

A BRIEF AVATAR- NETWORK THEORY

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ACTOR-NETWORKS AND OTHER OBJECT-ORIENTED ONTOLOGIES

For more than two decades, Bruno Latour's actor-network theory has dominated discourse in Germanophone cultural and media studies (Latour 1999, 2005b: 21–26, 46–50, 79–82). Originally conceived for sociologically-informed research on science, particularly in the field of science and technology studies, actor-network theory engages with scientific research and its historical changes by analyzing networks of actors. Actor-network theory defines the category of actors in a broad sense to include scientific objects, experimental systems, theories, instruments, methods of measurement, archives, scientists, and their assistants. It focuses not so much on the theory of science, which explores how scientific objects are constituted and the application and genesis of scientific theories. Rather, it is more of an ethnography of the sciences, of how they organize their practices and establish global networks. Actor-network theory seeks to uncover *all* “agents” that have a part in the scientific process. Instead of restricting itself to intentional action, the theory understands “agents” in the weak sense of “co-actors” situated in a field of forces. For actor-network theory, scientific praxis is rooted not in an ensemble of ideas and intentions but is a function of a web of relations that provide the foundation for what is called “objectivity” in different historical periods (Daston Galison 2007). In short, the approach aims to critique the fantasy that science is a wholly transparent, controllable process and not a complex field of diverse, sometimes contradictory elements and their relations, which only bring forth that which is to

be defined as a scientific object when they come together. The basic claim underlying this critique is that facts are always forged out of and connected to a series of factors that can never be identified in their entirety. The result is that scientific constructs remain resistant and contain blind spots that relativize their validity. Accordingly, the “networks” (*réseaux*) made up of connections, objects, technologies, and people precede that which constitutes science, its facts, and its discourses.

The success of actor-network theory and its transfer from science and technology studies to cultural studies, media studies, and aesthetics and art has been remarkable. Having garnered the status of its own paradigm, it has established itself as one of the key theoretical approaches, and this despite the fact that alternative philosophies of praxis—one prime example being that of “artistic research”—gained an upper hand around the same time. The transfer to other disciplines was not clear-cut, though. Distortions, misunderstandings, and exaggerations were all part of the process, particularly as concerns the theory’s main category, the “actor-network.” The expression is *one* word: there are not, on the one hand, networks and, on the other, actors or agents as separate entities that then fuse together into a conglomeration. Rather, the term signifies the heterogeneity of actor-relations itself, with the “nodes” represented by subjects or objects and the “edges” represented by relations that have their own individual affordances and power to act. Thus, we are not dealing with neutral units, but with closely interwoven “actants.” Among them are things in particular arrangements or concepts in the context of discourses, materials, and experimental practices and settings, all of which only attain their “effectiveness” in their mutual interactions. They are all inseparably bound up with one another, and it is the unique relations that generate divergent effects that can rarely be reconstructed identically and thus must be analyzed as a whole. Thus, actor-network theory is a type of relativism that demands that we think holistically and place a whole assemblage of mutually interacting elements in relation to one another. These elements’ constellations mark a break with classical modes of description because the purpose is not to identify causality, but to deduce “scripts” out of interdependencies and connections.

However, standing in contrast to its application in the history of science, one of the common vulgarizations of the theory in cultural and media studies and research on artistic practice is to shred the network of relationalities and extract actors out of it as self-standing entities. The term is then often turned into “actors-network theory,” where the silent insertion of the “s” underscores the mistakenness of the approach. Because while the expression “actor-network” emphasizes the network, the “actors-network” emphasizes the actors, which, for their part, advance to equally acting agents in a mixture of human and non-human elements. This underscores their individual autonomy and frees things and technologies from the yoke of anthropocentric paternalism. And it grants objects an almost magic power, as if they were living beings vested with their own powers of attraction and sometimes even intentions, thus systematically blurring the line between the human and non-human. Latour himself suggests this reading when he speaks of an “object’s activity,” even if in the same breath he says that objects can, at most, only be “mediators” or “intermediaries,” explaining that “specific tricks have to be invented to *make them talk*, that is ... to produce *scripts* of what they are making others—humans and non-humans—do.” (Latour 2005b: 79) This is particularly true of autonomous technological things and their assemblages, and especially objects with artificial intelligence that are seemingly capable of making their own “decisions.” Examples include self-driving cars, diagnostic expert-based systems, robots, communication assistants, and avatars. But these artefacts do not act “autonomously,” at least not in anything more than a metaphorical sense, because they always act within the predefined framework of a program and probability functions.

In philosophy, the theory has been further developed and radicalized by the New Materialism and object-oriented ontology. Especially prominent here is the work of Graham Harman, whose “speculative realism” has had spectacular success at schools of art in particular (Harman 2007: 171–206; 2018): “Something important is happening.

In our profession, there have never been better times to be young.” (Bryant, Srnicek, Harman 2011: 1) Harman goes well beyond Latour and asserts—in an anti-Cartesian state of “naivete” (Harman 2011: 5)—that there is a principle equality among all entities, whether it be humans, animals, viscous substances, atomic particles, or, as Harman adds somewhat flippantly: “diamonds,” “rope,” “neutrons,” “pens,” “eyeglasses,” “tools,” “beating hearts,” “fire,” “Egypt,” “armies,” and “football stadiums.” (Ibid., 5–7, 20, 37, 142 *passim*) He writes: “Everything both inside and outside the mind is an object,” (ibid.: 143) objects that maintain the most diverse relations with one another, most of which, however, we cannot observe. The picture of the world painted here is similar to that of a giant living organism in the mode of vitalism, but with the significant difference that its reasoning is purely speculative. For Harman, it is apparently wholly indifferent if two balls hit each other or if a person hits another person. This denies every difference, every hierarchy, every distinction between *actio* and *re-actio*, because in principle, things, plants, and other entities have the same rights as the people who make judgments about them. The main target of critique is what Quentin Meillassoux calls “correlationism,” (Meillassoux 2011) to which he ascribes the claim that everything that we can know or experience of the world is always already shaped by our thinking, concepts, judgments, and categories and is thus subjectively determined. In contrast—and in distinction to actor-network theory, which would not dispute this claim—speculative realism, of which object-oriented ontology is a species, asserts that there is an “ab-solute” reality independent of humans in which all events are placed on equal footing, whether they simply affect humans or whether they occur “between” humans or “between” objects. This confronts us with *two* givens: the objects, on the one hand, and networks of relations, on the other. The “humanist” uniqueness of humans is consequently erased. The only thing that matters are events that, regardless of their ontological origins, have relations with one another. The philosophy rules out the possibility of privileging any particular perspective. On the whole, the approach is inconsistent, because it is only possible to make this claim by simultaneously reinstating the primacy of the human thinking about these issues, thus surreptitiously reviving nothing other than the old anthropocentrism.¹

POST-HUMANIST FANTASIES

Anti-humanism or post-humanism in this form, whether it be vulgarized actor-network theory or object-oriented ontology, clearly remains a type of humanism. But the following will test its plausibility by analyzing a special example: the avatar, or more precisely, avatar-human constellations. Alongside cyborgs, robots, digital characters, and other seemingly “autonomous” technological constructs, much discourse in media and cultural studies is all too ready to grant agency to avatars—as purely simulated beings that have no other existence than as mathematical models. This, it is alleged, dethrones the hegemony of humanism. However, the claim is implausible, because the artefacts themselves have a humanist origin. After all, as Martin Heidegger (1977) writes, technology is only the tip of the iceberg of the metaphysical disposition that he criticizes in his “Letter on Humanism” as a human fantasy of power. But the claim serves to multiply the number of such agents and counterpose the primacy of human activities with more “autonomous beings.” The point is to relativize the precedence of humans by showing that they have to deal with heterological agents that might even be better than them in certain respects. Many theories of art have gone beyond this technological post-humanism by ascribing agency to every material, thing, medium, or technical apparatus; however, these efforts often remove the objects from their context and do not reposition them in a network of relations. Props, paints, slides, special effects, light, computer animation, and animated figures suddenly gain the capacity to formulate intentions and intervene in and shake up the action—just like smart phones and other programmable smart things evoke emotions that can bind people to them.

¹ See my critical remarks on this movement in Mersch 2016, 2019

Such fantasies were once the exclusive object of theories of schizophrenia. If one reads them as evidence of objects' "capacity to act," the question arises as to how one defines "capacity" and "action" in this context. Certainly, all kinds of objects can influence us and our environment, but this was not even controversial for classic theories of causality. The thing is *causa* of an effect, whether it be as the initial spark of a chain reaction or as hindrance, as an Odradek that always pops up where it does not belong or, conversely, is noticed in its absence as a "tool." As *absentia*, it has a further effect, because we experience the significance of a thing more gravely the more we miss it. Ascribing "agency" in the sense of a "capacity to act," however, goes well beyond this, because it concerns autonomy, intentionality, and thus independence. Certainly, things, other living beings, and "nature" affect us and sometimes *make* us act or change our plans, such as when they stand in the way and counteract our intentions. But they only do this because *we* had plans and then only by negating those plans. At other times, they require from us sophisticated techniques of diagnosis, methods of making visible and processing. Indeed, their vulnerability, fragility, and finitude are integrated into technology itself. They generate breaks and "force" us to behave in certain ways or to repair and revise. But the subtle difference between this conceptual insight and the various "actors" theories lies in the fact that the former works with terms like *re-action*, *change*, *temporality*, and *negation*, which are all associated with contingency, decay, and resistance. Thus, essential here is not a—positively connotated—"capacity to act," but, at the most, negativity.

But resistance does not necessarily constitute *capacity*, which is only true when the resistance is *wanted* and conflicts with the rules in protest. A tree blocking a road, a dam diverting water, a turnstile, an opaque structure that cannot be understood, and mutating viruses—none "want" anything or refuse to respond. Rather, they condition *our* actions such that we *always already have an essential part in these events*. This also means that we cannot subtract *our* role from *their alleged actions*. At the same time, the word "compulsion" says too much, because the issue is not how things and objects obstruct our actions, but is simply a matter of formal necessities. The discursive confusion lies in the fact that "actor" is a pretentious word that commits a category error when it is taken literally to suggest an activity that cannot be distinguished from passivity. What is more, passivity comes "earlier" than activity, which makes the "actors" perspective generally deficient, as will be shown in more detail.

The *adequacy* of such ascriptions is another issue, particularly as concerns the modality of *relationships* that we enter into with *others* as well as with that which we are *not*. This includes technological artefacts and artificial beings that we ourselves have created in order to busy ourselves with their automatic activity. They only seem to approximate us, touch us emotionally, subvert our affects and senses, provoke us, or engage in dialogue with us. The (ultimately cybernetic) theories of cultural and media studies as well as theories of the new "ecologisms" (Morton 2016) and parts of artistic practice consist in the notion that interactive technological media will enable us to overcome humans' monopoly on action, because current and—even more—future technologies will compel us to accept the destabilization of our dominance by developing their own affects, reading our emotions, intervening in our actions, applying our wishes, making decisions distinct from those made by humans, and thus being equal "playing partners." (Hayles 1999) But is it possible to call this "cooperation"? Do technologies really enter into "partnerships" with us in the genuine sense of the word when they interact with us? And are the "decisions" they make more than just algorithmic, randomized re-actions? These questions are particularly important for the many avatars that are conceived as simulative representatives of ourselves or other, potentially malevolent characters that serve as assistants, advisers, fictional bearers of identity, and much more. The following thus discusses whether we are justified in speaking of "power," "cooperation," "partnership," "foreignness," and "malevolence" when talking about such artificial beings, or whether these are not just concealed anthropomorphisms that fly in the face of the emphatic claims made by object-oriented ontology and actors-network theories, thus revealing that they revive the "humanism" that they themselves seek to fight against.

RELATIONALITY VERSUS RELATABILITY

The crux of our critique lies in the reality of “social” relationships and questions about their reduction to networks and formal ties. The comparison between avatars and interhuman relationships underscores the intensity of this issue. First, it should be recalled that network theories are rooted in mathematical graph theories that only know two types of entities: “nodes” substitute objects, which have no ontological predetermination and thus can be treated as empty containers that can hold anything, while “edges” represent the connecting lines and can stand for all types of relations. They, too, are “empty spaces,” determining in advance only the number of connections, but not their modality. Mathematical models abstract from their content, so that it appears irrelevant if the “edges” connect humans or non-humans. After all, crucial is the structure and its qualities, not experiences like social trust, communicative reciprocity, and interhuman interactions. Moreover, are sociality, cooperation, and understanding—in short, the specific *connections between humans and their own capacities* that were once associated with concepts like *koinonia* and *religio*—at

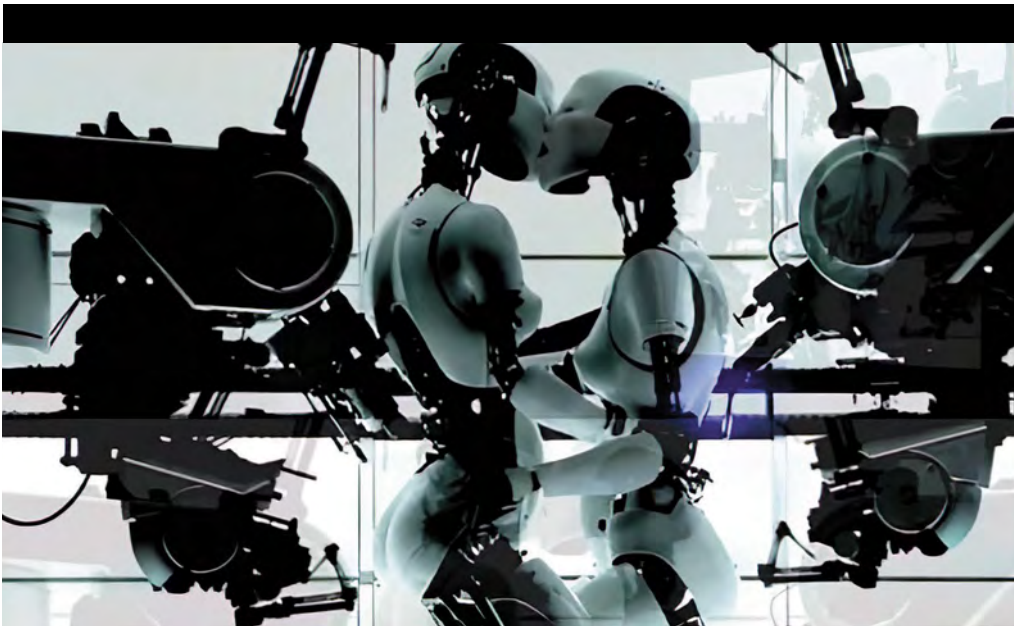


FIG. 1
CHRIS CUNNINGHAM, MUSIC VIDEO FOR
BJÖRK, “ALL IS FULL OF LOVE” (1999).

all compatible with avatars? Can “living together” in the sense of political “participation” be compared with the mere sharing of a common space between *us* and technological and other artefacts and images, artificial beings and simulacra? What does it mean to “encounter” an avatar—perhaps even an avatar of myself as at once a sort of alienating self-encounter? What does it mean to look at “them”—or, better, “it”—in the eyes, to be affected by “them,” to respond to “them”? And how should we view two avatars’ or robots’ “love” or “sexual attraction” to one another?

Should we feel shocked, disgusted, amused, tricked, excluded, entertained, or betrayed? Can they, as our own inventions, be treated as equals and granted the same rights? Or must we distinguish between “rela-

tionships,” which are always constituted by a “pull,” (Mersch 2010) and the diagrams of a network? In other words, do connections—and especially technological connections—not always constitute a deficient mode of relating that has interhuman sociality as a precondition? Must we not have already entered into social “relationships” in order to understand them?

As far as these questions are concerned, one might say that avatars serve as extreme tests of what it means to act autonomously, be an actor, and develop relationships with non-human artefacts. The diagnosis offered by object-oriented ontology seems clear: we have no privileges over artificial entities, which are not just simple passive objects. Nothing gives us privilege, greater status, or a sense of superiority over them. And yet, the assertion that there is equality between us and them involves a distortion, because the problem of fictive interactions with avatars is not the alternative between hierarchy and equality. Rather, the

decisive issue is the basic incommensurability between these relations themselves. This is to say that human relationships and artificial relations are incomparable, because the former signify an *event* within a complex social order that is defined by alterity, while the latter just derive from a network of positions that must always be embedded in social systems but cannot be larger or more expansive than them. Certainly, one can argue that ecologies precede economies and that environmental totalities encompass social totalities; that sociality is nothing without the “nature” that makes it possible. However, ecologies are always either described through graphic, mathematical structures, which remain neutral, or their semantics—and thus their anthropomorphic quality—are already a derivative of the social world. There is no ecology, no nature from which humans and their sociality can be removed, because this sociality always precedes the analysis of nature. The defense of ecology, too, is a social task that applies the experiences of the social to environment and nature, because they are a precondition for our living together. The philosophical weight of these reflections consists in the insight that the social is even constitutive for our *ability to distinguish between objects and humans at all* and for the fact that, where this distinction is missing, the *sense of the genuine sociality of the human* disappears. Without habitual social relations, we could not only not interact with one another, but would also not be able to interact with things and thus avatars. Indeed, we would not be able to relate to *anything at all*, not to speak of thinking, understanding, telling stories, creating art, and doing science. One of the possible consequences of this critique is thus that equalizing the ontological will lead to manifest sociopathologies that destroy the difference between relationship or relatability and relation.

Versions of actor-network theory prominent in media and cultural studies and art theory evidence this dissolution of difference, because they subtract precisely those aspects of the approach that are interesting for social science. With respect to research praxis, Latour’s actor-network theory is a social philosophy. Its brilliance consists in conceiving of actors as *network figurations* in which human relationships are always active. In contrast, post-humanist appropriations of the theory only function by abstracting from social reality. While Latour sought to delimit the social, the post-humanist version of ANT completely erases it. In defense of his own work against some of his followers and critics, Latour wrote an article in 1996 titled *On Actor-Network Theory: A Few Clarifications plus More than a Few Complications* in which he clarified that the postmodern appropriations of ANT were misled because “actor-networks” should be understood as an “ontology” with a genuinely “networky character” and not as a conglomeration of ontological things (Latour 2017). Actor-networks are *active interconnections*, not interconnections of “actives.” The widespread talk of the agency of things that allegedly necessitates a redefinition of the relation between subjectivity, materiality, and alterity, thus rests on a systematic false reading. The question of who or what the “actors” are is incorrectly formulated, because there are only connections and co-constitutions, whereby the prefixes “co-” and “con-” are primordial. And every network has its own shape that must be reconstructed. Thus, no avatars exist as isolated artificial identities that, in the guise of “simulated subjects,” undermine “humanism,” just as surprising “encounters” with them are unthinkable. Rather, there are only “avatar-networks” comprised of an ensemble of computer scientists, software engineers, displays, settings, discourses, visualizations, data flows, internet connections, online communities, narratives, fellow players, and much more. These actor-networks are always already shaped by human structures, one reason being that they are human technologies. In other words, we “encounter” avatars at most in play settings, films, and virtual realities in which we already anticipate their presence.

Thus, Erich Schüttpelz (2016: 235) correctly claims that actor-network theory avoids “fixing artefacts, social organizations, and signs” as well as persons and things in favor of delineating foundational orders of relations and their processes. From this perspective, agency is a function of “chains of operation” that should be characterized as “insistent transactions” and not as a function of autonomous decisions (ibid.: 237–238). As a consequence, we are confronted with the “postulate of the primacy of social and technological chains of

operation over the entities involved.” (Ibid.: 237) Agency should thus not be attributed to individual actors, but only to the complexity of a relational arrangement. This also holds for avatars, which are nothing but aggregates and not “living” humanoid beings that we could enter into dialogue with on equal footing. Instead, their agency is constituted through at least three factors: first, programs of similarity that are gleaned from social processes, even if artificial intelligence drives them; second, the quality of being a technological artefact, which enable the adaptation of certain movements or reactions with the help of tools like motion-capture; and third, signs, which include data, drawings, and archives, so that they can only be understood and treated as objects of a relationship when they are viewed within *the whole constellation to which they belong*: “Actor-network theory—despite rumors that say otherwise—does not grant the persons, things, artefacts, natural beings, instruments, media, writings, images, and data centers that it describes a power to act or ‘agency’ of same strength, equal quality, same source, not even same status. Rather, all that actor-network theory demands is the equal consideration of the ‘agency’—the power to act—of artefacts, signs, persons.” (Ibid.: 242)

The specific charm of the theory, which has had such an enduring effect on cultural, media, and art studies, thus derives from how it brings together the whole heterogeneous ensemble of relevant aspects that require an implicit “ontography” to be described. Their relational scripture, which has much more in common with Derrida’s theory of writing than most proponents of actor-network theory are aware, thus excludes every attempt at ontologization or the conception of agency as a quality of objects. Instead, as Schützpeltz writes, agency unfolds in an “operative process,” (ibid.: 243) which is to say that it comes out of a processual co-relationality that is similar to a “graph” of forces like in theories of physical force fields. In this sense, the non-human elements are more akin to the *pathic* than to *poiesis*. Applied to avatars, this means that they are hybrids in which relations and their relata are ordered together, but in such a way that the latter only obtain their specificity through the former. They are heterogeneous associations in which the *copula* is the most important part, such that the connections mobilize an entire apparatus that governs interactions with them, their possibilities, and their limits—in short, their operability. “One difficulty certainly concerns vocabulary. The equation of actors with the relations their actions place them in and their power to act, the equation of ‘actors’ with ‘actor-networks,’ the hyphen between actor and network, and the fact that every ‘network’ (every action relation) can appear as an actor that enters into other networks—all of this promotes an activist view of actor-network theory.” (Ibid.)

These points underscore that the human element cannot be removed from the network. The purpose of actor-network theory is thus the assessment of often forgotten *non-human elements* in the sciences, particularly ethnography, cultural philosophy, and social theory. Latour (1993) thus explicitly talks about a “symmetrical anthropology” that would remain anthropology and not get lost in the inconsistencies of object-oriented ontology. At the same time, this anthropology’s claim to “symmetry” reveals the necessity of the interdependency of its elements. Just as no human, social, or cultural facts can exist without relations to non-human things that they will have always already transformed, so too are there no non-human facts that have not already been influenced by human actions. Thus, the “human element” is just as dependent on things as the things and technological artefacts are on human and interhuman relations. Alongside Latour’s many examples, the pistol makes this point especially well. The pistol is a piece of technology, but it is nothing without the person who holds it and uses it for good or evil. One cannot call it a neutral object that freely stands to human disposition, nor can one call it a thing that is itself an actor. One can only speak of various human-weapon relations that generate a specific type of violence and are violent in every constellation. The issue is not to decide to engage in a violent act, but to understand the different modalities of violence that are produced by different relations. Thus, we are not dealing with innocent, isolated things nor with individual humans who only activate these things through their practices. Rather, we are dealing with impenetrable

“knots” of various actions and potentials to act. Actor-network theory, with its emphasis on chains of operation, thus contains a moment of opacity and contingency, which is what makes it so powerful for the analysis of both the sciences and of art and society.

AVATAR-NETWORKS

The implication is that avatars only have *being* at all where networks are already laid out and mapped. Avatars never appear and cause trouble on their own, but only do so in the context of human-avatar associations with their technological, semiotic, and computer foundations, which include all the parameters of simulations and the scenes that correspond with them. They parasitically feed on the primacy of social relations that they rely on and from which they have “learned” through machine learning. The fascination that we have for animated figures and quasi-living dolls carries a trace of this. They embody a vitality that we know is only staged, but that captures our attention precisely because it evidences a similarity shot through with dissimilarity and thus forges a distance to our everyday experience. In other words, having an encounter with an avatar implies already being wrapped up in an avatar-network that remains subordinate to the sociality of interhuman relationships. As a result, unexpected face-to-face encounters with avatars seem impossible because, unlike with ghosts and other apparitions, avatars never appear as autonomous *agents*. After all, attributing agency to them would mean extracting them from their networks and elevating their status to one of autonomous beings. But in the end, they are predictable, even if they simulate unpredictability. This is why—like with robots—fear is not the dominant emotion in our

experience of avatars, an insight that stands contrary to the “uncanny valley” hypothesis. Rather, dominant are neutrality, contempt, and distance, because, as both neuroscientific experiments and experiences with cinema show, there is always a certain degree of familiarity that we can easily decipher and enjoy.



FIG. 2
AVATAR: THE WAY OF WATER (2022)
© DISNEY



FIG. 3
3-D AVATAR MODEL
[HTTPS://LEEGOONZ.WORDPRESS.COM/2010/02/13/W-I-PREAL-TYPE-3D-CHARACTER-MODELING/](https://leegoonz.wordpress.com/2010/02/13/w-i-preal-type-3d-character-modeling/)

Thus, the foreignness of the avatar is a myth, just like the fear of humanoid aliens that conspire against us and take over in the world of science fiction. It is a myth because they are part of the history of technology, which witnessed varying prototypes and degrees of perfection before human attributes were directly programmed into them and we began to integrate them into our perception. Thus, avatars always originate in an analogy, which means that they will never attain the status of alterity that would be necessary to recognize them *as* other others, neighbors, or equal cooperation partners. They are more like mirrors without enigma because we know how they are made and what they really are: *mathematical simulacra*.

Thus, despite all of its theoretical productivity, there is something lacking in actor-network theory, because the primacy of networks does not allow for a distinction between relationality and relatability. Like the graph theories that stand at the foundation of network theories, relations denote formal classifications that distinguish only between “nodes” and “edges,” but do not necessarily differentiate between the *modes* of classification that connect the networked elements to one another in varying ways. In short, as avatar-networks demonstrate, the deficiencies of actor-network theories lie in their *lack of an adequate concept of modality that would relativize the concept of relation* and, above all, *enable a separation between relationship and relation*, which is crucial for all forms of sociality. Cooperation, neighborliness, friendship, and dialogue can hardly be sufficiently described with the neutral concept of relation, and they do not adhere to the formalism of mathematical functions. This is why interhuman relationships are different than human-machine or human-avatar relations and relations between things, necessitating that a fundamental asymmetry be charted in the symmetry of networks from the very beginning. This is likely a reason why human-avatar relations, particularly in games, always have such a stereotypical form and why *fighting*—the quintessential form of binary relations—is dominant in them. At the same time,



FIG. 4
SCENE FROM *MORROWIND: THE ELDER SCROLLS* (2017).
[HTTPS://WWW.BUFFED.DE/TESO-THE-ELDER-SCROLLS-ONLINE-SPIEL-15582/TESTS/MORROWIND-REVIEW-1229438/](https://www.buffed.de/teso-the-elder-scrolls-online-spiel-15582/tests/morrowind-review-1229438/)

it helps explain why these relations rarely deal with political conflict, in which diplomacy and its nuances are of utmost importance, or love relationships, which traverse pretty much all emotional registers.

Another way of expressing this is that actor-networks and their relational diagrams are similar to homogeneous webs that are wholly determined by the logic of their graphs, while social structures constitute asymmetric “fields” in which identities, belonging, and the elements that forge or break community are most significant. This brings us to a momentous claim, because from a philosophical perspective, the reductive versions of actor-network theory

cast doubt on nothing less than the *primordial sociality* in theories of agency and replace sociality with a primitive copy. While they seek to revive social philosophy by proclaiming the symmetrical equality of all relations, they are faced with the “ab-solute” difference

that follows out of all other relational differences. Responsible for this difference is, beyond Derrida, not the “scripturality of writing,” but the never-ending drama of interhuman relationships. It is these relationships that produce differences between humans, technological artefacts, objects, and artificial beings, such that where these differences are neutralized, the *sense for the social* and thus for *genuine human sociality* gets lost. Is this not why Chris Cunningham’s video for Björk’s song “All is Full of Love” (1999) is so unsettling? And, conversely, is it not symptomatic that the pathologies of the social can be perceived in the mythical fantasy worlds of computer games and animated movies, whose archaic narratives are—not for nothing—defined by violence and heroism, as if they were just directly channeling the energy of the social? The reason for this shallowness probably consists in the fact that the theater of algorithmic models without genuine decisions is not able to do much more or much else.

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