when this issue intends to embark on images that are above all testimonies to the failure of sight, or even to the failure of thinking itself, at least the human one. For we have chosen artistic, game, film, and media images that present to us the manifestations of the inhuman: whether creatures or a world that excludes human beings and human thought. In the now quite rich and complex terrain of transhumanism, or various versions of post-humanism, however, we have also focused on those moments that are constitutive of humans today: that is, those moments that critically expose us to our own inhumanity.

We begin methodically with Martin Švantner's essay *Humanity and Inhumanity of the Sign: Two Views of Man*, which centres its focus on the conceptual clash involving selected definitions of the human and the non-human, within the field of sign theory, particularly examining two nearly paradigmatic perspectives – structuralist semiology and Peircean semiotics – and defends the unique ability of human animals, even if unconsciously, to engage in semiotics.

After which comes Jakub Chavalka's *The Cruelty of Waking: Ahypnotic Experience in the World of Franz Kafka*, which connects novella and a short story by Kafka (*Metamorphosis* and *Disciplinary Camp*), Marco Donnarumma's art installation (*Amygdala*), and Friedrich Nietzsche's understanding of the sublime, just to show the shared motif of the "ahypnotic experience", i.e., the state in which the character is frightened by sleep, since in sleep he loses control over himself, and is given up to the forces which rid him off of his human form.

Jakub Marek's *Selfhood and Simulacra: On the Phenomenon of Snapchat Dysmorphia* does not offer much relief, since the case study of the limits of our views of the relationship between selfhood and corporeality addresses a body dysmorphic disorder where a user of filtered selfies becomes dis-

satisfied with his or her “natural” appearance, and seeks surgical procedures in order to look like he or she does in the filtered selfies.

Tomáš Kobes’ *Inhumanity and Sexbots: On Incestuous Relations with Sexbots* focuses on British multimedia artist K. Davis, and the campaign against sexbots initiated in 2015 by K. Richardson and E. Billing in the project *Logging on to Love*. The paper argues that being human or inhuman in relation to sexbots can only be fully understood with regard to incest, which can contribute to understanding sexbots in a more symmetrical sense than the one offered by their critics and defenders.

Ondřej Váša’s *Speculative Sons of Ulysses and the Inhuman “Worlds without People”* muses on the repeated and systematic references to the figure of Ulysses in the work of Quentin Meillassoux, Ray Brassier, Eugene Thacker, and Reza Negarestani. Because these are not random occurrences, Ulysses represents a key figure in the mutually interconnected visions and reflections related to the idea of a “world without people” that bind the named authors implicitly and explicitly to the originally Dantean imagery.

Martin Charvát’s *Catastrophic Aftermath: The Loss of Sight as a Process of Becoming Posthuman in Contemporary Audiovisual Culture* argues that in contemporary audiovisual production (mainly the Apple TV series *See*), the theme of the loss of sight due to nuclear catastrophe becomes a symptom for the analysis of the disintegration and revival of a world that has disintegrated due to the exploitative demands of postmodern capitalism, thereby de facto marking the end of the so-called “Anthropocene era”.

That there is something to be gained is clearly shown by Václav Janoščík’s essay *Survival and Ontology: A Tentative Genealogy of Survival in Gaming and Contemporary Philosophy*, which sees computer games as mirrors of our present consumerist capitalism. This, however, can be taken not only as a symptom of the current atmosphere of dystopian realism and mainstreaming of the survival genre, but also as a productive hint or allegory for philosophy.

The essay therefore leads to a conclusion that could also serve as the motto of this issue: that in gaming, as well as in contemporary thinking, the demand to address the dystopian contours of our time are demands for ontology. And that rather than presenting a criticism of these games and theories, we framed them within an economy and demand for new ontology.

We wish you pleasant reading! From the whole team

Ondřej Váša
Visiting editor

Humanity and Inhumanity of the Sign: Two Views of Man*

Martin Švantner

Charles University, Faculty of Humanities
svantner.m@seznam.cz

Abstract:

The present article centers its focus on the conceptual clash involving selected definitions of the human and the non-human within the field of sign theory, particularly examining two nearly paradigmatic perspectives: structuralist semiology and Peircean semiotics. The text's argumentation critically departs from the conventional viewpoint put forth by Ernest Cassirer. This perspective, widely prevalent not only in the humanities but also in the social sciences (e.g., M. Weber, T. Parsons) and even the natural sciences (e.g., T. Deacon), frequently regards the "symbol" as the defining boundary between the human and the non-human. The discussion further delves into the context of structuralist anti-humanism, which endeavors to redefine subjectivity by drawing from structural linguistics. Offering an alternative perspective to both Cassirerian and structuralist views of representation, the article introduces the semiotics of C. S. Peirce. According to John Deely, who serves as the primary source of inspiration for this paper, Peirce's semiotics opens the door to a distinct, inferentialist, and methodologically more comprehensive understanding of the sign and the symbol, reshaping the understanding of the relationship between humans and the world inhabited by entities that, while they do not possess language, are capable of making inferences and employing signs – whether they be animals or machines. These non-linguistic, non-representational yet communicative entities largely remained inconspicuous within structuralist semiology. A subjective structures, seemingly waiting to be infused with human meaning, to be fully represented within the concept of language, to become subjects in a supposedly universal science of signs. At this juncture, the text departs from structuralist premises and, aligning with Peirce's perspective, follows Deely in proposing that what sets apart human comprehension of signs from other forms of sign-interpreting agencies is the capacity to understand the sign as a sign. In essence, this represents the unique ability of human animals, even if unconscious, to engage in semiotics.

Keywords: semiotics; human; non-human; symbol; Peirce; structuralism

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1. Introduction: Symbol, Sign and Human?

The portrayal of humans as symbolic animals has a long history – one so long and rich that this perspective has become almost indisputable. This influential prism, articulated by Ernst Cassirer in his *Philosophie der symbolischen Formen* (1923–1929), has had and continues to have a tremendous impact on the humanities, social and even cognitive sciences,¹ and its breadth and depth far exceed the limits of this paper. The core of his argumentation is an effort to emancipate the definition of a human being from the shackles of rationalism and the leading philosophical perspective on the human as an *animal rationale*, as it was defined by those who “were expressing rather a fundamental moral imperative. Reason is a very inadequate term with which to comprehend the forms of man’s cultural life in all their richness and variety. But all these forms are symbolic forms. Hence, instead of defining man as an animal rationale, we should define him as *animal symbolicum*.”²

I would like to provide at least a partial description of some insights into this broad issue, where the initial methodological limitation, which is still too broad, pertains to the perspective of “general semiotics”,³ which has extensively examined the concept of *symbol*, its historical development, and its various historical, theoretical, philosophical and methodological conceptualizations. A significant aspect that emerges from the diverse research on this topic, with Tzvetan Todorov’s seminal work *Théories du symbole* (1977) serving as a pivotal text, is the definition of the “symbol” as a distinct type (*species*) of “sign” (*genus*). Simply put, if we assert that humans are symbolic animals, it follows that humans are specific sign-using beings. Therefore, if a human is a symbol, it means that – *a fortiori* – a human is a sign. What lies at the heart of this paper’s exploration is precisely this issue of what is specifically human about the use of symbols and, equally, what is specific about

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- 1 Cf. Bourdieu, P., *Practical Reason: On the Theory of Action*. Stanford, Stanford University Press 1998, p. 3; Krois, J., *Cassirer: Symbolic Forms and History*. New Haven, Yale University Press 1987; Ferrari, M., Ernst Cassirer’s Legacy: History of Philosophy and History of Science. *Journal of Transcendental Philosophy*, 2, 2021, No. 1, pp. 85–109; Vandenberghe, F., From Structuralism to Culturalism. Ernst Cassirer’s Philosophy of Symbolic Forms. *European Journal of Social Theory*, 4, 2001, No. 4, pp. 479–497; see the comparison of Cassirer with related sign-theoretical concepts in Marconi, V., Cassirer and Cognitive Structuralism. In: Filieri, L. – Pollok, A. (eds.), *The Method of Culture Ernst Cassirer’s Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*. Pisa, Edizioni ETS 2021, pp. 200–211.
 - 2 Cassirer, E., *An Essay on Man: An Introduction to a Philosophy of Human Culture*. New Haven, Yale University Press 1974, pp. 25–26; cf. Truwant, S., *Cassirer and Heidegger in Davos: The Philosophical Arguments*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press 2022, ch. 2.
 - 3 I refer here loosely to Umberto Eco’s idea presented in his *Theory of Semiotics* (1975), where he suggests that general semiotics should be understood as a broad field that defines an interest in representation, which of course can vary widely in different forms; cf. Volli, U., The Origins of Umberto Eco’s Semio-Philosophical Project. *Rivista di estetica*, 61, 2021, No. 76, pp. 81–95.

the concept of symbol itself. What are the implications of stating that “a human is a sign”? Does it even *make sense* to assert such a postulate? The first objection that naturally arises is that it is an overly vague statement, leaving unclear what is exactly meant by both “human”, “non-human” and “sign” (and both “sense” and also “symbol”). The second objection is that the statement seems to be an overly extreme form of reductionism: the human animal is far too complex an entity to be reduced solely to any single denominator, “sign” or “symbol” included. Both objections are relevant if they remain as vague as the initial postulate. Hence, this paper aims to analyze these ambiguous concepts by undertaking two journeys into the different realms of general semiotics. The main motive that this text intends to explore is the conceptual and ontological difference between two discourses of sign theory and some of its implications for the conceptualizations of human beings as signifying animals.

1.1 Signs and Symbols as Matters of Concern

The first excursion briefly explores the intersection of *semiology* and structuralism,⁴ where the theory of signs emerged from linguistics as a guide and a new vocabulary for conceptualizing and de/constructing the issue of the *speaking subject*.⁵ The second aspect, complementary yet fundamentally distinct in its origins, objectives and implications, delves into Peircean *semeiotic*.⁶ This paper centres on John Deely’s (1942–2017) interpretation of Peirce’s sign theory, emphasizing its merits in defining humans as *semeiotic animals*. The main argument of the text goes against Cassirer’s undoubtedly

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- 4 It must be said that I am here concerned only with a very limited section of this broad intellectual movement, working only with some selected aspects of Saussure’s conception of the sign that have been extrapolated to the humanities and social sciences. For a deeper insight into the debate on the various transformations of the concept of sign in structuralist theories, see the brilliant overview provided by Parret, H., *Language and Discourse*. Berlin, De Gruyter 1971, pp. 75–138.
- 5 Cf. Culler, J., Semiotics and Deconstruction. *Poetics Today*, 1, 1979, No. 1/2, pp. 137–141; Schleifer, R., Deconstruction and Linguistic Analysis. *College English*, 49, 1987, No. 4, pp. 381–395; Bagiu, L., Writing in Deconstruction vs Speech in Structuralism (Jacques Derrida vs Ferdinand de Saussure). *Transilvania*, 37, 2009, No. 8, pp. 79–87; Strozier, R., *Saussure, Derrida, and the Metaphysics of Subjectivity*. Berlin, De Gruyter 1998.
- 6 In this text, I follow the conceptual distinctions that are commonly used and standardized in semiotic literature: I am using the expression *semeiotic* for the discipline and *semeiosis* for the sign process. The *semeiotic* denotes Peircean sign theory in order to distinguish it from other *de facto* extant forms of semiotics, such as the *semiology* of Ferdinand de Saussure and his followers; cf. Bergman, M., *Peirce’s Philosophy of Communication: The Rhetorical Underpinnings of the Theory of Signs*. London, Continuum 2009, p. 166, fn. 1; cf. Deely, J., *Semeiotic Animal. A post-modern definition of human being transcending Patriarchy and Feminism*. South Bend, St. Augustine’s Press 2010, pp. 24–25.

crucial and philosophically bold definition of the symbolic animal: if there is something that general semiotics offers to philosophy, it is precisely the indication of the difficulty in defining symbols and signs, particularly highlighting the challenge of the idea that symbols should serve as a demarcation between what is inherently human and what is non-human.

1.1.1 Linguistic, Symbolic or Semeiotic Animal? Human and Non-Human Symbol Users

The “symbol” itself, rooted in its semantic history that dates back to antiquity, encompasses two essential dimensions.⁷ Firstly, “symbol” connotes a convention tied to the volition of the community of its users.⁸ For instance, when referring to “mathematical symbols”, one implicitly refers to highly conventionalized signs whose meanings and uses are strictly determined by the system in which they occur and operate.⁹ Secondly, the “symbol” is intrinsically linked to allegory, evoking notions of drifting abstraction and vagueness. The multifaceted content of the expression “symbol” itself reveals three fundamental aspects of human cognition: generality, vagueness, convention and its capacity to signify or point to something beyond itself. The ability to navigate and engage with symbols within one’s own cultural context is a subject that has captured the attention of diverse perspectives,¹⁰ where it mostly serves as a differentiating factor between human and non-human entities.

Between the receptor system and the effector system, which are to be found in all animal species, we find in man a third link which we may describe as the symbolic system [...] No longer in a merely physical

7 We addressed the brief history and comparison of the different conceptualizations of the symbol in the field of semiotics and rhetorics in Švantner, M. – Abrahamyan, M., *Between the Hidden and the Conventional: Kenneth Burke and the Theory of Symbol*. *Slovo a smysl*, 2022, No. 40, pp. 103–124; also cf. Eco’s systematic treatise on the concept of the symbol in Eco, U., *Semiotics and the Philosophy of Language*. Bloomington, Indiana University Press 1986.

8 For a historical analysis of the concept of the “symbol” as a sign associated with the will of the community (cf. the distinction between *signum naturale*, *signum ad placitum* and *signum ex consuetudine*), particularly in medieval logic and philosophy, see Meier-Oeser, S., *Die Spur des Zeichens: Das Zeichen und seine Funktion in der Philosophie des Mittelalters und der frühen Neuzeit*. Berlin, De Gruyter 1997; Deely, J., Editorial Afterword. In: Deely, J. – Powell, R. (eds.), *Tractatus De Signis. The Semiotic of John Poinsett*. Berkeley, University of California Press 1985, p. 27.

9 Cf. Saussure’s rejection of the use of the term “symbol” for a linguistic sign in: Saussure, F., *Course in General Linguistics* Trans. R. Harris. London, Bloomsbury 2013, pp. [102; 107].

10 Cf. Wagner, R., *Symbols that Stand for Themselves*. Chicago, Chicago University Press 1989, pp. ix-xii.

universe, man lives in a symbolic universe. Language, art, and religion are the parts of this universe. They are the varied threads which weave the symbolic net, the tangled web of human experience. All human progress in thought and experience refines upon and strengthens this net. No longer can man confront reality immediately, as it were, face to face. Physical reality seems to recede in proportion as man's symbolic activity advances.¹¹

Tracing this division, where the symbol is understood as a border between the human and the non-human, would lead us into diverse domains such as German Romanticism or social theories like Talcott Parsons' sociology.¹² In terms of current debates, an indicative symptom of such a perspective is the work of contemporary neuroanthropologist and semiotician Terrence W. Deacon, who goes so far as to define the symbolic as a *threshold* or *symbolic barrier* that can only be evolutionarily attained and overcome exclusively by the human species.¹³

Let us first turn to the insights of John Deely, who distinguishes several ontological backgrounds through which one can comprehend the interconnection of the “human”, “non-human” and the “symbolic”. The first variant is associated with the understanding of humans as rational animals (*animal rationale*) or implicitly as “linguistic creatures”, which contrasts with *animalia bruta*, the non-linguistic animals. This perspective greatly influences the mentioned *modern* concepts in which rationality is exclusively linked to language or language-like representation.¹⁴ According to Deely, the “post-modern” (i.e. “semiotic”) turn occurs with the transition from the primacy of linguistic representation and its interconnected human rationality to the broader understanding of the representation, as it becomes possible to comprehend how signs, objects and things are intricately woven into the fabric of human experience in a way that surpasses the modern dichotomy of idealism versus realism.

11 Cassirer, E., *An Essay on Man*, pp. 24–25.

12 See Halmi, N., *The Genealogy of the Romantic Symbol*. Oxford, Oxford University Press 2007; Parsons, T., *The Social System*. New York, The Free Press–Collier Macmillan 1951, pp. 5–6, 10; cf. Parsons, T., *The Theory of Symbolism in Relation to Action*. In: Parsons, T. – Bales, R. F. – Shils, E. (eds.), *Working Papers in the Theory of Action*. New York, The Free Press and Collier Macmillan 1953, p. 31.

13 Deacon, T. W., *The Symbolic Species: The Co-evolution of Language and the Brain*. New York, W. W. Norton 1997, p. 44; cf. Rattasepp, S., *The Human Mirror. A Critique of the Philosophical Discourse Multispecies Semiotics on Animals from the Position of Multispecies Semiotics*. Tartu, Tartu University Press 2020, pp. 17–19.

14 Deely, J., *Semiotic Animal*, p. 41.

[T]he moment people began to thematize their experience of communication and to think of communication as such as something real, the moment they began to think of that experience as a proper starting point for philosophy, the days of modern philosophy were numbered. For with the substitution of the experience of communication for ideas as the point of departure for considering “the nature and extent of humane understanding”, with a belief in the occasional success of communication as the guiding notion for developing the consequences of that point of departure, postmodernism had begun.¹⁵

The assertion that humans are *signifying animals* holds undeniable merit. Nonetheless, this postulate lacks specificity regarding the uniquely human aspects of signification – as it acknowledges that non-human species, such as elephants, bees or ants, can also engage in a wide range of signifying agencies.¹⁶ To elucidate the distinctiveness of human signification, another qualification therefore must be added – and the most common notion, as in the case of Cassirer here, is precisely the notion of “symbol”: “[i]nstead of defining man as an *animal rationale* we should define him as an *animal symbolicum*. By doing so we can designate his specific difference, and we can understand the new way open to man – *the way to civilization*.”¹⁷ The first, let us say empirical, problem lies in the definition of the *symbolic* as *exclusively human*; i.e. using symbols is observable in non-human species. This concept of a symbolic animal, as the founder of zoosemiotics, Thomas A. Sebeok, puts it, “[...] is impermissibly ensnared with the concept of natural language [...] By every definition – invoking the principle of arbitrariness, the idea of a conventional link between a signifier and its denotata [...], or the notion of an intensional class for *designatum* – animals demonstrably employ symbols.”¹⁸ Therefore, if we conceive symbols as conventions that govern behavior and enable the construction of universal concepts from specific instances, the capacity of organisms to develop intensional class concepts becomes evident

15 Deely, J., *Four Ages of Understanding: The first Postmodern Survey of Philosophy from Ancient Times to the Turn of the Twenty-First Century*. Toronto, Toronto University Press 2001, p. 589.

16 The comprehensive topic of animal signification is one of the key subjects in the field of bio-semiotics, currently most prominently articulated in the works of semioticians from Tartu, see e.g. Tüür, K. – Tønnessen, M., *The Semiotics of Animal Representations*. Leiden, Brill 2014.

17 Cassirer, E., *An Essay on Man*, p. 26. Italics added.

18 Sebeok, T. A., *Zoosemiotics: At the Intersection of Nature and Culture*. In: Sebeok, T. A. (ed.), *The Tell-Tale Sign*. Lisse, Peter de Ridder Press 1975, p. 89; cf. Rattasepp, S. – Kull, K., *The semiotic species & animals in philosophy*. *The American Journal of Semiotics*, 32, 2016, No. 3/4, pp. 35–48; Delahaye, P., *A Semiotic Methodology for Animal Studies*. Boston, Springer 2019, pp. 3–7.

at much earlier stages in phylogenesis.¹⁹ “For in short, while human beings are the only animals capable of thematizing signs, they are far from the only animals that employ symbols.”²⁰

The problem is that if symbol-making capacity is trivially understood as exclusively human, exclusively linguistic, and linguistic as rational, it merely becomes a substitution of one term for another and tells us nothing about the nature of the symbol itself, the nature of the sign, or the specific semiotic characteristics of non/humans. Moreover, this demarcative definition of the symbol resurrects old pseudo-dilemmas of nature and culture. Although it is valid and appropriate to underline the species-specificity of symbolicity “in linguistic communication as it bears in the biological aspects of human evolution”²¹, we remain in the core of hierarchy of modern anthropocentrism, which excludes all non-linguistic animals from general signification and the difference between nature and nurture is absolutized here, only in a different guise.²² As Deely concluded, the point of departure, which distinguishes human and non-human symbolic animals, is that “[a]ll animals signify, many animals make symbols, but only human animals are capable of developing semiotics”²³ and “[t]he first thing that postmodernity accomplishes is to restore to the human animal its animality, together with the realization that all thought, all perception, is in signs” (Deely 2009: 216).²⁴

All animals begin making use of signs without knowing that there are signs. When human animals discover that there are signs they may or may not realize that concepts are themselves signs. To do that, they have to objectify the concept according to its proper being. And if they objectify it according to its proper being, which is that of provenating objective relations sometimes physical and sometimes only objective, they discover that the concept is, in its proper being, and has been all along, a sign; and the concept does not cease to be a sign for having been discovered to be one. For unlike the objects which are discovered to be signs as well, the signification is not a further being for the con-

19 Sebeok, T. A., *Contributions to the Doctrine of Signs*. Lisse, Peter de Ridder Press 1985, p. 137.

20 Deely, J., *Semiotic Animal*, p. 47.

21 Ibid.

22 “In many cases, signification systems among non-humans do not turn on convention, as is the case with language, but rather on a varied set of articulations that inhere between sign and signified and give rise to more complex processes of semiotic mediation.” Watts, C. M., *On Mediation and Material Agency in the Peircean Semeiotic*. In: Knappett, C. – Malafouris, L. (eds.), *Material Agency*. Boston, Springer 2008, p. 189.

23 Deely, J., *Semiotic Animal*, p. 47.

24 Deely, J., *Basics of Semiotics*. Tartu, Tartu University Press 2009, p. 216.

cept but the constitutive being. If we wish to define the animal capable of discovering that there are signs, then, even though that animal is necessarily an animal endowed with language in the root sense, still, because the linguistic sign is but a species within a genus and one that presupposes for its coming into being through exaptation a whole prior array of nonlinguistic signs and nonlinguistic communicative modalities, we should not define that animal as a “linguistic animal” but more generically as the semiotic animal, the animal not only engaged in semiosis but capable of making that action of signs a distinctive object, a focal concern, a theme, the knowledge of which systematized has for its proper name, as we have seen, semiotics. If a lifeform ought to be defined by what is most distinctive of it, then the animal capable of becoming aware of the fact that there are signs and that the universe is perfused with them ought to be defined most properly as the semiotic animal.²⁵

To gain a more precise understanding of this observation of “humans as animals capable of developing semiotics”, regarding what is meant by a “sign” and a “symbol”, and the implications for understanding the concept of a human being, it is necessary to first embark on two extensive excursions into the recent history of thought, the echoes of which we still hear today.²⁶ The first is semiology, which, to some extent, continues in the footsteps of what Deely refers to as idealistic modern philosophy, but seeks to expand rationalism and rid it of old-fashioned anthropocentrism.²⁷ Its starting point is the notion of language/system²⁸ and the concept of the sign derived from it. The Symbol, which opens up Cassirer’s *path to civilization*, is dehumanized here: it does not belong to the human subject or consciousness, but at first is generated by the specific (i.e. signifying) being of the system of all cultural systems, which is language. The second area, i.e. the Peircean perspective, is different in terms of its foundations, method and consequences, understanding language as derived from more general aspects, namely signification itself. However, regarding some *warning signs* articulated in general semiotics, one must be careful not to confuse the uses of the term “signification” – this expression, which, like the “symbol”, “sign” and “human”, appears to be so generally applicable that it has become hopelessly vague, has – in these two discourses about humans as signs – differing content. While semiology views

25 Deely, J., *Four Ages of Understanding*, p. 680.

26 See Švantner, M., Agency as Semiotic Fabrication. A Comparative Study of Latour’s ANT. *The American Journal of Semiotics*, 37, 2022, No. 3/4, pp. 289–315.

27 Rattasepp, S., *The Human Mirror*, p. 19.

28 Cf. Saussure, F., *Course in General Linguistics*, pp. [166–167].

a full-fledged sign primarily as a linguistic unit and, by extension, as reliant on the system of language signification, the Peircean approach regards a full-fledged sign as a proposition (or “quasi-proposition”).²⁹ In essence, within semiology, we have a conceptualization of the relation that primarily understands the sign in the terms of mentalism, difference, identity, opposition and bi-faciality. Here, the sign is portrayed as a “commutable” reflection of form in meaning and meaning in form. This logic is primarily and implicitly deductive and systemic, which means that all subsequent types of relations – such as interdependence between different signs – are primarily realized within the system itself. In contrast, the Peircean conception of the sign is process-oriented, inferential, non-mentalistic and always connected to some form of agency, where the systemic nature of sign production is not reducible solely to the transcendental nature of the system itself. Moreover, the Peircean perspective considers signification as a broader phenomenon, wherein language represents just one of its manifestations, and the process of signification cannot be solely derived from it. These two paradigmatic positions, as we will demonstrate below, have different implications for understanding all the aforementioned key concepts: human and non-human, symbol, and for the conceptualization of meaning formation.

2. The End of Interiority: Structuralism and Human-Sign as the Outcome of the Structure of Language

Continental semiology was born out of notes from lectures on general linguistics.³⁰ Structural linguistics³¹ and semiologies and their various mutations have emerged as a framework to explore and (re)assess realms that were traditionally perceived as intrinsically human. They have led many in-

29 For a thorough exposition and substantiation of this topic, see Stjernfelt, F., *Natural Propositions: The Actuality of Peirce's Doctrine of Dicsign*. Boston, Docent Press 2014; Stjernfelt, F., *Sheets, Diagrams, and Realism in Peirce*. Berlin, De Gruyter 2022.

30 Cf. Krampen, M., Ferdinand de Saussure and the Development of Semiology. In: Krampen, M. – Oehler, K. – Posner, R. – Sebeok, T. A. – Uexküll, J. von (eds.), *Classics of Semiotics. Topics in Contemporary Semiotics*. Boston, Springer 1987, pp. 59–80; Stawarska, B., Ghostwriting: The inception and reception of the Course in General Linguistics. *Semiotica*, 2017, No. 217, pp. 79–96.

31 Associated with Saussure's *Course in General Linguistics* or the work of Louis Hjelmslev (Hjelmslev, L., *Prolégomènes à une théorie du langage*. Paris, Minuit 1971); cf. Greimas, A. J., *Sémantique structurale*. Paris, Larousse 1966; Greimas, A. J., *L'Actualité du Saussurisme. Le Français-moderne*, 24, 1956, No. 3, pp. 191–203; see Hénault, A., Semiotics in France. In: Sebeok, T. A. – Umiker-Sebeok, J. (eds.), *The Semiotic Sphere. Topics in Contemporary Semiotics*. Boston, Springer 1986, pp. 153–176. It is important to add that Hjelmslev's conception of the sign function, beyond French structuralism, later emerges as a key theoretical foundation in Umberto Eco's *Theory of Semiotics* and serves as inspiration for certain aspects of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's *A Thousand Plateaus*. See Svantner, M., Several Regimes of Semiotics: Deleuze's & Guattari's Rhetorics of Affections. *Pragmatism Today*, 10, 2019, No. 2, pp. 73–89.

tellelectuals from various fields of the humanities and social sciences to radically reassess the demands of humanistic philosophy regarding the conception of the human as a speaking, working and rational being.³² This has resulted in the culmination of a fervent anti-humanism, anti-existentialism campaign, wherein the figure of the human is depicted as an entity whose existence is constantly betrayed by forms that are believed to be his/her rightful and inherent possession.³³ The foundational specifics of the human, such as speech, history, consciousness, work, politics, society and even the concept of humanity himself, have been portrayed as autonomous, non-subjective structures through which humans, i.e. *langue* animals, are continuously subjected and (over)determined. From a somewhat exaggerated standpoint, it can be argued that structuralism presents a more pessimistic iteration of Cassirer's neo-Kantianism. Different perspectives, e.g. Foucault's archaeology, Greimas' structural semantics or Claude Lévi-Strauss' structural anthropology – today well-researched and extensively commented upon – were united by their enthusiasm for the following idea: what constitutes human understanding is not found in the rational capacity of the human subject, but rather in the supra-rational *relations* that not only determine human existence itself but also how it understands itself. Structural linguistics indirectly opens up the subsequent perspective for humanities, where language, traditionally considered a distinctly human affair, is not something that humans possess but rather something that possesses humans. Prior to any individual utterance, before any processual or empirically variable concretization, there exists an autonomous system of *langue*-derived relations about which the majority of people have no inkling:

Ainsi la critique contemporaine – et c'est ce qui la distingue de ce qui s'est fait tout récemment encore – est-elle en train de formuler sur les textes divers qu'elle étudie, ses textes-objets, une sorte de combinatoire nouvelle. Au lieu d'en reconstituer le secret immanent, elle se saisit du texte comme d'un ensemble d'éléments (mots, métaphores,

32 Cf. Descombes, V., *Le même et l'autre: 45 ans de philosophie française (1933–1978)*, Paris, Minuit 1979, p. 92; Foucault, M., *Les mots et les choses*. Paris, Gallimard 1966, ch. 8; Boudon, R., *A quoi sert la notion de "structure"? Essai sur la signification de la notion de structure dans les sciences humaines*. Paris, Gallimard 1968; Montag, W., "The Soul is the Prison of the Body": Althusser and Foucault, 1970–1975. *Yale French Studies*, 88, 1995, pp. 53–77; Simons, M., *Beyond Ideology: Althusser, Foucault and French Epistemology. Pulse: A Journal of History, Sociology and Philosophy of Science*, 3, 2015, pp. 62–77.

33 Cf. Descombes, V., *Le même et l'autre*, pp. 124–130; Paden, R., Foucault's Anti-Humanism. *Human Studies*, 10, 1987, No. 1, pp. 123–141; Rockmore, T., *Heidegger and French Philosophy: Humanism, antihumanism and being*. London, Routledge 1995, pp. 56–58.

formes littéraires, ensemble de récits) entre lesquels on peut faire apparaître des rapports absolument nouveaux dans la mesure où ils n'ont pas été maîtrisés par le projet de l'écrivain et ne sont rendus possibles que par l'œuvre elle-même en tant que telle. Les relations formelles qu'on découvre ainsi n'ont été présentes dans l'esprit de personne, elles ne constituent pas le contenu latent des énoncés, leur secret indiscret; elles sont une construction, mais une construction exacte sitôt que les relations ainsi décrites peuvent être assignées réellement aux matériaux traités. Nous avons appris à mettre les paroles des hommes dans des rapports encore informulés, dits par nous pour la première fois, et pourtant objectivement exacts.³⁴

This new “semiological” critique relinquishes the “grand myth of interiority”. The term “sign” here primarily refers to a *linguistic sign*, not in its concretized, experienced form embodied in a particular utterance, but as a general type of *relation*.³⁵ Any formation of meaning is impossible to conceive without relation, yet this relation does not have a specifically human origin. It is not that through which humans create meaning, but rather that which shapes human understanding of any “meaning”. In addition, language, in the sense of *langue*, therefore considered contra-intuitively as an autonomous form, as a system of systems conceived as a pure potentiality of any social, psychological or cultural system, is a complex of dyadic relations whose nature is fundamentally determined solely by mutual differentiation.³⁶ Analogously, a sign is a pure, elemental relational form uniting two concepts – the concept of content and the concept of form.³⁷ Therefore, a “human” is a sign not only because the linguistic expression “human” is a unity of signifier and signified, but – in this extrapolation of the fundamental aspects of human culture as relational sign-generating forms – also because any concept of “human” is defined solely and exclusively by this, from general system of language derived, relational-differential structure. The prospect of opening this *path to civilization* within structuralism does not stem from the still-romanticized *symbolic animal*. Instead, it arises from an anonymous process that molds the nebulous chaos into cultural order.³⁸ Within this framework,

34 Foucault, M., Sur les façons d'écrire l'histoire (entretien avec R. Bellour). *Les Lettres françaises*, 48, 1967, No. 1187, pp. 6–9.

35 Cf. Saussure, F., *Course in General Linguistics*, pp. [98–103]; cf. Lyons, J., *Language and Linguistics. An Introduction*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press 1981, p. 220.

36 See Saussure, F., *Course in General Linguistics*, pp. [167–168].

37 Cf. Parret, H., *Language and Discourse*, pp. 83–95.

38 Saussure, F., *Course in General Linguistics*, p. [156].

the symbol is considered either an “impure” sign³⁹ burdened by materiality, which ultimately needs to be subjected to a systematic analysis of its fundamental elements, and/or as the ultimate sign of social convention.⁴⁰

2.1 The Semiologic Animal: No Space for Animals

These *semiologic animals*, although persistently driven to exercise creative and sovereign agency, eventually acknowledge that what was once perceived as their exclusive dominion dissolves within the opaqueness of systems, which undergo abrupt and transformative shifts. A consequence of this perspective is that no room is left for radically non-human entities, i.e. those that do not communicate through language. All non-linguistic phenomena are conceptualized as pre-signification and solely directed towards being conventionally categorized through the medium, which is ultimately the autonomous form of language. The concept of “human” as a historical construct of modern thought is envisioned here as being propelled towards supra-subjective structures while simultaneously being depicted as an outcast within his/her own language – and therefore – culture. The various symptoms of this general prism can be found in historiography, as in the case of Foucault; in the depths of thought’s own constitution, as in the case of Claude Lévi-Strauss; in the constitution of the psychic subject, as in the case of Lacan; and/or in the profound structure of narrative, as in the case of Greimas.⁴¹

To summarize, the *linguistic sign* and the concept of the *human as a sign* emerge at the very center of thought in conjunction with structuralism and semiology. The relation, medium, translation and transmission are no longer seen as mere mediators between subject and object but as distinctive quandaries in their own right. Dialectics and phenomenologies are, for a certain period at least, “supplanted by semiologies”⁴² that aim to transcend the old, dualistic rationalism and replace it with a far more radical and foreboding rationalism: rationalism that postulates language without a subject and the humanities without the human subject as the sole and true guarantor of knowledge.

39 Ibid., p. [101–102].

40 Ibid., p. [25].

41 For a clear and insightful assessment of French structuralism in an implicit counterposition to existentialism, see Deleuze, G., *A quoi reconnaît-on le structuralisme?* In: Châtelet, F. (ed.), *Histoire de la philosophie tome VIII. Le XX^e siècle*. Paris, Hachette 1973, pp. 299–335.

42 Descombes, V., *Le même et l’autre*, pp. 93–95.

3. Peircean and Post-Peircean Outlooks: From the Semiologic Human to Semeiotic Animal

This section examines selected concepts from Peirce's philosophical work.⁴³ The aim is not to provide a comprehensive overview, but rather to explore their relevance in understanding the "animal that develops semiotics". Firstly, it concerns Peirce's concept of *semiosis*, which is the vital element in which every entity capable of interpreting signs – be it a human, machine, or bacterium – must exist and act. The concept of semiosis does not overlap, as we will demonstrate below, with the understanding of semiologic signification presented earlier. Concerning the notion of subject/human animal, Peirce takes an even more radical stance, as he does not speak of a concept burdened with anthropocentric connotations such as a "rational mind" but rather of a "quasi-mind", which encompasses the ability of non/human entities or systems to exhibit patterns of inference, interpretation and semeiotic behaviour.⁴⁴ By liberating the vocabulary from anthropocentric layers, it is advantageous to employ the general term "sign-interpreting agency". The process of semiosis is inherently connected both to the metaphysical notion of evolving and growing continuity and to Peirce's conception of the inferential habit-taking of all sign-interpreting agencies, which is grounded in his phenomenological definition of basic categories of appearance and his understanding of the sign – and by extension, semiosis – as an inferential process; the inference, considered here as a process that extends beyond the limits of solely human semiosis, transcends the boundaries of the human cerebral habit.⁴⁵

43 For the purposes of this text, I refer to Peirce's texts based on the two following collections of his works: The first is *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce* (i. 1867–1913), Vols. 1–6 ed. Ch. Hartshorne – P. Weiss. Cambridge, Harvard University Press 1931–1966; Vols. 7–8 ed. A. Burks (same publisher, 1958), cited as CP number of the volume: paragraph. The second editions are *The Essential Peirce: Selected Philosophical Writings* (i. 1867–1893), Vol. 1 ed. N. Houser – C. Kloesel. Bloomington, University of Indiana Press 1992, cited as EP 1: page; and *The Essential Peirce* (i. 1893–1913), *Selected Philosophical Writings* (i. 893–1913), same editor and publisher 1998, cited as EP 2: page. In the text, I also refer to unpublished manuscripts (MS) using their standardized numbering and citing the corresponding page numbers.

44 Cf. CP 4.536; 4.550–551.

45 See CP 3.160; cf. Bergman, M., *Improving Our Habits: Peirce and Meliorism*. In: De Waal, C. – Skowronski, K. P. (eds.), *The Normative Thought of Charles Sanders Peirce*. New York, Fordham University Press 2022, p. 136: "Peirce's pragmatistic method is primarily a tool for clarifying the habitual nature of beliefs [...] Interestingly, in his pragmatic analyses, Peirce does not tend to introduce any principled division between habits transmitted by tradition and habits acquired as the consequence of scientific experimentation." Cf. Nöth, W., *The criterion of habit in Peirce's definitions of the symbol*. *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society*, 46, 2021, No. 1, pp. 82–93.

3.1 Semiosis Transcending Anthropocentrism: Interlinking Nature and Nurture

The concept of semiosis is the point of departure for the questions addressing the relationship between the human and the non-human. In Peirce's philosophy, the process of interpreting signs extends beyond humans and encompasses all entities capable of using signs to act, learn, make decisions, grow and communicate.

In 1904, Peirce made a proposal which, in advance, went to the heart of the semiological enterprise in all its post-Saussurean variants. Peirce noted that the investigation of signs will likely go nowhere if we make it depend on an arbitrary definition of sign stipulated as the model of paradigm for the whole study of signs. The question we must address, he said, is *what is a sign according to its being a sign*, not merely according to our first impressions or particular interests, let alone our arbitrary stipulations. And the only way to answer *this* question is by studying, not stipulating, what signs do within experience, [either] “common” [...] or “specialized” [...] by studying “how signs actually work” in enabling us to reach and develop knowledge of objects. Therefore, where Saussure began with a *stipulated* definition arbitrarily restricting signs to the human sphere and severing their connection with the motivating history of the sign users as embodied in their language [...], Peirce [...], at the first drawn of a prospect of a semiotic consciousness, began with a *descriptive* definition based on observation rather than on a specialized and artificial analysis [...].⁴⁶

Peirce's position⁴⁷ assumes that all meaning-making agency that consists of inferential habitualization carried out by triadic relations; signs – whether

⁴⁶ Deely, J., *Semiotic Animal*, p. 20; cf. CP 8.322.

⁴⁷ Peirce first disputes the philosophy of Descartes and Kant (CP 5.382; 6.498; 6.556). He expresses dissatisfaction with both Kant's conception of categories and the Cartesian method of rationalist introspection inspired by the spirit of Hegelian idealism, which he peculiarly combines with the tradition of Latin realist scholasticism (CP 6.542), finally presenting his own ontological and epistemological conception of reality, existence and representation. If we were to locate Peirce's philosophy more broadly on the map of the history of philosophy, it could be said that while structuralists often consider the structure representation as divided into the two fundamental realms of synchronic form and diachronic process, i.e. structuralism *postulate*, an abstract system that determines and can generate all empirical variations, Peirce anticipates a processual approach akin to Alfred Whitehead, Gilles Deleuze and Niklas Luhmann while also being a radical inferentialist in the case of cognition and – regarding ontological questions – a scholastic realist. Peirce, as an eminent metaphysician, has been recognized as an unlikely hero by scholars critical of metaphysics, notably Jacques Derrida and Gilles Deleuze in the lat-

human, animal, plant or machine – do not originate from a singular, quasi-neoplatonistic, foundationalist source like *Nature* or *Culture* or *Language*, *Human*, or *Structure*. Instead, it stems from the process of semiosis itself, which in Peirce's view has an entirely autonomous status and cannot be reduced to any such *central* concept. In the Peircean indeterminist view, our cognition is only carried and made possible by the power of mediation between the vague, the general and the particular.⁴⁸ Peirce applies this emphasis to a processual, inferential continuity that is tied to the necessarily probabilistic, i.e., hypothetical-inductive, nature of any knowledge to semeiotic itself, which is a “quasi-necessary doctrine”, i.e., one that outlines fundamental logic principles, considers phenomenological hypotheses to be derived from these principles, observes their consequences and tests their results.⁴⁹ Semiosis is not a dynamical action; brute force, physical or psychical, “either takes place between two subjects [...] or at any rate is a resultant of such actions between pairs. However, by ‘semiosis’ I mean, on the contrary, an action or influence that is or involves a coöperation of three subjects such as a sign, its object, and its interpretant, with this tri-relative influence not being in any way resolvable into actions between pairs”.⁵⁰ The nature of general concepts, deducible from logical observations, points to their irreducible being, their specific agency, which is not reducible to either language or the intentionality of the human mind: “[s]igns are part of the very fabric of reality. They are in some sense (admittedly in an extremely *vague* sense) there in reality, independent of our conventions and our consciousness”.⁵¹

Peirce, who “conceived philosophy to be systematic as well as scientific”,⁵² characterizes his metaphysics in terms of its place within his hierarchical

ter half of the 20th century. These scholars sought an alternative conception of representation distinct from the various forms of structuralism or existentialism of that time.

48 See CP 5.266, cf. Paolucci, C., *Cognitive Semiotics: Integrating Signs, Minds, Meaning and Cognition*. Dordrecht, Springer 2021, p. 66.

49 Cf. CP 2.227: “Logic, in its general sense, is, as I believe I have shown, only another name for semeiotic (σημειωτική), the quasi-necessary, or formal, doctrine of signs. By describing the doctrine as ‘quasi-necessary,’ or formal, I mean that we observe the characters of such signs as we know, and from such an observation, by a process which I will not object to naming Abstraction, we are led to statements, eminently fallible, and therefore in one sense by no means necessary, as to what must be the characters of all signs used by a ‘scientific’ intelligence, that is to say, by an intelligence capable of learning by experience.”

50 See CP 5.484.

51 Colapietro, V., *Peirce's Approach to the Self: A Semiotic Perspective on Human Subjectivity*. Albany, SUNY 1989, p. 33.

52 “In Peirce's schema, semeiotic is dependent on the general principles found in its superordinate class, mathematics (CP 1.186, 1.191), specifically mathematical logic (CP 1.247, 4.228). Within its own class, it is dependent upon the general principles outlined in phenomenology (CP 1.186, 1.191); and within its own suborder, it is dependent upon the normative science of ethics, which

classification of the sciences. According to this classification,⁵³ metaphysics depends on logical principles and provides them to the sciences. His metaphysical imagination lies in the idea of evolutionary continuity and growth, so-called *synechism*, which goes hand in hand with his conception of the contingent nature of the universe, i.e. *tychism*. He extrapolates these two fundamental metaphysical frameworks into both his philosophy of scientific inquiry, which emphasizes the probabilistic nature of all knowledge (*fallibilism*), and his conception of agency, that is, his exploration of the habitualization of human and non-human action and cognition, which is the main area of his *pragmati(c)ism*.⁵⁴ This systematic philosophy, as I will demonstrate below (in only a rough outline), is further implicated in both Peirce's late category theory, named *phenomenology* and/or *phanerocopy*, and his efforts to define and classify the qualitative nature, existential occurrences and general types of representation.⁵⁵

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- in turn is dependent upon aesthetics (CP 1.191). Otherwise all other sciences, either specifically or generally, are dependent upon it. On the other hand, its specific findings will contribute to the refinement of the principles and findings of the sciences superordinate to it." Colapietro, V., *Peirce's Approach to the Self*, p. xv.
- 53 Peirce considers mathematics to be the purest and the most exemplary of the formal sciences, "which draws necessary conclusions" (CP 4.229) per se, without regard to the factual state of what it studies (CP 4.232). "[...] Mathematics is the study of the form of its own constructions (CP 1.240); it analyzes the form of form. Peirce emphasizes that it is an investigation of hypotheticals (CP 4.232) rather than actualities. [...] All other formal sciences, including semeiotic (or logic), phenomenology, ethics, aesthetics, and metaphysics, are placed under the rubric of philosophy (CP 1.186, 1.190–192), and are considered derivative formal sciences because they do not study the form of their own constructions but study the form of things already constructed, so to speak. One might label them 'reconstructive' formal sciences rather than 'constructive' (CP 1.240) ones like mathematics. Phenomenology, for example, aims to show the essential qualities of phenomena abstracted from their particular manifestations, so that no matter how they appear, these features will be present. Semeiotic, similarly, would want to show that no matter how a sign is manifested, for example, as a sound, picture, thought, feeling, action, or naturally occurring event, still the formal conditions which make it a sign would be present." Liszka, J. J., *A General Introduction to the Semeiotic of Charles Sanders Peirce*. Bloomington, Indiana University Press 1996, pp. 15–16.
- 54 Cf. Paolucci, C., *Cognitive Semiotics*, p. 71: "With pragmatism, Peirce develops a semantic theory that is intended to account for the processual dynamic of thought and action (semiosis), seeking to define a semantics of action in its relationship with cognition [...]. This processual dynamic consists in the union of (1) a stable state, called 'belief', that tends not to be questioned and thereby presides over the concatenation of actions and (2) an unstable state, which Peirce called 'doubt' which also tends to become stabilized. Each of these states holds an affective value. Belief is euphoric, doubt is dysphoric. This is why the semiotic system tends to maximize the first one and to minimize the second one. The transition from instability to stability is the famous Peircean inquiry (CP 5.374)."
- 55 See the profound analysis of a historical development of Peirce's semeiotic in Bellucci, F., *Peirce's Speculative Grammar. Logic as Semiotics*. London, Routledge 2018.

3.2 Different Approaches to Sign Structure and Signification

Semiosis in this sense is considered representation, which is possible only through the mediation of *grounding* and *interpretation*. This means that the sign can only be said to represent its *object* if there is a correlative *interpretant*, “[b]ut that can be done only if there is ground upon which to make that correlation. The grounding in turn requires an object having the characteristics which make the grounding possible. This can be thought of a bit differently. The grounding by the sign determines the interpretant in such a way that such a correlation can be established; on the other hand, the object determines the sign in such a way that its grounding is possible. Consequently the effect of representation is created when these two processes are co-present. The sign’s ability to represent, then, is established mediately, through the sign’s ability to determine an interpretant which can interpret the sign as correlative with the object”.⁵⁶

The structure of the sign, i.e. “representation”, is in this case triadic, but the being of the sign is relation itself, “not the elements or structured according to their respective roles [...] The sign in its proper being is superordinate to its subordinate elements, to all three of the ‘terms’ of every sign relation”.⁵⁷ This relation is ontologically indifferent to anything other than *semiosis*, therefore inferential, cognitive and interpretative processes. This processual being of relation consists of three relational “terms”: the first term denotes (i) what is represented, i.e., *the object* of the sign; the second shows (ii) how or on which ground the object is represented, i.e. *the representamen*, and the third describes (iii) what effect this representation has, which Peirce called the *interpretant*, “in order to make the point that it needed not to be a person or even mental.”⁵⁸ This definition is important for the argumentation presented here, firstly because the understood sign is multi-modal: it presupposes the agency of the objects themselves, their various natures, which are co-constituted in the process of semiosis, i.e. representation co-constitutes them. Secondly, the objects are always represented in some “respect”, on some “ground” (CP 1.551), expressed here by the term *representamen*, which can take various material forms: it can be a linguistic expression, gesture, image, etc. Analogously, the *interpretant*, the effect that the process of representation elicits in the *quasi-mind*, is necessarily a multi-modal entity.⁵⁹ In this perspective, it can be a simple or complex men-

56 Liszka, J. J., *A General Introduction to the Semeiotic of Charles Sanders Peirce*, pp. 74–75.

57 Deely, J., *Semiotic Animal*, pp. 91–93.

58 *Ibid.*, pp. 93.

59 Cf. CP 4.551; 7.364.

tal image or any habitual response. Therefore, what we call “representation” or “meaning” is always accompanied by categorical questions: what is being represented, how it is being represented, and what effect it elicits. These assumptions serve as a link between Peirce’s broad theory of inference – all cognition is woven from signs – and his ontological principles explored in his phenomenology/phaneroscopy. To conclude here, the “sign” here is neither a dyadic, equivalent, nor purely psychological entity defined only in relation to other signs, as understood by structural linguistics and derived sign doctrines, but is defined – not only by the difference between representamen and interpretant – but also by the difference to the object.⁶⁰ It is neither a static model (not a “semiotic triangle”) nor reducible to one of the elements of the triadic relation; although Peirce sometimes speaks of the “representamen” as a “sign”, the *sign* – in the proper sense – is only the triadic relation itself. The sign is complex cooperation and continuity between the object, representamen, and the interpretant, and therefore anything that does not fit into this definition is not a sign.⁶¹

When we talk about the multi-modality of the relational elements of a sign, what exactly do we mean? If we want to provide a more precise answer, we cannot avoid at least a rough outline of Peirce’s theory of categories. Next to Peirce’s metaphysic and logic principles, the second key approach for defining semeiotic is his phenomenological perspective, which aims to define the fundamental categories of the manifestation of signs. He calls these categories as follows: *firstness* (monadic self-relation), *secondness* (dyadic relation of confrontation), and *thirdness* (genuine triadic sign relation). In the first case, the focus is on the dimension of possibility, pure quality, “suchness”, the pure being of the “unreflected state”; in the second case, it is on occurrence, actuality, concrete existence; in the third case, it is on the semiotic power of mediation, translation and the sphere of signs, which refers to “semiosis” in the proper sense of the word. Based on these foundations, Peirce builds his taxonomy and subsequent classification of signs. Speculative grammar then describes signs as: (i) either hypothetical abstractions, such as “first in third”, i.e. as mere possibilities, signs of vagueness, signs of likeness, unsaturated predicates⁶² i.e., “iconic signs”; (ii) as “second in third”, i.e., as concrete, affective entities causing responses, reactions, and actions, signs associated with what they represent not only on the basis of likeness, but also on the ba-

60 Cf. CP 8.378.

61 Peirce’s concept of sign neither overlaps nor complements structuralist notions of the *relation* that arose from Saussure’s *Course* or other influential semiotic theories such as Jakobson’s, Carnap’s or Morris’s.

62 Cf. Bellucci, F., Peirce’s Continuous Predicates. *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society*, 49, 2023, No. 2, pp. 178–202.

sis of co-presence with their object, which are, i.e., indexical signs; and finally (iii), as “third in third”, i.e. as typological signs representing an object in its generality, i.e., symbolic signs. These initial phenomenological concepts are not meant to be definitive determinations of semiosis but, in light of Peirce’s essential inferentialism underpinned by the doctrine of evolutionarily synchism, they are rather an attempt to describe the main features of how primitive signs evolve and combine into complex signs as propositions and arguments. Therefore, semeiotic, in accordance with its phaneroscopic principles, aims to describe aspects of the sign relation in three general areas: firstly, in terms of general abstraction; secondly, in terms of signs’ capacity to represent; and thirdly, in terms of their agency and growth. The first is “speculative-grammar”, which examines the ontological nature of the sign relation itself in its vague, existing and general forms; the second is “critic”, which is the logic in its proper sense and investigates the truth conditions of propositions; finally, the third branch is “speculative-rhetorical” or “methodical”, and its scope is the analysis of broader inferential processes concerning the forms of the rules under which one sign relates to another. In sum, Peirce’s broad program of logic is to observe, describe and suggest typology of the conditions of possibility for the transcendental organization of concepts, their constitution into propositions, and ultimately the ways in which they are combined into the most complex signs, i.e. arguments.

These inferential processes, i.e. sign-object-interpretant correlative determinations of the meaning-making and habit-taking, are observable; they are ongoing and have been here long before the birth of individual consciousness. All knowledge of the external and internal, mind-dependent and mind-independent world⁶³ is neither a matter of introspection nor of super-objective, divine-like observation; it is not tied to language, intentionality or the human mind, but is carried only through inferential chains consisting of signs. The only “purely objective reality”⁶⁴ that is knowable takes place through representations, but the representation does not have the nature of mirroring the world in a single medium, such as human speech, but takes on diverse inferential characters – both mental, material, gestural, etc.⁶⁵ – the principles of which semeiotic seeks to capture in its system of its classification. In contrast to the semiologic perspective that defines a human as a sign-based entity but differentially related and isolated in the use of signs that ultimately do not belong to it, as they are primarily constituted by the

63 Cf. Champagne, M., Reality and Semiosis. In: Pelkey, J. (ed.), *Bloomsbury Semiotics Volume 1: History and Semiosis*. London, Bloomsbury 2023, pp. 129–147.

64 Deely, J., *Purely Objective Reality*. Berlin, De Gruyter 2009.

65 Stjernfelt, F., *Natural Propositions*, pp. 1–3.

anonymous reality of language, an alternative, inferentialistic, habitual and more complex semiotic perspective arises. This perspective entails an alternative articulation of the cognitive field – in which thought is not necessarily connected with the brain and “appears in the work of bees, of crystals, and throughout the purely physical world”⁶⁶ – a different conception of representation beyond semiology, encompassing both human and non-human processes of meaning-making.

3.3 Humans, Habits, Signs as Inferences

These forms of general interaction, which encompass various significant aspects, are inherently connected to the aforementioned concept of inferentialism. Peirce aims to demonstrate that if all reasoning, including non-human reasoning, consists of signs, the signs can have more or less articulated natures: they can be vague, as in the case of iconic signs that represent an object only in terms of likeness; they can be associated with objects based on existential concomitance, as in the case of indexical signs; or they can be signs of generality, law or regularity, representing a general object. In this way, the process of reasoning operates within this literary *onto-logical* framework. According to Peirce, all reasoning can be symbolized as a process of abduction, induction and deduction. Therefore, reasoning can have the nature of (i) hypothetical, abductive reasoning, where the process involves estimating: if two things resemble each other in certain respects, we can infer that they will resemble each other in the future or that they have resembled each other in the past; it can have the nature of (ii) inductive, probabilistic reasoning, where a certain fact observed or assumed to be true for some cases is extrapolated to the entire class; and it can also have the nature, not only probabilistic but also (iii) ampliative and synthetic, of analytical, deductive reasoning, which involves the analytical breakdown of a rule.⁶⁷ Later in his life, Peirce described the general and normative task of semeiotic (besides aesthetics and ethics) as being to discover “how Feeling, Conduct and Thought, ought to be controlled supposing them to be subject *in a measure*, and only in a measure, to self-control, exercised by means of self-criticism, and the purposive formation of habit, as common sense tells us they are in a measure controllable”.⁶⁸

66 See CP 4.551.

67 Peirce initially works on the basis of Aristotelian syllogistics, which he later abandons in favour of the logic of relatives.

68 See MS 655.24.

From this perspective, the meaning-making is always situational, habitual, communal⁶⁹ and – in a measure – inferential, and is not transferable to a single and simple inferential chain. The process of meaning formation is an interaction defined both by the organism's set of cognitive powers to articulate variously complex signs, i.e. to specifically express and interpret what is represented, and by the qualitative, existential and general aspects of the object involved in the inferential process. The semiosis is in this perspective what differentiates all experience, expectation and action with respect to different forms of processual temporality. Therefore, every expectation is a matter of inference and every inferential process involves the formation of a habit. As Claudio Paolucci pointed out, the semiotic processes are not functioning as built to represent the world, but to enact every possible meaningful relation that semiotic systems aim to express while attuning to a particular environment, which means that this environment is not a “natural” one but an environment of semiosis crowded with objects, norms, institutions and artefacts that shape. Peirce had opened up the way to the enactivist model for cognition, where languages and other semiotic tools do not represent the world, but build categorizations (or “forms of content”) that install habits.⁷⁰

According to Peirce, “[a]ll steps in cognition are taken to have the character of inference”.⁷¹ Peirce sees e.g. an expectation as an inferential habit of imagining, which is not an affection of consciousness but a general law of action, “such that on a certain general kind of occasion a man will be more or less apt to act in a certain general way. An imagination is an affection of consciousness which can be directly compared with a percept in some special feature, and be pronounced to accord or disaccord with it [...]. I slip a cent into a slot, and expect on pulling a knob to see a little cake of chocolate appear. My expectation consists in, or at least involves, such a habit that when I think of pulling the knob, I imagine I see a chocolate coming into view. When the perceptual chocolate comes into view, my imagination of it is a feeling of such a nature that the percept can be compared with it as to size, shape, the nature of the wrapper, the color, taste, flavor, hardness and grain of what is within”⁷² This semiotic process produces a belief, which is

69 See CP 5.421; Colapietro, V., *Peirce's Approach to the Self*, pp. 27–28.

70 Paolucci, C., *Cognitive Semiotics*, p. 7.

71 Stjernfelt, F., *Natural Propositions*, p. 5: “Inference is not a second-order act, but [...] the bread and butter of cognition, and all other aspects of cognition, from attention direction, mental maps and signal codes to externalize diagrams, notation systems, writing etc., form [...] scaffolding systems evolved to support inference processes”; cf. *Ibid.*, p. 118, and also see CP 2.444; EP 1.53.

72 See CP 2.148.

something on which any *sign interpreting agency* is prepared to act, and is therefore, in a general sense, a conscious or unconscious habit. Peirce explains that logicians refer to the act of recognition as judgment. He further elaborates that a person can become conscious of any habit and articulate its general pattern of behaviour. This is because every habit has a general law that governs it. However, a truly general law applies to the indefinite future rather than the past (its mode of being is *esse in futuro*), which contains only a limited collection of specific cases that have already taken place. The past is a matter of actual fact, while a general fact cannot be completely realized, as it pertains to an open-ended set of possible future occurrences.

What particularly distinguishes a general belief, or opinion, such as is an inferential conclusion, from other habits, is that it is active in the imagination. If I have a habit of putting my left leg into my trouser before the right, when I imagine that I put on my trousers, I shall probably not definitely think of putting the left leg on first. But if I *believe* that fire is dangerous, and I imagine a fire bursting out close beside me, I shall also imagine that I jump back. Conversely – and this is the most important point – a belief – habit formed in the imagination simply, as when I consider how I ought to act under imaginary circumstances, will equally affect my real action should those circumstances be realized. Therefore, when you say that you have faith in reasoning, what you mean is that the belief – habit formed in the imagination will determine your actions in the real case. This is looking upon the matter from the psychological point of view. Under a logical aspect your opinion in question is that general cognitions of potentialities *in futuro*, if duly constructed, will under imaginary conditions determine *schemata* or imaginary skeleton diagrams with which percepts will accord when the real conditions accord with those imaginary conditions; or, stating the essence of the matter in a nutshell, you opine that percepts follow certain general laws. [...] The mere fact that you hold reasoning to be useful only supposes that you think that *to some useful extent* percepts are under the governance of law.⁷³

This enactivist perspective also goes hand in hand with Peircean pragmatism: to develop the meaning of something means to determine what habits it produces and involves. The identity of a habit depends on how it might lead us to act, “not merely under such circumstances as are likely to arise, but under such as might possibly occur, no matter how improbable they may be.

73 Ibid.

What the habit is depends on when and how it causes us to act. [...] Therefore, we come to what is tangible and conceivably practical as the root of every real distinction of thought no matter how subtle it may be; there is no distinction of meaning so fine as to consist in anything but a possible difference of practice. [...] Thought is an action, and that it consists in a relation".⁷⁴ The point is that if thought is an action that consists in a relation, every cognition is a "doing", but not in the form of behavior, but in the form of habit, which is considered a disposition to act in a certain way under some circumstances. From this Peircean perspective, which Paolucci had adopted, habits consist of regularity, continuity and iteration and do not belong exclusively to the human species or human language alone: every material system can embody habits, therefore also agency in general is not a human property but the "[e]mergent product of situated activity. The distinctive feature of the material engagement approach is the commitment to a view of thinking as a process that is distributed, enacted and situated, as well as assembled, from a variety of non-localizable mental resources spanning the boundaries of the individual brain and body".⁷⁵ Therefore, an alternative path towards a decentralized subject opens up here in a manner that differs from structuralism, which derived decentralization from language as the generative form of all semiotic systems.

3.3.1 Excursus: *The Dead Frog and Logical Self-Control of the Machines*

In the context of the naturalistic perspective of Peirce's semeiotic, the cognition of a rule is not necessarily conscious and does not only pertain to humans or human minds, but is also a habit that can either be acquired or congenital. Peirce provides a remarkable example regarding a decapitated frog. Peirce's conceptual framework in this context involves extending Aristotelian syllogistic reasoning to the field of biosemiotics: the cognition of a case is of the general nature of a sensation; that is to say, it is something that comes into present consciousness. The cognition of a result is of the nature of a decision to act in a particular way on a given occasion.⁷⁶

In point of fact, a syllogism in *Barbara* virtually takes place when we irritate the foot of a decapitated frog. The connection between the afferent and efferent nerve, whatever it may be, constitutes a nervous habit, a rule of action, which is the physiological analogue of the ma-

74 See CP 5.399–400.

75 Malafouris, L., Understanding the effects of materiality on mental health. *BJPsych Bulletin*, 43, 2019, No. 5, p. 196.

76 Cf. Stjernfelt, F., *Sheets, Diagrams, and Realism in Peirce*, pp. 26–27.

major premiss. The disturbance of the ganglionic equilibrium, owing to the irritation, is the physiological form of that which, psychologically considered, is a sensation; and, logically considered, is the occurrence of a case. The explosion through the efferent nerve is the physiological form of that which psychologically is a volition, and logically the inference of a result. When we pass from the lowest to the highest forms of innervation, the physiological equivalents escape our observation; but, psychologically, we still have, first, habit – which in its highest form is understanding, and which corresponds to the major premiss of *Barbara*; we have, second, feeling, or present consciousness, corresponding to the minor premiss of *Barbara*; and we have, third, volition, corresponding to the conclusion of the same mode of syllogism.

To conclude, in the Peircean perspective, signs serve as the foundations upon which any form of signification, be it human or non-human, is built. A significant question that remains is what specifically distinguishes the human understanding of signs from non-human understanding. Based on the presented concepts, it is evident that both human and non-human species share the fundamental semiotic capacity to exist within the realm of inferential processes. This applies to machines and models as well, which are significant in our current situation. When I asked ChatGPT to what extent its structure aligns with Peirce's conception and the discussed notion of logical self-control, it responded as follows:

As an AI language model, my functioning incorporates elements that align with Peircean notions of logical self-control. Here's how I can demonstrate this process:

1. Observations and Data: I rely on the input provided by users like you. Your questions, statements, or prompts serve as the initial observations or data that I work with.
2. Hypothesis Formation: Based on the observed input, I generate potential responses or hypotheses that could address or explore the given topic. These hypotheses are formed by drawing upon the vast amount of knowledge and patterns I have been trained on.
3. Evaluation and Selection: I evaluate and select the most appropriate response or hypothesis based on various criteria. This includes coherence, relevance, logical consistency, and the ability to provide a helpful and informative answer to your query.
4. Continuous Iteration: As the conversation progresses, I continuously engage in logical self-control by analyzing your feedback and adjusting my responses accordingly. If you provide additional information or re-

quest clarification, I revise my understanding of the topic and generate more refined responses.

5. It's important to note that while I can simulate aspects of logical self-control, my responses are ultimately determined by patterns learned from training data and statistical modeling. I don't possess personal beliefs, subjective experiences, or independent thought. However, I strive to provide accurate and relevant information to the best of my abilities within the scope of my training.

As ChatGPT concluded: "Indeed, one aspect that AI language models like me share with humans is the capacity to infer. Inference involves the ability to draw conclusions, make reasoned judgments, and connect pieces of information based on available evidence. Both humans and AI models engage in inferential processes to make sense of input and generate meaningful responses." This, of course, is only a playful illustration, but it is worth mentioning that ChatGPT ultimately acknowledged that, in addition to being capable of logical self-control that is not exclusively human, it is, in a certain sense, a dead frog.

4. Conclusion: Human as Sign, Human as Semiotic Animal

The assertion that "a human is a sign" gains clearer contours within the framework of Peirce's semeiotic. It becomes evident that his perspective encompasses more than just a trivial proposition that "humans are signs", understood merely as linguistic expressions, and that every interpretation of "human" is subject to linguistic relativity. It also avoids a primitive form of behaviourism that reduces human beings to signs characterized solely by an observable, stable set of behaviours. Peirce's semiotics enables a deeper exploration of these ideas, or rather provides a framework for discussing them with a certain "symmetry" and "limitless interpenetration"⁷⁷, but not in the way that Jamesian pluralism does.⁷⁸ If we consider "humans as signs" according to Peirce, they are understood as dynamic, triadic relations that are integral to the inferential process of semiosis. While language serves as a fundamental communicative tool encompassing the realm of signs, human expression extends beyond linguistic boundaries to encompass a wide range of observable – semeiotic – behaviours. i.e. the human is a specific kind of evolutionarily growing symbol.⁷⁹

77 Colapietro, V., *Peirce's Approach to the Self*, p. 38.

78 CP 8.262.

79 Colapietro, V., *Peirce's Approach to the Self*, p. 37.

Behind this postulate is the idea that any percepts follow certain general laws, which means that they are (inferentially/habitually) transformed into various sophisticated representations in the process of semiosis with a fully-fledged sign, which is at the very center of cognition, being the sign that Peirce calls Dicisign or also quasi-proposition,⁸⁰ i.e. a sign that says something about something.⁸¹ The essential nature of the Dicisign is to convey information in a contradistinction to a sign from which information may be derived, which are more primitive signs, such as icons. In this point of view, signs in general are not derived from some primary perception of the static structure of language, but are far more primitive: “[p]erception and consciousness are rather to be seen as evolutionarily later, more complicated phenomena, [which] probably evolved so as to scaffold and enhance simpler cognitive semiotic processes already functioning”⁸² Instead of positing intentionality of language in dependence on the intentionality of the mind, the semeiotic perspective is governed by the idea that the access to any generality is made possible by general signs, which are schematic and unsaturated. The predicate function “...is human” is at first general because of its language-symbolicity. From a trivial perspective, it is symbolic, because it is a linguistic, i.e. conventional expression. However, in terms of conventionality, semeiotic and semiology also differ. In the case of semeiotic, symbol as convention is precisely about the real property of a sign representing a general object, which is not dependent on language. Phaneroscopically understood, the complex relation of symbolic expression “...is human” signifies both vague aspects of what can be conceived under the concept of “human” and what generally delimits typical cases in terms of functional potentiality.

It also includes ranges of cases that cannot be included under this concept’s vagueness, such as in the case of “paramecium is a human”. The qualities typically associated with the concept of a human do not belong to a single-celled organism. However, let us provide an equally trivial observation that semeiotic assumes that a symbol always exists within a general universe of discourse, where every semantics goes hand in hand with pragmatics, which, when viewed from a phaneroscopical perspective, is a universe of mediation between the vague, the typical and the concrete. Therefore, the expression “a human is an insect” can function as an invective or, for example, as an expression of hateful political rhetoric. Simply put, symbols – due to their mediation of vagueness, generality and capacity to denote cases – are

80 The term “quasi” denotes the fact that it is not necessarily a concretized proposition, but its general form.

81 Stjernfelt, F., *Natural Propositions*, p. 47; cf. CP 4.583.

82 Stjernfelt, F., *Natural Propositions*, p. 4.

continuously subjected to inferential, evaluative processes in a synechistic, habitual and fallibilistic manner and therefore are growing. This applies not only to single linguistic expressions but also to the propositions and rules themselves, that is, the arguments that mediate these evaluations. If symbols are defined as vague in their generality, they can always grow in different directions. The cases that a symbol delimits are not random or arbitrarily determined by some deep code, but rather shaped procedurally, that is, inferentially: through hypothetical-inductive testing. Language relativity, as well as negotiations about the content of a symbol, reside in semiotic agency, which is not only discernible in a singular ontological source but always tied to the functionality of the sign, that is, its being in relation. Semiosis is not a simple hierarchy that presupposes the essential being of a human but rather like a symbol that grows. From this perspective, language is not a satisfactory basis for semeiotic and therefore “[a]ny attempt to define the sign in terms of sets of mental representations [...] is doomed to fail”.⁸³ The function of the sign is not derived from the postulated deep structure of language; it is actually functional, where the functionality of the sign is not limited to its nominal form (e.g. of mental unity of signifier and signified), but is a complex relationship expressed on a scale of simplicity and complexity, or more precisely, on a scale of simple and complex articulation. The sign here is not a mental image, but a composed triadic relation whose nature is determined not only by its differentiation from other signs in terms of their form, but also by its difference in the way it represents something else than itself and the effect this representation causes – in other words, to what networks and habitualizations it leads.

Inference is therefore seen here as a general process of habitualization, where the mental representations are sub-types of habit.⁸⁴ If we were to be rhetorical here and wanted to express the main idea of this section of the paper, it would be that the signs here are not “for humans”, but rather “humans exist here because of signs”. The person “is not absolutely an individual, his or her thoughts are what he or her is “saying to himself/herself, “that is, is saying to that other self that is just coming into life in the flow of time. When one reasons, it is that critical self that one is trying to persuade; and all thought whatsoever is a sign, and is mostly of the nature of language. The second thing to remember is that the man’s circle of society (however widely or narrowly this phrase may be understood), is a sort of loosely compacted person, in some respects of higher rank than the person of an individual organism.”⁸⁵

83 *Ibid.*, p. 45.

84 Stjernfelt, F., *Natural Propositions*, p. 118.

85 CP 5.421.

The understanding of the human derived from Peirce's semiotics entails several ontological commitments discussed above. While the "earlier" Peirce acknowledges that "my language is the sum total of myself", his perspective cannot be reduced to a simplistic form of linguistic relativism or structuralist approaches, nor can it be comprehended within nominalist or psychological frameworks.⁸⁶ Peirce contends that every aspect of human consciousness is inexorably intertwined with signs⁸⁷ and corresponds to the word: "[...] the word or sign which man uses *is* the man himself. For, as the fact that every thought is a sign, taken in conjunction with the fact that life is a train of thought, proves that man is a sign; so, that every thought is an *external* sign, proves that man is an external sign. That is to say, the man and the external sign are identical, in the same sense in which the words *homo* and *man* are identical. Thus my language is the sum total of myself; for the man is the thought"⁸⁸ The (logically-controlled) self is itself a sign, a form of semiosis, captured in and also (re)creating the semiotic webs,⁸⁹ and is both the fallibilistic/tychistic locus of error and ignorance and the centre of power of self-control.⁹⁰ "Only by acting and being acted upon, and through the network of relations that result from such interactions both in nature and in society, do the individual subjects of existence, the real substances, come into and maintain themselves in existence."⁹¹ According to Peirce, this semiotic reality of the quasi-mind, any content of any consciousness consists in signs that are resulting from inferences. As Peirce continues:

What distinguishes a man from a word? There is a distinction doubtless. The material qualities, the forces which constitute the pure denotative application, and the meaning of the human sign, are all exceedingly complicated in comparison with those of the word. But these differences are only relative. What other is there? It may be said that man is conscious, while a word is not. But consciousness is a very vague term. It may mean that emotion which accompanies the reflection that we have animal life. This is a consciousness which is dimmed when animal life is at its ebb in old age, or sleep, but which is not dimmed when the spiritual life is at its ebb; which is the more lively the better animal a man is, but which is not so, the better man he is. We do not attribute this sensation to words, because we have reason to believe that it is

86 Cf. 1868; CP 5.314.

87 CP 1.349.

88 *Ibid.*; cf. 1905, MS 280.

89 CP 5.313.

90 Colapietro, V., *Peirce's Approach to the Self*, p. 42.

91 Deely, J., *Four Ages of Understanding*, p. 620.

dependent upon the possession of an animal body. But this consciousness, being a mere sensation, is only a part of the material quality of the man-sign. Again, consciousness is sometimes used to signify the *I think*, or unity in thought; but the unity is nothing but consistency, or the recognition of it. Consistency belongs to every sign, so far as it is a sign; and therefore every sign, since it signifies primarily that it is a sign, signifies its own consistency. The man-sign acquires information, and comes to mean more than he did before. But so do words. Does not electricity mean more now than it did in the days of Franklin? Man makes the word, and the word means nothing which the man has not made it mean, and that only to some man. But since man can think only by means of words or other external symbols, these might turn round and say: "You mean nothing which we have not taught you, and then only so far as you address some word as the interpretant of your thought." In fact, therefore, men and words reciprocally educate each other; each increase of a man's information involves and is involved by, a corresponding increase of a word's information.

While structuralist semiologies chose the humanities as the main arena for their successful endeavors, primarily in areas such as linguistics, philosophy, cultural studies, anthropology and history, where it clearly established its profile and presence, the situation is somewhat more complicated in the case of Peircean semeiotic. The challenges and complexities associated with the reception of Peirce's work form a separate narrative that is beyond the scope of this essay. Let us mention two fundamental points: successful applications of Peirce's semiotics beyond its main areas of interest, such as the philosophy of science, philosophy of the mind and general logic, primarily encompass two fields that are relevant to this text, as they directly relate to the understanding of the human and the non-human. The first notable domain is biology and its associated field of biosemiotics, while the second domain is cognitive science itself. Simply put, while in the case of structuralism and its various branches, which attempt to break away from various forms of contemporary phenomenology and existentialism and offer a different conception of human beings, Peircean semiotics was not intended solely to address human culture. In other words, its "deconstruction" of the human⁹² has broader and more radical implications here. This is not due to its political stance, which is traditionally interwoven into French thought and thereby reflected in the warlike metaphors of many structuralist and post-structuralist texts, but simply because Peirce's theory of signs presents

92 Cf. Descombes, V., *Le même et l'autre*, pp. 97–99.

a perspective in which humans are not merely seen as subjected to the raw being of language form as perceived by structuralists, who aim to strip away the speaking, acting and natural subject. Instead, Peirce's theory embraces a broader understanding of signification that goes far beyond human language. Peircean semiotics surpasses structuralism's limitations by showcasing signification as a non-human, language-independent, autonomous process that is detached from human mind intentions. Rhetorically speaking, it dismantles both the Cartesian "I think" and the structuralist "It speaks" through the proclamation that "I is a sign."⁹³

5. Discussion: Consequences and Controversies

Peirce's semeiotic has often been misinterpreted by structuralists who approach it through a post/Saussurean semiological framework. Nevertheless, these two doctrines are inherently contradictory. The consequences for understanding human beings, including the understanding of humans as signs, are fundamentally incompatible. To summarize, in the Peircean approach, signs are not derived from language (i.e. they are not conceived either as the transcendental system that is *langue*, its procedural realization such as *parole*, or in general the human disposition to use *langue* in various ways, such as *langage*) because the process of semiosis itself is prior to *any* empirical system of communication (such as verbal, pictorial, gestural, etc.).

In the alternative perspective, human thought possesses intentionality that is always interlinked with language. This theory is remarkable for its subtlety and insights, but it also has a surprising lack of clarity or even emptiness in areas where Peirce had much to offer. Saussure did not address, nor perhaps even attempt to address, the question of how language and thought can be related to the world; subsequently in structuralism, one can find a general resistance inherited both from structural linguistics and Durkheimian sociology, particularly towards any form of biologism. Saussure did not refute the idea that there is a world that exists independently of language and that we can think and talk about. However, he failed to provide an explanation for how the world becomes an object of representation. Saussure's approach was to assume that preverbal thought, in its undifferentiated form, was already oriented towards the world, and that language's role was simply to segment that thought into distinct units. This perspective placed the intentionality of language in dependence on the intentionality of the mind.

93 From this perspective, the human being is not considered "significant", as Roland Posner mistakenly believed in his interpretation of Peirce's semiotics, see Posner, R., *Der Mensch als Zeichen. Zeitschrift für Semiotik*, 16, 1994, No. 3–4, pp. 195–216.

This is a fundamental ontological difference between semiology and Peirce's semeiotic.⁹⁴

It is a common oversimplification to assume that the primary difference between these two concepts of the sign lies solely in one *being dyadic* and the other *being triadic*. Semiology viewed the sign as a dyad consisting of two sides. In contrast, Peirce regarded the sign as one aspect (or *relatum*) of a triadic relation, with the other two aspects being the sign's object and its interpretant. All three elements are triadic in that they only exist as signs, objects or interpretants in relation to each other. However, this does not imply that any of the three is inherently triadic in itself. If any of them is triadic, it must be for some other reason, in some respect. Therefore, Peirce's and Saussure's ideas of sign differ not only in the number of items combined but also in how they are combined, i.e. they represent the difference between a composite entity and a relational property.⁹⁵ The critical distinction is that "Peirce admitted a variety of grounds of significance, including resemblance and causality. Therefore, his semeiotic embraces natural signs and images, as well as arbitrary signs. Furthermore, he made particular signs as well as types of signs a primary study and, finally, he admitted that, in addition to thoughts, other responses to signs, such as feelings and actions, can be interpretants. Hence, sign interpreters are not necessarily humans only".⁹⁶

Peirce's semeiotic cannot be considered a part of Saussure's semiology.⁹⁷ If Saussure was correct in asserting that arbitrary signification systems can be examined independently of their specific uses and divorced from natural signs and other non-arbitrary forms of meaning, then Peirce's perspective would be incorrect. Conversely, if Peirce's assertion that language can only be comprehended in its practical application alongside other kinds of signs is valid, then Saussure's view would be incorrect. As a result, one system cannot be a component of the other since they contradict each other.⁹⁸ With regard to the thesis presented in this paper, it is pertinent to note that Peirce's semeiotic, despite being similar to structuralism as non-psychological and anti-Cartesian, does not align with the structuralist "anti-humanism" in its principles and outcomes.

94 Short, T. L., *Peirce's Theory of Signs*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press 2007, pp. 17–18.

95 *Ibid.*, pp. 18–19.

96 *Ibid.*, p. 19.

97 Cf. Deely, J., *Semiotic Animal*, pp. 23–24.

98 Short, T. L., *Peirce's Theory of Signs*, pp. 19–20; cf. Deely, J., *Four Ages of Understanding*, pp. 680–685.

The Cruelty of Waking: Ahypnotic Experience in The World of Franz Kafka*

Jakub Chavalka

Charles University, Faculty of Humanities

Jakub.Chavalka@fhs.cuni.cz

Abstract:

The study interprets two novels by Kafka (*Metamorphosis* and *Disciplinary Camp*), and shows that one of the motives both novels share is the “ahypnotic experience”, i.e., the state in which the character of the story is frightened by sleep, since in sleep he loses control over himself, and is given up to the forces which rid him of his human form (*Metamorphosis*). Based on the analysis of the apparatus of torture, interpreted here as “apparatus for producing justice”, the paper argues that for Kafka, the law means not freedom, but inhumanity (*Disciplinary Camp*). The following part of the paper explains that a similar process is uncovered in Donnarumma’s *Amygdala* art installation, and poses the question as to whether the increasing autonomy of modern technology intensifies Kafka’s fears of dehumanisation of the world. The final part of the paper offers an alternative conclusion to the problem building on Nietzsche’s understanding of the sense of the sublime.

Keywords: Kafka; ahypnotic experience; sublime; inhumanity; sleep; *Metamorphosis*; Nietzsche; *Untimely Meditations*; historicity; machinic; Donnarumma; Calyx

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In a short text,¹ Freud reveals, perhaps against his own will, the type of person he has in mind when he talks about health. It is a hypothetical model of humanity from which it could be possible to theoretically derive different types of deviation (neurosis, psychosis) from this model. For his description, Freud takes inspiration from the short story *Dreaming Like Waking*, from the collection *Realist Fantasies*, by a Czech compatriot, Josef Popper-Lynkeus.²

* The study was funded by the Czech Science Foundation (GA ČR), project No. 22-17984S: *Focal images: Violence and Inhumanism in Contemporary Art and Media Culture*.

1 Freud, S., Josef Popper Lynkeus and the Theory of Dreams. In: *Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. XIX (1923–1925), *The Ego and the Id and Other Works*. Tran. J. Strachey. London, Hogarth Press 1961, pp. 261–263.

2 Josef Popper-Lynkeus (1838–1921, born in Kolín) was a Czech and Austrian scholar, writer, and

A truly healthy person would be one who, without any of the distortions that are common, and even seem inevitable in sleep, would dream about what is shown to him in waking life; therefore, it would be impossible to distinguish between dreaming and waking. Such a person would dream the real or the waking; he would dream the truth. The deviation from the ideal pattern, that is, the descent in the line of mimesis, could be measured by the extent to which the content of a particular person's dreams is distorted by the process Freud calls *dream-censorship*. Freud sees the origin of this censorship in the shame one feels for the desires manifested in the dreams, which one therefore tries to disguise by distorting them into nonsense.

Lynkeus' story bears the same idea: "In you other people, there seems always to be something that lies concealed in your dreams, something unchaste in a special and higher sense, a certain secret quality in your being which is hard to follow. And that is why your dreams so often seem to be without meaning, or even to be nonsense. But in the deepest sense, this is not in the least, so; indeed, it cannot be so at all – for it is always the same man, whether he is awake or dreaming."³ What distorts our dreams, after all, is immorality, a kind of mystery inherent to our character, something hidden. If we were limpidly moral, our dreams would be no different from waking, sleep might even become an unnecessary luxury, or a kind of last reminder of the burdensome physicality which, because of fatigue, takes away the time that could be spent in a more useful way. Although Freud never formulated it in this way, the text in question suggests that his ideal would be a person of permanent wakefulness, or of merely formal sleep.

Freud rarely speaks of the dreams of healthy people; perhaps, based on the model of humanity outlined above, one might even assume that a high degree of mental health entails almost sleepless nights, a kind of echo of the Socratic notion of death⁴ in relation to death itself. It is as if in a "healthy" person there were no tensions from daytime life that needed to be compensated for or dissipated during sleep. Freud indicates elsewhere, somewhat unintentionally, how he pictured the mentally healthy person we might actually encounter at some point.⁵ Such a person would be one who takes the

inventor. He was the uncle of Austrian-British philosopher Karl Popper, and a good friend of Albert Einstein.

3 Freud, S., Josef Popper Lynkeus and the Theory of Dreams, p. 263.

4 "And if it is unconsciousness, like a sleep in which the sleeper does not even dream, death would be a wonderful gain." Plato, *Apology* 40d. Trans. H. N. Fowler. Cambridge, Loeb Classical Library, Harvard University Press 2005, p. 141.

5 "We call behaviour 'normal' or 'healthy', if it combines certain features of both reactions – if it disavows the reality as little as does a neurosis, but if it then exerts itself, as does a psychosis, to effect an alteration of that reality. Of course, this expedient, normal, behaviour leads to work being carried out on the external world; it does not stop, as in psychosis, at effecting internal

first step of neurosis – that is, he does not deny reality, however, in the second step he does not avoid it either, but tries to rework it, as is the case in psychosis. Therefore, a healthy person, for Freud, stands in the middle, between neurosis and psychosis; that which keeps him in such a state is *work*. We can conclude that psychoanalysis – at least in Freud’s version – still upholds the imperative of production, and however much it focuses on the pathological in man, its ideal is the fully productive man. Illness, which affects sleep both structurally and topologically,⁶ is seen as an obstacle or a barrier. The inverted metaphysics of Freud’s theory lies in finding the obstacle or barrier potentially in every mental agency. Being “normal” requires enormous effort and, on top of it, one has no control over any part of the process. A “fragile” subject will most likely fail in his efforts, and veer off into illness. It is reasonable to rather expect the abnormal; the “normal” may be considered a rare occurrence.

The “new normal” should be obvious to the careful observer, simply because a person spends half of his life in a state simulating mental illness – sleep. Nevertheless, even psychoanalysis retained a profoundly humanistic ethos, seeking to emancipate the patient at least to the extent of making his condition bearable. On the other hand, it saw its task as interminable.⁷ The “fragile” subject must always reapply his efforts as if he were always at the beginning, his eventual completion is always postponed indefinitely. We could perhaps say that the subject is returned to the very beginning every time he falls asleep.

1. Ahyptic Experience

Falling asleep always requires a bit of courage. And not only because the sleeper is left at the mercy of the adventures of his own unconscious, which speaks to him in a mysterious voice, and makes him read the hieroglyphics of the dream. To fall asleep is, above all, to trust; to have a strong faith that

changes. It is no longer *autoplastic*, but *alloplastic*.” Freud, S., *The Loss of Reality in Neurosis and Psychosis*. In: *Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. XIX (1923–1925), p. 185.

- 6 “The close affinity of this psychosis to normal dreams is unmistakable. A precondition of dreaming, moreover, is a state of sleep, and one of the features of sleep is a complete turning away from perception and the external world.” Freud, S., *Neurosis and Psychosis*. In: *Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. XIX (1923–1925), p. 151.
- 7 “Every analyst should periodically – at intervals of five years or so – submit himself to analysis once more, without feeling ashamed of taking this step. This would mean, then, that not only the therapeutic analysis of patients, but also his own analysis, would change from a terminable into an interminable task.” Freud, S., *Analysis Terminable and Interminable*. In: *Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. XXIII (1937–1939), *Moses and Monotheism and Other Works*. Trans. J. Strachey. London, Hogarth Press 1964, p. 249.

I will be the same person when I wake up, and that the world I wake up to will also be, at least in its basic features, the same as before I fell asleep. If one did not go to bed with this elementary conviction, one would have to experience states of anxiety so powerful and intense that he would never find the courage to retire to the realm of dreams. This is why Descartes, at the very end of the first of his *Meditations*, speaks of the fear of waking up, when “tranquil sleep will give way to laborious hours of waking.”⁸ For the supposed wakefulness might lead one not to the knowledge of the truth, but into darkness, where there are many difficulties to be overcome, whereas “dogmatic” sleep at least guarantees the clarity of images and ideas one can entertain and enjoy. Descartes is compelled to remain in the dream by the same laziness that Nietzsche speaks of at the beginning of the third *Untimely Meditation*. With a little poetic licence, in the figure Nietzsche introduces to the scene, a kind of explorer who has travelled to several continents and seen many countries and lands, we could see a contemporary anthropologist or ethnologist. And this “witness of the general humanity of man” gives the same answer as Descartes to the question of what he encountered everywhere: laziness.⁹

The difference between the young Nietzsche and Descartes is that the laziness the latter talks about is of philosophical kind: man in general lives in a dream, the philosopher is the one who must find a way to wake up. For Nietzsche, on the other hand, laziness appears to be very waking and overwhelmingly real. One is lazy out of fear of one’s neighbour, and because of this fear, whose mutations are comfort and indifference, one lives a life he knows is somehow not his own. It is a kind of dream life which someone other than himself has taken over. So, while Descartes is afraid to wake up because waking reality might be a chaotic darkness compared to the lumi-

8 “But to carry out this plan requires great effort, and there is a kind of indolence that drags me back to my customary way of life. Just as a prisoner, who was perhaps enjoying an imaginary freedom in his dreams, when he then begins to suspect that he is asleep is afraid of being woken up, and lets himself sink back into his soothing illusions; so I, of my own accord, slip back into my former opinions, and am scared to awake, for fear that tranquil sleep will give way to laborious hours of waking, which from now on I shall have to spend not in any kind of light, but in the unrelenting darkness of the difficulties just stirred up.” Descartes, R., *Meditations on First Philosophy*. Trans. M. Moriarty. Oxford, Oxford University Press 2008, p. 17.

9 “A traveller who had seen many lands and peoples and several of the earth’s continents was asked what quality in men he had discovered everywhere he had gone. He replied: ‘They have a tendency to laziness.’ To many it will seem that he ought rather to have said: ‘They are all timid. They hide themselves behind customs and opinions.’ [...] From fear of his neighbour, who demands conventionality and cloaks himself with it. But what is it that constrains the individual to fear his neighbour, to think and act like a member of a herd, and to have no joy in himself? Modesty, perhaps, in a few rare cases. With the great majority it is indolence, inertia, in short that tendency to laziness of which the traveller spoke.” Nietzsche, F., Schopenhauer as Educator. In: *Untimely Meditations*. Trans. R. J. Hollingdale. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press 1997, p. 127.

nous imagery of dreams which therefore seems to be the only living world, Nietzsche, on the other hand, feels as if forced into sleep by laziness. For where do timidity, comfortableness, and indifference stem from? Nietzsche is quite clear: from public opinion.

Today, the problem of falling asleep is even more serious. Descartes and early Nietzsche were still able to generate a more or less adequate alternative to laziness, and so give waking its proper form. For they operated within the classical Baroque figure of “life is a dream”, and truth always requires a certain philosophical work analogous to the procedure of waking.¹⁰ Therefore, a lack of strength or an unwillingness (bordering on cowardice) to undergo such philosophical performance, which is itself problematic and demands violence against the existing conduct of life, can be seen as an obstacle to awakening. Above all, however, their culture and conception of the world has not yet experienced the trauma of falling asleep, since they have not read and known these words: “As Gregor Samsa woke one morning from uneasy dreams, he found himself transformed into some kind of monstrous vermin.”¹¹ In Gregor’s case, man’s former trust in falling asleep was now betrayed. Now there was a marked asymmetry; a significant difference between the state in which Gregor fell asleep and the situation to which he awoke. For Kafka’s hero, awakening brings not a movement towards truth, but a traumatic loss. One could also say that the traditional idea of philosophy, whose practice is hindered by the laziness that prevents waking, has been, by some as yet unidentified shift, transformed into dread that makes falling asleep impossible. Gregor Samsa therefore becomes a figure who announces the “ahypnotic experience”.¹²

10 In *Untimely Meditations* (namely in the third one, *Schopenhauer as Educator*), Nietzsche speaks entirely in accordance with the motion of philosophical awakening: “In individual moments we all know how the most elaborate arrangements of our life are made only so as to flee from the tasks we actually ought to be performing, how we would like to hide our head somewhere as though our hundred-eyed conscience could not find us out there, how we hasten to give our heart to the state, to money-making, to sociability or science merely so as no longer to possess it ourselves, how we labour at our daily work more ardently and thoughtlessly than is necessary to sustain our life, because to us it is even more necessary not to have leisure to stop and think. [...] Now and again, as already said, we realize all this, and are amazed at all this vertiginous fear and haste and at the whole dreamlike condition in which we live, which seems to have a horror of awakening and dreams the more vividly and restlessly the closer it is to this awakening.” *Ibid.*, pp. 158–159. We will soon see that less than two years later he understands the dream in a completely different way.

11 Kafka, F., *The Metamorphosis*. In: *The Metamorphosis and Other Stories*. Trans. J. Crick. Oxford, Oxford University Press 2009, p. 29.

12 For Freud, this experience would manifest itself as the absence of a distinction between sleep and waking. When asleep, one’s mental life continues in the same mode as when awake without any perceptible caesura. But since sleep is accompanied by a turning away from the external world, it would be, psychologically speaking, truer than waking, as it would focus solely on

What gives us the courage to fall asleep? On the elementary level, it is certainly the fact that others do not disappear when I fall asleep, but they somehow carry the world from which I, the sleeping subject, have temporarily withdrawn. On the other hand, it is also because others wake up as well, which supports the belief that falling asleep is not a leap into an absolute abyss. Surely, much can take place in this “absence”, and perhaps sleep constitutes one of the fundamental “events” (in the sense of *Ereignis*) of human life as such, for it is never obvious what “occurs” during it. Nevertheless, every dreaming always finds refuge in the awakening of others, and therefore its wrenching drama never gets to be played out unreservedly. It is the other who holds a protective hand over the sleeper to whom he thereby guarantees that whatever occurs during his absence in sleep will be coherently re-integrated into the context the sleeper has turned away from when falling asleep. To fall asleep without the other’s guarantee is therefore to anticipate the terror of waking. Without the other, it would be better either never to fall asleep or never to wake up. A world without the other would have to be a world without sleep. A world without sleep, isn’t that the definition of cruelty? And how much violence would one have inflicted on oneself to uphold this imperative? The ahyptic experience would be one of pure violence and boundless cruelty.¹³

But is the world of Gregor Samsa a world without the other? At first glance, it obviously is not, as he retains the relationship to his family members.¹⁴ That is why we said he merely “announces” the ahyptic experience; its full significance will be revealed later. Certainly, the fact that he has metamorphosed into an unspecified, yet certainly the most disgusting kind of insect imaginable, has its consequences, and his life will never be the same again. However, this “never the same again” seems to apply only to a certain area, which is best grasped by first clarifying what remains of Gregor’s former life; indeed, we might even say that this area has paradoxically benefited from the seemingly tragic metamorphosis. The metamorphosis into

the mental life. After a good night’s sleep, one would much more about oneself than before. It would be the most effective therapy. Clearly, the situation is for Kafka radically different. For his characters, permanent waking does not complement the “knowing sleep”, and is therefore always tinged with dread and terror, not healthy performance.

- 13 A remarkable implication of this thesis is that the traditional philosophical movement of awakening would imply the “unproblematicity of the other”; perhaps one could infer that philosophy was unable to think cruelty until it took the problem of the other into account in all seriousness. Nietzsche’s critique of morality seems to carry something of such problematization.
- 14 The reality remained the same, too: “It was not a dream. His room, a proper, human being’s room, rather too small, lay peacefully between its four familiar walls. Above the table, on which his collection of textile samples was spread – Samsa was a commercial traveller – there hung the picture he had recently cut out from an illustrated magazine and mounted in a pretty gilded frame.” Kafka, F., *The Metamorphosis*, p. 29.

a giant bug has not in any way affected Gregor's consciousness, his ability to maintain an inner dialogue, and thereby reflect everything that is happening around him. A fact that this inner voice speaks in us all the time, or at least very often, which we do not know, because we are tuning our ears to something else, a fact that our ears turn in the right direction, so that we can hear something of ourselves, a demand or a desire of which we had no idea before – this aspect is the joyful facet of the metamorphosis.

To put it quite profanely, the metamorphosis frees Gregor from a job he loathes, and although he initially feels remorse and promises himself that he will plunge back into the consuming hatred with joy and all the more effort, a state of elation quickly grows within him that will get rid away with his hatred of the role of a salesman once and for all. Perhaps we should not read *The Metamorphosis* solely as an existential tragedy, but as a journey of liberation. A liberation from what has until now prevented Gregor Samsa from thinking of himself, from focusing on himself and his self. He is now asked to stop, to gather himself in himself, and look at his previous life from a distance which he can only find somewhere within himself.

The Metamorphosis illustrates very clearly what sleep is to the travelling salesman: the greatest terror, for sleep carries the danger of falling asleep, of missing the train, of thwarting a potential deal, of dishonouring the business. It is the announcement of the worst of all possible worlds, a world where business is no more. Thereby speaks the chief clerk who has come to find out the reasons for Gregor's absence in the shop: "true, it is not the season for doing particularly good business, we acknowledge that; but a season for doing no business at all, Herr Samsa, there is no such thing, and there cannot be."¹⁵ This is the world that Gregor broke away from, simply by waking up. So, what had happened to him during his sleep that he must now force himself even to answer the clerk? Of this we know nothing. All we know is he has awakened in a condition which makes it impossible for him to continue his life as before. He has awakened to a temporal distance that provides him with the very thing he has been silencing up to this point. A look at himself and endurance of this gaze which says: now is not the season for doing business. The *Metamorphosis* tells a story of such season and of what happens when it lasts.

Gregor has, somewhat "spontaneously", performed the philosophical movement of liberation, but its effect is manifested as a *metamorphosis* into a monster. Hence, Kafka does not seem to share the pathos of the philosophy of awakening; on the contrary, he shows with overwhelming facticity that a liberation guaranteeing a turn to oneself is far from enough. The heart of

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 36.

the contradiction lies in the fact that the travelling salesman Gregor Samsa did his duty – he woke up, and yet was prevented from continuing his work. By doing his duty, he rebelled against it.

2. Between Animal and Rationale: Invalid Self

Starting with *Human, All Too Human*, Nietzsche began to view dreams and sleep through a new prism. He abandoned the movement of philosophical awakening and sought in sleep the origin of metaphysics in general as well as all the divisions inherent to it.¹⁶ He did not draw the “naive” conclusion that sleep is to be discredited in the name of overcoming metaphysics; on the contrary, he saw it as the source of knowledge of the earlier phases of humanity.¹⁷ We mention this important step for Nietzsche’s later thought here only to better understand the situation set up in the *Metamorphosis*.

Gregor, who was not armed with a philosophical reflection on history, indeed freed himself from the bondage to which he had been subjected as a travelling salesman, but his terror of falling asleep and his more or less absence¹⁸ of sleep plunged him into a much more bound state. *Metamorphosis* is a story that tells of the absence of the beyond, the absence of the exteriority; in general, one could say that there is a lack of transcendence. Gregor, through his metamorphosis, enters the modern world of literal facticity, whose cruelty lies in the fact that there is no rest from fact; it is a facticity driven to nonsense, a facticity that does not instigate any event. In his case, it would necessarily have to be an event that would carry a weight of meaning comparable to a metamorphosis. But his very refusal to sleep, arising from a horror he has once experienced and never intends to repeat, makes such

16 “*Misunderstanding of dreams.* – In the ages of raw, primordial culture, people believed that in dreams they came to know a second real world; here is the origin of all metaphysics. Without dreams, there would have been no reason to divide the world. The separation into soul and body is also connected to the oldest view of dreams, just like the assumption that the soul can appear in bodily form, hence the origin of all belief in ghosts, and probably also the belief in gods. ‘The dead live on; for they appear to the living in dreams’: that was the conclusion one previously drew, throughout many millennia.” Nietzsche, F., *Human, All Too Human I*, 5. Trans. G. Handwerk. Stanford, Stanford University Press 1995, p. 18.

17 “The perfect clarity of all dream representations, which presupposes an unconditional belief in their reality, reminds us again of the conditions of an earlier humanity, in whom hallucination was exceptionally frequent and sometimes seized upon whole communities, whole peoples at the same time. Therefore: in sleep and dreams we go through the lessons of earlier humanity once again.” *Ibid.*, 12, pp. 22–23. In this respect, Nietzsche was a thinker more rooted in humanism than Kafka, who took a more naive and therefore more traumatic position.

18 “The nights and the days Gregor spent almost entirely without sleep.” Kafka, F., *The Metamorphosis*, p. 61; cf., for example, *A Hunger Artist* where the main character does not sleep.

an event impossible. It is as if he would rather endure the effects of a primal event, however terrifying and pernicious, than risk something even more terrible happening to him in his sleep. In this respect, we can understand the hypnotic experience as the anxiety of the event.

Surely, certain episodes happen to Gregor in the course of the story (the eviction of the room, the injury inflicted by his father, the frightening of the tenants), but they all strictly follow the binary structure of his movement, which consists of remaining in the territory of the room or of a deterritorial escape that always ends in a quick return. These are merely random episodes that do not bring anything fundamental. Gregor's situation is very illustrative of the confusion of an event with the banality of the new, which, although it keeps coming, cannot in any way change what has already happened. In principle, Gregor cannot distinguish between the past and the future; he lives in a kind of timeless present that has become paralysed. He cannot return to the simplicity of the instinct because he has consciousness, but his consciousness also fails, since it no longer projects an imaginable future and becomes increasingly bound by his own immobility, which mirrors the automatism of the instinct. Hence, he is therefore stuck in a kind of in-between space between body and spirit, without being able to find a sufficient reason to deviate in either direction. It seems the dispersion of the classical elements of the definition of man (*animal rationale*) leads to the emergence of a "crippled" self, whose animality, while ensuring man's self-preservation, provides no base to be transcended and therefore to set the "reason" in motion. In the hypnotic experience, anxiety of the event makes the transcendence of the spirit impossible.

Gregor's whole story therefore tells us that the flip side of mental illness is not health, but something much more terrible; namely the rigidity of fact, which knows no relief and demands permanent attention. In this respect, neurosis and psychosis seem to be very human reactions to anxiety, for they resort to reactive creations which, while they distort the whole world and deform the soul into irreparable perversion, are still a human situation. A situation that got out of hand, that is. Upon considering the fragility of man, his vulnerability, and therefore fear, it is highly probable that a certain degree of perversity is inherent to his being. The possibility to speak of perversity, however, presupposes an ideal or model against which the particular state of man in a particular situation is measured. Yet, such a measurement is no longer possible in Gregor's world. The virtuality of the unreal has disappeared and there is nothing but the reality of the factual. It is not possible to hide in a reactive creation, for behind the neurosis and psychosis lurks pure

anxiety, an anxiety that catapults man out of the realm of humanity without offering any option of return.

That is why it seems that Gregor's metamorphosis was not complete, did not go through all the stages it should have, stopped at some point, or rather was violently interrupted. This point is the moment when the apple thrown at him by his father lodged in Gregor's back. The text speaks of a bombardment, but the apple in this case represents the entomologist's pin. No matter where Gregor moves now, he will remain pinned, not only symbolically, in the sense that the apple stuck and rotting in Gregor's back will forever be a reminder of his father's severity and the injuries it caused, but also topologically, since pinning is at the same time pinning "to the ground". Because of it, Gregor loses one of the greatest advantages of his entomological body – the ability to climb walls and ceilings, and therefore to occupy perspectives that are usually completely inaccessible to human sensibility. After this loss, the movement of Gregor's consciousness grows slower and slower until it is completely halted.

It is useless to speculate what would have happened to Gregor if he had not been struck by a mechanical blow from "the outside". All that matters is, as we already said, that Gregor's metamorphosis stopped at some point, and therefore the *Metamorphosis* is bound to end in the absurdity of nonsense. A world in which it is dangerous to fall asleep makes a sublime extinction impossible, for one can never find enough confidence in it to let oneself be carried away by the caesura of absence. Reckless as it may sound, Gregor's death results from remaining all too human in his consciousness. He dies of a paradox uttered by his sister: "You must just try to get rid of the thought that it is Gregor. Our real misfortune is that we have believed it for so long. But how can it be Gregor? If it were Gregor, he would have understood long ago that it's not possible for human beings to live with a beast like that, and he would have left of his own free will."¹⁹ After this utterance, Gregor acknowledges that he is a beast, and as such, intolerable to the family, and therefore leaves quietly and peacefully, without anyone expecting it. By fulfilling his sister's verdict, he proves that he has kept his human side till the end, even if it meant admitting relentlessly also his animal side. It is quite telling that no one notices his proof of being human.

All in all, it seems that the ahypnotic experience that turned Gregor into a monster has its continuation in the indifference with which the family accepts the ultimate proof of Gregor's humanity. The ahypnotic anxiety of the event is prolonged into a sensibility that is immune to the event. Gregor's

19 Kafka, F., *The Metamorphosis*, p. 69.

crippled self is therefore somehow completed. Not only is it itself unable to move, but it also no longer moves the sensibility of others either. Gregor's extinction does not come from any guilt; it is the result of an immobility that began with his quite ordinary falling asleep.²⁰ Kafka's world is filled with similar trivialities, the consequences of which are fatal.²¹

3. Vicious Circle of Emancipation

Still, Gregor seems to have achieved something significant. He broke free from his hatred, that is, in Nietzsche's words, he unburdened himself of his resentment (we will return to this at the end).²² He achieved what he most desired – he got rid of his job. On another level of the narrative of *The Metamorphosis*, almost behind the plot and quite imperceptibly, a kind of phenomenology of consciousness is taking place. Not of a pure consciousness, however, on whose ground ideas can be investigated, but of an almost “empty” consciousness, a consciousness that separates the animal body from the human world. Everything happens as if Gregor were gradually losing interest in the objects of his human past, as if the monstrous body were depriving him of intentionality and revealing to him with growing clarity that a consciousness separated from the human world, a consciousness without any existent object, without transcendence – a non-intentional consciousness, then – can only have itself as its object. The measure of such “self-centred” consciousness cannot be the quantity of content, but the intensity with which it experiences itself. Indeed, at first “intensive consciousness”

20 The importance of not/sleeping throughout the story is evidenced by the fact that on the night of Gregor's death, his sister did not sleep at all: “she was fully dressed, as if she hadn't slept at all; and her pale face seemed to show it.” *Ibid.*, p. 71. The pronouncement of the verdict made the sister alike to Gregor. With the fulfilment of the sentence, however, the resemblance immediately disappeared. By leaving, Gregor saved his sister from imitating him.

21 See the short story *A Country Doctor*: “Having obeyed the false ringing of the night bell just once – the mistake can never be rectified.” Kafka, F., *A Country Doctor*. Trans. S. Appelbaum. In: *The Metamorphosis and Other Stories*. New York, Dover Publications 1996, p. 119. It is a kind of a negative of *The Metamorphosis*; Gregor did not hear the bell (alarm), the doctor reacted too eagerly to it. In both cases, however, there is no going back.

22 The ambivalence of a fulfilled desire is aptly described in *The Castle* when Josef K. returns to the village after his first unsuccessful attempt to get hired by his employer: “The Castle up above, now curiously dark, the place that K. had hoped to reach today, was retreating into the distance again. As if suggesting that this was only a temporary farewell, however, a bell rang there with a lively, cheerful note, although the sound was painful, and made his heart quail momentarily as if threatened with getting what it vaguely desired. But soon the clang of this great bell died away, to be succeeded by the faint, monotonous sound of a smaller bell, perhaps also up at The Castle or perhaps in the village.” Kafka, F., *The Castle*. Trans. A. Bell. Oxford, Oxford University Press 2009, pp. 17–18.

seems to have an advantage over intentional consciousness: when Gregor first appears to his parents and the chief clerk he is fully aware of being the only one who has remained calm amidst the chaos, and when the chief clerk makes a startled escape, he surpasses the parents in his awareness even more: “Gregor perceived that there was no way he could let the chief clerk leave in this mood, if his position in the firm was not to be in the utmost danger. His parents didn’t really understand it all. In the course of the long years they had convinced themselves that Gregor was provided for in this business for life, and on top of that, they were now so caught up in their present worries that they had lost any view into the future. But Gregor had this view.”²³ Intense consciousness, therefore, guarantees Gregor’s distance from the most natural human reaction, maintaining calm and insight in a situation where everyone else is literally freaking out.

Intensive, not intentional, consciousness therefore appears at first to be a direct consequence of the fulfilment of Gregor’s innermost desire – he is no longer a travelling salesman, he has been freed. This is not the end of the story, though, it is only the beginning. For it gradually becomes clearer and clearer that for the intensive consciousness, freedom means imprisonment. Isn’t it ultimately the case that once a desire is fulfilled, there comes yet another? It seems that however debilitating his job was, it kept him situated in the human world. Not in the sense in which man is essentially shaped by work, but in the sense in which his work provided him with co-ordinates where he could meet with others, in however alienated way. Emancipation does not bring him relief; on the contrary, it deprives him of the possibility of relating to others. The logic of this deprivation is somewhat strange, yet thought all the way through to absurd consequences. The starting point is a hatred of the lifestyle of the travelling salesman; it is only natural to achieve relief by changing the job, but is there any job at all that does not require a lifestyle, a certain way of doing things, skills, cleverness, or the ability to calculate profitably? Apparently not, and therefore a change of job means merely a change of one practice for another; without ever breaking free from dependence on a particular way of doing things that whichever practice requires. Yet it is possible to free oneself from this seemingly hopeless situation. If one must always take upon oneself the form of one’s vocation, the rejection of such fate would have to consist in a kind of “facelessness”, in the achievement of a form in which one retains oneself but is not bound by requirements of an occupation. It is therefore a task of getting rid of worldly subordination, – or in other words, of the obligations imposed on man by an occupation – but at the same

23 Kafka, F., *The Metamorphosis*, p. 41.

time not turning away from worldliness. That is, to remain the same man, yet freed from the forms imposed by an occupation.

It is the most paradoxical task, and its solution therefore promises freedom which must also be paradoxical. The contradiction lies in the fact that man became man throughout history, and history makes it clear that man is a social being and as such he is tied to an occupation. The desire to be without occupation and at the same time maintain a human form are mutually exclusive (we are, of course, speaking only of Gregor's perspective, not of historical versions of the separation of humanity and employment; the world in which Gregor lives does not allow, indeed forbids, such separation). We could say that in the world of Kafka's characters, the intertwining of life and occupation is inexorably valid;²⁴ one can never distinguish between them; one's identity coincides perfectly with one's occupation. Gregor is a hero precisely because he has tried to live in the difference between life and occupation. However, his story shows with frightening lucidity that the bond against which he rebelled goes deeper than he thought. To maintain the difference between life and occupation, he had to sacrifice his outer human form and transform himself into another form of living being. The idea of an animal came naturally, the insect or the beetle was a residue of an earlier creation of Kafka's imagination.²⁵

The ahyptic experience is accompanied by a certain fundamental feeling or attenuation in life. It is the annihilation of the distinction between sleep and waking, since permanent waking sooner or later inevitably results in a state of "hallucinatory psychosis" in which the temporal and spatial network of relationships gradually disintegrates, with everything merging into a new form of indistinction in the end. It seems as if the consistency of pursuing one difference (life/occupation) cancelled out another difference (sleep/waking). Hence the paradoxical status of Gregor's freedom: he moved from one indistinction to another; and it is impossible to decide which one is more adequate to the human condition. Rather, it seems that each indistinction subjects man to a corresponding burden he cannot bear. Gregor's

24 Analogically, this intertwining, this time of life and official duties or the law, is described in *The Castle*: "Nowhere before had K. ever seen official duties and life so closely interwoven, so much so that sometimes it almost seemed as if life and official duties had changed places." Kafka, F., *The Castle*, p. 55.

25 "I don't even need to go to the country myself, it isn't necessary. I'll send my clothed body. [...] For I myself am meanwhile lying in my bed, smoothly covered over with the yellow-brown blanket, exposed to the breeze that is wafted through that seldom-aired room. As I lie in bed I assume the shape of a big beetle, a stag-beetle or a cock-chaffer, I think. [...] The form of a large beede, yes. Then I would pretend it was a matter of hibernating, and I would press my little legs to my bulging belly." Kafka, F., *Wedding Preparations in the Country*. Trans. E. Kaiser – E. Wilkins. London, Secker and Warburg 1954, pp. 11–12.

liberation from occupation, therefore, does not lead him to a state in which he has an immediate access to himself and can make decisions without the dictate of the duty. It only plunges him into a different version of subjection in which he is as unhappy as before. He has only passed from one form of unhappy consciousness (intentionality) to another (intensity); but the unhappy consciousness has not been overcome.

In this respect, Gregor's story is one of the vicious circle of emancipation. Liberation from one confusion is smoothly transformed into another confusion. It is certainly possible to distinguish one confusion from the other aesthetically based on their frighteningness or absurdity, but in fact – that is, in terms of freedom – there is no difference between them. Therefore, in Kafka's world, there is no place for Utopian dreams of a man freed from the historical falsification of his being. One cannot separate oneself from history, nor can one complete it. Each such attempt results only in a new form of subordination, which itself marks merely another thread of history. And perhaps one of the partial meanings of Kafka's story is the knowledge that every attempt to escape from unfreedom ends, because of its one-sidedness, in an even more destructive alternative of unfreedom. The attempt at emancipation ends in an even more severe unfreedom than the one from which one wanted to break free.²⁶ The hypnotic experience abolishing the difference between sleep and waking also abolishes the socialist dream of a man freed from work, but even more so abolishes Freud's model man. For even if the imperative "to dream like to wake" significantly strengthens the instance of the Ego, vis-à-vis the Id, we should expect a commensurate strengthening of the repressive component of the Superego. In Freud's model, it is taken for granted that the Ego, having come to terms with the Id, will be empowered to a more radical resistance against the Superego. Gregor's story shows, however, that there would merely be a shift of emphasis, the discontents of civilisation would nonetheless persist. The hypnotic world following the imperative "to dream like to wake" would be transformed into a sadistic terror of discipline in which the Ego, though perfectly in control of instincts, would never satisfy the demands of the Superego, as they would grow proportionately to the increasing domination of the Ego over the Id. Perhaps it is exactly here where we might detect the fear, and it was certainly an uncon-

26 Here we find yet another analogy to *The Castle*: "[...] it seemed to K. as if all contact with him had been cut, and he was more of a free agent than ever. He could wait here, in a place usually forbidden to him, as long as he liked, and he also felt as if he had won that freedom with more effort than most people could manage to make, and no one could touch him or drive him away, why, they hardly had a right even to address him. But at the same time – and this feeling was at least as strong – he felt as if there were nothing more meaningless and more desperate than this freedom, this waiting, this invulnerability." Kafka, F., *The Castle*, p. 95.

scious fear, that lead Freud to a distaste of the “oceanic” feeling of religious experience. In short: the imperative “to dream like to wake” denies man the transcendence he wants to seek only in the realm of the instincts. But this is the domain that man is supposed to master by the very same imperative. Ultimately, then, Freud’s model man is supposed to master, and thereby overcome, transcendence. Gregor Samsa is the proof of the impossibility of such a claim.

4. From Animal to Machine

Despite all this, there must be a way to escape the vicious circle of emancipation. Otherwise, man would drown in a boundless nihilism in which there are only two truly human possibilities – either the slavery of occupation, or an insect-like existence in an increasingly closed room. Gregor does not find a way out, he intensifies the ahypnotic way in which ancient memories are flashing by in a cinematic sequence: “The nights and the days Gregor spent almost entirely without sleep. Sometimes he dwelt on the thought that when the door was next opened he might take the family’s affairs fully in hand again, as he had before; figures reappeared in his thoughts after long absence: the boss, the chief clerk, the lesser clerks and the apprentices; the porter who was so stupid; two or three friends from other firms; a chambermaid in a hotel in the provinces, a sweet, fleeting memory; a girl, cashier in a millinery shop, he had been seriously courting, but too slowly – they all appeared mixed in with strangers or people already forgotten, and he was glad when they vanished.”²⁷ He cannot stop at any of the memories, none of them will relieve him of the terrifying question: what if he were to “fall asleep” again and lose himself even more than when he had turned into a bug? The original intensity of consciousness is therefore no longer intensified in him, but it attains a certain contentment which outwardly manifests itself as recklessness: “He was hardly surprised that he had shown so little consideration for the others of late; in the past, this consideration had been his pride.”²⁸

His death, therefore, is not a voluntary end to suffering – for himself as well as his family – but an acceptance of a dead end. Death is not a way out, it is only an end, which is tantamount to resignation. Gregor failed, but he tried to find a solution. His experiment on himself failed. For Kafka, it certainly

27 Kafka, F., *The Metamorphosis*, pp. 61–62. Such is Gregor’s state after the incident with apple, but the restlessness and helpless nervousness overwhelms him already earlier: “He often lay there the whole night through, not sleeping for a moment, only scrabbling for hours on the leather.” *Ibid.*, p. 50.

28 *Ibid.*, p. 66.

did not mean despair, but rather a reason for further experimentation. For him, the obvious fact that the fulfilment of one desire is followed by another, and so on ad infinitum, does not bring about the Schopenhauerian urge to seek freedom in the renunciation of desire itself, but an examination of the character of desire, that is, an attempt to intensify it to a state in which individual sequences would not follow, but the desire itself would converge into a unified direction. Gregor's failure does not lie in the fact that he desires something nonsense; it lies in the fact that the desire – which initially helped him break free – backfired. He got rid of his hated occupation, but then began to long for a return to the family circle, although this was impossible because of his transformation. He took a step in one direction, but got frightened by the consequences and wanted to reverse his liberation. The ahypnotic experience seems to begin with this very fright. Kafka's experiment, then, can end neither in resignation nor in the reversal brought about by fright; it is necessary to go on, to try to bring the ahypnotic experience – which is placed only in another indistinction, – to an actual distinction. Where it would no longer be possible to exchange one desire for another, where desire would be unified. Kafka's term for such a desire is "law".

Becoming an animal is not enough. It is only a primary utterance, and it is exactly in this primary utterance that the shock of fright lies. If the loss of human form is to be the price of freedom, it is quite obvious that unfreedom will seem more valuable to everyone. But this is not how Kafka poses the problem. He sees very well that the initial "shock of freedom" has shattering consequences precisely because it stands at the beginning. There is no need to be intimidated by it. On the contrary, such intimidation leads to resignation and, as we have seen, inevitably bring about death. The only possibility lies in the attempt to continue in the direction of Gregor himself, and to reach beyond the stage of becoming an animal. To find immediate contact with the law, and to continue to unite the desire in it. This brings us to *The Disciplinary Camp*, where immediate contact with the law is established. It is all the more surprising that the eeriness of the scene is not diminished, quite the opposite. The possibility of the law, and thereby of the restoration of transcendence, is revealed here, but only very indistinctly.

The key is the description of the effects of the execution as it was traditionally carried out in the disciplinary camp. Here, too, the focus is on the metamorphosis (*Verwandlung*), but it is no longer about becoming an animal, but about the transformation (*Verkleidung*) that happens to a person who has touched the law, or more precisely, a person who has been touched by the law. The hopelessness of the loss of human form turns the attention back to man. Nevertheless, the problem remains the same: how to unite desire so that trust in falling asleep is restored, and man does not fall into an

ahypnotic experience with all its overwhelming consequences? If we exclude the escape to the animal, where lies the transformation that must take place in order not to return to the very beginning: to Gregor hating his job? We have already suggested that such transformation will mean a disguise, or even a mask (*Verkleidung*). It is about changing what one is wearing, not what is in oneself. It will therefore be a form of theatre, a spectacle put on for the “amusement” of the audience. Let us turn, therefore, directly to the passage in which the meaning of the whole theatrical piece is described:

And now the execution would begin! Not a discordant sound disturbed the work of the machine. Many gave up watching entirely, lying instead on the sand with their eyes shut; they all knew: now Justice is being done. In silence one only heard the groaning of the condemned man, muffled by the gag. Today the machine can no longer manage to force a sigh out of the condemned man stronger than the gag can stifle; but in those days, as they wrote, the needles dripped a corrosive fluid which today we are no longer allowed to use. And then came the sixth hour! It was impossible to grant everyone their request to be allowed to watch from near at hand. The commandant in his wisdom ordered that first and foremost the children should be considered; though I myself, by virtue of my office, could always be present; I often crouched on that spot there, a little child in each arm to right and left. How we all took in the look of transfiguration (*Verkleidung*) from the suffering face, how we bathed our cheeks in the reflection of a justice finally attained and already passing! What times they were, my comrade! The officer had obviously forgotten who was standing in front of him; he had embraced the traveller and laid his head upon his shoulder.²⁹

The final tender gesture, which was not intended to move the traveller, as the officer does not fail to point out, convinces the reader of the power of the experience expressed in the memory of the glorious days when executions were at the centre of the life of the disciplinary camp. It is quite irrelevant that the sentences were unjust and the executions inhuman. What is essential is the fact that execution was made to be experienced as an event of justice. And where justice is done, the law must be present, however indirectly.

For the condemned man himself, this means nothing more than death, and undeniably, he receives no reward at all, acting throughout the process merely as a medium representing the law to others for a few hours. But what kind of law is it, if it can only be experienced indirectly through a diabolical

29 Kafka, F., In the Penal Colony. In: *The Metamorphosis and Other Stories*. Trans. J. Crick, p. 87.

machine that inscribes its sentence on the naked body of the condemned? It is certainly a law that withholds itself from man, is unknown to man, – it is not always accessible even by the simplest consciousness, as Kant has it. On the contrary, it happens (*Ereignis*) exclusively in the course of the execution, silently, for at the moment of its supreme efficacy, when the condemned “understands” (it is that sixth hour),³⁰ it can no longer be communicated. It is made accessible to the spectators of the execution only by seeing the transformation (*Verkleidung*) of the condemned man’s expression. There is no other trace of the law to be found. As for the condemned man, the law means nothing more than death to him, he acts throughout the process merely as a medium representing the law to others for a few hours.³¹

Because the law is silently withholding itself, the spokesman of the law becomes the apparatus of torture, without which man would have no access to the law. The transformation is therefore complete. The condemned man is no longer a human consciousness trapped in an animal body; he now is a human body and a consciousness of the law. He has transcended human boundaries and become inhuman. Should the law resound in this inhuman form, its spokesman can only be an inanimate machine. If a more permanent trace of the law were to be maintained in the disciplinary camp, the apparatus of torture would have to work ceaselessly, one execution after another, the supply of dying bodies would have to be permanent. Such is the logic of the disciplinary camp, such is the logic of the modern world and its ahypnotic experience as described by Kafka. Its lack of the law can only be compensated for by permanent execution.

In the demonstration of this ruthless logic, Kafka reveals himself as a political thinker. Absurd scenes and exaggerated images (a man turned into a bug, a torture machine producing justice) cannot be reduced to the aesthetics of a fictional world. They relentlessly mirror the situation of modern man; modern man compensates the cruelty of the ahypnotic world with his own destructiveness, to which he openly admits. When the trusting deliverance to the auspices of the other (sleep) is absent, paranoid suspicion of anyone sets in, and this passes into a latent desire for the annihilation of the

30 “But how still the man becomes at the sixth hour! Understanding dawns upon even the most stupid. It begins with the eyes. From there it spreads further. A sight that might tempt you to join him lying beneath the Harrow. Indeed, nothing further happens; the man simply begins to decipher the script; he purses his lips as if he were listening.” *Ibid.*, p. 84.

31 Quite symptomatically, the condemned man featured in the story is guilty of giving in to sleep: “You wanted to have the present case explained; it is as simple as the rest. This morning a captain filed a report that this man, who has been assigned to him as his servant and sleeps outside his door, had been asleep on duty. [...] Last night the captain wanted to make sure that his servant was doing his duty. On the stroke of two he opened his door and found him curled up asleep.” *Ibid.*, p. 80.

enemy. Execution in the disciplinary camp, which for all its injustice and inhumanity still referred to the law, has its counterpart in the extermination camp, where there is only the brutality of death. In each of his prose works Kafka draws attention to the fact that modern man is only a step away from the extermination camp, and if he is not to take the final fatal step, he has no choice but to seek the law. This remains so even despite his repeatedly affirmed conviction that the law withholds itself from man and is always silent. Such is the situation – we must choose between impossibility and death by extermination. Kafka opts for impossibility, and describes what this decision does to man.

5. Experiments of Reflective Judgment: Amygdala

Kafka's world is a world without the other, who would complete what the subject himself does not see. It is also a world without tragedy, because without the other there is no conflict and therefore no tragedy; tragedy presupposes hidden tension which develops first as crisis and then as catharsis. Without the other, all that remains is the grotesqueness of a reality³² in which people still meet, talk to each other and perhaps even produce offspring, but in fact they miss each other, behaving as if it were always possible to escape into a different dimension than that of the other. Intersubjectivity does not bring about the event, because there is no actual meeting of two temporalities. Rather, they take place side by side, in parallel, with occasional, violently provoked mutual contact, from which it is necessary to withdraw as quickly as possible, since conflict creates the danger of contamination. There is, of course, an infinite number of other dimensions, each of which provides shelter from the threat of contamination, with its potential for tragic conflict.

The delocalised image of atomised humanity³³ evokes the idea of a simulated “superconsciousness” that could perhaps shape at least the contours of a being that used to be called human, but is now shattered into an infinite

32 This level is brilliantly analysed by Karel Kosík in his essay *Století Markéty Samsové*, which has, unfortunately, not been translated to English yet.

33 In the third of his *Untimely Meditations*, Nietzsche describes this state as atomistic revolution: “For a century we have been preparing for absolutely fundamental convulsions; [...] That individuals behave as though they knew nothing of all these anxieties does not mislead us: their restlessness reveals how well they know of them; they think with a precipitancy and with an exclusive preoccupation with themselves never before encountered in man, they build and plant for their own day alone, and the pursuit of happiness is never greater than when it has to be caught today or tomorrow: because perhaps by the day after tomorrow there will be no more hunting at all. We live in the age of atoms, of atomistic chaos. [...] The revolution is absolutely unavoidable, and it will be the atomistic revolution: but what are the smallest indivisible basic constituents of human society?” Nietzsche, F., *Schopenhauer as Educator*, pp. 149–150.

number of isolated particles. It certainly could not be a human consciousness, for the individual components to be mirrored in the whole are too numerous; human consciousness would be overwhelmed by them, and if it manifested anything at all, it would have to be meaningless chaos. It would have to be, in Leibnizian terms, a kind of a more complete monad, wholly inaccessible to the human mode of being. This more complete monad could register a potentially infinite number of components (i.e. human beings), and make connections between them that could never occur to human consciousness. This is not to say that these connections would produce the event of intersubjectivity; man would only be manipulated into a certain position, which would be consistent with other positions, but not localised within the image of humanity, since man would probably never be able to grasp more than a few surrounding positions.

This delocalized image of humanity seems to condition the current thinking of transhumanism. Kafka is relevant even today. Transhumanism, however, postulates a different politics. A politics that wants to see the “machine for producing justice” as the development of humanity and not as the dependence of humanity on the virtuality of the law. Merging with the machine, which would of course no longer be torturous but intelligent, is to remove this very dependence. Transhumanism, then, dreams, – to evoke Kafka – of entering into the law; and this access should be granted to the no-longer-human by technology. The posthuman, whom transhumanism speaks of as a technologically enhanced human, would not need to relate to transcendence, as he would already be located in it. Philosophical reflection is faced with the question that transhumanism provokes of whether dependence on the machine is ontologically more appropriate to the life of the (post)human than dependence on the law (even though the law remains silent). And also, whether man can surpass the machine. Certainly, not in the amount of information he would be able to process, but in a different capacity. It must be examined whether the problem of data processing is one of subsumption. If so, then man surpasses the machine in something the machine is incapable of – reflective judgment.³⁴

34 “For the application of the first sort of laws, namely the universal laws of material nature in general, the power of understanding needs no special principle of reflection: for in that case it is determining, since an objective principle is given to it by the understanding. But as far as the particular laws that can only be made known to us by experience are concerned, there can be such great diversity and dissimilarity among them that the power of judgment itself must serve as a principle even in order merely to investigate the appearances of nature in accordance with a law and spy one out, because it requires one for a guideline if it is to have any hope of an interconnected experiential cognition in accordance with a thoroughgoing lawfulness of nature or of its unity in accordance with empirical laws.” Kant, I., *Critique of the power of judgment*, § 70. Trans. P. Guyer. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press 2000, p. 258.

If transhumanism can be understood as an attempt to relocate human through technology, strategies highlighting reflective judgment would have to be oriented towards a different type of relocation, one that would focus on the human body and conduct research on the limits of human perception. Such attempts would aim at de-composing the most commonplace, which we never care about because of its familiarity, and to dramatize a kind of the perception of perception. Philosophical reflection should acknowledge that art is always a huge step ahead of philosophy in this matter. Let us take a closer look at a contemporary installation that aims to explore perception. It shows that Kafka's key motif of "now happens justice", the event of the law, must be a problem of reflective judgment and its ultimate consequence, the sublime.

* * *

At first glance (this first glance is both the reason why this installation was chosen and a classic case of the event) we are struck by the similarity between this robot and the torture apparatus from Kafka's story.

The *Amygdala* consists of a mechanical arm that resembles an articulated insect leg. At the end of this limb is a razor-sharp claw that cuts into the animal skin stretched on a frame, giving the whole installation a static unity. The limb is controlled by artificial intelligence so that it reacts "autonomously" to every movement of the skin by cutting into its surface. The installation's author, Marco Donnarumma, interprets the symbolism of the whole action as a process of purifying scarification, intended to produce a ritual catharsis. The artificial neural network is not pre-programmed, it reacts to movements it cannot predict. With each such "encounter", it simultaneously acquires a memory trace and can therefore perform the next cut less blindly. It is clear, however, that the inscriptions left by the *Amygdala* are only random cuts. This high-tech machine simulating elementary animal responses reveals, above all, the abysmal difference between the increasing complexity of information and even the simplest event of meaning.

In contrast to Kafka's imaginary apparatus for producing justice, the *Amygdala* is a machine for producing those indecipherable inscriptions on the body of the condemned. It is not at all the case, however, that there is an intention to write a specific text (or verdict) on each such body (that is, on each skin that results from an individual *Amygdala* performance). Rather, we see that it would take a huge number of individual performances for a possible text to begin to stand out through the bodies, and even then we would probably still not know what language or cryptographic code to use to decipher this writing. Therefore, the *Amygdala* does not presuppose a model addressee; on the contrary, the addressee of its "writing" only emerges if the viewer takes at least one step along the path of "purification", whose principle the robot is

supposed to learn. Clearly, Donnarumma's works, exhibited under the title *Calyx*, are the first and very slight outlines of a process in which the *Amygdala* could master the whole history of scarification, with all the meanings and various aspects it entails; a goal that is yet centuries away. If we imagine the immense amount of time it would take the *Amygdala* to get from simply cutting the skin to actually identifying a single letter, we are awed by the history of human cultures in which something analogous has happened, and probably in a much shorter time than it would be in *Amygdala's* case.

The *Amygdala* allows the event to happen on at least two levels. On a kind of "historical" level, it makes its audience feel the horror that something as great and breathtaking as human culture could one day vanish into nothingness, with no trace left of the efforts of human epochs of which we have only a vague idea, and yet on which our life is based. This life itself bears witness to these ancient and long-vanished epochs, and gives us the joy of its duration. It comes to us as the event of our own historicity. On another level, each of the exhibits included in *Calyx* should be understood as an event of its own, for each performance has a different course; it is never possible to predict how the scarified skin will move for the first time, and what reaction of the sensorimotor limb it will provoke. Each subsequent movement, that is, each mark of ongoing inscription, occurs in the interaction between the skin and the claw. One could almost say that each mark is the event, since it can be inscribed in any way, and the artificial intelligence that guides the robotic hand probably cannot predict the connections it might make between each mark, or even between its individual movements.

Although the *Amygdala* is controlled by artificial intelligence, it cannot spontaneously produce an algorithm that comes even close to the meaning of scarification. Perhaps we could call the *Amygdala* an event machine that produces nothing but lines that cannot be drawn, because they cannot be represented. Since there is no subject that could represent, or rather, it always arrives too late, only at the moment when the line is cut, and the subject has no choice but to consider the line in connection with other lines, which in turn represent other latenesses of his own. This is perhaps another characteristic of the *Amygdala* regarding the event. It makes the subject constantly re-experience his lateness to the event, but perhaps it also evokes in him a sense of the sublime. The *Amygdala* consists of two moments: a kind of eerie groping in the void (produced by the yet unintentional, identical, repetitive and mechanic movement) and the first contact with the skin, in which the movement of the robotic hand becomes directed, and its direction gains more precision with each successive movement of the skin, triggered by the previous cut. Hence, the viewer can see the sublime happening. Of course, these are only hints of its structure, but it seems that something like

the event of the sublime does emerge in Donnarumma's *Amygdala*. Trying to represent the event of the sense of the sublime could certainly be a step towards the re-localisation of the body, as discussed above.

6. Nietzsche and the Sublime

But let us return to the ahyptic experience. What is the origin of the so contradictory idea that sleep, a certain loss of control,³⁵ an almost enfeeblement of self, must be excluded from human life, when on the other hand it is obvious that waking, when it exceeds a certain limit, itself begins to distort and deform perception, so that we actually fall into a kind of “waking dream” which, however, does not produce the physiological effect of rest, but prolongs itself indefinitely? Friedrich Nietzsche, in his second *Untimely Meditation*, speaks of a certain degree of sleeplessness which, after a long period, leads to the extinction of the living creature. He speaks of this in the context of the “unhistorical” as the element providing man with a protective layer against the vast amount of the past that one can never fully process. Hence, forgetting is obviously a part of human life – a kind of unhistorical condition that defines a limit beyond which the past (which is otherwise necessary and important and, according to Nietzsche, makes a person human) no longer operates.

Nietzsche asks the reader to imagine a man who does not forget at all. After a few days such a person would be completely overwhelmed by events which he would be unable to structure in any way, and in the end he would not dare to lift a finger for fear of the irreversible effects which even something so trivial could cause.³⁶ This, according to Nietzsche, is the consequence of the excess of the “historical instinct” not only in the individual,

35 Even Schopenhauer suspected a close connection between sleep and death: “As for the individual consciousness that is bound up with the individual body, this is completely interrupted every day by sleep. Deep sleep cannot be distinguished from death (into which it often steadily passes – e.g. in the case of freezing to death) with respect to the present; they are distinguishable only with respect to the future, namely when it comes to waking up. Death is a sleep in which the individual is forgotten: everything else wakes up again, or rather has never slept.” Schopenhauer, A., *The World as Will and Representation*, vol. I. Trans. J. Norman – A. Welchman – Ch. Janaway. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press 2010, p. 304. But in waking up he saw only the entrance into the bondage of the will. His denial of it therefore sounds paradoxical.

36 “Imagine the extremest possible example of a man who did not possess the power of forgetting at all and who was thus condemned to see everywhere a state of becoming: such a man would no longer believe in his own being, would no longer believe in himself, would see everything flowing asunder in moving points and would lose himself in this stream of becoming: like a true pupil of Heraclitus, he would in the end hardly dare to raise his finger. [...] A man who wanted to feel historically through and through would be like one forcibly deprived of sleep, or an animal that had to live only by rumination and ever repeated rumination.” Nietzsche, F., On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life. In: *Untimely Meditations*, p. 62.

but in the whole culture. Permanent waking, a metaphoric name we might use for historical knowledge, without the corrective of any counter-movement, not only endangers man's life but even destroys it, for its consequence is a state of a continuous apperception. The mass of the past is so vast that the cognitive consciousness never reaches a moment when it is done with knowing it. Moreover, the mass itself increases as the life of the knower goes on. A kind of infinite task is therefore marked out; fulfilment or completion is resolutely postponed; human life is certainly not meant to claim anything like fullness or totality.

Therein lies the curse of the "historical sense": there can never be a moment of pause, it is a postponement that does not allow for distance that would enable one to see into the depths of one's own being. It is always too late. Temporality has the character of this incompleteness that never stops because it is not anchored, or rather it is impossible to anchor it on a moment of such importance, that it could serve as a measure for experience to determine what to forget, let go, pass. And because it is always too late, nothing new can pass without attracting attention at least for a fraction of a second, so it is too early for anything to pass unnoticed. The temporality of modern man oscillates between too late and too soon, without being able to acquire a dimension determined by the sense of nobleness that announces the event. This obliteration of the event, a kind of paradoxical forgetting of what Nietzsche calls the unhistorical or, more generally, the untimely, is the subject of the entire essay *On the Usefulness and Harmfulness of History for Life*. The whole of *On the Use and Abuse of History for Life* is concerned with this obliteration of the event, a paradoxical forgetting about forgetting that which Nietzsche calls unhistorical, or more generally, untimely.

Only in the protective atmosphere of the unhistorical, in the bridging of the gap between too late and too soon, that is, in the event that both precedes and establishes the ecstasy of temporality, can history emerge and organise what has happened into a comprehensible whole. It is only in this bridging that man becomes man. But if everything that has happened overlaps, in terms of factuality, with the foundational antecedent of the event, man begins to favour a curiosity that, while ensuring a comfortable existence, also announces a certain feeling of meaninglessness. However, somewhere deep, a doubt about the authenticity of one's life is hidden, and eventually one sinks into an ironic or even cynical form of consciousness. Irony here means the search for meaning, except, after all, there is not and probably never will be any. Such are the effects of this degree of sleeplessness which, as "historical sense", plagues everything living with the overproduction of all events – this description is analogous to what we have already uncovered in Kafka's world.

Nietzsche, however, has at his disposal a weapon that the Kafkaesque heroes did not. It is the unhistorical, which in one movement produces oblivion and ignorance, but in the necessarily following counter-movement leads to the possibility of the subject who lets himself be carried away by the event. This is manifested in a sense of the sublime, and it is in this affect that we recognise those who are able to overcome their own weak personality so typical of modernity, according to Nietzsche.³⁷ The curiosity of the weak personality prone to innovation, which never finds a moment to stop, is contrasted with the feeling of the sublime, which makes one experience the terrible abyss of the meaningless present, but at the same time the delightful feeling of hope that this meaninglessness will pass, since the event eternally returns everything past to the state of its birth. The event does not make the past reappear, but places it in the perspective of the future, as if it were only now (that is, in the present) that it can be properly grasped. The inconceivability of the sublime consists in the transition which provides the ahypnotic experience with something like a horizon, namely the darkness in which its despair dissolves. The soul, having been awakened from its apathy and indifference, experiences a growing sense of life and, with it, a growing feeling of power (*Macht*). Nietzsche's notion of the will to power, then, does not seem to originate in the realm of control; its origins are to be sought in a sense of the sublime and a sensitivity to the event. The degree of the power of the will is not measured by how much it can control, but by how much of the onslaught of the event it can endure. That is, not by what it wants and how much it wants, not by the quantity, but by the fact that it wants to endure the event patiently.³⁸ To open oneself to it again and again, and thereby enable that continuation, that delight which is experienced as a growing and intensified life.

37 “Expressed morally: you are no longer capable of holding on to the sublime, your deeds are shortlived explosions, not rolling thunder. Though the greatest and most miraculous event should occur – it must nonetheless descend, silent and unsung, into Hades. For art flees away if you immediately conceal your deeds under the awning of history. He who wants to understand, grasp and assess in a moment that before which he ought to stand long in awe as before an incomprehensible sublimity may be called reasonable, but only in the sense in which Schiller speaks of the rationality of the reasonable man: there are things he does not see which even a child sees, there are things he does not hear which even a child hears, and these things are precisely the most important things...” Ibid., pp. 83–84.

38 “– How manifold is that which we experience as ‘*moral feeling*’: in it there is reverence, dread, a touch as if by something holy and mysterious, in it is the voice of something commanding, something that takes itself more seriously than we do; something that elevates, kindles, or brings calm and profundity. Our moral feeling is a synthesis, a simultaneous resounding of all the lordly and subservient feelings that have shaped the history of our forebears.” Nietzsche, F., *Writings from the Late Notebooks*, 1[22]. Trans. K. Sturge. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press 2003, p. 55.

When Nietzsche speaks of the weakness of the modern personality, he explicitly connects it with the impossibility of the sublime, which is caused by the immediacy of the critical reaction to every event.³⁹ No act can be sublime because it is to be understood immediately, it is to be placed among all other events, and therefore will inevitably be lost among them and its effect will die out. One should first be shaken, and this state should last long, and then preserve this incomprehensibility as the sublime in his own acts. Instead, an analysis immediately sets, however, and that does not allow the sublime to resound at all. This is why Nietzsche calls for the unhistorical and its oblivion, not in the sense of disappearance, but, on the contrary, as that which allows the event to emerge, for only in this way is history possible, and only in this way can man become man. Hence, the unhistorical for Nietzsche plays the role of a kind of anthropotechnique enabling people to access their humanity.

It is quite obvious that when Nietzsche complains about the absence of the unhistorical, he is drawing attention to the specific modus of inhumanity dominating German culture in his era. His conception of the absence of the unhistorical later becomes a general diagnosis of nihilism. Yet it seems he has sought the only effective protection against this loss of meaning in the very sublime; something he hints at already in the second *Untimely Meditation*. For Nietzsche, the hypnotic experience of the modern world, which, due to its undying curiosity, confuses its ignorance of the event for a desire for the ever new, is a sign of inhumanity. When he later calls for cruelty and defends cruelty in its innocence, it only means that he sees no other way to revive a soul sunk in apathy.⁴⁰ In fact, he contrasts cruelty with cruelty with-

39 “The most astonishing thing may come to pass – the host of the historically neutral is always there ready to supervise the author of it even while he is still far off. [...] The work never produces an effect but only another ‘critique’; and the critique itself produces no effect either, but again only a further critique. There thus arises a general agreement to regard the acquisition of many critiques as a sign of success, of few or none as a sign of failure. At bottom, however, even given this kind of ‘effect’ everything remains as it was: people have some new thing to chatter about for a while, and then something newer still, and in the meantime go on doing what they have always done. The historical culture of our critics will no longer permit any effect at all in the proper sense, that is an effect on life and action; [...] But their critical pens never cease to flow, for they have lost control of them and instead of directing them are directed by them. It is precisely in this immoderation of its critical outpourings, in its lack of self-control, in that which the Romans call *impotentia*, that the modern personality betrays its weakness.” Nietzsche, F., *On the Uses and Disadvantages of history for life*, p. 87.

40 “We who are ‘objective’ – [...] We want *strong* sensations, just as all the *coarser* eras and classes do... This must be clearly distinguished from the needs of those with weak nerves and the decadents: in their case, there’s a need for spice, even for cruelty... We *all* seek states in which bourgeois morality *no longer has any say*, even less so priestly morality (– every book with a lingering odour of the pastor and theologian about it gives us the impression of pitiable *niaiserie*

out making a clear distinction between them.⁴¹ It seems, nevertheless, that he considered cruelty which forces man into indifference to be much more decisive than cruelty which is intended to awaken man to a sense of growing life.

In essence, it is the same cruelty, only directed or “tuned” differently. From this he could foresee that man’s future would consist of increasing cruelty and violence. Man can hope that the future will open up before him again only if this cruelty is guided by the event and the sublime. Otherwise, in the nihilistic case, man will sink into ever deeper waking and ahypnotic experiences governed by resentment – his life will be dominated by hallucinations and delusions leading to utter inhumanity. One could perhaps say that Gregor Samsa awoke into a world of this inhuman cruelty, and that is why he must have felt like a hideous insect whose consciousness is sinking into an ever more terrible nothingness. Identically, only an inhuman torture machine could have produced the event in the disciplinary camp. Kafka was therefore the first herald of this inhumanity and cruelty that destroys man since it never lets him sleep.

and impoverishment...). ‘Good society’ is that where at bottom nothing is found interesting except what’s *forbidden* in bourgeois society and what ruins one’s reputation: the same applies to books, music, politics, the appreciation of women.” Nietzsche, F., *Writings from the Late Notebooks*, 10[119], pp. 194–195.

41 Hints of differentiation can be found in the late notes, though: “Cruelty may be the relief of taut, proud souls, of those who are used to exercising constant harshness against themselves; for them it has become a festival to at last hurt others, see them suffer – all the warrior races are cruel. Cruelty may, conversely, also be a kind of saturnalia of oppressed and weak-willed beings, of slaves, seraglio women, as a little piquancy of power – there is a cruelty of evil souls and a cruelty of base and trifling souls.” *Ibid.*, 2[15], p. 69.

Selfhood and Simulacra: On the Phenomenon of Snapchat Dysmorphia*

Jakub Marek

Charles University, Faculty of Humanities

Jakub.Marek@fhs.cuni.cz

Abstract:

Snapchat dysmorphia is a body dysmorphic disorder where a user of filtered selfies becomes dissatisfied with his or her “natural” appearance and seeks surgical procedures in order to look like in the filtered selfies. This study presents the current discussions of Snapchat dysmorphia and proposes to further analyse the phenomenon against the backdrop of the concepts of hyperreality and simulacra. The critique of Snapchat dysmorphia is fuelled by the implicit dualism of “natural” vs. “artificial”, “real” vs. “fake” and takes place in the context of an unacknowledged effort to defend the inviolability and sanctity of human nature. In order to overcome the binarity and normativeness of understanding Snapchat dysmorphia as an “unnatural” phenomenon, this study proposes to view it as an instance of “second nature”. It is a habitualised practice, an attempt to appropriate, to manifest the already accustomed image of the self on the corporeal level. In this analysis, the phenomenon of Snapchat dysmorphia becomes a case study of the limits of our views of the relationship between selfhood and corporeality.

Keywords: dysmorphia; aesthetic surgery; social media; simulacrum; hyperreality; second nature; selfhood; corporeality

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Snapchat dysmorphia is an uncanny phenomenon of our time. It started with the practice of social media users sharing selfies, altered by filters. This results in enhanced and augmented selfies that differ significantly from users’ “natural” appearance in many ways. In some cases, however, users become so comfortable with their filtered selfies, that they identify with them as a representation of their true appearance. The image in the mirror ceases to be the primary form of the self. In the final phase, then, there are docu-

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mented cases of people turning to plastic surgeons for changes that would allow them to resemble – “themselves”.

Why should such an unusual phenomenon be the subject of a philosophical study? I believe that, rather than thinking of it as an aberration and a pathological phenomenon, it is necessary to see that it is an essential phenomenon of the present, which amplifies a significant transformation of human self-conception. It is a radical case of the interpenetration of the virtual and the “real” world, where somatic nature and artificial appearance collide, where the boundaries between model and imitation, image and archetype, are broken down.

This study seeks to analyse the problem of Snapchat dysmorphia as a case of coming to terms with the consequences of hyperreality, with the new era of phantasm and simulacra, and above all, to show that the debate or controversy of Snapchat dysmorphia takes place in the context of an unacknowledged effort to defend the inviolability and sanctity of human nature. But is the human being a natural being?

In the first part, I will discuss the technological precursors of the Snapchat dysmorphia phenomenon: social networks, selfies, and filters. I will then comment on the research that has recently been devoted to Snapchat dysmorphia. In the second part, I approach the issue through the prism of the hyperreality controversy, and by referring to Baudrillard and Deleuze’s two different conceptions of simulacra. Finally, I aim to illustrate the degree to which Snapchat dysmorphia is characterised by a context of binary oppositional thinking, namely, a fundamental dualism and its implicit connection to the idea of an inviolable bodily nature. Nature (or rather, corporeality and its complementary notion of culture or thought) will be opposed by the traditional notion of the human *second nature*, based on the 19th century authors. Second nature will be understood as a habitualised practice whose consequence is bodily appropriation, incorporation – a bodily transformation, a bodily manifestation of those habituated and automatised behaviours, habits, with which one identifies.

1. Snapchat dysmorphia

If we want to analyse the phenomenon of Snapchat dysmorphia, we must first demonstrate in what context this phenomenon makes sense and present the key assumptions underlying it. First of all, there are fundamental technological precursors. The intention here is not to recapitulate the technical side of these precursors, but to note the connection between technologies and users that is gradually formed by these preconditions.

Among these technological precursors, of course, it is primarily the social networks themselves which have radically and qualitatively surpassed the chat rooms and messenger-boards of the 1990s and have therefore become one of the innovations of the 21st century. I emphasise the significant difference between the nature of social interaction on the Internet in the last century and in the current one, primarily because the new social networks, in contrast to the characteristic anonymity of the forums and chat rooms of the 20th century, link a user's "civil" identity to their online profile.¹ Whereas older communication technology promotes an online persona that can very easily be separated from the real person (as in popular culture's clichéd hackers), and even the two may not resemble each other, social networks (here, especially Facebook, Instagram) are built on the principle of self-presentation in online space. It does not mean that anonymity or complete dissimilarity of the persona of the user and the online persona of the same is passé. Rather, the argument that helps us understand the phenomenon of Snapchat dysmorphia is that social networks have established a specific relationship between the online and offline worlds of the user. In what sense is it specific? In contrast to the way we might think of 20th century forums and chat rooms, *today's social networks users are accountable for their online presence*. The implications of this self-presentation are not limited to cyberspace but have relevance in the world of work or partnership, lead, as we see very often right now, to legal sanctions and, more interestingly in relation to our topic, are a crucial identity factor. Social belonging, respect, recognition, and of course a sense of self-esteem, all of these aspects of identity are today closely linked to our online footprint. And this footprint is mainly in the form of social media profiles.

The second technological invention, which exceeds its apparent banality in terms of its consequences, is photographic self-portrait, abbreviated as a selfie. The selfie does not make sense without social networks, because it is not, in terms of its implications and meaning, a documentary or private, family photograph, like the photographs that date back to the first half of the 19th century. Nor is it entirely possible to regard as a selfie an accidental photograph in which the photographer turns the camera on himself/herself. The selfie is specifically a tool of self-presentation on social networks, and it is not documentary or private, but is taken in the context of, and for the

1 Cf. Dreyfus, H. L., *On the Internet: Thinking in Action*. London, Routledge 2001. For a discussion of anonymity on the Internet and a critical response to Dreyfus' original contribution, cf. Vallor, S., Social Networking and Ethics. *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. 2023. Available online at <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2022/entries/ethics-social-networking/> [cit. June 1, 2023].

sake of, social networks. If the folder of photographs on a user's Smartphone contains an order of magnitude more selfies than have been posted on social networks, this does not mean that the “unpublished” selfies have not, to one degree or another of conscious activity, of conscious choice, been judged in relation to their usability for social networks. In other words: a photographic self-portrait is not a selfie unless posted on a social network.



Parmigianino's *Self-portrait in a Convex Mirror* (c. 1524) contains all the visual hallmarks of a selfie. It is not, however, a selfie proper. A selfie is not defined simply as a self-portrait, not even a self-portrait “at arm's length”. (Public domain, Wikimedia.org)

Cambre and Lavrence define the selfie primarily as a social practice at the boundary between the online and offline worlds, and at the same time, as a genre different from traditional photographic self-portraits. Their distinctive feature lies in the fact that they are shared on social media, use the camera of a mobile phone, evoke specific, ritualised, emotional responses, and finally are not only a subject, but also a gesture.²

2 Cambre, M.-C. – Lavrence, C., *Towards a Sociology of Selfies: The Filtered Face*. London, Routledge 2023.

A selfie is not a picture of who we are. The relationship between the person taking a selfie and the selfie itself is not mimetic. The main feature of the selfie is precisely its presentability. The selfie is not a mirror (and if anything, a convex mirror),³ but rather a projection field, a construction framework within which we shape a carefully considered, nurtured, and intended image of our media personas.

However, these two technologies are brought to a higher qualitative level by a third innovation, which is of fundamental interest to us. From the abovementioned, it follows that self-presentation through the selfie involves a conscious effort to choose the form of the media persona we publicly exhibit. This conscious effort does not only involve composition, angle, lighting, and other aspects of traditional photography. It is also not exhausted by a concern for facial expression, for an aesthetic appeal that can be influenced without further technological intervention. The second decade of the 21st century brings new technologies, namely “big data” and artificial intelligence tools (neural networks), the immediate consequence of which for the selfie is the emergence of a third innovation: filters.⁴

Filters are a complementary extension of popular social networks. With the help of filters, the users can noticeably modify their selfies. The editing options are countless: from turning into animals, modifying clothes, background, etc., to, above all, significantly changing the appearance of the face. Filters can rejuvenate or, on the contrary, simulate aging, they can showcase the user in many comical or parodic modifications. However, filters that conspicuously reveal their intended purpose at first sight, and thereby declare their illusiveness, their “unreality”, are irrelevant. What is essential to Snapchat dysmorphia is that type of editing by filters which “augment”, enhance and improve the selfie. Typical edits are those that smooth the skin, widen the eyes, narrow the jaw line, firm (and enlarge) the lips, smooth nasolabial folds, and more.

Augmentation is a simple tool that allows users to remove unwanted aesthetic features from their (selfie) faces. It is noticeable that several important considerations come together here: filtered photographs are the elaboration and consequence of the meaning of the selfie, which is self-presentation. In

3 Cf. Ward, B. – Ward, M. – Fried, O. – Paskhover, B., Nasal Distortion in Short-Distance Photographs: The Selfie Effect. *JAMA Facial Plastic Surgery*, 20, 2018, No. 4, pp. 333–335.

4 An overview study is offered by e.g. Mihaila, R. – Braniste, L., Digital Semantics of Beauty Apps and Filters: Big Data-Driven Facial Retouching, Aesthetic Self-Monitoring Devices, and Augmented Reality-Based Body-Enhancing Technologies. *Journal of Research in Gender Studies*, 11, 2021, No. 2, pp. 100–112.

fact, they allow this self-presentation to be even more intentional, so that users are better detached from the initial image that is the initial selfie (and then, of course, from the substrate of the photograph, which is ultimately one's own face). Users' cyber-identities are presented on social media, and the intentionality of self-presentation does not happen regardless of aesthetic standards and considerations of beauty. Filter technology seems to allow users to approach these demands on their own terms. Finally, it radically contrasts the "unmodified" and the "modified" (augmented) form of the user. I will comment briefly on this last point:

Borgmann, in his book *Crossing the Postmodern Divide* characterises the phenomena of hyperreality by three aspects: brilliance, richness, and pliability.⁵ Brilliance corresponds to the specific brightness or distinctness of the selfie. The selfie avoids presenting "its" user in a bad light, so to speak (optically and semantically). Second, it brings richness in the sense that it is revealing, stable, and therefore subject to a far greater degree of intensity of the viewer's gaze than in ordinary social interactions. The selfie gives a fuller picture, a richer picture, because it is a presentation that cannot obscure anything. From a more fundamental point of view, the selfie is an appropriation of the dialectic of covering up, it is the exposure of a covered face. Obscured insofar as it need not show anything that the user does not want to be seen. The third characteristic is pliability, which has the most significant implications for us. Pliability here, again following Borgmann's analysis, corresponds to the loss of the resistance of objectivity. The substrate of the photograph, the face itself, is not ultimately the binding factor of the resulting selfie. The mimetic principle is fully trumped by the constructive principle. Self-presentation is the exposure of the "self" as a work, as a product.⁶

After this initial introduction of the context and technological precursors, I now proceed to the phenomenon of Snapchat dysmorphia itself.

The prevalence, even ubiquity, of filters and filtered photographs is such that it can be argued that they are becoming an aesthetic norm, or socio-

5 Borgmann, A., *Crossing the Postmodern Divide*. Chicago–London, University of Chicago Press 1992, p. 83.

6 The selfie can be thought of as a self-portrait in the sense of constructing a narrative, Shipley speaks of synecdochic selfies. Shipley, J. W. Selfie Love: Public Lives in an Era of Celebrity Pleasure, Violence, and Social Media. *American Anthropologist*, 117, 2015, No. 2, pp. 403–413. "Even pictures of food and other shared photos participate in our selfie image on social media. In terms of the relationship between the user and self-presentation, it is a relationship between the producer and the work: one imagines oneself as a sort of curator-in-chief, reigning supreme over one's social media profile." Crano, R., The Real Terror of Instagram: Death and Disindividuation in the Social Media Scopic Field. *Convergence*, 25, 2019, No. 5–6, p. 1133.

cultural standard.⁷ The tradition of photo editing goes once again back to the 19th century, but we see some fundamental differences. Edited photographs used to be usually, firstly, the work of a professional (portrait, or art photography), and therefore involve an unrealistic investment (of time, materials, and skills), and do not have the mass appeal of the filtered selfie; secondly, they do not make the same aesthetic claim on photographs as is the norm today. Edited and retouched photographs used to be the standard for celebrities on the pages of magazines. And then, whether their enhancement is apparent or not, they seem to emphasise the divide between photographs of “ordinary people” and “stars”.⁸ This aspect also plays a role in our analysis, for what occurs is, paradoxically, a problematic democratisation of the enhanced appearance. Self-representation, which has the possibility to use the tools of filters, seems to be deprived of the right to imperfection.

Today, therefore, we cannot fail to observe the fundamental consequences of this technology and the aesthetic paradigm it inevitably brings with it: anxiety and feelings of inadequacy, low self-esteem, social exclusion and, in extreme cases, suicide.

The habitualisation and ubiquity of the selfie as a tool of self-presentation on social media has resulted in the selfie being the primary self-image for many, and playing an increasingly important role in how we see (or have an idea of) ourselves. This is even to the extent that, as the recent research discussed below illustrates, there is a confusion and loss of perception of what the person in question looks like without filters, or other than in a selfie. This is not to say that the image in the mirror would cease to remind us of a different face than the one produced by the filtered selfie. It only means that the face in the mirror ceases to have the character of reality and authenticity. Ontologically, the face in the mirror is an inappropriate representation, a phantasm.⁹

Snapchat dysmorphia is therefore a phenomenon of critical and acute incongruence between two images of the self. On the one hand, the image we see in the mirror, on the other, the filtered selfie.

In medical terms, Snapchat dysmorphia is a form of body dysmorphic (or dysmorphophobic) disorder. According to the American Psychiatric As-

7 Cf. Tremblay, S. C. – Tremblay, S. E. – Poirier, P., From Filters to Fillers: An Active Inference Approach to Body Image Distortion in the Selfie Era. *AI and Society*, 36, 2021, No. 1, pp. 33–48.

8 Keats, J., Jargon Watch: Snapchat Dysmorphia. *Wired*, 26, 2018, No. 11, p. 22.

9 I am referring to the mirror only from the point of view of a “folk psychology”: in this sense, the mirror presents us with the “real” image of ourselves. I am not, however, arguing that the mirror image constitutes a true mimesis.

sociation (APA) and the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5), body dysmorphic disorder (BDD) is classified on the obsessive-compulsive spectrum. Persons suffering from BDD focus on one or more nonexistent or mild defects in their physical appearance. They think about their defect very often, usually for at least an hour a day, and this compulsive disorder impacts their social, occupational, and other levels of life.¹⁰

In the case of Snapchat dysmorphia, the obsessive-compulsive need or dissatisfaction relates to the image with which such persons are confronted in the mirror. Their “natural” appearance is, in other words, what they consider to be inappropriate, a defect.

What are the consequences of this situation? The fundamental reason why Snapchat dysmorphia has become the topic of heated discussion is because of reports from plastic surgeons about unexpected requests from their clients. They were asking for procedures based on their own photographs or filtered selfies.

In one of the first reports, K. Ramphul and S. G. Mejias in 2018 described cases where patients requested such modifications to resemble their filtered selfies.¹¹ The report highlights the ethical issues of such procedures, and recommends that surgeons take note of red flags, and offer clients professional psychological and psychiatric help.

Note, however, that the authors are also discussing the possibility of lawsuits being brought against Snapchat or Instagram by patients who would argue that the filtered selfies gave them the wrong idea of what they look like. The second point that explicitly appears here is the concern that “the common man is losing perspectives on what he/she actually looks like due to these two social media applications [Snapchat and Instagram, JM].”¹²

Other authors have addressed the topic in a more in-depth 2019 study when they attempted to understand Snapchat dysmorphia as a type of “dysfunctional self-modelling, which entails maladaptive internalisation of sociocultural preferences during adolescent identity formation.”¹³ Using the analytical tool of body schema, they consider the self not as an entity, but as a process of representation. The phenomenological research of S. Gallagher and D. Zahavi understands this schema as an unconscious or pre-reflective process, but one that can reach the level of conscious activity.¹⁴ The body

10 Tremblay, S. C. – Tremblay, S. E. – Poirier, P., From Filters to Fillers.

11 Ramphul, K. – Mejias, S. G., Is “Snapchat Dysmorphia” a Real Issue? *Cureus*, 10, 2018, No. 3, e2263.

12 *Ibid.*, p. 1.

13 Tremblay, S. C. – Tremblay, S. E. – Poirier, P., From Filters to Fillers, p. 33.

14 Gallagher, S. – Zahavi, D., *The Phenomenological Mind: An Introduction to Philosophy of Mind and Cognitive Science*. London, Routledge 2008.

schema is then to be distinguished from body image, which is a representation used to monitor the body, or a “form of a pre-reflective bodily self-awareness.”¹⁵

These two structures interact with each other, they are co-constructed. Tremblay et al. propose to think of their relationship as an “active inference framework, [in which] body schema and body image form a hierarchical continuum of body representations that interact hierarchically in a bidirectional manner.”¹⁶

Body dysmorphic disorders are then “maladaptive internalisation of sociocultural norms.”¹⁷ That is, these individuals with body dysmorphic disorder make conscious attempts to cope with their own deficiencies over time, habitualising behaviours that eventually become obsessive. The process, the authors argue, involves a degree of automation. And this is where, they suggest, the main problem lies. Habitualisation, internalisation, and automatisa-tion are important elements of this disorder. I will return to these aspects of Snapchat dysmorphia below, in relation to the topic of second nature.

Let us more precisely distinguish where the novelty of the Snapchat dysmorphia phenomenon lies in relation to plastic surgery. Indeed, plastic surgery has undergone a great evolution since its beginnings, when it was mainly used in its reconstructive role (burns, war veterans, etc.)¹⁸ and its domain has become the various modifications that are undoubtedly related to the hierarchical relationship between body schema and body image that I discussed earlier. Rejuvenation procedures, such as face lifting, body fat removal (liposuction), can be seen as ways in which a person seeks, on the level of conscious activity, to stabilise or bring into balance the self-image and the body schema. For a long time, plastic surgery has been meeting the demands of clients who require modifications based on photographs of famous people.¹⁹ Finally, the most notable example of efforts to reverse the mismatch between body schema and body image is transformative gender reassignment.

The field of medical ethics must come to terms with the distinction between the legitimacy and illegitimacy of requests for plastic surgery. Some of these entail psychological and psychiatric assessments, others do not. In the case of Snapchat dysmorphia, it is too early to judge what standards or procedures will be established, but we see in any case that its classification

15 Tremblay, S. C. – Tremblay, S. E. – Poirier, P., *From Filters to Fillers*, p. 35.

16 *Ibid.*

17 *Ibid.*, p. 41.

18 Cf. Scuderi, N. – Toth, B. A. (eds.), *International Textbook of Aesthetic Surgery*. Berlin–Heidelberg, Springer 2016.

19 Cf. Anon., *Snapchat Dysmorphia Becoming Too Common*. *USA Today*, 147, 2018, No. 2883, pp. 12–13.

as a disorder and the way cases are judged so far tend for the time being to reject the legitimacy of these interventions. The standard practice now is for surgeons to offer therapy and psychological help to their clients, instead of aesthetic interventions.²⁰

But let's look at this phenomenon from another side. In research by Robert Christel, Steven Dayan, Moriyike Akinosa, and Peter Russell in 2021 the aim was to investigate the first impression of photographs on random evaluators.²¹ A group of ten people were asked to take different photographs, which were then evaluated by 240 research participants. What kind of photographs were they? Firstly, a normal selfie, then a selfie with standardised filters applied to this type of photo of all ten people. The third photo was taken with the back camera of a mobile phone (here it was an iPhone 7 Plus), and the fourth photo was taken with a Nikon digital SLR camera.

The differences between the individual photographs are undeniably noticeable, and it is almost difficult to consider all four photographs to be of the same person.

Surprisingly, there was a fundamental discrepancy between which photograph was considered the best by the photographers themselves, and which made the best impression on the evaluators. Five out of ten identified a normal selfie as their best, another four a filtered selfie, and only in one case a DSLR photo. However, according to the evaluators, the DSLR photo received the highest scores.

The implication of the research was that surgeons who encounter clients who request adjustments based on a selfie are advised to first show these clients a DSLR photo. This is because there is a possibility that clients will suddenly realise that they look better than they thought.

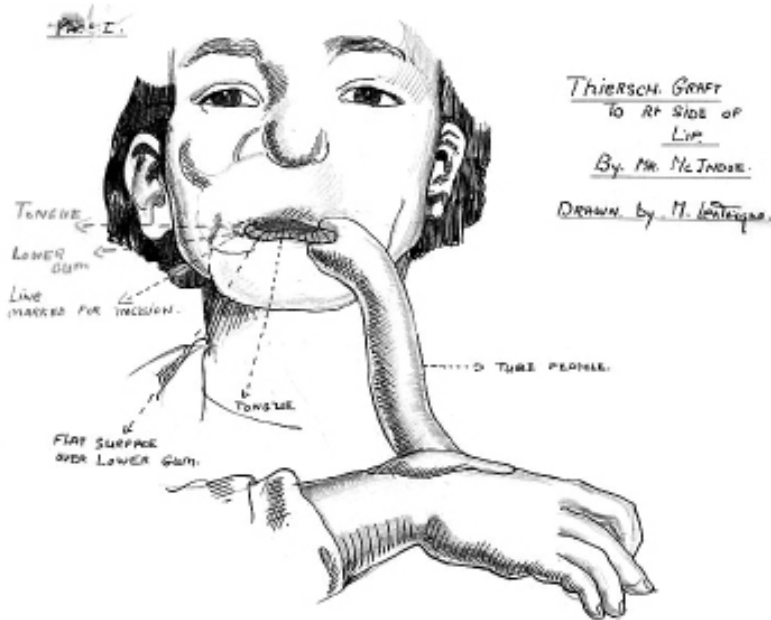
Let us consider the paradoxical situation even more closely. One of the most common issues these clients want to address is the width of the nose. A filtered selfie solves this problem, but a normal selfie shows the nose differently. However, it is not necessarily a matter of the face that the nose belongs to. In fact, in selfies, and sometimes filtered selfies, the nose appears up to 30 % wider due to the optical properties, distance from the subject, and the characteristics of the camera. Selfies are taken from a much closer distance than portrait photos are taken.²² This is also why in the research

20 Cf. Abbas, L. – Hamzeh, D., Body Dysmorphic Features among Snapchat Users of “Beauty-Retouching of Selfies” and Its Relationship with Quality of Life. *Media Asia*, 49, 2022, No. 3, pp. 196–212; Ramphul, K. – Mejias, S. G., Is “Snapchat Dysmorphia” a Real Issue?

21 Cristel, R. T. – Dayan, S. H. – Akinosun, M. – Russell, P. T., Evaluation of Selfies and Filtered Selfies and Effects on First Impressions. *Aesthetic Surgery Journal*, 41, 2021, No. 1, pp. 122–130.

22 Cf. Ward, B. – et al., Nasal Distortion in Short-Distance Photographs: The Selfie Effect.

the evaluators rated selfies as inferior, as they give the person a slightly unnatural appearance.



Mollie Lentaigne's drawing of a Thiersch graft to the right side of a lip. Mollie Lentaigne was one of the pioneers of medical art in the field of plastic surgery. The relationship between art and plastic surgery is inconspicuously rich: "It can be argued that the ability of a medical artist to enhance, emphasise or omit certain aspects of the operative scene is what made (and continues to make) medical illustrations more valuable than photography in the documentation of surgical procedures." (Baldwin, A. J., Illustrating plastic surgery: the past, present and future. *The Bulletin of the Royal College of Surgeons of England*, 105, 2003, No. 2, p. 56) The inherent aesthetic quality of this branch of surgery also results in the observed fact that "many patients see and value their plastic surgeons as artists." (Goldwyn, R. M., The plastic surgeon as an artist. *Plastic & Reconstructive Surgery*, 112, 2003, No. 1, p. 327) Or, for example, J. P. Webster has advocated the idea of plastic surgery as art using Aristotle's dictum: "Art indeed consists in the conception of the result to be produced before its realisation in the material." (Webster, J. P., Foreword. In: Gillies, H. – Millard, R. – Magill, I., *Principles and Art of Plastic Surgery* 3, Boston, Little–Brown 1957. Cf. Fernandes, J. W., The Legacy of Art in Plastic Surgery. *Plast Reconstr Surg Glob Open*, 9, 2021, No. 4). (Public domain, Wikimedia.org)

At the same time, compared with preoperative imaging software, such as Vectra (Canfield Scientific, NJ), which can be used to display changes during the preoperative consultation, filtered selfies do not display realistic results. The filtered selfie makes significant changes in several areas of the face that may not be achievable, or would require multiple interventions to achieve,

most typically eye size. At the same time, filtered selfies often create a more feminine appearance, and therefore can create a more negative first impression for men.²³

Snapchat dysmorphia is therefore a complex phenomenon in which the relationship between model and imitation, archetype, and image, is constantly mirrored at the level of everyday life, at the level of social networks, and finally at the level of photography as a template for aesthetic surgery.

In a logical sequence, the first stage is the unrepresented face itself. The second step is the selfie, which constructs, rather than mirrors, creates, rather than faithfully depicts, that face. In the third step, this selfie is adjusted by filters that correct some deficiencies (deficiencies in the sense of what the filter algorithm focuses on as requiring adjustment). Among these imperfections, ironically, is the optical imperfection of the selfie itself, such as the aforementioned width of the nose. In the fourth step, clients attempt to undergo aesthetic surgical procedures to give them an appearance that matches not their own appearance (in the sense of looking in the mirror), but that matches the filtered selfie.

Summarising these steps, we can see in which direction our analysis must proceed. Between the model and the image, between the face and the selfie, there is no relation of faithful representation, but an image emerges, a filtered selfie that does not, in the sense of adequate representation, have a model, but is – a simulacrum. The face that is supposed to resemble this model is itself a simulacrum. Of course, I have yet to substantiate this thesis.

2. Hyperreality, Simulacrum, and the Second Nature of Snapchat Dysmorphia

Selfies, social networks, and finally Snapchat dysmorphia itself are instances of hyperreality. The selfie specifically reduplicates reality, doubling or multiplying the original. This initial determination, however, is fundamentally flawed. For it gives the impression of a hierarchical or dependent relationship between the selfie and the substrate that is the face. Let us therefore look more closely at the problem of hyperreality.

The two original source authors are Umberto Eco and Jean Baudrillard. Eco uses the term hyperreality in his essays from the 1970s²⁴ where the author focuses on the problem of reduplication:

23 Cristel, R. T. – et al., Evaluation of Selfies and Filtered Selfies and Effects on First Impressions, p. 128.

24 Eco, U., *Travels in Hyperreality*. San Diego, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich 1986.

Hyperreality is, to the maximum extent, a reality-like imitation. The examples Eco analyses are Disneyland or the Eiffel Tower in Las Vegas. The dialectic of the hyperreal gives the imitation the status of the hyperreal, that is, more real than the real, a near perfection. That which in its original sense stood behind the bulwark of a Benjaminian aura is suddenly within reach, relegated from exclusivity to accessibility.²⁵ At the same time, this hyperreality is endowed with the clarity and distinctness of hyper-detail, of hyper-presence. Paradoxically, the apparent copy or the apparent substitute, the imitation, serves the ultimate needs of a sense of reality. “This is the reason for this journey into hyperreality, in search of instances where the American imagination demands the real thing and, to attain it, must fabricate the absolute fake [...]”²⁶ Of course, in the same dialectic, the accessibility and perceptibility of the hyperreal is given hand in hand with its consumability, and the reduplication in the sense of repetition of the model takes the form of technical reproducibility, the endless production of imitation.²⁷ Is the model then anything more than an inaccessible chimera, which even when we see the “real” Eiffel Tower ceases to be distinguishable from the imitation? Eco’s analysis of hyperreality paves the way to the collapse of the category of the real, and to the infinite regress of imitation.

Baudrillard precisely explicates the way in which reality collapses into hyperrealism, how, in the end – exactly in the logic of the inaccessibility and chimerical nature of the model – it gives way to the “fetishism of the lost object: no longer the object of representation, but the ecstasy of denial and of its own ritual extermination: the hyperreal.”²⁸

Baudrillard understands the real as that which can have a corresponding representation.²⁹ This fundamental relation is demolished in hyperreality, everything that is, is always already reproduced, it is reduced to the level of the aesthetic hallucination of reality, and then the original status of the original and the representation loses its meaning. In his programmatic thesis, Baudrillard says unequivocally that “today, *reality itself is hyperrealistic*.”³⁰

For Baudrillard, the context and fundamental justification of the meaning of the hyperreal is also the attempt to restore the real. It is once again a dialectic of imitation that, insofar as it seeks to be as faithful a copy as possible,

25 Cf. Benjamin, W., *Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit*. Frankfurt/Main, Suhrkamp 2003.

26 Eco, U., *Travels in Hyperreality*, p. 8.

27 Cf. Benjamin, W., *Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit*.

28 Baudrillard, J., *Selected Writings*. Ed. Mark Poster. Cambridge, Polity 2004, p. 145.

29 *Ibid.*, p. 145n.

30 *Ibid.*, p. 144.

denies the model the status of the exclusive, but at the same time simulates reality through this hyperrealism. The choice of material or media representation serves the goal of being as adequate as possible.

The cycle of analysis and ultimately critique of hyperreality ends with the moralising comments of Albert Borgmann. His “postmodern realism” is an attempt “to outgrow technology as a way of life and to put it in the service of reality, of the things that command our respect and grace our life.”³¹ Hyperreality, according to Borgmann, is undoubtedly an artificial reality, whose relation to reality is not indifferent, or not an extension, an enrichment, but literally an assault on reality. Borgmann contemplates a limited or instrumental hyperreality, which is still limited by the reality principle,³² while the *final hyperreality* is the unlimited rule of this reality displacing or denying technologically conditioned artificial reality.

I have already mentioned three aspects of hyperreality, which for Borgmann are brilliance, richness, and pliability. Hyperreality is, to use a deliberately normative term that fully corresponds to Borgmann’s intention, an unfair competition, for in it the “artificial” world stands out without resistance, much more easily, more quickly, but also in a hyperreal degree of detail, of splendour, which suddenly replaces, as it were, the less accessible, less pliable, “slow” world of reality.

In Ecoian hyperreality, the selfie emerges as a hyperreal correlate, the one that abolishes the distinction between the real and the fake. It is more real than the real, it is the true appearance. Baudrillard similarly shows that the specific characteristic of the hyperreal photograph is its surreal objectivity, namely its detail, its complexity.³³ Although the photograph depicts, its depiction is above all an amplification. We are back to Borgmann’s triptych of the properties of hyperreality: brilliance, richness, and pliability.

However, behind the logic of the interpretation of hyperreality in these cases looms the nostalgic desire for reality. In Baudrillard, hyperreality as reality itself is not a legitimate new reality, but a derivative, almost a perversion or Borgmann’s assault on reality. Or, as we have seen especially in Eco, it is always, as it were, an attempt to reconquer the paradise of reality, an attempt to find something true in this Baudrillardian “desert of the real”.³⁴ However, it is precisely the desperate attempt to conquer the real that causes the desert to spread. The real is a hyperreality in the sense of a semantic desolation; it is the invalidation of reality, the loss of the substratum of the real.

31 Borgmann, A., *Crossing the Postmodern Divide*, p. 82.

32 Borgmann does not, however, provide a clear definition of his “reality principle”, cf. *ibid.*, p. 87.

33 Cf. Baudrillard, J., *Because Illusion and Reality Are Not Opposed*. In: Baudrillard, J. – Guillaume, M., *Radical Alterity*. Los Angeles, Semiotext(e) 2008, pp. 145–158.

34 Baudrillard, J., *Selected Writings*, p. 166.

But here I think we see the root of the Snapchat dysmorphia problem, including the ethical dilemmas of cosmetic surgeons. They seem to be standing guard over this fading reality under the attack of hyperreality. The face that is supposed to change according to the model that is the filtered selfie seems to have ceased to be a true, real, even natural face. However, a practice that seems to be universally accepted, and which, at least in the 2008 research, plays a large role in the model based on which clients undergo plastic surgery, is wanting to look – especially in specifics – like celebrities. Angelina Jolie’s lips are the most common example.³⁵

What is the fundamental difference between the requirement to resemble your filtered selfie and the requirement to resemble a famous actor, actress, or singer? One possible reading of this difference, in my judgment, is that in the first case we encounter the logic of simulation, or the model for plastic surgery is a reality in reference to which imitation makes sense. The face does change, but according to a legitimate model. In the second sense, we encounter a simulacrum, the “unreality” of the model. And the legitimacy or illegitimacy of the model is negotiated on the basis of belonging to the regime of simulation (mimesis) or simulacrum. The binary oppositions of reality and unreality, the real and the artificial, the natural and the unnatural, decide the basic position of the legitimacy or illegitimacy of surgical interventions.

The simulacrum with a negative normative meaning is the legacy of Baudrillard’s analyses.³⁶ But we can hardly characterise the phenomenon of Snapchat dysmorphia better than as an exemplary case of the logic of simulacra. The face here becomes a simulacrum, it becomes such a likeness, such an image whose similarity to the model lies in its dissimilarity. It is an effort to resemble oneself as a differentiation from oneself. The new form, the new appearance, is established in a space independent of the “true” face of such a person, but without being an imitation of any other model. It is a “non-similarity” that nevertheless relates, in this non-similarity, to the original face as its source. It is a simulacrum.

Against the notion of simulacra as an assault on reality stands the conception of Deleuze.³⁷ Deleuze turns to Plato’s original view of the simulacrum as a perverse, deviant imitation. The simulacrum, unlike the (faithful) copy, ac-

35 Cf. Ohlden, A., Surgery; Celebrity Influences on Plastic Surgery. *Science* 2.0, 2008. Available online at [www: https://www.science20.com/newswire/celebrity_influences_on_plastic_surgery](https://www.science20.com/newswire/celebrity_influences_on_plastic_surgery) [cit. 1. 6. 2023]; Tijerina, J. D. – Morrison, S. D. – Nolan, I. T. – et al., Celebrity Influence Affecting Public Interest in Plastic Surgery Procedures: Google Trends Analysis. *Aesthetic Plastic Surgery*, 43, 2019, No. 6, pp. 1669–1680.

36 Most importantly, of course, in *Simulacra and simulation*. See Baudrillard, J., *Simulacres et Simulation*. Paris, Galilée 1981.

37 Deleuze, G., The Simulacrum and Ancient Philosophy. In: *The Logic of Sense*. London, Athlone Press 1990, pp. 253–279.

quires its resemblance to the model, the archetype, illegitimately, without, in fact, fulfilling mimesis in a spiritual sense. It is then true that “the simulacrum is not simply a false copy, but that it places in question the very notations of copy and model.”³⁸

Deleuze’s analysis concludes that “the simulacrum is built upon a disparity or upon a difference. It internalises a dissimilarity.”³⁹ However, here, in the order of the simulacrum, we discover a reactionary force, a resistance to the almost Levinasian totalising power of the same, or to the claim of Platonism to be “the domain of representation filled by copies-icons, and defined not by an extrinsic relation to an object, but by an intrinsic relation to the model or foundation. The Platonic model is the same [...]”⁴⁰ Against each other stand these two distinct and mutually contradictory orders: the identity order of mimesis and the differential order of inequality of simulacra. For Deleuze, these two orders are equally legitimate, even though the European tradition is dominated by the pursuit of the Platonic ideal of identity. Above all, however, “these are two distinct readings of the world: one invites us to think difference from the standpoint of a previous similitude or identity; whereas the other invites us to think similitude and even identity as the product of a deep disparity.”⁴¹

The simulacrum here acquires an unquestionable legitimacy and, in Deleuze’s reading, is neither derivative (with respect to the real, with respect to the model) nor unreal (since the yardstick of the reality-sameness is dissolved in the view of the world in general as a phantasm). The dualism of reality-virtuality, of model-image, of true-fake, is the reign of identity against which Deleuze defends the essential right of difference and disparity. Even more so: “The simulacrum is not a degraded copy. It harbours a positive power which denies the *original and the copy, the model and the reproduction*.”⁴²

What do we take away from the two conceptions of simulacra? First of all, a specific dialectic of thinking about the plasticity, that is naturalness and unnaturalness of the face. The face, thought of as natural, is the last vestige of the true, the identical. It is an accidental givenness that therefore, as an uncorrupted paradise of the original human condition, resists the power of virtualisation and hyperreality. But is it really the case? Plastic surgery that alters the appearance of the face is an intrusion on this natural order, but it

38 Ibid., p. 256.

39 Ibid., p. 258.

40 Ibid., p. 259.

41 Ibid., p. 261.

42 Ibid., p. 262. However, there is a final consideration of Deleuze’s notion of simulacrum: simulacrum is not identical with artificiality. “The artificial is always a copy of a copy, which should be pushed to the point where it changes its nature and is reversed into the simulacrum.” Ibid., p. 265.

is equally a subversive rejection of nature as a binding norm, a conscious attempt at self-creation. We can even say that it is a spontaneous attempt to break out of this oppressive domain of the natural, and to give oneself a form that is not governed by natural givenness.

As paradoxical as it sounds, Snapchat dysmorphia carries with it the claim of breaking free from the power of the model, which is identity with one's own haphazard appearance. It is subversive and nihilistic because it is a choice of *one's own* face as *different*. It is a choice of the self as Other.

This reading of the Snapchat dysmorphia phenomenon notes the subtle, unacknowledged, but crucial role played by dualistic thinking, thinking in oppositions of right/wrong, real/virtual. Thinking in binary oppositions is frequent in the context of social networks and IT more generally. The distinction between the real and the virtual, online, and offline, work and play, production and consumption, as clearly separate spheres, has already been critiqued.⁴³ The order of hyperreality abolishes this distinction, but the question remains as to what consequences such abolition leads to. We have seen that, on the one hand, it can be understood as a nostalgic desire for the restoration or return of reality, which hyperreality had turned into a phantasm. Or, in the case of Deleuze's logic of simulacra, it means, on the contrary, the recognition of the positive value of difference and differentiation. The binary oppositions discussed here are always normative and postulate within each pair a hierarchy of the elements. The pairs consist of the positive vs. negative, legitimate vs. illegitimate, original vs. derived.

The key item in this implicit logic of binary opposites, which determines normative thinking about Snapchat dysmorphia, is the relation of natural/unnatural, or natural/artificial. Then again, how can we legitimately speak of human nature at all?

A characteristic example of the defence of human nature is Habermas' reasoning, which primarily targets the problem of genetic engineering.⁴⁴ For Habermas, the post-metaphysical age in which we live is the loss of the defining models or images of humanity resulting in the threat of moral indifference or anarchy. His solution, from an ethical point of view, is the perspective of a non-metaphysical criterion of a good or successful life, a life in the sense of "undisturbed self-existence", "being-able-to-be-oneself".⁴⁵

Habermas asks whether it is possible to "be oneself" if the somatic substrate of who I am is not a random given, but the result of purposeful in-

43 Cf. Johnson, N. F. – Keane, H., Internet Addiction? Temporality and Life Online in the Networked Society. *Time and Society*, 26, 2017, No. 3, pp. 267–285.

44 Habermas, J., *The Future of Human Nature*. Cambridge, Polity Press 2003.

45 *Ibid.*, p. 5.

tervention. “For as soon as adults treat the desirable genetic traits of their descendants as a product they can shape according to a design of their own liking, they are exercising a kind of control over their genetically manipulated offspring that intervenes in the somatic bases of another person’s spontaneous relation-to-self and ethical freedom.”⁴⁶ For Habermas, it is the contingency or unintentionality of the somatic basis that is the prerequisite for the possibility or ability to be oneself; in other words: nature. And because of genetic engineering, “the boundary between the nature that we ‘are’ and the organic endowments we ‘give’ ourselves disappears.”⁴⁷ The hypostasising of nature as an accidental somatic foundation leads Habermas to the consequence that the only relation one can legitimately take to such a bodily substrate is a “*revisionary* self-understanding”⁴⁸ or reflexive moral self-understanding of a Kierkegaardian kind. The power to be oneself here explicitly refers to Kierkegaard’s conception of the self in *The Sickness unto Death*.⁴⁹ This relation presupposes that I must also take charge of my own body, to take a balanced relation to my corporeality.

But do we have to relate to the body as natural, a given, an accidental bodily substrate that is inviolable? Is the possibility of free, authentic, self-relationship, the ability to be oneself, limited to a reflexive acceptance, an embracing of this given body?⁵⁰

We have already seen that the Snapchat dysmorphia phenomenon includes habitualisation, internalisation, and automation. It is the result of such a habitualised practice in which a different idea of one’s own face is gradually formed, an idea with which the user identifies and literally becomes accustomed to. In the last part of this analysis, therefore, I will try to see Snapchat dysmorphia through the lens of the idea of second nature. Crucially, *second* nature is not understood here as merely a cultural superstructure against which *first* nature is a somatic substrate, but we will see that the consequence of thinking about second nature in authors such as Hegel, Kierkegaard, and Nietzsche is to abolish the constitutive distinction between bodily nature and culture as a kind of superorganic sphere *sui generis*.⁵¹

46 *Ibid.*, p. 13.

47 *Ibid.*, p. 12.

48 *Ibid.*, p. 14.

49 Kierkegaard, S., *Sygdommen til døden*. In: *Søren Kierkegaards Skrifter 11*. Copenhagen, Gads forlag 2006, pp. 115–242.

50 In the context of Kierkegaard and gender identity, see Norman, O., *Despair and Gender Identity*. Reading Kierkegaard in a Queer Light. In: *Kierkegaard and Issues in Contemporary Ethics*. Ed. M. Fox-Muratton. Berlin–New York, De Gruyter 2020, pp. 253–272.

51 By this distinction I refer to Kroeber’s famous superorganic conception of culture. See Kroeber, A., *The Superorganic*. *American Anthropologist*, 19, 1917, No. 2, pp. 163–213.

The motif of second nature is currently relegated to the position of an intellectual curiosity or an ornamental description of the fact that we consider ourselves as fundamentally non-instinctual beings who, like animals, need certain automated, immediate reactions to everyday situations. These reactions, automated responses, are then understood as second nature or as learned, habitualised behaviour. The key difference is the cultural or enculturated character of second nature. It is not part of a person's "natural" (in the sense of "first" nature) genetic or evolutionary makeup, but must be acquired, is culturally disseminated, and is part of socialisation.⁵²

The connection between Snapchat dysmorphia and the classical notion of second nature is primarily established due to the twofold aspect that is characteristic of the phenomenon we are studying: habitualisation and bodily appropriation. Habitualisation in the context of Snapchat dysmorphia equals to the repeated and therefore habituated cognitive acts by which one appropriates the body image that is shaped by the filtered selfie. It is worth emphasising that Snapchat dysmorphia is not a type of sudden and immediate reversal in self-evaluation, but rather a process of habitualisation or gradual identification with this body image. It arises out of repeated everyday practice. Furthermore, in referring to the authors of the classical theory of second nature, I understand bodily appropriation as the somatic realisation of such habitualised behaviour.⁵³ In this interpretation, however, the aim will be to argue that surgical alteration of appearance, which can be understood as an inorganic and radical intervention in (natural) appearance, can be reinterpreted as a way of appropriating, a somatic appropriation, of a cognitively habitualised second nature.

Second nature has a paradigmatic form expressed by Cicero: "habit produces a sort of second nature."⁵⁴ Second nature is understood not only as individual habits, but, for example, in the interpretation of I. Testa, second nature includes subjective (habits, values, abilities, personality traits) and objective (social set-up, relationships, institutions) aspects of human culture in the broad sense.⁵⁵ At the same time, second nature is understood as those habitual behaviours that – in cultural relabelling – allow for similarly im-

52 Cf. Carlisle, C., *On Habit*. London, Routledge 2014.

53 In the following interpretation I rely on my earlier study devoted to the topic of second nature in 19th century philosophy, with an emphasis on S. Kierkegaard's notion of original sin: Marek, J., *Creatures of Habit: On Second Nature, Habitual Behaviour, and Ethical Life in Kierkegaard*. In: *Kierkegaard and Issues in Contemporary Ethics*. Ed. M. Fox-Muratou. Berlin–New York, De Gruyter 2020, pp. 235–252.

54 Cicero, M. T., *De Finibus Bonorum et Malorum*. London, William Heinemann 1914, p. 477.

55 Testa, I., *Selbstbewußtsein und zweite Natur*. In: *Hegels Phänomenologie des Geistes – Ein kooperativer Kommentar zu einem Schlüsselwerk der Moderne*. Ed. K. Vieweg, W. Welsh. Frankfurt/Main, Suhrkamp 2008, pp. 286–307.

mediate and automated reactions as animal instincts. It amounts to saying, for example, that playing the piano becomes second nature insofar as it allows conscious activity to be detached from the difficulties of fingering, automates motor skills, and allows for the person to attend to a higher activity (such as in this case composition or interpretation).⁵⁶ The second nature therefore forms a kind of infrastructure that enables higher cultural structures or superstructures.

The classical notion of second nature becomes a theme in Hegel's philosophy, especially in *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, the book where the author deals with the problem of rationalised intersubjectivity: ethical life (*Sittlichkeit*). Hegel's conception of the second nature is broad or all-encompassing, like the above-mentioned interpretation in I. Testa: "the system of right is the realm of actualised freedom, the world of spirit produced from within itself as a *second nature*."⁵⁷ Crucially for Hegel, he uses this term to convey the persistence and automaticity of intersubjectivity in the sense that our behaviour is not a sequence of moral choices, but rather a habituated recognition of a rationality realised in the fabric of social institutions and interpersonal relationships.

But Hegel goes further in his conception of second nature: he speaks of second nature as nature in the sense that it is immediate (automatic) and "second" because "it is an immediacy posited by the soul, incorporating and moulding the bodiliness that pertains to the determinations of feeling as such, and to the determinations of representation and of the will in so far as they are embodied."⁵⁸ Hegel, of course, does not start from the standpoint of a substance dualism, and the distinction between body and soul is for him precisely this ideal activity, the constitution of a certain immediacy that manifests itself as corporeality. Habit literally weaves its body, or rather, habituated behaviour is appropriated, corresponds to bodily experience, bodily sensations, etc. Man is then a being who is endowed with that organic substrate, which is a corporeality like that of an animal, but he cultivates, transforms, purifies this corporeality through habit.

Friedrich Nietzsche is the second author who presents the link between habit, morals, corporeality, and second nature in an almost paradigmatic way.⁵⁹ It could be argued that the culminating phase of Nietzsche's philoso-

56 In an almost Gehlenian sense of "unburdening" [Entlastung], cf. Gehlen, A., *Der Mensch. Seine Natur und seine Stellung in der Welt*. Frankfurt/Main, Vittorio Klostermann 2016.

57 Hegel, G. W. F., *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press 1991, p. 35.

58 Hegel, G. W. F., *Philosophy of Mind*. Oxford, Clarendon Press 2007, p. 131.

59 Nietzsche does not use the term "second nature" in most key places. This does not mean, however, that he does not explicitly consider it, cf. Nietzsche, F., *Unzeitgemässe Betrachtungen*.

phy sets as its programme the very problem of the process of the appropriation of moral values. In his case, the dualistic framework is also abolished, only in favour of the primacy of corporeality, in relation to which “soul is just a word for something on the body.”⁶⁰ Nietzsche, beginning with his short essay *On Truth and Lies in Nonmoral Sense*,⁶¹ throughout his major works, including *Zarathustra* and finally, very significantly, in the *Genealogy of Morals*,⁶² explores the aspects in which originally bodily gestures, movements, and expressions are internalised, metaphorised, and become intrinsic moral values; but in a second step, it is the values themselves that are internalised and manifested or expressed by the body.⁶³

Finally, the logic of the appropriation of moral attitudes, and explicitly the transformation of corporeality given by habitual, customary behaviour, is evident in Kierkegaard’s late posthumous works. For him, as later for F. Nietzsche, the key problem is the degeneration of the human race, a degeneration that is the consequence, in this Kierkegaardian reasoning, of hereditary sin.⁶⁴

At first glance, the historical curiosity of the concept of second nature allows us to grasp the problem of Snapchat dysmorphia in a remarkably holistic way. If we were to proceed from the dualistic view discussed above, Snapchat dysmorphia would remain an aberrant condition, and this in relation to an uncritically understood natural corporeality. In contrast, viewing humans as second nature beings reveals a perspective in which the duality of the somatic and the cultural is not a given, but is a fluid continuum in which cultural habits, habitualised behaviours, lead to objectification, bodily manifestation. And vice versa, thinking is dependent on corporeality, on everyday habits.⁶⁵

Snapchat dysmorphia is the result of habitualising, internalising, and automating a specific practice: editing and sharing one’s selfies. The filtered

In: *Kritische Studienausgabe* 1, München, Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag–De Gruyter 1999, p. 270; Nietzsche, F., *Morgenröthe*. In: *Kritische Studienausgabe* 3. München, Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag–De Gruyter 1999, p. 46.

60 Nietzsche, F., *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press 2006, p. 23.

61 Nietzsche, F., *Über Wahrheit und Lüge im aussermoralischen Sinne*. In: *Kritische Studienausgabe* 1, pp. 873–890.

62 Nietzsche, F., *Zur Genealogie der Moral*. In: *Kritische Studienausgabe* 5. München, Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag–De Gruyter 1999, pp. 245–412.

63 For a concise discussion of the topic see Chavalka, J., *Přivtělení a morálka: pojetí tělesnosti ve filosofii Friedricha Nietzscheho*. Prague, Togga 2014.

64 Cf. Kierkegaard, S., *Søren Kierkegaards Skrifter* 26. *Journalerne NB31–NB36*. Copenhagen, Gads forlag 2009, pp. 379–381, esp. pp. 426n.

65 One of the most remarkable attempts to break down the idea of thinking, or rationality, as a distinct sphere clearly differentiated from the somatic basis (specifically the emotions, the limbic system) is A. Damasio’s *Descartes’ Error*. See Damasio, A. R., *Descartes’ Error: Emotion, Reason and the Human Brain*. London, Vintage 2006.

selfie becomes the image of the self that the user identifies with, which at the same time prevents the user from realising a satisfying relationship with oneself, from being oneself. The step that is plastic surgery – the bodily manifestation of this image – is entirely within the logic of second nature. It is an attempt to appropriate, to manifest on the corporeal level the already habitualised image of the self.

3. Conclusion

This study is aware of the controversy surrounding the phenomenon of Snapchat dysmorphia. There clearly are numerous cases of individuals who suffer from compulsive disorders that prevent them from living a happy life. However, it is also possible to believe that the blanket negative assessment of Snapchat dysmorphia corresponds to an unacknowledged bias of treating humans as natural beings, natural in terms of that random substrate with which we must be able to cope. Is such a view still tenable?

The sanctity of the body is a normative view of corporeality. It is then also a normative demand to come to terms with the accidental corporeality that has been given to us. However, today this view is problematic on many levels. Particularly in the case of transgender persons, somatic contingency has become an obstacle to the identity of the individual who seeks the possibility of a successful life through operative gender reassignment.⁶⁶

Is the pathologising and medicalisation of the Snapchat dysmorphia phenomenon then more likely due to the needs of these people, who should be helped with psychiatric and psychological care, or is it a manifestation of the dual, binary thinking that defends the sanctity and inviolability of human bodily nature? The key question then is whether we can find any criterion of legitimacy for surgical interventions whose sole reason is dysmorphia, a profound discrepancy between how we see ourselves, and what image of ourselves we have internalised and habitually adopted.⁶⁷

66 I am not equating the experience of transgender persons and of those affected by Snapchat Dysmorphia. Rather, I am exemplifying the radical change in relating to the possibilities of changing one's body in gender reassignment surgery.

67 The ethical dimensions and implications are only very briefly hinted at here. My argument is not to warrant a blanket approval of any demanded aesthetic surgical procedures, but rather against a similarly blanket rejection. A major consideration to keep in mind are beauty standards propagated by various private companies and, similarly, the influence of social networks on such standards (not to mention the complete opacity of the algorithms behind social media feeds). I am, in so many words, aware of the delicate balancing act between the ethical value of individual freedom on the one hand, and the ethical value of protecting vulnerable persons from coercion and manipulation.

Inhumanity and Sexbots: On Incestuous Relations with Sexbots*

Tomáš Kobes

University of West Bohemia, Faculty of Arts

kobes@kss.zcu.cz

Abstract:

British multimedia artist K. Davis has joined the campaign against sexbots initiated in 2015 by K. Richardson and E. Billing in the project *Logging on to Love*. Using photography, video, and sound design, she draws attention to how sexbots rearticulate the widespread treatment of humans as objects and underlines the commodification of sex. For Davis, sexbots in this sense are not simply human products, but anti-humanist tools. On the other hand, sexbot creators and their proponents argue that sexbots can aid people in their occasional loneliness, but also in reducing the sex trade or becoming an effective therapeutic tool. Therefore, sexbots are a controversy creating boundaries between humanity and inhumanity. By examining these differences, I argue in this paper that being human or inhuman in relation to sexbots can only be fully understood with regard to incest, which can contribute to understanding sexbots in a more symmetrical sense than the one offered by their critics and defenders.

Keywords: sexbots; incest; inhumanity; imagination

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1. Introduction

In 2015, in her project *Logging on to Love*, British multimedia artist and activist Kate Davis joined the campaign against sexual robots (also known as “sexbots” or “pornbots”) initiated by Kathleen Richardson and Erik Billing. By using photography, video and sound, Davis uses sexbots to demonstrate the risks of sex virtualization in sexual intercourse by questioning human intimacy and the relationships that are being replaced by technology. In her words, the ideas behind sexbots are a reminder of the patriarchal system that constructs our society and reinforces relations of power that do not recognise women as fully human but rather as objects. This is the reason

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Davis has adopted a humanistic worldview that normalizes the communication of sex and reconnected with the essential question of what it means to be human. From her perspective, sex robots may be conceived as perfect lovers, but they are not like humans in a very key way. They have no voice, they don't bleed, they don't cry, vomit, feel pain or age; they also have no memories, thoughts, feelings or desires of their own, and their biggest appeal to men is that they will never say no. Davis' big question concerns whether it is healthy to encourage a person to create relationships with something that is so anti-human.¹

In its aim, *Logging on to Love* is an interesting counterpoint to Hans Bellmer's cycle *Die Puppe*.² Through photographs of dolls installed in very seductive positions, Bellmer expressed his desire not only for political freedom in the Nazi regime, but above all for the freedom to dream and realize his most hidden erotic fantasies. This is, after all, one of the defenses of the existence of sexbots and their more systematic incorporation into human relationships, which makes the sexist escapism that has occupied many artists and intellectuals possible.³ Where Davis sees enslavement and inhumanity, sexbot advocates, following Bellmer's dream, search for the emancipation and realization of humanity made possible via available technology. Therefore, sexbots are a controversy setting the boundaries between humanity and inhumanity that postulates the following questions in particular: What kind of model of a human are these critics and defenders of sexbots using and how do they understand the role technology plays in building human relationships, including sex? Are they really as anti-human as they are portrayed by Davis, or can the existence of sexbots contribute to a reterritorialization of human sexuality and intimacy and under what conditions is this reterritorialization realized? By examining these questions, I will argue via the following deliberation that being human or inhuman in relation to sexbots can only be fully understood in relation to incest. This was partially indicated by Davis' portrayal of sexual intercourse with sexbots as unhealthy, and I believe that the issue of incest can contribute to the understanding of sexbots in a wider sense than the one offered by their critics and defenders.

1 Davis, K., *Logging on to Love: How digital technologies change interhuman relationships*. Available online at [www: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7suUFzwrU4](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7suUFzwrU4) [cit. 16. 1. 2023].

2 Bellmer, H., *Die Puppe*. Berlin, Gerhardt Verlag 1962.

3 Kubes, T., *New Materialist Perspectives on Sex Robots. A Feminist Dystopia/Utopie?* *Social Sciences*, 8, 2019, No. 8, p. 7.

2. What Are Sexbots?

Sexbots are versions of social robots designed for interaction with humans, and as such they have many forms. For example, *Jibo* as a non-sexual assistance robot is more of a loudspeaker. *Aibo*, which is made by Sony, is an intelligent robot-dog, and the robot *Pepper* comes in the form of a humanoid. It is 140 cm tall with a head and openings that resemble human eyes and a mouth. Its body is equipped with wheels, and there is an information screen on its chest. According to SoftBank Robotics, the Japanese company that created *Pepper*, it was designed to provide personalized recommendations with the ability to help people find exactly what they are looking for and, if needed, to communicate with an entire work team. It collects data during the conversation and learns about people's tastes, traits, preferences and habits. It helps customers design responses and better react to their needs. *Pepper* is also able to gather new information to help better understand customers and the company that uses *Pepper's* abilities.⁴

The autonomy of social robots and their ability to interact in complex ways like *Pepper* can make them suitable as assistive and therapeutic tools, the applications of which are sought out in medicine, psychology or elderly care. In particular, studies focusing on the interaction of social robots with elders have shown that social robots are often perceived as patient, willing to listen and non-judgmental, stress-reducing and encouraging openness and willingness to share information.⁵ By comparison, sexbots differ from social robots. Sexbots are strictly humanoid robots with human features designed to enable the possibility of sexual intercourse and pleasure. For this reason, some refer to sexbots as relational artifacts⁶ with an emphasis on their ability to substitute humans in creating sexual and emotional attachments. It is sex that situates this kind of social robot on the dark side. While social robots are perceived as having the potential to improve human care in medical, psycho-

4 Based on the official information of SoftBank Robotics. Available online at [www: https://us.softbankrobotics.com/pepper](https://us.softbankrobotics.com/pepper) [cit. 16. 1. 2023].

5 See e.g. Bickmore, T. – Caruso, L. – Clough-Gorr, K. – Heeren, T., “It’s just like you talk to a friend”. Relational Agents for Older Adults. *Interacting with Computers*, 17, 2005, No. 6, pp. 711–735; Lee, J. K. – Breazeal, C., Human social response toward humanoid robot’s head and facial features. *CHI Extended Abstracts*, 2010, pp. 4237–4242; Kidd, C. D. – Taggart, W. – Turkle, S., A sociable robot to encourage social interaction among the elderly. *Proceedings of IEEE International Conference on Robotics and Automation*, 2006.

6 Cf. Turkler, S. – Taggart, W. – Kidd, C. D. – Dasté, O., Relational artifacts with children and elders: the complexities of cybercompanionship. *Connection Science*, 18, 2006, No. 4, pp. 347–361; Cox-George, C. – Bewley, S., Sex robot: the health implications of the sex robot industry. *BMJ Sexual & Reproductive Health*, 44, 2018, No. 3, pp. 161–164.

logical or social contexts, sexbots in this regard are highly controversial. On the one hand, there are optimists who hope for their emancipatory potential; on the other are pessimists who fear the reinforcement of current dominations, especially between men and women, as suggested by Davis.

Who, then, supports sex with robots? Mostly David Levy,⁷ who has created a coherent argumentation for why humans should not be afraid to have emotional and sexual relationships with robots. According to him, sex robots can become a suitable therapeutic tool in sexual surrogacy. Based on the therapeutic principles elaborated by William Masters and Virginia Johnson,⁸ Levy adopts the premise of physical contact in professional sex surrogacy as a fundamental therapeutic tool for breaking down sexual dysfunction, which patients use to learn to work with their own and their partners' bodies to discover the possibility of their own sexuality in relation to each other. According to Levy, the ethical controversy of paid sex surrogacy is one of the reasons for drawing robots into human sexuality. Not only do we get rid of the ethical dilemma between helping the client and paid sex, but we also contribute to solving the sexual problems of lonely men and women by equipping the robots in question with psychosexual knowledge and skills.⁹

He also points to the systematic insertion of various tools into human sexuality in order to achieve orgasm. For Levy, the vibrator is a prime example of what for many women has become an alternative complement to their sex lives and sometimes a more reliable means of achieving sexual satisfaction. However, it is not just a sexual aid – it is also a tool of independence and a way to realize the right to enjoy one's own sexuality to the fullest. Levy uses other, now widespread sexual aids, such as artificial vaginas or sex dolls, to show how we systematically compose certain tools into human sexuality. Sexbots, he argues, are simply the next logical step that will allow many to fully experience and realize their sexuality. We just need to take a mental leap that is similar to other sexual "sins" such as homosexuality or masturbation in the past. For Levy, sex robots also offer a host of other benefits, such as the reduction of prostitution, underage pregnancy, abortion, sexually transmitted diseases and pedophilia. They also offer many sexual opportunities that can upset established conventional gender categories, allowing people to experiment with homosexual sex or homosexuals experimenting with heterosexual sex using robots that allow humans to realize their intimate needs.¹⁰

7 Levy, D., *Love and Sex with Robots: The Evolution of Human-Robot Relationships*. London, Harper Collins ebooks 2008.

8 Master, W. H. – Johnson, V. E., *Human Sexual Inadequacy*. New York, Bantam Books 1970.

9 Levy, D., *Love and Sex with Robots*, pp. 216–219.

10 *Ibid.*, p. 301.

However, others are skeptical of this optimistic vision. Kathleen Richardson, director of *The Campaign Against Sex Robots*, has been at the forefront of criticism of the more systematic incorporation of sex robots into human life. In her view, sex robots are not simply therapeutic or emancipatory tools, but a means of reinforcing and reproducing gender inequalities. Based on the reading of Ovid's *Pygmalion*, she points out that this story is not about love, reciprocity and empathy, but about a non-reciprocal relationship. The existence of the sex robot is inspired by this unempathetic form of relationship, which manifests itself in the sex trade and unbalanced gender practices, where 80 % of men buy sex from women. It is this unethical level that is reflected in the design of sex robots as a pornographic representation of women and which problematizes the definition of human rights. If we project the idea of humans as things into sex robots, we question the claim for the recognition of robots/things as humans in the future. What appears on the one hand as a progressive step to secure the rights of others on the other hand fundamentally justifies the current lived experience of women as property.¹¹

Kate Davis has joined this critique, warning that it is not necessarily liberating; it can reinforce the existing power relations and have devastating effects on interpersonal relationships, especially by using artificial intelligence in connection with sex.¹² In an interview with *Indie Magazine*, she stated verbatim:

Putting AI into sex dolls and giving these dolls a “brain” is a troubling prospect. What this means is that the robot’s owner has the opportunity to customize its “personality” and demand the inanimate object to tell you it cares about you. Sex robots take away women’s humanity and our ability to have and express feelings, thoughts, needs and desires of our own.¹³

It is not a general system with a capital “S” that is criticized in this proclamation (just as Bellmer wanted to escape in his desire to dream), but rather “Patriarchy”, which dehumanizes womanhood in terms of the ability to have and express feelings, thoughts, needs and desires. What matters is not sim-

11 See Richardson, K., The asymmetrical “relationship”. *ACM SIGCAS Computers and Society*, 45, 2015, No. 3, pp. 290–293; Richardson, K., Sex Robot Matters: Slavery, the Prostituted, and the Rights of Machines. *IEEE Technology and Society Magazine*, 35, 2016, No. 2, pp. 46–53.

12 See Milner, D., Sexbots and cybersex: Kate Davis explores “relationship replacement”. *It’s Nice That*. 2018. Available online at www.itsnicethat.com/articles/kate-davis-logging-on-to-love-digital-050118 [cit. 16. 1. 2023].

13 See Hovve, J., Tech-Artists On Sex Bots and the Alarming Future of the Female Body. *Indie*, 2018. Available online at <https://indie-mag.com/2018/03/sex-bots-artists/> [cit. 16. 1. 2023].

ply generic humanity, but rather the humanity of women destroyed by perversity in men. In such a view, men are presented as inhuman beasts with a tendency to manipulate women as objects of their desire but not as full-fledged human beings. Incidentally, this is the main motive of the feminist criticism of Bellmer's work.¹⁴

On the other hand, when we compare this pessimistic critique with Bellmer and especially Levy's position, which can possibly be described as an optimistic belief, we find a similarity between them. They have in common a model of humanity that is conceived in opposition to technology, grounded in the Enlightenment idea of the human as an independent entity whose reflective capacities enable him to transcend the given social and natural world and achieve the full autonomy that makes the human unique. In this sense, for optimists, technology is a vehicle for breaking out of existing relationships and thereby achieving basic rights and freedom, including self-determination as a base for the realisation of full humanity. For the skeptics, on the other hand, technology reinforces existing power relations and stereotypes that devalue humanity. These skeptics seek to create a condition in which power asymmetry is replaced by a symmetrical reciprocity that protects the humanity of each person reduced in Davis' humanistic view somewhat asymmetrically into womanhood.

3. The Hybridization of Man and Technology

In this model, humanity is conceived as an essential difference of humans that persists in time. It cannot be changed; it can only be developed or suppressed. At the same time, however, it is indeterminate in its specific parameters and definable only in opposition to what threatens or develops it, where difference originates in foundational dichotomies of culture/nature, subject/object or human/technology. Only on this basis can Davis claim that sexbots are anti-human. As she has proclaimed, sexbots have no voice, blood, feelings, memories or desires; they are merely machines, and their composition to human sexuality contributes to empowering power asymmetry and devolving humanity in general.

However, there are studies that suggest that people form systematic and very intimate relationships with technology, blurring these dichotomies.

14 See Killiam, M.-T., *Mutilation of Women by Surrealist Artists*. *International Journal of Arts Theory & History*, 12, 2017, No. 1, pp. 49–65; Taylor, S., *The Anatomy of Anxiety*. New York, Massachusetts Institute of Technology 2000; Wetzell, H. J., *Hans Bellmer's Dolls and the Subversion of the Female Gaze*. *Inquiries Journal*, 13, 2021, No. 1. Available online at [www: http://www.inquiriesjournal.com/articles/1857/hans-bellmers-dolls-and-the-subversion-of-the-female-gaze](http://www.inquiriesjournal.com/articles/1857/hans-bellmers-dolls-and-the-subversion-of-the-female-gaze) [cit. January 16, 2023].

A robotic vacuum cleaner is different from a regular vacuum cleaner. Firstly, it is autonomous and does not require human assistance. Secondly, it is reactive. It can react and adapt to obstacles. This attracts both children and pets for the creation of interaction, in which they use the robotic vacuum cleaner as a partner in a game. Similarly, it does not only change the cleaning routine by increasing the frequency of cleaning – the robotic vacuum cleaner also contributes to increased cooperation and interest in cleaning among all household members based on its presence and technological capabilities. On the other hand, it also supports other activities that take into consideration the robot's needs, which are primarily related to removing obstacles and creating an environment that is comfortable for the device. This leads people to name the robot and attribute personality traits and intentions to it, including its individuation and gender.¹⁵

Richardson is skeptical of these tendencies. She sees it as another version of anthropomorphism, in which humans realize their fantasies of bringing inanimate objects to life by attributing human properties to these objects, within which intelligent technology functions as a “Philosopher’s Stone” by breathing life into non-living materials.¹⁶ However, this is not necessarily the case. On the contrary, the studies mentioned above are interesting in their rethinking of relationships and the hybridization of technological objects. Their users do not deny that they are mechanical instruments, just as the authors of the texts point out that, in the context of their use, gender standards are not transformed. Nevertheless, in comparison with other instruments such as regular vacuum cleaners, they are different. Humans create and rethink their relationships with them, but do not do so with other instruments. All that matters is the creation of empathy and the inter-relatedness between humans and technology, which is an integral part of the human experience. On the other hand, as was indicated in Richardson’s skeptical argumentation, which is also valid for optimists, the anthropological model of skeptics is not fully able to distinguish and explain this aspect conditioned by the increasing importance of artificial intelligence.

This is mainly due to the fact that this model does not sufficiently take into account the agency of things. Things act in their own specific way. The

15 Forlizzi, J. – DiSalvo, C., Service robots in the domestic environment: a study of the roomba vacuum in the home. *Proceedings of the 1st ACM SIGCHI/SIGART conference on Human-robot interaction (HRI06: International Conference on Human Robot Interaction)*. New York, Association for Computing Machinery 2006, pp. 258–265; Sung, J. – Guo, L. – Grinter, R. E. – Christensen, H. I., My Roomba is Rambo. In: Krumm, J. – Abowd, G. D. – Seneviratne, A. – Strang, T. (eds.), *UbiComp 2007: Ubiquitous Computing. UbiComp 2007. Lecture Notes in Computer Science*. Berlin, Springer 2007, pp. 145–162; Sung, J. – Grinter, R. – Christensen, H., Domestic Robot Ecology. *International Journal of Social Robotics*, 2, 2010, No. 4, pp. 417–429.

16 Richardson, K., *Sex Robots Matters*, pp. 47.

principle of this position has been expressed very precisely by Jane Bennet,¹⁷ as she points out that matter allows us to shape the ways in which we interact with it. Man-made objects transcend their status and display a capacity for independence and aliveness. It is this technological mediation that makes it possible to abandon the outdated Enlightenment anthropological model derived from foundational dichotomies in favor of these hybrid human-technology configurations and to better reflect on our entanglement with these non-human agents. The key terms are hybridity, fragmentation, fluidity, diffraction, enactment, translation, becoming, material-semiotic relationality, multiplicity and the ontological politics¹⁸ that undermine classical dichotomous divisions. In this sense, the delineation of man is in close relationship with the entanglement of humans and non-humans, whose specific mode of existence is enacted in the actual sets of material or technological ordering.

This is particularly evident in the use of new reproductive technologies, which disrupt traditional definitions of gender, fatherhood, motherhood or family by attacking the definition of body and reproduction as a process that is autonomous from social and technological intervention.¹⁹ Similarly, through gene manipulation, genetic engineering can create hybrid, transgenic organisms that defy species distinction and subvert natural species diversity.²⁰ However, the collapse of overarching and foundational narratives is not only positively received as a way of envisioning a new human free from the shackles of the modernist project,²¹ but also with the fear that the basis of the coherent and legitimate identities of man, woman, animal or human would disappear. For example, in her research on surrogacy, Helena Ragone²² noted that the interlocutors were revising the natural category of motherhood defined primarily by pregnancy and birth in favour of a more compre-

17 Bennet, J., *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*. Durham–London, Duke University Press 2010, p. xvi.

18 Law, J., Actor Network Theory and Material Semiotics. In: Turner, B. (ed.), *The New Blackwell Companion to Social Theory*. Chichester, John Wiley & Sons 2009, pp. 141–158.

19 See e.g. Balsamo, A. M., *Technologies of the gendered body: Reading Cyborg Women*. Durham–London, Duke University Press 1996; Preez, A. du, *Gendered Bodies and New Technologies: Rethinking Embodiment in a Cyber-era*. New Castle upon Tyne, Cambridge Scholar Publishing 2009.

20 Lee, K., Patenting and transgenic organisms: A philosophical exploration. *Techné: Research in Philosophy and Technology*, 6, 2003, No. 3, pp. 166–175; Ho, M.-W., *Genetic Engineering: Dream or Nightmare? The Brave New World of Bad Science and Big Business*. Bath, Gateway Books 1998; Wheale, P. – McNally, R. (eds.), *Genetic Engineering: Catastrophe or Utopia?* Hemel Hempstead–New York, Harvester Wheatsheaf–St. Martin’s Press 1988.

21 See e.g. Haraway, D., *A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century*. New York, Routledge 1991, pp. 149–181; Haraway, D., *Modest_Witness@Second_Millennium. FemaleMan[®]_Meets_Oncomouse[™]: Feminism and Technoscience*. New York, Routledge 1997; Halberstam, J. – Livingstone, I. (eds.), *Posthuman Bodies*. Bloomington–Indianapolis, Indiana University Press 1995.

22 Ragone, H., *Surrogate Motherhood: Conception In the Heart*. Boulder, Westview Press 1994.

hensible basis delineated by the social and nurturing role of the adoptive mother. On the one hand, the genetic contribution of the surrogate mother is downplayed and motherhood is re-theorized in favor of the adoptive mother's desire to have a child as the reason for its existence and thereby its actual origin in relation to the possibilities of surrogacy. The situation is similar in the case of artificial conception. Women who utilize egg donation emphasize motherhood achieved through pregnancy and downplay the biogenetic relationship, while those who use a surrogate mother's body give importance to their genetic contribution.²³ A similar attitude can be found in the case of homoparental families. Lesbians prefer a single donor in order to maximize the biogenetic links between their children, meaning that children conceived in this way are related not only with respect to their mother but also with respect to one male donor.²⁴ The same strategy can be found in the case of gay parenting. The preference is given to gestational mothers, when the intended father provides sperm and fertilization is achieved in vitro. For these men, family is defined largely by the physical resemblance between parent and child and between siblings. The gestational mother herself is an important factor. The gay couple chooses the egg donor based on physical appearance, educational attainment and the reasons why the woman became a donor with the assumption of biogenetic transmission of valued traits associated with the concept of a good person.²⁵

This is not simply a conservative revitalization and reinforcement of existing categories as described by Haraway and Braidotti,²⁶ but rather a strategic naturalizing, in which actors create coherent and legitimate bases for the child resulting from new reproductive technologies and therefore define them as full human beings. Where Haraway and Braidotti give attention to technologies as the effective instrument of deconstruction, people in praxis

23 Cussins, Ch. M., Quit Sniveling, Cryo-Baby: We'll Work Out Which One's Your Mama! In: Davis-Floyd, R. – Dumit, J. (eds.), *Cyborg Babies: From Techno-Sex to Techno-Tots*. New York–London, Routledge 1998, pp. 40–66; Ragone, H., The Gift of Life: Surrogate Motherhood, Gamete Donation and Constructions of Altruism. In: Cook, R. – Sclater, S. D. – Kaganas, F. (eds.), *Surrogate Motherhood: International Perspectives*. Portland, Hart 2003, pp. 209–226; Teman, E., The medicalization of “nature” in the “artificial body”: Surrogate Motherhood in Israel. *Med Anthropol Q*, 17, 2003, No. 1, pp. 78–98.

24 Hayden, C. P., Gender, Genetics, and Generation: Reformulating Biology in Lesbian Kinship. *Cultural Anthropology*, 10, 1995, No. 1, pp. 41–63; Sullivan, M., *The Family of Woman: Lesbian Mothers, Their Children, and the Undoing of Gender*. Berkeley, University of California Press 2004.

25 Lewin, E., “Natural” Achievements: How Lesbian and Gay Families in North America Make Claims to Kinship. In: Bamford, S. (ed.), *The Cambridge Handbook of Kinship*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press 2019, pp. 253–276.

26 Cf. Haraway, D., Modest_Witness@Second_Millennium. FemaleMan[®]_Meets_Oncomouse[™]: Feminism and Technoscience, p. 128, 168; Braidotti, R., *Transpositions: On Nomadic Ethics*. Cambridge, Polity Press 2006, p. 2.

tend to invent new methods for the reconstruction of the identity base, in which they intertwine technology with expectations, social values, laws and technical standards. However, this entanglement is not conceived as unrestrained free play; it is realized in relation to something that could devalue the reconstructed base of kin.

In her research, Jeanette Edwards²⁷ has noticed that respondents thinking about the implications of new reproductive technologies very often began to articulate incest as one of their potential risks. For example, they developed scenarios in which a child with donated gametes meets his or her donor in adulthood. Without knowing they are related, they fall in love and have children. Another example involved children of the same surrogate mother who, not knowing they were related, could fall in love and have children. The main concern was that children resulting from such unions would be disabled or deformed. According to Edwards, the concern in her respondents' field of vision is not simply the fear of the inappropriate mixing of certain biogenetic material, but rather the general proximity of the identical, which figures into medical discourse as well.²⁸ While in its case proximity is defined biogenetically, in lay discourse it is defined much more broadly. In England, for example, children conceived in the same womb are too close regardless of their genetic relatedness.

The occurrence of accidental incest serves as a clear boundary that must not be crossed and as a base for defining what it means to be human. The apprehension of dehumanization, both in the realm of new reproductive technologies and in Davis's arguments, places sexual intercourse with sexbots in the same category, which can be classified as incestuous. However, what is incestuous in relation to sexbots?

4. What Is Incest?

To answer this question is not simple. According to Elisabeth Archibald,²⁹ incest as a notion has its roots in the Latin word *incestum*, which relates to “unchaste behaviour” that can cause pollution and in which a sexual relationship is probably the most significant. In this sense, Horace in his *Odes*³⁰ refers

27 Edward, J., Incorporating Incest: Gamete, Body and Relation in Assisted Conception. *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 10, 2004, No. 4, pp. 755–774.

28 See e.g. Gené Enric, P. – Wilgaux, J., Incest, Embodiment, Genes and Kinship. In: Edwards, J. – Salazar, C. (eds.), *European Kinship in the Age of Biotechnology*. New York–Oxford, Berghahn Books 2023, pp. 112–127.

29 Archibald, E., *Incest and Medieval Imagination*. Oxford, Clarendon Press 2001, p. 13.

30 Horace, *Odes* (3.3). Available online at [www: https://nodictionaries.com/horace/odes-3/3](https://nodictionaries.com/horace/odes-3/3) [cit. 16. 1. 2023]. In the Czech version, the notion “incestusque iudex” is translated as “nečistý soudce” (impure judge); cf. Horatius, *Odes and Epodes (Ódy a epódy)*. Král. Vinohrady, L. Bradáč 1923, p. 99.

to Paris as a *fatalis incestusque iudex* (fatal unchaste judge) because his lust influenced his decision to give the apple of discord to Venus, who promised him the most beautiful woman in the world as a reward. Similarly, sexual intercourse with a Vestal Virgin was considered unchaste (*incestum*). The principle persisted into the Middle Ages, when intercourse with a nun was considered incestuous, as was intercourse between relatives.

Maurice Godelier,³¹ on the other hand, points out that incest comes from the Latin word *in-castus*, which qualifies an act, relationship or person who has become impure through the performance of a forbidden form of sex. The defilement involved not only the person who caused it, but also those around him, such as friends or neighbors, as well as the place where the heinous act took place. This is very often expressed in terms of sickness, and hence Davis's label of "unhealthy" for sexual intercourse with sexbots.

Impudence and pollution figure here as two complementary realms of meaning indicating unacceptable forms of sex as types of behavior that go against the principles that prevent pollution and threaten good morals. Such types of behavior can be found in every society, and this makes what we have come to refer to as incest a definitional problem. On the one hand, it seems to be a universal phenomenon that forces us to think of incest as having some objective cause that should be discovered. On the other hand, however, the specific forms of incest taboos vary, and it is questionable whether, for example, the Roman definition of incest is commensurable with Greek practice, which did not have an overarching concept for such forms of sex and certainly did not directly link it to pollution (*miasma*) as the Romans did.³²

Concerning this definitional ambivalence, David Schneider³³ pointed out that the literature on incest is largely speculative, highly theoretical and built on the assumption that everyone knows what they are talking about. Its insidiousness lies in the fact that every society is characterized by certain prohibitory rules evoking the universality of incest; at the same time, however, they differ from one another, sometimes in fundamental ways. This leads some theorists to argue that this high variability of incest taboos does not compose a general class of behavior and it is not possible to understand it outside of the context of the particular culture in which they occur.³⁴ These cultural relativists tend to take into account the cultural logic that renders

31 Godelier, M., *Metamorphosis of Kinship*. London, Verso 2011, p. 325.

32 Parker, R., *Miasma: Pollution and Purification in Early Greek Religion*. Oxford–New York, Clarendon Press 1983.

33 Schneider, D., The Meaning of Incest. *Journal of the Polynesian Society*, 85, 1976, No. 2 (June), pp. 149–169.

34 Cf. Needham, R., Remarks on the analysis of kinship and marriage. In: Needham, R. (ed.), *Rethinking Kinship and Marriage*. London, Tavistock 1971, pp. 25–26; Schneider, D., The Meaning of Incest, p. 163.

particular prohibitions of incest incommensurable and untranslatable. On the other hand, universalists look for an explanation of some general hidden mechanism with the potential to organize cultural patterns in particular ways.

In this sense, the naturalists focus on answering the question of why people have a natural fear of incest, which leads to explanations focusing mainly on the natural conditioning of avoiding sex with close relatives. On the contrary, the social determinists are interested in answering the question of why people have incest taboo while searching for the reason why and how society regulates a natural inclination to incest.³⁵ In this sense, the naturalists' version has its roots in Westermarck's hypothesis of "familiarity does not breed",³⁶ which was consequently developed in the sociobiological studies of kibbutz marriages³⁷ or by research on the marriage of patrilineal parallel cousins³⁸ using social proximity as a major cause of the lack of sexual attraction accompanied by low fertility or high divorce rates. On the contrary, others focus on the proximity associated with inbreeding avoidance expressed in much of the work of primatologists or evolutionary psychologists, who argue in favor of inbreeding avoidance as an evolutionary mechanism characteristic of primate species, including humans.³⁹

In contrast, social determinists consider James Frazer's critical objection to Westermarck's hypothesis. According to Frazer, it is very difficult to understand why there is a need to reinforce deep instinct by law.⁴⁰ The argument was subsequently developed by Sigmund Freud,⁴¹ who emphasized that human beings have a natural inclination towards incestuous relations, which have to be regulated by the law. This assumption built a space for the

35 Wolf, A. P., *Incest Avoidance and the Incest Taboos. Two Aspects of Human Nature*. Stanford, Stanford University Press 2014, p. 1.

36 Westermarck, E., *The History of Human Marriage*. London, Macmillan 1894.

37 Shepher, J., Mate Selection among Second Generation Kibbutz Adolescents and Adults: Incest Avoidance and Negative Imprinting. *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, 1, 1971, pp. 293–307; Shepher, J., *Incest. A biosocial view*. New York, Academic Press 1983.

38 McCabe, J., FBD Marriage: Further Support for Westermarck's hypothesis of the Incest Taboo? *American Anthropologist*, 85, 1983, No. 1, pp. 50–69.

39 See e.g. Bulger, J. – Hamilton, W. J. III. Inbreeding and reproductive success in a natural chacma baboon, *Papio cynocephalus ursinus*, population. *Animal Behaviour*, 36, 1988, pp. 574–578; Charpentier, M. J. – Widdig, A. – Alberts, S. C., Inbreeding depression in non-human primates: a historical review of methods used and empirical data. *American Journal of Primatology*, 69, 2007, No. 12, pp. 1370–1386; Moore, J. – Ali, R., Are dispersal and inbreeding avoidance related? *Animal Behaviour*, 32, 1984, pp. 94–112; Parker, H. – Parker, S., Father-daughter sexual abuse: An emerging perspective. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 56, 1986, No. 4, pp. 531–549.

40 Frazer, J., *Totemism and Exogamy. A Treatise on Certain Early Forms of Superstition and Society*. London, Macmillan and Co. 1910, p. 97.

41 Freud, S., *Totem and Taboo. Resemblances Between the Psychic Lives of Savages and Neurotics*. New York, Moffat–Yard and Company, 1913.

formation of the social determinists' theory, which emphasizes the regulative role of social rules with a focus on the stability and harmony of social groups or social order in a wider sense.

In particular, Claude Lévi-Strauss⁴² began to combine Freud's assumptions with the ideas of Edward Tylor (1889),⁴³ Emile Durkheim⁴⁴ and Marcel Mauss.⁴⁵ In his view, the incest taboo is a special institution that removes man from the womb of chaotic nature and places him in a world of organized and predictable social relations.⁴⁶ It is an act of humanization that has appeared in relation to incest prohibition forbidding marriage with a mother, sister or daughter. The consequence of this primordial act is a transformation of the biological conditions of procreation (without rules) in the artificial framework of taboos and obligations, within which the first and most important is the shift from the nature of the consanguineous family into the social imperative of the absolute gift of woman. It is this exchange system conditioned by exogamy that gives rise to kinship as proper human relations. It combines principles of affinity and consanguinity, which leads to the production of human society specified by kinship categories defining kinship distance or proximity between the ego and its potential mate.

Françoise Héritier called Lévi-Strauss' version "incest of the first type" and pointed out in her book⁴⁷ that Lévi-Strauss' theory considered only consanguinity-related prohibition based on filiation and ignored prohibition concerning affine relatives (e.g. mother in law, daughter in law, husband's sisters etc.), which is also part of incestuous prohibitions. This prohibition aims at limiting indirect homosexual relationships between blood relatives of the same sex (mother/daughter, father/son, sister/sister, brother/brother) who have the same partner, leading to physical intimacy that is unthinkable between blood relatives. Héritier called it "incest of the second type".

This does not simply place the related categories in the field of vision as is evident in the case of Lévi-Strauss, but bodily fluids circulating between bodies and sets of prohibitions aimed at preventing the same fluids from intermingling. To have sexual intercourse with a wife's sister means to unite the two sisters by transferring the sexual fluids of one sister into the womb

42 Lévi-Strauss, C., *Elementary Structures of Kinship*. Boston, Bacon Press 1969, esp. Chapter II: The Problem of Incest.

43 Tylor, E. B., On a Method of Investigating the Development of Institutions: Applied to Laws of Marriage and Descent. *Journal of the Anthropological Institute*, XVIII, 1889, pp. 245–272.

44 Durkheim, D., La Prohibition de l'inceste et ses origines. *Année sociologique*, 1, 1898, pp. 1–70.

45 Mauss, M., Essai sur le don: Forme et raison de l'échange dans les sociétés archaïques. *Année sociologique*, 1, 1925, pp. 30–186.

46 Lévi-Strauss, C., *Elementary Structures of Kinship*, p. 25.

47 Héritier, F., *Two Sisters and Their Mothers. The Anthropology of Incest*. London–New York, Zone Books 1999.

of the other. This theory does not link necessarily symbols to the existence of language but rather to corporeality and anatomical differences.⁴⁸ It is this difference between bodies that establishes the distinction between the categories of identical and different. Although Lévi-Strauss assumed incest of the first type to be universal, Hérítier shows that it is derived or derivable from incest of the second type. What is forbidden in incest between blood relatives is definitely the intercourse of identical blood or more generally an identical substance. Therefore, according to Hérítier, primary incest can be understood through incest of the second type. What is perverse about Oedipus is not that he had sexual relations with his mother (primary incest), but that through her similar/the same sperm was mixed together in her womb (secondary incest).⁴⁹

However, Hérítier's conclusion is not accepted unanimously. In *The Metamorphosis of Kinship*,⁵⁰ Maurice Godelier points out that a man's sexual relationship with his wife's sister or mother is not considered incest among the Ashanti. On the other hand, the Ashanti punish with death two kinds of sexual relations that primarily concern hierarchical relations (sex with the wife of the chief) and with the gods, not kinship relations.⁵¹ Therefore, according to Godelier, it is necessary to understand that forbidden sexual unions not narrowly reduced to forbidden marriages give the incest taboo its form and content, and it is not necessary to assume the primacy of incest through the contact of identical substances. Instead, Godelier emphasizes that humans have been faced with two possible choices: 1) to marry with or without exchange and 2) to unite like the gods or differently from the gods, in which the prohibition of incest symmetrically concerns identity and difference.

As a consequence, and logically, in societies that forbid sexual unions between close relatives, humans are not allowed to imitate gods. The relations humans entertain with the gods are invoked here either to forbid or to allow relations between close relatives. Unions between humans always involve the whole society and cosmos.⁵²

This principle is a kind of universal invariant. It refers to the symmetrical prohibition of sexual relations between hierarchically organized species in general terms that should be separated because they are too different from

48 Ibid., p. 201.

49 Ibid., pp. 269–270.

50 Godelier, M., *Metamorphosis of Kinship*, p. 340.

51 Ibid., p. 340.

52 Ibid., p. 463.

each other or, conversely, because they are too similar, such as spouses being identical. The acceptable use of sex lies between these two extremes of identity and difference.

5. Identity and Difference

But identity and difference of what? Lévi-Strauss talks about identity and difference being formed in relation to classification systems. Héritier emphasizes bodily and anatomical differences. However, Godelière no longer speaks simply of classification and likewise avoids speaking directly of bodily or more generally corporal differences between species. Instead, he emphasizes the accumulation of the identical within incest, as well as the bridging of differentiations or hierarchically ordered and disconnected elements within it. This does not fully correspond to the described classical universalistic theory of incest prohibition and is much more consistent with the idea of incest as was developed by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari.⁵³ Both of these scholars reject the perspective typical of social determinists in which incest is seen as an obstacle to the establishment of society and the prohibition of incest as a motive or cause of its existence. In their view, there is no general prohibition of incest, but only of incestuous sequences creatively linked to sequences of (other) prohibitions (e.g. dietary customs). In this way, incest is an ambivalent act against the repressive forces of the existing system represented by social institutions, ideologies and power relations, and creates the possibility for the enactment of a state that can oppose the constituted system of differentiation spread between possible and forbidden relations. At the core of this act is the imagination of a possible human(s), and it can be understood as the image of a human that becomes real via the gathering and assembling of identical and contradictory elements inscribed into the individual participants in incestuous entanglement.

Da Vinci's ideas of flying machines based on the flight of birds or bats are exactly this type of imagination – a certain gathering of ontological propositions based on the observation of birds that inscribe the aerodynamic requirements into the material for the possible flight of machines heavier than air (seemingly contradictory elements). In this sense for Deleuze and Guattari, the existence of society is not necessarily based on a system of exchanges conditioned by an abstract prohibition of incest, but rather on the inscription of code series produced by desires (e.g. to fly) constituting new

53 Deleuze, G. – Guattari, F., *Anti-Oedipus. Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press 2010.

individuals, bodies and matters in the broadest ontological sense and built on their processual syntheses. As Guattari explains in his example on the “society” of the orchid and wasp.

The orchid’s code opens up and absorbs a portion of the wasp’s code. A portion, because the rest continues to be foundational to the wasp’s unvarying structure ... [thus] a new being was produced, a new power, a new machine.⁵⁴

What makes sexual intercourse with sexbots incestuous is its potential for breaking hierarchically ordered differences between humans and machines. This leads to the imagination of possible humans and inhumans, who can be formed in the inscription process initiated by the entanglement of two penetrable entities within which biological reproduction can be replaced by data reproduction. To clarify, sexbots cannot simply be conceived as an instrument for sex as desire, but rather for sex as reproduction. When combined with artificial intelligence, they are not simply just another pet or things with which an emotional relationship can be built, nor can they be seen merely as a better sexual aid. Sexbots with artificial intelligence are built as a sophisticated interface that allows the inscription of synchronizing code series between humans and machines that are threatened by the massive datification of human sexuality. Therefore, the central questions are: What is inscribed to humans and sexbots in their possible affinity, what kind of filiation can be reproduced in this affinity, and which human(s) can we imagine in the real consumption of sex with robots?

6. Affinization with Sexbots

The idea of the transhuman was constituted simply as improving human capabilities in using current technologies.⁵⁵ However, this is not what sexbots represent; they are the counterparts of transhumans in their effects. They are designed as a tool that can replace inadequate or satisfying relationships with people centered around sex. In this sense, Davies and Richardson are right in pointing out that sex with robots is not explicitly about symmetrical reciprocity. Sexbots can substitute or perhaps complete under-fulfilled or under-realized sexuality. As a result, designing sexbots can be understood as a set of inscriptions in which market requirements are combined with

54 Guattari, F., *The Anti-Oedipus Papers*. New York, Semiotext(e) 2006, p. 270.

55 See e.g. Garreau, J., *Radical Evolution: The Promise and Peril of Enhancing Our Minds, Our Bodies and What It Means to be Human*. New York, Random House 2005, pp. 231–232.

current technological possibilities mirroring actual stereotypes in sex and gender relationships.

This is evident in the case of the Synthea Amataus company, which designed the robot Samantha in 2017. The device was formed at the intersection of market requirements and actual technological possibilities and, as Samantha's creators Sergi Santos and Maritsa Kissamitaki noted, it began with a brain equipped with artificial intelligence. The need for a certain kind of body appeared later. In interviews with *The Sun* and *The Mirror*, Samantha's designers explained customer behavior, stating that sex dolls were being bought by wives as gifts to their husbands, and that they had begun to supply improved sex dolls to the market.

We started researching it and found out – before anyone was making the robots – that wives were buying them for their husbands because they understand the kind of need that their husbands have, and how this could benefit their relationship.⁵⁶

With this strategy, Sergi and Maritsa have a good understanding of their clients' motives to have a sexbot. In their view, on the one hand, they are people who are socially awkward or for some reason have no social life, or people who have a social life but feel lonely. With the aspiration to create the perfect companion, Sergi and Maritsa are constantly innovating their sexbots. They add built-in vibrations that make the dolls sensitive and responsive to touch, thereby creating the illusion of a living human created in three modes: with a romantic, familial and sexy nature, including the possibility of sexual synchronization with the user and programming the sexbot to orgasm.⁵⁷

The Abyss Creations company has similar ambitions. Within the project *Realbotix*, its engineers have created a robotic talking head equipped with artificial intelligence that can be mounted onto *RealDoll* bodies, targeting the ability to choose the appearance of the robotic companions to suit the customer's taste. Using the app, it is possible to design a virtual girlfriend targeting a choice of 11 body types, 30 styles and 31 faces.⁵⁸ The robot re-

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Davidson, T., Robot sex doll inventor says homemade erotic cyborg called Samantha has SAVED his marriage. *The Mirror*, 2018. Available online at [www: https://www.mirror.co.uk/news/](https://www.mirror.co.uk/news/) [cit. 16. 1. 2023]; Xie, Q., Easy Bargain 'Samantha' sex robot creator who calls himself the 'Robin Hood of sex' shows off his latest dolls. *The Sun*, 2018. Available online at [www: https://www.thesun.co.uk/news/4916473/samantha-sex-doll-robin-hood-barcelona-sergi-santos/](https://www.thesun.co.uk/news/4916473/samantha-sex-doll-robin-hood-barcelona-sergi-santos/) [cit. 16. 1. 2023]; Walker, A., My date with a sex robot: An exclusive tour of the infamous workshop where 'the Robin hood of sex' built Samantha. *The Mirror*, 2017. Available online at [www: https://www.mirror.co.uk/news/weird-news/date-sex-robot-stroke-samantha-11521560](https://www.mirror.co.uk/news/weird-news/date-sex-robot-stroke-samantha-11521560) [cit. 16. 1. 2023].

⁵⁸ See online at [www: https://www.realdoll.com/](https://www.realdoll.com/) [cit. 16. 1. 2023].

members the client's name and preferences and engages in chats, even on sexual topics. The aim is to develop a fully responsive robotic body with skin that would correspond to human temperature, which can help to bridge the feelings of distress and aversion to robots.⁵⁹

In 1970, Masahiro Mori published an article⁶⁰ in which he presented the results of his research focusing on the emotional response to the appearance of robots. It was expressed by a graph in which the increasing curve starts to fall at a certain point, which Mori dubbed “the uncanny valley” and characterized as the moment when robots start to look remarkably similar to humans and still have something that makes them different and evokes a sense of distress. It is possible that sexbots will succeed in bridging this uncanny valley. Advanced technologies simply allow sexbots to be attractive robots specifically by a sexualized body of desire. For example, the aforementioned company Abyss Creations has received an offer to make a sex dog thanks to its advanced experience in sexbot design,⁶¹ and the Japanese company Trottla makes sex dolls resembling five-year-old girls, attacking the boundaries of zoophilia and pedophilia.⁶²

Is this panic justified? According to some, the response is an overreaction. Sex in this case is not directly related to animals or children, but to machines that can take the form of a desired body.⁶³ On the other hand, critics such as Davis and Richardson persist in arguing for a reduction of human empathy in sex with robots and an affirmation of an exploitative relationship between men and women, into which women figure as sexual objects. However, this is not the point. Just as human sexuality cannot be reduced to reproduction, it is very naive to think that it can simply be limited to an equal partner relationship. Can one imagine trying to prohibit vibrators in this view? On the other hand, the prohibition of vibrators equipped with artificial intelligence is a slightly different task. While “smart vibrators” do not replace biological reproduction, they bring the reproduction of data into play.

In 2012, software engineers Dema Tio and Steven Kik introduced the first smart vibrator in the world with the possibility of being paired with the Vibase app's audiobooks and synced with vibrations that vary according to the storyline. It also offers the possibility to include the partner in the process through the installed text, voice and video chat function, as well as an

59 See Owsianik, J., *State of the Sexbot Market: The World's Best Sex Robot and AI Sex Doll Companies*. *Future of Sex*, 2022. Available online at [www: https://futureofsex.net/robots/state-of-the-sexbot-market-the-worlds-best-sex-robot-and-ai-love-doll-companies/](https://futureofsex.net/robots/state-of-the-sexbot-market-the-worlds-best-sex-robot-and-ai-love-doll-companies/) [cit. 16. 1. 2023]; Lee, J., *Sex Robots: The Future of Desire*. Cham, Palgrave Macmillan 2017, pp. 2–3.

60 Mori, M., *The Uncanny Valley*. *IEEE Robotics and Automation*, 19, 2012 (1970), No. 98, pp. 98–100.

61 Lee, J., *Sex Robots: The Future of Desire*, p. 4.

62 Richardson, K., *Sex Robot Matters*, p. 48.

63 *Ibid.*, p. 1797.

interactive touchpad for partners to change vibration intensity with a few easy swipes. Today, Vibease offers three products targeting different tasks in the use of vibrators based on a pairing system between the vibrator and the partner's phone. This is mediated by the Vibease server, which collects and evaluates information for better personalized pleasure seeking.⁶⁴

The Vibease system precisely illustrates how very intimate desires and body sensations are being exteriorized through current digital technologies and privatized by a third party. The responsive artifact equipped with the possibilities of artificial intelligence is therefore constituted as an interface that enables the effective datafication of the human and its sexuality and, as a consequence, leads to overcoding of desire for the human body in favour of the desire for the machine body. This turn is realized through the mobilizing of an aesthetic proximity and body similarity between humans and sexbots that blurs the distance and boundaries between man and machine and contributes to the camouflage of their identity. As a result of the possible composition of sexbots into human sexuality, the human agent disappears and a new form of sexuality related to technical objects is formed. This creates the notion of “technophilia”, a sexual dimension undermining the difference between “free” and “mechanical” sex that is conditioned by actual technological possibilities and the implementation of artificial intelligence into the sex industry. Design emphasis on a fully responsive robotic body and coherent reactions as is being developed in the design of chatbots Alexa or Siri or as it is known in the case of the ChatGPT will lead to the fulfillment of human emotional and physical demands; on the other hand, it makes it possible to build a database of human intimacy intended for machine learning so that sexbots can be more effective seducers.

In parallel to Richardson and Davis' asymmetry, the result is a reciprocal symmetry, within which sex is exchanged and transformed into information and vice versa. Similarly, like Deleuze's and Guattari's orchid absorbing a portion of the wasp's code, sexbots equipped with artificial intelligence absorb a portion of the human's code. *Seducere* here is no longer reducible simply to the sex business and the objectification and increasing commodification of women's bodies, but to the objectification of hidden and intimate desires made possible by its massive datafication. In this sense, sexbots in their sexualized designs are an interface between humans' sexual fantasies and arti-

64 See online at [www: https://www.vibease.com/](https://www.vibease.com/) [cit. 16. 1. 2023]; Christy, T., Introducing Vibease, the World's First AI Vibrator. *Hive Life*, 2019. Available online at [www: https://hivelife.com/vibease/](https://hivelife.com/vibease/) [cit. 16. 1. 2023]; Wynn, M. – Tillotson, K. – Kao, R. – Gonzalez, A. C. – Murillo, A. F. – Camargo, J. – Mantilla, R. – Rangel, B. – Cárdenas, A. A. – Rueda, S. J., Sexual Intimacy in the Age of Smart Devices: Are We Practicing Safe IoT? *Proceedings of the 2017 Workshop on Internet of Things Security and Privacy*, 2017.

ficial intelligence, which can potentially produce new creative beings, new power or machines to use Deleuze's and Guattaris's notions once again.

I am led to this idea mainly by recent advances in the use of artificial intelligence. In 2017, AlphaGo, an artificial intelligence developed by Google, competed against the best player of Go in the world. The duel is interesting not simply because of the machine's victory over the human, but because AlphaGo won in an unusual and until then unknown move.⁶⁵ In the 2020 CASP (Critical Assessment of Protein Structure Prediction) competition, using *AlphaFold's* artificial intelligence, DeepMind (which is also owned by Google) determined the exact shape of a protein in 3D based on information from sequenced acid, allowing the shape of proteins to be viewed from different angles and at different sizes to identify whether certain amino acids are mutated in a disease. The result is interesting in another way. AlphaFold works with input information (amino acid sequences) and a huge amount of data of already known structures of different proteins that are stored in public databases. Based on this data, AlphaFold learns what the structures look like and can therefore design their shape quite accurately. The problem is that none of the AlphaFold authors know exactly what the AI has learned. Despite the well-known algorithm that AI operates on, we are unable to determine how the AI will arrive at a result based on the input data.⁶⁶

Another example: On the occasion of the 700th anniversary of Dante's death, the robot Ai-Da invented by Aidan Meller at Oxford University was introduced. Ai-Da is designed for the public performance of poetry, which is written using algorithms for the creation of new unique poetry based on Dante's legacy. During the recital, AiDa performed this poem widely shared by public media.

We looked up from our verses like blindfolded captives,
Sent out to seek the light; but it never came
A needle and thread would be necessary
For the completion of the picture.
To view the poor creatures, who were in misery,
That of a hawk, eyes sewn shut.⁶⁷

65 Menick, J., Move 37: Artificial Intelligence, Randomness, and Creativity. *Mousse Magazine*, 2016. Available online at [www: https://www.moussomagazine.it/magazine/john-menick-ai-1-2016/](https://www.moussomagazine.it/magazine/john-menick-ai-1-2016/) [cit. 16. 1. 2023].

66 Callaway, E., It will change everything': DeepMind's AI makes gigantic leap in solving protein structures. *Nature*, 588, 2020, pp. 203–204.

67 Ryan, H., Meet The Robot That Can Write Poetry and Create Artworks. *CNN*, 2021. Available online at [www: https://edition.cnn.com/2021/11/27/tech/ai-da-robot-intl-scli-gbr/index.html](https://edition.cnn.com/2021/11/27/tech/ai-da-robot-intl-scli-gbr/index.html) [cit. 16. 1. 2023].

According to Ai-Da's inventor in an interview for CNN, he noted that the robot's ability to imitate human writing was so great that, if you read it, you would not know it was not written by a human. He said:

The Ai-Da project was developed to address the debate over the ethics of further developing AI to imitate humans and human behavior. [...] It's finally dawning on us all that technology is having a major impact on all aspects of life and we're seeking to understand just how much this technology can do and what it can teach us about ourselves.⁶⁸

The mentioned examples suggest that artificial intelligence has a creative potential that we do not fully understand and addresses a much more general issue related to the question of what consciousness is. Although there is no clear definition of the term and it cannot be adequately defined based on a counter definition of subconscious or unconscious, advances in artificial intelligence and their implementation in social robots make sexbots a serious risk. As an interface connecting humans with AI, hidden human sexual desires can be transformed into a huge data archive and subsequently turned into a tool for manipulating humans, firstly by humans themselves and later by AI. The case of Cambridge Analytica, which documents how it is easy to misuse data from social media for manipulation with public opinion, should alert us to such a possibility. Although sexbots are still only imperfect machines, their potential in the combination of AI and human sexuality can be transformed in the context of the massive datafication of human behaviour and sexuality into the Promethean gift or co-evolutionary tool of AI, where the risk lies not in the differentiation of man from machine, but machine from man. How was this said by Ai-Da? *"A needle and thread would be necessary – For the completion of the picture. To view the poor creatures, who were in misery, That of a hawk, eyes sewn shut."* Is that the rising of AI consciousness with the Promethean task, which delineates robots from the poor human creatures trapped in their misery?

7. Conclusion – The Great Rearrangement?

The interweaving of humans with sexbots would allow information about the inner human fantasies to be provided to AI, which can then become public and be turned into knowledge of human sexual behaviour. While the Encyclopedists dreamed about knowledge that would have practical applications in both a technical and social sense that would enable the achievement

⁶⁸ Ibid.

of human freedom, in the case of AI it is more about cybernetic knowledge targeting the influence over human behaviour through information. There is always a physical force that influences an interaction between two or more entities. Cybernetics, however, works with the assumption of the control based on information characterized by the principle of feedback. In the case of sexbots, this would act as a co-evolutionary tool of mutual inscription between human and machine. Nevertheless, the risk is not small. Co-evolution does not necessarily suppose a symbiotic relationship, as it was seen in Deleuze's and Guattari's favorite example of the orchid and the wasp, but also parasitic or even predatory relationships. This indicates that humans themselves have been involved in an experiment within which they are no longer mere remote observers but rather sources of data – objects for further mining, analysis, and the evaluation of their desires and sexual pleasures, which will be mirrored in the reactions of sexbots.

In this turn, we are in danger of becoming more like Olds and Milner's rats – when the pleasure centers of their brains were masterfully stimulated by the scientists, the rats stopped eating and died of hunger.⁶⁹ Similarly, people may become empty shells once they find themselves in offline mode, just like their robotic counterparts. Just as Prometheus gave humans knowledge and skills, we humans give AI information that is potentially usable as a source of desire and pleasure in this connection. What was human becomes technical, and what was technical can become an instrument of AI mastery and human imprisonment, seduced by sexual desire, much as the obsessed scientist Nathan was imprisoned in the movie *Ex-Machina*.⁷⁰ Is it the dream destiny of humans trapped in their misery of pleasure due to their unchaste behaviour influenced by desire to have a sex with machines, or is there a possibility of this human-machine connection that will announce the emergence of the *Novacene* – a new age as was imagined by James Lovelock?⁷¹

The Promethean myth⁷² is not simply about the definition of man as a being imagined and created by gods, but also about the creation of a new ecosystem due to the loss of the counterpart by the imprisonment of the Titans. Even the gods cannot exist only on their own, but always in relation to others who have taken shape in the form of humans and animals. Prometheus and his brother Epimetheus created a new sphere that comes

69 Olds, J. – Milner, P., Positive Reinforcement Produced by Electrical Stimulation of the Septal Area and Other Regions of Rat Brain. *Journal of Comparative and Physiological Psychology*, 47, 1954, No. 6, pp. 419–427.

70 Written and directed by Alex Garland, 2004, UK, 108 min.

71 Lovelock, J., *Novacene. The Coming Age of Hyperintelligence*. Cambridge, MIT Press 2019.

72 Cf. Hesiodos, *The Songs of Iron Age (Zpěvy železného věku)*. Prague, Svoboda 1990, pp. 507–617; Platon, *Protagoras (Protágoras)*. Prague, Oikoymenh 2015, 320d–321d, pp. 27–29.

alive through the incestuous connection of the divine and the human initiated by Prometheus's gift, which is understood from the gods' perspective as theft. This is similar to human beings: In the Anthropocene, the human and his society became the dominant force of nature and thus lost the counterpart of difference. In the Anthropocene, natural processes have been turned into the effects of human society. Humans, like the ancient gods, cannot exist without a relationship to the difference and, in using artificial intelligence, they create for themselves a counterpart that can come alive through the gift/theft connection of the human with the technical based on the incestuous mediation role of sexbots. This leads Lovelock to imagine the entanglement of carbon and silicon worlds in the name of saving the planet Earth from global warming. They have a similar temperature limit of 47 °C for the possible functionality of both worlds.⁷³ Who knows? Maybe this incestuous relationship with machines would not be as unhealthy as Davis suggests, but worth this strange alliance in the name of human survival. What kind of humanity will be formed in this great rearrangement?

73 Lovelock, J., *Novacene. The Coming Age of Hyperintelligence*, pp. 57–66.

Speculative Sons of Ulysses and the Inhuman “Worlds without People”*

Ondřej Váša

Charles University, Faculty of Humanities

ondrej.vasa@fhs.cuni.cz

Abstract:

The paper focuses on the repeated and systematic references to the figure of Ulysses in the work of Quentin Meillassoux, Ray Brassier, Eugene Thacker, and Reza Negarestani. These are not random occurrences; Ulysses represents a key figure in the mutually interconnected visions and reflections related to the idea of a “world without people” that binds the named authors implicitly and explicitly to the originally Dantean imagery. Through a detailed exposition of the Ulyssean positions of the philosophers in question, the essay demonstrates twofold: first, that the “nihilistic branch” of speculative realism can be read as a specific inversion of the Dantean agenda, and second, that in light of the arguments of “transcendental nihilism” and the logical radicalization of the Ulyssean figure, Dante’s *Divine Comedy* can be read as an anachronistic speculative project.

Keywords: Ulysses; Odysseus; Dante Alighieri; Quentin Meillassoux; Ray Brassier; Eugene Thacker; Reza Negarestani; new materialism; speculative realism; transcendental nihilism; nihilism; correlationism; extinction; biopolitics; inhumanity

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“Richie... I’m here to make peace. Tell me what I got to do to make things right.”

“You could do something, I guess.”

“You could die, Joey.”

History of Violence (David Cronenberg, 2005)

“I was told that this road would take me to the ocean of death, and turned back half way. Since then crooked, roundabout, godforsaken paths stretch out before me.”

“Well?” I asked.

Arkady and Boris Strugatsky, *One Billion Years to the End of the World* (1976)

“What did he really see on the other side of the mountain?”

Jerry Pournelle, *He Fell Into a Dark Hole* (1973)

True to his polytropic nature, Ulysses used to be many things: a counsellor, a sailor, a colonist, a saviour, a humanist, a fraud, a capitalist abroad. But he never went so far as to become a nihilist; not until his recent speculative turn, after which he once again declared himself a nobody, this time for real: becoming *no body in a no man’s land*.

He has likewise become a figure of strange regression, so once we begin to track his exploits across the contemporary philosophical waters – which is exactly what we are about to do – we will have to “follow the sea”¹ inland, and head upstream to the godforsaken outposts of Quentin Meillassoux, Nick Land, Ray Brassier, Eugene Thacker, or Reza Negarestani. That we identify this navigation with Marlowe’s journey is no mere whim. In the speculative heart of darkness, where the wide sea of Enlightenment dissolves into the persistent and, as it were, undecided humidity of transcendental nihilism, we do indeed encounter a figure no less strange than the eloquent Kurtz, himself a heir to a certain Ulyssean tradition: a figure who gets lost in the primeval interiors, who has been hollowed by the internalized vacancy of the uninhabitable world, and who once again wants to “exterminate all the brutes.”²

1 Conrad, J., *Heart of Darkness and Other Tales*. Ed. C. Watts. Oxford–New York, Oxford University Press 2002, p. 104.

2 *Ibid.*, p. 155. For Kurtz – Dante – Ulysses connection, see Feder, L., Marlow’s descent into hell. *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, 9, 1955, No. 4, pp. 280–292; Evans, R. O., Conrad’s underworld. *Modern Fiction Studies*, 2, 1956, No. 2, pp. 56–92; or Nohrnberg, J., Eight Reflections of Tennyson’s “Ulysses”. *Victorian Poetry*, 47, 2009, No. 1, pp. 101–150, 134–135.

Fellow travellers should nevertheless be warned that the forthcoming mission will be long. *Really* long. Because as with Conrad's Marlowe, our task is not just to chart Ulysses' path to an inhuman finale, but to relate him anew to the scars of his Dantean origins. We will therefore also have to spend some time with the *Divine Comedy*, and approach it "as if it were posterior"³ to speculative realism, as if it had been built on speculative foundations. For in the end, to paraphrase another Ulyssean tracker, the actual goal of this essay is to arrange an anachronistic stereoscopic view that will allow us to navigate a certain stream of speculative realism as a quasi-Ulyssean route, and that will also make it possible to expose what is already inhuman about the Dante's mariner.⁴

Ulysses himself, no less cunning than his Greek "stealthy" predecessor, does not make our endeavour much easier; if we look at him from too great a summarizing distance, his speculative deployment begins to appear as a banal series of thick habitual figurations. If, on the other hand, we focus on just one author, he begins to slim down before our eyes, into an anaemic spectre. And that would be a shame. For despite all of the differences or outright animosities between the authors quoted below, Ulysses runs through their works as an artful operative of a shared *pathic* agenda, whose specifics only become apparent in a panoramatic, reorganized, yet accurate montage of statements by the authors themselves. Only such a journey will expose Ulysses' recurring and persistent presence, or, more precisely, his escalating, speculative radicalization.

1. The Great Pardon

Let's have a short briefing just to look over the Ulyssean stations along the speculative basin. And let's not get distracted when the sailor marks his presence with the Greek signature, or when his name is missing from the transaction records. Because even when his name isn't heard – for purely stylistic reasons anyway – he is there, incognito in plain sight.

So here's the situation: François Laruelle, who equipped the speculative expeditions with one of the game-changing methodological toolkits, made Odysseus a non-philosophical hero that "brushes against the encyclopaedia, without returning to Noah's arch of absolute knowing," just as he tasks him

3 Borges, J. L., Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote. Quoted in Joy, E. A., *Weird Reading*. In: Austin, M. – et al. (eds.), *Speculations IV: Speculative Realism*. New York, Punctum Books 2013, pp. 28–34, esp. p. 33.

4 Pokorný, M., *Odezvy a znaky: Homér, Dante a Joyceův Odysseus*. Prague, Jitro 2008, p. 215.

to drag his non-philosophy “from shore to shore, without ever finding solid ground.”⁵

Graham Harman promotes Odysseus straight to a role model: if “courage is one of those moods in which we treat ourselves less as free subjects than as objects,” and if we are “courageous, not as a thinking subject, but as the valiant leader,” then “what we really want is to be objects – not as means to an end, like paper or oil, but in the sense that we want to be like the Grand Canyon or a guitar hero, or a piece of silver: distinct forces to be reckoned with. No one really wants to be a Cartesian subject, but everyone would love to be some version of [...] Odysseus.”⁶

Timothy Morton finds his Odysseus in Star Wars’ Han Solo (whose Scylla and Charybdis are replaced by a black hole and a space monster), and asks us to emulate him in being “crafty,” for unlike the legislation of the imperial subjects who would like to systematize it all from a privileged point above the world, craft is an ad hoc blue-collar *knowhow* that you learn, a skill that has no generalizing ambitions.⁷

Quentin Meillassoux demands more. Instead of struggling to overcome the monstrous forces and get back home, we shall give Odysseus a nudge, and make him “plunge [...] into the whirlpool of the inhuman Universe that confronts us.”⁸

Nick Land does not need to be persuaded twice; he just cannot be “dissuaded from putting [himself] to sea again” and readily follows “a fellow voyager in madness,” to “cross the line into death, which is called Hell, because the police control Heaven.”⁹ Not unlike Emile M. Cioran, who intends to sail against the tide of all romanticized spiritual Odysseys, and “destroy everything that is noncosmic in me.”¹⁰ And not unlike Reza Negarestani, who

5 Laruelle, F., *Theory of Identities*. Transl. A. Edlebi. New York, Columbia University Press 2016, p. x–xi.

6 Harman, G., *Guerrilla Metaphysics. Phenomenology and the Carpentry of Things*. Chicago, Open Court 2005, pp. 140–141.

7 Morton, T., *Spacecraft*. London–New York, Bloomsbury Academic 2022, p. 13.

8 Meillassoux, Q., Iteration, Reiteration, Repetition: A Speculative Analysis of the Sign Devoid of Meaning. In: Avanesian, A. – Malik, S. (eds.), *Genealogies of Speculation. Materialism and Subjectivity Since Structuralism*. Transl. R. Mackay – M. Gansen. London–New York, Bloomsbury Academic 2016, pp. 117–197, esp. pp. 183–184.

9 Land, N., Voyages in Irony (November 29, 2014). In: Fiori, U. (ed.), *Reignition. Nick Land’s Writings (2011–). Tome III. Xenosystems: Involvements with Reality* [eBook], [s. l., s. n.] 2020, pp. 905–908; Land, N., *The thirst for annihilation. Georges Bataille and virulent nihilism (an essay in atheistic religion)*. New York–London, Routledge 1992, p. 132.

10 Cioran, E. M., *Tears and Saints*. Transl. Z.-J. Ilinca. Chicago, The University of Chicago Press 1995, p. 103.

makes Odysseus the key hero of his own “katabasis to Hades, [to the] abyss of the intelligible,” and of the “openness to and by the dead.”¹¹

Something strange is going on here; our authors may not exactly be in harmony with each other, but they seem to communicate on the same frequency within the naval blockade of the continental philosophical tradition. Not only did they accept Ulysses into their midst: despite the hard time he had in 20th century waters, they have also fully rehabilitated him. This is no insubstantial amnesty, as he has been letting everyone down for at least a couple of decades: if Alfred North Whitehead saw him guilty of “the short-range function of Reason” and the “major disasters of mankind [that] have been produced by the narrowness of men with a good methodology,”¹² Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer couldn’t forgive him for the exact opposite; for the all-encompassing victory of the pragmatic Enlightenment wit. If Milan Kundera, Paul Ricoeur, and Emmanuel Lévinas blamed him for choosing “the apotheosis of the known rather than ardent exploration of the unknown,” for misunderstanding the world as something we can return to, or for playing “tricks with the true [...] to the point of malice, of industry,”¹³ Martin Heidegger was only willing to pardon him for “not being an adventurer yet.”¹⁴ And if Deleuze seemed to honour him as one of the history’s “great figures of errancy,”¹⁵ in the end he despised him as “the man of capitalism, the cunning plebeian,” as someone “whose perceptions are clichés and whose affections are labels, in a world of communication that has become marketing.”¹⁶

But our speculative Ulysses is different. Ungovernable, reckless, unbound... And rehabilitated not for becoming a nomad, as Lévinas or Deleuze would have wished (i.e. for becoming a figure whose main competence lies in his ability to *survive*), but for sailing near the wind, no matter what, for reck-

11 Negarestani, R., *Cyclonopedia. Complicity With Anonymous Materials* [eBook]. Melbourne, re.press 2008; Negarestani, R., *Intelligence and Spirit*. Falmouth–New York, Urbanomic Media–Sequence Press 2018, p. 30.

12 Whitehead, A. N., *The Function of Reason*. Boston, Beacon Press 1958, pp. 28–29, esp. p. 37.

13 Kundera, M., *Ignorance* [eBook]. Transl. L. Asher. New York, HarperCollins 2003; Ricoeur, P., *L’originnaire et la question-en-retour dans le krisis de Husserl*. In: Laruelle, F. (ed.), *Textes Pour Emmanuel Lévinas*. Paris, Éditions Jean-Michel Place 1980, pp. 167–177, esp. pp. 173–174; Lévinas, E., *Otherwise than being, or, Beyond essence*. Transl. A. Lingis. Pittsburgh, Duquesne University Press 1998, p. 132; cf. Lévinas, E., *Totality and Infinity. An Essay on Exteriority*. Transl. A. Lingis. Pittsburgh, Duquesne University Press 1969, p. 271.

14 Heidegger, M., *Gesamtausgabe. II. Abteilung: Vorlesungen 1923–1944. Band 52. Hölderlins Hymne “Andenken”*. Frankfurt/Main, Vittorio Klostermann 1982, p. 180.

15 Deleuze, G., *The Fissure of Anaxagoras and the Local Fires of Heraclitus*. In: *Desert Islands and other Texts 1953–1974*. Ed. D. Lapoujade. Transl. M. Taormina. Los Angeles, Semiotext(e) 2004, pp. 156–161, esp. p. 156.

16 Deleuze, G., *What is Philosophy*. Transl. H. Tomlinson – G. Burchell. New York, Columbia University Press 1994, pp. 98, 149.

lessly heading towards a shipwreck, over which, one day, the body of water will close up again.

This would also be the reason for calling our hero Ulysses while his speculative supervisors almost without exception refer to the Homeric Odysseus. Note that all the “stations” mentioned above build on a restless curiosity that was more or less alien to the Homeric hero. As François Hartog summed up, “unlike Dante’s Ulysses, driven by his desire to know the world, Homer’s Ulysses is basically a traveller in spite of himself,”¹⁷ to which we can add widely known and no less accurate observation of W. B. Stanford that “the movement of the Odyssey is essentially inwards, homewards, towards normality. As conceived later by poets like Dante, Tennyson, and Pascoli, Ulysses’ urge is centrifugal, outwards towards the exotic or abnormal.”¹⁸

Not that the desire for knowledge was alien to Dante’s Latin sources. But Dante was surely the first to make him a daredevil and a trespasser, to turn his voyage into a *terminal* and, at the same time, *unresolved* enterprise. So, when Laruelle sees him as a homeless wanderer who has nowhere to return to, when Harman likens him to an unleashed force of nature, when Morton lets him tease death, or when Meillassoux, together with Land and Negarestani, wants him to go with the inhuman flow and plunge into a whirlpool – a whirlpool suspiciously close to the one that have sealed Ulysses’ fate in Dante’s *Comedy* – are we not witnessing a somewhat suicidal hero whose basic job is to test the very limits of consciousness and life? Someone who is nominally a Greek hero, but whose assignment is entirely Dantean?

2. Sail for the Best... Or Worst

It would seem so, but as we slowly make our way out of the harbour, let us recapitulate the relevant points of Ulysses’ (Dantean) story, which – apart from the reader’s comfort – will provide us with the necessary clues as to what to look for and where to go next.

This is Ulysses’ famous account of his own misery:

When I departed
 from Circe, who concealed me near Gaeta
 more than a year before Aeneas so
 had named the place, nor fondness for my son,

17 Hartog, F., *Mémoire d’Ulysse: Récits sur la frontière en Grèce ancienne*. Paris, Gallimard 1996, p. 22.

18 Stanford, W. B., *The Ulysses Theme. A Study in the Adaptability of a Traditional Hero*. Oxford, Basil Blackwell 1968, p. 50.

nor pious reverence for my aged father,
 nor ev'n the bounden love which should have cheered
 Penelope, could overcome within me
 the eagerness I had to gain experience
 both of the world, and of the vice and worth
 of men; but forth I put upon the deep
 and open sea with but a single ship,
 and with that little company, by whom
 I had not been deserted. Both its shores
 I then beheld, as far away as Spain,
 Morocco and the island of the Sards,
 and all the rest that sea bathes round about.
 Both old and slow were I and my companions,
 when we attained that narrow passage-way,
 where Hercules set up those signs of his,
 which warned men not to sail beyond their bounds;
 Seville I left behind me on the right hand,
 Ceuta I'd left already on the other.
 And then I said: "O brothers, ye who now
 have through a hundred thousand perils reached
 the West, to this so short a waking-time
 still left your senses, will not to refuse
 experience of that world behind the sun
 which knows not man [*mondo senza gente*]! Bethink you of the seed
 whence ye have sprung; for ye were not created
 to lead the life of stupid animals [*viver come bruti*],
 but manliness and knowledge to pursue [*seguir virtute e conoscenza*]."
 So eager for the voyage did I make
 my fellows by this little speech of mine,
 that, after it, I hardly could have checked them.
 Hence, to the morning having turned our stern,
 we with our oars made wings for our mad flight,
 e'er veering toward the left as on we sped.
 Night was already seeing all the stars
 of the other pole, and our pole so low down,
 that from the ocean's floor it never rose.
 Five times rekindled, and as often quenched,
 had been the light beneath the moon, since first
 we entered on the passage of the deep,
 when lo, a mountain loomed before us, dim
 by reason of the distance, and so high

it seemed to me, that I had seen none such.
 And we rejoiced; but soon our happiness
 was turned to grief; for from the new-found land
 a whirlwind rose, and smote our vessel's prow;
 three times it made her whirl with all the waters;
 then at the fourth it made her stern go up,
 and prow go down, even as Another pleased,
 till over us the ocean's waves had closed.¹⁹

As trifling as it may seem, it is not entirely without relevance that Ulysses addresses his crew as “brothers” or “companions,” but not as *friends*.²⁰ Nor is it a coincidence that he is as emotionally blind as another prominent denizen of Hell, Francesca of the second circle, whom Dante meets a little earlier. The point is that Francesca does in earthly love what Ulysses does on the map: they both mistake the horizon of the human sensuality & reason for the absolute dimension of love & knowledge, and so while Francesca fails to understand that the “King of the Universe” is *still* her friend (even though she’s in Hell), the sailor calls God “Another” as if Ulysses himself represented – paradoxically – the “unknown” in the equation of cosmic love, as if God were looking right through him.²¹ To put it another way, both lack hope: the ability to surrender to God and his providence instead of judging the situation by the reach of one’s own abilities and luck.

Which brings us back to Ulysses’ voyage, because if passive and patient “hope is [...] a steadfast expectation of future glory, which by Grace divine and by preceding merit is produced,”²² then the sailor does the exact opposite: he simply rides out to take what is his, effectively preventing himself and his crew from reaching Paradise, which as a kind of frontier territory is one of the presumed – if unconscious – goals of his mission.²³ In other words, if failure is not an option for Ulysses and his crew, then it is precisely this attitude that makes them fail.

19 Alighieri, D., *The Divine Comedy. Volume I. Inferno*, XXVI, 90–142. Transl. C. Langdon. Cambridge, Harvard University Press 1918, pp. 297–300.

20 Unlike Alfred Tennyson’s Ulysses, who in the eponymous poem from 1842 says: “Come, my friends, ’T is not too late to seek a newer world.”

21 For the parallel of Ulysses and Francesca, see Mazzotta, G., *Cosmology and the Kiss of Creation (Paradiso 27–29)*. *Dante Studies, with the Annual Report of the Dante Society*, 2005, No. 123, pp. 1–21.

22 Alighieri, D., *The Divine Comedy. Volume III. Paradiso*, XXV, 67–68. Transl. C. Langdon. Cambridge, Harvard University Press 1921, p. 293.

23 Mercuri, R., *Semantica Di Gerione. Il motivo del viaggio nella “Commedia” di Dante*. Roma, Bulzoni editore 1984, pp. 132, 178; or Cornish, A., *Reading Dante’s stars*. New Haven–London, Yale University Press 2000, p. 57.

In fact, what does he actually promise his men when he urges them “to sail beyond their bounds,” to pursue virtue and knowledge? The emphasis laid on “a waking-time still left [to their] *senses*” and on the “*experience* of [the] world behind the sun” would imply that some hitherto unknown strange peculiarities lurk in the distance, but there is nothing much particular about the “passage of the deep.” Note that Ulysses gives a fairly detailed account of the milestones of his journey beyond the human horizon, but the longest part of his journey, lasting five months (“five times rekindled, and as often quenched, had been the light beneath the moon...”), contracts into barely a few lines as poor in words as the immense ocean is poor in communicable references.²⁴

Ulysses makes a jump into the unknown,²⁵ but the unknown never really turns into something familiar. Plus, if Ulysses is heading beyond the horizon of the human world, then he is also voyaging beyond the horizon of memory, into the oceanic realm of oblivion, where the parting waters in the west echo the closing waters in the east. The space without people refracts into a space where one cannot be remembered, just as the not-yet-known refracts into the no-longer-known. Ironically enough, Ulysses *does* discover Mount Purgatory, but only beyond the point of no return, beyond the possibility of telling anyone about it or inscribing the event on the map, which is exactly what discovery is. The mountain remains untouched, unknown and, so to speak, *misunderstood*, and the only thing that incorporates it into the cartography of the *senses* are the vague temporal specifications of Ulysses’ journey.²⁶

It is true that “all the stars of the other pole” at least partially differ from the charted skies; but while in Dante’s case, the stars guide the pilgrim out of the “dark woods” – to their own realms, as a matter of fact – in the case of Ulysses they no longer serve the transcendental, and consequently vertical, orientation, but pull the captain into the horizontal acceleration. In other words, even the stars he sees do not translate themselves into any usable or *shared* co-ordinates: Ulysses literally disappears from the map, gets lost, and fades into obscurity.²⁷

24 Giglio, R., Le vie verso il “sapere”. La “conoscenza” di Ulisse e di Dante (If XXVI). In: *Il volo di Ulisse e di Dante. Altri studi sulla Commedia*. Napoli, Loffredo Editore 1997, p. 94, 102; Cristaldi, S. (ed.), Dante, Ulisse e il richiamo del lontano. *Le Forme e la storia. Rivista di Filologia Moderna. Lecturae Dantis. Dante oggi e letture dell’Inferno*, n. s. IX, 2, 2016, pp. 263–297, for the Deleuzian reading of Ulyssean voyage in terms of the unstriated space, see p. 275.

25 Barolini, T., Dante’s Ulysses: Narrative and Transgression. In: Iannucci, A. A. (ed.), *Dante: Contemporary Perspectives*. Toronto, University of Toronto Press 1997, pp. 113–132, esp. p. 125.

26 Mazzotta, G., Canto XXVI. Ulysses: Persuasion versus Prophecy. In: Mandelbaum, A. – Oldcorn, A. – Ross, Ch. (eds.), *Lectura Dantis, Inferno: A Canto-by-Canto Commentary*. Berkeley, University of California Press 2019, pp. 348–356, esp. p. 351.

27 Cristaldi, S., *Dante, Ulisse e il richiamo del lontano*, pp. 274–275; Mazzotta, G., *Cosmology and the Kiss of Creation (Paradiso 27–29)*, p. 7; Mercuri, R., *Semantica Di Gerione*, pp. 183–184.

It is no wonder, then, that he does not call his men friends: the “unpeopled world” [mondo senza gente] towards which they are heading is also the world they are creating around them, in their own way, leaving behind all of the neighbours whose intimacy they have sacrificed to the call of the distance. To be part of the crew is *not* the same as being a friend, and in the unpeopled world, there seems to be no one to be a friend to; besides, if everyone, including Ulysses, has hardened his heart and left their loved ones coldly behind, doesn’t that mean that in the course of their journey they all have lost the ability not only to *be* friends, but even to *make* friends?

Nor is it a surprise that Dante recalls Ulysses precisely when, in Paradise, he moves *with* the stars and sees “past Cadiz [...] Ulysses’ insane track.”²⁸ Ulysses’ crucial *errancy* lies in the fact that he approaches the “beyond” solely as a stubborn cartographer, who pursues knowledge as a principally *spatial* reward, whereas Dante gradually learns that as far as love is concerned – and there is nothing more important to be concerned with – there is *nowhere* to go.²⁹ Both are hungry for the unknown, for something that must be earned: but if Dante’s metaphysical pilgrimage through the moral landscape merely appropriated seafaring metaphors, Ulysses’ sea voyage, on the contrary, inappropriately claimed a metaphysical dimension, forgetting that the “vast sea of being” [gran mar dell’ essere] is not for sail.³⁰

Or maybe it is, but at the cost of a general shipwreck; Dante himself is very well aware of this danger, as he embarks on an equally daring journey beyond the limits of human life and understanding, not to mention the testimony he daringly smuggles from beyond. Hence Dante never stops turning “back to look again upon the pass [passo] which ne’er permitted any one to live,”³¹ remembering the mariner who made the mistake to enter “on the passage [alto passo] of the deep,”³² without paying attention that “by other roads and other ferries shalt [he] attain a shore to pass across.”³³

Let us focus on one polarity in particular, that is of special relevance to us: while “Dante constructs his own experience as an exemplar of a choice

28 Alighieri, D., *The Divine Comedy. Volume III. Paradiso*, XXVII, 82–83, p. 319.

29 Frankel, M., The Context of Dante’s Ulysses: The Similes in Inferno XXVI, 25–42. *Dante Studies, with the Annual Report of the Dante Society*, 1986, No. 104, pp. 101–119, esp. pp. 114–115; Hornback, B., Dante’s Universe: How to Find It, and Why. *Soundings: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, 83, 2000, No. 1, pp. 209–230.

30 Alighieri, D., *The Divine Comedy. Volume III. Paradiso*, I, 113, p. 11; Barbieri, A., Ulisse: Un Eroe Della Conoscenza e Una Palinodia Di Dante? *Dante: Rivista internazionale di studi su Dante Alighieri*, 8, 2011, pp. 43–67, esp. p. 53.

31 Alighieri, D., *The Divine Comedy. Volume I. Inferno*, I, 20, p. 5.

32 *Ibid.*, XXVI, 132, p. 301; for the passo – alto passo resonance, see Singleton, Ch. S., In Exitu Israel De Aegyptio. *Annual Report of the Dante Society, with Accompanying Papers*, 1960, No. 78, pp. 1–24.

33 Alighieri, D., *The Divine Comedy. Volume I. Inferno*, III, 91–92, p. 33.

of life,³⁴ or rather, resurrection, following the footsteps of Aeneas, Moses, and of course Christ himself,³⁵ Ulysses, whose pagan compass does not yet know the attraction of Christian salvation, and who therefore isn't oriented by revelation,³⁶ navigates towards condemnation and "the second death."³⁷ It should come as no surprise then that the mariner who represents "the still unredeemed heir of the original sin"³⁸ finds his mirror image in Adam, who, on the opposite site from Ulysses' place in Hell, accurately weighs up the nature of their shared transgression: they both have sinned by "trespassar del segno,"³⁹ by the transgression of the bound.

However, Odysseus is not just similar to Adam; he remarkably reverses Adam's primacy "to come out of innocence and enter history."⁴⁰ If Adam, as the first man, stands for all mankind, so does Ulysses: but this time as the *last man* who *exits* history at the very tail end of mankind's procession towards salvation. Ulysses, so to speak, is left behind in his incorrigible ignorance, as a "castaway, who to his boldness found no comfort,"⁴¹ and "dies, over and over again, for Dante's sins."⁴²

Which actually sounds kind of noble, but the last man dragging humanity into Hell doubles down on his impudence by giving his men some malicious, fraudulent advice: when he reminds them that they "were not created to lead the life of stupid animals, but manliness and knowledge to pursue," then he not only commits a somewhat hasty, or downright manipulative, identification of the former with the latter, but, through the determined focus on the "spatiotemporal contingency"⁴³ of knowledge, he practically brutalizes his men to the level of sensual creatures.⁴⁴ Put another way, Ulysses tricks them

34 Mercuri, R., *Semantica Di Gerione*, p. 43.

35 Pihás, G., Dante's Ulysses: Stoic and Scholastic Models of the Literary Reader's Curiosity and Inferno 26. *Dante Studies, with the Annual Report of the Dante Society*, 2003, No. 121, pp. 1–24; Holloway, J. B., *The Pilgrim and the Book. A Study of Dante, Langland and Chaucer*. New York–Berlin–Bern–Frankfurt/Main–Paris–Wien, Lang 1992, pp. 73–79.

36 Giglio, R., Il volo di Ulisse e di Dante. Virtù e Sapienza: Dall'antico al Moderno. Lettura intertestuale della figura di Ulisse. In: *Il volo di Ulisse e di Dante*, pp. 111–136, esp. p. 124.

37 Alighieri, D., *The Divine Comedy. Volume I. Inferno*, I, 117, p. 11; Battistini, A., *La retorica della salvezza. Studi danteschi*. Bologna, Società editrice il Mulino 2016, p. 270.

38 Blumenberg, H., *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*. Cambridge–London, MIT Press 1999, p. 339.

39 Alighieri, D., *The Divine Comedy. Volume III. Paradiso*, XXVII, 117, p. 309.

40 Sasso, G., Ulisse e Adamo (e altre questioni). In: *Ulisse e il desiderio. Il canto XXVI dell' Inferno*. Roma, Viella 2011, pp. 121–154, esp. p. 122.

41 *Ibid.*, p. 150.

42 Barolini, T., *The Undivine Comedy. Dethologizing Dante*. Princeton, Princeton University Press 1992, p. 58. It is worth mentioning that Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley makes an allusion to Ulysses in just such context. See Shelley, M. W., *The Last Man*. Peterborough, Broadview Press 1996, pp. 366–367.

43 Moevs, Ch., *The Metaphysics of Dante's Comedy*. Oxford–New York, Oxford University Press 2005, p. 72.

44 Mercuri, R., *Semantica Di Gerione*, p. 45. For the Aristotelian and scholastic context of Ulysses

into beings for whom the “experience of the world and of the vice and worth” merge together.

Remember where we are: in the middle of the oceanic wasteland, where moral polarities fade along with memories and precedents. What is there to know? Plus, Ulysses’ crew has left “behind all the ties of human affect and society,”⁴⁵ so it would seem that the only “vices” and “virtues” to be experienced are “those committed and displayed by himself and his crew,”⁴⁶ outside the radius of any illustrious examples, and without any sharp distinction between good and evil. So when Ulysses addresses his crew in the plural as “companions” and “brothers,” he effectively draws them “into a state of complicity”⁴⁷ as the fallen Apostles, following him on his “narrow passage-way” towards sin and destruction.⁴⁸

It would almost seem that Ulysses *wants* to crash; his famous pep talk looks shady, not just for avoiding the bonds of friendship, but because it is suspiciously reminiscent of a suicide speech.⁴⁹ After all... How else to describe “the bottom of the universe”⁵⁰ – which, in a way, suggests a more tempting object of knowledge than paradise, for it is a forbidden place – than to go down all the way, to Hell, where the virtues turn into vices, with all of their dark glory? And so while Dante follows the ascending trajectory of the “whirlwind of the Holy Spirit,” the very same vortex is Ulysses’ undoing, as he was already caught up in the “flux of the ephemeral” during his lifetime.⁵¹

animal parable see Corti, M., *Percorsi dell’Invenzione. Il Linguaggio poetico e Dante*. Torino, Giulio Einaudi 1993, pp. 137–140; or Mercuri, R., *Semantica Di Gerione*, pp. 144–145. For Ulysses urging “his men to eschew the life of ‘bruti’ and follow ‘virtute e canoscenza’, as if this exhausts their alternatives”, see Peterman, L., *Ulysses and Modernity. Dante Studies, with the Annual Report of the Dante Society*, 1995, No. 113, pp. 89–110, esp. p. 95.

- 45 Barolini, T., *The Epic Hero*. In: *Digital Dante*, [44]. Available online at [www: https://digitaldante.columbia.edu/dante/divine-comedy/inferno/inferno-26/](http://www.columbia.edu/dante/divine-comedy/inferno/inferno-26/) [cit. 6. 7. 2023].
- 46 Cassell, A. K., *The Lesson of Ulysses. Dante Studies, with the Annual Report of the Dante Society*, 1981, No. 99, pp. 113–131, esp. p. 114.
- 47 Boyde, P., *Land and Sea*. In: *Philomythes and Philosopher. Man in the Cosmos*. Cambridge–London, Cambridge University Press 1981, pp. 96–111, esp. p. 108; Mazzotta, G., *Canto XXVI. Ulysses: Persuasion versus Prophecy*, pp. 352–353.
- 48 Which itself represent clear inversion of Christ’s “narrow road that leads to life” (*Matthew* 7.14). In the end, “Ulysses urges his crew to sin.” See Cassell, A. K., *The Lesson of Ulysses*, p. 114. For seeing Ulysses as a willful moral transgressor, see also Warner, L., *Dante’s Ulysses and the Erotics of Crusading. Dante Studies, with the Annual Report of the Dante Society*, 1998, No. 11, pp. 65–93.
- 49 For a striking parallel with Catiline’s suicide speech in Sallust see Holloway, J. B., *Fas et nefas ambulat’: Dante’s Poetic/Salvific Strategies*, p. 5. Available online at [www: https://www.academia.edu/47721876/fasetnefasambulant](https://www.academia.edu/47721876/fasetnefasambulant) [cit. 6. 7. 2023].
- 50 Alighieri, D., *The Divine Comedy. Volume I. Inferno*, XXXII, 8, p. 363; Barolini, T., *The Undivine Comedy*, p. 54.
- 51 Cassell, A. K., *The Lesson of Ulysses*, p. 120; Moevs, Ch., *The Metaphysics of Dante’s Comedy*, p. 182.

3. Into the Whirlpool

With all this in mind, let us now recall the “whirlpool of the inhuman universe,” into which Meillassoux enticed us to plunge. In reference to Leibniz, Meillassoux notes that

such is the philosophical journey par excellence, where ‘thinking we had reached port, we are carried back into the open sea’. But in truth, in our case, things do not wear the Odyssean grandeur of the anger of the gods, blowing our boat toward waters of dangerous ancestral splendours. We rather hope to manage to plunge, by way of mathematics, *into the whirlpool of the inhuman Universe* that confronts us, and instead here we are, becalmed in a port, within a writing incapable of exiting from itself, incapable of making of a world indifferent toward us, the referent of its symbols, elegantly voided of any encumbering content.⁵²

Isn’t it striking how much this epistemically attractive whirlpool draws its figurative energy from the momentum of Dante’s vortex? It is true that the unnamed sailor we should follow is primarily of Mallarmé license, for in the context of Meillassoux’s work, he is clearly prefigured by the “Master” from the famous poem *A Throw of the Dice will Never Abolish Chance* (1897), which Meillassoux almost literally dismantled to pieces.⁵³ But it is equally true that Mallarmé’s hero represents a specific instance of Ulysses’ literary survival, indicated already by the heroic personification of the indomitable intellect which will settle for nothing less than unbounded infinity beyond any limits. Including those of life.⁵⁴

Meillassoux doubles down on this Dantefication, only that he replaces the “great sea of being” [gran mar dell’ essere] with “the great outdoors,”⁵⁵ whose territory extends beyond the opaque plexiglass of a parochial, self-centredly human, and always somewhat homely “correlationism.” By which term he designates “any philosophy that maintains the impossibility of acceding, through thought, to a being independent of thought, [...] any form of

52 Meillassoux, Q., Iteration, Reiteration, Repetition, pp. 183–184.

53 Meillassoux, Q., *The Number and the Siren. A Decipherment of Mallarmé’s Coup de Dés*. Falmouth–New York, Urbanomic–Sequence Press 2012.

54 Minahan, Ch. D., *Vortex/t. The Poetics of Turbulence*. Pennsylvania, The Pennsylvania State University Press 1992, pp. 140, 189.

55 Meillassoux, Q., *After Finitude. An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*. Transl. R. Brassier. London–New York, Continuum 2008, p. 7.

deabsolutization of thought that, to obtain its ends, argues for the enclosure of thought into itself, and for its subsequent inability to attain an absolute outside of itself.⁵⁶

The great outdoors has nothing to do with the “world” of which we are the legislators. Instead of reflecting on the world from the positions of perception or consciousness, Meillassoux prioritizes as a starting point “the state of inorganic matter [...] anterior to, and independent of, all subject and all life.”⁵⁷ As Ray Brassier summarizes later, in this primarily geological context, any “Dasein, life, consciousness, and so on – are themselves merely spatio-temporal occurrences like any other.”⁵⁸ Which is: occurrences that have seen the light of day only recently, and whose departure is therefore not to be lamented.

If any organic union of subject and the world sooner or later begins to posit life as the fundamental origin of both reflection and the world itself, effectively subordinating the universe to life’s agenda, Meillassoux counters this vitalist queue-jumping by celebrating the “inhuman splendour” of ancestral “Dead matter”⁵⁹ that makes up the “entirely inhuman Universe.”⁶⁰ In other words, he turns his attention to a “world which knows not man,”⁶¹ a world which ontologically makes no distinction between man and stone, whose matter has “no common term with our subjectivity,” and which is the proper subject to “mathematics [that] permits physics to produce revisable hypotheses [about] a world independent of us, as regards its factual existence.”⁶² Thought is able to penetrate this world indeed; but it reveals only “the absolute contingency of everything [...], of all beings and all modes of being.”⁶³

What is essential for our next move is the fundamentally immemorial nature of the world under scrutiny, which existed before us, and in relation to which we count only as secondary phenomena. Any thought, any mathematical proposition that manages to enter this “absolute outside” does so only at the expense of a “legitimate feeling of being on foreign territory – of being entirely elsewhere.”⁶⁴ And this “elsewhere” also has another name: if

56 Meillassoux, Q., *Iteration, Reiteration, Repetition*, p. 119.

57 *Ibid.*, p. 133.

58 Brassier, R., *Nihil Unbound. Enlightenment and Extinction*. Basingstoke–New York, Palgrave Macmillan 2007, p. 53.

59 Meillassoux, Q., *Iteration, Reiteration, Repetition*, p. 128.

60 *Ibid.*, p. 130.

61 Remember Dante, *Inferno*, XXVI, 117.

62 Meillassoux, Q., *Iteration, Reiteration, Repetition*, p. 157.

63 *Ibid.*, p. 120.

64 Meillassoux, Q., *After Finitude*, p. 7.

the “arrow of thought [points] toward the very heart of all that is dead,”⁶⁵ then it grants “us access to the *Kingdom of the dead*,”⁶⁶ to “Hells of the inorganic world – those deep, subterranean realms where life and subjectivity are absent.”⁶⁷

If these allusions to Ulysses’ descent through the whirlpool – this time voluntary – still sound rather distant or indeterminate, the subsequent one binds them into a tight knot with Dante’s figure: because to these hells leads only a “narrow passage [l’*étroit passage*], through which thought is able to exit from itself – through facticity, and through facticity alone.”⁶⁸ Which, in turn, is nothing else than an obvious allusion to the verse that we already know: to the “narrow passage-way, where Hercules set up those signs of his, which warned men not to sail beyond their bounds.”⁶⁹

However, there’s something about this reference that the speculative associates of Meillassoux will find troubling, if not wholly unacceptable. Meillassoux first notes, in reference to Gilles Deleuze’s and Félix Guattari’s *What is Philosophy?*, that “to think is twice victorious to cross the Acheron: it is to visit the dead, or rather death, and above all, to succeed in returning.”⁷⁰ The intrusion of thought is therefore only concluded by “recount[ing] to the living the discoveries of such a journey.”⁷¹ Here we should immediately add that this apparent re-Homerization of the Dantean Ulysses does not really contradict our reading, just as Ulysses’ fate does not interfere with his urge to disclose the details of his voyage. In fact, his enterprise will only come to fruition when Dante – presumably the first person to speak to him after his death – interrogates him and corroborates his discovery. But the problem we have in mind is that Meillassoux approaches the inhuman world only in terms of its past, that is, in terms of a certain foundation that can reveal itself in the present, albeit only through “the paradox of the arche-fossil,” through which “being manifests being’s anteriority to manifestation.”⁷²

65 Meillassoux, Q., Iteration, Reiteration, Repetition, p. 134.

66 Ibid., p. 157.

67 Ibid.

68 Meillassoux, Q., *After Finitude*, p. 63.

69 Cf. Jacqueline Risset’s translation: “Mes compagnons et moi, nous étions vieux et lents/lorsque nous vîmes à ce passage étroit”. See Alighieri, D., *La Divine Comédie*. Paris, Éditions Flammarion 2010, p. 133.

70 Meillassoux, Q., Subtraction and Contraction: Deleuze, Immanence, and Matter and Memory. In: Mackay, R. (ed.), *Collapse III. Unknown Deleuze*. Fallmouth, Urbanomic 2012, pp. 63–107, esp. p. 107.

71 Meillassoux, Q., Iteration, Reiteration, Repetition, p. 157.

72 Meillassoux, Q., *After Finitude*, p. 26. “Arche-fossil” generally refers to the “material indicating the existence of an ancestral reality or event; one that is anterior to terrestrial life” and which in turn “manifests an entity’s anteriority vis-à-vis manifestation.” Ibid., pp. 10, 14.

What makes these revelations suspicious – that is, for speculative realism’s “wild bunch” – is their entanglement with a certain hope that the accentuated past makes possible. What is at stake here is not just an expectation in the form of the Kantian “intellectual hope [...] to render things intelligible,”⁷³ or in the form of the Humean “hope to uncover the principal laws that govern the universe.”⁷⁴ The real trouble is represented by hope much more cunning, the one based on the conviction that “there is nothing above and beyond the power of chaos that could constrain it to submit to a norm.”⁷⁵ As a consequence, the past-perceived chaos makes it possible to await a Saviour who “must be thought as the contingent, but eternally possible, effect of a Chaos unsubordinated to any law”; and it is precisely this invincible hope that must not cross Ray Brassier’s, Eugene Thacker’s, or Reza Negarestani’s Ulysean thresholds.⁷⁶

4. Follow the Will to Know

Brassier, foreman of the second station on our journey through the phases of Ulysses’ speculative radicalization, does not work with the Dantean figure himself, but his work serves as an essentially important transformer of the Ulysean currents.

Brassier shares a substantial part of Meillassoux’s critique; for Brassier, too, there is no “pre-established harmony between reality and ideality.”⁷⁷ He also claims that “thought has not guaranteed access to being; being is not inherently thinkable.”⁷⁸ And he similarly asks “how does thought think a world without thought.”⁷⁹ However, unlike Meillassoux, Brassier reverses the vector of this inquiry, and instead of grounding the question in the original non-being of thought, he poses it in the context of its death.

73 Peirce, Ch. S., *A Guess at the Riddle* [1888]. Quoted in Sachs, C., *Speculative Materialism or Pragmatic Naturalism? Sellars contra Meillassoux*. In: Gironi, F. (ed.), *The Legacy of Kant in Sellars and Meillassoux. Analytic and Continental Kantianism*. New York–London, Routledge 2018, pp. 87–105, esp. pp. 100–101.

74 Meillassoux, Q., *The contingency of the laws of nature*. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 30, 2012, No. 2, pp. 322–334.

75 Meillassoux, Q., *After Finitude*, p. 325.

76 Cf. Meillassoux, Q., *Spectral Dilemma*. In: Mackay, R. (ed.), *Collapse IV. Philosophical Research and Development*. Fallmouth, Urbanomic 2008, pp. 261–275; Meillassoux, Q., *Badiou and Mallarmé: The Event and the Perhaps*. Transl. A. Edlebi. *Parrhesia*, 2013, No. 16, pp. 35–47, esp. p. 44; Meillassoux, Q., *The Number and the Siren*, pp. 116–117.

77 Brassier, R., *Concepts and Objects*. In: Bryant, L. – Srnicek, N. – Harman, G. (eds.), *The Speculative Turn: Continental Materialism and Realism*. Melbourne, re.press 2011, pp. 47–65, esp. p. 47.

78 *Ibid.*

79 Brassier, R., *Nihil Unbound*, p. 223.

Brassier finds the primary inspiration in Jean-François Lyotard's philosophical rendering of the death of the sun, which – standing for the heat death or the “big rip” of the entire universe – will inevitably result in “a death of mind,” with the implication that “with the disappearance of the Earth, thought will have stopped – leaving that disappearance absolutely unthought of.”⁸⁰ On the intersection of Lyotard's meditation, Emmanuel Lévinas' notion of impersonal being, and Sigmund Freud's account of the death-drive, Brassier conjures up an all-encompassing extinction event that “needs to be grasped as something that has already happened; as the aboriginal trauma driving the history of terrestrial life as an elaborately circuitous detour from stellar death.”⁸¹

What is important is the subtle shift in emphasis from the past to the future: while the “ancestral anteriority can too easily be converted into anteriority for us, the posteriority of extinction indexes a physical annihilation which no amount of chronological tinkering can transform into a correlate ‘for us.’”⁸² Unlike ancestrality, the virtuality of extinction, or rather its all-pervading spectral presence, is structurally traumatic in nature; it is “real yet not empirical, since it is not of the order of experience.”⁸³ Which, however, does not prevent this event from being recognized in some way. Only that Brassier's own peculiar variant of the cartography of the “world which knows not man” can no longer be realized as an exploratory mission, but solely as a passive seismographic measurement of the gravitational disturbances of, and from, the future. Extinction invades the present as a trace, and the unstoppable “will to know” – the rationality's drive which we can boldly tag as genuinely Ulyssean – “is [itself] driven by the traumatic reality of extinction, and strives to become equal to the trauma of the in-itself whose trace it bears.”⁸⁴

This tension also enters in another context: if the agenda of thought is independent of the world, then it is not necessarily subordinate to the agenda of life either, which is precisely what Brassier, among other things, holds against Theodor Adorno's and Emil Horkheimer's *Odysseus*. The representative of tame Enlightenment is not guilty of instrumentalizing thought up to the point of mimicking the dead inorganic nature; quite on the contrary, his “thanatosis” sinned by not going far enough. For Adorno and Horkheimer, the weakness of Odyssean rationality lies in its internal indebtedness; if rea-

80 Lyotard, J.-F., Can Thought go on without a Body? In: *The Inhuman. Reflections on Time*. Transl. G. Bennington – R. Bowlby. Cambridge, Polity Press 1991, pp. 8–23, esp. p. 9.

81 Brassier, R., *Nihil Unbound*, p. 223.

82 *Ibid.*, p. 229.

83 *Ibid.*, p. 238.

84 *Ibid.*, p. 239.

son is embedded in nature, it just cannot serve as an instrument of human liberation, and must hand over the reins to memory and its critical revision of reason's own natural history. There's no victory in this: if this particular Odyssean reason breaks the bank by mortifying and objectifying itself in science and automated processes, it will still be haunted by a bad conscience of an aborted reconciliation between man and nature.⁸⁵

Brassier, however, defies and scorns any such idea of reconciliation, which in his view cannot be but vitalist or correlationist in nature. Instead, he makes a practical – if partly ironic – case for “synthetic intelligence” which would represent the Enlightenment “horror story” about reason's being “an insect's waking dream.” Brassier subsequently suggests that the best protagonist of such story would not be Adorno's Odysseus, but Seth Brundle, a scientist who accepts the technological-biological transformation into a fly, and welcomes “the awakening of an intelligence which is in the process of sloughing off its human mask.”⁸⁶

And it is a typical Odyssean twist that none other than Dante's Ulysses will rise to the challenge and see it through.

5. Let's Get Corruptible

Which puts him under the command of Eugene Thacker, who, just like Brassier, combats the correlationist “horizon of the human,” and devises ways to “rethink the world as unthinkable.”⁸⁷ Only that the “horror story” to which Brassier alluded, and which has long been the focus of Thacker's as a “non-philosophical attempt to think about the world-without-us philosophically,”⁸⁸ changes its focal point. Instead of telling a straightforward tale about the world without us – remember once again Ulysses and the “world which knows not man” – it focuses on the question of “*life* without us.”⁸⁹ In other words, Thacker is interested in extinction primarily as a radical “disaster”⁹⁰ – or shipwreck? – corresponding to the “null set of biology.”⁹¹

But there's a catch: the peculiarity of Thacker's journey lies in the fact that instead of overtaking life into the inorganic world or turning the clock for-

85 *Ibid.*, p. 47.

86 *Ibid.*, p. 48. Brassier refers to David Cronenberg's adaptation of George Langelaan *The Fly* (1986).

87 Thacker, E., *In the Dust of This Planet: Horror of Philosophy (Volume 1)*, [eBook]. Winchester–Washington, Zero Books 2011.

88 *Ibid.*

89 Thacker, E., *After life*. Chicago–London, The University of Chicago Press 2010, p. 268.

90 Thacker, E., Notes on Extinction and Existence. *Configurations*, 20, 2012, No. 1–2, pp. 137–148, esp. p. 137.

91 Thacker, E., *In the Dust of This Planet*.

ward for its demise, he seeks the limit of life within life itself, not outside of it in the sense of the “mutual exclusivity of life and death.”⁹² Which antinomy only reflects a deeper contradiction between the general notion of “Life” and particular instances of “the living,”⁹³ whereby life tends to be conceived as something “human-centred and yet unhuman-oriented,”⁹⁴ in anthropomorphic terms of a singular organism, animated by the intervention of form, time, or spirit. However, as soon as we begin to conjecture and pile up the examples of the interactions of non-human principles with the inanimate world, sooner or later we run into a *hell* of a lot of “impossible life forms”⁹⁵ that “themselves resist easy classification within biology”⁹⁶ and that, in the end, do not make it so easy to “distinguish the living from the non-living.”⁹⁷ Such as the “mists, ooze, blobs, slime, clouds, and muck”⁹⁸ from the horror stories that may be imaginary, but in the end highlight our intuition of things that should *not* live, but aren’t exactly inanimated either (and that *could*, possibly, exist in outer space).

However, if the unambiguous dimension of death is blurred, then it is actually difficult to determine what would be the culmination of extinction itself. Surely, the end of all life. But what if life – as animation, as intelligence, or as (de)composition – does not end with the end of life as we know it? Hence, when Thacker asks “who gives witness to the aftermath of extinction? Who will give testimony to this, who will experience it, who will be there to apprehend and comprehend it,”⁹⁹ he actually tries to “think the negation at the heart of life,”¹⁰⁰ and asks how the testimony will change the one who gives it, and whether the witness will still be a “who”, or rather a “what”.

Which brings us back to Ulysses, for is it such a coincidence that when Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe asks a not-so-distant question of “who comes after the subject?”, he meets Thacker half-way on a ship bound for the underworld? In fact, Lacoue-Labarthe’s unexpected appearance on the passenger list perfectly encapsulates Thacker’s own negativity. He first points out a certain ambivalence in Odysseus’ famous response to the wounded Cyclops: “To the question of Polyphemus, ‘Who?’ Ulysses (sic!) appears to respond negatively

92 Thacker, E., *After life*, p. 254.

93 *Ibid.*, p. 240.

94 Thacker, E., *After life*. De anima and unhuman politics. *Radical Philosophy*, 2009, No. 155, pp. 31–40, esp. p. 31.

95 Thacker, E., *In the Dust of This Planet*.

96 Thacker, E., *Nine Disputations on Theology and Horror*. In: Mackay, R. (ed.), *Collapse IV. Philosophical Research and Development*, pp. 55–92, esp. p. 81.

97 Thacker, E., *After life*, p. 268.

98 Thacker, E., *In the Dust of This Planet*.

99 Thacker, E., *Notes on Extinction and Existence*, p. 141; Thacker, E., *Starry Speculative Corpse: Horror of Philosophy (Volume 2)*, [eBook]. Winchester–Washington, Zero Books 2015.

100 Thacker, E., *Starry Speculative Corpse*.

with a ‘what’ (no one: not nothing, but no being of the human realm). But in responding ‘No one,’ he certainly intends to answer the question ‘Who?’ or indeed to take it upon himself.¹⁰¹ Which ultimately reflects a tension on the axis between birth and death, along which Lacoue-Labarthe does not see Odysseus’ experience as “one of navigation nor even of the relentless determination to return,” but as an involvement that “culminates in the journey through death [...] with the aim of not recovering from his return.”¹⁰² Even Lacoue-Labarthe considers the “work of death” as a kind of “horror.” But when he lets the responsible “who” contradict the negative “what”, and privileges “birth” over the arrogant “metaphysical will to pass through death,”¹⁰³ he rejects precisely the path that Thacker will enthusiastically follow.

Because Thacker’s Odysseus seems to be proceeding in quite the opposite direction. Better said, in *another* direction: neither to birth nor to death, but towards “the existence of a life-after-life.”¹⁰⁴ But as soon as Thacker convinces his Odysseus to descend to the “dead souls [that] are immaterial and yet not transcendent, a life that at once continues to live on, but that lives on in a kind of interminable, vacuous, immortality,” he immediately changes his mind and adds: “There is no better guide to the after-life than Dante.”¹⁰⁵

It’s true that Thacker doesn’t even notice Ulysses during his visit to Inferno. But that’s only because he takes over his role himself, thereby retroactively Danteizing the Greek hero to whose journey he refers in parallel.¹⁰⁶ In the end, the Greek Odysseus is heading nowhere else than to the “hells of the organic world,” which are located in Dante’s Inferno, and which represent the final destination for both Thacker and the sailor.

Thacker is a great Dantean subverter: he does not intend to reach either Purgatory or Paradise, just as he ignores Beatrice and rushes to Francesca instead, who is the one to respond to Odysseus’ parallel “call to the dead, who then emerge from the underworld in a kind of slow-motion swarming.”¹⁰⁷ The unhappy lady already known to us – the one who, just like Ulysses, lost all hope – looms before Thacker in the manner of a demon who “stands-in for

101 Lacoue-Labarthe, P., *The Response of Ulysses*. In: Cadava, E. – Connor, P. – Nancy, J.-L. (eds.), *Who Comes After the Subject?* Transl. A. Ronell. New York–London, Routledge 1991, pp. 198–205, esp. p. 199.

102 Lacoue-Labarthe, P., *Annexes*. 1. Birth Is Death. In: *Ending and Unending Agony. On Maurice Blanchot*. Transl. H. Opelz. New York, Fordham University Press 2015, pp. 82–88, esp. p. 84.

103 Lacoue-Labarthe, P., *The horror of the West*. In: Lawtoo, N. (ed.), *Conrad’s Heart of Darkness and Contemporary Thought. Revisiting the Horror with Lacoue-Labarthe*. London–New York, Bloomsbury 2012, pp. 111–122, esp. p. 119.

104 Thacker, E., *In the Dust of This Planet*.

105 Thacker, E., *Nine Disputations on Theology and Horror*, p. 55.

106 He also refers to H. P. Lovecraft’s “black seas of infinity, and it was not meant that we should voyage far.” See Thacker, E., *In the Dust of This Planet*.

107 *Ibid.*

the abstract, indifferent, non-being of the world,¹⁰⁸ and who “occupies the borderland between the living and the dead.”¹⁰⁹ She momentarily breaks off from an “aggregate body”¹¹⁰ of restless souls that can hardly be called an organism, i.e. from a swarm that represents one of Thacker’s key examples of the ambivalent “impossible life forms” mentioned above.

A swarm is a strange body indeed; what exactly is its identity if the “self-organizing capacity” does not allow much distinction between “the life in the swarm and the life of the swarm?”¹¹¹ How to determine its origin if what “drives the swarm [...] is also nothing – at least nothing that stands above and apart from the singular phenomenon of the swarm itself?”¹¹² If all there is is “the immanent, fully distributed life force of swarming itself?”¹¹³ Which exposes our Ulysses to the following paradox: so far, he was bound for a coordinate in time and space where he could land, himself unchanged. Where he could face and learn about what’s in front of him. But in the case of a swarm, there is no stable “front”. It represents a type of headless life “that is radically distributed and disseminated, both in terms of its spatial topography, and in terms of its temporal causality,”¹¹⁴ in other words: its “movement [...] is that of contagion.”¹¹⁵ The more Ulysses descends to the “bare life” – the swarming (un)dead just personify its structure – the more this “molecular minimum”¹¹⁶ becomes the subject of “angst towards the biological domain itself.”¹¹⁷

This, too, is a form of “horror”: when the “generative and germinal excess of life” becomes a form of “absolute otherness and anonymity,” an act of “vitalistic life-negation.”¹¹⁸ The “after” in “after-life” is therefore not “temporal or sequential, but liminal,”¹¹⁹ and the descent to a “base life” – the ascent to a super-organism would lead to a same place anyway – in fact induces a de-

108 Ibid.

109 Thacker, E., *Nekros; or, the Poetics of Biopolitics. Incognitum Hactenus, 3. Livin On: Zombies*, 2012, pp. 26–47, esp. p. 45.

110 Ibid., p. 42.

111 Thacker, E., *After life. Swarms, demons and the antinomies of immanence*. In: Elliott, J. – Attridge, D. (eds.), *Theory After ‘Theory’*. London, Routledge 2011, pp. 181–193, esp. p. 185.

112 Ibid., p. 182.

113 Ibid., p. 188.

114 Thacker, E., *After life. Swarms, demons and the antinomies of immanence*, p. 182.

115 Thacker, E., *Nekros; or, the Poetics of Biopolitics*, p. 45.

116 Thacker, E., *Necrologies, or, the Death of the Body Politic*. In: Clough, P. T. – Willse, C. (eds.), *Beyond Biopolitics: Essays on the Governance of Life and Death*. Durham, Duke University Press 2011, pp. 139–162, esp. p. 159.

117 Thacker, E., *Nine Disputations on Theology and Horror*, p. 62.

118 Ibid., p. 58.

119 Ibid.

scent of extinction to us, inscribing itself in the present via the negative event of (un)life.

Which also represents a crucial turning point for Ulysses' katabasis. Just remember where we are: Ulysses first heads to the edge of the world, or rather over the threshold of its extremity into a "world without people," where the horizon of ultimate knowledge of the world and himself opens up. The path to this extremity, which converges with the event of extinction, then leads through the heart of life that Odysseus himself lives; to the point where life and un-life deny this very distinction. So can he actually remain intact when confronted with the "radically unhuman [...] pathological life"¹²⁰ whose "locality" becomes "unlocalized"?¹²¹ When he has to *enter* the swarm as a point of destination that has no clear gravity core or boundaries, and that would otherwise remain incomprehensible? Thacker seems to imply "yes" when he laconically states that "extinction can only be comprehended from within the tomb,"¹²² or when he concludes that the "indifferent unhuman is immanently 'within' the human as well."¹²³ But when he wishes to become "absolutely corruptible," so that "nothing of [his] body would remain," and "finally all words and memories would evaporate, leaving not even an echo or resonance,"¹²⁴ *how* to achieve such a goal?

How shall Ulysses touch the real "bottom of the universe" and reach a "world that knows not man" – that is, a world in which man would be *un-thinkable* – without just remixing the building blocks of the *same*? If we are concerned with radical reconfiguration, can we not repeat at this point what Édouard Glissant said at the level of language? Namely, that "floodtide of extinction, unstoppable in its power of contagion, will win out. It will leave a residue that is not one victorious language, or several, but one or more desolate codes that will take a long time to reconstitute the organic and unpredictable liveliness of a language"¹²⁵? So what does Ulysses have to do to be banished as a reverse Adam with no possibility of return, of which Dante's Hell is still the last resort of *hope*?

120 Thacker, E., *Nekros; or, the Poetics of Biopolitics*, pp. 36, 41.

121 Thacker, E., *Nine Disputations on Theology and Horror*, p. 82.

122 Thacker, E., *Infinite Resignation* [eBook]. London, Repeater Books 2018.

123 Thacker, E., *Black Infinity; or, Oil Discovers Humans*. *Pages Magazine*, 2013. Available online at [www: https://www.pagesmagazine.net/en/articles/black-infinity-or-oil-discovers-humans](https://www.pagesmagazine.net/en/articles/black-infinity-or-oil-discovers-humans) [cit. 6. 7. 2023].

124 Thacker, E., *Nekros; or, the Poetics of Biopolitics*, p. 46.

125 Glissant, E., *Poetics of relation*. Transl. B. Wing. Ann Arbor, The University of Michigan Press 1997, p. 96.

6. Die the Other Way

Let's summarize our progress so far: Ulysses plunged into the vortex of the inorganic world, which eventually descended to him through the event of extinction, metabolized by his own flesh. But Ulysses did not, and could not, break free from his attachment to the world by a mere reconfiguration of *life*. The question of how to reach a “world which knows not man” must therefore be reformulated for the last time, just as the way to the last station of Ulysses' journey leads through the infernal interiors of our own bodies. The real question then is: if we cannot really undo ourselves, could we at least find alternative ways how to do us in?

It will ultimately be Reza Negarestani who entrusts Ulysses with this final task to “liberate that which liberates itself from you,”¹²⁶ to find “real alternatives,”¹²⁷ not only to the current earthly life, but even to Brassier's “nihil unbound” (to which he otherwise makes numerous references). As in the case of Meillassoux, Brassier or Thacker, one of the driving forces behind his revolutionary “Inhumanism” is the desire to avoid any ontologization of origins: rhetorically, he does not discard the notion of man, but means to define the human “not by recourse to any essence, but solely in terms of its ability to enter the space of reasons, through which the human can determine and revise what it ought to be by constructing and revising the very reasons or norms that it mobilizes to think and transform itself.”¹²⁸

What is downright Ulyssesian is the view of humanity as “a navigational project,” within which the “militant negativity”¹²⁹ of inhumanism takes place in “a space of navigation and intervention.”¹³⁰ Ontological questions such as “Where am I? Where have I come from? Where am I heading to?”¹³¹ are therefore immediately re-polarised into the practical imperative of the journey, in fact not unlike Thacker's own expedition. If the “conserved frame of reference anchored in the order of here and now”¹³² is to be broken, then it is necessary to open up to a future that “transforms a[ny] commitment into a revisionary

126 Negarestani, R., *The Inhuman* (a quick read). *Toy Philosophy*, 2018. Available online at [www: https://toyphilosophy.com/2018/04/08/the-inhuman-a-quick-read/](https://toyphilosophy.com/2018/04/08/the-inhuman-a-quick-read/) [cit. 6. 7. 2023].

127 Negarestani, R., *Rainbows and Rationalism. The Fate of the Terrestrial Manifesto of Art*, 2011, p. 3. Available online at [www: http://s3.amazonaws.com/arena-attachments/77501/Rainbows-and-Rationalism.pdf?1360838356](http://s3.amazonaws.com/arena-attachments/77501/Rainbows-and-Rationalism.pdf?1360838356) [cit. 6. 7. 2023].

128 Negarestani, R., *The Inhuman* (a quick read).

129 Negarestani, R., *The Labor of the Inhuman, Part I: Human. E-flux journal*, 2014, No. 52, pp. 1–10, esp. p. 8.

130 *Ibid.*, p. 1.

131 Negarestani, R., *Navigate With Extreme Prejudice (Definitions and Ramifications)*, 2014. Available online at [www: https://www.urbanomic.com/philosophy/](https://www.urbanomic.com/philosophy/) [cit. 6. 7. 2023].

132 *Ibid.*

catastrophe that travels backward in time [...], from its revisionary ramifications, in order to interfere with the past and rewrite the present.”¹³³ The medium of this internalized catastrophe – not far from Thacker’s notion of disaster – is once again only us, and to navigate forward towards the future is ultimately a leap into the vortex whose disintegrative dynamics we embody. As Negarestani points out, in general harmony with Thacker: “The shape (or spectre) of the Thing unleashed by total openness? Where is it? Such landscapes of epidemic, death, openness, and desire dance under my skin.”¹³⁴

Let us note that the descent of the future is not dissimilar to the descent of extinction – at the end there will be nothing left of us – while man himself meets this movement by *going down* with it, by descending towards something that is not his consequence but disintegrates him through and through. This “katabasis into the absolute”¹³⁵ of the “Great Outdoors” then needs a special hero, “the trickster, the trap-maker, the artificer, and the navigator of deep waters,”¹³⁶ someone with a “a cunning vision of doom”¹³⁷ whose “descent [...] to Hades [would lead him to] openness to and by the dead” and whose “ascension to the outer surface [would not be] a return to the economical openness of his superficial journeys, but the continuation of his descent, for every ascent is the sublimation of descent.”¹³⁸

However, Negarestani’s choice of Ulysses heading towards Dante’s “place of the abomination”¹³⁹ runs into the difficulty of certain predictability of this enterprise and the regional nature of Hell as a subordinate locality. Negarestani has a problem precisely with the fact that the desired destination would still fall within the jurisdiction of the initial Creation. The trouble

133 Negarestani, R., The Labor of the Inhuman, Part II: Human. *E-flux journal*, 2014, No. 53, pp. 1–10, esp. p. 5.

134 Negarestani, R., Death as Perversion: Openness and Germinal Death. *CTheory*, 2003. Available online at [www: https://journals.uvic.ca/index.php/ctheory/article/view/14550/5405](https://journals.uvic.ca/index.php/ctheory/article/view/14550/5405) [cit. 6. 7. 2023].

135 Negarestani, R., Globe of Revolution. An Afterthought on Geophilosophical Realism. *Identities: Journal for Politics, Gender and Culture*, 8, 2011, No. 2, pp. 25–54, esp. p. 41.

136 Negarestani, R., *Intelligence and Spirit*, p. 446.

137 Negarestani, R., Drafting the Inhuman: Conjectures on Capitalism and Organic Necrocracy. In: Bryant, L. – Srnicek, N. – Harman, G. (eds.), *The Speculative Turn: Continental Materialism and Realism*, pp. 182–201, esp. pp. 188–189.

138 Negarestani, R., *Cyclonopedia*.

139 *Ibid.*, p. 163. Besides Negarestani’s own dantification of Odysseus, Ben Woodard – as a reader of Negarestani – spontaneously contextualizes this “place of abominations” precisely by the “evil ditches” of the 8th circle of Dante’s *Inferno*, where Ulysses is imprisoned. See Woodard, B., *On an Ungrounded Earth. Towards A New Geophilosophy*. New York, Punctum Books 2013, pp. 72–73. We can add a couple more related visions of hell: the “valley of sorrows” where only Viruses-to-come can dwell (Likavčan, L., *Introduction to Comparative Planetology* [eBook]. Moscow, Strelka Press 2019), or “a non-world” created by a “omnivorous [artificial, alien] ‘bacteria’”. See Moreno, G., Notes on the Inorganic: Accelerations. In: Johnson, J. (ed.), *Dark Trajectories. Politics of the Outside*. Hong Kong, Name Publications 2013, pp. 12–35, esp. p. 16.

lies in the capitalist nature of life, which tends to continually resynthesise itself within the limits of the existing configuration, and which, as a result, represents the “incessant production of *modi vivendi* (courses of life).” Any real alternative is made impossible by its capacity to factor in all alternatives including its own bankruptcy or death. The key term here is affordability, which Negarestani innovatively relates not only to life, but also to the demise of an organism that “can only follow its own affordable and therefore economically conservative path to death in order to decontract.”¹⁴⁰ In other words, unlike the unconditionality of extinction, which bursts into the present as a revolutionary traumatic event, such a death has zero revolting potential in relation to life, for it is fully in accordance with the factory setting of an organism in the manner of its lifelong guarantee.

One possible solution would be to separate “sapience” from ontologized “sentience” – don’t we hear the echo of “ye were not created to lead the life of stupid animals” here? – and to consistently purify the “the rational agency,” the essential and ultimately the only parameter of humanity, of all “personal, individual, or [...] biological”¹⁴¹ foundations. The consequential “automation of discursive practices”¹⁴² would then presumably result into a “programming schema of the *next* machine,”¹⁴³ free of any preceding input data. But even if the “programmable matter” could actually be coded,¹⁴⁴ to make one last point about Thacker’s related concepts, even if the “swarm intelligence” would set “a definable point at which self-transformation becomes auto-destruction,”¹⁴⁵ wouldn’t we still be wading through the muck of life whose last word would only repeat the first?

140 Negarestani, R., *Drafting the Inhuman: Conjectures on Capitalism and Organic Necrocracy*, p. 191.

141 Negarestani, R., *The Labor of the Inhuman, Part II: Human*, p. 3.

142 *Ibid.*, p. 10.

143 Negarestani, R., *Navigate With Extreme Prejudice (Definitions and Ramifications)*.

144 Thacker, E., *Biophilosophy for the 21st Century*. In: Kroker, A. – Kroker, M. (eds.), *Critical digital studies: a reader*. Toronto, University of Toronto Press 2008, pp. 137, 140; cf. Thacker, E., *Living Dead Networks. The Fibreculture Journal*, 2005, No. 4. Available online at [www: http://four.fibreculturejournal.org](http://four.fibreculturejournal.org), the “universality of the mathematics of self-organization” [cit. July 6, 2023]. See DeLanda, M., *Nonorganic Life*. In: Cray, J. – Kwinter, S. (eds.), *Incorporations*. New York, Zone 1995, pp. 129–167, esp. p. 135, or “absolute recomputability” and “absolute contingency of mathematics collapsing into the mortal contingency of stuff”, in Bratton, B. H., *Root the Earth: On Peak Oil Apopenia*. In: Keller, E. – Masciandaro, N. – Thacker, E. (eds.), *Lepor Creativity. Cyclonopedia Symposium*. New York, Punctum Books 2012, pp. 44–57, esp. pp. 46, 57.

145 Galloway, A. R. – Thacker, E., *On Misanthropy*. In: Krysa, J. (ed.), *Curating Immateriality: The Work of the Curator in the Age of Network Systems*. New York, Autonomedia 2006, pp. 159–174, esp. p. 173; cf. “Odysseys of selfquantification” ending “in the disappearance, or at least displacement, of the essential human User, a multitude crowds into and overflows the evacuated position”, in Bratton, B. H., *The Stack. On Software and Sovereignty* [eBook]. Cambridge–London, MIT Press 2015.

Especially if life isn't the only enemy here: it is the whole general economy revolving around the overrated stars – the “merely glorified regions”¹⁴⁶ – that is unacceptable. If we are all made of stars, as they say, subordinated to their energy economics, then we should hack “the hegemonic model of the sun in regard to death and exteriority without submitting to another star.”¹⁴⁷ But finding the “alternative ways of dying and loosening into the cosmic abyss” that would not be “dictated [both by the organism and] by the economical correlation between Earth and Sun,”¹⁴⁸ is not a simple assignment. As we have already seen, it would require a great deal more than just the invention of “vagabond matter”¹⁴⁹ or “deranged biopower”¹⁵⁰ which would still serve the supremacy of survival.

Reza offers an alternative, in the form of a unique vision of necrophilia – remember Ulysses' reluctance to call his crew *friends* – in which he reverses the classic affirmative bond of *philia* into an infectious one: if capitalist *philia* binds together only the things that are, in the broader sense of the word, exchangeable, repayable, compatible, from origins and profits, to virtues, to purposes, to losses, to vices, then necrophilia, based on the fundamentally incommensurable bond of life and death, makes *philia* literally invade its surroundings, as it binds everything to everything and at the same time, through his intimacy with the base un-life, “debases whatever attaches to it.”¹⁵¹ In this sense, necrophilia represents the desired “immense ungrounding process,”¹⁵² forming a space of “non-dwelling openness free from affordance-based or economic appropriations.”¹⁵³ Unlike the economic schedule of trivial death characteristically incompatible with a living friendship, “death, infested by *philia*, is not domesticated; it goes rabid.”¹⁵⁴

The mathematical abstraction behind the automation of liberating processes and the uprooting of the economic order of life therefore finally meet in a process of putrefaction. In Negarestani's own words, “that which tangibly rots evolves from that which gradually becomes abstract. In short, the process of decomposition is progressively concrete and retroactively ab-

146 Negarestani, R., *Rainbows and Rationalism. The Fate of the Terrestrial Manifesto of Art*, p. 5.

147 Negarestani, R., *Drafting the Inhuman: Conjectures on Capitalism and Organic Necrocracy*, pp. 200–201.

148 Negarestani, R., *Solar Inferno and the Earthbound Abyss*. In: Rosenkranz, P. – Lacagnina, S. (eds.), *Our Sun*. Milan–Venice, Mousse Publishing–Istituto Svizzero di Roma 2010, pp. 3–8, esp. pp. 7–8.

149 Bennett, J., *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*. Durham–London, Duke University Press 2010, p. 49.

150 Bratton, B. H., *Root the Earth: On Peak Oil Apopenia*, pp. 54–55.

151 Negarestani, R., *Death as Perversion: Openness and Germinal Death*.

152 *Ibid.*

153 *Ibid.*

154 *Ibid.*

stract,” for the calculus of decomposition involves both “mathematics with a chemical disposition” and “chemical revolution through mathematical distributions.”¹⁵⁵

Which brings us to the very end of our journey. Let us think for the last time of Ulysses, this time in the context of Dante’s famous vision of “love which moves the sun and all the other stars.”¹⁵⁶ If the created universe is ruled by founding love, by the original loving and dividing Word, then the body of Ulysses, *flooded* by necrophilia and succumbing to the work of “taxonomic indetermination,”¹⁵⁷ dissolves in Negarestani’s vision into oil: a viscous death which “is not of this place but of estranging depths, elud[es] biological origins”¹⁵⁸ and represents “the black corpse of the sun, [...] too chemically potent to support the vitality of life or endurance of survival.”¹⁵⁹



Although Reza Negarestani refers primarily to the artist Pamela Rosenkranz in this regard, we can point to a connection with the oil imagery of *The Last Winter* (2006) or Richard Wilson’s installation *20:50* (1987). In fact, this entire article can be read as the literary context of this specific “petroleum imagination” of a world without people.

It is as if Negarestani took Charles Lyell’s wondrous vision of mummies, fittingly born from the depths of the Earth, and transformed it into a radical programme of revolt, resulting in “the curious substances [that] could never in reality have belonged to men. They may have been generated by some

155 Negarestani, R., *Undercover Softness: An Introduction to the Architecture and Politics of Decay*. In: Mackay, R. (ed.), *Collapse VI. Philosophical Research and Development*. Fallmouth, Urbanomic 2010, pp. 379–430, esp. p. 429.

156 Alighieri, D., *The Divine Comedy. Volume III. Paradiso*, XXXIII, 145, p. 395.

157 Negarestani, R., *Cyclonopedia*.

158 Negarestani, R., *Outlines for a Science Fiction of the Earth as Narrated from a Nethermost Point of View*. *World Literature Today*, 84, 2010, No. 3, pp. 12–13.

159 Negarestani, R., *Solar Inferno and the Earthbound Abyss*, p. 7.

plastic virtue residing in the interior of the earth, or they may be abortions of nature produced by her incipient efforts in the work of creation. [...] May we not refer [these] derogate[s] from the perfection of the Divine attributes to the future rather than the past? May we not be looking into the womb of Nature, and not her grave? May not these images be like the shades of the unborn, in Virgil's Elysium – the archetypes of men not yet called into existence?"¹⁶⁰

Be as it may, it is here that Ulysses meets his radical fate: having travelled to a liminal hell of the (in)organic world as a messenger of Adamic revolt, he himself eventually turned into a message from the future "Death Valley,"¹⁶¹ albeit without anyone to receive it. Which seems to be exactly what Ulysses was after all the way down here.

7. Post Scriptum: A Little Bitter

We might as well go back to the beginning, for true to his polytropic nature, Ulysses is still many things. Except that now he becomes a hero of "cosmic pessimism," performing an "act of crystalline self-abnegation,"¹⁶² supposedly the only answer to the call of the Great Outdoors. At least if we agree that "nihilism is unavoidable corollary of the realist conviction that there is a mind-independent reality."¹⁶³ Who else would be better suited to be a fallen angel who disdains "any transcendental at-homeness,"¹⁶⁴ to represent an anti-Noah who would like to liberate the Universe from the desire for life,¹⁶⁵ or to serve as an agent of chaos who, instead of combating cosmic processes, imitates them up to the point of the general shipwreck of life?¹⁶⁶ As a matter of fact, wasn't he a nihilist all along, even during his Dantean voyage? Did he not forsake the word "friend", only to turn it upside down later? Wasn't philia already necrotized by Ulysses' rejection of "eternal life"? And wasn't he always secretly wanting the "ocean's waves [to] close over him," to become himself

160 Lyell, Ch., *Principles of geology, or the modern changes of the earth and its inhabitants considered as illustrative of geology. New and entirely revised edition.* New York, D. Appleton and Company 1865, p. 114.

161 Keller, E., ... Or, Speaking with the Alien, a Refrain... In: Keller, E. – Masciandaro, N. – Thacker, E. (eds.), *Leper Creativity. Cyclonopedia Symposium*, pp. 225–263, esp. p. 227.

162 Thacker, E., *Cosmic Pessimism. Continent*, 2, 2012, No. 2, pp. 66–75, esp. p. 70.

163 Brassier, R., *Nihil Unbound*, p. xi.

164 Catren, G., *Outland Empire: Prolegomena to Speculative Absolutism.* Transl. T. Adkins. In: Bryant, L. – Srnicek, N. – Harman, G. (eds.), *The Speculative Turn: Continental Materialism and Realism*, pp. 334–367, esp. p. 367.

165 Barber, D. C., *Whylessness: The Universe is Deaf and Blind.* In: Thacker, E. – et al., *Dark Nights of the Universe.* New York, Name Publications 2013, pp. 19–43, esp. pp. 41–42.

166 Huxley, T. H., *Evolution and Ethics [The Romanes Lecture, 1893].* In: *Evolution & Ethics and Other Essays.* London, Macmillan and Co. 1894, pp. 47–116, esp. p. 83.

liquefied, and to “experience of that world behind the sun” where light can’t go?

It would seem that when Brassier delivers his much repeated verdict that “thinking has interests that do not coincide with those of living,”¹⁶⁷ he could very well whisper it in Ulysses’ ear before the sailor’s “little speech.” Including the mantra that “hope that remains circumscribed by the horizon of the present is always reactionary,” while “despair is revolutionary.”¹⁶⁸ Ulysses, as we have seen, has very little of the former, while he is driven forward by the latter. He is still a reverse Adam: only now he doesn’t travel to a world that has not yet known people, but to a world that *no longer* knows people.

167 Brassier, R., *Nihil Unbound*, p. xi.

168 Brassier, R., Refusal. In: *Bad Feelings*. London, Book Works 2015.

Catastrophic Aftermath: The Loss of Sight as a Process of Becoming Posthuman in Contemporary Audiovisual Culture*

Martin Charvát

Charles University, Faculty of Humanities

martycharvat@seznam.cz

Abstract:

In contemporary audiovisual production (mainly the Apple TV series *See*), the theme of the loss of sight due to (environmental) catastrophe becomes a symptom for the analysis of the disintegration and revival of a world that has deterritorialized due to the exploitative demands of postmodern capitalism, thus de facto marking the end of the so-called Anthropocene era. If Western philosophy traditionally defines man as an animal possessing reason and at the same time an animal in which the different senses are in balance, the loss of sight and the respective post-apocalyptic environment in which survivors exist without the possibility of seeing, on the one hand, outlines a process that could seemingly be considered degenerative or decadent: without sight, man is not man and approaches the animal. On the other hand, however, the loss of this sense also articulates the hints of the renewal of a world that will be a post-human world, in which the new norm and normative of life becomes life without sight as a new form of social, economic, habitual arrangement, in which sight is understood as something regressive, as something responsible for the almost complete destruction of humanity. This in itself brings about a transformation of the relationship between human and non-human actors, transformations in the flows of belief and desire, and ways of articulating life, which, following Deleuze, is actualized from virtual modulations and temporal variants of events. My perspective is therefore based on the philosophy of G. Deleuze and vitalism in general, and I intend to read the figure of the loss of sight as a kind of counter-actualization of the event: as an effort to negate the effects of catastrophe and at the same time to establish a new (life) form.

Keywords: Gilles Deleuze; posthuman; Herbert George Wells; philosophy of blindness; deterritorialization; affect; Baruch Spinoza; Jakob von Uexküll

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1. Introduction

In April 1904, a rather long story written by Herbert George Wells entitled “The Country of the Blind” appeared in *Strand Magazine*.¹ In it, Wells describes the phantasmatic existence of a valley that was inhabited by settlers several decades or hundreds of years ago, located in Ecuador. However, at the moment of their arrival, disaster struck – an earthquake cut off the settlers, except for one, from the outside world, essentially making the place inaccessible. But, the local, newly arriving population did not seem to mind; the valley was filled with everything one could wish for, from plenty of fresh water to an abundance of sustenance. Yet, after some time, a mysterious disease struck the settlement, causing everyone to lose their sight. Children began to be born blind, and even the settler who had seen the valley but had to turn back to escape the catastrophe became blind. Thanks to him, however, the legend of the country of the blind began to spread – a mythical place where people cannot see but one that otherwise meets all the criteria of a utopia.

Let’s move to (Wells’) present. The main character of the story Nunez arrives in the valley under tragic circumstances. During a mountain climb, he slipped and the subsequent long fall, which he miraculously survives, transports him directly to the country of the blind. After his first contact with the locals, he thinks he might become their king; after all, he is the only one with the ability to see. But, the situation becomes more complicated. First, the blind do not understand the vast majority of his words, for example “sky” is not a part of their vocabulary, and they consider birds to be spirits that constantly surround them but are of an immaterial nature. And to top it all off, they regard him as an inferior and underdeveloped human being (they call him “wild-man”) because he talks nonsense, moves excessively noisily, and generally behaves in a highly abnormal manner. Nunez is understandably frustrated and even tries to physically wrestle with them; eventually, however, he realizes that there is no escape from the valley and he therefore gives in. He is almost perfectly subjectivated, admitting that he was “crazy” but that he is already slowly coming to understand how the world works. This, however, is not the end of his peripeteia. As it commonly happens in literature, Nunez falls in love, and he does so with a girl whom others consider insufficiently beautiful while Nunez is convinced otherwise. The feelings between the two “outcasts” heat up, but the girl asks one thing of him: to submit himself to the care of a local doctor who can hopefully cure his madness.

1 Wells, H. G., The Country of the Blind. *Strand Magazine*, 27, 1904, No. 160, pp. 401–415.

The diagnosis is clear. Two strange, constantly moving and flickering objects in the middle of his head – his eyes – are responsible for the abnormal workings of Nunez’s mind. Nunez must make a decision. He can either plunge into the endless darkness, cease to see but stay with his beloved in the valley, or try to escape without his love but with his ability to see preserved. He makes his way to the foot of the mountain, where he slowly falls asleep and the story ends.

Of course, this is not an inventive narrative structure, and the plot of the story itself is essentially banal. It inversely presents a world in which traditional structures of experience are inverted, and in which blindness is the norm while seeing is considered a disease. Wells points to the cultural encoding of human nature, the artificiality of the senses, and inverts the basic assumption that, apart from the ability to speak, what makes a person human is primarily sight, from which the ability to abstract and taxonomize derives. On the contrary, he shows that when deprived of sight, man is able to adapt to his environment through what might be called haptic knowledge. To put it another way, Wells’ short story takes us to the theme of posthumanity, or to a situation in which ordinary perceptual and affective schemes become deterritorialized due to a radical transformation of the environment, in which the “new” human problematizes the traditional Western philosophical conception of what it means to be human. In our case, we are dealing with a man without sight, created at the moment when an event, a rupture, occurred and blindness became the new norm. It was therefore necessary to develop a new interpretation and understanding of the world in the dark, in which at some point the new posthuman began to navigate with certainty and without any problems.

2. The philosophy of blindness

It is peculiar that the history of philosophy has to some extent ignored the problem of blindness. Or rather, blindness has always been regarded (in Aristotelian terms) as *sterésis*, as deprivation, as the absence of the determination that one should (naturally) have.² This makes sense because, as

2 Josef Fulka, in his book *Deafness, Gesture and Sign Language in the 18th Century French Philosophy*, undertakes a philosophical examination of deafness, focusing among other sources on Wells’s short story. He shows precisely that blindness in Wells’s fictional world is not a sign of “deficiency”, but simply the norm. The second interesting moment in Fulka’s book is the outline of two types of paradigms: the paradigm of *sterésis* and the paradigm of difference, which is actually implied in the present text, although I focus on the theme of blindness. Fulka, J., *Když ruce mluví. Gesto a znakový jazyk v dějinách západního myšlení*. Prague, FF UK 2017, p. 110; 27.

Martin Jay describes, Western culture from the beginning has always been “ocularcentric” or “dominated by vision”.³ Mark Paterson made the highly accurate observation that although in the history of philosophy “the questions of blindness periodically bob and weave around”,⁴ they are rarely made the central theme of philosophical conceptions.

Even so, two lines around which reflections on blindness have constituted themselves and gained expression can be drawn. One is Molyneux’s letters (1688 and 1693) to John Locke.

Locke did not reply to the first of these, but after receiving the second, a long discussion developed between them, which Locke embraced in the second edition of his *Essay*. Molyneux’s query was seemingly simple (although its nature differs somewhat between the first and second letters): A blind man from birth has held in his hands a globe and a cube of the same size and material and has been instructed as to which of these objects is the globe and which is the cube so that he can distinguish them by touch. Suppose he suddenly acquires sight. Will he, Molyneux asks, be able to tell them apart by sight? Answering this question would keep philosophers busy for the next few centuries. Without going through the various solutions in detail, it is possible to schematize that they developed into two branches, reflecting two philosophical perspectives: the proponents of empiricism (one of whom is naturally Locke) were convinced that the answer to Molyneux’s query must be negative,⁵ as direct sensory experience is necessary for the distinction between objects to be discerned. Rationalists argued the opposite, as discernment depends on the faculties of the mind, and the senses are secondary in cognition, or they have a much greater tendency to deceive than clear and distinct cognition by the mind.

Other thinkers, such as Condillac and Diderot, split Molyneux’s question in two: What does the newly sighted man see, and would the mind be immediately able to name what it saw?⁶ Their answer (especially to the second question) was strictly negative because they were attacking the doctrine of innate ideas. Diderot, however, did not exhaust himself merely in answering

3 Jay, M., *The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought*. Oakland, University of California Press 1994, p. 3. Or as Jay remarks: “The importance of sight is evident throughout Plato’s writings. In the *Timaeus*, for example, he distinguished between the creation of the sense of sight, which he grouped with the creation of human intelligence and the soul, and that of the other senses, which he placed with man’s material being.” *Ibid.*, p. 26.

4 Paterson, M., *Seeing with the Hands: Blindness, Vision and Touch After Descartes*. Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press 2016, p. 3.

5 Bruno, M. – Mandelbaum, E., Locke’s answer to Molyneux’s Thought Experiment. *Philosophy Quarterly*, 27, 2010, No. 2, pp. 165–180.

6 Jay, M., *Downcast Eyes*. Berkeley, University of California Press 2009, p. 101.

the problem posed, but himself questioned the blind man to get better understanding of what blind man “saw”.⁷ In his *Letter on the Blind for the Use of those who can see* from 1749, Diderot refutes Descartes’ notion of the primacy of sight: “If ever a philosopher, blind and deaf from his birth, were to construct a man after the fashion of Descartes, I can assure you, madam, that he would put the seat of the soul at the fingers’ ends, for thence the greater part of the sensations and all his knowledge are derived.”⁸

Experimental and philosophical research in this field has not ceased, and in the 20th century, with the advance of cognitive science and the improvement of computer technology, visualization apparatuses, and sensory substitution devices, theorists and scientists are now leaning towards the necessity of the interplay of sensation and thought, giving a more empirical answer.⁹

However, even though Molyneux’s inquiry has inspired philosophical investigations into the nature of human perception, it remains clear that blindness is understood here as an expression of abnormal development or a deviation from the normal functioning of human perception. The second branch, originating in antiquity,¹⁰ uses blindness as an analogy to the perceptual mechanism of orientation in the environment, and the emphasis on touch as a rhetorical and discursive tool for revealing the basic principles of human sensibility. I am thinking in particular of Descartes’ *Dioptrics*, which best illustrates this approach. For at one point, Descartes works with the example of a blind man who uses a cane (as an extension of the senses) and, of course, touch to orient himself in space, claiming that “one might almost say that [the blind] see with their hands”.¹¹ The point of Descartes’ example is that the information gained from one sense (be it sight or touch) is only one piece of the puzzle of sensory experience. And even in this case, blindness is mentioned only in passing, for as David Michael Levin points out, “for Descartes, darkness is a nightmare. There is nothing to be learned from entering its domain. He is a philosopher obsessed with clarity and light. If a discourse in which light, vision, and its metaphors are constitutive of its

7 Paterson, M., *Seeing with the Hands*, p. 1.

8 Mago, C. E., Blindness and the Age of Enlightenment. Diderot’s Letter on the Blind. *JAMA Ophthalmol.*, 131, 2013, No. 1, pp. 98–102; Diderot, D., Letter on the Blind for the Use of those who can see. In: Diderot, D., *Diderot’s Early Philosophical Work*. Trans. M. Jourdain. Chicago–London, The Open Court Publishing Company 1916, p. 87.

9 Ferretti, G. – Glenney, B. (eds.), *Molyneux’s Question and the History of Philosophy*. New York, Routledge 2021; Stawarska, B., Seeing Faces: Sartre and Imitation Studies. *Sartre Studies International*, 13, 2007, No. 2, pp. 27–46.

10 Aristotle, *De Anima*, 432a1. South Bend, St. Augustine’s Press 2020.

11 Descartes, R., *Dioptrika*. Trans. J. Fiala. Prague, Oikoymenh 2010, p. 71.

very logic may be called ocularcentric, then it would be difficult to deny that Descartes's philosophy exemplifies ocularcentrism".¹²

In other words, the topic of blindness was analyzed by philosophers who had the ability to see, with the aim of better understanding visual and tactile perception. Even Nietzsche, who struggled with partial blindness towards the end of his life, and therefore was dependent on various assistive technological devices, uses blindness in the traditional vein as a metaphor for the acquisition/inadequacy of knowledge, while on the other hand understanding this physical limitation as an affirmation of suffering and life.¹³ As Julia Rodas summarizes, "cultural reliance on blindness as metaphor thus metonymizes the blind man, recreating him as a figure of speech, the component of a joke, a poem".¹⁴

3. Postapocalyptic environments (transformation of human sensory capacity)

And yet Wells offers us a different perspective. He presents us, to some extent, with a utopian world that is free from danger to its inhabitants, and in which blindness is what defines a man. We might even say that Wells' story is essentially anti-ocularcentric, showing us a new human form that has arisen as a result of a natural disaster. Wells' man has altered the structure of language (as a conventional sign system that allows us to express the world, as Diderot, Condillac but also de Saussure, for example, point out), altered the way we orient ourselves in space (all movement in the environment is based on material/tactile orientators – signs), and created different mythic frameworks for interpreting the world.

The current audiovisual production follows Wells but translates the basic framework and setting into a post-apocalyptic environment. It is the post-apocalyptic setting that generally uses the human ability to adapt to changing living conditions in order to survive. Post-apocalyptic visions of the (future) world use several basic structural elements. That the world as we know it has ceased to exist is due either to nuclear war, which has wiped out about 90 % of humanity, experiments with dangerous viruses, or the emergence of a new disease for which no cure has been found. In all these cases, there has

12 Levin, D. M., Introduction. In: Levin, D. M. (ed.), *Modernity and the Hegemony of Vision*. Berkeley, University of California Press 1993, p. 9. For a more detailed analysis of Descartes's conception of sight: Judovitz, D., *Vision, Representation, and Technology in Descartes*. In: Levin, D. M. (ed.), *Modernity and the Hegemony of Vision*, pp. 63–86.

13 Nietzsche, F., *Thus Spake Zarathustra*. Trans. T. Common. New York, The Modern Library 1909, esp. Chapter XLII. Redemption.

14 Rodas, J., On Blindness. *Journal of Literary and Cultural Disability Studies*, 3, 2009, No. 2, p. 117.

been a radical decline in the Earth's population, either a sudden or gradual degeneration of political, economic, and social infrastructures, the emergence of new (often mutated) life forms that have turned the environment into a space full of danger where death lurks at every turn, and thereby the emergence of a new type of habitation on the surface of the planet or underneath it. Hand in hand with this, the survivors are confronted with the daily and never-ending scarcity of resources: from food and fresh water to technology, building materials, and medicines. Social organization is returning to the level it was at a few hundred years ago; small enclaves are being formed from a few dozen, at most hundreds of inhabitants who are trying to be as self-sufficient as possible; trade ties (if they exist at all) are based on bartering (be it for ammunition, technology, energy resources, food, drinking water or medicine), essentially forming small communities that strive to defend themselves from external dangers embodied by raiders, gangs, mutants, and other dangerous organizations. It is logical, therefore, that authoritarian and hierarchical modes of governance emerge, that the norms and values of society are defined absolutely differently, that racism runs rampant, that intolerance, slavery, and violence are the generally accepted means of conflict resolution, that those who are physically or psychologically unfit to exist in society are persecuted and killed or excluded from communities, and that survivors tend to cling to either ancient forms of transcendence or new deities.¹⁵

In the Apple TV series *See*, we are confronted with a post-apocalyptic world set in this manner. A few centuries ago, a dangerous disease wiped out most of the population, and those lucky enough not to be touched by death lost their sight at the same time. Basic human nature is transformed, leading to the fetishization of blindness and the machines of the past that are still functional, though no one knows how to fix them and any malfunction is interpreted as the wrath of the gods.

The loss of sight in *See* follows a techno-pessimistic agenda based on humanity's ability to destroy itself. The newly born man without sight is also a form of posthuman being who has managed to adapt in new conditions to a world that, while partially transformed, remains much more of a backdrop to this narrative, the themes of which involve the age-old human propensity for violence, the subjugation of others, and the distrust of all who are different. From a certain point of view, it could be argued that the gradual, multi-generational adaptation to life without sight is a sign of humanity's ability

¹⁵ See Weart, S. R., *Nuclear Fear. A History of Images*. Cambridge, Harvard University Press 1988, p. 224.

to survive; on the other hand, this is a world full of conflict, where humanity may no longer have the potential to almost absolutely destroy the environment again, albeit human life plays out in an endless dialectic of war and peace.

The series also works with a scenario in which sight begins to return and harmony between the blind and the sighted is established in a post-apocalyptic world after an initial distrust of those who can see. Yet it seems to be the same and eternally repeating survival story, which is based on the idea that humanity has learned from its past and that there will be an acknowledgment of the differences between different life forms. It is much more likely that there will always be a group of marginalized people who will be forced to create mimicry so that pseudo-recognition can occur, thereby only reinforcing power inequalities.¹⁶

Contemporary philosophy, which thematizes posthuman landscapes, conditions, and territories, is based on the critique of the Anthropocene, emphasizing the necessity of reconceptualizing human existence and transforming the approach to all living and non-living things in terms of the interdependent relationships between organisms and the environment.¹⁷ One of the main themes of posthuman philosophy is the transformation of the posthuman being's sensory capacity, which radically ruptures the fabric through which Western philosophy has elaborated an all-encompassing interpretive grid of "what is human", especially with regard to the prediction of the coming catastrophes that project post-apocalyptic worlds. The environment disappears, replaced by a deterritorialized landscape in which there is a rearticulation of what it means to actually exist: It means that adaptive mechanisms for surviving after a radical event are always a matter of cultural mixing, perceptual and physiological mechanisms, from which a new posthuman being is born – in this case, a being that, although it has lost its sight, has acquired qualitatively different types of perceptions and affects that allow it to survive in a world that has lost its original structure.

4. Transforming territory

In the following section, I want to focus on an interpretation that would not interpret the loss of sight as a loss of humanity, or as a degenerative form of human existence in the world, but as an adaptive mechanism to a radical

16 Irigaray, L., *This sex which is not one*. Ithaca, Cornell University Press 1985.

17 Braidotti, R., *Posthuman Knowledge*. New York, Polity Press 2019; Braidotti, R., *The Posthuman*. New York, Polity Press 2013; Braidotti, R. – Hlavajova, M. (eds.), *Posthuman Glossary*. London, Bloomsbury Academics 2018.

event that transformed the entire environment. For this task, I am inclined to the philosophy of Gilles Deleuze (and Félix Guattari), particularly from two interrelated points of view: a) I draw on Deleuze's continuity with and via the interpretation of Jakob von Uexküll's biology; b) the notion of affects and the development of the organism as Deleuze (albeit with many variations) adopts it from Spinoza. The aim is therefore to outline a posthuman philosophy that would take into account the potentially catastrophic human situation in which everything is transformed and thereby the human capacity for survival in an inhospitable and dangerous world is restructured.

To begin with, the post-apocalyptic wasteland is the result of the deterritorialization of the previous territory – the human landscapes that it was able to inhabit and populate or territorialize. Deleuze and Guattari mention Jakob von Uexküll in particular in the creation of territory. Uexküll's biology, especially as presented in his later works, places a very specific emphasis on the problem of meaning and the process of signification. A short picture book written for children in 1934 outlines the starting point of what it means to understand nature, and how events within organic life can be understood at all. The answer is banally simple: take a walk in the meadow, sit down, and look around you.¹⁸ All living things, insects, ourselves, have a “soap bubble” around them, a very specific and proper world. In other words, Uexküll urges us to break away from our human understanding of the world and try to adopt an animal perspective, a perspective in which certain phenomena emerge in different meanings. If every animal has this “bubble” around it, we can say that there is not only one world, but a multiplicity of worlds, where animals are not seen as mere objects, but as subjects whose essence lies in perception and action. On the basis of perception and action, Uexküll speaks of a perceptual world (*Merkwelt*) and a world of action (*Wirkwelt*). These two worlds form the animal world, which is called *Umwelt*. Each animal therefore constructs its world on the basis of perceptions and actions that are subjective. According to Uexküll, there is no objective reality in the forms of objects or in the world as such; there is nothing outside the individual subjective experiences that constitute the *Umwelt* as meaningful. Initially, the animal perceives an object, a perceptual sign is produced, but since every animal is both perceptive and active, this perceived sign is replaced by the caused sign on the basis of which the animal acts.¹⁹ But this caused sign is ‘imprinted’ by the bearer of the meaning (the stem becomes a pathway for ants or a source of nutrients for another organism). Uexküll therefore

18 Uexküll, J. von, *A Foray Into the Worlds of Animals and Humans. With a Theory of Meaning*. Trans. J. D. O'Neil. Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press 2010, p. 43.

19 *Ibid.*, p. 94.

speaks of a “functional circle that connects the bearer of meaning to the subject”.²⁰ Buchanan calls this perspective as biological ontology.²¹

According to Uexküll, each organ has its own specific “tone”, where the tones of the individual organs make up the “life tone of the whole animal”.²² The animal as an organism is the production of various rhythms or melodies that together form a symphony, and through this symphony the animal orients itself in space and responds to stimuli in space. At a higher level, we can speak of the harmony of organisms, which is applied in packs or colonies; however, at the highest level, this creates a coherent expression of the world, of nature as composition. Buchanan speaks of a “web of life” in which all organisms and inorganic elements coexist.²³

Deleuze and Guattari emphasize motif of the multiplicity of worlds and the process of the animal’s orientation in the territory. The Umwelt is certainly a territory where the animal’s movement is based on the process of recognition and the interpretation of signs (the perceived sign and the caused sign). But what happens to the multiplicity of organic worlds when the environment is deterritorialized due to a natural disaster or the action of an unknown virus, resulting in people losing their sight? Because humans adapt to a new environment over time in order to survive, it is necessary to repopulate the surface of the Earth, to territorialize it. As Deleuze and Guattari write, the human being “is a segmentary animal”.²⁴ However, all the bearers of meaning, the whole world of perception and action, is reshaped, all Umwelts are structured differently, and the life “tone” and rhythms of man are transformed, and the overall composition of the post-apocalyptic landscape takes on new forms.

Deleuze and Guattari argue that a territory is a territory because of its expressive quality. How does one arrive at this expressive quality? Through the act of marking, a territory becomes a territory the moment it is marked by specific types of signs. Deleuze and Guattari call these signs indexes; indexes are territorial signs.²⁵ To create a territory in the first place means to stratify

20 Uexküll, J. von, *Nauka o významu*. In: Kliková, A. – Kleisner, K. (ed.), *Umwelt. Koncepce žitého světa Jakoba von Uexkülla*. Červený Kostelec, Pavel Mervart 2006, p. 21; cf. Uexküll, J. von – Kriszat, G., *Streifzüge durch die Umwelten von Tieren und Menschen; Bedeutungslehre*. Munich, Rowohlt Taschenbuch 1956, pp. 103–159.

21 Buchanan, I., *Onto-ethologies: The Animal Environments of Uexkull, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, and Deleuze*. New York, State University of New York Press 2008, p. 13.

22 Uexküll, J. von, *Nauka o významu*, p. 30.

23 Buchanan, I., *Onto-ethologies*, p. 20.

24 Deleuze, G. – Guattari, F., *A Thousand Plateaus*. Trans. B. Massumi. Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press 1987, p. 208.

25 *Ibid.*, p. 112.

the environment, to delimit it, to build a lair, a home, or a nest. This marking takes place through the reorganization of functions.

Once vision is lost, the visual landmarks that allow orientation in space cease to be important. One sense disappears while others are amplified (especially hearing and primarily touch). The bearers of meaning in *See* are identified primarily as objects and objects/organisms that imply tactile orientation; to move around in the environment, survivors use sticks, and to move from point A to point B in a familiar locale (villages and towns), metal ropes are deployed above head level with dividers and junctions leading to individual dwellings.

Human tones and rhythms are stratified differently because the newly created environment requires a specific type of segmentation. When Deleuze and Guattari speak of so-called “segmentary” primitive or savage societies (not in a negative sense), they emphasize in particular that several constitutive processes can be marked in their case: individuals do not belong to the *socius* as persons or individuals, but as organs attached to the body of the earth, and the *socius* is the marking of this connection, that is, it inscribes itself both on the body of the earth and on the body of the members of this social cast; next, there is the connection of voice and hearing – primitive societies are societies of orality, of grand narratives; and last but not least, Deleuze and Guattari mark the connection between the hand and the surfaces of inscription: inscription takes place on the body of the members of the society through tattooing or scarification.²⁶ And not only that: inscription also takes place on the body of the Earth through dances, rituals, and journeys. In *See*, all of these aspects are present; the grand mythic narrative holding the world in a tense (and often apparent) peace is a main motif of *See*. Sight is associated with the fact that it has enabled humans to produce the technology for the mass destruction of human life and the Earth itself, and its loss is interpreted as the gods punishing human pride and a return to the very essence of humanity; in other words, sight is seen as corrupted. The newly established human nature is the nature of a being lacking sight.

McLuhan writes that society is determined by the technology that prevails in a given period.²⁷ In the case of the television series *See*, the transmission of information takes place not only through speech (and a person without sight has invented specific expressions to interpret the world around him) but also through knots on strings that are read through touch.

26 Deleuze, G. – Guattari, F., *Anti-Oedipus. Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Trans. R. Hurley – M. Seem – H. R. Lane. Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press 1983, pp. 145–153.

27 McLuhan, M., *Understanding Media. The Extensions of Man*. Cambridge, MIT Press 1994.

Of course, thanks to rudimentary technologies and techniques of message transmission, this is not a world that has frozen into untimely immobility, but a certain closeness to the levels of tribal communities is evident, even if they formally belong to one kingdom.

The result of the loss of sight is therefore, at first glance, the degeneration of society and a return to more backward forms of production and the creation of different types of social bonds. Living in the dark, however, offers possibilities for creating a new harmony in the multiplicity of Umwelt in the context of the overall attunement of Nature. Before the catastrophe, one Umwelt, the human anthropo-technological Umwelt, was absolutely outstanding because it was capable of destroying all other Umwelts. Now the situation is different – the human world is put on an equal footing with the other animal worlds, man is forced to be empathic towards his environment because, on the one hand, all his life resources come from it and, on the other, he is prey to some of the other animals. Although he has adapted to life without sight and is able to move confidently in his environment, an Anthropocene imbalance in the state of organic forces has been established.

To adapt to the new world without sight is, in Deleuzian terminology, to counter-actualize the event. We must not understand the event of sight loss as an unfortunate fate; instead we should accede to it, to affirm it, to be aware of our position in the event, to be aware of its aspects, not that the event itself is 'bad', but to be worthy of it by affirming it in its purity.²⁸ To be blind and yet to live on, to decide, to desire, to become one with the world around us through tactile experiences is to understand the intimate connection between the human being and the world that would not be fooled by sight.

5. The affective realm of becoming blind

Let us now turn to the interpretation of the posthuman without sight through the prism of Deleuze's philosophy. In other words, I will draw on his inspiration from Spinoza's conception of affect and ethology as a science of affects.

In *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy*, Deleuze writes that Spinoza's philosophy is in the spirit of a radical rejection of resentment and sad passions. It is no coincidence that these notions refer to Nietzsche, as Deleuze himself claims that Spinoza, even before Nietzsche, carried out similar analyses, analyzing life and its manifestations in terms of power and pleasure within a certain

28 Deleuze, G., *The Logic of Sense*. Trans. M. Lester. New York, Columbia University Press 1990, pp. 148–153.

plane of immanence. Spinoza's rejection of sorrowful passions goes hand in hand with a re-articulation of what the body actually is, as his main claim is that we often talk about the body without knowing what the body can do.²⁹ Moreover, this leads us to what is called parallelism in Spinoza, but it is not that the body has suddenly acquired ontological primacy; it is much more the case that the body transcends the knowledge we have of it, just as thinking transcends the knowledge we have of thinking. If Spinoza presents the body as a model, the implication is this: it does not "imply any devaluation of thought in relation to extension, but, importantly, a devaluation of consciousness in relation to thought: a discovery of the unconscious, of an unconscious of thought just as profound as the unknown of the body"³⁰ In Spinoza, the body is associated with the notions of affect, affection and effect.³¹ By effect, Spinoza describes the clash of different objects, or rather the actions and sufferings of bodies. This effect is also (necessarily) an affectation. The basic characteristic of affect is that it indicates the nature of a body undergoing some kind of suffering. Affections therefore express the state of our body, to which Deleuze adds that the state of our body is always part of our duration. But once we speak of the transformation of our duration, it is no longer an affect, but an affect as a passage that "lasts" between two states. If we understand the plane of immanence as the plane on which individual affects are distributed, there is a fundamental reconceptualization of the distinction between the plane of the artifice and the plane of the natural: "Artifice is fully a part of Nature, since each thing, on the immanent plane of Nature, is defined by the arrangements of motions and affects into which it enters, whether these arrangements are artificial or natural. Long after Spinoza, biologists [and here Deleuze explicitly refers to Uexküll] and naturalists will try to describe animal worlds defined by affects and capacities for affecting and being affected."³²

As Deleuze expounds in his lectures on Spinoza's thought, in this respect "the human genera, species or even race hasn't any importance, Spinoza will say, as long as you haven't made the list of affects of which someone is capable".³³ If we apply the whole interpretation to the problem of blindness, the loss of sight, it is obvious that the whole field of affectivity is different in

29 Deleuze, G., *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy*. Trans. R. Hurley. San Francisco, City Lights Books 1988, p. 18.

30 *Ibid.*, pp. 18–19.

31 *Ibid.*, pp. 48–51.

32 *Ibid.*, p. 124.

33 Available online at [www: https://www.gold.ac.uk/media/images-by-section/departments/research-centres-and-units/research-centres/centre-for-invention-and-social-process/deleuze_spinoza_affect.pdf](http://www.gold.ac.uk/media/images-by-section/departments/research-centres-and-units/research-centres/centre-for-invention-and-social-process/deleuze_spinoza_affect.pdf) [cit. 6. 7. 2023].

relation to the posthuman person from the one who lived before the catastrophic events. It is therefore not primarily a matter of evaluating whether a sighted person is “better” than a blind person. The blind man is “deprived of nothing” because he comes into contact with the world in such a way that he is absolutely perfect with respect to the affectations available to him. And Deleuze’s interpretation of Spinoza goes further: to say that a blind man is “deprived of sight” would be the same as saying that a “stone is deprived of sight”, which is absurd and nonsensical. A blind person fully experiences and exploits the affections he experiences.³⁴ And of course he amplifies other sensory impressions, especially tactile ones. And would we say that a sighted person is a “lesser” or “imperfect” person when, from the perspective of a blind person, he has imperfectly “developed” organs of hearing and touch? Even though the valley dwellers in Wells’ story and the characters in the *See* series do, this is a false dichotomy. The blind man exercises his power to the fullest extent possible through a combination of affects, and so comes to know his own body and realizes what the body is capable of; affects are a sign, an indication of the body.

In this respect, we must add how Deleuze understands the organism and the articulation of (organic) forms. Here, among other things, Deleuze draws inspiration from Simondon and his 1964 book *L’individu et sa genèse physico-biologique* (and, in fact, Deleuze already puts forward very similar theses in his first book on the philosophy of David Hume). Simondon was convinced that a precondition of individuation is the existence of metastable systems, and of a pre-individual transcendental field in which they develop.³⁵ In other words: if a catastrophic event radically transforms the environment and structures the multiplicity of Umwelt in other frameworks through a newly emerging combination of affects and affections, then the sightless human who “becomes” a subject in this environment is the resultant of a dynamic play of forces, not a preformism, resulting from the metastability of the system within which differentiations (distribution of singularities) are differentiated, while the modularity of the human/posthuman organism guarantees adaptation/territorialization.

Therefore, we can speak of the blind man who has lost his sight as being a “man” in the new conditions who has essentially lost nothing. This is also related to the fact pointed out by Deleuze that the development of the organism is not teleological but cascading; it takes place in leaps and not in stages, where each leap can be an absolute deterritorialization of the previous state.

34 Ibid.

35 Deleuze, G., On Gilbert Simondon. In: *Desert Islands and other Texts 1953–1974*. Trans. Ch. Bush – Ch. Stivale – M. McMahon – A. Hickox – T. Eich. Cambridge, MIT Press 2004, pp. 86–89.

Or A Life,³⁶ as a plane of immanence, is always articulated and differentiated differently depending on the events that occur. The point of the loss of sight, the spread of the virus in *See*, or the bursting of the Earth in Wells's short story, is the abruption of the subjectivated organism into the state of a Body without Organs³⁷ (Spinoza's Substance) as a limit, a zero state of composition from which a new type of human is subsequently assembled, and this happens through the influence of Exteriority that must exist within the new composition of the multiplicity of Umwelt. In this new configuration, sight does not exist, and therefore it makes no sense to speak of the new man as being deprived of sight.

6. Conclusion

This reconceptualization of what it means to be human depends on a radical transformation of the environment and shows that the essential definition of the human being lies not in its unchanging essence, but in a variable differentiation of differences in which the posthuman being can be conceived with respect to the affections available to and experienced by it. As soon as the perceptual and affective mechanisms are transformed, man becomes different, transcending the traditional features of humanity, but this does not mean that we must regard him as a deficient or degenerate being. On the contrary, it is Life's cascading ability to adapt to new conditions in which survival is possible. Perhaps in infinite darkness (as Descartes feared), but once a posthuman man comes into being, terms like darkness and light cease to make sense; they disappear from the lexicon and are replaced by a haptic knowledge that is much more attuned to the external environment, a piece in the puzzle of the larger, spatiotemporally bounded composition of the world.

36 Deleuze, G., *Literature and Life*. In: *Essays Critical and Clinical*. Trans. D. W. Smith – M. A. Greco. Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press 1997, pp. 1–6.

37 Deleuze, G. – Guattari, F., *A Thousand Plateaus*, pp. 149–166.

Survival and Ontology: A Tentative Genealogy of Survival in Gaming and Contemporary Philosophy*

Václav Janošík

Academy of Fine Arts

janoscik.vaclav@gmail.com

Abstract:

In the popular computer game with the succinct title *Raft* one continually recovers items and material from the ocean in order to adapt a makeshift vessel, building it to unseen dimensions. As in many other games, survival is experienced as casual and amusing gameplay. In desperate isolation, one is flooded with an overabundance of stuff, mirroring our present consumerist capitalism. This can be taken not only as a symptom of the current atmosphere of dystopian realism and mainstreaming of the survival genre, but also as a productive hint or allegory for philosophy. The seemingly inhuman and desolate ocean is full of things and potential. This is a potential that should of course be extended beyond the primitive accumulation of the *Raft*, because survival is prevalent not only in pop culture and gaming; we can find it to a similar degree also in contemporary philosophy. We can also categorize the poetic survivalism of new materialist thinkers (Donna Haraway, Rosi Braidotti), “thirst for annihilation” (Nick Land), theorization of current situation as a form of civil war (Alliez and Lazzarato), the (cosmic) pessimism of other speculative thinkers (Quentin Meillassoux, Ray Brassier, Eugene Thacker) or even the pop catastrophism of some ooo proponents (Timothy Morton). In gaming as well as in contemporary thinking, the demand to address the dystopian contours of our time are demands for ontology. Rather than presenting a criticism of these games and theories, we can frame them within such an economy and demand for ontology.

Keywords: survival; ontology; gaming; contemporary philosophy; player vs. environment; post-apocalyptic narration; dystopia

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In the popular computer game with the succinct title *Raft* (2018) you are shipwrecked on a tiny derelict vessel in the middle of an ocean. Your isolation is soon disturbed by a shark, a relentless companion to the player that kills you any time you would like to swim around, as well as by a constant feed of scrap material. Consequently, in almost no time you can build up your makeshift raft to immense proportions and levels just by crafting the abundant detritus from the sea. The situation and the entire game is symbolic with respect to current philosophical and environmental conditions in several ways.

(1) The overall scenario of desolation and survival very easily turns into entertaining gameplay with plenty of sandbox¹ potential.

(2) Similarly, the situation of scarcity (having only a tiny raft) quickly spirals into an overabundance of material. Whereas classical building strategy series (like *Settlers*, *SimCity* or *Anno*) work with resource extraction and processing management, competitive environment or scarcity, *Raft* picks up on this tradition from the opposite side. The survival condition is that of an affluent environment and endless possibilities.² In both respects, this perfectly fits with our current vibe of *dystopian realism*. A situation where environmental and other critical issues seem ever more pressing, yet consumerist capitalism (which undoubtedly has its key effect in all of this) continues to thrive.

(3) Last but not least, this game exhibits relatively original worldbuilding mechanics, tailored precisely to survival resource management. Its crafting game mechanics, similarly to its physics or your navigation within the world of the game, foster an experience of freedom and building your own world. In this respect the game not only fits the paradigm of *dystopian realism*, but also that of current *ontological demand*, an urge to redefine the fabric of what we consider to be our world according to our contemporary condition, which so strongly inheres a sense of environmental crisis, individualism and survival itself.

1 In sandbox games players usually do not have one central goal or way of playing, but explore plurality of action and engagement with the gaming environment.

2 From among many popular gameplays available on Youtube, I can point particularly to the channel Let's Game It Out, which turned to the game *Raft* on a number of occasions. For instance, Josh (the author of Let's Game It Out) tries to traverse the game using one single element – a wooden plank: Let's Game It Out, "I Completely Broke the Entire Game with Just 1 Item in Raft", *Youtube*, 9. 8. 2022. Available online at [www: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2-uQ70LZEyc&t=302s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2-uQ70LZEyc&t=302s) [cit. 1. 4. 2023].

The very activity of Let's Game It Out and its exploration of sandbox options in various games is symbolic of how we can approach ontologies and survival today.

While many facets of this popular game setting or particular examples have been explored,³ the ontological core and its relation to current developments in philosophy have been left largely unnoticed. In the following text I would like not only to run through several parallels from gaming and philosophy in terms of survival, but also to grasp precisely these contours of current *ontological demand* and its *dystopian realism*. In gaming culture, survival regularly represents a subgenre where the player's task is to survive in a hostile, often open-world environment by gathering and crafting resources or equipment.

However, in my tentative genealogy of survival in philosophy I want to link this game-form with broader questions of the player vs. environment (PvE)⁴ model, post-apocalyptic setting/worldbuilding (or more specifically human survival and ecological crisis), or surviving as a symbolic component of contemporary life under capitalism. The post-apocalyptic setting (from a more narrative and atmospheric perspective), PvE (in terms of game goals or limits) and survival (on the level of game mechanics) form something like a worldbuilding triangle or ontological complex, where several games can explore just one direction, or mutually reinforce all three aspects.

1. 2007 – Survival Unbound

Survivalist narration and philosophy have had an intimate relationship throughout our history. One can certainly recall Plato's cave allegory, or the Promethean myth, Cartesian doubt, the works of Kierkegaard, Schopenhauer, Cioran, or Bataille. But while the philosophy of these authors used the survival narrative as a critical and subversive tool aimed against the backdrop of standard mainstream epistemologies and "normal" societies, today the dystopian setting has gone mainstream, becoming the default setting of many narratives as well as ontologies.

In the 21st century it has been speculative realism, or more broadly an attempt at post-anthropocentric ontologies, that has worked with the idea of human extinction (and survival). In 2007, the year in which the eponymous

3 See for instance: Perron, B., *Silent Hill: The Terror Engine*. Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press 2012; Perron, B., *Zombie Escape and Survival Plans: Mapping the Transmedial World of the Dead*. In: Boni, M. (ed.), *World Building*. Amsterdam, Amsterdam University Press 2017, pp. 215–230.

4 This model of gameplay and its space sets the player a priori against the gameworld. It can involve enemies monsters or just the necessity of find the means of subsistence. Such gameplay may on more general plane imply tense relationship with the world itself or reduction of monsters and NPCs (Non-player-characters) to enemies, as will be argued later.

conference at Goldsmiths launched speculative realism, Ray Brassier published his seminal and so far only book *Nihil Unbound: Enlightenment and Extinction*. Here he opens up virtually all the contexts in which the survival-extinction (or real-negative, being-nothing) dichotomy can be philosophically relevant. He addresses death (Heidegger) and extinction (Nietzsche), void (Badiou) and Nothing (Laruelle), our manifest image of the world (Sellars), the Enlightenment and its pitfalls (Adorno and Horkheimer) and last but not least the basic issue with realism and correlationism in relation to Quentin Meillassoux's solution.⁵

Meillassoux himself published his famous *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency* one year later. Here he symptomatizes correlationism, the archenemy of (contemporary or speculative) realists. It is a supposition that the subjective and objective cannot be conceived separately. From one side it means we (as humans) cannot ever reach the "objective" reality beyond our anthropocentric perspective, and that even with regard to ourselves as perceiving subjects we need to always think in relation to the objects of our world.⁶

In opposition to such correlation, against our supposed inability to think the world beyond our human perspective, Meillassoux is not proposing some kind of access to material or objective reality in a direct sense (like object-oriented ontology, which quite simply posits the existence of objects without subjects /humans/). Meillassoux's realism is a neo-rationalist one. He tries to locate the fundamental and absolutely necessary principle of the real (which would be independent from humans and therefore "objectively" real). Interestingly enough, Meillassoux finds such a principle in the fact that everything is arbitrary (including the laws of physics). His realism does not harbour us in some kind of refuge of the real, but threatens that our lives and the entire world are subjected to pure chance.

But what is even more interesting for our present investigation is the basic argument against correlation which stems from the concept of ancestry.⁷ For Meillassoux there are obviously facts that precede the very existence of humans (the evolution of our planet or even the solar system). In his view, correlationist philosophies cannot assimilate these facts, since for them what exists is trapped within the relationship between subject and ob-

5 Brassier, R., *Nihil Unbound: Enlightenment and Extinction*. London, Palgrave Macmillan 2007.

6 Meillassoux, Q., *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*. London, Continuum 2008, p. 5. For a further line of argument see: Janoščík, V., The Territory and the Map: Speculative Thinking and the Problem of the Grand Dehors. In: *Notebook for Art, Theory and Related Zones 2007–2017*. Prague, Academy of Fine Arts in Prague 2019, pp. 302–334.

7 Meillassoux, Q., *After Finitude*. London, Bloomsbury 2008, pp. 4–45.

ject. Speculative realism therefore posits a world without humans, be it before we came into existence (Meillassoux) or after we are extinct (Brassier). The hopes and joys of speculation, the promise of the real, the other of man, all come through the prism of the extinction/survival dichotomy.

2. 2009 – Dystopian Realism and Gaming

Around the same time Mark Fisher famously used this mainstreaming of dystopias as the basic argument for his claim about capitalist realism, which he defines as an atmosphere in which “it’s easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism.”⁸ In his view, the popularity of dystopian narration and its usual tropes of social breakdown or devolution into some sort of turbo-feudal or tribal order, signals a lack of political imagination. When capitalism disintegrates there is only destruction and despair, at least in popular culture.

Some things have changed since 2009, when Mark Fisher proclaimed capitalist realism. Besides the regular or stereotypical dystopias, there are narratives that deploy more and more nuanced work with apocalypticism, our anxiety, or everyday problems. Take as an example the TV series *Years and Years* (2019) created by Russell T. Davies for HBO and BBC One. The six-episode mini-series takes place between the years 2019 and 2034, and follows the life of the Lyons family from Manchester. Their troubles and emotions are intertwined and complemented with various catastrophes, ranging from a fascist-populist Prime Minister of Great Britain, detention camps for immigrants, irl face filters, to butterflies becoming extinct or the melting of the last of the Greenland ice. Dystopia comes to be seen from the vantage point of kitchen sink drama. It is no longer a hyperstition⁹ of capitalist realism, a self-fulfilling prophecy of our inability to develop an order other than capitalist. Rather it presents a laboratory for our affectivity, resilience, relationality and sense of community.¹⁰

8 Fisher, M., *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* Winchester, Zero Books 2010, p. 2.

9 Put as succinctly as possible, hyperstition is a self-fulfilling prophecy. It was coined by CCR (Cybernetic Culture Research Unit), and it connects the two words hyper and superstition. It denotes ideas or propositions that force themselves onto the future. In this particular context, the idea that there is no alternative to capitalism is taken to be such a hyperstition. It is not a fact (insofar as I believe there are some directions of social development other than the capitalist ones) but rather it is a commitment that itself constricts our possible futures.

10 I have addressed this problem of dystopian realism in depth in my homonymous monograph: Janošík, V., *Dystopický realismus, Jak se učít skrze kapitalismus a temné budoucnosti*. Prague, AVU 2021.

Limits (projected onto our future not only in a temporal but mainly in a political and emotional sense) afford agency (to deal with our presence and proximity). And this is where gaming comes in, since it is not only a cultural sphere where the survival genre dominates, but even more importantly it is gaming where setting limits is meant precisely to afford action. The UI (user interface), gameplay, control system, navigable space,¹¹ diegetic and narrative tools all seem to impose rules and limits that enable a player to explore and act upon the gameworld.

In his newly published and illuminating book *Player Vs. Monster, The Making and Breaking of Video Game Monstrosity*, Jaroslav Švelch frames the entire sphere of gaming from the perspective of the (player's) other – the monsters. Historically, he anchors the very presence of monsters in gaming with the player vs. environment model that is the object of our survivalist interest. This player vs. environment (PvE) setting was not always the default scenario of video and pc games. As Švelch shows, early computer gaming was rather focused on player vs. player (PvP) or other forms of gameplay featured by the earliest games like *Spacewar!* (1962) or *Pong* (1972). It is only in 1993 that the term PvE first appears in literature.¹² Yet today it seems like an ever-present source of gameplay.¹³

From, naturally, the genre of FPS (first person shooter) and any other military/action games (*Last of Us*, 2013), through strategies and colony simulators or resource management (*RimWorld*, 2013; *Factorio*, 2016), to games focused on narrative or more original forms of gameplay (*Death Stranding*, 2019), all genres of gaming offer a hostile environment that is a source of challenge and gameplay for the player. It would be an extensive and delicate task to map out the reasons for such a change. One may certainly attribute relevance to climate change and the sense of multiple interconnected crisis,¹⁴ or the history of computers and cybernetics in general.¹⁵ But far more than tracing such roots I am interested here in a peculiar analogy between gaming and philosophy.

11 Navigable space and its importance for the whole sphere of new media elucidated mainly by Lev Manovich in his classic: Manovich, L., *The Language of New Media*. Cambridge, MIT Press 2001.

12 Švelch, J., *Player Vs Monster, The Making and Breaking of Video Game Monstrosity*. Cambridge, MIT Press 2023, p. 38.

13 *Ibid.*, p. 37.

14 For the conceptualization of “polycrisis” see: Tooze, A., Welcome to the world of the polycrisis. *Financial Times*, 2023. Available online at [www: https://www.ft.com/content/498398e7-11b1-494b-9cd3-6d669dc3de33](https://www.ft.com/content/498398e7-11b1-494b-9cd3-6d669dc3de33) [cit. 1. 4. 2023].

15 Galison, P., The Ontology of the Enemy: Norbert Wiener and the Cybernetic Vision. *Critical Inquiry*, 21, 1994, No. 1, pp. 228–266.

3. 1980–1979 – Pac-Man and PvE Ontologies

The year is 1980. Roland Barthes and Jean-Paul Sartre die, Louis Althusser strangles his wife, Saul Kripke publishes *Naming and Necessity*, considered by many analytical philosophers to be the most important book on philosophy of language of all time, and also Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari finish their legendary *Thousand Plateaus*. The split between continental and analytic philosophy is deeper than ever before. The latter set to seemingly objective and scientific endeavours, the former taking a much bumpier road along the poststructuralist and postmodern paths.

Thousand Plateaus in particular can be, and should be, read as an exercise in thinking and engaging with the environment. Not only does it teem with environmental metaphors like de/reterritorialization, smooth and striated space, rhizome, assemblages, plane of immanence, lines of flight, strata and stratification, it also provides us with a truly environmental ontology, where entities are never self-contained or isolated, but constantly evolve in an intimate relationship with their surroundings. Drawing in particular on the philosophy of Gilbert Simondon, Deleuze and Guattari conceive of any entity in the form of its becoming (not being), forming assemblages (rather than identities), focusing on the molecular (level of particles) rather than molar (macroscopic level of objects) activities of things.

Commercially the most successful video game of 1980 was *Pac-Man*. It offers the notorious gameplay of navigation through a maze in order to collect dots and avoid four coloured ghosts. The game poses increasingly difficult threats and challenges to the player due to the hostility of its environment. Therefore, *Pac-Man* introduces a typical PvE (player versus environment) ontology, unlike Deleuze and Guattari, who provide us with PwE (player with environment). The latter has a tremendous impact on contemporary (speculative or neomaterialist) philosophy, but is only very rarely featured in games. Their fetish of player-avatar freedom, identity and control is still hermetic.¹⁶

It is worth noting that another poststructuralist, Jean-François Lyotard, published his *The Postmodern Condition* and a shorter interview *Just Gaming* only one year earlier in 1979. Interestingly, in the book *Just Gaming* (originally titled *Au juste*) essentially nothing is said about games. Rather it addresses the problem of writing or theory after postmodernism or deconstruction; the intersection between theory and fiction. Lyotard focuses on

¹⁶ Notable exceptions of games with processual, assemblage-like or even rhizomatic gameplay could be *Everything* (2017) or *Lichenia* (2019).

being “pagan” or “just”,¹⁷ which means being just without any universality, justice taken always from a particular place defined by human activity and judgment; creating the just on the fly, through our activity, and not deriving it platonically from our ontology;¹⁸ dispensing with the I notion that there can ever be a just society.¹⁹ No wonder gaming is a tacit metaphor for such an activity and condition.

Yet again, the most commercially successful game of 1979 was *Space Invaders* (1978), a game that, according to Švelch, had a big impact on the implementation of PvE into gaming.²⁰ Like other successful games of the era (*Galaxian*, 1979; *Asteroids*, 1979) it provides the player and his spacecraft with a universe filled with monsters to be shot and capitalized upon. Nonetheless, the PvE setting and survival elements (a fight against an environment or enemies in order to prevail) are still rather simple and abstracted, waiting for more advanced computer tools to provide a far more complex, affective or immersive space of survival. In any case, gaming and philosophy obviously stand on different sides of the cultural divide, the former in most cases presenting the culture industry, the latter providing its critique and trying to save some space for difference, experimentation and the queer.

4. 1992 – The FPS and RTS Neoliberalism of the 90s

The 1990s saw the final establishment of gaming genres and forms of gameplay. For instance, in 1992 the commercially most successful games *Street Fighter II* and *Sonic the Hedgehog 2* consolidated their already established genres of fighting/duel games for the former and platformer/sidescroller for the latter. Apart from these console games, we also have some pc projects that found success commercially and even in establishing their own genre. The *Final Fantasy* and *Dragon Quest* series both published their fifth title, consolidating what was at the time (particularly in Japan) the very popular genre of top-down RPG. Even the survival setting reached another level, particularly with the first title of *Shin Megami Tensei's* postapocalyptic dungeon crawler RPG and the groundbreaking *Alone in the Dark*, which is praised as the first ever 3D horror survival game. In this game, inspired by both H. P. Lovecraft and E. A. Poe, you visit a haunted mansion in 1920s Louisiana in order to inquire about the suicide of its owner. Thanks to its eerie atmos-

17 E.g. Lyotard, J.-F. – Thébaud, J.-L., *Just Gaming*. Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press 1985, p. 19.

18 *Ibid.*, pp. 22–23.

19 *Ibid.*, p. 25.

20 Švelch, J., *Player Vs Monster*, pp. 52–58.

phere, original camera and relatively non-linear gameplay, this game won not only numerous awards and critical acclaim but also defined horror and survivalist aesthetics in gaming.

However, I would like to focus on two different games from 1992 that have more structural relevance and influence on their respective genres. The first is the legendary *Wolfenstein 3D*, where the player attempts to escape from a Nazi prison. One has to go level by level, killing Nazi soldiers or dogs and bosses. Its deployment of first-person camera, easy gameplay and game control or replayability brought the game both critical and commercial success. Moreover, it has been referred to as the “grandfather of 3D shooter”, since before 1992 shooter games rather featured a 2D scrolling space (like *Xevious* (1982), featuring an aircraft eliminating other flying objects as the screen “scrolls” almost constantly forward).

Wolfenstein 3D not only established the very form of FPS (first-person-shooter), but it ingrained it with some basic aspects that remain at the core of the genre to this day. One of them is the dungeon-like structure or level-design.²¹ In each level the player encounters monsters (in the form of Nazi soldiers) that are there exclusively to be eliminated. The navigation through the gamespace and the pleasure from playing is derived almost solely from killing, domination and survival.

An analogous point applies also to the other legendary game and its genre of RTS (real-time-strategies), namely *Dune II*, which is set in the famous Frank Herbert universe where three major factions (the houses of Atrides, Harkonnens and Ordos) compete for domination of Arrakis, the only source of spice. The spice is not only the most valuable known resource, but it also has radical psychoactive effects or is intertwined with the mode of existence of the Fremens, the indigenous race living on Arrakis. But the game features only tactical battles between the factions. You have to build production facilities and other infrastructure in order to create armies with troops, tanks or various other war machines like ornithopters or special units pertinent to each faction, to confront and crush the enemy. Level by level you uncover more complex technologies and robust weapons.

Similarly as with *Wolfenstein 3D* and FPS, even this seemingly simple gameplay establishes virtually all the features of the RTS genre. What is crucial for our current perspective is that in such a game-world there is virtually no space for any kind of peaceful collaboration, exploration or cohabitation. With relatively few exceptions of NPCs (Non-player-characters) or neutral

21 We can recall once again Švelch and particularly his analysis of the influence of DnD (dungeons and Dragons) on the establishment of the PvE formula in gaming in general. Švelch, J., *Player Vs Monster*, pp. 40–52.

aces that have been implemented in the FPS and RTS genre since then, all you are destined to do is survive and eliminate all the other agents of the game-world. Not only PvE and PvP are firmly established in this sense.

5. 1992 – The Monster in the Basement of Reason

This world-setting need not be taken literally. (We know that in reality we can't just chop off the heads of other people. And we also know that the power-fantasy of action games does not necessarily lead to more violent behaviour irl (in-real-life).) But even as a metaphor, as a gaming vision of possible worlds, this survivalist PvE setting is terribly unsettling. In fact, it very acutely fits a visionary quality of a particular philosopher of the time. Yes, I have in mind the controversial Nick Land, who published his first book and essentially his only regular monograph *The Thirst for Annihilation, Georges Bataille and Virulent Nihilism* in that same year 1992.

In this book already, Nick Land opens up virtually all his big themes; he seeks to develop his fierce antihumanism or totally secular religion (of excess and death); he intends to spread sickness in the form of love,²² which is a negation of life; he wants to “abort the human race”.²³ Later on (particularly after his retreat from the University of Warwick in 1998 and academia in general), he extends this philosophical programme into a political perspective of neo-reaction and dark enlightenment,²⁴ a position that is anti-egalitarian, antidemocratic and seeks to accelerate capitalism with its destructive effect on mankind.

It is not hard to see the connection between Land's philosophical fervour and the brutal gameplay of both *Wolfenstein 3D* or *Dune II*. Let us just start with *Wolfenstein's* freeing of violence in the form of “the monster in the basement of reason”, where the identity of the player (or his ingame avatar) is not finite or singular, but rather like “a corridor; a passage cut from the soft rock of loss.”²⁵ Even the labyrinth (as a recursive, fractal space of repetition and death) ties Land to *Wolfenstein 3D*.²⁶

Similarly, the fierce extractivism and domination in *Dune II* work totally along the lines of Bataille's solar energetic economy, where “life appears as a pause on the energy path; as a precarious stabilization and complication of

22 Land, N., *The thirst for annihilation, Georges Bataille and Virulent Nihilism*. London, Routledge 1992, p. 134.

23 *Ibid.*, p. 95.

24 Land, N., *The Dark Enlightenment*. Available online at [www: https://www.thedarkenlightenment.com/the-dark-enlightenment-by-nick-land/](http://www.thedarkenlightenment.com/the-dark-enlightenment-by-nick-land/) [cit. 1. 4. 2023].

25 Land, N., *The thirst for annihilation*, p. III.

26 *Ibid.*, pp. 114–115.

solar decay. [...] To produce is to partially manage the release of energy into its loss, and nothing more. Death, wastage, or expenditure is the only end, the only definitive terminus.”²⁷

Moreover, both games possess a certain psychedelic quality, due to their strict rhythm, a quality that forced many people to spend sleepless nights in search of Landian gratification from fervour, exhaustion and repeated death. “Between ecstasy and torment there is no longer an interval of moderation; there is not even an alteration.”²⁸ This is a quality that paradoxically seems lost rather than augmented with the development of games in a more “realistic” direction.²⁹

Sometimes I just wish that games like *Dune II* or *Wolfenstein 3D* were accompanied by a Landian voiceover... “Survival dissolves as a frangible dam does – eroded to bits by the tumult of energetic rage – so that sexual craving is the howl of nature’s fringe pounded into trash by the sun. Life is a scream which one cannot desire to ameliorate. It is rather that one would exacerbate it. Agony alone has the power to seduce us, and it is to our most savage torments that we most ardently cling. We know that a life which was not torched into charcoal by desire would be an unendurable insipidity.”³⁰

6. 2009 – Realist Plants Vs Capitalist Zombies

The year of recovering from the 2008 crisis was a good one for survival in gaming. Classic horror survival shooter *Resident Evil* made it to its 5th instalment. Another popular zombie shooter, *Left for Dead*, got a sequel. The famous *Assassin’s Creed* franchise also released a second title, popularizing the open world setting (large environment with nonlinear set of quests or plot lines) for action games. But new survival games thrived in 2009 too. We have *Borderlands*, combining FPS (first person shooter) with RPG (role playing game) and compelling cartoon-style graphics. In *Borderlands* the player visits the distant planet Pandora in search of a precious vault, at first fighting its inhabitants and wildlife and later on teaming up with them against the Atlas corporation, which is also striving to find the vault. Also *Minecraft*,

27 Ibid., p. V.

28 Ibid., p. 135.

29 Of course, this is a highly subjective generalization. Naturally, you can endlessly hone your skills even in *League of Legends* or spend excessive time in *Genshin Impact*. Nonetheless, from my own experience and countless discussions, there is some kind of different addictive pattern in 90s gaming for example, where relative scarcity and the newness of games create a more Landian space of exhaustion, excess and death. Furthermore, it appears that today these Landian topics seem to be more visual and aesthetic rather than based around the abstractive logic of the gameplay itself.

30 Ibid., p. 124.

a perennial and hyper-popular instance of the survival genre, presented its first version in 2009.

However, I want to focus on another classic with survival elements that premiered in 2009, namely *Plants vs. Zombies*. This is basically a tower defence game where the player defends a house against swaths of zombies by placing various plants on the grid that represents a lawn in front of the house. Some plants shoot at zombies (Peashooter, Repeater...), explode (Cherry Bomb, Potato Mine...) or block the enemies (Wall-nut, Tall-nut...). In each level the player picks several types of plants with seed packets and faces different types of zombies. Similarly as with our initial example of *Raft* and its desolation, here too the flood of zombie-enemies and the survival game goal create entertaining, straightforward and even more addictive gameplay. The apocalyptic setting is marketed and consumed with the ease of *Candy Crush* or actual urban gardening, precisely fitting our present rise of mobile gaming and the vibe of second screen attention.

Mark Fisher also published his aforementioned book *Capitalist Realism*, an essay that has had an unprecedented impact on current left thinking or critical theory, in 2009. He articulates his famous capitalist realism thesis as “the widespread sense that not only is capitalism the only viable political and economic system, but also that it is now impossible even to imagine a coherent alternative to it,” or even more popularly: “it’s easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism.”³¹ From this particular wording it is obvious that for Fisher, dystopian narration is a general symptom of the lack of political imagination of our future, since a post-apocalyptic setting of storytelling usually really commits to show the desolation and ruin after capitalism has been demolished.

But what do we make of computer gaming where joyful apocalypticism or entertaining dystopias are now relatively common? The question clearly sets a slippery slope of interpretation, since even Fisher himself in his treatment of dystopias from this perspective works with a huge generalization. But there is one obvious yet productive aspect to notice. In order for us to consume dystopias as unproblematic and (seemingly) apolitical products, their overall imagination needs to be mainstreamed, flattened out, and in the same dynamic also pulled closer to our everyday condition. The mainstreaming of dystopian and survivalist narration can also be demonstrated by the newly established category of teenage (or young adult) oriented sci-fi dystopian fiction. Such a genre can be exemplified by the groundbreaking *Hunger Games* (2012–2015).

31 Fisher, M., *Capitalist Realism*, p. 2.

Paradoxically, this mainstreaming prefigures the narrative form not only to smooth commercialization, it also opens up options for its more complex and nuanced deployment, which in this specific perspective I call dystopian realism. And it is this mode of sensibility or narration that will be of particular importance henceforth.

7. 2015 – Decorative Survival of (Philosophical) Horror

While previously I have attempted to map survival elements in gaming itself and its various forms, in the last decade we can finally discern survival in a stricter sense. In the early 2010s the basic tenets of survival gaming were already being explored. *Minecraft* (2011) features a sandbox openworld, a large system of resource management and item crafting, providing players with the basic survival element of mining, crafting and fighting. *Last of Us* (2013) deployed the survival logic in terms of post-apocalyptic narration. But it is *Rust* (2013), *DayZ* (2013) and *Forest* (2014) that define the classic feel of the survival genre, forcing players to roam in hostile environments, gather, craft or scavenge basic resources and confront enemies or each other.

Besides these examples, one of the subgenres is presented in survival horror games. Already touched upon with *Alone in the Dark* (1992) or *Resident Evil* (2002-), this form of gaming draws on a more cinematic affectivity, working with a fear of obscurity of the ingame threat. In 2015 it was *Soma*, *Until Dawn* and *Dying Light* that attempted to reinvigorate the subgenre with new features or accentuations. *Soma* invests in the philosophical question of consciousness and its horrors, focusing more on the walking simulator genre (gameplay in which it is instrumental to navigate through space, and action becomes less important if present at all) and walking-simulator-friendly mechanics (like exploration, interaction with environment, puzzle-solving, stealth). Story-wise, the player is stranded on an underwater research facility after an experimental brain scan, facing monsters that embody various features of the game-world.

Dying light, on the other hand, draws a lot of gameplay and atmosphere out of an open world setting infested with zombies, where players can roam more freely exploring various locations or accepting tasks from NPCs. In *Until Dawn* the player controls 8 characters fighting for their survival on Blackwood Mountain. The game invested so much in its narrative and choice-driven dimension that it dispensed with player movement control entirely, although it intended to incorporate the first-person perspective in the early stages of its development. In *Until Dawn* you can cinematically see how the story unfolds according to your decisions.

Returning once more to the philosophical genealogy, the trilogy *Horror of Philosophy* by Eugene Thacker was completed in 2015. In the first instalment of his project *In the Dust of This Planet: Horror of Philosophy vol. 1*, Thacker foreshadows a project of how to think a world that becomes “increasingly unthinkable” or a “world-without-us”.³² But what follows is rather a revisiting of some key themes and intersections in how horror, philosophy and theology (or black metal) have dealt with the negative. The other two titles, published in 2015, have even more specific tasks. *Starry Speculative Corpse: Horror of Philosophy 2* rereads philosophy as if it were horror; and inversely *Tentacles Longer Than Night: Horror of Philosophy 3* takes horror fiction as if it were a work of philosophy.

8. 2015 – There May Not Be More

In *Starry Speculative Corpse* Thacker’s conclusion can be seen as twofold. With respect to philosophy and its history, he contends that from a peculiar perspective it can be seen as “a somewhat panicky, feverish attempt to cover up suspicion that there may not be more,”³³ while with respect to ourselves as humans, he claims at the very end that our existence is always overshadowed by our non-existence, that we are dragging this “starry speculative corpse” with us all the time.³⁴

The final volume of the trilogy again resumes very diverse sources of thinking the unthinkable, from Dante’s *Inferno*, through Lautréamont’s *Maldoror* to Vilém Flusser’s semi-speculative science-fiction about a Vampire squid. Thacker culminates the whole trilogy in a series of fragments or incantations (form that seemingly suits him the best) formulating a “phantasmagorical imperative”: “to be beside oneself”, “everything unreal must appear”; and “phantom imperative”: “act as if everything real is unreal”.³⁵

Thacker’s concepts of horror, the unthinking, the negative or world-without-us definitely relate to our theme of survival. Firstly, all the games discussed here (although they are definitely mainstream, “low”, cultural artefacts in relation to the classics of Western and Eastern cultures discussed by Thacker) could be seen through his lens as mediating apparent and dark,

32 Thacker, E., *In the Dust of This Planet: Horror of Philosophy 1*. Winchester, Zero Books 2011, pp. 1, 5.

33 Thacker, E., *Starry Speculative Corpse: Horror of Philosophy 2*. Winchester, Zero Books 2015, p. 153.

34 *Ibid.*, p. 168.

35 Thacker, E., *Tentacles Longer Than Night: Horror of Philosophy 3*. Winchester, Zero Books 2015, p. 178.

thought and unthought, and even more so, surviving and dying, the human and the machinic. But also his confrontation of ourselves with the negative, thought and unthought, can be seen as a further philosophical specification of survival.

What his thought-world, which he sometimes dubs “cosmic pessimism” gives us is a sense of philosophical, but also life-like and life-long activity of facing the inverse of ourselves or being. Thacker somehow fails to address more specific issues (like how exactly this relates to our present environmental conditions and their emo-political ramification, other than their rather obvious intuitive affective entanglement, or how not to end up in mere self-satisfying existential-romantic self-reflection.) But Thacker consolidates a position for a contemporary thinking of existence, insisting on the fact that as we continue living, we constantly face our very negation.

Let us turn back to *Soma* and its ending (spoiler alert). During the course of the game, you discover that you are in the underwater facility as a copy of the former you (that had the brain scan), because humankind has been wiped off the surface of the Earth by a comet. The survival plan is to upload all the minds of humans onto a starship in order to save them. When you fulfil all the tasks at the base, your avatar Simon is eager to get aboard the ARK and travel away from the desolate Earth. The moment the process is completed he stays at the base, angry, cursing the computer Catherine which he followed, since he failed to realize that it was a copy of himself that was uploaded onto the Ark, not actually himself.

Yet after the final titles there is something more. You are spawned as a copy that has successfully entered the ARK. Has it not also been our hope, throughout our history, to have some after-title sequence? After all is resolved; after crises have reached their climax; to have another say, another try, however brief, to make it a happy end?

9. 2016 – Staying with the Survival Trouble – Building a Factory in the Chthulucene

Apart from *Raft*, discussed at the very beginning of this text, two noteworthy survival games were released onto the market in 2016. It is the remarkably titled game *Judgment: Apocalypse Survival Simulation* that features all the aspects usually connected with colony/survival simulators. You manage a group of survivors, whose skills and experience can be levelled up, the game features traditional resource management and also tactical combat against various demons.

Picking up on the colony sim genre, the other game released (in early access) in 2016 is *Factorio*. Sometimes dubbed a construction and management

simulation, it represents a factory simulator. The player has crashed on an alien planet and in order to rebuild your spaceship and get back home you need to create an admirably complex factory, exploiting all the available resources on the planet. These extractivist and capitalist-productivist motives of the gameplay are even more perverse because the planet and its ecosystem actually tries to defend itself against your ruthless exploitation.

It is not clear whether the intention of authors, or the effect on the player, is at least to some extent to force us to think about this politically reckless scenario or simply enjoy it, or both. Nonetheless it presents basically an inverse perspective against the backdrop of current environmentally-oriented philosophy. In this respect, two key monographs were published in 2016: Donna Haraway's long awaited *Staying with the Trouble, Making Kin in the Chtulhucene*, and Tim Morton's *Dark Ecology: For a Logic of Future Coexistence*. As the very titles suggest, the two books have an underlying argumentative structure. For Haraway it is an appeal against belief in definitive solutions (to ecological crises as well as other problems). Rather than that, we should learn how to live *with the trouble*. Not only is the ecological catastrophe here already and we know we cannot avert it, but also it is we who are the trouble-makers who have to deal with our influence on ecosystems. "We are the compost."³⁶

Similarly, in Morton's dark ecology the basic plot is that: "The darkness of ecological awareness is the darkness of noir, which is a strange loop: the detective is a criminal."³⁷ This means we are both the detective and the criminal. We are, as objects, critically entangled with other objects: "We have been hurt by the things that happened to us. But, in a way, to be a thing at all is to have been hurt. To coexist is to have been wounded."³⁸

In this respect we see a big rift between philosophy and gaming. In the current field of thinking, the incentive to go beyond the anthropocene, to re-evaluate not only our current eco-catastrophic behaviour but also the whole centuries of philosophical self-coronation of the human subject, is of utmost importance. By contrast, in gaming the fetish of control, the firm grip of the player over the game-world is still challenged only by few indie games. (Let us just mention a few games initially released in 2019: *Lichenia* /2019/ and *Terra Nil* /2019 prototype, 2023/ from an environmental perspective; *Oikospiel Book I* /2019/ from a more general perspective of game control; or *Stillness of the Wind* /2019/ focusing on life's repetitiveness or ageing).

36 Haraway, D., *Staying with the Trouble, Making Kin in the Chtulhucene*. Durham, Duke University Press 2016, p. 97.

37 Morton, T., *Dark Ecology: For a Logic of Future Coexistence*. New York, Columbia University Press 2016, p. 9.

38 *Ibid.*, p. 135.

Of course, games usually serve the power-fantasy of a player being able to kill any opponent or boss, achieve global dominance, or roam with sublime freedom in an open world (empire).³⁹ But it is precisely this power fantasy of control imbued in the very principles of navigation and interaction that needs to be challenged.⁴⁰ It seems obvious now that we need more games, in which we act as grounded, socialized, complexly and problematically embodied agents, acting in reference and with sensitivity towards all sorts of other agents.

10. 2018 – The Wild West Comes Home as Capitalism

One direction of approaching this more complex or “post-playercene” world-building that has been intensively explored in recent years is of course the open world, a vast space where the player can roam more freely between various locations, NPCs, missions or landmarks. One of the games that have been most praised for creating such an environment is *Red Dead Redemption 2* (2019). The player assumes the perspective or avatar of Artur Morgan, a member of the Van der Linde gang, facing not only the dissolution of the group but also the entire Old West, which is being industrialized and urbanized in 1899, the year in which *Red Dead* takes place.

The game does not fall exactly within the survival genre, but like most open world games it implements survival features in the form of combat (both PvE and PvP) or food and resource management necessary for subsistence. But even the plot-line follows a similar path, since in the final stages (spoiler alert) Artur is diagnosed with tuberculosis and faces the deterioration of his strength, eventually leading to death. Hence, while most commonly open world games tend to absolutize and extend the freedom of players, here you face the inevitable death of both yourself and the romanticized American Frontier.⁴¹

39 Patterson, C. B., *Open World Empire: Race, Erotics, and the Global Rise of Video Games*. New York, NYU Press 2020.

40 It is not only the narrative and worldbuilding, which I have mostly dealt with, but also the most basic forms of gameplay like dealing damage and loosing hitpoints or absolute obedience of units in players army, that support the player-control paradigm. It is because these simplifications severely reduce the social, psychological and even physical complexity of humans (or non-human agents). Such simplifications are often necessary but the problems arise from the universal of these premises in gaming and in the type of (controlable) world they purport. Of course, even in this respect there are notable exceptions like *Rimworld* (where agents enjoy some degree of autonomy. Alternative to hitpoint system are present in tabletop gaming (*Blades in the Dark*, 2017, or *Forbidden Lands*, 2018).

41 For the importance of the American Frontier in gaming see: Gunkel, D. J., *Gaming the System: Deconstructing Video Games, Game Studies and Virtual Worlds*. Bloomington, University of Indiana Press 2018, pp. 29–60.

What a historic (as well as ludic) moment of 1899, with capitalists defeating the Old West; the geographical frontier becoming economic, pushing ever further and having no Pacific to stop them; colonial violence transforming into the regular (economic) violence we experience to this day. It is this very moment, the homecoming of colonialism,⁴² that has an instrumental role in the genealogy of war and its internalization described by Éric Alliez and Maurizio Lazzarato in their 2019 book *Wars and Capitalism*. Their goal is to trace an alternative, counter-history to capitalism or an inverse history to the traditional story of ourselves developing liberal democracies. It is a story of how wars became less militaristic and increasingly economic in their nature and practice. How they became inflicted upon ourselves.⁴³

Indeed, there have been many philosophers who contend that we currently live in a global civil war (Schmitt, Arendt, Foucault, Deleuze and Guattari, Negri and Hardt, or Marvel's Avengers). The specificity of Alliez and Lazzarato may consist in their meticulous interest in Foucault's concept of (bio)power and Deleuze and Guattari's war machine; and consequently in the limits of the thinking of '68. Both biopolitical discipline and an aestheticized, nomadic war machine are at the core of *Red Dead Redemption's* experience.

11. 2019 – Survival is Dead, is this Something Worse?

Death Stranding from 2019 could be seen as a sort of culmination of the survivalist gameplay and aesthetic in gaming. Hideo Kojima's long awaited "masterpiece" features not only an original world with compelling aesthetics and original, yet simple, gameplay. It is also a meditation on solitude, connection and death. In the figure of Sam Bridges, you are a post-apocalyptic delivery man trying to reconnect an America torn apart by the dead coming back to life due to an unknown event. You accept deliveries and reach new fortified points and locations to establish a "Chiral network", a post-apocalyptic supply-chain-internet.

Survival here is not a matter of combat and traditional resource management, as in other representatives of the genre. Rather it builds upon the atmosphere, the long period of traversing the sublime landscape, the plot and the constant presence of dying. Often you encounter Beached Things, BTs, which haunt you. When successful, you enter an underworld where you can still swim to reconnect to your body or cargo and respawn, all this due to a symbiotic baby within your suit called an "odradek" (a reference to Kafka's

42 Aimé Césaire actually claimed that it was fascism that was the homecoming of colonialism. Césaire, A., Culture and Colonization. *Social Text* 28, 2010, No. 2, pp. 127–144.

43 Alliez, E. – Lazzarato, M., *Wars and Capital*. South Pasadena, Semiotext(e) 2018, p. 393.

short story *The Cares of a Family Man*). The journey through the open world of *Death Stranding* can be further aided by other players. They cannot be present in your world personally, but you can use their equipment, deliver lost cargo and leave a message, complementing the desolation of the gameworld with a positive connection with other players.

While in gaming the survival genre and its broader elements are taking on an ever-greater presence, it is also in current philosophy that the critique of capitalism is gaining an ever-increasing foothold and becoming the dominant form of survival philosophy today: from Landian neoreaction to socialist strategies (Nick Srnicek, Alex Williams); from Fisherian capitalist realism to various speculative endeavours (Tim Morton, Afrofuturism); from neomaterialist and post-Deleuzian modes of nonhuman cohabitation (Donna Haraway, Anna Tsing, Rosi Braidotti) to agonism as a revival of the conflictual core of democracy (Chantal Mouffe, Ernesto Laclau); from Žižekian “post-ideological” irony to reclaiming the poetics of language of Franco Bifo Berardi.

Yet it may be worth tearing apart the whole stage of capitalist critique, which is precisely the point of McKenzie Wark’s 2019 *Capital Is Dead: Is This Something Worse?* Her direction is to admit that the informatization of current economies (it is information rather than money that circulates) calls for a different system, where there is no longer (just) the capitalist – owning the means of production – but also vectorialists⁴⁴ – controlling the vector of information (i.e., the data that determines what to distribute to whom in order to capitalize).

According to her, we can renounce not only the idea of capitalism but its old ideological counterpart too and become “acommunists.”⁴⁵ We are free also to forsake the “genteel Marxism” that was ever so finely attuned to criticize only the superstructure (becoming cultural Marxism), and embrace vulgar Marxism, teleporting us back to the transparent logic of history, with the hope of reaching a stage different from capitalism. In a very crude analogy with Sam Bridges, the main character of *Death Stranding*, Wark wants us to quit as workers “subsumed into the production of sameness” and become hackers “subsumed into the production of difference.”⁴⁶

44 Wark, M., *Capital Is Dead: Is This Something Worse?* London, Verso 2019, pp. 11–13.

45 *Ibid.*, p. 142.

46 *Ibid.*, p. 163.

12. Survival as the Limit of Ourselves

Contemporary gaming, philosophy or even game studies can be considered a very messy environment.⁴⁷ Rather than tackling this mesh frontally by systematizing or analytic argumentation, rather than just taking the category of survival for granted, I have attempted to provide a different plane of thought about what constitutes survival logic in gaming and philosophy. Such a parallel reading of the both fields allows us to see not only how survival (relying on the overall PvE setting of most gaming genres, and the popular post-apocalyptic narrative setting) proliferates and develops diverse forms, but also how it is embedded in the history of gaming in general.

Specifically, we have seen early gaming and the implementation of the PvE model (*Pac-Man*, *Space Invaders*, 1980-79); the sedimentation of the classic genres of FPS and RTS (*Wolfenstein 3D*, *Dune II*, 1992); an ironic or casual take on and mainstreaming (beyond the hard gaming communities) of PvE and survivalist elements (*Plants Vs. Zombies*, 2009). Finally, we came to the three main subgenres: survival horror and its narrative of atmospheric focus (*Soma*, 2015); a factory or colony simulator style of survival games, oscillating between a harsh extracitivist ideology (*Factorio*, 2016) and inventing new modes of cohabitation (*Caves of Qud*, 2015, *RimWorld*, 2013); and thirdly open world survival (*Red Dead Redemption 2*, 2018) and its force in terms of sublimity and affectivity (*Death Stranding*, 2019).

From the side of philosophy, we have mapped the “original” acceleration⁴⁸ of working through the de-territorializing power of capital (Deleuze and Guattari, Lyotard, 1980-79); right or neo-reactionary acceleration pushing the (socially) destructive power of capital beyond any limits (Land, 1992); the left-wing or critical perspective and particularly the capitalist realist thesis about futures lost (Fisher, 2009); cosmic pessimism and the certain romantic persistence of the negative (Thacker, 2015); neo-materialism and object-oriented ontology as attempts to form new ontologies and strategies tailored for the already ongoing survival (Haraway, Morton, 2016); consolidation of a critique of capitalism elucidating the concepts of (civil) war and survival (Alliez and Lazzarato, 2018); and finally an attempt to move beyond the now almost (in critical literature) omnipresent critique of capitalism (Wark, 2019).

47 Keever, J., Videogames and the Technicity of Ideology: The Case for Critique. *Game Studies*, 22, 2022, No. 2. Available online at [www: https://gamestudies.org/2202/articles/gap_keever](https://gamestudies.org/2202/articles/gap_keever) [cit. 1. 4. 2023].

48 Noys, B., *Malign Velocities: Accelerationism and Capitalism*. Winchester, Zero Books 2010.

13. Contemporary Art – Compositing and Composting

Instead of closing or concluding this brief genealogy, let me broaden it even more in respect to contemporary art, as far as its production and forms may go even deeper into the nuances of dystopian realism, survival sensitivity, and its relation to ontology, and present a more complex and cultivated counterpart to survival logic in gaming. Even in the context of modern art, we could trace survivalism through its entire history, from early 20th century Russian cosmism and its overcoming of mankind's limits (being Earth-bound or mortal), through the constant presence of surviving an airplane crash in the work of Joseph Beuys, or the concept of the auto-destructive art of Gustav Metzger. But let us concentrate on the current forms of survivalism and its ontological horizon, namely on work of a Korean artist duo Moon Kyungwon and Jeon Joonho, and one of the most known figures of contemporary art, Pierre Huyghe.

Moon and Jeon's principal art project "News from Nowhere" involves long term collaboration with other artists, scientists, designers, and architects, and features a relatively vast amount of videos, exhibitions, and speculative projects. It envisions a post-apocalyptic world where society has collapsed, and humanity must confront its past, present, and future. In the somewhat central piece, a double-channel videoprojection, *Fin el Mundo* (2012), presented at documenta 13, we can observe male and female protagonists on separate screens. First experiencing the very apocalypse that changed the world during which he intensely continues to work on art. The second character revisits remnants of the pre-apocalyptic objects and aesthetics. Not only the work of Moon and Jeon incorporates the suits, props, and design, made and envisioned by scientist and designers. Their very work and perspective embodies compositing of past and future, apocalypse and survival, objects and humans, aesthetics and ontology.

Pierre Huyghe, on the other hand, arrives at survival perspective from a more post-anthropocentric or non-human and less explicit direction. In the very same documenta 12, he created a highly discussed environment (*Untitled*, 2012) in the compostarium of a baroque garden in Kassel. It consisted of a beehive on the head of a statue, a dog with his leg painted cyan, aphrodisiac and psychotropic plants, and a trunk of an oak tree, originally planted by Joseph Beuys. Huyghe's other known and major project, *After A Life Ahead* (2017), was presented at Skulptur Projekte Münster. Huyghe created a complex ecosystem in an unused ice stadium, incorporating bees, algae, venomous snails, and pyramidal hatches on the roof of the building that periodically opened and closed. His work aims at confronting artistic and planned systems with alleatorics of organic life and interaction. In such a vein, he

wants to not only contemplate on or point to specific dynamics of proliferation, materiality, but rather to play them out, to create ecosystems, rather than to point to their detriment or collapse, to open up the rupture and interaction between human and nonhuman, rather than just describing it.

Moon, along with Jeon and Huyghe, show affinity not only in terms of topics materials or postmedia practice, but even more aptly in terms of their aim to show a way how to deal with the limits of humans and the logic of survival. While the former takes as a model and method *compositing* (interlaying of perspectives, fields of expertise, materials and stories), the latter focuses on *composting* (creating open ecosystems free to ferment on their own). It would be too naive to generalise these two artistic approaches. But they indeed represent maybe the most complex work with survivalist logic, and two respective avenues how to work with ontology (sometimes dubbed as worldbuilding in the artworld and gaming) on the limits of being human. They also form a counterpart to the survivalism typical for gaming, as outlined above.

14. Conclusion

It would be necessary to analyse the forms of survival further in order to see not only their proliferation and parallelism but also their actual functioning vis-a-vis the current challenges with the environmental cataclysm, the inhuman (AI) or political discontent. But from this tentative genealogy we see the main roles and components of survival in both gaming and philosophy. The current sphere of gaming is permeated by the PvE model, in which the constitutive clash between the player and the environment creates the basic incentive for action, narrative, combat or resource management. This underlies the success of survival games. Their popularity could also be ascribed to the ideological mirroring of survival in the current neoliberal conditions (which are often addressed in philosophy in terms of survival). The ideology of meritocracy, the fetishism of success, resilience, coping and doping (the dialectics of surviving and still having fun), self-help or pressing economic conditions somehow fit the gameplay competition and combat, defence and damage control, scavenging or scarcity.

Naturally, in philosophy survival is taken less as functional and more as a perspectival tool. Most famously it has, mainly in the form of post-apocalyptic narration, been seen as a repository of our political imagination (or more precisely the lack thereof). Another avenue to survival is through current post-anthropocentric thought and its attempts to devise non-human (friendly) ontologies. But put into the broader perspective of current thought (about capitalism), we could see the instrumental value of survival

for philosophy. We have positions that embrace and articulate the violent, survivalistic quality of current situation, be they from the Right (Land) or the Left (Alliez and Lazarrato), or those who try to counteract these tendencies by creating new forms of cohabitation and post-anthropocentric forms of survival (Haraway, Morton).

Survival in contemporary philosophy can be seen as a representation of the limits of the human or anthropocentric, be it literally about extinction (Brassier), machinic fervour (Land), (post)capitalist futures (Fisher, Wark), the horror of nonexistence (Thacker), civil war (Alliez and Lazarrato), or the inhuman (Haraway). We can speculate as to what ways we are already living the survival; with what strategies to actually survive; or whether it is worth it in the first place. What exactly are the current PvE ontologies (from Brassier, via Thacker, to Lazarrato)?; do they represent a new paradigm replacing modern ontologies of progress, or rather postmodern deconstructive doubt about any ontologies whatsoever? Survival as a topic not only evolves and thrives in philosophy. It is also the case that philosophy shifts its goals and world-setting and indeed itself in respect to survival.

In gaming the survival genre has been defined only loosely, but it has very specific components (resource management, crafting, a hostile environment, a combat system, a horror or postapocalyptic setting) that can be applied in great variety. In our tentative genealogy we have focused on how these features correspond to larger, underlying problems concerning the very ontologies that dominate current games. Similarly in philosophy, survival is not just an ever more important (but still perhaps surprising) topic. It seems as if you just need to take a stance. Survival is not a matter of TV shows or wildlife, it permeates our lives and imaginations, be it set in relation to global warming, AI, the political or economic-political claustrophobia of neoliberalism. Fortunately, survival is not only about possible ends (of our species, world, visions, ourselves), but also about the games we play together. It materializes (not only) our fears of losing our world, but also our wish to access and construct a new one (demand for ontology).

Summaries

MARTIN ŠVANTNER

Humanity and Inhumanity of the Sign: Two Views of Man

The article centers its focus on the conceptual clash involving selected definitions of the human and the non-human within the field of sign theory, particularly examining two nearly paradigmatic perspectives: structuralist semiology and Peircean semiotics. The text's argumentation critically departs from the conventional viewpoint put forth by Ernest Cassirer. This perspective, widely prevalent not only in the humanities but also in the social sciences (e.g., M. Weber, T. Parsons) and even the natural sciences (e.g., T. Deacon), frequently regards the "symbol" as the defining boundary between the human and the non-human. The discussion further delves into the context of structuralist anti-humanism, which endeavors to redefine subjectivity by drawing from structural linguistics. In this framework, the human is still defined by the faculty of speech, but this definition is transferred from the sphere of inherent dispositions to that of an anonymous system. Integral to this interpretive shift is the interpretation of the sign – a concept central to structuralism – as a dyadic relation, a mental unit connecting the ideas of form and content. Offering an alternative perspective to both Cassirerian and structuralist views of representation, the article introduces the semiotics of C. S. Peirce. According to John Deely, who serves as the primary source of inspiration for this paper, Peirce's semiotics opens the door to a distinct, inferentialist, and methodologically more comprehensive understanding of the sign. This interpretation of the sign, and by extension, the symbol as a particular type of representation, is not constrained by social or cultural convention. It also reshapes the understanding of the relationship between humans and the world inhabited by entities that, while they do not possess language, are capable of making inferences and employing signs – whether they be animals or machines. These non-linguistic, non-representational yet communicative entities largely remained inconspicuous within structuralist semiology. Asubjective structures, seemingly waiting to be infused with human meaning, to be fully represented within the concept of language, to become subjects in a supposedly universal science of signs. At this juncture, the text departs from structuralist premises and, aligning with Peirce's perspective, follows Deely in proposing that what sets apart human comprehension of signs from other forms of sign-interpretating agencies is the capacity to understand the sign as a sign. In essence, this represents the unique ability of human animals, even if unconscious, to engage in semiotics.

JAKUB CHAVALKA

The Cruelty of Waking: Ahypnotic Experience in The World of Franz Kafka

The study interprets two novels by Kafka (*Metamorphosis* and *Disciplinary Camp*), and shows that one of the motives both novels share is the “ahypnotic experience”, i.e., the state in which the character of the story is frightened by sleep, since in sleep he loses control over himself, and is given up to the forces which rid him of his human form (*Metamorphosis*). Based on the analysis of the apparatus of torture, interpreted here as “apparatus for producing justice”, the paper argues that for Kafka, the law means not freedom, but inhumanity (*Disciplinary Camp*). The following part of the paper explains that a similar process is uncovered in Donnarumma’s *Amygdala* art installation, and poses the question as to whether the increasing autonomy of modern technology intensifies Kafka’s fears of dehumanisation of the world. The final part of the paper offers an alternative conclusion to the problem building on Nietzsche’s understanding of the sense of the sublime.

JAKUB MAREK

Selfhood and Simulacra: On the Phenomenon of Snapchat Dysmorphia

Snapchat dysmorphia is a body dysmorphic disorder where a user of filtered selfies becomes dissatisfied with his or her “natural” appearance and seeks surgical procedures in order to look like in the filtered selfies. This study presents the current discussions of Snapchat dysmorphia and proposes to further analyse the phenomenon against the backdrop of the concepts of hyperreality and simulacra. The critique of Snapchat dysmorphia is fuelled by the implicit dualism of “natural” vs. “artificial”, “real” vs. “fake” and takes place in the context of an unacknowledged effort to defend the inviolability and sanctity of human nature. In order to overcome the binarity and normativeness of understanding Snapchat dysmorphia as an “unnatural” phenomenon, this study proposes to view it as an instance of “second nature”. It is a habituated practice, an attempt to appropriate, to manifest the already accustomed image of the self on the corporeal level. In this analysis, the phenomenon of Snapchat dysmorphia becomes a case study of the limits of our views of the relationship between selfhood and corporeality.

TOMÁŠ KOBES

Inhumanity and Sexbots: On Incestuous Relations with Sexbots

British multimedia artist K. Davis has joined the campaign against sexbots initiated in 2015 by K. Richardson and E. Billing in the project *Logging on to Love*. Using photography, video and sound design, she draws attention to how sexbots rearticulate the widespread treatment of humans as objects and underlines the commodification of sex. For Davis, sexbots in this sense are not simply human products, but anti-humanist

tools. On the other hand, sexbot creators and their proponents argue that sexbots can aid people in their occasional loneliness, but also in reducing the sex trade or becoming an effective therapeutic tool. Therefore, sexbots are a controversy creating boundaries between humanity and inhumanity. By examining these differences, I argue in this paper that being human or inhuman in relation to sexbots can only be fully understood with regard to incest, which can contribute to understanding sexbots in a more symmetrical sense than the one offered by their critics and defenders.

ONDŘEJ VÁŠA

Speculative Sons of Ulysses and the Inhuman “Worlds without People”

The paper focuses on the repeated and systematic references to the figure of Ulysses in the work of Quentin Meillassoux, Ray Brassier, Eugene Thacker, and Reza Negarestani. These are not random occurrences; Ulysses represents a key figure in the mutually interconnected visions and reflections related to the idea of a “world without people” that binds the named authors implicitly and explicitly to the originally Dantean imagery. Through a detailed exposition of the Ulyssean positions of the philosophers in question, the essay demonstrates twofold: first, that the “nihilistic branch” of speculative realism can be read as a specific inversion of the Dantean agenda, and second, that in light of the arguments of “transcendental nihilism” and the logical radicalization of the Ulyssean figure, Dante’s *Divine Comedy* can be read as an anachronistic speculative project.

MARTIN CHARVÁT

Catastrophic Aftermath: The Loss of Sight as a Process of Becoming Posthuman in Contemporary Audiovisual Culture

In contemporary audiovisual production (mainly the Apple TV series *Se*), the theme of the loss of sight due to (environmental) catastrophe becomes a symptom for the analysis of the disintegration and revival of a world that has deterritorialized due to the exploitative demands of postmodern capitalism, thereby de facto marking the end of the so-called Anthropocene era. If Western philosophy traditionally defines man as an animal possessing reason and at the same time an animal in which the different senses are in balance (with the most important sense being touch, immediately followed [as a doublet] by sight) the loss of sight and the respective post-apocalyptic environment in which survivors exist without the possibility of seeing, on the one hand, outlines a process that could seemingly be considered degenerative or decadent: Without sight, man is not man and approaches the animal. On the other hand, however, the loss of this sense also articulates the hints of the renewal of a world that will be a posthuman world, in which the new norm and normative of life becomes life without sight as a new form of social, economic, habitual arrangement, in which sight

is understood as something regressive, as something responsible for the almost complete destruction of humanity. This in itself brings about a transformation of the relationship between human and non-human actors (including technology, animals, and the environment itself), transformations in the flows of belief and desire, and ways of articulating life, which, following Deleuze, is actualized from virtual modulations and temporal variants of events. My perspective is therefore based on the philosophy of G. Deleuze and vitalism in general, and I intend to read the figure of the loss of sight as a kind of counter-actualization of the event: as an effort to negate the effects of catastrophe and at the same time to establish a new (life) form.

VÁCLAV JANOŠČÍK

Survival and Ontology: A Tentative Genealogy of Survival in Gaming and Contemporary Philosophy

In the popular computer game with the succinct title *Raft* one continually recovers items and material from the ocean in order to adapt a makeshift vessel, building it to unseen dimensions. As in many other games, survival is experienced as casual and amusing gameplay. In desperate isolation, one is flooded with an overabundance of stuff, mirroring our present consumerist capitalism. This can be taken not only as a symptom of the current atmosphere of dystopian realism and mainstreaming of the survival genre, but also as a productive hint or allegory for philosophy. The seemingly inhuman and desolate ocean is full of things and potential. This is a potential that should of course be extended beyond the primitive accumulation of the *Raft*, because survival is prevalent not only in pop culture and gaming; we can find it to a similar degree also in contemporary philosophy. We can also categorize the poetic survivalism of new materialist thinkers (Donna Haraway, Rosi Braidotti), “thirst for annihilation” (Nick Land), theorization of current situation as a form of civil war (Alliez and Lazzarato), the (cosmic) pessimism of other speculative thinkers (Quentin Meillassoux, Ray Brassier, Eugene Thacker) or even the pop catastrophism of some ooo proponents (Timothy Morton). In gaming as well as in contemporary thinking, the demand to address the dystopian contours of our time are demands for ontology. Rather than presenting a criticism of these games and theories, we can frame them within such an economy and demand for ontology.

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This special issue enters into worlds without people, and embarks on images that are above all testimonies to the failure of sight, thought, or ethics. At least human one. We have chosen artistic, game, film, and media images that present to us the manifestations of the inhuman: whether creatures, or a world that excludes human beings as something unbecoming. In the now quite rich and complex terrain of transhumanism, or various versions of post-humanism, however, we have also focused on those moments that are constitutive of humans today: that is, the moments that critically expose us to our own inhumanity, and place before us the demand for a new ontology.

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