

---

## Digital Soul – A Modest Proposal

Michael Stockinger

“Everything seeks its own heightened version. Or put it this way. Nothing happens until it is consumed.”  
(Don DeLillo)

In an interview for MTV, French house veteran Etienne de Crécy called the music on his latest album *digital soul* – a mixture of old-style soul and funk elements with the latest sequencing and sampling techniques. Although the majority of DJs still uses vinyl records for their gigs, the music they play or produce is made up of mostly digital bits and pieces. And despite the frequent use of analogue elements, the shift in contemporary media art and technology is clearly one towards digitalization, and therefore, infinite reproducibility. While records, audio and video tapes, super 8 films and the like are inevitably given to deterioration and decay, compact disks, DVDs and digital film are – at least in theory – thought to last forever, since the multiplication of digital data should be possible without any loss of quality.

From the first screenings of movies at the turn of the century up to the invention of VCRs, film used to be experienced as “evanescence”, as Philip Auslander remarks in “Ontology vs. History: Making Distinctions Between the Live and the Mediatized”, but he adds that “it is now experienced as repetition” (Auslander 5). We can buy or rent a copy of our favorite film and watch it, until we know every line of dialogue<sup>1</sup>. Human beings have, quite generally, tended towards creating possibilities of reproduced pleasure. If something

---

1 A wide-spread phenomenon, by the way, particularly among lovers of comedy classics (from Monty Pythons to The Simpsons or Beavis and Butthead) who will at any time and in any place attack you with an enthusiastic rendering of any line of dialogue you might happen to mention accidentally in conversation.

was great once, why shouldn't it be even better the second or third time around?

This tendency towards *repeatable pleasure* might be linked to or even account for the rapidly growing technologies of mass reproduction. There is "something in the soul of technology that requires this to happen. Once it is feasible, it can't be resisted", as Don DeLillo points out in an interview with Mark Feeney about his play *Valparaiso*, in which his anti-hero, Michael Majeski, attempts to find his missing identity through a series of radio and television interviews. Majeski hops on a plane in order to go for a short business trip to Valparaiso, Indiana, but has to realize that he had flown to the wrong destination with paradoxically the same name in Chile. He returns back home and consumes his 15 minutes of fame. He becomes, in DeLillo's words, "a hero of self-disclosure", as he is invited to talk about his strange adventure to an interviewer and, finally, on an Oprah Winfrie-like talk show.

By sharing his experience with a broad public and by transferring his existence on to film, he hopes to gain knowledge of his existence. The reproducibility of the images promises insights he is denied in his ordinary life:

"The drive in technology is always toward something that is faster, better, more complete. In this play, there is a sense of *complete revelation*, *complete exposure*, and the *complete absorption*, finally, by the main character. I wonder if there is a secret drive in technology that tends toward some kind of *totalitarian perception*, something we won't glimpse necessarily. Or whether there is something in us that's brought to realization by technology itself."

(Feeney 2, my italics)

In this sense, the individual's wish to be "absorbed" and dissolved, is linked to the promise of "totalitarian perception" or total understanding induced by technology. "He [Majeski] does it through instruments of broadcast technology, microphone, cameras, videotape and film", says DeLillo (Feeney 3). Some of these instruments

are still analogue, but ideally they are digital, since – according to the laws of perfect digital reproducibility – the experience of *complete digital absorption* might promise eternal reproducibility of this understanding. In a digital universe our identity will be transformed into a *digital soul*, continuously present and available, flawlessly reproducible at any moment in time.

Even if this self-realization will never be fully attainable, there is still the wish for it to be feasible. In a digital universe, there would be no separation, just a democratic matrix of egalitarian particles. The self will lose its incentive to exist separately and in opposition to others, since all its hidden desires, fears and inadequacies would dissolve into pure form and order (= complete understanding). The shamanistic melting with the universe could finally be reached, no dark sides, no mysteries, no good and evil – simply subatomic harmony: digital heaven.

“Nous sommes tous à peu près identiques. L’individualisme est une catastrophe qui nous entraîne vers le malheur et le meurtre. Les gens veulent absolument être différents les uns des autres. Renoncer à être exceptionnels nous aiderait à aller mieux.” (Michel Houellebecq)

Given the fact that analogue technical equipment is bound to deteriorate as time goes by, analogue humanity is consequently also doomed to disintegrate, fail and decay. If we assume that the human race is currently living on the verge of an analogue age which is rapidly transforming into a digital one (at least in the places on earth we have so aptly baptized “First World”), we might have to face the fact that the complete digitalization of humanity is an irreversible process unless we are willing to follow the road to self-annihilation.

In his novel *Les particules élémentaires*, French author Michel Houellebecq traces back the fictitious lives (and deaths) of two

brothers, Bruno and Michel, both born around 1955. In his prologue Houellebecq states that they lived in an era where feelings such as love, tenderness and fraternity had largely disappeared. Instead, human relationships were mainly governed by cold-heartedness and cruelty. After around 330 pages, during which we learn about the disastrous impacts of such cold-heartedness and cruelty on the two brothers, Houellebecq concludes the book with an outlook into the next millennium. Or rather, with a review, as the narrator tells us that he is actually looking back from the year 2079, approximately 50 years after the first new, genetically-modified human being was created.

On the basis of a ground-breaking article on the genetic manufacturing of human cells written by Michel in the year 2009 (and after the publication of which he decided to disappear somewhere in the ocean), the newly founded “Movement for the Human Potential” quickly developed elaborate genetic engineering processes which enabled them to create a new breed of human beings, who no longer depended on their sexuality for reproduction. These genetically modified humans gradually took over, making the old human race look terribly pathetic with their wars, genocides and diseases. As the new breed was basically genetically equal, all rivalry, jealousy and sexual frustration gave way to a harmonious existence among brothers and sisters. According to Houellebecq, “Individualism is a catastrophe that leads us toward misery and murder” (*Extraits d'interviews* 1). Individualism was a myth that could not prevent humanity from failure. The old human race understood this and agreed to its own annihilation, since the genetic inequality was recognized as the source of all evil:

“J’ai l’intuition que l’univers est basé sur la séparation, la souffrance et le mal. La séparation est le mal.” (*Extraits d'interviews* 1)

On the verge between the analogue (imperfect, decaying) and the

digital (sexless, eternally reproducible) age, Houellebecq's humans chose *digital heaven* instead of perpetual suffering.

The *digital souls* did not have to renounce their sexual appetite, on the contrary: their lust could be satisfied with the greatest pleasure and license. Since there was no rivalry, no fear or hatred, there was no reason for psychotic behavior. Beings who do not feel separated from their compatriots lose their capacity to hurt others or feel hurt themselves. The complete absorption into the digital master plan not only promises complete understanding of the self – thereby causing its dissolution – but also complete sexual satisfaction.

“Viele Länder sah Zarathustra und viele Völker: keine größere Macht fand Zarathustra auf Erden, als die Werke der Liebenden: ‘gut’ und ‘böse’ ist ihr Name.”  
(Friedrich Nietzsche)

In his often mentioned but rarely quoted<sup>2</sup> masterpiece *Also sprach Zarathustra* Friedrich Nietzsche proposed, or even demanded, a new type of human being, the “Übermensch”. Nietzsche knew about the confines of eternal separation (“‘gut’ und ‘böse’ ist ihr Name”), and about mankind's inability to overcome them. Nonetheless, he still stuck to the idea that the new breed could grow out of the old one:

“Der Mensch ist ein Seil, geknüpft zwischen Tier und Übermensch, ein Seil über einem Abgrunde (...) Was geliebt werden kann am Menschen, das ist, daß er ein Übergang und ein Untergang ist.” (*Zarathustra* 13)

Houellebecq's and Nietzsche's visions are, however, not too far apart; they both view the current race of human beings as a doomed link between the animal world and a kind of paradise, which is no longer a celestial Garden of Eden but a terrestrial one.

---

<sup>2</sup> The exception to the rule is, of course, “Du gehst zu Frauen? Vergiß die Peitsche nicht!” (*Zarathustra* 53).

In the last chapter of *Les particules élémentaires* Houellebecq describes how the last disciples of Nietzsche were won over to join the “Movement for the Human Potential”, thereby giving in to the assumption – formulated by Nietzsche himself – that a human being comprises (in his very essence) his own fall (“daß er ein ... Untergang ist”). Nietzsche, of course, knew nothing about digital ways of reproduction, but he glimpsed and foreshadowed *digital paradise*, when he says “Ich liebe Die, welche nicht erst hinter den Sternen einen Grund suchen, unterzugehen und Opfer zu sein: sondern die sich der Erde opfern, daß die Erde einst des Übermenschen werde” (13). Such a paradise is feasible, but it is to be self-made and requires substantial sacrifices, namely the deaths of those who are willing to pave the way for the “Übermenschen”. At the turn of the century, people were not yet willing to do that.

Nietzsche spent the last years of his life in a small room which Stefan Zweig later compared to a pharmacy, because it was packed with drugs which were to help him soothe his pain. In 1900 he died, suffering from a severe mental disorder. Houellebecq lives in a house in Ireland which is – according to the American journalist Emily Eakin – packed with cigarettes and booze which help him soothe his depressions. Both men have suffered quite extensively in their lives from psychological pain (Houellebecq as well as Nietzsche spent time in psychiatric wards) – an extremely vicious form of analogue suffering. Both writers share, quite understandably, the wish to leave the human race behind.

The fundamental difference between Houellebecq’s and Nietzsche’s approach to a new race lies in the view they adopt towards equality. While Houellebecq champions the idea of complete immersion and anti-separation, Nietzsche sees ‘sameness’ and ‘non-individuality’ – inevitable and even hoped-for qualities of Houellebecq’s new breed – as weaknesses. This is vividly exemplified in a passage in which Zarathustra explains to a crowd of people

what ‘the last human being’ (“der letzte Mensch”), whom he deeply despises, would look like:

“So will ich ihnen vom Verächtlichsten sprechen: das aber ist der letzte Mensch. Und also sprach Zarathustra zum Volke: (...) Die Erde ist dann klein geworden, und auf ihr hüpfte der letzte Mensch, der alles klein macht. Sein Geschlecht ist unaustilgbar wie der Erdflöhen; der letzte Mensch lebt am längsten. ‘Wir haben das Glück erfunden’ – sagen die letzten Menschen und blinzeln. (...) Krank-werden und Mißtrauen-haben gilt ihnen als sündhaft: man geht achtsam einher. (...) Ein wenig Gift ab und zu: das macht angenehme Träume (...) Jeder will das gleiche, Jeder ist gleich: wer anders fühlt, geht freiwillig ins Irrenhaus.” (Friedrich Nietzsche, Also sprach Zarathustra, p.15)

I am fairly convinced that both Houellebecq and Nietzsche know quite a bit about taking a little ‘poison’ to induce sweet dreams, they both know what it feels to be in a lunatic asylum. Nietzsche (and Houellebecq) view the last humans as “unaustilgbar” (which cannot be erased or done away with), obsessed with happiness (“Wir haben das Glück erfunden”) and principally equal (“Jeder ist gleich”). They draw, however, different conclusions. For Nietzsche, all of these characteristics are signs of decadence and decay which the “Übermensch” will have to overcome. For Houellebecq, these qualities are the prerequisites for happiness on earth.

Houellebecq has in any case a few advantages over Nietzsche. First, he is still alive and, second, he has followed (directly or through books) the course of the last 100 years – his pessimism as far as the human race is concerned, therefore, is even more justified than Nietzsche’s. Had Friedrich Nietzsche known about atomic bombs, chemical warfare and concentration camps, he might have given up the idea of creating the “Übermensch” out of the current human race – he might have chosen horses for that matter.

It was, to my knowledge, the sight of a horse that was being beaten by its master which not only triggered an outburst of com-

passion and love but simultaneously Nietzsche's last and lethal attack of a disease called "progressive paralysis". He had suffered from belly cramps and severe headaches for all his life<sup>3</sup>. With Antonin Artaud, who throughout his life fought against similar physical as well as psychological pain and disorders, Nietzsche shares the drive to reconcile (or even 'heal') body and psyche in his writings. Houellebecq's existential *malaise*, his limited physical and psychological well-being (which he expresses in any interview he grudgingly grants), brings him close to both Artaud and Nietzsche. All three are trying to overcome 'humanity' as it presents itself to them. And this includes the mental state as well as the physical.

"Alles am Weibe ist ein Rätsel, und alles am Weibe  
hat Eine Lösung: sie heißt Schwangerschaft."

(Friedrich Nietzsche)

In Houellebecq's case pregnancy was not the solution. Neither for his own life (he left his first wife and son), nor for the new breed of genetically engineered humans. "La décision de décrire cet état de choses et peut-être de le dépasser" – after working in various jobs he chose literature as a means of coping with a decaying analogue world, as well as with his decaying analogue body.

Nietzsche did not have a child, but he was – as the quotation above proves – rather obsessed by the thought of it. Sexuality plays an important role in the works of both writers: in Houellebecq's oeuvre it is prominent, absolutely in the forefront; in Nietzsche's oeuvre it is present as a menace, something that can't be accounted for, but which threatens to disrupt everything.

Both writers' obsession is humanity's inability to live happily. They proposed a new breed, but by doing so, emphasized their critical

---

<sup>3</sup> Although his last condition was thought to have no direct connections to those former sufferings.



and immanent ('in the world') stance. Houellebecq's analysis of a world governed by neo-liberal principles of domination, exploitation and separation, makes him a melancholy observer of a process of self-annihilation. Nietzsche's rants against the last humans likewise demonstrate how deeply he was rooted in his fin-de-siècle society. Pointing towards the future is, for both writers, a means for coming to grips with a very tangible (but still metaphysical) reality.

Houellebecq's solution was to accord women the role of the future models of society. Compassion, tenderness and understanding – all the virtues that have vanished over the last centuries are, according to him, intrinsically female values. Therefore, the self-proclaimed motto of the last part of *Les particules élémentaires* as well as many of his theoretical writings could be: "The future is female".

"The future is digital", we might add, turn up the volume on our stereo and shake a little to Etienne de Crécy's latest track: "AM I WRONG"...

## Literature

- Auslander, Philip, "Ontology vs. History: Making Distinctions Between the Live and the Mediatized", <http://webcast.gatech.edu/papers/arch/Auslander.html>.
- DeLillo, Don, *Valparaiso*. New York: Scribner, 1999.
- Eakin, Emily, "Ich bin der radikalste von allen: Interview mit Michel Houellebecq" in *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*. Frankfurt: FAZ, 19.9.2000, Nr. 218.
- Feeney, Mark, "Unmistakably DeLillo" in Boston Globe Online/Living/Arts, <http://www.boston.com> 24.1.1999.
- Feiertag, Andreas, "Thema Gentechnik: Gentechnik zwischen Genesis und Urknall" in *Der Standard*. Wien: Der Standard, 6.12.2000.
- Fleischhacker, Michael, "Leidende Embryos und rettende Zellhaufen: Interview mit Johannes Huber" in *Der Standard – Biotechnologie*. Wien: Der Standard, 6.12.2000.
- Houellebecq, Michel, *Die Welt als Supermarkt. Interventionen*. Köln: DuMont, 1999.

Houellebecq, Michel, *Elementarteilchen*. Köln: DuMont, 1999.

Houellebecq, Michel, *Suche nach Glück*. Köln: DuMont, 2000.

Houellebecq, Michel, *Lanzarote*. Köln: DuMont, 2000.

Houellebecq, Michel, *Extraits d'interviews*  
<http://www.multimania.com/houellebecq/fr/entrevue.html>.

Krumpl, Doris, "Und jetzt alles neu – für wen?" (Interview mit der Soziologin Joanne Finkelstein im Rahmen des Ars Electronica Schwerpunktes "Next Sex") in *Der Standard*. Wien: Der Standard, 14./15.8.2000 sowie  
<http://www.aec.at/nextsex>.

Nietzsche, Friedrich, *Also sprach Zarathustra*. München: Wilhelm Goldmann Verlag.

Philipp, Claus, "Sterben: Wenn nichts ungesagt und ungesehen bleiben darf (Don DeLillo's "Valparaiso" im Volkstheater Wien)" in *Der Standard*. Wien: Der Standard, 9.5.2000.

Ridley, Matt, "Visions of the 21st Century: Will We Still Need to Have Sex?",  
[http://www.time.com/time/reports/v21/health/sex\\_mag.html](http://www.time.com/time/reports/v21/health/sex_mag.html).