

# Legacy of the Void

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## Introduction

A thing that grants great pleasure. My sister and I at times take turns scanning each others faces in search for comedones, blackheads. When an irregularity is located one would extract it from the dermis: applying pressure on the skin surrounding the clogged pore in order for the mix of sebum and dead skin cells to “pop” out of the skin. The bigger the better. Sometimes a string of hair has curled up inside. We lend our skin to each other allowing the pain that the act of popping causes to be inflicted on us, because we know that the pleasure received from popping pores on the other will exceed that pain. Skin is magical, never as flat as cosmetic commercials at times intend to present it with their digital renderings. It is alive, it gets dirty and wrinkled, on it mites and microbes live, it is one of our main perceptive organs.

This text has its starting point in a collection of images that has been growing during a long period of time, and from the experience that I have obtained as a visual artist by working both in digital and physical media. I balance in a tension between the two, oscillating back and forth. Virtual media is immediately seductive, with its slick photorealism, but after a while it gets boring. It is too flat. Then I turn to physical matter, immersing myself in its infinitely porous texture. When that gets too chaotic I turn again. Making art for me is finding places in which I can be, in a world that otherwise is difficult to relate to. The places that are the most soothing are often the blurry fuzzy ones.

It begins among the glossy virtual surfaces of contemporary culture, entailing a motion from a flat world of digital scenography and representation, towards the immediate experience of the porous texture of matter and the chaotic multiplicities. Through the digital void of contemporary culture, towards unmediated nature. Over all looking at how nature is mediated, and fictionalized, from scientific representation and nature documentary to the aesthetics of the evil. Analyzed through the Baroque aesthetics and the theory of the Fold provided by Leibniz through

Deleuze.

This is an attempt to give form to a construction of phenomena, concepts, images contained in my mind, a construct which has three dimensions, which is made up by flows and colors rather than words. I will not give it complete justice, but I might be able to draw out a map from one point of view and write it down here. The text is accompanied by a second part, an image collection or a kind of map. It provides another point of view that might help on the way to deliver you closer to the complex construct that is before articulation, a swarm of things whose relationships are not yet crystalized.

Digital Void

## Scenography, CGI and Illusionism

*Then Tom Thumb lost his temper. He put the ham in the middle of the floor, and hit it with the tongs and with the shovel—bang, bang, smash, smash! The ham flew all into pieces, for underneath the shiny paint it was made of nothing but plaster!*

*The Tale of Two Bad Mice* by Beatrix Potter (Figure 5)

As the two mice Hunca Munca and Tom Thumb were exploring the dollhouse in the children's room next to which they reside, they came across a dining table set for a feast. But soon they found out that none of the food was real. Upset by their deception they started smashing it, the fish, unwilling to break, was put into the fire place, only for the mice to realize the fire was but orange crinkly paper. The ravage continued throughout the house, but whatever item considered useful was brought back to the mouse hole.

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*“For underneath the shiny paint it was made of nothing but plaster!”*. Let us start here, in the flat, digital, simulated habitat of contemporary human culture, where most is mediations and representations. The material object is so far away that, in this new reality, only copies seem to exist. The complex material texture that normally makes up the appearance of things has been reduced to a flat surface of representation. Vilém Flusser, philosopher of photography, media and technology—in his essay “Line and Surface”—classifies the world into three realms: immediate experience, images and concepts. The first is the world of given fact, direct perception of things without mediation, and the two latter are categorized within the world of fiction and representation, as they are mediations. He argues that in our time the mediated realms have taken over and the immediate experience of things has become more and more scarce. We experience a loss of material reality. The immediate experience of an object “out there”, of nature, has been rendered obsolete. We no longer look at stones in nature but rather at images of stones, and both remain equally real.<sup>1</sup> “Line and Surface” was

written in 1973 and concerned media of that time, namely television and photography. With the technological development of new media and the transition from analogue to digital, the effect described by Flusser seems to have multiplied in our time. Computer generated images (CGI) are taking the places of photography, in 2014 the IKEA catalogue was 75% CGI.<sup>2</sup> The object represented is no longer physical, but digital.

Contemporary culture thus turns into a kind of scenography. The Lascaux cave paintings are not accessible to the public. What one can see instead is its sequel, a copy. *Lascaux II* was constructed two hundred meters away from the original cave in order to preserve the paintings that started decaying because of alterations in the air caused by visitors. The fact that they are not the original paintings does not seem to disturb hundreds of visitors, that pass by everyday to experience it. In the turn towards the virtual we are still determined to preserve the old, in the Ōtsuka Museum of Art, photographic copies of masterpieces from the western canon have been printed onto ceramic plates, a method that allows these copies to stay intact for 2000 years.<sup>3</sup> They will outlive the originals, whose matter will decompose as time passes by. But, what is the experience of a photograph on a ceramic plate in comparison to the original artwork, whose pigment vibrates and whose brushstrokes upon the canvas show actual traces of the work of the painter? A strong drive for preservation has led us to compromise the materiality of things to instead surround ourselves with flattened copies.

An interesting example, that points out a hesitation in the movement towards the increasing digital void and a fear of losing materiality completely, is *skeuomorphism*. Skeuomorphism implies that an object has a surface that imitates the material the tool would traditionally be made of, to make it feel more familiar and friendly. It is a kind of mimesis, applied in design to make us feel certain things, a kind of illusionism. Examples are laminate floors and furniture, the plastic panel in cars with the appearance of wood. But most interesting might be digital interfaces, calendars with paper-like texture and spiral coils at the top, a desktop on which icons in the shape of folders, trash can, envelopes, sticky notes, can be arranged, opened, thrown away just like in physical reality. The concept was frequently used by Apple on an attempt to make the interaction with computers more intuitive. (figure 28)

WHY CAN WE NOT TAKE THINGS AND MATTER FOR WHAT THEY ARE,  
WHY DO WE WANT TO PRETEND? WAS THE TRANSFORMATION FROM ANALOGUE

TO DIGITAL THAT PAINFUL WE HAD TO KEEP THE OLD APPEARANCES? IS IT THAT  
THE REALITY OF DIGITAL OBJECTS IS SCARY? MESHES WITH THEIR GREY FACETS,  
EVERYTHING CONSISTING OF THE SAME GREY MASS, NO VARIATION, ONLY  
FLATNESS.

*Trompe-l'œil* is french for *trick the eye* and refers to a type of painting that is so realistic the spectator takes it for reality, at least for a little while. It was and is often used on ceilings or walls for the purpose of extending the architecture with a fictional space. The illusion created by this kind of paintings is often dependent on a certain point of view, from which the immersion of the spectator into the fictional space becomes complete, but when the spectator steps aside, taking another viewpoint the illusion is revealed as perspectives become crooked and the painting flat.

Contemporary culture has turned into a scenographic landscape with superficial surfaces and fictions that reveal themselves as I move around. This sensation is very well displayed in the digitally produced video work *Establishing Eden* (2016) by artists Persijn Broersen and Margit Lukács, scenography revealing itself as a camera moves through a world of 2D planes, textured with photographs. (figure 4) At certain points of view the illusion is total and the landscape seems completely three-dimensional, but as the movement continues the construction shows itself in a very baroque manner. Like the illusionistic ceiling paintings, where the spectator is immersed from one point of view but when stepping aside the illusion is revealed. It is like a theme park ride where the camera functions as the vessel.

The *trompe-l'œil* is even sharper in the painting series *Folds* (figure 3) in the exhibition *Tetrachromat* (2013, Malmö Konsthall) by Tauba Auerbach. By using a technique where she folds the canvas beforehand and leaves it under pressure for some time for the pleats to settle, then the canvas is unfolded, revealing a creased landscape that is spray painted from one direction, before finally being stretched on a frame. With this technique Auerbach can eternalize the illusion of the folded surface on to a two-dimensional painting. The *trompe-l'œil* was indeed striking, I had to perform a movement similar to the one the camera makes in *Establishing Eden*, to make sure the painting was actually flat. It is interesting to note that the name of the exhibition also points at the multiple perspectives and perceptions coexisting in the world. *Tetrachromat* means four colored and refers to the amount of color receptors that exist in the eyes of certain

animals. Humans in comparison have trichromatic vision, and only three receptors. These animals are able to see a wider range of colors and nuances and experience a very different reality because of their extra receptor. The black crow is very colorful.

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There is an analogy between physical scenography and 3D CGI. They are both creating illusions in the way that they only have care for the surface of the object, what I will call the *epidermal layer*. In the virtual 3D programs shapes are made up by a mesh, a geometric network consisting of points forming little flat planes, no matter how round an object is, it always comes down to 2D planes. Physical scenography is constructed in a similar way, there is a base material that could be wood, MDF, papier-mâché, taking whatever shape possible. To these shapes an illusory surface is assigned, in 3D CGI it might be a photograph, a scan, or a *texture painting*. The wood and papier-mâché would probably be painted but a photography could also be pasted on to the shape. Both of these medias are hollow in the sense that they are not made up by the matter they pose as. It is more complex than the 2D trompe-l'œil painting where the fiction is revealed with the change of viewpoint, the revelation of the fictionality of the scenographic or digital object instead lies in the hollowness of the object, and the lack of porous matter.

An example of this epidermal layer that lies close to my heart is *Warhammer*, (figure 2 & 37) a hobby and a fantasy war game produced by Games Workshop. One buys plastic miniatures, that is assembled and painted by hand before they can be used in the game, painted like scenography or textured as virtual objects. The three-dimensional surface is to an extent being treated as if it was two-dimensional, with multiple highlights and ink that settles in the recesses the shape is enhanced. This high contrast produces a very special color scheme that reminds me of the paintings by El Greco. One of their really specific paints is called *Nurgles Rot*, it has a greenish tone and is slightly transparent, when it dries up it maintains the gloss and really looks like slime. They are like miniatures of the classical greek statues that in reality were painted. How wrong they got it during the renaissance thinking the greeks preferred the naked marble before a nicely painted surface.

These translations between media interest me, painting and

photography, 2D media, on something three-dimensional, to give the illusion of being real. Like the broken ham in *The Tale of Two Bad Mice*, I like to imagine the inflatable *Stonehenge* (the artwork by Jeremy Deller, figure 18) without air, a world that lost its shape, that is just surface. Making a fabric simulation in a 3D program out of a solid shape, letting it collapse, ending up almost completely flat. The grey mass that makes up the shape does not really give anything, it is like the air in a ballon, it can fall out. After making objects in both actual and virtual reality I ended up finding comfort in the physicality of matter, the perfection of the virtual is first stunning, everything is calculated, shiny as it lacks dust and imperfections, like the commercials for cosmetics that promise eternal youth. But this perfection, far from the physical reality of organic matter, instead makes it slippery, frictionless, and the digital therefore becomes ungraspable. CGI today is so photorealistic that it is almost more real than reality. But floors are never dirty in the IKEA catalogue, unless someone decides to generate all those tiny particles the physical world is made up of. It manages to trick most until it comes to representing nature, nature is too quirky. A perfect sphere cannot physically exist, instead there are almost-spheres, not made up by lines but by atoms and molecules, it is not scaleable, to make it bigger one has to add to it, it is not empty, but full of matter that constitutes its properties and textures. The air cannot fall out of a physical rock. The complexity of physical reality catches me, in all its little folds, lets me rest in them, contrary to the virtual reality which I constantly slide of trying to get ahold of something, trying to penetrate it, but there isn't really anything there except perfect flatness. It might be that our means of simulating another reality are still too primitive and in the future there will be technology that lives up to the complexity of physical reality, connecting directly to our neural system?

For now the digital remains too simple.

## Future?

“Since human beings have been human beings, they have been handling their environment. It is the hand with its opposable thumb that characterizes human existence in the world.”<sup>4</sup> In his essay “The Non-Thing 2” Flusser describes a future scenario, instead of handling people that “grasp” their world with the entire hand we will become fingertip people with *fingertips*

as organs of choice. A change from a world of manufacture to a world that is a preprogramed system within which we no longer are creators but decision makers whose hand has been reduced to the fingertip that only pushes buttons. Through industrialization the worker became alienated, an appendix to the machine, as production moved away from the hands of humans into the mechanics of the machine.<sup>5</sup> Today few people find themselves making things, most are making choices, as we are already swiping and pressing on our smartphones and computers. It is evident that culture is turning more and more towards the slippery virtual with its preprogramed systems and algorithms, and away from making and the immediate experience of matter. What is yet to come is a complete robotization of labour, and with that, possibly an immense alienation, an identity crisis for humanity? What do we become when the hand is no longer defining us, when we no longer grasp the world through our hands, touching matter?

The process described by Flusser is recurrent in the book *Neo-Baroque Aesthetics and Contemporary Entertainment* by Angela Ndalianis. She describes how God, during the Baroque era, was overthrown by humans, as the technological and scientific discoveries and developments changed the worldview, and allowed human creations to awake wonder and magic in the spectator. Ndalianis sees a potential for a similar process happening in our time, but instead of humans overthrowing God it will be technology overthrowing humanity: "In our neo-baroque times, the creation (which has been granted motion and a spirit by the computer) threatens to overthrow the human as Creator: The creation may become Creator."<sup>6</sup> Similar to Flusser's fingertips as organs of choice we have, before us, another proposition that expresses how we will cease to be creators, makers making use of our hands, and become actors in someone else's creation. The algorithms become the creators, and we just make choices, pushing buttons, unable to change the overpowering system.

WHAT CONSEQUENCES DOES THIS HAVE FOR US AS PHYSICAL BEINGS? ARE OUR BODIES RENDERED OBSOLETE IN THE TIME OF THE DIGITAL?

The disconnection from material reality continues, VR (virtual reality) headsets are on the market, Oculus Rift and Playstation 4 VR provide three-dimensional immersive experiences into virtual worlds, worlds made up by digital surfaces, available right in our living rooms. It is so exciting! One can go anywhere, but not fully. Through the current simplicity of the VR headsets only eyes and ears experience, and the virtual world experienced is

itself simplified (the flatness of CGI). We are, after all, more than just a head, the complete detachment of the mind from the body caused by these headset is weird, two eyes floating around in space without hands that can touch the surroundings. What is this experience worth compared to the immediate experience of physical reality, when touching is impossible, when there is no smell? What happens to the soul if it is without its body, can it really be separated from organic matter?

THESE VIEWS OF THE FUTURE TAKE ON QUITE DYSTOPIAN TURNS, HEADING TOWARDS A SEPARATION BETWEEN MIND AND BODY, SUBSTITUTING EXPERIENCE OF FOLDED MATTER WITH FLATTENED REPRESENTATIONS. TAKING MATTER OUT OF OUR HANDS, PUSHING US AWAY FROM THE MATERIALITY THAT WE ARE MADE OF, WHAT HAPPENS THEN TO EXPERIENCE?

A more balanced alternative to the immersive VR perhaps is augmented reality, where reality is enhanced with digital projections into actual space. Virtual and actual surfaces mix, much like the trompe-l'œil paintings that extend rooms and let fictional spaces exist next to the actual. For example Microsoft's Holo Lens, a VR headset that lets news, weather icons or emails be projected into actual space blurring the border of actual and virtual, reality and fiction. There is a similar blur in the game *Pokémon Go*, released in the summer 2016. The player navigates the actual surroundings through a map on the screen of a smartphone looking for Pokémons. When one is close enough it appears on the screen pasted in on the live stream video the camera is recording. The creatures are projected into actual reality, or the device works as a filter that reveals a parallel reality. It is striking how this game physically move people around, in a new kind of reality where spaces of fiction and reality are mixed, a more probable future.

## The Baroque Aesthetics

The epoch that we live in, with its multiple fictional surfaces and versions could be understood as Neo-Baroque, in *Neo-Baroque Aesthetics and Contemporary Entertainment* Angela Ndaljian analyses contemporary entertainment media and finds aesthetic parallels to the 17th century Baroque era, she names our time Neo-Baroque instead of the more negative Postmodern reading of these phenomena. In the illusory special effects, the seriality of blockbusters and theme park rides, and in the labyrinthine structures of computer games the traits become visible. She lets the Baroque be as a transhistorical state, being more or less present throughout time, rather than an epoch.<sup>7</sup>

At this moment a short description of the different traits of the Baroque aesthetics is necessary. The etymological origin of the word Baroque is disputed, but it is believed to come from the Portuguese word *barroco*, that in its turn comes from latin's *veruca*, meaning wart. (figure 1) It was used to refer to the irregularly shaped pearls that were fashionable during the era.<sup>8</sup>

*“The Baroque refers not to an essence but rather to an operative function, to a trait. It endlessly produces folds. It does not invent things: there are all kinds of folds coming from the East, Greek, Roman, Romanesque, Gothic, Classical folds.... Yet the Baroque trait twists and turns its folds, pushing them to infinity, fold over fold, one upon the other.”*<sup>9</sup> In this way Gilles Deleuze begins his monograph *The Fold* on 17th century philosopher Gottfried Willem Leibniz and the Baroque. The Baroque produces infinite series, Leibniz sees a world consisting of infinite series of monads, whose infinitely folded interior each include the entirety of the world from one point of view, these are the subject, the soul. The concept of point of view is therefore important, as it is never limited to a single one, instead the Baroque proposes infinite series of parallel points of view.

As there is an infinite series of monads that express the world there is also an infinite set of possible worlds, in the Baroque God chooses the best one and brings it into existence: the compossible, which is not contrary but parallel to the impossible. In turn, in the Neo-Baroque all the impossible worlds are allowed into existence. The scenario is described in Jorge Luis Borges short story *The Garden of Bifurcating Paths*, where all possible outcomes of an event are accounted for and “each being the point of departure for other bifurcations” which results in “a baroque labyrinth whose infinite series converge or diverge, forming a webbing of time embracing all

possibilities.”<sup>10</sup> In our Neo-Baroque time God becomes a trickster and we are lost in a game without rules.

The Baroque is thus an open form that denies linearity in contrast to the contained Classical system. It promotes instead a multiple set of narratives in labyrinthine structures where the spectator/reader herself gets to navigate and make sense. This seriality creates multiple layers of meaning and view points, and in that sense an instability of truth since versions/viewpoints are endless.

The Baroque also refuses to respect the limits of the frame and invades the space outside. “The term ‘excess’ ‘describes the overcoming of a limit in terms of an exit from a closed system.’”<sup>11</sup> The frame is overwhelmed by matter that infinitely folds as “it does not suffice to contain the mass that spills over and passes above” at times it erases the frame completely in order to blur the spaces of fiction and reality.<sup>12</sup>

Illusionism plays a big role and the act of tricking the spectator is common, but only to the extent that the trick or illusion is eventually revealed and the spectator gets to enjoy the virtue of the technical skill or machinery that created the magic. For example the trompe-l’œil painting with its sharp realism made rooms continue into eternity or the automata that gave the illusion of being alive, another example is the movement of the camera in *Establishing Eden* mentioned above.

In painting the concept of *chiaroscuro* might have been the most significant. The Baroque painters prepared the canvas with a dark color instead of the white previously used. Contrast is high as forms emerge from the background as light hits it, outlines can appear blurred or non existing. (figure 17)

The technological development during this era changed how the world was perceived (maybe we see a similar change caused by technology today?). The invention of telescope and microscope opened up to worlds before unseen and non existent. The Copernican Revolution removed earth from the center of the universe and proposed instead a heliocentric world. The question, according to philosopher Michel Serres reading Leibniz, of where the unmoving point is situated is secondary to however there are any fixed points at all. The Copernican Revolution becomes trivial, “For Leibniz himself, every monad is a fixed point, and no monad is the fixed point”.<sup>13</sup> There is no longer one center. The circle is substituted by the ellipsis.

Technology was not only changing how we understood the world, but also widely applied for entertainment purposes, in the Baroque era the automata was awakening wonder and in the Neo-Baroque it is the special effects in Sci-Fi movies or theme-park rides, or the augmented or virtual reality of the latest entertainment systems that amazes us. (figure 33) “Artists sought to transport their audiences to a higher level of feeling, whether religious or political awe, amusement, astonishment, or terror.” The Baroque is seductive and sensorially engages with the spectator, and in a way spiritual.<sup>14</sup> A new presence of this sensorially engaging Baroque can be seen in the growing use of robots and VR headsets in art installations. The contemporary robot is convincingly looking into your eyes, triggering a sense of empathy. No longer too mechanical, the spirit in the machine seems alive.

The Baroque is an aesthetic that reaches out into infinity, it is rhythmical. Proposing all possible realities, as one travels from fold to fold from monad to monad. Destabilizing truth as all points of view are valid. These traits of the Baroque I will keep with me through out this thesis, as they will apply in many places.

## Scientific Mediation of Nature

### The Glass Flowers

Next to the epidermal layers on digital and scenographic objects there are other ways of creating simulacra. A very fascinating example is a collection of glass flowers, scientific models from the end of the 19th century, on view in Harvard Museum of Natural History, consisting of 847 life size models of 750 different species. (figure 7) These glass flowers were carefully crafted by Leopold and Rudolf Blaschka, father and son, whose techniques showed example of a life-long dedication and virtuosity impossible to replicate.

My respect has been deepened after my own experiences of working with glass, being a material with very high integrity and low plasticity. It prefers to be spherical and has a very specific language. To see the glowing hot glass coming out of the furnace has provided me with one of the deepest connections with matter I have experienced. Despite the difficulty of managing this matter these craftsmen were able to make highly convincing copies of organic things. The glass flowers are—as Lorraine Daston expresses it—a “triumph of form over matter”. The simulacra is so astonishing that it, in some ways, feels superior to nature, crystalized, eternalized. I find excitement in thinking of the complex living cells that make up the actual flower in comparison to the glass molecules. These flowers are not illusory in the same way as the scenography or CG, but of another kind, there is no epidermal layer that contains the illusion, but it is rather the material itself that conveys it, this is probably why they are so successful.

The models were supposed to serve as objects of study that would not decay, dry up, and would be available all year around. For this reason the replicas had to be indistinguishable from the original plant. But as opposed to functional scientific models that capture a general morphology of a species, these ones portrayed extravagant traits of single individual flowers, making them curious objects with a short life as actual scientific models.<sup>15</sup>

### Standardized Working Objects

In *On Exactitude in Science* Jorge Luis Borges describes an empire that wanted to perfect the art of cartography, a map was developed that was as big as the land itself with each point of the map coinciding with the one of the land, the map was as exact as possible, later generations however found

the map useless and they got rid of it.<sup>16</sup> The problem with representation is for it to be practical it implies simplification, in the case of the map reduction of scale and flattening of the landscape is necessary, or the act of showing one single individual of a species from a unique point of view to produce a scientific image. But as we have seen before, when view points change the fictional construct is revealed.

In “The Image of Objectivity” Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison follow the development of the idea of objectivity through atlas imagery. In the 19th century, before the emergence of objectivity, *truth to nature* was the norm, where the ideal representation of an object was favored, meaning not a particular individual of a species was portrayed, rather a composition of the traits the scientist found most recurring. Since this was before the invention of the camera these mediations were painted with very high detail. These illustrations were highly subjective and would later be criticized. With the invention of the camera came the possibility of making representations that would be way more objective, although the quality was poor these images came to be preferred for their mechanic objectivity. But this is not a complete solution to the problem, the choice of what particular individual from a species was to be the representative still remained a subjective choice made by the scientist. Sciences need to deal with the problem of choosing “working objects”, these are for example atlas images, type specimen, the manageable representative of a sector of nature. In immediate reality raw nature is far more diverse and particular, and seldom repeats in an exact manner. So, “the problem of selection deals with which phenomena are key to the essence of things.”, but this is a complicated task because it means one has to generalize, and take a step back from actuality, in order to conceptualize, and step into a space of fiction and simplification.<sup>17</sup>

I WANT TO COMPARE THIS PROCESS TO THE CONTRACTION OF FLOWS INTO THE PERCEPTION OF A SINGLE THING. I RECALL AN IMAGE DRAWN OUT BY MICHEL SERRES IN HIS BOOK GENESIS, A RIVER, A UNITY, THAT IS MADE UP BY THE CONFLUENCES OF TINIER ONES, HE WANTS US TO WALK UPSTREAM, AWAY FROM SYNTHESIS TO REACH THE ORIGIN AND MULTIPLICITY OF STREAMS, AWAY FROM REASON, TOWARDS DOUBT.<sup>18</sup> THE SCIENTIFIC IMAGE TURNS INTO A SCENOGRAPHY, THAT ONLY ENTAILS ONE SIDE OF THE OBJECT, ONLY ONE VERSION, ONE POINT OF VIEW OUT OF THE INFINITE VARIATIONS. WHEN MEDIATING FOR SCIENCE ONE HAS TO GENERALIZE OR CHOOSE AS THE ENTIRETY OF NATURE IS NOT REPRESENTABLE. (EVERYTHING IS COVERED WITH MICROBES!)

## Popular science, Fictionalization and CGI

In science we experience a certain level of fictionalization in order to attain a standardized “working object”, in popular science the level of fiction is even higher. The objects might be subjectively chosen, images are often computer generated, sound effects, narratives and humanization of animals are imposed.

CGI and simulations have made it possible to represent things in a very realistic manner, things that we could not see before because they are long gone or yet to happen, in the same way that the microscope and telescope unlocked objects previously inaccessible because of their scale in the Baroque era. Simulated imagery has made it possible to visualize dinosaurs, reconstructions of the ancient wonders of the world like the *Colossus of Rhodes* and space documentaries about catastrophes yet to come, like the collision of Milky way and Andromeda. (figure 19) When watching them we seem to forget these images are constructed and fictional, as their visual realism is high. It is, after all, recently that the dinosaurs started having feathers, now the feathers have started to be included in the plastic miniatures. To get an idea of the relativity of this type of imagery it is interesting to put different images of for example neurons next to each other in order to see the stylistic choices made by the 3D artist. (Figure 12, 13, 14, 15 & 16)

WE ARE MOVING IN MULTIPLE DIRECTIONS AT THE SAME TIME. EARTH ROTATING AROUND ITS AXIS AND ORBITING THE SUN, THE SUN HAS ITS ORBIT IN MILKY WAY, AND THE MILKY WAY MOVES THROUGH THE UNIVERSE. THERE ARE NO FIXED POINTS. IT IS IMPOSSIBLE TO TAKE ANYTHING FOR TRUTH.

A strong case of fictionalization of nature is the celebrated BBC nature documentaries, through the narration by Sir David Attenborough we are provided with heart touching stories. These sometimes impose a humanization of the animals, together with the cutting of clips and addition of sound it presents a storyline we follow tensely. A newly hatched praying mantis taking its first steps in a dramatic world.<sup>19</sup> In another clip a very moving storyline shows a group of monkeys seemingly grieving the supposed death of a doll robot monkey, when I look at the video again I realize that both the place and the color of the doll changes multiple times, the video is highly edited and the addition of a narration makes it seem linear, possibly telling a story quite far from the actual events, and in a baroque way reality

and fiction are blurred.<sup>20</sup> More like a fable than a nature documentary.

Next to the popular science there are weird hybrids of entertainment shows and nature documentary, I came across one called *Monster Bug Wars*, showing staged brutal gladiator-like combats in-between bizarre terrifying insects, arachnids and myriapods fighting till death in a simulated natural environment.<sup>21</sup> Before the battle, we are informed by entomologists about the strengths and weaknesses of the individuals, accompanied by schemes and glowing virtual renderings of the creatures. (figure 29) The whole spectacle reminds me of the show *Robot Wars*, the aesthetic overall recalls *Discovery Channel* with its loud sound and visual effects. What is here proposed as nature is highly constructed, nature is made to appear monstrous.

## Aesthetics of the Evil

## Sci-fi and Fantasy Monsters

In opposition to the clean and flat virtual surface there is an aesthetic that defies all attempts to be contained, the *aesthetic of the evil*. In this part I want to take a closer look at how evil forces and beings are visually portrayed in fiction. Interestingly enough they are always delivered to us in the form of actual scenography, costume and masks, or as virtual computer generated imagery. There are a number of different forms that play the role of representing evil, but one thing seems to unite them, they are multiplicities rather than unities, and they defy flat surfaces. Evil is horrifying because it does not lend itself to a definition, it is irrational, it refuses to be classified, one cannot put its finger on it, because it is growing, exceeding the frame and crossing borders, dissolving order, corrupting organisms.

Let's go into the specificities looking at a few examples from contemporary horror, Sci-Fi and fantasy. In the space horror film *Event Horizon* (figure 23) a dark geometrical fractal surface covers a spherical portal to hell, it is the dark ornament, jagged and aggressive. A more organic version is H.R. Giger's strange assemblies of skulls and spines in the *Alien* franchise, (figure 30) especially the nests where impregnated people hang on a wall made up by a dark, folded and glossy ornament. This is related to the growing ornament, here evil makes use of trailing vines and branches that explode out in all directions grabbing, suffocating or dragging the victim down towards hell. A good example is *Silent Hill*, where trailing vines come up from the burning abyss of hell in order to pierce the body of a woman, and the Devil snare in *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*. In *The Last Witch Hunter* the Witch Queen always appears surrounded by the same kind of vines, that grab, capture and corrupt its victims. It is interesting to note that even her face is made up by vines and stems, (figure 21) there is no flat even skin, instead she appears like an overgrown statue, or a skinless one.

In a similarly growing way there is a corrupting substance. In *The X-Files* there is an alien virus that moves around in black shiny oil, it finds its way to a host and takes control over it, manifesting its presence through a dark clouding of the eye. (figure 36) More visible is the corruption caused by the green evil magic, *the fel*, in *Warcraft*. Spreading like ink in water it gives the infected individual great strength, but also makes the eyes shine green and causes horns, warts and vines grow out everywhere over the skin.

(figure 25 & 32).

We move from the ornamented surface to the decaying one. The surface that folds becomes a porous surface that opens up. A dissolution of borders, the porous abolishment of the body limit. A great example is *The Nurgle God of decay* and his *Nurgle Daemons* from *Warhammer* with its multiple openings from which guts are hanging out, multiplicity of warts and abscesses filled with pus. (figure 8 & 2) And of course the zombie, probably best portrayed in *The Walking Dead*. (figure 20) Rotten flesh is falling off, guts coming out, there is no skin barrier anymore. This dissolution of skin somehow obliterates order, it is abject and baroque, a mix of inside and outside, of reality and fiction, it erases the frame placing the viewer in a disgusting and exciting chaos.

IT IS DEEPLY DISGUSTING AND DEEPLY TICKLING AT THE SAME TIME, WHY AM I ATTRACTED TO THIS KIND OF AESTHETIC? IS IT AN ESCAPIST MECHANISM TO DWELL IN THESE FOLDS, TRYING TO ESCAPE EMPTINESS? OR IS IT A BAROQUE VERSION OF THE WORLD THAT ACCORDING TO LEIBNIZ IS NEVER EMPTY BUT INFINITELY POROUS? IT SOMEHOW ALLOWS ME TO FLOAT FREELY, TO BE AT PEACE IN AN UNREGULATED SURROUNDING. IT IS SUBLIME.

These folded and porous things and surfaces are paradoxically enough brought to us through virtual CGI or physical scenography, that in its essence is flat, enabling this porous aesthetic to be tamed, contained. Compare Henson's very material universe consisting of puppets and scenography, in *Labyrinth* (figure 26) and *Dark Crystal* with the digitally produced monsters and environments of for example *Warcraft*. (figure 25) The digital remains ungraspable flat and slippery, and the scenographic epidermal layer remains visibly illusory and dusty, obviously fake.

If one looks close it is clear much of the monsters that seemed so other are actually drawn directly from nature. The growing and fractal patterns should not be completely unfamiliar to us as they are everywhere in nature, but it appears that I am more familiar with Sci-Fi than with nature itself. When I first saw the *cordyceps* parasite fungi in a nature documentary I was so struck by the otherness of this being that the only way I could relate to it was through Ridley Scott's *Alien*.<sup>22</sup> (figure 24) The spores of the fungi contaminate the ant and manipulate its brains so it climb up a straw or branch that it bites into, then the ant dies and out of its head a fungi grows. My thought was the same when I discovered that the body fluids of the carnivorous praying mantis were green. (figure 35) One just needs to make

it big and it is ready for fiction, R.L. Stine imagined it in an edition of *Goosebumps*. Neither too far from the gigantic alien insects in *Starship Troopers*. Something I first only believed could belong in the universes of *Mad Max* (figure 11) and the army of *Khorne* in *Warhammer* (figure 37) was the *Acanthaspis petax*, or the assassin bug, that like an ornament of death carries its ant victims on the back.<sup>23</sup> (figure 9) In the end these traits are not as alien as we first might have thought, but an actual part of physical beings and organic matter.

HAS NATURE BECOME UNCANNY? SINCE WE FOR A LONG TIME HAVE BEEN MOVING AWAY FROM IT DO WE NOW LET IT COME BACK TO US AS A COSTUME OF EVIL? WHY HAS THESE PURELY ORGANIC FORMS AND PHENOMENA COME TO REPRESENT EVIL IN SUCH A DIRECT WAY IN ENTERTAINMENT CULTURE? TOWARDS WHAT IS THE REAL FEAR DIRECTED? THE IMMEDIACY OF THE MULTIPLE? THE FACT OF BEING A PHYSICAL BODY THAT WILL DIE AND DECAY? WHY DO WE HAVE TO FICTIONALIZE NATURE? WHY FLATTEN?

## Tree man Trypophobia

There are images too repulsive to look at, more extreme than the mediated horror monsters, images completely opposite to the slick clean computer generated perfect geometry. Warts made up by actual organic matter that is neither tamed nor contained by CGI or scenography. The “Tree Man” suffers from the genetical disease *Epidermodysplasia verruciformis* that allow warts grow uncontrollably from mainly his hands and feet, the warts produces so called cutaneous horns, keratinous skin tumors that take the appearance of horns, corals or wood. Branches and roots seem to constitute the hand instead of fingers and toes, he is the real version of an *Ent*. (figure 31) Looking at the picture visceral reactions are triggered, evoking a crawling sensation in my stomach. It delivers me to a state of emotion hard to grasp, it is sublime. I am again looking at the into the dissolution of all borders, of the body and of reason. It is abject, as one steps out of any kind of order, into chaos. It is exiting, now the feeling is complete because it is a real man on the picture, it is actual organic processes that has produced such shapes. It is the open Baroque form that exceeds all limits transporting me to a higher level of feeling.

A reaction of repulsion makes sense because this is the manifestation of disease and corruption. Wart viruses makes the skin fold, DNA mutates

and become cancerous, make the cell turn evil, spreads through the body like the green magic in *Warcraft*. Then the body dies and decays. THE MAGIC WITH LIVING TISSUE IS THAT IT EVENTUALLY DIES, BECOMES POROUS, EATEN BY LARVAS, DISAPPEARS.

It might be that there is a biological answer to the question of why these things came to be the aesthetic of the evil. The picture of the “Tree Man” is a perfect example of tryphobic imagery, (figure 22) from greek: fear of holes. It refers to a phobia of clusters of holes or bumps. Researches speculate about the possibility of tryphobia having an evolutionary basis. Apparently clusters of holes awake repulsion because they share visual patterns with certain poisonous animals humans learned to avoid in order to survive. They also found that even if one is not diagnosed with the phobia most people find it more uncomfortable to watch this kind of imagery compared to other pictures.<sup>24</sup>

We really seem to have a problem with confining with the materiality of our organic bodies. To accept the decay and corruption that is the natural path of organic matter, an impossibility of understanding our own death? Deleuze describes the complex relation the Baroque soul entertains with the body, “Forever indissociable from the body it [the soul] discovers a vertiginous animality that gets it tangled in the pleats of matter, but also an organic or cerebral humanity (the degree of development) that allows it to rise up, and that will make it ascend over all other folds.”. Gravity is imposed on the matter that constitutes the body as the soul or monad ascends above it in its weightlessness and becomes reasonable, “*independently from its organism, yet inseparable from it*”.<sup>25</sup> The folds of soul are embedded and surrounded by the pleats of matter. The relation is described in the allegory of the Baroque House, consisting of two floors, the lower story is a facade with openings – the material body that receives impressions that resonates in the upper story, that is an enclosed interior decorated with a “drapery diversified by folds” – the soul.<sup>26</sup> A division Deleuze points out in the painting *Burial of Count Orgaz* of El Greco, on the bottom bodies pressed towards each other loaded with the heaviness imposed by gravity, death, above the soul ascends “along a thin fold”.<sup>27</sup> (figure 38)

## Istigkeit

### Fractals and Folds, Cavern within Cavern

In the theory of the fold brought to us by Deleuze, the soul is an infinitely folded interior surrounded by infinitely pleated matter. He writes: "Matter thus offers a texture that is infinitely porous, that is spongy or cavernous without empty parts, since there is always a cavern within the cavern" here we are provided with an opposite to the slippery flat digital void, like a fractal matter seems infinitely porous.<sup>28</sup> This is what makes the immediate experience of matter so valuable for me. Instead of the hollow empty shapes of CGI and scenography we are faced with a landscape in which one can travel for a long time, there are pores, holes, into which one can enter, only to find new ones. In contrast to the slippery epidermal layer on simulated surfaces, where everything that is thrown onto it will drip off immediately as it lacks these kinds of pockets.

A good envision of this property that matter expresses according to Leibniz is the *Mandelbrot set*, as it provides a mathematical visualization of the self-similar fractal, each element contains a smaller version of its own form, like the bifurcations of a tree, into infinity. *Mandelbulb* is a fractal generating software that enables this visualization of equations, these can then be made into video, mostly aimed for YouTube and it is a type of imagery very connected to the psychedelic image culture. A disembodied camera travels through a landscape that constantly redefines its scale, what was a tiny detail becomes an immense architecture which in its turn is filled with small details. (figure 6) Through these equations the Baroque fold reaches its full virtual potential, it goes on into infinity. Although it appears quite similar to CGI it is actually composed by folds or pleats, and not a representation thereof, it has that cavernous property that CG textures can only flatten into illusions.

### Huxley: Doors of Perception

How, in this slippery scenographic contemporary landscape, can we have more immediate experiences of the physical world and matter and regain an acceptance of the bodily and organic?

The English writer and philosopher Aldous Huxley accounts for, in

his essay “Doors of Perception”, the experiences he obtained after the intake of mescaline, a potent psychedelic substance found in a cactus called peyote, traditionally used by native americans in shamanic ceremonies. He finds himself in a state of contemplation, looking at the folded velvet of his pants and the flowers in the vase on his table. When reflecting on the experience he comes to agree with the theory of perception put forward by Bergson,

The suggestion is that the function of the brain and nervous system and sense organs is in the main eliminative and not productive. Each person is at each moment capable of remembering all that has ever happened to him and of perceiving everything that is happening everywhere in the universe. The function of the brain and nervous system is to protect us from being overwhelmed and confused by this mass of largely useless and irrelevant knowledge, by shutting out most of what we should otherwise perceive or remember at any moment, and leaving only that very small and special selection which is likely to be practically useful.<sup>29</sup>

Our experience of reality is according to Bergson already contracted, perception is a synthesis of all flows taken in by the senses, in order for us to have a graspable world.

Deleuze touches on the subject in *The Fold*, “Events are produced in chaos, in a chaotic multiplicity, but only under the condition that a sort of screen intervenes.”<sup>30</sup> Chaos is here an abstraction, inseparable from a screen that makes something emerge from it, the screen is what enables the Many to become the One. It is a black backdrop, the “fucsum subnigrum”, the dark background of the chiaroscuro painting, that in spite of its blackness contains all color. The deep shadows of the folded soul. “From a psychic point of view, chaos would be a universal giddiness, the sum of all possible perceptions being infinitesimal or infinite minute; but the screen would extract differentials that could be integrated in ordered perceptions.”<sup>31</sup> Like the Baroque motive emerges from the dark canvas, the perceptions that are allowed over the threshold of the screen are drawn into clarity and consciousness, out of an infinite ocean of tiny perceptions. The whole world is contained within the folded interior of the monad, but only certain parts are drawn into clarity or are unfolded.

COULD THIS SCREEN BE MADE WIDER? IS THE ELIMINATIVE PROCESS REDUCED DURING THE INTAKE OF PSYCHEDELIC SUBSTANCES?

Huxley does propose that the eliminative process can be slightly lifted as to the intake of mescaline and we can access a wider range of inflow, “of everything that is happening everywhere in the universe”. This statement almost proposes that there is a possibility that the entire monad can be brought into light. “Mescaline raises all colors to a higher power and makes the percipient aware of innumerable fine shades of difference, to which, at ordinary times, he is completely blind.”<sup>32</sup> I come to think of the title of the show by Tauba Auerbach mentioned before, *Tetracromat*, and the animals that perceive the black crow in multiple colors. Huxley goes so far to say that this kind of contemplation he experiences is the ultimate purpose of human life, he sees an “Is-ness”, that he calls *Istigkeit*, quoting Meister Eckhart. I agree with Huxley to the extent that more of this kind of contemplation is needed, as I believe it makes us better at understanding the complex relation between mind and body.

I would propose to classify this kind of experience as an enhanced type of the immediate experience. Opposed to the common state described Flusser in “Line and Surface”, where we find a culture in which we are given only concepts and images and the immediate experience has been rendered obsolete. Instead of actually experiencing nature we live in a kind of scenography, caught in representations and fictionalization of nature, a digital era with virtual worlds, where porous texture is abandoned.

Huxley admits to the impossibility of rendering the immediate experience into any kind of image or concept, talking about the great painters, believing they somehow already could access the enhanced kind of perception he does with mescaline: “They had seen the *Istigkeit*, the allness and infinity of folded cloth and had done their best to render it in paint or stone. Necessarily, of course, without success.”<sup>33</sup> It is the case that line (concepts) and surface (images) never can give justice to nature itself, in its “Is-ness”, to quote Huxley. It is a similar problem the scientists experience when choosing the standardized “working object”, how can they account for all the diversities within a species with only one individual flower? Huxley continues writing about the reductive qualities of language:

Every individual is at once the beneficiary and the victim of the linguistic tradition into which he has been born - the beneficiary inasmuch as language gives access to the accumulated records of other

people's experience, the victim in so far as it confirms him in the belief that reduced awareness is the only awareness and as it bedevils his sense of reality, so that he is all too apt to take his concepts for data, his words for actual things.<sup>34</sup>

and: "...there is something futile, mediocre, even foppish about speech."<sup>35</sup> I wish there was a possibility of sharing my thoughts, in their strange three-dimensional colored shapes they appear to me. But we all think differently and we have to search for words and concepts that can somehow be close to representing them, but with that contraction we fail in conducting deeply nuanced communication. I am not proposing we should get rid of language, it just seems like we are spending way too much time in the realm of concepts and fiction and way too little in the immediate experience, which is like an immense ocean in which we are floating around trying to make sense. The continuous strive for the virtual perfectly flat surfaces is an approach that I believe makes it harder to grasp what it means to be a mind in a body.

## Serres: Unity or Multiple

Let us immerse ourselves deeper into the noisy clamor of multiplicities. Earlier I mentioned the French philosopher Michel Serres and his book *Genesis*. It entails a long human struggle for order, unity and rationality, showing the constant reduction of the multiple into unities and representations, caused by a fear of chaos and multiplicities.

We are now afraid of disorder and the rarely predictable. In fact, we are afraid of multiplicities... The solid is the multiple reduced to the unitary. A concept is a multiple reduced to the unitary. A representation is a multiple reduced to the unitary. Any power is a multiple reduced to the unitary.<sup>36</sup>

This is what the act of choosing the standardized "working object" in science does, it reduces the multiple to the unitary, just like the digital surface simplifies the porous matter into a flat representation. Or the screen that out of the chaotic sea of infinitesimal perceptions drags out ordered perceptions. There is a clear connection between the aesthetics of the evil, made up of multiplicities, and the fear of disorder, noise and chaos described by Serres. Is it the case that fixation with linearity, unity and flatness is what made the folded, porous, detailed, skin of the monster into the evil one? If that would be true our fear of the irregular has robbed us of very much, contemplating the multiple and the aesthetic of the evil in its incalculability is for me a sublime experience.

But at the same time do all the attempts of flattening and of containing multiplicities into unitary forms seem to fail, unities and representations are cracking open:

It would seem that power has the role and function of making people believe that both concept and reason, closure and domination exist, where there is only ever pure multiplicity without any unity. Ruins, monsters and dreams, and time without redundancy - these always come back, in spite of the crude endeavors of these machines to transform the noise and fury into all sorts of order, discourse, harmony, sense of history, architecture. We are ceaselessly trying to repair the not very reliable machinery that is there to make the confused noise gel and the fury crystallize, but the noise exceeds its capacity. The noise is more powerful than its mechanical force. I mean: incalculable. I mean: measureless. It always exceeds the machines' capacity for calculation.<sup>37</sup>

Serres' noise is like the infinitely folded matter that exceeds the frame, explodes it and continues above. This is the most beautiful image of the Baroque for me, the resistance to be contained. And at the same time in the Baroque aesthetics there coexists a strong imposition of flatness on, for example, the Baroque garden, the bush that actually grows has to be constantly cut to be maintained, kept in place, or the flatness of the illusory trompe-l'œil paintings. This is the doubleness of the Neo-Baroque, it endlessly produces folds, it proposes that matter is infinitely porous and therefore exceeds all limits, and within this it produces multiple scenographies and

fictional illusory spaces and surfaces, whose mechanics are allowed to reveal themselves and we find ourselves in a scenographic labyrinth where all versions are coexisting without any fundamental base. It is up to us to navigate and find the narrative of our reality. It is necessary to flatten and contract the immediate experience into lines and surfaces in order to be able to communicate experiences, but we should be aware it is only one version, one point of view out of an infinity of noisy clamor. To, from time to time, dive into the ocean of the roaring multiple might be the most sensible thing we can do. One way of achieving this, I believe, is touching things with our hands, another might be the use of psychedelic substances.

## Conclusion

Contemporary culture introduced a new kind of surface, similar to scenography, the digital surface. Made up by geometries it is completely flat, it holds illusory imagery that tricks the eye to believe it is porous matter. This surface lacks the quality of the folded matter; instead of being able to travel from fold to fold, cavern to cavern, one is being thrown onto a surface that directly rejects the spectator, like liquid thrown on a water repellent material, the drops do not merge into the fabric. (figure 10) The world produced by contemporary culture is like the inflatable Stone Henge, impenetrable and empty of substance.

Reality is made up by images and concepts, it is mediated and in a sense fictionalized. It is a Neo-Baroque system, that allows all worlds into existence, resulting in multiple points of view. Illusions that await their revealing as the subjects continues its movement through the scenographic landscape that lacks any foundation.

Technological development pushes us further into this digital void, making us more isolated from nature than ever. We are becoming fingertip people, we no longer *handle* the world. We are to a big extent lacking the immediate experience of nature and matter - experiences that are less contracted. Alienated from our organic being we fictionalize nature, make it monstrous. It comes back to us as the aesthetic of the evil, made up by growing multiplicities, decaying matter.

What will happen to us, our brains, our body, does the continuous strive for flat glossy worlds make us mentally ill? Does it make it harder to accept cancer, aging, death and the physical decay that is inevitable for organic beings? This development is maybe expected in a society colored by the Cartesian division between mind and body, instead the baroque allegory of the two floors might be a better model, the soul that is independent, but *inseparable* from the body.

It is practical and necessary to simplify and contract, if our brain made every inflow conscious we would find ourselves in complete chaos. In

order to share thoughts and experiences we need it, but it might be good to remember that the noise will always exceed the capacity of the machinery, images and signs crack open. A better balance in between the immediate and the mediated is necessary, spending more time smelling, touching and looking at the porous, multiple matter, instead of the flattened digital and scenographic. Allowing things be complex instead of making them simple, touch what it is we are made of, embrace it, or we will remain little mice desperately smashing plaster food. The multiple, then, appears more exciting.

## Notes

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### Filmography

- Cris Carter, *The X-Files* (1993-2001)
- Frank Darabont, *The Walking Dead* (2010-)
- Breck Eisner, *The Last Witch Hunter* (2015)
- Christophe Gans, *Silent hill* (2006)
- Jim Henson, *Labyrinth* (1986)
- Duncan Jones, *Warcraft* (2016)
- George Miller, *Mad Max: Fury Road* (2015)
- Ridley Scott, *Aliens* (1986)
- Paul Verhoeven, *Starship Troopers* (1997)

## Other

Fantasy War game: Armies of Chaos – *Nurgle* and *Khorne*, *Warhammer age of Sigmar*,  
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