Other Worlds, Other Mind

by Björn Franke

> *"If a lion could speak, we couldn't understand him."*[1]
> —Ludwig Wittgenstein

In 1974, the philosopher Thomas Nagel posed a question that continues to haunt the philosophy of mind: what is it like to be a bat? His point was not that we lack information about bat echolocation or nocturnal behavior, as these can be studied scientifically, but that there exists a subjective character to bat experience that remains fundamentally inaccessible to us. No matter how much we learn about sonar and wing membranes, we cannot know what it feels like from the inside to navigate the world through sound. The bat's mind remains other.[2]

This otherness extends in multiple directions. We are surrounded by minds we cannot fully access: not only those of animals, whose sensory worlds differ radically from our own, but also those of possible artificial intelligences, hypothetical extraterrestrials, and even other humans whose inner lives remain opaque despite our shared biology.

And alongside these other minds lie other worlds: the futures that never arrived, the pasts that haunt us, and the alternative realities that fiction and speculation conjure into being. These two horizons—other worlds and other minds—are not as separate as they might first appear. To imagine an alternative reality is already to imagine a different way of perceiving; to encounter another mind is to glimpse another world.

But the problem of other minds is not only philosophical. It is also visual. To see is already to interpret, to project, to fill in. The images we make and encounter are never neutral records but proposals about what exists, what matters, what is visible at all. The question of whose perception counts, and whose remains invisible, runs through every image as surely as it runs through every mind.

What we call reality is not a transparent given but a construction. Anil Seth describes perception as a "controlled hallucination," the brain's best guess about the causes of incoming sensory signals, shaped by prediction and prior experience. We do not perceive the world as it is, but as our brains model it. This insight dissolves the hard boundary between perception and imagination: both involve the brain generating representations, differing only in how tightly they are constrained by sensory input.[3]

The artist James Turrell has spent decades constructing environments that make this dissolution palpable. His Ganzfeld installations immerse viewers in undifferentiated fields of colored light, stripping away edges, shadows, and depth cues—everything the perceptual system relies on to build its model of space. Deprived of structure, vision does not simply go blank; it becomes aware of itself. Turrell describes his work as having no image, no object, and no point of focus. There is nothing to look at, only the act of looking. The philosopher Martin Seel has characterized aesthetic experience as an appearing in the medium of appearing: not the presentation of something, but the presentation of presentation itself.[4] Turrell's rooms

achieve this literally. Standing in a Ganzfeld, one does not perceive a world; one perceives perception, the controlled hallucination caught in the act of hallucinating.

The biologist Jakob von Uexküll introduced the concept of Umwelt to describe the perceptual world of each organism, the particular slice of reality accessible to its senses. A tick's Umwelt consists of little more than the smell of butyric acid, the warmth of mammalian blood, and the texture of hair.[5] A bee perceives ultraviolet patterns invisible to humans; a shark detects electrical fields we cannot sense. Ed Yong's survey of animal perception reveals that we are surrounded by countless parallel realities, each constructed by a different sensory apparatus.[6] The world is not one but many, layered atop one another like transparencies.

This recognition challenges the anthropocentrism that has long characterized Western thought. As David Abram argues, the phenomenological tradition from Husserl to Merleau-Ponty began to dissolve the Cartesian separation of mind and world, revealing perception as an active engagement between sensing body and sensed environment. But Abram extends this insight beyond the human, suggesting that perception is always reciprocal: we

are perceived even as we perceive, enmeshed within a network of sensory relationships with the more-than-human world.[7] The invisible does not lie beyond the horizon of what exists. It lies, most often, within what is already there—in the channels of reality that our senses, calibrated to a particular scale, a particular tempo, a particular evolutionary history, simply cannot receive.

Specters of the Future

If perception constructs the present, imagination constructs the possible. The speculative genres—among them science fiction, utopian literature, and climate fiction—offer laboratories for thinking otherwise, for inhabiting alternative futures and counterfactual histories.

Mark Fisher drew on Jacques Derrida's concept of hauntology to describe a peculiar condition of contemporary culture: we are haunted not by the past but by lost futures, by the specters of possibilities that never materialized. The technological utopias of the mid-twentieth century persist as ghostly residues. Visions of space colonies, flying cars, and automated leisure linger as reminders of a future once imaginable but now foreclosed. In Fisher's diagnosis, neoliberal capitalism has produced a cultural impasse: a sense that while the fu-

ture continues to arrive, it no longer feels like the future. We are left with pastiche and nostalgia, endlessly recycling the forms of previous decades because we can no longer imagine genuinely new ones.[8]

Chris Marker's 1962 film *La Jetée* anticipates this hauntological condition with uncanny precision. The film tells the story of a man haunted by a single image from his childhood: a woman's face glimpsed on the observation pier at Orly airport, which turns out to be the image of his own death. Made almost entirely from black-and-white still photographs rather than moving images, the film enacts its argument formally: the future is already frozen, already captured in a still that cannot be animated into life. The protagonist is sent back and forth through time by scientists seeking to rescue a devastated present, but the film reveals that the image that haunts him is not a memory of the past but a premonition of the future, and that these are one and the same. Time in *La Jetée* is not a line but a loop, and the still photograph—suspended between the moment that has passed and the moment that will never arrive—becomes the medium of hauntology itself.

Fredric Jameson argues that utopian thinking serves a diagnostic function: utopias reveal the

limits of our present by imagining their transcendence. The utopian enclave, a bounded space where different rules apply, allows us to glimpse alternatives to the seemingly inevitable structures of contemporary life. Science fiction, for Jameson, is less about predicting the future than about defamiliarizing the present by making strange what has come to seem natural.[9] Yet the speculative imagination has its own politics. Benjamin Bratton's account of planetary-scale computation—the "Stack" of interconnected platforms and infrastructures—suggests a future in which human agency is increasingly distributed across technical systems, a development that some read as liberation and others as a new form of subjection. What is not in doubt is that the architecture of these systems shapes which futures become thinkable at all. When the infrastructure of imagination is itself a platform, the range of possible worlds contracts to those the platform can render.[10]

Intelligence Beyond the Human

The question of other minds returns with particular urgency when we consider nonhuman intelligence. But intelligence, it turns out, takes forms that challenge even the frameworks we have developed to recognize it.

Peter Godfrey-Smith's work on octopuses offers a case that unsettles fundamental assumptions about cognition. The octopus is intelligent—demonstrably so, in ways that match or exceed many vertebrate capacities—but its intelligence evolved independently of the vertebrate lineage, along a separate branch of the evolutionary tree that diverged from our own more than five hundred million years ago. Where vertebrate cognition is organized around a central nervous system, two-thirds of an octopus's neurons are distributed across its eight arms, each capable of autonomous action and local problem-solving. The octopus does not so much direct its body as inhabit a distributed network of semi-independent agents. If this is intelligence, it suggests that the mind is not a single thing but a space of possible organizations, most of which we have barely begun to map.[11]

Frans de Waal arrives at a similar conclusion from a different direction: decades of research on primate, cetacean, and avian cognition reveal that many capacities once considered uniquely human—tool use, empathy, cultural transmission, political alliance—emerge independently across species, each time taking a different form. The question is not whether other animals are intelligent, but whether our instruments of detection are

sensitive enough to register the shapes their intelligence takes.[12]

Kate Crawford's analysis of artificial intelligence reveals a different problem: not the failure to recognize intelligence in others, but the failure to recognize how thoroughly our own assumptions are encoded in the systems we build. Machine learning does not transcend human prejudice but amplifies it, trained on datasets that reflect existing inequalities and optimization functions that embed contestable values. The intelligence of contemporary AI is not autonomous but relational and is dependent on vast quantities of human labor, shaped by the frameworks of its creators, and legible only within the terms its developers chose to measure.[13] James Bridle proposes that what is needed is a genuinely broader conception of intelligence, one that encompasses not only human and animal cognition but also the distributed processes of ecosystems, the emergent behaviors of networks, and the computational activities of machines.[14]

Donna Haraway's cyborg, a hybrid of organism and machine, offers one image for this condition, suggesting that the boundaries of cognition have never been as fixed as we imagined.[15] We are not isolated minds but nodes in larger systems, our cognition extended through tools, languages, and

environments that we rarely acknowledge as parts of our thinking.

The hardest case, however, is not the octopus or the algorithm but the truly alien: a mind so differently organized that the concept of communication itself may not apply. When the nuclear waste management program at the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant in New Mexico commissioned a panel of scientists, artists, linguists, and anthropologists to design warning markers intended to remain legible for more than 10,000 years, the project quickly revealed the depth of the problem. No language, symbol system, or pictorial convention can be assumed to persist across that span of time. The panel's proposals, such as forests of jagged concrete spikes, fields of black granite discs, and earthwork landscapes designed to radiate unease, were attempts to communicate across what may be effectively an alien mind: a future being who shares our biological heritage but perhaps none of our cultural, linguistic, or conceptual world. The warnings are designed not to be understood but to be felt, to communicate danger through form and affect rather than through meaning. This is visual culture at its outermost limit: the image as a message in a bottle addressed to an unknown receiver, carrying what language cannot guarantee to preserve.[16]

Jeff VanderMeer's novel *Annihilation* approaches this limit from a different angle.[17] The "Area X" in VanderMeer's Southern Reach trilogy is an alien presence that does not communicate, appears uninterested in humanity, and transforms whatever enters its boundaries according to rules that resist interpretation. The novel's narrator, a biologist trained in careful observation, finds her methods increasingly useless as the alien does not behave like an environment or a mind. It behaves like something for which neither category exists. What *Annihilation* suggests is that the encounter with genuine otherness may not be a problem to be solved but an experience to be inhabited: a dissolution of the frameworks that ordinarily make the visible legible.

Dwelling in Time

Other worlds are not only spatial but temporal. We inhabit not just different places but different times—or rather, different relationships to time itself.

The ecological crisis forces a confrontation with what geologists call "deep time": the vast scales of planetary history that dwarf human civilization. Climate change is not merely an environmental problem but an ontological one, revealing the

fragility of the Holocene stability that enabled human flourishing. Glenn Albrecht has coined the term "solastalgia" to name the particular grief of witnessing the degradation of a beloved place while still living in it: a homesickness experienced at home.[18] This is the affect of the Anthropocene: a melancholic awareness that the world we knew is slipping away, not in memory but in the present tense.

Against the linear, progressive time of modernity, Henri Bergson proposed durée to account for duration as lived experience, a qualitative flow that cannot be reduced to the quantitative units of the clock. In durée, past and present interpenetrate; memory is not a storehouse of discrete records but an ongoing modulation of consciousness.[19] Bergson's duration suggests that we never simply occupy the present but always carry our pasts with us, layered into the texture of experience.

The musician Leyland Kirby, recording as The Caretaker, has produced what may be the most sustained artistic exploration of this temporal interpenetration. His six-album series *Everywhere at the End of Time* (2016–2019) begins with scratchy, half-familiar fragments of 1930s ballroom music and over the course of six and a half hours slowly degrades them into unrecognizable

noise, static, and silence. The work traces the progressive stages of dementia, each album corresponding to a further dissolution of coherent memory. What makes it hauntological rather than merely illustrative is the uncanny quality of recognition and its withdrawal: melodies surface and almost cohere before collapsing back into distortion, producing what Freud described as the *Unheimliche,* the familiar made irrevocably strange.[20] Bergson's durée becomes audible here as a process of decay rather than accumulation, memory not as a storehouse but as a signal deteriorating in real time. Mark Fisher, who collaborated with Kirby and wrote extensively about The Caretaker as exemplary hauntological music, heard in these recordings the sound of cultural memory itself eroding: not the loss of a specific past, but the loss of the capacity to remember, the slow fade of the apparatus through which the past was once accessible.[21]

These temporal disruptions are not only audible but inhabitable. Andrei Tarkovsky's *Stalker* (1979) follows three men—the Stalker, the Writer, and the Professor—as they enter the Zone, a cordoned-off territory where the ordinary laws of physics and causality have been suspended. Adapted from Arkady and Boris Strugatsky's novel *Roadside Picnic,* in which the Zone is debris left

behind by extraterrestrial visitors who were never interested in humanity,[22] the film transforms this premise into something closer to a pilgrimage. Tarkovsky's long, unbroken takes track slowly through flooded rooms, overgrown corridors, and landscapes reclaimed by water and moss, creating a cinematic durée in which the viewer is forced to dwell rather than progress. Time in the Zone does not accelerate or compress; it thickens. The characters must follow indirect paths, throwing metal nuts tied to bandages to test the way ahead, accepting the Zone's incomprehensible rules as simply how things are. Alexei Yurchak later coined the term "hypernormalisation" to describe this condition in late Soviet society—the collective acceptance of a visibly false reality as normal.[23] The Zone enacts this with eerie literalness: a space where the surreal has become the only ground available.

The hauntological sensibility combines these temporal disruptions: we are haunted by futures that did not arrive and pasts that will not stay buried. The present becomes spectral, inhabited by ghosts of what was and what might have been. This is not simply nostalgia but a more profound disorientation, a loosening of time's arrow. And it is, irreducibly, a visual condition. Ghosts are what appear at the limit of the visible. The haunted image is one

that holds open a door to a world that should no longer exist.

The fourth volume of *Seeing* assembles contributions that approach these constellations from within, as acts of visual attention rather than philosophical arguments. Developed in response to two seminars in the MA Visual Communication program at the Zurich University of the Arts—the first tracing hauntology, lost futures, and speculative imagination through science fiction, cyberpunk, and ecofiction; the second investigating altered perception, animal minds, xeno-intelligence, and post-human cognition—the visual and textual essays gathered here do not illustrate the themes outlined above so much as enact them.

If what we find here are images, then they are ones that attempt to elude our awareness. They appear volatile, fleeting, enigmatic, and disquieting. And therefore, we tend to spurn or disregard them. This volume invites a renewed attention to what usually remains hidden from our gaze: the other worlds that exist alongside our own, and the other minds that perceive them differently.

Notes

1 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations,* trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford: Blackwell, 1953), II, xi, 190.
2 Thomas Nagel, "What Is It Like to Be a Bat?," *The Philosophical Review* 83, no. 4 (1974): 435–450.
3 Anil Seth, *Being You: A New Science of Consciousness* (London: Faber & Faber, 2021).
4 Martin Seel, *Aesthetics of Appearing,* trans. John Farrell (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005).
5 Jakob von Uexküll, *A Foray into the Worlds of Animals and Humans,* trans. Joseph D. O'Neil (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010).
6 Ed Yong, *An Immense World: How Animal Senses Reveal the Hidden Realms Around Us* (New York: Random House, 2022).
7 David Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-than-Human World* (New York: Vintage Books, 1997).
8 Mark Fisher, "What Is Hauntology?," *Film Quarterly* 66, no. 1 (2012): 16–24; Mark Fisher, *Ghosts of My Life: Writings on Depression, Hauntology and Lost Futures* (Winchester: Zero Books, 2014); Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (Winchester: Zero Books, 2009).
9 Fredric Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions* (London: Verso, 2005).
10 Benjamin Bratton, *The Stack: On Software and Sovereignty* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2016).
11 Peter Godfrey-Smith, *Other Minds: The Octopus, the Sea, and the Deep Origins of Consciousness* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2016).
12 Frans de Waal, *Are We Smart Enough to Know How Smart Animals Are?* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2016).
13 Kate Crawford, *Atlas of AI: Power, Politics, and the Planetary Costs of Artificial Intelligence* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2021).
14 James Bridle, *Ways of Being: Animals, Plants, Machines: The Search for a Planetary Intelligence* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2022).
15 Donna Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century," in *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991).
16 Kathleen M. Trauth, Stephen C. Hora, and Robert V. Guzowski, *Expert Judgment on Markers to Deter Inadvertent Human Intrusion into the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant* (Albuquerque, NM: Sandia National Laboratories, 1993).
17 Jeff VanderMeer, *Annihilation* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2014).
18 Glenn Albrecht, "Solastalgia: A New Concept in Health and Identity," *PAN: Philosophy Activism Nature* 3 (2005): 41–55.
19 Henri Bergson, *Time and Free Will: An Essay on the Immediate Data of Consciousness,* trans. F. L. Pogson (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1910).
20 Sigmund Freud, "The Uncanny," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud,* vol. 17, trans. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1919), 217–256.
21 Fisher, *Ghosts of My Life;* Mark Fisher, The Weird and the Eerie (London: Repeater Books, 2016).
22 Arkady Strugatsky and Boris Strugatsky, *Roadside Picnic,* trans. Olena Bormashenko (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2012).
23 Alexei Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).