
Post- human Habitats II

**Otherkin, Digitalization, Puberty.
Three Sketches on
Crises of Embodiment**

– Martin Beck

1

Otherkin: Human Bodies as Wrong Bodies

**“This is not a list for or about role-playing or
role-playing games; we’re elves.”***

The concept of otherkin has its roots in the year 1972, when groups of people in the US began to refer to themselves as elves (like the “Elf Queen’s Daughters” or the “Silver Elves”). One protagonist describes in retrospect how in “the late ’60s a doorway opened to the Ancient Knowledge of Faerie”.¹ Another person recounts that she spontaneously came to the conviction of being an elf while reading Tolkien’s ‘Lord of the Rings’. These groups exhibit an apparent proximity to the New Age movement. The movement’s underlying idea of a spiritual elite that prepares the world for a new age was also present in the self-identified elves, who strove to distinguish themselves from humanity and its destructive mastering of nature. As a result of this, they combined an environmentalist approach with the goal to recover the magical forces of nature that were suppressed by civilization.² Maybe surprisingly, their affiliation to American post-hippie-milieus also brought them close to the technological and ideological roots of the Internet, which consisted of practices like Phone Phreaking and later computer hacking,³ as well as the engagement in discourses about cybernetics, self-organizing systems, and networks.⁴ Part of their social communication was the idea of an aetheric web, as well as an infrastructure of about sixty so-called energy vortices spread around the globe, regularly connected by circular letters.⁵

In 1990, shortly after the Internet was technically realized and opened up to public use, a first mailing list for people, who identified as elves, appeared, the “Elfinkind Digest”, based at the University of Kentucky.

*“Elfinkind Digest”, 1990. Cited from O. Scribner: “Otherkin Timeline. The Recent History of Elfin, Fae and Animal People”, Version 2.0, 08.09.2012, in: <http://orion.kitsunet.net/time.pdf>

It was in this digest that the first mention of 'otherkin' or 'otherkind' can be found (borrowed from the term 'elfkind'⁶). Initially used as umbrella terms for non-elf creatures such as dragons and wolves, they later came to generally designate some kind of spiritual kinship to beings, who are not and/or other than humans.⁷ In the realm of the Internet, the movement initially continued as an amalgamation of romanticist and anti-modern conceptions of nature, shamanistic awakenings, journeys into past lives, and numerous elements of fantasy and pop culture. As indicators or characteristics of being otherkin, various bodily and mental features were discussed: certain allergies or – on the contrary – the absence of allergies, knowledge about magic, and a specific sensibility towards other beings and nature in general.⁸

In the early 2000's the concept underwent a decisive transformation that was especially linked to the blogging platform 'tumblr'. Here, a new generation of otherkin appropriated the academic language of identity politics and social justice activism, characteristic of the 'tumblr' discourse in general. Their self-conception was not anymore that of a spiritual avant-garde, but that of a socially marginalized, quasi-political identity group.⁹ Crucial for this step was the critique of heteronormativity, which had been developed by the gender theory of the 1990's, and one of whose central implications was the performativity and (relative) construction of categories of gender and sex.¹⁰ A spiritual awakening was replaced by the idea of a 'coming out', inspired by the emancipatory narrative of transsexuals; now, otherkin identified as elves, animals, or other beings no longer in the sense of a spiritual relationship, but in the biological and psychological sense of a person that was born in the wrong – in this case human – body.¹¹ Accordingly, otherkin claimed to experience marginalization by the human majority society. This can be confirmed at least in part by reports about problems in the family environment, as well as the deriding or even openly hostile discussion of otherkin in forums like '4chan', 'Reddit' or '9gag' (often associated with the term 'special snowflakes'). Frequent elements of the newer otherkin narrative therefore are personal stories of disrespect and trauma, the sharing of certain group specific 'kin experiences', and the call for social acknowledgement and/or safe spaces.

At the same time, the spectrum of possible identities or 'kintypes' broadened: a striking example being the incarnation of a specific novel or

manga character, called ‘fictives’ or ‘fictionkin’. Similar concepts emerged regarding body type (e.g. ‘trans-fat’) and ethnicity (e.g. ‘trans-japanese’). Often, being ‘otherkin’ is combined in a person’s identity with differentiated sexual identities (e.g. ‘demi-romantic’, ‘autochorisexual’) as well as self-diagnosed mental divergences, which are similar particularities of the ‘tumblr’ discourse.¹² The principle of intersectionality that emerged out of the discourse in identity politics – and which states that each individual can be privileged regarding some aspects of their identity (such as gender, race and class), but is marginalized in relation to others – translated into lists as a characteristic form in the self-presentation of bloggers. These lists of individual features can then again be multiplied, based on the psychological idea of multiple personalities: so-called ‘headmates’ are supposed to take control of a body at different times, and can themselves have lists of sophisticated identities and multiple kinships. Otherkin often complain about the lack of understanding in their everyday surroundings and limit the expression of their identities to the Internet and organized community meetings. Yet some strive to extend their identities to everyday life, as e.g. by clothing, demeanor, or eating habits. The experience of being in the wrong body is often described in analogy to ‘phantom limb pain’, as it is sometimes felt by amputees. Many ‘kin experiences’ report phantom limbs such as wings, tails, and whiskers that are not materially present but are lucidly perceived.

It is important to note the difference between otherkin and other groups like ‘furries’, who, according to their own statements, simply enjoy to dress as anthropomorphic animal figures. Otherkin, for the most part, insist that their identities are real.¹³ This has provoked criticism by transgender activists, who – most certainly correctly so – complain about the undermining and delegitimizing of their struggle for recognition by the otherkin’s appropriation of their emancipatory narrative.¹⁴ But otherkin also have internal demarcation problems. Common grievances are wannabes and attention seekers, as well as a proclivity to outdo others with increasingly eccentric identities; by others identifying as manga-characters, entire forests, goddesses, or real living persons (‘factkin’), ‘real’ otherkin claim to be discredited. Apparently, some personal otherkin blogs on ‘tumblr’ are operated by trolls with parodistic intentions. Therefore, it might seem safer to take a step back and regard

the ‘tumblr’ blogs – independently from the intentions of their authors – as a textual or narrative genre. From the viewpoint of discourse analysis, their specificity lies in expanding the language of identity politics and trans-sexuality into a poetical principle that now encompasses all kinds of possible contents. This replaces the older formal and content-wise liaison to the criticism of modern civilization, esotericism, and the romanticist fantasy genre.

At first glance, otherkin may appear to fulfill the post-human and difference-theoretical politicalness that Deleuze and Guattari conceived as “becoming-animal” in ‘A Thousand Plateaux’ (1980): a “becoming-molecular that undermines the great molar powers of family, career, and conjugality”.¹⁵ In contrast to the inclusive milieus of the disciplinary society, “the animal, flower, or stone [that] one becomes are molecular collectivities” realizes a transgressive potential, the transgression of fixed identities in general.¹⁶ This concept of becoming-animal should thus precisely not “proceed by resemblance” inasmuch as “resemblance, on the contrary, would represent an obstacle or stoppage” for it.¹⁷ Thus, from the view of a theory of difference, otherkin discourse turns out to be questionable, because it reproduces the language of resemblance, imitation, and identification.¹⁸ While Deleuze/Guattari are interested in destabilizing the ideas of “descent and filiation” in general,¹⁹ the otherkin – as it is already apparent in the notion of ‘kinship’ – produce new genealogies and forms of belonging. The pursuit of otherness, dis-identification, and withdrawal, on the other hand corresponds to an insistence on one’s identity, and the establishment of highly differentiated categories and complex lists, reminiscent of medieval scholasticism. This can include, as should be noted, the possibility of categories on the verge of the paradox, such as ‘skelogender’: “a gender that’s a big part of you and comes from deep inside but is obscure and unknowable. A gender that’s unique to you...”²⁰

As a general conclusion of this reading, the otherkin discourse may be regarded less as questioning identity in the name of a transgressive ‘becoming’, than as the disconnection of identities from real bodies and their replacement by phantom bodies. This corresponds to a common criticism of the comparison to other marginalized identity groups, who state that otherkin are not experiencing stigmatization via visible bodily features related to sex or race. The ‘natural’ habitat of otherkin

culture (or the otherkin meme) in its present form seems to be the sphere of digital communication, which detaches language and speech from the body, and lacks the objectifying gazes of the others, who permanently make us remember who we are in their eyes. In effect, the otherkin discourse works best in the form of language, while attempts of a performative, pictorial, or photographic representation often appear aesthetically inappropriate or absurd. At the same time, it is precisely the wonderful boundlessness, openness, and relative non-normativity of the digital sphere that allows for a critical mass of like-minded individuals and their mutual recognition, without having to gather in real life.²¹ The otherkin turn out to be an avant-garde of disembodiment. If this is the case, their pursuit for the disintegration of identities does not fulfill the philosophical utopia that marks the end of the subject and its identity – but rather the consequence of this early and diffuse affinity of the elves towards the technological.

2

Digitalization: Human Bodies as De-localized Bodies

**“The Internet is a lot like ancient Egypt.
People writing on walls and worshipping cats.”***

It is a common observation that the utopian promises evoked by new media technologies are often accompanied by uncanny feelings. These are usually already addressed in their precursor technologies. For instance, movies and cinema have staged digitality and the virtual worlds of the Internet as a threat to physical and imaginary boundaries of the body.²² This discomfort could be a symptom of the transformation of the human ‘form of intuition’, as the philosopher Immanuel Kant called it. The way humans share an embodied perspective on the world is superimposed by a technically generated virtual space, which follows its own laws and thus transforms our relation to the world, ourselves, and others. The general principle of processes of virtualization can be described with Hegel as the disintegration of an initial unity of form and matter (associated with the ‘thing’) in favor of a pre-eminence of form (associated with ‘appearance’): “What appears exists in such a way that its ‘subsistence’ is immediately sublated, and is only ‘one’ moment of the form itself; the form contains subsistence or matter within itself as one of its determinations.”²³ Virtualization accordingly doesn’t mean that real physical bodies are vanishing, yet their status changes from an unchallenged pre-requisite into a negotiable, disposable, and computable factor. With Derrida, virtualization can also be described as de-localization; associated with globalization and digitalization is the “de-localizing virtualization of the space of communication” that “destabilizes” traditional habitats.²⁴ To be sure, it is the

* Meme

“‘abc’ of deconstruction” that this has already started in any case of human communication and use of signs: “for as soon [as] there is a trace, there is also some virtualization”. Yet: “What is new, quantitatively, is the acceleration of the rhythm, the extent and powers of capitalization of such a spectral virtuality.”²⁵

As stated, the relevance of this displacement does less consist in the elimination of the human being’s actual bodily existence. Rather it exists in the transgression of those body-related functions of human thought, the ‘forms of intuition’, that are immediately linked to this bodily existence. In anthropology, their importance was adequately given credit just in recent times: the basis of human thought and communication – even prior to language and its logic – is formed in a sphere of ‘shared attention’ or ‘shared intuition’.²⁶ This refers to the immediate and instantaneous interaction of bodies through the interrelation of vision, motor skills, and gesture. One aspect of this is our spatial imagination which is based in certain visual, motoric, and tactile experiences that can be called ‘proto-mathematic’. The everyday problems of orientation in space, the communication about the relative positions of objects and controlled changes in perspective, induce a notion of space that is shared with other individuals. For Kant, the philosopher of human ‘forms of intuition’, these structures are made explicit in Euclidean geometry, which describes the laws governing the experience of solid, tangible bodies.²⁷

How, in this regard, human embodied perspective is superimposed in the digital realm becomes clear in the example of ‘Google Earth’. The virtual space of ‘Google Earth’ does everything to present itself as a continuation of the human space of perception – as a walkable photographic image, where an imaginary human subject can proceed following its visual and tactile senses. This attempt for continuity yet passes through a completely different logic than that of the space of perception. In his documentary work ‘Postcards from Google Earth’, Clement Valla has discovered frequent anomalies that rupture the fabric of ‘Google Earths’ virtual space by creating distortions and anamorphoses – bridges above rivers and highways bend, wrinkle, flex, or twist.²⁸ This irritation is not a mere mistake, but expresses the way ‘Google Earth’ works – as a collection of data points organized by algorithms based on their own mathematical principles. Viewed from

the perspective of the history of ideas, these divergences can be traced back to a division of two historic threads of mathematical conceptions of space: Firstly, an anthropological thread which is expressed by Kant's theory of a human 'form of intuition' and is continued by 20th century phenomenologists like Merleau-Ponty.²⁹ This features a visual-tactile model of embodied world experience that is expressed by Euclidean geometry. Secondly, a symbolical and technological thread, that starts with Kant's predecessor Leibniz. In the metaphysical and onto-theological framework of his philosophy, the human subject is precisely not the last instance of thought. Instead, Leibniz anticipated a lot of today's thinking about self-organized systems and networks, and, with his exploration of symbolic calculuses, he laid the foundations for modern computation. This historical thread starts with Leibniz' 'Analysis Situs' and leads via a 'closing of the eyes in mathematics' in the late 18th century³⁰ to non-Euclidean as well as topological notions of space, and ultimately the kind of network mathematics relevant for 'Google Earth'.³¹

The shared sphere of perception has yet another important aspect for human thought. Prior to language, social relations and identities initially take shape in a field of 'visual reciprocity', as noted for example by the image theoretician Tom Mitchell.³² This thought and its presence in numerous theoretical traditions can here only be outlined very superficially. Hegel, for instance, calls the seeing and seen eye as the "first point of identity between the humans, this point of the first understanding".³³ While his idealistic humanism is especially interested in the topics of self-realization and mutual recognition,³⁴ the existentialist philosopher Sartre is primarily interested in the element of objectification and fixation in acts of looking.³⁵ How specific relations of domination between genders are created by the male gaze, is shown by the film theorist Laura Mulvey.³⁶

These functions of seeing or gazing find their complement in the body as an expressive medium. Already the philosopher Plato describes how gestures and body movements bear and confer social meaning, mediated by so called 'schemata', which are – as Horst Bredekamp notes – 'patterns of stereotypical motion sequences, in which the bodies become images'.³⁷ Western thought has pervasively made the connection between this idea of the 'body as image' and the corres-

ponding idea of the 'image as body'.³⁸ Although (or maybe because) they are creating virtual realms, painted and maybe even photographic pictures can still be considered as a continuation of the described logic of bodily-gestural expression: Precisely to that extent, to which they themselves are products of a 'spiritualization' of matter, a poetic creation via the eye and hand of the painter or photographer. The resulting pictures then are not treated as perceptible things that are 'merely there', but as a vis-à-vis with the corporeal presence of a human subject.³⁹

The dis-placement caused by digitally based virtualization creates a rupture in this coupling of body, gaze, and gesture. In the digital the 'schemata', the expressive and meaningful body images, detach themselves equally from the real human bodies and as from the fabricated, material picture bodies. The consequences for the social identity of human individuals can be observed in the various image economies of the Internet. The theatricalization of the self and of social relations ('selfie') on 'facebook' and 'Instagram' may at first glance seem to be only an exaggerated resumption of the dynamics of seeing and being seen in real space. Yet, in many instances, the detachment of the image from the bodies becomes visible as a process of hollowing out: For instance, in the never-ending play with real time filters on 'Snapchat', that distort the faces or overlay them with animal faces or masks. On the other hand face recognition, a decisive evolutionary basis of human sociality, is now performed by algorithms which, in the 'face swap' software for instance, continuously recognize faces in pets or inanimate objects, and by such a 'recognition' produce something of the kind of digital phantom subjects. In the genre of 'Photoshop fails', the original purpose is to tailor one's own appearance to body ideals, or to portray oneself with status symbols.⁴⁰ Silhouettes that are warped like caricatures or poorly executed collages reveal that the desires of their makers exceed their technical resources. In the failure to control the image of the body, the makers reveal the body-image-machinery of 'Photoshop' that is usually much more effective in creating the illusion of real space. Another kind of image economy has evolved on platforms like 'Imgur' or '9gag', whose users are mainly anonymous. The role of communication of social and emotional meanings is taken by 'memes', single images or short motion sequences ('gifs') of faces,

bodies, or situations which have attained a generic status and thus resemble the 'schemata' described by Plato. 'Confession Bear', 'Bad Luck Brian', and 'Foul Bachelor Frog' thus become the gestural and expressive medium that mirrors life experiences and in which identities are finding themselves. A most interesting feature in this context is the frequent use of the animal body as an expressive medium for human emotions.

"The Internet is a lot like ancient Egypt. People writing on walls and worshipping cats." – This joke, which itself circulates as a 'meme', implies that in the present form of the Internet there is a recurrence of the aesthetic and cultural principles of ancient Egypt: inscribed architectures and cat adoration. Hegel's 'Aesthetics' allows to recover a serious subtext from this: The centerpiece of the 'Aesthetics' is the idea of the expressive human body, the only natural form that's able to 'signify itself' and make an inner soul externally visible and transparent for other human beings. This ability stands in contrast to the animal body, which is split up in an invisible inner soul and an opaque surface. The animal soul only manifests itself as a 'cloudy gleam', while the animal body is covered by opaque and lifeless covers such as scales, feathers, or fur. In terms of the interchangeability of body and image, in Hegel's narrative this pre-human corporeality corresponds to the so-called symbolic art form of pre-classical antiquity, notably Egyptian art. Symbolic art is in its core a failing search for embodiment, which oscillates between the indefinite and the excessive, between abstract architectures and anthropomorphic animal figures. Its principle – in Brigitte Hilmer's words – is that of the 'dead and thus sign-like body, the dismembered, wrongly assembled body, or the body which is disconnected from an integrating sensation'.⁴¹ In terms of the cited joke, the post-human aesthetics of digital image practices are the recurrence of these pre-humanistic principles of embodiment. On the one hand, we witness the flight out of the body towards the positive potentials of disembodiment, and with that into a technological sublime of virtual architecture and code. On the other hand, we see the persistently failing search for embodiment reverting back to the opaque and mysterious body imaginary of the animal.

The phenomenon of a failure of human embodiment, which is pervasive in the examples mentioned above, is manifold and ambiva-

lent. It can be related to other phenomena of failure and estrangement in contemporary cultures, for instance, in the sense of the 'inhuman' pressure that digital capitalism imposes on individuals. On the other hand, the visible manifestation of failure in 'glitches', technological errors and bugs, might also be the cause for an experience of difference and a starting point for criticism. It is the bugs and errors such as the twisting bridges in 'Google Earth', the wrong face recognition, and the 'Photoshop fails' that, in a world of 'transparent' displays, create the enigmatic and the questionable.⁴²

3

Puberty: Human Bodies as Uncontrolled Bodies

“The formerly modern concrete cube of the Musische Oberschule for boys and girls, Sootbörn, is starting to blister.

Peter Jörg Jacobi hypnotizes Helga Rose, who rises on the school’s horizon with two

mammary glands like breadfruits.

Ove Müller-Neff mounts the vaulting horse.

Karl Jörn Endrulat grows breasts.

Karin Plett gets two legs.

Ilse Langeloh a haircut.

Jürgen Kühl an unfitting voice.

In gymnastics, Gerd Harbeck drills his finger into the ass of Werner Schmalenbach, a boy from another class.”*

In western societies, puberty is the transition from the sphere of the immature and innocent children into the sphere of grown-up and responsible individuals. This is initiated by a bodily transition that is often experienced as a crisis. One’s body produces unknown outgrowths and liquids, as well as new pleasures, which are not yet tamed or sublimated by cultural schemata. Having a potential of uncontrolled transformation, the pubescent body also proves to be inert and uncontrollable; the pubescent individuals laze around sluggishly; they spend too much time on the phone, etc. In short: They don’t seem capable or willing to discipline their bodies in accordance with reasonable and responsible ways of conduct. Given this, a conflict between the pubescent and the adults is already predestined. Hereby, being an adult can be associated with a bourgeois and hetero-normative pressure to conform, or being a

*Hubert Fichte: ‘Versuch über die Pubertät’, Frankfurt a.M., 1978, 67. (My translation)

hypocrite and a killjoy, but also with precisely the form of responsibility that is required for ethical decisions and political action. The pubescents on the other side appear to be sexualized, uncivilized, foolish, and lazy. They remain in an aesthetic state that strives for immediate gratification and fun, one that doesn't stop short of cruel mobbing.⁴³ Yet puberty also means rebellion. Not wanting to take part in the normative form of adulthood is a radical way of protest, unintelligible for the criticized adults: Why won't the pubescent come to reason?

The idea of a 'crisis of subjectivity' is almost a standard diagnosis of the present era. It can refer, for instance, to the crisis of bourgeois subject philosophies brought about in the 19th century by the projects of Nietzsche, Marx, and Freud. Or it can refer to the advent of the so-called 'third spirit of capitalism' which, since the 1960s, replaces the hierarchical administrations of industrial capitalism with new, globally interwoven value chains and thereby also scraps the seemingly solidified constitution of the individual.⁴⁴ Especially its present culmination in digital capitalism can be regarded as the cause for a crisis of embodiment. The experience of the 'disconnectedness' of one's body can also be discussed as one of the central topics of so-called 'post-internet' or 'post-digital' art.⁴⁵ If we accept this diagnosis, it is not farfetched to think of the figure of puberty as a general cultural metaphor. Especially taking into account the various attempts to conceive the present economic and political crisis of subjectivity as a crisis of adulthood. A much-discussed essay by the film critic A.O. Scott, titled "The Death of Adulthood in American Culture," (2014)⁴⁶ One example is the show 'Mad Men', which – as a side effect of its critique of patriarchy – seems to bury the idea of the adult and of responsible action in general. The show 'Girls' again demonstrates, how a present generation of twenty-somethings fails to achieve the social and economic hallmarks of adulthood, which still were taken for granted by their parents.⁴⁸ For Scott, examples like these, as well as the success of teen franchises like 'Twilight' and 'Hunger Games', are signs, "that nobody knows how to be a grown-up anymore. Adulthood as we have known it has become conceptually untenable."

Regarding Scott's question, if we should moan the cultural death of adulthood or instead dance on its grave, we can find two contrary answers in recent cultural theory and philosophy. J. Jack Halberstam has developed the 'refusal to become an adult' into a political program

of resistance against hetero-normative ways of life. Halberstam's book 'The Queer Art of Failure' (2011) identifies the child as an all along 'queer' being that per definition stands outside of conventional norms. This provokes a reaction of society which, by using rites of maturation, attempts to convert the child into a proto-heterosexual being as quickly as possible. The child's answer consists in failure or non-achievement, falling short to attain the social roles it is confronted with. Therefore, Halberstam proposes the child as a political model to conceive alternative forms of development and kinship. For Halberstam this anti-normative potential becomes especially manifest in the animation films of the Pixar-Studios, which stage the triumph of the child against a (hetero-) normative adult world. In contrast to classical Disney movies, these children's movies don't follow the values of the nuclear family and the romantic couple. The protagonists in these movies, monsters ('Monsters, Inc. '), animals ('Finding Nemo'), and things ('Toy Story'), stand outside of the traditional value systems. They are – like their pre-pubescent audience – in constant rebellion against the adult world, while at the same time not in control of their own lives. As their central feature, Halberstam highlights their incapacity to master their own bodies: In the way, the non-adult bodies "stumble, bumble, fail, fall, hurt"⁴⁹ lies a "propensity to incompetence, a clumsy inability to make sense, a desire for independence from the tyranny of the adult, and a total indifference to adult conceptions of success and failure."⁵⁰ Animated films realize this dissociation from essentialist and humanist corporeality not only through characters and narrative, but also already on a structural level – in the principle of animation as a technical vivification of the inanimate.

On the contrary, philosopher Susan Neiman wants to cure political apathy and a crisis of decision and action by means of the ethical and political virtues of the grown-up. In her book 'Why grow up? Subversive Thoughts for an Infantile Age' (2015) she shares Scott's analysis that western societies have entered a stage of infantilization. This is the outcome of consumerism and fan cultures, and at the same time also a means of political repression by elites, as people in the state of self-imposed immaturity should be easier to govern. As a remedy, Neiman proposes an ideal of autonomy and maturity that follows historical enlightenment thought, drawing especially on Rousseau and Kant. The book's cover advertises this model to current audiences by stating that growing

up doesn't mean to "renounce most of the hopes and dreams of your youth"; in the context of general immaturity it instead is a 'subversive ideal'.⁵¹ The strategies to grow up, recommended by her – like reading and travelling – don't refer to contemporary media technologies. They are taken from the inventory of the bourgeois 'Bildungsroman' (educational novel) and the humanist canon of the 18th and 19th century, which postmodernity in the 20th century had declared obsolete. Therefore, Neiman's approach is at least ambivalent: On the one hand, there is indeed something at stake. For instance, in facing climate change, the inability to 'grow-up' and take responsible action becomes an urgent and most serious problem. On the other hand, as Neiman's emancipatory model draws so much on 'bildungsbürgerlich' (educated middle class) values, it has to be questioned, how an isolated individual can return to a character ideal that was maybe never real, or whose economic and cultural prerequisites are at least rapidly disappearing. The internal paradoxes of her approach become visible in her attempt to promote adulthood by pointing to the 'fun' involved – the bourgeois and protestant notion of duty, as well as the enlightenment's notion of autonomy, constituted themselves first and foremost by the repression of pleasure and the desire for fun and immediate gratification.

Halberstam's search for alternative models to traditional subjectivity initially appears more productive and progressive. Yet one can question his optimism in proposing the child as a model for emancipation from the 'tyranny of the adults'. Have those modalities of not reaching adulthood, failure and the disruption of identities – whose subversive potential he counts on – not already become reality by some measure? And this, under the completely different terms of a disempowerment by economic conditions and technological mechanisms? An alternative queer theory of failure – or theory of 'queer' failure – was drafted by British journalist Mark Simpson. In his Essay "Camp for Beginners: Saturday Morning Kids' TV" (1999) he looks especially at game shows for children.⁵² Just as Pixar animation movies, these can also be initially understood as an aesthetic empowerment of the child against the adult world: "On 'Live and Kicking', Andi and Emma are going through the weekly ritual of reminding kids how sad and tasteless the square world of adults is."⁵³ We also see manifestations of failure, by staging competitions that essentially are anti-competitions: "The emphasis is on spectacle, excitement, mess, and

most of all, humiliation – never on winning.”⁵⁴ This results in “a splendid and joyful total mayhem in which the details of who actually wins are lost. Which is, of course, the whole point.”⁵⁵ Yet for Simpson, the chaos of the uncontrolled body, the experience of slapstick-like failure, which is a source of both humiliation and pleasure, doesn’t become a model for resistance. Instead, its point is precisely to practice for a future of real economic failure in neoliberalism. The queer sensibility of the “lifesaving styles of irony, parody, and excess”,⁵⁶ is less a starting point for alternative ways of life, but rather the appropriate preparation for the “riptide capitalist currents”⁵⁷ of the future as well as “the shallow, media-manipulated, consumerist inanity that is modern live.”⁵⁸

If Halberstam defines it as an essential feature of children to be “not in charge of their lives”,⁵⁹ one could argue that this is perhaps less our parent’s fault, but rather that of technological, political, and economic mechanisms.⁶⁰ Equally, Neiman’s analysis of political paternalism remains in the anthropomorphic pattern of the family and disregards how technologies and media apparatuses become increasingly ungovernable, inaccessible to human decision-making in general.⁶¹ If that’s the case, then the state of not being able to be ‘in charge of one’s life’ could even less be solved by a return to the character ideals of enlightenment, which of course would only be accessible for few privileged subjects. The failure to be a capable subject visibly mastering its body, would rather mark a sphere of ambiguity and indistinguishability, which Derrida has described as a basic condition for political action. The stumbling, bumbling, failing, and falling of the uncontrolled bodies would then coincidentally be the result of estrangement and the condition for individual, maybe also collective emancipation.

Yet, perhaps one should go into more detail and differentiate. To some extent, while contrasting the adult and the infant, the abovementioned positions seem to forget the pubescent. Thus, the body appears to be caught up in two alternatives – to either be the medium of a pleasurable ‘acting out’ of infantile instincts without any embarrassment, or to be the overpowered instrument of adult ‘rationality’. However, as indicated above, the pubescent body is caught in between these two conditions, resulting in a state of double disharmony: The confrontation with a (biological) materiality that raises questions that can’t yet be answered, and the confrontation with roles and ways of conduct that cannot

be fulfilled due to a lack of body control. Thus, the universal experience of puberty is that of awkwardness and embarrassment. This is a direct contrast to the child's "total indifference to adult conceptions of success and failure" diagnosed by Halberstam.⁶² The pubescent simply doesn't stand outside of the structures of responsibility and external expectation, but in a constantly problematic relation to them. Although it may not be necessarily well-advised to cast the pubescent as such into a political program (how, anyway?), it could be an appropriate category to analyze the state of subjectivity in the 'crisis of adulthood' as outlined above. The intention of such an analysis would not be to find some random new metaphor for 'difference', but to ask the question of embodiment as a central problem of digital capitalism. With reference to Hubert Fichte's 'Essay on Puberty' this could mean, that we all – just like the protagonist Jürgen Kühl – have gotten an 'unfitting voice' which we don't yet know how to deal with.⁶³ Since all of the four reference points of our deliberations are linked to the aesthetic formation of bodies (educational novel, tv series, game show, animation film), and thus to specific forms of embodied knowledge, we are pointed to the aesthetical as a field of further inquiry.

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- 1 "In the late '60s a doorway opened to the Ancient Knowledge of Faerie, and the Elf Queen's Daughters was born." O. Scribner: "Otherkin Timeline. The Recent History of Elfin, Fae and Animal People." Version 2.0, 08.09.2012, in: <http://orion.kitsunet.net/time.pdf>
- 2 "1975-09-21: The Elf Queen's Daughters published 'Baboon' in 'Green Egg', in which they wrote that it's wrong for humanity to consider themselves superior to animals, and described themselves as both elven and environmentalists. 'I will return, sweet mother [nature], with my Elven sisters and brothers, forever and forever to your side. [...] Elves move out again to the forests, the deserts, upon the plain [...] We are Mother Nature's Children again.'" Ibid.
- 3 Max Read: "From Otherkin to Transethnicity: Your Field Guide to the Weird World of Tumblr Identity Politics." 06.09.2012, in: <http://gawker.com/5940947/from-otherkin-to-transethnicity-your-field-guide-to-the-weird-world-of-tumblr-identity-politics>
- 4 See for example Dieter Mersch: 'Ordo ab Chao'. Zürich 2013. And the exhibition The Whole Earth. Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin 2013.
- 5 "1975-12-21: The Elf Queen's Daughters published 'The etheric web' in 'Green Egg'. It's a philosophical meditation upon loneliness. They refer to themselves as 'elven' and address their readers as 'sisters', but they don't explain how or why. This lists their mailing address in Aurora, Illinois." O. Scribner 2012, *ibid.*
- 6 "First use of the word 'otherkind' is in 'Elfinkind Digest #16', dated 18 April 1990, coined in quotes as a term to include non-elf 'others' cropping up on the list, and was a specific branching off from the word 'elfinkind.' There was later some talk of renaming the digest to 'The Otherkind Digest' but that didn't happen." O. Scribner, *ibid.*
- 7 "'Kin' to beings 'other' than humans, to put the idea very bluntly." Jarandhel Dreamsinger: "Kin to the Other", 2005. In: <http://wanderingpaths.dreamhart.org/articles/kintotheother.html>
- 8 Nick Mamatas: "Elven Like Me." Gawker, 13.02.2001, in: <http://www.villagevoice.com/news/elven-like-me-6416536>
- 9 Max Read 2012, *ibid.*
- 10 See: Judith Butler: 'Gender trouble: feminism and the subversion of identity.' New York 1990. And: 'Bodies that matter: on the discursive limits of 'sex'.' New York 1993
- 11 "Where the first generation of otherkin, birthed in the post-60s hippies-read-'Lord of the Rings' rise of nerd-dom (not coincidentally, the same psychic space that birthed phone phreaking and, in turn, computer hacking), seemed to align along the crystal-healing-'Elfquest'-comics axis of outsider subcultures – less about a biological or psychological identification than a kind of mystical or poetic connection – this new set of otherkin (or those claiming to be otherkin) has grafted the academic language of identity politics and social justice activism onto their experiences. In doing so, they've transformed what Nick Mamatas' 2001 'Village Voice' story, 'Elven Like Me', saw as a kind of new-age Burning Man-style subculture into a semi-politicized identity group." Max Read 2012, *ibid.*
- 12 Demiromantic: "A type of grey-romantic who only experiences romantic attraction after developing an emotional connection beforehand. Demiromantics do not experience primary romantic attraction, but they are capable of secondary romantic attraction." Autochorisexual: "to be aroused by content that would normally arouse you and even enjoy masturbation, but having no desire to have sex with another person." Source: urbandictionary.com
- 13 'Scientific' explanations of the phenomenon often draw on the contemporary physical theory of an infinite number of parallel universes, in which evolution has taken another path or pokémon are real.
- 14 Some otherkin react to this criticism by calling this out as a form of discrimination against them. Regarding this controversy see Gavia Baker-Whitelaw: "Understanding the Otherkin." 22.02.2015, in: <http://kernelmag.dailydot.com/issue-sections/features-issue-sections/11866/otherkin-tumblr-definition-pro-nouns/>
- 15 Gilles Deleuze, Felix Guattari: 'A Thousand Plateaus.' Minneapolis, London, 1987, 233.
- 16 *Ibid.* 275.
- 17 *Ibid.* 233.
- 18 See *ibid.* 237.
- 19 *Ibid.* 238.
- 20 See: Martin Beck, Postanthropological Habitats I: 'love knows no concept of dimension.' digital archive, 2016.

21 Regarding the origin of otherkin as a cultural concept in the 70s, one would of course also have to look how such features were in part anticipated by hippie and post-hippie environments.

22 See for example: Brett Leonard: 'Lawnmower Man' (1992), David Cronenberg *eXistenZ* (1999).

23 G. W. F. Hegel *The Encyclopaedia Logic* (with the *Zusatze*) Part I of the *Encyclopaedia of Philosophical Sciences with the Zusätze*. A new translation with Introduction and notes by T. F. Geraets, W. A. Suchting, and H. S. Harris. Indianapolis / Cambridge, 1991, § 132, 201.

24 Jacques Derrida: "The Future of the Profession or the University without Condition." Jacques Derrida and the Humanities. *A Critical Reader*. Ed. Tom Cohen. Cambridge 2001, 24–57, 31.

25 *Ibid.* Translation supplemented for the word 'spectral' as the original speaks of a "virtualité spectralisante". The result of this virtualization for Derrida is "the necessity to rethink the concepts of the possible and the impossible". *Ibid.*

26 cf. Michael Tomasello: 'A Natural History of Human Thinking.' Cambridge 2014.

27 This basic fact is not compromised by the possibility of non-Euclidean geometries and their applications in relativistic physics. In a similar fashion, Newton's mechanics describe for instance the trajectory of projectiles in the space of perception. The (at least approximate) validity of these laws in the local space of perception are not compromised by relativistic physics, that describes the differing and more complex laws of fourdimensional spacetime and the global space of movement.

28 Clement Valla: 'Postcards from Google Earth.' <http://www.postcards-from-google-earth.com/>

29 On Merleau-Ponty's 'existential theory of mathematics' following Kant, see Jan Wöpping: "Die synthetische Kraft der Mathematik. Merleau-Pontys existenziale Philosophie der Mathematik." 'Synthesis.' Gabriele Gramelsberger, Peter Bexte, Werner Kogge Eds. Bielefeld 2014.

30 cf. Gerald Wildgruber: "Das Schließen der Augen in der Mathematik." 'Figur und Figuration. Studien zu Wahrnehmung und Wissen.' Gabriele Brandstetter, Gottfried Boehm, Achatz von Müller Eds. Munich 2007, 205–235.

31 Regarding these topics, I am indebted to the symposium "Leibniz – Netzwerk – Digitalisierung" at the Berlin-Brandenburgischen Akademie der Wissenschaften 2016, especially the presentations of Gabriele Gramelsberger and Sybille Krämer.

32 WJT Mitchell: 'What do Pictures Want.' Chicago 2005, 47: "This complex field of visual reciprocity is not merely a byproduct of social reality but actively constitutive of it. Vision is as important as language in mediating social relations, and it is not reducible to language, to the 'sign,' or to discourse."

33 My translation. Original: "ersten Punkt der Identität zwischen den Menschen, diesen Punkt des ersten Auffassens." GWF Hegel: 'Vorlesung über Ästhetik Berlin 1820/21. Eine Nachschrift.' Helmut Schneider Ed. Frankfurt a. M. u. a. 1995, 209.

34 'The individual can't know, what it is, before it has brought itself through activity into actuality'. ("Das Individuum kann daher nicht wissen, was es ist, ehe es sich durch sein Tun zur Wirklichkeit gebracht hat.") GWF Hegel: 'Phänomenologie des Geistes', Frankfurt a.M. 1986, 297. This activity is a 'pure form of translation from the 'not-being-seen' into the 'being-seen' ("reine Form des Übersetzens aus dem Nichtgesehenwerden in das Gesehenwerden") *Ibid.* 293.

35 Through his gaze the other appears as the 'limit to my freedom'. Jean-Paul Sartre: 'Being and Nothingness. An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology.' Routledge 2003.

36 Laura Mulvey, "Visual pleasure and narrative cinema". 'Screen' 16 (3), Fall 1975, 6–18.

37 Horst Bredekamp: 'Theorie des Bildakts.' Frankfurt a. M. 2010, 40.

38 For example, in the perception of one's shadow as the first experience that shows that the own body acts as a medium and an image. See Hans Belting: "Blickwechsel mit Bildern. Die Bilderfrage als Körperfrage." 'Bilderfragen.' Munich 2007, 55.

39 cf. Michael Fried: "Art and Objecthood." 'Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews.' Chicago & London 1998.

40 Regarding the use of material status symbols as a mirror of personality in early modern oil painting and the continuation of this function in 20th century advertisement, see John Berger: 'Ways of Seeing.' London 2008, 83 ff. and 129ff.

41 Brigitte Hilmer, "Kunst als verkörperte Bedeutung." 'Die geschichtliche Bedeutung der Kunst und die Bestimmung der Künste.' Annemarie Gethmann-Siefert ed. Munich 2005, 64.

42 Regarding the aesthetics of disruption and a theory of technical bugs, see: Markus Rautzenberg: 'Die Gegenwärtigkeit der Störung.' Zürich/Berlin 2009.

43 cf. Jean Cocteau: 'Les Enfants Terribles.' Paris 1929.

44 Luc Boltanski, Ève Chiapello: 'The New Spirit of Capitalism.' London, New York 2006.

45 Kerstin Stakemeier: "Prothesis Productions. The Art of Digital Bodies. On 'Speculations on Anonymous Materials' at Fridericianum, Kassel." 'Texte zur Kunst' 93, spring 2014, 166–181.

46 A.O. Scott: "The Death of Adulthood in American Culture." New York Times, 11.09.2014, <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/14/magazine/the-death-of-adulthood-in-american-culture.html>

47 Ibid.

48 See also: <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/mar/07/revealed-30-year-economic-betrayal-dragging-down-generation-y-income>: "In our series, we will reveal that today's young people are not delaying adulthood because they are – as the New Yorker once put it – "the most indulged young people in the history of the world". Instead, it appears they are not hitting the basic stages of adulthood at the same time as previous generations because such milestones are so much more costly and in some cases they are even being paid less than their parents were at the same age."

49 "Children stumble, bumble, fail, fall, hurt; they are mired in difference, not in control of their bodies, not in charge of their lives, and they live according to schedules not of their making." J. Halberstam: 'The Queer Art of Failure.' Durham and London 2011, 47.

50 Ibid. 120.

51 Susan Neiman: 'Why Grow Up? Subversive Thoughts for an Infantile Age', New York 2015. The first part of the citation is taken from the blurb of the English edition. The blurb of the German Edition calls growing up a 'subversive ideal'.

52 Mark Simpson: "Camp for Beginners: Saturday Morning Kids' TV." 'It's a Queer World. Deviant Adventures in Pop Culture.' New York, London 1999. Simpson is not mentioned by Halberstam.

53 Ibid. 84.

54 Ibid.

55 Ibid. 85.

56 Ibid. 84.

57 Ibid.

58 Ibid.

59 Halberstam 2011, 47.

60 Interestingly, according to Simpsons analysis it could be actually our parent's fault, probably by voting for Reagan and Thatcher. Die Shows "are saving your kids from capsizing in the riptide capitalist currents that you and your parents bequeathed them." Simpson 1999, 84.

61 As an indicator for a normalization of failure in our societies one can look at the fact that the slogan 'Failure as Opportunity' ('Scheitern als Chance') in the year 2000 would serve as a provocative title for an action of Christoph Schlingensiefel, in 2015 as the title for an conference of the Alfred-Herrhausen-Society, a conservative political think tank in Berlin.

62 Halberstam 2011, 120.

63 Hubert Fichte: 'Versuch über die Pubertät.' Frankfurt a.M. 1978, 67. My translation.

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