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Publication Date

2023

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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA SAN DIEGO

How to misread properly: The Metaphor in the Real

A Dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements
for the degree Doctor of Philosophy

in

Communication

by

Juan José Rojo Solis

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2023

The Dissertation of Juan José Rojo Solis is approved, and it is acceptable in quality and form for publication on microfilm and electronically.

University of California San Diego

2023

DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to Arcelia Nogueira, master witch and semiotician, all-around bad-ass, and as sweet and generous as they come. I miss you.

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VITA

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

How to Misread Properly: The Metaphor in the Real

by

Juan José Rojo Solis

Doctor of Philosophy in Communication

University of California San Diego, 2023

Professor Fernando Dominguez, Chair

This dissertation explores the misreading of figurative language (mainly metaphors), especially when literalized, in “sites” where reality is challenged by these misreadings. The “proper” mode of reading metaphors tends towards abstraction (metaphorical “meaning”), while “improper” readings veer towards materiality (literal interpretations) forming a familiar two-poled continuum that goes from the material to the abstract. Science fiction becomes the means of transportation between these different sites, as literalizing metaphorical

language is one of the basic mechanisms of speculative fiction, which disagrees with reality while explaining it through its prophetic mode.

There is a double danger of reading metaphors. The first is reading them properly, abstracting features and transporting them. This abstraction reduces the world to data, and enforces, by different methods, the realization of the ways the information is organized. This danger is studied as the mechanism of speculative finances, the border wall and extractivism, a process I call *mise-en-force* by which abstract value is enforced and material wealth is extracted. This procedure forces itself on a world that is materially collapsing (ecological disaster; species extinction; rogue-weather). Abstraction is co-related to the ecological/health/political crisis the world is going through, intimately related to colonialism.

The second danger, literalizing metaphors, is characterized by certainty, and rounds up fundamentalism, conspiracy theories, indigenous cosmogonies, lack of intelligence and madness (especially delusions). Misreading metaphors is pathologized, almost criminalized. The procedure for understanding figurative language becomes a major, even decisive factor, in the production of subjectivity (according to psycho- and schizoanalysis). Abstraction is the mandatory way in which the algorithmic unconscious works. It is political: its effects bypass the difference between abstraction and materiality.

Literalizing metaphors is also a strategy to make sense of the world. Science fiction's literalizations make the complex world we are living in "available for representation" in the same way a delusion, or any conspiracy theory, is always an attempt to understand the world. The difference between facts and ficts is hard to tell apart when the authority of the Other — language, the law— is failing.

In order to break away from the dichotomy between abstraction and materiality, this dissertation understands metaphors as a coupling between different species: a device that creates a productive becoming between categories that are seemingly disparate. Metaphor is, by definition, as much an ontological device as a transdisciplinary one, which is why I use the opportunities this device allows me as a methodology, preferring trajects to arguments, and thoughts to logical sentences. A proposal to understand metaphors through double negations that shortcircuit the difference between the abstract and the material is attempted, through the use of both anthropology and, not surprisingly, theories and practices of magic and madness.

INTRODUCTION: CATEGORIES AND CRISIS

People in the so-called first world live seven hours of their waking life staring at screens (Moody, 2022). It takes approximately one 64 millionth of a second to conduct a financial trade (Reed, 2021). Video chatting, live, with someone on the other side of the world is business as usual. Human contact has been declared dangerous, possibly lethal (at least during the coronavirus pandemic). Fake news surround us. Artificial Intelligence programs are taking decisions. Oxford philosophers and Harvard astronomers are calculating the chance that our reality is a simulation (Falk, 2019) or an experiment (Ho Tran, 2021). Meanwhile, “the size of the populations of mammals, birds, fish, amphibians and reptiles has decreased by a worrying 68% since 1970” and “we lose one species almost every hour in the world” (WWF, 2022). According to NASA, some parts of the world will be uninhabitable by 2050 due to climate change (Chatal, 2022). “The richest 10% today snap up 52 percent of all income” (Stanley, 2022) with “the richest 1% grabbing nearly two-thirds of the \$42 trillion of wealth newly-created since 2020” (Bucher, 2023). Human waste will probably outlive the species.

The world seems to be ending. Or at least “a” world. Our abstract, controlled, and simulated realities seem to be thriving. The material world doesn’t seem to be so healthy.

At the same time, we “understand” the world better than everyone ever before in the history of humankind. Understanding shows the same rising trend as our continuous crises. We have more data, and more ways to process it, than ever before. Our world seems to be disappearing, disintegrating materially or dematerializing virtually.

The proper ways of reading, of understanding, are not holding up. The same arguments against the irrationality of conspiracy theories are wielded (by the same economic

class, by the way) against indigenous cosmologies in order to mine their lands. We are in the middle of a “mental health” crisis (going either very crazy or very very depressed), a “sense-making” crisis (how to tell facts and lies apart?) and always on the verge of another economic crash. Our reality has been reduced to crisis management.

This dissertation is a plea for misreading, for not understanding properly.

The point of entry to my subject is metaphors, mainly when misread, especially when literalized. That explains the subtitle of this essay: the metaphor on the real. Confusing abstract language with material reality. Not getting it.

Misreading metaphors has a terrible reputation, almost criminal, in academic writing. A metaphor can be usefully defined as a “category mistake” (Kirklin, 2007) in the *Journal of Medical Ethics*¹, while what philosopher of language Joseph Stern defines as the mistaken “literal deviancy hypothesis” understands metaphors as relying on the “falsity, necessary falsity, categorical violation, or semantic anomalousness perceived” (Stern, *Metaphor in context*, 2000) in metaphorical expressions. Metaphors are by themselves invitations to misread. And their misreadings have been characterized on a range that goes from “broken tropes” and “linguistic dysfunction” in a wonderful reading of Kafka’s literature (Saffranowska, 2019) to “thought disturbances” when analyzing the 18th century prophetic delusions of James Mathew Tilly by historian of medicine Roy Porter to a very categorical “crippled epistemologies” with which legal scholars Cass Sunstein and Adrian Vermeule explain the belief in conspiracy theories. From “aberrant abstraction scores” related to proverb interpretation in schizophrenia as explained by scholars from the Psychiatry

¹ I would have to add that Kirkland uses “intentional category mistake,” the intentional part of which I will be tackling later.

Department of the University of Chicago (Rosen et al, 2021) and neurolinguist Lancker “bizarre interpretations,” (Lancker, 1990) while Lacan aligns symptoms and metaphors, literal interpretations can be understood as a telltale sign of psychosis in psychoanalysis and schizophrenia —“our most troubling madness” according to anthropologist TM Luhrman— in psychiatry. Even a professor of religion like Paul H. Jones (2007) insists that “a literal reading of the Bible is an exercise in self-sabotage” and, if we think religions are mainly to be understood as metaphorical devices, their literal understanding could well be called a fundamentalist approach. “Mythmaking consciousness” according to Ernst Cassirer, involves as “short-coming, a weakness of language” which allows “a fundamental assumption... that the potency of the real thing is contained in the name.” This difficulty with proper readings was mobilized, at the turn of the 19th to 20th century, as a hallmark of “primitive thinking,” mistaking the name for the thing. Magic is defined by Aleister Crowley, perhaps its 20th century most important theorist and practitioner, as a “disease of language”, which he stole from Friedrich Max Müller, a 19th century German philologist, that used the phrase to explain mythology.

Misreading metaphors has very bad (academic) press. Its qualitative semiotic corpus seems categorically negative in both nouns (mistake, deviancy, falsity, violation, anomalousness, dysfunction, disorder, sabotage, short-coming, weakness, disease) and adjectives (broken, crippled, aberrant, bizarre, troubling, primitive). I am pretty sure even you, gracious readers, have felt at least a little bit awkward and maybe even dumb when misreading a metaphor that everyone else seemed to understand.

The dissertation deals with two key interpretative strategies to understand metaphor that travel along the axis of a previously understood continuum that goes from the abstract to the material. The “proper” reading tends towards abstraction (the metaphorical “meaning”), while the “improper” readings veer towards materiality (“literal” interpretations). “Proper” readings are, of course, the recommended, healthy ways of approaching metaphors, and the contending explanations of how they are achieved are sprinkled by what we might call a success grammar commonly used by linguists and social scientists (which could easily be mistaken for propaganda): JL Austin talks about “felicitous” speech acts, Harold Garfinkel speaks about human organization in terms of “accomplishments,” Grice proposes a “cooperative principle” that underlies understanding and using language properly.

The abstract procedure to successfully unpack a metaphor goes something like this: a metaphor establishes a relationship of similitude between its constituent terms A and B (target and vehicle). The probable characteristics of both terms are abstracted and the proper reading consists of correctly choosing which of those abstracted properties will be translated from the vehicle to the target. The proper transferal of some of the sun’s characteristics (but not all) is what makes Shakespeare’s “Juliet is the sun” work². The correct way to “read” a metaphor takes as a starting point the difference between words and things, signs with their referents, and this is the normalized, healthy and successful way to understand language.

The first danger of reading metaphors is to take this abstract interpretation as normative. The abstraction of the characteristics of words and things, as a general interpretative mode, derives into the “realization” of those characteristics, because they supplant the object they describe, idealizing it, rendering it immaterial. Bifo Berardi

² And this is, of course, a coarse generalization. Metaphors seldom consist of just two explicit terms. Shakespeare had already conjured up the Word “east,” thereby declaring Juliet coming out of her window not just any sun, but the rising one.

characterizes this general tendency —“abstraction of work from activity, abstraction of goods from usefulness, abstraction of time from sensuousness” (2012,36)— as a progressive tendency “that started with capitalist industrialization” and that “culminates” with speculative finances. This abstraction is part of the constant measuring and parceling of the world by which both the State and Capital literalize and turn themselves material, using an abstract grid that does not measure the world, but organizes it. There are two main cases for this in the dissertation, The first is both credit and speculative finances in chapter 3 and 4, and the border wall between Mexico and the United States in chapter 10, an abstract line that has insidiously materialized as a wall against which proper readings are mise-en-forced. The proper reading of metaphors is part of a particular production of subjectivity.

On the other side is the improper reading of metaphors, which veers toward the material side of the continuum. Herein lies the second danger of reading metaphors, and it might as well be characterized as both madness and fundamentalism, which is the certainty that language coincides perfectly with reality in a very particular way and enforcing that coincidence. “Taken (i.e., "mis-taken") literally, metaphors cease to function as sources of insight, but rather they blind and they limit us; they lose their cognitive utility and we instead are "used" by them,” writes religion scholar Thomas Raposa, which could explain fundamentalism: the certainty that some things cannot be read metaphorically but are totally literal. On the other hand, Freud wrote that a schizophrenic “treats words like things.” One of the main differences between these two approaches is a question of sociality. While the madman is a lonely figure whose particular misreading of the world is individual (as explored in chapters 6 and 7), fundamentalism is a social phenomenon, several people agree

on a literal truth which makes it harder to dismiss, and is the baseline phenomenon of cults, conspiracy theories and religion in general.

But when one notices that the same argument is used to characterize the mentally ill, children, and indigenous cultures one has to wonder whether this might be part of the construction of an other, an alterity, which deviates from an accepted and proper way of understanding reality, from a uni-verse, emphasizes on its single nature: one version.

A proper reading of metaphors implies understanding them as comparisons. However, the point of a metaphor is to reject comparisons. It is the most ontological of all rhetorical figures. It doesn't state "A is like B," that is the province of its shy cousin, the simile. A metaphor flatly states that A is B. It is not a technique of definition (which fixes a proper, common meaning for words), it is closer to what Holbraad conceptualizes as an "infinite" ("an inventive definition") and which Marilyn Strathern explains as "a categorical announcement that will provide a newly conceived baseline for future action, inaugurating new meaning." (2018, *Opening up relations*) A metaphor that works as such is inaugural, it opens up different relationships to both things and words, both of which are a set of relations. A metaphor rearranges those relations. A thing, as well as a word, exists in complicities. A misread metaphor testes those complicities. It estranges them. Misreading metaphors is as much creative as it is critical. And political.

Misreading metaphors has been systematically pathologized, even if, as a device that oscillates between the abstract and the material, you can see it at work in several sites, which form the core of my research. This dissertation is also an exploration of—as well as a search for— sites, genres and situations where reality is contested, in several ways and through

several fronts. That is my field of study: sites, situations and genres that disagree with reality. The list is long: it happens wherever categories go into crisis. We have animation and comics that, free from the shackles of photo-realism, can sidestep the rigorous discipline of physical laws. Speculative genres (science fiction, fantasy and horror for the sake of this dissertation) generally approach us by showing us a “different reality.” Ecology, social justice initiatives and border studies point out the mechanisms through the world is unfairly constructed (and destroyed). Chapter 10 explores what I call experiential fictions, which are closely related to pranks, as well as to interventions and interferences (artistic or not) in public spaces. There’s outsider art and the discussion on how to understand art done by people outside the institutionalized channels (self-taught artists, psychiatric inmates, prisoners) and its self-built architectural counterpart: visionary environments. But madness also fits the “disagreeing with reality” description, particularly psychoses, with its delusions, hallucinations and deliriums. Religions occupies a highly contested and highly violent, site, as well as animism, indigenous ontologies and cosmologies, and, of course, conspiracy theories.

The dissertation uses science fiction as the means of transportation throughout these sites, the thread which traverses these different disciplines, situations and genres. I use science fiction as a Istvan Csicsery-Ronay defines it: “mode of awareness.” More so than a genre, it is a way to understand a highly complex world. The pervasive feeling that social reality seems like science fiction (which was highly enhanced by the pandemic) points to the privileged position science fiction occupies in terms of explaining our strange reality because it does so by exploring the impact of science and technology in our daily life.

And there are at least two theories that explain science fiction as a genre that literalizes rhetorical language, a reading procedure that takes metaphors as real. Samuel Delany did so in the 70's, starting at the sentence level (try reading "a thousand universes exploded in her head" in science-fiction mode) but it is Seo-Young Cho's brilliant *Do Metaphors Dream of Literal Sleep?* that informs this dissertation.

I argue that all speculative genres rely on a productive misreading. The fantastic, according to Todorov, relies "on a hesitation... located on the level of the literal meaning." Science fiction would be a particular approach to this hesitation, in which the literalization of the metaphor is rationalized through a scientific, modern explanation. "Science fiction is fantasy for people who like explanations," jokes musicologist Phil Ford, and a very particular kind of explanation, I might add: one that bases the disagreement with reality in scientific and rational terms. Science fiction provides an interesting angle with which to approach speculative finances (chapter 3), conspiracy theories (chapter 5) and influential machines (a psychoanalytic term used to explain delusions in which a machine controls our thoughts or bodies, chapter 8).

Understanding fantastic elements as literalizations of figurative language also allows the dissertation to understand why religion and mythology (chapter 5), indigenous ontologies (chapter 2), hallucinations and delusions (chapter 6 and 7) and magic (chapter 9) are characterized as misreadings, either pathological or just plain mistaken.

This is exactly where Seo-Young Cho's explanation of literalization in science fiction becomes extremely helpful. Our reality, Cho explains, has grown "less accessible over the past several centuries and will continue to evolve in that direction for decades (if not centuries) to come." We live in a reality that has become increasingly difficult to understand

(“financial derivatives are more cognitively estranging than pennies; global climate change is more cognitively estranging than yesterday’s local weather” Cho explains). Science fictional literalized metaphors attempt to “render cognitively estranging referents available for representation.” Metaphors allow understanding of a fugitive reality. And if literalizing metaphors is an attempt to make sense of a world that defies explanation, well, so are religions, indigenous ontologies, conspiracy theories and delusions, all of them showing us a world that we are not available to see, even if we are inhabiting it.

The literalization of rhetorical language constitutes the prophetic element of science fiction: this “mode of awareness” allows people to make the present state of things “available for representation.” In this sense, it is as much a reality probe for the present as an exploration of the future. I call this the “prophet mode,” an apparent misunderstanding of the world that creates confusion between the literal and the abstract interpretation of a metaphor but also seems, somehow, to predict the future by actually articulating the present. The “prophet mode” literalizes metaphors as a sometimes-desperate attempt to articulate what is already happening. It is the realm of both charlatans and visionaries. This discursive approach can be found as a theoretical approach (which I explore in chapter 9), a literary device (Burrough’s cut-up method, for example, through which “the future leaks”) and a magical practice (divination, invocation, materialization, hyperstition), but also as an explanation of delusions (understood, through Darian Leader in chapter 7, as steps towards healing and not symptoms of a disease). Chapter 8 explores “the prophet mode” through the sadly wonderful case of James Edward Tilly’s —an inmate of the Royal Bethlem Hospital from 1797 to 1814 — delusion, in which thoughts and actions were controlled though the

fumes of a pneumo-chemical machine which he called the “air loom.” Tilly’s delusional idea, conceived between the French and the Industrial Revolution, is the first modern delusion (in which a machine substitutes supernatural creatures as agents of control), the first case-study of a delusion (jump-starting psychiatry), as well as the first conspiracy theory (well and alive today: machines control us, wouldn’t we agree?) and the first modern example of a science-fictional mode of awareness: science fiction in the wild, before the genre was packed as a product into books, magazines, movies and video-games (almost three decades before Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*). For Tilly, the science-fictional device was very, very —and horribly—, real.

Misreading metaphors usually takes on a material, concrete reality. Literalizing figurative language involves ascribing language a material reality (which it always has: it’s called media), and enhancing its “sensuous vivacity” as Cho puts it. It involves a materializing that can also be understood as embodiment. It takes on the real. Hallucinations might be understood as this, but also symptoms, if read through a psychoanalytical lens. Risking the improper reading procedure takes on material weight.

Discussing metaphors are purely ornamental seems naïve nowadays (and if they are mainly ornamental they are probably also very boring). Lakoff and Johnson have placed “conceptual metaphors” as reality-building devices, organizing the way humans understand the world, while bodily occupying it. “Our ordinary conceptual system, in terms of which we both think and act, is fundamentally metaphoric in nature,” they write.

As a way of navigating the different disciplinary strictures have around metaphors, I have decided to define metaphors fuzzily, mainly by taking them out of linguistics and

thinking through them as a device, almost an action, as well as a practice, that has effects in the world, depending on how it is approached. Linguistics and literary analysis in academic circles sustain a radical difference between words and things, a point of view categorically denied by the most radical forms, sites and situations of misreading figurative language, like magic, and religion (specifically religious experience). Starting with the traditional success-oriented, truth or false binary simplification and linguistic-based explanations of metaphor seems like an embedded bias, which I try to avoid.

This dissertation is an effort to understand metaphors as a coupling between different species, which will not only produce strange offspring but that will also put into question the conceptual framework through which the species involved are differentiated. In a sense, I understand metaphors as non-reproductive, actually productive, asexual engendering: sex without matching genitals. If approached so, metaphors become the site of unexpected mutualism, a hinge with which to bridge and question categorical assumptions about the usual, taken-for-granted complicities, a condition that provides insight, wonder, horror and humor.

Attempting to short-circuit the difference between things and words, between representation and reality, allows us to understand metaphors as both a procedure (a technique, if you will) and an action. The sometimes outrageous but always productive aspect of misreading metaphors is the reason why Paul Ricoeur understands them as living, and why Rorty sees the literalization of metaphors as the engine of culture.

This conception of metaphors refuses to treat them as intentional. The coupling between different species occurs all the time around us. The coupling is beyond our control: it is a way the world lives. Metaphors can be unconscious and invisible to us (as conceptual

metaphors are): it is something that happens whenever categories try to take a hold of reality. The flooding of our daily reality with words and images and codes and winks, nudges and shoves makes it impossible to stop categorical promiscuity. That is what Burroughs cut-up method is about: learning to deal with all of these weird and unnoticed couplings. It's about time we cease to think of the subject as the sole place of enunciation. The whole multiverse speaks, and the capitalist universe does so in a particularly loud and ceaseless way.

This essay locates, in lieu of a conclusion, a possibility to bypass the figurative/literal binary opposition, along with the truth/false, abstract/concrete and reality/fiction ones: a way to misread properly and avoid both the abstract and literal dangers of reading a metaphor. It does so using Deleuze's open contempt of anything that appears to be metaphoric, because the proper reading of metaphors is already a surrender to a very particular way of dealing with reality that takes the binary oppositions previously described as foundational. Deleuze and Guattari propose "becomings" as an antidote, "metamorphosis" as a solution. Their example of the becoming between an orchid and a wasp serves as the perfect example: although neither changes species, they become each other in order to have a relation.

Double negations seem to do the trick. Cho understands science fiction as being both counter-literal and counter-figurative. Its power resides in avoiding that opposition. Science fiction can't be totally understood as fictional/figurative because it somehow describes the way we are living in the world, but it also can't be understood as literal because, as fiction, it can't be understood totally as real. Science fiction, according to Cho is counter-literal and counter-figurative as much as it is counter-factual and counter-fictional. Even though science

fiction operates in that blurry area, it has been packaged as fiction in order to bracket its operation.

Erik Davis describes “weird skepticism” as the attitude that Philip K Dick, Terence McKenna and Phillip K Dick approached what could be accounted as both psychotic breakdowns or mystical experiences they underwent in the seventies, an oscillation between acknowledging their experiences as real but also doubting their reality. Anthropologist Rane Willerslev explains, through a double negation formula, the elk-imitating activities of Yukaghur hunters in Siberia: by acting as the elk he wishes to hunt, the hunter achieves a highly risky state where he is “not-animal, not-not animal.”

Double negation may provide a point of entry for multiplicities that bypasses binary opposition. The formula appears to be clear: misreading properly implies taking figurative language as “not literal, not-not literal”, and “not metaphoric, not-not metaphoric.”

Then again, we should also remember double negatives are “bad grammar” and “should never be used in formal settings” (Gina, 2023).

“A degenerating research programme” is the way philosopher of science Imre Lakatos characterized bad science³, and it is also a fair description of how writing this experimental dissertation has felt all the way. But then again, this dissertation is all about making the wrong choices the best way possible: it is an invitation to misread properly. A few methodological/aesthetical notes are due.

This dissertation is an attempt to map out how and why misreading metaphors has turned out to be so dangerous and earnestly wrong, according to “proper” academic press. It

³ “If a program predicts nothing new or its predictions can’t be tested, then it is bad science and might be degenerating to the point of pseudo-science” is the way Baggot (2020) understands Lakatos.

tries to do so by methodologically using metaphor's category mistake: jumping through disciplines, categories and frames of reference, partly because of sheer intellectual curiosity, a sense of play and humor inherent in the "mistaken" nature of metaphorical readings and because of the impossibility (and the writer's intellectual incapacity) of diving deeply and specifically into each of the disciplines that were mentioned in the above paragraphs. Usually, dissertations tend to be in-depth investigations into a phenomenon. This one, probably mistakenly, prefers the amplitude afforded by researching the standing of the metaphoric and the literal in more disciplines, knowing full well what it sacrifices in depth. Finishing the dissertation would have been impossible if I had taken the necessary time to immerse myself more deeply in each discipline: it is a lifetime's work. I am sure I missed a dozen gems that would surely clarify a lot of my doubts. There was always the feeling that I could learn more from each of the disciplines and sub-disciplines that this essay mobilizes, and I apologize before-hand because experts will certainly notice my knowledge gaps. Once again, I hope the curiosity-driven breadth of the research compensates for its disciplinary shortcomings.

The proper reading of metaphors gets all the good press. This is an attempt to balance out the situation.

As a method, I try to avoid arguments as much as possible. Instead, I use a transversal approach that privileges trajectories over arguments. Most of the chapters in this dissertation start with a subject and end up with a different one, and although they are thematically united, they are what I call *throughs*. Things are *throughs*, as are ideas. I have characterized them as complicities, as strategies to weave together things that seemed to be different, creating co-incidences. There's nothing but *throughs*, and our desperate attempts to control

them. I am not interested in isolating an “object” and studying as much as I am interested in how the object can turn into something else. Instead of subjects or objects of study, I have tried to think about *trajects*. To do so, I work with micro-cases in each chapter, using them as examples that help me get through the thoughts and map out the trajectory.

This dissertation attempts to use the misreading of metaphors as a method in order to avoid “ways of knowing and communicating that are categorically distinct from their objects,” which is the proper academic way to deal with knowledge (and metaphors): through abstraction. It is political not only because it ties “proper” ways of reading with extraction and colonization, but also because it criticizes the proper way of producing knowledge through abstractions and impersonal/objective narratives. It tries to find ways around the grammar that constitutes the reality principle of modernity. It formally insists on misreadings.

This essay criticizes the normativity that abstraction has imposed in the ways we think and interact with the world. There is not a more ossified, rigid and codified genre than academic writing. It assumes that “freezing” aesthetics and keeping up a form as strictly as possible produces objective, common-coded knowledge, and an abstract knowledge that has no relationship to our bodies or the ways we read. It believes that standardizing “proper” ways of dealing with disembodied information produces truth, while what it mostly does is categorize the world in order to discipline it: “these many books sing me no song or showed me no dance,” as Amiria Salmond wrote about most academic writing.

As a defense against abstraction, I tried to mobilize aesthetic choices:

Most people I know who talk about political ideas seem to think that the idea can be reduced to some core statements. I think that’s untrue and that it is the

atmosphere in tone, the resonances in which ideas are conveyed, and that is art... So the writing becomes – as I put it – what the writing is about (Taussig, 2019).

The aesthetics then, must be situated. I have written this dissertation as a transborder 50ish old Mexican living mostly in Tijuana and working in San Diego. This dissertation should also be considered as a reflection on borders and their policing. In this case, I'm interested in the borders between proper and mistaken readings of metaphors, and there's no hiding I try to break through that distinction. It's that border thing. I've also written most of this dissertation through the coronavirus pandemic and a worldwide confusion about bodies, contact, information and contagion. I hope it shows.

This is, then, an aesthetic experiment with theory; it is not about “the search for truth but rather the playing around with the aesthetic constitution of truth” (Flusser, 2019).

The dissertation is designed because that was the most effective way I found to provoke the appearance of the body (that's what aesthetics do); tweaking the form at least allows the hesitation speculative genres rely upon. I try to confront the reader with blown up “quotes” that challenge a proper reading. The writing style is meant to lead the reader through the strange juxtapositions misreading metaphor afford: I aim for a sensuous, “felt” effect, not an abstract one. The aim is a political corpo-material knowledge that challenges the usual ways in which knowledge is produced. I am arguing that misreading figurative language is a way of thinking and acting, so I do my best to explore it.

This is a dissertation about speculation and about madness that tries to mobilize delusional thinking as a critical method. If it sometimes reads as free association it is because it explores how free association works, and how a mechanism, the metaphor, can explain

what seems like gratuitous leaps, or at least make them salvageable. If it sounds delirious, maybe it is: that is exactly the problem with the metaphor on the real.

I'm feeling confident as I write these notes, but I have to confess I felt I was going crazy several times while writing it. After all, this is a dissertation about misreading. At the very least, it is a collection of mistakes and failures. It could not be otherwise.

CHAPTER 1: MEDIA AND COUPLINGS

“Words are alive like animals” is what I wish William Burroughs had written when I started looking for a quote I remembered reading as an epigram in anthropologist Michael Taussig’s book “Palma Africana”, where he explores mimetical practices in mono-crop palm development in (mainly) Colombia. African palm is a capitalist driven “cash crop”, one of the most ubiquitous ones, a machinic invasion and colonization of the swamp and riverland which Taussig studies: an “ecological menace”, a dangerous business that has also given a new job to the people who had been paramilitaries in Colombia’s war against guerrillas. The (x)paramilitary units —as Taussig names them to acknowledge the fact that there was a national agreement where guerrilla and paramilitaries agreed to lay down arms— still kill people and work under contract of the high-yielding Palma Africana money machine. They still practice methodical terror and murder, but now do it to help out the proliferation of palm farming. “Fats, oils, margarines, sauces, emulsions, soaps, shampoos, cosmetics, creams, inks, paints, resins, lubricants, glycerin, and green diesel fuel” are just some of the “slippery, sliding, bubbly commodities” (2018, 244) that Taussig traces to the palm oil produced by the OxG hybrid palm, also known, he reports, as “the American Hope”. Taussig characterizes palm oil as “the contemporary elixir from which all manner of being emerges, the metamorphic sublime, an alchemist’s dream⁴.”

This “metamorphicity” has a sexual component, even if this particular sex occurs between species. The OxG Palm “is unlikely to reproduce naturally, yet more able to resist

⁴ This process is not restricted to so-called “living things”: oil is a good example of the metamorphic sublime. It is a mark of extractivism

plagues (for the moment) while at the same time it is highly productive.” So it needs help. Taussig describes the photographs from a promotional book (*Palma de Aceite Colombiana*, 2013, 89) as “pornographic botany” (154):

One woman is kneeling by an adult palm with a plastic tube in her mouth blowing sperm into the tiny flowers. In another photo a dark-skinned young woman wearing bright pink jeans and a coal black jacket and cap guides the inseminating tool in her right hand while with her left she pushes back the palm branches studded with fierce thorns. (74)

But Taussig also writes about the people who inhabit the Colombian swamps, who have their own practicing system of mimesis, what Viveiros de Castro tries to explain as “perspectivism”. Rane Willerslev gives this account of perspectivism:

Viveiros de Castro proposes that, for cultures which subscribe to what he calls 'perspectivist notions', different subjects or persons, and non-humans, inhabit the world. Each of these has a point of view or perspective which provides it with a 'humanness', such that it sees itself as humans see themselves; animals and spirits thus live in households and kin groups similar to those of humans. However, an evil spirit or a predatory animal will see a human as prey, to the same extent that prey animals will see humans as evil spirits or predators. The point is that different species see things in similar or identical ways to humans, but what they see is different and depends on the body they have. However, bodies and the particular perspectives which they facilitate are exchangeable, because behind them lie subjectivities in the form of souls, which are formally

identical in human and non-human persons. Thus, Viveiros de Castro argues, humans and animals can traverse the ordinary Self/Other divide but remain essentially the same (Willerslev, 629-630)⁵.

So, alongside the “fabulous mimesis with woman of color impregnating the ‘Hope of America’”, we also get shamans turning into jaguars, and a pervasive need to adopt several perspectives to even try to understand the practices that allow (x)paramilitaries to care for the proper reproduction of global commodities in a predator-prey relationship that transcends species. Mimetic strategies are everywhere, hinging realities. “Palma Africana”, the book, is also a “meditation on capitalism and ethnographic writing”, on the way writing is also a mimetic practice, and its ability to hinge, change, or even depict the strange realities that are articulated.⁶ As an attempt to capture this “freaky realism” (65), Taussig turns to William Burroughs writing experiments.

But no, Burroughs hadn’t written what I remembered —“Words are alive like animals”— and neither had Taussig. What William Burroughs had actually written was this:

Cut-ups? But of course. I have been a cut-up for years and why not? Words know where they belong better than you do. I think of words as being alive like animals. They don’t like to be kept in pages. Cut the pages and let the words out”(Burroughs, 1964).

⁵ Willerslev tries to counter-weigh Viveiros perspectivist abstraction with Taussig’s mimesis, or imitation, as will be discussed in chapter 11, as well as the transformation’s relation with Deleuze and Guattari’s becomings.

⁶ Sophie Chao frames it, where “the instabilities, fragmentation, shock, and phantomlike qualities of the modern— meaning here agribusiness—are to be subject... to the premodern modes of perception as well as the modern, rather than held apart and distinct.” (Taussig, 18)

Burroughs wrote this as part of “The Literary techniques of Lady Sutton”, while exploring his famous cut-up technique, an “amusing exercise” as he describes it. Lady Sutton-Smith, who “haunted as she put it a villa in the Marshan (Tangiers) overlooking the sea” was old and arthritic, so she wrote, daily, the walk her “servant” would make to the market and what he would see and who he would meet and what they would say in the first of three columns. When the servant returned, she wrote his account of the walk in the second column, while the third would serve as the place to reflect on the relations of the first pair. Lady Sutton-Smith was cut-upping her and her servants life, intrigued by the coincidences and deviations this produced. She was doing this through *procedure*, a material algorithm, repeating steps. How did Lady Sutton-Smith calculate the odds of success for correctly scripting one of these errands? How was she doing? What was her success rate?

Cut-up is a practice that William Burroughs experimented with through most of the 60s. It is a highly conceptual but strictly material procedure for reproduction. It is highly conceptual as a loose set of instructions that the creator follows. It starts up as cutting pages of different books (or texts), placing them together, and typing the results in a new page, but soon evolves in different ways, like the fold-in (folding the page in half so you can also read half of the page below) or even using tape recorders (and film) to accelerate, record, tape over and mix different sound environments, conversations or whatever. Burroughs was actually very excited about it. You could “read” the world in a whole different way: “Yes how many of you know how to *read*?” Burroughs advises to:

Sit down in a café somewhere drink a coffee read the papers and *listen* don't talk to yourself . . . (‘How do I look? What do they *think* of me?') Forget *me*. Don't talk. Listen and look out as you read... Note what you see and hear as

you read what words and look at what picture. These are *intersection points*.

Note these intersection points in the margin of your paper. Listen to what is being said around you and look at what is being said around you.

Burroughs instructions are a way of making sense of the world, to have a particular “reading” of it, by trying to bring elements that appear to be unrelated into a productive dialogue that hinges apparently disparate realities, as much as Taussig is trying to find those points of connection that bring together genetic manipulation and shamanism, and the way they are articulated.

Because, even if it’s highly conceptual, the cut-up is also strictly material. You need media devices for any cut-up: printed books, tape recorders. Scissors, writing machines. Pens, film. People, places. Perhaps that’s why McLuhan wrote, in 1964, that Burroughs “is attempting to reproduce in prose what we accommodate every day as a commonplace aspect of life in the electric age.” Cut-up was every day life. And Burroughs was trying to make sense, through writing, of a reality that runs on electricity, at least according to McLuhan.

The cut-up procedure was also being automatized. Changing radio stations or zapping TV channels are 20th century analog — but electrically-driven— improvements of the cut-up: your zapping would start with a phrase from a newscast which would be continued with sound bytes from Homer Simpson, a fragment of a homily from the Pope and could end with some final remarks from Hitler, and a beautiful tooth-paste smile, if you shut down your device at the right time (actually, the cut-up goes on infinitely). And that’s how cut-up reads, beyond devices, but grounded on them; as a translator, a coupler, of different material instruments, that provides a working relationship —which some could call non-sensical—

between them. And why wouldn't it be non-sensical: When I started reading Adbuster's magazine, they claimed that any person living in a big city is subjected to 5,000 messages a day. The average was raised, four years ago, to 10,000.⁷ Receiving so many messages a day, it's almost a miracle that we manage to have any thoughts at all. Or even remain sane. Which maybe we aren't, if we actually *read* as Burroughs advised.

The wild, absurd juxtapositions of television, newspapers and radio have now been tamed by the most guarded algorithms of search engines and data processing, which are, after all, complex procedures. Even if the cut-up effect is similar, as when you start researching a subject and end up watching a videoclip you hadn't, the road that took you from point A to point X, is saved as "history", and organized, patterned and even managed and induced, as such. Television made really wild and weird associations, just by itself. Zapping is crazy. But the internet is better behaved: pop-ups and targeted advertisements try to maintain a coherent environment of what you might want (to buy, at least). Any social media feed is a self-regenerative curated cut-up, always metamorphing (into) what you (and the algorithms you are subjected to) want to see, a cut-up that produces "you".

The essential algorithm of "cut and paste" powers human use of computers, echoing Lev Manovich's dictum: "Avant-garde aesthetic strategies became embedded in the commands and interface metaphors of computer software," (258) which is to say that avant-

⁷ Ten years ago, Patricia Torres started a video project in which she would document all the message she saw throughout her day. She gave up at around 1,000. It was just too much. She guessed that the actual number would be way beyond the 5,000 (the rate she was using a decade ago).

garde techniques, in which we could include the cut-up, end up, sooner or later, at the very least, as Photoshop filters or Tik Tok transitions.⁸

If words are alive as animals, we would have to assume that they reproduce. They certainly do couple, with other words, with other wills, with other materials (what we call media), and they certainly produce offspring, sometimes seemingly monstrous evolutionary dead-ends, especially if you set them free with cut-ups. But for a long-time now, the cut-up not only grounds our reality, but produces it.

Or at least that's how Taussig explores the (x)paramilitary/dark-skinned third-world-women/Hope-of-America producing machine, as the metamorphical sublime: "saturating everything from potato chips to nail polish, palm oil has made its way into half of the packaged goods in our supermarkets" (Taussig, 2018b). Taussig brings Burroughs in order to try to make sense of this particular understanding of editing—of programming transitions into— this multiple-mattered reproductive montage.

Granting "aliveness" to words also helps us bridge not-only the animal divide but also the non-living one. If words are alive then everything is, and everything is capable of both reproduction and transformation, and it also allows humans to relate themselves to "matter" and "animals" in a different way, or at least from a different perspective. Which is what

⁸ This is, of course, part of a greater strategy, as Oliver Harris frames it: "Adorno's well-known culture-industry thesis, that the avant-garde is to capital what research is to development, has been more successfully updated than refuted" (Harris, 1997).

caught me concerning the Burroughs epigram “words as being alive as animals”, because his most famous argument about language is “language is a virus.”

This phrase makes the transition from something alive like an animal to a much more menacing undeadness. This is probably William Burroughs best known phrase⁹, and it has been on my mind whenever I try to think about the coronavirus epidemic and infodemic, and the political difficulty of not only telling, but keeping them apart. Thierry Bardini has argued that Burroughs was the “patient zero” of the hypervirus because it was first detected in his writing, and calls the virus “the master trope of ‘postmodern culture’ (whatever that is)”, theorized by Derrida, Foucault, Baudrillard and Deleuze, in addition to Dawkins, a “threat” to bodies, cultures and computers. But Burroughs didn’t understand the virus as a “trope”:

My general theory since 1971 has been that the Word is literally a virus, and that it has not been recognized as such because it has achieved a state of relatively stable symbiosis with its human host; that is to say, the Word Virus (the Other Half) has established itself so firmly as an accepted part of the human organism that it can now sneer at gangster viruses like smallpox and turn them in to the Pasteur Institute. But the Word clearly bears the single identifying feature of virus: it is an organism with no internal function other than to replicate itself (Burroughs, 1986:47).

Burroughs thought language was a virus in much the same way as the coronavirus is: an irrefutable presence. Even though most people’s readings of his “thesis” tend to be metaphorical, Burroughs insisted on the literality of his thesis: Language is a virus.

⁹ Even if he probably never wrote it as such...

It's very hard to really shut-up. That's why some people like to sleep, but even there, the production remains in what we call dreams. Some people try anthropotechnic solutions, like meditation. But it's hard. This continuous stream of language was Burroughs recurrent proof that language is a virus:

The word is now a virus. The flu virus may have once been a healthy lung cell. It is now a parasitic organism that invades and damages the central nervous system. Modern man has lost the option of silence. Try halting sub-vocal speech. Try to achieve even ten seconds of inner silence. You will encounter a resisting organism that forces you to talk. That organism is the word.

But language doesn't just come from the inside. It is also reproducing outside our bodies (10,000 messages a day!), and not just as words. Burroughs conception of language is much richer: "The word leg has no pictorial resemblance to a leg. It refers to the SPOKEN word leg. so we may forget that a written word IS AN IMAGE and that written words are images in sequence that is to say MOVING PICTURES." Even "moving pictures" are part of the organism. Burroughs "language" extends through media and phonetic language, bridging once again the material and the conceptual. This relationship between our body and the virus is the human. Christopher Land explains that, for Burroughs, "what we have come to understand as the human is in fact a symbiotic relationship of body and word-virus. In this sense 'human' is not an identity so much as a difference: a heterogeneous relationship rather than a thing in itself" (Land, 2005). But the once symbiotic relationship had taken a wrong turn and had become parasitical and highly dangerous —as a matter of fact a turn that was both technological and racial: "the word virus assumed a specially malignant and lethal form in the white race. What then accounts for this special malignance of the white word virus?"

Most likely a virus mutation occasioned by radioactivity.” Once again, Burroughs places us a strange turning point between the metaphor and the literal. How to read “white” in the last fragment? It makes more sense as a metaphor for the Western strain of the virus, which is still literal, but that would mean a particular nasty generalization: Burroughs himself was a white man trying to free himself from Control through the cut-up technique, while also a stereotypical colonizer working through the drugs and pleasure of the Third World.

Burroughs hypothesized that radiation had caused the virus mutation. McLuhan, while ignoring the racial question, blamed electricity. Although usually characterized as an optimistic technophile, McLuhan adopted a highly dark view of the new electronic environment in which westerners were living when he discusses Burroughs: “It is the medium that is the message because the medium creates an environment that is as indelible as it is lethal.” According to McLuhan: “Each technological extension involves an act of collective cannibalism. The previous environment with all its private and social values is swallowed by the new environment and reprocessed for whatever values are digestible.” Whether literal or metaphorical, McLuhan was highlighting the violence.

The danger was evident for both, so Burroughs was “trying to point to the shut-on button of an active and lethal environmental process.” Even more so than simply writing, Burroughs was hacking the transliteration process. This was not just a way to ‘read’ the world. It was also a way of re-writing it, and although decades later Burroughs would admit being “over-optimistic”, he was, at first, really excited about its possibilities, especially with tape-recorders:

All association tracks are obsessional get it out of your head and into the machines stop arguing stop complaining stop talking let the machines argue complain and talk a tape recording is an externalized section of the human nervous system you can find more about the nervous system and gain more control over your reactions by using the tape recorder than you could find out sitting twenty years in the lotus posture or wasting your time on the analytic couch” (Burroughs, 1972).

Burroughs was probing a procedure, an algorithm, as a method with which you could change the way things were. His thinking also went beyond the individual: “put a thousand young recorders with riot recordings on the street that mutter gets louder and louder remember this is a technical operation one step at a time.” The cut-up procedure was not just a way to understand and “reproduce in prose what we accommodate every day as a commonplace aspect of life in the electric age”. It was also meant to subvert it.

And maybe that is also why Taussig is using Burroughs as a guide to understand the miraculous transformations that surround palm oil production in the global South. He is looking for ways to render his account effective.

Taussig’s pornographic botany, humans impregnating palms, can be understood as a literal and realist interpretation of McLuhan’s “man provides the sexual organs of the technological world”, which he said Burroughs understood too well. But then again, so does the genetic transnational company that produces OxG. Everyone’s invested into procedures to hack reproduction.

Even if Burroughs hadn't written what I had thought he had written, Rodolfo Piskorski—who “coined the term zoogrammatology to frame the thinking of “the animal question via the early work of Jacques Derrida,” (Piskorski, 2021)— had: “words are like animals.”

Piskorski uses the sentence in his website to explain the “creaturely”¹⁰, animal aspect of words by referencing them to their materiality and saying that “animality is the condition of mimesis” (Piskorski, 2020). Piskorski locates this materiality on Saussure’s ethereal signifier, acknowledging that “We come to understand that words are composed of a material vessel that houses a conceptual content” (2021). But Saussure’s signifier is more elusive, because the Swiss father of modern linguistics defined it as an “acoustic image”¹¹, which can be explained as the image of the sound, and which explains that we have signifiers without sound. As much as the concept is not the “thing”, the signifier is not the “sound”. The sign process happens inside our head, a ‘concept’ coupled with an “sound image”, which is why one can sing a song without emitting sound or read lips. But the signifier requires a material support, which is what we usually understand as media: either sound producing instruments, inscribing materials, or screens. Media could then be understood as the material support of the signifier, that place where the signifier meets the Real, “there is no signification which is not, in a way, trapped in the support of a substance, since there are no signs without a sensible face”. No meaning without material friction.

¹⁰ Piskorski takes the word “creaturely” from Anat Pick: “[t]he creaturely is primarily the condition of exposure and finitude that affects all living bodies whatever they are” (Pick, 2011). Moreover, Piskorski relies on the “exposure and finitude” aspect to argue that words, and texts, are indeed creaturely.

¹¹ Or “sound image.”

Piskorski then compares the matter-concept with the body-soul opposition and situates the animal on the body/soul(mind) continuum, as the “losing” part of it’s usual hierarchization. An animal is just a body while we have “soul”.

But then he goes to reverse his equation, and writes “animals are like words” in the sense, first of all, that their mere presence acts as something to be understood, a signifier with no clear signified:

For us humans, it’s impossible to establish a clear-cut distinction between the signs produced by an animal and its mere body or presence. When an animal simply shows itself, isn't it producing a sign, engaging in some sort of communication? Conversely, is any animal vocalization a conscious attempt at signifying? We cannot be sure, and thus everything about animality seems open to interpretation and signification. More crucially, this experience reveals to us deep truths about language, about the illusory nature of signifying sovereignty, about the arbitrary relationship between signs and meaning, about the gulf that can separate uttering and interpreting (Piskorski).

The animality of words is embedded in media, and maybe that’s why the cut-up is a hands-on material method. If words are like animals, we would also have to assume they run in packs, in a multiple and changing feedback loops with other creatures and landscapes. And maybe instead of thinking about language as made up of words, we should be thinking of language as a constant material flow, both on the inside and the outside, that actually almost never stops and that metaphors try to frame.

Saussure included a diagram in “Course in General ‘Linguistics” that tries to explain how signs organize flows: “The linguistic fact can therefore be pictured in its totality—i.e. language—as a series of contiguous subdivisions marked off on both the indefinite plane of jumbled ideas (A) and the equally vague plane of sounds (B).” I’ve always enjoyed this graphic representation because it implies change and movement: a flow that language attempts to organize through the dotted lines of the sign.

Friedrich Kittler explains how print, but especially the typewriter¹² formalized words as discrete objects, as it gave words visual autonomy by standardizing them and always placing a space between all words, the writing machine has a direct impact on how Saussure theorized language by cutting the flow in the smallest unit that works as language: signs. The material, media, aspect of language organizes how language appears, and how it is conceived.

But Saussure’s signs have fuzzy borders. He says that signs have a “value” and that it affects both the signifier and the signified. This “value” means that both the sound substance and the thought substance are defined “not by their positive content but negatively by their relations with other terms of the system”. The sign has fuzzy borders because it depends on the associative relations it provokes, which can be phonetic or conceptual. The fuzzy borders allow us to understand words in different accents, for example, or to understand irony and humor.¹³ “In language there are only differences *without positive terms*”,¹⁴ says Saussure.

¹² And I think of Burroughs as a writing machine: the most radical and efficient machine the Burroughs Corporation—to which Burroughs was a heir— ever produced. The Burroughs Corporation merged in 1986 to form Unysis, but had been producing, for a century, adding machines, typewriters, printers and computer mainframes.

¹³ “A particular word is like the center of a constellation; it is the point of convergence of an indefinite number of co-ordinated terms.”

“Acoustic images” and “concepts” are not definite things, but a gamble that depends on their relationship with whatever surrounds them. Signs, like animals, are always tactical, always ready to change according to the situation.

When questioned about the title of his most famous (anti)novel, *The Naked Lunch*, Burroughs answered: “The title means exactly what the words say: *naked* lunch, a frozen moment when everyone sees what is on the end of every fork.” Defending Burroughs from the obscenity charges that plagued *Naked Lunch*¹⁵, Anthony Burgess wrote:

The obscenity is not of Mr Burroughs’s devising: it is there in the world outside. We’re all sitting grinning at a ghastly meal which he suddenly shows us to be cannibalistic. The meat on the end of every fork is revealed as the guts and blood of our fellow-men” (Burgess, 1964).

I think that’s why Taussig chose Burroughs as a literary companion during the writing of *Palma Africana*. He was looking for that literal effect: forcing the readers to notice the blood tinge of the palm oil in our snacks and accessories.

Then, I realize what I wish Burroughs had written. I wish Burroughs had erased the “like” that makes his phrase a shy simile and had gone full throttle ontologizing a metaphor instead of just making a comparison: “words are animals.”

¹⁴ It’s always a gamble to write what Saussure said. His *Course in General Linguistics* is a book compiled by Charles Bally and Albert Sechehaye from notes on lectures given from 1906 to 1911. We’ll never know what Saussure “said”, only what other say he said.

¹⁵ “The Naked Lunch” was banned in Boston and Los Angeles in 1962, and an obscenity trial ensued, a decision reversed in 1966.

CHAPTER 2: SCIENCE FICTION AND FICTS

“I’m going out to buy an orgasm,” Paty Torres said as she walked out the door, with her reggaeton-punk look and a smile on her face, leaving us wondering exactly what the hell did she mean, and what she was going to do, especially since we were in Tijuana and she was heading towards *La Cahuila*, Tijuana’s red light district. Catching up with her she explained that an “orgasm” was a cocktail you could get at the *Zacaz*, the mythical Tijuana bar where you can use drugs even though they are illegal (they used to sell them, but now they don’t; you have to bring your own). So, at least in some places of the red light district in TJ, the traditional orgasm is made up of equal parts Amaretto, Kahlúa and Bailey’s Irish cream, and “can be served either on the rocks or layered and drunk as a shooter”¹⁶, and there are many recipe variations.

So “I’m going out to buy an orgasm” needs context and makes sense after taking that context in (as does any other utterance). And the sense it makes is not only made up of words, but streets and places, bodies and substances¹⁷. But “I’m going out to buy an orgasm” can be so much more. It is a whole world waiting to hatch. Let’s take the science fiction road, forget common sense and context, and understand the sentence “literally”. If we misread her sentence and forget about drinks and even the possibility of hiring a sex worker, it begins to take a life of it’s own. Let’s suppose the character Paty is actually going out to buy an orgasm, and lives in a world where you can do so. Where would she get it? A

¹⁶ I am sorry to inform that, since 2011, and according to Wikipedia, the orgasm is no longer part of the official IBA cocktails of the International Bartenders Association (IBA).

¹⁷ We can safely there’s a huge difference between understanding what an orgasm is (and what are its components) than to actually have tasted it.

drugstore? Then we would have to think of an orgasm as a remedy, a “something” used to control sickness, suffering and degeneration. Would you need a prescription for it? What kind of doctor would prescribe an orgasm? What kind of science?

Or maybe character Paty would dive into a dark alleyway and knock on a metal door and interact with some very *seedy* characters, or, hopefully, a Tijuana version of a mad scientist and a whole underground network of orgasm dealers. Or it could be just sordid. Would she have to consume the “orgasm” there or could she take it home? Are they expensive? What’s the price of an orgasm? In which currency?

And of course, there’s the option of just buying orgasms at a super market, garishly designed bright-coloured “orgasm” packs lining up the brightly lighted shelves (some of them even on sale). A chorus version of “Smells like teen spirit” sounds slightly in the background. How many packages would she take? Just for herself or would she give some away as a present? To whom? How do intimate relationships work in a world where you can buy orgasms at your local Walmart?

In order to understand the provocative “I’m going out to buy an orgasm” correctly, you need a reductive process: you need to organize the signified-signifier-referent triangle correctly and find the “right” way to literalize the sentence, to ground it. Orgasm is a drink, and Paty was getting one at the *Zacas*. But to misread the sentence, to read it wrong in very particular ways, is a productive process. It creates worlds, lots of them if you literalize it’s content improperly. This literalization then produces a metonymic chain (more words to fill in the gaps, one after another, organized into sentences which follow the logic of the

literalization), which is once again, a reductive process, because we then follow all the implications that each particular understanding of “orgasm” brings forth.

Still, both the element “buy” and “orgasm” constrain us: the combination of the almost technical “orgasm” coupled with the capitalist undertones of “buy” guide us somewhere. Just the fact that I namedropped Tijuana steers interpretation into particular paths. The sentence opens up speculation as much as it constrains it. But it does its world-building work through opening up and then closing down. The world is built according to the rest of the objects, be it signs, sensations or supermarkets, that join (or will join) its stroll. In a (science fiction) story that uses words—and it steers towards science fiction if this interpretation goes against the grain— “each word revises the complex picture we had a moment before”, as Samuel Delany puts it. “The story is what happens in the reader’s mind”, Delany continues, “as his eyes move from the first word to the second, the second to the third, and so on to the end of the tale” (Delany, 2009).

Samuel Delany took the particular reading (and writing) of particular sentences as a highly specific characteristic of science fiction. Samuel Delany is a striking figure in the US science fiction scene since the 60s. Black, queer, and not only a science fiction writer, but one of its finest theorists, Delany tried to bring the complexities of continental European structuralist and post-structuralist theories to his understanding of science fiction. Delany understood this science fiction procedure, this device, in a microscale¹⁸. Delany wrote that the unit of prose was the sentence, and that the sentence worked in peculiar ways where

¹⁸ And we will get to the macroscale, with Seo-Young Chu’s *Do Metaphors Dream of Literal Sleep?* later on.

science fiction was concerned. His key example, one that he repeated both in texts and interviews, was a line from a Robert Heinlein novel¹⁹:

THE DOOR DILATED

Delany recorded Harlan Ellison's reaction to his line:

Heinlein has always managed to indicate the greater strangeness of a culture with the most casually dropped-in reference: the first time in a novel, I believe it was *Beyond the Horizon*, that a character came through a door that... dilated. And no discussion. Just: "the door dilated". I read across it, and was two lines down before I realized what the image had been, what the words had called forth. A *dilating* door. It didn't opened, it *irised*! Dear God, I knew I was in a future word.

Let's say the commonsensical way of dealing with "the door dilated" would be to take it as a metaphor, which is to say a not-very-common-or-probable use of language that joins two different and unrelated fields of associations and merge them into one, and then take some of the aspects of one and apply them to the other, using abstraction to figure out which elements could apply to the sentence. "The door dilated" would be a less than fortunate metaphor that could make you think, maybe, of the (slow-mo) sentimental dimension of someone to whom life closes (or opens) a door.

¹⁹ The other example Delany commonly use is "Then her world exploded," that, when read as science fiction, is "not just giving a muzzy metaphor for a female character's mental state; you reserve the margin for the words to mean that a planet belonging to a woman blew up" (Delany, 2020)

But science fiction bets on another reading, a not-so-commonsensical one. “The door dilated” means that the door actually did, and the fact that it actually can, at least in Heinlein’s story, points to the development of an otherwise world. But to get to the otherwiseness that would seem inimical to science fiction, the way to accept the sentence would also have to be, according to Delany, that “the world of his (Heinlein’s) story contained a society in which the technology for constructing iris aperture doorways was available.”²⁰

Delany singled out science fiction particularly because of this use:

...certain things happen in the language of science fiction that don’t happen anywhere else. Science fiction tends to take the literal meaning. If it has a choice between a figurative meaning and a literal meaning, the literal meaning is always available” (Plotz, 2019).

Delany aligned science fiction with symbolist poetry: “its stated aim is to represent the world without reproducing it”. It creates a different fictional reality that stands for our world without mimetically reproducing it (as in so called “realism”). Science fiction could be understood as a “play of codic conventions”, to which readers apply a different set of interpretive procedures, mainly, according to Cho, applying “literal understanding to potentially metaphoric phrases where a reader more accustomed to a different set of interpretive protocols might apply no literal understanding at all.” Mainly, misreading correctly.

²⁰ Before understanding the world-building exercise Heinlein was using in “Beyond the horizon”, I always entertained the idea that the “door dilated” clause could also be explained with an organic house, where doors could function as flesh sphincters, much like in Bruce Sterling’s cartel Dembowska flesh city, dedicated to pleasure. The organic city is also a sentient “person”, Kitsune, a genetically created love machine.

So you can imagine applying science fiction’s “interpretive protocols” to just the first line of Thomas Campion’s “There is a garden on her face.” Of course, science fiction is not only that. The weirdness, to use the term recently theorized by Erik Davis²¹, in order to be properly described as science fiction, needs to have exactly that, science, or at least something that resembles its major features: a particular kind of logic and rationality. These two characteristics make up Darko Suvin’s now classic definition of the mechanism of SF, *cognitive estrangement*, a definition that, even though a lot of people try to debunk, still holds its explanatory allure. Suvin takes *estrangement* from both Russian formalist Viktor Shklovsky’s *ostranenie* (“the technique of art is to make objects unfamiliar”) and German theatre author Bertolt Brecht’s *verfremdungseffekt* (“a representation which estranges... allows us to recognize its subject, but at the same time makes it seem unfamiliar”), and is used to account for the fact that science fiction places us in a different “reality” from ours. Suvin explicitly rejects to use either “real or “reality” and prefers to use instead the “author’s empirical environment” as a substitute²², because he is trying to deal with the cognitive side of the estrangement he is trying to describe. Science fiction explains the estrangement through a techno-scientifical approach: if doors dilate, they necessarily need a rational and logical technological explanation (even if the author doesn’t provide it). There must be some kind of tech, organic, digital or mechanic, which explains their dilating. Let’s say that the

²¹ “The weird is just the ontological demand that the aesthetic makes on us,” (2021) Davis writes on his Burning Shore blog. This weirdness does not just demand a “reading procedure,” but an aesthetical, felt and embodied one; a phenomenon we will encounter later, when we find literalized metaphors outside of its usual confines in books and movies. The literalization of metaphors is world-producing.

²² Suvin writes that the problem resides in defining persuasively what is real and what is reality, which is almost the same problem analytic philosophers find when trying to define what is the common-sensical meaning of a word while trying to explain metaphors. We could say there is something particularly elusive in trying to define both reality and common-sense, even though we know they both are kind of out there.

interpretive procedure of science fiction relies on the way we use a scientific *rationale* for otherwise unexplainable phenomena (and for literalizing metaphors). If a bright light shines over you while driving on a lonely desert road, the science fiction procedure will yell “aliens!” instead of invoking the Virgin Mary, to put it bluntly. Why? Because we can safely think, under the scientific umbrella, that there is life on far away planets, and that that life might be intelligent, and that they might have devised transportation that have brought them to the desert in search of human specimens to study (or torture, you never know). While Mary, or a demon, or a ghost would conjure up a “non-rational” metaphysics, aliens do not. They can be explained away through scientific speculation. They are possible.

Savin’s use of the “cognitive” half of his definition is restrictive, of course, as he is aligning cognitive with the rational, and empirical environment with the objective and the scientifically verifiable. But the estrangement is still there, at least as a way out²³.

“The metaphor in the real” is the title I had, for a long time, figured out for this essay. It is also a mistake. A honest one, though. I had thought Lacan had said it in his 1955/1956 seminar titled “The Psychoses”, and when I tried to look it up, I just couldn’t find it. What Lacan actually said²⁴ was, while trying to explain psychotic delirium as that really

²³ Suvin wrote that science fiction belongs to “the liberating tradition which contends that the world is not necessarily the way our present empirical valley happens to be, and that whoever thinks his valley is the world, is blind.”

²⁴ As with Saussure, this is a question of faith. Lacan’s seminars were verbal, and are transcribed from their recordings. His case is similar to Saussure’s, but Lacan’s words have gone through a different machinic inscription. Not handwritten notes, but an actual, indexical recording, which still leaves room for both interpretation and property issues (Lacan’s seminars have ‘official’ versions, those published by Jacques Alain-Miller, his son-in-law, to whom Lacan left his actual legacy, and who has been occupied with monopolizing and systematizing the authorized version of Lacan’s thoughts, and the “unofficial” ones, which contest this version and publish notes, corrections, and their own versions of the published seminar, mainly by the Ecole Lacanienne du Psychoanalysis)

disorienting experience when discourse, bypassing signification, ends up as things, as reality: “the limit at which discourse, if it opens onto anything beyond meaning, opens onto the signifier in the real” (139). According to him, this was a “fringe of discourse phenomena”. But he called this “the signifier on the real”, and not “the metaphor in the real”²⁵, as I remembered. The signifier appears as real, and not as a part of a symbolic web. It confuses the signifier with actual things²⁶.

Which turns out to be helpful, somehow. SF does not only literalize metaphors. It literalizes anything, It has a peculiar and explosive reaction when it literalizes figurative language in a fictional space, because it confuses the difference between literality and materiality. In science fiction, the literalization is actually a materialization. It asks us to think of things, impossible things by our reality standards, but things nonetheless.

SF has a very particular and problematic relationship with metaphors. It is easy to say that science fiction is a metaphor of our lives, but then all kinds of fiction are a metaphor for our lives. I mean, it explains a lot of things, like the way an “unreal narrative” (as in estranged) can affect us. JG Ballard, for example, said about his sf novel *Crash!* —dealing with characters that can only experience sexual excitement and release through car crashes—, “I have used the car not only as a sexual image but as a total metaphor for man’s life in today’s society”. So yes, all science fiction does that, but it does that through actual

²⁵ Transcribing Lacan is problematic, mainly because he liked capitalizing some words to point to their different theoretical implications. It’s not the same writing the Other than the other, and those written subtleties are impossible to understand in the recording, one is only able to reconstruct through guesswork. The Real (capital R) is a Lacanian concept that attempts to recreate the impossibility of defining (or even knowing) what is “real”. The Real is that which resists symbolization

²⁶ Barthes called this identification between the signifier and the referent “the reality effect” because that’s what it provokes on the reader, the feeling that we are witnessing something actual. Barthes explained this “reality effect” in terms of the descriptive references on realist texts that have no bearing on the semiotic build-up of the story other than lending it world-building consistency.

literalization, a misreading of language. Istvan Csicsery-Ronay, for example, writes that “we make science of our metaphors”, but it could also go the other way, where we make metaphors out of our science.

Wikipedia defines metaphors in a classical way:

A metaphor is a figure of speech that describes a subject by asserting that it is, on some point of comparison, the same as another otherwise unrelated object²⁷.

The classical view of metaphor insists on a “transfer”, an identification that is, as Aristoteles put it, *allotropos*, alien, different. It implies a movement, where the “otherwise unrelated objects” bring with themselves a whole set of “related objects” and characteristics. Metaphors tend to join two different, and apparently unrelated, fields of meaning: they are the unnatural coupling between two distinct sets of relational subjects. In this sense, they are different from metonymy, where the description of the subject is brought upon by a related object (hands for bodies, for example) without leaving its field of denotation (to use Barthes terms).

Metaphors are everywhere, and you could even argue that the whole edifice of language is metaphorical (as Derrida used to explain). Lakoff’s conceptual metaphors try to explain the ubiquity of this process in everyday transactions. There is even a (completely justified) distrust of metaphors as only rethorical effects, used to “embellish” things up. It’s a contested field. Joseph Stern, for example, writes, very pragmatically, that he “...shall start

²⁷ “Wikipedia: Metaphor”. Wikipedia, accessed June 8, 2014. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Metaphor>. A more recent version (August 13, 2021) says: “A metaphor is a figure of speech that, for rethorical effect, directly refers to one thing by mentioning another. It may provide (or obscure) clarity or identify hidden similarities between two different ideas.

off by talking of a ‘metaphor’ as a token of an expression used or interpreted metaphorically,” a view that denies a literalist reading of a metaphor because there is no such a thing as literal meaning, because a metaphor relies on its interpretive procedures. Stern (a Literalist) will end up arguing that “there must also be metaphorical expressions”, a way of grounding the literal interpretive procedure against which the metaphor can be read as such (which means properly). This tension is what provides the fuel for most discussions about the metaphor as both a creative and an interpretive procedure.

I’m taking these procedures improperly, much more occupied about their mistakes than their correct reading. I’m interested in the metaphor not as a rethoric, linguistic figure of speech, but as a device that hinges apparently unrelated subject/objects and proceeds to make them productively couple, instead of just making sense, or being “true”. A metaphor, literally, is something that carries beyond. It’s a tethering device that does not necessarily, at least at first, make sense. And that is why it’s also a material process. I’m thinking about Burrough’s cut-ups, and the inmixing of two different texts as a metaphor making procedure. And I’m also thinking about how Taussig tries to understand the (x)para-militaries—dark-skinned third-world woman—OxG palm plant oil—chocolate-donut conundrum he finds in Colombia. Or the way the difference between the science fictional reality of a story interacts with what I think is my “empirical environment”, which creates a metaphor in and by itself, an intersection of different substances, of different realities²⁸. And my interest is not only in the how to interpret this, but about its productive relationship to material reality.

So I’m up for “savage” readings, and not proper ones.

²⁸ And it is in this sense that science fiction cannot help but be metaphorical. The radical overlap of the fictional world with the reader’s reality provokes, by itself, a metaphor.

So even if “the signifier on the real” provides a way to understand how science fiction literalizes language (and not just metaphor), I would much rather stay with “the metaphor in the real” because, as Lacan said, “a metaphor is not comparison, it is identification” (even though the proper reading of it is as a comparison). A metaphor is always wild in the sense that it is a hinging procedure that ontologizes the relationship it creates. Juliet IS the sun. The door dilates. Time is money. It conjures up being, and the conjugation “is” as part of its basic mechanism. A metaphor is an ontologically radical hinging process, even if it is not meant to be read that way.

When I couldn’t find the actual “metaphor in the real” phrase in Lacan’s seminars, I was really bummed. Lacan’s name would grant a certain amount of respectability to my digressions²⁹. But he hadn’t said that, and that threw me into a couple of week’s worth of self-deprecating utterances thrown at me from inside my own head.

I snapped out of it because a good friend of mine told me later that it was even better, because if Lacan hadn’t said it, then I had.

“It cost too much, staying human” is a Bruce Sterling’ six word story published in Wired in 2006. If you read this using realism as you interpretive procedure, you get a moral question through an aphorism. The cost is moral, much as the blazon’s lips are red and not coral. The procedure is abstract, not material. But the six-word story was published as science fiction, and also written by one the genre’s most interesting practitioners and

²⁹ At least I thought so, even though now I can see he is taken as a very convoluted charlatan in the most respectable and institutionalized US academic fields of knowledge. I don’t mind. I truly respect charlatans.

thinkers. So literal thinking helps. Reading it as science fiction opens up the possibilities of interpretation: the cost ceases to be moral and turns literal, even if its literality is a credit card or dirty cash. Remaining human is a matter of money, a privilege for whoever's richest. Maybe it implies a body and spare parts. It does certainly imply labor; if the cost is so high it's because you just don't have enough capital for that kind of transaction, if you were actually the subject implied in the sentence. Maybe it implies alimentation, let's say transgenic versus organic. Or maybe it's about health care and prosthetics. Or being unable to distinguish yourself from your computer or smartphone. It's about humanity being an economical problem. But that is also a moral question. And the story ends up being at the same time literal as it stays abstract, and a richer one for that. It's like having a cake and eating it too³⁰.

Usually, and especially in both the novel and the feature length movie format (as well as in complex videogames), the hard work of figuring out the details of the world being created is left to the author(s), and it is usually referred to as world-building. It is part of the process of a metonymically chaining of reality out of a metaphor. Of course, as Adam Roberts suggests when discussing the role of metaphor in the genre:

...it is the infusoria of detail, the minutiae of starship-design, characters, imagined backstories (filled in by fan fiction), social structures, alien biology, timelines, religions, languages and so on that give Star Trek or Dune their heft, their purchase upon the minds of fans, and not any supposedly core 'metaphorical' meaning in the texts (Roberts, 2006: 139).

³⁰ And I would like to stress out that this is not a binary process, or what Jameson calls "a bad Reading of allegory, where you have the allegory and its meaning in a one-way interpretation. This is a productive relationship, which multiplies possibilities instead of reducing them.

A science fiction story does not contain facts, it contains ficts, or “facts” that are only valid inside the story being told (and some of these may be literalized metaphors as ‘the door dilated’). These ficts accrue through a coherence that usually (and partially, because science in SF always has an imaginary facet) rests on science’s shoulder, but they accrue in a way that leads to a different reality that the reader has to, somehow, believe, or at least to do so partially³¹. The ficts are believed as facts, even if they are later shown to be false, where they will be replaced by new ficts (as in the Matrix, for example) that give the appearance of a cohesive universe, even if it is filled with horrors that go beyond human comprehension (as Lovecraft loved to do). The canonical way to think of this belief, or interpretive procedure, is Coleridge’s “willing suspension of disbelief”, which, according to him, gives way to “poetic faith”, which, in turn lets the reader/user immerse herself in the fictional world in order to emotionally engage on the character’s plight.

The “suspension of disbelief” that Coleridge asked of his readers has provoked much discontent, and, as much as “cognitive estrangement” for science fiction, it somehow still holds, especially in the narrative genres we are discussing. Literary critics like Terry Eagleton, for example, has argued —against such Romantic notions— that the critical task is to step away from the allure of art (Barbeau, 2019) (which, from my point of view, just takes away the fun of it; at the same time, the dangers of market driven commodities makes alarms blare in my head!). Fantasists like JRR Tolkien and CS Lewis just didn’t like the double

³¹ The same could be applied to any kind of text: it always relies in a variable set of rules which lets the “user” engage with it. Sometimes the rules are narrative, sometimes the rules are purely aesthetical (as in a phonetic or a conceptual poem), bodily (as in a song you just can’t stop dancing to) and sometimes even mechanical (as in the rules of movement in a videogame) but in order to engage with the work, the “user” has to interpret these ficts, bodily and mentally.

negation of the term³², and preferred to talk about belief in Secondary Words, or Sub-worlds, “reality” being First. Tolkien was particularly worried about the conflation of imagination with irrationality, particularly because the alternate reality he created was realistically depicted:

(fantasy) does not either blunt the appetite for, nor obscure the perception of, scientific verity. On the contrary: the keener and the clearer is the reason, the better fantasy will it make (Tolkien, 1947).

Michael Saler thinks calling it “ironic imagination” works better in trying to understand how it has worked in the last century and the present one, while also attempting to create a genealogy of these fantasies (both scientific and not) as the direct literary (and cinematographical) precursors of virtual reality. Saler calls the ironic imagination “a form of double consciousness that became widely practiced during the nineteenth century and attained its cultural centrality in the twentieth. The ironic imagination enabled individuals to embrace alternative worlds and to experience alternative truths.” The disbelief remains, but at the time, so does the belief. You believe in the fiction but still keep your feet planted in the Primary World (that’s why it’s a double consciousness). This particular imagination allows “fantasy realms presented in a realist mode, cohesively structured, empirically detailed, and logically based, often accompanied by scholarly apparatus such as footnotes, glossaries, appendices, maps, and tables³³.” Saler conjures German philosopher Hans

³² The double negation of the term appeals to me, especially as I’ll be using a couple, one borrowed from anthropology, the other from psychoanalysis, later on, and as a way out of the literal/abstract poles of interpreting metaphors.

³³ Even though Saler is mainly talking about fantasy, his argument is as good for science fiction, but also for fake news. As such, fake news rely on a style, on a particular form in order to exert its suspension of disbelief upon the readers. Fake news appear as news, with accompanying citations and data. But as they are not bracketed as fiction, they can be taken as real.

Vaihinger and his 1911 book titled “The Philosophy of “As If””, where Vaihinger accepting Kant’s impossibility to see the world as it actually is, “examined the prevalence and utility of fictions in science, aesthetics, religion, jurisprudence, and ethics” (cited in Saler, 2012).

Differentiating between useful fictions, accepted to be unreal, and provable hypothesis, Vaheinger actually “argued that many important concepts in science —the atom, the infinitesimal, even Kant’s own *Ding-an-such*”— are actually fictions that we treat “as if” they were true in order to get on with the practical business of the day” (cited in Davis, 2019). “As if” is the way we treat fictions, “as if” they were real³⁴. We engage with them as though we were on a game, where we, as Vygotsky said a child does, “let(ting) the basic categories of reality pass through his experience” (Vygotsky, 1978: 100).

Of course, all of this theorizing takes place in a capitalist marketplace. Even the maps and appendices that accompanied prototypical genre literature can be understood as a sales mechanism (which they actually were), as well as the allure of immersive world-building (which has, as Saler argues, spilled over into virtual realities). But then again, we are dealing with stories that declare themselves as fictional, and that are placed as such in the bookstores (virtual or actual) where they are bought. Even though each product has a particular set of ficts, there’s an agreement that there won’t be too many facts in them, and that they have to be consumed “as if” whatever happens inside the pages is not real:

We can claim that prior to the onset of the fictionalist turn in modernity, individuals tended to dwell within the dimensions of the sacred and the

³⁴ Vaheinger’s theory has implications that go beyond academic or literary genres. We might even think of a “fictionalist” turn, and social constructivism is just a part of it. We even have mathematical theoreticians like Hartry Field saying that numbers are not real, but actually “useful fictions”.

profane rather than the real and the fictional. When the novel became an identifiable literary form in the eighteenth century, conceptual distinctions between reality and fiction sharpened, and the fictional was accorded an important, if ambivalent, place in everyday life. It's part of the contract by which the game is played³⁵ (Saler).

If it is a game, then the "As if" of fiction and its interpretive codes is also a dance. It's not just the reader/user who willingly suspends disbelief, the belief is also provoked and sustained by the ability of the writer/creator(s), and some non-coherent ficts and authorial mistakes usually take even the most willing reader/user out of the Secondary World they are immersed in. Cultural horizons, for example, might prevent the suspension of disbelief, as well as shoddy writing, and, for aesthetical reasons that could even be called interpretive procedures, bad science. Not everybody likes to dance, or sing, to the same tunes³⁶.

Science fiction, for example, can be a demanding dance partner. Not everybody might get the scientific references, or even understand them (both literally or metaphorically). But the fact is that when it works, it gets the reader somewhere else and binds them to the possibility to engage, intellectually and emotionally, with wholly different ontologies.

³⁵ Saler doesn't go into what happens when the "prophylactic distance" afforded by the ironic imagination is flattened; when, as Erik Davis aptly puts it: The "*as if* congeals into *because*". We'll be dealing with this later, but I just wanted to point out all the non-fiction books that actually work like science fiction but are treated as hypothesis, like, for example, books that explore how alien civilizations traveled throughout the earth, or books about alien abductions, or even conspiracy theories.

³⁶ I distinctly remember a student refusing to read *Dracula* on the grounds that he did not believe in vampires.

CHAPTER 3: ANTHROPOLOGY AND THE FIRST DANGER

“Stones don’t speak, but say” is part of a conversation heard between a *Wixárika* woman selling hand-made traditional jewelry in downtown Tijuana and a *Rarámuri* friend of hers, who sold rocks and stones in her stall a stall at Pasaje Colonial in downtown Tijuana³⁷. Stores that specifically stressed and spelled curios surrounded both. *Curios* shops. The *Rarámuri* woman agreed silently to the statement.

How to understand a statement such as this is one of the quintessential questions of anthropology, and a really peculiar one if we take it literally, which is what anthropologists aligning with the ontological turn would do. The ontological turn is a speculative one, as it mainly deals with indigenous ontologies, which are markedly different from “ours”, because “it (the ontological turn) proceeds boldly to lend the ‘otherwise’ full ontological weight so as to render it as *viable as a real alternative*” (Viveiros de Castro, Holbraad et al). So, an *onto-anthropologist* would say yes, stones say but do not speak, and ‘boldly proceed’ to try to understand how this happens, and in what kind of word stones say but do not speak, understanding, meanwhile, that those stones are not the same “thing” for those woman talking than for most of those hearing them. A different ontology is at stake. A different world appears.

The ontological turn is described as a reading/inscribing procedure, a strategy, a “technology of description,” as Pederson writes, in which the anthropologist “instead of treating ethnography as the object of concepts and analytic procedures... (it) treats

³⁷ A conversation overheard by Viviana González Gómez while doing field work for a documentary.

ethnography as its source” (Holbraad). Instead of explaining how the “ethnographic sources” understand the world, the ontological turn radicalizes this approach and asks how the world “is” for them. That’s why it is ontological. It refuses epistemology, because that means explaining worldviews as mistaken, taking the western rational and modern account of the world as a granted blanket statement on how the world really is. Instead, these anthropologists try to describe the world as it is for their sources.

Traditionally, anthropology takes these indigenous myths, stories, actions, rituals relationships and conversations as ficts, because “Anthropology” thinks it knows what the facts really are. This “technology of description”, takes (usually) indigenous ficts (or what is usually considered as ficts) as facts. This experimental approach grants ontological status to the practical worldviews of the *otherwise* (to borrow the fantastical term of Elizabeth Povinelli), in “the optimist (non-skeptical) hope of making the otherwise visible by experimenting with the conceptual affordances present in a given body of ethnographic materials” (Viveiros et al). Taking those materials as facts would presuppose acquiring (or being afforded) new conceptual openings into the “multiple worlds” inhabiting this planet and not just holding true to the single ontology hypothesis that has been violently imposed on whole territories of being, like, for example, the two woman theorizing stone`s language a handful of pages ago. Doing so allows the anthropologist to break out from right or wrong, proper or improper ways of being in the world.

Anthropophagy as anthropology” is Viveiros take on the conceptual affordances given by taking ficts as not just facts, but ideas that make everything change places and consistencies. Traditionally, Tupinambán anthropophagy was understood as a form of human sacrifice. But Viveiros take on the ethnographic material is that anthropophagy was all about

taking in the enemies (or the others) perspective: “what was actually consumed was his condition as enemy... the aim being to reach his alterity as a point of view on the Self” (Cannibal, 142). Cannibalism could actually be understood as a method of understanding the other.

To reach his alterity as a point of view on the Self” here means eating other people’s flesh, officially called cannibalism or antropophagy, but is actually a method of understanding the other, of viewing the world through the other’s position. As such, it would be the equivalent of anthropological studies, but would require a whole conceptual rearrangement of terms that would illuminate, according to Viveiros, ”cannibal metaphysics”³⁸.

The idea is to actually learn and be changed from these concepts. The approach is risky, experimental, political and, as such, exciting:

For example, the relativist reports that in such-and-such an ethnographic context time is “cyclical,” with “the past ever returning to become the present.” It is an evocative idea, to be sure. But strictly speaking, it makes no sense. To *be* “past” is precisely *not* “to return to the present,” so a past that does so is properly speaking not a past at all (in the same sense that a married bachelor is not a bachelor). By contrast, like a kind of “relativist-turbo,” the ontologically-inclined anthropologist takes this form of e(qui)vocation as a starting-point for an ethnographically-controlled experiment with the concept

³⁸ Cannibal metaphysics is the title of Viveiro de cCastro’s book, which he casts as a beginner’s guide to a book he never wrote, a fictional book, that would have been titled “Anti-Narcissus: Anthropology as a Minor Science”. A fictional book, “that because it was endlessly imagined, ended up not existing”, except in the pages of Cannibal Metaphysics.

of time itself, reconceptualizing “past,” “present,” “being,” etc., in ways that make “cyclical time” a real form of existence. In this subjunctive, “could be” experiment, the emphasis is as much on “be” as on “could”: “Imagine a cyclical time!” marvels the relativist; “Yes, and here is what it could *be!*” replies the ontological anthropologist.

So maybe you can imagine my surprise at learning that a mostly Cambridge-based group of anthropologist was reading third-world indigenous worldviews using interpretive procedures common to science fiction³⁹. Reading as reality that which, disciplinarily, is not supposed to be. Misreading productively and take ficts for facts. Suspending disbelief. To read as factual, literal, what is usually discarded as a myth, or a superstition, using “controlled equivocation” (what a given anthropological analysis is, according to Viveiros) and “productive misunderstandings” (Tsing, quoted by Holbraad, Pedersen et al); to use ethnographic material as a source, because if we “do” the ontological turn, this will re-organize “the universe of the possible.”

The anthropologist then has to work through the “conceptual affordances” (Holbraad) this ontology makes graspable. If anthropophagy is anthropology and stones say but do not speak, then we have to rethink the whole business. We have to misread properly.

³⁹ And this is not just a question of privilege. It’s also an ontological question, where these anthropologist are conducting thought-experiments about indigenous “beliefs” while living a way of life afforded by a former empire that still believes in Kings and Queens.

The whole enterprise sounds very similar to the one used in “Learning from other worlds” a collection of essays “honoring” Darko Suvin’s work. The subtitle is “Estrangement, Cognition and the Politics of Science Fiction and Utopia.”

Cognitive estrangement, indeed, and all the way: “Reflexivity down to the bottom and reflexivity way outside —complete, that is, until creating concepts that can stand by themselves,⁴⁰” writes Holbraad (2014).

Even if it is not “realistic”, science fiction is thoroughly materialistic. It is a genre that firmly believes that science and technology can change us radically and materially, and explores these changes in our own being⁴¹. The “novum” (another idea introduced by Suvin), is the “new thing” that jumpstarts the action (social and individual, conceptual and material) or provides the background of any given SF text. The novum is a key position around which reality accretes. It is usually characterized with “thingness” (cyberspace in *Neuromancer*, LeGuin’s *ansible*, and the matrix in *The Matrix*). It changes the way things are, and that change seeps into quotidian life. SF ‘proceeds boldly’ to understand and explore those changes, and of course, its “conceptual affordances” in a way that “learning from other worlds” is possible. It engages us with turning ficts into facts through the procedure of “as if.”

⁴⁰ My translation, I could never find the original.

⁴¹ The worst kind of science fiction is the one where, passing through several wonders and even nightmares made real, the characters still act as if they were middle class US citizens, insensible, as if nothing can “touch” them or change them anyway. Good SF practices fidelity, in Badiou’s term, to material events. “Fidelity occurs when an Event is conceptualized without denying its Eventual character,” writes McLaverty-Robinson (<https://ceasefiremagazine.co.uk/alain-badiou-truth-subjectivity-fidelity/>). It would be tempting to compare the event to the novum, but I won’t try it here. But it would fair to say that an anthropologist, as defined by the ontological turn, exercises fidelity to the ethnographic experience: “to go beyond what one has already understood to be better captured by it, that’s the turn!” (Holbraad, 2014).

One of the “main limitations” of the ontological turn, according to Mario Blaser (2013) “is the proposition that reality is outside of individuals rather than constantly being performed,” which is, in fact, a problem with materiality. As such, there should be no ontological turn without a performative one, “where different stories and practices are neither describing something existing ultimately ‘out there’ nor are they mistaken or metaphorical, but actually enact or ‘world’” (Chandler and Reid, 2018)⁴². Which actually gets me thinking about the 20+ people (no more than a 100, according to Dr. Marc Okrand, the inventor of the fictional language (Murphy, 2013) who actually speak Klingon in the world. If it were a question of performativity, then we would have to add that “Shakespeare, the Epic of Gilgamesh, and A Christmas Carol are all available (and have even been performed) in Klingon”⁴³.

But, due to the disciplinary inclinations of anthropology, the interpretive techniques —“the technology of description”— that the ontological turn tries to materialize have more much to do with science fiction’s (sometimes uncomfortable) twin: fantasy (or fantastical fiction)⁴⁴.

“That’s not the way I do it. Yours truly, GOD” reads an anonymous letter addressed to sf writer Poul Anderson, who had published an article called “How to create a world” in

⁴² It is also worth noting that the ontological turn does not try to accomplish “the dubious reduction of each “culture” or “people” to an encapsulated reality” (Pederson), because it takes ontology as immanent, and not transcendent. Being immanent, it is subject to time, and to change. An ontology without essence, as Povinelli writes.

⁴³ We would also have to add, as the blog where this quote comes from states, that Klingon is “synonymous with the stereotypes of nerd culture and comic book convention aficionados, and often a point of ridicule” (Kwintessential).

⁴⁴ Kinship theories differ, of course. While I cast them as twins, many others believe that fantasy is an encompassing category of which science fiction is just a sub-genre. Most bookstores in the US treat them as siblings, or really close cousins, and places both of them in a “Fantasy and Science Fiction” section. “Horror”, when afforded bookshelves, is always near, providing a little bit of conceptual distance from “Mystery”, always lingering close by.

the Bulletin of the Science Fiction Writers Association, as re-told by Ursula K Le Guin in “Do it yourself Cosmology”, a short essay on fantasy written on the seventies. Le Guin explains how Anderson’s article on world-building gets “down to the groundwork”:

Which kind of star is likely to have planets? What size and kind of planet is likely to have life aboard it? At what distance from what sun? Is the moon’s role functional or decorative? (Anderson quoted in LeGuin, 1979).

According to Michael Moorcock, both genres, science fiction and fantasy, could well be “described as the only popular fiction defined by what is not;” by its distancing effect from what sociologists Berger and Luckmann coined as “consensus reality” (1966), and its materializing aspect. Fantastical fiction disregards the “cognitive”⁴⁵ parts of science fiction while holding strong to the “estrangement” side of it, and that’s what LeGuin is trying to argue using the response to Poul Anderson’s essay. Fantasy writers do not necessarily need to be concerned with a planet’s gravitational pull. God (I should add “gods”) do not work that way⁴⁶.

The fantastic, according to Todorov, is characterized by a “hesitation experienced by a person who knows only the laws of nature confronting an apparently supernatural event”⁴⁷ (Todorov, 25), a “hesitation that” just as science fiction, “is located on the level of the literal meaning.” (68) But there is no rational explanation for it.⁴⁸ This particular misreading needs

⁴⁵ As I wrote before, cognition in traditional SF theory is pretty reductive, as cognition is tied up with rational thought: modern, materialistic, logic and technophilic. And of course, rigid delimitations between both genres are elusive, and a lot of weird things thrive and live, happily and unhappily, in their borders.

⁴⁶ As Phil Ford says: “Science Fiction is fantasy for people who demand explanations” (Weird Studies)

⁴⁷ In this passage we could easily substitute “hesitation” with “estrangement”. Csicsery-Ronay also places science fiction between two hesitations: one about the plausibility of the sf novum, and the other with its effects.

⁴⁸ Here, again, we find kinship issues. For Todorov, the fantastic “occupies the duration of this uncertainty”. If the anomaly is explained, we pass unto the “uncanny”, if the anomaly is total, we are in the marvelous (as in Tolkien).

to do away with the single ontology hypothesis. And that's why it's almost always unsettling, because it allows us to see the world being otherwise, much as the ontological turn tries to accomplish through their ethnographic material.

An *onto-anthropologist* takes the “willing suspension of disbelief” to radical extremes. The job description implies turning a Secondary World into the Primary. The “technologies of description” applied are actually the twisted mirror image of world-building, or the more recently coined “worlding”. It is, of course and at the same time, an anthropologist wettest dream and deepest fear, *going native*. Viveiros warns about this as an impossibility. The ontho-anthropologist goes around the *otherwise* realities, “neither dismiss(ing) them as the fantasies of others, nor ...fantasizing that they may gain the same reality for oneself. They will not. Not “as such”, at least; only as-other” (Viveiros et al). You can sort of map out that other-world but never actually live in it. Secondary world never occludes the Primary. This is the “ironic imagination” Saler ascribes to genre readers, what fantasy readers and virtual worlds inhabitants are supposed to bring into play.

What is at stake here is a subversion of the “natural order” of things, in both the “fantastic literature” genre and the ontological turn’s “techniques of description”. Rosemary Clark defends fantasy as a literature of subversion: “what could be termed a ‘bourgeoise’ category of the real is under attack” because, in the fantastic mode, “the introduction of the ‘unreal’ is set against the category of the ‘real’— a category which the fantastic interrogates

In this discussion, I’m bypassing Todorov’s distinction to talk about a genre that includes his threesome: the fantastic, the uncanny, and the marvelous.

by its difference” (Jackson, 2)⁴⁹ much in the same way the anthropologists of the ontological turn do. It is subversive because it seeks not only to destabilize the very notion of a ‘subjective culture and an universal ‘objective’ nature “to provincialize the symbolic modalities of our language,”⁵⁰ (Ruiz Serna). If fantastic literature is subversive, then the ontological turn is political because “to subjunctively present alternatives to declarations about what “is” or imperatives about what “should be” is itself a political act—a radical one, to the degree that it breaks free of the glib relativism of merely reporting on alternative possibilities (“worldviews,” etc.)” (Viveiros et al). After all, “the politics of ontology is the question of how persons and things could alter from themselves (Holbraad and Pedersen 2009; Pedersen 2012b).”

But the catch is, of course, that anthropology deals with actual people, who are usually on the “wrong” side of our “rationally” (or “science-fictionally) ordered world:

One does not need much anthropology to join the struggle against the political domination and economic exploitation of indigenous peoples across the world. It should be enough to be a tolerably informed and reasonably decent person. Conversely, no amount of anthropological relativism and old-hand professional skepticism can serve as an excuse for *not* joining that struggle. (Holbraad et al, 2014)

That’s why Viveiros calls for a “theory/praxis of the permanent decolonization of thought.”

⁴⁹ And that’s why Jackson hesitates to bring Tolkien into the mantle of the fantastic, because if the fantastic turns into the marvelous (a complete whole world) it usually ceases to “interrogate” reality. Tolkien does not try to unsettle, but pacify.

⁵⁰ This extract from Ruiz Serna refers specifically to Thomas Kuhn’s “How Forests Think” which goes against the human-nonhuman divide and tries to explain the semiosis that constantly runs through an Amazonian forest.

Then again, “decolonization is not a metaphor” or so goes the title of an Eve Tuck and Wayne Wang article, where they try to understand, and make a counter-move, against the common application of both the noun “decolonization” and the verb “decolonize” to a wide variety of subjects: decolonize the future, decolonize school, decolonize imagination, decolonize method, and “decolonization of thought.”

Decolonization, they explain, is a very particular and material demand: “the repatriation of Indigenous land and life.” And turning it into a metaphor, according to Tuck and Wang, “makes possible a set of evasions, or ‘settler moves to innocence’, that problematically attempt to reconcile settler guilt and complicity, and rescue settler futurity” (2012). Tuck and Wang go further:

...we want to be sure to clarify that decolonization is not a metaphor. When metaphor invades decolonization, it kills the very possibility of decolonization; it recenters whiteness, it resettles theory, it extends innocence to the settler, it entertains a settler future. Decolonize (a verb) and decolonization (a noun) cannot easily be grafted onto pre-existing discourses/frameworks, even if they are critical, even if they are anti-racist, even if they are justice frameworks. The easy absorption, adoption, and transposing of decolonization is yet another form of settler appropriation. When we write about decolonization, we are not offering it as a metaphor; it is not an approximation of other experiences of oppression. Decolonization is not

a swappable term for other things we want to do to improve our societies and schools. Decolonization doesn't have a synonym.

And that's the first danger of reading metaphors. Reading them properly means deliteralizing them. A proper metaphorical reading disdains the literal and turns real things into abstractions as much as it channels real demands into more and more abstract combinatory practices. Wang and Tucker argue that using decolonizations as a metaphor, as a set of abstracted features, actually reinforces what the term decolonization is actually fighting. The literal/material axis recedes from sight, and we are just left with idealized forms that leave material reality untouched. The very particular demand for restoring rights to the dispossessed turns into abstract games and alliances that furthers those dispossessions. That's why materialists see metaphors as intrinsically suspect. The proper reading of metaphors implies abstracting certain features from a metonymically-constructed context and moving them into a different one. You just take the red from the coral, paint the lips with it, and forget about the rest. You just take the bodies out of the indigenous, paint a theory with it, and forget about the people.

And even if the fantastic genre and the anthropological turn use similar "reading procedures," that's where the resemblance ends, or at least seems to: anthropology deals with real people, fantasy fiction does not. Or at least the characters who inhabit the "imaginary world" aspect of it, because there are real people all around it, writers, film-makers, readers, watchers, distributors, marketers, critics and a whole chain of relations, human and non-human, that keep those "imaginary worlds" alive, even if these entities do not inhabit the otherwise ontology, the imaginary space of fiction, that the characters of the fictional world

inhabit and enact. Anthropology deals directly with people who literally bleed (and are bleeding), no abstraction here. The problem is material.

But this people who bleed inhabit (and enact) what a materialist point of view would only describe as an epistemological mistake, a delusion, or an ideologically masked reality—a fantasy. The materialist argument, of course, is the single ontology hypothesis, in which only one possible world is available, a rational and scientifically verifiable—thoroughly material—one, one that has been violently imposed. And that’s what the ontological world is fighting against, the scientific, material prejudice that there’s only one reality, “the single ontological domain... of modernity.” (Blaser, 2009)

The indigenous people actually studied by anthropologist do not have the luxury to have a Secondary reality lived through the “as if.” The colonization process could well be explained in a materialist world as the violent imposition of the modern “Primary Reality” into their life. But there is a centuries old-struggle in which the pre-modern try to preserve their very own “Primary reality” (which the ontological turn tries to understand) and this struggle could well be described as the emancipatory resistance, both material and ontological, to this imposition⁵¹. We are talking about people who don’t have the luxury of treating the dominant reality “as if”. It has been forcefully imposed on them. So they have to navigate both their actual Primary World (our *otherwise* ontology or their *fantasy*, depending on where you stand on this debate) and a Secondary one (our reality), and find ways to negotiate through them. And some of them can even live and enact the struggle while they enjoy Game of Thrones or Dune. A spectral world has materially taken over theirs and

⁵¹ We could also say that this “Primary Reality” imposed by colonization is not a fixed and clear one. It constantly changes and mutates through the process of history and the very same encounters it brings about. Immanent ontologies are not states but processes. Not all colonizations are the same.

threatens all that they consider life. There is a life in which finding interstices, ways of entrance, exits, cohabitation and maintenance have to be discovered and kept.

Of course, there are many strategies to deal with this: the main one, favoured by the system, is to take on the west's Primary Reality as the only one and discard their ancestors' one as superstition and fantasy. This is the safest bet: to abandon an ontology and hop on the most powerful one. Disregard the superstitions, and rationalize the beliefs as just that, a belief that has clearly been proven as a failed epistemology. Get a job. Turn in to the wonders of global capitalism. Others may try a radical strategy: defend their original ontology by all means (which is actually very hard, especially in our times, that tend to dispel remote places through telecommunication and transportation technologies), and this goes from armed resistance to keeping altars. But in this globalized world, most have to negotiate both realities, which are oft time incompatible and at odds with each other, sometimes in a very violent way, not just to themselves, but to the whole planet.

“To mine the shit out of Mars” is the answer I got from a Nicaragua-USian STEM student, after I asked him why he wanted to contribute to the colonization of Mars, after asking my students to explain to each other why they were studying what they were studying. His answer is a science-fictional one, a future speculation that slowly gets closer to reality (with its own streaks of the horror genre). No sense of wonder here.: Just a plain utilitarian argument. Still, it works as a Freudian metaphor and “the shit” is all the materials that will be turned into money, which is, according to traditional psychoanalysis, closely related to shit. Mars is just a cash machine waiting to be tapped into. The colonial fantasy is literal and

material here: no weird Martians or haunted landscapes, just resources to be extracted. No need for metaphors, really. This is as straight-forward and literal as it gets.

This is actually forcing stones to speak, to make them answer in the language of capitalism: money. All they can say are abstract, technical quantities. What they say has been given voice by a particular interpretive technique, a particular “controlled equivocation.”

If the ontological turn’s “conceptualization” of *otherwise* ontologies is the twisted mirror image of fantasy (and science-fiction) world-building, then the “ironic imagination” proposed by Saler, that “allows individuals to embrace alternative worlds and to experience alternative truths” through the consumption of fictional worlds, is the twisted mirror image of extractivism, and much more ironic than he imagined.

Saler builds a genealogy of the creation of fictional worlds that travels from Sherlock Holmes and gothic horror to Second Life and virtual reality (via Tolkien and Lovecraft, of course, and what he calls the “public spheres of imagination”). This is big business. This is Disney scale business, worldwide and all-encompassing, with corporate take-overs and marketing rights valued in millions. Saler rightly states that more people want to spend more time in these Secondary Worlds, and transnational corporations flood the market with fictional products that attempt to lure you into these voyages of the imagination. Better screens, better stories, better SFX. Realer each time. We could even argue that these activities, engaging with Secondary Worlds, are almost essential for survival in semio-capitalism. But people are able to enact/inhabit these Secondary Worlds because they live in a reality that depends in the extraction of resources that fuel the technology necessary not just for their entertainment, but for their life. This extraction is a phenomenon that dates back

to the “primitive accumulation” of colonization and that continues to our days: it is called extractivism.

We can enjoy our fantasies only by classifying Indigenous people’s ontologies as fantasies and “mining the shit” out of the worlds they inhabit. No laptops or smart phones without the minerals buried deep below the earth you inhabit. So sorry. It’s time to be objective. Your mountain (or your desert, or your jungle) is not alive and is definitely not a person (are you crazy?), so we’ll do open-pit mining or heavy foresting, on it. While Saler’s double consciousness in the West implies an entertainment choice, the double consciousness in the global south is often a life-death choice, especially when global south ontologies tend to extend the mantle of life and sentience to what the West just sees as non-human things. In extractivism, the “not-being” status of certain zones of the world, writes Grosfoguel, extends to the lives of the people who inhabit them.

That is the danger: preserving and understanding the ontologies of people whose whole universe is being forcefully led to extinction. No more literal material reality, just abstraction. Just resources, not existents.

Although I certainly think, following Jorge Luis Borges, that realism is a newcomer, and that fantastic literature has been the norm in the history of mankind, which makes science fiction belong to the genre of fantastical literature, the term “speculative fiction”⁵² sidesteps the kinship dilemma and brings both genres together. Approaching anthropology through ontology could well be taken as part of the ‘speculative turn’ (“daring speculations

⁵² Speculative fiction is an oxymoron. All fiction is, by definition, speculative. Facts can be turned into ficts in realism, right? But ficts are never facts, right?

about the nature of reality itself” as the back cover of “The Speculative Turn” anthology says).

The great “mineral rush” the world is seeing right now, and that is making stones “say” in our global economy, relies in a very peculiar interpretive (and imaginary) procedure which turns the literal into abstractions in order to properly obliterate them, because what really drives the speculative turn is not theory, nor fiction, nor anthropology, but finance.

CHAPTER 4: FINANCE AND PERFORMATIVE ABSTRACTIONS

August 15, 1971 is quickly becoming the symbolic —almost official— divorce date in which language and reality parted relationships, and went on their own. It is the day the Nixon administration abandoned the gold standard, severing gold, with an actual material existence, from the US dollar. It was an act of speech that serves well in the stories' arbitrariness and strange ritual connotations. It is a divorce that was already happening. The relationship was already strained. In the US, Franklin Delano Roosevelt separated the dollar from the gold reserve in 1933, trying to get out of the 1929 market Crash by debilitating the ability to make money from its dependence on gold reserves, but not entirely. If you actually tried to cash in your dollars you would have been able to “convert” them, trade them, at a fixed price. Nixon just completed the move. The US government stopped converting dollars to gold at a fixed price, abandoning the gold standard.

Both philosopher Giorgio Agamben and writer/activist Franco Berardi mark this particular date. Agamben does so in his “Capitalism as religion” essay, where he marks the date as one of those cases where dates “count as signs, as historical events.”⁵³ On that day, more symbolic than factual, “money was emptied of every value that was not purely self-referential.” Money was freed from a literal body, enacting a proper metaphorical maneuver into pure abstraction:

⁵³ Agamben also wrote that the “state of emergency,” under which a state suspends its laws in order to deal with a crisis, “had become the rule”. It should also be noted that another particular date, 9-11, brought particular attention to Agamben and his writing.

After 15 August 1971, one would have to add that money is a form of credit which is grounded on itself alone and which corresponds to nothing other than itself.

Berardi, in *The Uprising: Poetry and Finance*, says that from that moment on, money becomes “independent, autonomous -or better, aleatory. Floating, undetermined” (2012).

Of course, money has always been a very useful fict: it has never had any actual, material value. What really seems to be fictitious is barter, the system that regular economist accounts was “bettered” with the invention of money. Caroline Humphries, anthropologist at Cambridge, wrote in 1985 that:

No example of a barter economy, pure and simple, has ever been described, let alone the emergence from it of money; all available ethnography suggests that there never has been such a thing.

“What we now call virtual money came first,” (40) writes David Graeber while trying to explain that the “economy” has always been based on credit. As such, the ‘economy’ has always been speculative. It is always a matter of arranging the future. Graeber writes about historical cycles between virtual and metal money. But even he marks August 15, 1971 as “the beginning of yet another phase of virtual money, one which has only just begun, and whose ultimate contours are, necessarily, invisible.” (214)

The modern contractual relationship to debt is named by Graeber as the *Age of Capitalist Empire*, “a massive planetary switch to silver and gold bullion”, that started around 1450. The departure from this age, marked by the symbolic date of August 15, 1971,

is fueled, or turboed with, electronic computational tools that have made exchanges go faster than a speeding bullet and way beyond experiences of the human body and mind. It takes approximately (and here approximately just sounds like an irony) one 64 millionth of a second to conduct a trade, “the time it takes for a computer to process an order and send it to another machine” (Reed, 2021). That’s why Simon Sullivan, following Fredric Jameson, characterizes this kind of trading as “already properly posthuman” (2019).

The gold standard was just an illusory, and ritual, literalizing of credit’s speculative nature. There seems to be a consensus, as de Boever writes, “that Nixon’s abolition of the gold standard marked the beginning of an era of unbridled economic speculation (high-risk financial action) that is at the origin of our economic situation today” (2018)⁵⁴.

Contemporary finance, which is digital and globalized, is, as much as the ontological turn in anthropology, “a technology of description.” Financial derivatives contracts are, according to economist Fabián Muniesa, “nothing more and nothing less than descriptions themselves... a financial derivative is a document that describes its conditional behavior and the terms of payment.” They are imaginary creatures that create “money through money without the generative intervention of physical matter and muscular work” (Berardi). As such, financial contracts —or creatures, depending on how you want to frame them— are an example of the deep abstractive and proper reading of metaphors. They become vectors of meaning that reject possible literalities, in order to actually impose their own.

⁵⁴ It is also worth noting that “The Limits to Growth” report was first presented during the summer of 1971. Using computer simulation, the report, commissioned by the Club of Rome, presented a bleak view on the prospects of growth in both population and economy because of natural resources. “The Limits to Growth” is still being discussed today, a major turning point in anchoring economy to the material resources of the planet.

“Three rice cookings” is a perfectly “likely response,” in certain parts of Malaysia, and according to James C. Scott, “if one were to ask ‘How far is the next village?’” (Scott, 25) The response, of course, assumes that you want to know how much time you need to get there, and that you also know how long it takes for a certain kind and quantity of rice to be properly cooked: very practical, “commensurable” and material questions. According to Scott, the modern state has to enforce simplifications and standardizations in order to provide a legibility that allows it to control the territory it “owns.” These are all both reading protocols and technologies of description that make an abstraction in order to manipulate reality⁵⁵. Standardization of measurement, cadastral survey, cartography, economic indexes and linguistic centralization are “apparatus of capture” that organize an abstract survey that facilitate both police control and relations bound by an even more standardized law. These abstractions are essential: “the very concept of the modern state presupposes a vastly simplified and uniform property regime that is legible and hence manipulable from the center.” But they do so at the expense of the particular lived and localizable experience they describe:

These state simplifications, like all state simplifications, are always far more static and schematic than the actual social phenomena they presume to typify.

The farmer rarely experiences an average crop, an average rainfall, or an average price for his crops. (1998, 46)

⁵⁵ One might argue that even the simplest word accomplishes this. “The word kills the thing” said Lacan. Just the act of naming something is a way to control it. We would have to add that the ‘simplifications’ Scott argues about are particularly abstract, and mostly deal, like science fiction, with the “cognitive” part of the estrangement that goes with them. They cease being “commensurable” and material-based and become over-coding systems that relate material events to highly ordered abstract systems.

The violence is simple and obvious and a slow process still ongoing today, according to Scott. The world ceases to respond to actual literalities and has to answer in miles, terms of property, currency and proper English (or French or Spanish). Much as in the fact that decolonization is not a metaphor, the abstract erases previous materialities in order to turn three cooked rices into a couple of miles, or one day's work into a one day's wage, or the future into a hedge fund.

This is the turn in which “the map becomes the territory” (Baudrillard, 1994). The new measurement systems become abstract systems that take over the actual material conditions⁵⁶. After Nixon's abandonment of the also illusory gold standard, the metaphoric handles by which the world enacts ‘economy’ become autonomous and slip away from a material reference that would only hold them down. Finances are contracts, which are bundles of descriptions and rules of relation, based on the fictive nature of money, that thrive on logico-mathematical environments but that manage to graft onto the material upon which they feed. How do they graft into it? Through measuring and counting everything, enacting, because everything has a description and this particular “technology of description,” with its corresponding ontology, translates every material thing into a particular kind of bodiless, immaterial value⁵⁷. “Technic” is the name philosopher Federico Campagna gives to this “reality-system,” which reduces the world to measures, serial units and the infinite proliferation of instrumentalized positions, “a condition of enframing that is so absolute as to deny any legitimacy to whatever isn't the frame itself.”

⁵⁶ Once again, you just take the red away to describe the lips and forget about the rest of the coral. You just seduce stones to speak in terms of money and actually forget about them.

⁵⁷ There is, of course, another method of grafting these abstractions into reality, which is violence: the enforcement of these “measurings,” to which we will get to later in this chapter and also in the “epilogue” of the dissertation, with border walls as the prime example of the mise-en-force of these abstractions.

The combined annihilation of things' full and autonomous existence, and their total transformation into sets of equivalent serial units, is at the heart of the contemporary process of transfiguration of the world into an impalpable cloud of equivalent financial units, digital data, chains of information, items of identification (Campagna, 2018).

He also calls this "reality-system" a "mortal threat."

Everything is talking. All the time. Objects are legally bound to name themselves in order to be able to be translated into these abstract systems that Scott talks about. It's not just that everything is named (or branded, or legally bound or however you might want to call it) but that these naming is done in order to translate the objects into the domain of economics, to try to make things, including stones and mountains, rivers and toothbrushes, cars and affects, to speak in the same language, which is then made to act. Painting tags on objects (a very psychotic move, by the way) is, today, the act of painting price tags on them (that's what smart objects are, anyway). These are enunciations, speech acts, but there's always the doubt of the subject of the enunciation. Who is saying all these things? Specially when these things talk among themselves. Maybe they are just what Guattari named "proto-subjectivities," that ontological characteristic of machines, that allows them to make enunciations and communicate among themselves. The way they speak, even if they do not say.

Trying to understand the performative aspect of economy, Fabián Muniesa writes about the “economic” as an “inherent exacerbation of the calculative articulation of things”⁵⁸. To do so, one needs to abstract, which Muniesa considers “as a verb (a performance) rather than as a noun.” The radical performance of finance is similar to fiction —Max Haiven even considers it “capitalism’s imagination”— and finance is particularly speculative when this “contracts” take a life of their own: it’s own particular kind of magic, that Phillipe Pignaro and Isabelle Stengers call “capitalist sorcery” (“a system of sorcery without sorcerers”), but that Marx tried to explain as the “fetishism of the commodity” and through “fictitious capital” in the third volume of *Capital*: “value, in the form of credit, shares, debt, speculation and various forms of paper money, above and beyond what can be realized in the form of commodities” (Marx, 1991). Or as Aimee Bahng writes: “the playful juxtaposition of fictitious capital and mystical commodities suggests that capitalism’s reliance on fantastical representations... is itself a kind of science fiction.” There’s a “proper” metaphoric reading that favours the process of abstraction by itself, which in turn literalizes itself, re-organizing reality upon its very own characteristics, instantiating its very own literality, and disregarding the previous one which, in the case of financial objects without the illusory gold standard, didn’t even exist.

That’s why abstractions are performative. In the same way the map (and the miles) take over the landscape and allow us to act upon them, financial fictions allow taking action on money as an abstract system that then instantiates itself as real, because, as Muniesa warns: “financial objects, which are both descriptions and objects of description, are very

⁵⁸ Ratio is not only reason, but more exactly calculation, computation

very real.” And they have consequences in the real world, the one with people who bleed, even though what they are actually about is, as in science fiction, the future.

“Buying futures” is a search one can do in Google that will lead you into a set of possible questions to narrow your search, my favorites of which are: “How do you buy futures?” “Should you buy futures?” and “How much money do you need to trade futures?” All of them, of course, talk about futures as if they were actually things you can buy, which, in the investment world, they actually are. But, being speculative, what you actually buy is a bet on those futures materializing in the way you hope.

The derivative market, “the heart of calculation and competition within a capitalist economy” (Bryan and Rafferty, 2006, 9), uses the same interpretive procedure as the proper reading of metaphors. As much as taking the red out of the coral but not the coral itself, derivatives “dismantle any asset into individual attributes and trades them without trading the asset itself” (DeWaard, 2023) —which could well be an operational definition of a metaphor— and that’s why they are “essentially abstracted relations about the relations of capital.” (LiPuma and Lee, 2004, 105). Understanding them as strategies of description shows they are next of kin. There are two classes of derivative contracts, “lock” and “option.” Futures (along with swaps and forwards) belong to the first one. Futures contracts bind two agreeing parties to “purchase and deliver an asset at an agreed-upon price at a future date” (Fernando, 2022) in order to *hedge* that price in the future (hence hedge-funds) and minimize the risk of the asset changing prices that would affect either the buyer and the seller²⁴. It is, of course, a gambit on the future, but one that tends to minimize the risk of

investing. The other kind of derivative contracts, *options*, are more prone to speculation, because they “offer the holder the right, but not the obligation, to buy or sell the underlying asset or security at a specific price on or before the option’s expiration date” (Fernando, 2022) in order to *hedge* that price in the future (hence hedge-funds) and minimize the risk of the asset changing prices that would affect either the buyer and the seller⁵⁹. It is, of course, a gambit on the future, but one that tends to minimize the risk of investing. The other kind of derivative contracts, *options*, are more prone to speculation, because they “offer the holder the right, but not the obligation, to buy or sell the underlying asset or security at a specific price on or before the option’s expiration date” (Fernando, 2022) allowing the investor to just abandon the future if it doesn’t work in the way the investor was hoping for (paying a prime, of course). Now, imagine these selling and buying, taking or leaving futures at the speed of one 64 millionth of a second in a speculative world organized by highly complex algorithms managing highly abstract contract terms. It’s as mind-bogglingly uncontrollable as it is exhausting, but these gambles on the future become real and veer the way the future behaves, not based on the assets (or the assets of the assets some contracts conjure up into being) they are supposed to stand for, but on the mere representation and abstraction of those assets and the faith on those representations. At that speed of exchange, at that complexity of contracts and transactions, the actual assets just become highly manageable information, an almost useless materiality that will reach its final, definitive form, when the hedge-funds settle on a future that has already been predicted and accounted for, one way or the other⁶⁰.

⁵⁹ Maybe we should think of hedging (as in hedge-funds) as the time-based equivalent of the English “enclosures” around which the privatization of property began.

⁶⁰ Actually, what the financial market is actually hedging is the fact that this system of measuring value will continue to be used: that’s the contract.

Even so, financial objects, as in the case of derivatives, are imaginary creatures. And imaginary creatures are usually fickle and yes, they do violently crash.

But there's another form of buying futures, lived in a much more intimate manner by most humans in this world. Deleuze famously considered credit as the main mechanism of his "society of control" which was superceding Foucault's "society of surveillance," much more Big Brotherish and characterized by the Panopticon, in which citizens were constantly afraid of being surveilled and so had to act as if they were. In the society of control, Big Brother, as Larry McCaffrey wrote, was actually a fun guy who sat in your couch and actually knew what the coolest shows were. Instead of being surveilled, individuals constantly check-in and prefer to be in places where surveillance cameras will keep them safe. They constantly go into facebook, instagram or tik-tok, and report where they are exactly so everybody knows. In a society of control nobody forces you to watch the screen, you actually want to do it because that show is so good, and there are a lot films you really want to see and songs you want to hear, restaurants you want to try, places you want to be and books you want to read.

Credit and its ensuing debt are the society of control's major mechanisms. "Man is no longer enclosed, but man in debt," Deleuze wrote in his Postscript on the societies of Control. While Lazzarato sees the creditor-debtor relationship as an antagonism replacing capital-labor, David Graebner argues that debt is intertwined with guilt, debt being both the origin of money and its ensuing morality, where we always are in debt and will feel guilty if we don't pay it, especially in a world where "the usurers are themselves the ultimate moral authorities" (Graebner), Fred Moten and Stephano Harney cast the student as the ultimate victim of the way debt is intertwined with desire in our contemporary society and where

“Find your own interest” works (metaphorically of course) as both finding the intellectual and creative desire one wishes to spend their life pursuing at the same time student loans in the US force students into debt, and find your interest is also the economical injunction at the interest rates you will be paying in order to chase after your desire.

Because, in reality, debt is the sale of future labor, and as such, the ultimate control mechanism. If you are in debt, and both morally and legally forced to pay it, you are under the obligation to find a job to keep your obligations. Your future is already cast. You need to keep on abiding by the system, and keep on working (which is usually means indentured servitude) to repay the debt and refinance it and organize your life around it. Credit means selling your future, and exhausting other possibilities of existence that are not directed towards settling your debt.

The key point here is extraction. Muniesa makes this connection explicitly when he says that “the act of economizing resembles another: that of abstracting.” Even though abstraction means “to transport (something) to a formal, calculative space” (think about the transportive function of all metaphors in terms of their “proper reading”), it is also “an action of transformation and displacement, as in 'to extract' or 'to draw away' suggested by its etymology: *abs* (away), *trahere* (tract)”

Financial capitalism, as a particular speculative creature, is engaged in abstraction, and does so foreclosing the difference between metaphoric and literal readings. It extracts both natural resources and immaterial ones. It extracts stones as well as futures.

“Cash is trash” has been the media-savvy slogan of Ray Dalio, billionaire founder of Bridgewater, the world largest hedge fund⁶¹. Gold still seems solid. Crypto-currency is good but “at the end of the day if it’s really successful they’ll kill it”⁶² (“they” meaning government). But cash is trash, “so get rid of it now. Invest it anywhere or burn it. Just don’t keep it.”⁶³ Cash is slow and just backed down through the “full faith and credit”⁶⁴ of governments. So goes financial advice by the world’s biggest speculator, who speculates by hedging futures. Capital, detached from the commodity, now wishes to detach itself from cash, printed or coined money, preferring the possibility of untethering its physicality. And as Berardi writes, “the financial ideology is thriving in the context of social precariousness. When the prospects are uncertain, you are invited to bet on the future. Lottery, net-trading, risk taking —these are the opportunities financial capitalism is offering everybody” (Berardi, 2012).

Both David Graebner and Bifo Berardi find a strong relationship between debt-credit economies and violence. Physical violence. Graebner ‘s explanation for this is practical: there is no way you can hold up an economic (and moral) system without violence, both actual and virtual (as in threatened). A debt is the abstraction (into numbers) of an obligation and “the violence and the quantification are intimately linked” (14). In his book, Graebner explores “the way violence... turns human relations into mathematics.”

On one level the difference between an obligation and a debt is simple and obvious. A debt is the obligation to pay a certain sum of money. As a result, a

⁶¹ <https://www.forbes.com/sites/greatspeculations/2021/01/25/the-gold-standard-ended-50-years-ago-federal-debt-has-only-exploded-since/?sh=71b2071c1e17>

⁶² <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-09-15/ray-dalio-says-cash-is-trash-and-makes-the-case-for-crypto>

⁶³ <https://medium.com/geekculture/cash-is-trash-according-to-ray-dalio-4f531ee657d0>

⁶⁴ mismo q 26

debt, unlike any other form of obligation, can be precisely quantified. This allows debts to become simple, cold, and impersonal-which, in turn, allows them to be transferable. If one owes a favor, or one's life, to another human being-it is owed to that person specifically. But if one owes forty thousand dollars at 12-percent interest, it doesn't really matter who the creditor is; neither does either of the two parties have to think much about what the other party needs, wants, is capable of doing-as they certainly would if what was owed was a favor, or respect, or gratitude. One does not need to calculate the human effects; one need only calculate principal, balances, penalties, and rates of interest. (2011, 13)

So the debt actually works in two ways: the capacity to exert physical violence onto the debtor, and the almost abstract violence of turning human life and relationships into mathematics.

While Graebner relates violence to a mathematical system of debt and credit which is as old as money, Berardi explores the relationship particularly on our financial regime, where this quantification becomes a part of transactions that have no actual equivalent to human scales (at one 64 millionth of a second).

In the sphere of the financial economy, the acceleration of financial circulation and valorization implies an elimination of the real world. The more you

destroy physical things, physical resources, and the body, the more you can accelerate the circulation of financial flows⁶⁵ (2012).

According to sociologist Ramón Grosfoguel⁶⁶, after the financial market crash of 2008 and the rise of China's "western-centric and ecodestructive industrialization... metal prices went up to levels previously unheard of"⁶⁷. Extractivist industries went into full-fledged financial speculation, causing "not only ecological destruction, but the violence used to displace human beings from their territory, most of which are racialized subjects categorized in the 'non-being zones' of the system-world."⁶⁸

The world needs its metals, and if financial speculation says their price will go up, then open-pit mining (probably the most destructive way to raze parts of the world short of an atomic bomb) should be implemented. It's a question of numbers. We need our iPhones and computers to keep on living in the world of abstraction and finance. The "decorporalization" McLuhan talked about as a factor of electronic culture seems to have both a literal and metaphorical existence. Our need to live in Secondary Realities is tightly related to both financial capitalism, electronic media and the constant extraction of all the global South has to offer, from their "fantastic" ontologies to their rare metals.

⁶⁵ Of course, Berardi claims "Economics is not a science." "Economic reality does not exist. It is a result of a process of technical modeling, of submission and exploitation" "They (economists) profess social reality to be in a crisis if it does not conform to the reality of these notions (growth, competition, gross national product). Muniesa's chart comparing economists predictions and actual conditions could be helpful here.

⁶⁶ Grosfoguel traces three possible ways of extractivism: economic, epistemological and ontological. Economical extractivism deals with the physical removal of goods fueled into the global or imperial economy. Epistemological extractivism is about taking the knowledge and practices (and ontologies) of the global south and inserting them into the global North's economic Exchange. Ontological extractivism, according to him, is a way of life, "a form of existence" which only sees the other as a way of getting benefits for oneself.

⁶⁷ http://www.scielo.org.co/scielo.php?script=sci_arttext&pid=S1794-24892016000100006#nu2

⁶⁸ my translation

Cryptocurrency for example is actually software (an electronic “technology of description”) that can act as money. Instead of using a particular material asset that acts as a real “hold” on it, bitcoin, for example, uses “mining” (and yes, the analogy is not as far-fetched as you might think). Mining “is performed by high-powered computers that solve complex computational math problems,” problems so complex they “can’t be solved by hand and are complicated enough to tax even incredibly powerful computers.”⁶⁹ The mining actually solves *blockchains*, transactions that need to be accurate and accountable, and non-duplicable. Solving this math problems produces new bitcoins while also serving as a check on transactions, making the network safe. The ‘stoppage’ process in order not to have everyone producing bitcoins is actual resources. Solving the problems and completing verifications is very expensive, and it runs against the cost of equipment, electricity and cooling water the verification needs. The system acquires a certain stability because the cost of “breaking it” is usually higher than the rewards one will get. It’s almost a dare: How many resources can you burn and still make a profit?

Of course, the method through which to achieve this is science fictional by a weird reading of the metaphorical protocols of the genre, in which its “improper” reading becomes monetized. Kodwo Eshun defined the future industry as “the intersecting industries of technoscience, fictional media, technological projection and market prediction” Eshun expands Mark Fisher’s concept *SF (science fiction) Capital* in order to tie up both mathematical formalization (“computer simulations, economic projections, weather report, futures trading, think-tank reports, consultancy papers”) and informal descriptions (“science-fiction movies, science-fiction novels, sonic fictions, religious prophecy and venture

⁶⁹ <https://www.investopedia.com/terms/b/bitcoin-mining.asp>

capital”). He warns about the consequences: “it would be naïve to understand science fiction, located within the expanded field of the futures industry, as merely prediction into the far future, or as a utopian project for imagining alternative social realities.”

Science fiction is now a research and development department within a futures industry that dreams of the prediction and control of tomorrow. Corporate business seeks to manage the unknown through decisions based on scenarios, while civil society responds to future shock through habits formatted by science fiction. Science fiction operates through the power of falsification, the drive to rewrite reality, and the will to deny plausibility, while the scenario operates through the control and prediction of plausible alternative tomorrows (2023).

This is extractivism of the future. Either your personal future, the labor you will have to do in order to pay your debt, or the future of natural resources, even the planet. Photis Lysandrus argues that “just as globalization represents the extension of the commodity principle along the axis of geographical space, financialization represents the extension of the same principle along the axis of time: the future is being colonized” (2016). Ficts will grab their factuality in the future, hedging it.

In the case of financial capitalism, statistical projection transforms the untenable future into a futurescape —akin to the transformation of land into landscape— that *materializes the abstract*, rendering it available for possession, even as a sight to behold, or an imaginary to occupy” (Bahng, 2018).

Immaterialization takes it out in the world. It's not that hard. You can trade futures or even hire an "ontology editor" (or use a free-source one) to crank out the framework for your intelligent systems on which your network runs (as Protegé software announces on its webpage). This abstraction, finance fueled by electronics, forces its own brand of materialism, first by using a proper reading of metaphors in order to enact its own literalism, while dreaming of mining the shit out of Mars.

CHAPTER 5: RELIGION, PROPHET MODE AND THE SECOND DANGER

“Faith is the credit we enjoy with God” is one of the ways Giorgio Agamben explains why capitalism is our religion on terms of how we actually believe in terms of money, but especially credit. He tells a story about David Flusser (Vilem’s cousin, by the way), an Israeli Religious Studies scholar specializing in early Christianity who was thinking through the word *pistis*, while walking in modern Athens. *Pistis* is the greek word Jesus and his apostles used for what has been translated as faith. Flusser looked up and saw a sign above himself that said *trapeza tēs pisteos*, which stopped him on his tracks, until he remembered that is possible Greek for “credit bank.” Agamben reads this as a way of understanding faith, and that “*pistis*, ‘faith’, is simply the credit that we enjoy with God and that the word of God enjoys with us – once we believe.” Agamben doesn’t stop there, and then turns to Latin:

...*creditum* is the past participle of the Latin verb *credere*: it is that in which we believe, in which we place our faith, at the moment we establish a fiduciary relationship with someone by taking them under our protection or by lending them money, by entrusting ourselves to their protection or by borrowing money from them.

This allows Agamben to say that if we take money as God, as that which we put our trust into, capitalism as religion, “the bank has taken the place of the Church; and that by governing credit,” the bank “manipulates and manages the faith —the scarce, uncertain trust— which our time still has in itself.”

The speculative nature of finances mirrors the speculative nature of religion, both focused on the matter of faith, on what and who we give credit to. But credit is also granted. And usually enforced. Religion could well be understood as a political position about the proper way to read metaphors. This position becomes highly sedimented when it comes to certain texts bound by printed language, in which specific words are supported by a particular material arrangement known as the book (or The Book, according to some). Joseph Campbell frames a simple divide according to the protocols of “reading”:

...half the people in the world think that the metaphors of their religious traditions, for example, are facts. And the other half contends that they are not facts at all (Campbell, 2022)

Of course one cannot read this literally. Campbell is not trying to make a statistical point (once again the State comes to bear upon the question). It doesn't matter if half the population takes metaphors as facts and half doesn't. The point is that there are at least two possible positions: regarding certain statements as fact or taking them as lies, which is the other extreme: “As a result we have people who consider themselves believers because they accept metaphors as facts, and we have others who classify themselves as atheists because they think religious metaphors are lies” (2022). Facts and ficts live on opposite (and warring) sides of the fence. But the divide is also a continuum, one that Campbell and whole cohort of religious studies scholars try to bridge through their understanding of metaphor. Because we could always say, following Taussig that there are religious people who take their tradition's stories (usually officialized by scriptural rigour) as facts, as literal truth, and those who read them as metaphors, in the same way some atheists will read myths (and ficts) as lies or judgement errors, and some will understand them as metaphors.

“Mythology is other people’s religion” would be one of Campbell’s favorite definition of mythology, making a distinction clear: that which I don’t believe as truth, goes in the drawer of either lies or mythology, especially if that mistaken belief, that mistaken ontology, the onto-anthropologists would say, is shared, or was shared, by many people. A straightforward atheist (who casts myths and religion as lies) would characterize all religious beliefs as myths, while probably bringing up front the authoritarian structure of religion in terms of enforcing and “handing out,” managing, those beliefs. But the idea of belief remains, contrasted with the apparent objectivity of western rational thought: they are myths because they are not true. Those stories are mythological because there is no scientific and factual explanation of them. Campbell takes that side:

My favorite definition of religion: misunderstanding of mythology. The misunderstanding consists in the reading of the spiritual mythological symbols as though they were primarily references to historical events (Campbell, 2022).

Once again, these are reading procedures. The problem, according to Campbell, is the literalizing of those symbols and stories as “historical facts, instead of metaphorical representations of spiritual realities.” Understanding religion and mythology as metaphorical has been a common academic strategy for reading into things people “believe” (or facts that can’t be factually proved through scientific apparatus of capture). Psychologist of religion J.M. van der Lans, for example, wrote that “metaphor is the leading stylistic character of religious language” (1991). Against literal readings of Scripture, for example, you can

oppose ‘deeper symbolic meanings which lie beyond their literal wording,’ (Hunt, 1972) which is the third category of the LAM scales, developed by Richard Hunt in the early 70s, which measure styles of religious commitment: literal, rejection or anti-literal (dismissal of the religious statement, as in Joseph Campbell’s “lies”) and symbolic (mythologic)⁷⁰.

The problem Campbell finds is a big one: as a matter of fact, I’ll characterize it as the second danger of reading metaphors, which is literalizing them, and sticking to the literalization, even if “rational” people find it disconcerting. The second danger of reading metaphors lives in secular minds as the problem of fundamentalism. Unnever and Cullen (2006), for example, write: “the fundamentalist hierarchical image of God is consistent with their belief that the Bible should be interpreted as the literal word of God.” This literality is contested, and nuanced. Choueiri (2010), for example, defines fundamentalism as “a literal yet creative interpretation of the Bible” where “its direct meaning is assumed to indicate a certain intellectual stance that claims to derive political principles from a timeless, divine text.” Barr for examples, sidesteps literalization looking for inerrancy:

The ‘plain man’, asked this question, will commonly say that a fundamentalist is a person who ‘takes the Bible literally’. This, however, is far from being a correct or exact description. The point of conflict between fundamentalists and others is not over literality but over inerrancy. Even if fundamentalists sometimes say that they take the Bible literally, the facts of fundamentalist interpretation show that this is not so. What fundamentalists insist is not that the Bible must be taken literally but that it must be so interpreted as to avoid any- admission that it contains any kind of error. In order to avoid imputing

⁷⁰ The most criticized of these categories is the symbolic one, as it allows a variety of interpretations that are just gathered together in one category.

error to the Bible, fundamentalists twist and turn back and forward between literal and non-literal interpretation (Barr, 1978).

But even Barr has to admit “the only natural exegesis is a literal one, in the sense that this is what the author meant,” (1978) the author being God, of course. Marty (1988), while stating that “the idea that the doctrine of the inerrancy of the Word of God commits its adherents to a literalistic type of exegesis is wholly groundless,” also admits that “fundamentalists suspect and oppose “spiritualizing” or rendering only “symbolic” or “metaphorical” the teachings or acts of compromising on the laws, codes, and customs of a tradition.”

Thinking about religions as beliefs also becomes problematic, mainly because “belief (rather than ritual, for example) seems to have been the pivot around Christians have told their own story” (Lopez, 1998) and has been the traditional explanatory measure, and an abstract one as such (you believe in an idea: you believe that an idea is truth: that truth becomes literal), with which to understand religion, “a Christian import that spread with the rise of Protestantism and with globalization more broadly,” in a “story bound up with imperialism and colonialism” (Morgan, Sutton, 2021). In this sense, belief aligns itself with the abstract: first you believe, and only then can you practice. And of course, this belief is foundational: capitalism relies on it, as faith in abstract financial institutions like banks, but mainly in credit, which is as much faith-based as its payment is literally enforced. It is foundational because it is subjectifying: belief is understood as an individual decision, and the individual is also part and parcel of the subjectivation processes of the West⁷¹. As

⁷¹ In this context, the individual choice of belief is almost irrelevant. What characterizes fundamentalism is its social character: a shared one. When a person grants solidity to ideas or metaphors that no one else shares, chances are he

Lazzaratto writes about the indebted man: “the promise he created to ensure the fulfillment of his promise⁷².”

It is actually the practice that becomes problematic in fundamentalism. If you believe in something, it is highly probable that you will act as if it actually, literally, exists, and as such, belief is a cause for action (and it is no coincidence that Unneven and Cullen’s discussion of literalization was published in a *Journal of Criminal Policy*), of people acting as if they lived in a reality of their own making, and even more so, willing to die for it (which is the slippage from fundamentalist to terrorist which became common, at least in Western media, after 9/11).

Even if abstract belief is used as a parameter, fundamentalism implies having “fundamentals,” “basics,” or “essences” (Marty, 1988) where what can only be described with language matches reality, be it race, scripture, facts, the market or god.

The prevalence of the metaphoric, especially in academic secular circles, has also affected theology. Paul Avis, theologian at the University of Exeter writes:

It is primarily through the imagination and the genres typically generated by the imagination (metaphor, symbol and myth) that we are brought into living contact with our object (the sacred, the divine, revelation, God), both in living religion and in theological reflection; second, that these modes of discourse

will be categorized as mentally ill. Madness is a solitary business, as we will see in chapter 6. When the belief (or the literalization, if you will) is shared, you can at least get the dignity of a “cult” or a ‘sect.’”

⁷² This relationship between abstraction and the West, including the religious dominance of Christianity can also be understood as the conflation of progress with abstraction: from animism to polytheism to monotheism to reason. Multiplicity gives way to abstract unicity, enforced through policing and war, colonization and extractivism.

have a truth-bearing capacity and can support a critical-realist theology, one that does justice to both the subjective and the objective aspects of theology (Avis, 1999).

According to Avis, “the whole repertoire of religious imagery—primarily metaphor, symbol and myth—forms the primary constituents of the sacred” and it is through these imaginative devices that we can have access to God because “they mark the limits of the human world and the boundary points where men and women meet the unknown but felt reality that encompasses their world.”

It is both strange and alluring that the middle point where the theist and the atheist can come together is in the metaphoric reading of the texts. For the theist, they can provide at least an opening into the experience of the divine, and for the atheist, the reading of religious stories can also show how those stories are really stories about the human condition. Campbell built himself a very notorious career by making some of the most beautiful and interesting readings of mythology and religion (which are, “in a sense” the same thing for him). Both Avis and Campbell agree on the mysterious aspect of these particular metaphors. For Avis, “the mystery of imagination points to and reflects the mystery of God” while for Campbell, “These images must point past all meanings given, beyond all definitions and relationships, to that really ineffable mystery that is just the existence, the being of ourselves and of our world. If we give that mystery an exact meaning we diminish the experience of its real depth.”

The middle ground that metaphorical reading, what both Campbell and Avis would agree on as a proper one, provides the middle ground between the literalists (which we will

get to eventually) and the “every mythology is a lie” atheist, who maybe would, after a Marxist reading, agree, as Bruce Lincoln does, that myth is ideology in narrative form; or with Fredric Jameson, claiming that ideology “subsumes everything else in culture and the superstructures, assuming the position religion once held for the first historians and cultural theoreticians of the West” (2019). Even Joseph Campbell (no Marxist at all) points towards the use of myth as a way to control populations: “the social, as opposed to the mystical function of a mythology, is not to open the mind, but to enclose it: to bind a local people together in mutual support by offering images that awaken the heart to recognitions of commonality, without allowing these to escape the monadic compound.”

But even Fredric Jameson, who warns about a “bad reading of allegory” which conflates a “reduction of symbolism and one-to-one allegory,” also points out that “Allegory raises its head as a solution when beneath this or that seemingly stable or unified reality the tectonic plates of deeper contradictory levels of the Real shift and grate ominously against one another and demand a representation” (2019, 109).

“Do Metaphors Dream of Literal Sleep?” is the title of Seo-Young Chu’s book, subtitled a “science-fictional theory of representation” in which she argues that the literalization of figurative speech allows science-fiction to flesh out, so to say, conditions of life that are not available yet for representation, following, in a sense, both Jameson’s quote about things that “demand a representation” and Davis “boundary points with the unknown.” And that is the macro way of understanding science fiction (although it could be expanded to speculative fiction) as a literature that works by making metaphors real. While Samuel

Delany's approach would be micro, almost on a sentence or phrase level like "the door dilated," Chu's approach tries to make sense of the way science fiction uses this device, this reading protocol, to make sense of bigger issues, some of them really pressing. In this sense, Chu is continuing Joseph Campbell's work in terms of making the myth a metaphor and reading it as such, with the science-fictional surplus of articulating metaphors that deal with the very nature of our technologically mediated world.

Chu writes of science-fiction as a high-intensity realism (better yet: realism is low-intensity science fiction), where the "objects of science-fiction representation, while impossible to represent in a straight-forward manner, are absolutely real" (Chu, 2011). The crucible, so to say, is the relationship between the literal and the figurative dimensions of the objects. When they match easily, we get low-intensity science fiction (realism), and things are what common sense would have them. But then you get to when their match is complicated:

Consider, for example, the globalized world. The main reason why the globalized world resists straightforward comprehension is the fact that its literal dimensions operate independently of its figurative dimensions. Literally the globalized world is a concrete object that possesses measurable dimensions (e.g., a radius of approximately 6,378 kilometers). Figuratively the globalized world is a nebulous and ever-changing web where two people separated by vast physical distance might feel as if they're actually sitting face-to-face while talking to each other through Skype.

A hyper-mediated global community understands itself through science fiction because science fiction has the tools to do the job. There are things in this world, forces running all around us at accelerating speeds that science fiction “makes available for representation.” The method is the metaphor in the Real: “lyric figures are systematically literalized, substantiated, and consolidated in science fiction as ontological features of narrative worlds.” William Gibson’s cyberspace is exactly that: “non-imaginary yet cognitively estranging.” Science fiction objects of representation are real, and science-fiction attempts capture by side-stepping the difference between literal and figurative. Science fiction is both counter-literal (“both metaphor and SF bring into imagined existence things non-existent in the world of literal facts”) and counterfigurative (“displacing the ordinary attributes of figurative language— its weightlessness, virtuality, as-if-ness, dependence on cognitive labor— with the vivacity, solidity, persistence, and givenness that characterize the perceptible world of literal facts”). It resists the literal as it does the abstract, creating a space when you can have both, which is what I called getting the cake and eating it too.

Chu makes bold readings. She makes a wonderful case that three science fiction classics, Vonnegut’s *Slaughterhouse-5* (“unstuck in time” being the metaphor turned Real), Haldeman’s *The Forever War* and Stapledon’s *Last and First Men* are not only trying to capture the experience of PTSD, but that actually “science fiction is the only kind of testimony that a trauma survivor can give” because the dissociation that happened during the trauma, a moment in which there is no way of taking it all in, becomes displaced in time and can never be experienced as such: dissociative fugue states and science fiction’s time travel work together to capture the experience of rupture in time related to PTSD.

The approach is highly interesting in the way it approaches the mechanisms of science fiction but it runs the risk of falling in the one-to-one allegory trap. The mythological style of approaching religion, which Hunter used in his LAM studies, produced a variety of interpretations which were difficult, and maybe impossible, to organize. This approach runs the risk of being this clear:

The film *The Matrix* (directed by the Wachowski brothers, 1999) is premised on the idea that day-to-day life is a virtual-reality prison constructed by machine-intelligences (Roberts, 2006).

I would have to add: “that use humans as fuel,” and it is certainly a characterization of the movie which does a pretty good work. Adam Roberts uses this sentence to start his discussion about the relationship between the metaphorical and literal devices in science fiction. And while extremely accurate in terms of analysis, it misses all the details that make the movie great: learning how to drive a vehicle downloading software right into your brain (and the weird pleasure of having orifices to do so), those beautifully choreographed ballet-like battle scenes where time goes from super slow to super fast and the explanation that *deja vu*'s are just glitches in the Matrix, to name a few of *The Matrix*'s “science-fictionemes,” according to Chu, “units of the science-fictional medium through which cognitively estranging referents become available for representation.” Reductiveness always takes out the fun of things.

What interests me is the subversion and the dislocation of the metaphorical/figurative sense, an abstract one, and the literal/factual, headed towards the material dimensions. This

ability to juggle the literal and metaphorical aspects is not only one of science-fiction strengths, but almost also a survival mechanism:

“Mundane” reality has never been an uncomplicated matter, but the case could be made that everyday reality for people all over the world has grown less and less concretely accessible over the past several centuries and will continue to evolve in that direction for decades (if not centuries) to come. In other words, cognitively estranging referents are growing more and more prevalent. At the same time, the referents that constitute our everyday reality are growing progressively estranging. Financial derivatives are more cognitively estranging than pennies. Global climate change is more cognitively estranging than yesterday’s local weather. Multinational conglomerates are more cognitively estranging than independent retail shops.

Science fiction ceases to be a tool to understand the world and actually becomes the world. The way it flattens metaphor and the real is the productive force in the world: science fiction does not predict the future, it allows us to understand our present experiences. Adam Davis continues writing about the “single, apparently straightforward instance” of *The Matrix* quoted above:

It does not mean this statement literally. It means it metaphorically; we are not really living in a virtual-reality prison, although this is a useful metaphorical way of talking about contemporary life.

Sea-Young Chu’s theory implies that it actually accounts for a lived reality, not the future, but that the literal and metaphoric dimensions of the issue do not match, and science-

fiction has the tools to make it graspable. It is actually making the present condition “available for representation.” Chu’s theory allows the possibility that The Matrix is not only asking us for the suspension of disbelief that might make us mistake its Secondary Word for the Primary through the use of ironic imagination, but that it is actually a possible way to describe our experience in a moment in history where we spend most of our time looking at and interacting with screens. Science fiction, through the metaphor-literal breakdown it puts in motion, goes into prophetic mode. If Marshal McLuhan wrote that Burroughs’ Naked Lunch understood that “man provides the sexual organs of the technological world”, then the Matrix has degraded us to mere fuel. Prophetic mode babbles non-sense that suddenly gains illuminating consistency. Marshall McLuhan was once asked what he thought of people describing him as a prophet, to which he answered that prophets never see the future, but that they actually saw the present, and that most of us go through life “forward through the looking mirror,” holding onto ideas and identities that were relevant in the past (like democracy, the individual, privacy, the nation, the self: printhood) that have ceased to be operant. Going forward looking through the window mirror implies a crash —especially at the speed the world is carrying on, where 64 million financial operations can happen in just one second. Artists were able to see through the windshield, and tried to articulate what they saw. Anybody who did this (and McLuhan kind of self-styled himself as an artist) appears to be predicting the future when they were actually just seeing the present.

And in our present age, the metaphorical capacity of our species is in full information overload. We see fragments of things everywhere (50,000 messages a day), which randomly couple with each other. This is what Burroughs advised writers attempting the cut-up: “You’ve got to learn how to listen. Really listen.” And that’s what the cut-up proves: the

insane associations are already there. When you do a cut-up right, as Burroughs wrote: “the future leaks out.” This is prophetic mode: articulating the present through apparent nonsense.

This present-to-be, and the availability of its presence through representation is what science fiction does through its operations and reading protocols. Driving away from the abstract, and proper reading of metaphor, literalizing metaphors is becoming sensuous: “to literalize a metaphor— to subject a metaphor to counterfigurative procedures— is to augment the metaphor’s sensuous vivacity, to incorporate the metaphor into the world of material details.” This tweaking of language, this literalization, a controlled hallucination for the readers and maybe the writer, gives body and presence, aesthetical weight, to those things we are experiencing but cannot understand, so that machines, abstract machines, can appear to bleed.

“The word made flesh” remains the basic mystery of Christianity, which is also the main mechanism of religion, myth and all the speculative genres. Taking it as a metaphor or as literal device seems, according to Campbell, the way the word works. Taken as a metaphor, the mystery of Incarnation might always be a way to approach human nature, and to think about our language-driven sense of the world as flesh-driven endeavor —we are speaking bodies after all— while also positioning the word as the beginning. As such, it is a grounding metaphor, a ritualistic endeavor that crucifies the divine into pain and blood and love and the ways to transcend, and deal with the fact that we have bodies that bleed, and mouths that talk and engage with others. Taking it literally, it means that Jesus Christ

actually existed, that he is the son of god and that he died to cleanse the original sin, allowing humans the chance to enjoy eternal life.

Whatever the case (and even the middle ground counter-literal and counter-figurative applies here), religion, myth, and for that case fantasy, also allows us to grasp through representation highly problematic experiences of the world where the literal and the figurative dimensions do not necessarily match, and that goes from cosmological paradoxes through sex and death and having desires and having a mind, but this genres do away with the cognitive part of the estrangement. They make certain ideas “available for representation” without having to rely on rational mechanisms to grant credit to them. The word made flesh can easily be understood as the human condition, which, as human history shows, is not exactly an easy state to understand.

Maybe religion does what the ontological turn wishes to do for different belief systems of indigenous people in the world: it grants ontological substance to a way of being in the world. Maybe Borges was right and fantastic literature has always been the dominant narrative form, and we just have different protocols for reading and experiencing it. Even as atheists we could understand that “God” is probably the most important concept ever created (in singular, at least in the Western world), because it is way of apprehending through words something that is very difficult to conceptualize, whether you take it metaphorically or literally. Your preferred strategy will most probably afford a particular consistency to the reality in which you live. If we think of religion thought as granting “conceptual affordances,” then we could think of the “conceptual affordances” and figures of God as something called human history, even if the guy doesn’t even exist. It is also, and I have to stress it, a history of violence and colonization, especially when you take it literally.

Understanding religion as a metaphor, especially in the monotheistic tradition of the book (Talmud, Bible, Coran) which have official versions, seems to be the academic answer to holy scripture. The word of God should not be taken as facts, much less historical facts because, as Paul Avis writes: “This literalistic approach is defensive and impossible to sustain indefinitely” while theologian Paul Jones adds that “a literal reading of the Bible is an exercise in self-sabotage.” There’s no way they will find Adam and Eve’s bones, and the road of improper reading is paved with either danger, “Taken (i.e., "mis-taken") literally, metaphors cease to function as sources of insight⁷³, but rather they blind and they limit us; they lose their cognitive utility and we instead are "used" by them” (LAM) or stupidity:

the popular, unenlightened practice of prosaic reification of metaphoric imagery has been the fundamental method of the most influential exegetes of the whole Judeo-Christian-Islamic mythic complex (Campbell, 1986)

So modern theologians have to make sense, either through metaphorical or historical analysis: “Nonliteralists want to know how to faithfully and honestly interpret a first-century text for a twenty-first-century world...they want to know how one can read the Bible and the morning newspaper with the same pair of eyes.” But religion has to draw a line because it is caught in the literal/figurative trap, it has to decide when the holy texts are metaphor and where should we read them literally because something about them has to be factual, or else there is no dogma, or faith. If religion is always a metaphor the we would have to accept the fact that God is also one, and that it connects to nothing except the fun house mirrors that taking language literally produces in humans.

⁷³ The upshoot, of course, is that taken literally, metaphors also become “sources of sight” as in the prophetic mode described above in science fiction: a defining feature of all speculative modes. Seeing visions that no other people sees is as hallucinatory as it is religious and prophetic. Madmen, primitives, children and visionaries...

“If I ever meet Jesus, I’m kicking his ass” is the chorus of my favorite country song: “She left me for Jesus,” co-written and performed by Hayes Carll, released in 2008. If I may address and ask a favor of the reader, I would really urge you to stop reading this essay and listen to the song in the platform of your choice while reading the lyrics, which I’ll reproduce right here. This will decidedly work better if you sing along, but I know I am pushing both my luck and your patience enough as it is⁷⁴:

“SHE LEFT ME FOR JESUS”

Hayes Carll

We've been datin' since high school

We never once left this town

We used to go out on the weekends

And we'd drink till we drowned

But now she's actin' funny

And I don't understand

I think that she's found her

Some other man

She left me for Jesus

And that just ain't fair

⁷⁴ If I may push things a little bit further, please don’t see the oficial YouTube video as i won’t be addressing it and it will probably ruin the experience of the song as it is.

She says, that he's perfect.

How could I compare

She says, I should find him

And I'll know peace at last

But if I ever find Jesus

I'm kickin' his ass.

She showed me a picture

All I could do was stare

At that freak in his sandals

With his long purty hair

They must think that I'm stupid

Or I don't have a clue

I bet he's a Commie

Or even worse yet a Jew

She left me for Jesus

And that just ain't fair

She says, that he's perfect.

How could I compare

She says, I should find him

And I'll know peace at last

But if I ever find Jesus

I'm kickin' his ass.

She's givin' up whiskey
And taken up wine
Why, she prays for his troubles
And has forgot about mine
I'm a gonna get even
I can't handle the shame
Why the last time we made love
She even called out his name

She left me for Jesus
And that just ain't fair
She says, that he's perfect.
How could I compare
She says, I should find him
And I'll know peace at last
But if I ever find Jesus
I'm kickin' his ass

It could have been Carlos
Or even Billy or Ted
But if I ever find Jesus
He's gonna wish he were dead
Ahhh, man

The humor in the song is wickedly witty, as it gets us inside a highly stereotyped small-town conservative Bible belt kind of man that is also incredibly stupid, and that makes sense and says the truth without even realizing it. The song allows the listener to understand the mistakes he is making, mainly taking Jesus literally as a guy who his girlfriend is cheating him with, instead of metaphorically. The character in the song, with which we identify because of the first person point of view the words drag us into, mistakes Jesus for a guy instead of taking the figurative high road of understanding him as a way of life, where you give up whiskey for wine. The misreading also allows us to understand Jesus as a hippie and a commie, which is an opinion, and a Jew, which would be a fact if you happen to believe Jesus really existed. So, the guy, which we would stereotypically think of as being really conservative and probably fundamentalistic, ends up, because of his jealousy-induced short-sightedness, thinking about beating up Jesus.

Of course, not everybody finds this funny. Just taking a quick look at comments about the song you'll get to things like "I am a preteen who is very close to god and I very much take offense to this song. You are offending Jesus and you call yourself a minister, you really need to get your act together. I find most of your songs nice and sad and loving but this one surprised me," or "Not funny singing about Jesus" (mmdsanchez2006, 2013) and a lot of erased comments.

"It's not aimed at anyone's religion," Carll said when interviewed in 2013. "It's aimed at intolerance and poking fun at somebody who calls himself a Christian and yet would beat up Jesus if he walked into a bar right now. That was the idea behind it" (Songfacts). And if you take Carll's approach, the guy's inability to understand (which makes him seem stupid in

the song) betrays his hypocritical approach to religion: his inability to leave the literal point of view is his mistake.

Humor might as well be understood as the hesitation between two contexts, usually one that is figurative and another that is literal, in which we can look at things from both perspectives and understand and misunderstand at the same time. As such, humor is isomorphic with metaphor, with the capability of a signifier to have different signifieds belonging to different contexts, pointing at different things, sometimes even at the same time, and the ineludible human trait to make mistakes when applying a reading protocol, when trying to flatten a metaphor into the literal. The song juggles both meanings, making both transparent to the reader, affording us a double perspective. Humor reconfigures the world according to each interpretation, with each misproper reading. Humor implies changing contexts, misreading constantly. The plasticity of the world, and its readings, causes us pleasure. We can feel the guy's burning rage when, while having sex, her partner cries out Jesus' name. The reader is understanding both his literal reading while also being aware of the abstract one. The song's character only has one perspective, and is unable to even understand the other one, which makes him dumb. In the same way, and through the narrative use of the character, Hayes Carll bypasses censorship and manages to say some lines that could be read as racist ("even worse yet a jew") and sacrilegious ("if I ever meet jesus, he's gonna wish he were dead.") The lyrics guide us towards interpreting both what is happening and how the main character is understanding it, and the juxtaposition of different contexts is what makes the humor in the song work. Jesus is as much a guy as a divine figure, which, we should also say, is Christian dogma. Jumping through meaning-laden contexts is not serious at all. It might be dumb, but never serious.

“Surely you can’t be serious.” “I am serious. And don’t call me Shirley,” is a dialogue from the movie *Airplane*, directed by Finkelstein, Abrahams and two Zucker’s, the brothers Jerry and David, which I am using here as an example of the kind of humor they used in this movie (a very free adaptation of *Zero Hour*, 1957) and their subsequent projects, *Naked Gun*: From the profiles of *Police High* (1988), *Naked Gun 2½: the smell of fear* (1991) and *Naked Gun 33½: The Final Insult* (1994), directed by both Zucker’s and Abrahams (ZAZ), a series of highly absurd comedies, all of them starring Leslie Nielsen, that focus on the protocols of reading genre, in particular the police/detective genre, but an exploration and parody, of cinematic conventions. The joke, playing with the vocal misreading of the homophones *Surely* and *Shirley*, is indicative of the kind of humor the movies enact. We constantly have to doubt what happens on the screen because the passage from metaphoric and literal happens so constantly and so fast, so hyperbolically that, if it catches you off-guard and without your serious glasses, it will make you laugh, even if the laugh is just a shameful one that laments you falling for the dumb joke.

In *Naked Gun*, Priscilla Presley goes up a stepladder wearing a skirt. Nielsen follows her, looks up and says “Nice beaver,” prompting Priscilla to hand him a stuffed beaver she found, keeping the sexual innuendo but going around it through its literalization. Here, we come again (and literally) to the animality of the signifier, to Piskorki’s “words are animals”, to the materiality of words, where a beaver is a beaver. The relationship between “surely “ and “Shirley” sidesteps meaning and stays with sound (in the case of this dissertation, of course, “a sound image” as Saussure defined the signifier), forcing us to understand things as literally as possible, and probing the arbitrariness of language through its literalness, while

the reference to materiality sometimes produces a pleasurable chuckle that acknowledges the dumbness of the situation, the sheer stupidity of mistaking words for things, and viceversa.

One of the most famous scenes in *Naked Gun* follows the character's first date, cutting from location to location while they engage in more fun things than are possible to fit into a single day. The scene uses the complete song "Something good" by the Herman Hermits and ends up with MTV-style credits, as if what you had just seen was a video-clip (remember, this was the 80s), suddenly changing both the genre (movie versus video-clip) and the medium (tv versus cinema). A particularly vulgar but funny scene is the *Naked Gun* 2½ sex montage scene, where we only see Priscilla Presley's character's hands holding the rails of the headboard while inter-cutting that shot with in-crescendo time-lapses of flowers opening, the raising of an Egyptian obelisk, the launching of a rocket, a wiener being placed in its bun, a human cannonball entering its launching pad, a train going into a tunnel, oil pumps pumping (what else could they do?), a speeding rollercoaster, oil spilling out of the ground, a torpedo fired by a submarine, a dam breaking, a dynamite trigger being pushed and finally (and not surprisingly), fireworks.⁷ The metaphorical and representational euphemisms are so thin and poor, so easily and cornily identifiable as part of love-making that one can see through them, even if their appearance prevents you from actually seeing what is literally happening. The movie is doing with images what the "Shirley/surely" confusion is doing with sound and the Herman hermits/video-clip is doing with formats. It misleads us into misreading them. The co-existence of both the literal and metaphoric representation, of proper and improper readings produces —if the spectator is willing to play the weird and *meta* "as if" the movies are asking of them —a sudden release of energy that we call laughter (on one of its multiple variations, which may include rolling the eyes), in this case produced

by the impossibility of both the literal and the metaphoric to be properly understood. The sheer literality of the movies, the almost psychotic and childish commitment to deny and subvert any metaphorically “abstract” reality, makes these movies a high point in the history of farce.⁷⁵

I am serious.

And don't call me Shirley.

⁷⁵ People who take themselves seriously, especially in academic settings, roll their eyes when I call these movies masterpieces. My only defense is that I am not alone. Wikipedia says: In a 2007 survey by Channel 4 in the United Kingdom, it was judged the second-greatest comedy of all time, behind *Monty Python's Life of Brian*.^[10]

CHAPTER 6: CONSPIRACIES AND ONTOLOGICAL ANARCHISM

Of course, not all science fiction is good. As a matter of fact, the science fiction field has an informal law that has become an almost universal truth. It is attributed to Theodore Sturgeon, one of the best English language short story writers of all time, who worked almost exclusively in speculative fiction magazines and editorial imprints for fifty years, and who was trying to even out the usual disdain for the genre that was commonplace in the 60s. It is remembered as Sturgeon's law: "90% of everything is crap." This was Sturgeon's way of explaining, back in the early 50s, that science fiction didn't have the monopoly on crap. Yes, the law says, 90% of science fiction is crap but so is 90% of everything else.

"5G is the real killer" is a conspiracy theory that may lack credible or likeable characters and its plot turns may not be really efficient, but it is certainly science-fictional, because it shares the same practices: it cognitively estranges through the literalization of metaphor. "5G is the real killer" estranges because it changes the official narrative about the coronavirus. Actually, it changes the official narrative of the whole world, which is an effect conspiracy theories specialize at. If you enter through the door of a conspiracy theory, you will find yourself in a different world than the one you used to live in. Conspiracy theories rearrange reality. And they rearrange it using the speculative dispositif and deploying it out of books, or movies, or the different places where we usually confine fiction. They set it loose in the world, not only as a possibility but as a fact. Conspiracy theories beg for suspension of disbelief in a particularly alluring tone, a dissenting truth, which teases through epistemological certainties and that, if taken as a fact, reorders reality.

The Red Cross was trying to poison the people of Afghanistan through vaccinations. The landing on the moon was fake. The Holocaust did not happen. The earth is actually flat. Donald Trump claimed for years that President Obama was born in Kenya. Alex Jones, a conservative radio host, claimed that the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting, which left twenty children dead, never happened” (Solc, 2019).

Academic writing also succumbs to this allure, and it’s not that hard to find papers and books that start with a listing of conspiracy theories, even if it is to deny them, as in the quote above, lifted from Solc’s “xxxx”, in a Jungian attempt to understand what happens with symbols in conspiracy theories, and which carves out their relation to mythological ideation, or as Erik Davis calls it, “the wellspring of religious fantasy.” Another Jungian, Joseph Hillman, explains the mechanism of the allure, which includes the lurid: “Mythology, without its pathological side of animal monsters, cruel slayings, perverse arrangements, wanton rapes, ruinous penances, no longer touches the passions or speaks of and to the individual soul in its distress.” Maybe, keeping in mind Sturgeon’s law, so do conspiracy theories.

But conspiracy theories lean towards science fiction, because their estrangement recurs to cognitive explanations. According to Keeley, “conspiracy theorists are, I submit, some of the last believers in an ordered universe,” and a rational one at that. The explanation of the “alternative universe” they propose is a rational one, or at least suggested under a rational guise. There’s an explanation for everything they claim, and there is proof somewhere (but someone’s hiding it). A conspiracy theory accounts for everything, or at least points in that direction. That’s why they provide relief: they make the world

explainable, they render it understandable. They are a response to what T Melley's names the experience of "agency panic" They function as totalizing theories, —"by refusing randomness and unpredictability, conspiracy theories and paranoid reality tunnels reify the hubris of systematic rationality as such" (Davis)—, which is one of their problems. They make sense. And maybe too much of it. And wouldn't it be nice? To actually live in a world that makes sense? Even if it's horrible?

Although we might think they are false, they also sound alluring in a "speculative" kind of way. Part of their allure is their concreteness. Conspiracy theories beg for materiality. And this is the literalizing . It's easier to find aliens as the ultimate cause of everything than gods, because aliens have. Conspiracy theories are framed as cognitive estrangements, they use the logic and rationale of science (as well as its language of proof) to state what a lot of people would agree on calling "facts" as facts. They rely on a materialistic worldview. Aliens helped both the Egyptians and the Mayans build the pyramids if humanit can't be the gods), and when people say they saw angels, they were actually watching people from outer space. That is what makes them science-fictional. Conspiracy theories are materialistic, that is exactly what they do, they literalize, they materialize: there must be proof, even as a future promise, that Obama is a Kenyan, that the US never landed in the moon: there's a group of people hiding it but truth, the facts, will surface. The mode is science-fictional, doubly so. Conspiracy theories perform a double literalization. They do not only literalize a novum (autism is caused by vaccines), but also literalize the group of people, powerful, of course, that willfully conceals the truth of the novum in order to keep us blind to its effects. It's a double-pronged literalization, and a smart one. Because of this double literalization, conspiracy theories are self-feeding organisms and they thrive on whatever wants to refute

them: the more the refusal of their theories, the more powerful the agencies trying to hide the “truth” that is definitely out there⁷⁶.

The proper reading of conspiracy theories as metaphors, as one would do religion or myth, would be to abstract what is perceived as metaphoric, which is usually the novum, as in the case of 5G, its version of strays from official consensus. 5G doesn't kill you, authorities state. Either that or authorities don't care about our lives, because they are implementing it or maybe even doing it on purpose: they want to kill us). A metaphorical reading would assume that the problem is that 5G does not mean the same in both instances. If one were to think about 5G as the literalization of a science-fictional metaphor, then we would have to think of 5G expanding in different relations around us, not as a thing, but as an object of abstract language. And then think of these different relations as the ones that are killing us. There's no 5G that doesn't also include the speed at which bodies, in our current world, can be transported around the globe, which is also probably the proper way to explain the very fast spread of the Coronavirus throughout the world. There's no 5G that doesn't include screens which flood people's visions and makes them nervous whenever they are away from the constant buzzing of electricity around us, and there's nobody watching one of those screens which is not related to the ecological impact on the world at large of global extractivism. Everything is closer, and coming to you faster, 5G promises, but also threatens. If science-fiction works, as Seo Young Cho puts it, to render a whole array of phenomena “available for representation,” and is as such is an attempt to describe the world around us, 5G could be read as an attempt to make sense of the world, a world where, as was constantly

⁷⁶ Conspiracy theories are the non-academic form of Ricoeur's hermeneutics of suspicion, a term he used to capture a certain spirit in the writings of Marx, Freud and Nietzsche, a commitment to unmask the lies, tricks and illusions of consciousness, as well as its hidden agenda.

repeated during the coronavirus pandemic, reality was science-fictional. The toolbox provided by science fiction is probably one of the most useful ones we have to understand reality.

The official problem with conspiracy theories is the way they offer improper interpretations: they literalize. Solc, for example, makes a good claim about the Jungian proper reading of conspiracy theories: “Unconscious images are “objectified” via symbols,” and we’d have to remember that, following Jung, the unconscious is collective. “Conspiracy theories “anchor threatening and dangerous events in familiar, easily concretized and objectifiable narratives,” he continues, warning that, “as with fundamentalist religious beliefs, it is evident that the less symbolic awareness is employed, the greater the ideological adherence” (2019). Which is what makes these concretized symbols dangerous, because of the religious fervor with which some people may attach to them. That is the problem of literalizing 5G as the real killer. Of course, that’s wrong. The corporations and governments who implement 5G technologies throughout the world have our best interests at heart. No agency panic, please: we all have control of our futures.

It’s the double-edged problem with conspiracy theories, as Erik Davis argues:

One might be lured into suspecting, for example, that behind the Yog-Sothoth oil monster lies a perfectly real conspiracy: say, the suspicion that modern civilization is fueled by the sacrificial slaughter of innocent people on the altars of a militaristic petroleum pact exploited by mind-raping transhuman elites playing a very old game of social control (2021).

“The issue’s not whether you’re paranoid enough, the issue’s whether you’re paranoid enough” is the most famous quote extracted from “Strange days,” a 1995 science-fiction movie directed by Kathryn Bigelow. The film is a near-future narrative, which explores a police conspiracy in a future where devices named SQUIDS are able to “able to record memories and physical sensations directly from the user’s cerebral cortex onto a MiniDisc like device for playback. “ Following William Gibson’s dictum, “the street finds its own use for things,” the movie follows the illegal trade and the dangers of being able to record people’s experiences, and of course, to tweak those experiences. Of course, there is a conspiracy, which the main characters uncover, as a crowd celebrates the turn of the new millennium.

Maybe that is the question, are we paranoid enough?

“Everyone believes in at least one conspiracy theory,” writes Joseph Ucsinski in the introduction to “conspiracy Theories and the People Who Believe in Them”. The most reasonable scholars tend to agree on the reasonableness of conspiracy theories. Van proijeen and Douglas, for example, write that “contrary to common assumptions, belief in conspiracy theories has been prevalent throughout human history,” while Basham argues that “conspiracy and its theory are fundamental modes of human cognition and have been for millenia” (2006).

It’s almost common sense: everyone believes in at least one conspiracy theory. And why shouldn’t everyone? Conspiracy is, as Carl Oglesvy wrote: “normal politics carried out by normal means.” It would be naïve to presume there are no conspiracies. Jeffrey Bale, writing about conspiracy theories at the global stage, states that: “It became absurd to deny

the existence of large-scale political conspiracies, or powerful ‘hidden forces’, as soon as the existence of the CIA or KGB – both vast state conspiracies– was revealed.” There are always powerful groups of people trying to manipulate reality for their own purposes. And they keep it a secret. Pigden, for example, writes that:

The idea that there is something (intellectually) suspect about conspiracy theories is one of the most dangerous and idiotic superstitions to disgrace our political culture... History, as we know it from the original documents, and as it is recorded by the best historians, is shot through with conspiracy (2006).

Pigeoning conspiracy theories as the province of fools is a dangerous business, one that assumes that there are thoughts that “no well-educated, sane and intellectually honest person will accept them,” as Coady frames the usual argument about conspiracy believers, which tells more about what the doubter understands about education, sanity and honesty than about the actual claim the conspiracy theory is making. “The mere mention of the word ‘conspiracy’ seems to set off an internal alarm bell which causes scholars to close their minds in order to avoid cognitive dissonance and possible unpleasantness,” writes Jeffrey Bale. deHaven even goes so far as to say that the term “conspiracy theory” is an instrument of a discourse that is trying to flatten together two very different kinds of political narratives⁷⁷. Davis summarizes the poles of this narratives:

On the one hand, you have rational but nonconforming political, economic, and historical accounts that attempt to describe and expose covert

⁷⁷ The effectiveness of the label ‘conspiracy theory’ as a ‘strategy of exclusion’ (Husting and Orr, 2007) and the means of ‘cutting out’ (Smith, 1978)

organizations or individual agents working behind the scenes to achieve concrete goals. On the other hand, you have ungrounded, baroque, and sometimes “paranoid” fabrications whose flawed logic produces imaginative narratives that are more or less akin to mythology, clinical delusions, and urban folklore (Davis, 2021).

The conflating both narratives, according to deHaven is used politically to discredit actually possible conspiracies as delusions, turning nonconformist but realist discourses into superstitious and “crazy” elaborations that lack credibility per se. Which, of course, is a conspiracy theory about conspiracy theories, which presupposes a clear cut between rational accounts and fantasies as much as what a “well-educated, sane and intellectually honest person” is supposed to entertain as fact.

“All systems are paranoid” is an easy way to summarize one of Philip K. Dick’s hypothesis, articulated in his “The Android and the Human” speech given at the 1972 Vancouver Science fiction Convention, where he speculates that

Maybe all systems—that is, any theoretical, verbal, symbolic, semantic, etc., formulation that attempts to act as an all-encompassing, all-explaining hypothesis of what the universe is about—are manifestations of paranoia.

Critical theory, for example, regularly occupies this conspiratorial place, because it usually states that powers beyond our control are manipulating us. Any General Theory runs that risk, and usually commits the first mistake of reading metaphors: it tries to force its

abstraction into reality. But the second kind of conspiracy theories, the ones that according to Hofstadter make “the paranoid leap into fantasy” commit the second mistake: literalizing them, even though both of them are trying to explain the world. One is considered common sense, the other veers towards insanity. Both deHaven and Hofstadter write from “what now seems a distant golden age of reason,” (Davis) when ficts and facts were easily distinguishable. What a “well-educated, sane and intellectually honest person” is supposed to know as fact to avoid “leaps into fantasy” is up for grabs.

Maybe it is all a question of style and tradition, as much as the difference between speculative fiction and realist fiction is. Realism, according to Sean-Young Chu, uses “low-intensity mimesis, while science-fiction designates high-intensity realism” as the flattening of estrangement into cognition produces realist “worlds,” in which what is named is easily available for representation, once again, what Barthes called “the reality effect,” those words that represent things that are just there, doing their usual work, and which do not require the ‘leap of faith’ needed to transport us into the otherwise. But conspiracy theories, whether factual or not, speculative or realist, delusional or rational, always take us to the otherwise, they always estrange, and as such, the “reading procedure” used for them must be carefully considered. Byford claims that “conspiracism is not just an explanatory style, but also a tradition of explanation⁷⁸,” which points toward the fact that until proven or disproven, in almost a quantum sense, conspiracy theories are always literal and metaphoric at the same time. As such, they have as much to do with science as with religion, myth and finances: they are literalizing procedures.

⁷⁸ The details here can be particularly confusing, there’s conspiracy theories and there’s conspiracy thinking, as well as conspiracy ideation and conspiracism, conspiracy culture, conspiracy industry and even my favorite: conspирituality.

This stylistic flair is part of their science-fictional charm, which in turns allow us to understand them as attempts to “make available for representation” processes that are very difficult to understand, even if they are part of the 90% of science fiction that is crap, according to Sturgeon’s law. Their pathologization may well be a systematic opinion about their tradition, and not their truth; about their aesthetic style, and not their claims, about their political affiliation, and not their reality as facts: “to label a conspiracy theory ‘paranoid’ is merely to restate the claim that it is unwarranted; it is not evidence for rejecting it.” (Kealey)

It is a matter of epistemic authority. Of who warrants. And although it is not fashionable to write about postmodernity (we are so beyond it!), I can’t help but remember Lyotard’s claim about the decline of grand narratives as part and parcel of the postmodern condition. At the moment where modern (and scientific) globalization and capitalist realism are attempting to take the dignified epistemic reins of a grand (and global) narrative, conspiracy theories and its mechanisms have been weaponized. They are constantly deployed through algorithms and political plans as a means of creating both control and confusion. The last years, which have included an economic crisis, the end of Donald Trump’s wildly mediated end of office and a global pandemic in which those that could ended up watching the world unravel from their screens, has left us little doubt that we live in a “matrix full of rabbit holes” which is the way Erik Davis characterizes our current situation, flattening in one metaphor two particular bookends of speculative fiction: Lewis Carroll’s *Alice in Wonderland* and the Wachowsky brothers’ *The Matrix* in a playful phrase that organizes logically (as in a matrix) an infinity of holes, each one of them a reality of its own. Davis, who studies contemporary spirituality and religion (particularly in California), psychedelic culture and its relation with technology, provides a particular portrayal of our times,

“conspiracy theories and “conspiracy theory” have become tactical moves in the larger Great Game that is now afoot: a global mindshare struggle that involves narrative warfare, attention algorithms, meme magick, cognitive biases, a splintered Internet, weaponized fear, and infectious phantasms.” Conspiracy theories have become not just interpretations of the world around us, but a political force, deployed and fueled through automatized technology, that feeds on the growing uncertainty about our reality. While it is almost impossible not to believe in a conspiracy theory, now we also have to think about the forces that conspired the conspiracy, or the way they are using its mobilization. The Rabbit holes are psychological warfare: each one is a reality tunnel that promises to show you what reality really is, each one is a trap that tries to prompt your vote, or your money, your actions but mostly your attention. Each one offers the Truth.

Let’s call this open-ended augmented reality game Wilderness of Mirrors. That phrase comes from the notoriously paranoid CIA counter-espionage maestro James Jesus Angleton, who cribbed it from T.S. Eliot in order to describe, during the Cold War, the “myriad of stratagems, deceptions, artifices, and all the other devices of disinformation which the Soviet bloc and its coordinated intelligence services use to confuse and split the West ... an ever fluid landscape where fact and illusion merge (Davis, 2021).

Of course, the Wilderness of Mirrors should include the West’s own manipulations of reality, the “myriad of stratagems, deceptions, artifices, and all the other devices of disinformation” it has deployed to “confuse and split “ the World, and that would certainly include Hollywood and social media as well as political manoeuvres (has someone yet found weapons of mass destruction in Irak?).

Davis is describing a particular regime of sight: “Wilderness of Mirrors also names and maps the peculiar optics, alienated claustrophobia, and epistemological uncertainty that characterizes the mazy chaos of screens that has drawn us into the not-so-funhouse of Circus Hypermedia,” a place “where existential vertigo has opened up beneath our feet,” a place where it has become harder to differentiate reality from conspiracy, conspiracy from religion, and religion from speculative fiction, especially, if we think about the myriad devices fueling these confusions, science fiction.

The paranoid aspect of conspiracy theories might well be understood as a construction of otherness: the certainty that there are others —be it reptilians, democrats, government officials or aliens— that are in positions of power and that are out to get you and yours. The second part of the double literalization that conspiracy theories deploy, the fact that someone’s hiding the truth from us, speaks directly to this paranoid core, and which provides identity relief. If there is another, then there is certainly a you, and particularly, an us. The problem is when that other is actually trying to make you disappear, or to control you, because then you won’t be you anymore⁷⁹.

The problem is the other. The problem is the Other, in proper Lacanian, who used to capitalize the first letter of the word⁸⁰ in order to discuss what he termed the Big Other, that authoritative Other who knows what you desire, and what you are, and forces you to comply. The figure of the BO is thoroughly patriarchal, with both the allure of its protection and knowledge and its persecutory violence. It can take many faces. It can be God or the Church

⁷⁹ The literalization actually lends itself to racial and fundamentalist discourses, grounded on the most material element of our existence: our bodies and their deployment into race. There’s a material reality housed in our bodies. This is us. Our bodies are our facts.

⁸⁰ In the original French, the letter capitalized would be an A (as in Autre).

or the priest. It can be Science or a theory or a scientist. It can be one of the voices that come out of your screen. Or George Washington in a dollar bill. The Big Other is the subject's attempt to materialize the symbolic place of knowledge. It is also the comfort that someone or something out there truly knows. And perhaps this is the main point of all conspiracy theories: a wild gamble on the existence, the rational physical existence, of the Other, a being that warrants existence.

There are two ways to pathologize conspiracy theories (and not the actions their believers commit). One is to pathologize those who believe in them, and try to make them fit a type, a human type. The other is to pathologize the way they think, which is, after all, a reading procedure. Which assumes a proper way of reading⁸¹.

Most of the academic literature about conspiracy theories concerns itself with the proper way of reading conspiracies, Most of this literature, mainly the academics with a highly rational bend try to make a genre decision: which ones are realist and therefore worth considering, and which are really speculative, which are then not taken seriously. *Maybe* it is a stylistical turn that blurs the boundaries between rational and irrational, warranted or unwarranted, realist and fictional, conspiracy theories.

All of conspiracy theories agree in one point. There are serious problems with those who do the proper way of reading. The institutional warrantors of truth, our supposedly Big Others, are not to be trusted. They are hiding something. The “wilderness of mirrors” is a particular crisis of “institutionalized credibility” (as Basham calls it) coupled with a

⁸¹ The constructivist approaches, according to Trygub (2021), understands conspiracy theories as “attempts by ordinary people to make sense of a complex and highly unequal world” instead of “cognitive problems rooted in erroneous information and a lack of education”, as “cognitivist approaches” do.

technology that supports 66 million financial transactions per second as much as it is a crisis of power and material wealth. The crisis passes through religions⁸², news/media institutions, academic universities, economic institutions and the state apparatus: a lot of people systematically doubts them. Groups of these people have very concrete ideas about what the “epistemic authorities” are hiding (which in turn calls them conspiracy theories, even though these people say they are reality). The crisis is as much about reality as about the power structures that uphold it. It is a crisis about the Other, about the ways we know, who we pathologize, and where the money goes.

Cass Sunstein, US Legal Scholar and part of Obama’s government argues that “many people who accept conspiracy theories suffer from a crippled epistemology” (2014). He takes the term from Professor Russell Hardin, who used it to refer to extremists, “in the sense that they know relatively few things, and what they know is wrong,” which places the problem of conspiracy theories as a problem of information, of the narrow threshold of information some people get. Which is why Russell proposes, in a previous co-authored “Conspiracy Theories” (Sunstein, Vermeule, 2008) to perform “cognitive infiltration” as a way to deal with people who “suffer” crippled epistemologies, in terms of expanding their information and doing that, their worldview, as a way of counteracting on conspiracy theories⁸³. Secular education becomes cognitive infiltration. Decolonization theorists from the global south would agree.

⁸² Conspiracy theories are the modern equivalent of heresies, which were leveled against the institutionalized power of the Church. Conspiracy theories usually rise against the State and its theological branch: Academia.

⁸³ Of course, Sunstein claims “the focus throughout this chapter is on demonstrably false conspiracy theories, such as the various 9/11 conspiracy theories, not ones that are or may be true. The ultimate goal is to explore how public officials might undermine false theories, and true accounts should not be undermined.” Sunstein, and Hardin, claim to be worried about the most extreme literalization of ideas: violent action.

Which doesn't sound problematic (to me, at least) if we are talking about people who believe that the US government is run by a sect of satanic pedophiles, or that migrants come to our cities (or countries) to take away our privileges and take action either storming the Capitol or hunting undocumented migrants. But it starts sounding pretty strange when we are talking about a group of people who are about to defend a mountain from a mining company because they believe that mountain is alive, and mining will destroy it. The argument which rejects indigenous cosmologies as just epistemologies, discussed in the first chapters of this essay, claims to have a correct one, and refuses to accept any others. Indigenous epistemologies, they claim, are wrong. Which is where the "crippled epistemology" term comes into play. They don't understand correctly. The ontological turn in anthropology attempts to give ontological dignity to these cosmologies. And the "cognitive infiltration" explained above may as well describe religious indoctrination and colonial education, which produce what could well be described as "sane, well-educated and honest person(s)".

Once again, the improper reading, is problematized: "Literalized metaphor is the cancer of religious imagination, powerfully and pathologically at work," but this time in the name of science and common sense. Marveling at indigenous cosmologies can also be a way of hiding that the conspiracies against they fight are real and actual: the resources of the lands they have traditionally inhabited are being extracted at a rate never seen before, not even during colonization and effectively destroying not only lifestyles, but places and resources that made those lives possible. People actually want to mine those strange metal ores to feed electronic devices and vehicles, or plant *Palma Africana* to give shape to snacks and cosmetics, or take a tradition in order to make a profit.

This means we are stuck in a particularly problematic situation. If we grant ontological status to indigenous beliefs, should we also grant them to conspiracy theories? Are some epistemologies really crippled while some aren't? Are conspiracy theories the Otherwise? Is there One ontology to rule them all⁸⁴?

Mark Zuckerberg's Metaverse, Doctor Strange's Multiverse and Isabelle Stengers' Pluriverse: These highly similar, while at the same time disparate terms, seem to think there really is no ring to rule them all, except maybe for Meta, the rebranding that Facebook went through starting on October 28, 2021, and which is maybe a way to explain the way our social media selves communicate when the same company owns FB, Instagram and Whatsapp, and boasts 3.84 billion monthly active users (Tatevosian, 2022), which accounts for almost half of the world's population.⁸⁵ Meta explains itself as building "technologies that help people connect, find communities and grow businesses". They are also the ring that binds half of us, "moving beyond 2D screens and into immersive experiences like virtual and augmented reality, helping create the next evolution of social technology" (Meta, 2022). Meta is, borrowing a phrase of William Burroughs, "a reality engine," that produces, enhances and distributes ontologies, ways the world is. Of course, the plural here is key. It is not one world, it is beyond worlds, beyond versions, as its etymology would suggest. It doesn't matter which ontology you live in, as long as you do it through Meta. Although Meta exists in our material reality, it also exists, and is prescribing a speculative one. As Eric Ravenscraft explains in Wired: "the term doesn't really refer to any one specific type of

⁸⁴ And in the darkness bind them.

⁸⁵ Which is 7.96 billion, according to the UN in July 2022.

technology, but rather a broad (and often speculative) shift in how we interact with technology. And it's entirely possible that the term itself will eventually become just as antiquated, even as the specific technology it once described becomes commonplace.”

Then, you have Marvel’s version of the many-worlds theory, the Multiverse, which explains why different SpiderMans (or maybe, to be more accurate, trademarked SpiderCreatures?) can coexist in the same reality, literalizing both the scientific and the speculative conceit that there are actually different versions of the universe that do not necessarily intrude in each other but actually co-exist, a notion entertained by both Jorge Luis Borges and Erwin Schrödinger, explored through dizzying CGI in Marvel’s Spiderman into the Spiderverse, Spiderman: No way Home and Doctor Strange in the Multiverse of Madness, and which has proven a commercial success. Although Marvel has fictionalized the Multiverse⁸⁶, it is not difficult to make the claim that the highly controversial scientific notion of the Multiverse fictionalizes reality, as it proposes a variety of parallel universes, and even hypothesizes, with Borges, that each decision we make creates an alternate universe. Cosmologist Max Tegmark (MIT) hypothesizes a four level taxonomy of universes “beyond” our observable one, while theoretical physicist and string theorist Brian Greene (Columbia) talks about nine types of multiverses. Oxford philosopher Nick Brostrom posed and examined the possibility that we live in a simulation, and some researchers calculate a 50% statistic chance that we are actually living in one (Kipping, 2020).

The pluriverse is a term deployed by philosopher of sciences Isabelle Stengers, and anthropologists Marisol de la Cadena and Mario Blaser as a way to explain “heterogeneous

⁸⁶ Of course, all Marvel movies show characters trying to manage and interact with several of this versions of the universe.

worldings coming together as a political ecology of practices, negotiating their difficult being together in heterogeneity⁸⁷” mainly as a way to address the ways different worldings (“knowledges are world’making practices”) inhabit a world in danger of being consumed by Anthropocene extractivism, “the accelerated extraction of natural resources to satisfy a global demand for minerals and energy and to provide what national governments consider economic growth,” a world in danger of being unable to sustain what is alive, but that also struggles to find grounds on which to place concepts as life, personhood, and will (Stones say but do not speak). The pluriverse is an anthropological and political concept, which is why Stengers stresses that “the West is not a world and recognizes no world,” and characterizes it as a “world-destroying machine⁸⁸.” According to Stengers, “whatever its meanings, “ontological politics is thus connected with the possibility of resisting our world’s ongoing destruction” (stengers, 2018). The pluriverse is thus a political term engaged in, according to the EZLN’s 4th declaration of the Lacandon jungle, “a world in which many worlds fit” (EZLN, 1996).

All three terms can also be read as science-fiction formations. All of them are trying to make sense of a reality we are already living in (and not one which may come to happen). All of them are trying to make “available for representation” our “matrix of rabbit holes.”

Each and every time I am on a classroom in UCSD I try to remember that, in the group I am teaching, there might be someone who believes that the US is run by a cult of satanic pedophiles, while someone else might have grown in a household that believes the

⁸⁷ We would also have to mention Carl Schmitt, a German jurist, political theorist and prominent member of the Nazi Party as a predecessor of the pluriverse. In his “The Concept of Politics”, Schmitt writes: “the Political world is a pluriverse, not a universe” (53), although, following Mignolo (the darker side of western modernity, 2011, 72), Schmitt conceived pluriverse as a “plurality of states” and not ontologies.

⁸⁸ Let’s remember, with Lazzarato, that “capitalism hates everyone” (2019).

Earth is flat, while another believes that Jesus died for our sins and another that Mohammad is the true prophet while another is sure that there's a white conspiracy trying to kill and subdue the black population of her country as another is sure e is a woman regardless of what the doctor implied and another who is sure that social media are controlling our behaviors.

Accommodating and creating a political dialogue between these reality tunnels is one of the most pressing problems our planet faces today. Accommodating these ontologies just in terms of truth or false is only a self-gratifying attempt to re-create a redundant "one universe." And it means trying to accommodate both indigenous worldviews and conspiracy theories as constructs that are much more than just "true or false" propositions that can occupy either the metaphorical or literal spectrum of reality: the mechanism I am trying to describe blurs those distinctions. The world is not that simple. Reading protocols are intrinsically political, because "knowledges are world-making practices." Meta is betting on technology regardless of content: it views itself as neutral media, a technical channel. The Multiverse is totally speculative, as much a profitable fiction as a yet-unproven scientific theory. The Pluriverse is a pragmatic and political enterprise.

Understanding conspiracy theories as a matter of belief enacts the first danger of reading metaphors, because it understands belief as an abstract activity, something that happens in the realms of ideas, and as an "on" or "off" switch. Belief is not just an abstract decision, a "ruling" about the truth-status of certain statements. Belief is a practice, as much a "world-making practice" as knowledge. Maybe we should take into account Sloterdijk argument that religions do not exist, what does exist "are variously misinterpreted anthropotechnic practice systems and sets of rules for molding one's inward and outward behavior" (Sloterdijk, 2013). Instead of placing the analysis on beliefs, Sloterdijk decides to

focus on techniques that change people, and that run the gamut from secular to religious exercises. Both religion and conspiracy theories are practices, and Parmigliani understands conspiracy-believing “as an aesthetic (sensory and artistic) practice with performative effects,” that “build and feed a community of sense;” their communication is akin to religious ritual: “rehearsing answers to shared questions, as a declaration of faith and group identity (like the religious creed)” (Bauer, 2013, en Solc, 2019), providing “a feeling of cathartic insight, a feeling of personal theodicy—namely the feeling that one understands the origin of a negative phenomenon, its motivation, and its aim (Solc, 2019), and a sense of belonging and initiation. Conspiracy theories offer relief from the agency panic that the wilderness of mirrors produces in more complex ways than just “belief” and danger in terms of “action.”

Conspiracy theories are part of a set of “stigmatized knowledge” (Barkun, 2006), whose epistemic status is marginalized by conventional institutions. As such, “the epistemic status of other form of knowledge —paranormal beliefs, astrology, claims about the existence of extraterrestrial life or religious mythologies— is similar to that of conspiracy theories” (Byford), I would add indigenous ontologies and magical practices to that list.

“Ontological anarchism,” writes Erik Davis, “increasingly seems like a pragmatic response, a weird realism that constantly keeps you in your toes” (2021). His book, *High Weirdness*, deals with the particular “weird” experiences that three writers in the 70s went through, all of which included experiences that seemed to pry away these persons from consensual reality: delusions and hallucinations. Phillip K. Dick, canonical science fiction

writer; Terence McKenna, who launched psychedelic mushroom cultivation in the US after several trips to the Amazon and Robert Anton Wilson, who wrote playful novels about the deployment of conspiracy theories as a strategy for inhabiting the universe but found his novels seeping into his life and threatening his sanity. Instead of dismissing their experiences as truth or false, all three of them decided to do a perilous tightrope walk (as Davis describes it) between consensual reality and their lived experiences, between outside and inner worlds, practicing a skepticism that did not deny their hallucinatory experiences but also didn't take them as completely real, a kind of weird skepticism between the material and the abstract, the real and the imaginary, the literal and the metaphorical.⁸⁹

After all, even a rationalist like Cass Sunstein admits that “All of us have, at least to some degree, a crippled epistemology, in the sense that there is a lot that we don't know, and we have to rely on people we trust” (2014).

⁸⁹ Davis borrows the term “ontological anarchism” from *The Broadsheets of Ontological Anarchism*, a series of essays that Bey (actually Peter Lamborn Wilson) wrote and sent through mail to friends and publishers of fanzines in the early 80s. “Ontological anarchism proposes that we wake up, and create our own day,” Bey writes, “Any form of “order” which we have not imagined and produced directly and spontaneously in sheer “existential freedom” for our own celebratory purposes—is an illusion” (Bey, 2018).

CHAPTER 7: PSYCHOANALYSIS AND THE SPEAKING FLESH

“I will not swallow that” is what philosopher Joseph Stern, in his 2000 book, *Metaphors in Context*, writes that a young patient suffering from anorexia nerviosa, Marie, said to her therapist after “her mother had forbade her to continue seeing her boyfriend” in order to analyze the semantic implications of knowledge by metaphor. Stern cites Arthur C. Danto, art-critic and philosopher, as the source where he took this particular turn of phrase. Danto writes about how Marie had not said but thought that, and that “the symptom is like a puzzle that has to be solved,” and Marie’s thought provided the answer to that particular symptom, while pointing to Merleau-Ponty’s *Phenomenology of Perception* as the source of the material, and hinting that it might have been a case of Suzanne, Merleau-Ponty’s wife, who happened to be a psychoanalyst. Merleau-Ponty, gives much more context:

A girl whose mother has forbidden her to see again the young man with whom she is in love, cannot sleep, loses her appetite and finally the use of speech. An initial manifestation of this loss of speech is found to have occurred during her childhood, after an earthquake, and subsequently again following a severe fright (2002).

Merleau-Ponty, while never stating that Marie (the name only appears in Stern) had actually said that, reads this as a double puncher: talking is about co-existence, while swallowing is about taking the external inside: “the patient is unable, literally, to “swallow” the prohibition which has been imposed upon her,” and the “shutting off the future” is lived

as a deathly threat. But the symptoms were not a conscious decision: they just appeared. “The girl does not cease to speak, she ‘loses’ her voice.”

Merleau-Ponty also points towards the original case: a 26 year old Italian woman treated by Ludwig Binswager, one of the founders of existential psychotherapy, in the early 1930s. Binswager paints a more complete picture, and while never mentioning anorexia nervosa, he describes loss of appetite, violent stomach cramps and burping, along with facial twitching and hiccups that would last for days. Although Binswager temporarily interrupts the twitching and hiccups by placing “the fingers of my right hand around her neck and to compress the trachea so strongly that she must have had difficulty in breathing, tried to resist the grasp, and, when the pressure relaxed for a moment, performed a strong act of swallowing,” (Binswanger, 1994) both the aphonia and the twitching disappear after discussing the swallowing hypothesis with the woman and its relation to her actual symptoms: “the concrete bodily expression of her general inability to "swallow down" and "digest" something that threatens her life instinct, that does not correspond to her, that cannot be existentially assimilated by her...The sick woman cannot swallow her mother's prohibition, cannot swallow and digest the impairment or mortification done to her will to love and live” (1994).

And while our fictional “Marie” recovered her voice through therapy and the removal of the prohibition to see her boyfriend, the case, an actual example of an academic “telephone game,” resembles both the slippage of the signifier that Lacan used to talk about as much as the way that psychoanalysis understands symptoms. Following Binswager, the body “takes over the function of language,” and becomes “the organ of language of this rebellion.” The body speaks, and it says what the speaker cannot articulate (and I wonder

what Freud would have to say about the relationship between the earthquakes and the twitching and hiccuping of the Italian woman).

The metaphor, in this case the multiple meaning of swallowing, appears literally in the body, and is thus made real. In psychoanalysis, language is made flesh through the process of subjectivation⁹⁰. This is the way symptoms work, at least according to the psychoanalytic traditions I will be referring to: Freudian and Lacanian. In 1926, Freud wrote that “a symptom is a sign of, and a substitute for, an instinctual satisfaction which has remained in abeyance; it is a consequence of the process of repression” reading it already as a sign in a language that could be read, because psychoanalysis, “the talking cure” is, most of all, a practice that relies on a radical way of listening, founded in a highly complex set of theoretical suppositions which constitute a method⁹¹. But it is, in more than one sense, a reading procedure, which brings “conceptual affordances” that may help the analysand that brings, and delivers orally, the text which is to be read, and that expands beyond the words of the analysand into his/her body and the relations it has with the world, including and focusing particularly in the analyst⁹².

One of Jacques Lacan’s most famous formulas is “the unconscious is structured as a language,” which focuses on the “sign” aspect of Freud’s definition of symptom through the use of both Saussurean linguistics and Jakobson’s study on the language of aphasia students, in which he posits metaphor and metonymy as the two basic modes or ways of thought (and

⁹⁰ I speak with my body, and without knowing it, I always say more than I know,” said Lacan in his 1972-73 seminar (Lacan, 2004).

⁹¹ And here lies a subtle distinction between psychoanalytical theory, as used by Slavoj Žižek, for example, and psychoanalytical practice, which goes on in thousands of couches throughout the world. Both, though, are grounded on psychoanalytical listening.

⁹² Psychoanalysis places a particular importance on the analysand/analyst relationship, called transference, in which, through metaphorical substitution, the analyst will occupy the place of the other during sessions.

not just ornamental tropes)⁹³. A metaphor is, Lacan would write, “the effect of substitution of one signifier for another in a chain, nothing natural predestining the signifier for this function.” A metaphor creates an identity within two terms beyond the usual fields of correspondence, while metonymical thought remains within the “natural” or “common” fields of signification, for example, using “thirty sails” instead of thirty ships. That’s why metonymy is allusion and contiguity, while metaphor is identitarian and creative.

Freud already pointed towards this difference through his analysis of dream formations, which rely on two mechanisms, condensation (several figures are condensed into one) and displacement (which works through allusion and contiguity). Lacan would take both Freud’s and Jakobson’s accounts and make a fundamental turn: while symptoms are metaphorical, desire is metonymical. Through an identity manoeuvre, a metaphor substitutes meaning, creating a new series of associations, while metonymy keeps signification sliding through the usual channels. Thus, a “verbal abuse” (offense, affront) such as a metaphor (a symptom) provides a “reality” stabilization through which the subject can keep on desiring metonymically, “Which means that the most serious reality, and even the sole serious reality for man, if one considers its role in sustaining the metonymy of his desire, can only be retained in metaphor” (Lacan, 2006). In a symptom, much as in a speculative fiction, a metaphorical mechanism sustains a “reality” through which life can be lived, or experienced as in fiction, through world-building⁹⁴, or in the case of psychoanalysis,

⁹³ Jakobson places Romantic and Symbolic literature, as well as lyrical poetry, Surrealism and Chaplin and Eisenstein’s movies on the “pole” of metaphor and substitution, while Realism and prose, epic poetry, Cubism and DW Griffith’s movies would veer towards the metonymical, contiguous, side of language.

⁹⁴ In order to understand a phrase such as “the door dilated” in a science fiction context, certain metaphorical substitutions have to be made. To be read metonymically, as real, a rearranging of the way words and objects relate to each other has to be established, or at least played with.

body, behavior, and relationship building⁹⁵ (one in which “the effect of sense produced was made in the direction of non-sense,” (Lacan, 1970) as it happens in metaphors).

Freud famously wrote that “symptoms constitute the sexual activity of the patient,” because there are always secondary gains from the symptom, offering also a way to explain why we should go beyond the “pleasure principle,” because symptoms are not always pleasure-inducing. In order to explain this secondary gain, Lacan introduces the term *jouissance*, because one “enjoys” the symptoms even if they cause literal pain, playing with the French homonymy to *joui-sense*: the symptom provides a sense, a meaning, and a place where the subject can exist and with which it unconsciously identifies through the metaphor, providing a metonymical chain through which repressed desire can then flow. The symptom, as such, is the superego’s demand to enjoy in very particular ways. The symptom becomes an identity (“metaphor is not comparison, it’s identification” (Lacan, 1997), to the point where the whole Ego, the “I” with which we identify ourselves, might be understood as just a symptom, a seminal part of the disease with which we are in love⁹⁶.

“We are the aliens” is one of the interpretations Slavoj Žižek gives to the sf metaphor of the alien. The complete quotation is “We ourselves are the aliens.” We are an external force that captures a body and submits it to its will (or at least tries to) through a social. “Our

⁹⁵ It is important to point out that relieving the symptom allows the analysand new ways to desire, and to change its relationship to the world. That is why Lacan related repetition to the symptom, as the symptom/metaphor offers a signifier in which to exist, even if it is pathological.

⁹⁶ In the 70s, moving from his emphasis on the Symbolic to an emphasis on the Real, Lacan would define the symptom as an “event of the body.” It is in this sense that Badiou talks about a “Lacanian Biology,” in which *jouissance* will take much more primal place, because “the body affected by *jouissance* is neither imaginary nor symbolic, but a living one.” (Miller, 2019) a “mute *jouissance*”, which is impervious to and outside of meaning.

Ego,” continues Zizek, “our psychic energy, is an alien force, controlling, distorting the body” (Fiennes, Zizek, 2006). In “The Pervert’s guide to cinema,” Zizek tries a Lacanian interpretation of mostly “speculative genre” movies and tropes, going from the Voice to the Other, from the horror menace (think *The Birds* and *Jaws*) to the uncertainty of Lynch, from beyond, animated objects to the Double, reading all this figures and tropes both as metaphorical and real through a psychoanalytical lens that blurs the distinction between both. By saying that the aliens r’ us, Zizek is trying to find the relationship between our subjectivation and our body using Freud’s uncanny (*unheimlich*), in which the familiar becomes estranged and produces a certain fear and awe in us because it is, somehow, familiar⁹⁷. We are scared of the doll that blinks at us in the middle of the night because we have been that doll, a body that suddenly winks, infused by something we might call will. We are the alien, and that is horrible. We are the colonizing forces that turn a body into ourselves. What should be properly read as an abstract metaphor, is experienced as real in the so-called “speculative genres,” but also in our daily lives and it’s incessant demands to be ourselves which can only be met through pathologies (all those symptoms) and self-disciplining: that is why *Alien* is not just science-fiction, but also a horror movie. Zizek also invokes the *Exorcist*, which also puts a sexual flare into it. Ghosts, aliens, demons, possession. As with ourselves, it is always about mind and body snatchers.

Zizek rounds up speculative genres’ repertoire as radical literalizations of processes and moments of subjectivation, as read through a (particularly Lacanian) psychoanalytic perspective. In more than one sense, psychoanalysis takes up the very problematic question

⁹⁷ The original term from which the “estrangement” of “cognitive estrangement” (SF’s basic mechanism according to Suvin) comes is from Viktor Shklovsky’s Russian “ostraniene,” which has been translated as both “defamiliarization” and “estrangement.”

of how we come into being through language (the word made flesh, again) and how certain anthropotechniques (to misuse Sloterdijk's term) like breast feeding, toilet training, and sexuality-modeling, "discipline" the mound of flesh we are into subjects, into ourselves, the scars of which will not only be found in our bodies and the way we relate to others, but also into that defining psychoanalytical invention: the unconscious (which is what you have to believe in if you practice psychoanalysis), where unbridled and unruly desire also dwells (at its most heroic moments, psychoanalysis could be described as a commitment to desire as opposed to *jouissance*, which would mean the social routing of the former). Lacan introduced language as a key figure in this disciplining, and the tool with which most psychoanalysts work their trade. The approach and method is highly individual, as is the unconscious. Even Jung, whose heresy was to say that the unconscious was collective, insisted that interpretation had to be singular with all patients.

What Žižek is doing, by reading speculative tropes as a way of staging our subjectivation by literalizing (and hyperbolizing) certain abstract mechanisms which psychoanalysis likes to describe through a highly particular term: psychosis. The whole population, landscape and procedures of the speculative genres walk side by side with hallucinations and delusions: they contest consensual reality. And psychotics have a very particular relation to language. Freud wrote, in 1914, that the psychotic (he was talking particularly about schizophrenics), "treats words like things" (Freud, 1914) and goes on to compare this "mechanism" to the dream-work⁹⁸. According to psychoanalysis, what we have

⁹⁸ We could also say that this dream-work is important in hallucinations. The unconscious is not repressed in psychoses, and it can appear "outside," instead of in the interiority of dreams. Psychotics have different borders, and their relation between outside and inside problematizes what we usually understand as reality (and individuality).

understood as the literalization of metaphors is a major device in symptoms, madness and dreams⁹⁹.

This literalization (almost a materialization, as it is lived through hallucinations), has not just been noticed by psychoanalysts, and “thought disturbances” is a common term of psychiatry. “Deficits in understanding proverbs,” write Kiang et al (2007), “are considered a hallmark of schizophrenia” and then describe that “proverbs used in mental status testing involve metaphor, in which an expression is used to describe something other than its literal referents.” The medical language is kind of creepy: “Delusions are highly and positively related to aberrant abstraction scores, while hallucinations are mildly positive and positively related to this score,” (Rosen, 2021) and “bizarre interpretations,” (Van Lancker, 1990) although the winner would be D.R.Gorham, who, in the mid-Fifties wrote the paper that standardized his Proverbs Test, candidly titled “Use of the proverbs test for differentiating schizophrenics from normals.” The emphasis is, of course, to do the proper reading, “mapping elements from a concrete source domain to a more abstract target domain,” and correct responses include “the standard abstract interpretation of all the main elements,” (Kiang et al 2007) and “rising” to “the level of a general rule which could connect (the elements).¹⁰⁰” Although the proverbs test is highly problematized¹⁰¹, in terms of salience, cultural context and its plain weirdness, and the emphasis is on physiological and statistical

⁹⁹ We can read this in two major ways, which are also the two dangers of dealing with metaphors we have been working on: we can think of a metaphors literalized in our body, or we can think that the phenomena that is happening to our body can only be described through metaphors.

¹⁰⁰ This capacity, that of getting to a standard (proper) Reading, and being able to get to the “general rule” are fundamental in the psychoanalytical conception of The Other, and of psychoses, which we will get to later in this chapter.

¹⁰¹ One of the very few (and really helpful) articles that try to bridge neuro-psychiatry and psychoanalysis, “Metaphor in psychosis: on the possible convergence of Lacanian theory and neuro-scientific research” laments the just-neurological understanding of psychosis, and considers “the question of language use, and of metaphor use in particular, as the “forgotten dimension” in psychosis (Ribolsi et al, 2015).

readings, the literature, as much of the psychoanalytical one, is full of really interesting examples:

On one occasion the examiner attempted to explain that a proverb is applicable to different situations, pointing out that one may say "Don't cry over spilt milk" to some one who is worrying over lost money. The (schizophrenic) patient was then asked what the proverb would mean in this case. The answer was: "Don't cry over spilt milk because you can go to the store and get some more milk." Examiner: "But we were speaking about money." Patient: "Yes, maybe you have lost it around the building." The two situations remained isolated for the patient, since she never rose to the level of a general rule which could connect them (Hanfman, 1939).

There seems to be a problem with language in psychoses, and that problem has to do with its proper reading, which is abstract thinking, "the highest level of cognition" (Strub and Black, 1985). Their use of language appears to be at odds with how Lacan characterized the use of symbols to represent the world: "the symbol first manifests itself as the killing of the thing¹⁰²" (Lacan, 2006b) which is exactly what I have been trying to explain as the danger of the proper reading of metaphors: it turns the world into an abstraction, an abstraction that takes over the thing and distances ourselves from it, an alien taking control of the body and regulating its *jouissance*. This is the modern Saussureian word, where language is arbitrary because signifiers have no direct relationship to the thing they designate. Saussure was careful about keeping his signifier/signified dyad inside the head of the speaker, an acoustic image and a concept happen inside the head of the language-wielder, a word as sound and the

¹⁰² "And this death results in the endless perpetuation of the subject's desire," Lacan continues.

concept as thing happen, as in psychosis, outside. It is also in this sense that all language is metaphorical, inasmuch as it binds two unrelated fields, that of the thing and that of language, arbitrarily, what Derrida called metaphoricity, in the sense that all language is a murderous metaphor. Except, of course, for madmen.

The problem is not only the arbitrary, proper and murderous, reading of language. The assassination, as Zizek explains goes,

...not only in the elementary sense of implying its absence - by naming a thing, we treat it as absent, as dead, although it is still present - but above all in the sense of its radical dissection: the word 'quarters' the thing, it tears it out of the embedment in its concrete context, it treats its component parts as entities with an autonomous existence: we speak about color, form, shape, etc., as if they possessed self-sufficient being” (Zizek, 2008).

Language has its own way, as it burrows inside and outside of us, and Lacan’s own words take a life of their own, polished through oral repetition, failing memories, and symbolic efficiency, and one finds them changed so much that it is difficult to find their attribution, Zizek and Miller, for example, often use “the word is the murder of the thing,¹⁰³” although I prefer a much more reduced version: “Words kill things.”

¹⁰³ Of course, things are scurrilous beings that do not lend so easily to being murdered and turned into objects, as most practitioners of the materialist turn would agree. Things, as madmen, do their own thing. Lacanian psychoanalysis even has a term to explain that scurrilous, unruly, unsymbolizable and unapprehendable aspect of the world: the Real.

There is no such thing as normal. At least not in psychoanalysis. Or technically, as psychoanalyst Darian Leader puts it: “there is no such thing as mental health” (2011). There is no single standard by which to judge who is normal, and what constitutes mental health except in the judges imaginaries (and their system’s way of enforcing those standards). And if we mistake what is normal with what is most common, we would have to agree normal people are not having a particularly good time, at a time where there are some people that talk about a “mental health” crisis running through society, particularly societies of the Western flare, which is, thanks to electronic media, violent intervention, extractivism and transportation devices, globalized. Psychoanalysis is also a product of, thought for and by people with that flare, at a time where we are in the middle of a worldwide process of medication, where we are connected to the “farmaco-ponographic” regime of the production of reality (according to Preciado), which also happens to be a billion-dollar business of legally drugging patients. In psychoanalysis, what seems normal is also what we would usually consider a “pathology,” and there is no way around it because there is no actual healthy way of being crossed through with language, and dealing with it. At least that’s psychoanalysis take. What we might think of as normal is actually neurosis, one of the three possible ways that a human language-infected animal can be structured.

Lacanian tend to favour a parsimony: rather than the 360 labels of DSM¹⁰⁴, they recognize just three mutually exclusive mental structures – neurosis, psychosis and perversion – and within the psychoses, a further three – paranoia, schizophrenia and melancholia, with debates about how to situate autism and manic depression. (Leader, 2011)

¹⁰⁴ The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, the bible of psychiatry, now in its fifth edition, heavily influenced by the psychiatric drug industry.

Freud mainly wrote about neurotics (and doubted if psychoanalysis was effective against psychosis), while Lacan worked with, and wrote a lot about “the madresses” (les folies), as he called them at the beginning of his 1955-1956 seminar “The psychoses”. Writings about structural perverts are rare, as they don’t usually frequent psychoanalytical practices (but we could actually say that the neurotic’s phantasies are always perverse, about actually knowing how to enjoy, beyond the law).

When we usually think about psychoses, we tend to think of them in terms of their most scandalous symptoms: hallucinations and delusions, as if those were the main signs of madness. Psychotic behavior includes seeing (or hearing and feeling and smelling and tasting) and/or believing things that most other people neither feel nor believe, which usually leads to conventionally unexpected behavior (as metaphors do: they also behave unexpectedly). In popular culture, news & media, a psychotic is usually someone who “loses” it in very spectacular ways, usually through violence. But Lacanian psychoanalysis takes a different turn. Any self-respecting Lacanian will tell you that psychosis is just a structure of subjectivity, an actually common one, and that you actually know a lot of people who are thus structured and they are as completely normal as yourself. The most radical Lacanians will say that a diagnosis is completely useless and an imposition on the subject for the sake of the analysts ease of mind¹⁰⁵, while stricter ones will tell you, along with Freud, that this structure will be settled (and unchangeable) between the 4th and 6th year of life of the subject. Most psychotics will never undergo a crisis worthy of either the media or news.

¹⁰⁵ Gloria Leff even goes to say that she’s “convinced that in most cases, analytical theory and analytical concepts, instead of opening up, and allowing a reading, even more than clearing up our ears, actually close them.

Darian Leader uses a very problematic but highly useful handle in his 2011 “What is Madness?” book. He writes about the difference between “being mad and going mad.” The problem of course, is that one can be “mad,” but also that being mad is related to a psychotic structure. But his is not a lonely position:

This subtle, reserved madness has been called ‘white psychosis’, ‘normal psychosis’, ‘lucid psychosis’, ‘everyday psychosis’, ‘private psychosis’ and ‘ordinary psychosis’ (Leader, 2011).

Most psychotics will go through their whole lives without having a psychotic episode, they can be mad without going crazy. Noticeable and disabling delusions and hallucinations may or may not be triggered in their lives. Even more so, what is taken as the telling signs of psychoses, hallucinations and delusions, are actually a shot at defense, “less constitutive of madness than responses to madness, attempts at self-cure.” Freud writes that “delusion is found applied like a patch over the place where originally a rent had appeared in the ego’s relation to the external world” (Freud, 1924). But most of all, hallucinations and delusions are part of whatever it means to be human. They are an actual experience in the world that a lot of people have gone through, and not incompatible with what would appear as a “normal life.” Or, as Jeffrey Kripal, not a psychoanalyst, but a scholar of religion, writes: “these things are real in the simple sense that they happen” (Kripal, 2011). We could even talk about religion revelation as a psychotic hallucinatory and/or delusional episode at a cultural moment where that is not looked upon with kind eyes.

The tell-tale sign of the psychoses, Lacan will argue, is certainty. Madness is certainty. “Reality isn’t an issue for him,” Lacan says about Schreber’s delusion, “certainty

is” (Lacan, 1997). Leader lays it out: “The key clinical feature lies in this certainty, which almost always separates neurosis from psychosis.” And, following Lacan, he writes, “it is less the content of the beliefs than the attitude towards them” (2011).

In a more light-hearted way, Lacan reminds its audience of the joke about “the jealous husband who pursues his wife to the door of the very bedroom in which she has locked herself with someone else” (Lacan, 1997) and wonders if his wife is cheating on him, compared to the guy who sits at home and just knows she is. That is the difference between neurotic doubt and paranoid certainty.

This certainty is not a question of belief. “Faith assumes skepticism,” as Taussig says, while Lacan writes about a structural certainty: “one can only believe what one is not sure about. Those who are sure, well, precisely, they do not believe in it. They do not believe in the Other; they are sure of the Thing. These people are the psychotics” (Lacan, 2010).

This is the exact breaking point that Erik Davis writes about when discussing “weird” experiences: “when the as if becomes because of,” (2019) because there is no longer a “willing suspension of disbelief”: there’s just certainty, and a certainty that speaks to the subject as a singularity.

Speaking is of particular importance here, because the question is about language, and the other. Psychoanalysis might be under attack from its outside and with major tribal fights on the inside, but it is a discipline that listens to madmen, probably the first one to do so in the modern era, and that tries to take whatever mad people have to say seriously. It is a practice that deals with subjects and their particularity, and not just bodies that need to be either managed, restrained, medicated or exterminated, according to the options the 20th

century gave us. It is a procedure of reading (listening in this case, but that is why Lacan insisted so much in the “trace of the letter”) that is as surprising to its practitioners in terms of the result of the method that its theoretical formulation always seems to be behind what happens in the couch or the hospital. This mode of radical listening does not imply “being a judge of the literal truth or accuracy of statements” (Shulma, 1996) (which would imply a position of knowledge and a judgemental power akin to those who dismiss indigenous ontologies as epistemologies) but listening to the subject’s relationship to language and desire, to repetitions and assumed truths. “I am convinced that today, ‘lacanian’ points towards a question of method, a question of reading method, a question of listening, and this implies dropping off, breaking away from prejudice” (Aboslaiman, 2014). And then goes quoting another of Lacan’s famous dictums: “to know how to forget what one knows” in order to really listen. As a defense against certainty in abstraction, Lacan urged his students “to not understand completely” because “understanding means assuming there are obvious things” (Lacan, 1997). Which is, of course, an almost completely unattainable ideal and not an easy thing to accomplish. Picture yourself as an analyst who receives a patient who claims that “my father is God and my mother is a virgin.” It would not seem unreasonable to assume he is either Jesus or crazy¹⁰⁶. But the analyst job is not to break the analysand’s certainty and to correct his viewpoint (in order to install whatever the analyst thinks reality and normalcy is), but to help him live with that, which is most probably not easy. Jean Allouch has written that mental health would mean being able to “pass on to other things... which are not his/her alienation,” which makes him wonder on one side, whether that is even possible or whether that is absurd, as life doesn’t cease to pass on to other things (Allouch, no date).

¹⁰⁶ Just to break it down a little bit: the someone who says it is denying the sexual just by existing, denying lack in one fell swoop, as his father is perfect, all-powerful and his mother a virgin and immaculate.

Psychoses are characterized by a particularly problematic relationship with the other, and both Freud and Lacan framed it as a problem of rejection, a refusal of internalization that somehow prevents the subject from passing through that most famous and problematic of psychoanalysis complexes, the Oedipus and its unavoidable sidekick, castration. Passing through that complex structures the subject as neurotic (either obsessive or hysterical), but psychoses means not being oedipized, which entails a wholly different way of subjectivation. Lacan called this refusal foreclosure, and understood it as the main mechanism of psychoses (as repression would be for neurosis and negation to perversion). Once again, we enter the muddied waters between abstraction and literality. Castration is a symbolic operation, one in which the imaginary object of satisfaction and completion, the Phallus, is lost (as far as psychoanalysis goes, this doesn't happen physically, and that's the difference between the phallus and the penis). This loss, a lack that will haunt neurotics for the rest of their lives, goes all around; in order to function as a subject, nobody has access to that Phallus, not the mother, nor the father, nor the subject: nobody knows, which allows desire to run along a metonymic chain. This is what neurotics repress, and this is what places them in a particular relation to the symbolic order, in which they will place their faith in order to exist, an outside force which will tell them what they are and what they want, symbolically. The object of desire is left as a signifier, an empty space, the object *petite a*, which functions more as an engine than as a destination. The lack of a meaning, or a concrete object, with which to understand oneself also comes with an acceptance, an Ego, which can alienate itself to what the Other is supposed to demand from that same subject. This opens up the symbolic field outside the body and beyond the subject, into the field of the Law, an abstract and Imaginary

field of social and cultural conventions, identification and representation: a relationship to language which includes a particular kind of interiority.

At first, Lacan, following Freud, thought that psychotics foreclosed castration. Later on, he became more specific. Lacan thought that the relationship between signifier and signified was not fixed, there's a constant "slipping of the signified under the signified" and that meaning has to be temporarily buttoned at certain signifiers so that we can extract meaning out of utterances. These are "points de capiton" (translated as "anchoring points," "quilting points," or "button ties") which tie up a signifier to a signified so we get to understand. What was foreclosed in psychosis was a particular "button tie" which, for Lacan, was instrumental in accessing the symbolic order and which he called the "Name-of-the-Father," also an attempt to make sense of Freud's Oedipus as a symbolic maneuver.

This "Name-of-the-Father" was whatever could break away the one-on-one relationship to the mother in terms of desire, to open up a field of desiring possibilities beyond the mirror stage and towards abstraction, a place where everyone can occupy a different symbolic place, in some degree of independence of one another (since all are castrated and ultimately don't know what they are or what they want). It is an abstraction that secures places for everybody, but also the subjection to a general rule, a point de capiton which explains and organizes the world.

Although he began by referring to the paternal function – or Name-of-the-Father – he would later use the plural, evoking the Names of the Father, and questioning their link to paternity as such. What mattered was not exclusively the place of the father in the family, but rather any operation or set of

operations that would tie together the real, the symbolic and the imaginary, and provide a compass in relation to the enigmatic desire of the Other. The father was just one of the many different forms this buttoning-down process could take, and would become less and less privileged (Leader, 2011).

“Reality implies the subject’s integration into a particular game of signifiers,” (Lacan, 1997) which also implies a certain distance, and, as Levi-Strauss used to say, “an impoverishment of the empirical totality” (Levi-Strauss, 1966) but also a subjection of desire to the Law, an abstract Law which defines how signifiers and signifieds will be organized and thus, produce meaning. The freakish separation of signifiers and signifieds which castration brings about (if it is symbolized), is the soothed by and submitted to the Other’s demand¹⁰⁷. That’s what repression is about. In psychoses, this abstract alienation is absent, and foreclosed. Certain signifiers, like lack, Law, abstraction are foreclosed in terms that they are unthinkable, and psychotic mechanisms take their place as explanations. That’s why psychotics do not believe in the Other, but in the Thing: “what is refused in the Symbolic reappears in the Real” is Lacan’s formula for this operation. What is a symbol appears as concrete. Identification does not pass through representation, but through actualization. The metaphor appears as real. It doesn’t pass through an internalization process, but appears outside. The relationship between signifier and signified is not arbitrary but fixed, and words become heavy as objects, as there’s not a cut that separates the signifier from the signified.

¹⁰⁷ Psychotics can go through their whole life being mad without going mad (let’s say madness is also present in neurotics, but in a much more alienated, and seemingly normal way). Going mad psychotically is usually triggered: “Such states can be precipitated by the loss of an essential reference point or support: a position at work, a benevolent look, a form of representation, such as a title” (leader and I would add paternity or motherhood to the list. “Based on Lacanian theory we, on the one hand, expect that situations in which a person is confronted with the desire of the other (“what do you want”) and/or the issue of one’s own existential identity (“who am I”) will entail deficient metaphor comprehension” (Ribolsi, 2015).

Instead of a consensual hallucination organized by the Other, the psychotic tries to organize the world through its own. That is why both hallucinations and delusions are attempts at explaining the world, attempts at creating a “point de capiton,” a stoppage, that radically fixes language and its meaning in a coherent outside.

The paternal metaphor organizes the word outside: it gives it an order, an organization that regulates desire through the question about the desire (and demand) of that enigmatic Other, to which we try to put on different faces, maybe its God, maybe its money, maybe it's the law, or tradition or parents or objectivity: the reassurance that there is something outside which organizes the experience of reality and desire because it knows: “it's language plus law.” That capitalized other, the Big Other, stands for truth. It may be the panopticon or Big Brother, the sheer authoritarian trip, under the gaze of which we come to be. The problem is that we never know if somebody in the Panopticon is watching or whether Big Brother truly exists. That's neurotic doubt, and neurotic belief. The Other, Lacan would say, is just language, “the locus of the treasure trove of signifiers” (Lacan 2006c: 682), “the locus from which the question of his [the subject's] existence may arise” (Lacan, 2006d:459). “Reality, if the symbolic operates, becomes an out-of-body experience,” explains Leader, “our libido has been exiled from our bodies, more or less, and linked now to the sign of absence” (2011) through the organization of our jouis-sense and our orifices (mouth, anus, ears, eyes, genitals) which become borders where the signifying cut is made¹⁰⁸, our symbolic place secured, and our desire organized.

¹⁰⁸ This borders are how the body becomes erotized: it is the way language insinuates and organizes our bodies, and our needs, the ultimate literalization: ourselves.

The voices, and the dreams and the desires that the neurotic seems to understand as coming from their inside, are experienced as coming from the outside by psychotics.

How can one fail to see in the phenomenology of psychosis that everything from beginning to end stems from a particular relationship between the subject and this language that has suddenly been thrust into the foreground, that speaks all by itself, out loud, in its noise and furor, as well as in its neutrality? If the neurotic inhabits language, the psychotic is inhabited, possessed, by language (Lacan, 1997).

The Other is always an outside force, and in psychoanalysis terms, all of us were psychotic at one time or the other (and polymorphous perverts before), which is why I tried to explain Žižek's menagerie of speculative tropes as uncanny. What comes off as reality is just a relation (and submittal) to this other:

Neurosis and psychosis, in turn, can be seen as different modalities of nomination. Where, in neurosis, the Oedipus complex succeeds in naming the desire of the mother, through an appeal to a normative fiction, in the psychoses the subject has to invent: for the paranoiac, in naming what is wrong with the world; for the melancholic, in naming what is wrong with themselves; and for the schizophrenic, as a perpetual and unresolved activity (Leader, 2011).

That is a simplification of the fact that processes of subjectivation are relations with language. Because the Other does not know, the Other is just language¹⁰⁹. But the Other always appears, as a super-ego injunction, as guilt, as hallucination and delusion, as that which looks upon you while accidentally stumbling on the street while you immediately turn around to see who noticed (it's the Other!). That is why Lacan stated that psychoanalysis might be the only way to create "viable atheists". Because "with God, in every case, whether one believes in him or whether one does not, he must be taken into account. It is absolutely inevitable" (Lacan, 2010b). And it is unavoidable because God is a signifier, and, independently of his Real existence, or that of the Real which the term God tries to make available for us (as in Chu's metaphorical allowances of science fiction), he exists symbolically, and we have to deal with it. Which is why a true atheist would not be one who does not believe in God, but one who withdraws from his gaze. One who actually manages to love without the suspicion/knowledge/comfort not only that someone is watching and judging, but that someone knows what one is and what wants.

As much as Lacan emphasized the role of the Symbolic through the sixties, the seventies find him trying to attune himself to the Real which, as he writes "the Real, I must say it, is without Law. The true Real implies the absence of Law. The real has no order" (Lacan, 2010c). His interest passes, as he produces more and more neologisms (for example, he tries to do away with a relation to linguistics naming his own constructions about language linguistry), to the way some symbolic experiences touch the Real, as in psychoses,

¹⁰⁹ I could also argue that yes, the Panopticon is watching me all the time, and yes, Big Brother is guiding my actions: the algorithms that trace all my info have a pretty good idea of what I want.

and wonders about the unconscious before it is structured by language (before neurosis, so to speak) using terms as *lalangue* (as in the joyful and meaningless babbling of babies) and places a *jouissance*, a mute and opaque *jouissance*, that is uncapturable from meaning by sense, signification and meaning, which produces a *sinthomme* (as in holy man), a symptom that is not symbolizable, and that produces a reality.

It is in this Lacanian moment where we can find a “psychotic that does not allow him/her from being seduced by identifications, and has allowed to be ‘tempted’ —Lacan’s term— by the risk of madness” (Vallejo, 2018). In a radical Lacanian position, psychosis is somehow a choice, because the psychotic “refuses to treat his emptiness with identification... and discord turns feral, demands answers and forces him to a solitary invention, a knowledge that is a product of his ethical position” (Vallejo, 2018). The position with respect to subjectivation choice: “Lacan opposes the neurotic’s cowardice to the psychotic’s courage,” where the neurotic “turns him/herself kind or detestable to the Other, and with this first consentment, ties up his life to the gaze and voice of an Other that guarantees his/her existence” (Vallejo, 2018)

In more than one sense, what a psychotic tries to do with his hallucinations and delusions is particularly close to what psychoanalysis is trying to do, understand subjectification, desire and reality. At the very end of his essay on Schreber’s paranoia, Freud writes: “It remains for the future to decide whether there is more delusion in my theory than I should like to admit, or whether there is more truth in Schreber’s delusion than other people are as yet prepared to believe.” He writes this specifically about libidinal cathexis,

and the way drives are organized in the world, the difference being that Freud supposed the drive begins inside the subject and goes out, while Schreber tries to pinpoint it the other way, the drive starts outside and goes towards the subject (particularly himself).

Psychosis can also mean “an understanding of the language games make-believe that the ordinary social word is based on. Rather than being immersed within it, a certain distance allows a more accurate perspective,” according to Leader. Psychotics tread new ground because they “can see through conventions.”

This is a really interesting tension in psychoanalysis, the way that there’s always truth in what madness articulates, and that is why it’s a reading procedure. Psychoanalysis takes madness seriously¹¹⁰. And it allows Lacan to veer closer to Burroughs dictum: “language is a virus”:

It so happens that last Friday, at my presentation of something that is generally considered as a case, a case of madness assuredly. A case of madness which, which had begun with the *sinthome*: imposed words (*paroles imposées*). This at least was how the patient himself articulated this something which is the most sensible of things in the order, in the order of an articulation that I can describe as Lacanian. How can we not all sense that the words on which we depend, are in a way imposed on us? This indeed is why what is called a sick person sometimes goes further than what is called a healthy man. The question is rather one of knowing why a normal man, one described as normal, is not

¹¹⁰ We would have to note that this is also a language problem. While in both French and English the word used is delirium, which at least grants a touch of poetic creativity to the language-creations of psychotics, the word used in English is delusions, which instantly highlights and focuses on the way they are wrong.

aware that the word is a parasite? That the word is something applied. That the word is a form of cancer with which the human being is afflicted. How is it that there are some who go as far as feeling it? (Lacan, 2010c).

CHAPTER 8: DELIRIUMS AND TECHNOCAPITALISM

“Shit on your whole imaginary and symbolic mortification” is how Deleuze and Guattari react to the whole psychoanalytic neurotic construction in their “Anti-Oedipus” because Freud normalizes neurosis through that familiar complex that reduces everything to an internal daddy-mommy-me triangle which, according to them, should be politicized and understood as a “proper” reading, the normalized way of being in the world, which actually imprisons people, instead of liberating them. The whole oedipical set-up, they claim, is just control, and reduces all social and material processes to an idealist intimate drama: you have a daddy, your boss is daddy, the State is daddy, God is daddy, the Law is daddy. The unconscious, which they see as a productive instance, is reduced to mere representation: instead of the unconscious as a factory, psychoanalysis has reduced it to a stage, where each individual drowns in their own particular drama, where they play out their fantasies, of which they are forever terrified. This is, of course, a proper reading of metaphors: all that you dream, and all that you see has a ready-made symbolic explanation: daddy-mommy-me. These fantasies are then streamlined, encouraged and solved, put tidily into their symbolic places, in the private space of the psychoanalyst couch. Everything becomes representation.

But psychoanalysts are bent on producing man abstractly, that is to say ideologically, for culture. It is Oedipus who produces man in this fashion, and who gives a structure to the false movement of infinite progression and regression: your father, and your father's father, a snowball gathering speed as it moves from Oedipus all the way to the father of the primal horde, to God

and the Paleolithic age. It is Oedipus who makes us man, for better or for worse, say those who would make fools of us all (Deleuze and Guattari, 1983:109).

D&G consider “a schizophrenic out on a stroll,” a much better model. Keeping desire “abstract” and herded through normalcy in the family circle keeps the status quo and leaves reality untouched. That’s the reason why they propose schizoanalysis as an antidote to not just psychoanalysis but the whole symbolic, economic and political structure it supports. If Freudian psychoanalysis started out with the neurotic, Anti-Oedipus proposes to start out with schizophrenia, framing that particular figure outside of clinical practice (whose end result is the schizophrenic), and understanding it as those forces that escape coding, which scramble codes and deterritorialize beyond the usual processes of subjectivation, language, law, castration and lack: “Schizophrenia is like love: there is no specifically schizophrenic phenomenon or entity; schizophrenia is the universe of productive and reproductive desiring machines, universal primary production as ‘the essential reality of man and nature’”¹¹¹

“Anti-Oedipus” is a savage attack on psychoanalysis as a highly structured and conservative enterprise, at a historical moment, right after the 1968 uprisings, doing a major revision of Freud while also being highly critical of some of his tenets. D&G are very careful with the figure of Lacan, giving at least some room for doubt for his teaching, but certainly taking their own path¹¹². Even so, schizoanalysis remains in the Freudian tradition, but while

¹¹¹ Misreading can be so much more than just Reading in the wrong fashion...

¹¹² They even quote Lacan saying “I spoke of the paternal metaphor, I have never spoken of an Oedipus complex” (D&G, 1983:53)

Lacan concentrates on the practice and tries to go deeper into it, D&G make it explode through different matings: they are rhizoming the tradition. Guattari is usually pictured as Lacan's favorite follower at the time where Lacanians, the ones who were going to stay with his legacy, were taking a "Maoist turn" as Guattari paints it (Ryder, 2018).

One of the (several) problems D&G find in psychoanalysis (which they usually take as a whole enterprise that relies on Oedipus for explanations) is the emphasis on the individual and its almost structural bet (think a couch in a private room) on an individual cure. The unconscious is social in its own terms, because it is what they term a machine: it connects, it cuts, it gives causeways to flow, in the same terms that desire is not individual, but a productive force that traverses everything. D&G turn to Henry Miller for answers: "to be cured, we must rise from our graves and throw off the cerements of the dead. Nobody can do it for another—it is "a private affair best done collectively" (Miller,).

And neurosis and its Oedipus complex is exactly what keeps us from doing it collectively. Abstract interpretation is rendering ineffective what the psychotic produces, especially if psychoanalysts' efforts are to herd the psychotic back to the Oedipical individual corral, instead of following its productions.

Judge Schreber has sunbeams in his ass. A solar anus. And rest assured that it works: Judge Schreber feels something, produces something, and is capable of explaining the process theoretically. Something is produced: the effects of a machine, not mere metaphors (D&G, 1983: 2).

The problem with seeing the solar anus as a metaphor is its proper reading, which means placing abstraction as the privileged and most important trait of humans. The

question, for Deleuze and Guattari, is not what it means, but what it produces¹¹³. The metaphor on the real ceases to be a metaphor if it causes effects, if it is understood as a machine. The effects it produces are usually outside the norm, and swept under the rug of “categorical mistakes” because they produce ‘deviant’ behavior. At the same time, and this is what D&G are betting on: they produce different results, they produce possibilities.

In order to mark them as ‘deviant’ or “aberrant,” a normalcy has to be set, that normalcy, which D&G tack onto the Oedipus complex and what it works for, is exactly the problem: the overcoding (as in constant fixed interpretation) of desire and its channeling through business as usual.

Psychoanalysis changed because of D&G, and one can even say that their influence got to Lacan himself. In the last decade of his teachings, Lacan turned to the moment before the unconscious is structured as a language, which could easily be his most famous dictum, and which entail the psychotic experience (exchanging Schreber for Joyce, as I already explained) trying to frame a jouissance before the paternal metaphor sets things straight. It is in this sense that Lacan tries to find that moment in which “the Symbolic touches the Real.”

Jacques-Alain Miller, the formal “heir” of Lacan (he is the sole editor of the “official” versions of his seminars and also husband of Judith, Lacan’s daughter¹¹⁴) writes that

...following Lacan, (the schizophrenic) is the subject who specifies himself or herself by not being caught up in any discourse, in any social link. I would add that this is the only subject who does not defend himself or herself from the

¹¹³ The manner in which D&G will tackle the metaphoric problem (they hate metaphors and won’t go anywhere near them) will be expanded on the last chapter of this text.

¹¹⁴ Talk about daddy-mommy me!

real by means of the symbolic, which we all do when we are not schizophrenic. The schizophrenic does not defend himself or herself from the real by language, because for him or her, the symbolic is real (Miller, 2002).

And that is why the schizophrenic does not believe in the Other, but does believe in the Thing.¹¹⁵ He is not yet caught in the web of representations: the word has not yet killed the Thing, and its use of language (particularly irony) goes to the heart of any social relation, because it lays them bare. There is no abstract contract by which words are made to represent things abstractly: no other as law. The symbolic is not used as a defense against the Real, the word has not yet come to be unrealized by the signifier, by the fact that words relate to another words, and not to things, and that to think abstractly is exactly that, separating words from things¹¹⁶.

The only condition for a “differential clinic of psychoses,” the only condition on which we can differentiate a psychotic structure from others, Miller says, is a “universal clinic of delirium,” which would first make the claim that everyone’s crazy, and everyone is delirious, except that for neurotics that delirium is usually not only validated by others, but imposed by culture, by the hope (daddy again) that there is an Other who knows what I am and what I want, who can tell right from wrong. Lacanian psychoanalysis would go on to say that all systems are partial, and defenses against the Real, and, as the Real is that which is

¹¹⁵ The paranoid invents the Other as a literal representation. Someone is following him or her. Someone is plotting against him. The Other becomes a threat, an altogether real threat.

¹¹⁶ “There is representation, but only insofar as the signifier represents a null reference. This reference as empty is written as castration (- φ) or as what is made of castration, the subject. Lacan's subject is an effect of a non-existent entity, the one which motivates and haunts the theory of descriptions.

impossible, because language takes us out of it, no system can ever encompass the Real¹¹⁷. In reality, nobody knows everything.

A certain mental breathing space seems indispensable to modern man, one in which his independence not only of any master but also of any god is affirmed, a space for his irreducible autonomy as individual, as individual existence. Here there is indeed something that merits a point-by-point comparison with a delusional¹¹⁸ discourse. It's one itself. (Lacan, 1977:133)

Even if delirious, it is certainly is the official discourse. And Deleuze and Guattari try to take it apart by thinking through the social production of subjectivities (and not just individuals) in terms of the political economy and the economy of the libido, in the terms that subjection, is a process that is both economic and subjectifying: “to code desire is the business of the socius” (D&G, 1983:139)

Neurosis (and for that case, Psychosis) is not just a way of being, but a way in which being is produced. Even more so, neurosis is the desired outcome of capitalist production of subjectivity with all of its resulting symptomatic formations: belief in the system, guilt, anxiety and doubt, but, mostly, a compulsion to obey, and a constant fear of desire. Neurosis is just the way the system has organized the taming of desire through individuals who think they are unique, but that, in fact, they are not. Neurosis is the mass production of subjectivity.

¹¹⁷ And that is also castration.Or at least a symbolization of which can allow psychoanalysis to produce viable atheists.

¹¹⁸ Or delirious

Even so, capitalism has a schizo side, which deterritorializes everything (think “all that is solid melts into the air”) in order to get surplus. Money is such a deterritorializing agent. At the same time, capitalism territorializes subjectivities in order to maintain a place where things can formalize this surplus: it territorializes the socius “to guarantee that the flows pass through their corresponding places so that capital flows can keep on going” (Navarro-Fuentes, 2017). Neurosis has been that place.

Psychoanalysis may have been thinking that it had discovered the basic structures of subjectivity but what it actually describes as normal, neurosis, is just the way subjectivity is produced at a very particular moment in European history (and in a very European way, not only universalizing it but also confusing it with health).

Oedipus is always colonization pursued by other means, it is the interior colony, and we shall see that even here at home, where we Europeans are concerned, it is our intimate colonial education. (D&G, 1983:170)

The neurotic is a particular colonization we can call the modern self. Neurosis is the preferred subjectivity of the modern period: the individual, all by himself, cut-off from his desire and from the other, trapped by sexual stereotypes (daddy-mommy-me), hoping in his belief that someone knows how s/he should be, and all the time fearing that they do not live up to those expectations, alienated in their solitude, ready to obey a master and always in lack, depressed, in fear and ready to follow orders. Neurotics, and their abstract relationship to language and representation, who understand experience abstractly instead of as just experience (because of symbolic mediation), have historically made great employees. As

Maurizio Lazzarato writes: “it is perhaps property rights that form the most successful individualizing apparatuses of subjectivization” (Lazzarato, 2014). The modern individual rejects collectivity in order to protect his/hers property rights. Lazzarato writes that the main mechanism of social subjection today is debt, and in order to guarantee the paying of that debt, “memory and affects (guilt, responsibility, trust, loyalty) must be created to ensure the fulfillment of his promise” (Lazzarato, 2013). Neurotics are also great consumers: always expecting that the Other will give them a commodity that will ultimately satisfy them.

Even more so: they blame themselves. The problem is not outside (although there’s always someone to blame because they are not doing things the right way), the problem lies inside, and it has to do with daddy-mommy-me. Especially in a society that sells success as the main goal of life, the neurotic will have a difficult time understanding that the system is rigged and that it requires that a lot of people do not succeed in order for some to “succeed” (which is usually understood in terms of money). The neurotic will find a character flaw (and will be guided there by the kind of psychoanalysts D&G so thoroughly shred to pieces) that has stopped them from actually succeeding: something’s always wrong: too shy, too stupid, too careless, too lazy, too coward, too good, too open, too honest, whatever. There’s always something inside that has stopped from getting their due, and that stops them from realizing that the system is a pyramidal one that works exactly like that. Isolated and caught up in his/her guilty fantasies, the neurotic will have problems investing the frustration socially and against the forces that subjectify her or him. Besides, there are too many responsibilities. Japhy Wilson characterizes this as a form of obsessional neurosis, where the “subject

engages in frenetic activity to prevent anything Real from happening¹¹⁹” (Wilson, 2014). The neurotic, as framed by them, will buy insurance for everything and will make sure to follow all rules (and feel guilty if s/he doesn’t) in order to keep that symbolic place and abstract place intact, in the hopes that actually nothing ever happens, that the Real never appears, which is one of the reasons D&G place their bets on the schizo:

Wouldn't it be better to schizophrenize the domain of the unconscious as well as the sociohistorical domain, so as to shatter the iron collar of Oedipus and rediscover everywhere the force of desiring, production; to renew, on the level of the Real, the tie between the analytic machine, desire, and production? For the unconscious itself is no more structural than personal, it does not symbolize any more than it imagines or represents; it engineers, it is machinic. Neither imaginary nor symbolic, it is the Real in itself, the "impossible real" and its production.

But the *Anti-Oedipus* was published in 1972, a moment of open rebellion right at the time the gold standard was abandoned. And right now, it seems the neurotic structuration of subjectification is cracking at the seams. If the globalized world is undergoing a sense-making crisis, it goes hand-in-hand with a mental health crisis that has also been characterized as an epidemic. Rod Tweedy (2020) reports that “one in four adults in the UK today has been diagnosed with a mental illness, and four million people take antidepressants every year.” “ And Joel Kovel (1976), former psychiatrist and professor of political science, refers to the

¹¹⁹ Wilson makes this argument for the “neoliberal subject” even if, in a much more radical way, D&G were making it before.

If neurosis is what passes for normal, then, these days, normal cannot hold.

Meaning is irrelevant: At least that's something on which a lot of theorists in the second half of the XXth century, agree on, even if they are grounded in different explanations. Let's take BF Skinner, father of radical behaviorism, for example. Skinner rejected what he called the "mental dimension" as a possible explanation for human behavior, because any "mental" explanations "cannot be demonstrated one way or the other" (Baum, 2011). Skinner rejected what he calls "explanatory fictions," like freedom, autonomous man, dignity, creativity, will and self because they preclude the search for more objective variables (like conditioning and reinforcements). "Explanatory fictions" are "mental terms that have no reference at all" (Flanagan, 1991).

Around the same time, structuralists were dismantling the idea of meaning by upholding the primacy of the signifier over the signified as a strategy for analysis. In their view, the signified (the meaning of a word) is produced by the signifier. Lacan even flipped Saussure's sign diagram to place the signifier (a capital S) above the signified (lowercase s) in order to explain that there is only the possibility of meaning if there are signifiers, which produce it. In order to explain what a signifier means, we can only rely on other signifiers, in an endless chain (which of course, requires points de capiton, buttoning points, in order to make sense). Meaning is just an attempt to button up a sign, to make sense of the world because our main access to it is through the Symbolic, that fine-grained mesh thrown over the world and to which we are subjected to, in order to and because we speak. The sphere of meaning was usually thrown into the Imaginary. That is why he preferred mathemes, formulas

with which he could explain subjective processes. Even the idea that Allouch proposed as mental health, “passing on to a different thing” means throwing away imaginaries, fixed ways of understanding things, in order to let the subject (a signifier in front of other signifiers) find a different place, a different way of buttoning signifiers and signifieds, and not because that place is THE place, or that version is the final truth, but because it would allow desire to flow in different directions.

Meaning, of course, is sometimes confused with truth, and scientific facts take the place of meaning, as in this excerpt from Kurt Vonnegut’s *Cat’s Cradle*:

“The trouble with the world was,” she continued hesitatingly, “that people were still superstitious instead of scientific. He said if everybody would study science more, there wouldn’t be all the trouble there was.”

“He said science was going to discover the basic secret of life someday,” the bartender put in. He scratched his head and frowned. “Didn’t I read in the paper the other day where they’d finally found out what it was?”

“I missed that,” I murmured.

“I saw that,” said Sandra. “About two days ago.”

“That’s right,” said the bartender.

“What is the secret of life?” I asked.

“I forget,” said Sandra.

“Protein,” the bartender declared. “They found out something about protein.”

“Yeah,” said Sandra, “that’s it.”

If meaning is irrelevant, then interpretation is always suspectful and partial, because it attempts to do meaning. Facts and not ficts, please. Even digital capitalism does not care much about meaning, if we understand meaning as content, its irrelevance is one of the secrets of Srnicek’s “platform capitalism.” He defines platforms as “digital infrastructures that enable two or more groups to interact,” (Srnicek, 2017:43) positioning themselves as “intermediaries that bring together different users: customers, advertisers, service providers, suppliers and even physical objects. These digital intermediary infrastructures characterize themselves by not providing content: that’s what users do (and that’s why they rely on accumulating users through network effects). Most digital service providers have used this method, which has a very particular relationship with meaning and content. Users who want to take advantage of the platform compete with their own content. Think YouTube, think Facebook, think Google. They are just massive networks, and even making themselves responsible for the content they promote has been problematic for them, lately. Instead of meaning, these platforms collect user’s data and build massive databases through constant user engagement that are then not just used to predict behavior, but to provoke it. According to Shoshana Zuboff:

...surveillance capitalists discovered that the most predictive data come from intervening in human action to coax, tune, herd, and modify behavior in the direction of guaranteed outcomes. This shift from knowledge to power transforms technology from a means of production to a global means of

behavioral modification in order to achieve “economies of action.” I call this power to shape human behavior remotely and at scale toward others’ ends “instrumentarian power,” because it works entirely through the medium of digital instrumentation. Instrumentarian power will not threaten you with terror or murder. No soldiers will appear to drag you to the gulag or the camp. This new species of power works remotely, engineering subliminal cues, social comparison dynamics, rewards and punishments, and varieties of enforcers to shape behavior that aligns with its commercial interests (Zuboff, 2020).

Which is a detailed version of what D&G thought about meaning in the *Anti-Oedipus*. The meaning of a book is not what it says, but how it affects the reader, how being connected to it changes you. The question is never what it means, but what it does, and that’s why interpretation and representation is just a way of running in loops that never take you anywhere: the signified will endlessly slide below the signifier. This is, in a sense, properly McLuhanian, and not just in a “the medium is the message” kind of way, which is of course a way of saying that meaning is not the crux of the situation, but in terms of “the content of a medium is the metamorphosis of the user.” And that is one of the reasons why D&G shy away from proper metaphorical interpretation: “something is produced, the effects of a machine, not mere metaphors.” In a platform economy, big data knows more about you than yourself.

Still, even if meaning is irrelevant, we still need it. Humans live with it. It is unavoidable to try and make sense of things, even if this is just an Oedipal offshoot. And it has become incredibly difficult to make sense lately.

“To speak is to lie, to live is to collaborate,” wrote William Burroughs in *Nova Express*, following his “language is a virus” claim, and trying to make sense of what it means to be infected by what he termed Control. Part of this control might well be characterized by what Lazzarato, following Guattari, names “Social Subjection,¹²⁰” a power apparatus that relies on meaning and signification and the way that neurotic subjectification occurs. It is a semiotic operation where identity is formed, and provides markers that situate the indebted and property-owning individual, the preferred mode of capitalist subjectification, in a stable place. It uses a linguistic and representational semiotics that gives us markers by which to live: name, nationality, sexual orientation, properties, family history, religion, profession, character. These semiologies of signification have a political function: stabilization, centered on the individual, debt and work: economic and subjectivity production are administered, guided and controlled by capitalism.

But capitalism has changed, and, as discussed in previous chapters, lost its need for a material referent: abstract finances bypass even the body, which is the seat of the individual, and its first claim to property and human rights: “signs produce signs without any longer passing through the flesh” (Berardi, 2012). Lazzarato claims that the weakness of capitalism is that neoliberalism has undergone no new production of subjectivity: the entrepreneurial subject has not been enough, and instead of talking about an epidemic of mental health, he talks about a “crisis of subjectivity.” The markers of our identity do not longer work in our

¹²⁰ The other power apparatus that guarantee the reproduction of wealth is “Machinic enslavement,” according to both Guattari and Lazzarato, but I will be getting to it on the next chapter.

present day, and we are going crazy because of it¹²¹. Our affects and our body, according to Berardi, are not able to keep up with the ever-expanding abstraction, speed and connectiveness to machines. (let's not forget that McLuhan said that electronic culture "disembodies man", and that we live with our "nerves outside our skin, our neurons outside our brains" which of course begs the political question that McLuhan always avoided: if my perceptual apparatus is outside my body, then whose is it?). "The sign-machines of money, economics, science, technology, art and so on," writes Lazzarato, "bypass language significations, and representation" (2014).

And then there's the crisis of sense-making which might as well be the crisis of a centralized Other which functions as the guarantee of truth, a master-signifier that stops the sliding of the signified and fixes it to a place, and this is what I called an institutional crisis, where meaning has been so thoroughly weaponized that this tyrannical (daddy again) master has splintered into several, and spread throughout the world. Where to turn to in order to receive objective news: just the facts? The father figure in the oedipal dance has been disappearing for quite a while and a plurality of voices, which mirror the labyrinthine and instantaneous structure of the internet, lay claim to this place of truth and knowledge, certainty weaponized through algorithmic vectors created to produce actions.

William Burroughs used to think, following Korsibsky, that psychosis had been the normal, or statistical majority structure right up to the Middle Ages, where neurosis started to take a hold (which would make sense in terms of the age of reason, print culture and the birth of modern science and thought, as well as the capitalist regime and its assertion of private property). It is also the time where realism starts to take a hold as a representational strategy.

¹²¹ Lazzarato sees this crisis as a possibility to produce different kinds of subjectivities.

One has only to look at Thomas Hobbes frontispiece for Leviathan, which introduces the notion of sovereignty which would form the basis of the Modern State, to understand this passage from psychosis to realism. The image is radically psychotic: the result, the modern state, is highly neurotic. One could cast the whole history of religions and revelations as psychotic delusions and deliriums that somehow took hold of people's imagination. The erotic/religious poems of Saint Teresa de Ávila bear witness to this jouissance.

But then, persecution began in the Modern Age: rationality and abstract thought demanded that hallucinations and deliriums be treated as anomalies, and dangerous ones. There was only one reality, which also came in handy to explain and downplay the ontologies of colonized America and Africa, the province of primitives. Neurosis was sanity, along with the economic system that brought it along, the enclosing of the commons into private property, the mechanization of work and the psychologization of personality. So yes, madmen, children and primitives were the main victims of this process of subjectivation/subjectation: all of them unwilling to march along the abstract processes of the Western subject, now cast as the pinnacle of human evolution, the high point of a progressive chain. This is also why Borges casts realism as a newcomer: literature had always been fantastic. Metaphors had always been turned into the Real.

Now, neurosis is at stake, and madness seems to be near in the manner of conspiracy theories, fundamentalisms, new materialisms and a return to religious thought, while the neurotic indebted subject needs constant medication and psychiatric offices are busy finding new pathologies to explain the way subjectivation is constantly failing. Madness seems to be encircling us.

“The interference between the sound image and the meaning discriminates the natural language from programming language or mathematical language,” state Shimizu et al (2021), taking from Lacan the independence between signifier and signified as the sign of “natural” or “human” language, in an article that compares “word salads”, in both English and Japanese, generated by computers and schizophrenics, using as a control group newspaper articles, blogs and e-books generated by “healthy individuals.” In their study, they applied fractal dimension (repetition of patterns) and Fourier analysis to the vowel periodicities in the word salads in order to “develop an indicator to describe the density of meaning in a given text”. What they found were significant differences, independent of meaning between “normal” texts and schizophrenic word salads (taken from published clinical studies). Following Lacan, they say that the points of capiton that produce meaning also produce certain kinds of patterns. The conclusion to their paper is this:

The fractal dimension and Fourier analyses of human languages focusing on vowels presented in the present study useful for elucidating differences in normal sentences and various word salads. These methods are essentially independent of the meaning of the written or spoken word, and thus the relevant algorithms presented in the present study could be easily implemented in social robots to assess the mental state of a person in care. In future, we aim to construct a social robot that can communicate with people to determine their cognitive state and offer appropriate advice.

This would mean that meaning is irrelevant in terms of signification (it doesn't matter what the text "says") but relevant in formal terms: signifier patterns. If their analysis is correct, then we might hope for a bright future where AI-driven social robots will be the ones diagnosing mental-health.

"There are more than three ways to skin a cat" scared the shit out of an autistic when her grandmother told him exactly that, which made him wonder how many cats had her grandmother skinned in order to know it. You can find a lot of anecdotes like this one by [youtubing autism + literal + thinking](#) and find several people telling highly entertaining stories about the way they take things literally and the confusions (and sometimes anxiety) it produces. At the same time, it goes to show that you can have people in the autistic spectrum that can function "normally" without reading metaphors properly. The psychoanalytic question of whether autism belongs to the psychosis category seems a little bit pedantic, and there are good arguments pro and against that, the main one being that autism maybe a neurological disorder and not a subjective structure, although echolalia, difficulty understanding language, a problematic relation to others and a difficulty with abstract and figurative language might well fill the description (as well as mounting evidence that both hallucinations and delusions, what psychiatry understands as "psychotic experiences" 'are more prevalent in individuals with autism spectrum disorders/autistic traits than in the

general population.”¹²² The ‘quiet psychosis’ of psychoanalysis might be a good explanation of that.

The relation between digital culture, abstract finance and psychoses has been explored by a lot of people, and it might well be that the neoliberal regime is indeed producing new subjectivities that veer closer to the psychoanalytic conception of psychosis.

Arne de Boever, in his study of novels that deal with high finance finds that, at least in literature, “the economy —money, but in particular finance— renders human beings psychotic.” De Boever singles out “information, speed and non-human agency” as crucial for both digital culture and abstract finance:

I will use the term psychosis in a more general fashion to reveal what I consider to be the key affliction of our particular economic moment: with the abolition of the gold standard, the creation of complex financial instruments, the rise of high-frequency trading, and the unbridled intensification of speculative economic practices, we have moved from an era in which neurosis was the dominant affliction into an era in which psychosis has become prevalent (DeBoever, 2018)..

Levi R. Bryant, writing from both a philosophical and Lacanian perspective gives another account of this, placing this “psychotic turn” farther along time:

My hypothesis is that today we are living in the age of schizophrenia, as opposed to neurosis. In fact, I’m inclined to argue that the very reason that

¹²² A systematic review of cases, by Kiyono et al (2020) “finds that the pooled prevalence of psychotic experiences in autism spectrum was 24%: 6% in hallucinations and 45% in delusions.”

Freud could recognize neurosis as a clinical entity at all was because the age of neurosis– the age of the discourse of the master –was in a state of decline or disappearance. Here I hasten to add that in referring to schizophrenia, I’m not referring to the clinical entity, but rather to a form that social structure and relations take. Following Nietzsche, Deleuze, and Guattari, other names for “schizophrenia” would be “the death of God” and “capitalism” (Bryant, 2016).

Both De Boever and Bryant give Marx its due. De Boever by emphasizing Marx’s fictitious capital and its “ultimately psychotic, reality-disavowing effects of money, capital, and (ultimately) finance,” while Bryant quotes Marx and Engels’ “all that is solid melts into the air” pointing out to its resemblance to the schizophrenic’s processes and tying it up with the accelerating capitalist “decoding,” as understood by D&G, which undermines codes and deterritorializes them in order to get surplus, followed by a social response of reterritorializing identities (as in fundamentalism and identity politics) as a way to gain some solid ground. And then, there’s also Baudrillard, the theorist of the unreal reality, the hyper-reality in which we live the procession of simulacras (copies without an original) who realized that the value of objects was being reduced to their sign value, and who observed, with a keen acknowledgement to McLuhans “disembodiment,” how electronic communication was doing things to the body that were worthy of president Schreber, but on a mass scale, while also lamenting “the loss of transcendence or depth” in favor of the “surface of operation” in communication:

If hysteria was the pathology of the exacerbated staging of the subject, a pathology of expression, of the body’s theatrical and operatic conversion; and

if paranoia was the pathology of organization, of the structuration of a rigid and jealous world; then with communication and information, with the immanent promiscuity of all these networks, with their continual connections, we are now in a new form of schizophrenia. No more hysteria, no more projective paranoia properly speaking, but this state of terror proper to the schizophrenic: too great a proximity of everything, the unclean promiscuity of everything which touches, invests and penetrates without resistance, with no halo of private protection, not even his own body, to protect him anymore. The schizo is bereft of every scene, open to everything in spite of himself, living in the greatest confusion. He is himself obscene, the obscene prey of the world's obscenity. What characterizes him is less the loss of the real, the light years of estrangement from the real, the pathos of distance and radical separation, as is commonly said: but, very much to the contrary, the absolute proximity, the total instantaneity of things, the feeling of no defense, no retreat. It is the end of interiority and intimacy, the overexposure and transparence of the world which traverses him without obstacle. He can no longer produce the limits of his own being, can no longer play nor stage himself, can no longer produce himself as mirror. He is now only a pure screen, a switching center for all the networks of influence (Baudrillard, 1988).

Baudrillard's approach is particularly terrible, and he paints an ecstatic schizophrenic caught as just another node in a network, without possibilities. If neurosis is ceasing to be the preferred mode of subjectivation of digital-based neoliberalism and Foucault's homo economicus cannot stand it, it might well be psychosis, for the reasons offered above, that

takes its place as the best way to produce efficient consumers and workers. Producing subjectivities is not as easy as it seems, and the way our current digitalized and global world is producing new subjectivities to take a more efficient role in our new situations will probably take decades, and happen through trial and error, with painful mistakes unavoidable. Maybe the process has been going on for quite a while. We are living through those times, adjusting to how so-called “neurodivergent¹²³” individuals fit into the workplace. The language is worrisome:

“People with Asperger’s Syndrome can be excellent employees as they are often reliable, punctual, have a professional attitude to work, a high level of attention to detail and are good with routine and repetition” (Victoria Society, 2007). Medical Laboratory Technologist, Computer Programmer, Reference Librarian, Taxi Driver, Telemarketer, Artist/Designer, Information Technology might provide good jobs for individuals with High-functioning autism, because “focusing on technical skills (rather than conversational),” following a script and a detailed routine, and being “extremely logical, organized and predictable” makes them suitable for this kind of jobs (Cerny, 2021).. While “Remote working could be beneficial to some people with autism spectrum disorder because it limits the stress of ad hoc casual conversations and brings more predictability to social interactions” (Dentons, 201).

Reliability, punctuality, professional attitude, attention to detail, routine and repetition, technical skills, following scripts, logical, organized and predictability, all taken together, make a strong resumé.

¹²³ A politically correct but highly problematic term, mainly because it places the neurodivergent’s problems in physiological/organic terms, precluding any social etiology, not just reduced to the family triangle, but open to economics, technology, social relations and a way of organizing language, the Other and reality.

Maybe our techno-social assemblage is no longer in need of social abilities, metaphoric language and all the personal anguish certain kind of subjectivities that worry too much about social cues and meaning, are prone too.

Maybe we should stop fighting machines.

Maybe we should just become one.

CHAPTER 9: THE AIR LOOM AND THE ALGORITHMIC UNCONSCIOUS

“You are now remotely controlled” reads a quote-made-image in a slideshow at Soshana Zuboff’s website, leading you, with the ease of a click, to her New York Times 2020 essay that has the same title. The subtitle explains: “Surveillance capitalists control the science and the scientists, the secrets and the truth.” Under surveillance capitalism, Zuboff writes, “our lives are rendered as data flows,” which are used to make “behavioral predictions” which are “sold to business customers in a new kind of market that trades exclusively in human futures” (Zuboff, 2020b).

This is a particular kind of extractivism. It’s what being connected, in the way we are science-fictionally connected through our gadgets, is all about: business. “The data are conveyed through complex supply chains of devices, tracking and monitoring software, and ecosystems of apps and companies that specialize in niche data flows captured in secret,” writes Zuboff. They are, after all, after us:

In the competition for scope, surveillance capitalists want your home and what you say and do within its walls. They want your car, your medical conditions, and the shows you stream; your location as well as all the streets and buildings in your path and all the behavior of all the people in your city. They want your voice and what you eat and what you buy; your children’s play time and their schooling; your brain waves and your bloodstream. Nothing is exempt (2020b).

The description makes you wonder if surveillance capitalists are not really reptilians who have taken over the world. To prove her point, Zuboff is opting for a paranoid maneuver, and framing the way capitalism works in our day as a matter of mental health: “All of these delusions rest on the most treacherous hallucination of them all: the belief that privacy is private.” Neurotic privacy, along with neurotic private property (they’re taking away everything that’s yours) seems to be the crux of the problem, where the “ownership of the production of meaning” and its mobilization even take religious tones. Algorithms are deployed “to trigger the inner demons of unsuspecting citizens”. Under our present day conditions, even the commonsensical pleonasm that “privacy is private” can no longer be held as self-evident and Zuboff cannot help but use speculative dispositifs to drive the point home. But privacy has been under stress for quite a while now. In 2014, Ian Alexander Robson wrote to the Toronto Star:

While poking through Marshal McLuhan’s letters recently I found these revelations. On April 14, 1969, McLuhan wrote to Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau: “Under electric conditions, there can be no privacy. The privacy invaders are the bulwark of the new knowledge industries, from the pollsters to the insurance companies and the credit ratings, ‘the eye in the sky,’ ‘the age of the snoop’. Then on March 2, 1970, McLuhan wrote the following to the Office of the Prime Minister: “Any conventional bureaucracy becomes a police state when speeded up by a new technology such as telephone or telex (Robson, 2014).

Although the malaise is electronic, at least according to McLuhan, Zuboff is pointing out—mobilizing horror, science fiction and fantasy tropes—the eerie efficacy this regime of

abstract reordering of data has achieved. Perhaps the easiest way to predict the future is to control the present in order to rig the outcome. This is being done on both macro and microscopical scales, where we have weaponized messages that intervene “in behavior to tune, herd and modify action” while researchers at the University of Texas “created 125 headless mice by knocking out a gene called *Lim1* in (the) developing embryos” (Oliwenstein, 1995). Algorithms, which according to Friedrich Kittler, can be understood “as the sum of logic and control” (2012b) and reduced to the binary logic of presence-absence, zeroes and ones, are rewriting everything. And they are proving to be highly successful.

Alongside social subjection, which deals with meaning and signification, Lazzarato, following Guattari, posits machinic enslavement as the other “power apparatus” that operates the production of wealth, without involving “neither representation nor consciousness” (Lazzarato, 2013). Machinic enslavement refers to how we are connected to machines, and the way this connection bypasses “language, signification and representation.” Instead, machinic enslavement, as part of a process of subjectivization, produces “dividuals” (instead of “individuals”) that are contiguous with machines and are operationalized as part of a series of inputs and outputs that keep the machine running and “does not bother with subject/object, words/things/ nature/culture dualisms” (which are keystones of social subjection). Although surveillance capitalism, according to Zuboff, is busy veering humans to click on certain links, to perform certain actions, machinic enslavement’s job is to keep humans clicking, no matter where, as another node in the algorithms’ workflow. It is in this sense that consumer labor “epitomizes a production that no longer adheres to the psycho-social definition of work” (Lazzarato, 2013).

Guattari names these processes asignifying semiotics because they “do not have the subject as a reference: they produce operations, induce action, constitute inputs and outputs, junction and disjunction, circumvent language and dominant social significations.” Mainly, “their flows act directly on material flows, beyond the divide between production and representation, they act directly on the real, instead of referring to other signs” (Lazzarato, 2013).

There’s a point of convergence that Lucy Liu calls the “Freudian robot” where “human beings are evolving to resemble the intelligent machines we invent, even as we build robots to resemble human beings” (liu, 2011). Once again, we are faced with the dangers of the proper reading of metaphors, what Deleuze and Guattari called Oedipus, which is the way abstraction instantiates itself as the real. “Straightforward encoding transfers unlimited chance (the real) into a syntax with requirements and exemptions, that is, with laws” (Kittler, 2012b) writes Kittler in an essay where he claims that the world of the symbolic order is the world of the machine. Following Kittler, Lucy Liu breaks down how, when Lacan was articulating the concept of the Symbolic (“concerned with the control mechanism, not with perception” according to Kittler¹²⁴), he was thinking and reading about cybernetics and its binary production of the world.

You can play heads or tails by yourself, but from the point of view of speech, you aren't playing by yourself; there is already the articulation of three signs, comprising a win or a loss, and this articulation prefigures the very meaning of the result. In other words, if there is no question, there is no game, if there is

¹²⁴ And that is why, in the seventies, Lacan turned to study what happens before the unconscious is structured as a language and invented the *parletre*, which starts with the senseless, but joyous babble of infants, affected by language, but still not captured by its structure.

no structure there is no question. The question is constituted, organized, by the structure” (Lacan, 1988:192).

Lacan places cybernetics in a tradition of conjectural sciences (as opposed to exact) because of its probabilistical bend, prefiguring the “speculative turn,” but also aware that any question, and its consequent structure, is a rigged game. “The science of what is found up at the same place is substituted for the science of the combination of places as such. And the natural is “what shows up in time for the rendezvous” (Lacan, 1988:298).

Liu writes that, “for Lacan... ‘the primordial couple of plus and minus’ or the game of even and odd should precede linguistic considerations and is what enables the symbolic order.” The “divinational technology” that cybernetic theory was putting into place through the calculation of probabilities influence Lacan so as not to “dismiss the belief in chance, number and randomness as superstition,” but to see “it as the path towards the unconscious” (Liu, 2011:182).

Maybe we should start thinking that, instead of the unconscious being structured as a language, the unconscious is structured as an algorithm because it does; it doesn’t represent, it happens, it produces (dreams, desires, symptoms, acts, subjects). It is always a way to fold a flow and create something that might resemble an interiority from which to doubt a consciousness, because consciousness is first and foremost a hesitation about itself, that happens in degrees, and mainly in bodies that die.

Although the popular objection maintains that computers cannot think because they must always first be programmed, Lacan counters that human beings, who

carry out the same operations as machines, think just as little for the same reason (Kittler, 2012b).

“The battlefield of ideology has shifted predominantly from the control of political consciousness to the technological manipulation of the ineffable unconscious,” Liu writes, and as much as it happens “inside,” it is already happening “outside”, with our bodies and our consciousness as part of a material circuit board that hinges disparate elements in its machinic day-to-day-operations, like traffic, like liking on social media, like going to the market to buy food and silently trusting your pacemaker.

“Dance, jazz and libido” is what remains for subjects who do not speak a formal language, Kittler writes that Lacan says. He then adds the sad punch line: “At least for an inter-war period” (2012b)¹²⁵.

If both the language that structures our thought and the couplings of our bodies are machinic, it is no wonder, then, that the easiest way to describe these processes, “to make them available to representation,” as Chu explains, is science fiction. The paranoid-ridden writing of Zuboff finds its psychiatric and psychoanalytical counter-part in the “influencing machine,” a very particular and common enough schizophrenic delusion first theorized in 1919 by Victor Tausk, a student and colleague of Freud, and the first to apply psychoanalytical concepts to the study of psychosis. The influencing machine is a device that

¹²⁵ Here is Lacan’s argument from which Kittler deduces “jazz, dance and libido”: ”completed discourse, the embodiment of absolute knowledge, is the instrument of power. the sceptre and the property of those who know. Nothing implies that everyone partakes in it. When the scientists I mentioned yesterday evening - this is more than a myth, it is the very meaning of the forward march of the symbol - succeed in bringing human discourse to a close, they are in possession of it, and those who don't have it have nothing left but to tum to jazz, to dance, to entertain themselves, the good fellows, the nice guys, the libidinal types. That is what I call elaborated mastery. (Lacan, 1988)

controls the thoughts and behavior of people, “it serves to persecute the patient and is operated by enemies.” Tausk set to study the delusional construction of this particular machine, because “a large number of patients complain of all these ailments” without ascribing them to the influence of a machine.” “The patients”, Tausk writes, “are able to give only vague hints of its construction,¹²⁶” and there is always something about its workings that eludes them.

Tausk writes that the machine “represents the projection of the body on to the outer world,” and both Guattari’s description of machinic enslavement and McLuhan’s insight that in the electronic age “mankind wears its neurons outside their brain and its nerves outside its body” would give Tausk’s patients reasonable doubt, even if the machine which is haunting them does not actually exist. Tausk explains the symptom by describing (and naming) a schizophrenic symptom: “loss of ego boundaries,” which explains why “thoughts are given to them.” He places it in early childhood, “when the child knows nothing through its own efforts but obtains all its knowledge from others,” which would explain the symptom wherein the patient is sure that everyone knows their thoughts, “that his thoughts are not enclosed in his own head, but are spread throughout the world and occur simultaneously in the heads of all persons.” A delusional machine is a highly complex construction for explaining the symptoms. Tausk takes the individual, that particular cognitive subject, as the stand for sanity: “the patient seems no longer to realize that he is a separate psychical entity, an ego with individual boundaries.”

The influence machine “makes patients see pictures, produces as well as removes thoughts or feelings, produces motor phenomena in the body, creates sensations that in part

¹²⁶ “It consists of boxes, cranks, levers, wheels,, button, wires, batteries, and the like”

cannot be described and is responsible for other occurrences in the patient's body." It is worth noting that these effects are, note by note, applicable to what our current electronic devices do to us. Zuboff's warning (that surveillance capitalists "want your home and what you say and do within its walls, your car, your medical conditions, and the shows you stream, etc.) also take private property, the property of the individual, as a last stand. It would be totally naïve to dismiss Zuboff's research (and lots others) as just plain crazy, when there is so much evidence for it (besides the fact that her influence machine—which she has named surveillance capitalism and to which she has proprietorial rights—, is not aimed directly or mainly to her, or at least I hope so) when the really interesting point is to find when plain crazy became such an accurate description of our reality.

If, as Thierry Bardini wrote in 2006, William Burroughs was the "patient zero of the hypervirus" (the original vector of "the 'virus' virus" as "the master trope of postmodernism"), then the influence machine also had a "patient zero," and his name was James Tilly Matthews.

"The perplexity of metaphysical mazes" is what John Haslam—the apothecary of the infamous Royal Bethlem Hospital, popularly known as Bedlam, the madhouse where James Tilly Matthews was kept against his will from 1797 to 1814— wanted to "disentangle" himself from, according to his *Observations on Insanity with Practical remarks on the Disease and an Account of the Morbid Appearances on Dissection*, published on 1798, where he argued for completely ignoring the contents of the insane mind because "all modes of cure by reasoning... must be ineffectual," as the "immediate cause of the disease" consists "in a

morbid affection of the brain” (Haslam, 2011). Haslam defined insanity as “an incorrect association of familiar ideas, which is independent of the prejudices of education, and is always accompanied with implicit belief.”¹²⁷ Reasoning with them “is a folly on those who attempt it” because “there is always in madness the firmest conviction of the truth of what is false, and which the clearest and most circumstantial evidence cannot remove.”

Haslam would probably find tragic that he is best remembered as part of one of those “metaphysical mazes” from which he tried to distance himself, a delusion that has proved more fruitful than his theories and his practice. For a physician whose method of cure was “to obtain an ascendancy” over insane persons (as in “training a dog or breaking in a horse,” Mike Jay (21012) poignantly adds) in order to “direct and regulate their conduct,” becoming entangled with the prolific delusions of James Tilly Matthews wouldn’t probably seem like the best outcome.

But, in a way, he produced this entanglement. In 1810, after Matthew’s family and friends were denied a suit of habeas corpus to free him that included the examination of two external doctors who declared him sane, Haslam published, to prove them wrong, a pamphlet with a particularly long title: “Illustrations of Madness exhibiting a singular case of insanity and a no less remarkable difference in medical opinion: developing the nature of assaillment, and the manner of working events; with a description of the tortures experienced by bomb-bursting, lobster-cracking and lengthening the brain, embellished with a curios plate.”

¹²⁷ “And generally” Haslam adds, “with either violent or depressing passions.”

In a particularly arrogant manner, Haslam proves Matthews insanity just by letting him speak, formulating his delusions and quoting extensively from Matthew's own writings, in order to allow the reader to reach the same conclusion that he had: Matthews was crazy, dangerous and should be kept on the Incurables wing of the Hospital.

Matthews believed that there was a machine, an Air Loom, hidden in a basement near the hospital where he was kept ("the assassins say they are not five hundred feet from, but from the uncommon force of all their operation, I think they are much nearer" (Haslam, 1810)). Using "pneumatic chemistry", the Air Loom weaved magnetic gases that took over Matthews will and thoughts and dreams and not only made him mad, but actually controlled him. As a matter of fact, Matthews believed there were several of these Air Looms distributed across London and they held control over politicians and public figures. He held the Air Looms responsible for several political fiascos, including the continuing war between France and England. According to Matthews, the Jacobins built the machine in order to keep him, and the English, engaged in war.

Matthews, speaking through Haslam, gives a very detailed description of the seven individuals who work the machine. Four of them are apparently male. There's Bill the King, "never known to smile," who was the most efficient operator of the machine. Jack the Schoolmaster is the "recorder" and takes notes constantly: "Sometimes he says, 'I'm here to see fair play,' and makes a merriment of the business." Sir Archy, who "some of the gang assert that (he) is a woman dressed in man's apparel," is always, with a provincial accent, "cracking obscene jokes and throwing out gibes and sarcasm." The Middle Man, "about 57 years of age, of middle stature, with a broad chest," may be the manufacture of the air-looms, and, after his attacks, claims that MR. Matthews is the talisman.

And there are also three women. Augusta, who “states herself to be the chief of this department,” about 36 years old, “corresponds with other gangs at the West end of town.” Charlotte, who is probably as much a prisoner as Matthews is, is kept “nearly naked, and poorly fed” and is probably chained as well and even though she speaks French, her “brain-sayings are conveyed in the English idiom.” The Glove-Woman, who “has never been known to speak,” and probably wears her arm covered “because “she has got the itch,” is frequently traveling and is “remarkable for her skill in managing the machine.”

Haslam calls the disparate group the ‘*dramatis personae*’ of Matthews lunacy, who “by ordinary persons would be taken to be pick-pockets or private distillers,” and “hire themselves out as spies, and discover the secrets of governments to the enemy, or confederate to work events of the most atrocious nature.” And although Matthews doesn’t understand the workings of the air loom perfectly, he has some insights into its functioning. Haslam enlists the ingredients, the fuel if you will, processed by the air loom to control its victims, which includes “seminal fluid, male and female, effluvia of copper, sulfur and dogs, stinking human breath, putrid effluvia of mortification and the plague, “stench of the sesspool” and “gaz from the anus of the horse,” all of them kept in barrels and feeding the loom.

The effects of the air loom seem more contemporary and closely related to the workings of Zuboff’s surveillance capitalism, especially those who, according to Mathews, affected his mind and others’. Kiteing, for example “contrives to lift into the brain some peculiar idea, which floats and undulates in the intellect for hours,” while lengthening the brain makes any idea seem ridiculous and hilarious, and can “cause good sense to appear as insanity,” fluid-locking impedes speech by “constricting the fibers of the tongue; brain-

saying is similar to telepathy (and the way Matthews was able to communicate with the gang), while voice-saying makes people hear voices nobody else can, thought-making is self-evident and laugh-making forces “the muscles of the face become screwed into a laugh or a grin.” And there’s also dream-working¹²⁸, with which the gang influences his dreams through projected puppets in order to see how he reacts.

And then there’s the physical side of the event-workings (which is how Matthews described the gang’s arranged work in a major-scale; the gang uses it as a verb: “we have event-worked that, he is to be killed there”). The physical effects that could be worked through the air-loom are self-evident: lethargy-making, knee-nailing, eye-screwing, fibre-ripping, vital-tearing and bubble by bubble gaz-plucking¹²⁹. The most dreaded of this was the fatal lobster-cracking: “I do not know any better way for a person to comprehend the general natura of such lobster-cracking operation, than by supposing himself in a sufficiently large pair of nut-crackers or lobster-crackers, with teeth, which should pierce as well as press him through every particle within or without: he experiencing the whole stress, torture, driving, oppressing, and crush all together” (Haslam, 1810).

Although Haslam was trying to prove the ridiculousness of Matthew’s claims, we should have in mind that Matthews was feeling this pains as real:

He is not inventing the sensations of vital-tearing, fibre-ripping and bomb-bursting, but simply trying to describe what he actually feels. Many of those

¹²⁸ It is interesting to point out the characterization of dreams as a kind of labor. Freud would later name as “dream-work” the mechanisms through which dreams are “constructed” in the unconscious, using, among some others, the “condensation” and “displacement” mechanism which Jakobson and Lacan understood as metaphor and metonymy.

¹²⁹ Roy Porter, who prefaced his wonderful annotated edition of “Illustrations of Madness,” draws parallels between President Schreber’s “miracles” such as “compression of the chest,” “purification of the abdomen,” and the “coccyx miracle” and Matthews “event-workings.”

diagnosed with paranoid schizophrenia complain of agonizing pains, of which Matthews' event-workings are still cited in the clinical literature as a classic example. Since they have no discernible cause, these pains are described as 'delusional': but what is the difference between the delusion of pain and the real thing? (Jay, 2012)

As the centerpiece of the argument, John Haslam literally offers an Illustration of Madness and presents an engraving and a floor plan drawn by Matthews (who has learned drafting and engraving at the "mad-house"), picturing the Air Loom, captured at the moment of event-working a lobster-cracking on the subject X at the top-right of the engraving¹³⁰. It's interesting, though, that Matthews depiction is much more controlled and technical than one would expect from an insane person confined in Bedlam. "The influencing machine" theorized by Tausk a 100 years after Matthews drew his, "emerged fully formed," writes Mike Jay, who also wrote the most detailed and insightful book-length study of Matthews life, *The Influencing Machine*, taking its title from "the most gifted and tragic Victor Tausk" (Jay, undated)¹³¹.

The story of James Tilly Matthews takes place between two revolutions, the French and the Industrial, intimately tweaked with both. Matthews, a Welsh tea dealer in London,

¹³⁰ You can spot the Middleman operating the Air Loom, Jack the SchoolMaster at the left side, and sir Archy and Catherine at the right side of the picture, while the barrels hold all of the foul-smelling substances Matthews described.

¹³¹ Tausk was promising psychoanalyst, and had a complex relationship with Freud and Lou Andreas-Salomé, to whom he was romantically attached for a time. Tausk, 40, committed suicide after some disputes with Freud, "by tying a curtain braid around his neck, then placing a pistol against his right temple and firing, hanging himself as he fell" (Roazen, 1976, 317), a double death dispositive. Paul Roazen, controversial historian of psychoanalysis Roazen wrote "Brother Animal: The Story of Freud and Task" (1990) to both rescue Tausk's work and explore his relationship with Freud.

had traveled to France soon after the revolution, in December 1792, with political reformer David Williams, who was invited by the Girondin faction in power to draft the new constitution for the recently declared Republic (as of September, which started Year Zero, as well as the September Massacre where the sans-culottes had broken into the jails and executed 1400 prisoners). Matthews returned to England in January, and met separately with both the French ambassador in London and Prime Minister William Pitt the Younger. War was already underway, and the French had taken the offensive, reaching Holland.

Matthews would go back to France two more times. On his first return, he meets with LeBrun and according to Jay, gives him two documents: “The first consisted on two pages of undisclosed British military secrets, and the second a thirteen-page peace proposal, purporting to come from the highest levels of the British government.” Williams, who at this point had ceased meeting with Matthews, tells of a Girondin plan which could not be written, because it would cost LeBrun and Brissot’s heads if it were discovered. Britain, the closest model of a Republic that France had, could help them destroy the Jacobin power-base and both countries could form a politically integrated front. If the plan, conducted with utmost secrecy, had succeeded it would have forever changed history. The Girondin’s respond to the peace plan (which may easily have been drafted by Matthews, as it written in the highly unconventional and unprecedented format of questions and answers) point by point. Matthews goes back to England, where a Traitorous Correspondence Bill has passed.

Although Matthews can be cast here as both a French or a British spy, Jay takes a harder road and argues that Matthews was actually, and maybe somehow naively, devoted to finding a way towards peace. Back in England, he delivers the letters, and waits for a response from Foreign Secretary Lord Grenville (who would later become prime Minister).

He leaks the letters to the press, and returns to France, where the Girondins, most of them under house arrest, had lost power to the Jacobins and the sans-culotte. Instead of dealing with LeBrun or Brissot, who would soon be guillotined, Matthews now faces a Committee of Public Safety who believes him to be a British spy. He states his case in a letter where he describes himself as a true sans-culotte, and a republican who must try to make the French understand the dangers they face when all the rest of the powers of Europe turn against them; Matthews himself is the victim of “the most determined system of mortification and insult” organized by the British government and according to Jay, moments of grandiosity and centrality. Although it would be easy to understand this as part of Matthews madness, he release information to the French government about a British plan to attack Dunkirk. Four days later, they did.

Matthews was confined to his hotel and he stopped receiving responses from the Committee to his continuous stream of letters asking, and later demanding, to be released from this state of uncertainty, which would last for three years, while Robespierre’s Law of Prairal “made liberty or death the only two possible outcomes of any trial: since any crime was a crime against the nation, all crimes were treason.” Those years (even if the last one was spent in a prison, where he asked to be taken so as not to incur in more debt) must have been grueling: Matthews is “in a country where he speaks barely a word of the language, suspected of spying for a foreign power in the middle of a snowballing experiment in state terror.” Matthews letters continue pouring without answer, growing more paranoid: his case goes from being a “question of political Judgement” to one of “mistaken identity.”. Meanwhile, the guillotine is working overtime: “April saw 258 victims, May345 and June 688.” Then, after a year of silence, Matthews next letter is a plan for “a revolutionary

overhaul of vegetable economy,” 30 pages of a plan to turn cabbage-growing into the main source of food for the French using urban planting and the dirt and filth of the city streets into fertilizer. He is then transported to prison, and months later released. He gets back to England in 1796, where he starts a letter campaign that ends in him writing to the recently promoted Earl of Liverpool, whom he had talked to three years ago, “I pronounce your Lordship to be in every sense of the world a most diabolical traitor.” Less than a month after, Matthews shouts “Treason!” to Liverpool during a session of the House of Commons and is committed to Bethlehem Hospital, where he would be confined for the next 17 years, where he would construct his delirium.

Meaning is everywhere: Matthews’ Air Loom would then consolidate, “a coping mechanism for a life that had become too brutally contradictory to sustain otherwise.” The Air Loom and its operators do what Darian Leader writes delusions do: “the task of a delusion is to... inject a fixed and determinate meaning into a place of perplexity” (2011).

If it were possible for some people to control the minds of others, might that not account for everything? Nobody wanted war, and yet war had enveloped the world. The British government had dismissed it easily enough until Matthews took the stage, and had then insisted on its patriotic necessity. Brissot had not wanted war either, yet had stood up in front of the Convention demanding that Europe be consumed by flames. The peace plan that could have extricated them had been sabotaged from both sides. The entire revolution, so carefully conceived and courageously fought for, had been hijacked by a power that everyone seemed to fear but nobody could explain. It

was not merely that Matthews' own intentions and actions had turned out disastrously: everybody's had (Jay, 2012).

Matthews had had to play as a double agent for both the British and the French governments, and he had probably had to weave a web of lies in order to do so. The results had been disastrous, not only to Matthews personally, but to the world: war was still going on. Matthews had found himself in an almost impossible place: a doubled-up double agent, in a place where things had stopped making sense, even for himself. The world had become crazy and he had to figure out his part on it. Intense psychotic symptoms, according to Leader, can be "precipitated by the loss of an essential reference point" (2011). Mike Jay does a great work trying to understand the formation of the Air Loom:

The struggle between Matthews and the gang seems to have its origins in a struggle inside his own head, between Matthews the 'true sans-culotte' and Matthews the loyal British patriot. In his quest for peace, he found himself playing the role of the British spy to Pitt, and of international republican to Le Brun. The question 'whose side are you on?' became ever more difficult to answer: the truth, that he was on the side of peace, became unspeakable to all sides in a world committed to war (Jay, 2012).

The delusion can be followed, at least in broad strokes, to events that were happening or had happened in Matthew's life. Both Roy Porter and Mike Jay hypothesize that the gang was torturing Matthews through the Air Loom could be stand-ins for John Haslam and the staff and maybe even the patients with whom Matthews was forced to live. Matthews spent almost two decades trying to resist Haslam's "brain-sayings" with which he would try to

“obtain an ascendancy” over Matthews, his method for dealing with madmen. Apparently, Matthews spent two years chained, which added up to the terrible conditions of life in the hospital, may well explain the painful procedures the Air Loom made him suffer. Even the unsanitary conditions, and the terrible stench of a highly ineffective human waste disposal system might be mistaken for the putrid and fetid fuel of the Air Loom. The fact that Haslam is remembered mainly because of Matthews, and that their histories are hopelessly entwined is what prompts Porter (1988) to call the Air Loom delusion a “folie a deux”^{132,133}.

And then there are also the scientific discussions of the time. Matthews’ delusion is also caught between two intangibilities, one a respectable scientific discovery, the other condemned to the history of pseudo-science. The first one is Joseph Priestley’s —the pioneer of pneumatic chemistry— discovery of what he named ‘dephlogisticated air,’ which we now call oxygen, a scientist interested in pneumatics and the effects of gases who was also a republican sympathizer and whose Birmingham lab had been burned down “by loyalist mobs as the police stood by and watched” (Jay, 2012) would provide the idea that invisible gases could be weaved by a loom, at a time where industrialized looms were changing the mode of production irreversibly, and used for other purposes. The second discovery was “animal magnetism.”

“The art of talking with your brain” is what Matthew would tell Haslam a certain inmate at the French prison asked if he was acquainted with. The art was accomplished

¹³² A “madness of two,” a shared delirium, constructed by two persons.

¹³³ We could say, on Haslam’s behalf, that what he was arguing was about the possible dangers of releasing someone who, for years, was “sometimes, an automaton moved by the agency of persons, hereafter to be introduced to the notice of the reader; at others, the Emperor of the whole world, issuing proclamations to his disobedient subjects, and hurling from their thrones the usurpers of his dominions” (Haslam, 1810)

through magnets, Matthews had been explained, a clear reference to “animal magnetism,” an energy that encompasses both animate and inanimate objects and that could be channeled and controlled, according to the German proponent of the theory, Franz Mesmer. Mesmerism, although dismissed by the Royal Academy of Sciences in pre-Revolutionary France, was an international success, and Mesmer made a fortune out of it and his magnetic salons (or séances) where, due to the high demand, a group of thirty people would sit around a contraption named baquet, through which Mesmer would form a “mesmeric chain” which would make participants writhe, convulse and speak in tongues, but also cure them, allowing blocked “magnetic fluid” to move freely through the body¹³⁴. Mesmer could control people’s wills, thoughts and bodies.

But even Priestley’s and Mesmer’s discoveries and theories, as well as how the details of Matthew’s delusion appear to have a direct reference to his life, can account for the eerie accuracy of describing, for the first time, an influencing machine, and a particular one that echoes so precisely with our contemporary plights.

Matthews story is a story of first times. Haslam’s *Illustrations of Madness* is the first recorded case of paranoid schizophrenia, as Matthew’s delusional constructions fit the diagnostic criteria. But it is also the first extended writing of a case, in which a delusion is clinically registered and the patient quoted. It is also not only the first publication of a person committed to an insane asylum, but also the first published work of a “madman’s” art. It is

¹³⁴ In the XIXth century, the term hypnosis, proposed by James Braid for a technique found experimntng with animal magnetism, would supplant “mesmerism”but also jumpstart psychoanalysis. Henri Ellenberger finds the emrgence of “dynamic psychiatry” when Mesmer, invited by the Munich Academy of Sciences to give his opinoón on the exorcisms carried out by Johann Gassner, judged that he was able to cure people because of animal magnetism, but Gassner just didn’t know it. A scientific hypothesis would supplant a religious one. It is also worth noting that Mesmer’s “animal magnetism” is a form of vitalism, and I can’t help but think of Deleuze and Guattari’s desire flowing everywhere outside and through individuals.

the first recording of an influence machine. It is also the first modern conspiracy theory because it is also, if we think of science fiction as a mode of awareness that appears not only in books in film but also “in the wild,” the first science fiction construction of the modern world, predating Frankenstein by a good couple of decades. It is the first modern delusion: instead of being possessed by demons or gods, humankind is possessed by machines. In Matthew’s delirious constructions, the estrangement is cognitive, and the metaphor is turned into real without supernatural explanations: not god, but a machine.

There was definitely something happening. Maybe it helps to understand Matthew’s imagination through Seo-Young Cho science-fictional theory of representation: “Objects of description in SF are not the cognitively estranging referents to which works of SF mimetically refer” (Chu, 2011). Which would mean that the Air Loom is not exactly — literally— the Air Loom. The science fiction construction would be an attempt “through which cognitively estranging referents become available for representation.” Science fiction attempts to make literal what is already happening: it is a particular mode of representation, where identity has to be forced because it lacks proper representation. The something that is happening is not easy to see, or to understand.

This is what I have already called the prophetic mode. Science fiction’s fixation with the future attests to this, and Matthew’s Air Loom is particularly accurate. But prophecies do not need “cognitive” explanation, as in the particular rational and logic that hint towards science, to occur. They also happen in the “fantastic” mode, and the discussions on how literal prophecies and divination are is part of the genre —and human’s— history. Prophecies always move back and forth between the metaphoric and the literal: their interpretation is

always tricky. Oracles are double-edged swords. And influencing machines, according to Tausk, have a “mystical nature” (1992).

But Matthew’s science-fictional genius, besides predicting machinic mind and body control as well as mass media and biocontrol, articulates a double set of paradoxes that were being shaped during his time. The first one is about the marriage of science and politics and the birth of the modern nation: the realization of how easily Enlightenment can be turned into Terror, and reasonable ideals and scientific thought corrupted towards despotic ends and sadistic control. The second one deals with the production of subjectivity and the posthuman: “man had made a machine that could turn men themselves into machines (Jay, 2012).”

The fact that the literalization of figurative language is delusional doesn’t make it any less real: it is estranged because there is no other way to go around it, if what is trying to be understood is so complex. In Matthew’s weirdly accurate delusion, there seems to be a different kind of boundary making. The political, social and scientific milieu he was in weaves into his personal situation. He was actually persecuted by malignant forces (which kept him chained for two years, or locked for three in a room in Paris). He was conspired against, and was controlled and restrained against his will, surrounded by putrid fumes, forced to think in certain ways. It is almost as if Tausk’s pathological “loss of ego boundaries,” a psychotic symptom where the inside and outside of a person are not as rigidly bound as for neurotics, allows him or her to relate to the world in a different way, and to apprehend it with different elaborations, which can allow him or her to see things people who purportedly have a clearer understanding of the inside and the outside, of reality, that the

neurotic individual —which might as well be a redundancy—, just cannot. That’s what prophets do¹³⁵.

There’s a particular tuning in Matthew’s delirium to anxieties and obsessions that, at that time, were barely visible. At his time, “the notion of human minds being covertly controlled by machines was an outlandishly novel concept: the talisman of his madness, and the hallmark of his isolation from consensus reality” (Jay, 2012). Now, it is much more clear. Now we have “designer virus, computer surveillance, government cover-ups, mind control experiments, secret societies or terrorist cells,” and people report having messages “beamed at them through their filling, or their TV sets, or via high-tec surveillance, M15, Masonic Lodges or UFOs” (Jay, 2012). And there’s all kind of invisible emanations affecting us constantly: networks, transmissions, emissions, radiations, languages, codes. Most of them act upon us from afar, and mediate our relationship to the world” (Jay 2012).

¹³⁵ James Tilly Matthews story doesn’t end with the publication of *Illustration of Madness*. In 1814, Matthew was finally moved to a private asylum, where he helped with gardening and bookkeeping until his death, one year later. But his influence did not end with his death. In 1816, a scandal about the treatment of patients and corruption in Bethlehem, lost Haslam his post. Matthews mistreatment was used against him. While still an inmate at Bethlehem, a public contest was held to design a new hospital and Matthew submitted a plan. He was not the winner but was awarded 30 pounds (the equivalent of 2000 pounds today, according to Mike Jay) for his work. Moreover, the plans he made (which included proper ventilation, garden area and illumination) would somehow make it into the renovation, probably birthing the urban legend of the madman who constructed himself an asylum as a castle.

CHAPTER 10: METAPHORMOSIS AND DOUBLE NEGATIONS

“Gregory Samsa woke up an ungeziefer” constitutes one of the most famous translation problems in non-German traditions. What exactly did Samsa wake up as? Never quite hitting neither the mark nor the connotations, the list of English translations is quite large: “gigantic insect,” “monstrous vermin,” “monstrous cockroach”, “enormous bedbug,” “some sort of monstrous insect” (Gooderham, 2015). The translations, and the possibilities that not only scholars of Kafka’s translations, but even translation businesses, open up (like “creature unfit for sacrifice, household pest, unclean animal or bug” (TTC, no date)) barely match the numerous interpretations The Metamorphosis has been subject to. But the fact that non-German speakers will never quite know what exactly Samsa turned into, the main fact of the story is that he has become that. He is an ungeziefer. He does not look like one, he does not think he is one, he does not feel like one, he is not perceived as one: Gregory Samsa is an ungeziefer. That’s the fact through which we enter the story, and it uncomfortably forces the reader to stand in muddy ontological ground, in what Katarzyna Szafranowska calls a “*metaphormosis*.”

Kafka’s narrative world has been already described as “uncanny” (Masschelein 2011,63), a world of a premythical character (Benjamin 2007, 117), or a “deranged cosmos” (Adorno 1997, 249); while his narrative strategy has been defined, amongst others, as “the intimacy of distress” (Blanchot 1989, 83), an ambush staged with each written word (Bataille 1987, 5), a paradoxical act of constant self-accusation (Agamben 2011, 20–36) and a

“diabolical pact” (Deleuze, Guattari 2008, 29). Still, what seems the most problematic is the use and function of metaphor in his prose. Is it the case that Kafka completely destroys metaphor (Benjamin 2007, 111–140) or detaches it from any reference to achieve utter incomprehensibility (Sokel 2002, 82–101)? Or is it perhaps that Kafkian prose plainly escapes categories such as metaphor and proper meaning (Sussmann 2002, 123–148)?

Szafranowska clarifies that “metaphors do appear in Kafka’s works but that they are broken, dysfunctional metaphors,” in that they do not function as ‘normal metaphors,’ because “there is no longer a proper sense or figurative sense.” Kafka’s “broken tropes” manage to “blur the difference between literal and metaphorical meaning” through a “linguistic dysfunction which distorts the name-thing relation.” Kafka’s literary tactic occupies a space where what could be perceived as a metaphor resists a proper interpretation, and the space between a literal and the metaphoric opens up to “a distribution of states that is part of the range of the word” and ‘a new configuration of relations,” intensifying the ambiguity of interpretation, the stressful transformation of his characters and the uneasiness of the reader. Humans, animals and things undergo a metaphormosis: “Each of the Kafkian metamorphoses occur as the result of the use of metaphor, which eventually go beyond figurative language and blur the distinction between what is metaphorical and what is proper.”

Szafranowska mobilizes Gilles Deleuze in her analysis of Kafka. The choice seems natural: not only does Deleuze & Guattari use Kafka as one of the major examples of their minor literature in “Kafka: Toward a Minor literature” (1986), but D&G also use the concept of becoming to understand a becoming-animal central to Szafranowska interests. A

becoming, such as a human becoming-animal, is a process that D&G characterize as something that happens through contagion, and not filiation (as in language is a virus, I should add). It's not about reproduction, but about well, becoming, which also happens around the "anomalous," which designates neither an individual nor a species (part of the pack, not part of the pack), but "a phenomenon of bordering" (D&G) which happens between multiplicities. Becomings always occupy a liminal space: "There is a reality of becoming-animal, even though one does not in reality become animal." And this process does not only happen between humans and animals, but throughout the whole continuum of beings (their main example is the real encounter between the wasp and the orchid.) Szafranowska understands these cases of the metaphor in the real as a "machinic metaphor": "contrarily to metamorphosis which seems to imply that it has a beginning and an end, machinic metaphor, when once launched, acts ceaselessly." Samsa occupies the very problematic space between an ungeziefer and a human (the description of his death includes nostrils), never quite resolving happily into one or the other, but actually occupying this trail of becoming.

When the metaphor turns real, it sets off a process, a reality-building process, because it re-organizes the world. It has a reality-effect that produces a ceaseless "line of flight." The proper way to stop this process is abstract interpretation, foreclosing the effects of reality into a more-or-less stable attempt of turning it into "meaning," and render the process impotent. In doing so, interpretation makes use of the dominating "reality settings," which Federico Campagna defines as "the historically specific decision (witting or unwitting) over what criteria we use to understand the baffling experience of existing somewhere, somewhen" (2018) as the way to keep things normal as usual.

That is why Deleuze and Guattari constantly affirm that their theory and their concepts are not metaphors, for which they have a particular dislike. Their aversion is against the abstracting procedure that metaphors seem to get, treated as resemblances or analogies which in the end, just reinforce reality as we know it, so it also becomes oppressive. This conception of metaphors just cuts at the root the productive nature of language. “A concept is a brick” Massumi (1987) wrote in the translator’s foreword of Deleuze and Guattari’s *One Thousand Plateaus*, which can be used to “build a courthouse of reason” or to “be thrown through the window.” The productive (and destructive) potential of language is neutered through interpretation. A concept, as Deleuze would have it, cuts through reality and forces it to accommodate it. Kafka’s machinic metaphors, “walking the tightrope¹³⁶” (Davis, 2019) between the literal and metaphoric, create “a direct link between language and reality,” according to Safranowska, where “each enunciation starts bearing a revolutionary potential,” (2019) or, at least, a defiance to hegemonic ontologies.

When metaphors turn real, the world acquires a different texture. Throughout this essay, I have tried to use literature as the launching pad for the discussion, that quickly outgrew the literary realm, if we think of it as only written works, and quickly expanded into the real world of religions, indigenous ontologies, embodiment through symptoms, madness and conspiracy theories. I understand metaphors as something that happens, naturally, whenever we have linguistic categories (and a syntactical. Metaphor is not a calculated use of language made by humans, but a thing that happens because “words are like animals” and they run into each other, coupling in different ways. The sheer volume of semiotic units set loose upon the world through different devices makes metaphors unavoidable and actually

¹³⁶ A term that Davis uses to explain the reality juggling experience of the subjects of his *High Weirdness* book: K Dick, Anton Wilson and Terence McKenna.

beyond the intentions of particular individuals or communities, which is exactly what Burroughs was trying to capture through his “cut-up” method. As a method, this essay understands metaphor as the coupling between different species, or what our reality-settings categorize as different species. Metaphors breed becomings, bypassing reproductive logic, only to install their own. That is, if you read them improperly.

I have called the proper way of interpreting figurative language “the first danger of reading metaphors,” and here, I follow not just Deleuze and Guattari’s disgust with the term, but the reduction of reality into abstract categories, which then get enforced.

Federico Campagna explores the realization of abstract categories, or positions, as the prime mechanism of the cosmology (and subsequent cosmogony) of Technic, a particular “reality setting” that unfolds from an axiomatic principle he calls “absolute language” and which is the certainty that there can be a language that exhausts reality, and exerts “the ontological primacy of the position over the thing.” Things exist only if they appear as a position, so the main activity of technics is reproducing these positions serially and getting them to produce new positions infinitely towards an escathological wet dream: the moment where everything has an abstract position, which would mean the total ingestion, and equivalence, of existence into representation, into this absolute language. This is the danger of the proper reading of metaphors: the reproduction of the same.

For Campagna, presence consists in the activation of positions: “I coincide with a certain pattern of activations: the specific gender-position, citizenshipposition, work-position, set of desire-positions, skill-positions, health-indicators, etc. that I activate or

better, whose activation constitutes ‘me’.¹³⁷ Whatever escapes these positions¹³⁸, these categories, suffers from persecution and the constant pressure to adopt a place under these abstractions, “presenting everything as entirely reducible to its instrumental value in view of its mobilization within the productive apparatus” (2018).

In order to exemplify this “annihilating ontology” Campagna travels a long range, from “whatever falls out of citizenship’s linguistic series falls entirely out of the world” to “Big-Data systems and technology rest on the belief that there can’t possibly be anything ontologically relevant that couldn’t, at least potentially, be reduced (and reduced truthfully) to the serial units of the language of data,” while “neuroscientific metaphysics claims that mental processes that can’t even potentially fit within its language are nothing but mere fantasies or superstitions.” Technic reduces the world to its own ends; in the same way kilometers subsume the corporality of “three cooked rices” as a way to measure distance. Technic will measure everything until everything ends.

Financial capital does not apply value to preexisting things, let alone merely translating them into its own linguistic system of evaluation; conversely, it is the world (or whatever is left of it, tolerated only in its most larval state) that is expected to mobilize itself according to the grid of finance, if it wishes to be allowed within the gates of presence that finance so closely guards (Campagna, 2018).

¹³⁷ If “existing” in Technic’s ontology only happens through appearing in pre-ordered subject positions, impostor syndrome becomes the norm: “a condition of constant and severe existential anxiety that forces every existent to consider themselves illegitimate impostors inasmuch as they exist.”

¹³⁸ “What if the identity persists and we’re what’s lost?” asks Katherine Behar, doubting uncomfortably “if intersectionality might be understood as woke data mining” as “both participate in a broader trend toward parsing the personal with infinite granularity,” which closely resembles Campagna infinite seriality of positions and its repurposing as probabilities. Behar asks: Is it becoming today impossible to be anything other than possibly?”

This hunger to reduce everything into abstractions is echoed by Marx's "all that is solid melts into air"¹³⁹ in the same spirit as his definition of money as a "universal equivalent," where everything could be translated into its abstract value. Money is to Capital what the penis is to the Phallus: a "dirty object" that stands for a truer abstraction. Maybe it would be easier to think of this particular relation of techno-scientific capitalism as an almost living creature, as Nick Land does at the beginning of his *Meltdown*, probably one of the most visionary science fiction texts of the last 30 years¹⁴⁰:

The story goes like this: Earth is captured by a technocapital singularity as renaissance rationalization and oceanic navigation lock into commoditization take-off. Logistically accelerating techno-economic interactivity crumbles social order in auto-sophisticating machine runaway. As markets learn to manufacture intelligence politics modernizes, upgrades paranoia, and tries to get a grip.

The body count climbs through a series of globewars. Emergent Planetary Commercium trashes the Holy Roman Empire, the Napoleonic Continental System, the Second and Third Reich, and the Soviet International, cranking-up world disorder through compressing phases. Deregulation and the state arms-race each other into cyberspace (Land, undated).

Technocapitalism is eating the world. And this is not a metaphor. Extractivism is the radical key word that explains its mechanism. Data is extracted from users in the same way

¹³⁹ Campagna sees the "paradigm change" between Fordism and post-Fordism "as the closure of the cycle of translation and the beginning of an age of total language." "Industrial technic" was a giant process of translation which has already ended

¹⁴⁰ A text that travels Deleuzian "bordering" between fiction and essay.

that resources are extracted from the world: in order to make them productive. The distance between the metaphor and the literal is flattened out in order to produce a particular reality through an absolute language¹⁴¹. “Technics recoding of reality is a mortal threat,” writes Campagna, “specifically, the threat of losing both one’s own presence in the world and the presence of the world itself.” The ecological catastrophe is the same as the psychological one, the encoding of the world through symbolic positions, which, in this globalized world, as for the Freudian Robot Liu theorizes about, are reduced to the digital couple of zeroes and ones, sifted abstract positions where there is only presence or absence, either a yes or a no. The absolute language that Campagna talks about is digital, now: counted as binaries.

“The truth is not enough” is another one of those quotes that I thought somebody had written –in this case Franco “Bifo” Berardi— but that when actually looking for it, it seemed to vanish into air. I could find Batman saying some thing like it in *The Dark Knight* (sometimes the truth is not good enough), a psychological article on the need for new “narratives” (Leberecht, 2019), a song by Damien Rice, a religious tract (Christian Faith) and a book on how to stop fascism (Sun Bookshops) (the last both concerned with the need to act according to truth¹⁴²).

What Berardi wrote is that “truth is ineffective by itself, because the game of enunciation is infinite. Once you discover the secret content, you’re face with the enigma of

¹⁴¹ Which includes the “syntactical machinery of reality,” as Terence McKenna would frame it, at least negatively, in terms of its fluctuation (McKenna, undated).

¹⁴² The emphasis on actual behavior of these two posts, for religion and against fascism, is mirrored by Cambridge Analytica’s landing page, the infamous consulting firm instrumental in the Trump 2016 campaign advertisement. Cambridge Analytica concentrates on “data-driven behavior change,” and enabling clients to “connect with people in ways that move them to action” (Cambridge Analytica).

interpretation. It is the interpretation which decides on the last instance, and makes action possible; it is an infinite game that can only be decided through an act of will or by an act of aesthetic inclination” (Berardi, 2021).

If truth were enough, Wikileaks should have changed everything, but Julian Assange is still in prison. “The cultural backdrop of Wikileaks is a Puritan illusion,” Berardi writes, “language is an instrument of truth or an instrument of lies, and propositions can be identified, without ambiguities, as truth or false, right or wrong, good or bad. But this premise is useless to understand our psychic and social landscape” (Berardi, 2019). The Puritan illusion is the illusion of Technic, reducing everything to a binary position that works as on or off and just that, and that is the illusion, “an abstract cult.”

Still, this is the way in which metaphors are studied, and assigned a position of true or false, according to their conditions of truth, which assures the proper way of reading them, because then a zero or one value can be assigned to their position. Analytical philosophy has achieved very little in terms of explaining human existence, but has proved invaluable for the development of artificial intelligence. The obsessive reduction of truth to bipolar positions, the abstract rendering of reality as one, reproduces Technic’s “annihilating ontology.”¹⁴³ It is not a question of understanding, but of Control.¹⁴⁴

Campagna proposes a convincing revindication, at least a symbolic one, for the Flat Earth hypothesis. According to Campagna, “no respectable scholar in the Middle Ages took

¹⁴³ “The contemporary epidemics of psychopathology, both in its catatonic and manic declinations (as symbolized in a unitary way by the self-resolving acting-out of cases of suicide-murder), simply reflects the friction that still takes place between an as-yet imperfectly mutated humanity, and its expected form.” (Campagna)

¹⁴⁴ I use Control with a capital letter, echoing William Burroughs use of the concept, which is exactly what the language-virus does, wants, enforces and demands. Burroughs term was then taken up by Deleuze in order to talk about a regime of control (whose main mechanism is credit) taking the place of Foucault’s regime of surveillance. Under control, one willingly places him/herself in the place of the surveilled. Selfie, anyone?

the theory of a Flat Earth as worthy of any serious attention,” and he goes on to give a very good list of medieval scholars and theologians, including both Saint Augustine and Saint Thomas Aquinas, who clearly assume that the earth is spherical. The theory that in the Middle Ages everyone thought the Earth is flat is a modern one, and probably has to do more with the need to heroicize Columbus and mark a clean break between the Middle Ages and the Renaissance than to any historical fact.¹⁴⁵ But still, Campagna finds something else in the Flat Earth theory:

Understood symbolically¹⁴⁶, the image of a flat Earth points to two intuitive objects of human experience: that the inhabitable world of each of us is at once shaped and enhanced by its limits, and that beyond these limits lies, not ‘nothing’ but something at once altogether different and yet contiguous. Conversely, the symbol of a spherical Earth hints at a different ontological vision, according to which the world stretches without boundaries, seamlessly closed onto itself, while outside of its smooth surface it is possible to find either nothing at all, or other equivalent spheres, that is repetitions of the same form of existence...

Our contemporaries attribute the belief in a flat Earth to pre- modern ignoramuses, because we all believe, hope and indeed know very well that the Earth is flat. The symbol of a flat Earth, that is, of a world that is at once

¹⁴⁵ In this, he follows JB Russel, who traces the ‘flat error’ to Washington Irving’s 1828 best-selling book *A History of the Life and Voyages of Christopher Columbus*.

¹⁴⁶ According to Campagna, “a symbol stands for a semiotic sign which in no way attempts to fully convey and exhaust the object of its signification,” which is totally at odds with Technic’s absolute language. Much in line with Chu’s understanding of science fiction literal metaphors as making complex processes “available for representation,” Campagna understands symbols “as the appearance of something that cannot manifest itself otherwise to the world where we are,” a something like the Air Loom.

shaped and enhanced by its limits, and which is not surrounded merely by nothingness or sameness but that also allows radical alterity, speaks more profoundly and truthfully to our experience than that of a spherical Earth.

A Flat Earth, then, enhances the possibility of the pluriverse that anthropologists like Isabelle Stengers talk about, while a Spherical planet helps reduce it to exactly a universe, only one verso, a single version, just one thing. The second danger of reading metaphors leans toward its literalization. The argument that Campagna makes for the Flat earth theory turns moot if we literalize the hypothesis and only see it as a material fact. Flattening metaphors into their literality, misreading them improperly, leads to fundamentalism, which is just another way of enforcing language as fact, substituting truth with realness (my race is real, my religion is real, my nationality is real), risking madness (the characteristic certainty of psychoses according to Lacanian psychoanalysis) or just plain dumbness (she left me for Jesus).

Deleuze and Guattari's "becoming-animal" points the way to a different relation between the one and the zero, between the terms of a metaphor, and opens up a line of flight with which to navigate, and perhaps escape, their proper and improper dangers.

"Not-animal, not-not animal" is anthropologist Rane Willerslev's explanation of the becoming-animal traditional Siberian Yukaghirs hunters undertake when chasing their prey¹⁴⁷. Willerslev doesn't reference Deleuze and Guattari, but uses Viveiros de Castro

¹⁴⁷ "The Yukaghirs are a small indigenous population living in the basin of the Kolyma River, in the northeastern part of the Russian Republic of Sakha (Yakutia)." (Willerslev) He adds that "according to the 1989 census, there are

conception of perspectivism to understand the hunter's actions. Although Viveiro's theory is grounded on indigenous people of the Amazon, his account is useful for the Siberian Yukaghur hunters Willerslev studies. In order to kill his prey, the hunter has to imitate it. While the western world relies on "the unity of nature and the plurality of cultures" (which is why "mistaken epistemologies" are to blame for the non-proper understanding of nature's workings), perspectivism relies on a "spiritual unity and a corporeal diversity" (Viveiros de Castro, 1998, 470). This means that existents all have a "soul," and they see the world according to the body they inhabit (and that is why Viveiros treats perspectivism as an ontology); all of them are "persons," and actually "the capacity to take on the appearance and viewpoint of another species is one of the key aspects of being a person" (Willerslev, 2004). And this can be achieved by imitation. Willerslev argues that mimetic practice, imitating the elk that the hunter is following, grounds "the symbolic world of perspectivism."

...what Yukaghirs strive for when transforming their bodies into the image of prey is not to take on its perspective in any absolute sense, which would mean literally becoming the animal. Rather, they attempt to assume the point of view of the animal, while in some profound sense remaining the same. Mimetic practice, I argue, provides this ability to be like, yet also different from, the animal impersonated; it grants the hunter a 'double perspective' whereby he can assume the animal's point of view but still remain a human hunter who chases and kills the prey.

a total of 1,112 Yukaghirs," although many register themselves as such "in order to qualify for a variety of welfare entitlements," so the actual number is, well, unknown.

Willerslev understands this “double perspective” as an ‘oscillation’ between the hunter and its prey, “in which ‘he as subject seeing the elk as object’ and ‘he seeing himself as object being seen by the elk as subject’ shift back and forth with such rapidity that the inter-species boundary is affected and some degree of ‘union’ is experienced.” Willerslev explains this oscillation, this becoming, as a double negation: the hunter is not-animal, not-not animal, taking the difference between the existents to its minimum degree, and producing an “action in-between identities” where true or false, one and zero, cease to be relevant.

This would be the devil’s bargain I promise with the title of this dissertation: how to misread properly. The double negation, “not x, not-not x”, as an “action in-between identities” allows an engendering that does not favor either the literal or the abstract poles of “understanding” metaphors, neither denying their materiality nor abstract potential, reaching a point where they are “not-real, not-not real¹⁴⁸.” The actuality of a metaphor, its creative and generative potential, implies a refusal to reduce it to either of the terms the metaphor sets in motion, but to find an in-between place, or moment, where both are true, and both are denied but its effects are undeniable as a lived experience: not-representation, not-not representation. Willerslev quotes Michael Taussig’s use of mimesis as a practice that “collapses such dichotomies as Self vs Other, nature vs culture, and essentialism vs constructivism” because “it plays the trick of dancing between the very same and the very different” (Taussig, 1993:129), “between the real and the really made-up.”

This is why this essay understands metaphors as couplings between different species, because metaphor points towards a generating aspect of reality that does not pass through

¹⁴⁸ Double-negation is, at least in proper English, bad manners. It is improper reading per se. It does not resolve the two negatives in a mathematical fashion, turning them into a positive: it maintains both negations as possible.

sexuality as constrained by genital intra-species prejudices. All those involved take on the characteristic of the other term, trying to find a place in-between. Willerslev writes that the Yukaghir, “open up their bodies,” (2004) and tries to explain this as a “process of sexual seduction,” which also happens in dreams:

The evening before setting out in search of prey, hunters will sacrifice exotic trade goods to the fire. This 'feeding the fire' is seen as an essential part of the process of seduction. Thus, hunters told me that the goods they throw into the fire, especially vodka and tobacco, help to get the masterspirit into a lustful mood. Moreover, they explained that the alcohol dims the spirit's senses, so that it fails to recognize the true identity of the hunter's ayibii (soul), which during his nightly dreams travels to the spirit's house in disguise as an animal. The spirit, which is 'blinded' by drunkenness and sexual desire, will perceive the intruder as a harmless lover and a member of the family, and the two will jump into bed.

Becomings, as well as properly misread metaphors through a double-negation captures the generative power of sex that doesn't happen through biological and genital procedures¹⁴⁹. This is contagion, not reproduction¹⁵⁰. “Bacterial sex,” as Nick Land would have it. These practices have their very own peculiar dangers. The Yukaghir hunters are well aware that their transformation carries risks where their own being could be consumed:

¹⁴⁹ This, of course, can be used to generate new positions in the sense that Campagna uses, which explains the surprise felt by Michael Taussig when he finds “indigenous women impregnating african palm” plants.

¹⁵⁰ Bypassing sexual reproduction would probably bear on the production of subjectivity, Neurosis, according to Freud, implies a choice of sex object (whether hetero or homo) during the Oedipal stage, and it has been widely noted that Freud thought that in psychoses, in one way or another, there's a “difficulty” with gender difference. Maybe that happens because reproduction, as in becomings, does not necessarily pass through genitalia. A neurotic is bound to be him/her self, a prisoner of its own construction, which, although repressed, is always sexual.

The process of body transformation implies changes in the person, which must inevitably entail the assumption of an altogether alien perspective comprising a radically unfamiliar linguistic, social, and moral code. Taking on the body of another species can, therefore, only be done for short periods of time and is risky. It is possible that temporarily belonging to an alien species' body can result in the loss of one's own original species identity. When this happens, a true metamorphosis occurs. A transformed individual thus becomes an 'Other' and his memories of past experiences are lost (Willerslev, 2004)..

This is why Szafranowska stresses the difference between metaphormosis and metamorphosis, because the latter resolves into one of the identities (thus reinforcing them), while the former stays in the middle, confusing them. Those are the sterile dangers of metaphors: reproducing the same through the pole of abstraction, where the hunter stays a hunter and does not seduce the elk, or acquiring a new materiality through the pole of literality, where the hunter ends up an elk.

Such a relationship with language also implies different processes of subjectivation, and so, of being in the world, especially if we think about the neurotic-psychotic divide. The problem is ontological, not epistemological. Erik Davis figure of the “tightrope walker,” taken from Terence McKenna’s (1975) account of shamanism (“The shaman's psychic life is not unlike the unnaturally dexterous dances he performs at the height of his ecstasy; it is a constant balancing act, as though he were a psychic tightrope walker on the razor's edge between the external world and the bizarre, magical, often terrifying world within”), is once again appropriate. Davis uses it to explain the “weird” occurrences in the lives of McKenna, Phillip K. Dick and Robert Anton Wilson in the seventies, occurrences that could well be

categorized as delusional, hallucinational and delirious. Davis explores the way this “psychonauts” faced their particular (and really weird) encounter with what seemed, well otherwise. Their “acrobatics of deliré” (Davis, 2019) can be thought of as double negations: they did not accept those encounters as really real, but they didn’t dismiss them as unreal (because they actually happened to them). They did their own highly dangerous tightrope walk, walking through a site where “a liminal threshold returns as a tightrope, a site of vertiginous ecstasy and canny expertise.”

And here we enter weird, highly contagious and maligned grounds.

“A disease of language” is probably Magic’s most interesting definition. I came upon it through author and magician Alan Moore’s performances and comics¹⁵¹, although he actually took it from Aleister Crowley, arguably the most important Magic theoretician of the English language in the last 150 years.

The whole subject of Magick is an example of Mythopoeia in that particular form called Disease of Language. Thoth, God of Magick, was merely a man who invented writing, as his monuments declare clearly enough. “Grammarye”, Magick, is only the Greek “Gramma”. So also the old name of a Magical Ritual, “Grimoire”, is merely a Grammar. It appeared marvellous to the vulgar that men should be able to communicate at a distance, and they began to attribute other powers, merely invented, to the people who were able

¹⁵¹ Specifically the site-and-date-specific performances/magic rituals *The Birth Caul* (1995) and *Snakes and Ladders* (1999), both drawn and by published as experimental comicbooks by Eddie Campbell (1991 and 2001).

to write. The Wand is then nothing but the pen; the Cup, the Inkpot; the Dagger, the knife for sharpening the pen; and the disk (Pantacle) is either the papyrus roll itself; or the weight which kept it in position, or the sandbox for soaking up the ink (Crowley, 2017)..

Crowley does several things in this paragraph, besides defining Magick (his own spelling, used to differentiate from the practice of illusions and tricks, even though both are highly related) as a disease. He aligns Magick with the technic of writing as much as with a sickness¹⁵² and with the suits of a deck of cards¹⁵³. He is almost downplaying his own practice but also pointing out Magick and language as both media and technic. “The object of any Magick ceremony,” he writes, “is to unite the Macrocosm with the Microcosm,” in a sense, the divine and the profane, in a different one, the abstract and the material: once again, as in the tightrope walk Davis writes about, we have a balancing act,¹⁵⁴ a balancing act that resembles Sloterdijk’s view of religion not as a set of beliefs but as a set of practices that are meant to utterly change you. Contemporary chaos magic, for example, does not adopt any particular belief system, but uses any as a means to produce results: Alan Moore chose Glycon as his particular deity —“my imaginary patron friend” (Campbell, 2002) when he

¹⁵² The relation of writing with Magick, and maybe even of writing as a disease, is beyond the scope of this essay but should not be overlooked. This is a mediatic question, and informs McLuhan’s theory, for example, or Liu’s Freudian robot, which posits that writing nowadays ceased to be alphabetic and has become ideographic, digital and electronic.

¹⁵³ Hyland writes about the Tarot as “divining literature” that requires, materially, different reading procedures which she aligns with Burrough’s cut-up: the random shuffling of the cards is similar to the aleatory repositioning of the cut-ups. . Divining indeed: “When you cut into the present, the future leaks out” (Burroughs, 1986).

¹⁵⁴ Alan Moore will say that, following tradition, Magick is the Art, that is, all arts, the aesthetic manipulation of body, materials and signs to produce an effect that occurs both on the mind, the world and the body. The magician, he writes “is consciously attempting to alter his or her window’s width or its angle, so as to get a different view of the landscape outside. The schizophrenic, on the, other hand, has had his or her window kicked in by some great big astral skinhead in eighteen-hole Doctor Martens boots. Both of them are experiencing the same flood of phenomena and probably many of the same perceptions. The magician, however, has a means of processing this information. The magician has something to bail with. The schizophrenic can only sink beneath the flood. As Aleister Crowley once succinctly put it (and I’m not paraphrasing here). “The only difference between a schizophrenic and myself is that I’m not mad” (Moore, 2003).

became a magician, knowing full well that Lucian of Samosata had denounced Glycon as a puppet two centuries before Christ. Not real, not-not real. Even as he embraces Magick, Crowley doesn't explain why or what is this disease of language.

Crowley's particular emphasis on language comes from philologist and orientalist Friedrich Max Muller's 1863 Lectures on the Science of Language, in which he used the metaphor "disease of language" to describe mythology (in particular Hindu mythology, which he was studying). Mythology (the mythopoeia that Crowley talks about, substituting logos for poiesis, which is significant because Magick is productive: it does) was a disease of language in which abstract ideas and concepts ended up being personified, materialized, as deities: "when the similarity in quality was mistaken for identity in substance, mythology became inevitable" (Muller, 1864). But this process, according to Muller, passed through metaphor:

Whenever any word, that was at first used metaphorically, is used without a clear conception of the steps that led from its original to its metaphorical meaning, there is a danger of mythology; whenever those steps are forgotten and artificial steps put in their places, we have mythology, or, if I may say so, we have diseased language, whether that language refers to religious or secular interests.¹⁵⁵

¹⁵⁵ Andreas Mussoff (2018) points out the importance of Muller's lecturing about how to misunderstand metaphors (which is central to my essay) while also explaining that Muller writes about "radical metaphors as "an engine of creative meaning constitution in its earliest phase", much like Rorty's view on metaphors, "and as a facilitator of subsequent mythological misunderstandings in later stages" which he calls "poetic metaphor" and which is just taking that creative metaphor matter-of-factly, as a point-de-capiton: a dead metaphor which grounds the world with denotative certainty. Cassirer explains the "radical metaphor" as one that involves "not only a transition to another category, but actually the creation of the category itself" (1946).

Literalizing metaphors is the disease, a disease that would become a key argument for the “figurations of alterity constructed by early twentieth-century primitivist discourse” that Nicola Gess studies in his brilliant “Primitive thinking” (2022), a historical moment in the West when “scientists assumed that the mentally ill think like members of indigenous tribes, who think like children who think like the mentally ill, and so on.”¹⁵⁶

“They are what we were” is a quote from Friedrich Schiller’s “On Nāive and Sentimental Poetry” (1796) Gess uses to explain the recurrent European view, or maybe hope, that “a primordial condition of human existence may be found among peoples living elsewhere, and also among children, animals, and parts of the natural world.” But by the 19th century, and in a Darwinian context, this “primitive thinking” was understood in evolutionary terms, which took Eurocentric standards as the highest and most evolved form of thinking in a spherical planet undergoing a process of colonization justified by a logic of superiority and a reliance on science and technology as the proper, as in efficient, way of dwelling in the world. The “normal” intellectual development of a child was analogical to the development of man as a species: logical abstraction, and the measures of control that it entails, was (and still is) the highest form of thought. “Primitive thought” was “characterized as ‘magical’, ‘mythical,’ ‘prelogical,’ or ‘mystical’.” Take, for example, this fragment from Edward B Tylor’s, the father of modern anthropology and the first anthropologist to be hired as such, *Primitive Culture*:

¹⁵⁶ “These three figures are only the most conspicuous” Gess writes. “Others – with a range of different connotations– include women, the working class, ethnic minorities, and rural populations.” To these, I would also add the criminal, and, to a certain extent, artists.

In so far as myth [...] is the subject of poetry, and in so far as it is couched in languages whose characteristic is that wild and rambling metaphor which represents the habitual expression of savage thought, the mental condition of the lower races is the key to poetry (Tylor, 2016, 879).

Wild, rambling, savage metaphors out of control, but mostly, wrong. An important part of the literature tries to understand the epistemological mistakes “primitive” language was making. Even Malinowski, who “starts out with the idea that language possesses magical power” (Gess, 2022) in both primitive and modern societies, and understands this power in a similar as the ‘performative’ function Austin describes, pins the error on “the reduction of this power to an ontological unity of sign and referent” (Gess). If words are not properly separated from things, they could not be “understood” as abstract entities that organize the world. Saussure was just theorizing the arbitrariness of the sign (and its unmotivated character), which severed language’s relation to the world, in stark contrast with a different conception of language: “The vivid and natural traits of ‘primitive language,’ as ethnologists and developmental psychologists argued, go hand in hand with the belief that words are directly tied to the objects they designate and therefore possess magical power.” (Gess) A disembodiment was already taking place, Saussure argued that writing had a “complete indifference of the means of production of the sign and of the matter which forms it; we can carve the words in stone, in wood, write them on black paper in white, on white in black.” (Saussure 113a). Abstraction meant disentangling from material basis, not just the referents of words, but also media. Meanwhile, the “primitives” were still entangled in matter, and so was their faulty language.

However, if —like Lévy-Bruhl— one does not assume that ‘primitive thinking’ is based on association (the working premise of English ethnologists) so much as participation, metaphors do not express a perceived similarity between objects. Instead, the objects are co-present in a single perception, and the name they share indicates their mutual participation (Gess, 2022).

That participation is exactly the double negation, not one term of the metaphor nor the other, which in turn yields a different kind of affirmation, which we might as well call magical. The proper reading of the metaphor is an association, and its misreading coerces the terms into participating the one into the other, as much as naming an object, or an intuition, is a way of negotiating its shape, availability and kinship, particularly if the naming is technical¹⁵⁷. Gess quotes Levy Bruhl’s “law of participation: “in the collective representations of primitive mentality, objects, beings, phenomena can be, though in a way incomprehensible to us, both themselves and something other than themselves.”

“At the center of this law,” Gess continues, “is the vexing acceptance of difference and identity at the same time, thus disregarding the notion of logical contradiction,” but also the principle of identity, which should be positive and verifiable.

It is in this sense that Campagna understands Magic as a cosmogony/cosmology that “has acted as the silent shadow of most hegemonic cultural forms, from philosophy to theology to modern science” (2018). Its paradoxical nature, in which a thing is itself at the same time it is not, undermines Technic’s need for “detectability and classification by the

¹⁵⁷ And it is here that Adorno’s “Myth is already enlightenment and enlightenment reverses to mythology.” As Muller explained, the radical metaphor dwindles down into the repetition of quotidian, proper language and interpretation. According to Adorno “factuality wins the day; cognition is restricted to its repetition and thought becomes mere tautology.” The metaphoric point-of-capiton is turned into metonymy, horizontally infinite.

system of seriality and by absolute language to the point that a thing is liquefied into its very classification.” Magic, especially in the West, has taken the place of a third term between science and religion. Josephson-Storm (2017), while studying “the myth of disenchantment” of modernity, also understands magic as a double negation, negated by both religion and science, and thus occupying that bordering, liminal quality that we have been talking about: the place of paradox.

“Magic’s cosmogonic process originates precisely from that dimension of existence which can never be reduced to any linguistic classification,” writes Campagna (2018), and he calls that dimension the “ineffable,” but we might as well call it the Real with Lacan, or the body without organs or the plane of consistency with Deleuze and Guattari or “animal magnetism” with Mesmer, that “which permeates all things and events, and may be present now in objects, now in persons, yet it is never bound exclusively to any single and individual subject or object as its host.” In Magic’s cosmogony, —“the ineffable as life”— life not defined as biological, but as something that traverses existence, and it is unknowable exactly because it is irreducible to healthy language: it can only be partially captured through its disease, through “epistemological glitches” (Campagna), paradoxes and double negations.

“When the ineffable speaks,” writes Campagna, “the first word that it utters is ‘this’.” Existence trumps Technic’s abstract presence, which is the realm of “there”. In magic, it’s always “here.” And that’s exactly what happens, radically, when metaphors turn real. The thisness of the experience is undeniable: It has to be accounted for, it demands attention. Magic tries to account for this experience through the incorporation of the contingency as the participation of the ineffable, that which defies calculation, as in divinatory practices. Whenever something out of the ordinary happens, its sheer contingency, its thisness, has to

be taken into account. It's not just that it happens, which can always be explained causally, but that it happens in the context of particular things, to particular persons or places, at a particular time. Joshua Ramey (2014) explains that divinatory practices incorporate the coincidences that logic cannot explain, adding up a fifth cause to Aristotle's four, which could be called chance, life, the ineffable, or the impossible.

Psychoanalyst Franco De Masi writes that "the very nature of the psychotic process consists in transforming thoughts into sensory perceptions," (2020) which could well account for hallucinations and delusions, especially if we take the neurotic tenuous bordering of the inside and the outside as a fact. But "transforming thoughts into sensory perceptions" might as well be an operational definition of magic, which it actually is, as defined by Crowley: "Magic is the Science and Art of causing Change to occur in conformity with Will" (2017). Crowley's magical tradition is hopelessly entangled in the Will, which can be usually interpreted in terms of individual's will, and "transforming thoughts into sensory perceptions" happens outside the "psychotic's" will, but functions as magic anyway. Crowley's definition, "the Science and Art of causing Change in conformity with Will" "might as easily be describing technology" (Novy, 2020), because they both belong to the same tradition of our catastrophic moulding of the world. Of course, there's also a different way of reading Will as the Will of the World (and not another individual or culture).¹⁵⁸ Campagna defends the ineffability of this will, and thinks of Magic in a way more akin to gardening, of allowing the world to live, an inversion that instead of treating the world as an

¹⁵⁸ Schopenhauer comes to mind, when he defines Will as "the innermost essence, the kernel, of every particular thing and also of the whole. It appears in every blindly acting force of nature, and also in the deliberate conduct of man" (1966).

object treats it as a subject, or at least somewhere in the middle of both: not-object, not-not-object, while at the same time not-subject, not-not subject, avoiding the problematic object-subject binary and sending it into a line of flight that unavoidably will meet the occult in its trajectory. CG Jung recalls, in his memories, a particular moment in his relationship with Freud:

I can still recall vividly how Freud said to me, “My dear Jung, promise me never to abandon the sexual theory. That is the most essential thing of all. You see, we must make a dogma of it, an unshakable bulwark.” . . . In some astonishment I asked him, “A bulwark against what?” To which he replied, “Against the black tide of mud”— and here he hesitated for a moment, then added— “of occultism” (Jung, 1989).

But the occult is not just the occult (which is just a way of understanding the ineffable). What the occult preserves is the dimension of the unseeable, because that is what metaphors, in their wild dance between the literal and the abstract, try to make apprehensible, in a way that blurs and defies, if misread properly, the difference between the usual categories with which we understand the world. This implies Guattari’s advice in order to “exit language”: “dissociate subjectivity from the subject, from the individual and even from the human” a whole rearranging of what is alive and what is not, which includes the non-human world, and “cease considering the power of enunciation as exclusive to man and subjectivity” (Lazzarato, 2014). Everything speaks, even if it doesn’t say. In our case, it is easier to believe a computer can talk than to believe a mountain does. Maybe both do (or not do).

In the different traditions and disciplines this essay has explored, metaphors are neither alive nor dead. Like a virus, they are undead, both alive and dead, defying both categories, and they have the potential to become alive through their literalization or dead through their abstraction. There's dangers in both poles, as well as possibilities that go way beyond understanding them as somehow defective, or naturalizing each of their poles. James Tilly Matthews, for example, was able to articulate through his delusions a machinery that was already there, a machinery that, though invisible to most people at the time, is now an undeniable force in our world of fake news and instant communication. Science fiction has become a "mode of awareness," as Csicsery-Ronay Jr. (1991)g phrases it, and a particular privileged place to understand our current situation through its combination of cognitive estrangement achieved through the literalization of metaphors. Csicsery-Ronay Jr. opens up a branch of theory that uses science fiction as a method, and he uses Jean Baudrillard and Donna Haraway as his examples. Both Haraway's cybor and Baudrillard's simulacra live this spectral life. Are we supposed to take them literally? Are we supposed to interpret them abstractly? Their strategy is the strategy of that particular discursive strategy this essay has discussed: the blurring of the difference between facts and ficts as a productive endeavor. Trying to understand Baudrillard's simulacra as a fact will prove sterile: there is no actual way to achieve it, to prove it materially. Thinking of it abstractly (oh, it's just a manner of speaking) renders it sterile. Haraway's cyborg shares the same indeterminacy. Both can be read both ways.

They are part of a tradition of theoretical thought that refuses to let materiality or abstraction become the only avenues of thought, a realm where words become things, as much as schizophrenic thought, according to Freud, "treats concrete things as if they were

abstract” (1914). It is a tradition as old as what we call “indigenous ontologies.” It is not the case that they take their concepts literally, but that by taking them as material forces, the world is rearranged in different ways. Psychoanalysis is probably a privileged contemporary example of these kind of theories, and the unconscious its privileged object. Nobody will ever be able to locate in the brain (and it would be a folly to try to do so) its precise location, but that doesn’t mean it’s impossible to feel its effects. It’s actually not-literal, not-not literal, as much as it is not-metaphoric, not-not metaphoric.

Those who follow this tradition of thought usually risk falling under the label of charlatans, and in a sense, they are, as much as Tilly Matthews was actually insane, and the influencing machine is just a delusion. But the tradition is long, and fruitful, because it holds at bay both the idea that meaning is irrelevant and that meaning is everywhere and finds a middle space where both are true. Here, we have both Marx’s capital and Freud’s Phallus, Beatriz Preciado’s *potentia gaudendi*, Suely Roelnik’s zombie anthropophagy and even Richard Dawkin’s memes. The possibility of ambiguity (and the impossibility of automating it, as Abeba Birhane (2021) claims) grounds the ineffable and offers a different place not just in which to think, but in which to live, and change, and to realize, along with Sara Ahmed, “the invented nature of all differences” (Ahmed, 2006:99).

The limit of Technic and its cosmogony is life, especially the ineffable part of life, and that is why it is taken as the final frontier to overcome, according to Campagna (we will conquer disease and death, we’re already working on it!). It’s main concern is safety, because life is vulnerable, so our only defense is to make the world as safe as possible, to make sure life doesn’t happen. Magic’s counterpart is salvation, according to Campagna. Salvation doesn’t mean that we will live happily ever after in another world, but “refers to

the rescue of an entity from its exclusive identification with its linguistic dimension” (2018) or with its algorithmical probability. Salvation then becomes the possibility of being otherwise, more than what our reality settings provide as an explanations.

Metaphors are couplings between different species, and they world, as a verb, not a noun. These visions, these hallucinations, these fleshings, and becomings and belongings are attempts and probes that try to articulate what is already happening, what may already be happening, and elaborating on how those changes populate the world(s) and our place in then.

Misreading properly, literalizing metaphors through their double negation, and denying a radical divide between metaphors and reality is an act of creative resistance, maybe even a necessary one.

CHAPTER 11: EXPERIENTIAL FICTIONS AND MISE-EN-FORCE

“Nothing should seem natural” still sounds like good advice, more than 90 years after Bertolt Brecht wrote the line as part of his prologue to “The Exception and the Rule,” one of his many Lehrstücke (teaching-plays) meant to be performed outside of theatres, in schools and factories, and also meant to break the audience-actors relationship along with theatre’s fourth wall, in an effort to tweak dramatic conventions so that theatre could become, and promote, different social relationships (in Brecht’s case, through socialist politics). In the prologue the actors explain the play is about “a journey undertaken by one who exploits and two who are exploited,” and urge the audience to “observe the conduct of these people very closely: find it estranging even if not very strange” (1930):

Don't accept the habitual as a natural thing. In times of disorder, of organized confusion, of de-humanized humanity, nothing should seem natural. Nothing should seem impossible to change (Brecht, 1930).

A significant element of Brecht’s theatrical wager during the thirties was *verfremdungseffekt*, around which several contrasting translations have been discussed although I would place my bet on estrangement and place its genealogy following Schklovsky and his also polemically translated *ostraneine*. Alienation and defamiliarization have been proposed for both (and distancing for Brecht’s), and even enstrangement (with an *n*, as a making strange, and not estrangement as just becoming estranged). Brecht’s aesthetical maneuver is political: by estranging the action inside the play, veering away from emotional identification with character and foreclosing the climatic release of energy, he

meant to allow spectators to critically engage with the play—as well as the audiences’ place and reality— as a convention that could then be changed. Sidestepping the climax would allow the audience to find change in real life, and not having the conflict tidied up and solved by the work, by the fiction. The audience would be interpellated and participation welcome. Brecht was estranging regular life, in order to make it transparent and graspable by the audience. Breaking the fourth wall and bringing the audience in could allow them to engage the problem critically. To see the facts as ficts, and what they hide. He was trying to provoke the “naked lunch effect” that William Burroughs was after when explaining the title of his novel: “The title means exactly what the words say: naked lunch, a frozen moment when everyone sees what is on the end of every fork” (1962). Burroughs was being literal, and attempting to reveal the material aspect of our reality, if we follow Anthony Burgess explanation: “we’re all sitting grinning at a ghastly meal which he (Burroughs) suddenly shows us to be cannibalistic: the meat on the end of every fork is revealed as the guts and blood of our fellow-men” (1964).

Preserving this genealogy on his definition of science fiction is one of Darko Suvin’s most interesting aspects. In a world where it’s becoming difficult to explain everyday reality without using science fiction tropes, cognitive estrangement is one of the most powerful critical tools we have. What should be cognitively estranged is what we mistake for reality, in order to expose the suffering it causes, on so many levels: “Nothing should seem natural.” Cognitive estrangement, theorized as a reading/writing device, might as well be deployed as means of estranging our taken-for-granted, “zero-point” reality. Why not use cognitive estrangement with a Brechtian twist to understand money? Or video messaging? Or living between two realities separated by a border wall? Or mass extinction? Or pledging

allegiance, marrying and taking pills for anxiety or depression? Why not use science fiction's critical device to understand our facts as ficts? If alienation is the norm, why not literalize ourselves as aliens in our own reality and treating it as a *mise en-scène* to see how it works? Why not use science fiction as a mode of awareness? Why not cognitive estrangement as critical praxis? Misreading leads the way.

Aesthetics has been kidnapped by art. We think we have aesthetic experiences when we go to a museum, or a movie theatre, when we hear a song, see a painting, or even play a videogame. But aesthetics is about having a body; it is about sensation and perception, about our orifices (which include the myriad openings of the skin) and how they relate to the world. Anesthesia literally means without aesthesis. If we woke up tomorrow into an anarcho-primitivist wet dream and all museums and technology had been destroyed, we would still have an aesthetic experience seeing and smelling the smoke coming out of the destroyed high rises and police stations, while wondering what is there to do. Aisthesis remains as long as we have a body. But when the whole world has been aesthetized (look around you, and try to find a single object that has not been thoroughly designed), the aesthetic experience has to be bracketed by institutions.¹⁵⁹ While we think we only have aesthetic experiences in particular places, we are assaulted constantly by those experiences, to the point of insensibility and the need for withdrawal (which might as well be called depression). 10,000 messages a day: it is an assault. We are filtered experience.

¹⁵⁹ And that is why it is useful to understand McLuhan's theory as an aesthetic one: it studies how technology alters "sense ratios and patterns of perception steadily and without any resistance." (Understanding media)

And if aesthetics has been kidnapped by art, imagination is under the deadly choke hold of product or, to frame it in a milder way, trapped in its labyrinths. Speculative genres are the institutionalized release of the literalized metaphor: it is the accorded place where the maneuver can be played out and where the creatures springing from it can run free in its bordered world. Alberto Chimal (2012) has labeled the tradition as a “literature of the imagination¹⁶⁰,” a tradition that has recently gained critical respectability and marketing weight—right about the same time critical theory was declaring a “crisis of the imagination” prompted by that phrase Fredric Jameson attributes to Marxist circles: “it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism” (2005). The crisis of political imagination coincides with the boom of the speculative genres: my reading/watching list grows larger as the world’s possibilities grow thinner. Once again, the abstract wins over the material.

We could argue that the speculative genres are becoming dominant (at least in market share: think Harry Potter, Disney, Marvel, or even art horror). Their main mechanism, estrangement through literalization of figurative language, has proved extremely useful to make sense of a shifting and ungrounding reality that is also the main mechanism through which this stories are delivered, the devices they are circulated with. But these drive is rendered harmless because these genres are trapped by their circulation as commodities, channeled through certain objects with which people have a very intimate and individual relationship: money, books, movies, screens. Speculative genres have been herded in, and tolerated as, product. Let nothing be imagined outside the proper channels. Imagination is left toothless, as it ceases to be a lived experience, just to reappear as a purchased experience

¹⁶⁰ Chimal talks about a “imagination literature,” because the term fantasy has been co-opted by media empires (“innocuous, conservative and simplifying entertainment”) (2012), a body of “weird, eccentric, minoritarian and despicable” work that tries to problematize the “objective appearance of reality” (2012).

(just think that most Halloween costumes belong to multinational franchises). Imagination's reality effects are dimmed because imagination has been co-opted by product.

“You can see the future from here” is the title of a series of science fiction interventions that took place at the San Ysidro border-crossing between Mexico and the USA, famously tagged as the most busy in the world, from March to April in 2011. The interventions, organized by the Taller (e)Media of the Autonomous University of Baja California (UABC) and the Tijuana Cultural Center (CECUT), gathered the work of 200+ students from different faculties of the university imagining, and enacting, the near-future of the border.

T(e)M (roughly translated as (e)MediaWorkshop) was an experimental workshop I founded and ran from 2009 to 2011 as “a conceptual and interdisciplinary space of production lodged in the Humanities Faculty, dedicated to transmedia experimentation with formats, genres, investigation, distribution and collaboration”, in which “the (e) works as a variable, so we can substitute it with edition, experimentation, elaboration, electronic, election and even effervescence, depending on our needs” (T(e)M booklet, UABC, 2009). During its two years of existence, T(e)M gathered a group of students who elaborated a Philosophical Dictionary of Tijuana (a series of posters that detoured documentary photographs of the city with quotes from philosophers), a print catalogue of Fotofé: 10 years, an exhibition of student documentary photos, and two “seasons” of minibúks—small pocket-sized books easily transported and exchanged, designed to be read during short bus rides—one collecting science fiction stories written in Mexico, the other dedicated to writing that

isn't usually accepted as academically worthy but that seemed urgent to the students that edited and designed them, and the "You can see the future from here" interventions.

CECUT had approached the university at the end of January 2011 in order to reprint the nine booklets that comprised the "Science Fiction made in Mexico" minibúk season and use them for a program that invited people to read right at the border line that joins (or separates, depending on your political opinion) the Mexican and the USian Californias. They also asked the T(e)M to organize a series of readings at the border crossing to promote the minibúks, to which we replied with a more ambitious program that included performances and "occupying" the Mexican side of the border each Thursday during two months, ending with a conference, right at the borderline, that would gather science fiction writers from both sides of the border.

The interventions were more of an improvisation than a carefully executed plan. T(e)M had less than two months to organize them (along with a measly thousand dollars to produce them), so we decided to proceed in crescendo. Due to the other T(e)M projects, we had a certain reputation for producing interesting and challenging projects so we trusted we could gather a lot of students collaborating with what we ended up calling a "collective imagination experiment." We sent out an university-wide call for images and flash fiction because "the future needs to be imagined" and proceeded to occupy the space between both countries shyly, by reading our stories and giving them out as book separators, along with postcards of our images, to the people who get in line to cross the border and the people who work at the border selling Mexican curios, souvenirs and food.

Both the written and graphic fiction the students produced was centered on the city and the surveillance mechanisms of the border, but spread out as a critique of the way things go, like imagining the Playas neighborhood under water (Sánchez) or a border that separates the marginal east side of Tijuana from the wealthy west side, or someone trying to buy a pirate cyborg arm in order to keep his work at the maquila (Herrera) or a drug dealer hawking: ““What’s cracking, homie? What’s up? A joint? Ice? Weed? Crack? Ritalin? Low price, bar, economic. Clonazepam? Blackheads? Coke 100ml? In-the-pores! Pigfuck tissue, fingers, foetus, zygotes pickled in LSD! Happiness? A trip to the moon? 5D glasses?” (Gasparri) outside the Zacazonapan bar Paty Torres was going to buy her orgasm in, where you could consume any drug you wanted. Or a blonde Virgen María wrapped in a US flag standing over a brown cherubim (Bryan Chilián).¹⁶¹

Reading the stories out loud and showing our posters in the walls of a tent we had labeled as “The future needs to be imagined: suggestions booth” and as a “Management of the future booth” while handing our images and stories as postcards, prepared us for more complex interaction through a performative turn. Our fourth Thursday began with Mr. XXXX arriving with a hand-drawn map for a mono-rail line that would drive people nearer his neighborhood. He had already taken it to the Tijuana Municipality. A human-statue arrived, all-glittering silver and positioned himself near us to remain immobile for most of the time. And then, the bio(mecánicas) arrived, from the theatre faculty, dressed in maquila uniforms with cables dangling out from their garments and started doing line-of-production

¹⁶¹ Translations of the flash fiction produced during the interventions can be found here: <https://alchemy.ucsd.edu/microsciencefiction-you-can-see-the-future-from-here-intro/> and <https://alchemy.ucsd.edu/microsciencefiction-you-can-see-the-future-from-here-second-part/>

repetitive and violent movements while passing apples among themselves and vocalizing through their movements. Sergio Brown documented the action and edited a short video piece about it, which will give you a much better idea of the piece than my description.

The bio(mecánicas) performance unsettled reality in very particular ways. People had to quickly figure out what these women breathing out of tubes, like inmates of a psychiatric hospital or maquila workers but with science-fiction indexes that started as mechanical movements and went to the cables they sucked or came out of their clothes and their make-up and their clothes. But people don't have much time to figure out what is going on when they are formed in a line wishing to cross another line, in a highly contested and surveilled space. They could only glance for a moment and had to quickly assess, and give reality value, to whatever was happening¹⁶²

The bio(mecánicas) estranged the border crossing by placing themselves as bodies doing a choreography, wearing the same clothes. But people were doing a choreography of their own trying to cross into another country: step-stop-step-stop-step-stop-step-stop, sometimes for more than 4 hours. The bio(mecánicas) mechanical steps echoed their own. Trying to cross that border was akin to maquila work. For a moment, they were obviously visibilized as part of the same regime. The cognitive estrangement was lived, at least for the moment. The parallel between both realities produced insights both ways, and the distinction between the metaphor (the science fiction scenario sketched out by the bio(mecánicas)) and the literal (their actual choreography) became blurred with the literal reality people crossing

¹⁶² Even mentally, they had to assess if those bodies were crazy because they worked in the maquila, or if they worked in the maquila because they were crazy.

the border have to deal with and its metaphorical consequences. The ensuing confusion allowed things to be understood, and experienced, in a different way.

The border wall is a sedimented abstraction. It starts as a fict; an act of writing. “In order to preclude all difficulty in tracing upon the ground the limit separating Upper from Lower California,” reads the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo (2014), which in 1848 ended the Mexican-American war and defined the border between Mexico and the US, a legal line was drawn from the mouth of the Gila River to a point one marine league south of the port of San Diego, after Mexico’s defeat in its only open war against the US, where it lost 55% of its territory. There are no rivers or landmarks to give geographical credibility to this particular legal fiction: only a desert where an abstract line bred Tijuana.

For those who live near the border wall, it is easy to think of it as something that is alive because it is always changing: new materials, double walls, there’s a constant pouring of money so that it keeps changing: it is a difficult and expensive creature to keep. It is also the prime example of the danger of reading metaphors properly. It is an abstraction fighting, teeth and claws, to make itself real. Its method is sedimentation, or mineralization, as Manuel de Landa names it following Deleuze and Guattari:

In the organic world, soft tissue (gels and aerosols, muscle and nerve) reigned supreme until 500 million years ago. At that point, some of the conglomerations of fleshy-matter energy that made up life under-went a sudden mineralization, a new material for constructing living creatures emerged: bone. It is almost as if the mineral world that had served as a

substratum for the emergence of biological creatures was reasserting itself, confirming that geology, far from having been left behind as a primitive stage of the earth's evolution, fully co-existed with the soft, gelatinous newcomers. Primitive bone, a stiff calcified rod that would later become the vertebral column, made new forms of movement control possible... and yet bone never forgot its mineral origins: it is the living material that most easily petrifies, that most readily crosses the threshold back to the world of rocks. For that reason, much of the geological record is written with bone fossil. About 8000 years ago, human populations began mineralizing again when they developed an urban exoskeleton, bricks of sun-dried clay became building materials, stone monuments and defensive walls. This exoskeleton served a purpose similar to its internal counterpart, to control the movement of human flesh in and out of the town walls (DeLanda, 1997, p.26-27).

The political strategy of the border wall is to make the map real through sedimentation. It's the enforced incarnation of the abstract. And much like DeLanda's "philosophy of immanence," forgoes the difference between the metaphoric and the literal. DeLanda passes from bone to architecture, while the borderwall¹⁶³ traverses the symbolic as much as the literal. Baudrillard once wrote that the ideological function of Disneyland is to create a place that makes "Americans" fail to notice the disneyfication of the world. As such, the border wall is Disneyland. It makes us forget the border extends everywhere there's a migrant, and its surveillance applies to everyone who uses electronic communication devices and faces a paywall. In "Walled States, Waning Sovereignty," Wendy Brown (2010) argues

¹⁶³ The border wall, as Leuning-Rojo point out, is not a solid wall, but full of holes and gaps. Being completely solid would be impossible: the wind would knock it out (2022).

that border fortifications serve the purpose of restoring the idea of the “nation-state,” in a historical moment where that figure¹⁶⁴ is losing both coherence and relevance, and not just because electronic flows traverse it easily, but also because it hasn’t deterred either the entrance of humans or drugs¹⁶⁵. So it becomes literal, and its literality kills people: it draws real blood. Through a policy called “prevention through deterrence”, the wall has kept on growing across the desert, forcing migrants into more dangerous and unmarked routes to avoid being captured. This has horrific consequences. Since 2014, more than 3,300 migrants have found dead along the US-Mexico border (UN IMO, 2022), in an area Jason de Leon calls “the land of open graves” (2015). As a fict turned real, the border outsources murder to the sun.

“Is it a virus, a drug or a religion?” is still a relevant question first formulated in (and about) *Snowcrash*, Neal Stephenson’s debut sf novel in 1992. The novel’s novum and non-human antagonist is Snow Crash, a virus program that can jump from computers to bodies, in several updated versions (administered through drug, blood, computers and orally) of the (me) programs that could code both subjectivities and DNA, passed on verbally from priests to the populace of Ancient Sumer. “What’s the difference?” answers Juanita Marquez, a “neurolinguistic hacker” in the novel, who submits herself to several religions in order to create an immune system that resists programming. The novel marks both the entrance of the neologism “Metaverse” into popular discourse and the transformation of “avatar,” from Hinduism, where it names the apparition or incarnation of a deity (“Avatar” in Sanskrit

¹⁶⁴ And much of what we take as identity, McLuhan would add.

¹⁶⁵ Donald Trump used it as one his most important campaign promises: sealing the southern border entirely .

literally means “descent”), into our graphic representation in virtual worlds (the opposite movement: an ascent out of the flesh).¹⁶⁶

The link within several overlapping systems, that of language as a virus, and the virus as a disease (virtual and real), the material and organic realm of drugs, which actually change how you perceive the world, and the belief system —coupled with the anthropotechnics— of religion points towards the collapse of the difference between the metaphor and the real, which is what we tried to achieve through the following interventions.

The next move in our interventions was a procession for St. Ste-La, a saint from the future we had come up with, and to whom you would pray for help on any technology-related issue. Our fall-back explanation, when trying to explain the intervention, was this one: “imagine yourself in a future where you desperately want to have a baby but can’t, and undergo a series of fertility procedures in order to achieve pregnancy. Saint Ste-La is the one you pray to when a third nipple appears on your chest.” We used the Mexican tradition of *ex-votos*, small case-based paintings hung in churches thanking saints for their miracles, in order to sum up her miracles, which went from the quotidian (“thanks for erasing my memories of the past 5 years”), to the absurd (“I don’t have extremities, bless Ste-La”) to the sublime (“thanks for allowing me to see the last tree in the city”) (Rojo, 2019).

The group came up with an origin story, signed by Juan.a The Blind, set in the near-future (“everything happens after The Disaster,” the story began): Ste-La escaped to Tijuana, —a clone bred for working on the northern side of the border— and became a prostitute during a fertility crisis. Woman began falling pregnant after her arrival, the first of her

¹⁶⁶ Juanita actually programmed the architecture of faces in the novel’s Metaverse: she afforded faciality to whoever travels into the Metaverse.

miracles, but an abortion epidemic ran through the city. Soon, she was the only pregnant woman on the city: a miracle in itself, since clones are wet-wired for sterility. The story reflected the violence the city had lived through the last 4 years (the Drug Wars in Mexico started in Tijuana) but also their relationship to technology: the drugs itself were a technology constantly mobilized during the interventions.

But our main piece was performative: we organized a procession that went from Plaza Santa Cecilia (saint of al musicians), downtown Tijuana—a crossroads where tourists can decide whether to go to the Cahuila, the red zone, or head towards a less radical tourist experience in Avenida Revolución (where you can meet the ceburros or zonkeys: donkeys painted as zebras where you can take a photograph to take back home)—to the San Ysidro Border Crossing. The procession, which included litmus veils, a mannequin, face-painted wheat signs (Ste-La’s symbol) and discarded electronics, started awkwardly: none of those involved that day were performers. But the embarrassment started to wear off after a few blocks. Students had prepared and memorized a set of prayers all punctuated by a shout (líbranos del eco: deliver us from echo) and people began to approach us, sometimes just questioning what we were doing but sometimes walking along us for block and joining us in mobile prayer.

The questions were always amazing: Did we accept donations? Could they be baptized? What kind of things can you ask of the saint? Was she efficient? Did we have a temple, a place of worship? And if not, where else could they join us... We answered as best as we could, using our status as university performers as a last resort, when people started demanding factual answers. We were physically threatened for taking pictures of people who approached us (“don’t you know you don’t take pictures of people here?” was the

explanation for the threat). Most people, as in the bio(mecánicas) intervention were just content to stare as we passed them by. The procession ended with the raising of an altar (made out of discarded tech) near the borderline, where we read Saint Ste-La's story.

The end of the procession was exhilarating: the student's were shouting out her name, the awkwardness was exchanged for excitement. The performance had worked. Our condition as a group had been instrumental. Being enacted by several people helped the fiction out: truly individual relationships with language and behavior are deemed delusional and psychotic in this reality regime, but being several, part of a pack, confers at least the dignity of a cult.¹⁶⁷

Although we were aware we were using cognitive estrangement as a critical tool, we didn't know we were using ethnomethodology as aesthetic manifesto. Harold Garfinkel is usually named "the father" of ethnomethodology, a sociological approach that studies the order of the social world as a shared sense making practice, through local self-reflective accomplishments, which were exactly what we would be trying to (science-fictionally) tweak throughout our interventions. The estrangement we would produce was by manipulating the "shared sense" of the situations we were provoking. Although deeply entrenched in sociology, and as such, in social sciences, Garfinkel could also be read as a radical performer, especially in his "Studies in Ethnomethodology" and more specifically in the theoretical way he approached sociological experiments. He insists that his studies "produce reflections through which the strangeness of an obstinately familiar world can be detected"

¹⁶⁷ Later that day, I visited my father, who has had his gallbladder removed in a surgery. In the hospital, I met two indigenous women visiting a relative, staring, afraid, at the elevator. I offered my help and they told me they had been instructed to go to the third floor, but didn't know how to get there. As a true acolyte of Saint Ste-La, I helped out a couple of persons who, trapped inside a very modern hospital, didn't know how to operate an elevator. Bless St. Ste-La indeed: we certainly need her.

(Garfinkel, 1967). And then he goes on to write: “Procedurally it is my preference to start with familiar scenes and ask what can be done to make trouble.” And then he goes kind of wild, maybe as an evil scientist or a radical activist trying to bring down the “order of things”: “Multiply the senseless features of perceived environments,” “To produce the socially structured affects of anxiety, shame, guilt, and indignation,” “To produce disorganized interaction”. When he starts talking about how to design experiments that would totally break every expectation his subjects have about reality (Garfinkel, 1967: 54), well, it’s kind of exciting, but also cruel.

Maybe our interventions weren’t as ambitious as Garfinkel’s plans, but their critical employment was certainly trying to “multiply the senseless features of perceived environments,” especially the border wall and the underlying assumptions (and enforcements) that turn it into a reality. Part of what we sensed as an accomplishment (and most of the fun) was actually making people question the basis of the shared reality they were living through, and though we didn’t drive people to “anxiety, shame, guilt and indignation” we certainly suspended their belief in facts by exchanging them with ficts, in a version of the methodology through which Brecht wished to estrange the conditions of lived reality. We were certainly aware that our interventions were emancipatory, at least in the sense that we were freeing science fiction from its particular jails: books, videogames and movies. Screens. Things you can buy. And that by doing so, we were opening up not only a critique of “matter-of-fact” reality, but also opening up possibilities, amplifying the cracks on our very particular border wall and its techno-scientific regime.

Ethnomethodology is not the only way to explain the interventions. The arts have a long tradition, that begins with experimental theatre (Brecht would be a paradigmatic case)

passes through the situationist emphasis on the provocation of relationships and moments that happened outside of galleries and theatres taking the city as their canvas and tactical media's disorienting media activism to certain aspects, mainly viewer's participation, of what Claire Bishop has named participatory art (as much a redundancy as speculative fiction). Science fiction has its own tradition offering up ways to make the "mode of awareness" sidestep its own borders to position itself in reality. The ubiquity of speculative design in curricula everywhere points to this fact, in a very quick adoption and enlargement of the Bruce Sterling term design fiction in 2005 and which he defined in 2009 as the "deliberate use of diegetic prototypes to suspend disbelief about change," (2013) the same year in which Julian Bleeker published the same-titled book which popularized the name. Sterling wrote about separating "science fiction" from narrative. Stuart Candy expanded the term to 'experiential futures' in his 2010 dissertation, in order to cover "a range of interventions and media from immersive performance to stand-alone 'artifacts from the future'" designed "to produce the momentary suspension of disbelief in the concreteness of everyday life" (2010). Still, the emphasis was on the objects designed, and is now a widely used strategy for prototyping products as part of the "future industry" Kodwo Eshun theorizes (much more than exploring change). And "speculative design" usually happens in places where the fiction is "bracketed" by clear boundaries, gallery or museum walls, screens, book-binding. The interventions placed science fiction in the wild so to speak.

One of the most interesting meeting places between science fiction and theory was the now mythical CCRU (Cybernetic Cultural Research Unit) at Warwick University in the late 90's, closely associated to its leading members, Sadie Plant and Nick Land. One of their terms, hyperstition is used to explain fictions that turn real, or, as Nick Land defined it, "the

experimental (techno)science of self-fulfilling prophecies” (Carstens, 2009), an attempt at explaining (and creating) positive feedback loops (into and from the future) in which what was fiction becomes real¹⁶⁸. It is in this sense that financial fictions are a form of hyperstition, they gain “traction on the real”, as O’Sullivan writes (2017), by posing themselves as futures¹⁶⁹. O’Sullivan has been theorizing the term “fictioning” to describe these practices (“one that involves the collapsing of any hierarchical distinctions between art and philosophy”):

By using the term fiction as a verb we refer to the writing, imaging, performing or other material instantiation of worlds or social bodies that mark out trajectories different to those engendered by the dominant organisations of life currently in existence (O’Sullivan, 2019).

But these attempts do not only belong to the science fiction milieu. We could also call them experiential fictions, open-ended fictive performances on real life, especially when they are performed without the need of a fourth wall separating the fiction from the reality. Experiential fictions, like the interventions, are not restricted to science fiction and are, in fact, much more common (even pervasive) than we might think. They include belief in Santa Claus or the Tooth fairy, pranks ARG’s (alternate reality games), imaginary communities (as Anderson describes nations), fake news and border walls.

¹⁶⁸ It is interesting to note that one of the basic elements of hyperstition is an almost magical “Call to the Old Ones” which O’Sullivan relates to the Chthulu mythos and a nod to magic. The complete definition available in the CCRU website glossary is: “Element of effective culture that makes itself real, through fictional qualities functioning as time-traveling potential. Hyperstition operates as a coincidence intensifier, effecting a call to the old Ones” (Carstens, 2010).

¹⁶⁹ Hyperstition has a very occidental positive aspect: it produces things. The apocalyptic tone of the 2011 interventions went the other way, as Jhonnatan Curiel remarked, much more than an invocation, we were performing an exorcism.

“Fluctuations in the syntactic machinery of reality” is how ethnobotanist Terence McKenna described the appearance of crop circles in England, which “seems to start as a hoax and veers into a strange proof of other forces” (McKenna, undated). McKenna—one of the key figures advocating the use of naturally occurring psychedelic plants, believer of the 2012 eschatological predictions and one of the subjects of Erik Davis study on *High Weirdness*—completed the phrase: “The main thing to understand is that we are imprisoned in some kind of work of art” (McKenna, undated).

If the border is a sedimented fict, then the border apparatus could be understood as an aesthetic setup: a theatrical and thoroughly scripted production. A ritual, if you will, where crossing means following the script. Step and step and step, and the same lines repeated over and over: Where are you going? What are you bringing from Mexico? Is there something you want to declare? Although there’s room for minor variations, anomalies are usually highly unpleasant if not downright violent and humiliating. It’s relentless repetition ritualizes, through submittal, border crossing. It is, and is constantly trying to do it more efficiently, what Campagna understands as Technic: “the process of translating the world of things into a world of position” in which there’s an “ontological primacy of the position over the thing” (2018). As I cross the border, I am legally bound to be myself, and that “myself” is just the activation of a series of indicators which will allow me to cross the border or not.

David Graeber made a similar remark about bureaucracies: “it is always a matter of simplification,” of “ignoring all the subtleties of real social existence and reducing everything to preconceived mechanical or statistical formulae (2012). The most effective

(and stupid, Graeber would add) of simplifying the subtleties of human relationships and the need for “interpretive labor” is violence: “threatening others with physical harm... makes possible relations of a far more schematic kind (i.e., “cross this line and I will shot you”).” The border forces a certain production of reality.

Bordering is a form of fictioning, where “cops are bureaucrats with guns.” (Graeber) The border is a switchboard of realities in which you dangerously change legal positions: crossing that abstract line changes your legal status, the positions you occupy, your identity. Walking through the border is like walking through a science fiction dimension portal: you change realities and it is very evident: a different official language, different signage, different infrastructure and different ways to navigate it. It’s difficult not to notice. As such, the border is a place where reality is so weak and brittle it needs millions of dollars to be sustained. It is a place where reality is contested and the only way to have that reality upheld is through the threat of violence, and the threat of violence is the framework that keeps reality going. When writing about nursing homes, bans and HMOS, Graeber notices that the violence in them is not metaphoric (or “epistemic”) but “quite concrete”:

All of these are institutions involved in the allocation of resources within a system of property rights regulated and guaranteed by governments in a system that ultimately rests on the threat of force. “Force,” in turn, is just a euphemistic way to refer to violence. (Graeber, 2012)

In the border, there’s no need to keep the violence metaphoric: it is heavily guarded and policed. It is exactly the place where the map turns real that needs more force. The aesthetic aspect of the borderwall and the scripting of human relationships in its surroundings

is not a mise-en-scene, but a mise-en-force, an experiential fiction embedded through deadening repetition and sustained through the blatant threat of force, which is the basic way in which the proper reading of metaphors, giving ontological precedence to the position over the thing, is turned real.

And that is exactly what the 2011 interventions were trying to tweak through the deployment, at street level, of science fictional devices. Even though the border wants things clear cut, we understood never actually is. The border is full of holes, and people on both sides of the border scramble finding tiny cracks in the heavily policed legal labyrinths of international relationships, both legal and illegal.

We just had to mimic the indexical expressions of the border to, at least, expose how it worked. On the final of our interventions, we occupied the small plaza of the abandoned Foreign Relationships building between the two-lanes of traffic that merge into the San Ysidro border crossing with a swap meet from the future. Students brought things to exchange, from Cecilia Ventura's ziplocked bags filled with computer chips and transparent gel that promised "Wedding speech," "Wet dreams" and "Disposable fingers" to re-fashioned toys with mechanical implements to Casa Wagner's live set, the point was to make the event festive. To enter the plaza, you were given a photo id with a randomly chosen identity from a list of 50 nouns that used both science-fictional figures (illegal wetware, wookie, mutant, sex toy or sterile, for example) with psychiatric and "legal" disorders (borderline personality disorder, psychotic, illegal), handed out as arbitrarily as nationalities. Green packs of Marlboro cigarettes promised the legalization of marijuana. In the swap meet you could trade

stuff or purchase it by exchanging dollars and pesos into a currency we had printed, called “ameros,” which was, at those times, a conspiracy theory about exchange unification between Canada, Mexico and the USA. For a couple of hours, we were a nation with our own currency.

That same day, we gave away a tabloid newspaper called El Arco, postdated 32 years into the future, which of course, most people never read, trusting the format of news as a legitimizing procedure on its own. The headline was simple. “BORDER CLOSED” certainly raised some eyebrows. The people who work the line —street sweepers, curios sellers, food hawkers— expected something like this after two months of intervention but most people were caught unaware and had to stop on their tracks (nobody stops except when forming themselves on the line: everyone at the border zone walks briskly to get where they are going: it is, after all, a disorienting place) and try to figure out the logic of the newspaper and of the news they were reading. For a moment, reality swooned and they were forced to stabilize it again. Some of the students wore customs so that was a quick give away. Others were taken aback. One fellow grabbed the newspaper and kept walking while reading the headline, until he stopped and ran back to us, asking at what time would the border be closed. Other people were confused and didn’t know how to read this as a science-fictional device. As the paper had the UABC logo, someone asked us if this was a study about something that would happen in the future.

The recognition of the newspaper as fiction started when people read through it. We had planned a three-hit structure for it. The first one was the headline, which instantly raised an alarm. The second one was the front page’s picture, which showed people trying to get into Mexico (one would usually expect the opposite) which was explained in the back page: a

highly religious and conservative army called True America had occupied most of the country (except the east and West coasts) and had bombed San Diego. The people trying to enter into Mexico were war refugees, which the legitimate Government of Tijuana was trying to turn away. The third twist had to do with the Tijuana Liberation Front, the newspaper publishers, who had occupied parts of Tijuana and were fighting to open up the border for the refugees. Reading through the newspaper, you could catch glimpses of life under the Tijuana Liberation front: rooftop orchards, a wilded CECUT, and genetically bred zonkeys. There were two markers of success. The first one came when the sellers at the traffic lanes asked us for copies of the newspaper to give away to people in cars (we had been “forbidden” to give anything to people in cars) and taking pictures of themselves doing so. The second one was seeing so many people reading while standing in the line, headed for a military verification of their identities, while imagining a different regime of the border.

Our science fictioning was accomplished mainly by moving the basic scenography of reality in just a tiny way, more like a situationist detournement than a Wagnerian gesamtkunstwerk, or several, and offering as evident a different buttoning of words and things, slightly changing the points of capiton that are taken for granted and following through with our presence, as a cut-up which coincided with the tweaking, materially supported by things such as newspapers, or clothing. The newspaper, for example, relied on the familiarity of the format (and the association of objective facts with the format) and the familiarity of the front page photo (the border as usual) in order to subvert those expectations by science fictioning them in order to make people question the reality they assume as normal, which, as Brecht said, it should not be so.

The newspaper also has another science fiction accomplishment, one that was not clear to any of us at the moment. After its distribution in 2011, the border has been closed twice, both time to stop contagion, from the coronavirus in 2020 and from racialized migrants in 2018, when I started receiving mails and messages from those who remembered the interventions. That's what happens with cut-ups, Burroughs said: "when you cut into the present the future leaks out."

Mark Fisher said that we were living in times of "ontological precarity," "where individuals recognise the fiction of bureaucracy and political narratives and yet simultaneously acknowledge it as a reality they must accept in order to thrive (and stay sane)" (Cameron, 2018). Ontological precarity might also describe a world lived through screens, data and abstraction (and great entertainment) mediated by a technology that models our behavior and our desire at a time when we are undergoing, according to Berardi, "a desexualization of desire" (2022), which is a very particular aspect of the "disembodiment" that McLuhan saw as an effect of electronic media, while the coding of reality detaches reproduction from bodies. It might as well describe capitalist realism itself: the fact that there is just one reality, that of capitalism and anything else is unthinkable, which is similar to the anthropologist complaint about the flat reality that the western world imposes on other cultures: the only reality is that of facts, and science. Having just one reality seems highly precarious.

And that is why it's necessary to misread properly, because reading the right way and favoring abstraction as the proper and correct way to read forecloses opportunities and

worlds, while keeping the highly unfair destruction of worlds, and of the world, untouched. There are two major places where the western world goes psychotic on the world and demands the absence of metaphors: law and science. In those realms, words should be flattened, almost magical, so the distance between their material referents and their abstract component is reduced to the minimum. Even more so, they should be reduced to numbers, and should be made computable, and efficient. This efficiency is capitalism. We may call this the psychotic core of capitalist realism: the points of capiton that button our reality through the objectuality of things (as matter) and the rationalization of law as private property of those same things that are objects. But the world has been turning strange, and much more difficult to explain. These are the zones where our system roots its fundamentalism. The side-stepping of the difference between the metaphoric and the literal, the misreading of figurative language, is an attempt to understand the world according to different coordinates, an attempt to articulate what is already happening in more useful, although sometimes highly dangerous, ways. These visions, these hallucinations, these fleshings and becomings and belongings, these categorical mistakes, aberrations of abstraction and primitive wonderings might as well point towards a more habitable future.

Maybe just sustaining the difference between the metaphor and the real is useless and a hindrance and practicing the blurring of its borders is a way to find lines of flight out of this mess. Even if people think we are crazy.

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