

BEFORE AND DURING AND AFTER

Three days' thought on media culture and artificial life

BEFORE AND DURING AND AFTER | Basic Traits of Media Culture

"Boredom is rage spread thin."

The words of theologian and philosopher Paul Tillich mark the 20th century version of an existential agitation building up in etymological form from the *bore* of the 18th century, rising to today's as-of-yet unseen boiling point (or if it is boiling already, we squirm languidly in wonderment of what comes after Baudrillard's orgy). It is no wonder that contemporary use of the word *bore* emerges during the Enlightenment's turn from God towards man and his own self-reflection. *We are the bore*. Kierkegaard's realisation as such aims to purge the evils of humanity made symptomatic by boredom—by way of, first, the creative drive, and later, more finely attenuated by an aesthetic ethics bound in the very ironies of the "leap of faith". Inherently intertwined with Kierkegaard's passion is, as Levinas criticised, a kind of violence which confounds the former's own desire to expunge himself from boredom and pain, and yet, is it not the hyper-paradoxical simultaneity of these emotions that qualify our postmodern existence? The rhetoric of the sublime has wandered into horror, terror, beauty and the banal, made nowhere more apparent than with the very flip of the switch of the television. These are the very traits of our media culture, where "the X into which we actually leap is media, the new god and idol in one which creates anew the globalized world in the Internet age" [Schirmacher]. Media "culture" and technological advancement are the ultimate means for redirecting, sublimating, and making simulation of the boredom of humanity, which pits "progress" as the ultimate aggression.¹ It is the overwhelming power of media to devour and make use of everything, as its great relative Capitalism does as well, such that it becomes both self-regenerating and filter for nothing ('anything goes') and everything (humanity *mediated*). Boredom and rage work well together, as do faith, passion and inspiration. The best of humanity on offer feeds into Schirmacher's *Homo generator*, propagated by way of the flows of creativity (as in letting open, *Gelassenheit*) and control (控制).² This is progress in its ceaseless activity, an orgy and a spectacle and the wake all in one. And then... *what happens next?*

¹ The term *progress* is used in all instances of this essay to describe *movement*, *development* and *flows in time* as such, without recourse or judgement of betterment, improvement, or positive advancement as implied in the traditional sense of the word.

² Unlike the 'purely positive' implication of Deleuze & Guattari's body without organs, in nature, both creativity as *Gelassenheit* and control as 控制 must coexist for life to exist, as in the heart that pumps with valves, *Homo generator* both starts and stops, continually. Bringing together both this essay's use of the word *progress* and another interpretation of *Homo generator*, to use Schirmacher's words on Nietzsche: "movement' is on the contrary the intensification of all opposites and gaps, the elimination of sameness, 'overpowering creativity'". 控制, *kòng zhì*, is Chinese for *control*, the roots of which stem from the characters 手 and 空, as in *hand moving through space*.

BEFORE AND DURING AND AFTER | Unconcealing Artificial Life

What happens next is that artificial life reveals itself by such progress—movement as in what Heidegger calls the "will to will", what Schirmacher further describes as aimless and "consciously anthropomorphic", whereby fulfillment is self-fulfilling and "emergence and its feedback are one and the same". The same is true of media culture and indeed, of culture itself. They are movements at once highly flexible and creative, and thus speak more in terms of *aletheia* than any simple revelation of truth. Artificial life does not appear as a means for or against any objective "real life"; we pass through what passes through us. It reveals itself not before us but behind; the broken glass is just another sound drowned out during the party, its fragments kicked astray under charged and awkward dancers, apparent without begging to be seen. The 'artificial life of the party' is not concealment as such (*those chatting at the bar simply do not notice*), nor does it induce fascination (stillness, *displacing* life) so much as laying bare, not bare or just being there, in the middle of an ongoing process. Maybe the party is good, but this is no state of being, and it shows itself to us only ephemerally, in reflection, amidst the invisible inconsistencies of ritual (not the ritual itself), in anticipation or perhaps the momentary suspension of an event. Its *fascinace* can never be an isolated moment, for it can only exist in relation to the other, shaded under cause or lining affect, relinquishing nihilism after Nietzsche, purposelessness retained in verb format. An adverb, perhaps, it describes as much as *is* being (n. *dwelling* and v. *building*), though takes place in neither. Barthes' asks us to look toward the third, obtuse meaning. The form of artificial life means "the leap is imperceptible, the post-technological horizon goes unnoticed, and the ethical fulfillment behind our backs is barely noticeable" [Schirmacher]. The simple oneness of the four (earth and sky, divinity and mortals) has passed through Heidegger, Deleuze and others, as it has existed in Eastern thought for centuries, but could not be so crass or unwitting as to submit itself to ideological imperative. This is why language is never enough. And it is why humanity has constructed itself as such, for if we could catch up to our own embodiment, objectify all systems and conquer the gods, we would have conquered human existence itself. Is this death, or is it a call to vitalism? Arms flail in the sea, and Vitanza is amazed that the toddler gets up, however imbalanced, after falling to her knees time and again.³ Would the critics of Coleridge sneer and we be comfortingly dismissed back to the 'little' motions of everyday life?⁴ This is the task of media and technology and culture, and as responsible human beings, we forget (*Ha, seduction!*). Were we unable to, every horror and every pain experienced as the newly born would retain itself, excruciating, just as every moment of laughter and joy, but we would never recover. The mirrors of

³ Victor J. Vitanza, Professor of rhetoric and philosophy, Clemson University and European Graduate School.

⁴ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, 1772-1834. Coleridge was dismissed by his critics as mere romantic, a writer without form.

Lacan are as inevitably linked to artificial life as self and world. And forgetfulness is not so much saying no as being able to say yes again. *Are you ready to rule the world?*⁵

BEFORE AND DURING AND AFTER | Thinking, or poised on praxis

The question is one of thought and praxis. *Are you ready* as mental state and thinking preparedness, poised on the precipice of ruling the world, as physical as Genghis Khan and the Mongols, as the Romans or Napoleon or Hitler, as “physical” as the image of the slam of clenched fist on a large fine redwood desk—the symbol of roaring bureaucratic authority, of our contemporary head of state and multinational CEO, of *ruling the world*. Could you rule the world if you were merely *ready* for it? Or do we rule the world already, the world as subjective life framing, existence as Nietzsche’s perception, whereby *to perceive* is “To take something to be true; is to say yes to something”? We rule the world that is created by us, and in this sense, action *is* thought, as much as the pragmatic motions of everyday life come to represent our ways of perceiving the world, our beliefs and, quite simply, who we are. Can thought, therefore, be praxis? Is it enough? Schirmacher asks us whether Rafael would still be an artist without hands, and we wonder if Adorno’s call for self-reflection wasn’t only confirmation for elitist intellectualism deprived of agency. For one to bear agency, the thought must give way to language—to be voiced or acted upon, or channeled in between self and other. And thus, Adorno as writer and musician was a man of agency, but we can never be sure of the accuracy of his darkest thoughts to the breadth of words, intention to action, maintaining the loyalty of thought to praxis. If praxis is the manner in which we operate in and on the world, and we can not yet fully determine the thinking of another (what would be the implications of such technology?), if the possibility for errors in interpretation are too great, should we rule out the efficacy of the ‘practice’ of thinking? We can ask this question in a court of law (motive), in sex (love) and even in death (a life *worth* living). And it seems to go ‘without saying’ that we should not, nor could we; it is in our nature to be thinking human beings. Although the possibilities of technology may have overcome the metaphysical question, it is still quite apparent in society that we have not resolved the praxis of it, of reconciling our relationships as humans to nature, and that is, *our own* nature. This is what *Gelassenheit* speaks to, for it involves “the ‘nature’ of thinking, by looking away from thinking” and allowing theory (as path) to find releasement into/with praxis (as movement) [Schirmacher]. Thinking is not praxis, nor is it “real life” or excuse thereof, but its constancy in life is more than mere relation; Schirmacher claims, “*Sum ergo cogito, not Cogito ergo sum!*” Opening ourselves to the symbiosis of thought and praxis, natural thought and *Gelassenheit* (*letting* as thought, *be* as praxis) is what puts us poised on the precipice of real life and artificial life. As 无为 wú wéi, thought does not stand counter action so much as present itself next to it, or again, maybe behind. This is not to imply a

⁵ *Are you ready to rule the world* is a question of engagement and participation, our obvious subjectivities making it both anthropocentrically true and anthropomorphically ridiculous the notion of ruling the world. It is the “call to culture”, as per Nietzsche: “In a word, a very good word, after the old God has been done away with I am prepared to rule the world...”

certain situatedness, but it is *instaendigkeit*, an in-dwelling made temporal by its fleeting unconcealing. And though we can never fully turn around to see life's fulfillment already there with us all the time, our engagement between thinking and praxis is the attempt to do so. The attempt. Ronell calls it testing, and Schirmacher references again *Homo generator*. Like the recognition of a friend from far in the distance, no more than an abstract shape in subtle motion, we simply know. This is knowledge of Kierkegaard's leaping kind, and to trust our motions between thinking and praxis is the life technique of such leaps.

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