Jiří Maha:
Forgetting and infrastructure

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More than fifteen years ago, Bruce Sterling (2005) predicted that history would be the business of tomorrow.

Environment

The deep past, expected to be inherited, passed on, and remembered, has been forgotten and set aside. This is not to say that partial losses of meaning hadn't taken place before, but never had the past been torn apart and exteriorised in a way that would force us to fix it, to such a degree that it became all-encompassing. Through the rationalisation of random traces, imprints of previous frameworks and forgotten-from-consciousness yet deeply entrenched narratives, we have lost the sense of the possibility of forgetting. What we take on is only a determined, protocolary experience to which we are blind. What has been forgotten is the risk of forgetting; what remains is the conviction that the nature of the instant narrative is absolute. Similar fixations grow into the possibility (or rather the probability) of a lack of understanding tending towards anxiety and pretence, rather than a misunderstanding, which is connected to creativity and curiosity but also to forgetting in a specific form and how we admit this forgetting to ourselves.

We have given preference to the *past future* over the *future past*. This transformation, which is not a real historical milestone but only a model milestone; this ritually compensatory gesture meant not only resigning the future, but also accepting the absence of history as a given, and therefore also ceasing to care for; disposing of care for history. A memory of any picture of the past future is no longer sufficient or relevant. The designed future circumvents us, eludes us, and leaves behind traces of catastrophes not experienced from which we are forced to flee; to search for a way out. All

that's left is the immobile present, a pure structure with the fragmented illusion of the possibility of choice: duration without progression. This algorithmic experience is a reality in which, that which is to come should come, and that which has departed should have departed; a utopia without mystery. A utopia without adventures. An immutable utopia.

The universal value of today is escape. This escapism is a running-off in all directions, concentrically. It is a non-directed yet shared entropic reaction to the constantly reminding gravitational field of infrastructurally managed history – the history that does not belong to us, that we pass over, but in which we repeatedly encounter each other. The escape is, in this case, a necessary lottery in our search for infrastructural heritage. The heritage found is not defined as a place on a map but rather as the absence of this map, and forms a redefinition of what it means to forget. Such a utopia is a process, a meticulous method, and a transitional tool between a moment and duration. In this light, we must rework the historiographic method so that we are able to use it to respond to the algorithmically designed past through a procedurally experienced future. Its universal metric is the absence of a goal.

Naming Convention

1. Stream

We describe any duration without structure as a stream; an infinite stream of (post)phenomenological impulses perceived by both human and non-human sensitivity. Describing it would be more akin to an additive register, but a complete register is impossible. The end can never see as far as the beginning. The stream is operationalised in four possible ways: FIFO, FILO, LIFO, LILO. The stream is the domain of dialogue.

2. Sequence

We describe as a sequence a minimal segment of time, a temporal object, *i.e.*, a localisable stream of reality created during its operationalisation. We find here the seeds of prehistoric structures. The sequence can therefore also be merely a fragment of these structures, or composed of a single item. The sequence is the domain of salvage.

3. Protocol

Protocol is a cultural register, a codified narrative composed of sequences. Its essence is the desire to reduce constantly high levels of uncertainty. Protocol is the domain of storytelling.

4. Micro-utopia

We describe as a micro-utopia any cyclical protocol, *i.e.*, a protocol that is realised repeatedly. Every decision to repeat this cycle causes a certain loss in the original meaning encoded in the protocol. The micro-utopia thus allows for the creation of new branches of the original stream. The new branches are either overloaded or unused. In both cases, in principle they are blind, which leads to a situation in which forgetting is a temporary, paradoxically creative process connecting the past and the future. Both temporal objects – the past and the future – are defined in parallel by this process. Both are therefore the result of the integration of various inputs into a single synthesising output (that is mirrored in its doubling). The micro-utopia does not last, the micro-utopia is merely a methodological decision on the form of the cycle's realisation. It does not exist as a thing in itself. The micro-utopia is the domain of the write-up of documentation.

Default Configuration

In its own way, reverse engineering is a form of dialogue. It takes place through a quadrilateral negotiation. On one hand, there are abstract models (circular, rectangular, linear...), while on the other hand, we have their specific applications and definite decisions. In the case of applications, we must ask about their mutual bonds. What causes a circle to have corners, for instance? In the case of decisions, we can then ask which model was applied to which situation and why. Asking about the place and time is the third party in the dialogue – relationships with the exterior. The fourth party in the dialogue is the record-keeping, aye, even apophenic role – it walks through the gardens of fragmentary findings and moderates their interpretation. The tool used to crack the problem of the validity of the applied models is sequential prototyping.

The spear or magical staff of today is the operationalised sequence. This is a sequence that has an identifiable beginning, end, and trigger point. Such a sequence arises from accumulated fragments that – even randomly at times – create a micro-narrative loop that amplifies our agency in the world. A larger number of such causally connected fragments generally creates a more intense

effect and a greater degree of satisfaction. Through a single trigger, one sequence can therefore leap from one shore to the other without getting its feet wet in the stream of complexity. The sequence also provides the perpendicular vector of movement and produces the seeds of non-transparent stagnation.

The manager is a tragic hero in a narrative he himself narrates and forms variations of but which he did not write. It is a story about wild complexity and his heroic performance in its reduction. The more heroes like that we have, the easier it becomes to surround and starve this prey. Too many heroes, however, allows the prey to disappear within the disorder of the crowd. Each of them hopes for their own success. This creates a space for substitutive narratives, for fairy-tales about magic, magicians, and castles in the air.

Sustainability is a process that demands another type of narrative. Narratives that repeat without stagnation. Their perpendicular movement is not hidden from the sight of the observer who stands on the shore. As Ursula K. Le Guin (2020) writes, such narratives must be written with the logic of the gatherer rather than that of the hunter. In this case, however, the gatherer is more of a collector. Unlike the gatherer, the collector has at his disposal a form of fetish that helps him refine his taste as he augments his collection. For him, every fragment stored has the value of a new beginning. This is why collectors are only interested in such fragments that are simultaneously sequences. They ascribe the highest value for single-item sequences, known as a singleton. Such collectors' items become an entirely new application framework to the collector, from within which he can approach his entire collection.
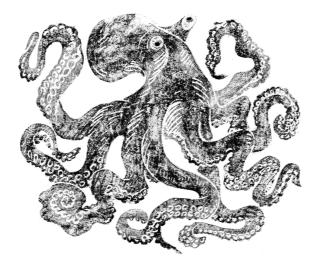
Documentation

Baudrillard's "final solution" – the extermination of the negative by a surplus of reality, ultra-reality – describes the incapability of the imagination and of utopian thought to compensate for the (technological) conditions of today's reality (Baudrillard, 2001). Stiegler's "symbolic misery" (Stiegler, 2014) describes the progress and consequences of this Baudrillardian transparency. There is no space here for utopia as paramount referent, nor for symbolic exchange, which is a process that envelops and connects these referents. The task of today, according to these thinkers, is to search for such a manner of thought that is capable not only of opposing this reality but also of conjuring up, creating, and caring for a new reality. According to Wendy Chun (2004), however, Baudrillard is, in a sense, wrong when he speaks of the absolute

transparency powered by the computational apparatus. Technologically distributed reality might seem transparent, the reality on offer overloads us, but how it does so, what this computational apparatus is, this invisible infrastructure in the background, and how it functions, how it's composed and maintained, that is, to a large extent, hidden, as it is ignored by one side and not fully documented by the other. This is why any thought attempting to describe this invisible layer is condemned to the thinking of extreme phenomena. And it is, primarily, the most boring extreme: the problem of common sense, which cannot see through this transparency. Common sense surfs the wave of the matter of course. Baudrillard's prophecy about the disappearance of reality and the very masking of this disappearance is thus more appropriate applied to the skeuomorphic ideology of software and the procedural rhetoric of (reusable, encapsulated) black boxes of object-oriented programming that together, in their "naturalness", successfully mask the complex reality of the infrastructural layer. The critique of technologically conditioned reality slips along that smooth, immediate and self-evident plane imbued with affordances, which is created and consumed separately from the considerably more complex background. Here, software is the "histrionic form of narrative" described by Easterling (2016). Software contains not only a certain unconfessed promise of ideology – it also offers us a tool of ideological critique, as Chun emphasises. And today, this critique must be infrastructural. Adopting Bogost's procedural rhetoric (Bogost, 2010), an affective representation based on rules that appear natural to software, provides us with a promising method of not only describing in reverse this masked background, but also of operationalising this reversed description. A critique which is simultaneously software is a *productive* critique. Software is a model of the *pharmakon* Stiegler dreamed of, an active poison with an untapped potential for healing.

The end of the 1980s saw the conclusion of a historical phase of development in the foundations of object-oriented programming, which is today the most dominant paradigm in the field of programming languages. This paradigm defines several elementary principles (*e.g.*, abstraction, encapsulation, inheritance) that are not only properties of the individual languages but are primarily a motivation to change our thinking about programming as such in relation to labour efficiency (reusability) and the capacity of programming languages to describe the world (object). This time also saw the creation of description and modelling languages, which, just like programming languages, follow a comprehensive set of rules and mechanisms, but unlike programming languages are not executable. Their primary aim is to provide humanly

comprehensible descriptions and the visualisation of systems, or a model of the execution of the code itself. In a sense, they capture procedural rhetoric.

If the ruin of the present is a monument reminding us of the last transformation, the event during which the symbolic broke free of its foundation, when content became code, when the language of the foundation was forgotten and the symbolic flew apart entropically in all directions, the resultant vacuum can only be filled when we embrace the new language and learn not only to speak it (symbolicism), but also to write it (foundation). Only then can we decipher the monument.

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Jiří Maha currently spends his time designing and developing educational tools at the Institute for the Study of Totalitarian Regimes. In his theoretical research he explores the interaction of design, technology and society. In 2016, he graduated from the Faculty of Arts, Charles University in Prague with a work about the writings of Gilbert Simondon. He has also attended the studio course of Jiří Kovanda at the Faculty of Art and Design at Jan Evangelista Purkyně University in Ústí nad Labem (2010). He has exhibited in the Fotograf Gallery in Prague, at the Brno House of Arts or in the gallery Magazin in Vienna.