

THE SIGN
WORLD
AND CHASM
WORLD

Monde-Signe et Monde-Gouffre

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Contemporary modes of existence exacerbate a kind of constitutive duality in man. This duality is that which is articulated around what one might refer to as the finite being and the projected being. The finite being is the local being, physical and mortal, which is defined by its limits and its material contingencies. It is this being who suffers and who enjoys. It is the being which walks or runs at a limited speed, jumps to a limited height, and whose voice carries at a limited distance. It is the being which grows tired, gets sick and feels hot or cold. Upon this body-being, the being facing the infinity of the world is superimposed; the being who dreams of being potentially unlimited and eternal (as, supposedly, the world around him). This being has always expressed itself, for example in the social game, political positions, ideals, patriotism, feelings of belonging or beliefs. It is the part of each person that is precipitated into a space that transcends it: the space of sacrifice, of posterity, of community, that is to say the other space or the space of others; in short, the space of elsewhere.

Such articulation is obvious. It has been studied in a thousand ways. What is less so is that which it produces. The current era offers a new context to this duality and makes it toxic. This context, which is so specific, is split. It is illustrated, in the first place, by the advent of a technical era that will soon render possible the expression of a totally synchronous world; one in which each point of the globe will be connected and updatable in “real time” by its positioning in a network; and secondly by what Jean-François Lyotard called the end of the great narratives, typical of the postmodern era we live in, where the discursive meta-structure in which we can inscribe our history is failing. Today, the projected being no longer deploys itself through projects of society, ideals, religions or beliefs. One of the common functions between all these forms was, in fact, the ability to traditionally explain, extend and perpetuate existence beyond the finite being (with the concealed objective of being able to dispose of this same finite being and thus to submit it to its Law). The projected being now thrives less through these transcendent axes in such a way that it synchronizes with the Network to rejoin the stasis of

- 1 Jean-François Lyotard, *Discours, Figure*, Paris, Klincksieck, 1971, p. 155.

the hyper-present, and this, for the sole purpose of finding itself confirmed there at every moment. Let us remember, the projected being dreams of being eternal. Death is no longer a horizon for him. And that is the secret objective: to reassure oneself and hide the horizon of death.

One of the major symptoms of this contemporary toxicity which is instilled in the “finite being/projected being” articulation touches the sensory register, in the sense that it results in the asphyxiation of experiences which are immediate or made immediate, attaining the gradual but irresistible silencing of the finite being. One of the most striking examples, and which for the past decade has constituted a series of miscellaneous news items that have taken place mainly in Asia, is that of young people dying in cyber-cafes, after continuously playing online for days and nights. Their being is projected into the globalized and static synchronous world of the Network, while their forgotten body struggled in silence before finally collapsing due to immobility. Here is an extreme example of the projected being which knows how to silence the finite being until its destruction.

Now, without waiting for such fatal consequences, the same imbalance in the articulation is expressed today for everyone, at any moment. And this, through the overall modification of our relationship to the world and the possible sensory experiences that such a connection either allows or, on the contrary, neutralizes and conceals. Henceforth, what is “allowed” to be felt is that which can be uttered. According to Jean-François Lyotard, “for the animal that speaks, the most spontaneous treatment of perceptual space is writing, i.e. abstraction. Spontaneity leads to the construction of the field as a fragment of a system that ‘speaks’...”¹ However, to utter the world is not exactly to describe it, and this is even more important nowadays.

Because if language can shape, deploy and even sublimate sensations and feelings, and thus intensify our relationship to the world by multiplying nuances, as literature shows, if it can even try to describe the indescribable by building bridges between two words to evoke an intermediate tonality, it also hides and obstructs any possible direct relationship to the world. This obstruction is more and more obvious as language loses its richness and the range of words making it possible to utter the world becomes scarcer. Let there be no misunderstanding: there is a strange relationship between the richness of the vocabulary and the ability to feel. There is, moreover, an affection, qualified as a personality trait and not as a pathology, called alexithymia, which denotes the difficulty of identifying and qualifying one’s emotions. Alexithymia points to the complex relationship established between feeling and formalizing one’s feelings, exposing the fact that not being able to express one’s emotions is already not being able to feel them fully. It remains to be determined if alexithymia is not the preliminary step to generalized anesthesia of the synchronous world.

Because, in the Synchronous Network, it is less important to say than to signal. However, to signal is not to say, and even less to describe. It is not to perform a discourse, but to send a signal and signaling oneself. By producing or responding with standardized protocols and a grid of symbols and pictograms (a heart, a star, a thumbs-up, an emoticon), we share emotion but more important than that, we signal ourselves according to a standardized procedure.

In our reticular contemporary world, that is to say the world where the sense of performance has instilled itself in almost everything thanks to the World Human Network, there is now a trend: we systematically disqualify that which does not make a sign; more precisely, that which is not synchronized. In other words, that which does not make a sign according to a protocol that is simple enough to be used, transmitted and received (here, the technical constraints are not as important as the simplification and formatting of the message itself). Information saturation has led to a second age of the Network – the one where we clock in and out synchronously.

Projected space, the other space in which the being projects itself as infinite and unlimited, is precisely the space that summons the world beyond itself. This signifying outward motion, that goes beyond the local and mortal being, has long been associated with the worlds of the sacred, whose function was precisely to evoke the excess part of the being: the soul, life after or before death, ancestors and descendants, and sometimes the future of societies. However, the wave of modernity and its gradual recession, once the discourse of progress has been delivered, have left behind a foreshore deprived of almost everything that is sacred and mysterious. The territory of the sacred has been left fallow. It has been substituted by a glorification of the present moment through the Synchronous Network. The projected space of the utterable world has been almost entirely reduced to the signaling space, therefore to become ever-synchronous.

On the other hand, if the sensory is subject to the sign in the Synchronous Network, what could be the residual world of the failing sign, where nothing can be said, but everything can be felt, then? In the work of Belgian artist Francis Alÿs entitled *The Nightwatch*, a fox named Bandit is prompted to walk in the National Portrait Gallery at night in London. A parallel world opens up to us when we watch this work. A parallel world where there is no guided tour and where the paintings do not inspire enough interest to give us pause. The gallery sprawls and defines itself once more according to the way Bandit uses it and walks through it: In a certain way, it reveals the fox's own world.

One could simply consider this work as another reminder that every species evolves precisely in its own world, its environment, as Jakob von Uexküll showed more than a century ago. And it is indeed a reminder. Propelling Bandit into a space that can barely be reconfigured

2 Jakob von Uexküll *Milieu animal et milieu humain*, 1934, tr. fr., Paris, Rivages, 2010, p. 71

3 Peter Sloterdijk, *Sphères 1 : Bulles*, 1998, tr. fr., 2002, Paris, Fayard, « Pluriel », p. 522.

into an environment for a fox is an implicitly disturbing reminder of what Uexküll calls the “conventional fable of a universal space². Man, like the animal, does not evolve into a homogeneous universal space but to quote James J. Gibson, into an “environment composed of substances with a greater or lesser substantiality, of a medium –the gaseous atmosphere – and of surfaces that separate the substances from the medium. “In this environment, the human being moves more precisely in his own world, defined by his faculties of perception and the possibilities of his actions and powers. However, one of the specificities of the human being is that he has managed to extend his powers and develop the environment beyond him. This is the meaning of the sentence by Peter Sloterdijk, who writes that “I am not [...], as the current systematists and bio-ideologists think I describe myself, a living creature in its environment; I am a soaring creature with which geniuses create spaces.”³

The world in which Bandit is evolving is no longer completely ours. It is a world abandoned by man, a world without language, or more precisely, a world where our language is absent. And this world is hostile, in the sense that man has no place, because he has no more words. In any case, according to Hofmannsthal, “words are not of this world”, that is to say, they never manage to give a true account of it, but always conceal and reveal it. This backward revelation resonates with the other side of that which is ineffable, which is no longer on the side of the animal, but of that of the contemporary man who has chased the geniuses away and moved them elsewhere to take refuge in the synchronous and eternal hyper-present, the time of the projected being.

In this economy of the hyper-present, there is a polarization of the sensory where language plays a strange game. On the one hand, there is the world of the expressible which is not quite the world of sharing but that of the exchange, or information about one another. It is the world of the community of the utterable, which has become, through accelerating, saturating and dismantling the language, the world of the synchronous dominant sign. On the other hand, there is the ineffable world of impressions, the infra-sensory, and emotions engulfed by the stream of consciousness. There is no opposition in principle between these two poles, which are only other representations of each other, but there is more to observe in the relations to the world, which based on one or the other of these poles and which work against those who pull from the opposite pole. The only possible distinction must be in terms of intensity of life, intensity of experiences, and use of the sensory.

The infra-lucid dynamics (in opposition to the extra-lucid that detects messages from sensory experiences), which explore and recognize the influence of a world that is ineffable (and yet produces affects, rather than signs), are

4 Ibid. p. 71.

5 Paolo Virno, *L'Usage de la vie*, 2015, tr. fr. , Paris, L'Eclat, 2016, p. 11.

both revealing and inspirational. It is a question of delving into these other possible worlds as illustrated by the hybrid world in which Bandit evolves, in order to undermine the sensory and signifying structures which validate this “conventional fable of a universal space”⁴ that is synchronous space. We then need to see “behind the fable”, to use the expression of Michel Foucault, of this space, to delve into the chasm world. Let the silence fall. To reintensify one’s relationship to the world as a finite being and to silence, to a certain extent, the projected being, the social being which constantly replicates experiences in order to live towards a synchronous matrix of narrative. It is no longer a question of reading or uttering the sensory through the Network, it is a question of using it.

For if, as Paolo Virno writes, using does not allow the isolation of the characteristic properties of a being, but identifies its “convenience, (or on the contrary, its resistance), to the current activity”, and if “using is marked from one end to the other by the seal of interest, in the most literal sense of the term: inter-esse, inter-being”⁵, it is through such use of the sensory that a relationship to the rebalanced world can expand.

We are never totally in the world in which we are in. Nor are we in an established environment – neither a purely synchronous dialectic space. We are in a hybrid environment that is always a bit magical, to use von Uexküll’s terminology one last time, that is to say a world where the invisible shows up and where the imagination tries to prevent it as much as it can. We live in a world intersected by lines of force that call and signal towards other worlds. The chasm world, the infra-world, is the one that flourishes between these lines of force. Facing this, the world stands disarmed, static and synchronous.

Two antagonistic poles fight over the sensory experience of the world. One of these poles is synonymous with the pan-signifying and synchronous determination of the world as a constructed world, while the second, on the contrary, signals the sensory concealed beneath the threshold, the infra-sensory. From one pole to the other, all the becomings of the sensory experience, from the terrorizing experience to the anaesthetized over-coded perception, are gradually sprawling. And from one to the other, the double impossibility of language set against the two irreconcilable worlds of signs and chasms dissolves.