

In the Destruction of the Self: Breaking the *I* and *Time* in Digital Worlds

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Abstract

*For a very long time, the Body has been the only outlet for the Self to reveal itself: to either itself or the world. The appearance of the body, from its ontic presentations to possible ornamentations, has, as Sartre reminds in *Being and Nothingness*, always been the precise way the essence manifests. Insofar as humans are concerned, such manifestations, regardless of their presentational variety, have consistently found, in the singularity of the body, individuality of Being. The Human Individual, in other words, has remained the (an) individual since the revelation of the Self, however spatio-temporally varied, has always found locations of anchorage within this singularity of the body. It is, after all, not really possible to change the body itself. However, with the introduction and the exponential increase of the digital in the world, the Self has suddenly found newer and increasingly more varied locations for revelation. The different social media websites are a good example. A user does not have to be the same across all the different social media platforms. In fact, it is entirely possible to be different persons altogether on the same social media platform. This is not the same as revealing a different aspect of the Self through the body. Throughout the various presences across social media, the body need not be involved at all. The Self becomes something else altogether: in *Being* and in perception. New histories, new presences and new discursive continuities become immediately possible once the binds of physicality are removed over digital spatialities (and, indeed, temporalities). The problem, in this, is about individuality itself: how can the Self be thus divided and still claim to be individual (that which cannot be further divided).*

In such scheme of things, the proposed paper wishes to interrogate the Self and the centrally conceited individuality of the Self. The incommensurability of the multiply divided Selves within and against each other (as opposed to selves — the mere representational division of the self instead of the presentational one at work here) threatens the Human itself and asks of it an essential question: what is the individual outside of its individuality? In the face of this breakage, is there a possibility of a return to individuality or is annihilation the only way out? The paper intends to interrogate this through Eric LaRocca's Things Have Gotten Worse Since We Last Spoke: an absolutely haunting novella about (ostensibly) two women chatting over a messaging service in the early 2000s. The purpose of the paper is not to damn digital technology. In fact, it is the opposite: to show the presence of a new Human and a new World brought in (even if as an enforcement) by such digitisations.

EMAIL FROM AGNES PETRELLA

Date: 08/20/2000

Time: 9:33 p.m.

From: Agnes Petrella <agnes_in_wonderland_76@[omitted].com>

To: Zoe Cross <crushedmarigolds@[omitted].com>

Subject: Something's wrong

Things have gotten worse since we last spoke.

I think there's something wrong.

It hurts me to even think it, but something's not right with our child.

I feel this intense pain all the time, as if someone were sliding a razor blade along my guts.

I don't know if I can bear it anymore. I feel like taking a pair of shears and slicing myself open.

Would you come then?

Would that get your attention? (LaRocca 2021: 73)

Eric LaRocca's novella *Things Have Gotten Worse Since We Last Spoke* is a haunting reminder of the disembodied, often schizophrenic, existences that all human beings lead; particularly in the incontestable revelation of such Being through the incursions of the digital

and cybernetic in everyday lives of the species. The story of the novella, innocent at the beginning, starts with an advertisement for her grandmother's apple peeler that Agnes Petrella puts up on the Internet. After a few failed possibilities, it catches the attention of Zoe Cross who, then, writes to Petrella to negotiate the price. Their interaction soon leads down a rabbit hole as Petrella falls in love with Cross. The latter, however, in the wake of the confession of this love, tells Petrella that she will reciprocate only if Petrella agrees to hand her life over to her: to do everything that she asks Petrella to do, no matter how revolting. Petrella agrees and so begins a series of harrowing, humiliating and disturbing chain of tasks and events that Cross has Petrella undertake. The quote above is the last of this task where Cross has asked Petrella to eat rotten meat and get sick with a parasite: something that the two of them would nurture as their lovechild. The task given, Cross cuts all connection and Petrella is left in anguish — both physical and mental — as she battles a parasitic infection and heartbreak. What is interesting, though, is that the novella chooses to tell this story in and as a series of emails and instant messaging transcripts. The reader never 'really' gets to meet either of the two characters. The digital intermediary in the narrative — through the email and the transcripts — effectively takes away the locus-of-Being of either of these characters as they begin existing in a jigsaw of disembodied words floating over the Internet. In such a scenario, several questions (raised by the infiltration of the digital within the schematic of the narrative) come up vis-à-vis the presentation and playing out of the two characters: are they real? Do either of them, specifically Petrella, actually do the tasks that are set since action in the novella is never shown but always desired and recollected? Even if one considers the objective reality of Petrella (since we get to see her emails and transcripts more than Cross' and have some hint about her 'human' negotiations), Cross' position is always suspect. In which case, how does the ending of the novella fit, where Petrella actively becomes 'something' else, giving 'birth' to a parasite and loving it like a child? The answers to these questions are not really defined and hinge on

subjective positions of the reader. However, these answers are not as relevant as the question that looms behind all these questions: that of the digital interface itself. How is it that the methodological digitality that the novella brings in enforces (in possibility and actuation) such questions of the 'real' to surface in rather central a fashion? What is the kind of relationship that the digital, and, by extension, the cybernetic, has with Human reality and its Self? The current paper wishes to interrogate this question and, possibly, attempt an answer. It proposes the digital as a catalyst, rather than an active modulator, towards the (aforementioned) revelation of a complex reality and unity that the Human Self always has had. This complexity, the paper further argues, is revealed since the digital is able to *dis-locate* the Self from the singularity of the body and represent, as it were, this disembodied Self to a non-linear, often infinitely looping, temporal positions.

In 'Circuitries', Nick Land writes: 'At a signal from the software virus linking us to the matrix we cross over to the machinery, which is waiting to converge without our nervous systems. Our human camouflage is coming away, skin ripping off easily, revealing the glistening electronics' (Land 2012: 292). Although Land goes on to speak specifically about the *techno sapien*,ⁱ integrated *into* the machine and *as* the machine, the beginnings of such integration finds comfortable commensuration with the digital's laying bare of the possibility (itself) of such un-humanⁱⁱ existences. The '*software virus*', (my emphasis) in the style of all viruses, is that which infects the singularity of the human Being. It bores in deep into the cellular matrices of bodily existence and chips away at the constructs that allow the human its physicality. As the body is disintegrated, the Self of the infected loses its anchor and inches towards destruction. The question is: destruction of what? The virus does not really touch the Self, but that which houses it, that which restricts it. The 'camouflage', in essence, that Land speaks of is the body in all its tactile presentations: a thing that has reached completion through however many political, economic or discursive interactions and interventions. Its end signals

a new era for the Self as it finds freedom to locate itself in varied forms as varied selves. This is what needs note — the conversion of the Self into selves. However, this isn't something new: this multi-dimensional existence of the (ostensible) Self has always been the case. The current paper will elaborate on this point later. What is important to note here is that this network of selves, in the style of Land's 'glistening electronics',ⁱⁱⁱ has always been present inside the camouflage that the virus removes. There is a revealing that happens: by the application of Boolean matrices of the digital onto the Cartesian of the human. But that which is revealed has already always been there. The 'software virus' simply brings it out. It is this virus that afflicts Petrella (in her feigned objectivity) as well; a virus in the form of the *digital* presence of Cross^{iv} that literally takes over the *bodily* presence of Petrella. That she is able to 'birth' a parasite by the end of the novella is an explication of her un-humanity. However, since a virus (and, *this* virus) feeds on that which *is*, to break down its host to its constituent compartments, Petrella's un-humanity has always been hidden inside her humanity. Cross never forces Petrella to accept her propositions. In fact, as stated above, they never actually meet. Yet, *the* Petrella, found in the beginning of the novella, is destroyed in favour of something new(er). The resultant death after the viral infection is, hence, a deliverance from a specific mode of being, where the potential of destruction is always already there. Having said that, the larger question — concerning the digital — still remains. How is it that the digital is able to inflict such a viral infection? What does it do? The beginning of an answer, perhaps, lies in the position of the digital vis-à-vis the human that finds itself in it. Consider, for example, the questions regarding LaRocca's book that have been raised above. Each question presents a systematic grating away of the 'real' Self of either of the two characters in and through the operations of the digital. But the digital is not an infectious appendage. It merely supplants, inside the formulaic system of the novel, the narrative mediation. That is all that it is, a

mediator, a sieve that reconstitutes not only the way how the narrative is presented in the novella, but through it, the reality of the Self away from the body of the human as well.

As a matter of fact, this conception of the reality of the Self is a rather central concern towards the interrogation of the affectations of the digital. In the interest of such an enquiry, there is, at once, a problem. The very idea of the reality of the Self hinges on two things: firstly, on reality itself and secondly, on the Self that has, at least seemingly, the ability to find itself in this reality. The problem in its truest form, for that matter, lies in the indefinite nature of the former. Having said that, a detailed examination of all the complex contours of the definitive real is outside the scope of the current paper. The one point (among the many that constitute the notions of the real) that is, instead, important and warrants mention is the one about the unfeasibility of the manifestation of noumena *as* the noumenal. Transcendental objectivity offers, in other words, an inherent impossibility that disallows it to find existential coordinate as itself. In fact, this is a problem that has been (in the search of a better word) haunting not only metaphysical philosophers since the Greeks but, with the onset of the 20th century, natural philosophers as well. One of the immediate effects of quantum mechanics, for example, has been the proposition that outside of human observation, the world does not exist. Everything, which has not collapsed into real-ised states by human reflection, is clouded in probability fields. Such probabilistic existences, in turn, reconstitute everything that exist in the world in terms of, literally, their *everything-ness* and not *something-ness*: a collection of which the real is thought to be constitutive of. This is what the (in)famous cat, put in a box with a timed vial of poison by Schrodinger, demonstrates.^v The cat is both alive and dead until the box is opened and its state is real-ised. In light of this problem, the only way to circumvent the impossibility of the Objective to manifest itself in reality is through the enforcement of the operation of an eidetic reduction that Husserl terms the *epoché*.^{vi} There is, within such an operation, a bracketing out of both the noumenal and the subjective experience of the noumenal for the

presence of just the phenomenal. The Objective real and the impossibility of its realisation as itself, in the processes of the epoché, is rendered an unnecessary consideration all together.^{vii} What remains is just the observed, the real-ised. Anything outside of or behind that existent is relayed from within that real-ised state. This, in turn, offers up some interesting implications, especially for the purposes of the interrogation of the Self here. Sartre, in fact, sums up the consequence of this 'bracketing' in his introduction to *Being and Nothingness*, especially the effect that it has had on philosophical enquiry of objects and, by extension, reality:

There is no longer an exterior for the existent if one means by that a superficial covering which hides from sight the true nature of the object. And this true nature in turn, if it is to be the secret reality of the thing, which one can have a presentiment of or which one can suppose but can never reach because it is the "interior" of the object under consideration-this nature no longer exists. The appearances which manifest the existent are neither interior nor exterior; they are all equal, they all refer to other appearances, and none of them is privileged (Sartre 1943: 1)

Sartre's summation of the *methodological* 'bracketing', rather obviously, goes beyond just the operative. The practice (itself) of the *epochal*^{viii} has brought into focus the phenomena to the point that it is only the entity-that-appears that holds the possibilities of the revelation of its essence. There is nothing objectively lurking behind either the appearance of the entity or its possible appearances that defines that entity as the entity it is. The noumenal, in a sense, is sublated into the phenomenal of the entity in question. But, as Sartre further notes, the deconstruction of the essence-appearance duality betrays the presence of yet another: that of the finite and the infinite (Ibid: 2). If all appearances, in a sense, become a part of the presentational reality of an existent (or an entity), then the infinite ways that it *can* be made manifest (by itself or an outside force) stands in a stark contrast against the finitude of the single manifestation that it *is* presented (to consciousness) in. The finitude of the existent's

phenomenological presentation does not, in that sense, deny the possibility of the other infinite forms of presentation that the object can take.^{ix} The infinite, thus, as Sartre points out, is found *in* the finite.

This dialectical position of the finite-infinite (since it is not a clear dichotomy) is what informs the current paper's consideration of the human Self as well. Insofar as the Self finds itself (it's self) in and of the real, it is subject to the same manoeuvres that constitute the real as well. In which case, the human Self is entangled, as well, with the crisscrossing mesh of the pathways of the finite and the infinite. To begin with, the removal of the essence *behind* the phenomenological presentation of an existent effectively effaces the singularity of the Self as an *in-dividual* entity. It does not remain, anymore, that logocentric *I* that seemed to loom (like a ghost or the *geist*) behind the presentations of the Self in space and time. The 'true' *I*, which seemed to have governed the processes and institutionalisation of uncountable human endeavours — from political states to economies to religions — vanishes behind the infinite possibilities and manifestations that the *I* has and/or can have. *I*, in a sense, is legion. But this is not something new. Even in common parlance and the everyday material organisations, the multiplicity of the *I* is noticeable. A human is, after all, different at different places, with different times and different other objectivised complexes of the *I*. Despite such quotidian and, frankly, intuitive presentiment of the variable nature of the Self, the valence of the singularity of this Self, in its *in-dividual* characteristic has always held. The attributions of absolute singularity to this essential *I* has also taken over any and all possibility of the divisibility of the *I* so much so that all different manifestations have been considered deviations: to return back into the singular Being that guides and decides the properties of the deviations. In *Things Have Gotten Worse Since We Last Spoke*, for example, the readers to get to witness (at least in and as a recollection) the many selves that Petrella possesses between her family, doctors, friends, and work. Yet, until Cross encroaches into these many selves of Petrella, she continues to

believe in the singularity of what she is. This is, in fact, proven by the very specific historical (linearly temporal) location that she allots herself when she wishes to sell her grandmother's apple peeler. Her emotive connection to that peeler seem to define her Self as just one concrete whole entity. It is, further, due to this illusion of the wholeness of her being that Petrella soon finds herself unable to come to terms with her actual broken self when Cross instigates her to 'be' all that she is. In any case, the reason for this dogged refusal to allow the Self its infinity, the current paper believes, lies in the restrictions posed by the singularity of the human body. Since the body is one and the observed world is interacted through the absoluteness of the oneness of this body (however camouflaged, masked or enmeshed inside staged characters) the Self finds itself tied inside an illusory singularity as well. The human Being may, in that sense, differ contemporaneous to spatio-temporal fluxes, but the return to the singularity of the Self is always upheld since this singularity is interlocked with another, very physical and physiological, singularity. Whatever the state of the Self be, in other words, it is always located within and revealed through the body. In such a scenario, will the singularity of the Self hold up if the singularity of the body is removed? This is where the digital comes in. It shifts the location of the self, especially in terms of its storage and presentation, away from the confines of the human *body* into multiple systems of *bodies*. Consider, for example, the many social media profiles that are curated, with extreme care, to reveal something concrete. The concreteness of this revelation, tied to the careful and exact construction, allows it to reflect, as the body does, what the human is. Such platforms are themselves many and can, either between them or within them, accommodate, theoretically, an infinite number of profiled manifestations, each slightly different from the other.^x With this, the infinity of the self opens up as well. It is, rather obviously, somewhat of a pedantic example. The point, however, holds. The digital destroys the *singularity* of the body and transposes the Self, in turn, into a *network* of physical/physiological sites. In doing so, it reveals the multiplicity that human Self has

always been; hidden, even if epistemologically, behind the individuality of the body. This revelation, finally, takes a full circle back to Land's 'software virus' that the current paper begun with. The bodily dis-location that Petrella goes through exemplifies this state of being. Even as she has multiple selves contemporaneous with multiple spatio-temporal coordinates, she always regresses back into the historically constituted singular Self-body complex that leaves her absolutely miserable. Cross' entry into Petrella's life, where the former is synonymous and symptomatic of the digital, removes the anchor that Petrella's body has, so far, been. This allows her to, quite literally, find some peace in her divided Self even as she struggles with coming terms to the fact that she cannot hide away behind the single body anymore. At one point in the novella, for example, she both wants and not wants everything that Cross offers and stands for. While such states of desires are quite common, Petrella, unlike such common affairs, does not have to choose between either. She is able to do exactly everything that Cross has been asking her to do (including but not limited to murdering a lizard) even as she refuses to follow her lover's instructions. This is, what the current paper has called above, a schizophrenic possibility that the digital frees up. Land, in fact, celebrates this schizophrenic decentralisation that the digital allows: '[far] from being a specifiable defect of the human central nervous system functioning, schizophrenia is the convergent motor of cyberpositive escalation: an extraterritorial vastness to be *discovered*' (Land 2012: 308). The discovery, in being a discovery, betrays the discovered (or the quested) already always present inside the systems of query that initiate the process of discovering: a process that is, in itself, extraterritorially vast. In being present, at least in terms of a Being-there, such schizophrenic states emerge as a step forward into the schematic of human evolution.

While there are many implications of the revelation (and, an unmitigated acceptance) of the schizophrenic state of the Self, from ontological, epistemological, to actual material,^{xi} one immediate affect is on the real-isation of the temporal. In *Humanity's Strings*, I have shown

how the consciousness of time (the temporal) is not linear but consists of a complex matrix of all shadows of time mixed in together. All happenings of the past, present and the future, in a sense, take place together, with only the Self standing as an epistemological boundary to distinguish the affectations of the either. What is of interest, insofar as the current argument is concerned, is that this epistemological boundary exists and acts, rather urgently, because the singular Self-body combination is unable to handle the 'extraterritorial' vastness of dimensionless temporal. Digital schizophrenia, on the other hand, allows the transcendence of such restriction and lets the play of the temporal pan out in its inherent dimensionlessness. Two instances, quotidian again, should suffice as an example. In the first, the possibilities of conversation and communication that the digital has opened up. Through the many instant messaging software it is now possible to speak to the same person about different things at the same time (or at least across the same section of time). In fact, the number of wholly different messages that can be communicated to the same person at the same time is theoretically restricted only by the number of software available and the speed with which the human hand and brain can switch between each software and type. Obviously, this is not something new. Writing allows something similar. However, the speed of the delivery of the message over the digital platform, especially across distances, cannot be matched by that which is written by the human hand. The only restriction faced in this system, once again, being the human body. The second instance comes from the world of video gaming. Each modern game allows the possibility for the player to save their game at specific points. Saving the game allows a moment to re-spawn in and continue, once again, playing through the narrative. This re-spawning, in turn, allows the player to make a completely different choice in the play through of the game; thus, taking away the finality of every moment as that moment. Each moment within the game world, in other words, is absolutely dimensionless and allows, technically, infinite play. The player can be almost everything, although only those every things that are

allowed by the codification binding the game, through the same in-game temporal moment. Time becomes fluid and not subject to the linear evolution that seemingly constitutes the temporal. The restriction, once again, being the human body. Such restrictions seem to never really go away since the immanence of the digital schizophrenic has not been absolute so far. One can only imagine the vastness that would open up for the human being if Land's cyber-integration finds absolute integration with and within the contours of the Human-ness of human beings.

ⁱ Land's italics.

ⁱⁱ Something that has surpassed the human. But in order to surpass the human, it has had to be the human. This is a state, as will be shown later, when the body has let go of its singularity.

ⁱⁱⁱ Since the electronic circuitry is not something whole in itself but a collection of varied objects doing various things. It is only the board that gives the illusion of a wholesomeness.

^{iv} Regardless of the reality or real-presence of Zoe Cross. What that is has been never shown in the novella and, thus, holds no importance in the playing out of the narrative.

^v Interestingly, Schrodinger had proposed the example of the cat to disprove quantum mechanics. Like Einstein, he too believed the God does not play with dice. History, however, notes the cat not as a disproof but an approval of the probabilities within which all things exist.

^{vi} Although Husserl works out the modalities of this epoché around 1906, he has had been using the idea since before: in *Logical Investigations* and then *Ideas Pertaining...*

^{vii} This effectively cements phenomenology as a legitimate methodology of metaphysical enquiry.

^{viii} My coinage.

^{ix} Sartre writes: 'Although an object may disclose itself only through a single *Abschattung*, the sole fact of there being a subject implies the possibility of multiplying the points of view on

that Abschattung. This suffices to multiply to infinity the Abschattung under consideration. Furthermore if the series of appearances were finite, that would mean that the first appearances do not have the possibility of reappearing. Which is absurd, or that they can be all given at once, which is still more absurd' (Sartre 1943: 3).

^x They cannot be same, since sameness betrays a unity. The profiles are always similar. But, that which is similar is also always inherently different. Which is why they are similar and not the same.

^{xi} How does, for example, one formulate economic models, either at the micro or the macro level, if there isn't a singular Self to cater to: a singular Self that drives the desires of the market.

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