The Human Re-cognized, the Lifeform Re-made (Reza Negarestani).

> A picnic. Picture a forest, a country road, a meadow. Cars drive off the country road into the meadow, a group of young people get out carrying bottles, baskets of food, transistor radios, and cameras. They light fires, pitch tents, turn on the music. In the morning they leave. The animals, birds, and insects that watched in horror through the long night creep out from their hiding places. And what do they see? Old spark plugs and old filters strewn around... Rags, burnt-out bulbs, and a monkey wrench left behind... And of course, the usual mess—apple cores, candy wrappers, charred remains of the campfire, cans, bottles, somebody's handkerchief, somebody's penknife, torn newspapers, coins, faded flowers picked in another meadow.
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> […]
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> The picnic is only my hypothesis. And not even a hypothesis, really, but an impression. So-called serious xenologists try to justify interpretations that are much more respectable and flattering to human vanity. For example, that the Visit hasn't happened yet, that the real Visit is yet to come.

Given the above quotes, what is not at all obvious or yet settled in the Strugatsky brothers' account of so-called visitation zones in *Roadside Picnic* is that such zones—where humans encounter anomalies—are made by alien visitors. In other words, we are led to believe that zones are traces left by something other than us, a different intelligence, a different race, a visitor from the outside world. But what if the zones and their alien effects are exactly left by us? What if they are made by exactly this intelligence who has now by virtue of a dissociative identity disorder or a form of mass amnesia has lost its connection with its own identity traces?

This is after all the psychological trope behind tales of alien abduction in which encountering aliens and their actions in a person's immediate environment are but encounters among personality states of the same traumatized person. The profound impairment of recall among personality states generates the alien effect: One personality state begins to see traces left by other personality states as alien objects often in what is perceived as a threatening or

highly outlandish circumstance. However, there are times where tales of alien visitation and abduction push back against such a psychological disenchantment while retaining the idea of being dissociated from oneself as the core principle of a new alien scenario. A recent example of this treatment is the 2016 TV series, *The Kettering Incident*. The insinuating core of the plot can be summarized in a single line, 'Just because you were traumatized as a child, and now suffer from dissociative disorder doesn't mean you have not been abducted by aliens.' Despite her childhood trauma that has indeed given rise to a sense of having been abducted or visited by an alien phenomenon, the protagonist finally meets herself, face to face, as a veritable alien abductee. The psychological explanation of the alien abduction here does not exhaust the alien visitation effect by explaining it away but reveals a further twist inherent to it: That at the root of the alien abduction lore, there is indeed an alien visitation phenomenon anchored in how the self encounters its alien counterpart—an alien clone which is just its own self but re-cognized differently, that is, it has been cognized anew.

What I like to argue here is that we can expand the theme of 'the self being re-cognized by itself' qua the alien to the concept of the human re-cognizing its form of life as the alien. In a sense, we can see Strugatsky brothers' notion of the visitation zone which is the locus of dangerous phenomena of allegedly extraterrestrial origin as an allegory for the concept of the human. But this concept is symptomatic of a register of humanity which has lost its connection with what it really is, namely, the human as a lifeform (*lebensform*). The artifacts littering the zone are left by not another intelligence, but this intelligence looking at itself through a fundamental dissociation with what humanity as a lifeform entails and has as its consequences. To this extent, this text simply attempts to:

(1) Look at what to be human as a lifeform consists in, and how the consequences of being a lifeform coincide with the possibility of that lifeform losing its traction upon what it really is, hence creating a negative estrangement.
(2) Investigate the relations between lifeform and worldmaking so as to show that the human is always in a state of positive alienation, or more precisely, in the perpetual state of being re-cognized or cognized anew.

The Enigma of Lifeform: Between Lifeforms and Worlds

In *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein uses the term *lebensform* (lifeform or a form of life) only five times. Yet despite this sparing use, the term occurs at key moments embedded

within cryptic passages where Wittgenstein's philosophy of life, philosophy of language and the life of philosophy twine together. The concept of lifeform as employed by Wittgenstein suggests two lines of thought at once: (*a*) life as a field of possibilities afforded by logic and language, and (*b*) more importantly, the possibility of rationally imagining and constructing different lifeforms (*lebensformen*), that is to say, to be a *form* of life already implies the possibility of the plurality of it as *forms* of life. Indeed, the question of lifeform—which is the philosophical question of what life ultimately is—already implies the plurality of lifeforms as constructible and not merely given possibilities. But this plurality does not simply suggest the existence of other forms of life, such as extraterrestrial or other types of intelligence. It pertains to exactly the existing form of life one is occupying as a field of possibilities or lifeforms which are constructions or re-cognized versions of it i.e., the existing form or life or the currently inhabited world.. For example, we can think of the human. By virtue of being a form of life, the human is a field of possibilities of how such a lifeform can be re-cognized and re-constructed beyond the manifest characteristics we often attribute to the human and beyond what we currently—due to historical dogmas in the broadest possible sense—take the human to be.

If life for Wittgenstein is simply the world, then lifeform is also a world insofar as it is what life ultimately is. To speak of life without form—a form that oscillates between material and noetic (i.e., linguistic, logico-computational) poles, between sensibility and cognition—is an empty idea, a vitalistic fallacy. Now to the extent that a lifeform is a world and it implies the plurality of lifeforms, it also implies worlds, the plurality of them: not possible worlds of the kind a modal realist espouses, but actual worlds, no less actual than the actuality of the world of humans as a lifeform. But where do these worlds qua lifeforms come from? They are not merely natural or given, they are not of sentient forests, rocks, wasps and termites. Instead, they are constructions whose elements or building blocks are borrowed from none than our world, from humanity as a lifeform and our experiences which recognize and make our world. We can think about lifeforms as world-versions in the sense Nelson Goodman has written about world-versions: Radically new worlds or worlds as pure alterities to our world are vagaries of thought. Such worlds are best left to scholastics and their metaphysical scams or so-called wagers.

Any sort of a different world—albeit strange or alien in configuration—we can think of or make will be scrambled from the resources of the world we have. In this sense the world we have is a *cognitive scaffolding*—of both theoretical and practical cognitions—for different world-versions in a similar sense that a piece of code can be a platform or a construction

cue for fundamentally different functions, applications and even new programming languages.

Then in a sense, any inquiry about lifeforms as world-versions is a philosophy that is at the intersection of philosophy of life, philosophy of language and the life of philosophy as a program for constructing world-versions. In short, it is a philosophy which is philosophy re-conceived as a view from nowhere and nowhen. Its task is to systematically postulate and construct lifeforms or worlds—not radically alien, unintelligible or noumenal worlds—but worlds which are ways of knowing about this world of ours—the human lifeform—as well as being perspectives or apertures into the space of possibilities of life from a standpoint that is not strictly limited to here and now of our worldly or human experience, and for that matter, it can be truly seen as a view from nowhere and nowhen. Philosophy of the human qua a lifeform, accordingly, is a program for re-cognizing or re-constructing human in theory and practice at the intersection of the philosophy of life, philosophy of language and the life of philosophy which for a lifeform is invariably a system of inquiry about what to think and what to do—namely, the perennial questions which constitute philosophy.

The question we can now pose is that 'what are these lifeforms or worlds which are constructed from our human lifeform, from our world as a springboard for other worlds?' The answer is that they are artificial machines, artifacts so to speak which should be understood in terms construction systems of whether formal or material re-cognition. It is not that they are artifacts in virtue of being derived from or constructed out of our world. They are artifacts because to say that we live in this or that world is already a statement about the artificiality of the world of which we are a part. The world is artificial to the extent that every statement about it is a statement made by the resources of our conceptualization, historically and linguistically. Every world consists of a series of statements about constructing of fabricating what it means to have a world and what it means to inhabit that specific world/set of statements rather than others.

A world is only a world in so far as that we see it as a product of theoretical terms and practical injunctions which are afforded by a system of constructions which is not given to us or any other lifeform in advance. In other words, to see a world is to craft a world, to be in the realm of the artifact to begin with. But an attempt at re-cognizing the existing world is in fact equivalent to make the artificiality of the world *explicit*, rendering it concrete for self-consciousness of what it takes or means to live in a world. I say explicitly because our world or form of life is no less artificial or constructible than lifeforms qua world-versions. World-versions or lifeforms are artificial not because they are *derived* from an originary world or

lifeform (a so-called neutral nature), but because they are built on a platform erected by an originary cognized lifeform or world. In so far as for a world to count as a world, it should be an object of cognitions (theoretical and practical), a world is always an artifact of cognizing acts. Its artifactuality is necessary rather than contingent, it is fabricated by a web of conceptions afforded by the language that structures that world.

We are all tangled in the maze of language and conception which organize and inform our experiences of ourselves in the world. But for us—i.e. humans dissociated from what being human entails and has as its consequences—language is taken for granted as something trivial (a naturalistic medium of communication) or as something transcendent and hence ineffable in its nature. Yet once we become self-conscious of the nature of language not as a medium of human communication but as a vast logico-computational framework that can be diversified and constructed out of the bounds of sense, we are, *in principle*, in the domain of imagining new languages and hence new lifeforms, new worlds. As Wittgenstein remarks, to imagine a lifeform is to imagine a language. Living as a lifeform demands that its members share a space of possibilities. Accordingly, being human as a lifeform necessitates partaking in a form a as a field of possibilities. Language or what can be called a general artificial language—cf. Wittgenstein's language games as generalizations of language—is in this sense the most expansive space of possibilities without which the intelligibility of life is voided and its possibilities remain untapped. General artificial languages, however, ought not be imagined as necessarily having words or even tenses. We can imagine them as having explicit logical, computational or probabilistic properties such as for example, a language built on Rudolf Carnap's logical syntax and logical induction. Indeed, in the fourth chapter of *Logical Foundations of Probability*, Rudolf Carnap intimates the prospects of a computer or a learning machine built on the principles of logical syntax and logical induction.

Once we attain the consciousness of the fact that imagining language as a space of structuring possibilities is tantamount to cognizing lifeforms and worlds, the Heideggerian *lebensraum* will be crumbled at the foot of *lebensformen*: only artifacts have a history and only forms of life have a history rather than a mere nature which will continue the timeless life of Ideas in the Hegelian sense. Living species will perish but lifeforms will endure. In line with this dictum, we can think about computers in the most general sense as constructed lenses looking into what humanity—our lifeform and lifeworld—is.

What is a computer if not a determination of what the human is not and what it can possibly be. And what the human can be from a perspective methodically put together by our various informed assumptions and critiques is but a historical template which is disposed to further

construction and revision. Computers are in this sense fragments of a lifeform/world called the human. They are fragments out of which other world-versions can be constructed, worlds which are not detached from the human but are its constructive-critical *versions*. Yet they are treated as the Strugatskys' alien artifacts precisely because the extant humans are cognitively disconnected with themselves as a lifeform or world—a field of possibilities—from which lifeforms or world-version can be made. The negative alienation effect, therefore, does not stem from the plurality of lifeforms or worlds, but from the fact that this world or this lifeform—the human—is misconceived as a unitary world, one and only one world. But as Goodman has informed us, a singular world can always be many, and many worlds can be one world depending on the mode of recognizing that is being projected onto what is at stake. The dogma that a lifeform or world called the human does not bear lifeforms or world-versions is due to the fallacy not having a historical and critical consciousness of what being a lifeform entails. That a lifeform is not a firm ground, but a scaffolding for what is yet to be constructed.

How a lifeform can reinvent life?

Following the previous section, we can now proceed to the second objective of this text: That is to say the idea that computers—generally understood along the lines of lifeforms, language and worldmaking—display the re-cognized states of the human, the world from which we have begun. Whatever we can ever imagine about other worlds and lifeforms is based on the critique and construction of the particular lifeform we possess, the specific actual world we already inhabit. Philosophy is always a view from nowhere and nowhen, a global recipe to construct otherworlds from viewpoints through which our world / our lifeform will be rendered ever smaller and cosmologically myopic by revealing new world-versions and life-forms. In a nutshell, all philosophy is about is what can be done through life and for life, as inseparable from form or the field of possibilities, namely, constructions. For us humans, then, philosophy is a critical and constructive double-pincer movement against the human as the dominant world: exposing its limits and its prospective possibilities as a lifeform.

A philosophy that takes as its premise death and extinction is not philosophy, but a self-defeating ideological fixation, a slight of intellectual hand that at once parasitizes on the resources of lifeform and life as a world that ought to be *re*-cognized, for every cognition is a re-cognition. All such a myth knows is a life bereft of form, a life that comes as noetically free, just like a tree that is not accompanied by the concept of tree. But what is a tree without

the concept of tree, how can we think like a tree, to understand what its world can possibly be without having a renewable conception of it, the language it might or might not have? How is it possible to think of life without a form that is neither given nor restricted to the conceptual resources we have at this time to think of life? A nihilist tends to reduce the lifeform to the question of bare life—that is a life without form, and to the extent that life will extinguish, the nihilist sees extinction as the truth of the human and all lifeforms. By separating the question of life from its form, by reducing lifeforms to the vacuous thought of life, the nihilist does indeed begin his position from the same premise that undergirds the position of a fanatic vitalist, namely, the empty idea of life without form which can be deflated or disenchanted by a nihilist or inflated and enchanted by a vitalist.

But if the question of life as conceived here and now is a historical illusion rooted in mistaking the incompleteness of our history for a completed totality then what does it mean to see life as a space of possibilities, not given by what we think of life in our narrow conception of life as a human lifeform, but afforded by a formal Idea or a Concept that stands for a network of different relationships between humans and is thus amenable to reconstruction, i.e., different conceptions of the human? In short, thinking of the human as one given world that is not amenable to construction and hence human-versions bespeaks of a specific historical form of thinking. What is that form though?

What is important here is that as Wittgenstein has suggested, words like human and life are not classes of entities that signify actual things or beings, they are not grounded on attributes, fixed properties or common denominators which can be added or removed from living beings at whim. In fact, for Wittgenstein, one of the greatest philosophical sins is to understand human and life as categorical concepts. Instead, life and human are formal concepts which are neither categorical (i.e., pertaining to a class) nor fixed. Difference and possibilities of diversification in such concepts arise from their formality, rather than from anything extraneous to their form. For example, regardless of differences in attributes and properties X and Y can be called human as long as they share the same form. As such both concepts of the human and life remain open instead of being closed under a definition. Their openness originate from the fact that they are not predetermined concepts but complicated networks of similarities overlapping and crisscrossing. This is what Wittgenstein calls networks of family resemblances which are not based on a single shared property but rather can be thought as 'created by spinning a multiplicity of fibers that overlap with each other.'[1]

[1] David Kishik, Wittgenstein's Form of Life (London: Continuum, 2012), 38.

Of course, the strength of this thread is not affected by the fact that there is no single fiber that runs through its whole length. Here we can think of Charles Sanders Peirce's metaphor of the cable which is not a chain (like the chain of beings) 'but a cable whose fibers may be ever so slender, provided they are sufficiently numerous and intimately connected'.[2] This form of understanding the concepts of life and the human is not by any means underdetermined, it is on the other hand healthy, anti-essentialist and anti-foundationalist. It allows us to imagine a lifeform as a community or a collective whose members do not need to share a class of attributes or a property for them to be counted as representatives of that lifeform.

Furthermore, this view of the concepts of the human and life enables us to finally see different classes of life as resting upon nothing more and nothing less than a form qua a field of possibility which can be shared and transferred from one member to another but also be actively engaged with as an open-source construction, within which other lifeforms and worlds can be imagined and actualized. In this sense, what are computers or logical machines if not other lifeforms born out of the suppleness of concept-networks such as the human logically and naturalistically conceived, and for that matter, they are extensions of our history in a different class of life rather than the discontinuation of our history. Having cursorily gone through what is at stake here, i.e., the systematic thought of different lifefroms or different worlds as the very task of philosophy which is the investigation of the lifeform, we can now begin to say that what all lifeforms will eventually do, the kind of performative task that defines them all, is to imagine and construct what other kinds of lifeforms will be born out of them. In other words, in living an intelligible world, one ends up speculating about and eventually making different worlds and lifeforms which are not unintelligible in principle. 'I think that I am a human but in my provincial idea of humanity, I wander across the oceans of time where the concept of human is broken into pieces and re-invented anew.'

Once the first humans—us—were shattered upon the wall of future, a new human was born, half an etching into the stone and half a computer. Its petrified remains lasted for some time and were eventually erased by the vagaries of different ages. Whereas its true form, a

[2] Charles Sanders Peirce, Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1966).

computational machine, evolved with time and became one with universe of which it was a part. This is how Olaf Stapeldon's novel, *Last and First Men*, beings and ends.[3]

The fact that we are living in the pre-history of intelligence should not be regarded as a debilitating moment of understanding or an enfeebling negative alienation, one that leads to despondency about our fate as humans. As homo sapiens, we will be subjected to what Thomas Hardy—with a nod to Darwin—has called the mean times, turning into relics of natural history.[4] Yet as a lifeform (Wittgenstein's *lebensform*), we as first humans will be complimented by other lifeforms. For a lifeform is not a species that simply dies but a flux of life that is determined by the form of its social practices shared among its members. Its perceptual and noetic images of itself are formed by language which is through and through collectively practiced and shaped. Yet insofar as the social or cultural practices which constitute the language can evolve or can be reconfigured such that the nature of language changes in the process, a lifeform can outlive its specific and contingent historical format such as homo sapiens as a biological species. Within this thesis on the endurance and evolution of *lifeforms* or the Idea of the Human (*a la* Hegel), there lies the ultimate import of artificial intelligence not as a technological hubris or a juvenile flight of fancy about the singularity yet to come, but as a systematic investigation of lifeforms and how they navigate an incomplete historical landscape, how finally world-versions make the idea of the world sound and robust.

Five dual-concepts define artificial intelligence as an investigation of lifeforms—both from the historical perspective of here and now, and from the perspective of a view from nowhere and nowhen, i.e., the possibilities of how lifeforms can evolve and diversify. These four dual-concepts are: *language and computation*, *language and experience*, *experience and history*, *history and wandering in time / evolution*, *lifeforms and machinic practices*. Let us look briefly at how these five dual-concepts interconnect: We have individual perceptions and experiences of ourselves and the world to the extent that we share a language. We have experiences to the extent that our experiences are fundamentally

[3] Olaf Stapledon, *Last and First Men* (UK: Methuen Publishing, 1930).
[4] Thomas Hardy, *A Pair of Blue Eyes* (UK: Tinsley Brothers, 1873): 'The creature represented but a low type of animal existence, for never in their vernal years had the plains indicated by those numberless slaty layers been traversed by an intelligence worthy of the name. Zoophytes, mollusca, shell-fish, were the highest developments of those ancient dates. The immense lapses of time each formation represented had known nothing of the dignity of man. They were grand times, but they were mean times too, and mean were their relics. He was to be with the small in his death.'

intersubjective passing through a common language (or languages which we can be interpreted by the community members of a specific language). Every language is constituted at its base by certain social practices or ways of doing and saying which also determine what we historically see or experience ourselves and the world as X or Y (namely, a form of life). Yet these social practices are not any kind of social practices. They are, at the bottom, logical and computational in nature. The noise 'red' has no meaning, no organizational capacity for our experiences unless and until it enters into an interaction between different interlocutors. The essence of this interaction can be understood as a confrontation of elementary actions between players or agents whose moves establish the rule of a game which in turn give meanings and contexts to the sign-noises, similar to how the rules of chess classify what kind of moves chess pieces can perform. Yet, at its basis the concept of lifeform is not about established rules to which we are bound, it is embedded in the idea of play (Goodman's toy aesthetics) that we share as an activity. If play precedes the game, and if lifeform is more on the side of play and tinkertoy manipulation than games and their rules, then to inhabit a lifeform means to play around with the form and the world, to reinvent them as new lifeforms and world-versions.

We can imagine this computational or machinic conception of social practices which form our individual and historical experiences might lead to ever more generalized forms of language with higher expressive powers and computational capacities. In line with this postulate, we can further imagine new lifeforms who are constructs of two vectors of reformatting the homo sapiens, one from below and the other from the above: the reconfiguration of our particular natural history by artificial means such that for example, the human brain is reconstructed by more powerful statistical and neural models, and the substitution of our language and its conceptual-inferential resources by languages with explicit logical and computational properties.

It is through the intertwinement of these two vectors—i.e., artificialization from below and the top—that we can conjecture about machinic lifeforms whose histories are the continuation of the Idea of the human yet unburdened by our immature history. Thinking otherwise would mean that we do indeed restrict the notion of history as the time of the Idea of the human to our particular instantiation as humans here and now, and thus we implicitly endorse the well-worn dictum that homo sapiens is the apex of history. In other words, we end up confounding natural history which is always contingent with regard to a lifeform with the artificial history of what it means to be human. Natural history may be unbound but it is not a history as such, its unboundness is blind to what lifeforms come and go, whereas an Idea (e.g., that of what

it means to be human) is thoroughly a construct, an artifact. Yet only lifeforms have a notion of history. To have a history, one has to have a concept of oneself and the world, and to have a concept, one must have a language or something as close as to a stable construction system of possibilities. It is in this sense that the gradual machinic transformation of our particular social practices through which our notion of history is shaped coincides with an unbound history which is the history of the Idea and not beings or species.

Lifeforms, in this sense, should strictly be conceived as machines, because only machines—whether supported by synthetic (organic-inorganic) or purely inorganic structures—retain an Idea or in this case the concept of the human. Everything that intimates natural entities or species will capitulate to the Darwinian deep time. It will become a fossil as an omen of indifferent times. The question of what it means to be human has always been the question what it means to be a machine, a constructible constellation whose history is as vast as of the possibilities of its re-construction and re-cognitions. Machinic lifeforms—of which we are a rudimentary exemplification—see their histories as a systematic navigation or wandering in the dense forests of time, where rainbows change their colours, where trees are at once green and blue (*grue*) and where any earth-home is always descending into an abyss called cosmological possibilities, into the field or form of life which is beyond what is now the case. Above all for such a lifeform, visiting a zone harbouring anomalous effects doesn't imply meeting the alien, for it is finally a revelation of what it has been all along: forms of life, familiar or strange. There is no alien without a world, a lifeform or theory of intelligence or intellection of which the human is a provisional yet necessary (not sufficient) exemplification.