



Playing at Being Human.

Sylvie Boisseau
Frank Westermeyer
David Zerbib

Éditions Naima
HEAD — Genève

Playing at Being Human.

Between AI, animal, and Plant Life:
an Artistic and Philosophical Experiment

Sylvie Boisseau
Frank Westermeyer
David Zerbib

This publication is the result of a collaboration between two artists, the duo Boisseau & Westermeyer, and the philosopher David Zerbib, as part of an artistic research project combining an artistic method that uses an experimental agent, *f*, who draws attention and activates situations, with a rereading of the work of the philosopher Helmuth Plessner (1892-1985), who developed a view of humans in biological and spatial terms.

By describing how a living body asserts itself within and outside its borders in the surrounding space, which Plessner termed “positionality”, the philosopher identified three forms of life: plants, animals, and humans. According to his theory, the particularity of humans is based on a form of positionality that he termed “ex-centric”, because humans never cease to project themselves outside their own bodies, though without ever ceasing to be this body, which is their animal “centre”.

The concept of positionality allows us to reimagine the relative state of living beings and forms of intelligence. We found it a highly pertinent way of addressing the challenges that human beings face, namely the prospect of their obsolescence due to the growth of the artificial intelligence that governs cognitive capitalism, and the dire crisis of our mode of development, which demands that we reinvent our relationship to non-human living things.

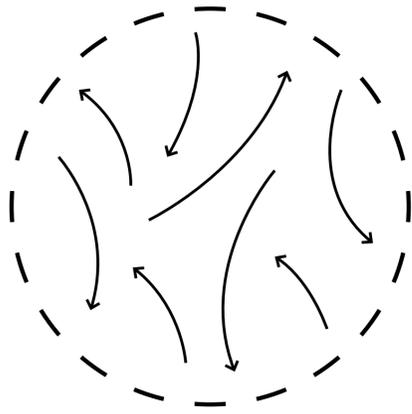
We wanted to experiment with several hypotheses drawn from Plessner's theories by immersing them in video imagery and submitting them to *f*'s actions. Could this process reveal a new image of humans, and in what way?

An essay by Plessner on the anthropology of actors was particularly useful in developing our mode of inquiry. Plessner explained that an actor is the ideal experimental figure for an anthropologist because every human is an actor. Thus, *f* constitutes this experimental figure, who engaged in new kinds of ex-centrings, heading towards artificial intelligence in one direction and towards other (animal and plant) forms of organic life in the other. From a cinematic standpoint, the focus on the body in these ex-centring experiments focuses the viewer's attention on new forms of subjectivity. They de-hierarchise (and not without a sense of humour) the relations between humans and non-humans.

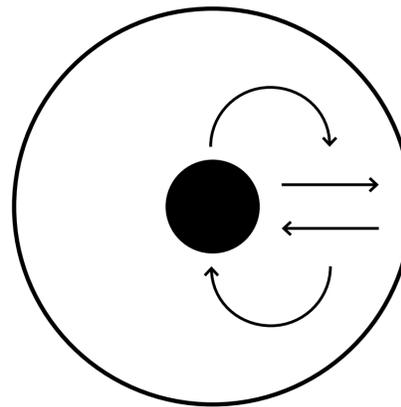
In the interweaving of filmed sequences that elicit ideas and concepts that provoke images, video and philosophy both explore the conditions of another "anthropic performance" in this new play at being human, offering it a new surface of reflection and projection.

Sylvie Boisseau, Frank Westermeyer, and David Zerbib

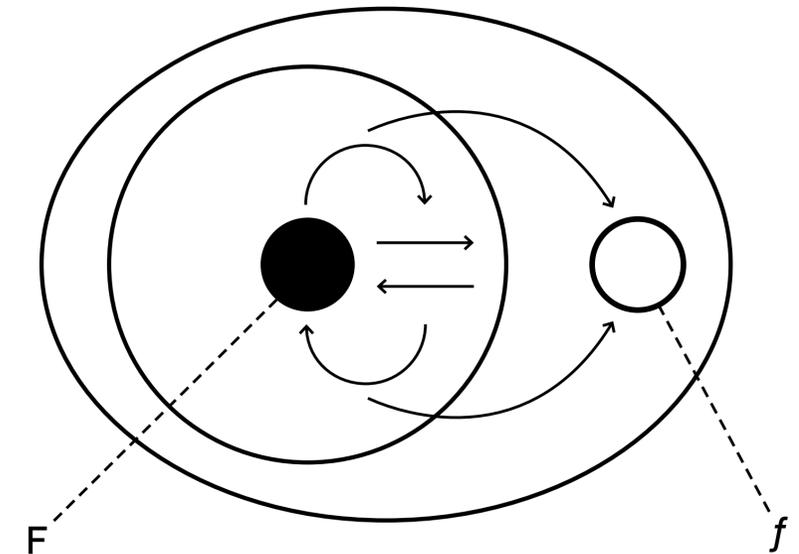
PLANT
open, non-centred positionality



ANIMAL
centred positionality



HUMAN
excentric positionality



We can show the three types of “positionality” of organic life classified by Helmuth Plessner in the following manner, using a diagram proposed by Jos de Mul that we have slightly modified¹. A plant is characterised by an “open” and “non-centred” form, as its relationship to its surrounding environment is one of full and immediate integration and assimilation. An animal is defined by its “centred” positionality, because it possesses a “core of a living form”², such as its central nervous system, which gives it its vital sensorial and motor capacities. Its form is “closed,” in the sense that its life depends on the limits of its own body.

It has a relationship to this boundary and, thus, to what lies outside it. This is coordinated by its “centre”, located in a “here and now”³. Human positionality is instead “excentric”, as it is not only a “centred” animal that “is” its own body. It is also a living thing that “has” its body as well, at a distance from itself. A human thus has a mediatised relationship to the immediate relationship to his or her own body. We have placed *F* here at the centre —or a focus, as it is called in geometry— in relation to which excentricity becomes possible. And *f* represents the excentricity of the relationship to the centre. D.Z.

1 De Mul, Jos. «Polyzentrität und Poly(ex)zentrität: neue Stufen der Positionalität? Zu Telerobotern, Craniopagus Zwillingen und globalen Gehirnen», in Burow, Johannes F.; Daniels, Lou-Janna; Kaiser, Anna-Lena; Klinkhamer, Clemens; Kulbatzki, Josefine; Schütte, Yannick; Henkel, Anna. *Mensch und Welt im Zeichen der Digitalisierung. Perspektiven der Philosophischen Anthropologie Plessners*, Baden-Baden, Nomos, 2019, p. 194.

2 Plessner, Helmuth. *Les degrés de l'organique et l'Homme. Introduction à l'anthropologie philosophique*, trad. Pierre Osmo, Paris, Gallimard, coll. «bibliothèque de Philosophie», Paris, 2017, p. 375.

3 *Ibid.*, p. 378.

Sylvie Boisseau &
Frank Westermeyer

f zwischen den Stufen des Organischen
f in between the Levels of Organic Life – Video

Der Freie Mensch – mit KI
The Free Man – with AI – Video

*f zwischen den Stufen
des Organischen*

—
*f in between the Levels
of Organic Life*

Germany/Switzerland
4k video, 20 min 40, 2021

[▶ watch online](#)



f is tiring of the possibilities that his hypersmart car offers him. He no longer wants to use its technological improvements to transcend the limits of his own body. Can he experience himself in a new way by embodying every stage of organic life, both animal and plant? Inspired by this line of inquiry, he ultimately decides to view the world first from the standpoint of a quadruped, and then from the immobile position of a plant.

Der Freie Mensch – mit KI

The Free Man – with AI

Germany/Switzerland
4k video, 7 min 43, 2019

▶ watch online



“The human being asks a question, and the machine provides the response”. This was the mechanism that Boisseau & Westermeyer used to confront *f*, their main character. What happens when the informational content is optimised and becomes accessible on a permanent, unlimited basis? Does the algorithm know *f* better than *f* himself? Can *f*'s personality still be detected? Is his perspective on himself still his own, or has it become that of the algorithm? Are his aspirations his own, or has he internalised the algorithm? The questions that *The Free Man – with AI* raise seem to unfold ad infinitum, but what happens when every uncertainty is resolved?

David Zerbib

*The Human, the Dog, the
Robot, and the Water Lily:
a Philosophical and Aesthetic
Anthropology of the Case of f.*

Scenes from an Organic Life	13
Positionality	24
Positional Field	35
Anthropo-Excentrism	44
This Living Thing that Plays at Being Human	52

Amerindian shamanism can be defined as “the ability of certain individuals to cross the physical barriers between species”. By making this crossover, a shaman seeks “to adopt the perspective of allospecific subjectivities to manage the relationship between these entities and human beings”¹. So, what kind of shaman would that make *f*, who appears to cross spatial boundaries and become a dog, a water lily, and then a tree? In the video *f zwischen den Stufen des Organischen* (*f in between the Levels of Organic Life*)², directed by Sylvie Boisseau and Frank Westermeyer, the main character, *f*, has experiences that exist *between* certain forms of life, plant and animal. What kinds of perspectives does he adopt, and for which relationships? We appear to witness a change in a human being’s perspective on himself, a kind of *auto-shamanism*, but other life forms meet in this relationship with himself, and *f* adopts their positions, thereby changing his situation and relationship to his surrounding space.

In a certain sense, the shamanic crossing of the barriers between species is not so foreign to the process constituting the film, in which we observe figures



f zwischen den Stufen des Organischen (*f in between the Levels of Organic Life*), 4k video, 20 min 40, 2021.

of thought after having experimentally instilled concepts that then react in the image, as if in a developing bath. In fact, this film is the result of an exchange of perspectives between artistic creation and philosophical inquiry³. The research that gave rise to this film leads the images and concepts to become de-centred and to evolve *between* the disciplines where the issues customarily find the epistemological and institutional fields that give them meaning,

1 Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, *Cannibal Metaphysics*, translated by Peter Skafish, University of Minnesota Press, 2014.

2 Sylvie Boisseau and Frank Westermeyer, *f zwischen den Stufen des Organischen*, video, 20 min, 2020.

3 Research Project *Plessner Transposed: an 'Ex-Centric' Actor between Philosophical Anthropology and Video*, (Geneva School of Art and Design (HEAD) / University of Applied Sciences and Arts of Western Switzerland (HES-SO) / Réseau de Compétences Design et Arts Visuels (RCDAV)). Project Team: S. Boisseau, F. Westermeyer (coordinator), and D. Zerbib.

as in their natural environments. More specifically, these “environments” are video art and philosophical anthropology. In this hybrid territory, a process of experimentation tested hypotheses that came from both the works of Boisseau and Westermeyer⁴ and a reading of the theories of Helmuth Plessner, author of *Levels of Organic Life and the Human*, the 1928 work to which the film’s title refers⁵.

The initial question was, what theoretical resources could Plessner’s philosophical anthropology offer to comprehend what is happening in the artists’ videos of the character *f*? Qualified by his creators as an “agent provocateur”, this character is in fact a figure that provokes certain effects, but he is not the product of a psychological interiority that acts by expressing itself. His position, his manner of being, both present and absent in the filmic situation, constitutes his mode of operation—and we will see exactly how. So, why do we refer to Plessner? Because he theorised the “excentric positionality” (*exzentrische Positionalität*) of humans. This concept merits a more detailed explanation but let us for now say that it designates a fundamental form of the understanding of human life in its relationship to

the animal body of humans and to its surroundings. This relationship entails a distance from oneself and a dynamic of spatialisation that presents a utopian dimension. *f* embodies this relationship in a particularly eloquent manner, to such an extent that he asks viewers to consider image and the acting of the character through a specific notion of a “positional field”,



Moi vu par... video, 1999, 19 min.

4 For documentation of this piece, please see www.filmerei.de.

5 Helmuth Plessner, *Levels of Organic Life and the Human. An Introduction to Philosophical Anthropology*, translated by Millay Hyatt, Fordham University Press, New York, 2019.

which lies at the intersection of the cinematographic notion of a “field” and of Plessnerian theory.

In another sense, the videos by Boisseau and Westermeyer tested and questioned Plessner’s theories in a way that the philosopher could not have envisioned.

In particular, how does the cinematic figure of *f* recontextualise the anthropology of the actor that Plessner first sketched out? In the 1948 work titled *Zur Anthropologie des Schauspielers* (“On the Anthropology of Actors”, unpublished in French until it was translated as part of this research project⁶), Plessner assigned to actors an “experimental type” function in anthropological inquiry. In fact, actors show what it means to be human through spectacle. Among all living beings, aren’t humans the one being that “can only live within a role”⁷? Plessner wrote: “As virtual spectators of ourselves and the world, we must see the world as a stage”⁸. Shakespeare had already written “All the world’s a stage”, a notion that was echoed in sociology with the theories of “the presentation of self” in everyday life developed by Erving Goffman⁹. However, the “stage” evoked by



f zwischen den Stufen des Organischen (f in between the Levels of Organic Life), 4k video, 20 min 40, 2021.

Plessner differs from these frameworks within which the individual’s social and psychological identity plays out, in essence. It instead constitutes a kind of *anthropic* stage, where a human becomes human, that space where a human, as a living being and thus on the same level as a plant or an animal, has the specific role of “embodying a human being”. So, if Plessner’s philosophical anthropology seeks to define what is essential about humans based on an organic form of a

6 Helmuth Plessner, *Zur Anthropologie des Schauspielers*, 1948.

7 *Ibid.*

8 *Ibid.*

9 Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, New York, Doubleday, 1959.



f zwischen den Stufen des Organischen (f in between the Levels of Organic Life), 4k video, 20 min 40, 2021.

than Othello, and more directly and in a more experimental representational and performative setting. Beyond the aesthetic issues, this also raises anthropological and ethical ones, because the goal is also to identify a form of human relationship to life.

living being that should initially be conceived of in the same way as all other forms of organic life, shouldn't we therefore consider the paradigmatic figure of the actor as visualising this form in action? But how can we render explicit this fundamental stage of anthropic performance that Plessner theorised as he observed Desdemona or Othello move about? Similarly, how can we see, behind the façade of a "movie star", not just an actor or an actress "playing him- or herself in a role"¹⁰, but instead *a living being playing a human*? The character of *f* explores this issue, certainly more

¹⁰ Helmuth Plessner, *Zur Anthropologie des Schauspielers*, *op. cit.*



f zwischen den Stufen des Organischen (f in between the Levels of Organic Life), 4k video, 20 min 40, 2021.

Scenes from an Organic Life

Already in Boisseau and Westermeyer's first videos, *f* tended to decentre the issue of social identity by stripping the character of any biographical content and expressive subjectivity, especially through his muteness. This identity was reflected in the image of the character's placement within his surrounding environment of beings and things. *f* appears to be alive within a social and relational field within which he must respond to the expectations and desires



Meine Familie und Ich (My Family and I), video, 16 min, 1997.

that concern him. But instead of acting on them, he remains mute; he does not respond, and, paradoxically, it is his passivity that activates the situation. Nothing is seen here; there is merely a seeing, a field of vision that opens around *f* as a field of social and existential possibilities. Likewise, in *Meine Familie und ich* (“My Family and Me”), *f* is questioned, requested, and awaited in a series of scenes that nevertheless always depict him as impassive and silent. In *Der Optionist* (“The Optionist”), *f* is shown in a wide shot, eating a sandwich while sitting on an oversized chair that is actually a sculpture in the middle of a public park. We hear the character's inner voice serenely listing all the things he could do, what he could be, whom he could love, and where he could go. He sits in a rather grotesque position at the centre of a world that appears to wait for him while he reigns like a spoiled child over the sphere of the possible around him.

f in between the Levels of Organic Life posits another problem in *f*'s relationship to his situation. The film explores another dimension, one concerning what fundamentally defines him as human. Should we admit that, before the performative processes involved in constructing our social and gender identity take place, there is a primary performance that constitutes the “human character” on an organic stage that is the same as that for plants and animals?

And, thus, does a vegetable or animal issue dimension before or alongside the social one?

f seems to respond to such a question by regressing towards life before culture. But is this a question – according to a neo-vitalist or primitivist logic – of “returning” to a sense of life in which we experience our lives nakedly, free of the trappings of civilisation? This seems doubtful, because the problem with such a regressive reasoning is, first, that any regression presupposes that we maintain the axis of progression or progress whose direction is merely being reversed. The “levels” of organic life that Plessner talks about and that inspire this work are not exactly phases along an evolutionary scale, as we would, for example, consider to exist on the axis of the Darwinian evolution of species in the field of biology, and which we might symbolically travel in reverse to return humans to a state of anthropoid primates, or even to the neotenic state of a larva¹¹. The idea of “regression” also entails an alien moral sense for *f*'s role. No specific value is attached here to experiencing oneself as an animal in relation to the predominant norms, for example. The zoomorphic experiment that *f* undergoes does not



Der Optionist (The Optionist), video, 4 min 30, 2004.

exclude, condemn, or grant *f* the dignified stature of a primordial and pure essence. Thus, *f* is not Kafka's Gregor Samsa. In *The Metamorphosis*, a young man who has become an insect is confined to his room, a prisoner of his family's shame and disgust¹². In Kafka's work, the animal represents a figure of social and emotional otherness that is unacceptable and inassimilable.

11 Marion Zilio, *Le livre des larves* (“The Book of Larvae”), Paris, PUF, “Perspectives critiques” collection, 2020.

12 Franz Kafka, *The Metamorphosis*, translated by A.L. Lloyd, London, Faber & Faber, 2015.



f zwischen den Stufen des Organischen (*f* in between the Levels of Organic Life), 4k video, 20 min 40, 2021.

When *f* gets up from the park bench where he was sitting looking at the screen of his mobile phone, he begins to walk on all fours. He soon arrives in the city centre, wandering about like an errant animal, observing the human beings he comes across one by one during his aimless trajectory. No one seems to remark on his position or behaviour, much less reject it. At the very most, he is observed by two individuals who are clearly homeless, sitting on the ground in the corridors of a subway station. Two representatives of social exclusion notice an animal inclusion. *f*'s animality, which is transparent to others, is not indicated in the film as a rupture from the world of humans. This animality is invisible, less visible than that of an actual animal, as we can see from the interactions that, unlike *f*, a small bulldog experiences as it begs for some food from its owner, who is eating seated on a building's stoop. *f* does not appear to be a member of this "mixed community", to invoke the philosopher Mary Midgley's notion¹³. This *animal that f is*¹⁴ instead reveals a position located between that of a human and a dog, an in-between level that is in one sense constituent of being human, but which, in *f*'s performance, appears above all to be a displacement of a



f zwischen den Stufen des Organischen (f in between the Levels of Organic Life), 4k video, 20 min 40, 2021.

perspective's coordinates. This displacement does not seem to concern the identity of the being it is affecting; in fact, this question appears to have been suspended. What instead matters is what becomes of the physical, visual, acoustic, urban, natural, and social space that is seen and traversed from this point of projection, from this other point of view yielded by an ex-centring and yielding a questioning of the common world made up of living beings.

13 Mary Midgley, "The Mixed Community", *Animals and Why They Matter*, Athens, The University of Georgia Press, 1983, pp. 112–124.

14 Jacques Derrida, *The Animal that Therefore I Am*, translated by David Wills, New York, Fordham University Press, 2008.

To show this in the film, *f* takes quadrupedy from the dog, as well as certain points of optical projection directed towards the human. But he is not naked, nor is he covered with an animal's hide. His body has not undergone any substantial mutation, hybridization, or metamorphic, symbiotic, or chimeric evolution, unlike the characters we see for example in Matthew Barney's *Cremaster* or Nicole Tran Ba Vang's video *Re-Member*, which depicts a human being in symbiosis with a monarch butterfly and a fern¹⁵. A different path is being explored here.

With his clothing, his sneakers, and his demeanour that does express either the effort or the ease and suppleness of an animal's behaviour, *f* expresses an animality that is at times grotesque, which underscores the intermediate state of his physical attitude. A more decidedly mimetic behaviour would have generated an entirely different effect, as in the case of "sprinters on all fours" or of persons who know how to gallop "just like a horse", whose sometimes eccentric performances we can admire in online videos. *f* is not actually imitating an animal or measuring himself against the performance of an animal.



Matthew Barney, *Cremaster 3*, production still, 2002.

Nor does *f* seek to provoke or subvert a moral, social, and human order, as other dog-humans have. For example, in Valie Export's performance, *From the Underdog File* (1969), Peter Weibel moves about on all

15 Matthew Barney, *Cremaster 3*, video, 182 min, 2002; Nicole Tran Ba Vang, *Re-member*, video, 15 min, 2019.



Nicole Tran Ba Vang, *RE_MEMBER*, video, 15 min, 2019.

fours through the streets of Vienna, kept on a leash by the artist, thereby overturning a certain sense of gender domination. Or, more radically, consider Oleg Kulik's performances such as *Dog House* (1994), in which the artist, naked and wearing a collar, barking and biting, behaves like a vicious dog, or his zoophile performance photographs where he appears to copulate with a dog. Using the opposite register of domesticity, but which also involves a subversive — and here comical — zoomorphic imitation, the dog-human

character in the film *Didier*¹⁶ could also be included within this symbolic kennel. Unlike all these examples, *f* does not bite or sniff passers-by. In fact, the olfactory dimension that is so important for animals is not decisive here. We are not engaged here in an ethological observation of a true animal *Umwelt*, as Jakob von Uexküll understood it¹⁷. Therefore, even if the point of view is sometimes “truffle-high”, we are not actually “inside of a dog” according to the analysis and thought of the ethologist Alexandra Horowitz¹⁸.

Anthropo-zoomorphic figures are generally used in our culture to question human relations on a moral and social level, whether in the form of an inspiring fable, a parodying imitation, or a cynical transgression; however, *f* does not appear to fulfil any of these roles. What he reveals in philosophical terms, for example, is not at all a cynical unmasking. In the philosophy of Diogenes, whose school took its name from the Greek word for dog (*kyon*), animal behaviour uncomfortably reveals the essential material and physical condition of human beings, masked as it is by moral values, spiritual and cultural aspirations, and the hypocrisy of power. Like a dog that does not hide

16 Alain Chabat, *Didier*, comedy, France, 1 h 41 min, 1997.

17 Jakob von Uexküll, “A Stroll Through the Worlds of Animals and Men: A Picture Book of Invisible Worlds”, in *Instinctive Behavior: The Development of a Modern Concept*, ed. & trans. Claire H. Schiller, New York, International Universities Press, 1957, pp. 5–80.

18 Alexandra Horowitz, *Inside of a Dog*, New York, Simon & Schuster, 2009.



Oleg Kulik, *Mad Dog*, silver gelatin print, 120 × 160 cm, 1994.

any of its needs, a cynic has the courage to speak the truth. *A mutant of the future, the myth of origins, and a militant for truth* represent three major symbolic roles in our culture played by the human-animal figure, to which *f* seems extraneous.

f embodies something else: an animality that is both external and internal, or, rather, natural and artificial, to use the terms of one of Plessner's "anthro-

pological laws". The "law of natural artificiality"¹⁹ posits that a human being, due to its excentric positionality, must "do to be", its nature thus being one of artifice. Embodying one's own animality means allowing it to exist in a specifically human fashion, according to the artifice of the performance, with the knowledge that this artificiality is conditioned from the outset by its manner of being alive, which is embedded in the fundamental form of its organic life. *f* remains *f*, even for being animal. His nature does not change; he instead activates something in and outside himself by changing his physical behaviour. On the other hand, we are witness to an objective situation more than a subjective perception. *f*'s point of view is obviously decisive. But aside from the beginning and the end of the video, where *f* appears to exhibit an ordinary form of rational, human awareness of his physical behaviour, we do not enter into *f*'s mind. His consciousness seems less the result of an interiority than of a body's relationship to the space around it. In the first scene he is at the wheel of a luxury automobile, stopped. The car talks to him; an artificial intelligence tries to capture its user's attention with the monologue of a jilted lover predicting disaster for the person leaving.

19 Helmut Plessner, *Levels of Organic Life and the Human*, op. cit., p.524.



f zwischen den Stufen des Organischen (f in between the Levels of Organic Life), 4k video, 20 min 40, 2021.

f appears to be renouncing a promise of technological civilization embodied by this smart vehicle. We know nothing about the reasons for this initial situation or of *f*'s effective and affective relationship to this object, but we do see what happens to this relationship.

This opening scene is a continuation of the video *Der Freie Mensch – mit KI (The Free Man – with AI)*²⁰, which depicts *f* involved in situations where he makes choices or asks questions about his personal life, from the most insignificant to the most crucial: whether or not to wait for the bus, deciding what to eat at the buffet, ensuring his line of descent, recognising a passer-by, wondering whether he embodies the figure of the dominant white male, or whether he should take an umbrella before going out. As in Spike Jonze's *Her*, but with a sense of irony, a female voice incarnates the responses of the artificial intelligence for *f* and for viewers. *f*'s attitude remains relatively indeterminate, despite the certainty of the AI's calculated responses. *f* does not appear to become more powerful or any freer; he exudes a kind of dissatisfaction, as if the right answers lay elsewhere.



Der Freie Mensch – mit KI (The Free Man – with AI), 4k video, 7 min 43, 2019.

20 Sylvie Boisseau and Frank Westemeyer, *Der Freie Mensch – mit KI*, video, 7 min, 2019.



f zwischen den Stufen des Organischen (f in between the Levels of Organic Life), 4k video, 20 min 40, 2021.

Positionality

There are two ways of understanding *f*'s situation at this point. The first concerns the existential dimension of this human figure. He is an individual whose freedom is being tested by the tension between reflective interiority and social and historical exteriority, but who remains unresolved within this tension, moreover in low-intensity situations that don't have much to do with the dilemma of someone who has to decide whether or not to resist, to evoke an emblematic case of Sartrean existential thought²¹. Freedom and action, which determine the situation of someone who acts, do not appear to be questions that torment this gentle Roquentin²², any more than the question of unveiling Being in the face of death to which the human *Dasein*, or "there-being", is offered, to refer to another philosophy of existence, that of Martin Heidegger.

In reality, *f* presents us not so much with an *existential situation* as a *positional situation*, in which the individual is considered in terms of how *his body is "placed" in space, and not in terms of how his being is projected in time*. It is interesting to note that Plessner's philosophy developed at the same time as

Heideggerian existentialism, though in its shadows, where it explored other avenues²³. Before any consideration of consciousness, thought, the relationship to Being or to language, Plessner asserts that a human being is first and foremost a living being that does not escape from this organic determination when it discovers that it has been endowed with *logos*. Quite to the contrary, a certain form of organic life within humans is what engenders consciousness, more specifically the structure of a relationship to one's body and the space that it produces. He calls this fundamental form *positionality*.

Before we explain this notion, let us illustrate it by coming back to *f*. In the park, before becoming a quadruped, the information displayed by the artificial intelligence of his smartphone concerned the fact that zoo animals were bored because humans were no longer coming to visit them due to the healthcare crisis. However, even if *f* does not engage with his car's mechanical intelligence, he doesn't visit the animals either. Nor does he interact with other humans or with plants.

21 Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism is a Humanism*, translated by Carol Macomber, New Haven, Yale University Press, 2007.

22 From the name of the main character in Sartre's novel *Nausea*.

23 Plessner's major work, *Levels of Organic Life and the Human* (1928), was published more or less at the same time as *Being and Time* by Martin Heidegger (1927).



f zwischen den Stufen des Organischen (f in between the Levels of Organic Life), 4k video, 20 min 40, 2021.



f zwischen den Stufen des Organischen (f in between the Levels of Organic Life), 4k video, 20 min 40, 2021.

What he is or could be is no longer determined in *relational* terms, in the sense of a connection that is formed with an otherness, either natural or artificial. It is once more in a *positional* sense that *f* will explore what he is and can be. From dog-human to tree-human by way of a waterlily-human, *f* fragilely embodies other *positionalities* within his own morphological limits. At the end of this cycle of zoomorphic and then “phytomorphic” experiences, *f* returns to his body and to his human ethos. We know nothing about *f*'s

inner life during this process, other than the fact that he activates thoughts connected to Plessnerian philosophy. The video does not seek to show the answers that *f* finds to his questions, whether they concerned carrying an umbrella, as in *Der Freie Mensch – mit KI*, or understanding the meaning of his existence. The goal is to see *where* the questions asked by the human being *f* are posited, and *how* they function as projections into a space emanating from a body and a relationship to oneself that concomitantly allows for a decentring towards a form of otherness. The “positionality” of the human being *f* determines these possibilities of projection.

The concept of “positionality” (*Positionalität*) comes from Plessner. This term identifies a “modal” form of life, a form presupposed by any empirical observation of life, as an objective *a priori*²⁴:

The living organic body, then, is distinguished from the inorganic body by its *positional character* or *positionality*. I mean by this the fundamental feature of an entity that makes a body in its being into a posited one. (...) [The] body is set apart from the

²⁴ In Plessner's work, this diverges from the thinking behind Immanuel Kant's subjective *a priori* (in which fundamental forms are to be sought not in the observation of facts, but instead in the essential conditions through which a thinking subject observes things).

body and brought into relation with it, or, to be more precise, the body is outside of and within the body. The non-living body is free of such complexity. It is as far as it reaches. Its being ends where and when it ends. It stops short. It lacks this ease in itself²⁵.

For Plessner, the difference between a simple physical body and a living body lies in this “complication” and “suppleness” that entail the organic body’s detachment from itself so that it can have a relationship with itself. It is inside and outside at the same time. One could say that it extends past its own reach, which is inseparable from the vital relationship that an organic body has with its surroundings. This structure defines a fundamental relationship to space, which means different things to organic life than it does for inanimate physical bodies:

Every physical, bodily thing is in space, is spatial. As far as its measurement is concerned, its location is in relation to other locations and to the location of the observer. Living bodies as physical things are not exempt from this relative order. Phenomenally, however, living bodies differ from non-living bodies

in that the former claim space while the latter merely occupy it²⁶.

Therefore, every living being “asserts space”, even if this process of spatialisation varies from one category of organic life to another. Plessner distinguishes between three types of “positionality” that correspond to three levels of organic life: plant, animal, and human, which are the levels between which *f* travels. To summarise this point of Plessner’s theory: the plant’s positionality is open and not centred (a plant organism does not have a centre insofar as its parts may live independently, for example when one cuts a branch and plants it far from the tree on which it first grew); its form is one of an extreme openness to its exterior, according to a principle of maximum assimilation. The animal’s positionality is instead closed and centred (an animal organism has a centre, materialized by a central nervous system for instance, and its integrity is preserved by a more rigid limitation of its form, the principle of maximum dissimulation). As to human positionality, Plessner wrote that it is closed and centred like that of an animal, but that it is also *excentric*. This means that a human is an animal

25 Helmut Plessner, *Levels of Organic Life and the Human*, op. cit., p. 273.

26 *Ibid.*, p. 276.



f zwischen den Stufen des Organischen (f in between the Levels of Organic Life), 4k video, 20 min 40, 2021.

that not only extends past itself to relate to itself like any other living thing, but that it ex-centres itself in this relationship, the difference being comparable to that of an ellipse in relation to a circle, where the logic is parabolic or hyperbolic, to use the conical curves that express different measurements of excentricity in geometry. In other words, it is not only the exterior that exists in relation to a human's centre. This centre itself becomes an exterior, something that exists at a distance. In excentric human positionality,

the organic centre of the lived body (*Leib*) may in fact become an object-body (*Körper*). Only a human *is* its own body and at the same time *has* its own body, as if it were something at a distance. This double aspect of the body (*Doppelaspekt*) is essential to understanding the “excentricity” of human positionality. This is what allows a human to occupy different positions at the same time:

Excentrically positioned, he stands where he stands and at the same time not where he stands. He both occupies and does not occupy the here in which he lives and to which his entire environment relates in total convergence, the absolute, nonrelativizable here/now of his own position²⁷.

One of the “anthropological laws” set out by Plessner ensues very directly from these reflections on excentricity, namely the law of “utopian placement”, which designates the effect of the process by which a human can situate itself where it physically isn't. This is like *f* in *The Optionist*, when *f* contemplates the range of “places” he could occupy professionally, and which are also the roles he could play and that he could be.

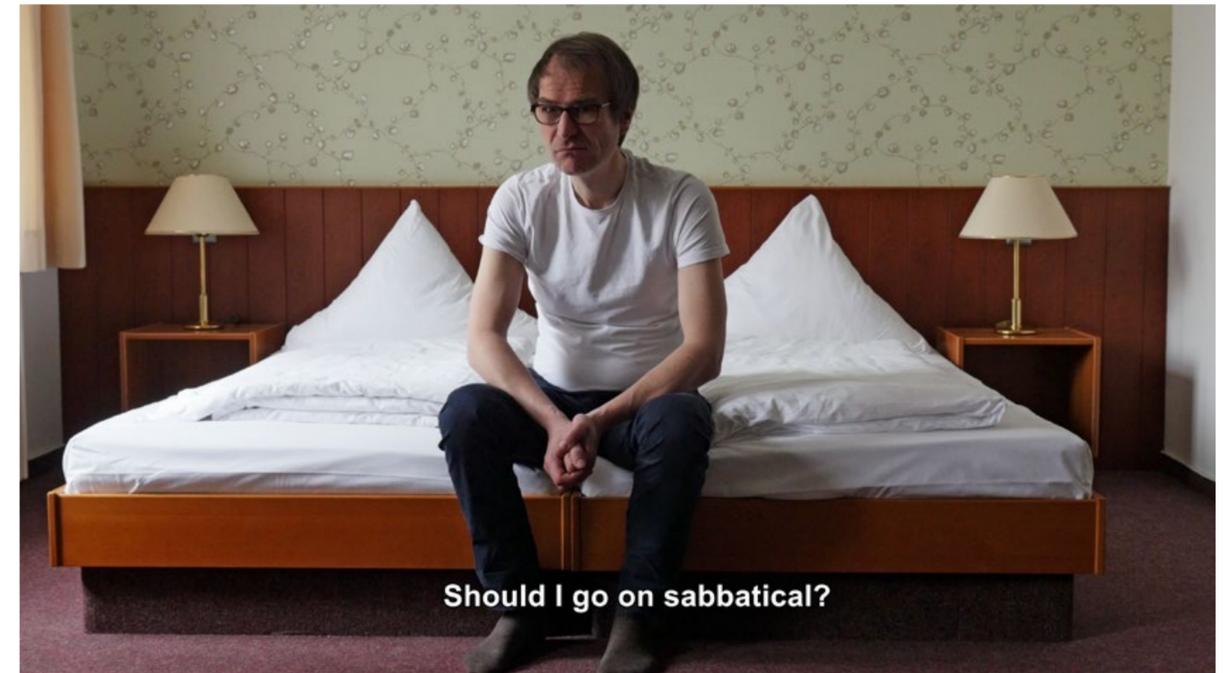
27 *Ibid.*, p. 570.



Der Freie Mensch – mit KI (The Free Man – with AI), 4k video, 7 min 43, 2019.

Or in *The Free Man – with AI*, *f* considers his options with the mediation of AI. Envisioning oneself later, elsewhere, otherwise, acting at a distance, and being present simultaneously in different places all form part of the ordinary experiences of this ex-centricity, which necessarily situates us in a kind of utopia, strictly in a topological sense. The ideological and political values and meaning that one may then confer to this topology are ultimately just specifications of this structure, which constitutes an anthropological law embedded in a relationship to a body and to space that exists before a belonging to culture and to history. Utopia is a physical necessity before it becomes a political possibility.

In *f in between the Levels of Organic Life*, *f*'s actions implement this excentric positionality, though in a paradoxical direction, as the film depicts the character projecting himself onto non-human positionalities. At the very least, *f* shows that, literally by changing one's position, i.e., his physical behaviour, he is neither engaging in a kind of mimetic action nor merely playing the role of a quadruped animal, a waterlily, or a tree: he is activating the idea of positional plurality in space. In other words, positionality does not simply correspond to a kind of behaviour



Der Freie Mensch – mit KI (The Free Man – with AI), 4k video, 7 min 43, 2019.

or to a physical position in space, but instead to the projective function of a living body in space, or to a form of projective space that exists in relation to a living body. The form of *f*'s behaviour thus leads us to envision the form of an organic space that consists of points of view that are also points of life.

Plessner helps us consider the distance from ourselves, the condition for the relationship to otherness and for the relationship to oneself *as another* (to use Paul Ricoeur's well-known phenomenological phrase²⁸) in a spatial, physical, or somatic sense,

28 Paul Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, translated by Kathleen Blamey, University of Chicago Press, 1994.



f zwischen den Stufen des Organischen (f in between the Levels of Organic Life), video 4k, 20 min 40, 2021.

and not in terms of a cognitive process determined by intellectual consciousness. As was also demonstrated by Richard Shusterman, there is a “body consciousness” that does not entail any deviation through intellectual activity, and which is embedded in the living, sentient body²⁹. This author also refers to Plessner and to his structure of positional excentricity to explain how this sort of somatic reflexivity that is not at all a reflexology, and which instead clearly

constitutes a form of consciousness, depends also on the possibility for persons to “maneuver between the spontaneous centric position of *Leibsein* and the reflective ex-centric position of *Körperhaben*, decentering themselves from full identification with the soma”³⁰.

Very concretely, *f* shows how this reflexivity is not a self-centred relationship to oneself, but instead an excentring that opens the space of the relationship to other bodies, both human and non-human. That said, there is nothing immediate about this relationship. Common experience is not posited as the echo of a primordial unity that should be made to resonate, as the Romantics thought. It presents itself to *f* above all as an enigma, and it demands an elaboration, a change in attitude, a construction.

The film shows that a displacement is in fact necessary. This is triggered by *f*'s physical actions, which transform the situation in the surrounding space. Thus, as of a certain point in time, *f* and other human beings no longer seem to inhabit the same world. At the same time, *f* does not live in the world of a dog either, that is, in its milieu determined by the specific

29 Richard Shusterman, *Body Consciousness: A Philosophy of Mindfulness and Somaesthetics*, Cambridge University Press, 2012.

30 Richard Shusterman, “Body Consciousness and the Excentric Self: Between Plessner and Somaesthetics”, *Pragmatism Today*, vol. 9, n°1, 2018, p. 18.

spatial and temporal coordinates of its form of life³¹, even though he activates something that he is able to share with the quadruped in terms of spatialisation. He projects himself onto this positionality that is not his own, but which he can “have” without being it: he has it in the form of a role. His difficulty in staying at the water’s surface shows that he is not a water-lily. Nor can he take the place of a tree for very long, remaining upright and immobile day and night. But the important thing is not what he is or what he can be, but instead ultimately what he can open up as a projective space, in terms of perspectives, which yields a utopia in the Plessnerian sense, between the levels of organic life, within the non-place of his own excentricity³².

According to Plessner, this non-place is fundamentally that of a theatre or film actor. At the theatre, we are dealing with an art that is termed “live art”, but which merely attaches to this live quality a value of aesthetic and poetic taxonomy concerning the specific means of elaborating an artistic form. What reminds us of Plessner is that the “living” character of theatre arts primarily concerns a structure that constitutes humans as living beings, and this structure,

both on stage and in the case of cinema, is also put into play. A fundamental anthropic performance takes place before the symbolic forms of artistic language and the actor’s practice: the spectacle of the human’s excentric positionality, the transparent implementation of the two sides of a human being’s “dual aspectivity” by which the human being differentiates itself from animals and other forms of organic life, all the while defining itself in this same way. In other words, this is the structural fact of a human being’s relationship to its own body, the only living being that *is* its body (*Leib*) and that *has* its body (*Körper*). The actor *is* this body of the actor that also *has* his/her body as an instrument for embodying another human being—or even a non-human being (something that Plessner did not envisage).

31 Jakob von Uexküll, *op. cit.*

32 “Non-place” here refers strictly to the etymology of utopia (*u-topos*).



f zwischen den Stufen des Organischen (f in between the Levels of Organic Life), 4k video, 20 min 40, 2021.

Positional Field

In aesthetic and cinematographic terms, this dynamic is visualised by making *f* an agent of a specific perception, projection, and spatialisation. From the opening scene in the park, *f* on all fours seems to see and hear differently. At that point the visual and acoustic fields become essential components of the film. It is largely through them that the space surrounding the character mutates. By changing position, *f* points to other positionalities, animal and plant, and he activates some of their parameters that he is able to share while being human. We can see that, although *f* continues to resemble the human being *f*, his situation has changed and his mode of spatialisation is different. His position thus activates the perception of a form of positionality that is not his own. It thus acquires a kind of objectivity detached from *f*, as well as a certain malleability of its parameters. The same holds true for the film's colours, which shift to signal a change in viewpoint (for example, the disappearance of reds, which is typical of the vision of certain mammals), without this viewpoint being ascribed to *f*. In fact, at certain moments, we see *f* in the image of, or through this alternative chromatic range. It is not a subjective camera effect, but instead the objectification of a viewpoint. *f* lets us see like a dog, or he lets us have the idea of seeing like a dog, but we do not see what he sees, or what a dog sees. How can we identify this space that is perceived

by a living agent whose situation and “positionality” set the parameters? How can we name this spatial dimension that depends on the relationship to the organic body, and which the image, specifically a moving image, shows us? We propose calling this dimension the “positional field”.

This notion refers to “field” understood in a cinematographic sense as designating an optical extension determined by the lens used for filming and then demarcated by the framing of the image. The “field” is a format of the visible, which cuts out the visual space and coordinates what lies within it and outside it. The field may thereby get what lies outside the field to act on the image, or articulate other fields through compositions and connections, multiplying or overturning perspectives, as in the reversibility of a counter-field. In essence, the field is always a relative format that determines the visible space using viewpoints and certain parameters of openness (for example, by offering varying degrees of depth of field). What optically constitutes its extent lies within the image. There are images whose aesthetic and symbolic function do not rely heavily on the parameters of the field understood in this spatialising, projective, and perspectivist sense, such as icons, while other images, as in cinema, depend on them greatly.



f zwischen den Stufen des Organischen (f in between the Levels of Organic Life), 4k video, 20 min 40, 2021.



Robert Montgomery, *Lady in the lake*, 1 h 45 min, 1947.

Once the optical field has been scaled in the image, it can play with the visual field of the viewer's gaze to produce particular aesthetic effects, such as projections, absorption, illusion, or vertigo.

By merging this cinematographic notion with Plessner's concept of positionality, the idea of a "positional field" does not emphasise a visual field constructed on the basis of a theoretical or ideal viewpoint, as in a traditional perspective, or one set

by a certain subjectivity, as in a subjective camera effect. In the latter the image is in the first person, as we can see in Robert Montgomery's *Lady in the Lake* or in "FPS" ("First Person Shooter") video games, as Patrice Blouin has analysed³³. Blouin has developed an original approach to analysing the domain of the moving image by distinguishing between several "audio-visual fields" beyond the established genres and art forms, without granting any historical or theoretical centrality to cinema. For this theoretician, a field is a category of moving images where a certain "staging figure"³⁴ presides, as in the case of what he calls the "scopic" field, where the subjective camera principle dominates, or in the "optical" field, where the camera functions as a video surveillance system, for example. The notion of a *positional field* could certainly contribute to a discussion of fields as being *within* the audio-visual more than *of* the audio-visual. But we can also consider certain films where the issue of the positional field is in fact essential and that involve specific production processes, especially in terms of their direction and staging. This is true of *fin between the Levels of Organic Life*, which could even justify the addition of a category to Blouin's typology

33 Patrice Blouin, *Les Champs de l'audiovisuel*, Paris, Éditions MF, 2020.

34 *Ibid.*, p. 13.

of audio-visual fields, one we can call “excentric”. In other words, in Plessnerian terms, the central object in this audio-visual domain would be the evolution of a human or non-human agent’s positional field; this evolution would depend on the possibilities of excentring the agent’s positionality.

In these terms, we could certainly also consider David O’Reilly’s video *Everything*³⁵, which appropriates the format of an FPS video game, but which is in reality constantly shuffling the “first person” identity. In this work, which consists of a video game, and in which one can also watch “gameplay” videos (video games being played by others), we can in fact play the role of a human, and then of a ladybug, a lion, a flower, a microbe, a planet, or even a galaxy, among other “things”. Space plays out in function of the scale of the entity that we embody. Even if the parameters for these changes are not very complex (they are essentially scalar), the dynamic nevertheless manages to elicit a transformation of the perception of the space. We will never truly embody the “first person” of a galaxy, which removes us considerably from the “scopic”. On the other hand, we “have” the body of a galaxy or of a microbe, something that we are not, and this

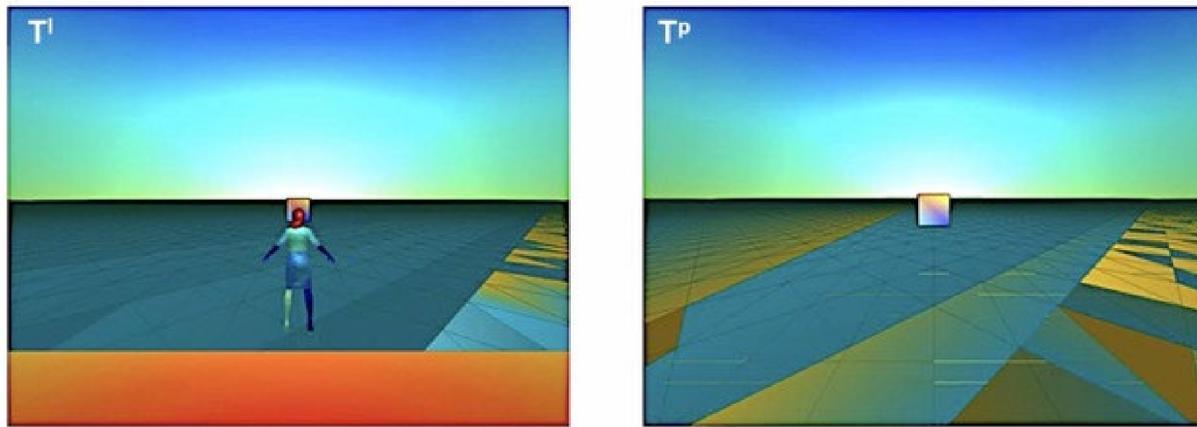


Example of a typical spatial projection of a “first person shooter” or FPS video game.



Everything, David O’Reilly, video game, 2017.

35 David O’ Reilly, *Everything*, video game, 2017.



David Rudrauf – PCM (The Projective Consciousness Model).

According to the "Projective Consciousness Model" (PCM), the state of perceptual consciousness (T_p or perceived projective transformation, right) corresponds geometrically to an imaginary viewpoint (T_i , or imaginary projective transformation) located behind the body. We could say that being aware and perceiving implies being situated where we are but at the same time to be behind ourselves. We can identify here certain coordinates of human positionality according to Plessner.

allows us to perceive certain spatial dimensions, as if these objects were possible points of view. It is as if, beyond the dichotomy between subjective viewpoint and objective reality, a space of *transposition* were unfolding, which means that any object constitutes a possible point of view, and, therefore, the transposition of a subjectivity.

Space envisioned in terms of the positional field is determined by adopting perspectives that start from



Der Freie Mensch – mit KI (The Free Man – with AI), 4k video, 7 min 43, 2019.

one's body and its relationship to its surroundings. For being "excentric", the positional field thus allows for transpositions of points of view and the pluralisation of perspectives³⁶. This power of excentricity reveals itself very explicitly through the technological media of telepresence and virtual reality. In rereading Plessner's work in light of new technologies, Jos de Mul views the resources that AI in particular provides as the advent of a new "level" of the organic, that of

36 With regard to the philosophical issues surrounding a pluri-perspectivism, cf. Emmanuel Alloa, *Partage de perspectives*, Paris, Fayard, 2020.



f zwischen den Stufen des Organischen (f in between the Levels of Organic Life), 4k video, 20 min 40, 2021.

“poly-excentricity”³⁷. In this case, human excentric positionality is replaced by the ability to multiply the “centres”, otherwise known as bodies (virtual bodies, clones, and androids), around which as many points of projection, as many possible roles, as many dreams, and as many “utopian placements” gravitate. “Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?”, asked Philipp K. Dick in the title of his famous novel³⁸. Science

fiction often depicts androids dreaming more of being human than of sheep. This is a possible example of poly-excentric positionality: our avatar or our android double imagining itself to be something else, projecting itself onto our way of seeing, dreaming of us, and even of being us.

On a less fictional basis, neuroscience and psychology model “projective” forms of consciousness that theorize the possibility of designing an AI that would work in the same way as our ordinary consciousness. In other words, this is not an AI designed merely to be a powerful calculating machine, but instead a spatialising entity that engages in acts of projection and anticipation. According to the Projective Consciousness Model, or PCM, developed by psychologist and neuroscientist David Rudrauf, the phenomenon of consciousness takes the form of a spatialisation process that functions according to projection dynamics³⁹. Active inference logics direct our actions, which are determined by what we anticipate in terms of any action’s consequences, according

37 Jos de Mul, “Polyzentrität und Poly(ex)zentrität: neue Stufen der Positionalität? Zu Telerobotern, Craniopagus-Zwillingen und globalen Gehirnen”, in Johannes F. Burow, Lou-Janna Daniels, Anna-Lena Kaiser, Clemens Klinkhamer, Josefine Kulbatzki, Yannick Schütte, Anna Henkel, *Mensch und Welt im Zeichen der Digitalisierung. Perspektiven der Philosophischen Anthropologie Plessners*, Baden-Baden, Nomos, 2019.

38 Philip K. Dick, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*, New York, Doubleday, 1968.

39 David Rudrauf, Kenneth Williford, Daniel Bennequin, Karl Friston, *et al.*, “The projective consciousness model and phenomenal selfhood”, *Frontiers in Psychology*, 2018, vol. 9, p. 2571.

to a retroactive loop of inferences and projection. By using tools from projective geometry to model these processes, PCM focuses more on the “field of consciousness” than on what is going on inside our brains. This notion of consciousness as a spatial exteriorisation relates directly to our Plessner-inspired idea of the “positional field”.

Technological and scientific developments appear to confirm Plessner’s anthropological theses in their exploration of human excentricity, also known as the possibility of projecting oneself outside one’s own body, of having another body, of being in another place from where we find ourselves. And yet, the issue that arises at this point, and which carries *f* throughout the film, is our knowledge of the status of the “centre”, without which any “excentricity” lacks all meaning. In other words, what happens to the original plane and point of movement, which in geometry is called the focus, the centre from which to measure the degree of excentricity, and which mathematicians traditionally call “F”? What becomes of a human being subjected to *f*’s excentricity? What focus of its anthropological identity is revealed in the exercise of its fundamental function of excentring?



f zwischen den Stufen des Organischen (f in between the Levels of Organic Life), 4k video, 20 min 40, 2021.

Anthropo-Excentrism

The paradox of *f*'s excentric experience—to the extent that it points to a certain crisis of anthropocentrism and the issue of technological “poly-excentricities”—resides in its animal and plant counterpoint. *f* prefers the waterlily to AI. A tension thus emerges between an organic excentricity and a technological poly-excentricity. What role should a human being's organic body continue to play in the anthropological excentring and the production of its constituent utopia in a time of biotechnologies and neurosciences? Would human positionality find an essential expression in non-human positionalities, in an animal or plant way of being? Should we reconsider the process by which, as animals, starting with our bodies and their specific mode of spatialisation, we learned how to be human? Should we witness and participate in a different way in the ongoing performance held on the stage of organic life, where the animals that we are play at being human? When we change our perspective on this performance, especially based on a different definition of being human as being anchored in life, in our bodies, and in space, what horizons emerge in relation to the contemporary crisis of anthropocentrism?

Such questions clash with certain evolutionist-type readings of Plessner. We have seen that it is

possible to push Plessner towards the idea of a succession of levels that situate humans at an evolutionary highpoint. For that matter, in the eyes of certain contemporary theoreticians, this level appears to be the steppingstone to superior levels of life, for example the post-human or the trans-human. Now, it seems to us that Plessner encourages us instead to return the essence of what it means to be human to our relationship to plants and animals than to aim for a technological surpassing of the human condition. In this regard, a reading of Plessner emphasises the political and environmental stakes of his anthropology of actors. It's not that he thematised even a general critique of technology or the exploitation of nature; that has nothing to do with his approach. But we can consider that grounding the essence of what it means to be human in a difference of levels, and not of nature in relation to plants and animals, undoubtedly constitutes a theoretical condition for challenging the anthropocentric paradigm, which, if we follow the famous statement made by historian Lynn White Jr. in 1979, lies at the root of our contemporary ecologic crisis⁴⁰. The theoretical movement of decentring that has been impacting the anthropocentrism of Western metaphysics at least since the Copernican revolution did

40 Lynn White Jr, “The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis”, *Science, New Series*, vol. 155, n° 3767, 1967, pp. 1203–1207.

not anticipate this crisis and the debates regarding the Anthropocene. However, our context renders the critique of anthropocentrism current once again. This sense of currency cannot help but reflect on our reading of Plessner and affect what *f* becomes in Boisseau and Westermeyer's film.

With regard to anthropocentrism, excentric positionality involves a dual decentring. There is on the one hand a clarification, an embedding of the forms of life on the same ontological level, based on which "positional" differences and differences in levels more than in nature can be measured. Consequently, a human is not an essentially spiritual being that exists in opposition to the materiality of animal life, to be considered, as in Descartes, for example, "as master and owner of nature". Its domination and anthropocentric ideology are ultimately just an expression of its excentricity, through which a human being imparts a certain ideological content to the utopian placement that is opened by the structure of its organic relationship to space. On the other hand, there is the *excentricity* of human "positionality" through which a human being distances itself from its organic centre, without however being able to remove itself from this fundamental, ontological polarity. It is on the articulation of these two decentrings that the "excentric positionality" of humans in Plessner's thinking

depends, especially through its link to other forms of organic life.

One way of analysing the meaning of the notion of Plessnerian *excentricity* in relation to certain contemporary anthropological issues consists of emphasising the geometric movement that it delineates in such debates. Ex-centricity is a trajectory that deviates from a centre. The most immediate example to explain this notion is an astral orbit, such as that of a planet that rotates around another celestial body. Because of the opposing forces that attract and repel the planet from the centre around which it spins, an orbit is not a perfect circle, but instead an ellipse. The greater the ex-centricity, the more the ellipse lengthens, and the more the curve becomes that of a hyperbole.

Let us play the game of *Everything* and take the place of these celestial bodies. If we consider the "centre" of the excentric positionality in this image to be the animal body that we are, or rather, the organic focus of all excentricity, and if we envision the surrounding orbital space as drawn by our manner of having this body, that is, turning it into a site of projection towards other places, then it is impossible to conceive of a human being without this relationship to the centre, without remaining within the orbit of organic life.



f zwischen den Stufen des Organischen (f in between the Levels of Organic Life), 4k video, 20 min 40, 2021.

Such a diagram would show very clearly that all anthropocentrism is in some way a paradoxical cosmological reversal. In revolving around its own body, we could say that a human being has long thought of its material, animal, and organic reality as accessory, accidental, temporary, and unnatural. The crisis of anthropocentrism challenges this metaphysical cosmology by returning to the realm of the living, or, in the opposite direction, by exercising a reverse acceleration that leaves this orbital field and pushes the deviation at the centre towards infinity along a vector that radically demarcates the linear direction of post-humanism.

To the contrary, *f* rediscovers a form of organic life. Non-human entities address him, a machine makes a declaration to him, animals get bored of him and his fellow humans, and the urban environment is impacted by a malfunctioning social space due to the healthcare crisis. This all seems to provoke a change in the character, pushing him to question certain parameters of his social humanity and to activate something like an animal and plant humanity. He does not do so in a new-age mode of meditation or yoga, as shown in the scene where we see him



Zheng Bo, *Pteridophilia II*, 4k vidéo, color, sound, 20 min, 2018.

circumspectly crossing a green space where a group of people are deep in meditation. *f* remains outside such expressions of self-centring. With regard to the plant world, it is also interesting to note the difference between what happens to *f* and certain expressions of a plant tropism in contemporary art and philosophy. *f* is not like the character in the very singular video by the artist Zheng Bo, *Pteridophilia*⁴¹, who is involved in a “phyto-erotic” relationship with plants. And the concept of “transpositionality” revealed by *f*’s wanderings is not subject to a logic of “metamorphosis”

41 Zheng Bo, *Pteridophilia*, video, 17 min, 2016.

strictly speaking, as according to Emanuele Coccia's metaphysical paradigm⁴². Once again, from a psychological standpoint, *f* is not the agent of a subjective expression (as the expression of a desire could be, par excellence); and from an ontological standpoint, he is not the agent of a substantial transformation or fusion. He does not dissolve as a human. It is instead as an actor that *f* becomes an animal and a plant, activating through his position of other positionalities. *f*'s actions are instead guided by a new dimension of play that no longer concerns what *f* the human becomes as a socialised individual, rather what constitutes *f* as a human in relation to other forms of life.

When the voiceover at the end of the film wonders about the possibility of an “us” emerging, the issue of a politics of the organic thus emerges. What is this “us”? Plessner distinguishes between the relationship to the “commonality” of all living things and what is specifically human: “Because it is alive, all living being stands in a relationship-with – that is, in a relation of accompaniment, coexistence and cooperation” with an innumerable quantity of things, living or dead, to be found in the surrounding field⁴³. But he writes that the “common world” is reserved only to human

beings, as there is an “actual world of Us, which is the fusion of I and You”. It has become necessary to consider the paradox of a common world that connects humans and non-humans. According to the terms of Plessner's distinction between a “commonality of relations” and a “common world” that needs to be surpassed, the alternative would today lead, according to one perspective, to an expansion of the political community of “us” to include non-human living things, in other words to conceive of an expanded common world that involves a process of legally and morally subjectivising animals and plants (as when we invoke “animal rights”). Or, in the opposite sense, the “us” considered here would instead deconstruct the fusion of the I and the You, or the fusion of fellow humans by asserting, within the I itself, a constituent relationship to organic otherness, a relationship of ex-centring that opens up the political space in all inter-human relations to the commonality of relations and the coexistence that connects human beings to non-human living things. It is along this line of thinking, for example, that we could situate Donna Haraway's thinking regarding the dynamics of co-evolution and the invention of modes of common

42 Emanuele Coccia, *The Life of Plants: A Metaphysics of Mixture*, Hoboken, Wiley, 2018.

43 Helmuth Plessner, *Levels of Organic Life and the Human*, op. cit., p. 522.

life between different species, beginning with the emblematic case of the relationship between human beings and dogs⁴⁴. The “us” in question would thereby no longer depend on a postulate of the *pan-subjectivity* of living things, but instead on the excentric movement of human beings.

The film touches on the aesthetic, philosophical, and anthropological dimensions of what we could call an *anthropo-excentrism*, in other words, an excentring of human beings from themselves that places them in the orbit of organic life, the core of what makes them human, the engine driving their discovery, and the site of a fundamental detachment from oneself, which is the condition for a relationship to human, animal, and plant otherness. It is not a question of abandoning *anthropos* to the obsolescence promised by its own technological achievements and condemning it to a “Promethean shame”, as Gunther Anders wrote⁴⁵, or to the new fires of post-humanism. It is an issue of bringing humans back to life that is understood not as a substance or force that runs through all things, but instead as a projective space.

44 Donna Haraway, *When Species Meet*, University of Minnesota Press, 2013.

45 Günther Anders, *Die Antiquiertheit des Menschen*, Munich, CH Beck, 1956.



f zwischen den Stufen des Organischen (f in between the Levels of Organic Life), 4k video, 20 min 40, 2021.

*This Living Thing that Plays
at Being Human*

“The major difference between artists and the overwhelming majority of academics specialising in the animal lies... in the capacity of the former to *animalise themselves* to penetrate the strange and wondrous world of non-human *Umwelten*”, writes Dominique Lestel in his preface to the French edition of Jakob von Uexküll’s celebrated book⁴⁶. The author specifies that the 20th century’s most innovative scientific approaches in ethology were based on this very capacity of projection: “Mark Bekoff has thus explicitly written that when he observes an animal very carefully, he projects himself onto it: ‘I become the coyote, I become the penguin’”⁴⁷. The video *in between the Levels of Organic Life* expresses this artistic capacity, which also constitutes an epistemological condition that in this case specifically activates a projection space *between* the worlds of different living beings.

With regard to the return to the animal, Giorgio Agamben refers to a comment by Alexandre Kojève on the fate of human beings who have arrived at the end of history, according to a characteristic reading

of Hegel’s philosophy. What does the end of History mean? The end of action, or rather, the end of humanity’s behaviour in pursuit of a goal, which means the end of war as much as it does the end of science and of language. What will humanity be at that point? Kojève responds: “Mankind will remain alive as an animal that exists in *harmony* with Nature or a given Being”⁴⁸. According to this vision of the end of Mankind that entails a new biological condition for humanity, culture as a whole will be transformed: “If Mankind becomes an animal again, its arts, its loves, and its games must also once again become purely ‘natural’. We must therefore admit that, after the end of History, human beings will construct their buildings and their works of art the way that birds build their nests and spiders weave their webs. They will perform music concerts like frogs and cicadas. They will play the way young animals play, and they will devote themselves to love the way that the adult animals do”⁴⁹. Georges Bataille was amused by this harmonious vision of a “post-historical” humanity, since he viewed human animality as a subversive, primordial force. Far from

46 Dominique Lestel, “De Jakob von Uexküll à la biosémiotique” (“From Jakob von Uexküll to Biosemiotics”), in Jakob von Uexküll, *Milieu animal et milieu humain*, translated into French by C. Martin-Freville, Payot-Rivages, 2010, p. 20.

47 *Ibid.*

48 Alexandre Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, translated by James H. Nichols, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1990; quoted in Giorgio Agamben, *The Open: Man and Animal*, translated by Kevin Attell, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2004.

49 Giorgio Agamben, *op. cit.*, p. 21.

an acultural, post-historical life or from a transgressive animality, what *f* asks us to consider, together with Plessner, is instead a form of life and creation that overcomes this dichotomy between nature and culture, as organic life always constitutes the stage for anthropic becoming, because it is there that living beings play at being human, all the more so when they play at being something else.

f has undoubtedly never been more human than when he tries to walk as a dog, float like a waterlily, or take root like a tree. He experiences and allows us to reflect on the excentricity that forms him, the projective and the reflexive space that combines the dynamics that give rise to him, between what distances him from the focus of his organic life and what connects him to it from the viewpoints that he constructs, delineates, and demarcates in that space where he has projected himself, from where he can see the body and the life that he has with a distance that is both a utopia and a gauge of the possible.

The game of anthropic performance thus opened by a reflection on the levels of organic life suggests an excentric aesthetic and ethic in the relationship to life itself. Such a relationship presupposes the

maintenance of differences, a condition for the distance and thus the space of the relationship and, in turn, of the transformation. In this light, our perspective converges with the emphasis that Hicham-Stéphane Afeissa places on the harmful assertion of otherness that should governs all animal and environmental ethics⁵⁰. In this sense, our horizon is neither a post-human overtaking nor the symbiotic, fusional mutation that would romantically resituate human beings at the heart of an experience of a natural and organic consubstantiality through a new experience of our belonging to “the flesh of the world”, as Maurice Merleau-Ponty wrote.

In the documentary *Becoming Animal* by Peter Mettler and Emma Davie⁵¹, the philosopher David Abram took inspiration from this phenomenological approach to call for a renewed bond with nature. This should take place through a renaturalisation of culture, as when he recalls the connection between the notion of mind and the experience of the atmosphere, or when he recalls the genealogical anchoring of language in tangible phenomena such as the sound of a rushing brook. Such a view could only enrich the semantic and sensory relationship we have with

50 Hicham-Stéphane Afeissa, *Manifeste pour une écologie de la différence* (“Manifesto for an Ecology of Difference”), Éditions Dehors, 2021.

51 *Becoming Animal*, David Mettler and Emma Davie, Switzerland and United Kingdom, 2018, 78 min.



Becoming Animal, by Emma Davie and Peter Mettler, documentary film, 78 min, 2018.

nature. But we believe it is necessary first to envision the structure underlying this sentiment of a common flesh, and, therefore, to redraw the geometry of this relationship to nature and to life. In this sense, the recognition of common points and their sensory resonance do not suffice for a mapping of the paths of this renewed relationship or to write the script of an ecologic, anthropic performance. We must be able to sketch out the lines and follow the dynamics that shift the points.

In *f*'s movements, we see more a *becoming-animal*, to quote the concept expressed by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, or even a “becoming-plant”. “Becomings-animal are neither dreams nor phantasies. They are perfectly real. But which reality is at issue here? For if becoming-animal does not consist in playing animal or imitating an animal, it is clear that the human being does not ‘really’ become an animal any more than the animal ‘really’ becomes something else. [...] The becoming-animal of the human being is real, even if the animal the human being becomes is not”⁵². For Deleuze and Guattari, becoming-animal describes the movement through which the human subject leaves the territory of his/her fixed, organised identity to become an other, with the animal representing the figure of change into the otherness. A human being does not morph into an animal, nor does it imitate the animal; it follows a destructuring movement and activates in him/her a sense of transformation that plays out at the molecular level, in other words, below the level of his/her own individuality, and in a way that is especially perceptible in literature and art. The line of convergence of this becoming thus qualifies a projection of the human, but it does not sketch it out fully.

52 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, translated by Bryan Massumi, University of Minnesota Press, 1987.



f zwischen den Stufen des Organischen (f in between the Levels of Organic Life), 4k video, 20 min 40, 2021.

If, as Deleuze and Guattari claim, human beings ultimately remain human in their becoming-animal, though human in a different way, this means that we need to conceive of the permanence of an anthropological identity in animal difference. This logic of the becoming-animal that Deleuze sees at work, for example, in Vladimir Slepian's poem *Fils de chien* ("Son of a Dog") is not so easily defined. Slepian wrote:

I am a human being, if you will. Yes, dammit! A human being. A human being like you, who does all the things that you do, even if I don't understand them. If I were not a human being, what could I be instead? A dog?⁵³.

An untenable humanism is in the process of dissolving here. Based on a metaphysical ideal that has been rendered precarious and contingent, it leads the narrator to lose a sense of his own anthropological structure. As if he were transgressing across the border between species, he comes to recognise himself as a dog. *f*'s evolution bends this movement of thought. Indeed, a Plessnerian reading of this becoming-animal demands a shift in perspective that allows for a reversal of the terms "human" and "dog" and an ensuing, different definition of the anthropological

structure in question. In a positional excentricity, this structure is not what excludes the dog, nor does it dissolve with the becoming-animal; it is instead what dynamically, visually arises with this otherness. It is in the human being's possibility of becoming a dog that a human being defines itself as such. The becoming-dog is a marker of the human being's positional excentricity in a way that undoes an anthropocentric humanism as much as the planned obsolescence of humans. Without engaging in a veritable metamorphosis or imitation of the animal, *f* becomes an animal while remaining human. This reveals the geometry of the process of excentricity that yields this possibility of a becoming that defines *f* as human. *f*'s transpositions without any transformation justify the following paraphrase: "I am a dog-robot-waterlily-tree, if you will. If I were not a dog-robot-waterlily-tree, what could I be instead? A human"? The only thing that is strictly human is this living being that ex-centres itself in a becoming-other on the basis of the ontological and dynamic polarity of its organic focus. The geometry of Plessnerian excentricity thus provides us with a form for explaining the becoming-animal. This is how the projection can be made, when Deleuze names the movement by which the becoming occurs

53 Vladimir Slepian, "Fils de chien" ("Son of a Dog"), *Minuit*, n°7, 1974.

in its antinomic relationship to modern humanism. For *f*, seen through a Plessnerian lens, as for Deleuze, life is a dimension that courses through beings; it is not a substance towards which we can travel, from which we can return, and in relation to which we can have a relationship of externality.

Thus, when we reread Plessner as we watch *f* evolve, it seems problematic to talk about a human who goes towards life as if it were an otherness that he would then try to bring back, or in which he would try to dissolve himself. What would it mean to go towards life for a human, or for *f*, who is himself alive? What does it mean to go towards what already constitutes us? To find ourselves again, as the expression goes? To find ourselves alive among the living? To feel ourselves alive again? Above and beyond any subjective experience likely to produce the feeling of such a return to life as immanent, organic, and situated, we believe that it is important to take stock of the distance not from life or from nature as such, but instead from the *positionalities* that construct the space of organic life in order to envision this space as the stage where relationships play out. It is less a question of thinking in terms of a monolithic substance than in terms of topical and singular performances, each one of which connects loci, highlights differences, and shifts and decentres points of view. We could call this construct

culture, an essential development and the result of an inescapable anthropological law that claims to create the language of the relationship, the gestures and the signs that map these avenues of excentricity. It is for humans a question of rediscovering that life is the very site of their difference, because it is this organic difference, this excentric positionality that represents the condition for all relations to otherness and to themselves. This difference allows them as living beings to continue to play their vital game, to play at being human.



f zwischen den Stufen des Organischen (f in between the Levels of Organic Life), 4k video, 20 min 40, 2021.

Bibliography

AFEISSA, Hicham-Stéphane. *Manifeste pour une écologie de la différence*, Bellevaux, Éditions Dehors, 2021.

AGAMBEN, Giorgio. *The Open: Man and Animal*, translated by Kevin Attell, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2004.

ALLOA, Emmanuel. *Partage de perspectives*, Paris, Fayard, 2020.

ANDERS, Günther. *Die Antiquiertheit des Menschen*, Munich, CH Beck, 1956.

BLOUIN, Patrice. *Les Champs de l'audiovisuel*, Paris, Éditions MF, 2020.

COCCIA, Emmanuele. *The Life of Plants: A Metaphysics of Mixture*, Hoboken, Wiley, 2018.

DELEUZE, Gilles; GUATTARI, Félix. *A Thousand Plateaus*, translated by Bryan Massumi, University of Minnesota Press, 1987.

DE MUL, Jos. "Digitally mediated (dis) embodiment. Plessner's concept of excentric positionality explained for Cyborgs", in *Information, Communication & Society*, 6, 2, 2003.

DE MUL, Jos (dir.). *Plessner's Philosophical Anthropology*, Amsterdam, Amsterdam University Press, 2014.

DE MUL, Jos. «Polyzentrität und Poly(ex)zentrität: neue Stufen der Positionalität? Zu Telerobotern, Craniopagus Zwillingen und globalen Gehirnen», in Burow, Johannes F.; Daniels, Lou-Janna; Kaiser, Anna-Lena; Klinkhamer, Clemens; Kulbatzki, Josefine; Schütte, Yannick; Henkel, Anna. *Mensch und Welt im Zeichen*

der Digitalisierung. Perspektiven der Philosophischen Anthropologie Plessners, Baden-Baden, Nomos, 2019.

DERRIDA, Jacques. *The Animal that Therefore I Am*, translated by David Wills, New York, Fordham University Press, 2008.

DICK, Philip K. *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*, New York, Doubleday, 1968.

FISCHER, Joachim. «Androiden – Menschen – Primaten. Philosophische Anthropologie als Platzhalterin des Humanismus», in Faber, Richard (dir.). *Humanismus in Geschichte und Gegenwart*, Tübingen, 2002.

GOFFMAN, Erving. *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, New York, Doubleday, 1959.

HARAWAY, Donna. *When species meet*, University of Minnesota Press, 2013.

HOROWITZ, Alexandra. *Inside of a Dog*, New York, Simon & Schuster, 2009.

KAFKA, Franz. *The Metamorphosis*, translated by A.L. Lloyd, London, Faber & Faber, 2015.

KINHOUN, Epiphane. *La positionnalité excentrique: Nouveau paradigme d'une anthropologie réaliste sans dogme*, Munich, Herbert Uitz Verlag, 2014

KRÜGER, Hans-Peter. «Das Schauspiel der Kultur im Spiel der Natur. Helmut Plessners Philosophische Anthropologie», *Deutsche Zeitschrift für Philosophie*, 48, 2, 2000.

LESTEL, Dominique. «De Jakob von Uexküll à la biosémiotique», in Jakob von Uexküll, *Milieu animal et milieu humain*, Payot-Rivages, 2010.

MIDGLEY, Mary. «*The Mixed Community*», *Animals and why they Matter*, Athens, The University of Georgia Press, 1983, p. 112-124.

PLESSNER, Helmuth. *Levels of Organic Life and the Human. An Introduction to Philosophical Anthropology*, translated by Millay Hyatt, Fordham University Press, New York, 2019. Translation of: *Die Stufen des Organischen und der Mensch. Einleitung in die philosophische Anthropologie* [1928], *Gesammelte Schriften*, t. IV, Francfort-sur-le-main, Suhrkamp, 1980-1985.

PLESSNER, Helmuth. *Anthropologie philosophique de l'acteur. Imitation, expression et existence humaine*, textes édités et présentés par David Zerbib, trad. Isis Von Plato, Paris, Presses de Paris Nanterre, coll. «Idées», to be published. Translation into French of *Zur Anthropologie des Schauspielers*, 1948.

RICOEUR, Paul. *Oneself as Another*, translated by Kathleen Blamey, University of Chicago Press, 1994.

RUDRAUF, David; Williford, Kenneth; Bennequin, Daniel; Friston, Karl et al. "The projective consciousness model and phenomenal selfhood", *Frontiers in Psychology*, 2018, vol. 9, art. 2571.

SARTRE, Jean-Paul. *Existentialism is a Humanism*, translated by Carol Macomber, New Haven, Yale University Press, 2007.

SCOTT DAVIS, Lawrence. *The eccentric Structure of Schamanism: An Ethnography of Taiwanese Ki-Thong, with Reference to the philosophical Anthropology of Helmut Plessner*, Thèse, Harvard University, 1992. SHUSTERMAN, Richard. «Body consciousness and the excentric self: between Plessner and somaesthetics», *Pragmatism Today*, 9, 1, 2018, p. 10-20.

SLEPIAN, Vladimir. «Fils de chien», *Minuit*, n°7, 1974.

VIVEIROS DE CASTRO, Eduardo. *Cannibal Metaphysics*, translated by Peter Skafish, University of Minnesota Press, 2014.

VON UEXKÜLL, Jakob. "A Stroll Through the Worlds of Animals and Men: A Picture Book of Invisible Worlds", in *Instinctive Behavior: The Development of a Modern Concept*, ed. & trans. Claire H. Schiller, New York, International Universities Press, 1957, pp. 5-80.

WHITE JR, Lynn. «The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis», *Science*, New Series, vol. 155, n° 3767, 1967, p. 1203-1207.

Biography of the authors

DAVID ZERBIB is a Lecturer in the Philosophy of Art at the School of Art and Design (HEAD) in Geneva. He also teaches at the Annecy-Alpes Art School (ESAAA). A member of the Centre of the History of Modern Philosophies at the Université de Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne, he researches contemporary aesthetics, with a focus on issues of performance and performativeness. He has published, among other works, together with A.Citron and S. Aronson-Lehavi, *Performance Studies in Motion: International Perspectives and Practices in the Twenty-First Century* (Bloomsbury, London, 2014). He directed the publication of *In octavo. Des formats de l'art* (Presses du réel – ESAAA, 2015), as well as the French edition of Helmuth Plessner's *Zur Anthropologie des Schauspieler*s, forthcoming under the title *Anthropologie philosophique de l'acteur. Imitation, expression et existence humaine* from Éditions Paris Nanterre as part of its "Idées" Series. (HES-SO)

SYLVIE BOISSEAU is an artist who lives and works in between Berlin and Geneva.

FRANK WESTERMEYER is an artist and associate professor at HEAD–Geneva. (HES-SO)

Under the name BOISSEAU/WESTERMEYER, the artists collaborate on video installations and films (among other artistic works) that are exhibited and screened at art centres and festivals internationally. With *f*, the experimental figure they created in 1997, they stage the role of desire and other aspirations embedded in language. In the 2010s, during a research seminar, they were alerted to the proximity of their work to the theories of Helmuth Plessner and the concept of excentric positionality. This led to the formulation of their second artistic research project since "Producing landscape, producing identity: Artistic, ethnohistorical, and anthropological views of southern Chile (19th-20th centuries)". The new research presented here explores the forms and discourses that can emerge from the combination of artistic and philosophical methods.

This book is the result of a research project led by Frank Westermeyer from 2018 to 2020 and supported by the strategic fund of HES-SO.

Hes·so
Haute Ecole Spécialisée
de Suisse occidentale
Fachhochschule Westschweiz
University of Applied Sciences and Arts
Western Switzerland

Co-published by:

— **HEAD**
Genève

HEAD — Genève
Avenue de
Châtelaine 5,
CH-1203 Genève
head-geneve.ch

and

Naima Editions (Paris-Berlin)
32 boulevard de Strasbourg
CS30108, 75010 Paris
naimaedititions.com

NAIMA

Editors:

Agathe Lacroix, Manon Piel,
David Zerbib, Sylvie Boisseau
and Frank Westermeyer

Digital distribution:
naimaunlimited.com

Graphic design:
Formula Studio
formulaprojects.net

ISBN: 978-2-37440-140-9
© 2021, the authors, the editors.

Credits:

p. 19 : Nicole Tran Ba Vang :
© Nicole Tran Ba Vang
p. 18 : Matthew Barney :
© 2002 Matthew Barney ;
Photo: Chris Winget, Courtesy the
artist and Gladstone Gallery, New York
and Brussels
p. 20 : Oleg Kulik : © Oleg Kulik ;
Photo © Centre Pompidou, MNAM-CCI,
Dist. RMN-Grand Palais /
Georges Meguerditchian
p. 39 : First Person Shooter : Source :
Improbable's FPS Starter Project
p. 39 : © David O'Reilly
p. 40 : © David Rudrauf
p. 48 : Zheng Bo : Courtesy the artist and
Edouard Malingue Gallery
p. 55 : Becoming Animal : Courtesy
Maximage [https://vimeo.com/
ondemand/becominganimalfilm](https://vimeo.com/ondemand/becominganimalfilm)

All other images:

© Sylvie Boisseau & Frank Westermeyer

We have tried to contact all the owners of the images reproduced in this book. If, in spite of our vigilance inaccuracies or errors remain, they will be corrected.

We warmly thank:

Jean-Pierre Greff, director
at HEAD — Genève
Anthony Masure, head of Research
at HEAD — Genève
and Anne-Catherine Sutermeister,
in charge until 2019.

We thank for their contribution
to the video *f in between the Levels of
Organic Life*:

Sound design and mixing: Philipp Ciompi
Voices: Véronique Alain,
Michaela Caspar
Grading: Raphaël Dubach

and

Pauline Barck, Michel Boisseau,
Bass Bousso, Johannes F. Burow,
Katja Clos, Lou-Janna Daniels,
Frank Doerner, Larisa Dryansky,
Élie During, Yan Duyvendak,
Enrique Fontanilles, Christelle Granite-
Noble, Anna Henkel, Jakob Hilpert,
Olga Hohmann, Anna Kaiser,
Josefine Kulbatzki, Christophe Kihm,
Clemens Klinkhammer, Alexander
Lange, Sujin Lim, Juliette Mapp,
Valérie Mavridorakis, Pietro Morandi,
Jan Peters, Manon Piel, Steffen Schmidt,
Yannik Schütte, Oliver Teuber,
Sinan Turan, Max von Mechow,
Isis von Plato, Lily Westermeyer,
Lucien Westermeyer et Lorin Wüscher,
the students of the 2021 Work.Master
seminar of David Zerbib at HEAD,
Geneva.