Between File and Life

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Philosophers and other freethinking spirits have always dreamed of equal autonomy, while at the same time, never wanting to lose safety and security of the state. In order to escape from mundane life, they have played ›games‹. Instead of finding freedom, they only found absolute and strict rules. But games, too, work by rigorous regulations. Longing for an open life mostly runs into complex files. Evidently, human history has always been structured by paradoxes, but people have never learned to cope with these contradictions. Instead, people have frequently tried to establish or find easy solutions in order to avoid complications. Consequently, humankind has developed religions, countless ideologies or new categories to explain the way of the world. Meanwhile, design has become part of this, especially as a solution offering concept. This is understandable because design can never escape society as it is only legitimized by social activities. To understand the root of the problem, taking a look at history is crucial. For example: it is easy to imagine how confused people must have been when Nicolaus Copernicus (1473-1543) explained and proved that not the Earth, but the Sun, was the center of the universe. Having to abandon the center was a radical change in the

belief system and a concept that intensified existential fear and the loss of control. The conversion of man's place in the universe also derails every concept of Anthropocentrism. Of course, at that moment, only religion could have come to rescue the belief that there is a center called God. Or, what was needed was a new philosophy offering a new idea of center. Although our knowledge about our Solar System is up to date and we are more quickly to adapt to changes, it is still nearly impossible to reconcile this insight with our physical sensations. De facto, we cannot really imagine, that on the bottom side of the Earth, the people of Australia are moving upside down while in Germany we are walking tall on the same plane ground.

It took some time and a great deal of discourse until such a new philosophy was delivered. Finally, René Descartes (1596-1650) introduced the idea of cogito, ergo sum, which he later extended into the safer and more tangible concept of dubito, ergo cogito, ergo sum. With this, he had found a new center, the I, or Ego. He seemed to be so convinced by this concept that he ultimately denied any other material worlds, even rejecting the body as part of the human being. By stating cogito, ergo sum, Descartes had found the category most important in philosophy: the Subject. To this day it is the basis of any identity philosophy. Not only does it encourage our brains, but it structures our everyday life. Later philosophies show the necessity of talking about two opposing sides. Thus, the Object benefitted from finally getting its counterpart. This is one of the fundamental parts in the discourse about design. It is necessary to create an opposition, a contrast or a problem, something to struggle with. The complementary oppositions of Subject and Object guarantee the consciousness or creation of a solution and thus of design, and change.

Let's have a change perspective: Later, the German philosopher Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646-1716) not only invented a mechanical calculator (because he was bad at simple mathematics) but he also formulated the system, which has been governing any algorithm up to the present day: the strange 0 and the big 1. To look at the background of this new concept is quite inter-

esting, because it is deeply rooted in old dichotomous beliefs of Christianity. The two numerals are based on the confrontation with God: God is 1 (one) and the Devil is 0 (zero). Indeed, as in Christianity, Leibniz believed that the world could be explained by these two entities and their dynamic interactions, which are not unlike the two categories of the Subject and the Object. The following example consolidates all these aspects of attempts to escape from paradoxical reality. Ada Lovelace (1815-1852), who initially im-proved the system established by Leibniz, and Charles Babbage (1791-1871) develop algorithms and computers. The latter is well known by now, contrary to the fact that Ada Lovelace was a very good friend of Mary Shelley (1791-1851). The Romantic author of the Gothic horror novel Frankenstein: or, The Modern Prometheus, published in 1818, tells a story where an artificial human being moves through and frightens the world. This horror, which is also inherent in algorithms, could only be saved by a new ideology: by the vision of robots or hubots. Nevertheless, any idea or concept for dissolving the paradoxes has failed until today. One can easily observe this in the context of Descartes' impressive announcement of the Subject. The latter was undermined by Charles Darwin (1809-1882), who upset all traditional concepts of human uniqueness by means of his theory of evolution, and, once more, subverted the image of an anthropocentric reality. How could the center of something be represented, if that center was only a fleeting moment in a continuous movement?

The next one to challenge any euphoric ideas of the Ego was Sigmund Freud (1856-1936), who stated that the Ego was composed of several influences that could not be controlled solely by the Subject. Factors influencing the constitution of human self-image are self-esteem and the individual's actions. These aspects also include the experiences of using objects, signs, services, media et cetera, in other words: every possible experience of design. The ideas introduced by Actor-Network Theory (ANT) are in no way new; they have been discussed for several centuries. Darwin and Freud could act without the impetus of defining new categories and, by doing so, they just offered new solutions to escape the paradoxes to be able to behave in linear

logic. Undoubtedly, there was a constant risk because new categories were short-lived, even if they seemed to work out. Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) discussed and analyzed each category intensely to prove its seriousness or its possible applications to explain something. The most exciting moment, probably also for himself, happened in his third critique, the Critique of Judgement. After more than 250 pages of arguing with and about possible categories, he abandons his rational arguments and explains that he had to invent a somehow bizarre new meta-category to understand what happens when judging artefacts or even natural evidence. Suddenly, he comes up with the Genius, an entity that no longer follows simple linear logical systems and categories. On the contrary: the Genius is an entity that acts by using associations, by intuition and by trusting non-categorical images.

Kant's discovery should not only have changed academia fundamentally, but the idea of the Genius should have revised universal structures, ways of thinking and acting. Unfortunately, it was forgotten or suppressed until the very end of the 19th century because it did not fit the conventions believed at that time, just following the industrial division of work disciplines. Therefore, everything was categorized, from thinking and trying to understand to doing something. The 19th century offered the standards of safety and security to establish a stable and strong bourgeois society. Still, that century also saw the fantastic Romantic poets and philosophers who always questioned the power and banality of a simple-minded concept of linear logic, disciplines and categories – but they only ended up in melancholic or even depressive statements lacking the power to destroy the academic and bourgeois ideologies. The avoidance of conflict and disregard necessary open discourse even discounted any scientific explanations that did not fit the simple desire for safety and security. A very interesting example is the discovery, which the physiologist and physicist Hermann von Helmholtz (1821-1894) made in the 1850s: he proved, and was able to demonstrate, that the human eye cannot see rectangular and parallel lines. This is doubtless the case, although nobody wants to believe it: our eyes cannot see these geometric facts. The problem, of course, is that we nonetheless believe to see them without problem.

We are absolutely sure that we are able to see rectangular and parallel lines. That means, despite being physically unable to see them, we want to see them and, whenever something seems to be similar to that geometry, we simply construct it. We want to think we are able to see these lines is because we are afraid of anything we cannot immediately understand. The known and the familiar give us assurance and a feeling of safety. It is the same with linear logic, categories and with algorithms. Algorithms are the permanent production of something expected. They are exactly what humans always long for: we do not want to run the risk of venturing into the unexpected. This is the sole reason for the present boom of the ›narrativity.‹ Humans want to be entertained and told stories continuously. These are quasi-activities without an open end, offering predictable results, like religion or other ideologies offer regulations. All of this is an example of what has been happening in design for several years. Companies and people in general are dreaming of design as an all-time problem-solver, as a supermarket of endless solutions and as a symbol for linear logic: simple, easy, fast, evident and devoid of paradox: a symbol for safety and security.

To conclude, I would like to show some alternatives which are easily described, but probably difficult to understand and to follow. Because we could just declare the need of giving up any dreams of a safe empirical life – accepting that there are, myriads of possibilities, which we need to understand in relation to their specific qualities. We also have to understand mistakes and misunderstandings as the main sources of innovation – understanding them leads to differentiating between helpful and bad mistakes. We all have to learn to live with blur, with fundamental uncertainty, with the unclear and the vague. Of course, this does not solve anything, but it does explain that we have to live far beyond solutions and move within fantastic associations. No doubt, design – if it is understood in this way – could be the foundation for those new thoughts, activities and behaviors. Just shake, provoke and criticize it.

↳Till Wittwer: *Genius*, Kant's »bizarre new meta-category«, as Michael Erlhoff puts it, is an interesting starting point when looking to devise a possible way of thinking beyond binary logic. In order to find a point of entry to approaching the world from a different vantage point via *Genius*, I would propose to situate the term in its original context, that is the realm of the metaphysical and the occult: In ancient Rome, »Genius« referred to an invisible patron spirit that accompanied every man. The Arab »Jinn« – a character that has been vastly exoticized in the West – similarly describes spiritual entities who populate the earth alongside all other lifeforms. Both terms seem to be rooted in the semitic »Jnn«, which means invisible or hidden. »That which is hidden from sight« in turn is the literal translation of the Latin »occultus«.

Genii and Jinn are beings who live in parallel to human beings but only occasionally reveal themselves. They belong to the sphere of the occult – essentially, they are ghosts. And precisely this concept of the ghost, I would argue, is the vehicle which has helped us in Western culture to accomodate and integrate paradoxes into our lives instead of having to make them disappear – in other words: Apparitions help us to leave things unresolved and be okay with it. And, in spite of its enormous power, linear logic, the ultimate measure of what can be considered »real« in our lives, has never quite managed to eradicate – dissolve, rather – the existence of ghosts and the occult.

To see how science and the occult intersect in our lived reality, let's look at a phenomenon that emerged in the 19th century – a science and tech-crazed period in which the Second Industrial Revolution radically unfolded its full effects and brought along hitherto unparalleled breakthroughs in engineering, science and technology. As Erlhoff points out, it is the century of Mary Shelley's technocrat horror-phantasy of Frankenstein – but at the same time, it is a century of the paranormal and the magical: With Bram Stoker's Dracula, a supernatural monster is released into the world; Goethe publishes his iteration of the folk tale of Doctor Faustus, the apostate scientist who turns to the metaphysical. A plethora of occult societies sprout in parallel to technological breakthroughs – and these seemingly contradictory notions all intersect.

Take photography: The scientifically objective result of nature inscribing itself onto a photographic plate's silver gelatin emulsion helps ghosts transgress into the realm of the real. How so? Shortly after photography – the documentation tool of the physical world – is invented and alters our relation to time, space and history forever, the photography of ghosts becomes almost as big a craze as the simple family portrait – the haunted images fuse the realm of the mundane with the realm of spirits, or Genii.

That ghost photography was only an elaborate scam, a manipulation of the photographic paper's exposure to light, does not matter: the paradox hunger for scientific proof of an underworld, of parallel dimensions and a surfacing of the occult demonstrates how closely binary thinking and non-binary thinking are in fact related: scientific and magical thinking are two sides of one and the same notion: the desire to transgress the human shell and senses, even in sight of the danger of being lost and finding that which is larger than the human mind – that is stumbling upon Genius.

The desire seems to be not as much to know for certain what IS, but rather to know for certain that the ghostly blur transcends us and our ability to know; it is the desire to invite the occult, the nebulous, the speculative to sit with us in the family portraits of our species, to let »that which is hidden from sight« appear on the silver gelatine print as a Jinn and demonstrate to us the limits of our knowledge. It is the desire to make the impossible, the paradox palpable and to accommodate it like a long gone but not forgotten relative. And I believe that the recent embracing of narrative and the speculative in academia is not just another strategy of streamlining the unknown and a flimsy attempt to resolve that which must remain forever unresolved, but instead it might be an acknowledgement »that there are, at best, only possibilities, which we have to understand in relation to their specific qualities«, to quote Erlhoff. It might be an attempt in opening the door to the fantastic, to the Genius, or Jinn to join us in our academic ivory towers and broaden our perspective. It might be an attempt to embrace and live with the blur of fundamental uncertainty – unthinkable in an endeavor to strive for linear resolve.