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Flusser's Planet

Extreme Deixis

What is at issue in finding Vilém Flusser's Planet is searching for a habitable zone for criticism. First, I should say more about Flusser (but maybe, considering this venue, not say too much). He is not a systematic thinker. Whether systematic thinking in the sense of *explanatory models that predict future data* is good thing for interpretive disciplines is question he engages deliberately. He is, instead, another late modernist theory-auteur, one steeped in a weirdly ironic and playful amalgam of Heidegger, Wittgenstein, and McLuhan, rushing to the end, skipping any serious engagement with Saussure or structuralism. "Reinvented the wheel, although in an ironical way," as he puts it in a letter, Flusser's concepts were worked out – or, perhaps, I should say worked through or worked over, between the 1960 and 1990, translated and retranslated – in a succession of aphoristic and occasional writings in four languages. Only now are these materials being collated and compiled. Translation is perhaps the formative literary gesture according to Flusser because it accurately expresses the reality of a communicological pluriverse, the inexorable comings and goings of language (310).

The book called *Here* (2010) by Richard McGuire illustrates a post-literary format for grasping a Flusserian literary problem, the extreme deixis of the inhuman communicology needed for finding a habitable planet for criticism, finding *what-here-is* means in terms of display, demonstration, reference, and reflexivity. McGuire's book visualizes a house, images spanning 200 or so years, as it is built, remodeled, and destroyed, lived and died in, hosts various happenings. A location given to human inhabitation and then dislocated into the dimensions of the deep past – prehistory, dinosaurs, continental drift, framed by the earliest moments of cosmic materialization, shown underwater, polluted, radioactive, taken proleptically to very imaginative future limit of the information death of the universe itself. What are we looking at when we look so far back? What the frame is before the window, the mirror, the screen, the fireplace? What is the future of the *way-back-when* right now? The deep time of a corner of a room, its transient inhabitants, scenes, objects, events, referents, accidents, furniture, books, pictures, animals, jokes, sounds, utterances, noises. Does *here* organize a fusion of horizons or

their undoing? Is a given space itself a container for anachronism, forever un-located by global positioning – locating, locating, locating? Is *here* in other words a question of being or a direction for becoming dislocated – for dislocated observation, in other words?

Here is, the book jacket notes, "the story of the corner of a room and of the events that have occurred in that space over the course of hundreds of thousands of years." What kind story is this, then, that exits *storia*? Isn't it necessarily about not being or beings but about becoming and becoming lost in chronic anachronism and negligibility at that? Put a marker under this and let's turn to the problem of the ancestral as posed by Quentin Meillassoux. Meillassoux "defines 'ancestral' [as] any event that is anterior to the emergence of the human species or life on the planet earth." Ancestral is another way of saying *paleo* – the way-back-when. The speculative turn makes a noise about the insignificance of symbolization, language, and epistemology in the face of ancestral objects – the decay of radioactive isotopes, "the accretion of the earth" "4.56 billion years ago," or, consider the inevitable heat-death of the universe, for that matter, but less about the indexicality of gestures made thinkable by seeing and hearing certain inhuman signals by technical means. Without going too deeply into the fevered pitch of the so-called correlationist controversy between being and knowing and its supposed implications for undoing the linguistic turn and so on, I want to re-describe the problem as a legitimacy crisis for the relations between here and there, between now and then.

Does deixis as such – given symbolic form, as a kind of communicological limit finding – have any ancestral import? Is there any sense in thinking here there, in short, by scanning the event horizon as a limit of possible information? Consider this cosmic banality: "what entitles us to make claims about the nature of the universe billions of years prior to the emergence of life or mind?" I take this as one of the main implications of McGuire's fascinating book. The vanishing point, the bent twig, the corner with the dog, the manifold dressing-up, and the dances, are not merely "a retrojection of the past on the basis of the present." "To understand the fossil," Meillassoux writes, "it is necessary to proceed from the present to the past, following a logical order, rather than from the past to the present, following a chronological order" (Meillassoux 2008: 22). Instead of retrojection and arche-fossils – *fossil* from *to dig* and *arche, crypt* – we might think of rather that *Here* demonstrate a logic of an-archeology and projection, to take a page from Vilém Flusser and Siegfried Zielinski. Rather than substances and essences – seeing objects as either perishing or subsisting – Flusser's paleofuturist communicology shifts attention to functions, relations of accidents and their inescapability. *Paleo* – which means something like *Way Back* – shares its etymological dynamism with another Greek root (*Tele*) more commonly associated with his telematic media theory, which means, as Flusser often reminds us, *Far Away. Tele*

and *Paleo* convey deep orientations, making ways to far away space and time respectively. They count among the few concept words transferred from the East – other than those associated with transfers of artefactual objects or sounds that babies make. Far away and way back. Here I want to highlight a continuity with the Benjaminian sense of rescuing the past: don't give up on your desire for a better past is itself a constellation of experiment as aesthetic-intellectual opportunity. "Do not seek the old in new" is Zielinski's way of putting this relation (Zielinski 2008: 3) – seek something new in the old – seek the no in the yes or the reverse. Ground control to Vilém F., I'm hoping to kick humanism, but the planet, it's glowing.

In Other Words

Words can be emptied of meaning. The gesture is familiar on Planet VF. Pick out a word and hammer it to death, and all that remains is the sound. *That that is, is. That that is not, is not. Is that it? It is. That that is, is that that is. Not is not. Is that it? It is. No, it is not.* That the punctuation of words is only a typographic alibi seems to point to something half-remembered about words from before words were words. It reminds us that nothing at all actually resides inside words, a nothing which comprises their very thing-ness and techné. The zero-dimension is what Flusser might it, which he associates with sounds and mathematics. Linguists refer to a phenomenon called "semantic satiation," that a word repeatedly re-peated loses its capacity to carry sense, as if the surfeit of a word overwhelms the febrile linguistic pathways of the brain itself (clogging or clotting invisible modules, as illustrated in the film *Pontypool* [2008], for example). At the end of the day words must come first, even before they are words. Again and again, the concept of the emptied word – clichéd, zombied, worn out, worn thin, ruined, eroded, evacuated, etc. – is not only commonplace but also a resource of literary-theoretical discourse. The uses and abuses of communicological leakage plays a lead role in Flusser's theory of media and his philosophy of language, image and gesture. For Flusser, a gesture manifests. It carries an intention or a direction. Distant from cause and effect, even the most insignificant gestures, reading a book, smok-ing a pipe, shadowboxing, playing a reel-to-reel tape, project variant possibilities for experience and experiment.

Into the Universe of Technical Images (1985) provides a condensed, late statement of his five-runged approach to media-theoretical dimensionality, the scaffolding for so much of his work. Importantly it's a schema that plunges into inhuman deep time – in a four-dimensional, ancestral zone shared with

animals, plants and rocks – and then reaches an apex of sorts in the zero-dimensional computational universe, in which the ladder becomes an algorithm, where it's the human not the ladder that gets thrown away. Compare Wittgenstein: "He must, so to speak, throw away the ladder after he has climbed up it." In other words, the human being is, for Flusser, a temporary side-effect of the interplay between bios and techné, a history that begins in doubtful words (*I doubt, therefore, I am*) and approaches modernity as a diabolical progress where doubting doubt is the endgame of humanism. Disbelieving that the one that thinks is beyond doubt: that's thinking. The void under humanism is the reality of not knowing what fiction is and what it is not.

It's a conceptual ladder of increased affordances in abstraction, storage and processing, and unexpected limitations, setbacks and side-effects. In effect, Flusser writes subtitles for McGuire's semantically satiated images: "If you could make a film of the [...] landscape that covered the millennia of history but compressed them into a convenient half-hour for the comfort of the public, it would show the following story: first, a cold steppe, populated by large ruminant animals migrating northward in spring and southward in the fall, and followed by the beasts of prey, including humans, that hunted them. Then, an ever-denser forest, inhabited by no-longer-nomadic peoples living and working in clearings kept open by the use of stone tools and fire. Then, a basically familiar scene of fields of edible grains, and pastures of edible animals, with occasional forests surviving as sources of newsprint. And if you could project your movie camera into the immediate future, you would see a continent-sized Disneyland full of people working very short weeks because of automation, and trying desperately to amuse themselves so as not to die of boredom." (Flusser 2017: 108)

Quick and dirty, the Flusserian Four are "hands, tools, machines, robots," his somewhat abstruse discourse about dimensionality actually deposits the things across five strata: 4-D, which goes way, way back in muted, deeply inhuman time; 3-D, way back with open hands, grasped tools, pointed sticks, bent branches and piled stones; 2-D, into the Paleolithic echo chamber, the advent of projectivity and aesthetic, shadows, paintings, and reverberations on walls; 1-D, establishing the Neolithic settlement, *pagus* and the plowed field, the co-emergence of writing and cultivation, culture and agriculture, archiving and the crypt (sitting, possessing, and counting possessions) (410). Finally comes the fifth shell, the leap into the zero-dimensionality with the technical image: all that is solid melting into interchangeable variables, non-things, below the surface, secret, algorithmic ministries of hidden metadata.[1] For VF, tech doesn't transform the world, it transforms its dimensions and the meaning of

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[1] In Flusser's famous thesis he carves out five epochs which are differentiated by the techniques of abstraction they can be described in brief as following: four-dimensionality (three space dimensions plus time), in which humans experienced the

world (328).

The idea that Flusser is a thinker of simple dualisms, pitting the image against the word, is procrustean. Kittler, for example, writes that he "suppresses the simple facts [that] the books used most often – the Bible once upon a time, and today more likely the telephone book – are certainly not read in a linear matter" (Kittler 2001: 39). Of course, we now know that the telephone book is simply a redundant portion of the Internet, haphazardly printed out by robots in codex form – as one recent joke has it. Kittler noted that "new media do not make old media obsolete; they assign them other places in the system." In fact, Flusser makes a related point earlier about the ladder of dimensionality, each subtractive step abstracts the gestural legacies of its predecessors, assigning ever more stylized roles and metaphoricity to the successors. Indeed, it's more apt to say in this context that Flusser is a thinker of strata. The Latin word "strata," as Flusser often notes, means levels – as in layers of rock in the ground or superimposed coats of paint – and also shares an etymology with the word strategy in the sense that strategy is something spread out or distributed (Flusser 2011: 96).

Or, broadcast. Flusser leaves us with a stratigraphy of mixed media – assorted interface effects and risk distributions that determine, oblige, and configure concrete research strategies and development projects. When it comes to strategic orientations, the stratigraphic heap is less about broken images for composing private narratives or dramas than surfaces upon which words bob up and down like empty bottles. Devising methodologies amid the detritus resembles what Flusser calls projectivities – projective and project-driven activities across multiple media interfaces – rather than subjectivities. What emerges, as Flusser writes, "will no longer be found in any place or time but [projected in and on] imagined surfaces that absorb geography and history" (Flusser 2011: 4).

And, following Annie Goh (2014), the projection of sound plays an overlooked part in Flusser's stratigraphic thinking. The zero-dimensionality of sound, in particular, the sonic character of technical images, conveys a particular relation between experience and experience moving beyond the impasse of epistemology and ontology. For Flusser, listening is, then, a gesture closer to thinking than seeing. He highlights the "adjustment of the body to an acoustic message" (Flusser 2014a: 113): a finger touching the lip: a hand pressing the face: a gesture informing a surface. In other words, pivots on the auditory experience, the gesture of listening. His short essay on hearing aids plays on the relations between the German word "hören" (listening or hearing) and "Hörigkeit" (or, "devotedness").

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world purely as concrete experience; three-dimensionality, in which humans grasped and formed objects; two-dimensionality, in which humans made images upon surfaces; one-dimensionality, in which pictograms were placed in a sequence and linear writing emerged; and zero-dimensionality, in which mathematics and computational code of "point-elements" emerges.

Audition is a high-fidelity devotion to signal detection, in other words, special attention to social sculpture and its affordances and orientations. Sonic space confronts the human form factor of the long now with the inevitability and utility of a hidden dimension – a subtracted dimension where potential dimensions of experience are not only *not seen* but also *abstracted away*. Archaeo-acoustics, in other words. Flusser explicitly notes the stratigraphic implications: "image does not mix with music," he writes, "rather both are raised to a new level, the audiovisual, which could not realize its meaning until now because of its grounding in earlier levels" (Flusser 2011: 165). As Goh points out, music provides "a situation [...] akin to Flusser's definition of a dialog, [the situation] in which new information is produced" (Goh 2014: 15), rather than discourse, where homogenizing in-mixing occurs. In a short piece from 1965, he describes "electronic music" as "the first step towards the musicalization, that is, concretization, of our reality" into a technical universe (Goh 2014: 15). Yet, it's also clear that for Flusser this step goes along way back – all the way into the void of words themselves and the gesture of grasping onto sounds as the first pieces of invisible matter. In *On Doubt* (1963-6), he suggests that it is the crisis of epistemology that goes all the way back, in effect. *Dubito ergo sum*. Before the thought (*I am a chain of thoughts*) stands the doubt (*my words are only sounds*). A wedge of doubt in the relation between a sound and the certainty of its meaning is not only a reminder that uncertainty already resides in words but also that it got there first.

In this vein, let's examine a famous experiment in the experience of semantic satiation in an action by the artist Josef Beuys. Listening to *ja ja ja ja ja. ne ne ne ne ne*, Beuys' action from 1968 – a half-hour of these words repeated, again and again, over and over – one gets precisely at the idea of layers of semantic satiation. "Mantra-like, monotonous and obsessive." Grueling: Yes yes yes yes yes. No-no-no-no-no. Shades of Don Logan as played by Ben Kingsley in *Sexy Beast* (2001): by the end, *yes* is forced into *no* and, vise-versa, no into yes. I once sat through a thirty-minute paper where the speaker played the Beuys recording as he spoke. During the Q and A, a late arriver asked if the speaker was disturbed by all the chatter in the room. *All that sighing!* What comes to mind is Michel Serres' idea of the parasite – uninvited background noise like animal sounds re-framing the signal through interruption. Eating off of the table; the chatter. Beuys' project – though frequently understood as an approximation of shamanistic incantation – foundering on its supposed bogus appropriation of the authentic voice – was actually described by the artist as something manifestly inauthentic – a stuttering game of "granny gossip," he called it. In English, the recording might be translated in such terms: *ja-ja-ja* as *well-well-well*, ne-ne-ne as *tsk-tsk-tsk*. That gesture of approval and/or disapproval: *Tut-tut-tut*.

Indeed, the title is sometimes rendered 3 x 3 – just 3 jas and 3 nes – as if 5 x 5 were too much to manage, too pentalogically fantastic for any bisymmetrical organism to reckon with. Of course, the individual human body is equipped for 5s, too, 5 fingers on each hand, but that's another form of reckoning. Here, the artist presents us with the problem of multiples, the multiplication of words, and, considering the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, the multiplication of their technical reproduction, multiplied relics multiply remediated through administration and display. In this case, Beuys makes two sets of recordings, the first on one hundred, reel-to-reel tapes from 1968 and the second version on 45s issued two years later. The recordings are encased in felt containers, stacks of felt, the properties of which recall insulation and the muffling of sound, as Beuys has it. The "form recalls," a curator notes, "a 'book safe' where pages are cut out to hide an item—whether firearm, illicit substance or banned text—prompting questions of the contents: is this tape, and the voices recorded on it, being protected, concealed or censored. [...] An inherent contradiction is set up: museological considerations counsel caution over the playing of the tape, so we are dependent on published documentation and unable to let the work 'speak for itself'" (Ward 2005).[2] The emphasis of format and orientation are two important takeaway points from the Beuys piece. *Yeah, yeah* means no; No, no mean *yeah*. The Beuysian relics of strictly analogical materials dream in binary, the computational future of sounds programmed as on-and-off switches. Aurally perceptible signs are, in short, components for linguistic improvisation (202).

The empty word is a kind of zero-dimensional switch. According to one dictionary of idioms, the expression *empty words* has similar connotations with these others: "words without actions," "mere ink on paper," something "not worth the paper it's written/printed on," and even, "All bark, No bite." Cybernetically speaking: All noise, no information. The word *empty* comes from an Old English root that means "at leisure, unoccupied" (*ǣmtig, ǣmetig*) and may also derive from another word for "no, not" (*ā* – a) and a word for "meeting" – or *mōt*. Leisurely not meeting. Fittingly, empty may be connected to *moot* which means something open to debate but in fact functions instead to suggest that debate is closed. Perhaps, this recursive etymology is why moot and mute are so often confused. The empty word brings nothing to the meeting. It arrives at the house of being with nothing to play with but stuttering and code. Moot, moot mute, toggling the on and off switches of meaning. It also is comes programmed for telematics. Jean-Michel Rabaté connects Beuys' performance to the pathos of

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[2] "multiples are the physical vehicle of his ideas; they mark his opposition to easel painting and traditional sculpture, allowing the distribution of his work to an audience beyond the gallery or art museum. Sometimes Beuys's multiples are relics from a performance or action; in other cases they are elaborately planned objects with complex geneses in earlier works.[2] The idea of mass is important: the object talks, travels the world, and stands in for the artist's presence."
http://nga.gov.au/exhibition/softsculpture/Default.cfm?IRN=131285&BioArtistIRN=18600&MnuID=3&ViewID=2

distance. And, Benjamin's version of Pathos, aura, is akin to invisible light, the telematic image. Some Benjaminian lines in a poem by Charles Bernstein come to mind: "an/aphorism by Karl Kraus: *the closer we/look at a word the greater the distance/from which it stares back.*" Go go go go go. Going going gone. Orientation and echo; error correction and audio sculpture; transmission and storage; these concerns go away and come back recursively.

Yes, yes, yes. No, no, no. Even as I type this, my word processor gets confused. It flags an error. *No no – a wavy red line* prompting me to "delete repeated word." It is a pre-programmed no-no. A hyphen disappears it. And, as for no-no-no: the command "Delete repeated word" gets repeated. Grammatically – or just linguistically – there is a problem of recursion. The error doesn't rise to level of grammatical error per se. Those green wavy lines, the function I turn off, denotes a spelling mistake, a mere aesthetic irritant, you may choose to ignore it. The program doesn't know what to do, with or without punctuation, the marks which, as Adorno observes, works something like traffic signals, directions for a U-turn. Semantically, repeated words resemble expletives. We're back to Don Logan – no-no-no-no-no; or Hamlet starting to rave. Logorrhea; logomania. Yet, I wish to underscore another property: recursive-ness: *if you already know what recursion is, just remember what the word means. Or, try asking someone else.* The second word is the echo of the first, a doubling down on the nominative case. Propping up a noun into a name by repeating it: Blah blah. Pizza pizza. Double double. "To reformulate Descartes," writes Flusser, "I have proper names, therefore I am" (Flusser 2014b: 106). Recursion on Planet Flusser begins to leak into syntax, the second word becoming something else, a noun becomes a verb, reverb, verbs verbbing. Words word. Worlds world. Blah-blahs blah. Three words, in other words, in close proximity to one another start to work otherwise, the middle term orients the other two and serves a kind of membrane, an interface effect between and against pleonasm. Making matter matter. Matter mattering matter. Blah-oriented blah. The third word introduces critical redundancy into a pattern of recursivity; the second only indicates ambivalence, whereas the third triangulates or returns coordinates for redirecting communicative traffic. A decision relies on if a word is dialogue or discourse. Hamlet's *words, words, words* is a synecdoche for *a lot of words*. It's the Shakespeare play with the most words, and signals that Hamlet is a big talker. What's the matter? Like Polonius, we want to know? What's the subject? Between whom? Hamlet's communication problem reverberates as an orientation problem among word-sounds. The auto-aggrandizing-connectivity is the ultimate no-no, yes? Against an approach measures for office-oriented-offices, Flusser's tunes us to the click, click, click – gestures of the tactile switches on keyboards. What can they mean?

Hedging Against Catastrophe

Click from Vilém Flusser's Five Favorite Spaces to "Stephen Hawking's Five Favorite Places": Here is the smartest man in the world. A stupid conspiracy theory claimed that he is not really who he says he is. Instead, he's a robot. A doppelgänger, even. This fantasy is probably inspired by the oversized role technological augmentation plays in both living out his life and establishing his celebrity identity. Nevertheless, when it comes to the topic of his genius, more attention is generally devoted to the miraculous feat of publishing one best-seller about black holes than anything in particular he hypothesized about them. Flusser writes about tele-presence as both a mishap and a form of the scalar uncanny. In his last Bochum lectures, he says that the small and the large were coarticulated long before Einstein and Planck:

> The telematic society is a society in which everything that can be automated is automated and everything else is "tele." "Tele-" comes from goal, τέλος (telos). The goal is distant and bringing what's distant closer. The first tele-gadget was the telescope. Telescope translates into German as far seeing or tele-vision. With this optical tube Galileo saw that Jupiter has four moons. I cannot describe the consequences of this television program. It turned out that the same messes are going on in heaven as on Earth. [Kulturkritik III 3b03] Who can still say: "Thy will be done on Earth, as it is in heaven" when things are so terrible in heaven?

Mishap reigns here and everywhere.

The film starts with not the Flusserian submarine but the Hawking wheelchair upgraded for a sleeker, interstellar one-seater, the S.S. Hawking, a fantastic vehicle for Hawking to pilot himself to his five favorite places in the universe. He still controls the "bad boy" – as he calls it at one point – with a few twitches of his face, one of his few remaining operational parts. In the clip, the face is mirrored on multiple screens, sporadically illuminated by various instrumental panels and displays. The face of the Other, according to Levinas, discloses a first philosophical condition – not as a quest for absolute truth per se but as a call for communication. Here is the stranger's inscrutable face. Writ large as cosmic *mise-en-abyme*, a mirror not a window, expressionless, indeed paralyzed, it becomes a synecdoche for communication as a possible interface effect not between the body and the mind but between this face and facing up to stranger things. A weirdly deictic, thematic convergence takes place in the film – as if a face alone zips around the universal extremum cinematographically represented. The premise is highly schematic, spectacularly didactic, morally banal – too expositive to be called narrative, too expositive to be called narrative (does sequence matter anymore?). Is this what realism looks like today?

The ride, phenomenologically speaking, is a bit of a People Mover in the Tomorrowland sort of way – or, any other Disney attraction, for that matter – an illusion of realistic movement jerking around curves past various special effect laden environments, decorative soundscapes and painterly phantasmagoric backgrounds taking occasional pit stops for the superficial homilies mined from a miscellaneous treasure chest of unexamined commonsense. At the end of the spectacle, one blinks, rubs one's eyes and wonders if anything ever moved. It's a journey of a face as a marker for an appeal for funded research made to anonymous publics – goals, purposes, rationales – reconfiguring themselves as a kind of universal psychobiography. This particular aspect – the atrophied mien of Hawking – represents fixity and finitude facing moving things you wouldn't believe. Not: attack ships on fire off the shoulder of Orion, or C-beams glittering near the Tannhäuser Gate. But: diagrams of far-flung cosmological learning. Over there, gigantic black holes acting as massive storage archives for dark matter; closer to home, near the rings of Saturn, sites being marked out for hotdog stands and the inevitability of wild toddlers and drippy soft-serve.

Next, time-drive fully engaged, clocks rewound all the way, as it were, it faces down the first instant in absolute terms – the cosmos poised for inflation. The point of maximum density, Hawking tells us, is also the prime mover of his own life's obsession, to fix the movement before the instant "time flows forward," to find nothing doing in speculative terms. Everything known became known in darkness. On cue, special instruments flicker to life on the dashboard, to indicate that massive production of energy that goes on invisibly, during the first eons that happen before visible light even becomes part of the equation. Indeed, the universe itself – the film underscores this point in a number of ways – acts as a difference engine for the production and storage of data, the given. Our universe is a magnified version of its tinier self, he says, a giant data file in which one element follows the next into the data banks. Moments otherwise lost in time – indeed moments beyond the horizons of any given observer – push at the limits of conceptualization and indeed the limits of graphical visualization itself, leaving assorted communicative impasses as weird, constitutive remainders that literary criticism might begin rescue. Here, I would note the strategic interface between all the data about the particular observer given (his siblings, his diagnosis, etc.) and the impossible destinations where the demiurgical stranger as a given observer wants lead us in terms of hypothesis and speculation.

What I have in mind is a face that works like the white search engine bar space, its blankness seems expectant of an infinite number of query terms, yet it's also all too ready to disclose a hidden archive of minor details, private micro-verses and interior habits and associations of a repetitive singleton. Biography as database. *The white space between [its] details overwhelms whatever significance they were*

supposed to bear, whatever pleasure they were meant to provide (Didion). The particular query terms – the Big Bang, a Black Hole, Gliese 832c, the Rings of Saturn, Santa Barbara, California – are not tourist destinations per se but tethered to particular, unsettlingly mundane biographical ready-mades: Being as, for, and with a search history: news of a terrible medical diagnosis, memories of depression and loss, professional achievements, notable wagers with colleagues, happiness associated with specimen days in sunny California. Four of the five favorite places produce associations of fully realized hermeneutic closure. For example: the singularity designates the primal scene of the cosmos at maximum density – just before inflation confirms the inevitability and redemptive character of imperfection as such; the edge of a black hole shows us not to give up no matter … what; the presence of Saturn not only confirms the fascination of a childhood curiosity, it actually protects the Earth from Jupiter like a bodyguard protects the weak kids from the playground bully. S.S. Hawking's final stop at Cal Tech not only somehow provides a fantastic testimonial for the value of having a particular sweet spot on Earth but also confirms the structuring role of the observer for cosmological inquiry as such. Blue skies fit for theory – as Hawking puts it.

Given all this, the strange skies of Gliese 832c takes on puzzling hue. This exoplanet, discovered in 2009, is, as Hawking claims, the most realistic of the "candidates for habitability" in the nearby galactic neighborhood, a mere "16 light-years from our solar system." Unlike other contenders – burning hellscapes, planet-sized diamonds bombarded by x-rays – it may be the best suited for … picnicking. The idea of picnicking on Gliese 832c is a reminder of Hawking's generic condition: kitchen sink realism. The alien planet he visits is being posited as one our descendants might credibly visit. Its postulated strangeness comes across as a minimal, tourist friendly differences – picturesque sunsets, pools of jellyfish, exotic colored plants, back lit skylines complete with unfamiliar buildings and public transportation. Then, hovering over the alien habitable world, the S.S. Hawking receives some kind of signal, a seemingly intelligible message on the instrumental panel from the surface of the Earth analogue: it might be an opera, perhaps, or an intercepted phone call, or perhaps something more ominous? A telematic arrow shot into space? "It shoots an arrow in the air, described in the words of old European alchemists as an *actio in distans*, with the objective of revealing an unknown friend and enticing him into the circle of friends" (Sloterdijk 2009: 13). The risk that this communique might be hostile is too hot to handle.

It's apt that even with the costs of a computer-generated fantasy this slick – forget the costs of actually travelling to 832c – the best we can do is defer answering. One day we might receive a signal from a planet like this but we should be wary of answering back, Hawking says. A curious cosmological

form of the fort/da comes to the surface – the operation of hide and seek that Freud identifies as central to mental apparatus of child's play. An unanswered telephone calls internalizes what's strange about communication as a situation of structural insufficiency of the self vis-à-vis the cosmos. For Freud, the interpretation of fort/da is obvious. It was related to the great cultural achievement – the instinctual renunciation (that is, the renunciation of instinctual satisfaction) which he had made in allowing his mother to go away without protesting He compensated himself for this, as it were, by himself staging the disappearance and return of the objects within his reach. Staging the disappearance and return of the familiar in the desire face the stranger. Having someone different to talk to is fraught with enormous risk not least the risks of renouncing renunciation; having the final answer might ruin all the suspense. If the alien encounter is truly an endgame, as Hawking has it, the reason he offers is that we must "give up the idea we unique and start acting with more compassion and humility." I'd just like to underscore how fantastically unimaginative it is that the non plus ultra of the human condition sounds suspiciously like the hoariest of platitudes: being nicer? We must love one another or die? Mutual recognition or mutually assured destruction? Let's leave the aliens on hold for a bit.

Face it: the known forms of criticism are only possible in certain habitable zones. Lately, these seem precariously confined to surfaces shrinking precipitously. Professions of critical humility abound, commonsensical, descriptive reading lessons about realism, flat ontologies, the mortifications of theory, etc., are legion. What we need now, we're told, is to get back in queue behind the reluctant non-reader – a more expert empirically-sensitive one, maybe – in front of us, attend only to what is "evident, perceptible, apprehensible . . . what insists on being looked at rather than what we must train ourselves to see through" (Felski 2015: 55). The lynch-pin of this pseudo-reading lesson involves retraining ourselves to want less as we wait in line for alien perspectives. Metonymy shrugs its shoulders. Ditto, metaphor. Given the frequency with which biography punctuates the bogus self-evidentiary pieties of the new realism (not as force that animates sentences but one that rushes matter to assertoric closure) there is every reason to remain skeptical. The face is itself a surface, a surface that provokes surface reading as surely as any text. What's on the face, like what's in the text, seems to solicit a desire for professions of epistemological modesty, for confirmations about the value of spending all our time with bogus realism. It's all right there on the face of it. Nevertheless, the surface is inscrutable, it also wants to be read as something else, hidden, a screen, a search engine bar. What I have in mind is that the Hawking film works as an allegory for a situation we must face up to for criticism at the present time, what Alexander Galloway calls an interface effect (Galloway 2012: 52): The interface, he writes, is an "agitation" or generative friction between different formats, a "fertile nexus between insides and

outsides," across scales, sizes, membranes, formats and platforms (Vilém Flusser's swerve).

Following Merleau-Ponty, it is the composition of common-sense itself – inferentially drawn from one's own senses, the solipsistic conditions of a mind inhabiting a body as its instrument panel to gather data about aliens as well as a rag-bag of other information – that provokes suspicion. The interface between the face and other life = the cosmological-observer-grade sort = remains a first problem for realism in a cosmological context or any other. Everything that lives, sentient, sapient or otherwise – leaves information, reproduces, consumes, and dies – occupying an extremely small habitable zone equipped with special instrumentation – small bubbles of time and space. Nevertheless, the sheer enormity of it all suggests that it's likely that others exist, have existed, will exist. There's the famous paradox of Enrico Fermi – where is everybody? – given the size and age of everything: how come we're not meeting more strangers? If it unlikely we're alone in this vast and varied universe, what does it mean that there is no evidence otherwise? "[T]here are no intelligent beings from outer space on Earth now." Were it technically feasible to span the galaxy – or communicate at a distance, for that matter – it's probable that we'd have gotten wind of it here by now. Michael H. Hart (the astrophysicist) call this Fact A. Fact A may speak to certain phenomenological constraints in the human condition. Encased in our own habitable zones, we are unable to surpass their restraints – physical, biological, ecological, sociological, psychological, instrumentational, as Kim Stanley Robinson has put it – that prevent us from facing up to alien worlds … or to render any realistic accounts of our own. Facing Fact A is in effect another name for facing up to disappointed Realism as a critical condition. It isn't simply a matter of looking and listening better; it also means that the impediments to cosmic-telematics are technically insurmountable in every case. There is Fact A – no Aliens – and there's conclusion that despite the hype machinery of planetary life-boaters like Elon Musk – there is no Plan B: Planet Earth is our only possible home for life-as-we-know-it!

Recently, astrophysicists have considered "the relative probability for the emergence of life as a function of cosmic time?" (Loeb, Batista, Sloan 2016: 2). When it comes to habitable zones as a function of cosmic time, consider the likelihood that we're not latecomers but early responders. The infrastructural constraints – liquid water, the necessary presence of a certain stock house of elements from carbon, oxygen, on up to iron – mean it may not so much be a matter of where life is (where is everybody?) but when (when will everyone show up)? The idea may be that there will be more likelihood in the future and a higher probability of a suitable medium for observer grade life. I prefer medium over infrastructure because it conveys a more understandably communicative sense as a term of art but medium is in its own way point to a workable fit. Medium emphasizes between-ness, what's in

the middle, not what's on the surface, there are other reasons to consider medium as a state of in-between-ness, and still say, in the beginning is the medium. According to Galloway, an interface is an unworkable medium, a medium that no longer mediates. Criticism in an age of might be conceived as an attempt to work through the unworkability of cosmo-realism (Galloway 2012: 52).

Hawking's reluctance to xeno-communicate is difficult to square with his generally good-natured cosmological hubris but this predicament is revealing one. His words: "It's time to commit to finding the answer, to search for life beyond Earth. The Breakthrough initiatives are making that commitment. We are alive. We are intelligent. We must know." This appeal notwithstanding, Hawking's most well-known position aligns alien intelligence with the likelihood of its hostility: If you look at history, contact between humans and less intelligent organisms have often been disastrous from their point of view, and encounters between civilizations with advanced versus primitive technologies have gone badly for the less advanced. A civilization reading one of our messages could be billions of years ahead of us. If so, they will be vastly more powerful, and may not see us as any more valuable than we see bacteria. If aliens ever visit us, I think the outcome would be much as when Christopher Columbus first landed in America, which didn't turn out very well for the American Indians.

The S.S. Hawking's exoplanetary encounter mostly scores a predictable truism of technological solutionism; it's predicable in the sense that it follows a familiar journey of dubious inferences about human natures from weak historical analogy. One might say, it precisely counts as the sort of surface landing on a topic averred by the new realists. Of course, even if it's a minor, micro critique, we are just starting to realize how pluralized our own organisms really are and not incidentally how wrong-headed it is may be to exterminate the non-human life that reside the habitable zones that are (inside) us. The probability that criticism will affect socio-political action elsewhere in the cosmos remains small. The idea that people read and watch things and that affects progress isn't exactly what it was ever about, even if reading here and there occasionally makes us more diplomatic about detecting submerged proclamations about *the cause [word?] of maintaining the earth as an inhabitable place for human beings*.

Tl; dr:

Where is criticism inevitable on Flusser's Planet;

failed messages and their hidden dimensions.

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