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LAB FOR THE UNSTABLE MEDIA

## Angels in Hell

Essay by Stefaan Decostere for "TechnoMorphica," 1997.

A system that would attempt to make a representation of everything that occurs within it, would find itself in a never-ending process of trying to keep pace. If the number of neurons would not increase at the same time, the system would accumulate more and more information in itself, and in the end would have no free energy left, so it would die off mentally. It is exactly the lack of selfrepresentation that could ensure a longer existence. Will the earth soon be populated by androids, immortal because of their renouncement of selfrepresentation, or will they perish beforehand in the struggle about their theoid?

# STEFAAN DECOSTERE

## ANGELS IN HELL – BENJAMIN IN CYBER

### THE 'WIRED' RETURN OF ALLEGORY

*Stefaan Decostere (B) has been producing documentaries for television since 1979. These include productions for Belgian Television BRTN, co-productions for the Barff Centre for the Arts, CBS, Channel Four, INA, NOS, TVE and VPRO. His programmes on video art, dance and technology aim to establish a critical platform for discussing current developments in image, media and technological culture and the impact of media on our daily lives. Since 1990, some of his work for television leads to media installations (tulips for holland\*, World Wide Video Festival, The Hague, 1994; Imperial TV, ZKM Center for Art and Media, Karlsruhe, 1992; @Holyking, Triple X, Amsterdam, 1995). Recently he initiated and curated the weblevent THE PARTY. In the course of 1998 he will in several ways express the theme of resilience and resistance in the media landscape of today.*

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Just as the Baroque poets in the 17th century, the cybers see in transitory technology an allegory for human history, in which the latter appears not as a chain of events, but as death, ruin, catastrophe. That attitude gives allegory a claim beyond mere aesthetic device.

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TechnoMorphica 1997

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Cyber-allegory attempts to preserve a devalued nature by making its very devalued meaning as the sign of its opposite. The destructiveness of its use of allegory is intentional. It bears violent traces of "Evil as such," however only existing in allegory. It means in fact precisely the non-existence of what it represents. Allegories are the absolute vices, as exemplified by tyrants and intriguers. They are not real.

Here "Evil" disappears, but at what cost. Allegory loses everything that was most its own. It "sweeps away" the entire objective world as "lost," and the subject is invited to become its own clone: a human, lost or post, a cyber.

What I criticize cyberism for, is its idealism. I still want to see truth claims to be tied to the material world. What do we do with an existence as advertised by most cyber-magazines, that wants to put an end to our existence?

Here I reconnect with Benjamin, and with Baudelaire, the "poet of allegory" of the nineteenth century. Both were concerned with the pre-modern Christian problem of sin and evil, expressed in the allegorical forms that had been out of literary fashion since the time of the baroque. Nowadays a lot of interpreters are preoccupied with a general return to pre-modern, ethic-religious themes. I want to acknowledge that movement, but at the same time view it from a critical perspective.

Baroque allegory was the mode of perception peculiar to a time of social disruption and protracted war, when human suffering and material ruin were the stuff and substance of historical experience. Hence the return in our own era as a response to the terrifying destructiveness of war and the further annihilation of the human by the virtualists.

In the seventeenth century the debasement of nature had its source in Christianity's confrontation with pagan antiquity. In the nineteenth century the debasement of the "new" nature had its source in the production itself. Nowadays the devaluation of the world of the living turned into its opposite by a kind of technological promise of total renewal and even final replacement.

In the nineteenth century commodity became an abstraction. Today, it is life itself that is being evaluated as something totally irrelevant.

Since long the commodity ceased to be a product controlled by human beings. Now, we ourselves are ready to stop being humans at all, in order to perform better in cyberworld. Before, commodity had a price. Now the Net is near to free of charge, its price being ourselves. Its price is no longer uniquely social value, but human value.

Cyberia produces enormous quantities of allegorical forms of the virtual tomorrow. In this way it expresses what the technological world wants to become, even if it has no understanding of the objective origins of its allegorical status. The proliferation around us of all these hot cyber-wish images, otherwise seemingly flourishing and manifold, assumes the terrible appearance of a desert, with vampires as its inhabitants: the living dead are amongst us.

These image-vampires are a long way from the actual users of the Net, the physical inhabitants of virtual tomorrowland.

Interesting is the tension between advertisement and the allegorical imagery. With advertisement a new kind of ambiance and energy is injected into the commodity. In contrast, the intention of emblems or allegories points back way in time, even in the cold war science-fiction movies. Advertising images still attempt to humanize the products. Whereas the allegories celebrate the coming of the new non-humans, the living dead of the future.

And this brings us back to Hell, precisely the Baroque vision of Hell: a guilty and abandoned nature that can no longer find its meaning fulfilled in itself, plunged into an abyss of arbitrary, transitory meaning, pursued by allegorical intention that is in its desire for knowledge, falling from emblem to emblem, into the bottomless depths.

This goes so far as to affect the personal appearances of all Cyberites: they become their own impresario, playing out roles of techno-heros before a society that already no longer needs real ones.

Paraphrasing Benjamin, the Theatre of Cyber is allegory's courtyard: the material world so disfigured by allegory, that only fragments remain as the object of its contemplation.

The computer wish-images of Cyberia are literally "nature-morte": the allegorical intention has done its work on its martyrs: post-beings celebrating their self-annihilation, translating into attitudes, the hollowness of their inner life.

The first part of this text is very much a transcription of a text by Susan Buck-Morss in "The Dialectics of Seeing" (Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project) especially of her chapter commenting Benjamins Trauerspiel-study: "Historical Nature: Ruin."

There is the old and the new media. Somewhere in between they mirror each other, in a space which is strange and spectral, if not virtual then surely actively imaginary. Here a lot of unwanted reflections appear, true mirror corridors revealing phantasmagorical images of ancient fears and desires. At such moments the old media turn out to be the carriers and emblems of a recent past which they conserve at all cost. Walter Benjamin reminded us of similar acts of revenge from the past. And therefore, isn't it so that fear of technology stems from such misunderstood mischief? And shouldn't we try to heal this by exposing and neutralizing the old media? Angels of the media, both old and new, unite.

## TO BE OR NOT TO BE AN ANGEL

Talking to Johan Pijnappel, at a distance.

Thinking about technology, about "healing & technology," is thinking in two simultaneous movements. One is causal and concerns the effect of technology on our existence: it is a kind of looking ahead: teleological (new times: prophecies) and is ending in the question how far can we go. This is the position of the angel: but, as Virilio says, there is a thin line between being an angel and not being at all. The second is a reversed prospective. Here the question arises how to live after the big change, after the effect has taken place. This is the position of the "living dead."

Somewhere there lies the reason why Benjamin is so relevant today (notwithstanding the fact that the modern now looks totally different from what it looked like then, in his days). It is no coincidence that Benjamin elaborated on the image of the ministering angel.

Above all it has to do with urgency, with the necessity of thinking about technology. Benjamin wrote most of his books with the brown-shirts breathing down his neck.

It is no coincidence that much of the fear of technology can be traced back to fear of totalitarianism, fear of losing our freedom as human individuals and as a species.

Television (very much the medium of post-war generations) is in danger of being swallowed by the new media. Multimedia is the death of television. Nowadays we sometimes feel as if we're next in line. Now we are threatened to be totally absorbed by virtual reality.

The last thing to offer resistance is the I as primordial medium, the body itself. This is why the body is so central to post-modernist thinking.

And maybe this is why, while thinking about technology, I have realized so many productions that have the body as their main theme.

I've made "Body in Ruins" (1987), mainly dealing with the ambiguity between reality and fiction. Or, more specifically, about the body being completely permeated by technology. Its central figure was the "cyborg": it was a kind of genesis, illustrated with scientific demo films and footage from Hollywood science fiction movies. The birth of an Evil Angel. The film ends with a fragment from an other annunciation: the belly of Mary (a film by Godard, Marie); an other birth: a Good Angel. With hindsight, I see here, again, Benjamin's double-sighted angel.

To this production was added a short sequence in 1990: "Digital Dreams." In "Body in Ruins" Scott Fisher appeared, introducing "virtual reality" (a first on European television, I think). Three years later virtual reality had become cover page news. The time had come for the great parodists: on one side psychedelics like Timothy Leary and on the other side cynical mimeticists like Arthur Kroker and Bruce Sterling. There was a lot of laughter. This is a form of healing too, but a short-lived one. Timothy Leary has since died, but just not on the Net - he just barely missed becoming an angel. And Arthur Kroker then started to lose himself in his role of pathetic clown: a kind of self-transcended post-modernist; a kind of update, or, in his own words, a recombinant-angel of evil.

Then there is the production "Lessons in Modesty" (1995). Here we took a very sober stance, as innocent as little angels. It is not for nothing that a little girl delivers half of the commentary. We went to the Mecca of new technology - Silicon Valley - as well as to future-realized: San Francisco and Las Vegas. Now that the future has come to pass, what did we look like, we wondered?

And disillusionment was not far ahead. In San Francisco we felt the paradoxical situation of the city as existing simultaneously in two times: that of new technology (like the Gulf War, a tele-distant war) and that of the stalled reality (like the war in former Yugoslavia, just as real). The second disillusionment awaited us in Las Vegas. We realized that if we wanted to know what life in cyberspace looked like, we shouldn't wait for the realization of Neuromancer's matrix, but simply had to go to Las Vegas. "Las Vegas, Las Vegas" sighs the girl in off-screen commentary. "My life for you." For a minute we played with Stephen King's dream in his novel "The Stand," where people who dream the evil dream end up in Las Vegas. The fallen angels come to Las Vegas to be cured: here they are literally delivered from all the surplus affluent society has brought them.

Hence again the relevancy of this discussion topic: healing and technology.

To go to Las Vegas, to this absolute techno-machine in the middle of the nowhere of this desert, is reminiscent of a generally experienced feeling of delocalization. We are torn out of context, on our way to somewhere, anywhere.

In Las Vegas you behave like a survivor: you play the part of earth immigrant in a real-time science-fiction drama: this is cyberspace realized. Here you are reduced to an absolute user, to the black pointer of the mouse on the flat surfaces of the city functioning as computer software on a screen. Everything here is "on demand." You are constantly confronted by programmers and all street signs, icons and billboards function as a 3D user manual. If you don't behave like a user here, you'll quickly end up in the trash can. The comparisons city-computer and human-user are here amplified by mega-numbers. This transcends metaphor, but we'll discuss that later.

In "Lessons in Modesty" we suggested we really needed to all work together for a new profile of human. If we want to be happy in cyberspace, we'll have to undergo treatment, urgently. We quoted from a number of books by M. Scott Peck, such as "The Road Less Traveled: A New Psychology for Spiritual Growth" and from "The World Waiting to be Born." These are text books on the "civility reborn," with supportive words of praise on the cover from Al Gore, the father of the electronic highway: "Dr Peck gives us powerful new reasons for hope and confidence and our personal ability to change ourselves and our world." First class help with life, available all over the world in airport bookshops. Literally: for people in transit.

The idea for an addition to "Lessons in Modesty" was born: Messages from the Vivarium, a series of six short programs on the abundant offerings of help with life and new age therapies. Heal thyself. The episode titles are self-explanatory: "How to Create Your Own Utopia" (with sufi-anarchist Hakim Bey, a.k.a. Peter Lamborn Wilson), "How to Become a Better Person" (with political philosopher Philippe van Parijs), "How to become God" (with cyber/new age publicist Kevin Kelly), "How to survive" (with marketing advisor Olivier Badot), "How to escape dependency" (with psychologist-metablicist J.H. van den Berg). The series were concluded in Amsterdam with the installation "@holysing": a sort of sanctification of King Boudewijn. With hindsight a tip of the head to the books on life help from the seventeenth century, especially those by Balthasar Graciàn. This Jesuit summed up his life rules as follows: "In short, become a saint." "Santo, sano et sabio": holy, healthy and wise.

And this survival trip again brings us real close to the statute of the angel.

Healing & Technology. Or: become an angel. The question is, what kind of angel? Virilio warns us against being an angel. Among angels as well you find collaborators and partisans. He is in favor of a fight here and now. "Being here," he says, "is one of the greatest philosophical questions of our times, as we live in times where the possibility of total absorption is very real. After all we are experiencing an acceleration, away from our environment, away from ourselves, away from others and eventually away from democracy." <sup>1</sup>

1. Interview by Catherine David with Paul Virilio, "The Dark Spot," Documenta-Documents 1, 1996.

The many dozens of techno magazines and lifestyle publications on the other hand offer a true mirror gallery of angel statutes that propagate the ultimate absorption. And this is where I return to eurofascism and Benjamin. Dean MacCannel sums up the similarities: the death wish, the attack on the truth principle, the feeling of living in an infinite now on the moment of the end of times, the nostalgia for primitive life, an instrumental schizophrenic behavior on a cultural level, a cherished feeling of "ennui," interspersed with moments of euphoric exuberance. For Benjamin, fascism does not see salvation in saying the masses are right, but in showing the masses how to express themselves.

Hence this enormous come-back of the body. Benjamin sees politics as founded first and foremost on control and the presentation of bodies, and on the willingness of everyone to mimic these gestures and poses.

Today we read that detachment from reality (and therefore from the reality of your own body) will eventually allow virtual reality to become reality, even if this implies that we have to turn our backs to reality forever. We are therefore part of a generation that openly propagates the end of humanity as we know it. This is a first. For them, healing is obviously already old news. While awaiting this offered "happy ending" the well-founded fear and uncertainty about our existence are slowly being transformed to the world of phantasms, visualizations and mirror images of our future others who today we still regard with some amazement and somewhat questioningly, in search of possible points of recognition, dislike, recuperation or transcendancy.

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Works

Lessons in Modesty



'Lessons in Modesty' (1995) is a feature film by Stefaan Decostere, also known under its Dutch title 'Lessen in bescheidenheid'.



People and Organizations

Stefaan Decostere