

A HERMENEUTICAL ONTOLOGY OF CYBERSPACE

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ABSTRACT

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In this study I build a hermeneutical ontology of cyberspace. In particular I interpret the conditions underlying existence in this virtual space that has been created by interacting communication machines, or what we have come to know as the World Wide Web. My argument is that there is a specific existence associated with this phenomenon and my aim is to frame and follow an inquiry upon its being. Ultimately, the “digital experience” is the end result of Modern Western cultural thought and therefore one of the privileged spaces for understanding Western culture.

My approach is hermeneutical although I associate hermeneutics with ontology in a manner similar to that of Gianni Vattimo. Vattimo argues that any ontology at the end of metaphysics has to be hermeneutical. Therefore we are dealing with an “ontology of decline,” an inquiry into a declension of being, and thus realized along lines of intellectual genealogies.

In this dissertation, I explore four major themes. First, we have the idea of cyberspace as a privileged ground for investigating Modernity. Second, is the idea of hermeneutics as a *koiné* of our times, thus an appropriate approach for this investigation. Third, I argue for the impossibility of separating the digital from the human, meaning that there is a general digital human experience which we can unearth by digging through cyberspace. The fourth theme, which appears towards the end, is the idea of an intimate connection between cyberspace, Modernity, and a democratic mindset understood in an ontological rather than political way.

Dialogue and consensus, these essential characteristics of democracy, will reveal themselves essentially subverting the violent metaphysical categories through their cyber

interplay. It is a glimpse of a feature of our times occasioned by this inquiry into the being of cyberspace. It may also be an open door that this study would offer, towards a different rewriting of Modernity.

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INTRODUCTION

In this study I build a hermeneutical ontology of cyberspace. In particular I interpret the conditions underlying existence in this virtual space that has been created by interacting communication machines, or what we have come to know as the World Wide Web. I argue that there is a specific experience associated with this phenomenon and my aim is to frame and follow an inquiry upon the essence¹ of this experience. As with any such inquiry, the ultimate goal of this endeavor is to position this particular experience within the larger field of cultural activities. The “digital experience” will show itself to be the end result of Modern Western cultural thought and therefore one of the privileged spaces opening up grounds for understanding the cultural mode of the West. Being a modern progenitor, the “digital experience” points to a late modern or terminal type of rationality of which it is only a part.

In a keynote address to a 2008 conference at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, Rafael Capurro,² mirroring Gadamer’s comment on the Italian philosopher Gianni Vattimo’s work,³ argued that hermeneutics, as the “philosophic theory dealing with issues of interpretation and communication,” thus being an essential tool for understanding the general human existence, needs to become “digital” or not be at all. Because of the global digital network affecting the access to knowledge, because of the digitization of the production and maintenance of

1. As the late modern framework apparent in the case of this project would suggest, I am working here with an understanding of the term “essence” along Heideggerian lines: it is about his *Wesen* concept, the answer to the question “what is?” an answer that provides the way (on which) something is, and not the substance something is made of (as the term “essence” from Aristotle to, say, Hegel, came to be used).

2. Rafael Capurro is a Uruguayan born philosopher, educated in Argentina, and with a PhD from Germany, currently Director of Steinbeis-Transfer-Institute of Information Ethics. The keynote address was called “Interpreting the Digital Human” and it was delivered at the conference “Thinking Critically: Alternative Perspectives and Methods in Information Studies” organized by the Center for Information Policy Research of the School of Information Studies at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, Wisconsin, May 15-17, 2008.

3. That hermeneutics is a *koiné* of our times, a virtual “universal philosophical language.” Gianni Vattimo positioned himself in the postmodern debate arguing for an understanding of our contemporary culture in terms of “late modernity” in which hermeneutics as a discipline plays an important part.

knowledge, and because of the certain cultural hybridization that comes with this global network, hermeneutics cannot interpret the human existence independent of the technological changes of the digital age anymore. Hermeneutics needs to address the digital and let itself be addressed by it. Thus, hermeneutics would stand at the core of information ethics by accounting for the digital challenge to “the self-interpretation of human beings in all their existential dimensions.”⁴

My approach is hermeneutical although I associate hermeneutics with ontology in a manner similar to that of Gianni Vattimo. At the end of metaphysics, within Vattimo’s “late modernity,” ontological projects are, with good reason, regarded with suspicion. This does not mean though that the central question of ontology, which is a question of being, has lost its meaning. On the contrary, Vattimo argues that any ontology at the end of metaphysics has to be hermeneutical just in order to be able to keep asking that question. Therefore we are dealing with an “ontology of decline,” an inquiry into a declension of being, and thus realized along lines of intellectual genealogies.

Because of this approach, as much as I find Capurro’s argument important for the identity of hermeneutics as a discipline, I cannot but remark a certain (perhaps rhetorical) artifice there. Studying the “impact” of digital technologies on the general human existence ends up separating these two, and our question of being turns into a gathering of beings around our contemplative position. Of course, we may speak of a digital divide, which means we may speak of the fact that, as pervasive as it is, digital technology cannot account for a universal human experience. Studying the specifics of this “impact” would seem to solve this problem. However, that is only an apparent solution. Universal human experience is something that a hermeneutical approach intentionally avoids. The question of being in a hermeneutical way, meaning following its declension, has nothing to do with existential substrata in between which we would draw

4. Ibid.

relations. Therefore, questioning the being of digital experience would be to regard it as a fundamentally human way. It is not about an “impact” but about a cultural path making us wonder about such impacts today. It is about following the cultural traces of the being of that which we inquire.

Michael Heim⁵ and Michael Eldred,⁶ although providing some excellent insights in their ontologies of cyberspace, have both given into this strong temptation (on different degrees though, as we will see) of separating their object of inquiry, paying attention to the way it relates to some “more fundamental” human existence. This temptation is strong because of the nature of inquiry but also because of the nature of that which we inquire. The Modern cultural tradition separates an object of inquiry as object, and thus positions it in an oppositional separation from a contemplative or manipulative subject. Also, the digital experience itself comes with a dimension of virtuality, an appearance of disembodiment that seems to frame itself in a radical difference from a basic human existence. In order to avoid this temptation of reconstructing strong metaphysical categories, our attention needs to be doubled: sensing the relation between elements but only while sensing how the elements come together as elements, in the relation.

From this point of view, while there are many ways of approaching a question on the digital experience, questioning cyberspace seems to present us with the best opening. Cyberspace, this “consensual hallucination,” as William Gibson described it first in his fiction, frames the experience of the digital in a simulated space, a space that is not physical, a space that is supported by the Internet’s global network and its functioning as a World Wide Web but that does not have a well defined *locus* of existence. It is a “space between us,” something that exists

5. An American philosopher inquiring the being of virtual reality and cyberspace in the 1990s, through a book and two collections of essays.

6. An Austrian philosopher attempting an inquiry into the being of digital beings in the early 2000s, through a fairly exhaustive study resulted from a series of conversations with Rafael Capurro.

as users use it, and thus brings together the digital and the human,⁷ opening up a site of archaeological diggings of the cultural sort.

Questioning cyberspace in its being, performed in this manner, is a question on a human mode, on a cultural tradition (in the way Vattimo was using *tra-dizione*) reflecting a certain understanding of being and a certain approach to the world. Using the hermeneutical *koiné*⁸ the questioning will thus move towards sensing a cyber *koiné*, meaning a common ground of understanding, a common language reflecting an underlying structure of thought. That is why I start my inquiry with an apparently different one, an inquiry into the condition of a Modern thought, at the end of which we may speak of cyberspace and digital technologies. If we speak of digital technologies, we have to speak of technology itself, and that, as Heidegger's questioning of technology shows, will make us speak of metaphysics and Modernity. The first unit of this study, with its two chapters, is a retelling of this story, the recuperation of a thread pointing to a decline of being at the end of which we find ourselves wondering about a "digital human." It is a necessary step – and precaution – belonging to any ontology of decline, framing the genealogy of the thought inquired in its declension. This is further explained in the study's second unit, defining the hermeneutical *koiné*, after an incursion into Michael Heim's project of an ontology of cyberspace. This second unit may be regarded in the manner of a chase for an elusive answer followed by a gathering of strength before the plunge into the spectral⁹ matter of cyberspace – undertaken in the third and final unit of this study, all the while attempting to avoid the pitfalls exposed in the second unit.

7. To try a pun on Capurro's keynote title "Interpreting the digital human."

8. *Koiné* is the Greek dialect commonly used in the Ancient Greek space, but also in the Near East, from the time of Alexander the Great to the Byzantine period. For Vattimo (as we will see later in this study) Hermeneutics is a *koiné* of our late modern times, something that reflects a common understanding of the world. The fact that *koiné* belongs to the post-classical Greek period and is the result of Alexander's imperial adventure draws enough parallels with the "late modern" situation as Vattimo describes it throughout his work.

9. To use Alec McHoul's term – referring to cyberspace as a "spectral space."

In this study, I explore four major themes. First, we have the idea of cyberspace as a privileged ground for investigating Modernity. Second, is the idea of hermeneutics as a *koiné* of our times, thus an appropriate approach for this investigation. Third, I argue for the impossibility of separating the digital from the human, meaning that there is a general digital human experience which we can unearth by digging through cyberspace. The fourth theme, which appears towards the end, is the idea of an intimate connection between cyberspace, Modernity, and a democratic mindset understood in an ontological rather than political way. Dialogue and consensus, these essential characteristics of democracy, will reveal themselves essentially subverting the metaphysical categories through their cyber interplay. This may seem like a puzzling thought, if we are to take note of authors like Baudrillard (with his “silent majorities,” finding at the end of Modernity a disintegration of society into a homogenous mass incapable of action), or just a bland idea, if we are to think of the exalted thoughts of liberating cyberspaces. All I can say at this point is that it is neither. It is a glimpse of a feature of our times occasioned by this inquiry into the being of cyberspace. It may also be an open door that this study would offer, a door opened to a different rewriting of Modernity – if I am to refer to Lyotard’s redefinition of the “postmodern.”

The answer to the problems discussed above, ever elusive,¹⁰ calls for a patience required by any interpretation and genuine questioning. I would say that this study can actually be read in the manner of a hypertext – with the particular patience and discipline of thought that come with this manner. However, as it is not a hypertext, and only contains this possibility, I find its style in itself just one more point from which that which is inquired responds to our call, speaking the *koiné* we have set up for it.

10. As it should be, I could say, since we are dealing with an ontology of decline.

UNIT ONE

CHAPTER 1: THE MODERN PROJECT

In this chapter I build a genealogy of modern thought, situating the idea of a contemporary digital culture in its direct continuation. It is about identifying possible theoretical roots in the history of ideas that would help explain the emergence of such culture. The chapter moves historically and systematically towards the realization that understanding digital culture is essential not only for understanding the condition of our present but for understanding Modernity itself.

I begin by analyzing Modernity from the perspective of the idea of progress, an idea contained by the very definition of anything modern. The analysis of the idea of progress continues with a genealogy of the idea of subject, the focus on the individual being another essential trait of the modern thinking. The chapter moves then to uncover what happened to these two ideas in the second half of the twentieth century, after the emergence of theories critiquing Modernity. I argue for a theoretical surpassing of Modernity in the sense developed by Lyotard's explanations to his *Postmodern Condition*, and by Vattimo's take on the Heideggerian concept of *Abendland* (Occident). It is about late Modernity rather than post-modernity, a passing through rather than a passing over, an attitude that favors a reflexive modern thought, one that continuously rewrites itself, and thus weakening its absolutist tendencies. I argue that in order to fully understand the condition of this *Abendland*, we have to approach an experience that seems to openly display its characteristics: digital culture.

The Idea of Progress

We will start our inquiry on cyberspace with an inquiry on the cultural mode within which cyberspace appeared both as a concept and as a phenomenon. This cultural mode, a Western mode of thinking, is something we call “Modernity.” Modernity may be considered as an age of ages, which is to say an age of the history of ages structured in a succession. This is made possible by a general trust in the possibility of developing a unitary course of history essentially based on an image of time perceived as a progressive temporal line – from past to present to future. Image, because the entire Modernity operates under the auspices of representation. Image, because from Descartes on, the self becomes a point of maximum certitude and subject – and I will only point back to Heidegger’s etymology of the subject: that which stays in front, that which, as a ground, brings everything to itself. The truth in this case is nothing else than a certitude of representation. As Descartes himself argued in his third Meditation, our thinking is formed by ideas (images of things), affects, and judgments. The ideas and the affects in themselves cannot be true or false, as the only place where error might be possible is the judgment: “I judge that the ideas within me conform the things outside myself.” Thus, once we think of man as *subjectum*, the knowledge of the world becomes the knowledge of the image of the world.

The decisive factor that determined the construction of such an image of time was, in fact, the Christian worldview. According to this worldview, God is one and he is universal – God is one for the entire world. This means that the entire mankind participates in the same history, the one ordained by God. This history, because it is ordained by God, has to have a sense, necessarily, and that sense is the salvation of mankind at the end of history. Time, in this

conception of the world, can only be imagined as a *progressive* line moving from a past towards a present towards a future. St. Augustine was the first one to compare the succession of various generations of humanity with the life of one person. We find, in his view, that mankind has a youth or childhood, where the divine law is absent, an adulthood, where the divine law is present, and an old age, where the divine grace has finally arrived. Death, in the life of a person, in this interpretation, would be equivalent to the end of history and the universal salvation.

The modern secularization, started off by the mutation¹¹ appeared in the way modern thinkers began to consider the essence of man, and eventually transformed the Christian idea of spiritual growth of humanity into a progressive development (growth) of its techniques. Already, during the Renaissance, we can identify an idea of cumulative progress within the field of science (Hugues de Saint-Victor for instance was trying to institute it as an universal law). Around 1683 Bernard de Fontenelle was arguing in his *Digression sur les anciennes et les modernes*¹² in a similar way with the Augustinian comparison, claiming that, while indeed humanity is getting older, it is our contemporaries that are in fact the ancients (as in elders). Opposed to Augustine, Fontenelle does not believe in an eventual end of history, as this growing older, the progress actually, does not have in fact limits; already the idea of progress starts to appear as a goal, rather than a means.

The first to elaborate the modern idea of progress in an explicit manner was Condorcet. *Esquisse d'un tableau historique des progres de l'esprit humain*¹³ may be considered from this point of view a philosophic testament of the eighteenth century. Condorcet believes that man is born with the ability to receive sensations and to retain, combine, compare, and signify them.

11. I would have to point here to the second part of this chapter: "The Story of the Subject."

12. Bernard de Fontenelle, *Entretiens sur la pluralite des mondes. Digression sur les anciens et les modernes* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1955)

13. Jean Marie Antoine Nicolas Caritat marquis de Condorcet, *Sketch for a historical picture of the progress of human mind* (New York: Noonday Press, 1955)

This ability is further developed by the action that all the exterior objects have upon himself, but also through communicating the impressions that all those actions have left upon himself. Only through this communication we can have the possibility of knowledge and the development of any method necessary for mastering nature (after all, for Condorcet, the history of mankind is a continuous struggle against nature). Arranging all the generations in a succession then, would offer us the complete table of human progress. Thus, Condorcet identifies nine ages in the history of humanity, to which he projects a future tenth. The first age sees people gathering together in small groups in order to make their life easier. This determines the birth of language and the first form of politics (he points to the supposed tribe chiefs) and religion (he points to the supposed mystical aura of medicine men). The second age is an age of the shepherds, as people leave behind their hunting-gathering ways and start developing the first notions of property. The first notions of property, in turn, facilitate the birth of nations. The third age means a move towards agriculture and a settled life which leads to the development of commerce, a rigorous system of laws and, hence, writing. The fourth age is suddenly represented by the Ancient Greece, as that, for Condorcet, seems to be the only place where political freedom is born, and, moreover, where the sciences cease to belong to a priestly caste. The fifth age is represented by Aristotle, and his operational division of science (because of the amount of knowledge already accumulated by mankind). The sixth age seems to be a hiatus – the middle ages – somehow overshadowed by the seventh. Condorcet identifies two crucial events in the seventh age: the invention of the printing press (which reduces the power that the Papacy seemed to have held) and the invention of gunpowder (which ends the reign of the seemingly invincible plated knight). The eighth age is the logical follow-up to the previous one, as sciences and philosophy are freed from any extraneous authority. The ninth age, according to Condorcet, represents the forming of

the French Republic. The projected tenth age, was supposed then to erase any inequalities among nations and people, and bring about a universal language.

At the same time with Condorcet, we might still mention Vico and Lessing. Vico (in *Scienza Nuova*¹⁴) brings in the idea that progress is possible not only at the level of the entire humanity, but within nations themselves. He finds that nations move from a divine age, to a heroic age, to finally reach a human age (it is interesting to note the similarity of Vico's ages to the three Christian ones: the Old Testament, the New Testament, and the projected "City of God"). For Lessing, just as for Condorcet if we are to think of his odd sixth age, progress is not exactly rectilinear, but rather dialectic. So even if we may notice odds and slips in the overall progressive line, they are actually necessary stages in the overall dialectic of reason – as "eternity" would be opened by this impetuous forward march towards truth.

It was the nineteenth century, in fact, that would bring about the full development of the idea of progress. Hegel remakes the idea of progress to be an essential fact of the history of humanity. For him, reason reigns over the world, as everything that is real is reasonable, which means that the universal history is nothing else but a reasonable development of "the Idea" ("the Idea" being the truth, the eternal, power *par excellence*). As he remarked in his *Philosophy of History*¹⁵ "the Idea" unveils itself in the universe, "and nothing else is unveiled in it but itself." Although, tempted by this view, we would think that an ultimate end of history would appear with necessity, Hegel states that perfectibility is almost as indeterminate as change in general. Thus, as in the realm of nature, we cannot speak of progress, in what concerns the Spirit, every change is progress. Universal history is nothing else but the image of the Spirit in time, while the changes we can see in it are in fact the steps of its evolution. Perfectibility is indeterminate

14. Giambattista Vico, *The New Science* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984)

15. Georg Friedrich Hegel, *The Philosophy of History* (Buffalo, New York: Prometheus Books, 1991)

because the “better” is indeterminate, as the Spirit acts in a realm superior to morality: its goal is its own realization and nothing else.

A rather extreme position is occupied by Auguste Comte, the founder of positivism. Maybe exaggerating a little,¹⁶ Comte transforms the faith in the idea of progress into a religious belief in itself. Considering that the term “religion” originates in the Latin *religio* which is originated in its turn in *religare* (synthesis), the religious would be, for him, everything that confirms the unity of man and society. He founds in 1845 a “Universal Religion” declaring himself its “Founding High Priest.” In 1891 he also publishes the foundational text of this religion: *Catéchisme positif ou sommaire exposition de la religion universelle en treize entretiens systématiques entre une femme et un prêtre de l’humanité*,¹⁷ which he calls an “apostolic edition” placed under the motto “Love as Principle; Order as Fundament; Progress as Goal.” We could mention the other inscriptions on the cover of this book as well: as a header, we find “Republique Occidentale, ordre et progrès - vivre pour autrui,”¹⁸ then as a footer on the 1891 edition we have “Cent troisième année de la grande Révolution,” while on the 1957 edition we have (even better) “Année CLXIX de la Révolution Française et CIII de l’Ere Normale.”¹⁹ Within the book itself we even find a “holy” calendar which marks all the celebrations that this religion would observe, but also the very detailed plans for the future cathedral of the Universal Religion. But let us look at his theory of progress in addition to these rather odd aspects.

Comte distinguishes three stages in the way human thinking functions. The first stage, the theological one, belongs to imagination. Following the question “why?” the human spirit invents

16. Although his act should appear perfectly normal as a symptom of Modernity: what he lifts up to a godly status is exactly the humanity, “the Great Being,” which would remind us of Descartes’ or Berkeley’s struggles to get out of solipsism that made them appeal to an idea of a subsistent god.

17. Auguste Comte, *The Catechism of Positive Religion* (Kessinger Publishing, 2004) – a full translation of the title would be “the catechism of positive religion in thirteen systematic dialogues between a woman and a priest of humanity.”

18. “Western Republic, order and progress – live for the other.”

19. “Year CLXIX from the French Revolution and CIII of Normal Age”

fictional beings instead of observing the real ones. The second stage, the metaphysical one, substitutes the imagined beings of the first with imagined entities. The last stage would be the normal state of mind, which necessarily has to be positive, scientific, and is the moment in which everything that was invented in the first two is tried against experience. Just like his predecessors, Comte jumps then from the individual to the whole of history, which means that we can observe these same stages in the history of humanity as well, not just in the individual. Though admitting his debt to Condorcet, Comte criticizes him for not following the true consequences of the scientific notion of the social progress of humanity. The universal history, argues Comte, is not at all a struggle of man against nature, but it is exactly by observing nature that this history is fulfilled. Science means knowledge of reality, a reality that contains universal laws. To know these laws means to know the present facts, but also the past and future ones. To know, for Comte, means to predict. And knowledge itself does not appear from an antagonism toward nature, but rather from a relationship with it.

This is how history looks according to Comte. From the beginning up until the thirteenth century, we have the theological stage of humanity. This one can be further classified in three stages as well: fetishism (adoring something natural, or astral), polytheism (represented by the great theocracies and military empires of the ancient world), and monotheism (represented by what he calls the catholico-feudal civilization). The polytheistic stage, argues Comte, is the stage where progress actually originates, as in the previous stage the history would be immobile and, ultimately, timeless. The second (metaphysical) stage spans from the fourteenth century to the eighteenth, culminating with the French Revolution in 1789. The third stage represents the end of history and the beginning of the Universal Religion. Thus we can see that, for Comte, history does have a well defined sense (and an end as well), even if that sense would lead us to an

infinity of progress, to a stage where progress is taken as a goal in itself. As knowledge becomes more and more positive, as the warring activities become industrial activities, mankind becomes more and more religious – given the meaning that Comte gives to the term. The ultimate (and final) moral principle becomes this “Vivre pour autrui” – which is, paradoxically, the complete form of freedom as thought by positivist philosophy.

Both Hegel and Comte are still paying tribute to their predecessors’ idea that human nature has an essential constitution in the sense of an internal un-changeable structure regardless of the aging process. Man is always something other than nature, no matter his/her relationship with it. The scholar who would open up the road for the final development of the modern idea of progress (meaning progress as both a historical and cosmological law) is Charles Darwin in his 1859 *Origin of Species*.²⁰ Even if we can say that during his time “evolutionism was in the air,” he was the first one to found his theory on the purest modern scientific spirit, meaning one based on observation and experimentation. He offers a model for the progress of life starting from what he calls “natural selection:” the species’ variations interact with the natural environment according to the law of the survival of the fittest (the unviable variations disappear). Nature becomes a self-regulatory system and the various species that we can observe are the results of that system. His book enjoyed a rather extraordinary success, the first edition (1250 issues) being sold out the first day, and the second (3000 issues) being sold out soon after. It was translated into most European languages, as well into Japanese and Hebrew. Encouraged by the impact of his theory, Darwin published his considerations regarding the origins of man in 1871.²¹ If the species are modifiable organisms, then this means that man cannot be exempted from this rule.

20. Charles Darwin, *The Origin of Species* (Gramercy, 1995)

21. Charles Darwin, *The Descent of Man* (Forgotten Book, 2007)

The idea of progress as evolution becomes then a universal law of everything alive and with Darwin, to borrow a Hegelian expression, the modern thought reaches its final realization.

Looking back at this little (hi)story, some additional explanations are needed. What we can see in all of these thinkers is that the model of knowledge is intimately connected to theory, observation, and experimentation. According to Comte, in the scientific (positive) stage we are trying against nature what we have invented during the theologico-metaphysical stage. For Hegel, the knowledge of nature is the knowledge of the unveiling of the Idea in space. For Condorcet, the knowledge process starts with us receiving sensations, and with respect to Darwin, we should only mention that the main reason he rejected all the other evolutionist theories of his age (including the one developed by his grandfather, Erasmus Darwin) was that they were not founded on observation, thus being just simple speculations. But let us appeal to Heidegger again, as he offers a really clear schematic of the way in which this happens and why.

Modern science, claims Heidegger,²² is essentially different than the *doctrina* and *scientia* of the middle ages, but also essentially different than the Greek *epistemé*. For Modernity, knowledge is a process opened by project and followed by experiment. We have a project just because we think of knowledge as a process. From here we also have the thought that science is and can be mathematical (or mathematizable). *Tà matémata* means that which man knows previous to examining the beings (as for instance, numbers). Mathematical physics means that the process of nature becomes visible within the horizon of a previous scheme (which is the project), a scheme that enunciates things like: movement is a change of place, or the force of something is determined by that which this something moves within a unit of time. The distinction between human sciences and natural sciences (natural sciences have to be mathematical, meaning “exact”) also suggests that nature is to be studied in a mathematical way.

22. Martin Heidegger – “The Age of the World Picture” in *Off the Beaten Track* (Cambridge University Press, 2002)

Knowledge, for the moderns, is a process through which the subject takes a grasp of its surrounding reality. The sense of this knowledge is from the subject towards that which surrounds it. Therefore we have to acquire first a project followed by an experiment. If we are to follow Heidegger's etymology, then the subject (*subjectum*) is that which stands before – that which as a ground brings everything to itself. But if by subject we think of humans, then the term comes to signify man as a being on which all other beings are founded (grounded) in the way of his being and truth. With Descartes, the self becomes the point of maximum certitude, meaning the self becomes that which stands before, bringing everything to itself as a ground. The self becomes *subjectum*. From this moment on, the project becomes the only thing that may offer rigor to research, as science becomes mathematical. Everything must start with the subject. If we think about it, this might also be the reason the Augustinian anthropomorphic metaphor is still successful even during a modern time when God is being removed from the point of maximum certitude. The said anthropomorphism structures, more or less, all the modern theories of progress. Nothing is more relevant for the degree to which this view persisted throughout the century's thinking than the following passage told by Charles Darwin himself:

“Looking back at my life, I can see how my love for science gradually came to dominate all my other inclinations. During the first two years my passion for hunting was very powerful and I used to shoot my own birds and animals for my collections. Step by step though, I have put the gun away [...] I have discovered without actually realizing that the pleasure to observe and judge was much greater than that of being good at hunting and fishing. The primitive instincts of an uncivilized man slowly made room for the habits of a civilized man. As a proof for how my thinking developed because of my research during the voyage, stands a remark that my father made, who was one of the most astute

observers I have ever met, a skeptic, and far from being an adept of phrenology. As soon as he saw me after the trip he turned to my sisters and exclaimed: "Indeed, the shape of his head has changed entirely!"²³

Once we understand man as *subjectum*, knowledge becomes a trek that we undertake, step by step, towards the real. Science becomes an accumulation of knowledge: the more knowledge we gather, the closer we are to an exhaustive image (read representation) of nature and thus a complete grip on the real. The idea of progress imposes itself automatically.

The twentieth century brought about a weakening of the general trust (faith) in the idea of progress. Claude Lévi-Strauss for instance, in *Race and History*, argues that progress is not necessary, nor it is continuous. Progress is just a function of a situation that each culture meets at a certain point in its historical development, but these cultures are not converging towards the same end. The loss of faith in the idea of progress might bring about a different image of time as well, which would actually make us think of a modification (mutation) in the essence of Modernity itself. We might ask if the age of ages has ended in the twentieth century. But before tracing possible answers to such questions, we would have to tell a different story, as we would have to see what is going on with the ontological model of the subject that, as we saw, appears to ground Modern thinking.

The Story of the Subject

We can discuss the modern epistemological theories along the lines of certain ontological models, worldviews structuring the order of experience to which these theories are pointing.

These models are associations of arguments, structuring structures (to use one of French

23. Charles Darwin – *Autobiography* (W. W. Norton & Company, 1993)

sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's metaphors) that act as attraction poles towards which these philosophies are heading. Looking at the history of philosophy, we can identify three such possible attraction poles, each of them postulating a certain stratum of reality as their starting point: the subject (the self), the objective world, and the transcendence (the divine). In order to understand one of the main features of Modernity and the tension brought about by the post-modern, or late-modern, we would have to take a closer look at the way the concept of a subject is developed by various philosophies in relation to these ontological models. We would have to tell the story of the subject. Although we can observe a prevalence of the individual, philosophically speaking, already during the Renaissance, from a historical and philosophical stand point, the problem of the subject appears with the Cartesian moment – the actual debut of modern philosophy.

Trying to build himself a system of knowledge, Descartes picks as his working method that which we call doubt.²⁴ To doubt, for Descartes, means to doubt anything that can be doubted, while the criterion of veracity would be that which is clear and distinct, simply said, simplicity. By applying this universal methodical doubt, Descartes reaches what he thinks is a sentence that is true by necessity: "I am," "I exist." We can doubt anything, thinks Descartes, while going through great pains to prove that, yet doubt itself cannot exist without a subject to apply it. In other words, "I think, therefore I am" (*cogito, ergo sum* – to use the fashionable Latin of Descartes' times). Thus, Descartes is able to build his system starting from this point of maximum certitude: the Self. Since we are a thing that thinks, all the ideas that we would form about things we would form them within our selves, or "Souls," and thus the knowledge of things may happen. We know ourselves as beings that think and, furthermore, we can see that within our thinking we possess ideas (meaning images of things), affects, and judgments. The

24. Rene Descartes, *Discourse on Method and Meditations on First Philosophy* (BN Publishing, 2008)

ideas and the affects cannot be false in themselves by definition; therefore the only place to err would be the judgments. So, we judge that the ideas we have within conform to the objects on the outside, even when that may not be so. At this point, if only we would apply Descartes' own method on these series of arguments, we may observe the thorny problem that comes with such an ontological model that postulates the Self as the starting point of the knowledge process. How can we really connect the objective world and the self, since the self is the only maximum certitude we have? How can we make the step from within ourselves towards the surrounding reality?

Descartes solves this problem by his "*Dieu, qu'il existe*,²⁵" by adding in the idea of a God existing with the same necessity as the subject itself. Not only does the self necessarily exist, but God does too. God is a perfect being, and, as a perfect being, he contains all the possible attributes, including the attribute of existence: the ontological argument for the existence of God, or Descartes paying tribute to Anselm of Canterbury and the medieval scholastics. Moreover, since we, as subjects, are finite and imperfect, the very fact that we possess such an idea of perfection, claims Descartes, should be enough of a proof that perfection itself exists outside ourselves. Thus, by surfing on the idea of God, Descartes believes himself able to surpass the solipsist difficulty and take the step from the Self towards the surrounding reality – proving in the first place that the step is indeed possible. Thinking further along these lines, Descartes concludes that God only, can be our creator, since it appears that if we would be our own creators (we are talking about us as "selves" or "subjects" here), it would not make sense for us to doubt anything, or lack anything. The idea of God, just as the idea of Self, are born together, within the same necessity of truth, hence Descartes' full sentence, or point of maximum certitude: *dubito, ergo cogito, cogito ergo sum, ergo Deus est* ("I doubt, therefore I think, I think,

25. "God, who exists"

therefore I am, therefore God exists”). The certitude of God, which can be found within the subject, guarantees our access to the objective world.

Continuing from Descartes in this story of the subject, we next find George Berkeley²⁶ with his empirical idealism. Berkeley posits that all the attributes of being are subjective. The objects themselves are nothing more than a complex of sensations that we perceive, hence his radical thesis: to be is to be perceived. It’s a different system than Descartes’ indeed. Yet if we take a closer look at it, we can observe the same thorny problem that was plaguing the Cartesian system as well: how do we make the step towards the surrounding reality? Do things stop existing if no one perceives them anymore? Berkeley’s solution to this is very similar to Descartes’, in fact. Over all our Selves, there is one Self that never stops perceiving: God. Through this eternal perception God creates and maintains the universal existence. Therefore knowledge means the knowledge of what God perceives; the knowledge of his work.

Of course, both Descartes and Berkeley reach via different ways this, as we may call, coagulation of the subject as a central point of a knowledge system. However, we can see that both their theories have something in common: the common subsistence of God and the Self. God subsists as long as the Self exists, and the other way around. The subject needs transcendence in order to act as a subject on the objective world.

A radical moment in the story of subject was constituted by the Kantian moment,²⁷ his critique resulting in a distinction between a functional subject and an existential subject, a distinction that would bring about a separation between the subject and that which seemed to be its eternal correlate, God.

26. George Berkeley, *Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge* (Cosimo Classics, 2005)

27. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* (Dover Publications, 2003)

For Kant, “I think” is a transcendental judgment, as this “I (because) think” can only be an object of our internal senses. The knowledge that we would draw from this sentence then, can only be independent of any experience. Therefore, this idea (“I think”) can only contain transcendental predicates, attributed following the categories of reason. There are four ways then, in which we can predicate something on this subject, to this “I (because) think,” and we can find them in his *Critique of Pure Reason*: the Soul is substance, the Soul is simple in what regards its qualities, the Soul is identical in what regards the different times in which it exists, and the Soul can be thought about in relation to other possible objects in space.

Starting from these four ways, Kant identifies four transcendental paralogisms. The first one confuses the determinant Self with the determinate Self, postulating the substantive character of the subject. The determinant Self is indeed the subject of all our judgments necessarily; however, it is not the same thing with the determinate Self, meaning the one taken as an object of knowledge (which we can only think about as being a representation of the determinant one). So, stating that we are beings that subsist in and through ourselves just because we think is a judgment that goes too far, claiming data that we cannot find just within our thinking. The same thing happens with the second paralogism as well. The fact that the subject is a singular is an analytical judgment, but to attribute substance to it because of that singularity is already a synthetic judgment. The third paralogism refers to a judgment that is simply the conscience of the self in time (which forms our internal senses), which does not prove at all the idea of identity of our own substance as thinking being throughout any changes of existence. Finally, the fourth paralogism starts from the analytical judgment “I am distinguishing my own existence as a thinking being from the existence of other things outside myself,” which is an analytical judgment that says nothing about the possibility of the respective self-conscience to exist

regardless of these other things outside myself, and therefore to exist only as a thinking thing; in other words, this would postulate the immortality of our soul.

Thus, in an attempt to avoid these four paralogisms, Kant reformulates Descartes' *cogito* argument from "I cannot exist otherwise than as a subject" to "I cannot use myself when thinking about my own being other than as a subject of my judgments." This would be the difference that Kant theorizes between an existential subject and a functional one. Postulating an existential subject would always be a step into the world of things in themselves, which, according to Kant, cannot stand from a rigorous epistemological view. The Kantian moment proves to be extremely important for the course of the philosophical thinking after this, a moment of "maximum lucidity," if we are to quote Deleuze's *Difference and Repetition*, twisting the story of the subject towards a different ending.

Originating its arguments in a Cartesianism filtered by the Kantian critique, phenomenology constitutes another important moment in the history of the problem of the subject. Similarly to Descartes, Husserl considers *ego cogito* as the ultimate true fundament on which any philosophy should be built.²⁸ Instead of Descartes' methodical doubt, Husserl finds that a better working method would be the "bracketing" of the objective world, a method that he names "phenomenological *epoché*." At the end of this bracketing, all we have is our pure life, our pure self together with the life of our own conscience, "in which and through which the entire objective world exists for us." This conception though is heavily informed by the Kantian idea of phenomena, which grants Husserl the possibility of moving away from Descartes. Descartes' error, says Husserl, is exactly the fact that he did not save in the pure Self a part of the world that would be able to found the building of a system *ordine geometrico* – hence why he needed that "*Dieu, qu'il existe*." The pure self resulting from the phenomenological

28. Edmund Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations: An Introduction to Phenomenology* (Springer, 2008)

transcendental reduction constitutes within its own sphere the “objective” world as a universe of being, alien to itself, together with an Other as *alter ego*. Moreover, the experience of the objective world, for Husserl, is to be identified as an experience of otherness. This is why we can say that, by moving away from Descartes, Husserl moved the thorny problem of the step from subjectivity to the objective world towards the framework in which this otherness is constituted within the phenomenal field of the subject.

The Other appears to me first as a body – if we are to follow Husserl’s arguments. Then I am identifying this body, or more likely I am recognizing this body, by appealing to its similarity to my own. In other words, we operate a transfer of meaning, the alien body of the Other borrowing the meaning of body from my own. However, the two bodies are different in essence, as nothing from this transferred meaning can be realized as originary within my own primordial sphere. This is what *alter ego* means actually: an essential modification of myself, a different me, a “me” moved “over there.” We are always reaching this Other through what Husserl calls “apresentation,” meaning a synthesis identifying the body of the Other and its similar nature simultaneously. This is in fact Husserl’s solution to the thorny problem: we can reach the certitude of an objective reality through this thought of a transcendental intersubjectivity.

Another phenomenologist, Emmanuel Lévinas,²⁹ further develops Husserl’s arguments in order to identify a slightly different solution. In a polemic with Heidegger (debating the issue of mortality), Lévinas ultimately ends in building a different construction of the subject than Husserl actually. The face of the Other, he claims, is a face only because it appeals to me (as in all the gestures of the Other are gestures towards me). Because it appeals to me, it means I am responsible for the Other (as in I have to answer). And it is exactly this responsibility that individuates me: the Self cannot appear in its uniqueness but only by answering to its similar.

29. Emmanuel Lévinas, *Time and the Other* (Duquesne University Press, 1990)

From this point of view then, the Self would not be essentially *conatus* but a hostage, a hostage of the similar Other. This would be why death, argues Lévinas, appears to us to be an absurdity and, moreover, a rapture. Our similar Other is being kidnapped from us, and this would be the only way in which we may acquire a consciousness of death, that is the way in which we can develop a relation to death, as a remembrance of the death of the similar Other interpreted as a lack of response (a silent face).

With this way of thinking, Lévinas seems to find the point of maximum certitude in a postulate of intersubjectivity, and if we look closer we can see that he is actually quite symptomatic for what happened to the story of the subject in the twentieth century. This happening (which is present in Husserl's thinking as well, but we can safely extend our observation to the Kantian moment), we might call a happening of language – the thematization of language. Representative of this turn, from the point of view of our story, would be Wittgenstein, the one from *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. Wittgenstein starts³⁰ by considering that everything is to be found in language, since everything is representation. The limits of our world are the limits of our language, and ourselves are in fact our worlds themselves. If everything is representation (thus belonging to the self) then things cannot be identical with the self – the self acting as a limit to the world. Therefore, Wittgenstein concludes that the thorny problem only shows up within our vain attempt to surpass these limits in a metaphysical way. Representations are sentences about facts, utterances about reality. Therefore a discourse on the subject is in fact impossible. In consequence, solipsism is no truer than realism as long as neither of them are illegitimately forcing the limits of language, and both of them are implied by idealism. Thematizing language (which as it seems, appears to be inevitable in the thinking on the subject) leads exactly to this: the ontological models collapse into each other. Wittgenstein

30. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico Philosophicus* (Routledge, 2001)

though is still paying tribute to the logic of representation in his *Tractatus*. So even if we accept that sentences are ultimately facts used instead of the facts themselves, we are still held hostage to the Kantian difference between a thing in itself and the way that thing appears, presupposing the phenomena as phenomena of noumena, meaning presupposing the existence of the unknowable noumena, which leads us back into the thorny problem unsolved.

Freed from the way of thinking based on representation and therefore thinking language in a radical way, Heidegger brings his own twist to the story of the subject. We can identify the subject in his concept of *Dasein* (being-there), the arguments being formulated within a framework informed by the ontological difference between beings (*seiendes*) and being (*Sein*). Language, simply put, would be the “home of being,” meaning that being is nothing more than a “to be,” a verb *par excellence*, that which keeps the language going. That which brings all of this together though, would be Heidegger’s conception of truth. The truth, for Heidegger, is *alétheia*, meaning a state of un-hiding of the being of beings. Truth is the way in which being (*seiendes*) is, its essence (*Wesen*). This state of un-hiding alone is the one that makes possible the manifestations of various aspects of being (*seiendes*). In order to understand what these aspects mean though, we have to appeal to the foundation of Heidegger’s ontological difference, what he calls “the transcendence of *Dasein*.” *Dasein* is always relating to beings by referencing the understanding of being itself. Transcendence means surpassing, passing over. That towards which the passing is performed though, observes Heidegger, is an intimate part of the passing itself. Therefore the transcendence of *Dasein* means that the subject never exists prior to the object to be known, but rather before: the subject appears in its relation to the object. To be a subject means for Heidegger (as formulated in *On the Essence of Ground*) to be a being that exists only within this transcendence, within this passing over. In other words, we can say that

that towards which the passing is performed is always *Dasein* itself, as self. Constituting itself in this surpassing, *Dasein* constitutes the world at the same time. The transcendence of *Dasein*, the passing over of being-there is the fact of being in the world. Being in the world, thought about in this way, suggests that we should understand *Dasein* as thrown project: *Dasein* is projected, cast already in a world (language is the home of being, meaning we are all born in a language, and start acting in a language already) and through its existence (the simple fact that it is) *Dasein* is placed in a passing over at the end of which it (re)constitutes itself and the world as well. This world is not the totality of all things that are, of course, but it is that world to which *Dasein* relates in the way it relates – which is why we can probably spell “(re)constituting” as “(re)understanding.” It is the world that *Dasein* creates, grasps, and justifies.

The Heideggerian moment (pointing back to Nietzsche) inaugurates a different way of approaching the issue of the subject, bringing our story towards an end. Gilles Deleuze and his “thinking of difference” reflected in his conception of simulacra illustrates this very well.

Refusing the tradition of representation (just like Heidegger), Deleuze starts³¹ from what he calls (while commenting the Kantian critique of the Cartesian *cogito*) the schizophrenia that directly opens being for difference. By observing the fundamental flaw of the Cartesian concept, Kant has emptied the existential subject of any content. Left with the functional subject to work with, Deleuze concludes that the identity of things themselves is dissolved, which means that being can only be (about) difference. That is to say that there is no prior identity of things that we can talk about, but things are constituted within their difference. Thus, the conditions of any experience have to be looked for exactly in this un-grounding, in this reign of simulacra, where representation does not grant a higher status to an original over its copy anymore, as everything is in fact constituted through difference. But where is the place of the subject in all this and, most

31. Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition* (Columbia University Press, 1995)

of all, can we still call it a subject? Things are bit complicated here, and we will see why immediately. In order to see what is going on with the subject, we have to take a short look at how Deleuze builds his synthesis of time in *Difference and Repetition*.³²

For Deleuze there are three ways in which we can analyze time. The first one refers to the present, the live (and lived) present: in this present, time unfolds. Time becomes a contraction of all moments in this present, which makes us notice the paradox of this present: to constitute a time, but also to pass over the constituted time. If the live (lived) present is the foundation of time, it is clear that we would need a different way to think about time, a way that would be able to operate with this lived present. Hence the second way of looking at time: one that relates to memory, to a pure past. This past is not just the present passed, but it is an element in which the present is aimed for. The two asymmetric features of this past would be a reproduced present and a reflected future. This past is the substantive element of time, and the only place where a Self can be constituted. The mechanism by which these two ways of time function together is actually the third way we can look at time: the empty form of time. Thus, the present is an agent, and the past is a condition of the future. In this way, the order and the finality of time are maintained. Thus we can see that this system is organized in series, explains Deleuze. Each series is defined by the differences between its elements. When the series communicate or connect with each other we have a second grade difference that acts as a differentiator: it is the difference only that is at the core of the system, the resemblance being only an effect produced by the functioning of this difference. And these systems, built around difference only, are in fact what we call

32. The form of time is the form under which exists the un-determinate "I am" being determinate through "I think." Heidegger is also making use of time when he is trying to explain the *Dasein*. The *Dasein* can be viewed as "being-towards-death:" only by relating to its own death, is the *Dasein* able to become a world builder, as death is the possibility of impossibility of all possibilities before it – which is exactly what makes them possibilities. Only from this moment on, can the *Dasein* exist as a being-in-the-world, meaning that which is its only way of existing. Being-towards-death is as constitutive to *Dasein* as is its transcendence.

simulacra, as they are the only ones that are not copies, and not even copies of copies, but something of their own order, an order of difference, that affirms (in the way of a celebration – Deleuze was heavily influenced by Nietzsche here) divergence and decentralization, and the lack of any original and in itself model.

We may find in Gianni Vattimo's works and the school of thought named *pensiero debole* (weak or soft thinking) another way to continue the story of the subject. "Soft thinking" proposes a reconsideration of all the categories of Modernity, which includes of course, the problem of the subject as well. *Beyond the Subject* is the title of one of Vattimo's books,³³ yet we must not misinterpret it. Even if we are living in an end of Modernity, he claims, that does not mean we can give up modern thinking. In fact, Modernity cannot end because of its very essence, therefore what we have to understand by the "end of Modernity," explains Vattimo, is rather a continuous dusk, a lingering rather than an ending. Extending Heidegger, Vattimo develops the concept of *Abendland* (meaning Occident), as a realm of a continuous dusk, as a place where the forgetting of being happens as an event of being. In this *Abendland* we cannot renounce the modern concepts, but we have to rethink them in a "softer" version, "weakened," dispossessed of all the "hard" metaphysical traits. The result is similar to Deleuze's although different because of the particular approach: the rethought modern concepts bring about a thinking that is decentralized, divergent, a thinking that lacks (although never needs one) a solid *Grund*, a thinking that embraces Nietzsche's conscious dreaming, the constitution of a soft subject, conscious of the fact it is a world builder, that it makes its own *Grund*. *Beyond the Subject* does not mean a move away from the thematization of the subject, but rather a passing over from a subject as Modernity had it.

33. Gianni Vattimo, *Al Di La Del Soggetto: Nietzsche, Heidegger e L'ermeneutica* (Feltrinelli, 1989)

None of these authors preach the death of the subject, but on the contrary, they restate its problem within the framework of an ontology that shook off its metaphysical traits. The thinking of difference (Deleuze) proposes the concept of a subject of simulacra, as the only realizable ontology. Soft thinking proposes the concept of a soft subject within the frameworks of an “ontology of decline,” of a theory of existence within the confines of *Abendland*.

Let us go back to the happening of language, in order to wrap up the story of the subject. The thematization of language has changed radically the way in which the ontological model informing the problem of the subject was working. Besides the three strata of reality we mentioned in the beginning, language actually came to impose itself as its own: the limits of my world are the limits of my language – claims Wittgenstein; language is the home of being – claims Heidegger; intersubjectivity constitutes the concrete transcendental reality – argues Husserl; communication, the relations informed by responsibility, are an individuating principle for Lévinas. Moreover, by becoming a model, the other three models were engulfed by it as well. First time we see this clearly formulated is by Wittgenstein; then, more rigorously, by Heidegger: the subject, through its transcendence is configuring a world and itself as well. Roland Barthes, utilizes a metaphor in *The Pleasure of Text*:³⁴ “Text means web [...], lost in this web – in this texture – the subject unfolds in it as a spider dissolving itself in the constructive secretions of its web.” Ultimately, the happening of language may be interpreted as a lesson of solipsism. Trying to think the problem of the subject to its ultimate consequences we end up with its dissolution into something else. And that something else can only be but a rethinking, a rewriting of a tired concept.

34. Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text* (Hill and Wang, 1975)

Being at Dusk

As we reached the final point in telling the story of progress, we saw the rise of the question on subject, but also we saw something pointing to a certain change of mindset within the frameworks of the twentieth century thinking. If faith in the idea of progress becomes diluted, does that mean that we may talk about a mutation taking place in the “to be” (the essence, if you prefer) of Modernity? Let us see though, before attempting an answer, what is it with this apparent loss of faith in the idea of progress.

It appears that Lyotard’s analysis of the *Postmodern Condition*³⁵ is quite significant for this problem. What is at stake in Lyotard’s discourse is the failure of the modern project, a failure resulted from the failure of, what he calls, metanarratives of Modernity. Metanarratives are grand stories that mark Modernity. They legitimize and apply competencies. They define what can be said and done within a culture. Lyotard points to a few examples of such metanarratives: the progressive emancipation of reason and liberty, the progressive emancipation of labor, or the gradual enriching of humanity through the progress of techno-science. Metanarratives legitimate in the way that myths legitimate, yet with an essentially different twist: they legitimate by pointing to a future to be fulfilled, an idea (always universal) to be realized, while myths are always pointing back towards an originating past. We saw with Heidegger how we can think of the project as an essentially modern mode, but we can draw the same conclusion by paying attention to Lyotard’s discourse as well. Modernity and its metanarratives are intimately connected, or better yet, they insist within this relation and they function in an originating way for both themselves and anything else. If we think in this way, then it would

35. Jean Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (University of Minnesota Press, 1984)

seem reasonable to conclude that the failure of the project in particular ways would shake the foundations of Modernity itself. That is why Lyotard points to historical events that not only illustrate the failure of a project, but un-ground the metanarratives themselves. The Holocaust shows the failure of a story that tells us “everything that is real is reasonable” – and Lyotard interprets this as the failure of speculative doctrines. Berlin, 1953, Budapest, 1956, Czechoslovakia, 1968, Poland, 1980 (and we may add to this Lyotardian enumeration the series of political revolutions in Eastern Europe during 1989), all these events prove that “not everything that is proletarian must be communist as well.” The events of May 1968 in France would prove that “not everything that is through the people is also democratic.” Also, the economic crises of 1911 and 1929 (we may add 2009 as well) would tell us that “free market does not necessarily mean economic prosperity.”

Modernity, rather than being just an age, argues Lyotard,³⁶ must be regarded more as a mode of thinking, a mindset. This mode interprets events as part of a unitary course of history that would have at its end the universal salvation of humanity. Twentieth century events then, have brought about a loss of faith in this progressive way of thinking. But the events themselves, we would say, are not the only thing that determines this dissolution. The idea of progress in itself contains the seeds of its own passing.³⁷ As we postulate a universal necessary progress, we start valuing (or over-valuing) the idea of new in itself. As the sense of history moves towards a universal “better,” then any newness becomes desirable. Already, in the nineteenth century we see Nietzsche warning about these subversive seeds.

36. Jean Fracois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Explained for Children* (Turnaround, 1998)

37. More in the way of Heidegger’s *Verwindung* – as a passing through, rather than passing over.

Nietzsche talks about a “historical illness” that would represent the condition of the modern spirit.³⁸ The vision of a unitary and progressive course of history causes thinkers to focus too much on histories, as identifying a cohesive course of past history may reveal the possible course of the future history, while telling us how we should act in present history – let us just remember Condorcet at this point. The excess of this type of knowledge, though, is that which makes Nietzsche think about an “historical illness:” it would prevent anything new from being actually created. Entrenched in a certain view on past and future history (a view that has to be objective), man loses sight of any other possibilities. The “historical illness” belongs to the idea of progress. They are inter-related, but it is the same “historical illness” that brings about its dissolution as well. And this is because any solution proposed to this illness can only lead to the dissolution of the idea of a unitary course of history.

We can argue then, that there is something within the essence of the idea of progress that eventually leads this idea to its own dissolution once it becomes completely elaborated. The twentieth century events that Lyotard was referring to would appear then as normal results of these internal tensions. Yet we have to ask at this point: what is left after the faith in the idea of a unitary course of history gets diluted? Lyotard’s answer points to a “billion little histories” that would make up our lives. A more elaborate answer though, can be found in Gianni Vattimo’s interpretations of “post-historicity” or of “the end of history.”³⁹

The end of history, if we continue to think within this framework, would not be as in Comte’s vision, the beginning of a new “Normal Age,” raising the idea of progress to a godlike status, nor something akin to some apocalyptic vision about the end of the world. The experience

38. Friedrich Nietzsche, “On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life” in *Untimely Meditations* (Cambridge University Press, 1997)

39. Gianni Vattimo – *The End of Modernity: Nihilism and Hermeneutics in Postmodern Culture* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991)

provided by “post-historicity” is exactly the experience of the impossibility of conceiving of a progressive unitary course of history – and we have to add – anymore. Vattimo’s interpretation is informed by the thoughts of Walter Benjamin (from *Theses on Philosophy of History*) or Arnold Gehlen (from *Secularization*), but he is actually following the path opened before them by Nietzsche and Marx. For Benjamin, history as a unitary course is nothing else but a representation of the past built by the dominant groups and social classes. For Gehlen, history is a history of a progress that becomes routine, as the newness stops being revolutionary in the very moment when it becomes needed for the very survival of the system: the Christian history of heavenly salvation becomes a search for mundane perfection, that is, a history of progress. This idea of progress though would be just an empty idea, since the goal of this history is to achieve the conditions of possibility for only its continuation (in fact, this is exactly what Comte was trying to do with his Universal Religion). Vattimo argues as well that the two crises of the idea of progress and of the idea of a unitary course of history are tightly connected, yet he thinks of two different reasons for their dissolution: the end of colonialism and European imperialism, and the rise of a “society of generalized communication” through the development of mass-media. The goal of progress is to realize a human ideal, yet this human ideal, because of the very space where it was imagined, could only be the ideal of the modern European man. The colonial revolutions confirmed the lack of ground for this universalist thinking, showing the European human ideal as for what it is: European, that is to say, particular. Or, if we think of the fact that the ideal of the modern human is in fact coterminous with this particular type of modern thinking, we can even say singular, instead of particular. Moreover, the development of radio and television, with their social corollary (the rise of a “society of generalized communication”), argues Vattimo, cannot be integrated within the same cultural revolution that Marshall

McLuhan⁴⁰ named “the Gutenberg Galaxy,” meaning the revolution caused by the invention/development of Gutenberg’s printing press. Contrary to the predictions of Adorno, the media did not homologate the modern society by unifying the course of history through a more facile communication. What happened, says Vattimo, was exactly a multiplication of visions (*Weltanschauung*), of points of view. Referring to Nicola Tranfaglia, he explains: “the world of media instruments spread around the entire planet is also the world in which the ‘centers’ of history – the powers able to collect and transmit information on the grounds of a unitary vision that is always also a result of certain political options – have been multiplied.”⁴¹ This means not only the dissolution of the idea of history as a unitary course, but the disappearance of the very conditions of possibility for such a thought. Just as the colonial revolutions, this media multiplicity disperses the unitary historical rationality through the affirmation of a multitude of “local rationalities,” or views.

Vattimo seems to prefer this kind of social explanation. As he claims in *The Transparent Society*: “the contemporary crisis of a unitary conception of history, the crisis of the idea of progress that it determines [...] are not just phenomena determined by theoretical transformations – by the critiques that the nineteenth century historicism (idealist, positivist, Marxist, etc.) received on the level of ideas.”⁴² Still, this dissolution has some internal causes that cannot be ignored, and Vattimo himself feels the need to come back to them when he is elaborating his thesis on the end of modernity. These causes are tightly connected to revisiting the issue of the subject (the possible subject of this history), which means that they actually belong to the internal mechanics of modern thought, a thought that we can call, with no

40. A Canadian philosopher and media theorist influential in the 60s and 70s.

41. Gianni Vattimo – *The End of Modernity: Nihilism and Hermeneutics in Postmodern Culture* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991)

42. Gianni Vattimo, *The Transparent Society* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992)

reservations, metaphysical, *par excellence*. The theoretical transformations Vattimo refers to do not do anything else but disprove the functionality of the modern project. Nietzsche was the first one to open the horizon for the critique of metaphysics, yet it was Heidegger who would frame it for theories to come.

The history of metaphysics is the history of the forgetting of being, states Heidegger. This is where we should look for a crisis within metaphysical thought. The being conceived by metaphysics is an objective being; it is present as Ground. It is, ultimately, substance. This results from the specific mode of modern thinking – one belonging to the order of representation. The model of the subject as a point of maximum certitude becomes, thus, constitutive to any modern thought. This means that the world, through the dynamics of the project, becomes an image. The being, thought about as Ground, becomes situated in opposition to the subject, and thus becomes itself an image. The image always stands for something, and it is in this something that the modern *sees* the being. But because this something that the image stands for appears in our field of knowledge because of a project, it means that knowledge is also pro-duction (as proposal).⁴³ This means that we cannot actually find being in that something. But because we cannot find being in the image either, this means that we have to look for being somewhere in between. Yet since there is nothing somewhere in between, we have to conclude that being cannot actually be somewhere, but rather we have to understand being as an event, as happening. Being makes something be, but it cannot be something: it simply is, as we come to understand being as the verb *par excellence*: “to be.” The history of metaphysics then, appears as a history of a confusion, the confusion of being with that something that being makes it be (the confusion of being – *Sein* – with beings – *seiendes*), meaning that it is a history of the forgetting of being.

43. Martin Heidegger – “The Age of the World Picture” in *Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays* (Harper Torchbooks, 1977), ed. William Lovitt.

This forgetting though is not a mistake, but on the contrary, the forgetting is the very “destiny” of metaphysics. But to explain this in a better way, we would have to appeal to Heidegger’s thoughts on the essence of technology.

Technology is not the same thing as the essence of technology, explains Heidegger⁴⁴ (essence meaning here, of course, the unveiling of that which something is – a phenomenological dimension of essence, rather than a metaphysical one – which understands essence as the substance of something). Technology is an instrument, meaning a means to an end. This further means that the instrument is something that mediates the relation between cause and effect. Furthermore, the cause is that which is responsible for something, and this something is something called forth, that is to say pro-duced. Pro-duction then, as a calling forth, is unveiling (which is how Heidegger translates the Ancient Greek term for truth, *alétheia*). Technology then is a way of unveiling, a mode of truth.

In the case of modern technology though, this unveiling happens in a particular way, as a demand through which we request something from nature to be extracted and stored as such. This is because the modern, (in)formed by the subject, does not regard the object only as something situated oppositional (*Gegenstand*) but rather as provision (*Bestand*), as something available, just because the subject is always the point where knowledge starts. Thus Heidegger concludes: the essence of technology is “Enframing” (*Ge-Stell*). It is in this Enframing that the modern technology unveils the real as a standing reserve.

Enframing can be thought in the way of a destiny, argues Heidegger, meaning something determinant, as it lies hidden within metaphysics long before the apparent development of technologies. It lies within the metaphysics through the image of a nature that can be known and

44. Martin Heidegger, “Question Concerning Technology” in *Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays* (Harper Perennial, 1982).

mastered through calculations, and that can be made available as a system of information. Furthermore, Enframing can be considered to be the fulfillment of metaphysics, a destiny of modern thought, as modern technology appears to be the result of the forgetting of being. Heidegger considers Enframing to be not just a fulfillment but a danger as well, because the determinant way in which it operates the Enframing enforces the forgetting of being. It is an unveiling that ultimately veils the ontological difference (between being and beings). However, to quote Heidegger, “where danger lies, there lies salvation too,” as we have to unveil the veiling Enframing in order to answer the question concerning technology. This means that we start remembering the being. This also means that we may glimpse the modern project exposed because of an inquiry into its internal conditions, and not just because of a confrontation with “reality.”

So then the question we might be tempted to ask at this point would be, if modern thought appears to contain something that ultimately subverts itself, can we talk about a beyond Modernity? Is the modern project a way of thinking that we may abandon? Or perhaps we already have? If we actually attempt to answer such questions, they will prove to be extremely difficult. However, a simple reformulation of these questions may show why is so difficult to answer them. In other words, can we talk about a Post Modernity? Thus, seeing how Modernity is a mode that contains surpassing within its essence, would not this question sound more like “can we surpass the age of surpassing?”

In 1979, Lyotard’s book *The Postmodern Condition* was “launching” the term “postmodernism” into theoretical debates. The term eventually started to gather under its umbrella a series of positions already known under names like post-structuralism, or maybe neo-structuralism, post-heideggerianism, deconstructivism, positions that in general would claim a

genealogy traceable back to Nietzsche and Heidegger. Lyotard revised his position in a later book (ironically named *The Postmodern Explained for Children* – although he also noted that the name might actually come from the fact that the book was a collection of letters that he supposedly sent over time to some of his friends' children), admitting that the coining of the term “postmodern” was an unfortunate moment, as he never intended to suggest the emergence of a “new,” radically different mode. The misfortune of this “post” though does not lie only in its formal impossibility. Indeed, the modern project fails as the metanarratives fail. Indeed, the faith in the idea of progress becomes diluted as history becomes a “billion little histories.” However, these little histories do not emerge within a different conception of time. Time remains this past to present to future line (lacking its ascendancy, though) in which these little histories take place simultaneously. Indeed, the model of the subject starts to be rethought, re-written outside the frameworks of representation. However, this release, even liberation, is a release from that which the relation between a copy and an original, in the way of an image as image of a model, frames. This subject, even re-written within a soft(ened) framework, within an understanding of being in terms of oscillation and unveiling, rather than presence and substance, this subject then, is still to be defined as that something which grounds all beings, gathering them together in the way of its own being and truth.

The key to understanding what happens within modern thought lies exactly in such thinking as the thinking on the essence of technology. As Heidegger shows, the essence of technology is something different than technology, meaning Enframing. And Enframing is nothing else but the complete fulfillment of metaphysics in the sense of a total organization of the world through technology. But to think about Enframing, meaning questioning concerned with technology, brings to its essence metaphysics itself and, thus, unveils being as it is, meaning

to be conceived in terms of happening. This would be that “salvation” Heidegger referred to. Enframing is not just a fulfillment, and thus end, of metaphysics, but constitutes itself as a place where the happening of being is unveiled. The thought of Enframing, because of the way it appears, and because of what it is, calls for a repositioning of metaphysics: perhaps indeed a surpassing, if by that we think of rewriting and distortion. This would be the meaning of the mutation that we see in the modern thought, the change we seem to observe. We cannot really say that we can experience something outside the framework of Modernity. The modern project may have failed, but this failure comes rather through fulfillment. The modern mode remains, yet weakened; it remains within this horizon of a being understood in terms of happening. It is not an experience of a post-modern but rather an experience of a continuous modern ending. An ending that is not to be understood in a historicist way, but more in the way contained by Vattimo’s way of developing a Heideggerian concept: *Abendland* (meaning Occident, although the literal translation of this composite word would be “land of dusk,” “the land of the setting sun”). The Occident, the West, is the space where being comes at its dusk. This dusk is the dusk of being because the history of being in the West is the history of the forgetting of being. And bringing this history to its essence means to let that being be.

The Meanings of *Abendland*

Abendland, which is to say the realm of being at (its) dusk. Let us ask now the question concerning the certain determinations of this kind of experience and concerning the way in which the certain subject of this experience may look like. To answer these questions though, we would have to explore first another one: a question concerning the truth of this experience.

Following Heideggerian thinking, we showed earlier how modern knowledge, because it functions according to a dynamic of the project, is also production. Knowledge adapts to beings in the way of a process, a process that is prescribed by a project. This dynamic is essentially production, in the way that production is a production of beings as they are made to happen. This technique, if we are to follow Heidegger's etymology of *techné*, from *The Origin of the Work of Art*,⁴⁵ is a way of knowing through which we perceive that which is present as such. The modern way has this presence to be realized within the horizon of a project: for instance, the process of nature is brought into presence – made visible – and perceived as such only within the horizon of a prior “schematics” of nature. The project is always pro-position. This is actually where the being comes to be forgotten, as in a product the happening of being is already passed. Thinking about this, we may clearly see that being cannot be anywhere, as it is only related to that happening that makes some thing be. Therefore we cannot think being otherwise than within this dynamic of happening, within a dialectic of hiding and unhiding, and never in terms of presence.

But if knowledge is production, what is truth in that case? The truth is the essence of that which is true, explains Heidegger in *The Origin of the Work of Art*. Truth is *alétheia*, meaning the state of unhiding (unveiling) of a being. Truth is an opening (a clearing in a forest, if we are to point at Heidegger's metaphor) in which we find unveiled (un-hidden) an element that confers stability and continuity to a certain being. The truth does not exist prior to this opening, and that is why Heidegger prefers this Greek word as it points exactly to its processual nature. The unveiling points to a movement that stops once something is unveiled. This makes Heidegger reach the paradoxical conclusion that truth is in essence un-truth, as it is exactly this un-truth that makes the truth be: truth is born, and is born out of nothing. Furthermore, the fact of being true is constituted by the fact of being in the world of *Dasein*, as the unveiling cannot make sense

45. Martin Heidegger, *Off the Beaten Track* (Cambridge University Press, 2002)

otherwise. That is to say that we cannot find the truth within an utterance, but rather we found the utterances on that state of revelation proper to *Dasein*. Already, in *Being and Time*, Heidegger was trying to point this out while explaining *Dasein*: the truth is born, and is born out of nothing “only as, and so long as, there is *Dasein*,”⁴⁶ or even better said, “there is⁴⁷ being only as there is truth” and “there is truth only as there is *Dasein*.”⁴⁸

Dasein functions as a place where the truth of being is revealed. But this is not possible without the fact that *Dasein* is a project cast on the world. That state of revelation proper to *Dasein* is involved by the fact that *Dasein* is in the world already. *Dasein* is cast, historically finite between birth and death, between the limits of an epoch, within the limits of a language and of a culture. *Dasein* is in an already constituted world from the very start, yet by being it (re)constitutes itself, and with itself, the world. This world building is possible just because of its functioning as a state of revelation, meaning as a place where beings come to be.

The world of this “subject,” the place of this truth, is the world of the Nietzschean dead God, and the world of Heidegger’s being reduced to value. The death of God means the disappearance of absolute values, meaning the transformation of values in trade values, as they become convertible, changeable – they are “transvaluated,” to borrow Deleuze’s term used while commenting Nietzsche.⁴⁹ This is exactly the kind of experience described by the interpretation we were outlining above. The “true world” becomes a story. Here is how Nietzsche tells this story.⁵⁰ First, the world becomes accessible to the wise and virtuous. This is Plato’s world, one in which we would trust that a universal eternal truth exists and that we can come to know it.

46. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* (State University of New York Press, 1996).

47. The German for that would be *es gibt* which means rather “it is given.”

48. *Ibid.*, Martin Heidegger.

49. Gilles Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy* (Columbia University Press, 2002).

50. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Twilight of the Idols: or How to Philosophize with a Hammer* (Oxford University Press, 2009).

Then the true world becomes inaccessible but promised to the wise and the virtuous. This is the Christian world of salvation and the promised kingdom of God. Then the true world becomes completely inaccessible, yet it still remains a moral obligation: Kant's ontological difference and imperative. Positivism brings a new twist to this: the true world is not known, nor it is accessed yet, therefore it cannot save us nor oblige us. Finally, the true world is removed as a concept completely – as Nietzsche proceeds to announce the death of God. What is left is a pure interplay of appearances. With God being dead, the distinction between truth and appearance does not make sense anymore, hence why Nietzsche's announcement prefigures a new type of experience, a posthuman (posthumous) one, the experience of the *Ueberschensch* – the Over-man.

Nietzsche's Overman, or Heidegger's *Dasein*, relates to this world from which the truth as presence, the substantive truth is gone. When the truth is about affirmation, or happening, the world becomes de-realized. It is the world of being at dusk, the only world, we might say, in which the subject can truly be free.

The thought of this de-realization of the world does not appear only within a meditation on being at dusk. *Abendland* does not only mean a realm of being at dusk, but *Abendland* is a dusk realm because it is the realm of being. The history of metaphysics is the history of the forgetting of being; thus, from this point of view there is no other history of being. Modern culture, born in the West, functioned according to the logic of newness determined by the mode of progress. The ideal that it aimed for could only be universal. This led this culture towards engulfing other cultures. Colonialism became legitimated by this logic, and in the end, the principles by which the West functioned came to be applied on a global scale. Following this trail we can say that Modernity did not only "fulfill" itself in metaphysics, but that its Universalist project came to be fulfilled in globalization. However, there is a difference between

globalization and universalism, and it is within this difference that we can find another aspect of this *Abendland*.

Universalism presupposes, obviously, a universal order. The world needs to become first a totality in order for the global initiatives of the project of modernity to be fulfilled. The progress of technology though, meant to bring about the frameworks within which this universal order would be possible, brought about a different happening: the world became de-territorialized, having mobility as the principle of social stratification and action. Zygmunt Bauman⁵¹ was trying to explain this in *Globalization*. The world “tightens” on a spatio-temporal dimension: the development of transportation techniques proves that distance is in fact a social product. Distance depends on speed or spending: how much and how fast does it take to go from point A to point B determines the perceived importance of that distance. The fact that distances become “shorter” (meaning easier – cheaper, faster – to overcome) has obvious results on a social level. Companies for instance, change radically: in this case, mobility brings about a dispersion of decisional centers as the company is “freed” from any territorial constraints. The investment of the stockholders in a company does not require their physical presence anymore. Because of this, the company itself comes to transcend national borders. The world economy becomes a global economy. However, this global dimension is far from something imagined by a Universalist project. The global world is not a totality, but rather a collection of forces spread out and lacking a command center (to try a pun, we can say “a destructured structure”). Mobility, as a condition of possibility for globalization, becomes a principle of social stratification as well, parting the world in two (and this is where Bauman comes close to Lyotard): a global elite, of those with access to mobility, and the rest of the world, to whom this access is refused. To use the example of the company again, Bauman argues, we can see how its freedom from local

51. Zygmunt Bauman, *Globalization: The Human Consequences* (Columbia University Press, 1998).

constraints has as a corollary the fact that the consequences of its actions linger on locally. Moreover, within the development of transportation techniques we can also include the transport of information. Information comes to be freed from both transporting agents and the objects that it refers to. This means that we can understand the shortening of distances and the mobility principle in a different way as well: the difference between “here” and “there” blurs (the Internet allows the “there” to be “here” at the cost of a local phone call). The ones with access to this kind of mobility (of information) find themselves freed in their process of signification, the others find themselves condemned to non-signification:⁵² the few gain their power by being watched by the many (synopticon) instead of the few gaining their power by watching the many (panopticon).

Bauman analyzes this social stratification under the principle of mobility with a grim tone, and indeed we can ask how else would we talk about stratification? There is something to this classification though, something that perhaps Bauman overlooked: the few may not be the same, the power structure may be, in fact, really fluid. We can analyze mobility as a factor of social stratification with good reasons, but we can also understand mobility as a catalyst for the end of history, viewed as a unitary course of events. De-territorialization means freedom from under the constraints of a place, yet that freedom comes at the cost of isolation from that place: communities are being reformed under this different principle. This however, generates exactly that explosion of “a billion little histories” that Lyotard was talking about, an explosion that spreads out the centers of signification where history coagulates, and rewrites, as Vattimo does, the subject according to its softened state.

Another way of approaching the thought of the de-realization of the world as a feature of being at dusk would come from observing the blurring of the distinction between nature and

52. Ibid.

culture. Analyzing capitalism as the economic form of the contemporary Western world, Fredric Jameson identified three successive types of capitalism:⁵³ market capitalism (present during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and marked by national markets), monopoly capitalism (featured by economic imperialism and the emergence of a world market), and late (multinational) capitalism. In this last form, the production, exchange and consumption of cultural forms become subsumed to the economic realm. Following Marx up to a point, and intersecting Jameson, we also find Jean Baudrillard's analyses.⁵⁴ He slightly rearranges this issue and draws another picture: in feudalism, a small part of production is considered surplus and thus sold; in industrialism everything is sold, while in late capitalism even the abstract values have to submit to the logic of trade, as every value becomes a trade value. The difference between the last two is not huge, we might say, hence Marx's treatment of it as an age of "generalized corruption" that needs to be corrected. However, what Marx did not understand, argues Baudrillard, is the fact that there is an enormous qualitative difference between industrialism and late capitalism: because the culture becomes tightly connected to the economic and social realms, it cannot be thought anymore in opposition with nature. If Modernity understands culture as a move away from an undesirable nature, a move away that would render that nature to transformation through knowledge, the "cultural logic of late capitalism" cancels this opposition entirely: by ceasing to exist nature is to be produced.

These are the two ways in which we can understand *Abendland*: on the one hand a realm of being at dusk, and on the other hand a realm in which everything comes together to an end. On the one hand, being, at the end of its history, comes to be seen for what it is. On the other hand, the culture generated by the subject of this being appears to become, at its end, a

53. Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Duke University Press, 1991).

54. Not surprising I would say, since both of them were heavily influenced by the situationists.

monoculture. I use Gerard Granel's term here:⁵⁵ "The culture that comes from this is one of power over the world. Electricity, quicker than a storm, wipes away the difference between night and day; what was once the 'mystery of life' is today the field of biological knowledge; astronomy shakes off its status of popular theology to guide ships; the elements that compose bodies reveal themselves to chemistry: we could go on and on with this list of new things that made the modern age an 'age of Newness' in an absolute sense: *die Neuzeit*. We can understand how such a culture is destined to destroy all the others, either by force, which it did not hesitate to use, or by the attraction that it exerts over the spirit of the other 'humanities' that once coexisted with it. By its very essence, modern culture is destined to become the planetary Monoculture."

Modernity was fulfilled by the very failure of its project: Universalism became globalization, and its subject, that point of maximum certitude, lives on a weakened state. Granel's Monoculture is the other side of the coin of Western multiculturalism. It is the field on which it is possible to experience the other in terms of tourism. By itself though, the idea of Monoculture may not be fit to describe the happening of culture in *Abendland*.

Globalization brings the individual to that which seems to be proper to itself: *in-divisum*, something that is not divided. To fulfill that, this bringing turns the individual back to itself, simulating the in-divisible in the way of a residual subject. I say globalization because this turning back comes from that de-territorialization we addressed earlier, while analyzing Bauman: by passing over the limits of community. But if we try to further this thought, we can see that this turning back comes also from the thought of de-realization that is so constitutive to *Abendland*. The experience of truth as happening places the individual on the level of language. As a modern Self, this individual cannot think of itself other than catalyzed by the image of a

55. Gerard Granel, "Monoculture? Lack of Culture? Perspectives on the Third Millenium" in *Philosophy and Stuff*.

subject. But this Self will always be founded by a language, by a discourse, by a text. Subject and language are weaving each other in the experience of a de-realized world, a world in which being appears within the veiling and unveiling that are proper to it.

Modernity and its dusk brought us to a disenchanting. This means that the experience of *Abendland* cannot support directives, meaning any other new enchantments. On the contrary, what *Abendland* calls for is a questioning: a question concerning the way its subject is cultivating itself. When Heidegger was asking himself a question concerning modern technology, he found that the answer was something of a different order than technology itself, in the same way being is of a different order than beings. We might be tempted to say that his answer was more about the ‘modern’ than it was about ‘technology’ but we would be wrong, as one cannot have been revealed without the other.⁵⁶ Such is the case with *Abendland* as well. Perhaps an answer that would tell us something about this experience would come from a question concerning something else. For our purposes here we will look at a modern project and that which came out of that project. For our purposes here we will ask a question concerning a cultural form that seems to reflect the de-realized experience of *Abendland* and its soft subject: a question concerning digital culture, a question concerning cyberspace.

56. It is not an accident I would say, that *The Origin of the Work of Art* which is the theoretical continuation of *The Question Concerning Technology* is built as a similar inquiry: he seems to follow the wrong paths of answering the question only to reveal at the end that, although wrong, they were necessary for the right one to be understood.

CHAPTER 2: APPROACHING A QUESTION CONCERNING CYBERSPACE

In this chapter I attempt to explain why digital culture seems to be a good place for understanding *Abendland*, and try to set up such an understanding. If the previous chapter dealt mainly with philosophical theories, I begin this one with a quick overview of an alternate genealogy of Modernity, one coming from the economic realm. Late Modernity will appear to be of the same “nature” with late capitalism (through the works of Jameson), and the digital culture reveals itself to be again a privileged place for understanding the modern thought. Continuing the analyses of late capitalism, I will approach the question on digital culture through a quick look at the Internet, concluding that interrogating the concept of cyberspace will provide us with an understanding of this digital culture and, therefore, with an understanding of the late modern condition. I review some possible ways to approach the question of cyberspace (using Michael Heim, Donna Haraway, or Lisa Nakamura) and I also attempt a first definition of cyberspace as a non-physical space, therefore cautioning against techno-determinist interpretations.

“The future is now.” Nowadays this seems to be a more and more fashionable market logo. We can notice it on t-shirts, we can notice it on web sites, and we can notice it in television commercials. But what is true indeed, is the fact that a sense of urgency, some rush toward some end of history, seems to be present “in the air.” The modern times, those modern times filled with trust in the inevitable progress of mankind, filled with trust in our capacity of making some unique difference – of standing as a knowing subject – have pushed us toward this rush. We have grown tired of that promised better future, we want that future to arrive today, we want to be able to say that, finally, the “future is now.” This is a discussion around the issue of postmodernism; this is a question burning in the minds of academics for almost thirty years now: Can it be? Is *an*

end possible? We may agree with the existence of a modern project, but can this project be accomplished? And most of all, if the project succeeds, is the end of modernity and a beginning of something else, is the *post*-modern really possible?

First of all, before seeing where such questions are going to take us, we have to consider the viability of the term itself. Questioning the postmodern, we realized that before making any assumptions we must question, in fact, the modern. And what we saw in this case is the fact that Modernity appears as an age of history. Modernity is the age of all ages, that is to say the age that provides a definition of ages and more: an age that maps and names all the “other” ages, arranging them in an ascending temporal line. Perceiving time as an ascendant line (past-present-future) is a constituting moment for modern thought. Mankind has a history, which is not only a history but an evolution. Progress is a necessity; something that no one can fight and that no one should fight. Progress is the paved road of civilization, the paved road that leads toward some better times for all of humanity. Now if we agree with this view of what modern thought means, let us look again at the post-modern question. The post-modern should be an age beyond modernity, and beyond means here “the next thing after.” But how can something surpass an age of surpassing-ness? Such surpassing can only be (nothing more than⁵⁷) another trend inside that age, another step on that paved road.

Unfortunately, the things are a little more complicated than this and thirty years of academic struggle over such an issue must be proof enough for that. The term (postmodern or postmodernism) is indeed an unfortunate term – as even Lyotard, the one who coined it for the academic debate, has rejected it, admitting that it was a very bad choice. But with or without this term we cannot help noticing that something that calls for such a name exists and is challenging

57. ...or “and nothing else” – to try a pun pointing to Heidegger’s “What is metaphysics?” as, after all, he still lies in the background for these thoughts.

us continuously. Thus, Lyotard wanted to avoid the implied meaning of the post-modern (an age beyond the age of ages) and eventually favored “the rewriting of Modernity” instead of “the postmodern.” The problem is that in order to surpass Modernity, the surpassing, as we have seen, needs to be a passing through rather than a passing over (as in Heidegger’s *Verwindung*). A passing over would do exactly that: pass over the Modern mode to something else and, therefore, keeping that something under the Modern mode. Only the passing through (Lyotard’s rewriting of Modernity, but we can safely add to this Vattimo’s late modern thinking as well) can be the critique of Modernity, its understanding, its delegitimizing, its derealization.

The answer that we seek may also come (surprisingly) from a different perspective than the one we approached earlier, and that is the economic field. As we saw, because it functions on the dynamics of the project, modern knowing/ledge is, implicitly, *production*. But besides the etymological or metaphorical meanings of this word, maybe we must look at the actual mode of production from an economic point of view, too. The question that arises from this is the question of capitalism, as a name given to the modern economic situation.⁵⁸

The problem of capitalism seems to find the same difficulties as the more theoretical one – the modern-postmodern issue. The mode of production inside the capitalist system seems to have changed, so we have the same situation: modern thought challenged by that something that we still struggle to define. The economists’ response was the coining of a new term: “late capitalism.” This could describe and explain the shift experienced in the present social and economic situation.

Late capitalism (together with its correlates: “multinational capitalism,” “spectacle or image society,” “media capitalism”) could be defined through such characteristics as: the role of

58. Let us not forget that Marx thought of communism as a *future* development of a “healthy” modern (capitalist) society.

the state in the economy is diminished (which could be understood as a transformation of the political scene into a media spectacle) and is replaced by the power games of multinational corporations. To obtain and to keep information becomes the crucial goal and the foundation of any economic activity. Late capitalism does not mean an end, a fall, of the capitalist mode of production. It is just a late stage of capitalism, what has come out of the most recent change within capitalism itself. Following Fredric Jameson's terminology we might argue that we are dealing with fundamental breaks within capitalism, following the three stages of technological revolution. First, we have machine production of steam driven motors (since 1848), which corresponds to "market capitalism." Second, we have machine production of electric and combustion motors (since 1890), corresponding to a "monopoly stage" that we may call "imperialism." Finally, we have machine production of electronic and nuclear-powered apparatuses (since 1940), corresponding to a "multinational – late – capitalism" stage.

However, by making use of the "fordism" and "postfordism" difference, we can light up these changes much better. Fordism is the entire system of mass-production and mass-consumption based on semi-skilled labor that underpinned the post World War II boom and the development of the welfare state. It is the description of the second stage of capitalism. The name comes (obviously) from Henry Ford, as he was the architect of the first assembly line ever used in industrial production. Of course he was not the "inventor" of mass-production but, still, he refined, coordinated, and integrated the process. He also recognized that the worker must be also a consumer, so he connected mass-production to mass-consumption. These are the characteristics of the fordist era: producing larger and larger numbers of standardized goods, with the help of more and more sophisticated means, for larger and larger numbers of consumers. But the sophistication of the means of production has brought with it in the end this change in the

very heart of the production mode. A new social order came to be as small batch flexible production systems based on robotics and information technology are beginning to be used for producing more and more customizable goods for more and more specialized markets. The possibility of using re-programmable manufacturing technology brought by the development of the informatics has opened the way towards a new relation between producer and consumer. We no longer need standardized goods to keep a profitable business. Instead we must re-shape our economic thinking and look at our clients as individuals rather than large masses of people belonging to some “normality” standard. The world of products is constantly changing and it is compelled to change. Consumers become more and more bored with the products offered, as their variety is constantly increasing. In principle, it is not necessary anymore, due to the spreading of cheaper and cheaper means of production, to build a huge organization in order to have a business.

So late capitalism’s essential economic manifestation is to be found in postfordism. To return to Jameson,⁵⁹ we may find some new insights. Late capitalism means indeed the fact that something has changed, that things are different: we are facing now a development of transnational business (something that in the years of the world wars seemed to be impossible), a new division of labor (the new growing need for “flexible specialization”), new forms of media relations, new dynamics of international banking, and all this along with a general gentrification, and with a general traditional labor crisis. We can easily notice what Jameson is adding to the postfordist structure. Late capitalism means also “media capitalism” – the fact that the nowadays explosion of media techniques and technologies gave it a new role, that of a looking glass through which we perceive and actually create reality. Information is the foundation of economy. This means that on the one hand we must get it and secure it, and on the other hand we can

59. Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Duke University Press, 1991).

transform it in sellable products. This is actually the reason for which media has its day now. Nowadays we can trade information, but more than that: we can trade lines of zeroes and ones – something that seems at a closer look at least puzzling – and we can trade them very profitably (Bill Gates is now one of the richest men in the world and he became so in about twenty years; and also we have the well known, the almost romantic story of George Soros who managed to get rich over-night just by “playing” with some numbers at the stock market). Commodities have entered into a process of ever-increasing abstraction; they are more and more immaterial and it is no wonder that mass-production does not seem to work anymore. But this can only mean one thing: culture, the realm of abstract matters, has been penetrated by sellers and buyers. This is actually the new insight that Jameson brought to his analysis of late capitalism: the two terms, the “cultural” and the “economic,” collapse into one another and start telling us the same thing. Anything can be sold or, as Nietzsche used to say, values have become trade values. For anything offered for sale there has to be (necessarily) at least one buyer – this sounds like a postfordist logo. Late capitalism also can be labeled “postindustrialism” – not in the sense that the industry and its mode of production had disappeared but in the sense that in the center of its logic we can no longer find *production* but *reproduction*, which is always reproduction of information. We are no longer dealing with kinetic energy, with movement, says Jameson, but with simulacra. Because the focus is on information, the connection of that information with that something about which it informs does not matter anymore. And because the master word of this society is consensus (although it functions basically on individual competition), a collective identity can be created only in a fictive way by that something that can arouse consensus. That something, argues Jameson, would be media, our most recent looking glass.

The market has infiltrated the realm of culture, and we do not have to struggle in never ending analysis to notice that. But this seems to (and I quote Jameson now) “obligate us in advance to talk about cultural phenomena at least in business terms if not in those of political economy.”⁶⁰ The social and then cultural phenomena that have caused us to consider the question of a post-modernity are based on the economic changes that appeared in the world as a result of various technological changes and political conditions: the World War II followed by the Cold War, the reshaping of the world after the colonialist age, the growing power of the USA, the Third World and its huge financial debt. If we do not consider the economic side of these changes I do not believe that an answer to my initial questions will ever appear.

So, can it be? Can we have an end of the project of modernity? Is the post-modern possible or not? These questions though, contain quite a few traps as we have seen. In fact, what is happening is a late modernity, as in late capitalism. A late modernity tightly connected to late capitalism. A new system that no longer trusts the eventual benefits of something new, that no longer focuses on what that new thing will bring but rather focuses on the new thing itself, that is on the newness of that thing in itself. Late modernity means in fact an intensified one, means that, finally, the modern thought began to question upon its inner essence, as in the Heideggerian *Wesen*. This is why we want the “future now;” this is the reason for that rush I mentioned earlier. We rush because we seek the new *for itself*, not because we want something to end. We are not waiting anymore for the “grand finales”; we simply start searching for something new.

So, late modernity as in late capitalism... One might say that all these considerations could only lead us to one thing: to understand late modernity, one must also have a good insight into late capitalism. Let us follow this thought for a while more, as perhaps we will find something else in it worth considering.

60. Ibid.

At the center of the late capitalist logic we cannot find anymore production but re-production. And this re-production is always re-production of information. For instance, when we buy a trip, we are actually buying this trip's story (as is written in the respective brochure), when we buy a detergent, we are actually buying the story of that detergent (as is presented in the respective advertisements). So if the story is the one that sells, then it seems to be crystal clear that it is not production that matters, but the way in which the information that wraps the product is propagated (let us leave aside publicity for a moment and think about Microsoft and about how this company managed to transform a low quality product such as "Windows" into one of the cultural symbols of the United States, the same type of symbol as the Statue of Liberty or Coca-Cola).

And if information is what matters in late capitalism then the representative technology corresponding to this epoch can only be the computer. We are not dealing any more with kinetic energies, with movement, as I quoted Frederic Jameson earlier, but with simulacra. And simulation is something that belongs to media. Moreover, simulation is something that belongs to computer technologies, or, better said, simulation belongs to the personal computer revolution and to the initially military project that we call Internet. So let us examine a bit what is happening with this technology and what it means that the simulacrum appears to be in the intimate proximity of information.

The first recorded description of what networking should look like and what it could mean, we may find in a series of memos written by J.C.R. Licklider of MIT in August 1962 (the "Galactic Network" concept). After the elaboration of a packet switching theory the next great step was to really make computers talk together. The military supported the idea of a virtually indestructible communication network that could withstand even a nuclear attack. Thomas Merrill

and Larry G. Roberts built the first network in laboratory during 1965. In late 1966 Roberts developed the plan for the “ARPANET” (*Advanced Research Project Agency Network*), which was born in 1969. Over time, this network had to split, as the military no longer saw fit to function alongside the civilian network; thus MILNET started to function more or less separately. In 1980 a first connection between the American networks and the laboratories in Paris and Lyon was engineered. The networks soon spread out and with the implementation of the hypertext technology we started to talk more and more about a thing called Internet. Growing in complexity, this networking attracted many economic interests and slowly it grew into what we call today the *World Wide Web*. Thus currently this Web is formed by hundreds of regional networks, which together form a single one. This is the Web: a cyber-space formed by tens of millions of ramifications, a space in which every computer (network terminal) can contact any other computer connected to this space. This is actually the fundamental principle that appealed so much to the military: being formed by millions of ramifications – actually millions of individual networks – the Web is practically indestructible; it will continue to function even in the case of a large part of it being destroyed or rendered useless. The Web is autonomous by its very construction – it does not have a center just because every one of its individual networks can be such a center.

The Web today appears as a graphical interactive environment, which combines the global connectivity with individual navigation through a distributed system that works in conformity with a client-server architecture. The World Wide Web is something that guarantees to us unlimited access to the information distributed on the Internet (or so it should be, in principle).

There are various aspects of what we call Internet activities, and some of them are closer than others to what we may gather under the name of “cyberspace.” As a communication tool, the Internet may serve as a wider and faster channel for distributing information that otherwise would be distributed through visual or written media. Most of the major newspapers, for instance, broadcast on the web a virtual version of their physical product. People can read *New York Times* or watch CNN online. From this point of view, there is nothing “radical” about this new technology – just something better than the postal services or TV subscriptions. People may also shop online, which is similar to, say, shopping by sending letters to the respective stores indicating what somebody would like to buy. As long as the experience of shopping online remains at this level (browsing a catalog), again, there is nothing “radical” about this new technology. These possible uses of the Internet, though, are not the only ones, and I would venture to say that they are also not the essential ones. There is nothing in them that would make us think of the Internet as a cyberspace.⁶¹

Back in the 1980s a science-fiction author, William Gibson, in a short collection of stories called *Burning Chrome*, coined the term “cyberspace.” Later on, he popularized this term in his ground-breaking (cyberpunk) genre-defining novel *Neuromancer*. For Gibson, cyberspace was somehow similar to what we would call the Internet today, with the only difference, yet a very important difference, being that the medium was accessed directly by its users through brain implants – therefore transforming the digital experience into a real travel (or surfing) experience through an imaginary (virtual) world, where bits of information appear as palpable objects. As

61. I have to say that I am not using this distinction in a derogatory sense. The fact that I would prefer to just open up an Internet ready computer and read the articles of today’s newspaper instead of going to the closest newsstand and get the actual newspaper from there, has nothing of this manner in it. However, when after reading the said article I engage in an online dialogue with the author of the article, the newspaper editors, and the other people reading and commenting on it, we have to agree that the “classic” experience of reading a newspaper changes. Such a distinction is actually helpful for understanding/defining the resemblance of a “radical other” that what we have to face when attempting a definition of a cyber-space. The Internet is a communication tool, but it is its interactive nature that makes us think of it, ultimately, as a “space.”

technology develops, our real digital experience becomes indeed more and more of a graphic nature, yet we are still quite far away from Gibson's imagined brain implants. This did not stop us (researchers⁶² and users alike) from adopting the cyberpunk term and more often than not referring to the Internet as a "cyberspace."

If we are to attempt an inquiry into the "nature" of cyberspace our first (Western culture determined) move would be differentiate cyberspace into a certain separation. In other words, we have to have something to look at first, in order to elaborate. Hence, I would add here, the temptation of considering cyberspace in its radical difference from other spaces. The problem becomes really complicated though, if after this move we try to actually define or understand, cyberspace: not only because of its virtual dimension, but also because of its interactive dimension. To refer back to Gibson: "there is not there, there," in the case of cyberspace. The object of our inquiry seems to slip away through our fingers from the very first moment we try to grasp it.

Perhaps the answer we seek may come if we look at the way in which, for example, Donna Haraway analyzed the notion of "cyborg."⁶³ Cyborgs are humans that embrace technology, making it an intimate part of their life. Cyborgs are amalgams of technological devices and human bodies. Yet if we follow this definition along Haraway's analysis, I can venture to say that if we are wearing glasses then we are, in a way, cyborgs. If we have artificial organs, or even transplanted organs, we would be indeed cyborgs. But also, we might extend this

62. Speaking of theoretical approaches connected with the study of cyberspace I have to mention two very different authors that integrated the theme of cyberspace in their theoretical endeavors: Paul Virilio and Slavoj Zizek. However, they never analyze cyberspace in itself but always rather use it as a means to exemplify their larger considerations about the world we are living. For Zizek the virtual identities floating around in cyberspace only represent a return to (or even a final arrival at) the Cartesian modern identity. For Virilio cyberspace is just one feature of his "Dromology," one feature of our world where speed and power frame our existence. Although their considerations are really interesting, they are placed outside the scope of our inquiry here, which looks directly at cyberspace and its associated experience.

63. Donna Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto" in *The Cultural Studies Reader* (London, New York: Routledge, 1999).

argument and say that if we are wearing clothes we are, after all, cyborgs. Haraway's point with this cyborg manifesto was to induce the awareness of the cultural constructs (like gender) by which we live our lives. She intended her analysis of this fictional term against a certain strain of feminism that was moving too close to an essentialized definition of woman, and therefore moving away from a true liberation of women. "I would rather be a cyborg than a Goddess" concludes Haraway, pointing towards the specific struggle she was carrying on there. So how is this connected to cyberspace?

Well, for one, in Haraway's cyborg case, just as in the case of cyberspace, we have to deal with the same movement: from a (science-)fiction cyborg to the postmodern existence, from the (cyberpunk science-)fiction cyberspace to the Internet. Second, the *Cyborg Manifesto*, beyond its feminist struggle, is also an essay on a post-human concept: it is, actually, an attempt at surpassing the hard-core⁶⁴ identity of the human subject. But instead of proceeding with a deconstructive critique of that subject, she proposes instead, from the very beginning, its reconstruction. It is a "coming out" we might say; the coming out of that repressed void of meaning from within our "human" identity.⁶⁵ The cyborg as a metaphor can stand for nature and culture collapsed in the same body as undistinguishable. It is the blurred boundary between two realms that stood in opposition throughout all of Modernity: a subject opposed to an object in order to know it and, thus, master it. This metaphor, thusly used, is also able to tell us that the subject opposed to its object is not in fact, primarily, a knowledge act, but a political act. Nature has to be brought within culture to make sense, as nature does not and cannot make sense of

64. I am following here Gianni Vattimo's formulations of thinking: in terms of hard-core modern metaphysical elements, and in terms of weak, no-core, late modern elements.

65. And here is where she comes really close to Lyotard's revisiting of the postmodern condition through his elaboration of the term "Inhuman" – along with his apologies for an unclear initial formulation.

itself.⁶⁶ But when culture becomes natural in the manner of appropriating an object, we face the tyranny of an object and not just its opposition.⁶⁷ Going back to this kind reading of Haraway's metaphor, the cyborg comes to name what remains when nature is revealed as being "essentially" produced: it is the sign of the essential discursive nature of knowledge, it is the post-modern self. While the Human displays himself as natural, thus eluding his discursive (informational) essence,⁶⁸ the Cyborgs display themselves as discursive from the very beginning. Although I am a man, I too can read her essay in this way and exclaim with her "I would rather be a cyborg than a Goddess." And that because in order to set up her specific struggle, she needed to appeal to a larger framework of thought, one that the Moderns would have probably identified under the label of "human condition."

Thus, Donna Haraway's manifesto is a work of anthropology, no matter how confusing such an affirmation would appear at first glance. An anthropology of the cyborg is possible, and her manifesto shows that it is also necessary: a post-human anthropology, not primarily an act of knowledge but, like any post-modern endeavor, an act of politics.

When the Internet becomes a cyberspace (and not just a communication channel) a new world seems to be born: a virtual world. With a wink at McLuhan's Gutenberg Galaxy, Michael Benedikt⁶⁹ summarized the history of technology, and the way the history of human thought was influenced by it, with a laconic formulation: "The tablet becomes a page becomes a screen becomes a world."⁷⁰ This world seems to exist there, behind the computer screen. Each time we open up a connected computer we can take a glimpse of this world through the window that the

66. "Nature" may appear to do that only within an essentializing context – the laws of nature are already an interpretive set.

67. As the early Baudrillard proposed at this point a way of conceiving knowledge and the subject-object oppositional relation in terms of seduction (the fatal strategies of the tyrannical object).

68. Heidegger: "Language is the house of Being" – a metaphor calling the natural discourse into silence.

69. Michael Benedikt put together the first collection of academic essays analyzing cyberspace (see the following note). The quote in questions comes from his introduction to that anthology.

70. Michael Benedikt, "Introduction" in *Cyberspace – First Steps* (Cambridge, London: The MIT Press, 1991).

screen seems to be. Yet, paraphrasing Gibson again, we have to admit that in fact there is no there, there. Behind the computer screen there is nothing that would resemble a world. And this is the paradox of a non-physical space. It is a space, so it exists, but it is non-physical, therefore it does not have a place. This means that cyberspace exists only within, and because of, our interaction with the technological medium that we call Internet.

Cyberspace then, from this point of view can be looked at as an extension of the cyborg metaphor, a monstrous amalgam, inhuman as Lyotard “twisted” the term. We are not just throwing curious looks at the computer screen as we would through a window, but we are building and maintaining this non-physical world every time we turn our attention to that computer screen. Apart from the web servers providing for a physical ground for this non-physical space, cyberspace is a space that forms within our lived lives, in between our minds. Therefore it has the same nature as our structure of knowledge and it has the same power of seduction.

However, if it is possible to conceive of a post-organic anthropology then it should also be possible to conceive of an ontology of cyberspace. Michael Heim has tried to build the foundations of such an ontology, drawing not only from its mere possibility, but from its necessity as well.⁷¹ Because of the central role played by simulation in regards to cyberspace, Heim claims that we have to assign a rigorous analysis to this phenomenon as it proves to be “a metaphysical laboratory, a tool for examining our very sense of reality.”⁷² What comes out of such an approach to our digital experience is that it is intimately related to a Platonic Eros. It is about a drive to extend our being on a physical level, but also on the level of our *psyche*. The

71. He first published “The Erotic Ontology of Cyberspace” in Michael Benedikt’s collective work, but then he expanded this project in a book of its own, *The Metaphysics of Virtual Reality* (Oxford University Press, 1993), and he continued it with *Virtual Realism* (Oxford University Press, 1998).

72. Michael Heim, *The Metaphysics of Virtual Reality* (Oxford University Press, 1993), 83.

philosophical “wonder,” according to Plato, comes out of Eros, and this is what Heim sees at the root of our “love-affair” with information technology (and, in fact, with technology in general). “Rightly perceived, the atmosphere of cyberspace carries the scent that once surrounded Wisdom.”⁷³ Platonism though, is only half the story for Michael Heim concerning cyberspace. In order to actually have a cyberspace out of the Platonic erotic drive, we need to address the modern mindset coming out of philosophical constructions like Descartes’ and mostly Leibniz’s. Built on the Platonic Eros, the modern logic and metaphysics that may be subsumed under the generic but very functional term of “calculating rationality” created a destinal move⁷⁴ that has brought us now face to face with cyberspace.

Michael Heim’s project is a genealogy in the Foucauldian (walking on Nietzschean trails, of course) sense, however it is not without flaws. His exclusive focus on cyberculture and its possible ontology has a few pitfalls that he did not seem to be able to avoid. For one, ontology in itself is a modern endeavor that might tempt the ontologist into drawing universalist schemes and the border between a particular destinal move and a destinal move of “humanity” is quite easy to trespass. Heim is delighted by the new promise of freedom coming out of the hacker ethic but this particular cyber-worldview is problematic as a political project to say the least. “Information wants to be free,” “access to computers,” “hands-on imperatives,” mistrust authority,” “do-it-yourself,” “fight the power,” “feed noise back into the system,” “surf the edge,”⁷⁵ they all sound nice, but in fact, as Vivian Sobchack points out in a well written critique,⁷⁶ they are neither progressive nor democratic. This kind of hacker ethic, argues

73. Ibid.

74. Heidegger can oftentimes be read between Heim’s lines – his first publication after all, was the translation of Heidegger’s *Metaphysical Foundations of Logic*.

75. This would be the list of imperatives making up the “cyberpunk worldview” as promoted by *Mondo 2000*.

76. Vivian Sobchack, “New Age Mutant Ninja Hackers: Reading *Mondo 2000*” in *Flame Wars: The Discourse on Cyberculture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1994) ed. Mark Dery.

Sobchack, is something more along the lines of a libertarian “bumper sticker,” as “its dreams of personal freedom and its utter faith in self-help are grounded in privilege and status-quo: male privilege, white privilege, economic privilege, educational privilege, first-world privilege.”⁷⁷

Along the same lines, we can also oppose to Michael Heim’s optimism the pessimism of a Marxist author like Stanley Aronowitz, who was actually grounding his analysis on the same Heidegger that Heim was using. This emergence of cyber-spaces as a result of a more and more computerized society has nothing liberating to it. On the contrary, we need to temper our hype about technoculture and “the coming of the cyborg” by recognizing the simple fact that these new technologies “are destroying paid work.”⁷⁸ Interpreting Heidegger’s meditation on technology in a particular way (bringing him closer to the existentialists than to poststructuralists)⁷⁹ Aronowitz’s critique had a flavor of nostalgia for a lost authenticity and a grim view on a “current” alienation; however, his critique of the “exalted” interpretations of cyberculture brings forth the same point that Vivian Sobchack was making: what about the rest of the world?

There is yet another flaw in Heim’s project that is revealed by highlighting his thoughts on the cyborg metaphor. On the one hand, Heim celebrates the cyborg freedom, but on the other hand he cautions on its “dark side:” what we need to avoid, says Heim, is to forget about our bodily existence and thus identify with the extensions only. This would seem similar to Baudrillard’s thoughts on the metastatic condition of postmodernity, but the “warning” and the “dark side” terminology points back to that very metaphysical and modern core self that the

77. Ibid.

78. Stanley Aronowitz, “Technology and the Future of Work” in *Culture on the Brink: Ideologies of Technology* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1994) ed. Gretchen Bender, Timothy Druckrey.

79. Yet still, a refreshing interpretation, given the fact that the usual Heideggerian literature is prone to encase itself in Heidegger’s specific use of language and forget that he was writing essentially in larger debates about Western culture.

digital experience seems to surpass. In fact, the extensions are everything for the cyborg, as the concept has value only insofar as it reveals the essentially culturally constructed nature of the core. Therefore, such nostalgia for a core self would only impede the understanding of what happens in the case of cyberspace and the people are constantly creating it.

As a communication medium, born out of a military technological project, the Internet does not seem to pose too much of a difference from the techno-science of Heidegger's inquiry. However, as De Certeau reminds us, the users operate within given frameworks, and we can always find an essential gap between their operations and the given framework – which was exactly the gap upon which he focused his attention. That is why we can talk today not only of an Internet, but of a cyberspace as well. Cyberspace though, is a tricky word to define, yet perhaps the best way to do it would be to use the appeal to a paradox: cyberspace is a non-physical space. It does not have a palpable existence, and we would probably safely doubt its existence in what we would call the “real world.” This paradoxical definition though, may work as in the end it reveals something of the essential nature of this phenomenon: the fact that by not existing in the “real world” but still existing as such, the only space where it can be found would not be behind our computer screens, or somewhere in the “pipeline” networks providing signals to our computer screens, but it would be in that space between our minds, in that horizontal signifying surface. So how then is cyberspace more than just a communication medium? It is everything about its conveying nature, which has writing (fixed expression) as a conveying vehicle. Yes, it is all about communication in the case of cyberspace, but we seem to face a slightly different type: cyberspace appears as an open book that continuously writes itself: as the agents of writing, by their very functioning within this medium, are only functioning as parts in an invisible mechanism.

Being a non-physical space, cyberspace has to have a fictional dimension; it is a product of our imagination, or, better said, it is a product of our minds, maintained through our communication. Seen from this perspective, cyberspace becomes of the same nature of any grand narration, of any theory, or of any belief. And that is because it has the power to seduce just by its presence. Ultimately, cyberspace is not a world, but a simulated world; cyberspace is not a space *per se*, as it is, after all, non-physical, but it is a simulated space. Glancing through the windows represented by our computer screens, we see a simulacrum simulating simulacra, and we are drawn into this mind vertigo that takes us out of the order of representation.

The movement of modern technology towards cyberspace reflects the movement of our perception of signs, as Baudrillard describes it: in the terminal, post-modern, stage the sign is not re-presenting anything anymore, but it is its own simulacrum. But as a simulacrum becomes successful only when it becomes invisible, as a story becomes a theory only when it becomes a “true” story, so is cyberspace able to capture our minds when it becomes regarded as that which is not: a physical space. Our mindsets, our cultural luggage, are always transported in this non-physical space, and used to building and maintaining this non-physical space. But when this non-physical space becomes more than what it is, that cultural luggage is returned to us with enhanced features. Being a shared space that exists in our minds, we should never underestimate the power flowing from that direction. It is not an overt power by any means, but it is that Foucauldian efficient power, reinforcing its structures in us, reapplying its discipline on our minds and bodies. And this is where the liberating function of the cyborg in the case of the digital experience may appear in full light. “Feed the noise back into the system” says one of the hacker ethics principles, and judged in this particular light we might find good value in it.

Lisa Nakamura, analyzing the experience of racial difference in online spaces,⁸⁰ came to the conclusion that users engage in “racial tourism” trying to pass a different race identity than their own real life-assigned identities. These acts are structured by racial stereotypes as well, and from this point of view they are disturbing. But “the temporary⁸¹ divorce which cyberdiscourse grants the mind from the body and the text from the body also separates the race and the body.”⁸² What Nakamura finds in this case is exactly the cyborg in full action, the moment when the core is revealed as being of the same nature as its extensions – and “race” being a biological fiction, a cultural construct of racism. Thus this kind of “racial tourism” is in fact able to jam the “ideological machine.” Along the same lines, Sherry Turkle⁸³ was analyzing from a psychological point of view, what we may call following Nakamura, “gender tourism” in online spaces. Her conclusions were similar as she argued for the need of an increased attention over the ways these acts change “real life” perspectives. Laura Miller,⁸⁴ in a response to Julian Dibble’s *Village Voice* article “Rape in Cyberspace”⁸⁵ was taking the reverse path taken by Nakamura or Turkle, showing how “real life” luggage can be transported on the “electronic frontier” – as in for instance the “classic” gender stereotype of weak women and strong protective men – calling forth for a rethinking of cyberspace regulations and, much more than that, a rethinking of cyberspace as a “new frontier,” a new radically different space to be conquered again.

80. Lisa Nakamura, “Race In/For Cyberspace: Identity Tourism and Racial Passing on the Internet” in *Race in Cyberspace* (Routledge, 2000) ed. Beth E. Kolko, Lisa Nakamura, Gilbert B. Rodman.

81. I have to underline the word “temporary.”

82. Ibid.

83. Sherry Turkle, “Who Am We?” (*Wired* 4.01, Jan. 1996).

84. Laura Miller, “Women and Children First: Gender and the Settling of the Electronic Frontier” in *Resisting the Virtual Life* (San Francisco: City Light Books, 1995) ed. James Brooks, Ian Boa.

85. An article depicting the possibility of (mental) rape in a cyber-world, alongside the ways in which that particular disturbing act determined the respective community to regulate itself and thus become a community.

We raise now the following question: what happens to the subject of this culture? We may find the key-concept that would help us answering this question in Scott Bukatman's work *Terminal Identity: The Virtual Subject in Postmodern Science Fiction*.⁸⁶ Terminal identity means a simultaneous dissolution of subjectivity in cyberspace's simulations together with its reconstruction on the new scene of "postmodern" experience: the Interface. Thus there are two modes of evoking cyberspace: the abandonment of the subject in experiencing parallel spaces – which can only mean an exit from the representational order of thinking by diluting its ontological limits – along with a stationing on the virtual scene – which can offer us an illusory habitation of a space. This is the movement of cyberspace: offering a where in nowhere, the realization of the autonomous world's collapse into another world, a world of simulations and stimulations, a world in which the main concept is the Interface.

But to further develop our inquiry and to better understand what happens with the information and the simulacrum, we need to plunge for a moment into another kind of analysis. We need to consider concepts like Marshall McLuhan's "Gutenberg Galaxy" and "Marconi Galaxy."

McLuhan's thesis⁸⁷ is that the structure of the means of communication determines the structure and the type of sensorial perception and spiritual activity of mankind (thinking is meant for communication, thus it is always organized towards its efficiency). McLuhan assumes an initial state of man, a state of harmony, in which all communication was verbal. The invention of the phonetic alphabet and, much later, the invention of printing techniques have made possible the appearance of visual culture. Through the phonetic alphabet, discourse was able to be drawn

86. Scott Bukatman, *Terminal Identity: The Virtual Subject in Postmodern Science Fiction* (Duke University Press, 1993).

87. Marshall McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of the Typographic Man* (University of Toronto Press, 1962).

on a surface (a book, for instance) and that, he argued, was enough to cancel the depth of the spoken word. The phonetic alphabet came with the birth of logocentrism, with the Aristotelian logic, and with the operational calculating rationality. This, in turn, led to the individuals' isolation (in the case of the book: I can always read by myself), to their de-tribalizing. Moreover, this isolation led to a certain aggressiveness in our relation with the real; it led to our considering of the real in terms of conquest.

McLuhan names this stage "the Gutenberg Galaxy," after the printing press' inventor's name. The twentieth century though, comes with a change: the new technologies bring about an electronic age, an age that McLuhan names the "Marconi Galaxy," according to the name of the inventor of radio. This new stage does not rely on the exacerbation of a certain sense, but on the extension of the entire nervous system required by these new technologies. In this age, says McLuhan, we can keep the gains of the "Gutenberg's Galaxy" but also we can reach again for that initial state of harmony. The essential interactivity of these new technologies makes McLuhan an enthusiast. His "global village" means the final stage of the modern thought, the postmodern – and a happy one, I might add.

Unfortunately, the flaw in this thought is just this assumption of an initial state of harmony. So this "surpassing" of modernity over this initial state, even keeping the gains of that civilization, is not at all a surpassing but a return. Instead of surpassing we should probably say refusal. And that is without even considering the fact that modernity, being an age of perpetual change, cannot be surpassed – modernity in itself is that terminal stage. But still there is something in this digital age that is bringing about a different experience. Yet this difference cannot be understood but only in the way of Heidegger's *Verwindung* (his way of interpreting this surpassing), *Verwindung* that is always *Verwindung* of *Ge-Stell* (Enframing). Metaphysics

(in essence, representing the modern thought) is fulfilled by Enframing – that is the total organization of the real with the help of technology. *Verwindung* means convalescence, restitution, but also distortion: a re-writing of Modernity. Only in such a way can the digital age be a “surpassing,” and only in such a way it can be a retrieval of a stage more likely initiating than initial.

The success of cybernetics and the appearance of this cyberspace in the shape of the Internet is a result of a change of attitude in the knowledge process, but this change is not a syncope but a fulfillment, a terminal stage. The rapid development of technologies generated by the phonetic alphabet has brought us eventually to the cybernetic way of viewing things. The Web was born from this way of thinking; it is the modern thought’s destiny. In the beginning, this idea was absolutely illuminist and humanist, and also it was not surpassing (or even trying to) its instrumental category. Its development generated a different type of experience though. And Enframing cannot find a better representation than this cyberspace. Thus, any cultural phenomenon born in this digital experience is also a meditation on the essence of technology – having the cyberspace as its representation, a cyberspace which through its double evocation (on the one hand, the invisibility of the structures that contain and transmit the information, and on the other hand, the projection of imaginary spaces behind and/or between the data on the screen) manages to take out our thought from a representational order. That is because simulation is not similarity, but similarity is the result of simulation. To simulate means to simulate similarity and identity. A successful simulacrum is always the one that we cannot distinguish from reality. In simulation we do not represent, as representation does not have the power to claim reality. Therefore, the virtual world of this cyberspace does not belong to a representational order even if this kind of thinking is that which makes it possible.

Exiting the representational order is what defines the difference of this digital experience. Dissolution of the modern subject, dissolution of ontological limits, all these are made possible through an efficient functioning of the simulacrum. For instance the web-art that we may encounter in cyberspace is already about the dissolution of the author/public opposition, opposition determined by the printing culture. Thus the work of art is freed from this relation and presents itself as a virtual space of meeting for difference. Also, in experiencing a (cyber) chat, the subject becomes nobody just because it can be anybody, and remains without consistency, without a pre-identity, a disrupted trace of a multiple ghostly dialog subject, carried on just for the sake of the simple difference. This depletion leads us in the end towards reconsidering the concept of real in the sense of a leveling in the horizontality of simulation. Our knowledge of “real” is free to become nothing more than an exploration of a virtual world.

Digital experience, following a cybernetic thought, is the result of the flat operational surface of communication. We are now multiple network terminals. What remains, in this de-realization through hyper-realization is, as Baudrillard argues (though strangely or not, without regarding cyber spaces, but looking straight at our notions of “the real”), is seduction as a single form of “knowing.” Seduction as defiance of the real, as we are not trying anymore to catch that real, to get a grip on it, but we seduce it by trying to look at it as it is: a story. This is the cyberculture after all: seduction, the abandon of the cognitive for an exploration of the possible as a displaced term from its relation with the real. It is the chance of the monoculture to avoid its metamorphosis in non-culture; and this chance appears just in this space where oscillations, fluctuations, and challenges are leading man and Being together towards losing their metaphysical determinations. In the end, this is exactly the challenge of *Abendland*: experiencing

thinking just when it shows that any thinking is produced in/towards an end (in the way Nietzsche was dreaming of conscious dreamers).

Cyberspace then, this digital experience appearing as an effect of the Internet, does not contain more gloom and doom, or more utopian promises, than do our physical “real lives.” Cyberspace is a technological and cultural construction, and thus, in order to operate it properly, we have to become, over and over again, and guided by a critical stance, its conscious builders. For that, an ontology of cyberspace is needed, indeed, but an ontology more of a hermeneutical nature (as in Gianni Vattimo’s “hermeneutical ontology” – trailing Nietzschean and Heideggerian thoughts), one that would account of the possibility and project of a cyborg anthropology. It is not about mapping a new frontier, but about orienting our attention to a place where, to follow a Foucauldian formulation, a “feature of our times” might be revealed.

UNIT TWO

CHAPTER 3: ELECTRIC LANGUAGES AND VIRTUAL REALISMS

The purpose of this chapter is to overview Michael Heim's philosophy of cyberspace. His visionary work *Electric Language, a Philosophy of Word Processing* will prove to be most useful for our general inquiry. Heim's thesis is that the technology of word processing signifies an ontological shift, as our worldview and mode of thinking is radically altered by it. I will argue against his subsequent works' ideas, as he started to consider cyberspace in a certain distinctness from nature and, thus, ended up reifying the technology. The ontology he builds then, ends up being similar to the ones himself is critiquing, the "strong" metaphysical constructions of High Modernity. I argue that his appeal to phenomenology and the lack of an explicit hermeneutical approach have caused Heim's inquiry to lose focus. Therefore we should try to keep his findings, but only after taking them through a hermeneutical filter.

We have seen so far that thinking of cyberspace in terms of frontiers seems to be a dubious enterprise. However, we can also say, with a certain ludic undertone, that whatever cyberspace is, it sure does seem to be here. Already at the end of the last millennium Michael Heim was making the point that "naïve questions like What is it? and How do I connect to it? have evolved into trickier questions like Am I for or against cyberspace? What position do I take regarding its social benefits? Now that we have crossed the electronic frontier how does our society measure cyberspace?"⁸⁸ Cyberspace is in a cultural limbo, he claims. It floats back and forth between "utopian fantasies" and "hateful cynicisms." Heim's solution to this is, of course, a middle ground: "virtual realism." What kind of middle ground though? Is it something in the manner of a Hegelian synthesis? No, explains Heim, not a logical synthesis of opposites, and not

88. Michael Heim – "The Cyberspace Dialectic," *The Digital Dialectic: New Essays on New Media* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1999) ed. Peter Lunefeld, 25.

a result of their “warfare” either, but rather something in the manner of a dialectic in the Greek sense (*dialektike*), akin to dialogue. Virtual realism then would be “an existential process of criticism, practice, and conscious communication.”⁸⁹ We have to ground ourselves in the earth before we attempt any flights through virtual skies. This is “technanalysis,” says Heim, the way of the virtual realism: a phenomenology of specific technologies, a way that “places the human being at the center of technology.”

So now we have to ask if Michael Heim is right. Should we not concern ourselves with questioning origins anymore, unless we set ourselves on this path of ongoing virtual realist dialectic? There seems to be a problem with Heim’s solution although it may not be immediately apparent. In fact, the solution appears to be so sound that we might encounter a few difficulties in making the problem apparent. Regardless, the path that his philosophy of cyberspace followed over time is something that we must address, as answers might appear, directly or indirectly.

Michael Heim is one of the pioneers of thinking dealing with cyberspace. Even to this day he is “the philosopher of cyberspace,”⁹⁰ and he was there at the beginning, at the First Conference on Cyberspace, held in Austin, Texas, May 1989, the resulting anthology⁹¹ imprinting on paper the moment when cyberspace as a concept left the realm of cyberpunk fiction and entered the academia. His essay outlined an “erotic ontology of cyberspace,” suggesting a predestined love affair of man and machine running through Western culture ever since Plato was struggling with allegories and caves.⁹² But just as this essay suggests, that there is more to cyberspace than just itself, meaning an entire cultural luggage to carry around, so

89. *Ibid.*, 41.

90. As for instance mentioned by Geert Lovink in the beginning of his interview with Heim, “Heidegger Online,” published in *Uncanny Networks: Dialogues with the Virtual Intelligentsia* (Cambridge, London: MIT Press, 2002).

91. Michael Benedikt, ed., *Cyberspace: First Steps* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991).

92. He published “The Erotic Ontology of Cyberspace” in Benedikt’s anthology but then he also integrated it in his second book *The Metaphysics of Virtual Reality* (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993).

Michael Heim started his inquiries not with cyberspace but with something predating it. The title of his first book, published in 1987, says it all: *Electric Language: A Philosophical Study of Word Processing*.⁹³ Before cyberspace was an issue, and when global interconnectivity was just an idea, Heim took notice that the new word processing technologies were about to signify a paradigmatic shift akin to the spreading of the printing press centuries before. In *Electric Language* he lays down the foundations of his thought, which will approach cyberspace in *Metaphysics of Virtual Reality* and propose a dialectical solution in *Virtual Realism*.⁹⁴

The main idea behind *Electric Language* is that the technology of word processing, although just a tool of expressing thoughts, turns on the thoughts themselves and modifies our ontological situation. It is a puzzling idea though, as we can doubt that such a relation is even possible since word processing deals with symbols of thought and not the thoughts themselves. This is the same question that Heim tries to deal with while setting up his inquiry. At closer inspection though, the question proves to be in fact a question about thought, language, and reality, and from this we may derive an answer. We operate within the Western tradition here, rooted in Ancient Greek philosophy, “the Greek logos tradition” as Heim calls it. Thought, language, and reality are intimately connected in this tradition: Plato’s theory of Ideas (it is our philosophical duty to identify the perfect other-worldly Ideas in their imperfect copies that surround us as things). No matter the form taken by this tradition, we can find this stream running through the West, a stream that gives meaning to the original question here, and also an answer: “the inquiry into word processing touches an ontological dimension, which is to say that

93. Michael Heim, *Electric Language: A Philosophical Study of Word Processing* (New Haven, London: Yale University Press, 1987).

94. Michael Heim, *Virtual Realism* (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).

the effects of word processing are not so much traceable to the computer as to the transcendental intimacy of language and reality.”⁹⁵

Word processing posits a radical difference from writing and typewriter typing, and it is a difference that we have to interpret within the development of Western thought. That is because Heim is careful not to imagine direct causalities between writing technologies and thought. To be precise, writing technologies do have a transformative power, but rather than using this power to explain historical developments we should use it to “illuminate connections between a number of historical changes.”⁹⁶ In a way, this is similar to the Foucauldian approach to the ruptures between the West’s cultural ages. Heim turns to three theoretical developments in order to stage his interpretation of word processing as a writing technology able to come together with an ontological shift: Eric Havelock, Walter Ong, and Martin Heidegger.

In his *Preface to Plato*⁹⁷ Havelock argues that there is a structural difference between Plato and his predecessors, a difference that can only be explained in the larger historical and cultural context of Ancient Greece. Plato’s dialogues and philosophy were in fact the result of an essential cultural shift that was happening at the time in the Greek world: the transition from an oral type of culture to a writing culture. Havelock sets Plato in opposition to Homer, considering Homer as representing a “ruling state of mind” of preliterate Greece. An oral culture has a different relation to language, and therefore thought, than a writing culture. In an oral culture memory and memorization have to play the main part in the development of thought. Therefore any language that makes sense needs to be a memorable language. Songs, rather than treatises; poetry, rather than philosophical analyses. Thus, Plato’s attack on poetry and poets in the

95. Michael Heim, *Electric Language: a Philosophical Study of Word Processing* (New Haven, London: Yale University Press, 1987), 31.

96. *Ibid.*, 65.

97. Eric Alfred Havelock, *Preface to Plato* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1963).

Republic can be explained in this light: it is an attack on an entire tradition, and a call to leave behind mnemonics in favor of analysis. By making Socrates the main character of his dialogues, and thus encasing him in book form, Plato contributed to the development of a world in which Socrates would not have been forcibly removed from society. Havelock goes even further though, and tries to argue that Plato's own philosophy, his theory of Ideas, is in fact, if not the result, at least deeply influenced by this cultural shift. Oral culture, focusing on mnemonics, has an essential temporal dimension: the parts of an epic poem, of a story, are designed to be told in a certain way and end up being more important than the whole. By writing down thoughts, and therefore leaving aside mnemonic needs, writing culture situates itself in a way to reconsider the world in spatial terms. The whole becomes more important than the parts, as the thought starts moving from the specific to the general. Plato's eyeing of the abstract world of perfect Ideas derives from this shift where writing comes together with an ontological shift.

Havelock's ideas had a major influence on the theorists trying to understand and expose the transition between oral cultures and writing cultures, and Heim turns to Walter Ong as a next step in his interpretation. A student of Marshal McLuhan, Ong comes close to his ideas on several occasions, yet he is always cautious not to fall under the same stance of technological determinism – which is why Heim prefers him to McLuhan. In fact Heim, more or less elegantly, waves McLuhan away, noting that “the point is not that the medium is the message. It is that language can come to be taken as a set of messages. There are elemental conditions that situate cultural symbols.”⁹⁸ Communication technology does have a structural influence, however in itself is only a part of an ontological stance and not that which determines it.

98. Michael Heim, *Electric Language: A Philosophical Study of Word Processing* (New Haven, London: Yale University Press, 1987), 23.

Ong continues Havelock's interpretation and attempts to define the two cultural ways, oral and written. Oral culture would have hearing as a dominant sense, and a specific departure from difference, as that which has to make sense is a pattern, a formula of transmission. Writing culture privileges sight, and has a characteristic spatial relation to reality, one positing a subject contemplating the world objectively. Gutenberg's printing press plays an important role in the development of this culture, by intensifying these traits; however, they were already forming up throughout (what Ong calls) chirographic (manuscript) culture. The pre-typographic man already "spearheads the dissociation of knowledge from the utterances of speakers."⁹⁹

Coming close to McLuhan (somehow – as McLuhan considers both the oral and the print stage in negative terms), Ong argues that the emergence of TV and Radio technologies manage to introduce a secondary orality in the print culture. Heim criticizes Ong at this point as, just in McLuhan's case, he starts resembling Hegelian dialectics too much. We would have the primary orality as thesis, and print culture as necessary antithesis for the electronic media's synthesis to come into being. Instead of questioning TV and Radio technologies, Heim starts a different inquiry, one that is more in tune with the line of thought he was trying to draw from Havelock and Ong: an inquiry on word processing as a new writing technology, different than the pen on paper, as well as different from the enhanced version of pen on paper – the typewriter. In order to do that, though, he needs to draw from a different theoretical direction: Martin Heidegger.

Looking at Western culture, Heidegger sees a temporal dimension to truth and a metaphorical nature to language. The truth, as he was arguing in *The Origin of the Work of Art*,¹⁰⁰ has in its essence un-truth. And that is because truth comes with the unveiling of being, being that has language as home. Heidegger, argues Heim, "sees the notion of truth in Western

99. Ibid., 62.

100. Martin Heidegger, "The Origin of the Work of Art," *Poetry, Language, Thought* (Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2001).

philosophy since Plato as gradually moving toward the apotheosis of this metaphysics of typification in the mastery over the planet through technology.”¹⁰¹ Heidegger was writing before the times of word processors and cyberspace; however, already in the 1950s he was cautioning against a tighter connection of language and machine. Heim sees that position as visionary. If we drag language through a machine it will become more akin to information rather than metaphor. “Treated as information, language becomes a transport vehicle for what is already determined existentially.”¹⁰² That is because information tells about a world already formed, while metaphor alludes to a world that is therefore in the making. And this is exactly the danger that Heidegger was noting in the case of Enframing as the essence of technology: total management of a standing reserve while being slips away unnoticed. But then, Heim wonders, is not this exactly what happens in the case of word processing? Are we not dealing with the digitization of language? That would mean that something comes to be interpreted as a sequence of numbers that cannot be experienced directly, which would point to that sequence of numbers becoming in its masked appearance the world we experience. Then “the world on our fingertips becomes the world at our fingertips,”¹⁰³ enframed.

If we are to speak of Heidegger’s Enframing though, we have to uncover his full thought. There is a danger brought about by Enframing, but, as Heidegger says, where danger lies, so does salvation. Heim also alludes to this before diving into his interpretation of word processing: “to recognize the inherent self-masking feature of word processing is to begin the description.”¹⁰⁴

101. Michael Heim, *Electric Language: A Philosophical Study of Word Processing* (New Haven, London: Yale University Press, 1987), 72.

102. *Ibid.*, 87.

103. *Ibid.*, 85.

104. *Ibid.*, 128.

The difference between writing using the word processing technology and writing using the “classical” pen and paper, or even a typewriter, stands in this veiling feature that essentially changes our relation to writing itself, and, thus, the way our thoughts are framed and encased in the world. The word processors themselves become explicit to us through a metaphorical level. We are using “windows,” “scrolls,” “pages,” and so on, when in fact the words we are inscribing in them are managed by the software in a totally different way. Heim actually goes through a short history of word processors (and their manuals) available at the time when he was writing *Electric Language* in order to show the struggles of software designers to come close to such a metaphorical level, basically concealing the alien nature of their products’ way of operating. We could make the argument that this masking metaphorical level is in fact necessary to define something that has never existed before, or, perhaps more important, to help users deal with and learn a different way of writing – the actual writing, meaning the act of casting out words into the world. Regardless, the self-masking word processor comes with something different that ends up in changing the very process of writing, even if we are surrounded by familiar metaphors that comfort our mind. Writing becomes characterized by fluidity and speed, and the process of prewriting collapses in the actual writing itself. There are no physical traces on a word processor’s metaphorical pages in the way that handwriting or typewriting would leave. Words disappear into nothingness, sentences are moved around, and letters changed, and when our fingers leave the keyboard these struggles seem to have never happened. “Unable to look at the radiant words, the writer must concentrate on the ideas and let them flow into the fingers and thus into the computer memory.”¹⁰⁵ Writing, as formulation of thoughts, is moved away from the writer and into the external self-concealing digital machine.

105. Ibid., 154.

The change in the formulation of our thoughts that comes with the use of word processors does not appear only out of the way words are being inscribed with this technology (or should we say technique?). “The sense of a sequential literature of distinct, physically separate texts is supplanted by a continuous textuality”¹⁰⁶ claims Heim. What used to be books, the word processor transforms into texts, collected and managed into data bases; they become information. But, we might ask, is this that different from just arranging books in a library? Heim argues that it is. There is a whole tradition of the book that modern metaphysics was founded upon, a tradition that is being waved away by this new technique of writing with all that it implies. Metaphysical thought is formed and informed by the book, and not just as a technological limitation. The tradition of the book presupposes the scribal hand of the authors, their contemplative transcendence, and the integrity of their private mind: this is to say the creative solitude of the subject. The book is an artifact that is a result of that objective struggle of the subject, and as an artifact it calls to an essential separation, or distinctiveness of the author. The way the word processor operates erases all this. The texts inscribed in the word processor have a standardized look, they look already “public” even when they are not yet or supposed to be. The digitized books are thus leveled on the same surface with our immediate private thoughts, and all can be neatly managed in the data base, challenged forth as a standing reserve.

Self publishing, even just as a possibility, makes the distinctiveness of the authors fade away. Their persistent self identity blurs on the surface of the screen, in the machine managed data base. Heim argues that the very ontological foundations of our world are being modified by this. Writing, as inscribed thought, is an essential part of the world, as the world is being told to us through writing. The “Total Management” under which the written pieces call to us from within the word processor is transferred to the way we apprehend realities as well. “The human

106. Ibid., 162.

being becomes part of the resources of an information system, including word processing, which spurs on accelerated productivity.”¹⁰⁷ Language turned to information, exactly what Heidegger was envisioning and warning in the 1950s. Word processing and its self-masking operation come with the Enframing.

Word processors conceal their own functioning by the use of familiar non digital metaphors. Their efficiently managed storage of texts is also as concealing as it is revealing. On the one hand, we might contemplate the possibility of dealing with the possibility of having a universal library at hand, standing in reserve behind the computer screen. On the other hand, the access to this library is limited by the logic of indexing. We do not need to learn how to “walk” behind the computer screen to search this library, but we need to learn how to make the right calls, how to challenge it effectively so that hopefully we will find whatever it is that we are searching. The challenge itself is not on the side of the user only, though, but on the side of the library builder as well: the library needs to be taught how to answer our calls as well. The concealing happens on the level of the dissolution of books as well. They lose their artifact nature, artifact of a subject, leveling that subject on the anonymous surface of a continuous textuality. The result is an entire inscribed life of humanity as a whole, “with no essential reference to a human behind it.”¹⁰⁸ Thus, a play of possibilities starts dominating, or replacing, the consistency of vision, as we move away from the contemplative concentration asked for by the book towards a “slight hypnosis” induced by the word processor. The word processor’s final way of concealing is the concealing of the writing act itself, a hypnotic forgetfulness that continuously detaches us as authors from the text we are authoring behind the screen. From this

107. *Ibid.*, 200.

108. *Ibid.*, 213.

point of view, this continuous forgetting of the writing act might be taken as a reclaiming of a lost orality, but rather as infusion than synthesis.

The essential self-masking feature of word processing fits into the logic of Enframing unveiled by Heidegger. Language turned to information within this concealment brings about the danger in the way Enframing *is* the danger. But where danger lies so does salvation. The forgetting of being, slipped away from this surface of continuous textuality, can be undone by the essential questioning of this technology:

“Only through sustained questioning can the psychic dimension be held open so as to create a free interplay between mind and machine. To assert an isomorphic compatibility of mind with machine or, conversely, to assert an absolute independence of mind and machine are equally tantamount to shutting down the free interplay within which the relationship of mind and computer can be held in question and formulated anew.”¹⁰⁹

By questioning the technology of word processing, Heim pulls out a thread that takes our thought towards unraveling something larger. His 1987 philosophy of word processing is already calling for his subsequent project: an ontology of cyberspace.

Heim’s second book is a collection of essays and papers that he wrote and delivered on various occasions after he published his *Electric Language*. It is a book that traces the development of his thought since his questioning of the word processing technology. It is a book that, as a questioning in itself, tries to deal with the inevitable spread of the mindset behind, and formed by, word processing. The ontological shift that he unveiled in *Electric Language* proved to be less subtle than he believed in the mid 1980s. When in 1989 he experienced a virtual reality simulator for the first time, the enormity of the shift became apparent: “the ontological shift

109. Ibid., 247.

through digital symbols became in VR a full-fledged, aggressive, surrogate reality.”¹¹⁰ Born in the cybernetic dimension, suggested (or rather implied) by the permanently networked computers presenting us with a subsisting “space,” VR appears to be the thread that unravels our world. The question that troubles Heim is “how much can humans change and still remain human as they enter the cyberspace of computerized realities?”¹¹¹ He wanders away from just a philosophy of word processing and starts building a *Metaphysics of Virtual Reality*.

The networking of computers forming a distinct cybernetic space appears to be the logical extension of the functioning of word processors. Heim does not imply causality here, and the fact that his thought is heavily informed by Heidegger should lead us to understand that. When he was questioning the essence of word processing, he was questioning the ground on which this technology is made possible and functions. The networked computers and the “cyberspace of computerized realities” belong to the same ground as word processing. Perhaps we should refer to this, as he does in one of his chapter titles from *The Metaphysics of Virtual Reality*, as “thought processing” instead. In fact, thought processing would be the key term to understanding the ontological shift that he is working to unveil. By using word processing, we build knowledge data bases. The electronic libraries containing our own writings but also those of our colleagues and those of past authors, historical documents, entire encyclopedias, and so on, are all stored in the digital memories. Thus we “naturally hope that the computer will in turn help mop up the mess.”¹¹² They do, but the way they do deserves a bit of attention. Searching these data bases – be they on our hard drive or on different hard drives that we would access through the network – requires key words or key phrases and an elementary search logic: the Boolean logic. A search logic though, is in itself a way of questioning. A way of questioning

110. Michael Heim, *The Metaphysics of Virtual Reality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), xiii.

111. *Ibid.*, xii.

112. *Ibid.*, 12.

always implies a world as much as it questions it, as the answers are always shaped by the way the questions are framed. Questioning ways of questioning would unveil that world to us. Heim neatly summarizes: “Socrates pushed for personal definitions; Descartes and Galileo taught scientists to pose questions with empirical hypotheses; McLuhan teased our awareness with enigmatic slogans; Heidegger drew on a scholarly history of reality; and Wittgenstein worried over odd locutions.”¹¹³ When the knowledge of the world we interrogate is in a data base we have to use Boolean terms. These terms then guide the way we model that world, as computers are revealed to have a structuring imprint on our knowledge.

The Boolean logic is essentially different than classical Aristotelian logic. It does not work with statements but with symbols. By treating and understanding language as a system of symbols, Boolean logic ends up inverting the relation between language and symbols. Direct statements become an instance of mathematical relations. “Logical argument became a branch of calculation.”¹¹⁴ What happens in this case, argues Heim, is that symbolic logic operates a dissolution of meaning, as knowledge needs to be framed in a system of mathematical symbols that would become thus operable: knowledge becomes information. There is an essential difference between computerized browsing and “classical” book browsing. They both begin with an intuition, a more or less formulated question – a wonder, we might say – but then they become divergent. Computerized browsing requires us to know in advance what we are looking for. The world we question is given to us through the tunneled vision walled in by the preset symbolic framework. Book browsing requires none of that. As artifacts of subjectivity, books are openings into other intuitions. Book browsing is not as efficient as computerized browsing when we think we are looking for something specific. However, book browsing displays a

113. *Ibid.*, 15.

114. *Ibid.*, 17.

serendipitous feature: the inquiry glides freely through a realm of open possibilities. In fact, book browsing, with all its un-strictness, requires us to place ourselves into an openness in which we may catch a glimpse of something we were not looking for but are happy to find. There is a timelessness to book browsing, that Heim points to, a timelessness that brings the past of writing into the present of browsing. This, he continues to argue, is slightly, but essentially modified in the case of computerized browsing. The past of writing, instead of being brought, is diluted in the present of browsing. The timelessness of the computerized search is a convergence, in the manner of concentration, of past and present due to speed but also due to the nature of the symbolic logic behind the search. The old stops being old and becomes obsolete, because “information depends on revision and updating.”¹¹⁵

The way of functioning displayed by word processing turning thought processing is not the only thread we can use to unfurl what it is about the ontological shift. The way information is displayed to us on the computer screen, the way the text is written within the surface of continuous textuality is what we call hypertext. It is still a text but with added dimensions. It is a text in which each word may have multiple facets to explore. The exploration though does not happen on the intuitive level of language, responding to memory and culture. Instead, it happens on the screen, on the surface, *hic et nunc*, (en)framed by the very texture of the text. Apparently built just as a reference tool, the hypertext, through the way of its functioning, becomes something of its own kind. The references come to inhabit the same place with the text that calls them, and, thus, the distinction between primary texts and secondary texts, is collapsed in the

115. Ibid., 27. I cannot help not to share his slightly disturbed wonder, and in the same spirit of dark irony re-quote his quote taken from the otherwise probably very useful book *Legal Care for your Software* (Berkeley, California: Nolo Press, 1987) by Daniel Remer and Stephen Elias: “Any book more than two years old is of questionable value. Books more than five years old are a menace. OUT OF DATE = DANGEROUS.” Heim calls them “a new breed of information publishers” as that warning does not come from the darkest pits of their thought but rather from this very mindset belonging to the ontological shift brought about by thought processing. To point back to the first chapter here, I would say that they continue with success the modern logic of progress towards the very metastasis of the idea.

specific concentrated timelessness of computerized reading and writing. Beyond the presence of a hypertext on a computer screen though, we can trace a larger comprehensive and encompassing hypertext framed by the networked computers. This observation, alongside the acknowledgement that hypertext existed as a possibility at the birth of computers, makes Heim point to the origin of computers themselves as a mindset belonging to the Western seventeenth century.

The connection between the networked computers operating the way they do and early Modernity is the struggle to build a world language. Heim focuses on Leibniz and his foundation of modern logic as a science of symbols. Leibniz constructed what we may call today computer prototypes: calculating machines. His machines though, obviously, were not capable of deductive reasoning, but because of the reasons behind their constructions and the goals Leibniz was trying to ultimately achieve through the development of such devices, they come very close to what today's networked computers are setting up to do. Leibniz dreamt of uniting the world in one political structure, and the development of a universal language based on rational symbols would make the creation of such structure inevitable. Wars would cease, quarrels would be solved, and differences negotiated, only if the opposing parties would have a common communicative ground, but one necessarily built upon rational, logical frames. Since all humans are gifted with the ability to reason, we would only need something that would reasonably solve disputes beyond any doubt: something like a calculating machine. "Once disagreements in attitude or belief are translated into matching symbols, they can yield to logical operations."¹¹⁶ In order to operate, the calculating machine would need to ingest the sum of human knowledge and digest it according to the rational principles upon which its system of symbols would be built.

Heim claims that Leibniz was inspired by a premodern sensibility. It is about God, and the relation of humans to God. Humanity needs to aspire towards the divine perfection. "Human

116. Ibid., 37.

knowledge, thought Leibniz, should emulate this *visio dei*, this omniscient intuitive cognition of the deity.”¹¹⁷ It would be a stretch to call this thought premodern, but perhaps Heim does so in order to differentiate Leibniz’s ideas from a certain way philosophy came to be practiced at the times of “high” Modernity. The systems resembling blueprints of reality constructed by Kant, Hegel, or Fichte appear to be different from the incipient Leibnizian hypertextuality. Heim argues that these authors tried to articulate everything, which is not what happens in the case of a hypertext. However, both the Leibnizian *visio dei* and the all encompassing high Modern philosophical systems in fact share the same tendency and strive towards an infinite representation of the world. Of course, there is a difference in method, as we have to flip page after page in order to access that representation in the Kantian or Hegelian tomes, but even in Leibniz’s case, that representation needs to be first ingested by his calculating machine. It is true that, while trying to separate themselves from earlier premodern traditions, Descartes or Berkeley still felt the need to appeal to the divine as an indubitable anchor into the reality explored by their subject, but that is different from the Leibnizian dream of a universal rational language. If we follow the Nietzschean (and, by extension, the Heideggerian) critique of Modernity we see that the removal of God, and hence the primacy of the subject, is exactly that which leaves room for such projections of divinity. Hypertext’s divine feature, its omniscience in the manner of simultaneity, may appear detached from the temporal logic of progress, but in fact it follows it all the way to its ultimate consequences. The old becoming obsolete, that Heim actually referred to earlier, is something at the end of Modernity indeed, but entirely a result of it.

Regardless of hypertext’s modern or premodern roots, one thing appears to be certain. Spread over the networked computers it emulates the divine simultaneous omniscience. The emulation, of course, is not one and the same as that which it emulates. Working through

117. Ibid., 38.

hypertext, we might feel as if accessing a divine-like relation to the world, but that is all but an illusion. “Human users remain on the level of symbols, as they are not really gods and do not see things in a simultaneous present all at once. Total information is the illusion of knowledge, and hypertext favors this illusion by letting the user hop around at the speed of thought.”¹¹⁸ Heim becomes prescriptive at this point. Sensing the danger posed by the loss of temporality in the construction of meanings and the transformation of meaning making through the data structuring symbolic logics, he urges us to anchor ourselves in the world beyond the digital experience. The stance we need to adopt is skepticism towards any structures that deliver information to us coupled with a meaning making process that would have its starting point outside the hypertext’s “heaven:” “we can only hope that the postmodern hyperflood will not erode the gravity of experience behind the symbols, the patient, painstaking ear and eye for meaning.”¹¹⁹ Only in this way would we be able to avoid the passivity that cyberspace may induce to us – as the system’s language that we strive to learn ends up in governing our minds.

Cyberspace, meaning that which comes with the networked computers, is closely related to the Platonic Eros. In fact, Heim argues that there is an “erotic basis for cyberspace,” erotic understood as a drive to extend our being (and because he is referring to Plato’s understanding of Eros) on a physical level but also on the level of our psyche. The drive to create cyber entities signifies a love affair between us and technology. Philosophy is of the same nature. It is a love affair with wisdom. It is a love affair predating our marriage to technology. However, more than just pre-dating, it actually pre-figures. Leibniz’s dreams of calculating machines operating on universal language, gets translated into the “hypertext heaven.”

118. Ibid., 38.

119. Ibid., 40.

Cyberspace carries “the scent that once surrounded Wisdom. The world rendered as pure information not only fascinates our eyes and minds but also captures our hearts. We feel augmented and empowered. Our hearts beat in the machines. This is Eros.”¹²⁰

Heim sees an underlying fault to this love affair, though. The illusion of omniscience in which we are pushed by hypertextuality brings the very end of the affair. The Platonic erotic drive to extend our being by constructing cyber entities is endangered by Leibniz’s computer God. If no unknown remains ahead of us, if all is revealed and neatly structured and classified, rendered fit for calculation, then the desire fades, and philosophy disappears. “The computer God’s-eye view robs you of your freedom to be fully human.”¹²¹ Heim prefigures his later virtual realism by drawing our attention to the outside world again (outside the network). Fortunately, as he seems to sigh in relief, we still need eyes and ears and fingers, we still need our physical bodies grounded in our physical world in order to function – and that means in order to function in cyberspace as well. In our dealings with cyberspace, we need to constantly be reminded of its “living genesis,” and we need to be reminded of “the heartbeat behind the laboratory.”¹²²

Heim did not write his *Metaphysics of Virtual Reality* as a book in a classical sense. It is a collection of essays written over time and, because of this, we can actually trace the way his philosophy of cyberspace evolves. The seeds of what he would later call “virtual realism” are already there, although in an incipient form. Before moving on to virtual realism though, we should, perhaps, pay a little bit of attention to the way he defines and interrogates virtual reality in relation to cyberspace.

120. Ibid., 85.

121. Ibid., 105.

122. Ibid., 107.

Virtual reality and cyberspace belong to the same essence. However, if cyberspace, the network, is already here, virtual reality is still at a stage of pre-building. As a technology, virtual reality displays a feature that sets it apart: there is a certain self-awareness that we can talk about in its case. As it is being built, virtual reality seems to continuously search for its own definition, and this defining process is an intimate part of its building. Heim identifies seven distinct trends among the pioneers of virtual reality research, trends that continue to inform the struggles of defining and, subsequently, building something that we may call virtual reality. Thus, we may have a virtual reality in the moment in which we realize a perfect audio-video simulation of a space. Or we may have one when we manage to build an interactive space through an electronic representation. Or we may call a virtual reality any space built artificially. Or we may claim that only a whole physical presence in simulated space can be considered a virtual reality. Or we may also claim that we do not need physical presence but “tele-presence” (present in a space from a remote location¹²³). Or maybe we would finally deal with a virtual reality when we are able to accomplish a full-body immersion unencumbered by sophisticated mounted devices (Myron Krueger’s approach: using a system of cameras and screens). Or maybe we would also need to couple this kind of immersion with a network architecture (do we really have a world if we are alone in it?). But, we may ask at this point, what is so special about this continuous search for identity? Heim answers by pointing to the fact that this search is in actuality what we may call “the essence of VR.” The essence of virtual reality is a Holy Grail. It is a continuous quest for a better world:

123. Heim tells an interesting story – in the chapter called “Nature and Cyberspace” from *Virtual Realism* (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998) – about what was behind *Electric Language*. Initially, he wanted to research the human presence in outer space, so he conducted a series of interviews at NASA in the early 1980s. To his surprise, though, he found out that NASA was not planning to send people in outer space but rather machines. NASA was more focused on building virtual reality environments according to the logic of telepresence, which would allow us to be in outer space without actually being physically present there – nowadays Mars rovers are a good example for that. This realization made him scrap his initial project and eventually led him to the questionings that we are exploring here.

“Perhaps the essence of VR ultimately lies not in technology but in art, perhaps art of the highest order. Rather than control or escape or entertain or communicate, the ultimate promise of VR may be to transform, to redeem our awareness of reality – something that the highest art has attempted to do and something hinted at in the very label of *virtual reality*, a label that has stuck, despite all objections, and that sums up a century of technological innovation.”¹²⁴

The claim that the essence of virtual reality has an esoteric nature will not seem so startling if we take a closer look at what the different approaches to building it have in common: simulation. We are indeed continuously searching for the simulation and that is because every simulation is meant to vanish – the perfect simulation cannot be distinguished anymore from what used to be called, until then, real.

Heim tempers his rather apparent enthusiasm from “The essence of VR”¹²⁵ in his third book, *Virtual Realism*.¹²⁶ Written after what he called “the cyberspace backlash,” *Virtual Realism* explores the necessity of a negotiation between two warring camps referring to cyberspace in opposite ways: the naïve realists and the network idealists. The idealists celebrate the global connectivity that cyberspace brings and increasingly push towards a networked world. The realists find themselves uneasy with the electronic collective and push towards a return to unmediated communities as the only space where human beings can mature physically, morally, and socially. These attitudes, says Heim, are two sides of the same coin. It would be pointless to even try to side with either of them. Instead, he proposes something else, a middle ground, an “uneasy balance,” something that we may call “virtual realism.” “We must balance the idealist’s enthusiasm for computerized life with the need to ground ourselves more deeply in the felt earth

124. *Ibid.*, 124.

125. *Ibid.*, 109-128.

126. Michael Heim, *Virtual Realism* (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).

affirmed by the realist as our primary reality.”¹²⁷ This middle ground though, explains Heim, is not akin to a Hegelian synthesis, it is not a result of logic, but a search for a middle path that would go *through*¹²⁸ the opposites: “virtual realism is an existential process of criticism, practice, and conscious communication.”¹²⁹

There are ten signposts on this path of virtual realism, guidelines that, argues Heim, should inform any attempt at technalysis – virtual realism’s method. First we have to be clear about the strong meaning of virtual reality – what virtual reality actually is and not just take it as a metaphor. Second, computers do bring a new layer of reality, but we should acknowledge it for what it is and restrain ourselves from extending it over all possible realities. Third, we have to acknowledge that the possible monstrosity of computers is in no way different than their also possible “angelic” side: it is ultimately our doing how we build and use this technology. Then we have to admit that virtual worlds come to parallel and not re-present reality. Also, “VR transubstantiates but does not imitate life.”¹³⁰ Another essential guideline would be not to criticize but critique the language used by engineers in their building of new cybernetic entities or space. “Now is the time for constructive criticism, while the electronic layer of reality remains largely in prototype on the drawing boards.”¹³¹ Also, we have to realize that realism in VR does not come from scientific calculation but from the possibility of dwelling it. The reverse of that is that VR may intersect real space as well, with a real possibility of enhancing our lives. Lastly, VR can be in itself a healing tool for “the bio-psychic imbalances created by computer technology.”¹³²

127. Ibid., 43.

128. He alludes here to Heidegger’s *Verwindung*.

129. Ibid., 44.

130. Ibid., 48.

131. Ibid.

132. Ibid.

These “signposts” are in fact merely calls to a more rigorous language in our approach to virtual technologies, which is to say a language that would foster awareness, that would remember and practice genealogies, and interrogate the essence of things “before they become the invisible furniture of our daily life.”¹³³ From this point of view the guidelines of virtual realism do continue his project that he started in *Electric Language*. His “technanalysis” needs to have a historical dimension, the phenomenology of specific technologies needs to not lose sight of the “big picture,” of the cultural genealogy that beckons us in our use of technology.

As I was mentioning before, virtual realism has a few problems. There is a subtle distortion, a certain slippage of thought, that happens along the trajectory that Heim’s thinking has taken over time. It is subtle because virtual realism appears to be consistent with the thought frame unveiled during the interrogation of word processing. Therefore, perhaps we should interrogate this consistency itself.

One thread that we can use in order to unfurl this questioning of consistency would be to actually look a bit further into the way Heim tries to detail his virtual realism. Hints and clues to this are already spread around in his writings since *The Metaphysics of Virtual Reality*. Eventually, in *Virtual Realism* he stumbles across a certain questioning that we might find revealing. What is the relation between nature and cyberspace, he asks. Are they opposite or just different? Do they exclude each other or are they able to coexist? If they are different, exactly how different are they? To answer these questions, he recalls one of his conversations with an environmentalist, Svend Larsen (who, in 1993, was the director of the Humanities Research Center in Odense, Denmark). They were trying to find out how can we define nature by appealing to a series of reactions (feelings – “gut feelings” as Larsen described them¹³⁴) that

133. Ibid., 47.

134. Ibid., 156.

Western human beings would develop in relation to nature conceived as a whole. The list of features Larsen came up with was: infinite, inaccessible, overwhelming in power, fearsome, wild, and primal. Heim takes all these features and applies them to cyberspace. As a result, he argues, we can talk about cyberspace as generating a feeling of infinity. We can travel through the constant growing electronic space and know that we will never reach its “end.” Also, as with nature, cyberspace does not give itself to us readily. Because the cybernetic surface has no center, no top-down hierarchy, its learning connects intimately with exploration. Moreover, its sheer vastness may create an overwhelming feeling: “with hundreds of thousands of users reading news groups, with millions of messages circling the globe every day, the matrix looms like a mountain on another planet.”¹³⁵ Cyberspace is wild too, social hierarchies blur and disappear, while virtual communities create their own morality and games – hence a tendency to think of cyberspace as a frontier, like, say, in the case of the Electronic Frontier Foundation trying to preserve the distinctness of cyberspace as a Jeffersonian democracy. Ultimately, cyberspace is primal, unintelligible because the technology upon which is built is essentially opaque, or rather self-masking. Heim sees here a certain theological feature of cyberspace: just as God represents a source and an end – traditionally meaning that from which we come but also that to which we strive – so cyberspace, in its opaqueness, posits the mystery of our origins and beckons us with its perfection.

All these features, applied to cyberspace, unveil its “psychic framework.” However, after Heim reviews them, he feels the need to revisit the original question. The psychic framework of cyberspace seems to lead us in the direction of network idealists, which is something that a virtual realism would have to avoid. “This line of thinking floats into the stratosphere of idealism

135. *Ibid.*, 159.

where the net and the web drift loose of all moorings.”¹³⁶ Cyberspace then, comes to engulf reality as reality gets transposed into it by the very notion of psychic framework. In fact, a psychic framework is already something apart from nature “because we began with human feelings, not with nature.” As a result, we might make use of cyberspace analysis in the way of a psychic framework as a starting point, but this analysis would have to be continued by “grounding” ourselves back into the real world, by positing and then trying to maintain a relation between cyberspace and nature as two distinct things. This would become even clearer if we would read another of Heim’s essays belonging to the same period: “Virtual Reality and the Tea Ceremony.”¹³⁷

Heim understands the Japanese tea ceremony as a technology design to recover an original dwelling in the natural world. The radical artificiality of the ceremony itself detaches the participants from the natural world, just in order to allow them to recover their lost connection with it. The attempt to unfurl the psychic framework of cyberspace needs to be an endeavor akin to a technology like the tea ceremony. In this way it can be a starting point that avoids the derail towards network idealism. In fact, the goals and means of the tea ceremony can be applied to cyberspace in the same way our existential report to nature can. There are four features of the tea ceremony that heal the breach between humans and nature, says Heim, and these features can and do relate to cyberspace. Harmony, respect, purity, and serenity, are all features that may connect cyberspace with the real world. Harmony, because it is not enough for a space to be distinctly consistent, but it needs to be coherent as well. Our building of cyberspace would need to imply the space as a whole, as a possibility of habitation. Respect means acknowledging the presence of the other, which implies distance. While the networked computers might seem to

136. Ibid., 161.

137. Michael Heim, “Virtual Reality and the Tea Ceremony,” in *The Virtual Dimension* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1998), ed. John Beckmann.

connect minds, we always need to remind ourselves of the essential physical distance implied by this connectivity. The virtual people of virtual communities have real people behind them. Purity here refers to the simplicity of a space, which in relation to cyberspace would have to generate a certain restraint that, again, would keep its essential emptiness (as a space) vivid in our minds. If purity appears somehow fragile, being easily cluttered with junk, so is serenity, which can only exist in privacy. The serene loneliness of a terminal may disappear in the noise of connectivity, which, in turn, makes us lose our focus, and, ultimately, ourselves.

This is the prescriptive side of virtual realism and it does not sound all that bad. We would probably all do better without the childish slants and rants of community trolls, without the mountains of junk cluttering our mail boxes, without the aggressive ads and scams calling us and polluting our visions, and without the bits of information that we were not looking for and do not need, that get thrown at us while we simply walk through cybernetic space. Should we add here that we would also probably do better without a confusing, incoherent, complex and unpredictable world? Perhaps we should not. Perhaps instead we should ask a different question: is it that different out there, in the network, than it is here in our real reality? For our purposes here, the answer to this question matters less than the reason to ask it.

The distinctiveness of nature and cyberspace appears to be one essential flaw that somehow managed, at some point in time, to slip into Heim's trail of thought. His initial questioning did not imply this at all. On the contrary, painstakingly trying to avoid any kind of technological determinism, he argued for a phenomenological way of inquiry. His philosophy of cyberspace is a phenomenology of specific technologies, a "technanalysis" as he later comes to name it. Being a phenomenology, it is centered on the human dimension, not analyzing the technology as a distinct in itself but the uses of technology and its creation. He was staying true

to Heidegger's questioning of technology, that is of its essence, which is to be found in a human way. The ontological shift that he was arguing for in *Electric Language* was happening, as he was saying, on the "tectonic plates of culture," the word processing technology being a very fit digging site for observing that shift. The middle ground of virtual realism, although seemingly close, is in fact as far away from this philosophical stance as possible. He describes virtual realism in the way of the Heideggerian *Verwindung*. It is a middle ground, not as a synthesis of network idealism and naïve realism, but as a passing through that would, thus, surpass them. But is this similar to *Verwindung*, as a surpassing of metaphysics in the way of passing through?

Verwindung has an essential historical dimension – a condition of possibility for passing through after all – and so does Heim's virtual realism, to a point. It is when he tries to become prescriptive, passing through by looking ahead, that things start to fall apart and the passing through fails. Holding cyberspace and nature in distinctness and maintaining their relation (in the sense of maintenance) ultimately ends up reifying technology and losing sight of the very human being he was so cautious not to lose. After all, he framed his inquiry as a phenomenology just so that we would hold on, or recuperate the memory of our physical being. When technology becomes distinct, and, thus, when it leaves the human sphere, the inquiry we pose to this technology has nothing left but the illusion of a response. An ontology is built, indeed, but an ontology as empty, as detached from being and self-contained, as the philosophical systems of High Modernity that Heim was critiquing.

There is a second flaw that comes together with the first and slips into Heim's trail of thought. However, this second flaw might offer us a more or less unexpected way out, and allow us to recuperate the original inquiry into the essence of cyberspace. Heim talks about a dark side of cyberspace and virtual reality. They operate a disembodiment in the sense of a forgetting of

the body – hence his virtual realism, his practice and thinking of balance, and his calls to the natural world. Things are bit complicated here, though. The forgetting of the body seems to be akin to the Heideggerian forgetting of being – as the forgetting of the event of being. In this case, we would talk about a forgetting of the physical being as originating moment in the experience of cyberspace. The virtual realism's balance, then, would aim to continuously recall that being as it is being forgotten. This forgetting, though, forgets something important. As long as we focus on disembodiment in the essence of cyberspace, the forgetting of the body is already happening. Its distinctness as a space, its out of the human sphere, that comes with this way of thinking about disembodiment, sees to this happening. If we are to take a closer look at this disembodiment, though, we might be able to observe that it is only a condition of possibility for something else. That something else, as paradoxical as it may sound, is in fact embodiment. The experience of cyberspace is participatory, we are not actually disembodied ghostly spirits haunting around, and we are not sightseeing passengers, but interacting actors. What seems to be disembodiment is in fact part of an embodiment as an opening of possibilities for dwelling. Moreover, this dialectic of disembodiment and embodiment calls for an interpretive framework that does not treat technology in a relationship with the human, but as part of the human.

Ultimately, that is what Heidegger's questioning of technology leads us to. We can speak of an ontological difference between space and cyberspace, but in order to render that difference significant we would have to frame it within a hermeneutical ontology – where the difference would reveal itself on the level of language, an essential part of human being. In the end, perhaps this is what Heim is missing: an awareness of the hermeneutical nature and beginnings of his phenomenology.

CHAPTER 4: THE HERMENEUTICAL *KOINÉ*

This chapter deals with a question of hermeneutics, partly to explain what was missing from Heim's project, and partly to explain that, within a late modern context, ontology needs to be hermeneutical in order to escape the metaphysical categories that it tries to overcome. I use the works of Gianni Vattimo, one of the most prominent hermeneuticians today, but I also make use of Umberto Eco's clarifications, in order to describe hermeneutics as a philosophical theory of interpretation. Following Eco and Vattimo (and according to a Gadamerian remark) I argue that hermeneutics is indeed a *koiné* (common language) of our times, a discipline of the mind more than a philosophical discipline, an attitude providing a democratic approach to the world.

If a hermeneutical approach seems to be missing from Heim's project in order for us to reach an answer to the initial questioning of cyberspace we have started here, then we should stop for a moment now and take a look at hermeneutics. What is hermeneutics, then? As long as we associate the word with something else, the answer seems to be easy enough. Biblical hermeneutics, literary hermeneutics, or juridical hermeneutics, they are theories of interpretation related to certain fields of intellectual life. After all, this is what the Greek etymology of the word points to: interpretation. What happens though if we are to consider the word just by itself? It becomes a discipline. Therefore perhaps it would be useful to reformulate the question as "what is the meaning of the discipline we call hermeneutics?"

Hermeneutics as a discipline – this word is nothing but confusing at this point, but let us dwell on it for a while, temporary accepting its opaqueness for the sake of understanding – is a

development of the twentieth century's intellectual history, gravitating around a Western tradition sometimes identified as "continental thought." It is a philosophical trend indebted to Nietzsche and Heidegger, and developed by thinkers like Gadamer, Pareyson, Eco, Ricoeur, and Vattimo. At this point in time,¹³⁸ Gianni Vattimo seems to be the most ardent proponent of hermeneutics. He worked directly with Gadamer but also with Luigi Pareyson (for whom both he and Umberto Eco were students and disciples). In fact, Gadamer himself, contributing to a festschrift honoring Vattimo's sixtieth birthday,¹³⁹ credited him for the prevalence of hermeneutics in contemporary philosophy:

He has "diffused his philosophical thought throughout America, France, Eastern Europe and, in general, throughout the whole realm of philosophical culture, along with the key concept of hermeneutics. Vattimo has specifically called hermeneutics a *koiné*: the common language in which philosophical thought after Heidegger and Wittgenstein, after Quine, Derrida and Ricoeur, has spread everywhere; virtually a universal philosophical language."

Indeed, Vattimo's *koiné* seems to be a key concept in understanding contemporary hermeneutics. *Koiné* is the Greek word designating the Greek dialect providing a *lingua franca* for the eastern Mediterranean regions from the time of Alexander the Great (the Christian New Testament, for instance, is originally written in *koiné*) and until it became the Byzantine Greek that developed in the Eastern Roman Empire. Contemporary hermeneutics as *koiné* then would come to signify a common stance, idiom, climate, or sensibility of Western culture.¹⁴⁰

138. And now that Gadamer has passed away at the age of 102...

139. *Interpretazione ed Emancipazione: Studi in onore di Gianni Vattimo* (Turin: Cortina editore 1996), ed. Gianni Carchia and Maurizio Ferraris, 7.

140. It is worth noting that Zygmunt Baumann had similar ideas about the role of the intellectual in the contemporary culture in his book *Legislators and Interpreters: On Modernity, Post-modernity, and Intellectuals* (Polity Press, New Ed, 1989)

“In this very generic sense,” explains Vattimo,¹⁴¹ “which bears no more precise definition, not only are Heidegger, Gadamer, Ricoeur and Pareyson hermeneutic thinkers, but so are Habermas and Apel, Rorty and Charles Taylor, Jacques Derrida and Emmanuel Lévinas. What links these writers is not a common thesis but rather what Wittgenstein (another hermeneutic thinker in the broad sense intended here) called a family resemblance; or, more modestly still, a sense of family, a common atmosphere.”

However, as comforting as this sense of family is, the pervasiveness of contemporary hermeneutics, its becoming *koiné*, makes it somehow difficult not to lose sight of what it actually means. Therefore it is exactly this becoming *koiné* that needs to be questioned in order to arrive at the meaning of hermeneutics.

A meaning of hermeneutics can only be a hermeneutical meaning though, as uncovering it would also be a hermeneutical act. Since the ground of contemporary hermeneutics is the Nietzschean observation (from his Notebooks, 1886-1887), much quoted by hermeneutic thinkers, that “there are no facts, only interpretations, and this is an interpretation too,” in trying to more precisely define hermeneutics Vattimo does not attempt to oppose an interpretation to another but rather to draw a few lines of resistance,¹⁴² generating an interpretation that “infers from the extent of the current popularity of hermeneutics in its various forms.”¹⁴³ Thus, hermeneutics would present us with two poles of thinking, two limits of interpreting hermeneutics that we can connect to two of its most influential authors: Heidegger and Gadamer. Of course, this does not mean that authors like Pareyson or Ricoeur were not as influential, nor does it mean that Heidegger and Gadamer present us with a unified theory; however, by trying to

141. Gianni Vattimo, *Beyond Interpretation: The Meaning of Hermeneutics for Philosophy* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1997), 1.

142. To use Eco's expression actually.

143. *Ibid.*, 2.

trace hermeneutics through the works of Heidegger and Gadamer we may come across its defining and constitutive characteristics. Referring to these authors would be then a good enough way to picture hermeneutics.

“Seen thus,” proceeds Vattimo, “hermeneutics reveals its constitutive characteristics: those of ontology and *Sprachlichkeit*, linguisticity. In spite of all the emphasis that Heidegger places on language, especially in the later phase of his thought, he regards interpretation primarily from the point of view of the meaning of Being: in spite of all the emphasis that Gadamer places on ontology, interpretation is thought primarily from the point of view of language.”¹⁴⁴

The connection between ontology and language within hermeneutics comes with a certain way of understanding truth. First of all, the hermeneutical *koiné* finds that there are truths outside the scientific experience, but then it brings into this the view the idea according to which there are no truths outside interpretations. In a way we can point back to the Nietzschean “there are no facts, only interpretations” but the recognition of the hermeneutical truth outside scientific experience goes even further back. In another way then we can point back to the Kantian philosophy, precisely to a certain moment of it shared within the contemporary *koiné*. Scientific propositions have their own truth, but as a truth they happen already within a pre-formed understanding. The question does not point to the scientific proposition and its object but to the very possibility of this connection. In order to happen, the connection must form in an opening of meaning that is already given – and to continue with Heideggerian terms, as Vattimo does, it is exactly this opening that the scientific propositions are silent about. To recall how Heidegger set up his question in “What is metaphysics?,” it was the way of the scientific inquiry that eventually made him uncover the ontological difference: “That with which the scientific confrontation in

144. Ibid., 3.

the irruption occurs are beings themselves – and beyond that, nothing.”¹⁴⁵ Questioning that very nothing beyond beings themselves that is rejected by science eventually led Heidegger to the thought of opening, of the projection, and of the thrownness of *Dasein*. Within the hermeneutical *koiné*, this comes close to that certain Kantian sensibility, that precise moment in Kant’s thinking (the moment that Deleuze calls one of utmost lucidity) when he elaborates his ontological difference and senses the pre-formative nature of our thinking. Yet it is this moment and no more, as the hermeneutical stance starts to diverge at this point. Where Kant elaborates transcendental categories¹⁴⁶ the hermeneutical thinking points to the historicity of the openness. To return to Heidegger’s “What is metaphysics?,” we can point to his way of returning to Hegel’s first step of dialectics, accepting it while distorting it. Heidegger agrees with Hegel’s proposition from the *Science of Logic* that pure Being and pure Nothing are the same, but not because of their similarity in indeterminacy but because of the finitude of Being that comes as an event rather than staying as a substance. Being should be thought in terms of sending rather than subsistence. From the point of view of a hermeneutical conception of truth, then, the consequences of this essential finitude, as sending, reveals two ways of thinking of truth. Thus, we would have truth as correspondence (of a statement and the object of that statement) which would appear as a secondary truth of a primary one, which is exactly the one that makes it possible (the opening, the pro-jection of the scientific project). What kind of truth is this primary truth, though? It is nothing akin to the Kantian *a priori* since hermeneutics insists on the finitude of being. It is a contingent and historical truth, indeed a truth as correspondence, if we understand that more in the way of sending letters. The subject of this truth, argues Vattimo, is

145. Martin Heidegger, *Pathmarks (Texts in German Philosophy)* (Cambridge University Press, 1998), 81.

146. That would inform any metaphysics that would present itself as science.

“the heir to a finite-historical language that makes possible and conditions the access of the subject to itself and to the world.”¹⁴⁷

A certain misunderstanding of hermeneutics is possible at this point, a misunderstanding that may be revealed by sensing a possible problem (or two, depending on how it is framed): does hermeneutics come to be a “metatheory of the play of interpretations,” and if it does how can it deal with the issue of what seems to be its assumed relativism? Let us address first the issue of relativism by moving only a little bit away from Vattimo.

As a student of Luigi Pareyson, just as Vattimo was, Umberto Eco developed a philosophy that may be considered of a different kind, yet the two authors do come together on several issues and occasions.¹⁴⁸ One of these issues, the problem of relativism in the hermeneutical stance, resurfaced in Eco’s essay “Weak Thought and the Limits of Interpretation,” written for the festschrift organized by Santiago Zabala (a former student of Vattimo’s) on the occasion of Vattimo’s seventieth birthday.¹⁴⁹ The wonderfully written essay, displaying a subtle ludic undertone, plays on the idea of the historicity of interpretation. The finitude of Being, mentioned before, that makes impossible the possibility of thinking in transcendental terms does not bring about an extreme hermeneutical relativism. We are not “free” to interpret anything as anything, and the hermeneutical *koiné* is not a realm of “anything goes.” To illustrate his point, Eco appeals to something that Richard Rorty presented as a

147. Gianni Vattimo, *Beyond Interpretation: The Meaning of Hermeneutics for Philosophy* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1997), 8.

148. Vattimo’s book, *Beyond Interpretation*, is in fact a result of Eco’s invitation to a series of dialogues, an event called “*Lezione Italiane*” that he hosted at the University of Bologna.

149. *Weakening Philosophy, Essays in Honour of Gianni Vattimo* (Montreal, London, Ithaca: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2007), ed. Santiago Zabala. The festschrift brings together philosophy “heavy-weights” such as Umberto Eco, Richard Rorty, Jean-Luc Nancy, Fernando Savater, Vattimo himself, and we can also mention the “absent without leaving” Jacques Derrida – who was scheduled and really wanted to contribute though, sadly, his illness and death prevented him from finishing his project.

counterpoint in a debate they had in 1990 on the issue of textual criteria of interpretation.¹⁵⁰

Rorty's claim, and illustration, was that there is nothing in the nature of a screwdriver that would make us think of its use as a screwdriver. We might as well think that the actual use of the screwdriver is to scratch our ears, instead of driving screws. The screwdriver, says Eco, is too sharp and too long to be fit for safely scratching our ears, as they are quite a small and delicate part of our bodies. We might claim, as Rorty did, that the screwdriver is in fact an ear-scratcher, yet the conformation of our bodies and of the screwdriver itself would suggest that we would be better off with a cotton wad on a stick. Now how does this relate to the historicity of interpretation? Well, for one, we might be tempted to believe that it invalidates the hermeneutical stance itself, since there seems to "exist a *hard core of being* of such a nature that some things we say about it and for it cannot and must not be taken as holding good."¹⁵¹ However, if we take a closer look at the example of the screwdriver as ear-scratcher, we can see that it does not refer to such a "hard core" at all, but rather to a certain limit imposed on our discourse by being. Eco calls it a "line of resistance," that which leads us into establishing ourselves in a horizon of being. The limits, the lines of resistance, are in fact the very condition of possibility for hermeneutics. If we can say anything about anything then the questioning itself becomes meaningless. After all, we can think of at least one undeniable limit beyond which interpretation fades, a limit that turns discourse into silence: death.¹⁵² An inquiry on this silence may then lead us towards wondering about other limits. But does this mean that we have arrived to a thought on

150. Although Rorty might as well have not said it... Eco explains that they were supposed to publish the proceedings of their debate, but Rorty edited out that episode from his part of the conversation. Therefore, after recounting all this, Eco claims that he is not actually attributing that argument to Rorty, but might as well bring it in, since someone else might come up with it eventually, thus making his clarification somehow necessary.

151. Umberto Eco, "Weak Thought and the Limits of Interpretation," *Weakening Philosophy, Essays in Honour of Gianni Vattimo* (Montreal, London, Ithaca: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2007), ed. Santiago Zabala, 52.

152. Perhaps here Eco is alluding to Vattimo's reading of Heidegger from his *Al di là del Soggetto, Nietzsche, Heidegger, e l'ermeneutica* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1981), where, while interpreting Heidegger's "being-towards-death," death as a limit and the play between silence and discourse constitutes one of his major points.

the existence of universal laws in nature? Again, we have to point back to the screwdriver example and notice once more that the problem does not lie in the screwdriver itself, but in the way our discourse refers to it. The positing of universal laws of nature appears then as one possible reaction to these lines of resistance that being sets in our discourse. “To state that there are lines of resistance merely means that our language does not construct being¹⁵³ *ex novo*: it questions it, in some way always finding something *already given*.”¹⁵⁴ The already given, which is to be coupled with the already said, is that which confronts the multiplicity of our interpretations. Eco uses another example here: the limit is similar to the response we would get from asking a tortoise to fly. It would be a negative response, not because the tortoise would refuse to fly, but also not because it would realize it cannot fly. Rather, the response would be negative because there was not really a question to begin with. The tortoise, in its tortoiseness, presents us with a lack of response, meaning that it does not give us what we would desire, meaning that “the limit is in our desire, in our reaching out for absolute freedom” – a creative freedom that would allow us to imagine flying tortoises. “Our freedom,” concludes Eco, “plays on this limit,” in the way of a play between the limit of the already given and our essentially conjectural thought. Hermeneutics is concerned with this play, as it works with “the assumption that every knowledge cannot be but conjectural”¹⁵⁵ – the point where Eco and Vattimo come together.

Actually, Vattimo’s decision for how to translate into Italian Gadamer’s dictum “*Sein, das verstanden worden kann, ist Sprache*”¹⁵⁶ is quite telling of his view on hermeneutics and of his way of relating to the works of Heidegger and Gadamer. The English and French

153. In Heideggerian terms, being is given (*es gibt*) in language – hence the event of being; it would be pointless to talk about being outside language.

154. *Ibid.*, 55, Umberto Eco.

155. *Ibid.*, 56.

156. He did that between 1960 and 1962, translating Gadamer’s *Truth and Method* while working directly with him.

translations¹⁵⁷ adopted a version of the dictum without the two commas: “Being that can be understood is language.” Vattimo insisted on adding back the commas, as without them the dictum might be interpreted in the way that beings would offer themselves to understanding through language. The point of the dictum is entirely different, he argued.¹⁵⁸ “Being, that can be understood, is language,” means that being is language, and by being is language we would have to understand that being’s essential character is to be comprehended. Being that cannot be understood is the (deathly) silence that the tortoise returns to us when we ask it to fly.

Already in Eco’s explanations we can see hermeneutics starting to shape up as a discipline, yet the word is still confusing, the shape is still blurred, and thus the question still remains: is hermeneutics a metatheory? The answer that shows up in the clarifications regarding relativism and hermeneutics is obviously a negative one. But if we are not to understand hermeneutics as a universal view on the conflict of interpretations, what is it then? Vattimo suggests that hermeneutics, as a philosophy of interpretation, is the conclusion of a history that brought us to the nihilistic thought of the impossibility of absolute foundations. It is a guide to the world of the Nietzschean dead God, the world that its history shows how it became a fable. Hermeneutics then would not be the realization of the fact that multiple perspectives on the world are possible. This would simply turn hermeneutics into that which it originally critiques: metaphysics. Instead, argues Vattimo, “the ‘proof’ that hermeneutics offers of its own theory is itself a history, both in the sense of *res gestae*¹⁵⁹ and in the sense of *historia rerum gestarum*¹⁶⁰ [...] in that it presents itself as an interpretation [...] and not as an objective description of the

157. As Santiago Zabala recounts in his introduction to *Weakening Philosophy, Essays in Honour of Gianni Vattimo*.

158. Zabala also recounts Gadamer’s reaction to this translation. While he refused to endorse one particular version, feeling that translators should have their own self-determination, he did call Vattimo (in 1995) an excellent translator, confessing his belief that it was particularly him the one that made his “universe of thought” known in Italy.

159. Things that happened (lat.)

160. History of things that happened (lat.)

facts.”¹⁶¹ Using different terms, the situation of hermeneutics may become apparent when we explore the possible reactions to the observation that philosophical texts are not written in a vacuum, but they, obviously, display cultural and historical connections with each other and with the world that they belong to. Can we say that the hermeneutical stance uncovers the sight of some truths beyond all these connections? Vattimo answers that this would contradict the anti-metaphysical stance of hermeneutics. Thus these cultural connections that hermeneutics is concerned about can only appear within its interpretation as a persuasive questioning of an epoch and, more likely, of a provenance. Nietzsche was working with a different word in his world of the dead God: genealogy. From this perspective, hermeneutics appears to be *the* philosophy of modernity, and Vattimo points to both senses of the genitive here. To recall Lyotard (who actually considered Vattimo’s reflections on late modernity to be “of major importance for the debate of the postmodern condition”),¹⁶² we would say it is about the rewriting of modernity, and (to go back to Vattimo again) about an interpretive philosophy unfolding as an ontology of decline – questioning the sending of being. It would be an ontology of decline because it works against the metaphysical stance considering its own history as a progressive march towards an absolute foundation, while hermeneutics interprets this march as going towards its own un-founding (thus making hermeneutics possible in the first place).

Vattimo’s argument for the task of philosophy within the hermeneutical *koiné* is to become *pensiero debole* – which was translated in English as “weak thinking.” If we are not to coin a new word (say, “debohic,” in order to point to the specific hermeneutical roots of the expression), I would prefer “soft” to “weak,” thinking of Vattimo’s conjunction of metaphysics

161. Gianni Vattimo, *Beyond Interpretation: The Meanings of Hermeneutics for Philosophy* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1997), 9.

162. Santiago Zabala, “Gianni Vattimo and Weak Philosophy,” *Weakening Philosophy, Essays in Honour of Gianni Vattimo* (Montreal, London, Ithaca: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2007), ed. Santiago Zabala, 13.

with violence, or of his view on the corrosive action of hermeneutics on the “strong” modern thoughts of absolute as a passing from *veritas* to *caritas*. Soft thinking, as a hermeneutical philosophy of modernity, is thinking that places itself at the end of philosophy. Vattimo’s claim is that philosophy, understood in Platonic terms, does not have a place in democratic societies. To illustrate his point, he draws on Heidegger’s 1964 lecture “The end of philosophy and the task of thinking,” and brings it closer to Karl Popper’s *Open Society*.¹⁶³ Popper believed that Plato’s essentialism makes him an enemy of the open society: the society would have to conform itself to the eternal structure of being. “Everywhere, in politics, we are faced with truth, there begins the danger of authoritarianism, just that ‘closure’ that Popper stigmatizes in his work.”¹⁶⁴ Heidegger’s polemic with metaphysics is centered around the same accusation of maintaining a stable structure of being, ultimately annihilating freedom. Vattimo draws Heidegger and Popper together and also alludes to other such possible unlikely pairings by bringing in Marx and Wittgenstein, just in order to argue that, even without direct reference to Heidegger, the hermeneutical *koiné* is at work, as a great part of contemporary philosophy seems to reject the metaphysical notion of being as a stable structure. Furthermore, he argues that this end of philosophy as metaphysics is tightly connected with the rise of democracies. “Where we find democracy, is not possible to find a class of holders of the real ‘truth’ who either exert directly the power, [...] or give to the sovereign the rules for his behavior.”¹⁶⁵ Vattimo does not talk about this end of philosophy only in abstract terms, but he explicitly refers to the contemporary dissolution of the institutionalized academic philosophy, either overshadowed by the growingly

163. He delivered this paper in Istanbul at the World Philosophy Congress, held in August 2003 under the topic “Philosophy Facing World Problems,” being organized by the Turkish Philosophy Board Association and the International Philosophy Organizations Federation. The paper, called “Heidegger: Philosopher of Democracy,” was published as “The End of Philosophy in the Age of Democracy,” *Le Portique*, numéro 18 – 2006.

164. Ibid.

165. Ibid.

autonomous Human Sciences, or reduced to a comfortable complement of other specialized fields (as in the “ethics focused” philosophy departments).¹⁶⁶ This dissolution of philosophy with the reverse side of a growing social prevalence of specialists leaves an open gap though in democracies that needs to be addressed somehow. The danger here, says Vattimo, is that the specialists and technicians themselves come to replace the sovereign-philosopher that we have just waved out of the room.¹⁶⁷ Therefore, the end of philosophy should be coupled with a task of thought. Thus, “following Heidegger and Marx,” and even Popper, “the task of thought in this situation is to think what remains hidden in the ‘everyday presentation’ of what usually happens.”¹⁶⁸ Accepting the idea that a certain strain of Marxism may be an alternative here, but distancing himself from the inherent metaphysical dangers of the Marxian thought,¹⁶⁹ but also from the inherent mystical dangers of an exclusively Heideggerian alternative, Vattimo proposes something in the manner of a Foucauldian ontology of the present, or something in the manner of *pensiero debole* – soft (weak) thinking. That is exactly because soft thinking requires a doubled attention in its weakening endeavor – a weakening of the strong metaphysical structures, a softening of the conception of being in the way of its passing from subsisting stratum to event. The attention is doubled because it has to be oriented towards that which it weakens but also towards the event sending to us that which we are weakening – “the hidden which tends to

166. I can point here to one of Jameson’s recent books *A Singular Modernity, Essay on the Ontology of the Present* (Verso, 2002), where he accuses a contemporary tendency for a return to what was wrong in Modernity: a retrenchment of authoritarianism led by ethics powered philosophy departments, the old political economy of the market, and a certain bourgeois aesthetics.

167. And this will give rise to another kind of authoritarianism, says Vattimo, a more dangerous kind, since because of the fragmented distribution of power it would be harder to oppose.

168. Ibid. Vattimo modifies Heidegger’s title into “the end of philosophy and the (political) task of thought” trying to uncover the (lost) connection of philosophy with “real life” (thus pointing to the topic of the Congress itself) – he also finds reasons for this modification in Heidegger’s thinking as well, specifically in his essay on *The Origin of the Work of Art* where politics stands beside art at some point, as privileged spaces for questioning being. From this point of view, the task of thinking, which is, of course, *pensiero debole*, comes really close to the discipline of Cultural Studies developed by the Birmingham School and by various North American academic programs.

169. Ibid. “Should we follow exclusively Marx, we would return to a metaphysical and rationalistic historicism, in which the task of philosophers is to express the definitive truth of history, which is known clearly only by the proletariat which also makes it real by the revolution.”

remain un-thought in the specialization of the sciences.” In this sense, hermeneutics can be thought of as a discipline, rather as a mental discipline than academic institution, *koiné* rather than metatheory.

UNIT THREE

CHAPTER 5: A DIGITAL CAST OF BEING

In this chapter, I approach two other projects, similar in scope with this study: David Koepsell and Michael Eldred's ontologies of cyberspace. If Koepsell dismisses the idea that cyberspace is "anything special" and tries to frame it as a simple medium of communication, Eldred writes a genealogy of the way of thinking that is behind digital culture and idea of cyberspace. Unlike Heim, Eldred situates himself closer to hermeneutics. He is not working with Gadamerian hermeneutics (and, by extension, with Vattimo's hermeneutics), preferring instead to refer to the early works of Heidegger. I argue that this ultimately leads him to an incomplete conclusion, as he manages to account for the genealogy of cyberspace but fails to take note of its actual functioning. Both Eldred and Heim, though, have a few really good insights that we could use in drawing our own interpretation of cyberspace.

Cyberspace is a tricky word to define. Maybe this is because of the self-masking essence of digital technologies that Michael Heim was pointing to. Or maybe it is because of the term's origins in fiction that would still assign to it a fictive dimension. William Gibson, writing in a science-fiction sub-genre – cyberpunk, was the one that coined the term in his 1982 *Burning Chrome* short story and later developed it in his 1984 novel *Neuromancer*. In a 2000 documentary, made by Mark Neale (*No Maps for These Territories*), Gibson commented on how he came up with this word:

"All I knew about the word 'cyberspace' when I coined it, was that it seemed like an effective buzzword. It seemed evocative and essentially meaningless. It was suggestive of something, but had no real semantic meaning, even for me, as I saw it emerge on the page."

Effective buzzword indeed. Beyond Gibson's mid-eighties' imaginings the word stuck with us as we come to point in the general direction of the Internet, referring maybe more to the "consensual hallucination" rather than to the "graphic representation of data" from the networked computers. Cyberspace is that which is made possible by the Internet and informed by the World Wide Web. More than a hallucination it is rather a consensual simulation of a space. We meet each other in this space, somehow different than the "real world,"¹⁷⁰ but part of it nevertheless. From this point of view, we can only agree with Michael Heim when he was trying to draw our attention to the importance of an ontology of cyberspace as we seem to be dealing in its case with "a metaphysical laboratory, a tool for examining our very sense of reality."¹⁷¹

The problem does not seem to lie in the importance (or lack thereof) of the ontological project but more in the way this ontology would be written. In other words, what kind of ontology? Wrestling with Michael Heim's *Metaphysics of Virtual Reality*, while trying to approach this project, David Koepsell¹⁷² seemed to believe that the only kind (of ontology) would be the correct kind. Probably that is why he names his book *The Ontology of Cyberspace*. That is to say, "an ontology of cyberspace" would be a little shaky, if not downright "incorrect," meaning we either have "the ontology" or we have nothing.¹⁷³ Ontology, says Koepsell, is not the same as metaphysics. Where metaphysics is concerned with ultimate realities, ontology "requires only an acceptance of the facts of common experience without regard to their deeper

170. I would only point here to one usual shortening in online places: irl stands for "in real life" and it is a marker used to designate facts or events belonging to the users' life outside their online interactions.

171. Michael Heim, *The Metaphysics of Virtual Reality* (Oxford University Press, 1993), 83.

172. David Koepsell, *The Ontology of Cyberspace: Law, Philosophy, and the Future of Intellectual Property* (Open Court, 2000).

173. As I am writing this in a word processor, the software keeps reminding me in its indifferent, automatic way, that I should not use "an ontology" unless I put it in quotes or delete the "an." Being free to disregard that little green underline, I should probably not feel offended... But this constant automatic reminder can be interpreted as a feature de-masking the concept of interpretation that machines seem to operate on. Let us not anticipate, though.

reality.”¹⁷⁴ Therefore, correct ontology, as a study of being, would categorize “the objects of the universe” in such a way that it would “at least a) correspond to every ordinary person’s perception of objects and b) serve as a guide for the perception of new objects.”¹⁷⁵ From this point of view, discussing Heim’s “erotic ontology of cyberspace,” Koepsell argues that he actually failed to realize it. Heim, says Koepsell, subscribes to Platonic metaphysics but he fails to make more of it than a simple metaphor for cyberspace. Apparently Heim failed to demonstrate the existence of the “Platonic Ideals” (Ideas, Forms) in cyberspace. So, because he fails “to show how cyberspatial objects fit into a categorization of other experiential objects,”¹⁷⁶ he fails to provide us with an ontology of cyberspace. Beyond all these “failures” though, but also beyond Koepsell’s own project and obvious difficulties in reading Heim,¹⁷⁷ let us follow this particular “correct ontology” thread, if only for a little bit, and see where it will take us.

The Austrian philosopher Michael Eldred presents us with a project similar to Koepsell’s in the way of questioning: *The Digital Cast of Being*. The book, a result of a 1999 e-mail conversation with Rafael Capurro, is presented to us both in artifact form (Ontos, 2009) and as a digital reading (version 2.2, in English, from 2009 superseding version 1.1, in German, from 2001). Eldred’s project is to build a digital ontology, which is to say asking the question about where does the “digital cast of being” come from – a question with an elusive answer despite the fact that “we live today surrounded by countless digital gadgets and navigate through cyberspace as if it were the most natural thing in the world.”¹⁷⁸ Although Eldred does not work with the same distinction between ontology and metaphysics as Koepsell does, they do come together in

174. Ibid., 25.

175. Ibid., 28.

176. Ibid., 23.

177. We will briefly return to Koepsell after a while though, as I think there is still something of a good insight to be had while reading his endeavors.

178. Michael Eldred, *The Digital Cast of Being: Metaphysics, Mathematics, Cartesianism, Cybernetics, Capitalism, Communication* (Ontos, 2009). http://www.arte-fact.org/dgtlon_e.html#0 (accessed June 4, 2009).

their way of questioning. On a Heideggerian background, Eldred understands the metaphysical approach as a focus on certain openings of understanding rather than “ultimate realities.” He formulates this kind of opening as a “cast of being” – alluding to the “thrownness” feature of *Dasein*. Thus, sciences for instance, act within a “presupposed understanding of the being of the region of beings into which they do research.”¹⁷⁹ The casting of nature within natural sciences is essentially mathematical, and that is an issue never addressed by the sciences as they are merely conditioned by it. However, it is this issue – which is metaphysical in nature – that needs to be addressed when developing the “correct” ontology, which in this case would be the study of the cast of being that founds digital technologies. In this sense, we can say that Koepsell’s principles for a “correct ontology” come close (and, let us say, in a much less sophisticated, although probably much more problematic way) to Eldred’s project.

Analyzing the cast of beings particular to modern sciences, Eldred finds the answer to lie in mathematics. In the Ancient Greek world, since the concept of zero was problematic (in the way of “how can nothing be something?”), algebra and geometry were two separate endeavors. Algebra was dealing with numbers, which were conceived starting from their ability to be counted. But when algebra was to be applied to geometry (which was dealing with the continuum of physical beings), something did not fit. A geometric line is divisible *ad infinitum*, and so the numbers did not seem to apply to it. Numbers can be “distilled” out of physical beings, but this comes at the price of a loss of place, or position. The geometric line, for instance is composed of points, and the distinctness of these points is given by their different position, but otherwise they are identical. The numbers are also distinct, and their distinctness is given from within themselves, but otherwise they are placeless. It is because of this distinctness from within themselves that the numbers cannot form a continuum. The distinct, countable numbers would be

179. Ibid.

what we call rational numbers. However, when numbers are to be applied to geometry, we would have to take note of the numbers “in between,” that is to say irrational numbers – which are uncountable. This means that a “unit line” cannot actually be counted, as the countable rational numbers are not enough to account for the continuity of the line. “Although rational numbers can be made to approximate each other as closely as one likes, between any two rational numbers whatever there is an irrational number, i.e. a magnitude that cannot be expressed as a fraction of two integers.”¹⁸⁰ Therefore, in order for a rational (and not intuitive) approach to physical beings to work, this magnitude needs to be considered in its generality and thus be rendered to calculability (instead of the impossible counting). Ultimately, this amounts to a certain definition of beings that would arise from this definition of magnitude, and that is beings to be conceived as *res extensa* – which is what Descartes does. “Magnitude is the quantity pertaining to any extension whatsoever of a real, sensuously perceptible being from which sensuous data, and therefore quantifiable data, can be received.”¹⁸¹

Working with a definition of beings as *res extensa* and with an approach to truth requiring an approach of beings in their simplest and distinct form, Descartes concludes that beings need to be abbreviated in order to be rendered to the intellect. “All the dimensions of beings thus become insofar representable in a manifold of quantities represented by symbols.”¹⁸² However we would still have at this point the problem of abbreviation in itself, which comes with the problem of making something unknown known. Thus we would need to apply a comparison between the known and the unknown, which is to say that we would need to reach some sort of equality between these two states. The equality in itself, though, cannot be reached otherwise than in respect to magnitudes in their generality: the equality needs to be an equality of

180. Ibid.

181. Ibid.

182. Ibid.

“magnitudes in general.” This means that we have to make use of the algebraic methods, working with magnitudes as symbols placed in equations. The unknown is reformulated and “brought in the equality” (meaning solved) with the known. “The data given by real beings are all quantitative by virtue of casting the being of beings solely as extension, so that all the many qualitative dimensions of being, no matter what it and they may be, are reduced to magnitudes that can be inserted into equations as knowns.”¹⁸³ Therefore the problem of magnitudes being continuous or distinct does not stand anymore since, from this point on, we can work with magnitudes as symbols, which can extend over imaginary numbers as well. In our approach to nature, then, calculability comes to take precedence over counting or intuitively sensing.

Eldred’s genealogy of the modern scientific view is indeed fascinating, although it mirrors Heidegger’s analysis from *Die Zeit des Weltbildes*. He is not doing it to mirror the Heideggerian commentary though, but to add to it, as the question of a digital cast of being is missing from his questioning of technology. Eldred’s point is that the digital cast of being is exactly the consummation of this modern calculative rationality.

Digital beings are a binary code, a finite sequence of 0 and 1: two numbers, two digits, signifying the difference between that which is and that which is not, meaning the difference as difference. These codes are inscribed in an electromagnetic medium in the way words are inscribed in a book, but with an essential difference. While words in a book have a place, digital beings in their electromagnetic medium do not have such a proper place. Moreover, while words in a book are read by humans, the binary codes are in fact read by other codes, meaning the software calculating and processing them. The way these digital beings come to be is through a “lifting” out of physical beings, in the manner of the “distillation” of numbers. However, even if they are actually placeless in their electromagnetic medium, they do somehow come to appear in

183. Ibid.

the manner of the geometric continuum. When something, say an image, needs to be digitally transmitted over a communication network, that something needs to be decomposed, deconstructed as a binary code and then reconstructed, with the help of other binary codes, into something that appears to be at least similar to the original something. Therefore, the image we receive at the end of the digital transmission allows us to approximate that which has been deconstructed in a sequence of numbers. The digital approach to beings, argues Eldred, operates in the same way the calculating rationality does in approaching the world. The “distillation” of the binary code is one way to render beings calculable. However, this way is not just “one more,” but it is a way contained and forecasted already in the Cartesian mathematical ontology of *res extensa*.

As Eldred’s arguments try to add to Heidegger’s questioning of technology, there is something more that needs to be noted on the being of digital beings, and that is the danger that comes with it, in the manner of Enframing being the danger. Equations themselves already open the way for an automation of knowledge, but the binary code that makes up digital beings takes that a step further. The sequence of 0 and 1 has to be read by another sequence of 0 and 1; as with the probable exception of some “master” programmer, they are not readable by humans.¹⁸⁴ This inherent self-masking feature of digital beings opens up the way for what Eldred calls “the outsourcing of knowledge.” Thus, digitized knowledge needs to operate in a pre-understanding that has already been digitally inscribed in the medium in which it operates. “Computers” do not really interpret the world, but they call it forth in the pre-understanding that already makes up what they are. The pre-understanding itself though, is hidden, since what comes out of a binary

184. Programmers actually use programming “languages,” meaning other binary codes providing tools for operating binary codes. The idea of a “master” programmer though (that would use exclusively “machine code”), is not as much an impossibility as it is either an improbability or a historical oddity – and we can safely add that the resulted programs would most likely (or reasonably) be, in fact, programming languages.

code reading another binary code (assuming the simplest relation) is what the latter has deconstructed, approximated according to the pre-understanding of the former. “Viewed thus, a computer program pre-script is [...] a *pre-interpretation* of [...] the world written down by us which is ready to receive data at any time in order to calculate the world, on the basis of the data fed in, in a certain predefined direction [...]”¹⁸⁵

There is something more to the digital being, though, than this pre-understanding, cautions Eldred. The operation of a computing machine, working according to this framework, in fact works towards not simply knowing or interpreting the world, but towards controlling it. After all, as Modernity teaches us, “knowledge is power;” calculating rationality does not aim only to uncover the physical beings in their being, but to uncover their usability, manipulability, it aims to control them. Appearing as a consummation of Modernity, digital technology, by its essence, leaves no other choice but to have the world rendered in its manipulability. The calculating happening in the hidden pre-understanding of the digital being always happens *for* something. To recall Michael Heim’s analysis of hypertext, we could think of the Boolean logic behind the search functions of a database. The search itself happens according to Boolean terms and so the terms of the search need to be informed by it. However, without the search, the database is rendered mute and the seemingly open and unlimited accessibility becomes opaque and forbidding. It is the same thing with the difference between books as artifacts and digital texts.¹⁸⁶ The digital knowledge is essentially different from the artifact knowledge in that it becomes accessible only insofar as it is called (challenged forth) for something. Returning to Eldred, the danger that this calling forth brings with it, is that it is happening within a forgetting (that is essential – meaning a forgetting of the ontological difference of *Sein* and *seiendes*, being

185. Ibid.

186. And here, we can say, is where Eldred comes to be very useful for further illuminating Heim’s insights.

and beings) that comes with the self-masking operation of digital technology. Moreover, since the automation of knowledge happens “naturally,” the forgetting and the manipulating calculation extend outside the electromagnetic medium. In a way, we come to consider our own selves according to such computational models (he sees the science of neurophysiology, for instance, as a perfect example for such movement: the human being is defined in terms of digital computing machines). The outsourcing and automation of knowledge may indeed bring more comfort in our lives, says Eldred, but they also bring their specific essentially obscured understanding of the world, which in turn may open up a wide array of oppressive possibilities, political state control being, of course, one of them.

Eldred’s analysis complements Heidegger’s questioning of technology very well. However, although he speaks of the danger that is Enframing, noticing how the digital cast of being that consummates Modernity displays the characteristics of Enframing (in quite an enhanced way), he seems to forget the way Heidegger ended his inquiry on the essence of technology. Enframing is the danger, argues Heidegger, but, just because of that, it might bring “salvation” as well. The said “salvation” is exactly the questioning of technology that finds its essence to be something of a different order than technology itself. In other words, the very act of defining Enframing might bring in fact salvation, in the way of un-forgetting the ontological difference. The problem here lies exactly in this essence of technology being of a different order than technology itself. Eldred works with this indeed, but somehow, in a very subtle way, he seems to lose his way from it. This becomes apparent in several of his conclusions.

For one, he argues that, digitally, time is cast as a mathematical variable, a countable successions of “nows.” This irreversible linear conception of time comes from Modern metaphysics, and indeed informs digital technology. However, Eldred explains that this is a

conception of time that ultimately fails to approach time's continuum, as both presence and absence (for the countable time we count the "nows" as either absent or present). Numbers are in fact outside time; therefore, reducing time to its measurability would fail to sense its essential temporality and thus reify being into standing-presence. This, says Eldred, is "a very narrow-minded access to the world that makes certain phenomena *inconceivable*, i.e. *invisible* to the mind's eye [...] including the movement toward death and the movements in interplay with free others, that are beyond the reach of the Western will to epistemic power over movement..."¹⁸⁷

The finitude of *Dasein*, its temporality, its being-towards-death is that which makes *Dasein* into a hermeneutical whole – *Dasein* is thrown (cast) into an already constituted world but also throws itself towards constituting itself and the world through interpretation. This finitude, which has us define mortality as a permanent possibility of the impossibility of all possibilities, being exactly that which makes them as such,¹⁸⁸ is that which opens up possibilities of interpretation in the simultaneous casting of a past and the casting towards a sense. Eldred's casting out of temporality from the digital cast of being – and his subsequent focus on its Enframing danger – seems though as a bit of an over simplistic conclusion. Is temporality indeed being cast out of the digital cast of being? Is the mathematical genealogy of the digital cast of being enough to obscure anything not (En)framed by the countable time?

I find it interesting that I was approaching this problem at the time when Eldred was pursuing his conversation with Rafael Capurro that stood at the origin of *The Digital Cast of Being*. My conclusions there¹⁸⁹ may still have some value, and may even provide an answer to

187. Ibid.

188. This would be the convoluted definition of mortality coming out of the Heideggerian thinking that also founds the hermeneutical *koiné* proposed by Vattimo.

189. I am referring to "The Merry *Dasein*," an article I wrote for *Philosophy & Stuff* (issue 7, 1999), exploring possible ways to think about Heideggerian temporality and cyberspace. Although if I would rewrite it today, I would reframe it and reformulate it in a slightly different way, I am going to use in the followings some of the ideas I was advancing there.

the problems we seemed to have run into here. Eldred's conclusion appears logical if we focus on the mathematical genealogy that he draws and if we accept his working definition of digital beings as "distillating" binary codes. In order to see if that conclusion actually stands though, we would have to approach the problem from the other way too, meaning working with a question on the possible relations between temporality and the being of digital beings. In other words, in what way can we speak of the possibility of impossibility in cyberspace, and what consequences can we really draw out of this?

At first glance, and trying to untangle the Heideggerian language, we might use Guy Debord's distinctions¹⁹⁰ in order to approach the problem of temporality and cyberspace. Debord talks about two different kinds of time, a commodity time and a consumable time. The commodity time is the irreversible countable time of Modernity – that Eldred was pointing to in his genealogy of modern sciences as well. Consumable time is complementary to commodity time and exists as a disguise of it, being charged with pseudo-valuations in order to be consumed. Debord argues that these false values make this time work with the illusion of the cyclical time of preindustrial societies: "Pseudo-cyclical time leans on the natural remains of the cyclical time and also uses it to compose new homologous combinations: day and night, work and weekly rest, the recurrence of vacations."¹⁹¹ One of the features of this consumption of time is the social absence of death, the fact that what we may call the biological irreversibility is moved aside, buried under life insurance ads (which Debord interprets as messages telling us to feel guilty about dying without life insurance and thus upsetting the economic balance around us) or under a general refusal of aging. The social absence of death is in fact the social absence of

190. Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle* (New York: Zone Books, 1994).

191. *Ibid.*, #150.

life, if we understand life as an essential relation to our own mortality – a self-realizing passage towards death.

If we look back at the cyber world with the help of these new terms we can see that indeed we seem to be dealing with an absence of death. Cyber life does not look at all as a self-realizing passage towards death, but quite the contrary. The cyber world would be then just another way in which our modern society consumes commodity time in its irreversible countability. We would have to ask though, if all this valuation, that seems to be common for Eldred and Debord, leaves us indeed free to sense what is going on. To recall Vattimo's conference on "The end of Philosophy in the Age of Democracy," it is perhaps too easy to fall under the mystical spell of the Heideggerian language (Eldred) or the metaphysical temptation of the Marxian approach (Debord). We would have to ask, then, what actually happens with the hermeneutical whole of *Dasein* in the case of its hanging around the cyber world.

Dasein becomes a whole, which is hermeneutical (meaning that it is in the manner of a web of significations) only insofar as it decides towards its own finitude. The horizons, in which beings appear to *Dasein* then, along with itself, are historically finite, with roots in the past and openings to the future.¹⁹² The cyber world does not seem to offer any roots. However, the past of the network is an elusive thing¹⁹³ just because of the ephemeral nature of its beings. But then does this ephemeral nature have anything to do with the possibility of impossibility? It depends on how we interpret this possibility of impossibility. If we interpret it as a condition of finitude

192. I should recall here that the "forgetting of being" that Heidegger speaks about refers to the (metaphysical) conception of being as a subsisting (eternally) stratum or core.

193. I can point here to archive.org and their "way-back-machine," an overly ambitious project trying to capture still "images" of the Internet at various points in time, saving in their archive the way websites are changing. The project is interesting because of its intention, revealing not so much the past of the network but the actual enormous difficulty of capturing the past of the network. Wikipedia, on the other hand, is supposedly archiving all the edits that have ever been made to its articles, and some of the explanations for these edits can be glanced at on their discussion pages, however these traces are completely absent from the articles themselves, as they are always presented as a "final" form "so far."

that provides for an “authentic” existence in the manner of an interpretive finality (however open it would be initially), then no, we are not dealing with this kind of thing in the cyber world. If we interpret it as a condition of finitude that constitutes possibilities as possibilities, then yes, the ephemeral nature of digital beings does point to this. The gravity of the “movement towards death” does not belong to the cyber world, indeed, but that is not because of the however inauthentic consumerist existence nor because of the consummation of a “narrow-minded access to the world,” but rather because, largely, authenticity in this case is irrelevant.

The cyber world exists under a condition of simulation. The cyber space is not so much a space as it is a simulated simulating space. There (where there is no there) the simulacrum is that which prevents any coagulation of “Truth,” any pretension of a possibility to surpass itself overshadowing the other possibilities. The simulacrum, more than anything, accounts for the possibility of impossibility. As the simulacrum is not a copy, the only thing it does is to attempt to simulate the real. When a simulacrum becomes “successful” it comes to replace that real. The “death” of a simulation (the impossibility of the possibility) comes with the success of another simulation, revealing the former as a simulation.¹⁹⁴ It is not a lonely and individualizing end, brought by a “movement towards death,” but a relational end, a differential one, revealing the functioning of the simulacra as persuasion, seduction, and ephemerality rather than authenticity of existence.

Now to finally clarify all this, we have to return to Eldred’s theoretical roots and Heidegger’s confessions. Eldred makes it very clear roughly in the beginning of his *Digital Cast of Being* that he is not working with the Gadamerian development of Heidegger’s thought. He

194. I can point here to the way “truth” is written in the “online free encyclopedia,” Wikipedia, but I would get ahead of myself. Instead I will point back to the Deleuzian analysis of time and simulacra that I was mentioning in the story of the subject. Eldred’s mathematical genealogy of countable time is sound, however problems start to appear when he begins considering a “real,” “illogical,” nature of time, outside calculating rationality. Deleuze does away with all that by considering the synthesis of time from the beginning as a simulacrum.

refuses the hermeneutical focus on the late Heidegger and his discursive shift from *Dasein* to being and language, and prefers to work with an early Heidegger, apparently more interested in a pre-linguistic access to being. The hermeneutical approach, starting with the Gadamerian “being, that can be understood, is language,” develops on Heidegger’s dictum “language is the house of being,” thus moving away from the metaphysical dangers lurking around the consideration of *Dasein* in its subjectivity. Heidegger’s “turn” might still be a point of contention for Heideggerians, however we might be able to clarify the usefulness of a hermeneutical approach in this entanglement if we read Heidegger’s last interview for *Der Spiegel*.

The interview was taken in 1966, but Heidegger wanted it to be published only after his death, which *Der Spiegel* did, printing it on May 31, 1976. The interviewer and Heidegger were addressing (among other topics) the problem of technology, which made him say the puzzling “only a god can save us” – that became the title under which the interview is known. But let us see first what he is actually saying.

“Everything is functioning. That is precisely what is awesome, that everything functions, that functioning propels everything more and more toward further functioning, and that technicity increasingly dislodges man and uproots him from the earth. I don’t know if you were shocked, but [certainly] I was shocked when a short time ago I saw the pictures of earth taken from the moon. We do not need atomic bombs at all [to uproot us] – the uprooting of man is already here. All our relationships have become merely technical ones. It is no longer upon an earth that man lives today.”¹⁹⁵

Faced with this technological landscape, the interviewer asks Heidegger what would be the task of Philosophy or of man in general, in this case.

195. Martin Heidegger, “Only a God can Save Us,” translated by William J. Richardson in *Heidegger, the Man and the Thinker* (Transaction Publishers, 2009) ed. Thomas Sheehan, 45-67. The brackets belong to the translator.

“If I may answer briefly, and perhaps clumsily, but after long reflection: philosophy would be unable to effect any immediate change in the current world. This is true not only of philosophy but of all human reflection and endeavor. Only a god can save us. The only possibility available to us is that by thinking and poetizing we prepare a readiness for the appearance of a god, or for the absence of a god in [our] decline, insofar as in view of the absent god we are in a state of decline.”¹⁹⁶

Richardson, Heidegger’s translator here, adds a brief footnote to this passage saying that “Heidegger is not using the word ‘god’ here in any personal sense but in the sense that he gives to the word (often in the expression, ‘god or the gods’) in his interpretation of Hölderlin, i.e., as the concrete manifestation of Being as ‘the Holy’.”¹⁹⁷ So what does the hermeneutical approach have to do with this? It is about the decline and the absent god. Vattimo frames his weak/soft thinking as a hermeneutical ontology that is an ontology of decline. To recall one of Vattimo’s interviews,¹⁹⁸ the ontology of decline is a theoretically rigorous discourse concerned with the way being is given in our experience. Since being is event rather than permanence, it can only be given, and since ontology is concerned with being (by definition) it can only be an ontology of decline. It is an ontology that traces the meaning of being in the manner of a decline, focusing rather on the essential mortality, temporality, finitude of life, and dealing away with the connotations of decline in the manner of deprecation. Besides hermeneutics in this declining endeavor, Vattimo places the thinking of difference of a Deleuze or Derrida, as a twin other. It is about living in the world of “God is dead,” meaning in the world that lacks any fixed structures, and within the limits of tradition understood as a language through which past experiences

196. Ibid.

197. Ibid.

198. I’m using the version published in the Romanian translation of *Al di la del soggetto: Gianni Vattimo, Dincolo de subiect: Nietzsche, Heidegger si hermeneutica* (Constanta: Pontica, 1994).

address us (Vattimo uses the hyphen in Italian, in order to point to this interpretation: *tradizione*). From this perspective, Heidegger's passage on the saving god appears as anything but mystical. Coupled with the passage on the man no longer living upon an earth, we can only notice that we are in fact dealing with his conclusions from the end of his questioning of technology and the framing of Enframing as both the danger and salvation. As journalistically sound as it would be to place the accent on the "only a god can save us," the accent in fact falls on the readiness to the appearance of a god, understood as a sensing of the decline of meaning that follows its absence. In other words, the shock that comes with seeing the photographs of earth taken from the moon might drive us to sensing technicity's decline of being (or the digital decline of being, if you like) should we be ready (open) to sense it. We first need an uprooting in order to sense the roots.

Going back to Eldred, we can probably see more clear now where does he lose his way. Sensing the Enframing of the digital cast of being, he (En)frames himself by insisting on considering cyberspace and its digital beings in a direct relation with an outside of cyberspace. That is because he insists on working with that "early" Heidegger that he perceives as being interested in a pre-linguistic access to being. From this point of view he comes close to Koepsell and his wish to develop "the correct" ontology, meaning one that would not lose sight of being by un-grounding itself from reality. Koepsell is careful to criticize Heim for discussing cyberspace in terms of virtual reality, although Heim makes it quite clear in his essay on "The Essence of VR"¹⁹⁹ that he chooses to do so as an answer, or openness, to the decline, or perhaps rather declension, of being. It is the same with Eldred. He follows the declension from the

199. Michael Heim, *The Metaphysics of Virtual Reality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 124: Virtual Reality's continuous search for identity, or definition, is in fact its "Holy Grail" understood as its essence – "the essence of VR ultimately lies not in technology but in art, [...] rather than control or escape or entertain or communicate, the ultimate promise of VR may be to transform, to redeem our awareness of reality..." a passage that sends to Heidegger's call for a "thinking and poetizing" that would "save" us from the danger of Enframing.

Ancient Greek mathematics and ontology through the rise of calculating rationality, to the Enframing consummated in the digital cast of being, and then he stops as if worried not to lose his grasp on the beings he gathered around himself. He insists on considering the digital beings in their “distillating” nature – decomposing “the real” in a calculating manner – and refuses to address their language, and their essential functioning as simulacra.

It is interesting to note at this point Eldred’s reasoning for considering cyberspace as a space, and the way he uses that reasoning after that. At a first glance, faced with the question of where digital beings move, we might point to an electromagnetic medium. By extension, then, we might try to define cyberspace as that which is made possible by the Internet and informed by the World Wide Web. However, is that a space? Eldred argues that it is, drawing from the spatiality of *Dasein*, characterized by approximation (in the sense of nearness) and orientation (in the sense of addressing). Viewed in this way, we can say that we can bring something near, addressing it, without the need of physical closeness. The person we talk to on the phone for instance, is in fact closer to us than the phone itself, says Eldred. Also, reading about Moscow in Tolstoy may be a way of “presencing” the city of Moscow. Therefore, he concludes, the spatiality of the internet is genuine, and not just virtual. “Even more than that: the internet as a navigable cyberspace is only possible at all because *Dasein* is spatial a priori.”²⁰⁰ If we follow this reasoning then, we can conclude (as does Eldred) that insofar as bodily togetherness is not required for a connectivity to be realized we can speak of the non-physical space of cyberspace as a proper space that exists as such because of the spatiality proper to *Dasein*. This reasoning alone seems to open up the possibility of a hermeneutical ontology of cyberspace outside the

200. Michael Eldred, *The Digital Cast of Being: Metaphysics, Mathematics, Cartesianism, Cybernetics, Capitalism, Communication* (Ontos, 2009). http://www.arte-fact.org/dgtlon_e.html#0 (accessed June 4, 2009).

limits of a “fantasy philosophy.”²⁰¹ However, Eldred moves to a different direction. Even if he finds enough reason to consider cyberspace a genuine space, he still seems troubled by its difference and starts struggling with its relation with the physical space. Is there an outside and inside of cyberspace? He poses this question and answers affirmatively, which is an odd move if we consider his own argument for the spatiality of cyberspace. It is possible, he says, to move in and out of the physical and digital world. This means that we actually move through different castings of being. To make things complete then, he goes back to Plato:

“Thought in a Platonic way, this space intermediates between sensuous beings (from which a digital abstraction is performed) and ‘transcendent,’ super-sensuous beings (here: mathematical, technical constructions). These beings, stamped thus, can move through the medium, and the supersensuous mathematized knowledge has thus been materialized in the digital electromagnetic medium.”²⁰²

After having found the genealogy of digital beings pointing to the rise of calculating rationality, after having discovered the consummation of the digital cast of being in Enframing, Eldred starts searching for some kind of authenticity and a place that would bring “salvation.” He searches for the Earth beneath his feet that got lost somewhere in the photographs taken from the moon. He reaches out for the uncountable continuum of the physical world. For him, the digital beings always refer to that something outside their electromagnetic medium that they decompose, and he cautions us never to forget this destruction. To forget it, he argues, means to give in to the manipulation and control of the mathematized world. He does admit indeed that once the digital cast of being is in place we cannot “go back” to a different, previous, cast of being: “it cannot be a matter of reviving Christian ‘spiritual’ ‘values’ to compete alongside the

201. So as to not direct another irony at “the correct” ontology...

202. Ibid.

seductive convenience of a digitized ‘materialism.’”²⁰³ But he still waits for a “more” authentic sending of being: “the question concerning who we are has to be posed more fundamentally than how it is implicitly answered by the digital casting of the world.”²⁰⁴ Therefore the question that needs to be posed to Eldred is: would not that whatever “new,” “authentic,” “more fundamental,” sending of being lead to the same grim landscape he is critiquing? Can we say that we have become so bored with the “fundamental” digital cast of being that we want a “more fundamental” cast to replace it?

Perhaps Heidegger’s thinking has no “turn;” however, we should still pay attention then to his discursive shift. By approaching language and being rather than *Dasein*, by abandoning to irrelevancy the thoughts of a pre-linguistic access to being (as Vattimo’s hermeneutics propose), we might actually be able to avoid this trap. Moreover, in the case of the digital cast of being, we might actually be able to account for digital beings in their being, something that Eldred almost did. By holding them in their decomposing difference from physical beings, though, he failed to actually take note of their very decomposition. That is to say, he turned away from their condition of simulation, from their ephemeral functioning through persuasion and seduction, a condition that in fact appears through questioning them in their being. To reformulate the thoughts of Heidegger’s last interview, Eldred refused to leave himself uprooted in order to sense the roots he was searching for.

203. Ibid.

204. Ibid.

CHAPTER 6: THE FICTION OF REALITY

The purpose of this chapter is to explore an issue that Eldred (and Koepsell) failed to address: the functioning of cyberspace according to the principles of simulation. I am focusing my analysis around the formula “fiction of reality” – to be taken in both senses of the genitive. I will use Darren Tofts’ insights on the connection between fiction and reality to frame a discussion of the online persistent worlds. I conclude with the idea that such cyber enterprises reflect and also direct a certain view of reality.

What we retain from following the “correct ontology” thread – and from reading Eldred’s *Digital Cast of Being* – is that the non-physical space of cyberspace is a genuine space and that digital beings function not only in virtue of mathematizable knowledge but on a condition of simulation as well. Rafael Capurro, commenting on Eldred’s work (sparked by their conversations) in his essay “Interpreting the Digital Human,”²⁰⁵ remarked that “digital ontology is pervasive in the sense that it is not necessary that people adhere to it consciously.” That is to say that Eldred’s concerns surpassed the simple questioning of an electromagnetic “existence.” He sensed being in a digital cast as a consummation of the essence of modern technology. Regarding technology as something “that happens between us and not just between the artist or *technites* and matter,”²⁰⁶ Eldred concluded that as long as this cast goes unquestioned, we fall to the danger of Enframing. However, he did seem to forget a questioning of digital being in its being. In other words, he was too careful not to lose his grasp on the connection between the digital and the real and rushed to consider digital beings in terms of their destructive side only.

205. Rafael Capurro, “Interpreting the Digital Human,” keynote address to the conference “Thinking Critically: Alternative Perspectives and Methods in Information Studies” organized by the Center for Information Policy Research, School of Information Studies, University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee, May 15-17, 2008. <http://www.capurro.de/wisconsin.html> last accessed on July 20, 2009.

206. Ibid.

The question is then: if digital ontology is interpreted as this pervasive interpretation of being characteristic to the late modern times, would not the task of thinking be exactly to uncover this self-masked destruction that essentially founds the digital? What would happen if we give in to this the digital seduction and start interpreting the digital from the direction of simulation rather than decomposition – which is to say starting from the mask rather than the masked?

Darren Tofts, an Australian media analyst who usually approaches the question of technology from the direction of cultural genealogies,²⁰⁷ took note through a fascinating argument in his essay, “Mind Games,”²⁰⁸ that simulation and reality have a complex relationship to each other. In a way, he argues, we may speak of fiction with degrees of realism, but also of reality with fictive attributes: that is to say fiction of reality, in both senses of the genitive. Tofts goes on to explore the apparent prank played by an Australian journalist, Guy Rundle, in the Saturday Extra edition of *The Age* (April 20, 2002). Rundle’s article mentioned that Borges visited Australia in late autumn, 1938, when he gave a lecture at the Royal Society and spent most of his time in the reading room of the State Library of Victoria. The problem was that no biography of Borges mentions anything about him traveling to Australia. Indeed, a week after the article was published, the paper came out with a disclaimer (written by Jason Steger), pointing to the fact that the article was intended as fiction and not reportage. Tofts claims he was not surprised, as he points to a series of clues in the article that a keen reader might use in order to realize the fictitiousness of the story. However keen Tofts’ literary detective abilities were, he still lets a playful shadow of a doubt infiltrate his mind: what if he did actually take those

207. As he does in his *Memory Trade: A Prehistory of Cyberculture* (Fine Art Publishing, 1998), insisting on the idea that what we may call cyberculture did not arise out of nowhere, or as a direct result of an indifferent technology, but it is a cultural phenomenon deeply rooted in the history of the West.

208. Darren Tofts, “Mind Games: Borges, Reality, and the Limits of Credulity” *Mind Factory* (Prague: Litteraria Pragensia, 2005), ed. Louis Armand.

detective abilities into the real world and try to follow the trail of evidence? Meaning, would he be able to find actual evidence of Borges not visiting Australia? This is a question that questions the fiction character of the article and begins suspecting the disclaimer.

Needless to say, Tofts does not find any evidence in the State Library of any of the books that Borges allegedly consulted. However, he does not find any evidence that he did not, either. It was the same with the passenger lists of the ships arriving in Australia, and the same with the 1938 Royal Society's Proceedings – they both were missing. Puzzled by this detective incursion, Tofts brings in the resemblance that these events seem to bear with Borges' own stories, "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius" being the one he specifically refers to. "Indeed, for a fleeting instant, the idea did cross my mind that along with Steger, Rundle belonged to the same secret society of intellectuals, Orbis Tertius, who made the world Tlön."²⁰⁹ Fantasy and reality were coming together occasioned by a "simulated belief in the reality of the unreal," a belief arising from the possibility of it being real. How "simulated belief" and belief would be different, then, would be a different discussion. However, I think we may interpret Tofts' formulation as if it points to a difference in the understanding of belief along the lines of the weak/strong distinction that Vattimo was using to approach thinking. "Simulated belief" is a weak belief, insofar as it arises out of a sheer possibility but never severs its contact with this possibility as a possibility. It would be then closer to the Nietzschean conscious dream: a belief aware of the possibility of impossibility of its object, a belief focused on the originating act of that possibility rather than on the possible itself coming out of that possibility.

Tofts draws this detective incursion to a possibility of interpretation similar to the one opened up by Eldred's analysis of digital technology in the manner of a (digital) cast of being. Fiction, for Tofts, does not stay in the enclosed space we would relegate it to, but instead it

209. Ibid., 168.

slowly creeps into “the real,” like a virus, ultimately changing the way we perceive it. Fantasy literature, for instance,²¹⁰ is digestible as such only as long as we raise fences around it, only as long as we allow ourselves a permanent “metaphysical way out,” one that would keep fantasy in its “realism” within an essential and overt difference between reality and fiction. As soon as the fence breaks, as soon as the way out departs from us, fiction’s carnivalesque role (reinforcing our sense of the real actually) is lost, as we open up the way for fears of psychosis. However, moments of fiction bleeding into the real, like Tofts’ own detective tale, or Borges’ “Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius,” might bring something other than psychosis: a reevaluation of our sense of reality, a genealogy of the nature of that reality. “In the desert of the real you can still find, if you are lucky, ruptures in the seam of things, little tears in the otherwise flawless efficiency of the map that covers the territory,”²¹¹ ruptures that, argues Tofts, may constitute themselves in parables “about the creation of the world.” Concluding his essay, Tofts reverses the oppositional binary relation between reality and fiction, and points to Borges as a possible guide through our times informed by virtual technologies, “through the labyrinthine fantasy that we call the real.”

At this point we might have to ask if Tofts’ arguments are not somehow exactly what Eldred was cautioning about. If we are not to be afraid of psychosis, perhaps at least we should pay attention to digital fictions’ way of destructively creating the real. Let us then follow this thread for a bit more.

Since Tofts started his analysis from the direction of fiction, we should perhaps wonder about the state of fiction in the cyber world. The first instance that we could think of then, would be the case of the so-called persistent worlds. They are something that we may define, as a first step, as digital environments existing independent of their users that come to simulate worlds not

210. But we may go along with Tofts and consider other realms of expression within the same genre (he pays as much attention to Tolkien’s trilogy as he pays to *The Matrix*, or *The Truman Show*).

211. *Ibid.*, 150.

only through means of fiction but mostly through this actual persistence. However, if we define them this way, we come awfully close to Berkeley's vision of reality – which as interesting as this possibility would be, would not be as useful as we might think. Berkeley's *esse est percipi* combined with the necessary reasoning that we have to have a universal perceiver that never stops perceiving in order for our perceivable world to persist, thus seems to be fit for a pretentious definition of, say, *World of Warcraft*. Or *EverQuest*. Or *Eve Online*. Or any MMO²¹² and MUD²¹³ out there. This kind of definition though, would be too focused on the persistence and not enough on the use of these persistent worlds. Thus it would act as a fencing of a carnivalesque space and end up dissociating the “community” of users from their actual human dimension. The persistent worlds, after all, persist as long as their users persist in using them, no matter how stable and sophisticated their persistence outside of a user's use of them would be. When enough users are gone, the persistent world loses its reason to persist. For instance, in the case of a persistent world heavily relying (in its rules/laws) on the interaction between users themselves, there is always a “critical mass” of users needed online at the same time in order for the “world” to function. This would be the example of *Warhammer Online* and its developers' struggles to drive the users around (both through the modification of the environment itself and through the modification of their technical architecture as well) in order to have them meet and interact with each other. In the case of a persistent world relying more on the interaction between its proposed environment and users, this “critical mass” may be lower, however it does not seem to go all the way to the level of a single player game. In fact, even in the case of MMOs designed to be “friendly” to a user's solo adventures (like *World of Warcraft* or *Lord of the Rings*

212. Massively Multiplayer Online, with its popular version: MMORPG – Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Game.

213. Multi User Dimension/Dungeon: the “prehistory” of MMOs, although they do exist in parallel. Being text based, MUDs are also a lot cheaper to produce and maintain.

Online), the developers build the world in such a way that a user is induced at least into contemplating the possibility of interaction – when it becomes obvious that it is the only way to access certain parts of that environment. On top of that, there are the financial requirements necessary to keep the world “persistent” – that there has to be someone to maintain the technical architecture “running” the world – and whether those financial requirements meet the output of users using that product.

Thus, in approaching the case of persistent worlds, the accent should not fall on their persistent qualities, or consistency of their environment. They persist as worlds because of the users using them and not despite that. But is there anything about these persistent worlds, or their use, that we might sense as a “rupture in the seam of things?”

We might be tempted to take a look at *World of Warcraft* because of its popularity (eleven million users across different countries as of 2009, all of them required to pay \$15 monthly). However, it is not actually a good example at all. For one, the way its environment is designed for user interaction points to something that we may formulate like this: you are given a set of numbers representing your avatar, which in turn produces a different set of numbers that may be used to modify the original set of numbers, in order to produce another different set of numbers, and so on. Eldred’s digital worries would exult. But while the game can be definitely played just from the perspective of these numbers,²¹⁴ it also provides actual “content” to be driven by these numbers: elements of fiction, stories. However, the question arising from this would be then if there is any essential difference between playing *World of Warcraft* and watching, say, *The Watchmen* in accordance with its respective comic book fandom. Sure, the fiction of *World of Warcraft* does not present itself to you at once, fenced within an artifact like a

214. Their forum community (maintained by the developers through employed “community organizers”) uses the term “theorycraft” in order to refer to various players’ analyses and guides aimed at providing a better, or more efficient, use of numbers.

book, or singular story, but neither does the fiction of *Watchmen* (as that particular movie requires previous knowledge from outside its artifact nature as well). To take this even further, we could also ask if there is any real difference between the regular contemplation of the world of *Warcraft* through the computer screen, and the regular contemplation of the *Price is Right* through the television screen.

The answer might actually come from looking at two other cyber endeavors, apparently opposed, but in fact intimately related. On the one hand we have *Second Life*, an environment proposed as a persistent world, but a world in which the users are actually the ones creating the content. On the other hand we would have the web project called *The Santharian Dream*, which proposes the writing of a consistent encyclopedia about a world that does not exist.²¹⁵ While *The Santharian Dream* focuses on consistency and asks its users to interact as a group or tight community, *Second Life* is a bit more individualistic in nature and is not concerned at all with the consistency of its user created world (insofar as that consistency is actually provided by its digital environmental shell). Their resemblance comes from sharing a similar drive that brings their users together. To illuminate that drive we would have to appeal to Michael Heim's analysis of Virtual Reality in his essay on *The Essence of VR*.²¹⁶ The essence of VR, says Heim, is the "Holy Grail" of virtual reality. The drive to reach its own distinctness as a simulated reality is exactly that which defines virtual reality prior to any of its particular definitions. The drive that

215. The project does bear resemblance to the Borgesian Tlön situation. Its community actually extracted much humor out of identifying other websites (including some Wikipedia articles) referencing their imaginings as if they were real. A perhaps more embarrassing situation (not for the project, of course) was the instance in which a *National Geographic* employee approached them for the use of some of their works for a documentary on the possible historical existence of "giants," not realizing the second level of invention at work in *The Santharian Dream*'s mythologies.

216. Michael Heim, *The Metaphysics of Virtual Reality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

drives *Second Life* is the construction of a second life itself.²¹⁷ The drive that drives *The Santharian Dream* is the continuous²¹⁸ dream of writing the encyclopedia itself.

Even so, we might object that what *The Santharian Dream* and *Second Life* are doing is just a fencing of fantasy, the setting up of the carnivalesque place reinforcing our perception of the real. This would be a hurried objection though. *The Santharian Dream* lets reality bleed into its fiction by manipulating traditional mythologies,²¹⁹ beyond simple syncretism, in a creative act, seeing mythologies as mythologies, and thus letting them roam free, transforming and growing. *Second Life*'s fiction also blends with reality, not only in the moment when *Coca-Cola* is setting up virtual shop there, not only when news agencies establish reporters in there, but also when academics start using it for conferencing or teaching, or musicians for making music. The avatar of a lecturing academic might tempt us to question the education process itself, the virtual musician might drive us into questioning the musical performance as performance, and the ever empty "*Coke*" *Second Life* building might make us question the "*Coke*" products themselves, if not the whole process of consumption. The *Second Life* reporters (and reports) are something special indeed. On the one hand, their existence (or persistence) there might point us toward questioning the news in itself,²²⁰ but on the other hand these reports point to the very essence of the cyber worlds, which is not to be found within their electromagnetic materiality but somewhere among the people inhabiting them.

Koepsell had indeed a good insight while he was struggling to build his ontology of cyberspace. Cyberspace is nothing special, he claims; it's just about another medium of

217. I have to recall here a sort of a common humorous remark when *Second Life* shows up in conversations – that it is rather a place for people to meet and talk about what it is they can do with and in this *Second Life*.

218. The project actually refuses its own finality (as their statement of purpose notes), treating its encyclopedia about a world that does not exist as a continuous writing and not one that aims completion.

219. As their community is formed by users from all over the world, the original Tolkienesque fantasy of the project started to change by integrating fantasy works inspired by different cultural areas than the one that inspired Tolkien.

220. What makes news? Are news about and from fictional worlds anything other than news? Are there, indeed, any other kind of "news?"

expression. Therefore, we should treat the products of people's actions in cyberspace as any of their other products. We do not need different laws for cyberspace, but instead we might use cyberspace (in the sense of what people do in there) to clarify the laws we already have in place.²²¹ Cyberspace thus, proves to be "nothing special" but nevertheless useful in a special way. This is where again, Koepsell comes close to Eldred. They both open up the interpretation of cyberspace by broadening the approach to it and contextualizing it within a larger social and cultural environment. However, Koepsell's "nothing special but useful" is what blinds Eldred in his analysis: it is the usefulness of digital technology that should worry us insofar as it masks itself as "nothing special." Similarly, it is Eldred's particular genealogy of digital being that escapes Koepsell and leads him to slap the "nothing special" label on cyberspace. Trying to recuperate something useful from both their approaches, we could say that cyberspace is something special, insofar as it directs but also reveals a view on reality.

221. The purpose of his ontology was a practical one: what do we do once we establish the way cyberspace is? Do we need to address it with different laws?

CHAPTER 7: THE INHUMAN CYBERSPACE

The goal of this chapter is to deal with the certain view on reality implied by the previous one, while extending its reflection on other types of cyber enterprises as well (like hacktivism). In this chapter, I connect a democratic viewpoint with Lyotard's philosophy of the inhuman. It is a view that promotes a hermeneutical dialogue, an exploration of possibilities of identity and action, against the rigid structures of the metaphysical truth. However, it is important to underline the fact that its implied reconstructive side (the hermeneutical dialogue) cannot be fulfilled without a deconstructive, genealogical work.

In/human De/reconstruction

I mentioned earlier in this study that apart from the web servers providing it with a physical ground, the non-physical space of cyberspace takes form in between our lived lives, in between our minds. Thought of in this way, cyberspace appears to have the same nature as our structure of knowledge and the same power of seduction.

I also mentioned that we may think of cyberspace as an extension of Lyotard's way of conceiving the "inhuman." There are two kinds of inhuman: "the inhumanity of the system which is currently being consolidated under the name of development (among others) must not be confused with the infinitely secret one of which the soul is hostage."²²² Children have to be educated and their humanity is given (through a language) by the institutions that form our culture, and thus our humanity. The problem, then, as Lyotard continues his inquiry, is the humanity of humans; what do we actually, or can we actually call human? The answer lies in the

222. Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time* (Stanford University Press, 1992), 2.

transformative ability of the child, in their essential openness to humanity. As humans, we have an unpayable debt to our childhood; we are to accomplish that transformation without forgetting it. That is why we have two essentially different meanings of the term inhuman that cannot take each other's place. When Lyotard sets up this argument, he is also alluding to his misfortunate coining of the term "postmodern."²²³ To only consider the inhumanity of the system is a misguided attitude. The "postmodern" cannot do away with Modernity, and it is not supposed to be a "new age." On the contrary, our task is to account for that debt, to listen to the inhuman call of our undetermined childhood. "This debt to childhood is one which we never pay off," says Lyotard, "but it is enough not to forget it in order to resist"²²⁴ [...] it is the task of writing, thinking, literature, arts, to venture to bear witness to it."²²⁵

Cyberspace presents us with this same double inhumanity. On the one hand we have the phobia-stimulating foreignness of the digital world, and on the other hand we have its opening to a multitude of possibilities as possibilities, the simulating fiction of reality. It is perhaps by no mere coincidence that we have encountered the serious playfulness of the non-physical space, the lack of gravity of its interplay of simulations.

Ultimately, *Second Life* itself bears an explanation in terms of a game. Actually, as I am looking right now at their front web page I take note of their presentation: a text saying "a user-created, 3D virtual world community" next to a series of links (leading to presentation videos) named "dance," "shop," "explore," "play," "work," "love," "learn" – in that order, from top to

223. In fact, *The Inhuman* contains an essay, "Rewriting Modernity" (based on his address to a 1986 conference at University of Wisconsin), in which he restates his thoughts from *The Postmodern Explained to Children*.

224. Lyotard actually refers to a resistance to the inhumanity of the system. In the previous paragraph he actually argues that the only politics possible today (as we have laid off the possibility of revolutions – an intersection with De Certeau there) are the resistance to the inhuman represented by the reified stories making up our educated humanity. This resistance though, can only be accomplished by taking account of the debt we have to the other inhuman, the one calling from our undetermined childhood. However, the translators (Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby) decided to write the passage I'm quoting as "is enough to not forget it in order to resist it" which changes the entire meaning of the argument. That is why I chose to truncate this passage in the way I did.

225. *Ibid.*, 7.

bottom, left to right. Trying a little experiment, I open the presentation web page of one of the popular video games of the last years, *The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion*. I quote from their press release: “Howard [the producer] commented, ‘Our games have always been about great depth and variety in creating any kind of character you want and going out and doing whatever you want.’ He added, ‘With Oblivion, we’re taking the idea of a virtual fantasy world as far as it will go.’”²²⁶ Granted, *Oblivion* is a single player game, but what about MMORPGs? I jump to *World of Warcraft*’s web page and take a quick look at the advertised “features.” I quote a few of them: “adventure together with thousands of players simultaneously,” “explore an expansive world with miles of forests, deserts, snow-blown mountains, and other exotic lands,” “locate and engage other players with easy-to-use features and tools, including chat channels, friends lists, and animated and audible character expressions,” “practice various professions to make and enhance custom items, locate and harvest reagents and raw materials, acquire wealth through trade with other players, and more.”²²⁷ Although, just like in Zhuangzi’s butterfly dream, we may ask which is actually using the terms of the other for explaining itself? Is it the world dreaming to become a game, or the game dreaming to become a world?

Is the proximity of play and simulation enough, though, to account for the double inhumanity of cyberspace? Is the fiction of reality enough of a thread-end that would unroll cyberspace in its being? After all, there are more uses of the non-physical space than games and persistent worlds.

Alec McHoul, an Australian media scholar, was struggling with an inquiry on cyber being in the late nineties.²²⁸ Working with an early Heideggerian approach, similar to Eldred’s,

226. http://www.elderscrolls.com/games/oblivion_overview.htm (accessed on July 20, 2009).

227. <http://www.worldofwarcraft.com/misc/features.html> (accessed on July 20, 2009).

228. He wrote two essays, “Cyberbeing and –space” in *Postmodern Culture* (volume 8, issue 1, 1997) and “Cybernetimology and –ethics” in *Postmodern Culture* (volume 9, issue 1, 1998).

McHoul concluded that cyber-being is to be found in between the actual and the virtual, going back and forth from one to the other. He mirrors the way Heim and Eldred lost their ways by considering cyberspace in its radical distinctness from reality,²²⁹ thus waiving the possible insight of cyberspace's "in between ourselves," of its functioning within our "reality."²³⁰ Cyberbeing, for McHoul, is that which helps us derealize the real. In between science's actuality and art's imaginary/virtual we find the ever fluid, spectral space of cyberspace. Cyberbeing, understood as that which resides in cyberspace, through a spectral functioning, loosens the actuality of the real "from its moorings," weakens its reality. Cyberbeing would be, then, essentially deconstructive.²³¹ However, if we are to think of Tofts' experiments with the fiction of reality, or if we are to follow Lyotard's call to meditate on the double nature of the inhuman, we see that the deconstructive feature of cyberspace is only one side of the coin. The other side is, in fact, conscious reconstruction. Insisting on considering cyberspace in its distinctness comes naturally with the Western way of inquiry. We have to have an object of inquiry; therefore, we have to carve it out of the continuum. But, as I was mentioning earlier, "there is no there, there" in the case of cyberspace. Considering it in a separation would lose sight of its non-physicality. Taking it in its radical distinctness would drive the thought towards its deconstructive feature only. It is as if speaking of simulation (and we speak of simulation in this case just because of cyberspace) we would take note of its deconstruction forgetting its originary mode, meaning that of construction. In the case of simulation, deconstruction is a side effect of its essential functioning and intention: to simulate the real, to build itself as real. McHoul did have a really good insight, even if he did not follow that thought to its end. Defining cyberbeing as that which

229. Although the distinction is not as clear at McHoul as it is at Heim, it is much clearer than it is at Eldred.

230. Although, again, he does point at the end of his "Cybernetymology and -ethics" to a few Heideggerian quotes that seem to prove exactly that possible insight.

231. It is interesting that Eldred reaches the same conclusion, but where Eldred worries, McHoul seems to exult.

resides in the spectral space of cyberspace, he argued that cyberbeing is more than online being. Trying to chart a series of possible spectral manifestations, he lists hypertext and Internet²³² as two separate such ways – along with games (single player included), MUDs, dildonics, cyber-performances (like Stelarc’s: coupling his body with electronic devices sometimes connected to the Internet, so that users can interact with his construct), virtual (or cybernetic) pets, and virtual reality equipment. Such a chart opens up the possibility of thinking cyberspace outside of a there-space and towards a space between us, an intimate part of our lived lives, and, therefore, a manifestation itself of a way to approach the world.

Perhaps we may further clarify this if we continue our incursion through the experiments dealing with the fiction of reality (again, in both senses of the genitive) with a different analysis, that also approaches cyberspace in its simulating nature, but extends from specific cyber phenomena to a worldview intimately related to digital technologies. After all, if not the analysis of persistent worlds or games in itself, then at least some of the specific examples we used here, meaning *Second Life*, or *The Santharian Dream*, can be questioned in their relevancy given the number of actual people involved in them,²³³ and thus they might never overcome their status of

232. For instance, because of the openness of electronic mail (given by its allowance of hyper-linking, not possible in the physical mail), he argues, we can safely say that what moves on the Internet is not the information on a highway, but the movement of the web itself.

233. Less than 100 contributors for *The Santharian Dream*, and around 68,000 actual users in *Second Life* (according to a VentureBeat 2008 interview with Mark Kingdon, Linden Lab’s CEO - <http://digital.venturebeat.com/2008/09/18/qa-linden-lab-ceo-mark-kingdon-on-second-lifes-latest-evolution/> accessed on July 20, 2009), as opposed to, say, *World of Warcraft*’s 11 million. It would seem that far more people like to play Blizzard Entertainment’s numbers game, but let us not rush to grim conclusions here. If only we would try a short analysis of the term “theorycraft” used by its community (it was brought to “life” by a different community organized around an older Blizzard Entertainment game, *Starcraft*), we would have to take note of the fact that the numbers game is regarded as a game. By “theorycrafting” users are aware that their goal is to use a set of numbers in order to efficiently produce another set of numbers. Numbers in their case, a goal in itself, are as separated from (if we follow Eldred, here we would add “the continuum of”) reality as ever. They are nevertheless real as they function. “Theorycrafting” is both a deconstruction of the game’s worldly simulation as it is a building of different world all together. If I could add another footnote to this footnote I would mention that *World of Warcraft*’s “theorycrafting” is similar in nature (maybe not in actual goals, but even that is debatable) with what we came to name “modding scene.” A growing trend over the past (at least) decade of the major computer game franchises is to allow users to modify the game itself. Communities have sprung around this (for instance “TESNexus,” organized around *The Elder Scrolls* franchise, announced on May 1, 2009, that they have reached the

examples of possible uses. The analysis I have in mind comes from two Swedish authors, Otto von Busch, a fashion researcher and artist, and Karl Palmas, an economist and theoretician. The two essays they brought together in *Abstract Hactivism*,²³⁴ advance a few ideas that are worth reviewing, as they might help our inquiry here.

Palmas and von Busch define hacktivism in accordance to Jason Sack's coinage of the term as "*online* strategies and tactics of activists that more or less follow the autonomous anarchist tradition – squatters, phreaks, scammers, crackers, and cultural jammers engaged in anti-globalization, direct action, and resistance."²³⁵ However, they distance themselves from this specific meaning of the term and redefine it, by attaching it the term "abstract." On the one hand they follow the distinction coming out of the hacker culture²³⁶ between hackers as builders and crackers as destroyers. Hacktivism then, would point to a process of construction rather than deconstruction. On the other hand, they also extend the term in order to apply to activities outside the online world as well: not politics of computers, or computers used in politics, but "how the abstract mechanisms enacted in the actual computers are adopted elsewhere, in non-computer contexts."²³⁷ In a way, especially from this second perspective, their enterprise mirrors

1 million members milestone, with 70 million unique visitors and 430 million views over 8 years, and an archive of 16.412 modification files only for the fourth game in the series – <http://www.tesnexus.com> last accessed on July 30, 2009) appropriating the games through their modifications, continuing them, and even making their own different games using the original game's engine – all of this culminating, I would say, with Cyan Worlds Inc's 2009 decision to release the source code of their MMO project, *Myst Online*, to the fan community in order for them to complete it as a free open source project, as the company found itself lacking the necessary financial resources to do so (<http://mystonline.com/en/> last accessed on July 30, 2009).

234. Otto von Busch, Karl Palmas, *Abstract Hactivism: the making of a hacker culture* (London, Istanbul: OpenMute, 2006).

235. *Ibid.*, 16.

236. A well done analysis of this subculture was done by Douglas Thomas in his book *Hacker Culture* (London, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002). He presents this distinction there, coming out of the history of computer hacking: the 1950s and 1960s computer programmers saw hacking as an intellectual exercise of understanding and manipulating the computer system, while in the 1980s and 1990s, hacking came to be associated more with manipulation in the sense of a deconstruction of computer systems (hence the other name used to refer to such activities: cracking).

237. *Ibid.*, 19.

McKenzie Wark's idea advanced in *A Hacker Manifesto*,²³⁸ that we can gather under the hacker name anyone who deals with information in the way of releasing the virtual into the actual: "whatever code we hack, be it programming language, poetic language, math or music, curves or colourings, we create the possibility of new things entering the world."²³⁹ Wark, trying to update Marxism to the digital age, pursues this idea along the lines of class. Hackers need to develop a class consciousness, as in our contemporary society they are, in fact, a class. Palmas and von Busch are not working with ideas of class, but they do retain the same defining core in their treatment of abstract hacktivism. Just as Wark talks about expressive politics as a possibility for the hacker class to "permeate existing states with a new state of existence, spreading the seeds of an alternative practice of everyday life,"²⁴⁰ Palmas and von Busch frame their abstract hacktivism as a possible attempt not to oppose a system, but its hegemonic order and control, connecting and reconnecting the power flows (hacking them), actually using the system instead of giving into it, or simply replacing it with another.

These essays are heavily informed by the intellectual disappointment with the events of May 1968 in France, a disappointment which we can trace throughout most of the poststructuralist works, and that becomes especially apparent in the work of Michel De Certeau. The disappointment deals with the realization of the impossibility of a truly liberating revolution, as, in the end, a revolution only replaces one system of power with a different system of power. Palmas and von Busch advance the idea that the countercultural age for which we use 1968 as a symbol²⁴¹ slowly makes way for a different one, an age of abstract hacktivism, for which we

238. McKenzie Wark, *A Hacker Manifesto* (Harvard University Press, 2004)

239. McKenzie Wark, *A Hacker Manifesto*, #02 of version 4.0, http://subsol.c3.hu/subsol_2/contributors0/warktext.html (accessed on July 20, 2009).

240. *Ibid.*, 59.

241. They do not refer only to the events in France when they talk about 1968 as a symbol, but also gather under it the civil rights movements in the United States, or the "Prague Spring" events in Czechoslovakia.

may use 1999 and its dot-com crash as a symbol. Nineteen ninety-nine, with its financial dot-com burst and subsequent crash, comes to signify a change in our perception of the world. Increasingly, instead of referring to it, or thinking it, in “machinic” terms (culture jamming, for instance) and along the lines of oppositional rhetoric (counterculture), we come to conceive reality borrowing from the functioning of computers and computer networks, with their inherent hacker rhetoric or ethics.

The question that arises here (besides the debatable proposal of 1999 as symbol – although we might accept it in its arbitrariness, in the same way 1968 is more or less an arbitrary post-construction, as Palmas himself alludes to) is whether this intensive focus on construction and reconstruction, and an intentional departure from deconstruction is not driving us back to an over-optimistic idealism.²⁴² Palmas and von Busch actually make it quite clear that they see an unraveling of what they name “the intellectual legacy of the ‘baby-boomer generation’ – language and narrative-obsessed social theory, the focus on deconstruction and debunking, the ‘science wars.’”²⁴³ Should we really call deconstruction passé? Should we move headlong with their use of Bruno Latour’s definition of critic as one that assembles, one that connects and brings together? It all depends on how we put together our understanding, of course.

We need therefore one last excursion in order to bring our inquiry into cyberspace to a certain end. It is an excursion incited by this discontent with deconstruction that seems to come out from these analyses of the possible worldview associated with the digital age. It is also an excursion incited by the very fact that we have, so far in this study, put away the thinking of difference, although at the same time bringing it under the hermeneutical *koiné*. We will see that, even if it seems a slightly different path, we will come to similar conclusions and more: they will

242. That actually caused the dot-com burst and crash anyway, as one may argue.

243. *Ibid.*, 17.

inform and complete each other. We may speak of a digital age if we so choose, but we cannot rule out the thinking of difference from its associated worldview. Deconstruction is not “passé” but on the contrary, it lives a new life within the hermeneutical *koiné*.

The Unnamed Difference of Possible Genealogies

We should consider at this point an excursion into the thinking of difference, trying to explain how deconstruction is tied into cultural genealogy, and why no reconstruction would be possible without it. Let us start this excursion by slightly repositioning our questioning. Since we have arrived at the thought of cyberspace having its being with our structure of knowledge, since we have extended its frame outside the electromagnetic lines, and somewhere in between us, we should probably start with a questioning of intellectuals themselves. Hacker class or not, what is their role today and in relation to the non-physical space?

If on the heights of Modernity we can still picture theorists driving a culture and a society towards a “farscape” of progress, the historical lessons of the twentieth century would have to turn us at least a little bit skeptical. We all know the stories of the disastrous interpretations of Nietzsche or Marx – and that would be just to name the few more prominent ones. Perhaps the eighties (and early nineties) walking on poststructuralist trails tell us that this would be exactly what intellectuals should do: guard us, the rest of the world, from such malign interpretations (by exposing their hypocrisies). But then (maybe thinking back to Plato’s *Republic*), how would we answer the question of who would guard the guardians? And after all, what sort of an image would we have in mind if we were to think of what an intellectual is? At this point I will have to

call upon some Foucauldian thoughts on the matter, hoping that they will manage to take us on a good path towards shedding some light on this matter.

With Michel Foucault, a definition of a “public intellectual” is always problematic. Of course, now that he is dead and he cannot speak back or make ironic remarks on our attempts to classify his ideas (as he, rather amused, commented on *Petite Larousse*’s short description of his philosophy), we can try to boil down such an image of how a “public intellectual” should be and look like. Using Foucault’s own remarks in the interview with Alessandro Fontana and Pasquale Pasquino (“Truth and Power”²⁴⁴), we might draw the following picture of the late twentieth century intellectual scene: there are three strains of thought, two of them in effect and one of them projected into the future (or enacted by Foucault himself). The two strains in effect are Phenomenology and Marxism, with their respective intellectual figures of a phenomenological or Marxist descent. The third one is what Foucault calls (tracing Nietzschean steps) “genealogy.” “Genealogists” then, would try to think outside of the established forms of subjectivity and representation, taking knowledge as formative discourse at the center of their discourse.

“And this is what I would call genealogy, that is, a form of history which can account for the constitution of knowledges, discourses, domains of objects, etc., without having to make reference to a subject which is either transcendental in relation to the field of events or runs in its empty sameness throughout the course of history.”²⁴⁵

Phenomenology, the thought thread that inherits the modern Western humanism, has become (especially in French academia) the established (institutionalized) form of philosophical (and I point here to the etymology of the term) discourse. Founded by the works of Husserl, who was trying to revive and recuperate the modern thought (Descartes’ *cogito*) through the later

244. Michel Foucault, “Truth and Power” in *Power/Knowledge, Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980) ed. Colin Gordon.

245. Ibid.

Kantian critique, phenomenology takes an already constituted subject at the core of its endeavors, tracing the history of that subject through the various ages of the “human” thought. Marxism on the other hand, is the response to this institutionalized search for wisdom, its critical counterpart, trying to underline and unhide the “truth” behind the history of this subject: the fact that its constitution is essentially used in a complex of social relations centered around economic-ideological domination and struggle. Public intellectuals in these two cases are the leading figures of the production of discourses, both Marxist and phenomenologic. Foucault, though, wants to go one step further beyond this distinction, observing that the Marxist critique of the established ideological production in the end plays right into its game. Since Heidegger, the authors whose work will eventually amount to post/late modern thought have tried to overcome metaphysics (phenomenology representing metaphysics in its later stage). Naturally, their works have turned towards Marxism, but the result could not have been other than a metaphysical critique of metaphysics, or, if you prefer, a metaphysical overcoming of metaphysics. And that is because Marx himself was still paying tribute to metaphysical thought. Moreover, building a critique of ideology solely on economic relations of domination, believes Foucault, fails to call forth the intimate relation running both ways between discourse (knowledge) and the socio-economical landscape. Discourse may be a result of class struggles, but only insofar as class struggles are a result of discourse. Genealogy then would provide this necessary intellectual movement beyond metaphysics or beyond totalizing systems of thought, by applying an interpretive *hybris* to various thought threads that appear to constitute us as individuals, and that appear to place us at various nodes in the social web. Genealogy is not about discovering the truth behind something (as Marxism claims to do) but about uncovering the ground beneath our feet. It is history done from today’s perspective, starting from now and

uncovering then. The ultimate danger for genealogy – for the genealogist as public intellectual for that matter – would be to fully become history, that is to say the danger would be to start (thinking that it is) speaking the truth and stop speaking to truth.

Because of this continuous *hybris*, or process of uncovering, genealogy can only be a public action. It is exactly the difference between Socrates and Plato. Socrates was an action-philosopher, he never wrote anything just because he was always speaking to the truth (that the people that he met thought they knew), and because his stage of action was always the agora – the public place *par excellence*. Plato was the erudite, encasing his and Socrates' discourse in the written word to be kept for posterity, or just for the dusty shelves of some secluded monastic library.

There is a problem though with this image of how a public intellectual should be, and this problem is shown (ironically) by a Marxist writing before Foucault: Gramsci. For Gramsci, to say that some people are intellectuals and some are not is absurd. As we are all granted with intellect, we are all intellectuals. However, it is exactly the social class system (economically grounded) that makes us speak of intellectuals, and public intellectuals for that matter, when referring only to certain people. This means that the function of a “public intellectual,” which is to say the function of producing discourse is granted only to certain individuals. Certain educational practices and certain access restrictions would be enough to create this quite exclusivist category of workers in the fields of discourse. Foucault's genealogists belong to this category, which raises the question: yes, they might speak to truth, but who is there to hear them? Yes, genealogists may form a good image for our times, or of how (necessarily public) intellectuals should look like. But even if they break apart ideologies with their applied *hybris*, can they be something else than just another worker in the field of discourse, producing

formative discourse in their turn? In other words, can they break out of their place in which they were assigned by the very thing which they critique? The problem was known to Foucault as well, yet the solution remained a puzzling one. Should we go back to Enlightenment? But isn't this the thing that we're critiquing in the first place? Can we ever escape the perils of erudition while, at the same time, avoid the dangers of unassuming philosophy?

We're not even half-way through our attempt to answer the question regarding a possible role of a (public) intellectual today and we already seem to be stuck. On the one hand, we have the Foucauldian dreams of genealogists, applying *hybris* on discourse, perhaps philosophizing with a Nietzschean hammer, speaking not the truth but to truth; yet, on the other hand, a Gramscian shadow still falls upon this thought as the speakers to truth appear to be as estranged (or alienated) from that truth as their counterparts, the speakers of truth. So perhaps at this point it would be a good idea to take a closer look at the way in which we got stuck.

This seeming dead-end, or maybe deadlock, lies exactly in this oppositional binary relation. On the first hand, as mentioned above, we would have intellectuals and the truth of the world and, on the second hand mentioned above, we would have intellectuals and the rest of the world. We might make good use here of the reading and critique that Michel De Certeau²⁴⁶ applies to Foucault, as it is a critique that senses exactly this kind of differential tension.

Taking Foucault (the one from *Discipline and Punish*) alongside with Pierre Bourdieu (the one from *Outline for a Theory of Practice*) as such genealogist intellectuals De Certeau observes that both of them, although thinking and aiming their endeavors towards practices (especially those excluded from discourse), have managed in the end to miss their object completely. In fact, judging by their end results, we might say that Foucault ended up being interested in what the practices produce, while Bourdieu ended up being interested in what

246. Michel De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988)

produces them. And in both cases, argues De Certeau, they needed “other regions,” a different space from which to extract what their culture has excluded from discourse: Foucault found that space in history – the *Ancien Regime* or the nineteenth century – while Bourdieu had to look for it in Algeria among the Kabylia people. They both needed an “other” of discourse as the only way to have that discourse revealed.

The problem, then, seems to linger in this circling around difference, signified by the intellectuals’ ivory towers and their constitutive departure from their object. Modernity, with its subject-object formative difference, seems to be stronger than we might have thought, as we see it infiltrating in every nook and cranny of our thinking. We are talking, after all, about theory and practice. We are talking about erecting systems of meaning, about constructing Babel towers to see the earth from heavens. We are talking about the way of thinking that isolates the subject just in order to let it gather around a whole – just in order to let it have a firm grasp on the web that it wraps around the object. Was it ever different? Can it ever be different? Modernity itself would not let us think of another way. But as I mentioned (as a metaphor) the tower of Babel, I recall a particular version of this myth (as myths telling the story of people failing to erect a building, and having their tongues “mixed,” as a result can be encountered all over the world, from central America to Mesopotamia),²⁴⁷ to be found in one African civilization, telling how the failure to build the respective stairway to heaven happened because the builders, being short of just one more necessary step, took out the base step in order to complete the stair. Modernity may not let us think of another way, but maybe it does not even need to.

247. Victor Kernbach, *Dictionar de Mitologie Generala* (Bucharest: Albatros, 1983)

Help here may come from Jacques Derrida²⁴⁸ and his reading of the Saussurian conception of sign. The towers of Babel, the systems of meaning that I was mentioning earlier, are all structures of signification, and their bricks and steps are the signs. Following Saussure's model, we would have to look at the sign alongside a differential relation between a signifier and a signified. These are not two independent elements, though, as they are constituted only by their difference. And this difference, says Saussure, is arbitrary. But just an arbitrary difference between a signifier and a signified would not provide for the constitution of a language yet. Language is a code, that is to say a structure, gathering signs in a system by the virtue of the difference that brings them together as distinctive signs. If we take one sign out of a language, out of such a system, that sign would lose its meaning, and, therefore, its character as a sign itself. The internal difference of a sign can only make sense within a differential system of language. However, even if all seems good for now, we need to pay attention to all the consequences of such a view, as Derrida warns us. The trick is that, given this system, the only legitimate conclusion would be that the thought of a transcendental signified has no place here. Our first drive might be to consider this system on two possible dimensions, one horizontal – the signs in their difference from other signs, forming a language – and one vertical – the signs in their internal difference between a signifier and a signified. The resulting image then, or better said, the resulting representation of how we speak about the world would lead us into thinking of language as a web to be thrown onto the world of objects. However, the vertical dimension presents us with a certain complication: the internal (and arbitrary) difference of a sign is not a difference between two discreet elements, as the elements become such only within that difference. The vertical “dimension” can only be then an illusory one – as there would be no

248. Jacques Derrida, “Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of Human Sciences,” *Writing and Difference* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978)

“vertical” to talk about in the first place. We have the principle of arbitrariness, meaning that there is nothing in the nature of a signified object that would force us to attach it a certain signifier. However, the signified object actually appears as a signified object by virtue of its difference from a signifier. Thus the image of “the web” thrown on the “world of objects” simply implodes and we can say, along with Derrida, that to think the Saussurian model to its ultimate consequences²⁴⁹ is to accept that there is no such a thing as a transcendental signified. In the case of the structures of meaning (or thinking), this very same principle would render for us the idea that there is no center generating (or maybe bringing together) structures, but structures providing the illusion of a center, insistently pointing to something that is not exactly there.

Clinging to the other of discourse, insisting on the elements of difference and not on the difference itself, can only replicate *ad infinitum* the same Western ontological duality: the theory and the practice, the active and the passive, the subject and the object (and, ultimately, us and them). Thinking of these twentieth century Western intellectual endeavors, I cannot but remark this strange framework implied by their titles: “Discipline and Punish” (Foucault), “Difference and Repetition” (Deleuze), “Being and Time” (Heidegger), “Being and Nothingness” (Sartre), “Totality and Infinite” (Levinas) “Writing and Difference” (Derrida himself). Perhaps this does not mean anything, being just a matter of Western intellectual fancy, or perhaps this is one loose point from which a deconstruction could start its subversive work. Regardless of this, we are back at the question of genealogy (but hopefully armed with some new tools): how can one speak *to* truth without othering that truth? How can one not other the truth without speaking *the* truth?

249. Perhaps Saussure never intended this – after all he was writing within a pure modern tradition – but that is not our concern here.

One answer to this would be to let that truth speak through writing, instead of having the writing speak the (or to) truth. Derrida's deconstruction was moving into this direction, with its enhanced attention looking for that detail able to unfold what writing was constructing, looking for that first and last step that would cancel the distance between the place of contemplation and the contemplated space. Michel De Certeau, aware of the problems inherent in the Foucauldian enterprise, was trying to accomplish that as well. Looking for a way to write about practice without giving into the temptation that (according to his critique) caused authors like Foucault or Bourdieu to miss their intended object, he applied to Diderot's encyclopedic definition of the difference between arts and sciences (if the object is executed we are dealing with art, if the object is contemplated we are dealing with science). Considering that, then, what would be necessary for the possibility of a theory of practice would be an art of theory, a movement that would set up through an art of narration a space in which practices would appear both in a verbal and a nonlinguistic field.

Such a requirement sounds puzzling, yet if we are to take a better look at De Certeau's *Practice of Everyday Life*, we might be able to see exactly this art of theory in practice. The issue at stake, again, is the constitutive difference that seemed to have bothered us here all the time. De Certeau traces that difference across a wide range of practices to be told, but he never names it as such. He does not offer a definition that would match this difference, thus managing to not focus his attention on the elements composing the difference but on the difference itself. It would seem that given such a requirement one would have to elaborate a theory of difference (see Deleuze), but De Certeau finds another way out. Instead, he builds theories around this difference already at work in his work and in the objects of his theoretical narrations. It is a difference between strategies and tactics, between places and spaces, between maps and tours, between acts of going

and walks. The closest thing to an act of defining this difference is performed by De Certeau while elaborating on the difference between strategies and tactics. It is a difference in military terms because it is a difference pointing to the way in which power works, while at the same time (just because we are talking, after all, about this strange unnamed difference) telling us something about the way in which (to follow De Certeau's language) the users operate within the modern framework. The speaking of truth, or the discourse about the truth of the world – always a scriptural act, sets up an order, a place to be inhabited, a map to be used, a strategy to be followed. The use in itself, though, the operations operated in the already given field, are something of a different order: they are improper spaces created inside proper places, a touring around, or a tactic unfolding within the given strategic field. A strategy is the postulation of power just because, by definition, it has the power to set up, while a tactic is determined by the absence of power, just because it appears in that space toward which power is oriented. Around this gap (and, to follow De Certeau's critique of Foucault and Bourdieu, not because of a gap – be that between the here and now and the ancient past, or the here and now and a remote other –) any story telling about what people do would have to be told.

There is one more interesting thing about this De Certeauian unnamed difference, and it becomes immediately apparent if we were to apply a reading in the spirit of Derrida's Saussurian thoughts (I would also have to say here that, given the absence of Derrida from De Certeau's work, it would be really interesting to read a study done at a confluence of their thoughts). What De Certeau actually does there is to leave that illusion of verticality present as a temptation within the construction of the sign as difference. De Certeau's discourse, or rather we should say narration, is anything but a scriptural play. In resisting the urge to name the difference, and thus reify its elements, he opens up a space for that difference to work its work – or become manifest.

His writing moves on the horizontality of difference, light(en)ing up the formation of discourse as web. He is not inferring things about the world, but instead he lets this world mirror itself in its own shards. Perhaps this is the same deconstructive drive as Derrida's, although applied to a different spectrum, a drive that moves on the borders of discourse, between language and silence, between theory and practice.

It would seem that it remains to be seen if the sight of power in the unnamed difference was a scriptural move or not. After all, there might be a reason for which the first site to find the difference at work in De Certeau's narrations is the one framed by military metaphors. But isn't this the sight displayed by the Saussurian model of sign if taken to its last consequences? A script is always about power, as it is about impositions. When the sign reveals itself on that "vertical" dimension to be nothing else than a preserved act of pointing that gives birth to the pointed as such, what we have is exactly the imposition bringing about the script. I say "bringing about" because just the act of pointing does not yet justify the use of thinking in terms of power. But the differential nature of the sign happens, as we have seen, on two possible imagined dimensions. In other words, a pointing does not make any sense unless it is a pointing *for* someone/something. The sign appears as internal difference but it is also caught in its differential relations that render it as a sign in a language. Therefore, because the pointed needs to make sense within the web of a language, we can in the end speak of scriptural plays and power.

Perhaps De Certeau's genealogies, not to mention Derrida's applied deconstructions, are yet too abstract and therefore a bit too much tied up in a pure discursive world; perhaps they move too close to the formative difference in their insistence of unearthing the world upon which they glide. But they are not the only intellectuals (to go back at the question setting off this trail of thoughts) performing their writing in this way. An interesting, and more recent, example that

comes to mind would be rooted in a field concerned with the same essential difficulty that determined De Certeau to embark on his chase for the unnamed difference: performance studies. If De Certeau was troubled by the ways in which discourse fails to account for practices without programming them into a discourse of their own, the study of performance faces the same problem: how can one offer an account of a performance without destroying it? Moreover, how can one offer an account of something that exists only in a here and now, how can one talk about something that permanently moves into silence with each passing moment of its happening?

In her performance studies essay *The Archive and the Repertoire*,²⁵⁰ Diana Taylor stops for a moment to analyze a performance act staged by two artists: Coco Fusco and Guillermo-Gomez Pena. They called their performance “the Guatinai World Tour” and presented themselves to various audiences as “authentic” tribesmen that have been “just” “discovered” on a fictitious island off the coast of Mexico. They were caged and acted as museum exhibits, even performing various tasks for money should the audience request them. Obviously that was supposedly a performance act uncovering the Western colonial discourse. By being a performance and not a theory text, though, they were aiming to uncover that discourse in places where it usually stays covered, continuing its work as such: common sense perceptions/acts/situations. Diana Taylor tries then to mirror that performance in her text, letting the artists’ deconstructive work manifest itself within the confines of a text, and in order to do that she performs her own (textual) deconstructive work on the idea of “discovery” arising in the space between two worlds in conflict (labeled “new” and “old” by the ones living in the “old” one). Diana Taylor’s performance is set prior to her telling of the artists’ performance, thus setting up a frame in which they would be able to perform inside her text as well. But, and here is the strangest thing, as they do perform within her text, their performance becomes Diana

250. Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003)

Taylor's performance and not Coco Fusco's and Guillermo-Gomez Pena's performance. In fact this comes out with no difficulties from Diana Taylor's text, when it is revealed that the artists' expectations from their ideal public would have been to have someone take them out of their self-imposed imprisonment. But the only ones that actually tried to do that were doing it in order to hurt them, and not to liberate them. Faced with the puzzled artists, Diana Taylor explains, reveals, deconstructs, and continues their work, letting them speak in her text. She performs.

I go back at this point to the question asked a bit earlier, the question that was reformulating the problem exposed in the beginning of this excursion: how can one speak to truth without othering that truth? How can one not other the truth without speaking the truth? What appears now, after we armed ourselves with these new tools, would be that we need to carefully position our writing so as to let writing bring about that truth that we are trying to speak to.

Sometime in the last century, after the Second World War and outside Saussurian terminology, Heidegger was asking a question concerning technology in order to find an answer concerning the world, or, perhaps better said, in order to find something in the essence of the modern thought. The essence of technology, meaning the answer to the question concerning technology, appeared to be something of a different nature (Heidegger's, strange even for the Germans, composite word *Ge-Stell*, framed in an acceptable English translation as "Enframing"), something pointing to a specific (that is modern) attitude towards being that, among other things, determines technology to be what it is and drives it on the heights of Modernity as what could be named "techno-science." Enframing, that is gathering beings together as a standing reserve, obscuring the event of being, and thus driving us into forgetting that being – which is the same thing as saying forgetting the constitutive difference (or ontological difference, if we are to

follow philosophical jargons) between being (*Sein*) – always an event – and beings (*seiendes*). This is after all, the story of the modern progress, the story of Modernity’s advance into the field of knowable reality: the race for the infinite representation of the world. But we can also say, safely I would argue, that this is, after all, also the story of overlooking the full understanding of the differential nature of the sign. By forgetting that the pointed is brought forth in the act of pointing only, we leave enough space for the pointed to become the ground legitimating a reified web of (horizontal) differences, and thus burying the flow of power. However, Heidegger was asking this question concerning technology quite a while ago, in the previous century. I would say at this point that we would not be out of place to ask “what about now?”

The techno-science is still in its place alongside that which lies in its essence yet being of a different nature, meaning Enframing. Heim, but mostly Eldred, have both took note of this consummation of the essence of technology, as Heidegger saw it, in the unfurling of digital technologies. However, Heim, more than Eldred, saw something else in place now, which was not present at the time of Heidegger’s meditations, something that appeared within the frameworks of this techno-science, and out of its inherent attitude towards being. We usually call this something “cyberspace,” “web,” “net,” “Internet.”

Taking the medium as a gimmick, or just a tool for e-mail, and thus refusing its projected nature of cyberspace, we would be tempted to doubt its radical slight difference. We would be able to doubt its impact on the rest of our everyday lives as well. But what if we would consider an extremely modern project developing in cyberspace right now as I write these words and as you read them? I am thinking, of course, about Wikipedia, the Free Encyclopedia (free both as in “free beer” and as in “free market,” to borrow a terminology often vehiculated by the “copyright warriors”), a project similar in structure to, say, Diderot’s Encyclopedia, yet with an intended

democratic twist on it. In principle anyone would be able to add their share of truth to the Great Library of truths displayed by this Free Encyclopedia. A database of all possible knowledge: what can be closer to the infinite representation of the world?

EPILOGUE: A FEATURE OF OUR TIMES

In this final chapter I tie in all the arguments brought so far and provide an answer to the questioning of cyberspace undertaken in this study. Truth, connected to the democratic view, appears to be a hermeneutical persuasive truth within the worldview reflected by the functioning of cyberspace. Thus, if we consider hermeneutics as a discipline of the mind, as a *koiné* of our times, cyberspace comes to be a reflection of it: we can speak of a cyber *koiné*. If we are trying to avoid letting the non-physicality of cyberspace tempt us into considering it in isolation, that does not mean we have to give in to a Koepsellian conclusion and claim that cyberspace is nothing special. Its very nature, democratic hermeneutical, points to a special feature of cyberspace: it reflects as much as it directs. In order to escape the dangers of the type of thinking from which cyberspace was born (dangers that Heidegger, Heim, and Eldred have explained extensively) we have to constantly question its essence. Thus, the interplay between deconstruction and reconstruction on hermeneutical grounds can lift us from the strong metaphysical Western modern thinking. Of course, cyberspace is not the only technological phenomenon of our times, however, the intimacy with technology that we gain while using it, makes it one (as I call it) “privileged” ground both for unearthing a feature of our times and for consciously moving towards a true democratic mindset, rather of an ontological nature than just purely political.

Perhaps an answer to the puzzles set forth here, or a possible course of intellectual action, would come from this direction, of cyberspace and its democratic projects. Although being writing (fixed expression) in essence, cyberspace seems to be a space of practice at the same time. It does not seem to present us with the same theoretical difficulties that a collection of

books would do. Also, because it seems to move in the direction of scriptural knowledge while at the same time undermining the usual power flow of the scriptural play, it appears to be helping us escape the perils of unassuming philosophy as well. Cyberspace then indeed appears to be a privileged place for unearthing what lies buried in our physical world.²⁵¹

I mentioned Wikipedia at the end of the last chapter as something that is worth investigating as it provides us with an insight pertaining to what happens in the case of cyberspace. Wikipedia is an online encyclopedia that was launched in 2001 by an Internet entrepreneur, Jimmy Wales, and a philosopher, Larry Sanger. It is based on a type of software called “wiki” (Ward Cunningham developed it in 1994 and used the Hawaiian word for “quick” to name it) that allows its users to quickly create interlinked web pages directly via a web browser. When this type of software is coupled with the idea of an encyclopedia the result is an ever changing, never finished collection of articles detailing the general knowledge of our times. It is ever changing and never finished because a wiki-encyclopedia can be edited by anyone anytime, provided that they have an Internet connection.

While the constant updating of this general encyclopedic knowledge, its constant growth, seems to be in tune with modern thought – as a representation of our furious march forward to uncover all the secrets of this world – the wiki structure of this encyclopedia brings in a fundamental change in the essence of truth. Since anyone can edit the articles of this encyclopedia, these edits need to follow a consensus if they are to have any traces of (relative) permanence. Consensus rather than credentials is that which drives this project further. That is to say that truth, in the case of Wikipedia, takes shape as a democratic consensus that may or may not have anything to do with careful argumentation. It is a truth that compels not from within

251. Just as Heim was using word processors as thought processors, unearthing, digging for an ontological shift of late modernity.

itself, but from its own consensual condition of possibility. Something becomes “true,” inscribed in this encyclopedia’s articles even if only for a fleeting moment, because of the agreement between its writers and readers. It is a node in a web, coagulated by a temporal contextuality.

Of course, this democratic intent and structure of Wikipedia brings in some puzzling questions. How can we trust the knowledge written there, when we have no more visible experts to guarantee for it? How can we trust that what is written there indeed follows a democratic process? But ultimately, the question is whether the democratic process is indeed in any way fit to the production of knowledge.

More than Wikipedia, we might say that these are puzzles set forth by the entirety of cyber practices gathered under the buzzword Web 2.0 (to which Wikipedia is an integral part). Insofar as its interactive “architecture” was already contained by the global network since its inception, “Web 2.0” remains only a rally call, or buzzword. Blogs, wikis, social networking applications, and their democratic ideals of communicability, information sharing, and user centered design (meaning what we now refer to as “Web 2.0”), were all contained as a possibility by the Web, we did not need a reinvention of the Web to uncover them. The 2.0 does not refer to a restructuring of the Internet to make blogs and wikis possible, and not even to a redefinition. It refers to a focus, a shift of intention, a realization of a potential and, more than that, it refers to the acceptance of an emerging approach to the world, an ontological shift if you want. Of course, Web 2.0 is not a be-all end-all; however it does signify exactly that shift that Heim was chasing through electric languages. It is about the cultural and thought development that slowly amounted to our continuously writing the cyberspace.

Wikipedia’s trust problems reveal a tension of thought present in the larger series of manifestations we call Web 2.0. Blogs (meaning “web logs”) are a similar example. Web pages

maintained by individuals and containing commentaries, opinions, or descriptions of events, blur the lines between established journalism and socializing. Moreover, the rising popularity of blog activities comes to subvert the very credibility of established media outlets. The question we face while engaging the “blogosphere” is “who should I listen to and why?” It is a question that slowly but surely directs itself from blogs to the established journalism medium. Another such example is the Amazon.com marketplace. An online shopping website that allows its shoppers to review its products, Amazon.com maintains all those reviews connected to their offer. While in the case of, say, shoes this might not present us with a host of abstract questions, everything changes in the case of books. As shoppers use the website to build a reputation from the ground up as “objective” reviewers, which book reviews should we eventually trust, the ones at the shopping site or the ones printed in academic journals? Perhaps both?

More than Web 2.0, these trust problems reveal a tension of thought present in the larger context of democracy. To restate, the overall question is indeed if a democratic process can be fit in any way to the production of knowledge. What kind of knowledge can we produce outside a traditional power flow? What kind of intellectuals would we listen, if we are not to listen to them from their ivory towers of power?

Yes, it is all about truth in the case of Wikipedia, it is about how truth comes to be, and how it comes to persist. The articles (of truth) on this Free Encyclopedia are ever changing, ever moving; they never stop, and refuse the permanence of print. Instead they work along traces. If one would try to approach Wikipedia, questioning its being, it would not be its particular truths the ones questioned, but that elusive truth itself that it is working with. If one would encase this encyclopedia in a series of tomes the encyclopedia itself would vanish back into the electromagnetic void from which it came. The attention does need to pay dues to the articles

themselves, of course, but only insofar as it would be doubled by an attention focused on the cloud of intellectual dust²⁵² surrounding them. A doubled attention for a doubled inhumanity.

Cyberspace was not around when Lyotard had his insight on the two kinds of inhuman. He pointed to the liberating monstrosity of childhood, but he did so explicitly as an example, an example that, he thought, would better resonate with his contemporary humanists. Cyberspace, I would say, displays the same double inhumanity. It is, on the one hand, inhuman in its digital cast, and on the other hand, it is essentially inhuman in its stimulating simulating nature. Cyberspace works with simulation as simulation. It works within the simulation – simulating itself first in order to let simulations follow their interplay. Moreover, simulating itself, being the non-physical (spectral if you like) space, it opens up the door for its simulations to simulate within what we call real. The truth of Wikipedia for instance, shows us the nature of the democratic truth itself: a simulation extracting its validity from persuasion and seduction. It is thus a hermeneutical truth, not a truth of “anything goes,” but one limited by the language we speak and by our casting in that language. This might scare some people (the critics of Wikipedia’s credibility for instance, or the critics of the journalistic qualities of the blogosphere), but only insofar as they still see themselves as seekers of truth in the sense of collectors of truths. The democratic truth has nothing to do with collection but with a sensing of a past in the way of perceiving that past and also in the way of giving it a sense. The persuasion lies in that sense, limiting it at the same time.

Cyberspace did not cause this ontological shift, or this particular approach to the world, but rather it emerged with it and within it. That is what makes it such a good digging place. As

252. I have to say that this metaphor comes from a conversation I had with a good friend of mine, Andrew Famiglietti, who is trying to build, write, or sense a political economy of Wikipedia. We were talking about his struggles to stabilize some object of inquiry when we came upon this thought: the only stability can be found in the instability of the “cloud” of edits and debates behind every version of every Wikipedia article.

hermeneutics came to be a philosophical *koiné*, cyberspace came to be, stand for, and promote, a *koiné* of our times. That is why Rorty or Vattimo were alluding to the possibilities of interpretation opened up by cyberspace (although they did not really follow that thought all the way to its end), that is why Rafael Capurro, meditating on the state of hermeneutics today, was calling hermeneutics to go digital: “hermeneutics misunderstands itself if it does not take care ontic and ontologically of digital technology with its overwhelming impact on the world.²⁵³”

The answer, we find now, has been with us all along. It is not in the virtual dimension of digital technologies, and it is not “in the real world” subjected to that technology. Instead of finding it in the impact that this technology has on our lives, we find that the answer lies in cyberspace thought in its being – there where there is no there. Because of its being, and because of its condition of continuous and ephemeral writing (construction), cyberspace is outside of a real and unreal distinction, and, ultimately, outside of the order of representation. Its “there where there is no there” is with us, in between us, in our making use of its supportive framework and in our way of listening to its call.

At the end of Modernity, we find democracy, in the sense of a democratic truth: hermeneutical by nature. Cyberspace questioned in its being, along hermeneutical lines, accounts for that truth. And as with anything democratic we need to maintain this questioning just in order to avoid our departure from democracy. The problem though, appears when we try to consider this being. If we separate it from its declension, if we succumb to the temptation of considering it in its “objectness,” its very nature makes us turn our attention away from it. I am not saying that Heim’s or Eldred’s ontologies of cyberspace were deeply flawed, or somehow “undemocratic.”

253. Rafael Capurro, “Interpreting the Digital Human,” keynote address to the conference “Thinking Critically: Alternative Perspectives and Methods in Information Studies” organized by the Center for Information Policy Research, School of Information Studies, University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee, May 15-17, 2008. <http://www.capurro.de/wisconsin.html> (accessed on July 20, 2009).

On the contrary, they have proved very useful for guiding our inquiry towards this hermeneutical insight. Both Heim and Eldred though, succumbed to this temptation, ultimately metaphysical in nature. They have both considered cyberspace to be something very special and they have both placed themselves outside of it in order to capture its essence. They both had the insight of the connection between cyberspace and a certain cultural mode. That cultural mode, that specific mindset making cyberspace possible in the first place, escaped them. This is because cyberspace, with its “there, where there is no there,” reflects and directs rather than represents.

Cyberspace by itself, separated in its virtual distinctness, is nothing. Only as it comes to be in our making use of it, and mostly as it comes to be within this hermeneutical approach to the world, cyberspace stands for a *koiné* of our times. That is why a discussion of cyberspace in terms of utopian fantasies, hateful cynicisms, or virtual realisms – in the way Michael Heim ended up doing – ultimately misses the point. That is why a discussion of cyberspace in terms of a closure of knowledge – in the way Michael Eldred ended up doing – ultimately misses the point. If we ask whether cyberspace will bring us salvation or doom, the answer would be “neither,” and it would be so because there really is not a question on cyberspace there. As a *koiné* cyberspace cannot bring salvation or doom, insofar as a reflection of a cultural mode cannot be thought of in those terms.

What cyberspace may end up doing though – if we can really say that something in its manner can “do” anything by itself – is finally make us come to terms with our late modern condition. By consciously practicing it, meaning to engage with and in its being, by continuously paying attention to both its genealogy and structure, we may find it easier to leave behind our metaphysical temptations. Ultimately, we may find it easier to live in the ever shifting

horizontality of the democratic dialogue, or, if I am to paraphrase Vattimo, live without neurosis in a world where absolutist values are dissolving.

Thus we have journeyed on digital landscapes towards a feature of our times. It is a feature that shows us a democracy of an existential, rather than political sort. It is a feature that shows us dialogue and consensus as *modus vivendi* while warning us that, not even now, we might still not be prepared for it. From the genealogy of the modern thought, to the problems of the post-modern, to the insight of a hermeneutical *koiné*, to Heim's ontological shift unearthed from electric languages and Eldred's digital cast of being, all the way to the unnamed ontological difference, the answer we sought has been with us all along: ever playful in its elusiveness, ever engaged in a game of hide and seek. Did we grasp it? No, but we have pointed at it. It is there, where there is no there, with our double inhumanity.

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