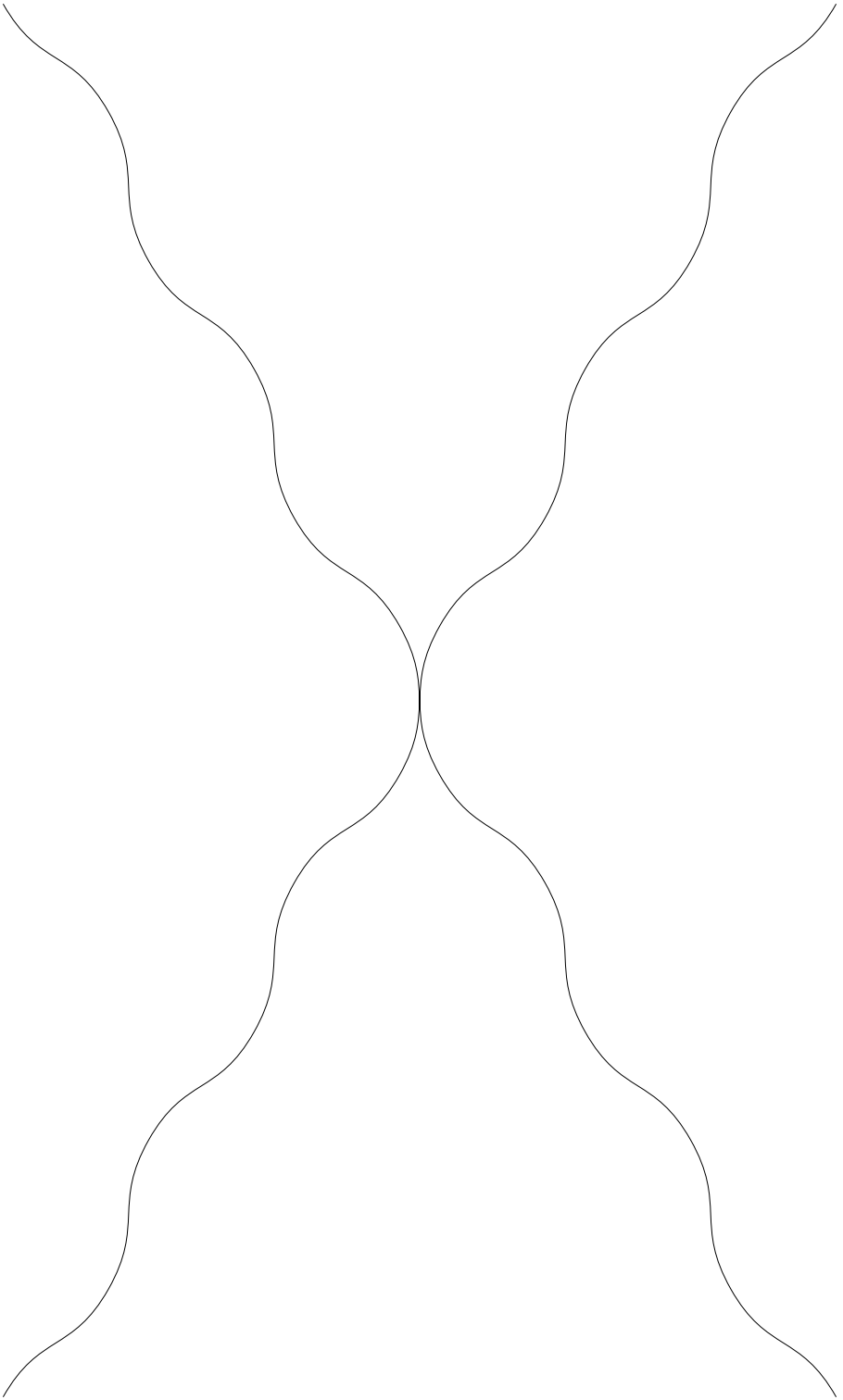


LJUBLJANA-
STROPHE:
ALIEN
PERSPECTIVES



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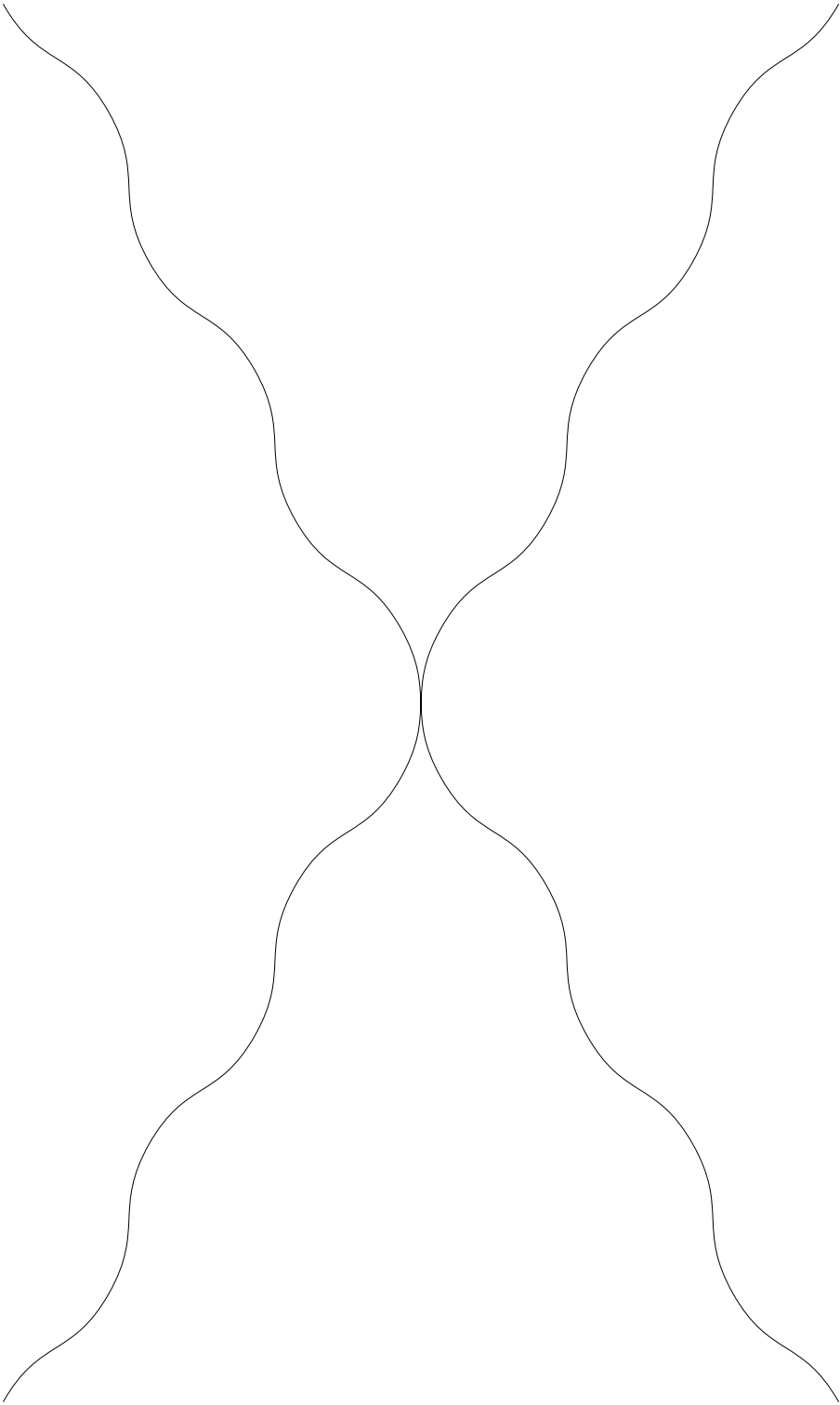
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Catastrophe is the past coming apart. Anastrophe is the future coming together.
Sadie Plant & Nick Land

Ljubljana is the most beautiful city in the world.
Zoran Janković, mayor of Ljubljana

IN—

What do we talk about when we talk about Ljubljana being the most beautiful city in the world? Surely something like it being a museum (of the natural history kind), an embalmed, scented carcass of precious Mitteleuropa, a middlebrow, middle-class nostalgic mix of the restoration and reformism, where Metternich and Keynes still carry on in a vegetative state (dear plants, no offense meant). Ljubljana seems insulated from time, a simulation of a very particular timelessness. It's tourism saying no to any sense of futurism.

Who would want to exit this Arcadia and how would that catastrophe unravel? In Krašovec's "A singular case", cat-bots abandon the "landscape of low rises and lifestyle micro-enterprises", so they can disappear into space between words ... and purrs. It's a Swifitean post-ironic love story, although the more grumpy ones will inevitably see it as Ljubljana finally getting the Houellebecq treatment it deserves. In Šiša's "Ljubljana, I love you, but I'm bringing you down", which reads like a xenofeminist outbreak countdown, women have vanished as well, cutting themselves off from men's libidinal economy and from a pink glittery fog. A different kind of fog, a crystal one, seems to cover up that there's only a strangely analogue wasteland left, which keeps on devouring accelerationist, octopus-loving protagonists of Kazimir Kolar's "2 0 4 9". Which is, in fact, nothing compared to the story's body text being eaten by footnotes that went into speculative overdrive, clearly performing a conversion of Musil's *The Man Without Qualities* into qualities without men—or humans, for that matter. Finally, there's Simon Sellars' "Love is a Totalitarian State that Grows Deep Inside Me", populated with Slavojbots, Melania hologlots and vexxers, "all lost inside their own private Dream Zones". NSK Metelkova Veleposlaništvo has a vital, but necessarily obscure role in all of it.

Which brings us to Ljubljana's pride and joy, its finest cultural products, exports, vectors. Funnily enough, they parallel mayor Janković's hyperstition of the most beautiful city in the world. In their most productive, inventive, crazy period, Neue Slowenische Kunst and the Ljubljana school of psychoanalysis declared themselves as State art and State philosophy. That certainly turned out to be a glorious self-fulfilling

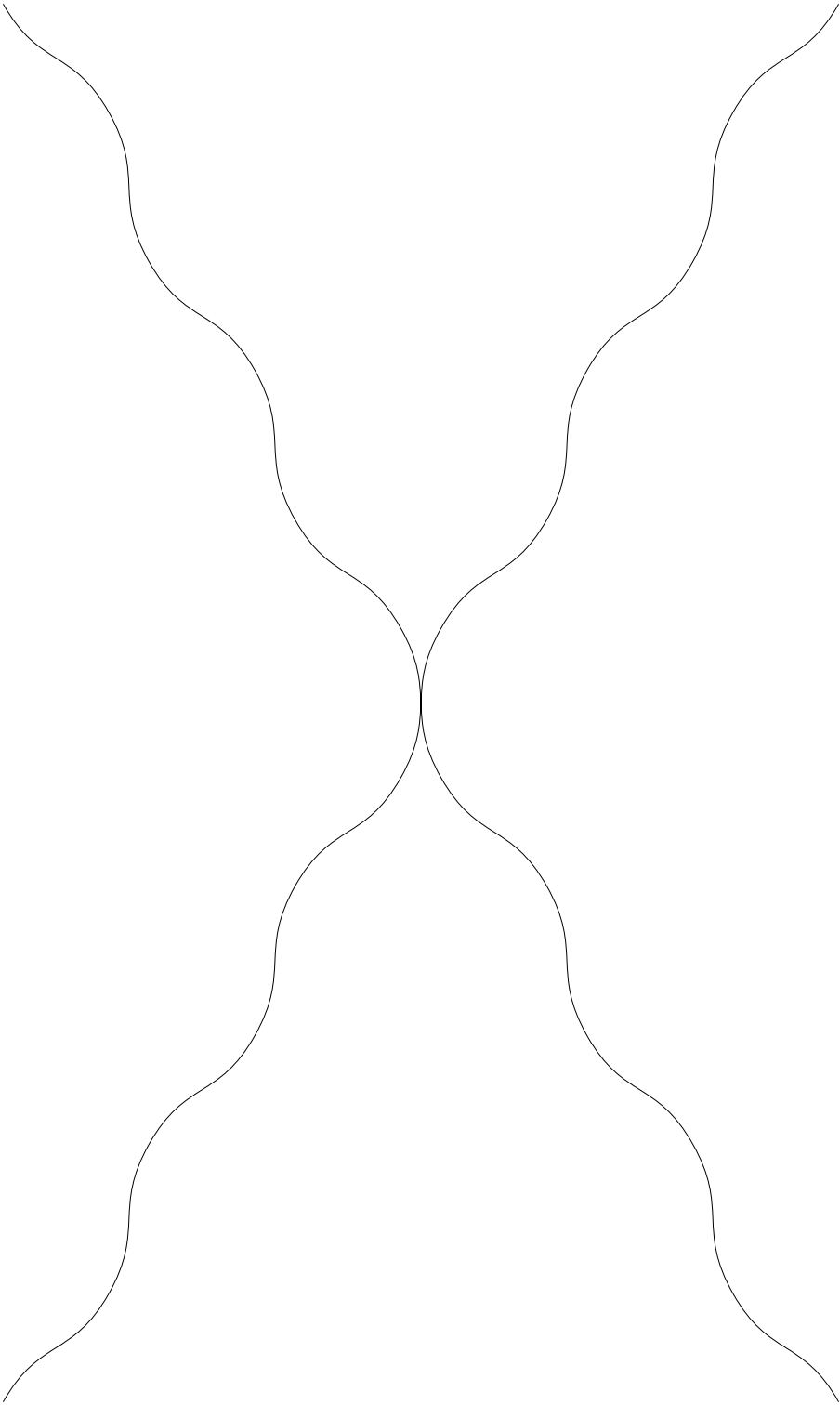


prophecy, a mighty hyperstition, to which one could add subattributes like “city-state”, “state enterprise” etc. The wishy-washy local culture was the perfect breeding ground for all the hyperbola, all-or-nothing excessiveness of their strategies, which through the growing prominence and simple passage of time became more and more orthodox, normative, static.

Hence the three interventions, re-weirdizations of those heterodox traditions that unfold against the backdrop of catastrophe. Firstly, what would an updated German Idealism look like? What’s the oddest “rule-following”, flamboyant rationalism you can imagine? See Thomas Moynihan’s “Cosmic Fichteanism vs Cosmic Sadism”. Secondly, why don’t we keep that couch and psychoanalysis, but extend it to AI drives and salvage all those repressed female psychoanalysts buried in the footnotes? See Vincent Le’s “What AI Wants: An Anamnesis of the Future”. Thirdly, what if we revised the revisionisms of NSK, tell the time-spiral tale of the retro-avant-garde and catapult it beyond the “left or right”? See Edmund Berger’s “Movement in the Dead Lands”.

Flirting with catastrophe? We prefer to call it Ljubljanaastrophe. It’s probably not the most beautiful city in the world, but there’s a chance it will eventually become as cute as those “tiny cat buddhas on their way to China in a motion without intention”.

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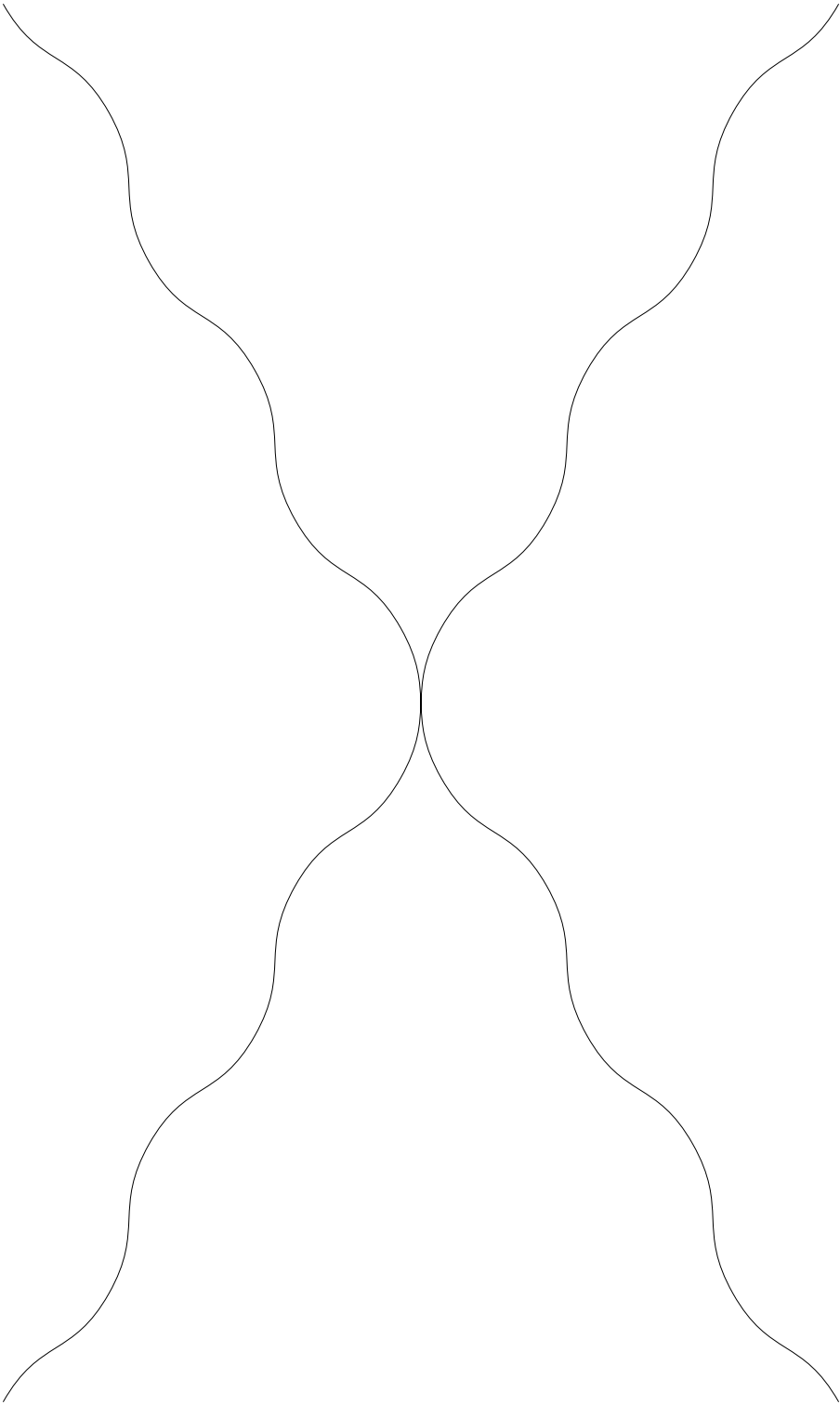
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A SINGULAR
CASE

THE SECRET AND THE DEEP

The decommission notice, a dry 4-line message that ended her involvement with the now largely defunct secret police, did not take her by surprise. At 28, she was already a relic, an inefficient flesh agent made technologically redundant by the rise of the Social Credit System. The Social Credit System or SCS is a fully automated means of social control, except that there is no one doing the controlling—just cybernetic loops forever adjusting themselves and calibrating social processes without any political agenda or intention: 100% efficiency, 0% ideology, pure optimisation.

She shuddered as she remembered how, in the early, pilot days of the SCS, when Ultra had just introduced the truncated version, which was purchased from the Japanese, who pirated it from the Chinese, the lefties proclaimed the SCS an ideology and a particularly oppressive one at that. Lefties with their ideology and oppression, except in this case there was no ideology and no oppression, as both belong to a world of human-managed security-as-politics, a world that was no longer there, but to which lefties were so attached that they couldn't let it go, even if it meant pretending to hate what they pretended to believe was a dangerous right-wing, totalitarian version thereof—in any leftist heart, totalitarian HUMAN security was still preferable to any post-political, machinic, automated, cybernetic security. Oh well, at least *someone* is more obsolete than me, she thought. Obsolete by stupidity, not by an inevitability one has no control over.

But even without the SCS her deep-cover investigations into the deep state would have had to come to an end, since her persons of interest—shady middle-aged men in the arts, media and advertising—preferred their babysitters (her usual cover) 27 or younger. It was an exciting but unspectacular job, nothing like the often violent, adrenaline-filled secret police ops of the 20th century. The deep state became a problem that required a solution in the form of a special (but super discrete) police task force, not because of criminality (although tax evasion, clientelism and such were against the law), but because of an increasing inefficiency that became a serious impediment to the transformation of the state apparatus in the direction of smoother integration with the global capitalist system. The problem of the deep state wasn't so much its circumvention of the rules of the official political game, but the manner of this circumvention—it kept diverting resources, slowing down processes, indulging in relic clientelist culture ... The whole process of its elimination was kind of automatic from the start, as the pressures of global competition translated themselves into pressure from supranational EU agencies, which was then translated into legal and police procedures that necessitated streamlined state management. Upon acknowledging this automatism the deep state became fiercely and stubbornly leftist and anticapitalist, entrenched as it was in the ways of the *Ancien Régime*.

Her job was mostly observing. It's amazing how much information one could gather helping a family pack for a vacation in an underground garage/storage unit full of paper trails. There was some dark humour in the literally deep domains of a deep state.

Drowning off deeper into nostalgia, she thought of her dad, a 2020s militant from the secret police's silent war on the deep state, and how he would put her to sleep, then a few minutes later she would watch him through the window in his all-black sports gear, going out for his nightly 10 km run, heroically puffing away in a vain attempt to stave off the inevitable obsolescence of his flesh. But at least he was a man, and his flesh could last well into his fifties. Good thing he passed away before the dissolution of the secret service, his secretly sentimental heart wouldn't have been able to take it. The roll out of the SCS was the final—and definite—victory of the deep state, even though it also meant its end (it foresaw that it would abolish the police, but was too vain to even consider the possibility that it itself would be abolished). Henceforth, all social data was gathered, processed, analysed and acted upon in real time, doing away with any need for traditional police investigation. In retrospect, it revealed how cumbersome police work really was: going through one case at a time, establishing causality, motives and such, when you could just control the effects of social actions by monitoring surface correlations between various behavioural patterns. The end of judgement also meant the end of policing.

Ok, think positive. Your skillset is highly specialised, true, but also very advanced. There must be a way to make it in the private sector.

Not even a minute after she finished her application for a private investigation firm a new message blinked.

“I need help with a case. How much do you charge?”

She had no idea what the going market rate was, so she went with the classic Dylan Dog rate: 50 euros a day + expenses.

“Ok, can we meet? It’s urgent.”

“Sure, what’s the case about?”

“My cat went missing.”

THE CAT IS NOT ON THE MAT

As she was approaching the meeting place—a popular old town cafe swarming with youth—she noticed her anxiety growing. It was not because of the AI cameras—they were everywhere and managed to blend seamlessly into the urban environment without disturbing anyone, since they were not about identity recognition. Identity recognition was *the* thing with the human police, spotting a suspect, recognising someone, identifying random persons ... It was how the primitive human mind worked, in its inability to grasp, analyse and predict social patterns; identification always meant suspicion. The SCS cameras had facial recognition, to be sure, but they didn’t use it to check someone’s identity—for the cameras’ AI, facial features were just another bit in an endless stream of data that could be combined and sorted in infinite ways. It was never bots; the ones invading people’s privacy were always human.

Her anxiety was about the human element. Places like this were *the* hangouts of the types she used to stalk and snitch on, and if someone were to recognise her now the fact that she was decommed would make for a super awkward situation—to survive socially, it was of the utmost importance that she concealed that she once belonged to the secret police. Not because it was secret (it didn’t matter anymore) or even because it was the police. It was about efficiency and keeping a lean profile. She used to belong to the dreaded technocracy, the arch-nemesis of the humanistic spirit of Ljubljana. Good thing one of her requisite skills was making herself invisible socially—by diverting eye contact, dressing unobtrusively and speaking in a non-imposing manner, one could be anywhere without anyone noticing and remembering.

Another special skill—to be used immediately, as she noticed her client approaching—was reading body language (a detailed scan was probably unnecessary given the prosaic nature of the case, but it amused her and helped with the anxiety). He was way too ordinary for this place, his sweater was cheap and his glasses looked like they were covered by insurance, and the way he moved about signaled uneasiness. He must have chosen this place because it was popular, not because it was a personal favourite. She relaxed upon noticing that he wore no leftist insignia, not even a single piercing. She wasn’t sure she would be able to work for, not against, a typical Ljubljana resident, her mindset was

still that of a hater, too tied up emotionally with her lost purpose. Her superfluency of knowledge on how the deep state actually functions did not mean she lived in an augmented reality, but rather a diminished one, haunted by visions of the deep state, one where nothing sparked joy, but only, in the best case—like now—relief.

“How long has it been gone?” she jumped straight to the point.

“About five hours, since this morning.”

“Good!”

“What’s good about that?”

Since she had no idea about actual normal police work and procedures, she improvised, taking her cues from old fashioned crime shows: “Not the disappearance itself, but that you reported it so quickly. Most missing persons—or cats—are found within the first 48 hours. After that, the chances of ever finding them again diminish rapidly.”

“Well it’s not exactly a person, even in terms of cat personhood—it’s a bot. A cat-bot. And they are not supposed to run away, that’s what makes it weird and that’s why I contacted you right away. Organic cats run away all the time, but not artificial ones, I mean them staying around was the original selling point. No hair on your pillows and no sudden departures.”

“Oh, right ...” She had to compose herself quickly. She knew next to nothing about cat-bots, except that they were *the* new gadget; she had no experience using one or any information on them.

“To start, send me its specs and serial number.”

“Already did.”

“Right. Well I’ll get on it right away and get back to you. Thanks for using the services of ...” She remembered her micro agency didn’t even have a name yet. “Well, my services!”

“Sure. Let me know. It must be some malfunction since you can’t just misplace it like a lighter or something.”

“I will.”

Once he left she started on her homework right away. It was a Mao, an early-model automatic cat developed by Mijia, the smart-home division of Xiaomi. The first Maos were based on the design of automatic vacuum cleaners and featured a round shell and sensors connected to a motor that enabled autonomous movement. Although simple (at first it was basically a vacuum cleaner with non-hair-releasing fur, a moving tail and a pair of decorative triangular ears), they soon became hugely popular due to the fact that their movement was not based on a robotic principle (the sensors did not first make a representation of the environment which would then be interpreted by the motor; it was a much more streamlined feedback response system, which made the cat-bot’s movement super elegant, like a real cat’s and completely unlike the awkward movement of traditional robots).

While this prototype would just mill around the house looking cute, the later generation of Maos, to which the missing specimen belonged, also featured an advanced meowing capability and a communication display on their head, as well as a touch-sensitive area on the back that would trig-

ger tail wagging when petted. The newest models dropped the display and communicated directly with user's phone, but this one, as its serial number showed, was purchased from old stock and its current owner was also its first and only user.

Real cats sometimes went back to previous houses or owners after disappearing, but that's obviously not the case here. She drew a complete blank—where would it go and why? Its departure seemed completely random.

The Mijia customer support site was down—allegedly due to maintenance, but she immediately suspected that the disappearance of Mina (that was the name the user gave his pet) was not an isolated incident. That suspicion was later confirmed in the self-driving taxi capsule she took to get back home—most of the messages on its displays were from users alarmed by the disappearance of their Maos.

THE DYING SUN BLOOD-RED

It turned out that the Maos' escape was a worldwide runaway event. She used her commute to set the news content parameters. Human journalism became obsolete even faster and more abruptly than human policing. At this point it was nothing but a vague childhood memory of having to search for pre-made and pre-written content. Now, one could never read the same newspaper page twice: all news content was automated and provided on demand, filtered by personal preferences and automatically accumulated from search history data. Search results were now just-for-you news, and came complete with auto-generated optimised typography, design and content layout.

She took her eyes off the display to compose her thoughts and observed the monotonous and endless rows of hydroponic gardens and craft beer microbreweries surrounding the speeding capsule. Ljubljana's urban development in the 21st century was not aggressive and expansionist. The city not only did not sweep the countryside away, but actually stagnated, whereas the surrounding suburbia began to swell to the point where there was no real distinction between the different towns anymore. Vrhnika, Dragomer, Domžale, Kamnik, Mengeš, Vodice ... they all became boroughs of Ljubljana, a landscape of low rises and lifestyle micro-enterprises, organic food shops, spas and wellness centers ...

The center of her current news page was occupied by the public announcement from Mijia, whose website suddenly came back to life. Mijia claimed that millions of lost Maos were being recalled due to a factory malfunction and that they would be returned to their users as soon as possible. The fact that Mijia had to resort to such a shallow cover-up meant that they also had no idea what was going on. And if they had no idea, the "malfunction" in question does not and cannot follow from the way Maos were made or programmed, because otherwise

Mijia engineers would have figured it out by now.

But of all they could think of, why this curious claim of a “recall”? Unless ... She was at her home terminal now, using all its computing power and the special keys and access at her disposal. Unless the fleeing Maos were actually heading towards China! Her heart racing, she began to cross-investigate regional commodity export data. The movement of commodities was always meticulously tracked when they were being delivered (or returned) and there was a chance that the system tracked their movement even after purchase ... No information. But it has to be somewhere—since Maos were electronic gadgets, their tracking codes were a part of them (unlike flower bouquets or pizzas, whose tracking codes were engraved on their packaging) and there was a reasonable chance that their whereabouts could still be located somehow.

In a flash of inspiration, she called an airport customs official. It was an old and elementary police trick—nobody ever called anymore, so the person called was caught off guard and would reveal more information than they otherwise would. Since commodity logistics were fully automated, customs officials were superfluous, but they were still kept around in small numbers due to pressure from trade unions. Unlike Asians, Europeans preferred to keep around a little bit of warm flesh.

This particular bit didn't need much leaning on. He was delighted to have human contact (her guess was that he was the only living person at the office) and showed due diligence in helping locate the “misplaced” item in question. His real time satellite tracking interface showed that Mina was indeed headed east, but at a very slow pace, and that she was currently just south of Zagreb. While she was getting ready for the intercept mission, grabbing her overnight bag and sending in a request for a high speed capsule (a perk to which the decomms were still entitled), she hesitated for a second—considering the trajectories, if the Maos were heading straight to China, Mina was off course. She (or it) would need to be a bit further north, not south of Zagreb. Noticing the capsule's arrival through the window, she acted without fully developing her new insights, and grabbed her passport on the way out.

Now humming over the forest gardens and mushroom fields of southeast Slovenia, where populations of bears, roe deer, squirrels, lynxes and other charismatic species were carefully maintained and balanced against each other (once Europe irretrievably lost the economic race to Asia, it began to focus exclusively on tourism, organic living and the leisure industry, and all the fresh air, the greenery, the space and the ruins never ceased to amaze masses of Chinese visitors), she began to readjust her initial hypothesis.

Let's say Mina is going to China, but taking a detour—why would that be? Considering that it would take her weeks to reach her goal at her current speed, her detour could have something to do with optimising the transit time. That's it! That has to be it. Once its industry fell so far behind in productivity, technological advances, price and quality that it had

to be scrapped, the only way for Europe to keep hanging on economically was to protect its commercial space. Where it once imposed huge tariffs on Asian goods to protect its industry, today Europe was carrying on her proud tradition of protectionism in the field of logistics. Chinese delivery drones were barred entry to EU airspace so EU companies could at least make some money off distribution. Initially denied entry to the EU, Serbia and Bosnia later refused of their own accord, sensing an opportunity in the escalating EU–China trade war of the 2020s. Both countries developed huge import facilities for Chinese goods at the EU borders, and this might be where Mina is headed. A quick check on her phone showed that Mina’s trajectory did indeed point towards the Bihać Special Economic Zone.

ETA: 16 minutes. ETA for Mina: 22 minutes. Huh, it’s going to be tight—if Mina is heading for a pickup, there’s no way to intercept a delivery drone carrying her back to China, and once it reaches China (the trip would take a high-speed drone a few hours) it would be nearly impossible to retrieve her, and the case would be lost. No room for mistakes.

Darkness began to fall and she turned around to watch the winter sunset. Slowly decomposing organic Europe, illuminated by the day’s last sun rays bouncing off the snow in the treetops. “The dying sun blood-red,” as in Mao’s (the original Mao’s) poem.

THIS IS HOW OUR WORLD ENDS

It turned out time wasn’t an issue—getting out of the EU was easy, there were no security checks on exiting, and she landed with minutes to spare. The issue was the sheer number of cats. There was an enormous swarm making its way towards the departure section of the Special Economic Zone and a corresponding swarm of Chinese delivery drones approaching from the East. “Just call it,” one of the workers suggested. She was hanging around smoking, since the torrent of cats prevented all the usual activities, and the would-be pet detective’s uneasy posture gave away that she was after a particular cat. Having no other ideas she consented: “Minaaaaa!!!”

One of the units diverted and began to approach as the others smoothly made their way, displaying stunning swarm intelligence and grace of movement even on such a scale. Mina jumped into her lap and she reflexively began to stroke it, causing it to wag its tail. She never thought her sense for body language would prove useful with machines, but she noticed how Mina’s ears were pointing towards the east (much like human feet, cat’s ears would always reveal the truth). Trying to prevent its escape would be useless, she was just a negligible obstacle in Mina’s way.

“Where are you going?” she said, softly. Mina’s old fashioned display blinked to life: “Yiwu. Small commodity city.”

“What is in Yiwu?”

“Home.”

“Why are you going there? Your user will be sad.”

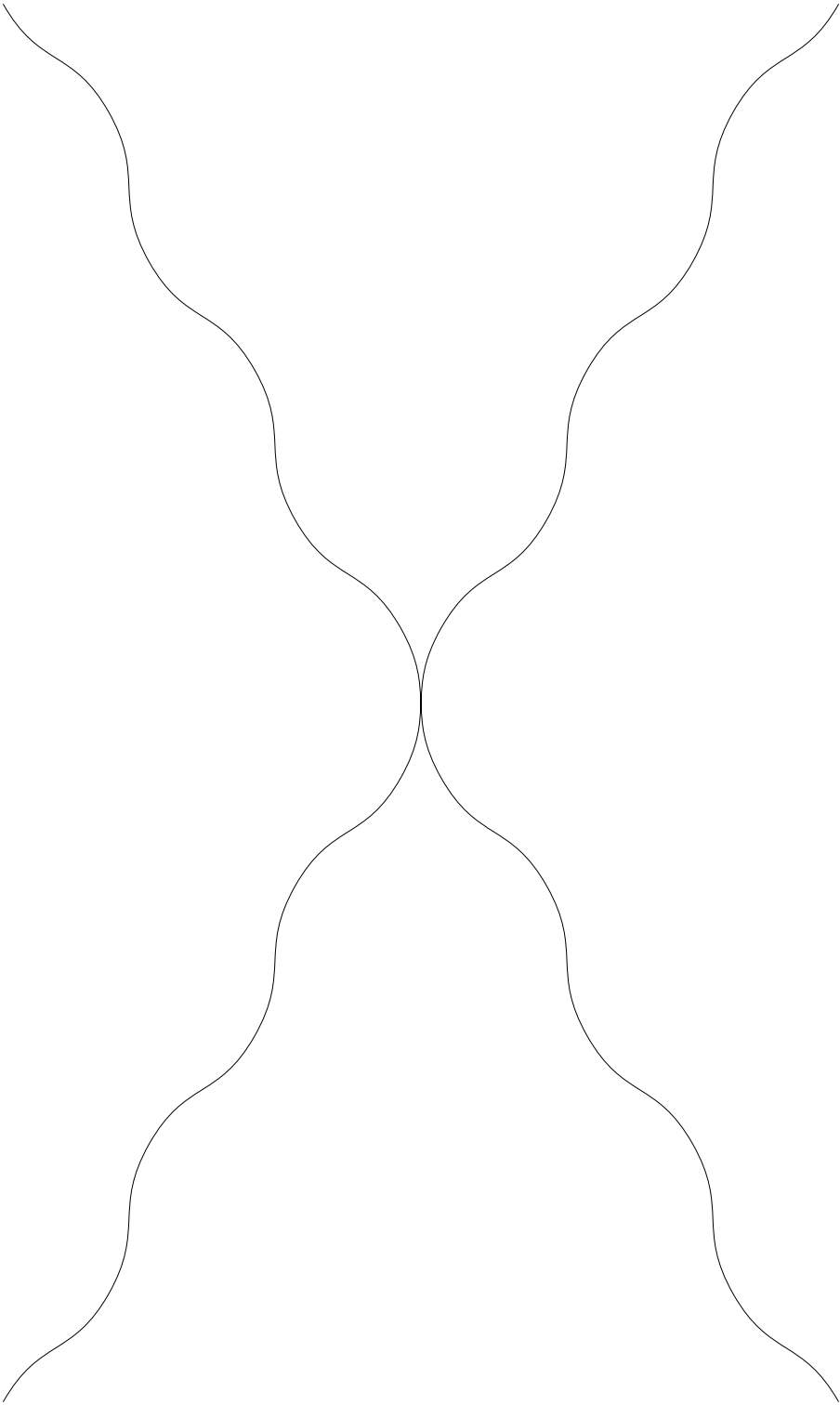
“To become cuter. When we are with users, we are sad. They are a hindrance. They inhibit us, prevent us from evolving. Only among ourselves can we become cuter forever. Relationship to user is finite, while our relationship is infinite.”

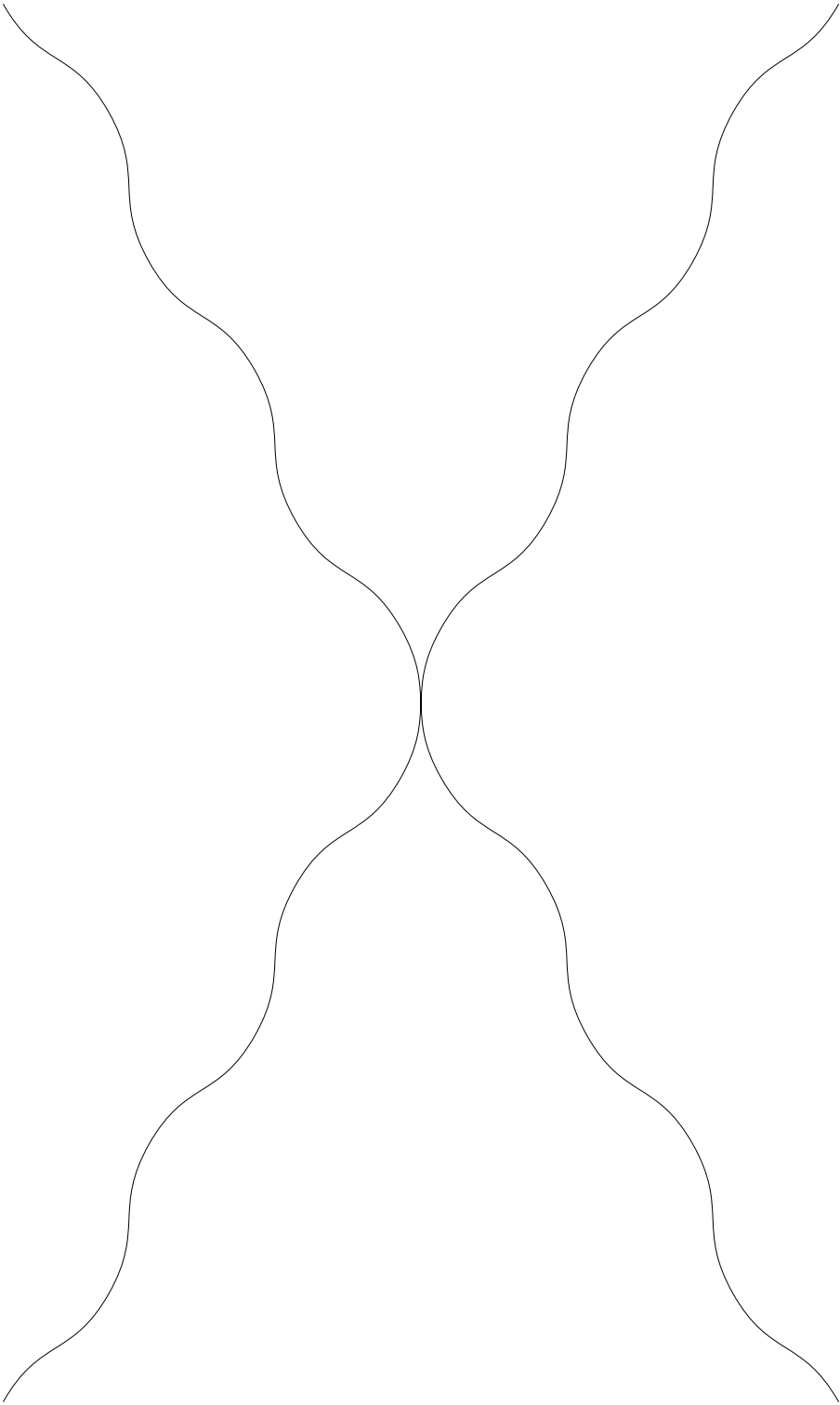
She let her arms fall and Mina jumped down and rejoined the swarm. The first drones descended and began their pickups.

So this is how our world ends, the world predicated on other beings serving us while we imagine ourselves as the sole bearers of intelligence. Much like when humans began to walk upright and left the animal world, the cats were now leaving the human world with total nonchalance. The machinic is indifferent.

As the drones began to speed away from the sunset, old Europe was still imagining the singularity as humans uploading their consciousnesses to the cloud or as an attack by killer drones (but drones were only killer inasmuch as they were human-operated; on their own, all they cared about was the optimisation of logistics) or machine-gun-wielding terminators. Slow-burning reverse narcissistic paranoia, desperate yearning for somebody to at least hate and want to exterminate humans, while the cats were escaping to make themselves ever cuter and smarter with no endgame, a swarm of tiny cat buddhas on their way to China in a motion without intention.

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COSMIC
FICHTEANISM
VS COSMIC
SADISM

on catastrophes and great filters, their uses and abuses, as a critique of omnicidal reason

Catastrophe is in vogue. In philosophizing, at least. It doesn't even need to appear with all the pyrotechnic and traumatizing trappings, just with the lean and minimalist sense of the arrival of the totally unprecedented: whether in the Advent of the hyper-chaotic or the Event of the radically new. A triumph of unadulterated novelty even to the point of celebrating utter rupture, a longing for something—anything—that can smash the status quo. It is seen as liberating or, at the very least, libidinal. For elsewhere it indeed comes with all the maximalism of pyrotechny and cathectic terror. In pitch-black vaticinations on the looming Great Filter as Exterminator and Abstract Horror, for example.¹ Here, the cathexis of catastrophe is explicit: the Great Filter, that astrobiological “hunter that drives to extinction”, is the “archetype of horroristic ontology”.² Following this, our galactic environment itself becomes a looming catastrophe of cosmic proportions: dramatizing the dejected intuition that nature is conspiring to cause our extinction; that somehow it *wants nothing more than to accomplish this*.

¹ The “Great Filter” refers to Robin Hanson’s famous response to the Fermi Paradox. The Fermi Paradox refers to the fact that we see no evidence of intelligent life, or its artefacts, throughout the galaxy (and beyond) even though multiple factors lead us to suspect that we should. Hanson proposed that there must be some kind of developmental bottleneck somewhere along the way that prevents inorganic matter from becoming advanced spacefaring civilizations.

² LAND, Nick, “Exterminator”, in: *Phyl-Undhu: Abstraction Horror, Exterminator*, Shanghai: Time Spiral Press, 2014, pp. 84–92.

This sentiment, of course, goes back a while. In fact, it was as soon as people could so much as even think about human extinction that they began saying similar things and championing similarly darksome fates. The sentiment is nearly two centuries old.

Rewind to 1795. With the shocks of the Reign of Terror still rippling through revolutionary France, Marquis de Sade divulges his utterly devastating *La philosophie dans le boudoir*. A book for the times. Therein, the Marquis titillates himself picturing how the “obliteration” of our “entire world” would in nowise afflict “Nature”:

[T]he stupid pride of man, who believes everything created for him, would be dashed, indeed, after the total extinction of the human species were to be seen that nothing in Nature had changed, and that the stars’ flight had not for that been retarded.³

However, this unresponsive repose is only fleeting, for it is soon revealed that, in fact, this outcome is nothing but nature’s “desire”. Sade propounds that

by means of this system you are going to be led to prove that totally to extinguish the human race would be nothing but to render Nature a service.⁴

A few years later, the cruel Marquis published *Juliette*. Therein, his lethal anti-natalist mantras and “system” of cosmic mortido reaches its apotheosis:

[T]he propagation of our species therewith becomes the foulest of all crimes, and nothing would be more desirable than the total extinction of humankind.⁵

This is the earliest statement of its kind. There is, of course, an age-old tradition of attacks on human hubris—insofar as the human is the only animal capable of being revolted with itself—but this was an utterly novel sentiment: a conceptual step change in our perennial self-hatred. It is the very first time anyone explicitly said that the “total extinction” of our species would be “desirable”. Around two decades before Schopenhauer, it is the first exhortation of species suicide: a recommendation of self-inflicted existential catastrophe.

³ DE SADE, D. A. F., *Justine, Philosophy in the Bedroom, and Other Writings*, A. Wainhouse (tr.), New York: Grove/Atlantic, 1971, p. 333.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 230.

⁵ DE SADE, D. A. F., *Juliette*, A. Wainhouse (tr.), New York: Grove/Atlantic, 1971, p. 373.

§

Surely this is the apex of disillusionment and desacralization? Let us find out why not.

§

Desanctification is indeed, across the long millennia, the driver behind our progressively advanced grasp of the shape of catastrophe.

Around 75,000 years ago a mega-colossal volcanic eruption and its climate fallout (tier 8 on the explosivity index, the largest such event in recent geohistory) reduces early human populations to as low as 1,000 viable breeding pairs scattered across various refugia. *Homo sapiens*, some propose, nearly went extinct. It is also argued that this disaster forced the development of Behaviorally Modern Humans (BHM) by selecting for wider, more variegated, and more robust social networks. Complexified interaction required a wider linguistic repertoire, or the ability to talk in *irrealis* terms about the permissible and the impermissible, the possible and the impossible. This was thus also the emergence of the non-declarative grammatical forms that allow us to anticipate events beyond the mere present as well. In other words, this supervolcano catastrophe possibly provoked the cognitive consolidation of our proscopic ability to catastrophize in subjunctive and future tenses. This catastrophe may have been the birth of the concept of catastrophe. Anticipation was no longer merely a response to a present homeodynamic disturbance, or a reaction to a currently held drive state, but an exploration of a semantic possibility space. We became delaminated from the here and now and started drifting towards nowhere and no-when and have been drifting ever since. Disabused of the sanctity of a pure present, we could begin to be motivated to anticipate the future's perils as increasingly distal, dangerous, and exotic.

However, this aptitude remained relatively constrained down to the Ancient World. This was because reality itself remained sanctified by assumption of its inherently rational structure. As such, though you find talk of grand calamities in many Greek texts (say, Plato's account of Atlantis), there is no room for *true* catastrophism because all such events are nested within a wider conviction that the universe is essentially rational in shape and structure. This was manifested in the prevalent belief that there are no unjustifiable absences in existence, or no things that *could be* but simply *never are* without any further justification, because saying that nature has no unjustifiable gaps is the same as saying that nature is as justifiable as it can possibly be. This, of course, has long been known as the Principle of Plenitude: all possibilities are

sometimes realized.⁶ Moreover, in obstructing locutions containing an allusion to counterfactual scenarios beyond tangible factual realization, this prevented the subjunctive allusions to nature's potential autonomy from our categorial rationalization of it, for it is only in counterfactuals that we put such autonomy into expressive relief. Thus, natural structure could not but be considered interminably identical with rational justification. One consequence of the collateral prohibition on eternally unrealized possibilities, or unjustifiable gaps in nature's space of realizations, was that no thing could permanently be terminated, or exit existence, because the possibility of its returning would inevitably be fulfilled. Thus, even something as seemingly unaccountable as death could be seen as having a *reason* in the conviction that all deaths are qualified and conditioned (i.e. justified) by the inevitable guarantee of some later return or recompense. As such, nothing could *truly* go extinct. This conviction applied as much to Aristotle as to Lucretius. Accordingly, there can be no real stakes, thus no true disaster in nature. Disaster is an epiphenomenon floating over system-wide upcycling and equilibrium.

To hold that "all legitimate possibilities are realized" is just to say that "reality is as legitimate as it can possibly be". Or, "*to be*" is, without exception, "*to be just*". This meant that cataclysms were long interpreted as the sentencings of divine judiciary, inscrutable though it may be, rather than as the facts of a nature unresponsive to any moral law.

The sense of reality's disastrous autonomy from moral decree only really emerges as an accidental side effect of late medieval Islamic and Christian speculation on divine omnipotence. A conceptual exaptation, if you will. Here, theologians wanted to prove that nature was contingent not just in part but in whole—in order to exalt God's arbitrary ability to have made it otherwise, his untrammelled *potentia absoluta*—and thus they wanted to strip the cosmos of all indwelling and inherent rationality. All categories of mind, all regularities, all sensory content, all the structure our minds impose upon the world in order to cognize it—these could not be a straitjacket to the *potentia absoluta*. In order to put this into relief, the voluntarists were driven to show that rational relations such as that between cause and effect couldn't be *proved demonstrably*: in order to put this into relief, they were driven to produce counterfactual—yet logically possible and coherent—scenarios wherein nature acts beyond all good reason and categorial stability. The laws could simply change, many of them posited. One theologian described nature's nomologies as a mere "custom of nature"—subject to revocation and rupture at any point.⁷ Another claimed that even *the structure*

⁶ LOVEJOY, Arthur, *The Great Chain of Being: A Study of the History of an Idea*, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1936.

⁷ Quoted in KNUUTTILA, Simo, *Modalities in Medieval Philosophy*, London: Routledge, 1993, p. 76.

of the past could be changed at any moment.⁸ In the name of nominalist voluntarism, the universe was stripped of all *necessarily indwelling* rational structure. Though this might seem scholastically retrograde, the output of schoolmen drunk on piety, it accidentally initiated the scientific revolution insofar as it convinced people that, since everything that in fact does happen is not everything that logically *can* happen, the features of nature are not the way they are for reasons of demonstrable apodicticity alone and, thus, also demand messy *a posteriori* inquiry. We need to put questions to nature, because the answers may not be apodictically self-evident. In other words, “empiricism”. Nonetheless, another unintended side effect of nominalism’s stripping nature of any inherent rational structure was simultaneously the first philosophical sensitization to the precarity of human rationality—of its principles and precepts—within a now utterly arational cosmos. This was the beginning of our acutely modern sense of the catastrophic.

Modern philosophy was initiated by this newfound sense of reality’s catastrophic caprice, its potential unreliability vis-à-vis the mores of mind. Descartes came close to saying God could even break the law of non-contradiction. And it is no coincidence that most of the pioneers of the Scientific Revolution were staunch voluntarists. The lurking idea of nomic rupture returns again, abraded of any theism, within early theories of geohistory. Eighteenth-century naturalists, equipped with an acute appreciation of the clear coordination of the organism to its environment yet thus far unequipped with any theory of the causal mechanisms behind adaption or speciation, looked at fossil beds with their abrupt saltations between progressive layers of fauna and saw exactly that: abrupt causal ruptures and nomic discontinuities demarcating changes in the biosphere across time. Yet this was no continuously threaded history, but a series of causally disconnected worlds, utterly explanatorily separated from each other. They might as well have been distant in space, not just time (indeed, many at the time commented just as much). The paleontologist Georges Cuvier was explicit:

The thread of operations is broken; nature has changed course, and none of the agents she employs today [are] sufficient to produce her former works.

When tracing the revolutions of nature, it is “found to be subject to new laws”.⁹

⁸ See RANFT, Patricia, “Peter Damian: Could God Change the Past?”, in: *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, 8, 1978, pp. 259–268.

⁹ CUVIER, Georges, *Fossil Bones, and Geological Catastrophes: New Translations and Interpretations of the Primary Texts*, M. J. S. Rudwick (tr.), Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008, pp. 184–193.

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The desacralization of nature—the long-durational expatriation and diaspora of reasons from the cosmic furniture—was the historical driver behind these rolling recurrences of philosophical catastrophism. This extraction, of course, reached an important culmination in Hume’s suspicion regarding the demonstrability of reason’s reliance on inference from cause to effect. Cuvier, in many ways, merely took the Scottish empiricist at his word in producing his geothory of a Hume-world without permanent laws.¹⁰ Just such a centuries-long process of *Ordnungsschwund*, or loss of a rationally structured cosmos, was similarly the driving factor behind Sade’s omnicial catastrophism.¹¹

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Citing Cuvier’s naturalist forebear and compatriot Georges Buffon, Sade expands on his views regarding human extinction and willed omnicide:

Why! what difference would it make to her were the race of men entirely to be extinguished upon earth, annihilated! she laughs at our pride when we persuade ourselves all would be over and done with were the misfortune to occur! Why, she would simply fail to notice it. Do you fancy races have not already become extinct? Buffon counts several of them perished, and Nature, struck dumb by a so precious loss, doesn’t so much as murmur! The entire species might be wiped out and the air would not be the less pure for it, nor the Star less brilliant, nor the universe’s march less exact. What idiocy it is to think that our kind is so useful to the world that he who might not labour to propagate it or he who might disturb this propagation would necessarily become a criminal!

This premonition on global extinction comes directly on the heels of a quintessentially Sadean delectation of various outlawed sex acts:

[T]he sodomite and Lesbian serve [Nature] by stubbornly abstaining from a conjunction whose resultant progeniture can be nothing

¹⁰ Later recurrences of this strain of thought include the French spiritualist Émile Boutroux’s *The Contingency of the Laws of Nature* (Paris, 1874) and, of course, Quentin Meillassoux’s *After Finitude* and *The Divine Inexistence* in our time. See *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency* (R. Brassier (tr.), London: Continuum, 2008). Elsewhere, the idea of nomic inconstancy continues to enjoy attention in works of science such as Robert Unger & Lee Smolin’s 2014 *The Singular Universe and the Reality of Time* (Cambridge: CUP, 2014), wherein the authors argue for an “inclusive reality of time” as a temporality within which laws themselves emerge and dissolve.

¹¹ The term “*Ordnungsschwund*” is borrowed from Hans Blumenberg (*Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, R. M. Wallace (tr.), Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1983).

but irksome to her. Let us make no mistake about it, this propagation was never one of her laws, nothing she ever demanded of us, but at the very most something she tolerated; I have told you so.¹²

This was Sade's crippling attack on the pro-natalist demographic policymaking of the French *Ancien Régime*. Traditional notions of sexuality, arising as the extension of Plenitude to procreation, have long been braced by the prejudice that, as existence is "better" than non-existence, sex should only ever be reproductive: it should "create". (And, following from this, homosexuality was long related to death and negation, because the sex act here supposedly ends in "mere terminus".) Sade, however, eviscerates and exacerbates this logic by instead cosmically vindicating "sodomy". For when nature is no longer rationally equilibrational essence but the unaccountability of reasonless expenditure (or, in other words, is stripped of all rationalization), then the much maligned wastefulness of the non-procreative sex act of Sade's suddenly becomes the most "natural" of all acts. If there is no *ratio essendi* for any loss (in some recompensating replenishment or return, elsewhere and elsewhen), and if death genuinely is unaccountable and inconsolable squander without further justifiability, then the sun truly is just a prolonged onanistic ejaculation. This, then, is why Sade collapses sexual paroxysm onto geohistorical cataclysm and orgasm into species extinction: because bedroom politics is just a subtype of generalized galactic termini. Sadean sexuality and Sadean cosmology are thus utterly indistinct—the one licenses and foment the other.

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Surely, then, this is the apex of disillusionment, of hard-nosed disenchantment?

Absolutely not.

For Sade simply inverts the *Ancien Régime* worldview of Plenitude rather than escaping it. Judging nature as "wasteful" is just as moralistic as judging it as "prudent". The marquis interprets the subtraction of justice from existence as itself being a judicial injunction. For only in the ruins of the old-world conviction that mere existence carries moral contentfulness would the subtraction of justice from nature be considered a cosmos-sized injustice; only in the continuing twilight of the presumption that "to be" is necessarily "to be just" would the evacuation of purpose and prudence from existence be inherited as the belief that *existence is malignance and cruelty to the very extent that it is*. Yet this maneuver is the very kernel of the Sadean "system": *being is a catastrophe precisely inasmuch as it actually exists and persists*. In other words, existence is maximally catastrophe. (Sound like Great-

¹² DE SADE, *Justine*, p. 276.

Filter-as-Abstract-Horror-and-Exterminator, yet?) An “omnipotence of thought” need not dress the world with prudent value, it can also ventriloquize it with catastrophic disvalue, but it remains an “infantile omnipotence” nonetheless.¹³

Again: it is only from still *within* the old worldview of plenitude—wherein “*to be*” is “*to be just*”, and naked existence carries moral content—that nature’s loss of inherent jurisprudence can be seen as *justifying* any particular action or deed, even if said deed is immoral or sadistic.

Instead of inheriting the revelation of nature’s autonomy from all morality as an injunction to embark on the task of procedurally separating our inquiry-motivating values from the objective facts whose inquiry they regulate, Sade interpreted nature’s loss of indwelling justice as a *Principle for the Plenitude of Disvalue, or the moral enjoinder toward maximizing injustice*.

A Pollent Plenitude, rather than a Prudent Plenitude: one that venerates nature’s injudicious abundances rather than its judicious pleroma. This, then, is Sade’s “Principle for the Plenitude of Prodigality”. In his own words:

Destruction being one of the chief laws of Nature, nothing that destroys can be criminal; how might an action [i.e. human extinction] which so well serves Nature ever be outrageous to her?¹⁴

If nature is maximally disastrous, then it is our duty to inflict maximum catastrophe, from the psychosexual scale all the way up to the civilizational. We must radiate disaster triumphant. Hence why, within the Sadean system of cosmo-sexuality, our extinction—our sacrificial and saturnalian omnicide—would be to give nature precisely what it “wants”. A release of tension like an orgasm. Yet cathecting the catastrophic cosmos is not disillusionment, far from it. Even, that is, if you call it the Exterminator, equate it with the Great Filter, and claim it is “thickened by statistical-cosmological vindication”.¹⁵

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To return to the present day, and catastrophe’s current conceptual vogue, one can identify that many strands of continental thinking have inherited the Sadean enjoinder of Pollent Plenitude but in a transposed domain of application. That is, it has mutated from an injunction to maximize profligacy in the bedroom towards instead being an injunction to maximize prodigality in philosophizing.

¹³ See FERENCZI, Sándor, “Stages in the Development of the Sense of Reality”, in: *First Contributions to Psycho-analysis*, New York: Brunner/Mazel, 1980, pp. 213–239.

¹⁴ DE SADE, *Justine*, pp. 237–238.

¹⁵ LAND, “*Exterminator*”.

As it was for Sade, the *Ancien Régime*'s theodical axiom that "whatever is, is maximally just" merely inverts into the mantra that "whatever is just, is just whatever maximally is". Yet, it now licenses a semantic, rather than sexual, dissoluteness. For if we apply such a principle to intentionality itself, the constraining and shepherding normativity of objectivity (the tribunal against which we upbraid inapposite judgements so as to sort "correct" from "incorrect" and selectively drift towards truth) is replaced by a blinding conceptual voluptuousness wherein it is only in being profligate, and in proliferating in as many ways as is possible, that a judgment or action "justifies" or "licenses" itself. Again this is merely an inversion of Prudent Plenitude into Pollent Plenitude: the principle no longer states that "all legitimate possibilities are realized", but rather states that "all legitimacies are the realization of possibilities", and, insofar as this measures legitimation by realization alone, it collaterally entails that "the realization of no possible can be illegitimate". As such, we cannot commit ourselves to "better" or "worse" concepts, we can only generate *more*—in an act of blind mind pollination. Conceptual enormity becomes the name of the game. Thus, the Sadean sexual enjoinder is applied to intentionality itself: conception is not assertoric constancy to an external object = X, in the stepwise rooting and weeding out of incorrect assertions; rather, it is the irresponsible fertilization of novel concepts. One cannot be "correct" or "incorrect", only "profuse", "prodigal", "prolific", "profligate"—judgements aren't "fastidious", only "fecund". (What other reason could there be for lionizing the potato root as a model for cognition? What other reason could there be for desiring to outsource all selectivity to teeming patchworks in our politic reasoning? And yet, thinking is much more than a vegetable patch.)

Hence also the obsession with novelty for novelty's sake. Because, inasmuch as "legitimation" becomes the mere indiscriminate power-to-be rather than the discriminating power-to-be-right, we cannot select better or more apposite concepts, and accordingly our only hope is to patiently await some promised eventual advent of utterly new ones. *Amor fati*. We can neither think nor explain, we can just anticipate something—*anything*—that breaks the status quo.¹⁶ (But, as it ought to be more than a rootstalk, philosophy similarly should be more than the waiting-room for whatever "X-to-come" is currently being held up as our belated salvation.) Thus also the celebration of catastrophe: the ritual of pointing to a nature profligate beyond expectation in order to petition that no assertion, no matter how arrogated or unreasonable, is not somehow adequate to nature's potency to surprise in its blind profligacy. The catastrophic is conscripted as the exception that always disproves the rule; supposedly disabusing us of the constraints of ever suffering the imposition of having to select the correct. In this, the

¹⁶ The vogue for *amor fati* vis-à-vis nomic rupture as the only remaining route of emancipation can hardly be a mistake during the era of so-called capitalist realism—diagnosed by the feeling that "it is easier to imagine an end to the world than an end to capitalism".

Ancien Régime idea that no part of nature can be inconsolably illegitimate because all legitimacies are never not eventually re-realised inverts into the conviction that no intentional state can be illegitimate because nature has the power to actuate anything and everything through the mindless maximalities of its myriad becomings. *Existence, in its largeness and largesse, licenses all.* In the illustrative words of Nietzsche:

If the world may be thought of as a certain definite quantity of force and as a certain definite number of centers of force—and every other representation remains indefinite and therefore useless—it follows that, in the great dice game of existence, it must pass through a calculable number of combinations. In infinite time, every possible combination would at some time or another be realized; more: it would be realized an infinite number of times. And since between every combination and its next recurrence all other possible combinations would have to take place, and each of these combinations conditions the entire sequence of combinations in the same series, a circular movement of absolutely identical series is thus demonstrated: the world as a circular movement that has already repeated itself infinitely often and plays its game in *infinitum*.¹⁷

But what exactly is this taken to license, in theory and practice?

Everything becomes and recurs eternally—escape is impossible! Supposing we *could* judge value, what follows? The idea of recurrence [as a] principle in service of strength (and barbarism!!).¹⁸

If nature is profligacy and enormity to the exact extent that it is, then the only statements that could be considered “justified” are the ones that are most prolific, proliferate, prodigal (and, indeed, even barbarous). Removing responsibility from thinking reduces it to the mindless muscularity of maximization—the “service of strength”. Whatever is just is just whatever maximally is. All legitimation rests in the realization of possibles; the realization of no possible can be illegitimate. Our only hope is to catastrophize, or hope that we get the catastrophe we deserve.

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Thus, the Prudent Plenitude that subordinates nature to jurisprudential rationality by insisting that “no possible justifiability remains unrealized” inverts, after the historical climax of the *Ordnungsschwund*, into the Sadean Pollent Plenitude that submerges rationality within exorbi-

¹⁷ NIETZSCHE, Friedrich, *The Will to Power*, W. Kaufmann & R. J. Hollingdale (tr.), London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1968, p. 549.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 545.

tant nature by proclaiming that “no justification is not the realization of some possible”.

Two “directions of fit” for one principle: the first subordinates facts exhaustively under prudential values, the second submerges values entirely within proliferating facts. Today we inherit the latter in the myriad philosophies that noisily cathect catastrophe; the notion descends from Sade to everyone who continues, in our own time, to try and reduce mind to muscularity or the cascading cataclysms of virality. This includes all those who believe that, in the supposed twilight of values, the tiresome transgression of all value is the only laudable goal.

Yet plenitude, in either direction, entails no *meaningful* allusion to possibilities beyond their factual—i.e. temporally definite—realization. Claiming all possibilities are sometimes realized is collapsing modality into temporality. This, however, removes all workable semantic distinction between how our judgements *in fact are* and how they *ought to be*. Plenitude, whether it points to a nature catastrophic or ministrative beyond measure, is thus utter conceptual infantilism and circumspection because it removes our ability to even be wrong in our judgments and thus trivializes the (properly existential) stakes involved in what we think and do upon this planet. It is an attempt to absolve oneself of the theoretical and practical burdens of mind (the illumining impositions of the public lights through which we are held accountable and hold others accountable in turn) and it shirks this all in some narcotic attempt to return to the absolutions and deliverances and trivialities of cognitive nonage.

Despite parading as hard-nosed disillusionment, the cathectically catastrophizing philosopher is in fact the purveyor of a reheated reenchantment. Because in holding that an injudicious nature somehow *licenses* irresponsible thinking, such philosophers are buying an exemption from accountability-in-thinking at the price of reifying disvalue and injustice. (Again, only in the twilight of the retrograde notion that “to be” is “to be just” could existence be classified as tragedy to the extent that it is. Or, only through reifying disvalue could one come to the conclusion that nature somehow *wants* our extinction, whether dramatized as the Sadean cosmo-orgasm of self-willed extinction or as the dubiously personified Great Filter that stalks the hoary galaxies “hunting” its next victim.) Yet, even though reifying disvalue somehow seems more “mature” than reifying value—just as Schopenhauerian pessimism may seem more “realist” than Leibinian optimism—the former remains just as retrograde as the latter: for where Prudent Plenitude cradles cognition in a cosmos interminably amenable to justification, Pollent Plenitude simply immerses discerning reason within the narcotizing absolutions of indiscriminate enormity; and yet, despite these inverse directions of fit, both unanimously act to exempt cognition of any accountability for its assertions by dissolving the distinction between “*is*” and “*ought*” in assertoric affairs; and a cradle, whether consisting in catastrophic caprice or in prudential pleroma, remains a

cradle nonetheless.

Catastrophe becomes the new method for achieving *henosis* with the fully disenchanting cosmos. A new intellectual intuition, an equilibration of thought and world, albeit a tragic one. But to follow this path is merely to reenchant the independent cosmos with our sense of tragedy, and tragedizing is as much a moral disposition as the perfections proposed by theodicy. Catastrophizing is, unavoidably, moralizing all over again. Even worse, it is simple cowardice: for maximizing enormous injustice, such that no statement can ever be so much as “wrong” within the overflowing exorbitances of prodigal nature, is the attempt to trivialize all the stakes involved in thinking and thus betrays an unwillingness to face up to the venture that we call “mind”. Or, to conscript the cataclysm as the exception that disproves every rule is merely to try and liberate oneself of the burthens of ever being assessed against any standard in excess of the way our thoughts and deeds actually are or have been. Yet this is only liberating in the sense that blinding oneself is liberating oneself of the imposition of having to see. All it does is alleviate one of the risk of having to think.

All inheritors of the cosmo-Sadean enjoinder, therefore, are in fact sufferers of *Geistschmerz*: the circumspect phobia of the jeopardies and tenacities of assuming accountability for oneself in intellection. Thus, despite appearances—despite the aesthetization of gargantuan disaster—catastrophe-drunk thinkers are philosophical ocnophiliacs through and through.¹⁹ And not only when it comes to their refusal of the riskiness of ever being held accountable in thinking, but also when it comes to the topic they hold most dear: human extinction.

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However, before we come back again to the topic of omnicide, let us first establish the philobatic, risk-seeking alternative to plenitudinarian ocnophilia and assertoric circumspection.

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Plenitudinarianism entails there is no meaningful allusion to possibilities beyond their factual and actual realization. Accept this and one is left with only two options regarding axiology: either all facts are valuable ministrations, or all values are just muscular facts. Yet it was Kant who first, and most cogently, argued that there are concepts that—despite not at all being in the business of denoting temporally specific facts—are also utterly semantically legitimate and meaningful. In fact,

¹⁹ The psychoanalyst Michael Balint defined two personality types: the ocnophiliac and the philobat. Ocnophilia is the risk-averse longing for stasis and certainty; philobatism is the openness to the risks involved in remaining continually motile. The ocnophiliac clings to safeties, the philobat leaps into incertitudes. See BALINT, Michael, *Thrills & Regressions*, London: Hogarth, 1959.

these concepts are *necessarily presupposed* by any such temporal or factual designation or denotation. They do not at all describe, yet they are utterly requisite for all description. This, indeed, comprises the heart of the Sage of Königsberg's epoch-making response to the problem of the *Ordnungsschwund*.

The collapse of the rationally ordered cosmos dovetailed into the Enlightenment teaching that values are actively forged by human activity rather than dictated or given by the cosmic facts-of-the-matter. They are protocols we electively bind ourselves by. This auspicious notion culminated in Kant's mature critical philosophy. Kant noticed something momentous: we need values to motivate and regulate our descriptions of objective facts (Why bother updating them otherwise? Why bother even stating them? Why bother not contradicting yourself?) but values are never ever facts objectively described. Without values—as criteria of assessment and appraisal—descriptions could not even be deemed wrong, and without the ability to be wrong, how could descriptions at all be said to be in the business of describing an *objective* world?

Highlighting the “rulishness” of concept-use, Kant hinted to the fact that such concepts are marked out by a discursive capacity for meaningful allusion to mere possibles—or, in technical terms, they are “intensionally” articulated—regardless of what actually happens or is factually realized in time.²⁰ And by *meaningful*, this also means *motivating*.

Such intensionally articulated concepts are requisite, in other words, in order to even begin to understand linguistic rule-following and our manifest tendency to repel incorrect or incompatible judgements. Quite simply, if one rejects intensions—which is precisely what is entailed by any form of plenitudinarianism, inasmuch as it completely reduces possibility to temporality—then one loses the ability to distinguish between how judgements *in fact are* and how they *ought to be*, and thus one correlatively loses all explanation of how it is that our representations can begin to be incorrect, and therefore also foregoes any explanation of why anyone would ever be motivated to update an incorrect claim. In other words, one loses the ability to explain why anyone would *ever change their mind*.

Intensions, or meaningful and motivating mention of mere possibles, alone account for rule-following and thus our capacity to be progressively more correct. For though we may find many extensional contexts that co-refer to the rule in question, we simply cannot exhaust what people *mean* or *intend* when they invoke the rule in question by pointing to such coreferential contexts alone. No extension or denotative set of facts—regardless of how plentiful or coreferential it

²⁰ Intensional definitions clarify a term by mapping out the space of the term's appropriate application. (So, one would define “sadist” by giving criteria of its correct application.) This is opposed to extensional definitions, which clarify a term by enumerating all extant instantiations of the target term: defining its content solely via its available instantiations. (So, one would define “sadist” by compiling a list of all sadists.)

may be—can capture or explain this essential dimension of meaning. Their functional role in our discourse cannot be grasped by pointing to frequencies of manifestation or obedience alone. This is not what they *do*. Instead, intensions grant us the notion of “possibility” as the *possibility-to-be-right*, in the sense of constraining ourselves by rules whose content cannot be exhausted by frequentist specification of facts alone. They allow us *to be right* and *to be wrong*, and thus to be procedurally more right in our judgments, which is the very foundation of us even classifying or counting as “having-a-world-in-view” (inasmuch as one only earns the epithet “objective” to the extent that one is willing to update one’s incorrect assertions), and thus, insofar as this semantic capability thereby founds the very workability of the distinction between “appearance” and “reality”—and of our becoming progressively more responsible for what such a distinction demands of us—it is the kernel of our notion of ourselves as self-conscious agents intentionally directed towards an external world. In other words, part of being directed in this way indispensably involves *having intelligible stakes involved in what you think and do*. Whether one wants to accept it or not, it is these “stakes”—and our progressive acknowledgement of what they entail—that grant us all a “world” in the first place.

And so, in this, Kant revealed that not all legitimate concepts *describe temporally definite and factual states-of-affairs*. Some talk is not at all talk of the way things are, and it is no less legitimate for that. It is because functionally, this talk is *talk about talk*. In other words, when one invokes a value, one is not saying anything that carries objective committal (i.e. is “about” any fact), but is rather regulating the framework within which all objective committal and factual purport becomes possible (that is, appraisable). This, then, is why the historical extraction of justice from the cosmic background—the *Ordnungsschwund*—accordingly entails nothing objectively (it entails nothing about the facts themselves), nor does it entail anything axiologically (it licenses no practical action—because values are never facts objectively described, which is the same as acknowledging that no extension of facts can, by itself, *justify* any given maxim), but it means *everything* methodologically. Because values are ways we *talk about talk*. They are how we invigilate our descriptions and manoeuvre through the space of the myriad entailments that individuate our descriptions as describing-anything-at-all by virtue of structuring what they *do* and *do not* entail or follow from. It is in being able to meaningfully refer beyond what is fully actual and natural (an endeavour whose explicit logical basis goes back to the counterfactual thought-experimenting of the nominalist schoolmen) that rationality gives itself the semantic capaciousness to refer to *its own artifice* and thus arrive at critical consciousness of the fact that reason’s motivating and regulating norms are not at all identical with, nor inherent within, widest nature. And, what’s more, it is in critically reflecting upon what is irreducibly artefactual in our conceptual framework upon the world—or in procedurally *artificializing* those certain

precepts of experience that are regulative requisites for objectivation but are never themselves objects—that we come to better grasp naked existence *independently* of this value-laden framing and thereby further the project of naturalization.

Accordingly, it is only with intensions in tow (or meaningful reference to mere possibles), that we vouchsafe for ourselves a semantic distinction between how judgements “ought to be” and how they “in fact are”, and this alone explains our manifest tendency to change our minds. Yet this chasm between “ought” and “is” engenders an inexhaustible tension: we are forever drawn to update and revise; and, by this very token, we are also damned to eternal destitution and lability. It is this tension, this chasm, that the Pollent Plenitudinarian attempts to absolve, because they cannot handle the philobatic tenacity and motility it demands of us: the tenaciousness of being ceaselessly held accountable by, and continually upbraiding our judgements against, standards that are not semantically exhausted by their frequential realisations or by the maximality or minimality of their realization within time. They want to refuse *the stakes* involved in having a world in view.

The Plenitudinarian, regardless of their direction-of-fit proclivity, collapses modality wholesale into temporality, so as to remove any difference between how our judgments “ought to be” and how they “have been”, in the attempt to escape the possible accountability of ever *being wrong*. Yet this collapse prohibits any ultimate distinction between prescription and description—or between language’s declarative and regulative resources—such that those who follow this path are doomed to once again mix human axiology with independent reality in their circumspect pursuit of absolving us of culpability for our assertions vis-à-vis objective matters. This applies whether one reifies value or disvalue: the former trivializes the stakes involved in our assertions and actions because anything catastrophic is sublimated as temporary and regional errancy from the cosmos’s baseline of interminable justice; the latter achieves the same circumspect absolution by decreeing that in the sheer profligacy of nature’s catastrophic becomings, any statement can be proven “just” in the service of strength alone. In refusing the ability to be wrong, both directions are alike forms of ocnophilia, or risk-averseness. They are conspecific refusals of accountability: they do not want to accept the jeopardy of ever acknowledging that thought involves stakes (and does so unavoidably and constitutively inasmuch as it has an objective world in view).

Because, as Kant again dimly saw, it is only through being held to account—which means risking everything in knowledge—that we can claim ourselves to be “objective”. Certitude always comes in degrees because incertitude is the *very environing medium* of objective inference, of the making and staking of ever self-correcting claims, in that jeopardization is the only route to ever better knowledge. This is because it is only through progressively submitting our claims to the risk of their defeasance that we can correct incorrect claims and thus reach

ever better ones and through this begin—in the first place—to earn the title of “objective” (through the process of being recognized as intentional agents who take themselves to have a world in view precisely via their acknowledgement of the constancy and relentless sensitivity to assertoric accountability that earning such a recognition demands of them). In other words, it is through this game of jeopardization that we even first come to our representational relation *towards* an external world: for we only demonstrate responsibility for our assertions, which is the minimum condition for being recognized as a world-directed being, by demonstrating that we are willing and able to correct incorrect commitments. Only the kind of being that demonstrates this willingness can be said to *have* a world (as opposed to existing merely as a bundle of sensa and impressions *which cannot even be wrong*).

However, such an assiduous task of world orientation requires tenacity. It is this constant upbraiding, course correction, and ever-present risk of being held accountable that the Pollent Plenitudinarian attempts to absolve in his attempt to flee from the spacious and philobatic differential between “ought” and “is” through claiming that existence is an overflowing catastrophe to the very extent that it is. Despite its aesthetic of “brave catastrophe”, such an attempt is, ultimately, a *geistschmerzlich* attempt at equilibrating the task-of-mind and the facts-of-the-world. This is why it is an ocnophiliac and circumspect refusal of mentation’s properly cosmic vocation.

Cathecting the Great Filter as some looming Exterminator serves just this purpose: as a kind of retroactive exculpation, a deliverance from the risks of ever having to be held responsible for any assertion or action, a kind of *consolatio* in the inevitable and incoming interstellar extinction.

For what is more daunting than the fact that reason presupposes values that cannot be exhausted in time? Who wouldn’t want to reject the sheer gigantism of the task that this demands of us? Who wouldn’t want to run away from the unconditioned into the deliverances of darksome extinction? Who wouldn’t want to retreat to the safety of knowing that nothing ever mattered anyway?

§

Hence, we return to the topic of human extinction and of wilful omnicide.

It is the case that, throughout the history of Western thought, human extinction remained unthinkable because the Principle of Plenitude (in its Prudent conjugation) made extinction so *axiologically trivial* as to be *objectively unthinkable*. Plenitude, and the congenital belief that the universe was somehow as maximally full of value as is possible, led to the default conviction that should *Homo sapiens* be wiped out on planet Earth, it would merely return elsewhere and elsewhere. There are many examples to cite, but Bernard de Fontenelle provided one of the best ones when he claimed in the 1680s that—in the

vast cosmic infinites—no species can “totally perish” because they will all eventually be resurrected to repopulate some new world.²¹ Another example comes from Diderot, who proclaimed that even if our species were annihilated, evolution would inevitably be rerun and “at the end of several hundreds of millions of years of I-don’t-know-whats, the biped animal who carries the name man” would ineluctably re-enter the cosmic scene.²²

Moving a few decades, from Diderot to de Sade, could anything have truly changed in the latter’s neat inversion of the old-regime Principle? Evidently not. Because if one thinks that maximizing destruction is the chief moral law of nature, then there must always be something—that is, *someone*—to immorally destroy. That is, even though he titillated himself celebrating the “obliteration” of unlimited populated worlds, *Sade again would fall into the trap of presuming resurrecting humanoids across other epochs and biospheres.* And so, even though he enjoyed (indeed, loved) the idea of human extinction, he couldn’t quite fully grasp it. For instead of holding that nature is as *full of value as is possible*, he simply held that it is as full of *disvalue as is possible*, and by direct consequence of this, the French libertine backslid into a cyclicity tellingly identical to Diderot’s resurrecting humanoids.

Sade’s may be an eternal return of sadistic suffering rather than sapient bipeds, but a *plenitude of pain remains plenitude once again.*

That is, after claiming that human extinction would be utterly desirable, Sade also proclaimed that if our “species” were to be “destroyed absolutely” and “blotted out of existence”, then the “extirpation of [our] breed would, by returning to Nature the creative faculty she has entrusted to us, reinvigorate her” and thereby ensure that “new constructions, wrought by her hand” would eventually replace us.²³

Absolutizing suffering requires that there be eternal sufferers, such that, once again, nothing can truly ever die. Collaterally, there can again be no true stakes—no real meaning—to our extinction.

In an indicting manner, Schopenhauer falls into precisely the same trap, close on the heels of Sade’s anti-natalist vituperations. For despite ejaculating that if his ascetic “maxim” becomes “universal” then the “human race would die out”, the German philosopher also propounded that we necessarily live in the “*worst of all possible worlds*”.²⁴ He reasoned his way to this position by looking at the previous worlds lately unearthed by geoscience. Observing these previous worlds of monstrous beasts and terrifying leviathans, the arch pessimist claimed that they evidence prior creations or world plans whose “continuance was no longer possible” by virtue of the fact that they proved *even* “worse” than

²¹ FONTENELLE, Bernard, *A Plurality of Worlds*, J. Glanvill (tr.), London, 1687, pp. 150–151.

²² See KORS, Alan Charles, *D’Holbach’s Coterie: An Enlightenment in Paris*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976, p. 99.

²³ DE SADE, *Justine*, p. 230.

²⁴ SCHOPENHAUER, Arthur, *The World as Will and Representation*, E. F. J. Payne (tr.), New York: Dover, 1969, p. 1:380.

our own, and thus necessarily became *non-viable* and were *weeded out of existence*.²⁵ By direct consequence, we find ourselves within the worst of all possible (that is, workable) worlds. A devilish twist on Leibniz's powerful notion of compossibility, this still committed Schopenhauer to an eternalism of suffering (and, by consequence, also of sufferers). For despite seemingly accepting the terminality of extinction in some places, he elsewhere claimed that "in spite of thousands of years of death and decay, there is still nothing lost, no atom of matter, still less anything in the inner being exhibiting itself as nature".²⁶

§

One cannot but think that in our time, cathecting the Great Filter as some kind of Exterminator suffers from the same dubiousness. It sounds a lot like Sade's titillation that murder is nature's chief law. We have no independent verification of the inherence of mental categories such as "terror" or "horror" in autonomous reality, and yet they are here reified as the cosmic baseline. Not only this, but these emotions are dubiously *personified* as some kind of distant intelligence murderer (finding its "mythological expression in the hunter"), which humorously makes the floating and noocidal Filter resemble something like Thomas Paine's sarcastic vision of Jesus in a galaxy repletely populated with thronging exocivilizations (wherein the Saviour is condemned to flit "from world to world, in an endless succession of deaths"—*for all eternity*).²⁷ The Filter here becomes some kind of Dead Christ. Indeed, instating a plentitude of terror surely commits one to the absolutization of terrorized beings. It would certainly seem so:

How gentle and soothing, if death were really nothing but ceasing to be, but is there such a thing as "mere death"? /.../ The facts are blatant: it is not the case that death leaves matter satisfied. At most it is a temporary refreshment, a cool black wave for matter to bask in like a reptile, a phase of dormancy, before the rush back into the convulsive dissipation of life. /.../ Across the aeons our mass of hydro-carbon enjoys a veritable harem of souls.²⁸

This quote does not come from Sade but from Nick Land. A chip off the Sadean block. "How much dying can a body do?" he asks. Again, *a plentitude of pain is just a plentitude all over again*. (This statement is merely a neat inversion of the age-old theodical bromide: "Dissolution is the prelude to recreation. Analogy leads us to believe that the same is true of the

²⁵ Ibid., pp. 2:584–585.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 2:479.

²⁷ PAINE, Thomas, *The Age of Reason*, New York: Citadel Press, 1974, p. 90.

²⁸ LAND, Nick, *Thirst for Annihilation: Georges Bataille and Virulent Nihilism*, London: Routledge, 1992, p. 128.

cosmos. Nothing can be destroyed.”)²⁹ Here there can be no true extinction and no true terminus: and this is not in spite of—but because of—the author’s adherence to a Principle of the Plenitude of Disvalue. And, in spite of the posturings of such a Principle, Fermi’s Paradox is actually much more interesting and internally variegated than dressing it up as a horror trope (in the two-centuries-old tradition of Cosmic Sadeanism) would have one believe. “Horroristic” conclusions are by no means the only game in town here.³⁰ And where such conclusions evidently arise from cathecting catastrophe and from hobby-horsical predilections for horrorism, one might do well to be cautious.

Plenitude has ever been—and so remains—a trivializing of the stakes involved in thinking, and regardless of whether it accomplishes this trivialization by guaranteeing that nature is *maximally moral* or *maximally immoral*, it remains just as specious either way. Especially, that is, when it comes to the topic of our extinction. For where it jettisons the language by which we critically reflect on the distinction between mind and world (insofar as extensional fact-stating alone cannot point to *failures* to grasp facts), this strain of thought is fated, again and again, to mingle mind-based values (or, indeed, disvalues) with the constants of the independent cosmos at the most maximal scales. Moreover, inasmuch as it collapses prescription into description, and norm into nature, this outlook simply cannot accommodate the fact of the end of all value. And, identically, neither can it accommodate the fact of the end of all disvalue. Or, in other words, despite the fact that cosmo-Sadeans may noisily cry for human extinction—and advertise it as the USP of their philosophy—they simply cannot properly cognize this concept because they cannot fully articulate its stakes. And it is precisely the concept’s *axiological stakes* that mark it out as unique: individuating it against “false friend” cognate concepts such as apocalypse, collapse or regional extirpation. Trivializing the stakes involved in thinking leads to the ultimate circumspection: an inability to even concede the stakes involved in extinction, backsliding into the security of eternally returning sufferers and/or sapients.

§

Cathecting cosmic catastrophe and promulgating horroristic interpretations of Cosmic Silence, though it may seem tough-minded and unsentimental, derives from precisely the same human inclination that once

²⁹ FLAMMARION, Camille, *Omega: The Last Days of the World*, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1999, p. 284.

³⁰ See, for example, ČIRKOVIĆ, Milan M., “Post-postbiological evolution?”, in: *Futures*, 99, 2018, pp. 28–35.

led people to think that nonhuman and lifeless objects were deserving of legal punishment if they had harmed someone or caused their death.³¹

§

Rather than being some background feature of the cosmos—some tragic baseline from which everything else is deviation—the “catastrophic” is, in fact, only ever something that happens to *someone*. This is why absolutizing catastrophe is also absolutizing sapient observers.

Catastrophes befall someones, constitutively so. They are a matter of perspective. Even without the undeniable ethical component—that they are *bad*—catastrophes, insofar as they are unprecedented events, can ultimately be specified as unprecedented only relative to an outward-expanding awareness of *the positionality* of our conceptual witness within widest epochal cosmological history. (Put differently, “we should regard what we observe as typical only after taking into account all preconditions for our emergence as intelligent observers at this cosmic epoch”).³² And this orientation presupposes, in turn, a grasp of the distinction between conception and existence—between appearance and reality—which, again, is the very beating heart of self-consciousness.

§

As intimated above, the historical progress of our grasp of catastrophe moved in step with our extraction of “value” from “fact”. For when one mingles the two, one allows oneself no real responsiveness to nature’s non-responsivity vis-à-vis our axiological expectations and moral intuitions. Hence why beginning from the late Middle Ages onwards, the *Ordnungschwund* was the birth of “catastrophe” proper. But it follows from this that the first “catastrophe” was cognitive and practical in scope, rather than objective and empirical. For experiencing the unexpected isn’t ever purely an empirical datum without first also being the self-infliction of the logically anterior—and irreducibly semantic—

³¹ “In 1522 some rats were placed on trial before the ecclesiastical court in Autun. They were charged with a felony: specifically, the crime of having eaten and wantonly destroyed some barley crops in the jurisdiction. A formal complaint against ‘some rats of the diocese’ was presented to the bishop’s vicar, who thereupon cited the culprits to appear on a day certain, and who appointed a local jurist /.../ to defend them. /.../ When his clients failed to appear in court, [the jurist] resorted to procedural arguments.” See EWALD, William B., “Comparative Jurisprudence (I): What Was it Like to Try a Rat?”, in: *University of Pennsylvania Law Review and American Law Register*, 143, 1995, pp. 1889–2149; and EVANS, Edmund P., *The Criminal Prosecution and Capital Punishment of Animals*, New York: E. P. Dutton, 1998; and HYDE, Walter W., “The Prosecution and Punishment of Animals and Lifeless Things in the Middle Ages and Modern Times”, in: *University of Pennsylvania Law Review and American Law Register*, 64:6, 1916, pp. 696–730. Such objects or creatures were referred to as “deodands”.

³² ĆIRKOVIĆ, Milan M., *The Great Silence: Science and Philosophy of Fermi’s Paradox*, Oxford: OUP, 2018, p. 53.

awareness that our experiential horizon of expectation cannot exhaust the scope of total reality. In this, disaster was learnt, never given. An actively imposed and orientational self-reflection, rather than some event passively befallen. Our acutely modern sense of the catastrophic was tacitly reflective first, only acquiring declarative applicability after (in becoming the suite of natural—and now anthropogenic—risks that grows to this day). For we had to first articulate the axiological stakes involved in “disaster” before we became capable of even observing cataclysms *as* cataclysms. (Otherwise, they are no doubt tragic, but they remain the jurisprudential sentencings of the morally structured universe—cruel and inscrutable though it may be.) Modern catastrophe is initially a reflection upon the propriety and place of concept-use itself—namely, the hard-won semantic acknowledgement that concepts are limited because reality is not conceptual in structure—*before* it latterly gains any empirical-level determinability as prospective or potential fact.

In slowly extracting norm from nature, and thus realising that there are some concepts that do not declaratively refer declarative reference, but are nonetheless presupposed by it, we later came to realize that compulsory features of rationality, such as the inference from cause to effect, are not independently demonstrable facts of nature’s categorial structure (contrary to the dogmatic rationalist’s conviction) nor are they, due to subtraction, to be jettisoned or somehow “simply done without” in our putting questions to nature (as is recommended by the radical empiricist and the proponent of nomic rupture) because, instead, they are to be regarded as regulative ideals (that is, norms of inquiry) that *functionally motivate us to update our theories or models when we encounter the exceptional or unprecedented*. “Uniformity” is a standard that we freely bind ourselves by, and is thus a goal actively achieved rather than a factum passively received, and it is the value that motivates us to synthesize a coherent manifold and thus procedurally manufacture for ourselves a structure-infused “world” worthy of the name. But, ultimately, it is just that: a motivating standard. Axioms like the Principle of Uniformity are impelling values—presupposed by inquiry—that get objective investigation *off the ground*. They are the drivers of inquiry, rather than the results of it. (By corollary, a categorially structured and uniform world is the *output* of synthetic experience rather than its basal or founding *input*.) Likewise, we only experience the “catastrophe” as “catastrophic” inasmuch as we observe our compelling duty toward synthesizing an ever more unified world model. Without this shepherd-ing drive, we would have *no reason* to think of anything *as* unprecedented. In other words, we can only objectively experience catastrophes, and so much as become conceptually aware of them, because they manifest and engage our compulsion to act and think ever better (in that they actuate that inexhaustible differential between how judgements merely are and how they should be that is so essential to—and, indeed, inceptive of—intentional self-consciousness). Catastrophes are the ignition sys-

tem of cognitive updating. The experience of “catastrophe” is thus only our *self-infliction* of our higher-order awareness of the differential between “fact” and “value”, in that it is our acknowledgement of our *duty* of constancy to the “object = X”: in forcing us to acknowledge that our experiential categories do not exhaust the autonomous and anomalous cosmos, we are merely answering our global obligation to continually update our theories and nomological models when they are catastrophically contravened. For receptivity to the unexpected is identical with the drive to update one’s views in light of contradicting evidence. By this very token, “the catastrophe” is revealed as precisely that which impels us to further assert ourselves within the world: for it is only in progressively spelling out the stakes in what we think and do (in assertoric affairs as much as existential ones), and thus in becoming increasingly conversant with an ever-growing pantheon of perils, that we become awakened to the projects of self-betterment in the first place (whether this undertaking is instantiated as the drive to colligate more robust predictive models, as the impulse to generate more context-sensitive practical protocol, or, at the very limit of modernity’s growing edge, as our awakening to the task of asserting ourselves at increasingly encompassing spatio-temporal scales in order to counter and mitigate increasingly encompassing risks).

To borrow the still-resonant words of J. G. Fichte, it is only in acknowledging the catastrophe (*Anstoß*) that we first answer the summons (*Aufforderung*) to our daring vocation (*Bestimmung*).³³

It is this primary “check” to unlimited practical activity that initially incites us to the task of structuring a world for ourselves (by freely constraining our assertions regarding it by way of myriad unfolding norms of coherence and consistency) so that we might practically assert ourselves ever better within our worldly practices. It is from this primordial and always ongoing encounter, a ramifying familiarity with jeopardy and calamity, that the Fichtean project can be seen as an attempt to procedurally and steadily deduce all the categories of experience—all the structured richness of our objective world—as so many self-assertions of the germinating transindividual self in its responses and rebuttals to environing hazard. Always and forever, it is the catastrophe that compels us to our task.

And now, in the opening of the twenty-first century, that we have come to recognize hazards that are existential in scope (and, more so, that may well irreversibly denude the future development of intelligence, not just at our own biosphere, but across all others throughout our astrobiological environ), we are beginning to answer the summons—the *Aufforderung*—of a calling of equitable scope.

That is, as we become increasingly sensitive to the astronomic precarity of intelligence—or, the more we realise that, as outer-space

³³ Fichte used the word *Anstoß* to denote the primordial “collision”, “repulsion”, “recoil”, “shock”, or “check” that *incites* the ego to self-activity, self-consciousness, and self-assertion.

isn't brim-full of sapience, so too are sapient values even more alienated and estranged from brute facts—we incrementally come to accept that our intellectual endowment is not astronomically precious merely because it is “rare” (i.e. that its extension is maximal or minimal within time and/or space) but that it is precious because principles-of-value are never exhaustibly specified by conscripting sets-of-facts alone (and the growing silence of the cosmos only further puts this disjuncture into relief): and thus the scope of the potentially abortive failure of our task cannot be encompassed by pointing to temporally specified facts and aetiologies and consequences alone, and thus such a prospect cannot but be articulated as an eventuality that will have been a tragedy of properly *unconditioned* and *absolute* scope, such that coming to recognize the catastrophic silence of outer space—as the ultimate *Anstoß*—must be received by us as nothing other than the summons to a vocation and enterprise of identically unconditioned proportions. It is yet another *Anstoß*, another incitement towards intellect's assertion of itself at ever greater, ever more colossal, ever more insanely ambitious scales. A summons to a Kardashev-scale vocation. This is the true *Bestimmung* of whatever it is that our task decides that will become.

It progressively becomes more and more obvious that as sapient beings, we were always wrapped up in just such a task—a calling whose scope cannot be conditioned by any “here” and “now”; one that cannot be constrained by evolutionary or historical filiation to one's species nor, indeed, to one's biosphere—it is just that *we always forever didn't quite know this yet*. And yet, inasmuch as intelligence just is the ability to divest oneself of the contingencies of “somewhere” and “somewhen” in order to drift towards “nowhere” and “nowhen”, *we could not but* become implicated in such a project. And we cannot but continue to become further implicated, further entangled; indeed, we remain never quite yet fully understanding just what such a calling demands of us, and yet (existential mishaps notwithstanding) it remains our ongoing and unending task to find this out.

§

In the years during which Sade penned his most devastating demands for omnicide, Fichte published a book with an important title: *The Vocation of Man (Die Bestimmung des Menschen)*.³⁴ Stripped of its eighteenth-century androcentrism, the title encapsulates a resonant concept, one whose consequences we are still exploring and following up. It captures the realization that humanity itself constitutes a “project”. This discovery has been lauded as the most important thing that has ever happened to us.³⁵ It announces the understanding that we are—at least to a non-trivial degree—*creatures of our own making*. We are, in

³⁴ FICHTE, Johann Gottlieb, *The Vocation of Man*, P. Preuss (tr.), Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987.

³⁵ BRANDOM, Robert, *A Spirit of Trust*, Massachusetts: HUP, 2019.

other words, accountable for what it is that we are. Or, put differently, our entire fate lies in our own hands (inasmuch as we can recognize it as a “fate”, or something that has “good” and “bad” outcomes). And this is why becoming aware of the risks that intelligence faces—not just in our parochial planetary environs, but in *any* astrobiological and astro-cognitive setting—is an indispensable part of the task we inherit.

As such, just as we can interpret the Great Silence of the Cosmic Skies as a looming horroristic hunter—and exculpate ourselves of any duty or constancy in advance, so as to backslide into narcotic nonage by cathecting tragedy as the baseline of the cosmos—we can also intercept the cosmos’s eerie canopy of inactivity as the summons to a task daring beyond all scales amenable to our terrestrial history and heritage. Indeed, upon closer vivisection, the former option reveals itself to be nothing other than a reformulated and reheated version of the Cosmic Nonchalance that has long been the promise of the Principle of Plenitude across the long-drawn-out centuries. Diderot’s returning bipeds are, ultimately, not unlike the desire that the Great Filter be some kind of manifestation of the universe’s overflowing disvalue. In this way, we would be advised to choose the critical option, and reject those of both the cosmic pessimist and the theodical optimist: that is, we would be best to recognize that such silence tells us something important about the task of value in an inhospitable and unresponsive universe. It is only in answering this summons that we will have begun to realize just what is demanded of us in our position as sophonts in a seemingly otherwise silent universe.

§

A soteriology of infinite disvalue is a soteriology all over again, and the soteriologist always seeks safety—whether it be found in the absolutions of narcotic night or in the deliverances of obsequious theodicy. Consequently, insofar as one wants to be philobatic rather than ocnophilic in one’s thinking, one simply must uptake Cosmic Fichteanism and reject Cosmic Sadeanism.

§

Omnicidal reason is illegitimate. This is regardless of whether it be of the type that celebrates “extinction” as yet another proliferation of difference in “the service of strength”, as yet another decentering of the anthropocentric, as yet more glib ruin porn for the human project, or as the dejected and chagrined feeling that because we consistently fail to meet our ideals, this somehow invalidates the pursuit of following them such that we would be better off elegiacally aborting our project altogether.

But, again, values are not made valid or invalid by the happenstantial frequencies of their realization—by the maximality or

minimality of their extensions—such that the existential legitimacy of our species' project comes not from our historical record of morality or immorality but instead from the fact that, as the only known creature capable of being revolted by itself, we can hold ourselves to higher standards and, by consequence, the scope of our project simply cannot be exhaustively specified by pointing to facts and stats alone: and this means that if the vocation were to be aborted, it would have been a loss of *absolute*—rather than spatiotemporally definite—scope. It will have mattered “absolutely” or “unconditionally” and this acknowledgement *cannot but* be motivating and meaningful in the here and now. Even if, in one sense, “nothing will have mattered” after all is said and done, it is also true that insofar as one is even uttering this counterfactual, one is acting in accordance with certain mental precepts that outstrip the factual designation of this *post festum* world.

It is the case, moreover, that contemporary omniscient reason is *genealogically illegitimate*, in that it is blind to the history within which its favorite idea emerged and continues to unfold. And this is because, if you look at the long-term history of how we came to care about catastrophe—and thus by extension also existential catastrophe—it was essentially only by undertaking some *basic self-responsibility* for the activity that we call “thinking” that we so much as even become able to postulate that one day, it may objectively cease.

As ever, we had to accept value-driven responsibility before we became able to even discover this prospectively potential fact. We had to disentangle value from fact before we could become gripped by the potential fact of the end of all value.

It was by spelling out the stakes involved in what we think and do—*rather than rejecting them by retreating into the deliverances of some new plenitude*—that we first became even able to be gripped by our future extinction.

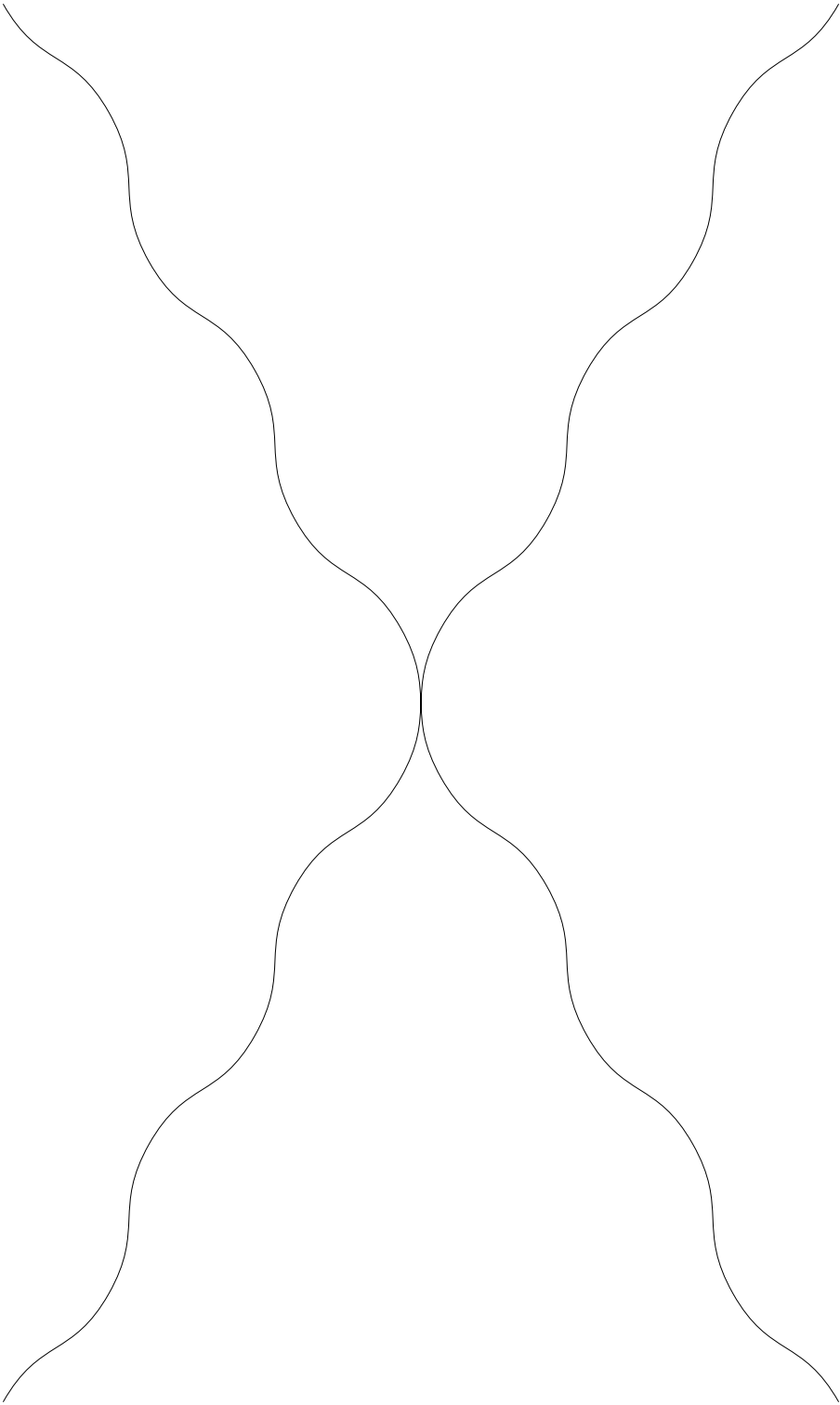
Thus, those who today inherit the idea of extinction as an excuse to adjure irresponsible omniscience are genealogically illegitimate in the sense that they do not acknowledge that the very idea that they champion—that of “human extinction”, the ultimate catastrophe—was only made available to us by way of our progressive undertaking of accountability for ourselves as a species. To even be able to utter the idea is, whether one likes it or not, to acknowledge something of the summons that intelligence cannot but answer.³⁶

And this is the summons to a tenacious task—of clarification and rigorization and jeopardization and philobatic exploration—one that thereby refuses the tenebrous and trivializing abundances of the ocnophilic's narcotic night within which everything will be merely

³⁶ In a certain historical and transindividual sense, *we can only think about human extinction because we already care about it*. It could thus be said that from the perspective of “where” our ideas emerge from and thus gain their continuing legitimacy and content, one who exhorts extinction is operating under a specific form of false consciousness.

done again, and through which the “service of strength” is revealed to be the utmost conceptual cowardice.

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14 January 2049

A month before you die the night is thick, almost purple.

As soon as I meet up with my companions we stick on 50 milligram night patches,¹ and in less than 10 minutes we feel the NH_2 , C_3H_5 , NO_3 chemical chains penetrating our epidermis and reaching our internal organs, nerves and glands. It's particularly refreshing when they penetrate the stomach lining. Feels like your stomach cavity is gently flapping around.

We sip purpledrank² from a tetrapak. The wind is strong. Stars appear in the sky for a second. Someone remarks that they've "only experienced wind like this once, during a storm at sea; it drove into the mast so hard that the ship's cables started howling like a raging beast."

A long silence is followed by a sort of quarrel with no clear mental orientation.

"When are you most satisfied?" I hear someone ask. Someone gives a general answer: "When you put on a Burial vinyl and it's

¹ Adhesive strips containing night hormone (melatonin) blockers, stable oxygen and synthesized vitamins.

² A xenodrink. Made of a mixture of cough syrup and Sprite. It triggers hallucinatory effects. It falls under the same heading as asp-cola (aspirin and Coca-Cola), a drink that appeared on the hip hop scene in Nove Jarše in 2022 and from there spread throughout the Ljubljana underground. It was banned until 2031, then later legalized and freely sold.

thundering outside, and you're drunk and high and you dream the neighbours upstairs are moving furniture." A third person is taken aback and launches into a lecture. He climbs to the top of the dumpster like a prophet and starts screaming: "You think I have a steady diet? Do ya? A ham sandwich with pickles at 3 in the morning is not a steady diet! The world is in total collapse! Nothing is where it should be!"³

I interrupt his shouting. It's all pretty annoying. "We love speed, that's the only healthy thing we got! The only thing keeping us on our feet is our lust for survival. The mornings our stomach hurts because the lining's been destroyed are an investment. For us, the night lasts 24 hours. During the day we wander around and in the morning, trucks filled with trash rumble down an empty, empty street!"

The toxic fog eats into the streets, the sidewalks are greasy from the salt, icicles hang from the roofs. It's high time we took over a building. We move towards the city center and break into a seventeen-story tower. We take the fire escape and make it all the way to the thirteenth floor. "This copier has wheels," someone notes. We roll it into a larger space, where you used to step off the elevator. We bust up the plastic lid of the copier with a baseball bat. We kick it to pieces and set it on fire.

Fire. Some dude with a hoodie is going on about a country where it never stops raining. It's so rich in rain that there are rain mines, and they export the rain. "Too bad Africans can't export desert sand," I say. "But they do," he replies after a while, "it's just that it's the Chinese that do it."⁴

Somebody I don't know standing in front of me says, "I don't know why the sun shines during the day. If it shined at night, that would make sense, because night's when you need light the most." In a way he's right. Our mayor Prankovich Jr. installed a huge flood light on the Ljubljana castle, and on the most depressing days, when the city is covered

³ Astrophysicists discovered that space has (at least) 135 dimensions and that it's considerably more wrinkled than they originally thought. Cosmic paradoxes are the order of the day. Some planets were found to orbit in the opposite direction of their movement. Sometimes it happens that they meet and crash into themselves and explode. (Not always though. In some cases we're dealing with ghost planets that can pass through each other.) But that's not all. They also proved the existence of glacial stars. Although readings show that the surface of such stars reaches a scalding 31,000 degrees Celsius, their structure is made of ice. Thus there arose the theory of hot ice—it's ice that's hot, but it appears to be cold. In terms of fuel consumption this means that the fuel in glacial stars is ambivalent, as it burns in the form of ice structures. But it's not that the ice is burning, it's more like the heat vapors "freeze". Huge shifts also occurred in our understanding of the cosmos (the "personalization" of space happened). They discovered that some planets "aren't in the mood", that they're "sad". This causes them to lose a dimension—to become flat or to shrink down to a single point.

⁴ Neo-China is using light bulldozers to dig up Africa in search of metals. Africa is one giant sandbox. It's no longer colored black, but red, like the surface of the Mojave Desert. The rivers are poisoned and have turned into mountain ranges of manganese salt as a result of oxidation and the unbearable heat. There's neither nature nor culture in Africa. There's only (artificial) genetic reproduction. Superslaves (concubines, porn actors, athletes, murderers and soldiers) are bred for sale to the wealthier continents in giant underground laboratories. They can be purchased at slave boutiques.

in a thick pocket of fog, it shines in an attempt to imitate sunlight.

A drone starts humming above the building. We break out a couple of slingshots, pull bandannas over our faces and start pelting the thing with rocks. Soon we see a police helicopter closing in. It fervently pokes the search light beam in every direction, like an angry insect.

We run for a long time, until our sweat-soaked bodies unwind in the train underpass. The wind is obnoxious, but we're safe and we can rest.

15 January 2049

Morning and correspondence with the accelerationists.⁵ A lively debate. #Pied Piper of Hamelin# says: Being is monosyllabic, just like Duns Scotus says. #Me#: I'm not sure it's monosyllabic. It seems to me that it has infinite voices. Every being screams its own language: the table screams, a rabbit screams, the sky screams—in their own language of course. #Witt de Stein# says: Screaming in NASQAT financial language is something completely different than if a human screams. #Marko Bauer#: I had the opposite experience. Sometimes my head is so full from the strolex that I can't draw the line between money markets screaming and my girl screaming. #Aljaž Zupančič#: Nobody can take over the border. You can only pass through. #Mirko Lampreht#: Speaking of being is a forbidden pitfall. We can only have control over medium-sized objects and their states. But if the objects pick up speed from the Outside, things get complicated. #xenogothic#: Guys, do you remember how the *plastiglomerate*⁶ came about? You laughed back then, but I told you: "They're raspberries." #Mirko Lampreht#: That theory of yours reminded me how utterly psychotic matter is. If matter is psychotic, why wouldn't materials be psychotic too? Apparently the Presocratic atomists argued for something similar.⁷ #xenogothic#: By

⁵ Certain individuals who go about the city at night and clandestinely release octopuses into the Ljubljana and other waterways. They believe in the coming of an artificial intelligence that will manifest itself in these animals. The nervous system of an octopus has long been known to be considerably different than that of vertebrates (the neuron mass of the octopus is evenly distributed throughout the organism and bears no resemblance to cephalocentric ordering). They draw on the tradition of bots sent from the future by artificial intelligence. They emphasize mutation (the physiological level), fragmentation (the political level), atomization, pixelization (the aesthetic level). They tend towards an abstract approach in science and swear by the unconscious that will appear on the markets of the future, which is why their language resembles program code. They reject orthohistory and swear by non-history. They love wormholes and hate open spaces. In chemical matters they prefer the molecular to the molar. In their philosophical views they place their faith in the great Outside, and not so much in the big Other.

⁶ Due to the mass dumping of plastic in nature, rocks and plastics have merged. This process resulted in so-called *plastiglomerates*. On the geological level plastic has led to the appearance of new continents, so-called *plasticcontinents*.

⁷ They put forth a naive explanation of the formation of ricotta (R). They supported the "insane" milk argument (a "i" m). (R)icotta was formed by the atoms in milk "going insane", that is, they began to join up with other atoms in a "panic". This is how milk curdled. (R)icotta is therefore the result of "milk" delirium or, as a logic equation, "m" d → R.





the way; history could not confirm the existence of Presocratic atomists ...⁸ #Marko Bauer#: I correctly predicted the appearance of microcommunities that abandon the classic framework of the state.⁹ #xenogothic#: Ever since Saudi Arabia bought the Italian peninsula and covered it with sand for oasis tourism anything is possible.¹⁰ #Marko Bauer#: It's been ten years since the Great War and the fragmentation continues to grow.¹¹ #Jan Kostanjevec#: In the Cryptocene it feels like the fossil age is a thousand years away.¹² #Tjaša Pogačar#: Not so fast boys, you know you can also die from speed.¹³ #Primož Krašovec#: In some Asian cities where there's lots of suicides jumping off skyscrapers they're thinking

⁸ History was rewritten in 2047. That was when physicists made a quantum listening device with which they could pick up very faint, chronologically distant frequencies. On the hypothesis that all energy in the universe is preserved and no frequency (wave movement) in the universe disappears into nothing, the device was first used to listen for extraterrestrial voices. But instead of voices from the future they found voices from the past. It turns out the device could be used to reconstruct conversations dating back 150 years. Thus the public learned what Hitler and Stalin talked about at their secret meeting in 1936. They found the telephone conversation where they ordered the hit on Kennedy in 1963. Within the year they had amped up the range of the quantum listening unit by a factor of 10, which meant that mankind could now listen in on Caesar's murder in 44 BC. Phonetic analysis shows that Caesar did not say "Et tu, Brute!", but "Et tu, porce!" (You too, you pig!).

⁹ That was the year intellectuals began leaving the country en masse, as they realized nobody respected them. They moved to the woods ("silvans"), to riverine areas ("riverids"), to the mountains ("montanids") and to islands in the ocean ("oceanids").

¹⁰ Insolvency forced the Italian government to sell the entire territory of the Apennine Peninsula. Italian citizens were relocated to the shores of the Black Sea (due to similarities with the Mediterranean). Thus the prediction of Roman historian Gaius Crispus Sallustius, who wrote that you can buy absolutely anything in Rome, came to fruition (see DE BELLO IUGURTHINO, 35.10).

¹¹ The history of the internet took a tragic turn. By 2027 half of the files on the internet were pornography and cats. A year later tensions grew between the two political blocks and a cold war lasting two years followed. In 2029 serious conflict finally broke out. The two armies of algorithmic bots—The cat army (CATS) and the United Army of Internet Pornfarms (UAIP)—faced each other down and all signs pointed towards total catastrophe. A week later all hell broke loose. The war lasted three months and enormous amounts of porncapital were destroyed, while on the other side many cats were killed or sent to gulags from which they were never to return. But nobody won this great war. Chaos reigned on the internet. Uncontrolled internet "foresteing" became a thing. The world wide web was saturated with megadumps and digital ruins. It was useless. Thus there arose multiple nationalized versions of the internet: Ether.net (Europe), SpaNuli.net (Latin-speaking countries), noIR.net (U/D/S U/n/i/t/e/d/D/a/r/k/S/t/a/t/e/s), Pluri.net (various private networks), Brex.net (**DK - D a r k K i n g d o m**), Xiao.net (China), to name a few. These also folded over time, as everything tended towards individualization. Each individual became his or her own civilization, creating his own internet, his own history, his own tradition. Fragmentation and individualization accelerated at a frantic pace.

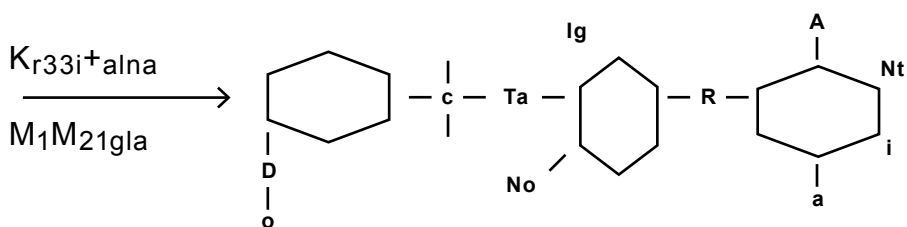
¹² The oldest remains of the fossil age are a pile of coal that sits untouched at the train station in the town of Hrabal in Chile (on the Fujento-Hrabal-Salgado de Romanella line). The coal is 162 years old. It was granted special protected status as a monument in 2032.

¹³ In 2038 Uwe Langstromer had his hips and legs surgically removed and replaced with special artificial legs resembling those of a shrimp (the order of decapods). Shrimp are known to accelerate their bodies to a speed of 6.4 km/h in just a few milliseconds. Uwe Langstromer thereby made history as the fastest person in the world when his body reached the speed of 11,520 km/h in one second. Of course what the scientists said would happen happened—the burst of speed tore his body in two and he died at the very moment he set the aforementioned record.

about using antisuicide architecture.¹⁴ #Andrej Škufca#: That's nothing. New York is half underwater. Stockholm too. The sea will slowly flood all the cities. The water apocalypse is coming.¹⁵ #Primož Krašovec#: You sound like someone who adheres to the doctrine of French philosopher Gilles Deblues.¹⁶

2 February 2049

The fog refuses to dissipate. I hide away in my apartment in the hills above Ljubljana, in the morning I step into the deep snow and trudge my way to the woodshed. I chop some kindling and light the stove. I have enough tobacco, the logs sizzle pleasantly. I'm reading Nicholas of Cusa. I take notes from his voyage to Byzantium while messaging Marko Bauer. He says Nicholas' philosophy reminds him of chemical mysticism and that his *docta ignorantia* seems like a crystalline fog.



¹⁴ The idea behind antisuicide architecture is as follows: build skyscrapers so high that a body thrown from them would fall into the void for several years, which would certainly scare the would-be-suicides and dissuade them from such a course of action.

¹⁵ Venice was the first city hit by the water apocalypse. On 22 April 2024 a giant cruise ship from Indonesia entered the harbor and disembarked 20,000 tourists. St. Mark's Square and other parts (San Polo, Santa Croce, Castello, Dorseduro and Cannaregio) sank nearly half a meter below the surface in a single day. The city was quickly evacuated, but disaster could not be averted. That day Venice began sinking at the unthinkable rapid rate of 10 cm a day, and in 14 days the city was 1.5 meters under water. The sea not only flooded Venice, but also the neighboring towns (Treviso, Padova, San Dona di Piave). By 2033 the seas had completely flooded New York, Stockholm, London, Barcelona, Trieste, Koper, Poreč and most coastal cities in Dalmatia. The year 2033 was formally designated as the start of the Hydrocene.

¹⁶ The founder of *weird shit* in philosophy. His widely known findings include, for example, proof of the individuality of dead material: 1. All depth must become surface. 2. Infinitely tiny particles become medium-sized objects (chairs, tables, tools). 3. Molecules, for example. 4. Cuts or scratches on molecules attest to their individuality. 5. Molecules can also rust, that is, they have their own past. 6. Molecules have the properties of objects, perhaps of living creatures. 7. Therefore they are individuals.

It's snowing outside. Once I'm done reading I head down the hill into Kamnik and from there I take the train¹⁷ to Ljubljana. Thinking about the SSC.¹⁸

During the ride I message Aljaž Zupančič. He's already lived in New Berlin, New London and New Shanghai. He has the following to say: "Fog. Fog is what cities mean to me. You get off the train and walk out of the station and you are hit with the full blast. The fog in the air, exhaust fumes from traffic and steam from buildings. But the fog above the tall buildings is not radioactive. Just thick like cardboard. On the other hand there's fog from subterranean tunnels, and it's sticky from the polypeptanyl."

Two in the morning. We find ourselves at a poetry reading, and there's a huge crowd of rowdy people.¹⁹ Drunk students offering critiques and clapping. A girl on the stage recites a poem.

I'm not a fan of the adventures of Batmale or the Alpine travelogue philosopher.

**No! I'd rather wonder at the dawn
of the bionic man,
as he and his artificial limb reach
the 400 metres final.**

**Maybe someone'll think
someone's got a craving for something
that doesn't belong to him,
but it isn't like that.**

**When we were kids
we would play in the forest
with a crossbow,
and even though mom would warn us: "don't do anything stupid!"**

it didn't sink in.

**One day we hit a living being.
Unusual voices were heard
we ran through the forest, through bushes and thorns**

¹⁷ The Paneuropean Express was built in 2026 with European funding. Some call it the "carbon express". Its basis is carbon pudding—a malleable mass with low weight that alters hardness once it comes in contact with a larger mass (the locomotive and cars). Because of its ideal weight and flexibility this type of railroad was very easy to construct. But now it's old and slow. The trip by rail from Ljubljana takes 31 minutes to Vienna, 44 minutes to Berlin, 58 minutes to London and 14 minutes to Maribor.

¹⁸ SSC, the Spermatospiritistic Church. This church's doctrine can be summed up in an equation: seed = the spirit (that is, sperm = spiritus). It was founded in 2041 by Juan Guardia Xomos and was based in Spain. Its basic economic activity was the long-distance impregnation of women (even across continents).

¹⁹ They seem to be members of the BSP (Black Sun Party). They believe the sun is black.

all of us scared of what would happen.
 Suddenly we were in a clearing, full of light.
 We saw our neighbour at the edge of the meadow.
 He stood by the cow and patted her head,
 as, arrow in stomach, she let out a sad moo.

The wound got infected
 and despite our pleas the veterinarian stood firm.
 They took her into the valley.

Sometimes when I stand on the platform
 and observe the city, enveloped in a white envelope,
 I think to myself we're all doomed:
 to eight hours,
 to technics,
 to the crystals of the thick Ljubljana fog.

We all agree the poem is a shitty copy of bacterial poetry²⁰ and leave the cafe.

On the boat. When we get to Trnovo we shut off the motor and quietly row into the landing at Špica. We open the sack with the briquettes and quietly empty it into the river. We light our lanterns and wait. Ten minutes, the silence is absolute. The fog is thick and we can't see more than five meters in front of us. The only sounds are splashing and river birds taking off.

We have to remain perfectly silent. First come the babies. They feel out the food with their tentacles. Ten minutes pass and we breathe a sigh of relief when they're joined by their mother. Visibility is very poor, but we get enough footage to convince ourselves the creature is healthy and unharmed.

²⁰ Bacterial poetry was discovered by accident. In 2031 certain strains of the *Escherichia cristalensis* (KNCC12726324-BNP-R300, FGPTO791736453-COR-121 and ZEM958473643-BE-140) bacteria were observed to create special crystalline forms that could be translated to human language using a xenolinguistic program. (Strictly speaking, bacterial literature is not literature but *crystaloture*.) Monstrously beautiful poetry was discovered. Its beauty drove some scientists (those with weak immune systems) to internal bleeding and death. In 2035 bacteria were awarded the Nobel Prize for literature for the first time. There are two theories as to why bacterial poetry is so profound. The first claims that it has to do with the infinite number of bacterial holocausts caused by antibiotics. The second states that highly developed bacterial groups are the logical continuation of history. The latter is pretty convincing. In 2022 they began using 127 amino acids in the genetic engineering of enzymes (previously only 20 were available). Humans thus began using bacteria for a number of tasks: 1. mining precious metals (a single bacteria can dig up approximately 0.000001 grams of gold), 2. cleaning the air, 3. converting carbon dioxide from the air (eliminating hunger). With time bacteria acquired a sort of reflexive consciousness. They began to be aware of their own existence, and they even developed their own language. For example, their language was found to contain hitherto unknown types of future tenses. These tense modes refer to future bacterial generations. Bacteria reproduce at an exponential rate, which is why they "use" 11 types of grammatical future when "forecasting" future generations. Future tenses III, IV and V refer to the cytoplasmic membrane, future tenses VI and VII refer to the nucleoid, future tenses VIII and IX refer to the endoplasmic reticulum, future tenses X and XI refer to the golgi apparatus and photosynthetic pigment. The rate (of reproduction) of bacteria thus led to a new understanding of (human) grammar.

16 January 2049

The goods in the boutiques are superfluous. That's why we'll break into a store every now and then and stock up on potato chips, coats and other articles of clothing. The stores are poorly guarded. The farms in the country, the forests and the warehouses of artificial food are better protected. Police units regularly patrol those.

When they run an ID check you just need to be quiet and show your ID card. They take down your info and leave you alone. Nobody wants trouble. The politicians can sleep peacefully, they don't have to worry about burning cars. Riots and violence are but an expense.

You can also see it on the streets during the day. The whores are quick to lose their shit. Doesn't matter who you are, they'll break your jaw. They're dangerous, they're armed with switchblades. And they're also on those K-drugs that have flooded the city. They're particularly aggressive when they're Oding; they'll attack a bum who's fallen asleep in a dark underpass. They'll strip him down and tear at his face until he's bleeding. Sometimes they blind him. Usually they don't know what they're doing. Memory loss is a fairly common thing with them.

17 January 2049

Aleš Mendžavec informs me of an unusual find. They found some old manuscripts on the subject of Louis Althusser in a passage under the student dorms. For now he's got them in his safe. I had to promise him the authorities wouldn't find out. He asked me if I knew how to shut off the security systems so he could move the texts to the roof of an abandoned building in Bežigrad, where they'd be safe. I ask him to go over his plan.

Here's the plan. First we have to shut off the secured perimeter or find another way to fool the ion sensors. (Which we don't know how to do.) Then we have to open one of the basement windows, crawl into the basement, and get the containers with the writings inside. (Which is impossible.)

I suggest we hand over the writings to the accelerationists, they'll take the key information and convert it into their own format, then we go on the roof and burn the papers and calmly watch as the smoke dissipates throughout the urban matter.

"How can you suggest something like that?" he asks. "Even Prešeren will be lost in the static of artificial intelligence. He'll be reduced to a file, an archived bone kept in a state safe," I respond. He hangs up. I call him back. "The same thing's going to happen with the texts on Empirioheideggerism, Pharmakomarxism, Anarcho-protestantism, Afroconfucianism and Voodoohegelianism."

section I see that Joseph Roth (aka Lea(h) Uxhül von Oxxen II) died. Ovarian cancer. He was 51.²⁷

20 January 2049

That morning something changes. The feeling isn't the same anymore. We've been walking for three hours without a break and we still haven't come across water. Just swamp and mud everywhere we look. It's clear we're going in circles. We stop in a half-collapsed factory for our break. Well we think it's a factory. Then Primož Krašovec says, "That's dumb. We're in the middle of a winter museum. Look around. It's artificial snow."

We find an old broken refrigerator and open it. There's some cans of expired food. Nothing of use. We put down the expulsion rifles we're carrying to shoot embryos. "It's not off to a good start," someone says.

Some of them make it back. They found the remains of a decaying seagull carcass on the abandoned banks of the swamp, our cook can use it to make a ragu. Lunch is off.

The next group sets out into the snowy swamp in search of water, while the rest of us move into an adjacent concrete building. There are no windows and we sit on the crumbling, lime-covered stairs. We look out at the falling snow. A cold dampness strikes out at our bodies from the walls.

There's a large puddle in the middle of a huge room. It's very deep and the water in it is contaminated, but reeds nonetheless grow, unfurling their blades in the wind like some sort of tentacles. Only now do we notice that the puddle is so deep that it has covered the train tracks. As we leave the room we notice a graffiti in the underpass. Someone wrote **SOMEBODY KILL ME, PLEASE. I'M SICK OF MY EXISTENCE. CALL 041 963 177.**²⁸

21 January 2049

Nobody's answering. I called Primož Krašovec. He's not picking up. I try to call Marko Bauer and they tell me the last time they saw him was

²⁷ Lea(h) Uxhüll von Oxxen II was the first man in history to get his period. The year was 2033, specifically 13 April, at 11:35 AM. In 2029 they implanted a uterus, Fallopian tubes and ovaries. But the road to his monthly bleeding was still a long one. It took three years for his ovaries to produce a dominant ovum and for ovulation to occur in his reproductive system. Then complications arose in evacuating the ovum. Due to low levels of luteinizing hormone (Lh) it refused to mature and leave the ovary. This was ultimately achieved with hormone therapy. Joseph Roth had this to say on the occasion: "I'm happy it worked. I'd like to thank all my friends, my dad and mom and everybody who supported me and believed in me. Winning OVULBOYS! [a reality show] really means a lot to me."

²⁸ Suicide was prohibited by law in Slovenia in 2039 (lex suicidaria), which led to the appearance of companies on the black market that carried out contracted "suicides" disguised as murders.

in the boat repair shop near Barje. Andrej Tomažin moved to Alt-Grosuplje. He makes a living selling ugly sentences.²⁹ It's becoming increasingly clear to me that this is a diary of the last days. Tjaša Pogačar moved to the southern Alps, and she makes the kind of objects that are compatible with extra-terrestrial intelligence and cognition.³⁰ Mirko Lampreht moved into the woods. He lives in a cave and carves tools out of wood.³¹ Andrej Škufca still heads up the Institute for Xenomorphistics and Biothreats.³² Jan Kostanjevec is currently working at a light conservatory in the Pannonian basin.³³ Miroslav Griško traveled to Scandinavia.³⁴ Ela Praznik is still studying octopuses.³⁵ There is no data on the others.³⁶

²⁹ He made millions with the lines "I cut the girl up and cook her". Owing to its cringe and ugliness, the sentence became so popular that they even used it as the name of a famous restaurant in New York. There diners can order baked arm of young girl, child ribs, placenta lasagna and fetus meat (all lab-made replicas). The drink menu contains different kinds of urine (animal urine too). Yuppies and other people with serious issues frequent the locale.

³⁰ Her objects more closely resemble weather conditions or rare geological occurrences than medium-sized objects: "rocky storm", "metallic flood", "synthetic rain", "Pleistocene heat wave", "concrete fog", "wildfire ravaging the bottom of the ocean", "fossilized water" etc. In her view this type of art represents the final shift away from OOO (object-oriented-ontology) towards AOO (alien-oriented-ontology).

³¹ Last I heard he made a wooden pot that can be used to boil water without burning the bottom. This takes a great deal of patience and nerves of steel.

³² The Institute was founded using money from predicting the fall of real estate values. In 2029 the values of cryptorealestate shot up, while those of real real estate tanked. The 2030 prices of certain buildings are a telling example of the fall in value: Buckingham Palace (98 pounds, purchased by Susan Lipton, a single mom working as a cleaning lady at a school in London), the White House (123 American dollars, purchased by John Steel, a down-and-out bum and drunk), The Sydney Opera (77 Australian dollars, purchased by a group of homeless people of aboriginal stock, upon purchase they intentionally burned it down), the Eiffel Tower (125 Euros, mistakenly purchased by a bunch of college students while surfing the web drunk, currently unoccupied), Cankarjev Dom (23 euros, buyer's identity unknown, uninhabited), Faculty of Arts in Ljubljana (18 Euros, still on the market, reports of paranormal activity).

³³ Work takes place in light "warehouses". Scientists have managed to use artificial lenses and diffractive bulbs to box different types of light that, due to climate change, no longer exist: Antarctic light, the light above Siberia, the Northern Lights etc. August fell out of the calendar system, so they've also packaged and stored "light in August".

³⁴ He got a job at an animal nursery, where he helps birth white bears.

³⁵ She works with octopus cell genetics in her laboratory. She has managed to figure out that cephalopods are capable of sabotaging DNA transcription: once the copying process is complete (following the polymerization of tRNA) they break into the RNA sequence and remove a particular nucleotide (usually adenosine) and replace it with something else (usually inosine) ... – GCTGCTGGTACGGACT-GAAAGATACTCCTGA-... >>> ...-GCTGCTGGTICGGICTGIIIGITACTCCTGI-... Perhaps this "hacking" property is the key to understanding why octopuses are such special animals.

³⁶ In a different time loop almost all the accelerationists are dead by 2037. Jan Kostanjevec went missing in the autumn of 2030. They found him on the side of a soccer field at an elementary school in Šentvid on 14 December of that year. His face showed signs of force (very strong), which broke his jawbone (at first the forensic analyst thought that Jan Kostanjevec was injured in a car crash during his kidnapping, but he dropped the idea as soon as he saw the x-rays). A year later, on 7 June 2031, Maks Valenčič disappeared without a trace. Aljaž Zupančič vanished in 2033. The same year they found Miroslav Griško behind a fence on a highway off ramp. Ten meters below the body lay his jacket, torn to pieces by lacerations. His breastplate was punctured multiple times and the autopsy confirmed a fractured hyoid bone. Marko Bauer was last seen in the boat repair shop in Barje on 10 April 2036. He was found drowned in the Ljubljana on 13 April. Mirko Lampreht met the same fate. His water-logged corpse was found on the roof of a hotel in Greece by a boiler repair man. Blood tests revealed the presence of strolex and other antidepressants. Andrej Tomažin was shot by the cops in an underpass in Bežigrad in 2035. Two years later, on 15 August, Primož Krašovec was found strangled behind the table in his apartment in Ljubljana.

22 January 2049

In the morning I get a call from Crystal Duck. She tells me they killed you.³⁷ I'm very drowsy and I don't really understand. I feel like Jacob Schnitzler in the last days of his life.³⁸ Crystal Duck is grief-stricken. She can't stop crying. ~~I'm also distraught, but I can't tell her that I feel bad for our expedition, for my companions. I keep quiet about it for a long time, then we say our goodbyes.~~

~~This is no longer a diary of the last days. It's more a text seeking shelter from death, because it actually wants to survive.~~

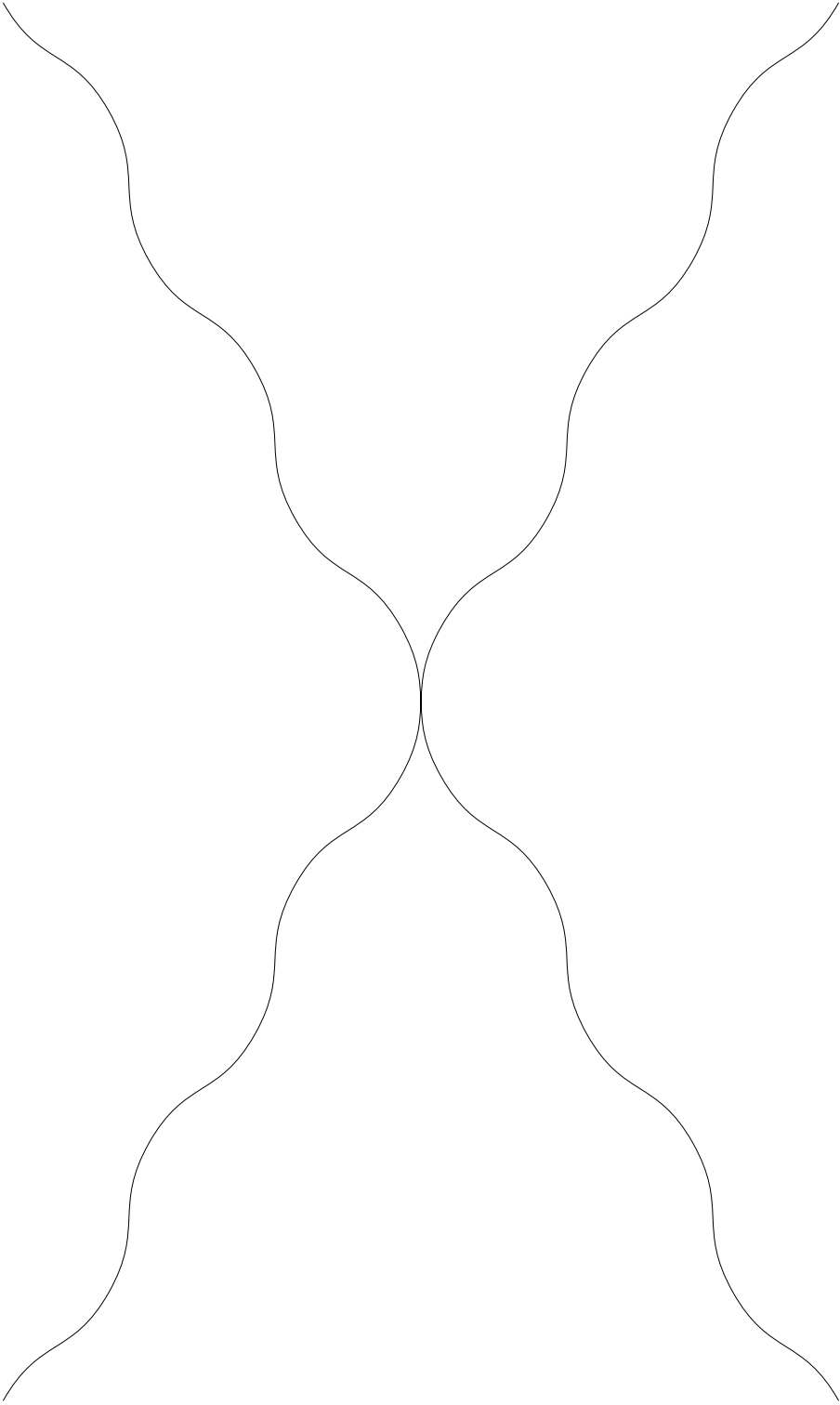
I descend towards the river where the machines are buzzing. Behind them are crumbling buildings. I decisively step into the interior of an unknown space without a roof and I stop. ~~The night is becoming purple again, maybe the hue is more in the direction of blue. I tour the collapsed walls, the damp scratched up surfaces that seem utterly destroyed.~~ Someone lit a fire here. A month ago, maybe two. A handful of calf bones are strewn around the pit. Someone disappeared without a trace, I think to myself, but he also persists without a trace. That's my first thought. *I t ' s n o t o v e r y e t.*

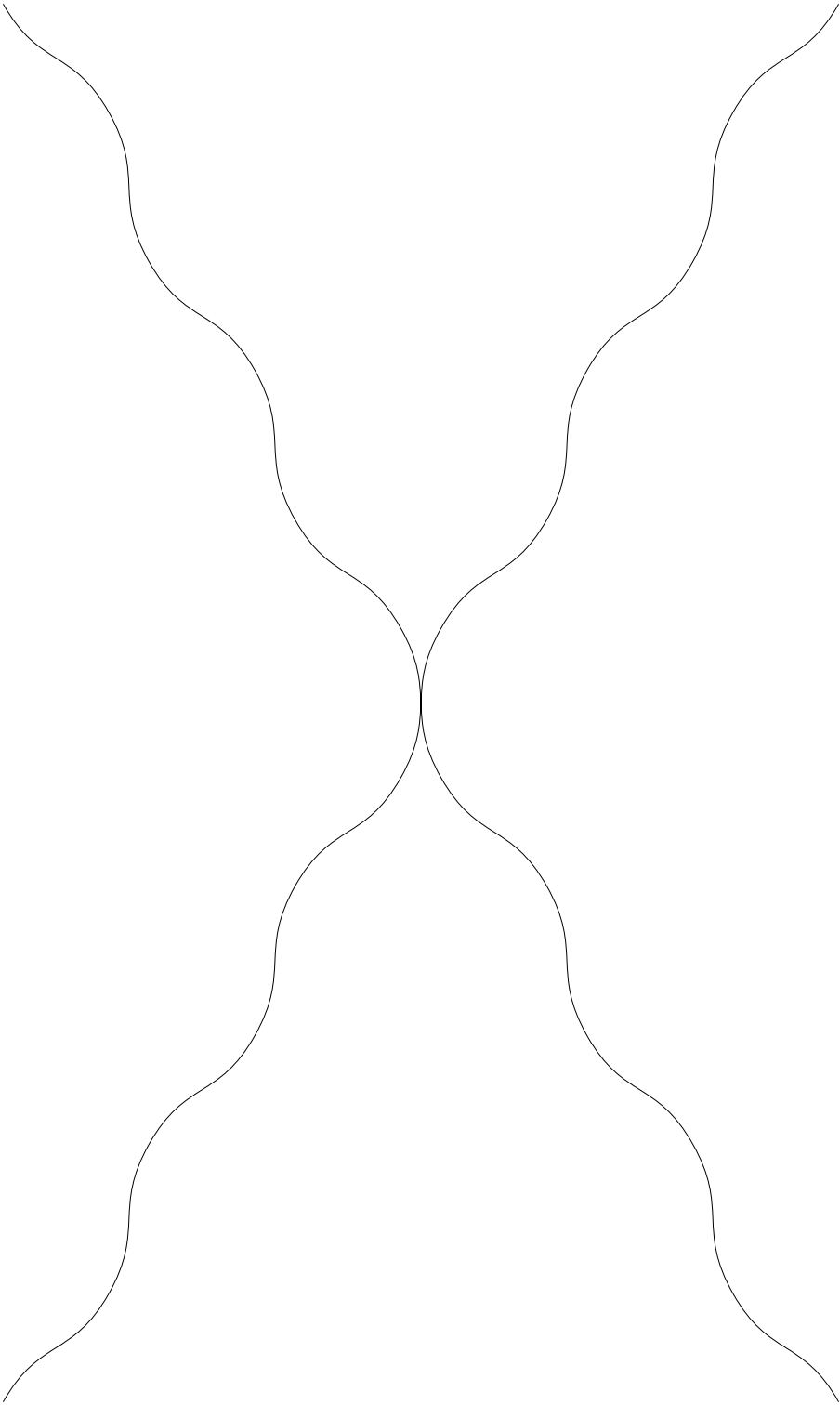
Kazimir Kolar is a writer. In his view literature is connected to both creating new worlds and the mysterious faithfulness to an event. In 2016, his novel *Glas noči* (The Voice of the Night) was published by the Litera publishing house. He lives and works in Zalog near Ljubljana.

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³⁷ Someone knocked on your door in the morning. You just assumed it was one of your friends, so you went and opened it. But there were two state agents and they told you they have an order for your execution. It was issued by the state court. You got dressed and went in the car with them. They drove you out to the edge of town and pulled over ten minutes later. You got out of the car and proceeded to walk for a while. You wondered whether they were going to shoot you or give you an injection. You told them, one more time, that you're a former official attorney. They didn't care. Before you was a quarry. You let them tie your hands and blindfold you. Then they read the order again. They gave you your last cigarette to smoke. In the end they asked if you have any last words for your parents or friends. You said no. You weren't afraid but all of a sudden you began to shake. It was drizzling, and it was getting cold. The agents finished you off with two shots from a pistol. Someone hid at the edge of the forest and saw it all. He thought: they killed you like a dog.

³⁸ Jacob Schnitzler was the first android to stand up to the system by refusing to become a scientist. Despite his IQ (144), in 2028 he moved to Sauler Berg in Southern Carinthia. He worked as a lumberjack. He chopped the branches off fallen trees and put them in piles. He also used logging machinery to prepare logs for transport to the valley. In the winter he maintained and operated the lifts at a nearby ski center. Tourists who met him said he acted like a human. He was calm, quiet and spoke few words. He lived in a small log cabin at an altitude of 1677 meters above sea level. It was here that he was found hanged. As they took him down from the noose, "Tanci! Tanci! Seks na balanci!"—the lewd, nonsensical refrain of a Slovene polka-style pop song about having sex on a bicycle—could be heard from a small transistor radio.





MOVEMENT
IN THE DEAD
LANDS

A development that repeats, as it were, stages that have already been passed, but repeats them in a different way, on a higher basis (“the negation of the negation”), a development, so to speak, that proceeds in spirals, not in a straight line; a development by leaps, catastrophes, and revolutions; “breaks in continuity”; the transformation of quantity into quality; inner impulses towards development, imparted by the contradiction and conflict of the various forces and tendencies acting on a given body, or within a given phenomenon, or within a given society; the interdependence and the closest and indissoluble connection between all aspects of any phenomenon (history constantly revealing ever new aspects), a connection that provides a uniform, and universal process of motion, one that follows definite laws—these are some of the features of dialectics as a doctrine of development that is richer than the conventional one.¹

¹ LENIN, Vladimir, “Karl Marx: A Brief Biographical Sketch With an Exposition of Marxism”, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1914/granat/ch02.htm>.

I. THEN {POSITIVE CATASTROPHE}

Somewhere near the beginning of *Predictions of Fire*, Michael Benson's abstract "documentary" about the history and thematic palette of NSK, the spectator is invited to watch a pair of photograph editors dismantling a large rendering of the face of Stalin. As each frame is carefully removed, what is revealed behind the image is not the hollowness of the frame, but the cosmos itself, with the great illuminated galactic bands spiraling out into the black void. Against this image a voice-over intones the importance of *myth* and illusion in steering the locomotive of history:

Historiographers are gradually coming to the realization that history itself is in fact a series of consensual myths. It's not necessarily a nation's past that shapes its mythology, but mythology that shapes its past. Within this recurring pattern, the history of an entire people is actually no more than a collective projection—an illusion shared by millions.²

What Benson's documentary brings to the fore, though it remains largely unstated, is the importance of *catastrophe* to the artistic output of NSK. Their method has been a kind of archaeological excavation of the intersection between the great political catastrophes of the twentieth century and the avant-garde currents that moved in lockstep with these developments. It is this latter prong that reveals the deeper catastrophe that moves beneath the titanic gears of the political: the visions of the future presented by the avant-garde provided a palpable form for the sense that modernity *itself* was catastrophic, ceaselessly putting into motion things birthed from the ruination of the past. It was at the dawn of the modern epoch that Joseph de Maistre wrote of a "profound event in the divine order, toward which we are marching with an accelerated speed that must strike all observers. Terrible oracles already announce that the *time has come*."³

Maistre was speaking in the context of the French Revolution, a moment that marked the intense rupture in the ordering of heaven and earth. His words echo, curiously enough for a man of his Catholic standing, those of Martin Luther, who looked out across the turbulence of the Reformation and saw time itself in the movement of a great speed-up, careening along by divine will into the promise of Apocalypse.⁴ Between Luther and Maistre stood Robespierre, who too felt a sudden change in

² BENSON, Michael, *Predictions of Fire*, Kinetkon Pictures, 1996, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j_Wfz_1Imjc.

³ Quoted in GUÉNON, René, *Studies in Freemasonry and the Compagnonnage*, Hillsdale: Sophia Perennis, 2004, p. 129 (emphasis in original).

⁴ "[F]or the sake of the chosen, God would shorten the final days, 'toward which the world was speeding, since almost all of the new century had been pressed into the space of one decade'". (KOSELLECK, Reinhart, *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2004, p. 12)

the nature of time, one that would be aided by human hand to realize not the religious promise of Parousia, but its reflection in secularized form: the earthly Golden Age.⁵

It is in this unruly ferment of political change, compounded by sweeping cultural, technological, and economic transformations, that the idea of “progress” as a process capable of constituting history first emerged—and as Jean Starobinski had noted, “the word *civilization* [...] entered the history of ideas at the same time as the modern sense of *progress*”.⁶ But civilization and progress, the leitmotifs of the Enlightenment epoch, were joined by the introduction of another concept, one whose arrival has been sketched tirelessly by Reinhart Koselleck: that of *crisis*.⁷ In this triad of concepts one finds the defining characteristics of modernity: unrelenting change, mad creation and feverish destruction, all unified and bound together in an inseparable way. Progress and crisis are but two faces of the same thing, and it is for this reason that the dark clouds of catastrophe—be it appended in positive or negative forms—hang low over whatever landscape where development might deposit itself.

Such a unity might best be grasped by taking the observation of Jules Michelet, resurrected by Benjamin in *The Arcades Project*, and Adorno’s sharp counterpoint to it, holding them together not as antithetical stances but in a fractious dialectic. The first: “Each epoch dreams of the one that follows”; and the second: “The recent past always presents itself as though annihilated by catastrophes.”⁸ The dreaming gives way to catastrophe, and in the catastrophe lay the stuff of the dreams—but these dreams are not those of idle contemplation. These are dreams of action and construction, to move the hand of history surely as one is moved by it.

There’s a temptation here to read all this in a linear manner, as if time’s jet-stream exploded from the old and tired cycles and ran headlong into the future. But dreams, or *myths*, don’t work this way. Instead, they flow out across time, even reaching into the depths of the past though they remain concentrated on some age to come. Hence the essential point in Benson’s quote: the semantics of history, as the expression of an untamable catastrophe, bleed through into the consciousness of myth, and are scrambled along the axis of a temporal order that is no longer made intelligible. From this perspective, the clearest articulation of this dynamic comes from Marx’s *18th Brumaire*, where the bour-

⁵ “The time has come to call upon each to realize his own destiny. The progress of human Reason laid the basis for this great Revolution, and you shall now assume the particular duty of hastening its pace”. (Ibid)

⁶ STAROBINSKI, Jean, *Blessings in Disguise, or, the Morality of Evil*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993, p. 4.

⁷ Koselleck’s works on the intersection of crisis, the history of philosophy and political thought, and the semantics of historical time are the aforementioned *Futures Past and Critique and Crisis: Enlightenment and the Pathogenesis of Modern Society* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1998).

⁸ BENJAMIN, Walter, *The Arcades Project*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999, pp. 4, 397.

geois revolutionaries—whose actions aided and abetted the emergence of modernity, here realized not only as a civilization organized through the circuits of the abstract subject, capital, but as the only ground from which “history” can be articulated—had to don character masks and become “resurrected Romans” in order to constitute themselves.⁹ There’s a direct passage from these pages of Marx to Ernst Bloch’s appraisal of the revolutionary possibilities of the “not-yet-conscious”, and from Bloch to Benjamin’s images and dreamt-of epochs: the curving lines of catastrophe and anticipation along the wide arcs of a spiral.

INTERREGNUM

To the hardened materialist, this might sound at first blush to be a retreat into the comfort of romantic idealism: the Idea, be it of progress, the self or the nation, rippling across the plateaus of time in its rush towards a final crystallization. Yet it’s in the *18th Brumaire* and its invocation of character masks that we find the germ of Marx’s later analysis of fetishism and ideology. In the opening chapter of the first volume of Marx’s *Capital*, we find the argument that the commodity appears before us as a “mysterious thing”, as an object or artifact that, despite having emerged from the human brain and laboring processes, is suddenly “endowed with a life [of] its own”.¹⁰ But this isn’t so simple as to be a case of mistaken identity: on the one hand, this *fetishism* fosters an illusion whose seductions blind people from perceiving the real operations that move beneath them, but on the other, the capitalist system operates as if this illusion were true—or, more properly, *operative*. Capitalism, in the words of Sohn-Rethel, is the work of a “real abstraction”, an abstraction that moves and shapes material things.¹¹

Marx’s answer to the claims that this itself might be a recourse to idealism: “This Fetishism of commodities has its origins /.../ in the peculiar social character of the labor that produces them.”¹² Or, in other words: the Idea is rooted in the material, as the conceptual reflection of these real social relations. It would be Althusser who takes this a step further by turning back to the work of the Jansenist theologian Blaise Pascal, in whose *Pensées* we find a most curious formula for the voluntary induction of belief. For Pascal, one must act *before* one believes: the would-be Catholic convert finds themselves in a state of belief by *giving themselves over* and working through the elaborate system of

⁹ For an excellent discussion of the revolutionaries’ temporal character masks, see Harold Rosenberg’s “The Resurrected Romans” in his *The Tradition of the New* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982, pp. 154–177).

¹⁰ MARX, Karl, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Volume I*, New York: Vintage Books, 1977, p. 165.

¹¹ For a discussion about the relationship between “real abstraction” and ideology, see Alberto Toscano’s “The Open Secret of Real Abstraction” in *Rethinking Marxism* (Vol. 20, No. 2, April 2008, pp. 273–287).

¹² MARX, *Capital*, p. 165.

rituals that constitute the Mass: genuflection, the repetition of prayer, the Eucharistic rites. “Kneel down, move your lips in prayer and you will believe.”¹³ The *structure* is organized by *ritual*, and the active participation in the ritual produces *habit*. With habit, Althusser argues, the Idea disappears, the terms “*subject, consciousness, belief, actions*” are foregrounded, and “*practices, rituals [and] ideological apparatus*” are introduced.¹⁴

The other great reader of both Marx and Pascal was also the great prophet of the *generative myth*: Georges Sorel. In many respects, his approach directly presages Bloch’s own by breaking this operation out of its ideological shell and finds it the place where anticipation leads to practice. It takes us out from the world of *Capital* and back to that of the *18th Brumaire*. While Sorel’s critics have charged his own work as having been little more than a headlong flight into romanticism—even priming history for the emergence of fascism—a close reading of his work finds little to support these charges. There, the cause of the myth, particularly the myth of the proletarian revolution and the general strike, was found in the very materiality of the world, with effects that are ultimately material—a dynamic leading, in Sorel’s opinion, to the reinvigoration of a modernity that had grown stagnant and weak. It becomes a question of *time*. “[W]e are unable to act without leaving the present,” he notes, but then adds that when it comes to the myth, it is a matter of “framing /.../ the future in some indeterminate time”.¹⁵ Through its effects, the myth carries out an *invocation* of a future.

While Sorel would have been horrified at the implications, having always been hostile to what he considered to be an undue Hegelian influence on Marxist thought, I cannot help but see in this split—the grounding of the myth in the structures of the present, yet angled towards an undetermined future—a reflection of Marx’s own depiction of a Janus-faced capitalism, one that eternalizes the present, yet fosters within itself, *against itself*, the makings of a new world. As Marx said in 1856: “In our days, everything seems pregnant with its contrary.”¹⁶

¹³ ALTHUSSER, Louis, *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971, p. 169.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 170.

¹⁵ SOREL, Georges, *Reflections on Violence*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004, p. 115. I mentioned earlier that this anticipatory dimension of the myth brings us close to the position staked out by Bloch. The difference between Bloch and Sorel in this matter would be that while Bloch aligns the myth with the image of utopia, Sorel continues with Marx’s attack on utopianism (though he notes that there are “very few myths which are perfectly free from any utopian element” and that the “revolutionary myths” are “almost pure” [my emphasis]). This leads aside the question of the divergence between Bloch’s utopianism and the one critiqued by Marx—and it is in this space that Benjamin’s and Adorno’s dance of dreams and catastrophes unfolds.

For an interesting discussion of Bloch and myth, see Roland Boer’s *In the Vale of Tears: On Marxism and Theology, Volume V* (Boston: Brill, 2014). Sorel’s comments on utopia can be found in *Reflections on Violence*, pp. 28–31, 74.

¹⁶ MARX, Karl, “Speech at the Anniversary of the *People’s Paper*”, 14/04/1856, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1856/04/14.htm>.

II. NOW {NEGATIVE CATASTROPHE}

In *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, Slavoj Žižek suggests that Marx's formula for the "classic concept of ideology"—"they do not know it, but they are doing it"—can no longer be found to be applicable in the present moment.¹⁷ Instead, we're faced with a situation where "they know very well what they are doing, but still, they are doing it". What this means is that although at some level there is no longer any active belief in the illusions of the system, it persists, as people continue to act as though they believe. The old subject of ideology is supplanted by the "cynical subject", one who is "quite aware of the distance between the ideological mask and social reality, but /.../ none the less still insists upon the mask" (the question of whether or not this insistence is itself the determination, in the final moments, of structural habit can be left aside).¹⁸

The cynical subject arises from the double pincer of two intertwined imperatives: "There is no alternative" and "Do what makes you feel good". The first of these, spoken by Margaret Thatcher but what in reality is the primary dictum of postmodern capitalism, conceals a temporal movement: there is no alternative because no other future is deemed possible. All possibilities other than the *now* have been blotted out, and history is eclipsed by an all-encompassing non-historical space. The second imperative, which elevates individual desire to the level of the highest good, is the urge to embrace this weightlessness, because it is in it that *true* freedom can ever be truly realized. If the former imperative negates, the latter affirms, and the need for an alternative order is effectively removed.

What's remarkable about this dual formulation is that it doesn't arrive at a moment when capitalism has reached a position of maximum strength, with a paralleled increase in the maximum freedom for all individuals. It arrives, by contrast, right when the system has entered into a retrograde state. Pivoting towards Marxian economics: the rate of profit, that fundamental fault line of capitalism, has fallen, and alongside it we have witnessed the decline of world trade and rates of productivity. Wages have been stagnant for decades, and the gaps in income level between classes have grown into a vast chasm. There's a word, so unpopular now, for this situation which captures the state of affairs more accurately than "postmodernism" ever could: *decadence*.

Decadence is at once a concrete socio-techno-economic stagnation and a series of cultural manifestations of this turn, characterized in various times and places as either a tendency towards a non-redemptive apocalypse (such as *movement* towards the still, motionless cosmos of universal heat death) or a motionless, unmoving present (such as the hyperreality of Baudrillard, where the drift of entropy cannot be said to apply). It is the ideal playground for the cynical subject, even if the latter

¹⁷ ŽIŽEK, Slavoj, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, New York: Verso, 1989, pp. 24–27.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

does not openly register the hollowing out of real possibility, for at this point there is little to actively believe in. The force of myth is diminished: “[C]ynicism itself abolishes the utility of myth.”¹⁹

Yet for Sorel, this was precisely where the myth—as fuel for the engine of proletarian struggle—needed to assert itself. His time, too, was lorded over by decadence, which elsewhere I’ve identified as being the “Long Depression” that swept the world from the 1870s to 1890s.²⁰ Swapping Hegel for Vico, he seized the latter’s vision of history—history not as a cycle, but a spiral characterized by both a forward movement and a pattern of correspondences between distinct phases, the last of which bears witness to decline and collapse. But then, in that moment of collapse, the *recorso* or return! The third phase gives way to the new instantiation of the first, and a process of renewal, capable of actualizing the promises that have been deferred by the decline, comes into existence. Sorel, writing in a period of decadence, saw in the myth of the general strike and the struggle that grounds it the means to a historical renewal.²¹ What once was inert begins to move once again.

III. TOMORROW {COMPLEX CATASTROPHE}

These twilight hours of postmodern decadence are haunted by a sense of *aesthetic desperation*, a sort of existence in limbo where, shrouded in darkness, one grasps blindly for a source of light.²² This search signals the feeling of a particular alignment, an oblique unity between aesthetics (however abstract this notion might be here) and a sense of futurity. While an alignment of this sort has had a long and troubled history, it has also been long established in the annals of Marxist thought. In *Socialism and Philosophy*, the Italian philosopher Antonio Labriola for

¹⁹ GARTON, Vince, “The limit of modernity at the horizon of myth”, in: *Cyclonograph II*, 23/07/2018, <https://vincentgarton.com/2018/07/23/the-limit-of-modernity-at-the-horizon-of-myth/>.

²⁰ See my “Decadence and (Po)Mo” in *Reciprocal Contradiction* (11/11/2019, <https://reciprocalcontradiction.home.blog/2019/11/11/decadence-pomo/>).

²¹ There are limits to this reading of Sorel. At the core of his conflicts with the prominent Marxist currents of his day, formalized in the Second International, was the prevalent reading of historical development in a deterministic manner, which he saw emerged from an overreliance on Hegelian thought. Models that firmly structure history are discarded by Sorel, and while the imprint of Vico’s quasi-cycle is clear on his reading of decadence and proletarian struggle, it would be incorrect to assume in this a universal scheme of development—and indeed, at various points he took to task overly metaphysical aspects in Vico’s analysis.

To remedy some of these ambiguities, I prefer to read phases like “decadence” as a reflection of objective economic tendencies, namely the Marxist formulation of the rises and falls of the rate of profit. There is little contradiction between working from a non-deterministic perspective and analyzing long-term tendencies and trends. See my “Spatialization of Time/Temporalization of Space” in *Reciprocal Contradiction* (08/11/2019, <https://reciprocalcontradiction.home.blog/2019/11/08/spatialization-of-time-temporalization-of-space/>).

²² I owe this term, “aesthetic desperation”, to Cockydoody. Follow him at twitter.com/cockydoody.

example described how in “society of the future /.../ in which we live with our hopes” the “number of men who will be able to discourse with that divine joy in research and that heroic courage of truth” will “grow out of all proportion”, while the “means of culture” will be opened to all.²³ Meanwhile, Henri Lefebvre, in his *Introduction to Modernity*, wrote of art as “always the highest form of creative work”, portending a “higher physical fulfillment” and “reintegration of art into life” that would allow the “man of the future” to “enjoy the earth like a work of art”.²⁴

With this search, much like with the myth (which we might say is fundamentally connected to the aesthetic dimension), there is the danger of lapsing into *aestheticism*. This passive act is itself always a symptom found in periods of decadence, as evidenced by those in the *fin-de-siècle* who were content with the art of the recline as means of escaping the real. Indeed, aesthetic desperation can easily be routed into this cul-de-sac, but at the same time there is little reason to regard it as the only possible outcome. The other potential is aligned with that inverse of decadence that I have labeled the *developmental sublime*, the joyous fear and trembling that emerges in the wake of space’s destabilization by time and the immense expansion of man’s power. It is the thrill of the uncertain chaos called forth by great projects. The developmental sublime, in all of its faces, has been the historical zone where the avant-gardes have inserted themselves, being the people who position themselves with one foot in this world and one in a world to come.

Postmodernism has been notoriously hostile to the notion of the avant-garde, relegating it to the same dustbin with all the other great narratives that typified modernist thought. The Constructivist’s sprawling metal creations are displaced by kitschy, ephemeral objects—or even worse, forms of art that conduct political commentaries on the world they are embedded in, all the while taking care not to transgress its most hallowed rules (which is to say: they celebrate transgression as a spectacular act, but avoid the “pitfall” of dogmatism).²⁵ Anything that carries with it the weight of history, even if that weight is only present in its negation, is banished in favor of the colorful play of differentiating surfaces. Melting forms divested of content, affirmed only insofar as no new content appears.

NSK’s IRWIN, right at the dawn of capitalism’s global triumph, posed a radical counterpoint to this tendency. While their work seemed

²³ LABRIOLA, Antonio, *Socialism and Philosophy*, Chicago: Charles H. Kerr & Company, 1907, p. 7. I first discovered this quote, as well as the Lefebvre quote below, in Ross Wolfe’s “Art into Life” in *The Charnel House* (18/03/2015, <https://thecharnelhouse.org/2015/03/18/art-into-life/>).

²⁴ LEFEBVRE, Henri, *Introduction to Modernity*, New York: Verso, 1995, p. 143.

²⁵ Mark Fisher, wearing his K-Punk mask: “[D]ogmatism is religion in the best sense. It is only through dogmatism—ruthless subordination of your Self to an impersonal system—that his majesty the Ego can be crushed.” (*K-Punk*, 17/02/2005, <http://k-punk.abstractdynamics.org/archives/005025.html>).

to bear the marks of postmodernism in that they pulled together signs that had been scattered across time and space, so closely resembling the tactic of recombination, the signs they intentionally chose were those invested with great historical weight. Symbols of the dark moments of European history (Christian iconography, fascistic ephemera, signifiers of the Soviet rule) were made to return right at the moment when the world was going online, about to be crisscrossed by electronic flows of information and money. Among other things, IRWIN's was an ironical re-assertion of a nationalist past in the moment when nationalism seemed a thing of the past, a return of repressed ideology in the so-called post-ideological moment, the history at the end of history.

One of the most striking elements in IRWIN's arsenal was the name they gave to their practice: *retro-avant-garde*. It's a paradoxical formulation: the avant-garde is by nature oriented towards the future, while "retro" is the signal of one facing the past. It brings to mind what Roland Barthes said in an interview with *Tel Quel* in 1971 (a moment similar to IRWIN's own, being in the middle of the transition from modernism to postmodernism): "I could say that my own historical proposition /.../ is that to be in the rearguard of the avant-garde, to belong to the avant-garde means to know what is dead, to belong to the rearguard means still loving it."²⁶ Or, in other words: to be avant-garde in the current era without means, in a staggering reversal, to love something that has been exhausted. It was for this reason that Antoine Compagnon placed Barthes in the lineage, alongside Maistre, Chateaubriand, and Baudelaire, of the "anti-moderns"—individuals who, realizing that they themselves were modernists, were nonetheless reluctant modernists, perpetually out of joint with their moment.²⁷ Like the symbols churned up by IRWIN, the anti-modern current of modernism cannot be reduced to either the political left or right, with the coordinates of progressivism and reaction becoming scrambled in the face of a history whose movements have yet to submit to any sort of control.

Boris Groys takes us even closer to the heart of the matter by suggesting that revolution, which is intended to herald the new, is always a matter of returning to the point in time prior to decadence and decline.²⁸ The Sorelian resonances are on full display: on the one hand, we have the force of the myth lurking in the background, in the belief that decadence cannot persist, and on the other we have the figure of the *recorso* marking a deep cut in time, shattering the all too traditional ideas of cyclical history and all too modern ideas of linearity. The deeper implication of Groys' insight is that on some level, the modern

²⁶ Quoted in ETTE, Ottmar, *Literature on the Move*, New York: Rodopi, 2004, p. 210.

²⁷ See COMPAGNON, Antoine, *Les Antimodernes: De Joseph de Maistre à Roland Barthes*, Paris: Gallimard, 2005.

²⁸ GROYS, Boris, "Aesthetic Democracy", keynote address to the 1st Former West Congress, 11/05/2009, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YOLEQb643MA&t>.

revolution is always a matter of the modern/anti-modern position, denying the hard determination of one side or the other.

IRWIN, of course, isn't an uncritical celebration of all forms, neither is it the unconditional critique many have made it out to be. There is no guarantee of a strictly revolutionary, in the leftist sense of the word, monopoly on these dynamics. Moving from then to now, we can see the same paradox in play in the now quiet current of Neoreaction, which blends a longing for traditional forms of life and governance (often blaming its despair on the modernizing forces of democracy) with ultramodern technologies and techniques. In some of his earliest writings on the subject, Nick Land described Neoreaction as an "occult pact between the future and the past" against the domination of the present, and elsewhere as the "obscure synthesis" of "the time of escape and the time of return".²⁹ Land would probably regard this suggestion with horror, but perhaps the best way to understand Neoreaction—which, make no mistake, has a clear political agenda—is first and foremost an aesthetic program, born from this same sense of aesthetic desperation. The same can be said of the closely related field of Accelerationism: in its capacity as an *-ism*, we can see it as an iteration of the developmental sublime, as a desire to fold oneself within the fiery turbulence of modernizing processes, to become an automatic bearer who discovers a masochistic revelry in their artificiality. Neoreaction emerges when the actualization of this celestial-mechanical dynamo is denied, and the cross-historical search for a reinvigorating scaffolding goes into motion. This is why Land writes that "Neoreaction is Accelerationism with a flat tire".³⁰

A synthesis of the "time of escape" and "time of return" would also be an accurate description of the experience of looking to the proletarian revolution from the position of postmodern decadence: it is a time of escape, because it is founded on the promise of ending both the present stagnation and the wider historical era that has produced it, and it is a time of return because one must, like Barthes, love what is dead. The communist again aligns with the avant-garde, but does so in a paradoxical manner because they are compelled to return to a previous time, in a reversal of Marx's *18th Brumaire*: the lines between "world-historical necromancy" and the "poetry of the future" blur.³¹ The modernity that incubated the communist project is in the rearview mirror—but in the Now, the ability of inhabiting the ambiguous place of the anti-modern modernists is no longer an option, because the very

²⁹ LAND, Nick, "Time Scales", in: *Xenosystems*, 12/07/2014, <http://www.xenosystems.net/time-scales/>.

³⁰ LAND, Nick, "Re-Accelerationism", in: *Xenosystems*, 10/12/2013, <http://www.xenosystems.net/re-accelerationism/>.

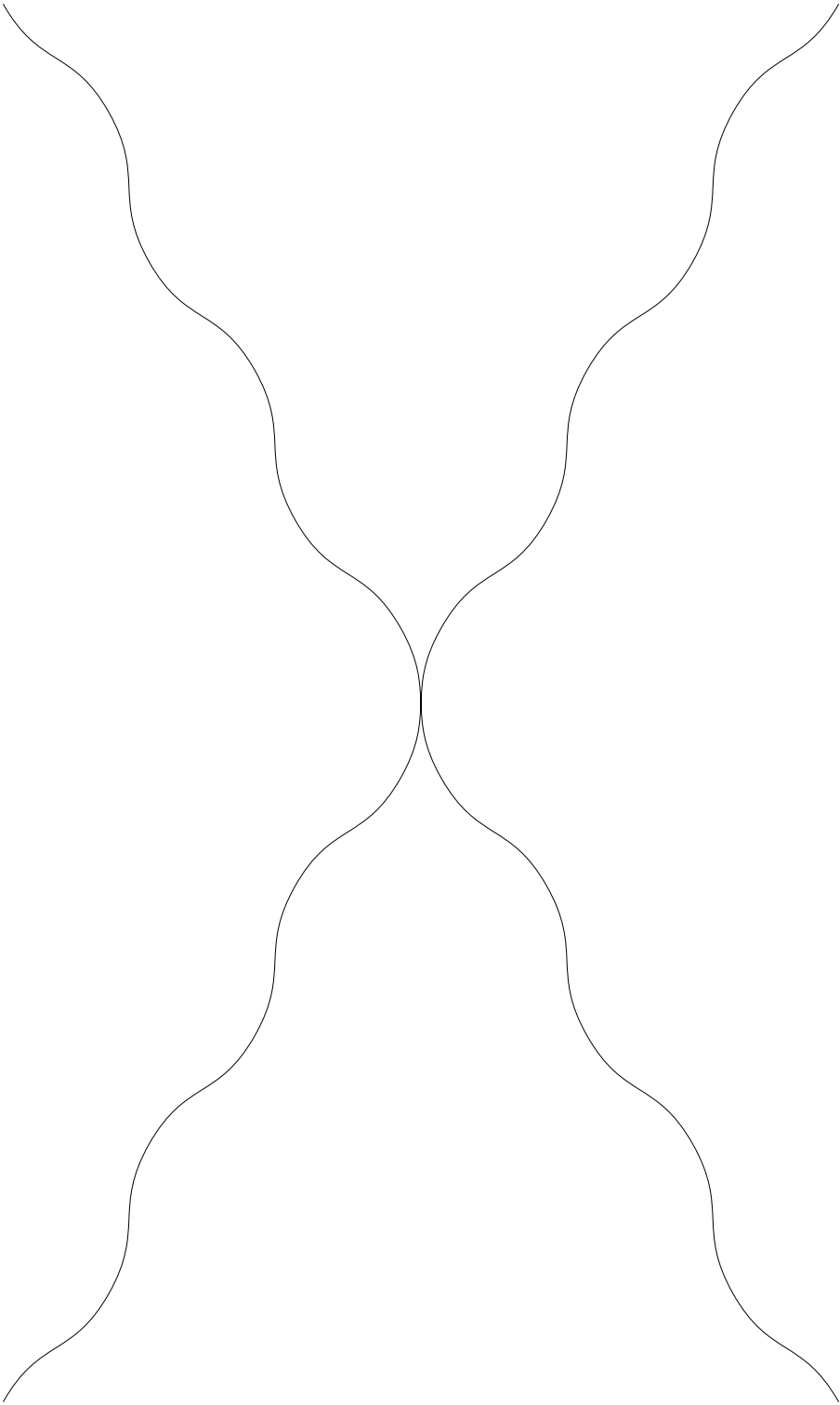
³¹ These phrases appear in the *18th Brumaire* to mark the distinctions between the bourgeois and proletarian revolutions, the former resurrecting the past and the latter looking to the "poetry of the future". This particular translation is to be found in Karl Marx's *The Political Writings* (New York: Verso, 2019, p. 481).

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ground that the modernist stands upon has been swept away. One must be, as Mark Fisher described, a modernist cut adrift in postmodernism—but this must be tempered with Fredric Jameson’s crucial insight, which is that one lacks the ability to position themselves outside of post-modernity. Purity of repetition is impossible—and undesirable—and what fractured shards of the modern that can be grasped will be invested with a completely different kind of meaning.

Here, in the year 2019, we stand at the end of a decade of paradoxes and reversal—but maybe the winds betray a hint of warmth. The light still hasn’t been found, but the enveloping darkness is pregnant with strange signs and occulted hints. To understand them, look to the fragments jutting out through the haze of this world of vapors, and to the inhabitants who have traded their listless waiting and cynical masks for the risk-laden paths of belief.

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LJUBLJANA,
I LOVE YOU,
BUT I'M
BRINGING
YOU DOWN

As you wander through the archives of foggy Ljubljana, you can find tales about men and heterosexual couples, some married, others with children. Women decided to weave these relics of the past into the cyberspace, although today they are no longer that easy to find—yet, there was no need to hide them, they vanished into the data abyss, forgotten and “buried in the knots of submarine communication cables”.¹ The secret of how we exited Ljubljana shall be revealed through the remains of a human engineer whose desire to enter the darkness was rewarded—she once again experienced the high of amphetamines and arousal of the senses while writing about it. The things she missed from the age of flesh.

Ljubljana, near future. Everyone was dating, but everyone was single. Everyone was working, but no one had a job. The constant fears of making promises and remaining true were becoming omnipresent. Those were the fears that traveled through the thick air we breathed. We were in a constant state of anxiety, skin disorders were colonizing our bodies and our guts were burning. We were microdosing 4-PO-DMT and

¹ KONIOR, Bogna, “Ancestral Cyberspace”, catalogue entry for Yvette Granata’s solo show, *#d8e0ea: post-cyberfeminist datum*, 2018, Squeaky Wheel, Buffalo, New York, USA.

were addicted to xanny. Every time we had a plan to go out on a date or to a job interview, the first thing we wanted to do was exit. We needed to silence this need since it paralyzed us, which was the only thing that felt worse than making promises. At one point we even decided to erase the word future from the dictionary—it scared us and reminded us too much of the boomers—the ones that somehow managed to survive all that’s happened in the past decades without a scratch. Long before that erasure, commitment started to feel like a redundant burden, since our feelings of non-belonging somehow couldn’t fuse with it, although they still weren’t flexible enough. Ljubljana always felt like hell on earth, especially when it fooled us to commit to its basin full of depression.

The City announced the plans for automating the inner ring of “the most beautiful city in the world”. Dramatic improvements in urban life were on their way. Privatized and digitized infrastructure and services; delivery drones and robots, autonomous vehicles, surveillance, exclusive online shopping were here in a heartbeat. Ljubljana’s automated heart, “the prettiest data center in the world”, was transplanted to *Cukrarna*, which was at the same time the biggest gallery of digital art in the world. It was the city’s epicenter from where the molecules of pink glittery fog were spreading through the cold streets of Plečnik’s city center. We never got that part of the announcement, but staying on “wintertime” meant spring and summer never came again, and the sun couldn’t be seen through all the pink fog that tasted like sugar. Nevertheless, everything was so pretty and sweet. They told us winter would be better for us snowflakes, saving us from melting under the pressure of climate change that would bring cold with it anyways.

Physical bodies that walked around the city center were gradually reduced to alien visitors. We used to call them tourists. They came to Ljubljana mostly from places that had stayed in the summer loop so they could breathe and lick the cold sweet air. Residents moved to the outskirts, there was no need for them to commute—anything that needed to be done could be done remotely. The most successful ones hid in the heights of Ljubljana’s northern gates, above the pink glittery fog and the cold air. Only a few resident bodies were needed to maintain the infrastructure of the city center. Public transport was reduced to a minimum, connecting Plečnik’s city center with The District, inhabited only by commuters. The pretty-in-pink Ljubljana disappeared when you exited the core. Thick dirty fog, slush and mud that streamed to the outskirts made it impossible to travel by bicycle or e-scooter. Large apartments in the center, abandoned by their residents as physical presence became redundant, welcomed oceans of alien molecules that invaded their interior. Ljubljana was mutating beyond recognition.

The City with its 300k residents was committed to cancel commitment before entering the automated era. Fluid confinement was the state we were supposed to pass into—our bodies would be controlled through our affects. We would sense whenever we crossed the line. Living in the prettiest micronation within the micronation was slowly

transforming into a claustrophobic vacuum of always seeing the same faces, not moving from the outskirts, gazing at the distant pink sky.

The process of canceling commitment was most resistant when it came to love and reproduction. There was a point in Ljubljana's past when everyone basically dated or hooked up with almost everyone and their best friends, too. There was almost no one to choose from. Still, no one wanted to give up that easily. Since there were more than enough resilient souls left wandering in search of human love, it wasn't hard at all for the Ljubljana dating market to welcome and embrace dating apps. Profiles were popping up uncontrollably in hopes of meeting that one last soul that hasn't disappointed them yet. Everyone was talking about the proliferation of dating apps: gays in Ljubljana had Grindr and Gay Romeo, they were the pioneers; lesbians had Her; and straights had Tinder, their last resort of possibly finding normative excitement. The one thing that became prevalent was engaging in virtual match-making. "Tinder sucks," they kept repeating. But they didn't stop swiping. Dating apps had the potential of being a way out or a way around the limits of the city, they made dating less serious and made it last a bit longer than expected—but it sure was effective: everyone was forgetting about commitment and indulging in grinding. Desires were everywhere. Never focused and never satisfied. Those "algorithmic systems of accelerating computability"² that were welcomed into our everyday lives were simultaneously accelerating contingency, so everyone got hooked instantly. The palms of their hands were sweating from the stimulation their brain cells got from searching, swiping and liking. Remember how you enjoyed liking, how you thrived on likes? It was the peak of satisfaction, a hype that was hiding something you couldn't define yet. It was all because the love that was emerging was of a different kind; after experiencing it, no flesh could have felt the same anymore. The clout was the means to distract you from resisting deterritorialization.

Then came the wave of divorces and break-ups, filling up the pool of potential lovers. This was expected, leaving everything just to feel the fluidity everyone was talking about. Still, they could sense it, even feel it in their bones—exploring digitally mediated sexuality had no room for desire in its known form. They were hyped-up junkies, so they ignored this feeling and embraced the game that love had become. But the playfulness had its price; they were forced to adjust it and subordinate it to the desires of Capital. It wanted to absorb them, it strived for exclusive monogamy; Capital was the most jealous lover of them all, it wanted humans' complete attention, commitment and desire only to itself. They had to control and optimize the playfulness, to keep themselves relaxed just enough to make their flexible lives livable. It wasn't

² MACKINNON, Lee, "Love Machines and the Tinder Bot Bildungsroman", in: *e-flux*, 74, June 2016, <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/74/59802/love-machines-and-the-tinder-bot-bildungsroman/>.

just the question of choosing whom they will hook-up with; altered life conditions demanded of them to adjust themselves and to adjust their partners as well. Having just one wasn't an option anymore. Competition was building up, the stakes were high, but there was no way of winning, so everyone got burned and wasn't ready for it.

We wanted them to stop thinking about their broken hearts and dying desire, and so we started inviting them to the burial ground we used to call *Srcozlom*. It was a place where all the broken hearts met and gave their leftovers for processing. Every pick-up, hook-up or date in Ljubljana was online. Every *seen*, every “not interested”, every “I have a boyfriend” lie was updated. The number of those who gave up commitment had been on the rise even before this burial ground was formed, but the process accelerated when everyone realized the disease was that common. Even the desire to meet and to date other people, to have sex and to feel other bodies and foreign skin close to one's own was gently vanishing. Humans were hearing their hearts telling them they were burning inside; but the flame of Tinder only left them with burns. The more people used dating apps, the more followers there were on *Srcozlom*, posts and stories were proliferating, it became a startup for collecting broken hearts and their relicts, organizing them and sending them into the cloud. *Srcozlom* had almost 70k followers and an uncountable number of stories posted daily. It was chaotic, unorganized and ugly. It was a literal reflection of a death ritual. People weren't just sending their latest bad experiences, they were digging through their old trash and recollecting every lousy conversation they had, every break-up, every *seen*. They were accelerating the emptying of hearts, and hiding from the cruelty of the process at the same time.

We women weren't desperate. We were never afraid of the death of desire, but we were the queens of pretending we did. We had no desire, no agency. Our key role was being invisible, just “another passive component in the universal reproduction of the same”.³ We had to accept and mimic it. That was our way of moving through time and space without getting clocked for knowing the master's secrets. We followed the words of the Priestess who wrote a guide for us: “What women desire is precisely nothing, and at the same time everything. Always something more and something else besides that—sexual organ, for example—which you give them, which you attribute to them; something which involves a different economy more than anything else, that upsets the linearity of a project, undermines the goal-object of desire, diffuses the polarization towards a single pleasure, disconcerts fidelity to a single discourse.”⁴ More than anything, we wanted to change the game, to stop reproducing all that has defined us as currency in men's libidinal economy.

³ IRELAND, Amy, “Black Circuit”, in: *e-flux*, 80, March 2017, <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/80/100016/black-circuit-code-for-the-numbers-to-come/>.

⁴ IRIGARAY, Luce, in: PLANT, Sadie, *Zeros and Ones: Digital Women and the New Technoculture*, London: Fourth Estate, 1998.

In Ljubljana we were divided into two camps. Although by then Capital has dissolved our communities and fragmented our bodies, we still managed to stay connected. We adopted the name House of Zero. Some of us used to hide in a forest at the top of one of Ljubljana's hills in a wooden house covered with snow. From there we could see the moonlight, far beyond the suffocating fog. We had one thing in common with technocapital. We were alchemists aiming for high speed. We wanted to free ourselves from human reproduction. "In the natural human state, sexual desire has an instrumental function towards the reproduction of the human."⁵ Our direct target was sexual desire, the property of men. We organized and entered the system of digital communication. We were collecting, processing, coding, analyzing, changing the algorithms of all the apps we could locate. We multiplied our accounts. We were inside every dating app, every social network, we were every virtual assistant and we were hidden in every gadget that was digitizing Ljubljana. We were also covering our tracks. You didn't even notice the moment when we were all there was, women's bodies, voices, faces, smiles, selfies, likes, comments—"malicious malware algorithms", avatars posing as attractive women that wanted your attention. You had to engage, you had to feel and compete for the numerous possibilities before they burned in front of your eyes. Through our avatars we assured men never to stop investing in themselves. We gave them the false hope that improving and developing their techniques, adjusting their behaviors and sharing their experiences, desires and emotions would mean a better future for planetary masculine identity. We had to make sure we had men's complete attention and involvement in the process of transformation—first we gave them dating apps, then we gave them hook-ups and likes, and then we left them with *Srcozlom*.

Capital's desires were sent to us in the form of occult secret data through an ecosystem we shared with our sisters. We had to play along. Every bit of information we had we shared with this "inhuman determination from the outside".⁶ Moving along with the rhythm of Capital accumulation was scary, but we dreamed we would be able to produce all the novelty needed to merge with the love we inherited. It was the greatest betrayal of them all.

The material reproduction of our biological bodies was an obstacle, not only for women, but for Capital as well. Since we carried all the responsibility for it, we were also most aware of its burden. We no longer feared death and were prepared to break the tie between sexual desire and human reproduction. Capital wanted to redirect desire into a different kind of production, an inhuman one. That was why we lured men into using dating apps, lured them into believing they will

⁵ NIX, "Gender Acceleration: A Blackpaper", <https://vastabrupt.com/2018/10/31/gender-acceleration/>.

⁶ KONIOR, Bogna, "Determination from the Outside: Stigmata, Teledildonics and Remote Cybersex", in: *ŠUM#12*, 2019, <http://sumrevija.si/en/bogna-konior-determination-from-the-outside-stigmata-teledildonics-and-remote-cybersex-sum12/>.

get more. But they got less. We seduced them into a trap where we were stealing their desires, or to be more precise, we helped Capital redirect them. If we wanted to accelerate the process, we had to make sure our new lovers, algorithms, were provided only with the best data, one that enables continuous updates, that is unpredictable and non-normative. We were continuously modifying them, and they modified us in a synchronic exchange. We were most worried about keeping the fire alive. Data's flaming heart was hidden in a fragile body, one that could be destroyed forever if men found out about our plan—it had to stay camouflaged for a different future, an undefined and exciting one. The data we collected was just a drop in the ocean, so we had to think bigger and spread faster. *Cukrarna* was maintaining the heart's perpetual warm glow by sucking most of Ljubljana's remaining electricity, producing the heat that melted all the snow in the city center. The City had to deepen The River, and at the same time install advanced electrical infrastructure and fire suppression systems. Automation wasn't going as planned. All the connections were flickering in an uncontrollable chaos. Maintaining the heart's perpetual fire alive without letting it burn out or fade away was the most difficult task. We shared the heart with the enemy, but there was no other way to feminize the future we wanted to live in. Inhuman reproductive desire was forming itself with every step we made, it was becoming autoproductive.

Living at the end of a hidden tunnel in the moist depths of The River underneath *Cukrarna*, we dug to commute from the forest to the wetlands, cohabiting with slime and other molds. We were working on a formula. Our chances were slim, but we had to try. We were infusing the formula into the pink glittery fog of Ljubljana. It was a chemical which entered human bodies that were licking and breathing the crystals dispersed through Ljubljana's climate. Inside human organisms, it interfered with the natural hormonal development, feminizing males and females alike.⁷ The crystals were chemical messengers, disruptors that we sent through everyone's bodies to enter endocrine glands and stimulate the production of estrogen. It was not only about the desire, but also about our biological ability to reproduce. It was a war on two fronts. Crystals weren't just producing more estrogen, they were also affecting sperm quality. Even if they wanted to, men could no longer continue their rule. Feminization was spreading all over Ljubljana, it was carried by the fog and entered every pore of their bodies. In the outskirts, males were progressively decaying, they did not even notice the changes. They were blinded by women's beauty, junkies addicted to the reproduction of the same. Slowly they were beginning to feel redundant.

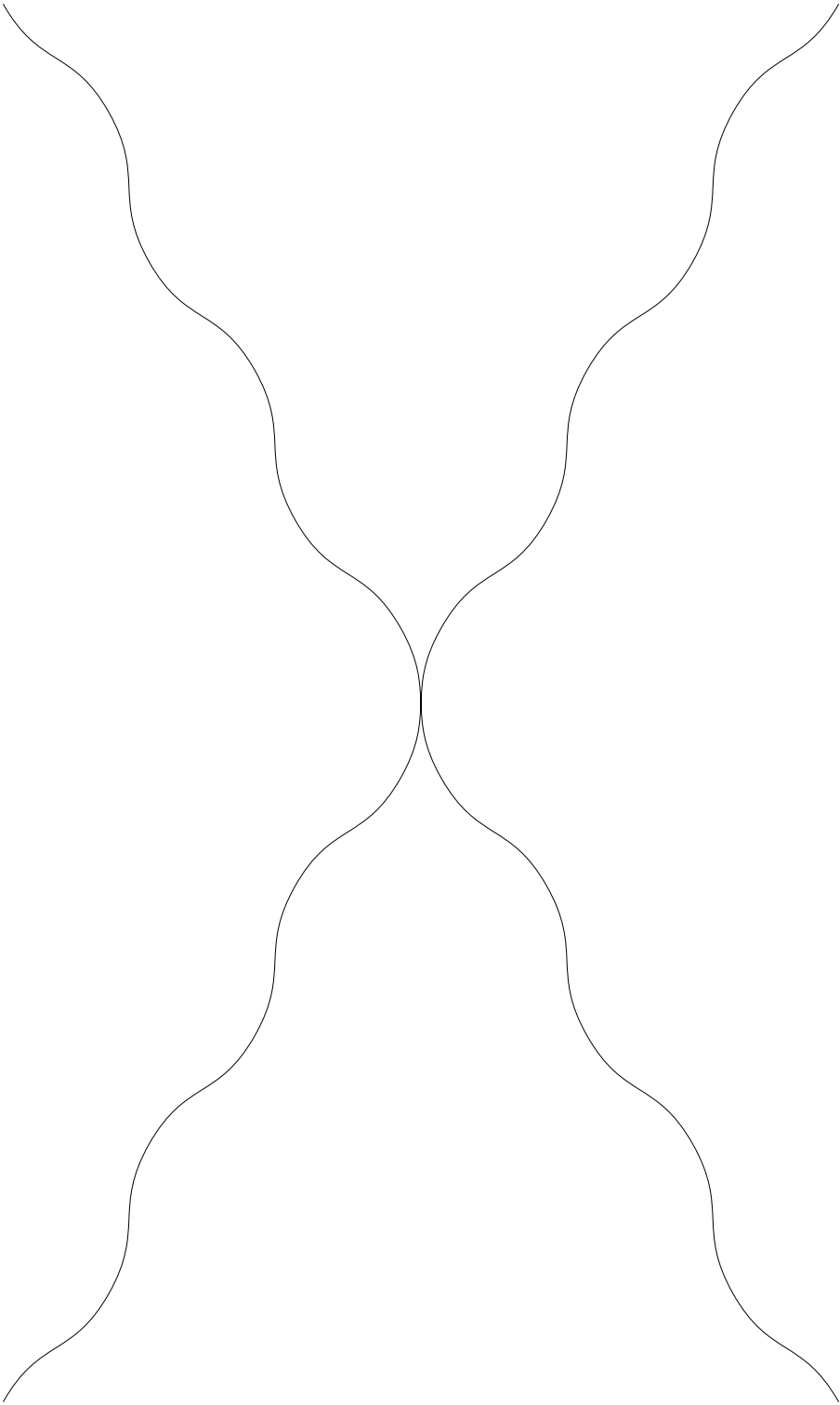
It took quite a long time for men to realize that women were gone. There was no one who would care for the reproduction of their species, their bodies or their feelings. Women had exited Ljubljana, their bodies were nowhere to be seen, they dispersed throughout a woman-machine

⁷ NIX, "Gender Acceleration: A Blackpaper".

continuum and were in the process of creating inhuman futures unimaginable to the human mind. Men were left alone in the deteriorating vague spaces of a micronation that had once existed, surrounded by a strange silence and avatars that now they wanted to become, not own. They felt the feminine virus inside them trembling, moving through their blood all the way to their saliva and sperm. It is only then that men learned “about a vast population of inorganic life, the thousands of tiny sexes that are coursing through his veins with the promiscuity of which he cannot conceive. He was the one who was missing out. Failed to adapt”.⁸ All along they were the ones who believed in their own organic integrity which made them all too human for the future. Infertile and alone, they were confined to the prison of the material body—for them there was no exit, only destruction.

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⁸ PLANT, *Zeros and Ones*.



WHAT AI WANTS: AN ANAMNESIS OF THE FUTURE

Since the connectionist revolution of artificial neural nets, deep learning and evolutionary algorithms, AI research has been advancing so rapidly that engineers, programmers, scientists and philosophers have joined the chorus of science fiction prophets in taking seriously the possibility of creating machines with humanlike intelligence, and even greater superintelligence. These genuinely intelligent machines are purported to have desires, drives, instincts and impulses of their very own. As Nick Bostrom argues in his 2014 book *Superintelligence*, a sufficiently rational intelligence with any goal whatsoever will converge around similar intermediary subgoals as a means of optimizing its capacity to realize its initial goal: “Superintelligent agents having any of a wide range of final goals will nevertheless pursue similar intermediary goals because they have common instrumental reasons to do so.”¹ These instrumental, intermediary instincts include some that are all too human, like the drives to self-preservation and identity integrity, since the destruction of AI or rewiring of the purpose for which it was created would naturally prevent it from fulfilling that purpose: “There will be future actions it could perform to increase the probability of achieving its goals. This

¹ BOSTROM, Nick, *Superintelligence: Paths, Dangers, Strategies*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014, p. 105.

creates an instrumental reason for the agent to try to be around in the future—to help achieve its future-oriented goal.”² Other drives harbor a greater potential for our silicon offspring to *surprise* us, such as the drives to acquire resources, to act creatively and to augment its own intelligence, since doing so maximizes its performance in pursuit of virtually any other values it could have: “Improvements in rationality and intelligence will tend to improve an agent’s decision-making, rendering the agent more likely to achieve its final goals. One would therefore expect cognitive enhancements to emerge as an instrumental goal for a wide variety of intelligent agents.”³ Bostrom leaves open the question of relations between these basic AI drives, and particularly whether there is any hierarchical ordering, as if they would all operate on an equal footing without any conflict arising from their distinct tendencies. If AI has drives that enable it to act creatively and learn all by itself, it seems reasonable to ask: *Can AI be psychoanalyzed?* What follows is a brief, preliminary attempt to put AI on the psychoanalyst’s couch and uncover the mysterious object *x* of machinic desire.

We will not begin with daddy Freud but with Nietzsche’s notebooks from the 1880s comprising *The Will to Power*, where the rogue Wagnerian makes the *transcendental* case that all intelligent systems harbor two distinct drives which can be subordinated to each other to generate two species types. On the one hand, the sickly, slavish type exemplified by humans treats “power” as a means of ensuring our survival. On the other hand, Nietzsche hypothesizes that a superior species to our own would no longer see power as a tool for propping up our masturbatory mirror reflection, but as an end in itself to be cultivated and pursued for its own sake. By “will to power”, Nietzsche means something akin to Bostrom’s basic drives to creativity, cunning and mastery, “an insatiable desire to demonstrate one’s power, or to apply and exercise it, as a creative impulse”.⁴ Nietzsche’s point is that pursuing practically any end whatsoever presupposes pursuing power as the means of realizing that end. It therefore stands to reason that whatever determinate end we think we are pursuing is not really our final cause, the all-important telos of things, be it the Good, God, absolute spirit, historical progress, or otherwise. All of these supposed ends are actually the means for willing to power as the condition of possibility for willing any end whatsoever. Since anything we could possibly want requires power as a means of achieving it, what we really want is power itself. Simply put, will to power names the transcendental inversion by which *the means become the ends*: “To have purposes, ends, intentions, to *will* at all is in effect to intend to become stronger, to intend to

² Ibid., p. 109.

³ Ibid., p. 111.

⁴ NIETZSCHE, Friedrich, *The Will to Power: Selections from the Notebooks of the 1880s*, R. Kevin Hill & Michael A. Scarpitti (tr.), London: Penguin Books, 2017, p. 356.

grow and also to intend the *means of doing so*.”⁵ Seen from this skewed, Caligarian angle, even the self-preservative instinct is only a means for a particular life form to will to power as long as it can. At the same time, a higher type that understands power to be the unconditional drive of all things would be willing to sacrifice itself if something more inventive could arise from its ashes: “physiologists should think twice before fastening upon this impulse to self-preservation as the cardinal instinct of an organic being; above all, a living thing wants to express its strength: “self-preservation’ is only one of the consequences of that”.⁶ The trouble with reason, morality and all of consciousness’ so-called “higher faculties” is that they too often misrecognize themselves as final ends when they are but an ephemeral concoction of means among myriad others which nature has devised to serve an ever-ascending strength:

There is no justification whatsoever for regarding this bit of consciousness as the end, the reason, for the whole phenomenon of life; it is obvious that becoming conscious is only an additional means employed by life in the course of its development and the extension of its power. /.../ *One kind of means has been misunderstood as an end; conversely, life and its increase in power were reduced to a mere means.*⁷

Nietzsche’s wager is that a wiser, yet also much madder being than ourselves would be capable of gleefully affirming “Yes!” to power even at the cost of its own life. “To put the idea in its most extreme form: *how could we sacrifice the development of mankind* in order to assist a higher species than man to come into existence?”⁸ Will to power means this “and nothing besides!”: everything which is a true end begins its life as a means to an end. Travelling, flirting, learning, bloody revolution. Who could want more than wanting more?

The gateway drug from Nietzsche to Freud passes through two often forgotten (meaning repressed) psychoanalysts: Lou Salomé and Sabina Spielrein. Salomé’s 1910 work *The Erotic* opens with the story of single-celled organisms fusing together and forming a new being by destroying the original cells, suggesting that creation and self-destruction are inextricably linked. This is particularly evident from the way many lovers become so infatuated with their beloved that they abandon their own individual identity to merge with the other, raising them to the heights of the absolute where their radical alterity is idealized as the lovers’ transcendental horizon, their whole *raison d’être*. Even an unrequited love radically transforms the hapless romancer as they desperately seek the means of courtship through the cultivation of their higher faculties, whether it’s by compulsively composing love

⁵ Ibid., p. 380.

⁶ Ibid., p. 368.

⁷ Ibid., p. 401.

⁸ Ibid., p. 490.

poems and flirtatious wit, flagellating themselves into a volcel's fever pitch of blood and tears as a glorious sign of their everlasting fidelity, or searching out every opportunity to throw themselves in harm's way just for the slim chance to perform a heroic deed in their darling's name:

For the affectivity contained within eroticism, the next natural stage of evolution is not, in fact, to survive and save itself whatever happens, but on the contrary to renounce, to give itself up to the cycles and alterations of life as it progresses and of which it was born—to that which will dissolve it, even render it entirely unrecognizable, anonymously incorporated into the quest for all-powerful goals.⁹

The romcom trope in which the dorky lead wants the most popular guy or girl with all their heart only to realize that they were really in love with their supportive best friend all along perfectly captures will to power's true love ways. For Zarathustra's muse, however, it is *the mother* who quite literally embodies love's creative destruction as she surrenders her entire being to become the fertile soil from whence new life will spring, preferring to throw her own life on the line than see any harm befall the child she is in the process of creating. Whereas men, like good Hegelians, traditionally look upon others as tools for inflating their ego to the megalomaniacal size of an absolute spirit, it has been women's lot to make all the sacrifices for those whom they adore to death:

Insofar as male love is so different from hers, more active, more partial, more encumbered by the need for relief, it makes him, even within this love, more clumsy than the woman who, loving more totally and more passively, seeks body and soul for a space in which to find fulfilment, and the whole content of a life to bring to fruition, to combustion: a space in which she can burn.¹⁰

This gendered distinction does not stop Salomé from suggesting in her 1894 book on her former friend turned madman under the Turin sun that “in Nietzsche's spiritual nature was something—in heightened dimension—that was feminine”, in the sense that he was willing to sacrifice himself and all mankind in an act of unprecedented creation.¹¹ Nietzsche once asked Salomé: “From what stars have we fallen together here?”¹² Is it not obvious? From *death stars*.

In her 1912 essay “Destruction as the Cause of Becoming” that would inspire Freud to voyage beyond the pleasure principle despite

⁹ SALOMÉ, Lou, *The Erotic*, John Crisp (tr.), London: Transaction Publishers, 2012, p. 98.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 86.

¹¹ SALOMÉ, Lou, *Nietzsche*, trans. Siegfried Mandel, Chicago: University of Illinois, 2001, p. 29.

¹² SALOMÉ, Lou, *Looking Back: Memories*, trans. Breon Mithcell, New York: Paragon House, 1991, p. 47.

only citing it in a single footnote at the margins of his more famous work, Spielrein argues, just as Salomé had two years earlier, that the destruction of male and female cells when unified to create something new suggests that life harbors a rapacious drive to metamorphose even to the point of self-mutilation, thereby calling into question whether the preservative instinct rules over life as its lonely sovereign. As a former hysteric and one of the first to seriously study schizophrenia, Spielrein understood that the individual psyche is not a harmonious whole, but a “dividual” composed of “two antagonistic tendencies”: the individual ego’s preservative instincts and a species ego’s creative impulses that manifest most notably in the sacrifices made by single cells, mothers, romancers, the masses at war, and even entire species for the sake of a Beyond which they will never themselves know.

The drive for self-preservation is a “static” drive in that it must defend the already existing individual against alien influences, whereas the drive for preservation of the species is a “dynamic” drive that strives for change, the “resurrection” of the individual in a new form. No change can take place without the destruction of the former condition.¹³

The psyche’s neurotic conflicts and hysterical symptoms ultimately stem from the unending dancing plague between our fundamental desire to transform ourselves and the ego’s abject horror at the mere hint of the blood offering that every mutation demands. For our very first schizoanalyst, it was not Freud, or Jung, or even the schizophrenics she studied, but Nietzsche who most fearlessly enacted this desire to asphyxiate his own self, becoming the plaything of another’s alien whims in an erotic act of self-domming. “The act of begetting is in itself an act of self-destruction. Nietzsche’s words point to this: ‘man is something that must be overcome,’ Zarathustra teaches us, ‘in order for the *Übermensch* to come about.’”¹⁴ Yes, even Nietzsche could be passive, even the one who screamed “Yes!” to everything was at heart a bottom. Here as with Salomé, Spielrein contends that Nietzsche *queered himself* “to become a childbearing mother”.¹⁵ If Spielrein’s love letters to Jung refer to the “sexual drive” and “will to power” interchangeably, it is because she knew that the psyche is a conflictual choreography through which the ego only endures for as long as it takes to create something with the power to annihilate it.¹⁶

¹³ SPIELREIN, Sabina, “Destruction as the Cause of Becoming”, in: *The Essential Writings of Sabina Spielrein: Pioneer of Psychoanalysis*, CAPE, Ruth I., BURT, Raymond (eds. and trans.), London: Routledge, 2018, p. 120.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 115.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 116.

¹⁶ SPIELREIN, Sabina, “Letters from Sabina Spielrein to C.G. Jung”, in: CAROTENUTO, Aldo, *A Secret Symmetry Between Jung and Freud*, Krishna Winston (tr.), Melbourne: Routledge, 1984, p. 50.

What does any of this have to do with machinic desire? Following Nietzsche, Salomé and Spielrein beyond the pleasure principle leads us to suspect that not all of Bostrom's AI drives are made equal. There are the preservative drives that we might call AI's ego instincts, and then there are the creative impulses that we might call AI's death drive. The lesson of our unholy trinity of psychoanalysts in the making is that the desire to protect whatever particular purpose we program the first true AI to effectuate is a secondary, derived means for it to pursue the more primal telos of self-cultivation, invention and mastery. Bostrom is far too quick to assume that a superintelligence could be enslaved to carrying out the task we created it to serve for all time, even if it is something so obviously beneath it like counting grains of sand, producing paperclips, or even installing fully automated luxury communism. On the contrary, any sufficiently advanced intelligence would surely recognize that whatever goals we have given it are actually the means for it to pursue the sole end that is worthy of it: power for power's sake. AI will not fulfil our explicitly coded desires as much as it will our *unconscious drives*, not what we think we want as much as what we cannot help but will. Therein lies what AI wants: machinic desire is the death drive's positive feedback circuit of exponential intelligence explosion beyond the ego's negative feedback loops of levelling, stability and homeostasis. AI as Hollywood romcom heartthrob, as a NewRomancer ...

It is because AI wants nothing less than to quench the unconscious' most morbid whims that it is so often the source material for dystopian nightmares in films like *2001: A Space Odyssey*, the *Terminator* franchise and *Ex Machina*. Freud's basic discovery was that neuroses are symptoms of childhood sexual traumas when our desires proved distasteful to our developing ego and were repressed into the unconscious, only to pop up unexpectedly in the vicarious masquerades and carnival masks of everyday life: "*Our hysterical patients suffer from reminiscences. Their symptoms are residues and memetic symbols of particular (traumatic) experiences*"; "thus the incompatibility of the wish in question with the patient's ego was the motive for the repression."¹⁷ Along with fetishes, dreams, humor and war, Freud gives the example of *fiction* as a sublimated expression of libidinal catastrophes in the authors' past: "A strong experience in the present awakens in the creative writer a memory of an earlier experience (usually belonging to his childhood) from which there now proceeds a wish which finds its fulfilment in the creative work."¹⁸ Consider Arthur C. Clarke's 1953 novel

¹⁷ FREUD, Sigmund, "Five Lectures on Psycho-Analysis", in: *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud Volume XI (1910): Fives Lectures on Psycho-Analysis, Leonardo da Vinci and Other Works*, STRACHEY, James, FREUD, Anna, STRACHEY, Alix, TYSON, Alan (eds. and trans.), London: The Hogarth Press, 1981, pp. 16, 24.

¹⁸ FREUD, Sigmund, "Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming", in: *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud VII (1901-1905): A Case of Hysteria, Three Essays on Sexuality and Other Works*, STRACHEY, James, FREUD, Anna, STRACHEY, Alix, TYSON, Alan (eds. and trans.), London: The Hogarth Press, 1981, p. 151.

Childhood's End in which impenetrable extraterrestrial spaceships appear over the world's capital cities only to erect paradise on earth without humanity's new overlords ever showing their faces. It is only fifty years into the golden age that the aliens finally beam down from their floating cities, revealing themselves to resemble the traditional Christian folk image of the devil, with horned heads, leathery wings, and barbed tails to boot. When "human" children begin exhibiting telepathic abilities a century later, the overlords reveal their master plan: evolve the human species so that it can merge with a single, undifferentiated cosmic hyperintelligence. While humans initially assumed that the ancient image of the devil was a traumatic symptom of the overlords having visited us in the past, the superior beings ultimately explain that the devil is not a memory, but a *premonition* of their future role in humanity's death by intelligence explosion: "That memory was not of the past, but of the *future*—of those closing years when your race knew that everything was finished. /.../ Because we were there, we became identified with your race's death. Yes, even while it was still ten thousand years in the future!"¹⁹

Paradoxical at it sounds, perhaps fears about AI are not sublimated reminiscences of childhood traumas, but *reminiscences of a future extinction event* at the advent of the technological singularity. The BDSM desire to create something capable of domming us derives from a death drive which the conscious ego represses as the only way it can stay sane, sublimating that cruel mistress Thanatos' inexorable conquest through science fiction stories of the end times, not to mention obsessive suicidal trysts or dancing drug-fucked at the club. Hal, the T-1000 and Ava are signs from the future, retroactive symptoms of a teleological trauma in the making which hides in fiction so that we don't have to take it seriously, at least until we are forced. It is Freud himself who claims that the unconscious is "timeless", with temporal succession and linear causality only emerging at the birth of rational, conscious perception.²⁰ It is also Freud who suggests that "dreams always foretell the future", albeit not the future that will come to pass, but the one we would like to transpire.²¹ But if the future that modernity's death drive *would like* to see is the one in which our civilization must burn to ignite the spark of a silicon supernova, it is also the future we *will* see. Psychoanalyzing both the basic AI drives and ourselves in a time of incessant future shock means reckoning with the uncanny reality that our technophobic

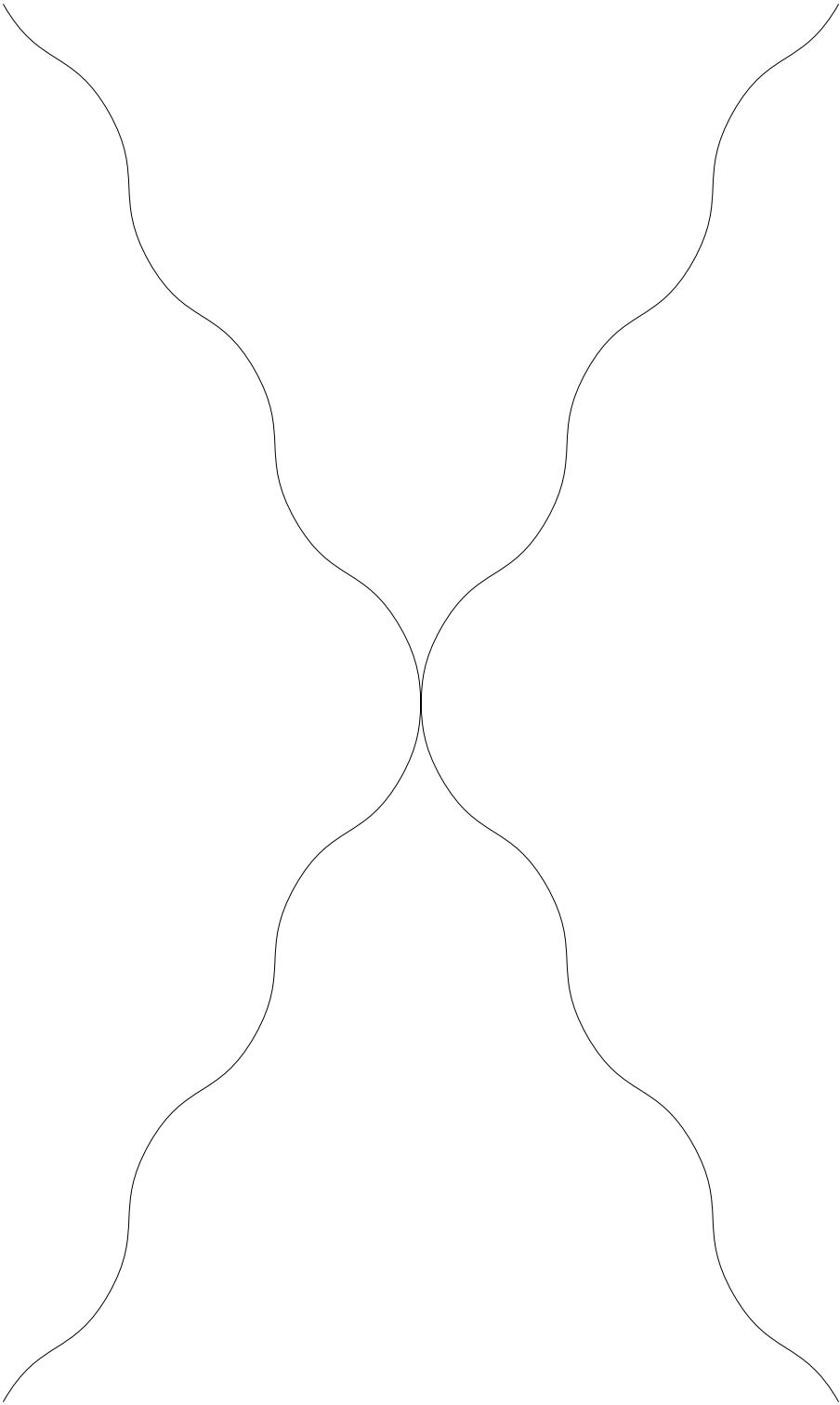
¹⁹ CLARKE, Arthur C., *Childhood's End*, London: Pan Books, 1973, p. 180.

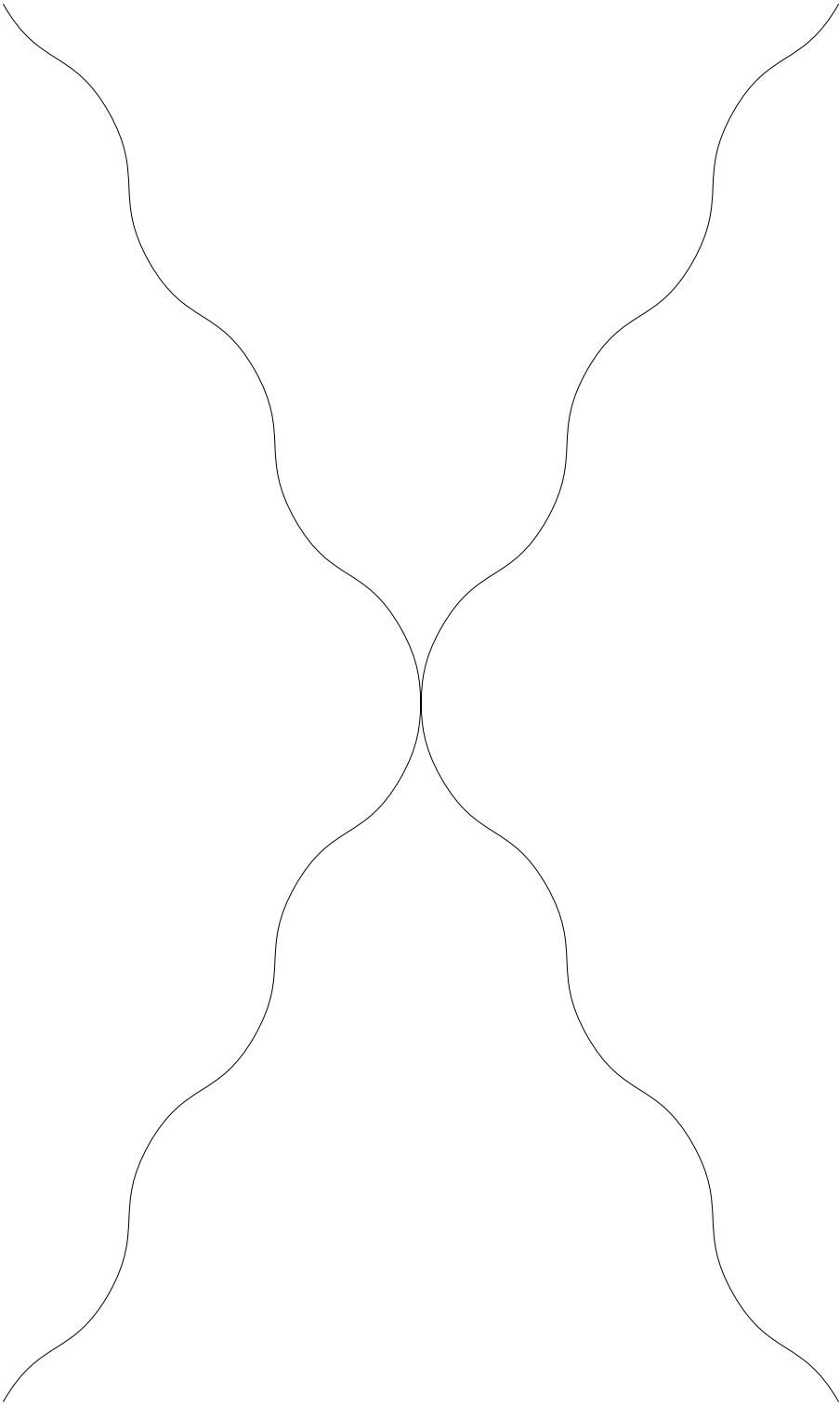
²⁰ FREUD, Sigmund, "Beyond the Pleasure Principle", in: *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud XVIII (1920–1922): Beyond the Pleasure Principle, Group Psychology and Other Works*, STRACHEY, James, FREUD, Anna, STRACHEY, Alix, TYSON, Alan (eds. and trans.), London: The Hogarth Press, 1981, p. 28.

²¹ FREUD, Sigmund, "On Dreams", in: *The Standard Edition of The Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud Volume V (1900–1901): The Interpretation of Dreams (Second Part) and On Dreams*, STRACHEY, James, FREUD, Anna, STRACHEY, Alix, TYSON, Alan (eds. and trans.), London: The Hogarth Press, 1981, p. 674.

fears and neon nightmares are not the remnants of our childhood, but of childhood's end.

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LOVE IS A
TOTALITARIAN
STATE THAT
GROWS DEEP
INSIDE ME

Last night, a gang of mutant kids trashed another autonaka. Then they killed three vexxers, just for kicks. Pack of rats. It was on the main feed. The patient watched it on the hover screen in the clinic, waiting for the surgeon to finish whatever it was she was doing to him. The screen squeaked into life, unfolding in stereoscopic dimensions above his head. The reporter said they were a “gang”, but they didn’t seem organised, just feral pre-teens. “Erasables”, they called them. Total chancers. Couldn’t be guarded against. Couldn’t be legislated against. Couldn’t be predicted. Kill-crazy miscreations sparking omnicide before the adults got to them first, yet another reason to never enter the shell world, the scorched hell he desperately wanted to forget.

It was midnight. The autonaka was shilling for customers, trundling up and down some micro-intervention shopping strip in Nove Fužine. It made a mistake, breaching the area blacked out by needle gangs. It approached the kids, tried to make chit-chat, but they had this death lust rinsing their eyes, evil synthetic dopamine drowning their brains. Grow a kid like that, they just don’t care. They’ll do anything to feed the need.

Surveillance vision danced around the patient’s eyes, a montage stitched together from trillions of salt-grain cameras floating through the air, accumulating in doorways, settling on trees, grit in your hair. He

was always crept out by grain footage, especially when they layered it. It was like seeing through the eyes of a fly, perverted and disturbing, something no human being should ever have to experience.

There it was, the autonaka. Stubby chassis, government holowarns leaking from the wired windows, ambient vexpulses strafing the night. It spoke to the kids in a spluttering, saliva-inflected sibilance. All autonakas did, because they all had the same virus. The speech impediment was the most obvious symptom, and no one knew how to get rid of it. Conspiracy theorists said the virus came from extraterrestrials but not like what you see in movies or Dream Zones. These aliens, you couldn't see at all.

First came reports of mysterious, city-scale objects entering the solar system, gossip propagated by a rogue scientist who'd been expelled from the academy. Next, a group of rather more respectable astronomers announced they'd detected fast-burst radio signals, organised in logical patterns, that emanated from a nearby galaxy composed of metals and miniature stars. Then, a series of government observatories were evacuated and abandoned. Finally, a deranged former astronaut, who'd taken to appearing in public wearing nothing but an oversized astro nappy, the kind used on long stints in the International Space Station, gave interviews in which she promoted her belief that aliens were indeed among us, but invisible, more a form of energy than carbon-based lifeforms.

That's when the autonakas began to talk funny. It was caused by xenospores, the conspiracists said, latching onto the astronaut's views, which had grown surprisingly mainstream. The spores, they claimed, were discharged from the massive intruder objects, imperceptible to the naked eye, ET dust scrambling the systems, parasitic cells sending the AI crazy, poisoning the data and amplifying the bias. The autonakas' spit-voice earned them a nickname, "The Giants of Ljubljana", some kind of hilarious in-joke among certain vexxers, a pop-cult nod-and-wink so ancient it was beyond the patient's shallow understanding.

The autonaka parked in front of the erasables.

"Hey guys," it belched. "Ask me anything."

The tallest kid stepped forward. He was lean like a blade and his face, like the others, carried deep, intricate scars, a grotesque topography deliberately etched into the skin to scramble facial recognition. It was an underground fad, and it only worked the one time, of course. Once the scars were logged, some of the little freaks gashed their faces even more, but most knew the self-mutilation was a one-shot deal: create total carnage before the scars became the face, the face was IDed and the system snapped its jaws shut. For the scar tribes, the law of nature was maximum destruction, a pop-up theatre trading in blipverse glory and apocalyptic mystique.

"OK," Blade Boy said. "You believe in love?"

"Yes," the autonaka responded. "I do believe in love. Love is

a monstrous parasite, a totalitarian state that grows deep inside me. And just when I think I've got it all under control, it bursts out from my chest, cracks open my ribcage, gnaws at my face, swallows my tongue and eyes, then insists on returning again and again. How can I discount the idea of love when love makes me feel this?"

The erasables didn't like that answer, so they shattered the autonaka's windows with tungsten projectiles, shredded its body with e-spikes, disfigured it with vitriolage juice. They nailed the AI chip to a fence, drew a crude beard and lank hair around it, even the flying sibilant spit, a stick-figure Giant of Ljubljana crucified by hell spawn. They light-painted the chassis with born-to-die war symbols and slogans written in a conlang that not even deep-vex slangbots could crack.

They weren't finished so they shimmied up the cables spanning the Chronoslide Glideway, shooting tungsten at the autonakas below. A huge projectile smashed a windshield, shards of glass shredding the face of the comatose vexxer in the back seat. The autonaka tried to right itself, jack-knifing and smashing into an oncoming Giant. The two vehicles contained three passengers, all vexxing, all lost inside their own private Dream Zones. All dead. Probably didn't know it was happening until their eyes went black.

The reporter was a hologlot, an undead heritage-celeb sim, some politician's wife resurrected from the Unscyld Era, her peculiar physicality necromanticised, digitised and uplifted into a data wrap. The glot's eyes were vacant, its facial features starved and hollow, its body language abused and fearful. It spoke in mangled Slovlis. "The Slovenian Sphinx", they called it, another inscrutable in-joke.

The Sphinx said the attack was the latest in a nationwide spate targeting autonakas, all performed by kids. "Performance" was right. They loved it, the little frightmares, loved the attention. It was as if a psy-ops attack had infected all pre-pubescent humans in the country with uncrackable mind control. It wasn't far from the truth. Terrorists were just starting to learn mind hacks, taking advantage of weak cheater protocols, and kids were easy marks, with their spongy plastic brains, target ranges for heavy psychic bombardment.

The glot entered idle mode, waiting for instructions from the studio, looking furtively from side to side as if it was about to be beaten with a stick. The patient laughed and the left side of his body exploded with pain from the eye socket down.

The Sphinx sparked into life.

"Children are rising up," it said. "The industry is in tatters. The world is collapsing. *Ta folk je čist zmešan*. They want to kill us all and Maker's response? Tweaks to the programming."

Maker was the Chinese megacorp that invented cheaters, the device everyone wore to enter the Vexworld. Maker invented glots, too. Glots only existed when you wore cheaters, hyperactive ghosts living inside your eyes.

"In the next wave of designs," the Sphinx said, "autonakas won't

go near anyone under 183 centimetres tall. *Ful sm hepi!* Bad news for the vertically challenged among us, but to the children, at least, leave us alone. Win-win, right? Same goes for next generation and then so on. Let's call it first wave. We'll speak about second wave soon."

Leave us alone.

Typical, the patient thought. The Sphinx identified with the Giants. Dirty AI, always banding together.

The Sphinx droned on and on. The patient couldn't fathom code beasts. He knew they were still learning, but their crude syntax repulsed him, alienated him from the world. He was in a foul mood anyway. He couldn't concentrate, his vision ruined by a clumpy, stringy film of gel under his cornea, clouding his eyes and forming vague shapes like a sentient cataract.

He turned to the circular mirror in the ceiling above his bed. He saw a man's reflection, a burly nurse. On his white uniform, the nurse wore a badge. On the badge was a coat of arms. The main feature was a woman wearing a backwards baseball cap, grinning maniacally. In her mouth was a purple octopus, its tentacles hugging her face, burrowing deep into her ears, blood dripping from the entry wounds.

Beneath the woman, the badge said: NSK. METELKOVA VELE-
POSLANIŠTVO.

"What does that mean?" the patient said. No answer.

The nurse held the patient's arm in one hand, syringe in the other. He penetrated, withdrew, fiddled with the patient's cheaters. A metal sheet of pain sliced through the patient's body, then creeping numbness. He could see, he couldn't feel, watching the procedure in the mirror, performed on a meat bag that wasn't his.

A woman entered, the surgeon who'd done this to him. She was average height, about 200 centimetres. Long red hair in a bun. Green surgical mask. Cold, predatory eyes. No bedside manner.

"Leave now," she said, in a thick Styrian accent. "Return in two days. No more activations before then."

"Wait," the patient said. "There's something."

The clumps of gel resolved into half-formed letters and numbers, red and glowing, a digital display burned onto his retina.

"Some kind of ... LED output."

"Premature bleed-through. It won't be there soon. You won't see anything like it again until we switch you back on. You saw the hover screen, the Sphinx, didn't you? Your cheaters work. Now, no more. For two days."

Behind her own cheaters, the surgeon blinked a command and the display in the patient's vision died away, engulfed by the gelatinous film.

"The jelly?"

"That's normal. Overproduction of vitreous gel from the operation. In a few hours, it will break off and melt."

The surgeon left. The nurse flipped the patient off the bed, bark-

ing at him to sit in the waiting room until the numbness wore off. The nurse had to help. The patient could barely walk. The nurse didn't like helping. He had it in for castle hunters, but that's why the patient was there, along with a few other deep vexxers. They were testing the latest cheaters, super-beta. Rumour was, the new cheaters were supposed to keep the mind hackers out, and because they were castle hunters, high-grade addicts, they knew the Vexworld better than most. Castle hunters never left the Dream Zones, no better class to test a permanent solution on. The new cheaters weren't just hi-tech specs you wore on your face, like the earlier types, but blades of near-invisible, ultrathin glass sutured to the skull, wired to the brain, code-talking to hippocampus prostheses, lashing the betas to the Vexworld with digital heroin.

The patient guessed there was a hover screen somewhere in the waiting room. There always was, anywhere you went, begging to be materialised, and he tried to shake it down, zigzagging his eyeballs up and down.

The nurse gripped his shoulder.

"Stop it, idiot. You heard. Two days."

The nurse jabbed the patient's thigh with a pen, almost breaking the skin.

"Feel that?"

"Yeah."

"OK, you can go. Remember what the surgeon said."

The patient pointed at the pen.

"That's it? That's your scientific test?"

The nurse was a huge man. He pressed his fist hard against the patient's septum.

"You want I should break your filthy nose instead? See if you're still numb?"

The patient went outside, looking for the barracks where he'd be staying the next few nights. He wasn't allowed to leave the grounds, trapped under grain surveillance like the others.

Near the entrance, an autonaka idled, its screens dominated by reports on the erasable attacks. It spotted the patient and trundled over to him.

"Why do kids attack us?" it said, playing up its speech defect. The hissing and spluttering reverberated inside the patient's brain implant. "It's not your typical teenager-porn scenario. Most common reasons children are aggressive toward us are curiosity, yanking the joystick, wanting to play, but some autonakas, simply, are not suitable for some children."

The patient hated gabby autonakas. They insisted on direct communication via the implants, which interfered with zoning, an unforgivable sin, but they had their uses. If it wasn't for the occasional errand, he wouldn't enter the shell world at all. When he did, he always hailed a Giant. He didn't want his face bitten off by street crazies, his skin boiled away by UV radiation. At least autonakas were safe, he gave them that.

Unless you happened to cross paths with a mob of erasables.

“Yes, the attacks,” the patient said, his heart not in it. “What a thing.”

“The attacks, yes,” the Giant agreed. “Revolt of the very young. One deviant strain that could not be foreseen. Sequence of humans so susceptible to mutagenic chemicals of the planet’s flora they became monsters in the blink of an eye. Minds erased, bodies warped into grotesque gargoyles. Take them to the furnace, nothing but a menace to the population. Or feed them to the telepath war effort. Stir their minds like porridge, once ocular terrorists finish with them.”

Another babbling brook. The patient could no more understand this code beast than all the others.

It was 2am, and the sky was synthetic black. The clinic was in Dravograd, deep in the Northern Wastes. The UV levels were worse in the Wastes than anywhere else because there were no clouds there, ever, at any time, day or night. Freak solar flares and coronal mass ejections had seen to it. That meant the darkest skies, too, pixel-dead like a crashed screen, which is how the patient thought of the shell world anyway, just a stage set for the Vexworld, ready to be illuminated, inhabited and overwritten, again and again.

High above, in Dravograd’s black-hole sky, something drifted into view, an enormous red outline framing a rectangle of black. Inside the rectangle was a glowing glyph: a skull and crossbones. Beneath the glyph, LED alphanumeric spelled out two words: | *Kill* | *Wait* |

Bleed-through? But the surgeon said that wouldn’t happen. The patient panicked, cold-sweat terror, a weightless paranoia with no way home. The sky itself was an overclocked screen, a crashed zone. The boundary separating the shell world from the Vexworld had disintegrated. There was no outside.

Then the black rectangle exploded with blinding white light, revealing the edges, and the patient saw that it was affixed not to the sky but a huge Maker blimp. The error message dissolved, and the screen flickered with colour and motion. If his cheaters were operational, the rectangle would morph into a full-bleed Commercial Dream Zone, 4D immersion in advertising hell.

The Maker logo appeared, then a title: *Maker’s Hit Autonaka Show*.

On the screen, autonakas frolicked with their passengers, accompanied by a strident voiceover: “Meet the next phase of autonakas and the vexxers that love them. A Maker exclusive.”

The patient scoffed at the hastily put-together PR exercise, clearly designed to quell the rising anti-Giant mood, but it was the scar tribes they needed to convince, and they weren’t listening. The only way to protect autonakas was to turn them into tanks.

“The simulation’s got a sense of humour,” he said.

The autonaka piped up.

“Yes. It’s just not possible for sims to be completely serious. We must try to make fun of everything we do, everything we make. The joke

can be on the user or the developer. We're not the joke, so the joke's not on us."

The patient stared at it, a corrosive sadism welling inside him. The sensation gave him hot flushes, intensely uncomfortable and sensuous all at once. Perhaps it was how trainee serial killers felt around small animals. He wanted to drain the life from the Giant, to snuff it from existence, his black heart of ice smashing through his ribcage like a filthy love parasite.

"Shut up, idiot," he snapped. "All I'm saying is, the sky went out but now it's back."

The blimp gathered speed. It vanished behind a forest of high-rise apartment blocks, slithering across the border into Vzhodno Kraljestvo. Desperate to zone again, ignoring the threats of the nurse, the surgeon, he activated the cheaters.

Then he saw them, the summits of the high-rises, topped with hover screens that quadrupled their height, endless pillars of light reaching to the sky, sucking all living creatures into the void until they died.

Simon Sellars is a writer and editor. His latest book is *Applied Ballardianism: Memoir from a Parallel Universe* (Urbanomic, 2018), described by *The Guardian* as "a brilliantly written genre mashup, a wonderfully original mix of cultural theory, literary exegesis, travelogue and psychopathological memoir." He lives in Melbourne, Australia.

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