

electronic mediations

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6. *Writings*

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5. *Bodies in Technology*

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4. *Cyberculture*

Pierre Lévy

3. *What's the Matter with the Internet?*

Mark Poster

2. *High Technē: Art and Technology*

from the Machine Aesthetic to the Posthuman

R. L. Rutsky

1. *Digital Sensations: Space, Identity, and
Embodiment in Virtual Reality*

Ken Hillis

w r i t i n g s

V i l é m F l u s s e r

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The theoretical space to be designed in this manner is a school (a place of leisure), because all work (all transformation of relational fields) is mechanized and relegated to the subhuman. But it is not a classical school of contemplation. It is much more a laboratory for formal experiments, for *sperimentazione mentale*; for it is a space for the processing of intrahuman relationships, for the concretization of possibilities inherent in these relationships. The new civilization should no longer identify humans as individuals with masks or in masks. Instead, using creative accumulation, it should project the specifically human out of these intrahuman relationships. Thus, we can talk about the “death” of science, politics, and the human subject, but only in the way we talk about the butterfly in terms of the death of larvae. A city designed in this manner is that place where the sincere human breaks out of the subject.

Contradictory Tendencies

If one considers the proposed, hastily thrown out, and not very thorough (rough) sketch of a city to be designed, one is impressed with two contradictory aspects. On the one hand, the sketch appears to be a completely unrealizable fantastic dream of someone who hovers outside the social fabric. On the other hand, it appears to be a projection of tendencies that can already be observed in this fabric. This contradiction is characteristic of the current situation. If we extend these contemporary tendencies into the immediate future, then very different scenarios play themselves out and all of them are fantastic. But, whoever does not dream, and instead wants to keep both feet planted firmly on the ground (whoever has no desire to project himself) is doomed to minimizing or misreading the majority of these apparent tendencies. Closing one’s eyes is not the recommended attitude for realists. On the other hand, whoever is prepared to accept these apparent tendencies will be led into a world of fantasy. The proposed sketch for a city to be designed is a fantastic dream. It was born from a desire to be engaged in creativity and for others. And thus, it is more realistic than the scenarios provided by pessimists—among other things, for the curious reason that reality is now becoming recognizable as fantasy.

(1988)

Humanizations

The fact that today the human genus (“Homo”) is represented by only one human species (“Homo sapiens sapiens”) is curious. It is worthy of attention, and it should be kept in mind while we consider everything that concerns the human. So important is this fact that we should dedicate an essay to it. You might object that there is a second human species (the Abominable Snowman, whose taxonomic classification I unfortunately do not know). I will throw your objection back at you, because this species has not been scientifically verified (“yeti” is not a recognized zoological classification). We do not recognize the Snowman as one of us (do not recognize him at all), because we abhor him, and, supposing he exists, his feelings are probably mutual. Perhaps you will not willingly accept my objection to your objection, because you will correctly acknowledge that two species of the same genus necessarily abhor each other. How else would it be possible to explain that they would perform sexual intercourse only out of perversity and that, in case they did follow through with it, they would only produce sterile crossbreeds? So, you see, my dear Volker, that with our little squabble, which is really rather harmless, we have already arrived at the issue at hand.¹

In order to show you how to approach this issue, allow me to present an example that suggests itself, the “dog.” According to what I know, people are arguing over the question whether the family dog (“*canis familiaris*”) is indeed a unique species, or whether he is not rather another breed of the species “*canis lupus*” (wolf), or whether there is perhaps something of the “*canis aureus*” (northern jackal) in the mix. This is a serious argument, because, on the one hand, the Paleolithic drawings

representing dogs show some similarity to jackals and, on the other hand, the jackal's jaw is differentiated so much from the wolf's jaw that we are required to consider wolves and jackals as separate species. The position of the family dog in the zoological hierarchy (dog dignity) is problematic, because it questions the criteria according to which this hierarchy is built. Thus, cannot the same be said about the position of the family man (about human dignity)? But, for now, I beg you to consider the dog.

As you see, there are breeds of dogs. Actually, this is not a zoological matter, because all the breeds are members of the same genotype. They enjoy mating with one another and, unfortunately, they produce fertile offspring. But dog breeds are very different from one another: The Tibetan bloodhound does not at all look like it would be able to mate with a Chihuahua. But, believe me, it can do it. And, supposing the little Chihuahua-hound (the word itself howls) survives, she will produce more offspring. According to some unreliable biological laws (namely, Mendel's), one should be able to tell from these canine offspring whether wolves, jackals, or merely dogs are in the mix. For, according to statistical principles, these sorts of wild crossings would have to make the genetic makeup (the genotype) apparent (through phenotyping). Unfortunately, this is not always the case: one does not know in advance what the result of this sort of miscegenation will be. Most likely, a mutt. But, perhaps, a superdog with a super Chihuahua sister. That is just how it is with statistical principles: one has to be ready for surprises. But please do not jump to conclusions—this alone does not explain racism among people. It is not true that Aryans do not want to mate with Zulus because they are afraid that a superman, a stupid, Greek-speaking beast will be the result. It is also not true that Aryans do not want to mate with Zulus. On the contrary, racism can only be explained when one takes for granted that both Aryans and Zulus want to mate with each other. But, continue to consider the dog.

There is a large superfamily of canoids. It is comparable (if, for dubious reasons, you are keen on hearing about humans) to the family of anthropoids. In this superfamily, there are several families, among them the canids. This is comparable, if it pleases you, to the hominids. Within this family, the one that interests us is the genus "canis," just as among the hominids, it is the genus "Homo." This genus "canis" is currently represented by many different species, for example, wolves and jackals, which I already mentioned, but also foxes, the foxlike *Otocyons* and the wolflike *Lycaons*. There is archaeological evidence of entire series of other species, but they are extinct. If you are searching for an analogy to humans, you

will hopefully become a little dizzy. Currently, the genus "Homo" has only "Homo sapiens sapiens" as its representative, and all the other species (whether there is archaeological evidence or not) are extinct. This seems simple enough: with us the whole issue is a lot less complex than with dogs. If, however, we look at the issue at hand a little more closely, this turns out to be wrong.

"Homo sapiens sapiens" is most likely younger than "canis familiaris." Long before there were houses, previous human species must have kept family dogs. Thus, we could assume that such a young species (a mere forty thousand years old) can provide evidence whether it is real or just a fake, and whether this pompous "sapiens sapiens" is not rather a mix of different varieties. There are researchers who believe that they are able to point to Neanderthal characteristics in our ancestors and in ourselves (and others who consider the Abominable Snowman, whom I mentioned earlier, to be a variation of the Neanderthals), but, of course, none of this is dependable. The uniqueness of the human species is questionable precisely because there is only one species in the human genus.

But this cannot be the reason why your head turns. You have tried to imagine how you would react if you were suddenly confronted by someone who was a different species than you. If "Homo sapiens sapiens" is analogous to "canis familiaris," what would happen if you were confronted by someone analogous to "canis aureus" (about "canis vulpes" a little later). Would you be able to recognize in "Aureus"-Man a different way of being human, or would your humanism turn out to be sapientism? According to the researchers I mentioned, you share some similarities with Aureus. For example, Aureus-Man would most likely possess one or a few sound-based languages, but the sounds would be shaped differently than ours. The vocal sounds would be even more radically different from our vowels than the clicking sounds of the African languages, and even these are sapient sounds. If you had heard these Aureus sounds, would you try to decipher them, or would it not even dawn on you to look for a semantic dimension behind them? In any case, it is a dizzying proposition, for it shows just how irrational it is to look for "intelligent life in the universe." The intelligence of Aureus-Man, who is so closely related to you, is already inaccessible to you. What we call "intelligence" is something that we can decipher (*inter-legere* = reading between the lines). To us, there is no intelligence other than our own (the "sapiens"), because we only decipher our own a bit, and all other forms of intelligence are nothing but approaches to ours. I must admit that this makes me sad.

Now, to "canis vulpes." The fox finds itself in a different relation to this

problem than does the wolf, and not only because one cannot say "man is a fox to man," but most of all, because its nasal passages do not lead to a sinus cavity. If they did, foxes would, without question, be like dogs. Thus, one has to put them aside and really say "vulpes vulpes" instead of "canis vulpes." Considering this, if you, my dear Volker, were confronted by Vulpes-Man, then not only his vocal sounds, but perhaps even the vocal cords that articulate these sounds would be different from your own. It is enough to turn one's head, because this is not only a question of language, but also of different systems of communication. Let us put it this way (in order to be decent): if you were confronted by a female Aureus, then you would be able to have intercourse with her without a problem, but it might not work out with a female Vulpes on account of her vulva. But, with a little mutual effort, which goes without saying, it might still work out. In any case, the experience would, as they say in Chinese mythology, not be something that could be denied.

Enough of dogs. It has now become clear why I have tried to convince you of the importance of an essay concerning humanizations. It can neither be assumed nor completely accepted that there is only one human species. Or, that a whole range of possibilities will not open up to us, to become human and thus to become ever more specialized. I have been entertaining you with a lot of ridiculous zoological nonsense, to take the sting of pathos out of the whole issue. This is exactly what is so sad about this issue: that there is something about humanization that seems to lead us directly into pathos. Do we want to remove the pathos from humanization? Do we want to attempt it without pathos? Do we want to go from family dog to family man and, from there, to somewhere else? We shall find out where.

First Warm-up Exercise

One can do gymnastic exercises with perspective. For example, just imagine Darwin inviting Heraclitus to dinner. Having learned from him, Darwin would most likely demonstrate how to look through being, to get a view of becoming. Darwin would show that every animal can be seen as the representative of a species. Viewed from this perspective, the specific is revealed by means of the characteristic. Then he would show that behind the specific there are ever more general forms that become visible (such as genera, families, classes, and phyla) and that this chain, where every category contains the one that came before and will be contained by those that come after, ultimately disappears in the fog of an originary moment that dates back billions of years. Lastly, he would show that a

tendency toward growth, toward branching, and toward becoming will emerge from the fog of this originary moment and that this tendency points to every single animal to come. Darwin would probably say that, by practicing this perspective, one recognizes that every animal is a transitional, transitory, and vague extraction from a stream, which flows out of the original molecular cell, to form an unimaginable ocean of life in the future. With a guilty smile, Darwin would perhaps add to this that he unfortunately has only a human eye. Thus, the stream that he sees seems to move in the direction of man and then beyond him in the direction of superman. Darwin would probably say that we are dealing with the kind of perspective where all animal life is seen in terms of humanization.

At this point in the conversation, a misanthropic Heraclitus would most likely wave off these Darwinian gymnastic exercises. In response, Darwin could retreat from his original position a little out of respect for his teacher and master: certainly, the human perspective is just one among the many possible (perhaps infinite) perspectives concerning the becoming of life. With the human perspective, the animal kingdom is considered to be a branching stream whose goal is to produce men and, beyond them, supermen. Yet, every other animal can (or must) recognize the goal of evolution in its own species, even though, according to a human perspective, evolution has passed this animal by and left it in the dust. Viewed from the human perspective, all animals are either precursors of man (assuming they occupy a position in the stream before it branches off toward mankind) or a cul-de-sac (assuming they occupy a position where the stream has branched away from mankind). For example, worms and reptiles show similarities to human embryos in the different, preliminary stages of their development, whereas insects and mollusks are seen as deviant, degenerate humans. From the worm's perspective, the human is a degenerate worm. From the insect's perspective, the human would be recognized as a monstrous deviation from insect development. And, perhaps, from the chimpanzee's perspective, the human would be considered to be a chimpanzee embryo, an underdeveloped chimpanzee who still lacks certain specializations.

Still, Heraclitus would not let himself be convinced by this. He would probably say that the Darwinian perspective is not Heraclitean at all. It does not see becoming, but rather a diverse branching out of forms that leaves the single concrete animal untouched. What does it matter to the worm if it originates from a single-cell organism and that vertebrates and insects will later develop from it? It only matters to the worm that, as a concrete thing, it is a becoming in the direction of dust. Moreover, this

dust, which the worm will become, itself is a becoming in the direction of something else. When Heraclitus looks at a man, he does not see the (or an) evolutionary peak, but rather a becoming without an end, a changing from one thing into another. On one stretch of this road of becoming, it is possible to speak of humanization, but only in the sense that it is also possible to speak in the next breath about the dustification of man. All in all, Heraclitus does not completely understand these gymnastic exercises of the Darwinian perspective. How is it possible that Darwin recognizes such strongly differentiated forms as species and such a rigid hierarchy of larger and emptier forms in the swiftly moving stream of the becoming of life? Are the forms not rather phantoms, which Darwin projects behind the animals, in order to veil this becoming and its shapeless weaving? If one considers the worm to be a preliminary step in the direction of humanization, does one do this in order to hide the wormification of man, his death?

Now that we have reached this point in the conversation, it is polite to let these two esteemed men take their dinners and direct their gaze elsewhere; that is, where beings attempt to become other than what they are, including becoming human. For example, there is the story of the prince who becomes a frog to become a prince again, or a god who becomes a swan to seduce a woman. We require a different sort of gymnastic exercises with perspective than those provided by Darwin or Heraclitus. Thus, we will be able to see the prince-to-be behind the frog and the degenerate God behind the swan. But we are so unpracticed in this way of seeing that we are unable to recognize this sort of becoming. If, however, someone speaks about humanization, then we will have to practice it. And not only because the Jewish God became man, to change man, and because this humanization—in comparison to numerous others, especially the Hindu—significantly influences our Western being, but also because the desire to become different (to become a “new” man) in one or another form has since typified Western history. Viewed from this perspective, “humanization” is an inconclusive process and, perhaps, an unending one. Thus, “man” is not the name of a situation (like a species of mammal), but rather, a horizon that cannot be reached, a limit.

In Darwin’s view, this gymnastic exercise with perspective is a somersault, but, in Heraclitus’s view, it is something less acrobatic. On Darwin’s side, it is hard to see how someone can want to become something else, or even how someone can want to become at all. Everything is becoming, and there is nothing to want. Becoming is a spontaneous, aleatory process pieced together by trial and error: everything became something by

chance, and it will also become something else by chance. On Heraclitus’s side, the exercise of identifying desire is simpler to carry out. It is possible to see that becoming and wanting something are synonymous (just as the English “it will” is synonymous with the German “es wird”). Thus, becoming is synonymous with the will (for example, the will to power). Moreover, this somersault from Heraclitus to Nietzsche can be directed back to Darwin by taking a detour through Schopenhauer. But, one has to view it from this perspective: Behind every animal, one sees a will; “It” wants behind all animals and through all animals, and one calls this desiring “It” life. On the human being’s side, this “It” wants to be human, and inside a man it wants to be something else (a superman).

However, this trick to simplify the somersault of perspective cannot be recommended. In doing so, one does not necessarily arrive at a Christian or Marxist view of humanization, where it does not matter that “It” wants to be human, but that “someone” (God or man himself) wants this. In comparison, the somersault of perspective from Heraclitus via Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, and Darwin to this particular essay distances the observer from the Christian and Marxist perspective instead of bringing him closer. If one wants insight into this desire for becoming human, one should direct one’s gaze inward. If such a transition is successful, a completely new landscape becomes visible to the observer, which is to say, one where it is apparent what “being human” has meant. A view of this landscape reveals that one cannot desire anything other than wanting to be different. Moreover, it reveals that “being human” means wanting to become human in the first place. This view of mankind must have been ingrained in a misanthrope such as Heraclitus, and it enabled him to first see the becoming. Thus, it is appropriate that he—the one who saw the becoming of fire—is called the “Dark One.”

The inwardly directed gaze makes apparent why the Jewish God became man: out of pity for man who can no longer be what he is. It makes apparent why, according to the Marxist perspective, man changes the world to change himself: out of disgust for himself and his own actions. In addition, this inwardly directed gaze, which is forced to see what being human implies, is able to see in humanization nothing other than the justified suicide of being human. After Auschwitz and its consequences, nothing else is possible. It is a dark gaze that foresees this humanization, but it is a perspective where the light of a completely different being human shimmers as a distant possibility on the horizon. The attitude represented by this perspective is not “death and becoming,” and also not “death, becoming, death, becoming,” but rather, “becoming

in the consciousness of dying." This sort of experiment commences with this perspective, even though it is questionable whether this perspective can be maintained, or whether anything at all will be maintained, particularly when it is not a matter of maintaining anything but of throwing everything into becoming. It is a matter of rejecting our present being human and of projecting into humanization(s).

Second Warm-up Exercise

In case "human" is defined as the mammal who, despite biological rules, stores and distributes acquired information—that is, in case "human" is defined as a no-more-animal—then humanization is the storage and distribution of acquired information. In this manner, one could say about humanization that it is the method of progressively making a mammal into a no-more-animal. The more someone is human and the less someone is animal, the more acquired information he stores and distributes; and, thus, "animal" and "human" are the two horizons between which humanization happens. This is a more radical statement than it seems at first glance, for it means that both "animal" and "human" are located outside the process of humanization. The animal organism with the genus "Homo" must possess the proper organizational structure, especially the proper central nervous system, and must also already be somewhat of a no-more-animal, so that the storage and transmission of acquired information in the sense of humanization can commence. For example, the organs necessary for speech must already be in place and connected to the brain in such a way that some kind of language can be acquired, stored, and distributed. On the other hand, a human should be considered an absolute no-more-animal only when all animal functions have been crossed out and his being has begun to concentrate on nothing other than the acquisition, storage, and distribution of information. Certainly, this line of reasoning leads to absurd conclusions. For example, all animals in general (including the protozoa) are to be considered somewhat of a no-more-animal, because the stirrings of humanization must be present in them. This is absurd, because then *animal* is synonymous with "somewhat of a no-more-animal," and it would then be better to give up the word *animal* in favor of "capacity for humanization." This can be thought about in the context of the abortion debate: if it should be forbidden to abort human embryos, because they are somewhat of a no-more-animal, then the eating of red meat and the purification of water with the goal of eliminating amoebas should also be forbidden.

The opposite line of reasoning leads to even more absurd conclusions.

If "human" is defined as the result of humanization and no longer as an animal caught up in humanization, then everything that we have previously called "human" is a hybrid at best. And, the systems for the processing of information, which have become increasingly immaterial, are then more human than the humans who built them. Thus, the question is not (as the free spirits suggest) the extent to which such systems threaten being human—because they mechanically simulate it—but, on the contrary, to what degree half-baked man-animals simulate these systems, to advance just a little in the direction of the "human."

After all, both of these absurd conclusions are not so new as they seem. In Hinduism, the first one is seriously accepted, whereas in Angelology it is the second. Nevertheless, the respective conclusions make clear that we are dutifully bound to animals and immaterial spirits in an absurd fashion, because neither animals nor immaterial spirits can exist; rather, only extrapolations of our being human can exist. This can be seen in the present text, which is itself an attempt at humanization.

Third Warm-up Exercise

It was not so long ago that one spoke of the "missing link." This was the circumstance where the seamless transition from anthropoids into hominoids and from these into humans lacked satisfactory evidence. The circumstance was in itself not very interesting, because seamless transitions from one genus into another often lack satisfactory evidence, not only because they depend on fossils, but in particular because species (and therefore genera) originate in punctuated moments, through mutations. This circumstance garnered interest because of the hope that research would be falsified, the missing link would not be discovered, and thus the theory that there is an abyss (even a small one) separating man from the animal kingdom would continue to be tenable. Currently, no one speaks anymore of the missing link, not because it was found, but because the problem of man's position inside or outside the animal kingdom is no longer interesting. Meanwhile, belief in the fact that we "evolved from apes" has become part of a healthy mind, which says little about either healthy minds or apes. Instead, we should begin busting our heads over the next missing link, which is to say, the one from contemporary into future humans. For we are seeing the new man of the future surface in different places (even if our view may be hazy), but we are not gaining insight into the thing that binds us to him, or whether there is anything at all that binds us to him.

There is the so-called little Brain Man.² It is an attempt to represent in

images how the brain perceives its body and how it directs it on the basis of this perception. This is a curious and ridiculous and terrible little man. One recognizes in him everything that makes up a human body, but in completely distorted proportions. Above all, one recognizes the grotesquely exaggerated size of the tongue, the penis, and the right thumb—as if the rest of the body served as a support for these three organs. If one thinks this thing over, however, one realizes that the brain actually sees the body better than the mirror; for it almost directly experiences the body and it serves the body and makes use of it with the utmost attention to detail. If the little Brain Man has been drawn properly, then one must assume that his proportions are more correct than those we see in the mirror. This is how we appear “functionally” (that is, factually): equipped with such tongues, penises, and thumbs. Indeed, all anthropologies should begin with this image of man.

Reflection gives us an idea of the little Brain Man belonging to the new man of the future, just as he is beginning to surface in different places. It is possible that his body is visible in a mirror similar to ours (this is the reason why we do not always recognize him as the new man). Yet, his little Brain Man must look completely different than ours. For example, his tongue will be noticeably smaller than ours, for he will not have the need to speak as much (he will instead communicate digitally). No doubt his right thumb will be negligible in comparison to ours, because everything will be immaterial and he will not manipulate material objects as much. As far as his penis is concerned, the whole issue of cybersex and chemically induced orgasms is difficult to make out. Perhaps other organs will replace most of the functionality of the penis, and they will therefore be more prominent in the little Brain Man of the future. The biggest difference will be in the fingertips. The fingertips, which will touch the keyboard, will doubtless be the most important organs, and it will become apparent that the purpose of the Brain Man’s entire body will be to support the fingertips.

If one compares both of these little men, ours with the men of the future, one finds oneself before a tremendous abyss, wider and deeper than the one that separated our fathers from chimpanzees or the one that separated our medieval fathers from angels. How does someone like us, Tongue-Thumb Man, associate with Fingertip Man—and that he must do, for is he not his father? He cannot speak to him, because his tongue would move in a manner disgusting to Fingertip Men with their fine fingertip feeling. He also cannot point his thumb or index finger at him, because the new man of the future would consider such brutal gestures

to be subhuman. On the other hand, Tongue-Thumb Man cannot decipher the tripping along of fingertips on the keys of the new man’s future apparatuses. And, where this is possible—such as when the tripping along appears as an image on the screen—he is still incapable of properly responding to the messages sent to him by Fingertip Man. This is played down as “generational incommunicability” to give the impression that it has always been like this.

Until recently, there was the hope that we would not find the missing link between us and our past, so that we would be able to worship an un-historical image of man. Now there is the hope that we will not find the missing link between us and the future, so that we will not have to deal with what is to come. Both hopes are absolutely justified, and yet, the first one has been dropped from the table. Eventually, the second one will also be dropped, because the cute little Brain Man of the future is already here. As we sit in our recliners with our legs outstretched, he crawls across our television screens like a little buffoon. We should begin busting our heads over the “missing link” between him and us.

(1990)

Notes by the Editor

1. Volker Rapsch, Vilém Flusser’s German editor for many years, to whom this text is dedicated.
2. The “little Brain Man” is a virtual map of the human body as perceived by the brain. Neurologists have drawn it to demonstrate the different intensities of various body functions.