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GATORS IN THE BAYOU

What Have we Lost in Disenchantment?

The scene has become too standard to draw anybody's attention. Your aircraft has just touched down, and while the flight attendant tries her best to sound personably corporate as she expresses the "warm wish" of being "the first to welcome you into" the city where you now are (a bit as if she had been waiting there all along), the passengers sitting to your left and to your right, after hours of dire abstention, activate their cellular phones. They will announce, to spouses, friends, or drivers who they know are waiting for them in the airport building, what the latter have most likely just seen on a screen over their heads: that the one flight whose number they remember has now arrived, and that its passengers will be at a certain gate in a few minutes more or in a few minutes less, depending on the taxiing situation. A few minutes earlier or a few minutes later indeed, while the now safely arrived passenger is waiting with his spouse, friend, or driver for the luggage (if he is old-fashioned enough to ever check his luggage), he will make further phone calls to whoever, among spouses, friends, drivers, and co-workers, has not come to the airport. And once the former passenger is sitting in the car that will bring him to his downtown office or to his suburban home, there are always some more people left who need to be called and notified about further arrival and meeting times. This is all very rational and saves infinite time indeed, in particular time for more phone calls. For the use of cellular phones has greatly reduced randomness in the planning and execution of the private and professional

everyday by allowing our minds, constantly and quite literally, to be miles ahead of our bodies.

Or think of e-mail. I am sitting in my office, being compensated by the University minute after minute, as I talk to my doctoral students, in a half hour rhythm, about their dissertation plans and dissertation chapters, and while I try to concentrate on their concerns, some familiar movements on the screen of my computer (and a little symbolic sound that goes with them) tell me that I should rather pay attention to all the messages coming in – coming in from next door offices, from the East Coast and the Middle West, from a European late afternoon (during the California morning), or from a Japanese early morning (during the California late afternoon). Sometimes I feel a pleasant vertigo thinking how divinely omnipresent we have become as we are attending to all the disembodied information that e-mail messages provide. In our office existence at least, we are now liberated from body inertia and from the time demands and financial investments that traveling in space (or even pre-cellular telephone calls) used to impose upon us. So we continue to accumulate time bits and to save them on imaginary accounts that we always forget to access. Like those two gorgeous young couples that I saw on a balmy Friday night in Rio de Janeiro, sitting at a table of a beach restaurant in Botafogo, one of the fancier neighborhoods of the city, trying hard to spend together the time and the money that they had saved over the week. At some point of the evening, all four of them were talking, individually and separately, on their cellphones to people somewhere else, and there were only a few moments, during the entire evening, when all of them were able to participate jointly in the conversation around their table.

Distance learning, the learning of the future, so I am told, will offer students endlessly cheaper ways of “talking” to professors than those old-fashioned office hours, and my Botafogo memory seems to suggest that

the same logic will soon regulate most of the new generations' weekend sociability. Sometimes I anticipate the nostalgia of the day when seminars with students and a professor sitting around a table will have definitively become an academic scenery of the past. In such moments I actively believe that discussions around a table must have something that electronic information exchange will never be able to replace. But if you think about it, seriously, it is hard if not impossible to pinpoint what exactly our intellectual loss will be, while the large economic (and by deduction even political) argument in favor of distance learning cannot be overlooked in an age of ever rising expenses for education. It cannot be overlooked, like that chillingly realistic prediction that human sex and human procreation will part and become completely separated indeed within a few decades. Who would want to argue against sex being finally and forever freed from the fear of unintended pregnancy? Who would dare to speak up, above all, against removing the disadvantage of childbearing from women's lives, and against the promise that in-vitro fertilization and extra-corporeal "pregnancy" will minimize, up to a hitherto utopian degree, all kinds of genetic and health risks for the children to be born?

By now you have understood that the common denominator of these present and future scenarios is the very strong feeling, a feeling that increasingly threatens to become the dominant and nagging background noise of my everyday, the feeling that I would prefer to live in a world without cellular phones, without e-mail (above all), in a world where people could continue to sit around a table while they have discussions and while they eat. I will even admit that I would rather live in a world where some forms of sex and procreation could stay associated.

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But is there anything more to my feeling than a nostalgia of times irreversibly gone, a nostalgia typical of a fifty-seven year old man who, even within his own generation, seems to be quite eccentric for his lack of enthusiasm and for an even greater lack of talent when it comes to playing with present-day technology? Can I at least explain more precisely what I think I have lost? And is there a way to reason that even those who adore cellular phones and are very excited about the prospect of in-vitro fertilization should be more apprehensive about some possible consequences of these technologies?

What all the situations about which I am complaining so loudly have in common is an ever growing separation between, on the one side, bodies and things that our minds are perceiving and experiencing and, on the other side, the location of our own bodies as the basis of our minds' perception and experience. It is a growing spatial distance between our own bodies and other bodies or things that produces the impression of a growing existential distance between our own bodies and our own minds. We can refer to this situation as a loss of "immediacy" or as a loss of "presence."¹ But what would be wrong with a loss of immediacy or presence?

To say that our bodies "belong to" ("have to be in") the proximity of whatever our minds are experiencing would only make more obvious the unbearable, somehow petit-bourgeois rigidity (not to say claustrophilia) of any cosmology in whose name one can "rightfully" complain about a loss of immediacy and presence. Should we then not simply be grateful for at least three existential improvements that modern communication

¹I have extensively discussed the conditions and consequences of using the word "presence" in similar contexts in my book: *Production of Presence. What Meaning Cannot Convey*. Stanford 2004.

technologies have conquered for us, precisely by reducing the importance of immediacy and presence? In the first place, the range of those phenomena and situations that we can perceive and on which we can thus have an impact at any given moment has exponentially grown. This implies, in the second place, that we have much more control over what is happening in our environment and are in an incomparably better position to protect ourselves individually and as a species against the potential threats of this environment (think only of early warning systems based on meteorological observation). Thirdly, some technologies enable us to save money and resources that we would otherwise have to invest to buy the privilege of exposing ourselves to certain forms and objects of experience (among others, this is the one powerful argument in favor of distance learning). Thanks to new technologies the world (and “world” does not exclusively refer to the planet Earth here) has been transformed into an overwhelmingly complex potential that is constantly at our reach.

Everything that I have invoked so far (and most of what I ever complain about) can of course be described as “effects of disenchantment,” very much in the sense in which Max Weber’s famous argument about disenchantment has forever linked this notion to a certain vision of the “process of Modernity.”² More precisely, “disenchantment” (“Entzauberung”) for Weber, is part of a typology of different legitimations of behavior that spans between the extreme poles of “rationality” and “magic.” Rational legitimations will above all try to show that certain forms of behavior (and from the perspective of rationality most forms of behavior would appear to be “actions,” i.e. purpose-guided forms of behavior) are geared towards goals and purposes (“motivations”) to be reached in the

²Weber has suggested and constantly complexified this association in some of his most important texts. See the excellent entry “Entzauberung,” by Walter M. Sprondel in the second volume of Joachim Ritter (ed.): *Historisches Woerterbuch der Philosophie*. Basel 1972, pp. 564f.

future, and that the progress towards these goals and purposes can be monitored and even (pre-)calculated step by step. “Rational behavior” will thus mostly be an investment into potential future effects. Actions like using a cellular phone or opting for in-vitro fertilization fall squarely under this understanding of “rational behavior” because they are directed towards future effects and make the paths of our behavior between the present and the future more calculable than ever before.

Legitimations within the order of the “magic,” in contrast, will normally claim that certain behaviors have the effect of avoiding situations of loss or disadvantage (“of loss or disadvantage” in comparison to present or past situations). Most forms of religious behavior, for example, are meant to keep the Gods’ blessing from vanishing or to protect us against their wrath, rather than to acquire and to produce more of their grace than we have had before. “Magical” legitimations, then, tend to have their point of reference in what is already present, and they are mostly driven by a fear of loss. I am course not saying, in interpreting Weber, that rational behavior is exclusively future-oriented whereas behavior in the realm of magic is exclusively geared toward the avoidance of losses in comparison to the past. For the distinction that I believe Weber is suggesting depends above all on the interpretation of forms of behavior (in other words – it is not inherent to different forms of behavior in and by themselves). Rather, it needs to be emphasized that Weber is talking about predominant tendencies in the legitimation of behavior – not about behavior as such. Therefore, I think it is plausible to say that the world presupposed by rationality is a world to be constantly transformed, and the world presupposed by magic is a world that wants to be preserved and maintained in some original state. Becoming increasingly rational, by any means, has been an ongoing process of disenchantment because rationality promises to free us from the fear of Gods and from the fear of

losses. Surprisingly, it also seems to follow that, among many other phenomena, any sustained complaint about technical innovations, complete with the fear of a subsequent loss of immediacy in our relation to the material world, can fit Weber's description of "magical" behavior.

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"Magical" or not ("magical" or "rational on a higher level of rationality," as some conservatives would have it), such complaints about some mainly technical innovations within the process of Modernity and their consequences have had a tradition that appears quite honorable by its sheer age, if not always honorable due to the authors who have lent their voices to those complaints. The massive intellectual critique of a material and social environment whose technologies appear to have an "enslaving" or "alienating" impact was inaugurated by early 19th century Socialism whose discourse reached its culminating impact in the writings of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. But if authors like Marx and Engels were convinced that they had solutions for these problems, solutions that were lying in their specific (and as they believed: even in their predictable) historical future, Friedrich Nietzsche's visions of an alternative culture did not presuppose such a specific, "calculable" future anymore.

Nietzsche's critique of his contemporary culture and society consistently pointed to a somehow vague, archaic-looking vision that was not apt to function as a practical guide towards a possible future. This is what set the very German genre of "Kulturkritik" (as I see it originating in Nietzsche's texts) apart from early socialist literature that always wanted to be (but never succeeded in being) political and practical. Now, what Nietzsche above all criticized in his own contemporary culture were various symptoms for a loss of immediacy and presence in this culture's relation to the material environment. The rising "historicism" of his time, for example,

appeared despicable to Nietzsche because it had “the sense and instinct for everything, the taste and tongue for everything,” as opposed to having the sense and taste for just one specific period of the past.³ In the same spirit, Nietzsche was highly skeptical of his own age’s desire to “abolish suffering.” “Well-being,” he added, was a state for him “that would soon make men ridiculous and contemptible – that would make their destruction desirable.”⁴

Another possible starting point for the specific discourse that we are looking for in the past, that is the discourse that has criticized the process of Modernity for a loss of presence and immediacy in everyday life (without claiming that such a critique would help to redirect Modernity), is Oswald Spengler’s hugely influential and even more monumental book “The Decline of the West” whose two parts were published in 1918 and in 1922 respectively. Given the contemporaneity of the two authors and their intellectual upbringing in the same German intellectual atmosphere, it is as interesting as it is plausible to say that Spengler’s critical description of the “Faustian soul” largely corresponds to Weber’s altogether affirming concept of “Rationality” as the core principle in his account of modern culture. From Spengler’s point of view, the key characteristic of Faustian culture, which he believed was approaching its end after a good millennium of dominance in the West, had been its tendency to produce “vast abstract form-systems.”⁵ Due to this underlying principle of abstraction, “goods became wares,” and “in place of thinking in goods we have thinking in money.”⁶ Spengler’s observation resonates with the association proposed by Weber between rationality and its eagerness to

³ See: Beyond Good and Evil. Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future. Translated, with a Commentary by Walter Kaufmann. New York 1966, p. 151.

⁴ See Beyond Good and Evil, p. 153.

⁵ See Oswald Spengler: The Decline of the West. An Abridged Edition by Helmut Werner. English Abridged Edition Prepared by Arthur Helps, from the Translation by Charles Francis Atkinson. Oxford 1991, p. 68.

calculate the future as a potential for ever more remote potential futures. Above all, however, Faustian culture, that is modern culture in Spengler's narrative, is seen as describing, analyzing, and dealing with space as an abstract, geometrical dimension: "Space [...] is a spiritual something, rigidly different from the momentary sense-present."⁷

A good decade and a half later, Martin Heidegger brought the critical motif of Modernity's abstractness to a new level of historical and philosophical sophistication in his 1938 lecture on "The Age of the World Picture."⁸ Within Heidegger's work, this critique had been preceded by a somehow isolated (and in its tone strangely uncontrolled) passage from "Being and Time," published in 1927, where he accused Descartes for having abandoned, in the context of Western philosophy, the dimension of space in its non-abstract phenomenality.⁹ The "World Picture"-essay describes modern Science as having emerged from the Subject/Object-paradigm as the epistemological basis of Modernity, which basis, according to Heidegger, increasingly kept the spatial and material world at a distance from immediate human experience, slowly replacing its palpability with a "world picture" that was built on the principles of mathematical abstraction and immanent coherence. With its emphasis on the epistemological foundations of modern Science, this text can also be read as preparing Heidegger's specific angle in his critique, another twenty years later, of modern Technology (as opposed to modern Science). Heidegger argued that modern Technology, different in this regard from Science, was a potential site for the unconcealment of Being as ultimate truth-event.

⁶ The Decline of the West, p. 404.

⁷P. 97.

⁸In Martin Heidegger: The Question concerning Technology and Other Essays. Translated and with an Introduction by William Lovitt. New York 1977, pp. 115-154. – This edition gives an account of the complicated philological coordinates for the texts it contains on pp. IX-XI.

For two reasons it may come as a surprise if I claim that Heidegger ended up favoring Technology over Science. In the first place, we are so used to the (ultimately quite banal and mostly academic) prejudice that Science is “nobler” than Technology and that, therefore, a philosopher would have to prefer Science over Philosophy. Heidegger opposite preference may look even more surprising as he, in particular, was cultivating that (rather corny) image of the philosopher disguised as Black Forerst peasant. On the other hand, however, it is quite plausible, at least on a conceptual level, that Heidegger associated Science with the (comparatively distant) “present at hand”-relation to the world of objects -- and Technology with a “ready to hand”-relationship, i.e. with the relationship that had become central within his revision of the Subject/Object-paradigm through the concept of “being-in-the-world.” Being-in-the-world is the very mode of existence in which the world presents itself as ready-to-hand – and in this very sense it is unsurprising indeed that Heidegger preferred, roughly speaking at least, Engineering over Science. Through Technology, then, modern culture offers countless opportunities for the unconcealment of Being to happen. But modern culture and its reaction to Technology, according to Heidegger (and this motif seems to have become more famous than his primarily positive assessment of Technology), is also running the risk of missing such an opportunity (an opportunity which existentially obliges humankind) because of its tendency to transform nature as being unconcealed into the potential of a “standing reserve” (“Gestell”).¹⁰ Instead of experiencing, for example, technologies of energy production as an unconcealment of nature, we are obsessed with endlessly storing energy – and thus miss the moment of unconcealment of

⁹See paragraphs 20ff. In “Being and Time.”

¹⁰See the title essay (from 1955) in: *The Question Concerning Technology*, pp. 3-35, and also (from 1949): *The Turning*, pp. 36-49. – For an impressive critique of early 21st century culture, based on its tendency to produce “standing reserve,” see Robert Pogue Harrison’s essay: *Of Terror and Tigers. Reflections on Cai Guo-Qiang’s Inopportune*. In: *Cai Guo-Qiang Inopportune*. North Adams, MA 2005, pp. 28-36.

Being that energy production may imply and offer us. In other words: it is an exclusively instrumental view of Technology and Nature that prevents us from fulfilling our specific task within the history of Being, i.e. the task of using the epistemological potential inherent in Technology.

Once again, we see how a central element in Weber's affirming account of Modernity, i.e. its future-orientedness and its tendency to transform whatever is present into future potentials, became reevaluated and reshaped as a motif within the critique of modern culture as a culture without presence and immediacy. In my view, the discovery of this tendency in modern technology and modern culture at large to build potentials, instead of allowing the presence of phenomena to unfold itself, marks a decisive interpretative insight. I have refrained from subsuming Spengler's and Heidegger's different but strongly convergent critiques of modern culture under political concepts such as "conservative" or even "right wing" because such concerns are also central (under almost identical concepts) for Max Horkheimer's and Theodor W. Adorno's book on the "Dialectic of Enlightenment" which, despite occasional reservations,¹¹ has long become canonical within the intellectual tradition of the European Left. Written by two Jewish-German emigrants in California during the decisive (but then still undecided) years of World War II, "Dialectic of Enlightenment" tries to uncover a dramatic ambiguity ("dialectic") within the legacy of Western Rationality. If abstraction and forward-orientedness have facilitated a new self-image of man as the agent of his own history, these principles are also inseparably intertwined in the execution of the Holocaust (and of other catastrophes of comparable impact) because they produce a position of agency and an

¹¹See the strong reservations expressed in Juergen Habermas' influential essay: *Die Verschlingung von Mythos und Aufklaerung. Bemerkungen zur "Dialektik der Aufklaerung" – nach einer erneuten Lektuere.* In: Karl Heinz Bohrer (ed.); *Mythos und Moderne.* Frankfurt/M. 1983, 405-431.

effect of “reification” by which humans had become disposable – “abstract” -- objects and victims for other humans.

More even than in Spengler’s and Heidegger’s texts, a closeness to Max Weber’s account of Modernity is apparent in “Dialectic of Enlightenment” where the concept of “disenchantment” (Horkheimer and Adorno indeed use the word “Entzauberung” in the German original) is explicitly used in a highly critical context.¹² Equally astonishing (and consistent within the discursive tradition of Kulturkritik) is a passage where Kant’s “Critique of Pure Reason” is being accused of having anticipated the very tendency of abstraction that is supposed to rule in the “culture industry” of Hollywood: “The senses are determined by the conceptual apparatus in advance of perception; the citizen sees the world as made a priori of the stuff from which he himself constructs it. Kant intuitively anticipated what Hollywood has consciously put into practice: images are precensored during production by the same standard of understanding which will later determine their reception by viewers.”¹³

The central point of convergence that brings together the different attempts at a critique of 20th century culture in the texts of Spengler, Heidegger, Horkheimer, and Adorno is obvious. Each of these authors uncovers ways in which Rationality, however central it may have been within the canonical and canonically positive self-image of western Modernity, has produced devastating side-effects of abstraction, alienation, enslavement and industrialized murder. This is why I believe that it is legitimate to invoke, as I do, the authority of these texts as preceding a critique of the still disenchanting effects of 21st century technology and culture.

¹²Dialectic of Enlightenment. Philosophical Fragments. Edited by Gunzelin Schmid Noerr, Translated by Edmund Jephcott. Stanford 2002, p. 91.

¹³Dialectic of Enlightenment, p. 65.

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At the same time, it remains very difficult to pinpoint and to describe what precisely we have lost in the abstracting and alienating waves of disenchantment – and even more so what we may want to recuperate. Compared to their analysis and critique of Modernity, of disenchantment, and of their effects, what Spengler, Heidegger, Horkheimer, and Adorno have to say about the worlds that they are missing is consistently vague – and very abstract indeed. As a typical intellectual in the German tradition (and never quite explicitly stating that he is longing above all for that other, non-Faustian culture), Oswald Spengler projects a truly robust image of Ancient Greek culture, for which image, following Nietzsche, he uses the word “Apollinian”: “In no other Culture is the firm footing, the socket so emphasized. The Doric column bores into the ground, the vessels are always thought of from below upward.”¹⁴ And what Spengler expected from the future -- more prophetically, at least within German history, than he could possibly know around 1920 -- was a “Caesarism” that would “break the dictatorship of money and its political weapon, democracy.”¹⁵ The conceptual (rather than the political) dilemma I want to point to becomes immediately obvious in this quote. All that Spengler is able to imagine and to describe as the object of his longing is tainted, to say the least, by a much more powerful vision of what he hates and what he wants to vanish.

And this problem comes back when we ask the same question in reference to Heidegger’s works or the works written by Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno. If, for Heidegger, a ready-to-hand relation with the things of the world, meaning a basic, often non-intellectual familiarity

¹⁴The Decline of the West, p. 97.

¹⁵ p. 414.

with the world,¹⁶ is the ideal that in “Being and Time” he sets against the “present-to-hand,” as a distance relation that he interprets as the existential equivalent of the Subject / Object-paradigm, this value distinction between “ready-to-hand” and “present-at-hand” will later become progressively replaced by the stronger (at least: by the more pathos-laden) distinction between “being” (“Seiendes”) and “Being” (“Sein”). Unfortunately, however, what Heidegger has to say, very critically, without any exception, about the “oblivion of Being” (“Seinsvergessenheit”) is always much clearer and perhaps even more philosophically impressive than his attempts at circumscribing what Being might really be. We read that Being is mostly “withdrawn” from human experience; we also read that there is no way for humans to provoke the “unconcealment of Being” as an “event of truth.” But, again, what would Being “itself” be? Could it be the noumenal, the world independent of all human perspectives? Or is it the occasional (existential) feeling of being “in synch” with and “part of” a cosmological order? In his later texts, Heidegger sometimes uses the words “god” and “gods” where one might at first expect the concept of “Being.”¹⁷ But it remains unclear whether these “gods” are indeed meant to replace whatever he wanted to refer to as “Being” or whether they are thought of as “helping” forces that could facilitate the very unconcealment of Being that humans, according to Heidegger, try and so desperately fail to achieve. Without providing a solution to the problem that I am pointing to, my favorite reference to “Being unconcealed” in Heidegger’s work comes in the 1952 lecturing course on “What is Called Thinking.” Showing, once again, why the abstract “world picture” that modern Science offers will never allow us to “embrace” Being unconcealed, Heidegger imagines, as an alternative, the moment in which a pilot or a passenger feels the thrust produced by the

¹⁶The concept of “ready-to-hand” plays a central role in Andrea Nightingale’s vision of “re-enchantment.” See her essay “Broken Knowledge,” in this volume.

engine of a modern aircraft.¹⁸ Will such comments then be the end of our epistemological and of our existential dreams?

Things do not look decisively better when we turn to Horkheimer's and, above all, to Adorno's texts. For however bourgeois their upbringing and however select their taste may have been, both these authors are under the spell of the typical left wing intellectual -- who always feels potentially guilty about the joys of life that he may have experienced (and, Marx forbid, about the moments of joy that he may have conjured and provided). It is thus only consistent that in Adorno's "Aesthetic Theory" works of literature and music will above all fulfill the function of reminding their readers and listeners of what they will never be able to have and never be able to enjoy in an alienated and alienating world -- and Adorno insists far more on this lack, as a fact and as a condition of life, than on what may be lacking. There are only very few passages where Adorno, as if randomly and only in passing, evokes moments of pleasure and personal bliss. In his childhood memories from the Southwestern German small town of Amorbach, Adorno writes about the sounds produced by a ferry that crosses the river Main: "to which we are silently harkening -- and which are so telling because they were no different thousands of years ago."¹⁹ I remember another short text -- reflection One Hundred in his "Minima Moralia" -- where Adorno once again identifies a moment of happiness as a moment of calm in which to follow the movements of the water allows his body and his mind to relax, to let go: "Rien faire comme une bête, to lie on the water and to look into the sky, peacefully, 'to be, nothing else, without any further determination or goal.'"²⁰

¹⁷See for example: *The Turning*, pp. 47-49.

¹⁸ *Was heisst Denken?* Vierte Auflage. Tuebingen 1984, p. 142.

¹⁹Amorbach. In: *Kulturkritik und Gesellschaft I. Gesammelte Schriften* 10/1. Frankfurt/Main 1997, pp. 302-309, this passage on p. 303.

²⁰*Gesammelte Schriften* 4, p. 179.

So again, what is it that we would want to recuperate -- if re-enchantment were ever possible? We begin to understand that one problem lies in the difficulty – or is it an impossibility? – to say in general concepts what we are longing for. It is easy to state, kulturkritisch and often too loudly, what we believe we have lost and what we are missing. It takes more effort and concentration to remember and, above all, to describe those moments (are they always and necessarily “short moments”?) in which we were happy. But those moments, in their singularity, seem to have vanished, forever and irreversibly,²¹ and this is why, at best, our memories can serve as metonymies for something larger that we would like to recuperate in the future. But what we are able to say, then, on a more general level and with a less nostalgic tone, remains vague indeed and all-too dependent, I insist, on the much clearer visions of what we hate. Nevertheless, we can try.

For my part, I wish I could live more locally during the years that I have left – and while what I am saying may well mean that I want a provincial (or even more scandalously: a suburban) life for myself and my family, a “local” life would not be the strict opposite of a “metropolitan” life. Rather, I mean by “local” a life in which my body would be allowed to be present in what my mind is experiencing; a life, also, in which the rational logic of action would not permanently oblige me to be ahead of myself, that is oblige me to make phone calls in order to save time for more phone calls to come.

²¹For a philosophical discussion of such ecstatic temporality, see Karl Heinz Bohrer: *Der Abschied. Theorie der Trauer: Baudelaire, Goethe, Nietzsche, Benjamin*. Frankfurt/M. 1996, but also: *Ploetzlichkeit. Zum Augenblick des aesthetischen Scheins*. Frankfurt 1981, and: *Das absolute Praesenz. Die Semantik aesthetischer Zeit*. Frankfurt/M. 1994.

At the same time and as a great athlete once said, I am longing for more moments of being “lost in focused intensity.”²² I want to be open for something unexpected or even for something yet unknown to arrive, rather than for moments in which I make happen, impatiently, what has long been announced. Not necessarily moments of religious piety, despite the language that I am using here. Above all, in my case, not religious moments, nor passive moments. What I dream of is a maximum alertness and openness to the world, an openness so open that it would feel like a very active state of my mind and my body.

Sometimes I reply to my more advanced students who are complaining about not living in a big city how graduate school is a monastic life form that I so wish I could return to. Of course I am not referring to long hours spent in silent or vocal prayer (although, agnostic that I am, I much prefer voices of prayer over voices on the phone). I mean “monastic life” in the sense of a life concentrated, over several years and almost exclusively, on one central and challenging task, a life on the edge, a life with something at stake – as opposed to a life in distraction and dispersion. I will never forget those two very old black men in New Iberia, Louisiana, who told me (in their archaic-sounding French) how they enjoyed spending entire days looking for alligators in the bayou – and whom I met again, four years after our first conversation, at the same place, still looking for alligators in the bayou. I was envious of a life so quietly focused on something very concrete. “Monsieur,” one of the two old men from New Iberia said in his archaic-sounding French when I met them for the second time, “Monsieur, there are two types of alligators in the bayou. Some are three foot long, and they are tender and very good to eat. But the other type, the four foot alligators, don’t taste good at all.” There is no way back for us to watching

²²This was the swimmer and Olympic goldmedalist Pablo Morales, a former Stanford and Cornell student. See the entire quote in my book: *In Praise of Athletic Beauty*. Cambridge, MA, 2006, pp. 49-52.

alligators in the bayou, except for that of occasional tourism. And yet I found it remarkable how much I envied those two very old men.

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Now, have I managed to explain anything beyond the fact that I dislike cellular phones (up to the point of a stubborn resentment) and that I sometimes dream of joining these quiet old men at the bayou in New Iberia – without being able to say on what principles my preferences are grounded? And has it become clear that I am not charmed, to say the least, as so many other intellectuals today seem to be, by the interpretation that what I dislike and like, taken together, looks somehow religious and may even offer the ground for a “secular religiosity”?

If so, if these two claims have become clear, then I may have maneuvered myself into an uncomfortable position. For, on the one hand, I have neither a basis nor concepts to give to my personal preferences the status of more general claims. On the other hand, I have declined the possibility of saying that my preferences have a “somehow” religious basis and I have also foregone the right of calling my preferences completely private -- as I have begun to discuss them in a text that is destined for publication (and thus for a however reduced public sphere). So I am liable to respond to that friend (and editor) who asks me whether my interest in (not to say passion for) “presence effects” does not imply a program for “rational re-enchantment.” I will indeed finish this essay by trying to react to my friend’s challenge as best I can.

An easy way out for me would (and could indeed) be to say that the notion of a “rational re-enchantment” is oxymoronic, that it implies a paradox and a tension that preclude its relevance and its use in any discussion about

norms and orientations of collective behavior (we might also say: a paradox that precludes its viability in any discussion about “ethics”). For if I understand the concept of “rationality,” as I have done so far, in Max Weber’s sense, it means that I associate rationality with a future-orientedness of the behavior in question, and if we agree that “re-enchantment,” on the other side, cannot help being the recuperation of past forms of experience that we see to have have lost, then “rationality” and “re-enchantment” appear to be incompatible indeed.

Here, once again, Nietzsche’s philosophy – or more precisely perhaps: Nietzsche’s language -- seems to converge with an intuition about the status of our (or only my?) desire for presence and immediacy. For throughout his work he is hesitant to describe his own values and visions for a culture that would be different from contemporary culture. As a future that one could reach on a path of practical action -- and even less so as a possible future for an entire society or for an entire culture. The arrow which, in the “Aftersong” to “Beyond Good and Evil,” is pointing towards the future will be propelled by the greatest energy – but it has no specific target: “A wicked archer I’ve become. – The ends / Of my bow kiss; / Only the strongest bends his bow like this.”²³ In a different web of metaphors, the “Aftersong” refuses to see this future as the future of a society, of a nation, or of humankind. No guests are coming to the meal that is prepared to celebrate the victory – until, when “this song is over” already, Zarathustra alone appears: “we celebrate / The feast of feasts: / Friend Zarathustra came, the guest of guests.”²⁴ The same hesitation becomes even more obvious whenever Nietzsche invokes “the philosophers of the future.” He feels obliged to insist that “in all seriousness: [he sees] such philosophers coming up.”²⁵ They are called “Versucher”²⁶ – “seducers” but

²³Beyond Good and Evil, p. 242.

²⁴p. 245.

²⁵p. 11.

also those who can only “attempt” or “experiment.” Above all, the philosophers of the future will dare to say no without having “the certainty of value standards.”²⁷

What I want to say, using Nietzsche’s concepts and metaphors, is that re-enchantment cannot be the philosophy or the ethics of our future. And this has perhaps less to do with a tension between the future-orientedness of rationality and the profound nostalgia that pervades any desire for re-enchantment than with the values of re-enchantment and with their status in our everyday world. Counter to some typical academico-intellectual daydreams, our contemporary technological environment is not at the disposition of any collective (let alone individual) agency. Electronic communication will not go for the simple reason that it is not a “tool” or an “instrument” of human action, as we so often imagine, but, rather, part of an irreversible state of evolution in which cultural change has long taken over the role of biological variation.²⁸

Would it not be pathetic to try and argue for a reduced use of cellular phones and e-mail as an ethical norm? Who except for the Health Insurance industry and some well-meaning relatives would want to persuade or even to oblige anybody who is not so inclined to engage in early morning jogging? Yes, it is possible indeed to make certain ecologically relevant forms of behavior legally binding – but this possibility hinges upon the empirical possibility to predict the indeed lethal consequences of some forms of ecologically irresponsible behavior. Who in contrast would dare to guarantee that a world with a slowed down pace of information exchange (a world of old men looking for alligators in the bayou) would really be a better world for a solid majority of citizens? There

²⁶p. 52.

²⁷p. 134.

²⁸ I take this argument (that would deserve a more detailed description and discussion) from André Leroi-Gourhan: *Gesture and Speech*. Cambridge, MA 1964/1965.

may well be some forms of behavior and of life that could be called “re-enchantment” and that would lend themselves to a transformation into ethical norms. But this is simply not the case for those moments and for those values that I miss and that I believe we have lost in disenchantment.

Opting for a gain of immediacy, then (or, rather, in most cases that I can think of: opting against a progressive loss of immediacy), can only be an act of individual choice. You may decide that you want to allow yourself to get immersed into certain situations of intensity (or again, rather, you may decide that you don’t want to fight the heroic subject’s fight against such forms of immersion). But while it makes sense to call a similar decision an “act,” it does not depend on your best intentions whether the desired immersion and the subsequent feelings will actually occur. You can decide, as the German philosopher Martin Heidegger puts it, “to let yourself be determined” up to a certain extent – but whether this outside determination will happen and where it will take you is not within your control. Perhaps what I am talking about is a rational act of suspending the use of rationality – which obviously excludes the possibility of calling “rational” whatever follows from such a decision. But, again, I would hesitate to subsume such behavior under what we normally discuss as “ethics.”

Unless you want to understand the word “ethics” more in the sense of a tradition going back to Aristotle’s “*Nicomachean Ethics*” – and this would mean as embodied forms of behavior whose appeal and whose function are better described as “aesthetic” than as “ethical,” at least in the today prevailing meaning of these words. What if we said that not to activate your cellular phone at the moment of touch down would be just a sign of elegance – and nothing else? What if one claimed that not to have a cellular phone, to refuse that life in which you are expected and feel obliged to be permanently “available” will make you part of an elite – as

long as you are in a profession and once you are in a position that allow you to even contemplate such a gesture?

I believe that this is the spirit in which Hannah Arendt so passionately wrote about the value of “action” (as opposed to “labor” and “work”) in the public sphere. Above all, Arendt was not interested in a “social behavior” that “has become the standard for all regions of life.”²⁹ Her pledge went “against a constantly growing social realm” as having conquered “the private and the intimate, on the one hand, and the political (in the narrower sense of the word), on the other.”³⁰ What she called “the political” or the “public sphere” are dimensions that she believed would vanish forever if we do not use them in order to perform and to develop “our capacity for action and speech” on a level of excellence, “arete,” and “virtus.”³¹ As if to remove any possible doubt that her argument was about aesthetics (or about ethics in the Aristotelian tradition), Arendt insisted over and again that she appreciated excellence in action and speech as a means to achieve individual distinction: “A life without speech and without action [...] – and this is the only way of life that in earnest had renounced all appearance and vanity in the biblical sense of the word – is literally dead to the world; it has ceased to be a human life because it is no longer lived among men.”³² And further: “In each instance, a human capacity which by its very nature is world-open and communicative transcends and releases into the world a passionate intensity from its imprisonment within the self.”³³

Such intensity – in some cases even such “passionate intensity” – is what I associate with a life that would allow our bodies to share a space with the

²⁹The Human Condition. Second edition. Chicago 1998, p. 45.

³⁰The Human Condition, p. 47.

³¹p. 48f.

³²p. 176.

³³p. 168.

bodies and the things that they experience and that would thus bring our bodies back to our minds, up to the nostalgic value and form of a life that cares about the beauty of embodiment. I also agree with Arendt's point that embodiment as a value always and necessarily transcends "the imprisonment within the self" – but this embodiment is not what we would call a "social value" today, a value whose legitimacy would lie in furthering the greater wellbeing of a majority of citizens.

To conclude: if we follow Heinrich von Kleist's intuition (and Miguel Tamen's reading of Kleist in this volume) that the grace of embodied forms comes from the impossibility to see and to experience them as the "expression" of any programs, intentions, or concepts, if we agree that grace is a state that makes us perceive "with trembling", as Kleist quite literally and very beautifully said, "that the soul lies in the elbow,"³⁴ then we have yet another reason for our friendly skepticism regarding "rational re-enchantment." For while those happy few among us who do not need cellular phones may sometimes have natural grace -- as have the two old men in New Iberia whom I would so like to call my friends – I cannot imagine anything more obnoxious than Anti-Cellphone Leagues or, for that matter, Alligator Watching Clubs.

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³⁴Heinrich von Kleist: Ueber das Marionettentheater. In: Saemtliche Werke und Briefe III. Bibliothek deutscher Klassiker 51. Frankfurt/M. 1991, pp. 55-563 (the "elbow"-remark is on p. 559).