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Ritualizing Media, Mediatizing Ritual

Milan Kroulik

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Ritualiser les médias, médiatiser les rituels : une étude sur l'interaction des technologies médiatiques et de la pratique rituelle dans les rituels thaïlandais

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(ERRAPHIS)

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sur les Rationalités Philosophiques et les Savoirs

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Philosophie

Dissertation

Mgr. Milan Kroulík, MA

**Ritualizing Media, Mediatizing Ritual: A Study on the Interaction of Media
Technologies and Ritual Practice in Thai Rituals**

**Ritualiser les médias, médiatiser les rituels : une étude sur l'interaction des
technologies médiatiques et de la pratique rituelle dans les rituels thaïlandais**

Doctoral advisor

Prof. Jean-Christophe Goddard

2023

I hereby declare that I have written this dissertation independently, using only the mentioned and duly cited sources and literature, and that the work has not been used in another university study programme or to obtain the same or another academic title.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'M. Kroulík', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

In Warsaw, on 17.5.2023

Mgr. Milan Kroulík, MA

The current version has been slightly altered as compared to the one handed in on 17.05.2023. It is cleaned of all references to the cotutelle agreement with Charles University, Prague, I previously worked under. It is also cleaned of all Thai script except in direct quotes, as I found it impossible to render it correctly and it disorganized the layout of paragraphs it was used in.

In Warsaw, on 29.1.2024

A handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of stylized, cursive letters that appear to be 'MK' followed by a flourish.

Mgr. Milan Kroulik, MA

Keywords: Anthropology, Theravāda, Thailand, Ontological Turn, ritual, body thought, temple, cinema, Deleuze, media theory, perspectivism, STS, cosmotechnics

Mots-clés : Anthropologie, Theravāda, Thaïlande, tournant ontologique, rituel, pensée du corps, temple, cinéma, Deleuze, théorie des médias, perspectivisme, STS, cosmotechnique

Abstract

The text develops a new philosophy and infrastructure of thought based on empirical encounters between Buddhist practices and thought, media theories, cinematic thought, philosophy of the body and general anthropological issues in such a way that all parts influence and transform each other. This creates a fluid text whose conceptual anchoring is continuously evolving and is evidently decolonial, as it develops a Buddhist conceptualization of science and thought as an alternative to the dominant one, which turns out to be distinctly Christian regardless of what it claims about itself.

Résumé

Le texte développe une philosophie nouvelle et une infrastructure de pensée innovatrice basées sur des rencontres empiriques entre les pratiques et la pensée bouddhistes, la médiologie, la pensée du cinéma, la philosophie du corps et les questions anthropologiques générales, de telle sorte que toutes les parties s'influencent et se transforment les unes les autres. Cela crée un texte fluide dont l'ancrage conceptuel évolue continuellement et est manifestement décolonial, puisqu'il développe une conceptualisation bouddhiste de la science et de la pensée comme alternative à la conceptualisation dominante, qui s'avère être distinctement chrétienne, indépendamment de ce qu'elle prétend à propos d'elle-même.

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Conceptual Preliminaries

1. Reading(,) Writing

A text composes of many elements, some of which is the space for the reader to enter, some of which, in my case, as I draw heavily on ethnography (as practice and concept), is the space from which the author composes. Then there are also the ways that concepts, images (concepts connect to) and images of thought (infrastructure) come together. From a decolonial perspective, the most significant limitations of classical research writing is that it operationalizes a very limited amount of tools (conceptual or imageric), while keeping otherness contained as the merely empirical. It is only one way of doing the world (with all its contradictions) that is allowed the power to shape reality, while other possibilities are apriori coded as fantasies, as something obviously untrue because unscientific. Thinking in scientific conventions is generalized as if every single modern white person would do it all the time, as if every scientist were able to always employ these skills no matter how immediately pressing a reaction is required. Other worlds, however compatible elements of them might be with the one that propagates itself through their analysis, are relegated curiosities to be categorized, but only rarely given the force to transform categorization and thought practice itself.¹ Thus for example, most Buddhist studies are well aware of Buddhist critiques of subject and essence or truth centered practices, but the alternatives offered in the Tripitaka, the Buddhist canon or practices drawing on it are never allowed to enter research at the same level as Western conventions. Mutual transformation is minimized, and if it happens, disavowed. Research is still mostly a one-way street, a transmutation of the world into the reality principle derived from a very specific hegemonic tradition presenting itself as the sole and unified West separated from the rest of the world. Effectively this leads to turning in circles² – the tacit assumptions of Cartesian modernity (of radical separation of subject and object, world and self, of human and non-human) seem impossible to displace, to innovate, so long as writing and thinking is composed in the ways developed to support precisely this type of thought. One might sense here that one of the issues is the separation between ontology and epistemology, so dear to

¹ I conceive ‘world’ as material-semiotic, it includes cosmologies, practices, institutions, forms of thought, etc. Worlds emerged as meta-stable frameworks as (not only) humans were interacting with their environments and past solutions and ideations came to be stored (as interpersonal and externalized memory) so as to become self-evident for those participating in a world. When worlds meet, self-evidence is fractured, bodies can learn radically new things (or double down on even more on what was considered normal). Some elements produced in a world more easily fit (with little friction) to other worlds – the more complex (as to the variety of material-semiotic parts) a thing, the more resistant it will be. However, this also means that it might become dangerously fragmentational for the world it was formed in as that world changes, hence a thorough differential archaeology (in the Foucauldian sense) of media and thought can effectuate unforeseen needs for adaptation.

² Occasional skids into a new circle notwithstanding, which is how such sciences develop. What is vexing here is that these are events outside of the methods proper, they come as accidents, and the metaphysical-conceptual infrastructure then goes on pretending it has always been the way it is. It cannot see its own (conditions of) change.

Western tradition, yet so non-sensical once understood from a different position.³ The primary delusional proposition that the knowing of what is and the knowing how are separable, and indeed both being neutral in their worldly effects, is impossible to maintain. They are in fact a prime example of an ideological operation, one that aims to hide what it in fact does by claiming it does something else.

This effect is so strong that even much of anthropology, that one science built on distinguishing what people say and what people do, only rarely manages to use this particular lens at what it does itself. Ruptures in these world-making practices appear when other worlds are encountered – which is where anthropology, but also thoroughly thought through materialisms and media theories enter to cultivate the playing field. It is here that a certain tacitly operating image of thought can be disentangled. “The image of thought is Deleuze’s characterisation of what comes before thinking: that which philosophy implicitly presupposes and explicitly projects, a pre-philosophical and natural and hence dogmatic image of what thinking is. [...] It is pre-supposed in the sense that everybody knows what it means to think, as though it were common sense.” (Dronsfield 2012, 404) In early works, Deleuze was concerned with a thinking without image as a destruction of a simply assumed unity: “[...] we do not speak of this or that image of thought, variable according to the philosophy in question, but of a single Image in general which constitutes the subjective presupposition of philosophy as a whole.” (Deleuze 1994, 132) However, by *What Is Philosophy?* (1994), “Deleuze now refers to the need for a new image of thought, he nevertheless continues to use the term image to refer to philosophy’s dogmatic presupposition about thinking. This new image of thought is, of course, nonrepresentational, but he nevertheless chooses to refer to it as an image. This language suggests that Deleuze’s concern is not that the dominant image of thought is an image, but rather, that this image is dogmatic and representational.” (Hein 2017, 658) Thought cannot do without image, the work lying in constructing a non-representational image of thought, one that is not set in advance but comes to be formed through complex interactions. But also, one can notice that thought fragments, once different images of thought can be constructed, once a few disobedient bodies do away with common sense. Importantly, “mainstream qualitative research shares in the same dogmatic image of thought that philosophy presupposes. More specifically, this image is an implicitly subjective presupposition, based

³ Many of the central linguistic operators explored in the research fields drawn on here, including how they are used in this text, make use of the inherent polysemy and foundational instability of concepts such as ontology, cosmology, image, frame, etc. The impossibility to finalize meaning has as is well-known been demonstrated long ago, and what is being done here is a writing of contextuality (*kala-thesa* is a Thai conception of this) that if it were to pretend it was possible to clearly define each word, it would perform a version of a world where things precede context and an easy universalism is possible, regardless of what is claimed in the text. In other words, the way a text is composed is part of how it proposes the world works – analytical writing is not only impossible (in terms of it being as consistent as it claims), but above all not neutral. (Cf. Jackson 2020)

in opinion, that ‘everyone knows’ (preconceptually) what it means for a qualitative researcher to think. [...] Every qualitative researcher is assumed to have this ‘natural’ capacity to think.” (Ibid., 659) The thinker to emerge once the dogmatic image of thought is abandoned is one that “manages not to know what everyone else know” (ibid., 658) and as such comes to construct thought in new ways. It is a thinking about thinking, what I call an infrastructure of thought, which is non-representational. The way thought connects. Thought meanwhile connects with images, a human is never a self-contained concept as it comes to operate through a body. Thus, different people from different backgrounds will think the same concept differently. While for Deleuze, philosophy is the creation of concepts, when engaging the meeting of sensual, aesthetic worlds, it appears that much more is created, including the creation of ways of connecting thought. Infrastructure, that which is below structure, that which supports and connects that which appears to our senses, generally disappearing from sight. The anthropologist Brian Larkin (2013, 329) defined infrastructures as “objects that create the grounds on which other objects operate” and that “they are things and also the relation between things.” The media theorist John Durham Peters (2015, 38) even thinks that “ontology, whatever it is, is usually just forgotten infrastructure.” Encounters with other worlds can make the ontological reappear as something that was once formed and could be different. Something similar occurs in recent research: “The new empiricisms and new materialisms are, indeed, laying out a different plane of thought. But different images of thought and their accompanying concepts vie with each other.” (St. Pierre et al. 2016, 2) Cracks appear in complex interactions, unpredictability arises, thought as it happens through bodies can never be purely immaterial – associations change as concepts travel. Indeed, how else would they be able to exert any effect in a material world? Deleuze furthermore demonstrated how cinema and the images (of thought) produced through solutions to crises it faces, can “provide philosophy with a new means of creating concepts that would replace its earlier universals.” (Lambert 2012, 156) Thought is sourced from interactions with the world.⁴

As any body having undergone thoroughgoing engagement with anthropological (or related) literature comes to be aware of, there is more than one common sense. Common sense, whatever it may be, therefore grounds nothing. Analogously, in a body trained in media theoretical sensitivity that has

⁴ It is important to note that ‘good will’ is assumed by the dogmatic image of thought, which is obviously anything but present in academia and society in general, as anybody working on making real critical theories in an uncritical field has experienced. ‘Good will’ like everything else is something that has to be learned. The dogmatic image of thought as it continues operating is one that just assumes humans to sort of operate by themselves, leaving learning, whether in thought or body, outside. It actively prevents for many things to even be thought in the first place. (Hein 2017) Unsurprisingly, this goes well with Christian cosmology and its small concern with humans, improvement and high impossibility to think gradual change. This is another central part of the work done here, as Buddhadharmā offers many tools to think learning.

ever encountered a sūtra (pa. sutta), awareness arises that thought and image here are coded differently than in any of the wide variety of writing and thinking styles considered part of Western tradition, and that simply doing away with the very material form of how sutta are composed might be losing much of what makes for a distinct world and thought. Awareness however doesn't yet mean that the tools to actually generatively deal with such an encounter are available, or that it won't ultimately be caught in the dominant conventions of the listener. Translation is transformation, and it doesn't only happen between languages in the narrow, common-sense sense. It is important to acknowledge the difference of the Deleuzian project from almost any other philosophical edifice: as one learns to see what concepts and conventions do, immanently, as transformations, one unlearns to the habit of inserting a transcendent but never really explicitly stated comparison or ground against which anything is evaluated. Actual continuous change is thus magically dispelled and only an already existing image of the world propagates itself through the practices of the Moderns.⁵

The fields of anthropology and directly related, cross-pollinating inquiries in STS and feminist technoscience (de la Cadena et al. 2015) in recent years have brought the innovation of the ontological turn, the demonstration that far from there being one natural world and many cultural, there are in fact many naturecultures (Haraway 2003), ontologies (Viveiros de Castro 2015), cosmotechnics (Hui 2016) or worlds (Law 2015): “Just as the ontological turn wants to do away with the opposition between nature and culture, the concept of cosmotechnics is designed to overcome modernity’s opposition between nature and technology.” (Lemmens 2020, 4) Each differs somewhat in the way they think and enable to think the world, as well as in their respective conceptual genealogies.⁶ They can be and have been put into productive dialogue as they try to articulate a similar set of problems generated by the limits of the more common paradigms. (Åsberg 2010, Jensen 2017, Lemmens 2020) Most of this research has been consciously philosophical/conceptual, only rarely drawing on ethnographic imagery in other but the most abstract ways. The challenge to me, here, is to create an ethnography or rather a

⁵ Ironically, this convention is so strong, that many works that reference Deleuze and Guattari keep evaluating the world as against the image introduced by them, thereby reinstating precisely what was supposed to be dethroned. Transcendence as the positing (from within world) of something outside of it, an unchangeable principle, is complexly encoded on countless levels, mutually stabilizing, reinforcing the seeming naturalness of transcendence.

⁶ I would like to point out, that critics of the ontological turn, summarized in Gad et al. (2015), but not only them, tend to operationalize a basically static image of the world, where nothing new appears, and so posit whether they want it or not eternal incommensurability, make learning and the creating or appearance of new entities in the world (whether co-constituted by humans or not) impossible. If most anthropology is Kantian, as Viveiros de Castro (2004a) points out, it shows here too, in this very static and definitely non-generative conception of world(s) and all that can be there. This remains so for the ontological turn in anthropology. All of this is undeniably representational, enacting a nature-culture divide, where thought and writing have no essential impact on the world, and are in some ways not of the (material) world.

cosmography, a writing of worlds, that operationalizes ontological concepts sourced from Buddhist teachings or discerned in Buddhist-coded worlds. Anthropology, whether in its more theoretical or its ethnographic form, has long been a technique of critiquing reality. (Jensen & Morita 2012) It introduces some sort of otherness, a new element into what would otherwise appear as a given and finished world: “An ethnography carries beings of one world into another one. This is a promise that our writing shares with fiction, poetry, cinema, and most other expressive arts.” (McLean & Pandian 2017, 1) Concurrently, until recently, dominant anthropological practice remained within a paradigm that ultimately keeps such difference bracketed, a practice that constructs conceptual infrastructure to ensure that the other remains other, mere examples of secondary variety but ultimate confirmation of sameness, of the modern propositions of what makes a human human. All too frequently, these endeavors have come to be separated, even treated as different if related entities. As if ‘that which comes before thinking’ is having a much greater force than thinking, at least the most conscious part of it (the conceptualization of which differs between philosophical traditions). Such disconnected dualism enables to uphold the illusory convention of theory and (empirical) reality to be separate, even as they clearly affect each other and thus cannot easily be treated as separate, disconnected. Such a split is easily discerned in ethnographic writing, among others, with its realism (however much critiqued), where in general, entities that do not in one way or another conform to scientific naturalism are assumed to be simply unreal, or cultural. Bruno Latour tackled the problem for a long time now, and I will paraphrase here to make it fitting to the spaces I explore: why is it that things/concepts such as religion, society or state (neither of which is simply found ‘out there’ or can be pointed to) are unquestioningly treated as real, independently existing, while ghosts or bodhisattvas or karma are not?⁷ There is a rather foundational blind-spot for the hegemonic Western cosmopractice: “In our emphasis on biology we dismiss culture too lightly. The assumption is that a man-made thing can be unmade.” (Strathern 2016, 276) As Strathern has been pointing out for a long time, Moderns pretend that culture can be (un)made and nature is given, all the while remaking the biological through all kinds of interventions and resisting cultural changes as if even a slight shift to which gender can play with which toys would bring about apocalypse. All entities are made, what they differ in is the elements they are composed of. “To be ‘made’ is not to be ‘made up.’” (Haraway 1997, 99) In any case, just because

⁷ Following Latour, among others, some researchers point out how some so-called fictional beings such as Mickey Mouse are very hard to unmake – their comparative immateriality even enhancing their reality. (Felski & Muecke 2020) Furthermore, Mickey of course is very much grounded in materiality, in many places at once, much more than the author of these sentences. The lack of a properly organic body to support a figurative dimension merely means that a different kind of materiality is at play and an inquiry into the composition of things is thus even more important. What additionally interests me, as will become clear in later chapters, is the material networks that enable and stabilize the existence of such less material entities.

entities are fictional (even in the common sense usage), it doesn't mean they don't do things, that they are not to some degree real, precisely because they have effects, are entangled with and entangle other entities. (Muecke 2012) All of this directly impacts how worlds can be written, with a marked difference to the epistemological solipsism of the writing culture tradition in anthropology that continued to rely on the above described separation – worlds are made through writing, all is onto-epistemology, all is performative, all is operations.⁸

To not do the hard work of developing writing worlds which build on theory, keeping to a vague realism with the occasional new concept being plugged in instead (or doing away with a reality outside of text, outside of research altogether) without significant change to the whole edifice of writing, is to give up not just on the most challenging questions posed in the encounter of worlds but also on the creative abilities of bodies to solve problems in innovative ways – the bodies in question here being those tied in complex networks and conditions that put together new ways of writing appropriate to the demands of the situation. Such a change brings research even closer to literature, as new ways of combining or even making vocabulary (or some minor hacking of grammar) have to be created, such that perhaps have not been here yet or have been forgotten, such that give rise to new worlds, however speculative and experimental. Such that point to the future, and not the past. Such that enact openings and not closings in the name of a transcendental truth or reality or nature all with capital letters. For any kinds of realism today close off the world, limit what elements are taken as real and which are excluded, which elements are taken as being part of the world (already here) and which are not. For what does science do if not create new entities (concepts, tools, images, languages) in order to enable a controlled effect on things in the world that have hitherto been mostly uncontrollable, such as diseases or different kinds of movement in the world? The scientific endeavor, however varied and tied to all manners of interests, was always busy with fictioning, because the things (including the languages innovated) that are continuously created have not been here before, at least not actually. What is insidious about the metaphysical infrastructure of science talk or the cultural practices of the Moderns in general is that such new entities are treated as being not new at all. If this were acknowledged in the way thinking is happening, the ghost of a world created by God as already finished would haunt us all much less. Modern Euro-American secularism continues to be intimately conditioned, is indeed unthinkable without a Christian legacy of the One and a world already finished the moment it came to

⁸ This parallels the influence of Derrida's deconstruction and Deleuzian constructivism in all kinds of research, keeping in mind that the work of Deleuze and Guattari even more than that of other philosophers such as Derrida is regularly and unquestioningly recoded into conceptual frameworks directly contrary to whatever said philosophies take so much pains to enable. (St. Pierre 2021a)

be.

Meanwhile, the world transforms, sentient beings keep living and combining. It is here that the theological basis of much Buddhist studies, if not much humanities research in general, is laid bare: scientists keep arguing about whether or not this or that activity is actually Buddhist, whether it is properly human or not. A matter of correct classification based on a tacit model, itself of course changing as what is considered Buddhist or not develops, one that only makes sense in a world that is already finished, one where new developments get reduced to old generalities. Stripped of everything that makes unique and creative. When in fact, the world keeps innovating itself and being innovated, and cares little about the essentialist pretensions of some humans. Indeed, the world, following the work done by researchers in the ontological turns, is not simply the same everywhere. What is vexing in science is that so much theory and methodology, or engagement in general looks backward. The more material and financially intense sciences, colloquially considered hard, at the very least create new useful things (including theories) based on interactions with materiality, while all too many humanities keep reiterating idealizations for their engagement with resisting materiality (which includes the lives of sentient beings) is minimal, making projection all the easier.⁹ As Wark (2020, 226) in her overview of the research of Keller Easterling wrote: “I am continually frustrated by the way in which scholars in the humanities and social sciences keep trotting out the same old authorities and the same tired languages, which pretty much guarantee that when they look at the present all they will see is how it looks like the past.” This extends to writing styles, to literary inspirations. Anthropology keeps turning around anthropocentric models, even as they are being undermined through human-technology developments as well as all kinds of human-nonhuman enmeshments, pointing toward worlds where unlike in Christian-Secular ones the human was never simply and fully different from other creatures, however immaterial.¹⁰ The conceptual-imageric baseline remains one built on bourgeois realism of the individual as the sole real existent and final ground of anything and everything. In other words, it is not purely conceptual, but the images implicitly contained are such to support transcendental individualism all the while being unacknowledged and generally hard to detect, as the world has gradually been built so that they are encoded all around. Hence, a separation between concept and image is an analytical operation, enacted in thought, but not so in general, for while separate they are not separable. In a world where such connection is routinely disavowed, it is much

⁹ This is why anthropology and media theory, practices based on the confrontation with elements of the world that are not already articulated in language, are so generative.

¹⁰ The humanist concept of the human is one of those immaterial creatures through which the ‘material human’ becomes and to which it came to be tied and set.

easier to innovate conceptually while continuing to perform the very world one has been critiquing rather than to develop ways of writing realities based on that innovation. Much of the research mentioned above seek to do precisely that. What I add, is the power of Buddhist tradition and a special focus on intersecting technology, media and ritual as sites of innovation. A thoroughly post-anthropocentric world, grounded and ungrounded in liminal spaces, in spaces of indistinction between entities and concepts regardless of their degree of organicity. That, and a specific focus on images.

All of this requires thorough engagement with theories of language, and, quite obviously, any kind of representationalism is of no relevance. The limits of any work, any cut made in the world, make it impossible to write all of the theories, thoughts and images that came to shape the current composition, though readers knowledgeable will of course notice what is being actualized, based on employment of words and manners of writing. A theory of language then will not be offered, though it is generally in line with the Deleuzian conception. (Cf. Leclerle 2002)¹¹ The chapters here operationalize different connections, arrange various parts in non-hierarchical ways. There is nothing that would precede anything else. In other words, not to write about, while keeping modern metaphysics beyond history, but write with and as, or simply to write worlds. “Writing thus becomes a means of marking and maintaining an openness to events, surprises, and contingencies, to a reality that is as much a source of questions and provocations as of answers.” (McLean & Pandian 2017, 4) It is in the connections established, constructed that the power of thought to create worlds lies. These were in fact among the most challenging parts of this research, as well as experimental. Often, it turned out that things that seemed to offer themselves to be connected, could in fact, for now, not be. And even when it turned out to be possible, the construction, the hacking of possibilities out of the virtual into something stable and legible proved infinitely challenging.¹² One does not just follow paths laid out by others, stabilized by hegemony, which one fills with some minor elements drawn from elsewhere (the entering of the outside into the inside without significantly transforming it). And, it is only once awareness of the contingency of elements arises, that challenge comes, because what once seemed so obviously given as to disappear completely as a field to engage and transform, that is enact freedom, has come to

¹¹ “We can attribute ‘Battle of Waterloo’, for instance, to a particular state of affairs, but what we find in that state of affairs are bodies mixing with one another: spears stabbing flesh, bullets flying through the air, cannons firing, bodies being ripped apart. Strictly speaking, the battle itself exists nowhere except in the expression of my proposition, which attributes ‘Battle of Waterloo’ to this mixture of bodies. More precisely, we could say that the battle itself merely ‘insists’ or ‘subsists’ in the proposition. Hence one of the fundamental theses of *Logic of Sense*: sense is to propositions what attributes like ‘Battle of Waterloo’ are to states of affairs.” (Smith 2019, 48) States of affairs, admixtures of bodies can be assigned different attributes, as they are very explicitly once different language worlds are entered.

¹² Wark (2004) puts hacking as the “creative production of abstraction,” (071) to hack is to “release the virtual into the actual, to express the difference of the real.” (074)

be an opening toward the future where even the tiniest stride is fraught with uncertainty. It is like physically stepping into worlds unknown, while at the same time building something that doesn't disappear immediately, swallowed by the jungle. It is constructing something others can follow, take apart and rebuild in other ways. That is, despite all the contingency and impermanence, science has a universalist dimension – in that others have to be able to follow the paths laid out, and be able to generatively engage them (without having to agree on everything). If one were to write worlds composed so wantonly of new elements, that none can follow, it ceases to be science – it comes to be an idiosyncrasy that might be inspiring but is of little coherent use. Science then, here, is not the quest for a true image of the world (that cannot be, as of course, the image produced comes to be part of the world, that is the world keeps changing as science is made), but rather somewhat stabilized techniques that draw on other techniques that can be reiterated by others drawing on similar techniques and used in other contexts. And good science is one that aims at creating new tools to add to this repertoire. To create a philosophical concept or an anthropological description that makes something that seemed impossible, possible, even self-evident, is one of the great pleasures of research. It almost makes the sweat and toil behind innovating scientific prose worthwhile.

Writing is also always a montage, an assemblage of disparate elements that achieve certain effects. Many things happen in between, they cannot be described or thought in a positivist way – as media theory has gone to great lengths to demonstrate (more on which later). Different ways of writing make things appear in the cracks. Following Eisenstein, but also Adorno and other thinkers, thought appears when elements collide. (Suhr & Willerslev 2012, 2013) This is a further theoretical background to the form encountered here. Furthermore, the seemingly incoherent style of the pages you are about to read results in the inquiry being led by problems met in the field. The field here is not just taken as that site out there where an anthropologist body goes to be transformed. It includes the research done by reading and watching. It is all reality, and it is highest time to move away from the idea that there is first a real out-there, say a Bangkok, and then its representation in texts. All things compose locally of different elements all the time. The Bangkok or philosophical problem or chanting ceremony composed in this text is a different one than that elsewhere. They are connected and overlapping, but not the same. Other entities are connected too, but overlap less or not at all. The way to think this problem, by way of images specifically, is one of the strongest threads of this work. It goes through variations of problems, sometimes obviously on the so-called surface, sometimes less so. The connective tissue is there, it moves through different strata of the thought composing here. As such, the text engages systematically

a couple of problems in different combinations, much like a movie according to Brenez (1997), a theorist drawing on Deleuze's thought developed with cinema, takes a figure through different figurations and combinations as it goes on. The problems ask for different solutions that include manner of composition. Things don't fit neatly in a more than one-world world. Different strands of anthropological and other research I draw on here encounter analogous situations, active resistance to understanding of what is actually claimed based on the false security of a world that is basically finished and known. One might even conceptualize it as the meeting of worlds in a classically anthropological fashion. Interactions with researchers with a background in metaphysically essentialist and humanist frameworks certainly can evoke the misunderstandings between conquistadores and Arawak, or Jesuits and Confucian scholar or Buddhist monks centuries ago (as will be explored in a later section), all the time one side keeps claiming that we are all same (epistemology), while denying that sameness in their dismissal of what they don't understand (ontology). If only the habit of reacting to the unknown with curiosity, awareness of the labor awaiting and the joy of dealing with conceptual challenges were more common in these worlds of ours. A real, affirmative experimentation built on the cultivation of the arts of noticing inconsistencies.

2. Speculation and a Future-Oriented Research

These are times where information can be gathered ready-made from almost anywhere. And mostly verified. In fact, there is so much information around that the even the most attentive will hardly be able to remember from where this or that particular nugget, much less all those half remember certainties that make up a world(view) came.¹³ An impossibility to know from where one knows what one knows implies there will always be uncertainties, speculations, shadowy border zones open toward something entirely other. It's the ideology of fact and certainty, significantly not a simple reality of fact and self-evidence that turns attention away. And people come to live in and as a world where divisions are clear, entities are given, and idea and thing are routinely conflated under the aegis of a long disproved representational theory of mind. Foundational myths of modernity still happily operating ensure that, for they are so thoroughly embedded in countless parts of reality that they appear self-evident, necessary, universal. Lucky then that science in some corners hasn't lost its emancipatory challenging force to probe and destabilize what is currently taken as given in places one would have never thought to look. Soil must be continuously cultivated, so it won't stop birthing the desired fruits, and a tilling with new techniques and new tools can lead to the breeding of new species off similar ground, entities better adapted to changing environments.

One of the sources for many modern conventions, Thomas Hobbes, when considered under the aspect of being in the process of creation, that is not retrospectively (when parts of it, such as the concept of social contract, seem self-evident), comes to appear as something of an SF writer. (Cf. Latour 1993)¹⁴ The relation between myth and history, especially since history is never accessible by the senses, was at this time still unstable and contestable. (Springborg 2007) The myth of objective history that is the transformation of uncertainty into a pretense of uncomplicated, independent, objective knowledge (as taught today in schools) was history yet to happen.¹⁵ Modern society (as

¹³ What is meant here is information in the common sense, that is something that appears as information to a contemporary body. Technically speaking, all has to be translated into some sort of information in order for a body to notice and process it – the world has always been too excessive and where what shard of memory comes from impossible to accurately pinpoint. Which makes the question of accurate representation redundant or rather misleading.

¹⁴ It is important to note that Hobbes was another among modern philosophers who participated in direct colonial endeavors, in his case the Virginia company. Issues we know he was present in discussing are justifications for settlement and natural-rights arguments. (Springborg 2007)

¹⁵ Many of the foundational myths found in Hobbes's work, such as the pre-social savage, keep being reproduced in popular media. (Friedman 2018b) It is the incessant reproduction and repetition of some conventions and narratives that makes them into myth as in foundational divisions of the world that are challenging to notice for those living (in) them. One of the important effects of anthropology as it eventually developed, as well as media archaeology, STS and to a lesser extent religious studies, is the introduction of variation into things that seem so self-evident as to be unnoticeable, and with the variation awareness of some of the myths that operate in the reality of Moderns.

organization) and the elements that constitute it had not yet been created as concept, divisions between spheres and imagery to go with, much less were they foundational, just assumed to exist like that, because encoded into the world through ubiquity, many of which are explicitly sourced from Hobbes. As for Hobbes, “[h]e had written his earlier, more academic work, *De Cive*, in Latin, but with *Leviathan* he hoped to reach a broader audience. For this reason he supplemented his use of logic and ‘geometric demonstration,’ with ‘myth, imagery and illusion’ in order to make a bigger impact.” (Friedman 2018a) The German media philosopher Horst Bredekamp (2007, 30) takes particular notice of the visual dimension of his work and how it also connects a biological conception of human with the political: “For just as vision reacts to physical pressure, so politics is enacted through pressure exerted in space-time, producing the images that people everywhere encounter, described by Hobbes’s extremely comprehensive concept of the political.” The visual part thus is irreducible to text, it brings together and transform elements commonly present at that time (but alien to a reader today) such as feudal effigies and the developing science of optics into a conception of the modern state. “The frontispiece of *Leviathan* is embedded in Hobbes’s complete works, which are largely constructed from images. This layout makes it clear that *Leviathan* is not an exception but rather the culmination of work from the beginning intended to deal with pictures.” (Ibid., 44) The imagery put together appears to resist much more effectively any easy projection of unchanging reality than the text does. It seems easy to ignore genealogically complex origins of certain abstractions and treat them as simply appearing without precedent. Both, image and text, meanwhile, are definite acts of speculation and myth-making at work.

It is this supplementing of an ostensibly scientific or ontological account with myth, imagery and illusion that can serve as an orientation. For one, according to the anthropologist Kerim Friedman (2018a) Hobbes's myth of the sovereign that binds the people to bring an end to war, ignores that it were typically sovereigns who engaged in wars with other sovereigns. On the other hand, the supposedly natural *qua* pre-social state that humans live in before entering into such a contract is already social, because familial (however such families might indeed be organized). The still potent image of the animalistic savage¹⁶ is of course one that organizes not just popular, scientific, and political convention and imagination, but is also a genealogically foundational one within anthropological discourse. The argument expands this contradictory logic to the problem of language as sociality: either language is present in the state of nature, which means the natural is social, or language

¹⁶ Bracketing for now that animal bodies and societies are much more complex, evolving and adaptive than (not only) Western cultural bias continues to assume against all the evidence of current ethology (e.g. Despret 2016). Furthermore, sciences in Japan for example at times follow different cosmological conceptions of the non-human (Jensen & Blok 2013).

is not present in the abilities of a savage, which poses the problem of when exactly this phenomenon emerges. Hobbes's arguably foundational myth for modern liberal capitalist ontology, that of the Moderns as per Latour (1993), requires that two for classical (onto)logic contradictory elements operate concurrently: man as artificial and natural.¹⁷ It also posits a negative outside, a horrific inhuman other as its most extreme version, against which an inside is articulated. (Shaw 2008) The fantastic negativity of the other that precedes the (secondary) positivity of the self is another of the most constitutive elements of Modernity.¹⁸

Hobbes's mytho-imagery was speculative at the time he created it, it was social science-fiction that has become mostly undisputed fact. Society and individual, nature and culture had to be created, they were not found ready-made in Nature. Many may treat it as philosophy out of history and imagination, but deliberately ignoring evident connections does not make them disappear entirely (oh the hubris of philosophers!). To put it in the words of the anthropologist Michael Taussig (1987, 121): “All societies live by fictions taken as real.” It is through such foundational mythologies, which include imagery, narration and concepts, that always-incomplete texts are read, and tentatively completed. (Cf. Derrida 1976) Thus, the pre-conscious contemporary enters into the worlds created in writing. Post-representational anthropology actively engages this creative and uncertain space, these gaps that are always automatically filled in or skipped, and makes them into problems, into possibilities. For the *Writing Culture* situation (Clifford & Marcus 1986, Marcus & Fisher 1986) rendered it impossible to ignore the impossibility of positionless objectivity. It definitively made that which most often disguised itself as fact show itself as fiction, as something made, non-neutral and effective. And, analogously, the position of the researcher creating knowledge became part of that knowledge making. To go further, one can notice that this way, the whole world enters. That in front of the researcher and that in back, which made her do what she does. Nothing is entirely irrelevant in the constitution of a scientific artifact. Monads rejoice. Indra's net is the name of the game.¹⁹ *Writing Culture* solipsists²⁰ hadn't

¹⁷ It is here that feminist technoscience and other research paradigms that do away with the culture vs. nature paradigm are most clearly founding a new world.

¹⁸ As can be seen in the common reflex of pointing out that somewhere else, it is worse and thus, over here, you should be grateful for what you have, because it is always already better than elsewhere without actually really defining what it is that is good in concrete terms and verifying whether it actually works.

¹⁹ The image of Indra's net is used in certain strands of Buddhist tradition to grasp the concepts of emptiness (*suññatā/sūnyatā*) and interdependent arising (*paṭiccasamuppāda/pratītyasamutpāda*). The rare Hindu deity that retains its name while migrating into a different cosmological/ontological worlding.

²⁰ The decidedly postmodern movement of *Writing Culture* framed everything around words and infinite reference within a (research) language, a play of signifiers, while cutting off any connection to the fieldwork situations, however imperfect, from which this knowledge arose. It came to see everything as nothing but imperialist projection, thus overvaluing the power of the researcher over any resistances the world might offer, hence solipsism. (Cf. Strathern 1991)

noticed it yet, as they continued to operate within the very representationalism they critiqued as never being fully adequate. On a related track, it was also made apparent that “the idea of difference, whether cultural, methodological, or even epistemological, cannot be sustained as a useful analytical framework.” (Miyazaki 2005, 6) An apriori expectation (one simply posed but not actually argued for) of difference between integrated cultures that are entirely untouched by either the scientist-anthropologist or global networks is thus made to appear as one of the foundational myths of anthropology and modernity. (Strathern 1988) The disavowal of the researcher's activity is perhaps the most ironic aspect of this configuration. Culture, as a concept, apart from being a fairly recent creation with its own varied history (Böhme 1996), does things (such as solidifying borders where once there was permeability and overlapping) that we perhaps don't want it to do.²¹

The following pages draw on fields outside of anthropology proper, as similar openings have appeared in many places and since if there is anything evident in the 21st century of the Christian-Secular calendar or 26th according to the Buddhist one. Old divisions between fields are increasingly breaking down forcibly disclosed by the actual world as arbitrary and impermanent. As long as the dominant, entrenched, institutionalized practice continues to function in favor of ideal-type definitions from long ago above the movements of the world, the very blind spots that have been tirelessly diagnosed by those able to inhabit different perspectives will be perpetuated.²² The whole way of thinking what knowledge is, how it is created and what role institutions play within this creation has to be rethought. Change was underway all along, much like crises were occurring all the time. In this case, I mean conscious change as an articulation of possible solutions to the problem at hand. Ones that seek to construct alternative onto-epistemological genealogical foundations to the normative (mis)conception of a rift between description and world, representation and reality, artifice and Nature. They all entail a reorientation toward the future, toward speculation, toward not taking apparent fictions as facts (the act of mythologizing) just because of the fear of losing any footing. “Far from recommending a rehabilitation of pre-modern or non-modern ontologies or cosmologies though, the cosmotechnics project explicitly looks at the future and aims to be an imaginative and inventive discipline in search for new cosmotechnics [...]” (Lemmens 2020, 4) Even with indigenous practices, naturecultures, the view is toward futures, for the question is how to sustain these alternatives in the

²¹ “The concept of culture is deeply reactionary. It is a way of separating semiotic activities (orientation in the social and cosmic world) into spheres to which people are referred. These isolated activities are standardized and capitalized to suit the dominant mode of semiotization – they are cut off from their political realities.” (Guattari & Rolnik 2007, 21)

²² Full (not conditional) acceptance of conventional and conventionalized barriers between disciplines typically leads to ignoring counter-evidence to disciplinary self-definition. (Cf. Buck-Morss 2009, 22–23)

face of capitalist hegemony (and its ontologizing conceptual divisions) and how to keep them generative in face of immense change. The approaches are all experimental, in that they aim to engender possibilities, be it on the level of textual, figural/imageric or conceptual composition. They are transformations of traditions that will appear as radically new only to those unaware of the variety already found in the world(s) of science. Sometimes it's difficult to see what's under our noses, especially when the convention is one that teaches us to perceive the world as finished, despite all the talk of evolution.

It further becomes a question of how to write with a propulsive force, how to not take what one perceives to be “as the end point of a process,” which leads to a loss of “the newness or freshness of the prospective moment that defines that moment as hopeful.” (Miyazaki 2005, 8) As Hirokazu Miyazaki following Ernst Bloch, Richard Rorty and Walter Benjamin tries to remind readers, in philosophy and other contemplative knowledge practices, the limits of the discourse stem from its retrospective character. In other words, much research “presuppose[s] a closed world that has already become [...]” (Bloch 1986, 8) Whatever the differences, Western Modernity in its organizing principles continues to be a variation of Christian cosmology. One where God created an earth in which nothing really New actually ever appears. In other words, a recoding of Darwin's non-Christian cosmological innovations. To think the future, to think with alternatives, requires other methods of thought, creation and composition. Methods that make it possible to take into account the material, corporeal, environmental conditions in which knowledge is created. To refine the old anthropological distinction between ivory tower speculation and field-work engagement of human practice, not as to deny one or the other, but so as to acknowledge their differing operativity. (Viveiros de Castro 2011b) Knowledge not as retrospection, but as prospection – a radical temporal reorientation. The gap that becomes apparent “lies between the conceivability of future transformations and the possibility of actualization.” (Csicery-Ronay 1991, 387) It expects the openness of reality, the unfinished quality of becoming, of “historically unforeseeable innovations” (ibid., 387) and with it the role of each and every sentient (or even not-so-sentient) being in making and partaking in world(s). Haraway playfully uses “SF” to denote a range of related compositions: Science Fiction, Speculative Fabulation, String Figures, Speculative Feminism, Science Fact, So Far. And all this invention is of course situated, it stems from field-work encounters, from experiences that put into question certain parts of what one takes for granted. And to be communicated it's put into some sort of narrative.

Stories “are always a complex production with many tellers and hearers, not all of them visible or audible.” (Haraway 1989, 8) Stories are ways of ordering and relating things in the world, something research also does, as is learning to see other ways of connecting, even other ways of putting together parts that form things. Only more often than not this creative activity is then disavowed. Any science is culturally and historically specific and involved. Sciences become within the processes that give them birth and act in the constitution of other processes. There is always something at stake for humans and non-humans alike. This embeddedness is part of SF, and contains the conception that any innovations necessarily emerge from established conventions. Innovation thus conceived is the bracketing of some elements and intensified development of others. They “cannot leap over the crafted standards for producing credible accounts,” (ibid., 12) since nothing stands above or outside history, and even when pushing the limits of a practice, a discourse, to be able to transform it, the work done must remain legible, in other words, credible. That is the challenge with innovation. This is what makes for the Science in Science Fiction, it is not free-form speculation, but actively sought innovation based on engagement with conventions. After all, there is no other way out of a dominant ideology. Free-form speculation without encounter with an other outside and within convention, rarely becomes anything more than vulgar reproduction of ideology. What SF is about is “concrete objectivity.” Situatedness is what produces objectivity, for one cannot see ‘everything’ from anywhere, but one can to a certain extent delineate the limits of the knowledge one produces while remaining open to other knowledge production. Reality is contested, a process in the making, nobody has the one correct narrative. If anything, it's necessary to let go of the One, that remnant of the Christian God transformed into Nature or Man that grounds everything in the end.²³ The only non-objective position is the one that arrogates disinterested objectivity hiding all the effort that goes into the production of its own position. (Haraway 1990) Yet, it is also here that Fiction is situated, for even active fictioning must remain credible in order to have the desired fictional effect, according to historically implicit standards, to be legible and not be taken as the scribblings of the insane or othered. As philosophers of language have demonstrated, for

²³ This is not a Spinozist immanent One, not a One world of continuous variation, but rather a One as a point of creation or radical change (Jesus), with concurrent stable, essential existence of all. A dualism that is secondary in time (the Devil falls after God creates Angels, free will appears after the fall from paradise, and for Rousseau but contra Hobbes, the human corrupts through culture what is innocent in Nature) but operates logically concurrently with the One. Nature is one Nature, not continuous differentiation, appearance and disappearance of bodies and forms and environments. This concurrent operation of the essential One and essential Dualism is mythological because it makes it possible to use two different logics and different times in an argument without, in the self-image of Western rational exceptionalism, being confronted with basic logical inconsistency. (Latour 1993) One of the reasons why Buddhist teachings, when not contained into Otherness, come to act in a very generative manner is that they are precisely about the appearance of stability from instability, and the mistaken attachment or grounding in what cannot ever ground anything. The functioning of stability and change is not simply inversed (as in many European reworkings of these teachings), but displaced – the appearance of stability is still part of the world and not to be easily dismissed for some real truth, as will be explored in different configurations throughout this text.

communication to be successful different sets of conditions have to be met – this is a radicalization of their epistemological claims by virtue of not excluding or containing border cases. (Cf. Derrida 1988) Analogously, the ontological containment of the Other in anthropological practice has been destabilized. (Winch 1964) It is however only recent innovations such as the ontological turn, new materialisms and generally systematic inquiries into the constitution of the world, not limiting knowledge to epistemology (while still positing an ontology through words as if independently) that made possible to make connections where none were seen before.²⁴ One should not reduce Science Fiction to the science part in a bid of pretending that science and technology are neutral and the same in any society. Speculative Fabulation is also to be done in relation to imagination, be it socio-political, biological, environmental, or ethical. All of this can draw on the countless pages of research about past arrangements, the otherness of which acts to destabilize the certainty and necessity of the contemporary. Such research also points toward a fundamentally ateleological development of the world and human societies. Through sheer addition of various readings across fields such an enormous wealth in wide-ranging arrangements is gathered, one of excessive resistance to any unified projections of how the world really is. Thorough empiricism, one that doesn't hide its own activity, one attuned to the resistances of things in the world to easy classification, one that considers the lighter matters such as words, images, formulas, styles and concepts as equally existing and worthy of attention, will always challenge its own certainties.

So reality itself might be open, more radically so than dominant convention and its genealogies are capable of conceiving, and texts or anything do not and will never represent (as in correspondence between natural and artificial, human-made, for those onto-epistemologies making that distinction) it, which, as expanded on in the previous chapter, leads to the highly scientific problematic of how to write so that a text's effect won't be reduced to old models. Write, compose, montage in ways that opens connections with the text's outside. There is more, once foundational mytho-imagery and conceptual infrastructure such as that of Hobbes is unearthed, composing can become active in demonstrating (part of) the ontological presuppositions generally naturalized. Especially when montage principles are applied, when different parts operationalize different ontological conventions, theories and cosmological frameworks. As researchers with varied backgrounds (Hui 2016, Verran 2002, Zhan 2011, Farquhar 2002, Law & Lin 2018, Jensen & Morita 2012, de la Cadena 2015, Escobar 2020,

²⁴ It is here that those who unquestioningly reproduce the representational image of language and thought see little but speculation gone wild, which serves as a pressing reminder that doing humanities without a complex engagement with different theories of how language operates and relates to its outside is a highly ideological endeavor, a continuing naturalization of conventions shown to be

Bobbette 2019, Aulino 2022a, Redfield 2000, Abrahms-Kavunenko 2019) have demonstrated, that which appears to the senses, seems to be simply given independently, does so as part of complex arrangements and links to cosmological frameworks and emergent technologies which themselves can very well be multiple and shifting. Other worlds, other propositions of how worlds work are no longer easily relegated to the dustbins of history with the only reality that can propagate itself being the modern bourgeois occidental capitalist hetero-patriarchal one. Science, specifically that of humanities, those activities that seek to engage the more immaterial production, can cease being the activity of containment of otherness through basic acknowledgment of its existence without worlds and differences actually ever meeting of equal terms. The move from epistemology (the world is treated as already finished) to an ontological politics is one that recognizes human and non-human activity in the co-constitution of things, of the world as it develops. (Stengers 2018a) It's the awareness that it didn't happen overnight that the entities that populate the contemporary world jumped out of a the Middle Ages with the radical break of Enlightenment (again that image of thought based in one radical change that prevents the perception of the hard work and violence that went into the creation of Modernity). Innovation, even the one assumed to have happened with European modernity bringing a new era of moral purity and rational perfection for those allowed to imagine themselves as part of it, doesn't instantaneously spring out of Zeus like glorious Athena. The world transforms continually. So did the Medieval world mythologized as radically other (yet curiously continuous) by those composing the foundational mytho-realities of today.²⁵ Any researcher worth that label today knows that there very much was technological, social, imageric and all manners of other innovation and development prior to self-proclaimed modernity before Europe was invented. Worlds shape futures and possibilities cross-pollinate. Entities are not determined by their relations, by how they came to be, but can enter into new connections. And all manners of interactions transform.

“What if Western evolutionary and ecological sciences had been developed from the start within Buddhist instead of Protestant ways of worlding?” asked Donna Haraway (2016, 176) in a footnote. And I seek here something in that direction, except as connected to technologies of representation and media, looping in different ways back into more conventionally anthropological inquiries into bodies, perceptions and practices. In the terminology of STS (Jensen & Morita 2017a), one can treat all of this

²⁵ In fact, the common framing of the Middle Ages as simultaneously other (violent, dark, excessively Christian) to Modernity and a basically same precursor where much later categories such as nations, the human, etc. are assumed to exist is one of the typical two-forked contradictions foundational of the constitution of the Moderns. It maps neatly on Enlightenment Rationalism and the Romantic reaction to it. What connects both is the positing of European exceptionalism untouched by any outside.

as *ontological experiments* or *practical ontologies*. In other words, worlds are enacted across boundaries of seemingly separate entities. The world is far larger and more varied than any theory (which nonetheless are parts of the world), any inquiry, any however complex and multi-actorly project can ever contain, so each newly composed entity whether it is a text, an image, a concept, a camera or any other tool, operationalizes certain connections and makes others impossible, makes them disappear. As Haraway wrote in the manifesto for cyborgs (1991), “Technology is not neutral. We're inside of what we make, and it's inside of us. We're living in a world of connections – and it matters which ones get made and unmade.” Hobbes project was such an experiment, looking into the future, hiding some things. As a plethora of researchers (Anderson 1991, Karatani 2014, Tambiah 2013, Clastres 1989, Viveiros de Castro 2020, for Siam: Morita 2017) meticulously demonstrate time and (time) again, it is a particularly modern ontological practice to project a political ontology (including the preexistence of the individual/society distinction) onto the past, including a nature-culture separation, where ancient empires and non-state societies would be a merely secondary deviation from the liberal, post-Westphalian ideal-type norm. When indeed, it would appear that not even these modern states ever actually fulfill that ideal. Written for the contemporary researcher, these ontological engagements here are speculative experiments in how the world might work otherwise. At least so long as these experiments don't straightforwardly contradict what can be verified with current reality securing tools and technologies. The conventions of analytical realist writing already speculate about how a world might work, only they don't care to acknowledge that reality is much messier than the one they perform, and simply naturalize the complex web made of entities such as an individual subject preexisting any relations and technologies, the nature-culture divide, writing and words in general as essentially without effect on the world, the conservative/progressive divide (when in practical fact conservatives and reactionaries too very much project futures, and reduce or fantasize pasts), states and money as simply existing and self-evident, the neutrality of concepts, a unified reality and all of those other things naturalized, kept out of view in a particular cosmology propagating itself as eternal as the Christian God.

The experimentation I attempt here takes Buddhist ritual spaces as sites of encounters between media technologies, cosmo-practices and various concepts and imageries. It also seeks to address that space between reality and reality-perception produced, which to me has been hitherto undertheorized and which Buddhist tradition offers many a tool to grasp and articulate. I treat what I encountered in fieldwork (which extends far beyond the conventional realist conception of a field out there to include

all manners of research and encounters pertinent to enacted openings) experimentally, working to find a speculative angle without reducing the new to the old, the particular to the obvious. In the good tradition of anthropology, I experiment with comparisons and contexts. Again, the distinction between two modes of anthropology appears in a way that doesn't treat either as obsolete, but rather as doing something similar yet different. The variation introduced is done by keeping a one part stable, while introducing change in different ones with the goal being defamiliarization of conventionality: "Instead of constructing the context surrounding the object, Frazer drew readers' attention to the resemblance between bizarre practices of savages and descriptions in familiar texts such as the Old Testament. While Malinowski created distance between readers and the object of study in order to put the latter in context, Frazer drew on familiar texts and contexts he shared with readers." (Morita 2012, 43) Both of course employed rhetorical strategies to keep difference at bay, something that keeps operating in most research that implicitly keeps positing an independent reality out there. What follows here is a mixing and mangling and mingling and montaging of what can be compared and how, including the comparative tools themselves. As new entities appear in the world, so too do new similarities, all too often projected independently of what made them appear in the first place, and with them differences, all the while others disappear. Thought and infrastructure of thought, worlds and texts, concepts and the concept of concept, all on the same place being able to interact in unexpected ways. On some level, this has always been the bread and butter of anthropology, with its *persuasive fictions* (Strathern 1987) and fabulations. "Henri Bergson and later Gilles Deleuze called it 'fabulation': the making of fictions sufficiently vivid and intense to be capable of intervening in and reshaping reality. This involves not the representation of a world assumed to be already given, independent of its figuration through texts, images, or other media but rather the participatory carrying forward of material world-forming processes in which human acts of creativity are always already implicated." (McLean 2017, x) The anthropologist of fabulation makes it abundantly clear in his exciting work on Scandinavian mytho-imagery and the biological and geological problems of today: the task now is to treat fictions of different human and not-so human potentialities as continuous with evolution, as solutions to specific problems drawing on local histories of imagination and all kinds of tools, which researchers today have the infrastructure and capabilities to actualize and make workable in order to find new ways of dealing with the problems made by our society. Fact is, at some time Odin existed, the entity was not the same as the one constructed by Moderns since the time of the Romantics, neither is it different. Odin emerged, as all beings do, no matter how immaterial, as a solution to problems faced by particular lives. As conditions changed, some entities continue as mostly stable transformations while others

disappear quietly or violently. In other words, a little speculative fabulation or science fiction is part of the process of the becoming of worlds, of forms and (a)sentient beings. A practice that “is never the expression of an already formed identity (whether individual or collective).” (Ibid., 39) One oriented toward the future, addressed, as per Deleuze and Guattari's (1994, 109) writing on geophilosophy, to the “people to come and the new earth.” Deities and other such entities come to be part of evolution and can be repurposed (ontologically, performatively) not just as subservient to the eternal truth of science or reactionary romantic fantasies of ideal-type Gods as if unrelated to material realities and more-than-human problems. All this without projecting an evolutionary cosmology as the one and only final way of the world, but instead focusing on fostering collaborative encounters with peoples with other knowledges of the world, of living other worlds that criss-cross modern conventions and separations. (Povinelli 2016) That is crucial here, for those that simply reproduce these conventions and/or leave some of them out, cannot become generative interlocutors, for they merely support the one world hegemony and offer little to deal with more-than-human problems.

My goals here meanwhile are not as lofty and do not aim to offer pathways to dealing with global problems of today. I merely seek to find some ways to see the immediate world otherwise, to find lines of flight for other futures in the present on the field where media technology, ritual (as intensified iteration) and Buddhist cosmological potentialities speculatively meet. A sort of “theory-fiction” perhaps, neither related nor unrelated to such speculative work as Reza Negarestani's (2008) rewriting of petrol in terms of Middle Eastern cosmologies. Something that has to deal with all kinds of fields, and slowly or rapidly build connections where there might have at first seem to have been none, flitting between pasts and presents. Science as fiction: “Both science and popular culture are intricately woven of fact and fiction.” The problem of fictionality in any endeavor returns. Donna Haraway elaborates on a constitutive issue for modernity, namely the relationship between fact and fiction. Both relate to human action and are “implicated in a dialectic of the true (natural) and the counterfeit (artifactual).” Fiction is the active form of the act of fashioning, of making. Meanwhile, fact as a word referring to past action, “masks the generative deed or performance.” (Haraway 1989, 3–4) Fact as something done, as something to be neutrally recorded. Fiction as something inventive, opening up to other possibilities, but always threatened by the possibility of outright lies (the inventions projected onto the other sourced not from complex engagement but from established cliché that just feels right for the casual reader). Much must be reimagined, reconceived, for the world as it is appears as natural because of the complexity of the connections already made, the concepts and imaginaries that mutually

support each other and seem to logically flow from one into the other. Only dealing with a small portion of a world, secluded from the rest (as positivists do) will not make the cut, or rather it will make the cut in a way to hide what is happening. New connections must be forged, even if they at first might seem out there. Hobbes's and others' fictions once also appeared to be. Pasts and futures intertwine, causality is not as straightforward as it at first might seem. Something Buddhist thinkers have known and demonstrated for a long time. In times when that old mytho-imagery crumbles in face of overwhelming evidence for a much higher complexity of worlds and the mediatic restructuration of materiality, and what once seemed so given as to not appear to the senses at all, one does well to keep techno-feminist words present: “The open future rests on a new past.” (Haraway 1991, 41)

03. On Images and Other Encounters

A particularly potent image sticks to my memory, one encountered while engaging historical research of Christian encounters with locals in Southeast Asia. It expressed a constant uncertainty for the Jesuits acting in the region centuries ago. Some among the indigenous populations would recoil in front of Christ on the cross, others at the very least unable to understand how a regular man might be all that the Christians say, even others understanding this figure as that of Devadatta, Buddha's schismatic cousin. Evidently, the image constructed by the Jesuits, containing the image/figure of Christ on the cross, expresses a problem: Christ does something different to different people. It is not merely a question of interpretation, a second step after sense-perception. Reactions are immediate, whether fearful or disinterested. Explanations are put together later. Rationalization is always one step behind, in danger of mistaking itself as source. What is seen is already different. It is not self-same. Appearance is an effect of relations, which include the body and corporeal memory sourced from the environment to which something appears. This is different from somebody like me, who isn't a Christian in the strongest sense of the word. Somebody who can't see Christ as anything but human, but immediately, when I see Christ on a cross, I see Christ and not merely a human. The figure is ubiquitous, one cannot but be a Christian in Europe, as the imagery is everywhere, and only secondarily denounce this element. In other words, keeping the common analytical distinction, ontologically, I remain Christian in some significant ways (for now), even if epistemologically, I definitely am not. It is impossible for me to even imagine a perception of a body on a cross and not literally see Christ, whatever I later think of that. This isn't to deny any materiality, it's not like subjects are free to project onto the world whatever they want. It simply means that anything that is perceived is already more than itself, for it is co-constituted by the perceiving organism and its capacities.

This is a very anthropological problem, in that it concerns a meeting of worlds through human bodies. (Viveiros de Castro 2011a) The worlds that meet are not only conceptual, but also sensory, aesthetic. Concept, percept and affect combine in the human bodies that come together in this image. And I here today, reading age-old writings of a French Jesuit enter this image, combine it, fill it with others, to smooth over the gaps left by writings. The body that enters the construction of research most actively is not an outside to the final product. As my research for the writings on the following pages went on, regardless of my initial intentions, the problem of the image and how what is immediately

seen as already different came to the forefront. It is a topic that as far as I know has never been tackled in this manner, and is what connects all of the chapters, what is explored in various contexts and as different possibilities within and between them. As it hasn't been undertaken yet in any significant way, there is no ready-made conceptual framework to deal with it, no image of thought to presuppose. Indeed, I am certain that the very framing of my research, combining, among others, anthropology, media theory, film philosophy, and Buddhist aesthetico-conceptual experimentation is what made this inquiry appear in the first place.

Encounters are stacked here, we might use the image of Russian dolls, one inside the other. But that would be somewhat misleading, as they fit neatly and cannot become part of other dolls. Here, we have images within images, encounters within encounters, and they can connect to others, and maybe that connection, let's think it in terms of montage, will make a new image apparent, one that otherwise wouldn't have been there. I operationalize this analogically to what Deleuze & Guattari enable to think through Kafka and Borges: "According to Borges, it is not only that something new and unique emerged when Kafka brought together this unique series of precursors in the production of his major works. Also, and perhaps more interestingly, Kafka's writing creates new connections between these earlier writers, connections which would have remained utterly imperceptible and hence non-existent had Kafka never written his own work." (Smith 2018, 102) It is these encounters between worlds as images that do something, as coincidental they may be. They make appear what otherwise would have been imperceptible. "Something in the world forces us to think. This something is an object not of recognition but of a fundamental encounter. What is encountered may be Socrates, a temple or a demon. It may be grasped in a range of affective tones: wonder, love, hatred, suffering. In whichever tone, its primary characteristic is that it can only be sensed." (Deleuze 1994, 139) Searching for this, this something where the apparently quotidian, unshakeable, so eternal that imperceptible, is what I consider among the central tasks of anthropology. I encounter the image of Southeast Asian peoples encountering the image of Christ, provoking thought in me, searching the memory of the world, the one accessible to me, to find adequate answers, in reading, looking, exploring, constructing. To explain away what appears, such as the ignorance of natives in face of a self-evident Christ, one could easily turn to ready-made images, clichés such as that of the ignorant native. Challenge to Western common sense contained. But instead of containment masquerading as success, I seek failure. Not ready-made cultural images of immediate recognition, but that situation where recognition breaks down, so that

thinking as a creative act might commence. A thinking that establishes new connections, subverts habits, makes the self-evident appear arbitrary. Difference, not sameness. So once a situation where all that fails forces itself, the construction of something entirely new, cobbled out of pieces that were here before and a little something extra. It would be insufficient to think of all this as encounters between conscious human actors (itself one of the main clichés of our time). What encounters far exceeds the human, indeed does not need it, the human bodies are just parts – but they happen to be those parts through which I am able to think more easily, given that I share most of their composition. This to me is how I came to understand anthropology, once the representational world is left behind: not as a study of man in general, but a study of things in the world as a human, from the point of view of a human body. This human body is never self-same, and different human bodies, as mentioned, perceive differently.

One has to leave behind the notion of a general human body, a general human, made particular through context but basically the same, only a few qualities removed. Anthropologists have repeatedly demonstrated that not only do conceptions of body, its borders, capacities and relations differ wildly, but also that these differences have very verifiably different effects on people's reactions to how bodies are treated. (E.g. Mol 2002, Lock & Farquhar 2007; also important is the stabilization of epigenetics as a field and the feedback between body and environment down to the molecular levels, see e.g. Lock 2013)²⁶ Each body and what it can perceive becomes singularly. Precisely because they compose locally of different sources, which include past images, figures, gestures, attentions. But even figures compose differently, as “divisions of nature and culture which are specific to modernity and its sciences work through a material-semiotic clot that embeds the figure of matter in spacetime.” (Verran 2009, 172) The very separation from background is already a non-universal operation, even if here, it will keep operating, as for now I am unable to do and write differently. This is why the concept of the multiple, which will do some important work in the text again and again, is so ground-breaking: a thing is more than one and less than many. The versions partially map on to each other, and partially they don't. Like the infamous duck-hare image, where it is one shape but two animals, and neither can be seen while the other appears. And things are made *infra*, not *meta* from above but in the messy,

²⁶ Developments in fields such as biomedical anthropology or other investigations into the functioning and successes or lack thereof of sciences and scientific imaginaries dominating society are potent reminders of how fantasy- and myth-based Modernity remains. This is not surprising as clichés and myths make life easier, reduce complexity to something manageable in daily life. The problem is the myth of rationality, already achieved perfect knowledge and objectivity imagined to be possessed by (almost) every human body coming to be formed in the institutions of this society.

unstable between. “This is dizzying work. Things that seem to be essential for generalizing – ‘knowers’ and ‘known abouts’ – disappear. New sorts of entities emerge.” (Verran 2001, 158)

As work went on, I came to decide to leave the concept of the image somewhat undertheorized, making use of its polysemy, taking it from one complex scene to the other. Leaving a clearer, philosophical articulation for future work. Here, I will lay out a minimal mapping of its potential, as the concept has come to be while doing this research. On a most general level, I take image to be a metastable set which includes parts (sub-images themselves complex) that have come to be habitualized or naturalized in certain regions of the world. These can overlap, as hegemonic images are made to travel, but can also have minimal connection, as in worlds of small scale societies. An image, following Deleuze (1989), is also temporal, a slice of time (qua change) that affects other images. An image to me, here, in so far as it relates to conventionally understood human consciousness and perception, has a pre-conscious part that operates immediately (and is constituted of past images, becoming stable through series of repetitions) and a conscious part, that can be accessed through active remembering (which is not memory per se, as here I follow Deleuze's Bergsonian conception of the term). To differentiate further, an image is made by random cuts and techno-cultural connections; if, following Strathern (2002), Melanesian realities are such that each body is seen not as an instance of a general body but through the decorations that connect it laterally with other decorations, it is still an image, just what is immediately seen and montaged/edited/associated together will differ from my own immediate habit.

To reenter the image from the beginning (which is actually just a part of the image, connected conceptually, but not sensorially to what is occurring here), the indigenous body reacting immediately to Christ on the cross is the preconscious part of image doing its work, and the indigenous body coming to think and argue about what that human figure on the cross might be or do, is the conscious aspect. It is what in many philosophies would be termed recognition, and is but a small part of what is happening. Though here too, new connections, associations can be formed. Images, much like everything, emerge from relational differences, and precisely because of this are not only not self-same, but also differ locally and as history. Thus, there is no general human (image), it will differ for each body in each place at each time. It is not prudent to locate image, recognition and reality-construction inside the human body (as Deleuze argues in the cinema books against phenomenology, which

operationalizes an image where the human illuminates what is basically dead matter), but rather all is image. And, crucially, for Buddhist teachings, imaging and imagining are separate but not separable, imagination always being co-constitutive of imaging, and vice versa. (Fan 2020) What is seen is never simply a direct imprint, the past and the speculative combine. Figurations operate everywhere.²⁷ Figurative artworks have that special capacity to multiply a locally constituted image and make it circulate far outside the borders of their original constitution. None more of course than those made of technologies that appear to make direct imprints of what is in front, in other words that constitute an image in such a way that the untrained human eye can't preconsciously grasp a difference between technologically produced image and outside reality. Perhaps, there is even mutual cross-pollination as constructed images come to condition what is seen otherwise. Such technologies take conditioned slices, leaving as much out as remains in, and can't in any way store much of what is there in a situation, including emotions. As mentioned above, it takes endless repetitions of certain images for them to have any stabilized effect on how bodies compose perception. With technologies of reproduction such as photography and moving images, the energy needed to create such images which can circulate and change worlds wherever there is adequate infrastructure, has minimized infinitely. The same goes for the energy needed for their repetitive presence in the sense-worlds of human bodies. The energy referred to here is that of human creativity. This is not to diminish the ecological and even geological formatting of the earth to make such infrastructure possible. (Parikka 2015) As any reader will be aware, not all images, much like humans and other species, have the same freedom of travel, as it is Western images, and those formed specifically in certain regions of the United States by the most hegemonic of actors, that move around much more freely and much further than any others. When their repetitive accumulation reaches a certain degree, they can come to act in ways close to their region of origin. In other words, once images (and accompanying frameworks) of Christ come to be ever-present in a new area of the world (usually through direct imperialism), locals will indeed start seeing Christ and not just a man. Images created in the region that came to challenge and change me, meanwhile travel only very infrequently and in such limited amounts as to their idiosyncrasy to be almost entirely erased, only at times being grasped conceptually, only rarely aesthetically. That is the presence of Buddhist imaginaries in the West remains comparatively minimal and as such unless a body specifically engages Buddhist worlds with the aim of changing the way it sees the world, these images

²⁷ "Figurations are performative images that can be inhabited. Verbal or visual, figurations can be condensed maps of contestable worlds. All language, including mathematics, is figurative, that is, made of tropes, constituted by bumps that make us swerve from literal-mindedness. I emphasize figuration to make explicit and inescapable the tropic quality of all material-semiotic processes, especially in technoscience." (Haraway 1997, 11)

and conventions will appear against an aesthetically Christian ground.

Additionally, figures can be separated through the operations of the complex nervous system of bodies, even as they mesh in materiality. Figure is something else than that which directly and exclusively tied to one specific material composition. It is a slice of a situation, an abstracted shape that passes through different layers and makes it possible to connect what is proper to these layers. This is the figurative. While the figural, following Brenez (1998) and Lyotard (1971), is the articulation of the figure within an (artistic) medium, proper to the potentials of the medium and the materials used, disregarding the limits a figure would have in a different sphere, such as the organic body. In other words, while a figure such as a specified human body might be referred to with the same words in the discursive realm, its composition in oil painting will differ from that in film, and with it the potential forms it might take. The common operations of language make it easy to forget that while a word appears the same, it is the composition of each situation that actually makes words real and heavy. Materiality enables different figural expression. In cinema, freed from the organic body, composed of a succession of (at times impossible) images, figures can take on forms they wouldn't be able to as tied to organic bodies. These in turn have creative potentials that a cinematically formed figure doesn't. It's the figures that migrate through these differing materialities, and are conceptually subsumed under a term in the discursive realm. One should not fall prey to the misapprehension that these are the same images (in the above sense) or bodies. In ethnographic writing, image encounters are translated into writing, and figures are what makes it possible to connect these different media spheres, detect analogous patterns, apprehend similarities based in convention. But these media ecologies are different, as the materials composing them are always unique. One may read the word Buddha, but it will be a very different thing, depending on the reader – even for the same reader, as in one of bodily continuity, when systematically engaging potentials of what Buddha is and looks like, Buddha will be a different thing with each iteration.

The figure of the Buddha or monks, as shaped in classical arts, but also in cinema and more recent media, does not have to be realist in any conventional sense. That is, the forms don't have to follow organic conventions of what is and isn't possible according to this or that code. Indeed, the limits to these figures are posed by conceptual conventions (often laid out in texts, whether transmitted orally or written) and material/technological conditions, innovations. Such is apparent to those who

have traveled to areas where this particular tradition has had significant influence in how the world has come to work. As opposed to Christian worlds, where massive statues of Christ or saints are few and far between, Buddhas seem to have little limits when it comes to size and location. And, of course, once awakened through following correct practice, one can see an entirely different world, outside of what a regularly composed human body is able to. Buddhist tradition, with its almost infinite amount of sūtras, further differs in another mediatic way: there is no one truth, no one event, to be at the center of everything; development, change, is part of that tradition, even if the karmic laws (inaccessible by untrained sensory equipment) continue to operate. Such manners meanwhile are difficult to access merely by going somewhere and looking or interviewing. Seeing takes practice and practice transforms. It is the confluence of percepts and concepts, the mixing of these from different traditions, that make such simplicities apparent. What is seen is and is not what is seen.

As has hopefully become clear, image, and problems connected to it, are anything but easy to delineate or to concisely clarify. The concept of the image, to paraphrase and slightly tweak Deleuze & Guattari (1994), is composed of other concepts, and while metastable, has around its edges zones of indiscernibility, where it overlaps with other images. Ironically perhaps, this is not dissimilar to how Tambiah (2013) has described the operation of mandalas in galactic polities of premodern Southeast Asian realities. The image as percept, as that which connects to and through the senses, I will treat analogically. In that each image (always specific, overdetermined, unlike a concept which is sensorially empty) is composed of other images and zones of indiscernibility. As the reader proceeds, concepts and percepts connect with what can be mobilized from habit, from the worlds one inhabits and of which one is inhabited. Habit here includes preconscious prediction, enabling a stable and continuous experience, while the world is an excess which each body's senses reduce for patterns to emerge. The same activity is done by the connected nervous system with its intensified region of the brain. In order to function, information has to be filtered, otherwise there will be only noise. A signal, information, is always a reduction of what is there. As this is research, the interest in finding something new pertains to intellectual and conscious operations, and the encounters sought so as they may enact an unpredictation for the patterns of recognition, do so on a level where conceptual certainty brakes down. While sensory certainty can also be shocked and break, this is forms a much smaller of the present inquiry. Be it, that quite a few rituals, not to mention artworks, or just movements through the excessive hustle and bustle of Bangkok at times acted that way upon the body that is writing here. Habitual, automatic predicting is

a repetition of patterns with variations too slight to appear as breaks or dissonances, it's a preconscious selection of information to constitute what will appear (that is have an effect on the senses and nervous system) in the first place. All the while, one should be aware that the future is open, it has not yet happened, whatever comes next is always uncertain and new, to some degree. Only sometimes the image that follows cannot compose in a way to ensure a smooth continuation. Still, even in the most secure sensory experience, the information contained in what is apprehended far outdoes anything that can be put into words. One learns this when attempting to write down every little detail one sees at the moment or that is contained in a frame of a film.

A description of an image will always differ from a sensory image. They have different functions, different effects and are made of different parts. For somebody who has never been to Bangkok, much of what I write will be empty, and inserting a literal image (as is sometimes done in ethnographies) here or there will not help, because it is only when sights and sounds and all other senses encounter worlds repeatedly, that other worlds become memories and pre-consciously connect with words. This to me, is one of the basic and somewhat undervalued powers of cinema – it forces an encounter with images different from what we have been taught, unlike writings, which may tickle the imagination, but this imagination will be filled with transformations of what is known, and not provoked into sensorial thought by what is unknown. Once again, empirical encounters can make aimed transformation happen, at least to those bodies that have not been hardened into pre-consciously dismissing the new or immediately transforming it into the known, even before any more active consciousness sets in to do the same.

04. From Media to Mediation

This is not a summary nor an overview of media theory or (German) media philosophy in all its variety and possible contradictions.²⁸ This, much like the previous explorations of contemporary potentials of anthropological inquiry, is a short expose aimed at those that have not concerned themselves systematically with these fields that reconfigure most of what came before. It will create a general understanding as to what role media thought plays here and how it enables a new kind of research.²⁹

The medium is the middle or mediator. All etymologically related words, of perhaps little explanatory value that nevertheless serve to intensify a position with a relation that tends to be overlooked. It is an object of study (media as technology), an approach (to old objects of study; media archaeology) and a performatively rhetorical thing polemically engaging outdated orientations such as humanism or most kinds of realism, such that cling to tenets long demonstrated to be untenable.³⁰ “*Media*, then, is many things, ranging from a verbal club liberally applied to those stuck in old meaning-seeking paradigms to a kind of conceptual defamiliarization tool designed to break the narcotic spell deviantly servile technologies cast on their users.” (Winthrop-Young 2013, 13) The term *medium* furthermore is used in anthropological and related literature for a type of person that communicates with the dead.³¹ While all are connected and overlapping, it is the middle one that I want to stress most: media as an approach. The middle is essentially relational and as a conceptual experiment can be applied anywhere, which is why it holds revolutionary potential and regardless of the differences between all kinds of media theories connects them. It enacts a radical reorientation or recomposition of thought and world. Once one learns to think and perceive in terms of media and mediation, nothing remains the same as one's world transforms and hidden metaphysical pretensions often claimed to have been wiped out appear to be happily operational in the most so-called secular of philosophies and sciences.³²

²⁸ For a detailed discussion of the difference, see Winthrop-Young 2013, 2014.

²⁹ A note for media theorists: concurrently, the position from which these pages are mostly written, is from that of a human body, so many media theoretical discussions are of little import, as it's more about 'culture,' how conditioned humans claim to conventionally experience or approach 'media technologies' and not so much whether the computer is a radically different entity than cinema.

³⁰ Here one can discern an affinity with posthumanism, which is multiple itself, and while much of it is Deleuzian, there is also foundational research that is not. (E.g. Hein 2016, but countered by Murriss & Bozalek 2019) So, in keeping with what I propose on these pages in general, philosophies are incompatible until new objects are created that make them compatible, which of course transforms all of the entities related.

³¹ The connection between the two has been explored in the anthropology of Thailand. (See e.g. Morris 2000)

³² The way Latour conceives of mediators and intermediaries is relatable to and not incompatible with what I write. (See

Thinking said middle is hardly a recent practice, what is new is taking it, in all its slipperiness, as an object of and for thought. This would be so, because the middle is the carrier of a message, of content, and disappears in the act of communication. The middle is not a ‘thing,’ a stabilized object easy to grasp and define. As something between, it is fundamentally heteronomous (Krämer 2015, 34), which makes much media theory easily resistant to facile reductivism, essentialism as well as generalization. In difference to signs, “[w]hen something is viewed as a medium, however, it behaves in the exact opposite way: what is perceptible is usually the message itself, and the message is also what matters most in the media event. The message is thus considered primary, while the medium itself is secondary; it neutralizes itself, becomes invisible and disappears in its (noise-free) use. In the semiological perspective, the meaning is ‘concealed’ behind the sensible; in the mediological perspective, on the other hand, the sensible is ‘concealed’ behind the meaning.” (Ibid., 35) One would want to pay attention to the phrasing, as ‘something is viewed as a medium’ – again, it is not artifacts out there, that are simply media (technologies), it's more and less than that. While semiology would look for the invisible meaning behind the material/aesthetic sign, a mediology looks for the physical, material medium that carries the meaning. Obviously, the continued use of ‘-logy’ is also put into question. This, when logically extended, comes to imply that the meaning is not simply independent of material carriers, in other words how thoughts are noted (including, say the style) is not a neutral ground that simply disappears.³³ Media by way of disappearing in the process of communicating, cannot serve as any fundamental ground: “no media a priori is to be established, and media are thus not to be located within the frame of ultimate justifications.” (Ibid., 39)

As the media theorist Alexander Galloway (2012, 13) elaborates, it is perhaps more prudent to write of mediation than media, as the former is processual, so as not to fall into the trap of positing media as specific technologies, as things out there, later to be classified and analyzed by quasi positivist research. The conceptual move hidden therein is a classic misapplication inherent to the dogmatic

Latour 2005a, Verbeek 2005) Deleuze's relation to mediation is much more complicated here. (Smith 2006, but Grusin 2015) However, systematically elaborating on this would turn the attention away from other matters of concern, thus I will leave a detailed discussion of meditation in these two indispensable thinkers to be followed through references.

³³ Again, one might notice the parallels to materialist posthumanism, as in the famous dictum of Karen Barad (2007), it matters how matter matters. And, in relational anthropology, Marilyn Strathern (1992, 10) coined a similar phrase: “it matters what ideas we use to think other ideas.” So to think something with the idea of media instead of essence, will produce a different kind of thought, a different object in thought even, as the (disappearing) idea that is in the middle is co-constitutive. Whether a Buddhist tenet is thought starting from liberal individualism or from within a relational world, makes for very different, if related, thought.

image of thought, namely the primary positing of something while disregarding its primary positing by one's thought in the first place, thus being able to pretend it is simply out there. A relational media thought would notice that that which disappears is precisely the first positing of something without having to substantiate this first event. The most basic operation is the positing of an independent reality or a thing out there that is fully and directly represented by one's thought and writing. The act of connecting elements, of selecting something out there and connecting it with an idea and narrative a body is putting together, disappears. One veers dangerously close to theology and the first move of a world (or thought) created out of nothing. It is in fact a naturalization of Christian tenets in allegedly non-theological practice like philosophy or research in general. Following the media philosopher Friedrich Kittler (2010) media technologies (such as writing) store, process, and transmit, and this non-relational way of positing their existence (and qualities) can make it impossible to notice the presence of theories of mediation in older thought. (Galloway 2012)³⁴ This leads to a connected tendency: “For Kittler also harbors a deep-seated interest in another ancient yearning of philosophy, one which is as old as it is powerful. It is the desire to reduce the many to the one.” (Ibid., 16) Which is, again, one that prioritizes object over medium – the middle disappears, what one is left with is stuff out there. However, “[a] philosophy of mediation will tend to proliferate multiplicity; a philosophy of media will tend to agglomerate difference into reified objects.” (Ibid., 17) Thinking in terms of mediation, a media theory not a theory of media, engenders the possibility of media thought appearing in unlikely places. “The Greeks indubitably had an intimate understanding of the physicality of transmission and message sending (Hermes). They differentiated between mediation as immanence and mediation as expression (Iris versus Hermes). They understood the mediation of poetry via the Muses and their *techne*. They understood the mediation of bodies through the ‘middle loving’ Aphrodite. They even understood swarming and networked presence (in the incontinent mediating forms of the Eumenides who pursued Orestes in order to ‘process’ him at the *procès* of Athena). Thus we need only look a little bit further to shed this rather vulgar, consumer-electronics view of media, and instead graduate into the deep history of media as modes of mediation, a task that with a bit of luck will be accomplished presently *vespere et mane*.” (Ibid., 15) Mediation is a process of the world, and nothing is reducible to one. In terms of relationality, it is important to note the way I treat the appearance of new objects, material or immaterial or any combination of these. The formation of something new in the non-teleological, acentral evolution (qua complex intra-action between bodies and environments) of cosmos means that

³⁴ This can be more conceptual, as the *tò metaxú* in Aristotle, or imageric as the Cartesian self modeled on the magic lantern (Galloway 2013, 14–15).

in things that were there before new aspects or possibilities appear, part of the virtual becomes actualized. One can notice it in the imagery that populates philosophies. Materiality, the sensory, the imageric is never simply disconnected from thought, much like the material that makes up a book, a writing system, etc. Anybody that attempted to open up material reading objects from the past, before the standardization of writing systems through new technologies (which include ideas) will be aware. Or indeed as anybody trying to listen to speech in circumstances of high noise will be aware, meaning is not always easily gathered. All takes energy, even as habitualization diminishes energy expenses. Depending on the signal to noise ratio, entirely new meanings based on strong misunderstandings based on preconsciously preconceived notions of what might be communicated in order to shape the noise into signal can appear. There is a game people play, called Chinese whispers in English that makes playful use of these conditions. Once a central stabilizing element is dispensed with, and communication continues along a temporal line, what is whispered from ear to ear in suboptimal conditions transforms rather rapidly. Understanding, meaning, translation are all entangled in materiality and habits. The sensory system and neural networks are material and mediate. Buddhist teachings and practices are actually concerned with this middle, with how senses come to construct what appears. The relation between such elements was, in Occidental tradition already formulated by Walter Benjamin, who “is seen as a pioneer in the discovery of a conditional relation between technics and art, technology and perception, media, and the senses.” (Krämer 2015, 40)

As for the following pages, media theory and mediation are of invaluable importance for at least two reasons. First, they enable to reconceptualize the activity of the anthropologist and the tools used in anthropology (and related fields), and make appear all that which supports the production of knowledge but disappears in the process of creating knowledge according to academic standards. That is, all the technological infrastructure, all the techniques employed, etc., to a much larger extent in more complex ways than the self-critical strands of anthropology have hitherto done. This is done in a way that actually acknowledges the material continuity of the world, while remaining aware of cosmological/ontological impossibility,³⁵ and concurrently acknowledging the random cuts or discontinuities made in order to be able to produce any knowledge. With it, a different image of the world appears, one that will sharpen as the accumulation of sentences, concepts and imagery will

³⁵ The Deleuzian version of Leibniz's concept is used here: “We must therefore understand that impossible worlds, despite their impossibility, have something in common – something objectively in common – which represents the ambiguous sign of the genetic element in relation to which several worlds appear as instances of solution for one and the same problem.” (Deleuze 1990, 114)

increase. And, secondly, they enable to reconstruct a Buddhist thought alternatively to what Buddhist studies of all strands (analytical philosophy and phenomenology being dominant) continue to do, namely taking the starting point of an individual subject as simply existing and (in case of phenomenology) secondarily problematized. Buddhist thought, Buddhist worlding, as (re)constructed by modern science, is quite clear on the construction of human perception, the role of body and its contact with the environment, and of it not being the ultimate ground. The uncertainties about perception and reality are distributed very differently than in the Christian-Secular versions commonly employed in research, as will be expanded on later. The challenge is to find tools to articulate this without falling back onto conditioned experience as is commonly done. What connects almost all (introductory and advanced) accounts of Buddhist thought is a realist assumption: reality as experienced by a Modern generalized is the starting point of inquiry and there is nothing to experimentally shift and decentralize this. Only with the occasional third-world Marxist³⁶ account is there any questioning of conventional liberal subject based reality as self-evident ground (Sankrityayan 1970). Even in teachings so intently built around the decentralization of subjectivity and so-called natural perception, when grasped by modern allegedly scientific means the liberal subject and its (latent) idealism continues operating silently or even loudly. It is one thing to start there, with thought, because that is where one out of necessity has to commence (as the Buddha pointed out, since otherwise one falls into senseless metaphysical speculation that cannot be verified), it's another to never be able to really transform it. When mind-body comes to be in different variations in different worlds, one cannot continue using the neutral body or mind as a general thing, or structures of perception as if all that ultimately remained stable, all transformation happening without fundamentally changing a body. Learning to think and perceive in terms of all that which disappears in the process of something appearing, whether it be a message, a theory, a description, a concept, enacts such a reorientation that it becomes evident that the concept as image of thought operationalized, is a distinctly modern European one with its Greco-Christian genealogy.³⁷ Thinking with mediation is a decolonial path out of the Christian legacy of the One and a final unmovable ground that keeps its iron claws sunk into fidgeting of mere mortals having encountered other worlds and ways of thinking but not always having tools to

³⁶ The most common approach among Occidentals is to show that Buddhist and Marxist ethics, at least the Western humanist Marxist ones, are compatible or very close. (E.g. Struhl 2017, Slott 2011) This to me is beyond the point, because in doing so both of them are reduced to a version of liberal humanism, leaving intact the whole conceptual infrastructure the problematic side of which (i.e. inherent exclusion via reduction to one, or the immediate projection of universalism before even inquiring into counter examples) continues to be disavowed.

³⁷ The Christian heritage in contemporary research and Occidental common sense will be explored in detail later on in the text.

generate something forceful from these openings. Decolonization is open-ended, a goal is to create the conditions for multiplicity and variety in academic research, so as not to fall back onto the one-world world model, held together by reification, essentialization and the one, hiding the very practices that constitute those illusions. This is one such experiment that seeks to build an alternative, impossible, partially overlapping, in other words a differentiation through incommensurable encounters made generative, the success of which will only show itself in an unknown future. It is also a thought that affirmatively operates a world-in-the-making instead of continually positing an independent, already finished one.

05. Buddhist Conceptual Alternatives

When wading through the endless pages devoted to the study of Buddhism, one must not even prance in the down to earth accounts by anthropologists to encounter a conceptual betel nut that is anything but easy to crack, indeed that seems to be a nut fashioned of stone. As postcolonial and other critical research has increasingly demonstrated, Buddhism was not simply found out there in the world, but is rather a Western invention (however much it is stabilized today as a category qua thing that operates in the world) with nefarious implications for history and all manner of peoples. (King 1999, McMahan 2008, Masuzawa 2005, Josephson 2006) Moreover, those doing research among the actually living, when having spent enough time among and acted in appropriate manners to be trusted by them, come to understand that people have come to learn to say certain things that appeal to Western Buddhists and non-Buddhists that are very different from what is actually practiced or thought. (Cassaniti 2015, 2018) The farang body more often than not brings with itself preconceived images of what Buddhism is and what Buddhists are and forcibly goes on to immediately transform what is encountered conform with their preconceptions. Whatever doesn't fit, is dismissed or posited as external to a true Buddhism, as something corrupted by locals. What if instead one were to take the complexity of contradictions as fact and relate it to one's own tacit assumptions about world, humanity or morality so as to transform one's own limitations and contradictions? As long as a world out there is posed and then related to an ideal to which it must conform, colonialist othering won't end. The farang, a term that arrived through Persian (from at first Franks specifically, later Westerners in general) in the Thai vocabulary, likes to come to places that have age old histories in a certain tradition and then arrogantly teach them about what is and isn't right in a tradition that the white person has only recently picked up through books or some learned Western monk with similar attitudes. In short and apart from evident Orientalism and the like, the entitlements of scientism as culturalized norm render blind to the creative affordances of any environment one moves in. Instead Buddhism is modeled on the conventions of the concept of religion (i.e. the ideal-type is posited as primary), the latter term itself evolving and changing with the times (without this being acknowledged). Religion, something developed with Christian modernity, of course reinscribes many divisions not found out there in the world beyond the Occident.³⁸ Dualisms such as

³⁸ Masuzawa (2005) demonstrates how religion is a matter of classification developed from some older Christian versions of dividing the world. Classification, separation, hardening of boundaries, sometimes even creating them out of thin air has always been the work of colonizers, and when steeped in Buddhist thought, it appears to have been central for Christianity: clear separation between Christians and non-Christians (as identity), the latter being Christians-to-be in the expansionist cosmology of Christianity and its contemporary secular version. Classification as ontologized separation continues operating in the constitution of fields of research, making the existence of entities like religion or Buddhism

religion and state, private and public, religion and science, modernity and premodernity, while having their pragmatic and indeed emancipatory reasoning given the histories of Christianitas and the development of modern states and ideas, such as those found in Hobbes's work. By way of the imperial restructuring of the world, the introduction and development of modern governing and state building techniques, first within colonial empires, then in emergent modern national states, such divisions came to be parts of reality all over, even if never easily mapping onto their outside. Indeed, it is the (partially) Buddhist worlds of so-called Eastern Asia where Western categories regularly break down, where 'reality out there' investigated empirically keeps resisting the image created by (Western) researchers and their propagated common sense. (Southwold 1978, Josephson 2012) For example, "the Thai religious field is characterised by multiple ritual and cosmological domains – including but not limited to Theravada Buddhism, Brahmanism, Chinese divinities, spirit possession, divination and astrology." (Jackson 2020, 9) And while some claim these "maintain distinct, bounded and differentiated identities," (ibid.) this extends at best to the composition of spaces, though what I encountered while doing research is not that easily separable in each instance. The challenge here is to pose the problem so that it appears generatively.

It is suggested to use *kala-thesa* "which can be understood as 'contextual sensitivity,'" (ibid., 9) literally meaning 'time and place' and showing a conception of the world where there is no neutral space or time within which sentient beings go about their affairs, but rather one where each section of space-time has its own rules and features, tying it to a relational logic of local hierarchical social organization. The different processes of mixing and combining that *kala-thesa* enables and can to some degree explain can happen within various contexts, in one ritual event or something much wider. What combinations appear depends on whether one, as a researcher, follows spaces, individuals, teachings, gestures, rituals, etc. In other words, it depends on what is kept stable and what can change within an analysis. As will be apparent, despite the occasional suggestion of including concepts drawn from local practices, I consider that most critical researchers (in fields organized around Buddhist topics) did not manage any actually generative engagement, mostly due to an unquestioned anthropocentrism, idealism (in how discourse is treated) and naive realism (in that the world is always taken as untouched

more real and ignoring critical work easier. The issue is most obviously a category mistake: the positing of a concept and then pretending it is somehow found out there in the world without the work done by the positing of the concept in the first place. Religion, today, is real, it is just something different than is assumed by common sense.

by research and the categories employed) that forecloses the possibility of becoming aware of all the new things that are brought into the world in doing research, as well as in forging new realities such as nation states, culture and, indeed, religion(s). All too often image as representation of world and world continue to be confused.

As many have noted, the similarities between different Buddhist worlds were anything but immediately apparent. In the words of one of the prime critical Buddhologists: “European explorers, missionaries, and soldiers had encountered Buddhists for centuries in all parts of Asia, yet only belatedly came to recognize the religion of these various peoples as somehow the same thing, as something that they would come to call Buddhism.” (Lopez Jr. 2005, 2) It took decades, centuries even to construct such scientific objects as to see immediately see the connections between artifacts appearing in what today is Japan, India, China, Thailand. The world changed as new things came to be, making some connections instantly visible and others disappear. Other people than Western(ized) scientists will see entirely different connections, realities.³⁹ Some of it was fed back into these regions (mostly through colonialism or neocolonialism, both drawing on scientific knowledges and classifications that they then materialized in Buddhist regions), of course transforming, changing the worlds in directions other than would've happened without this contact. The world differentiates, there is not a One above or apriori to tie it all together and make it all stable in a way that produces the illusion of eternal stability.

Still, Buddhism as a meta-stable entity has been created and does its work in the world. One can ignore it (but to what ends), one can critique it (as a negative movement, leaving the control of its futures to others) or one can experiment with it, creatively, take it to places where it ‘doesn't belong.’ As long as Buddhism will be treated as a thing out there to be categorized and not as a wealth of resources to make different worlds, ways of thinking and doing that can be tested and developed by applying it to new elements in the world, the engagement will be nothing but colonial – a work of containment and reduction. So, instead of a negation of a Western term (and its continually colonial and

³⁹ Unfortunately, for now, there is little research to parallel that done in relation to Amazonia in this mode of ‘reverse anthropology.’ (Cf. Kopenawa & Albert 2013) My work here is an attempt to put together a variety of sources to make such a reversal possible as it emerges from distinctly Buddhist worlding.

colonizing effects), to paraphrase ‘Asia as Method’ scholarship, it can be deployed in ways that are, to adapt Warwick Anderson (2012), more tactical engagements with the Western elements of the concept of Buddhism. According to Kuan-hsing Chen (2010, 223), the “task of Asia as method, then, is ‘to multiply frames of reference in our subjectivity and worldview, so that anxiety over the West can be diluted, and productive critical work can move forward.’” Multiplication of frames of reference is crucial, so as not to reduce the world to one, but also to enhance the (decolonial) possibilities of the so-called West. Much like Buddhism, Asia was also invented and carries with it more than just traces of its European origins. And, like Buddhism or any such entity, Asia is a category that is multiple, heterogeneous, operates relationally and contextually. Depending on the inquiry, it can be held somewhat stably in the background, or undergo active transformation. As Atsuro Morita (2020) stresses, a focus when using such laden terms should be on continuous transformations. Furthermore, one shouldn't mistake a category for a different thing out there, in the world, for that would be an all too common a category mistake. The category is the thing out there already. Something Buddhist teachings have been productive to point out for centuries – if only Buddhist studies researchers would manage to apply what they glean from such texts to their own practice. Modern science in its continued application of a dogmatic image of thought is very much built on category mistakes and confusions due to its tacit idealist realism and tendency toward thinking first in terms of separate entities with clear origins and any kind of mixing later. As another Chinese STS researcher (Fan 2016) points out, growing up in the Taiwan of the 1980s, things of all origins are already mingling, gathered from around the world. The world happens, there is no primary purity and secondary defilement. A medical anthropologist working creatively the fields of Thai realities, Felicity Aulino (2020a, 2022) keeps working through Thai realities and minds, modeling much of it on the influential Buddhist scholar Buddhaghosa (5th century Indian subcontinent) to show how reality doesn't have to be either or, to show that worlds and practices and thought don't have to turn around the One, Truth or any other mono-concept to the exclusion of others.⁴⁰ Treating Buddhism as method is a way to draw on these other

⁴⁰ To be clear, the One as immanence (via Deleuze-Spinoza) is a very different one. It is not sameness but as (potential) connection/communication/interaction of all. The insidiousness of the common sense (Christian) One is that it claims one world, but denies any actual communication and change happening between elements it doesn't recognize as its own. It is a transcendent One, untouched and expansive (or better: eyes are closed so that it can be pretended it is unchanging). As such, capitalism appears as a distinct development of Christianity, for it too connects with everything but only as a one-way street. One world is posited primarily, while alterity is posited in the same movement (but conveniently forgotten). “The disaster of world history is that capitalism was never the progressive unwinding of patrilineage through a series of generalized exploitative relations associated with a trans-cultural exogamy, leading to an uncontrollable eruption of feminine (i.e. migrant) alterity into the father's heartland, and thus to the emergence of a radical – or ethnically disruptive and post-patriarchal – synthesis. Instead, kinship and trade were systematically isolated from each other, so that the internationalization of the economy was coupled with an entrenchment of xenophobic

possibilities of conceptual and imageric (infra)structuration in ways that ought to be at least partly intelligible to those weaned on the reality that there are religions simply out there and that this is a neutrally descriptive statement, and not one that actively transforms what is.

Studying all manner of sources, one thing becomes as clear as Buddha's heart-mind: prescriptive and normative statements about Buddhism are not a productive way to approach this different world. For one, it becomes apparent that if anything, this is a tradition that thrives on hybridity and change. It is clear from the teachings themselves, the way it spread mostly along trade routes, with representatives often being called by rulers, as apparently it came with prestige as well as governing tools (for a Thai-based discussion, see Baumann 2020), and even when its 'missionary' potentials were tapped, this was not done through violence and forced expansion (how could it be, as there is no lay conversion in this tradition!). As is known from contemporary sources, when unsuccessful in preaching the dhamma, monks would just leave a village be. (Keyes 1993) The way societies where Buddhist teachings played an important role came to be, namely pluralist or multiple, with all kinds of practices and spaces next to each other, even in the lives of individuals, where it is common in all areas to practice rites from all kinds of traditions in one day even. This can be noticed today too, in Bangkok and elsewhere, even after the emergence of a purer and more state-related Protestant Buddhism. Of course, this doesn't mean that there aren't individuals or families to be found that would adhere almost exclusively to Buddhist practices. Any claim to fully exempt a possibility would be non-sensical. And it is precisely this enduring variety of combinations that stands against Western conceptions such as (religious) identity, even if a Thai today will tell you they are Buddhist. Such statements ought not to confirm the preconceived image of the world a Westerner has, but rather lead to posing a variety of questions that would lead to a transformation of one's own world to include possibilities that were hitherto external to it. That, indeed, would be a scientific attitude worth its name and lofty ideals. On these pages, the term *Buddhadharma* or Buddhist teachings will be used for such historical and (continuous if changing) contemporary Buddhist practices, teachings, worlds, while Buddhism⁴¹ will do

(nationalistic) kinship practices, maintaining a concentration of political and economic power within an isolated and geographically sedentary ethnic stock.” (Land 2012a, 62) The promise of universality (making everything same, but at least somewhat equal), undercut by radical in/out group distinction as hierarchy has been central to the operations of Christianity. In other words, one Nature (the realm of capital accumulation), but different cultures (the humans to be exploited) are assumed. This makes it possible to naturalize separations in the creation of so-called value (transformation of what was into other entities enmeshed with immaterial things such as ideas) and to deny to active participation of the culturalized others, as if all had always sprung from those owning capital.

⁴¹ This would be what Viveiros de Castro (2004b) terms 'controlled equivocation,' namely to make discursively present a

for the scientific construct and the significantly Christianized, solitary version Westerners practice more often than not exclusive of the myriads of entities, monsters and deities typically tied to Buddhadharma as it came to be practiced into worlds outside and before the poorly protestant Buddhist world habitually imagined by Moderns today.⁴² At times, the term *Sasanaphut*⁴³ will appear, the Thai version of Buddhadharma, when something specifically Thai will be operationalized.⁴⁴

Just to give a taste of a world not built on exclusion – though hierarchies may appear – a few examples will follow: “One could even argue that the early Chakri kings, with their Mon, Persian, and Chinese blood were foreign invaders into an ethnically diverse set of villages that was turned into Bangkok/Thonburi and that the ethnic minorities of the early city were the Siamese.” (McDaniel 2018, 132–133) Malay, Mon, Lao communities were not merely within the original mandala, but even within the original fortress, itself built by foreign workers. The mandala, that Hindu-Buddhist tool of government and spatial organization, “was simply mapped over an already diverse urban core by an already ethnically diverse royal family.” (Ibid., 133) Furthermore Muslims were part of the royal family, and mosques were to be found in the city, with Persian, Cham, Malay, Indonesian and other communities being important. (van Roy 2016) King Rama III himself, one of the most important Chakri kings, had a Muslim mother, a descendant of a Persian sultan who had founded a kingdom on today's southern Thailand. (Formichi 2020, 34) The Persian connection has been studied particularly well. (Marcinkowski 2005) “King Rama III did not deny or hide his mother’s religion or ethnicity.

difference in homonyms that usually disappears. Western ‘Buddhism,’ academic or not, is not the same as Buddhist traditions that go way back. Neither is it entirely different.

⁴² The positing of Buddhism as a thing out there, often to be found in the earliest and thus truest texts follows the well-known pattern: posing eternal essence with changes being secondary and unimportant, ironically going very much against any kind of Buddhist thought. Buddhism thus conceived is Christianity with (non-controversial, compatible) Buddhist decorations.

⁴³ “*sāsana* (Skt.; Pali, *sasana*). A term used by Buddhists to refer to their religion. It has a range of possible translations, including teaching, doctrine, and as ‘Buddha-sasana,’ ‘the teachings of the Buddha,’ especially in the context of their historical continuity as religious tradition.” (Keown 2003, 255) Note that Thais call Christianity *sasana christ* or, the teachings of Christ, and Islam *sasana islam*, the teachings of Islam, translating ‘religion’ as something more of ethical guidelines and institutions to follow, rather than something akin to truth and identity (and thus less exclusive of other teachings). With such a concept of ‘religion’ operating (when speaking English), it is of little surprise that Thais in general speak of adhering to other religions as being fine, as long as we all try to be good people. This is obviously a rather radical transformation of religions of the One, of Truth, of anything ultimate.

⁴⁴ The anthropologist Martin Southwold (1983) proposes to translate *Buddha Dharma* as reality and *Buddha Sāsana* as ‘Buddhism as a spatio-temporal phenomenon’ or ‘Buddhendom’ as an analogy to ‘Christendom.’ It is the onto-epistemological operations of dharma (as both world/reality/cosmic order and the correct teaching about it discovered by the Buddha) which make me favor it over *sāsana* which while partly overlapping, does not make it possible to engage multinaturalism, for it can easily be integrated into a one-world world framework.

Indeed, he promoted it openly. His very first act as king, before any military or building plans, was to elevate his mother as Queen Srisulalai, making her the highest-ranking Muslim in Thai royal history. Second, he built a mosque in her honour, not far from Ton Son mosque.” (McDaniel 2018, 135) She was treated as a Buddhist after her death and honored for her Muslim heritage during her life, which points toward a different cosmopractice than the one Christian-Seculars like to project. Different ethnicities also came to practice Buddhhadharma, such as the Persian Bunnag family that sponsored Wat Prayun. King Mongkut is another example from the elites, he “was not merely inspired by the Mon – he worked to incorporate their Buddhist knowledge and language into the heart of Siamese Buddhism.” (McDaniel 2018, 140) These are always shifting worlds and practices not turning around the verification of and by the One. The Hindu influence is known to have been of particular importance, with very popular shrines active even today, historical use for governmental purposes (including important roles for Brahmins) and the appearance of countless deities in constituent Thai Buddhist texts as well as vernacular suttas, jātakas and many other ostensibly Buddhist documents, not to mention the numerous shows on Thai television dramatizing Hindu materials. Thus, “one cannot begin to understand Bangkok without seeing it as essentially diverse and not a Siamese city that happens to have some other ethnicities because of historical circumstance and benign acceptance.” (McDaniel 2018, 138) This forces a different conception of religion, ethnicity, identity, etc. – in short reality. When one opens any of the general histories of the area, both continental and pelagic, it's impossible to overlook that the whole of Southeast Asia was, before Modernism (and the essentialist feedback of Western scientific categorization of identities, religions, ethnicities and nations as exclusive affairs with the truest versions of teachings to be found in the oldest documents) at least, a region where the world operated in a different way than we are used to. (Reid 1988, 1993; Hall 2010a; Lieberman 2003, 2009)

So how to deal with such a reality, when one doesn't just want to force a pattern on it that clearly doesn't fit? Perhaps one even wants to reconfigure the analytical tools, ensure a creative feedback from elsewhere that transforms the capacities of one's own world. Researchers on Southeast Asia (with import far beyond these boundaries) have developed certain ways to deal with the mind-boggling variety of the region. Benedict Anderson, famous for developing the Imagined Community concept, in that very book mentioned how states create categories in order to better govern. On the example of Rome and its relation to the Germanic outside, the anthropologist James C. Scott

demonstrates how the creation of such categories can go hand-in-hand with military efforts not necessarily to fully integrate that outside, but to enforce a reaction from groups of peoples to organize in a way that is legible for the state system. (Scott 2009, 2017) He elaborates such problematics based on research with the peoples of Southeast Asian continental highlands he calls Zomia (derived from Zomi, a common Tibeto-Burman term for highlander), to similarly show how states (ancient or imperialist) seek control through the establishment of categories, often knowing that these are not straightforwardly descriptive of a much more complex reality (e.g. the various Chinese empires and governing tools created there, but this is lost on most of us realist representationalist Moderns). Words do things, so do concepts, so does infrastructure, laws, and other technologies. They did and do so in Europe too, where nations or ethnicities with clear boundaries also had to be created. The Western category of Buddhism is one such entity that seeks, in order to govern and pacify, to put order into a world where humans and non-humans are anything but easily classifiable. That science cannot be done without categorization may be one thing, that researchers tend to mistake analytical or governmental categories for simple realities out there, is another. As European colonialist regimes expanded and complexified by learning from challenges, they had to create ways of ruling those subjugated (abroad and at home), among them are of course national, religious, etc categorizations, made more real through such things as passports, etc. The census and one's identity being materialized into a document somewhere harden boundaries wherever one goes. When new things are formed in the world, the world changes with it. Precolonial empires made for different realities than what we have today, when the either/or essentialism derived from Christianity was normalized not just in Europe, but in many other parts of the world. Despite this, moving around Bangkok, it is clear that people continue to practice all kinds of activities a regular ivory tower scholar would immediately consider as incompatible. And conceptually they might even be, but people don't live logically consistent lives, as any half aware scholar ought to realize about themselves (once they turn their gaze away from proclaimed ideals toward analyzing their life as it happens), and maybe other peoples do live more consistent lives than one reared in Euro-American realism might think, albeit with different logics than some worlds have habitualized projecting universally. After all, has not that always been one of the powers of the conceptual and practical tools developed by the anthropological tradition, namely to show how humans and the worlds we (co)create might be different?

The Anthropologist, Media and the In-Between

06. A Temple in the Jungle

Challenges. Even though the image was composed at what was in no way more than a mile or two from where he had been staying, the world couldn't have felt more different. Indeed, as he had noted in his digital fieldwork notebook, meaning folder on his drive, this place half-concealed in trees instilled in him an appreciation for concerns some Bangkok university students, who spent a previous weekend at the resort where he was volunteering as what turned out to be a social media expert so as to create the illusion of giving something to the local community in return for the opportunity to do research, experienced as significant. They had told him they go to the bathroom together for fear of encountering ghosts, *phii*. They being young people of all genders. Younger than him by a few years even, still studying at a technical university in the capital. On his way to that place he came to realize he had passed the fork in the road before without ever noticing there was a temple down this particular path. After all, it looked like a dirt road to nowhere, or alternatively to a private residence, and on his bicycle the paved roads looked like a safer bet for now. Especially with all the stray dogs barking and trotting about when not lying on the ground. And anyways, he was supposed to have time to explore by himself and there was not much there in this settlement in the Western mountains at the end of the railway. Instead of going out and about, trying to establish contacts and gather experience, he was made to sit in an office with nothing much to do. So much for volunteering. The temple down the dirt path situation had come to appear as a variation of his encounters with Thai practices: things are not exactly hidden or forbidden, but if you don't know how and where exactly, you won't notice. A world quite different from his own. Or maybe he would come to realize the same was true at home, if he only looked at it through eyes trained in Thai worlds. Riding a bicycle in this elongated village (*mu ban*) with a waterfall at the end of the railroad that passes over the river Kwai would have made him an obvious outsider even if he hadn't looked like a *farang*. This role he had to play, which admittedly also had its perks, as some local workers kept inviting him to drink with them, made him supremely conscious of not wanting to transgress. Going down the dirt road to God knows where seemed a little early after less than two weeks. The employees at the resort kept reassuring him they would show him around, so why press on? In time, uncertain paths will become more stable. He becomes aware of the necessary reliance on others and their good will. He acknowledges that he can't ever be sure his research plans will come to be as planned.

Movement. That day, it was all a rush. The woman who had promised to take him to the temple and a driver friend showed up nine-ish, and immediately almost dragged him with. They came unannounced, much earlier than the time they told him the day before. In the pick-up, still startled and slightly disoriented, he asked about the time with his rudimentary Thai skills and some gesticulating. They told him now was the best time, they had confused the day of the week. It was Thursday, Jupiter day in Thai and not Mercury day Wednesday. He saw the tall grass and the small fields passing by much more rapidly than ever before. This was a direction he had only explored on bicycle, never by car. After a turn right, the driver slowed down slightly, hit the turn signal and entered that dusty path that led into the forest. From here, the ride took about four minutes give or take and by this time he had managed to gather himself enough to enter the present motion and focus on the surroundings beyond their general impression, it was turning again. Just as the car was turning, he noticed the literal sign he hadn't seen before. *Wat Tha Sao*. Written in white on brown, as is common for temples (wats), with an arrow pointing down the dusty path that also looked like a private entrance. The reason for the blind spot turned out to be obvious, it was only noticeable from the opposite direction than he always took. The dogs, half feral, lying on the junction didn't help either. When on a bike or on foot in the Thai countryside, it seems prudent to think twice before disturbing them. Dogs that don't seem to have a mode between lethargic apathy and aggressive barking at anything and everything that moves and is still. Dogs that slowly trot to the side of the road when a car passes, but like to howl and run after any bicycle, when they are not too lazy to get up at all. They don't guard a place, they don't say: no this is forbidden. They just languish and serve as a reminder for the *farang*: your habits differ from those dominant here. It will take some time to acquire implicit knowledge that makes everyday life smoother. Dogs are as much part of the Thai rural landscape as random shrubs along the roads. Later he found some solace in the prescient words of Roy Wagner:

The immediate problems facing the beginning fieldworker are not likely to be academic or intellectual; they are practical, and they have a definite cause. Disoriented and dazed as he may be, he often encounters a good deal of trouble in getting settled and making contacts. If a house is being built for him, all sorts of delays occur in the work; if he hires assistants or interpreters, they fail to show up. When he complains about delays and desertions the usual lame excuses are offered. His questions may be answered by obvious and deliberate lies. Dogs bark at him and children may follow him about in the streets. All these

circumstances stem from the fact that people are usually uncomfortable with a stranger in their midst, more especially with an outsider who may be crazy, dangerous, or both. Often they create difficulties for him as “defenses,” to keep him at a distance or at least stall him off while he is considered and examined more closely. (Wagner 1981, 14)

This time, based on the assurances from previous days, he thought they were going to attend regular chanting or some other sort of well-attended practice. He had come here, to the mountains by chance, searching for a volunteering position in an area not yet overrun by anthropologists like the north and northeast of Thailand. He was not traveling along established anthropological infrastructures, but rather entering the field in its polyvalence from an uncertain and unstable position he aimed at mobilizing to achieve a multitude of displacements. He knew by now that some aspects only show themselves when certainty breaks down. At this time he had yet to build a complex image of Thai Buddhist rites and places, get a feel for differences and variations, unlearn to think in terms of the one and the manners of thought where the world is subsumed under the representation created in science and popular orientalist imaginaries. To take these as disparate elements that connect, transform, appear and disappear as new encounters occur, to form the experience of a world together with impressions made during fieldwork. The world moves and what is stabilized as given in scholarly literature might no longer fit, if it ever fit at all.

Unpresencing. The image goes like this. In Thai popular fantasy fare monks can give off dark vibes and battle all manner of evil beings. (Ancuta 2011, 2012) Here there are no evil beings, he thought already being educated about some ghosts, but there might as well be. The Thai Buddhist temples he had hitherto experienced had been full of light and color. Open spaces with even more open wall areas where windows would be in cold countries. Interiors one enters freely, without guidance, at one's own convenience. Here, shadows were the dominants in shaping temple spaces and nothing felt open. By the time sunshine heavily filtered through the thick greenery hit the back of the room, shapes were barely being formed. Behind the seated monks, all receded. There were five of them, arranged in an L-shape. Behind two of them emptiness opened up onto the outside. Only one of the orange clothed spoke, except for the two or three times the youngest looking monk, stooped over a bowl of food as if he were about to fall down, uttered a few words. The other three just sat there and ate. Didn't even glance at him. In this dim room, brooding, the faint light from the small windows dispersing. He

kneeled on the floor, just a bit lower than them. Behind him he sensed the presence of the driver and the lady that helped him get here. Bows, prostrations, all three of them. Seated and immobile. Any sort of concentration proved impossible for him. At the time, he found it ironic, only later would he develop theories to articulate such situations. A monk talked and he with his basic Thai couldn't understand, couldn't make out any known phonetic form. The two behind him seemed to want something. What it was is anyone's guess. Not yet habitualized to common behavior in a wat. Still stunned by the whole image, locked into its estranging stasis. A large, even obese monk was there, at the lower end of the L, wall opening behind his back. His whole body looked as fallen into itself. The monks ate and barely moved. Neither unfriendly, nor friendly. They just were, just like the statues were. Absently present. This was the future calling, at the moment, all was unnerving. An atmosphere of empty foreboding, dispelling any image of Buddhist monks in the twenty first century, casting its own magic as if from a different time. Only after, his body will move back to where it was living, the images will come back and raise awareness of the rapid slowness. Arrival, he rushed into the temple, sit down, monk says words, a small chant, blessed food is passed, he takes what they tell him, they all leave. The food in little plastic boxes will be delicious. He managed only one question as they nigh thrust him out: Can I take pictures? NO! (He knew there are pictures on Google Maps, not Street View, pictures made by visitors.) No. Back to the car. Captured in this imposed speed appeared another one, the one that took shape later, the one of statuesque monks, distant in their slowness, as if from another world. By the time it will slither out of the past image into the present one, trigger his thought, all will have changed a little. Time passes. A real encounter changes one. A week or so later, he will leave for the capital. Life in the mountains turns out to be unbearable. Not much to do outside of standing under the waterfall. Always under the pressure of being in the office, pretending to work even as there is no work, just procrastination. No clear instructions either, nor feedback, just chaos even as the pace of life was comparatively slow. Chaos experienced comes from contradictory movements, blockages and disorientation coming from other conventions. In order to get anywhere, to any of the temptingly idiosyncratic temples around, one must know how to ride a motorbike as public transport in the mountains is minimal. He didn't know how to ride that machine and wasn't eager to learn while going to remote areas. He won't return to that temple. Maybe the second time around it would have been different. Maybe he would have been less determined by the speeds and rhythms imposed by others.

Cinema. This image of overdetermination in a temple kept haunting him, it had thrown

overboard all of the conceptions of possible ethnographic encounters in his imaginative tool-kit. As it kept returning, it took on itself clearer contours, not as an image but as a problem. Deleuze (1989, 49ff.), when thinking through a specific cinematic proposition, formulates such events as forks in time. Moments, grasped only retroactively, moments that split the flow in time in different directions. Bifurcations. Instants that were often negligible, examples of habitual activities for all but one entities assembled there. A life and thought were inadvertently changed. Such events keep returning qua involuntary memory from the past as images that insert themselves into the habitual succession of life as images and in this montage keep enacting their specific differentiation in the evolving present. Long before sitting down to write the words on this page, he had come to connect these two lines, one of thought, the other of image. Perhaps these pages are an act of exorcism, a taming of the unruliness of some of the images that stuck, and coming to terms with their strength. To transform them, gather them into an entity capable of acting, of being productive within a research framework.

Memory. The temple turned out to be a strange beast, in its absent presence. All that is written here was done so based on notes taken from memory without any other aides. The monks said it was forbidden to take pictures there, even though in the past clearly someone had taken them. Pictures made and uploaded by regular laypeople. When using street-view to try and replicate the curious displacement of that day, he noticed that this map ends at that canine occupied crossroads. The Street View car never took a turn down this dusty path. Exploring the digital rendering much later, he doesn't remember seeing the two flags nor some of the architecture on the images. Memory is a fickle thing, or perhaps the view accessible online was taken at a very different time – it's impossible to tell. Each mnemo-generative medium accessed here, whether it's the capacities of the personal body to store and access memories (their making already conditioned by interests, habits, and attention), an image memory automatized (conditioned by map-making conventions, technology, and access), written memory in a fieldwork notebook (conditioned by the very limited connection between words and images in terms of complexity) has its own capacities and limits. Personal, interior memory as constituted within a biological body is continuously transformed by life as it is being lived, technological, exterior memories once stored (whatever the support system) tend to be less prone to continuous transformations, and so they introduce a different temporality, a different world into the present much more so than personal memory (at least the non-Proustian kind). Which of course continues to be a reason, together with being interpersonal and to some degree verifiable, for why they

are employed in scientific endeavors such as anthropology. Yet, it is futile to establish what exactly was there, especially if wanting to do so at the expense of other versions, it is nonsensical to reduce the variety of effects a situation had, the many different memories it became, to one. A different kind of question begs itself, even whole new worlds open up once the operative concern with a simple, consistent, exclusionary reality has been done away with. Here, it is the mis/alignment between the different speeds constitutive of the world that came to appear as a generative point of inquiry. The relative change of memory and of material conditions (each medium and its compatibility with surroundings dissipates in its own temporality) in relation to each other is what makes some things appear and others disappear. The almost full and decidedly material outside determination of the ethnographic position he found himself here made it impossible to follow up on any of the plans he had made when conceiving his then future, now past research in the *Wat Tha Sao* (translated as Temple Posture Pillar). Reality moves at different paces, is engendered as every varying dynamic, something that all too often gets lost when translated into the written medium, especially in its academic form, which tends to take full advantage of the relative stability language and words and unified textual codification offer. It makes the world as lived appear much more easily accessible and available for interpretation than it is. The mistake, as Buddhist tradition has been teaching for centuries, is to base an understanding of the world in these conditions of instability. In other words, it is to mistake a linguistically generated image of the world for the world itself. Confusing information for the world, or alternately rejecting information and image as wrong simply because it's not the world as represented is an all too common practice.

Dynamics. What is aimed at here, is to delineate some of the conditions necessary for noticing in and beyond ethnographic practice. Paying attention, the arts of noticing are something to be learned and refined, and if one gets to know cinema in its endless variety, one can also improve in these arts, because cinema as it passes through more decidedly avant-garde practices teaches to see anew. In other words, to construct a shared set of conditions, it is necessary to think through different assemblages and which types of attention they enable. Cinema and media theory here appear as indispensable components for an anthropology of movement, because they have been honed on a medium that tackles movement directly, has movement as a problem at its very center. (Deleuze 1986) And mediation in general is a problematic intrinsic to anthropology: “An anthropology that refuses to accept the universality of mediation, that reduces meaning to belief, dogma, and certainty, is forced into the trap

of having to believe either the native meanings or our own.” (Wagner 1981, 30) The technology of cinema does many things, and one of the things that came into the world with it, is the ability to see anew. To speed up and slow down, enlarge and reduce, cut and splice and put together. Turn it into a frenzy, so that a body gets lost in the wild dynamics affecting the sensory apparatus, or stabilize it to such an extent that even the minutest change becomes perceptible. Rites and their dynamics actualized therein also do that. (Kapferer 2004) The way a body that enters a ritual assemblage is composed and guided shapes experience and thought. Different rites and different traditions are composed differently. This is not a general theory of ritual, not just because such propositional ways of thought are hardly adequate in the 21st century. Mainly it is because once an understanding of (ritual) dynamics is added to the conceptual and perceptual toolbox of a researcher, it becomes self-evident that dynamics are everywhere, that the world is dynamics, and bodies move from spaces that form and are formed in different ways, of which more classical conceptions of ritual are but one framework among many. As this is written in words, it is important to remain aware that as different words do different things, so does reality become different according to which words are used, for words co-constitute reality. Approaching a so-called ritual situation will yield different effects based on how it is approached. For those who attend without tools and aims of a researcher, those experienced in local practices and conventions, researchers with a classical concept of ritual as a distinct entity, researchers with a deconstructive awareness, for each of these a somewhat different ritual will appear, will come to have an effect. Within the latter groups, a major difference will crop up between researchers who have a more performative, differential understanding of concepts and words, than for those for whom words transparently describe what is out there. I'd wager in some cases the same ritual event might almost be unrecognizable as such in texts produced under such different conceptual circumstances. Other issues will also arise, and hence events will have differing effects that might overlap to some degree, especially so long as the effects followed are close in time to said event. As time goes on, as distance between effects and event grows, issues will increasingly disperse and it might even become difficult to trace causes back to this event. Buddhist tradition offers a wealth of tools for sentient beings to engage with this issue and help create a more adequate understanding of (non)self and world. This will be a continuous focus on the following pages, blending in and out at times, but not disappearing. Interdependent arising, *paṭiccasamuppāda*: All that is emerges from complex webs of cause and effect, from which quite evidently follows that whatever is, is singular and compositionally complex. It is the act of conceptual, semantic or symbolic grasping that makes it seem to the untrained that there are

basically identical things out there, as particular instances of general categories.

Speculation. All of this leads to the necessity to somehow define science, specifically ethnographic practice and the mutual relation with anthropology, since the problematic of integrating movement and change into the conceptual framework of a scientific endeavor that takes as its goal the gathering (first translation as reduction from excess of information of life) and the second translation of material from the medium of sensory experience into written language has not been tackled heretofore. Eduardo Viveiros de Castro rephrased the relation between ethnography and anthropology fittingly: “We could perhaps, in this case, rename the discipline ‘field geophilosophy’ or (in reference to our armchair moments) ‘speculative ontography.’ In any case, the relevant onomastics would continue to be Greek — a detail that, there is little need to add, is neither accidental nor inconsequential from an anthropological point of view.” (Viveiros de Castro 2011b, 129) Anthropology remains, for now, in a transformative extension of an Ancient Greek (as well as Hellenized Roman) lineage imagined as such not much more than two centuries ago. (Critchley 1995) The same is evident for media philosophy that will be drawn on more explicitly later. (Krämer 2015) This is regardless of whatever new cosmo-logics have been produced by scholars researching these imaginations of the past. The influence and continued presence operates on another level. Later, experiments will be done, in order to demonstrate what could happen, if some of the more often than not Greco-Christian lineages were to be replaced by Buddhist ones. Throughout, thought will teeter on the brink between “field geophilosophy” and “speculative ontography,” switching codes, keeping the translations operating as present as possible, that is translation as equivocation. “Equivocation appears here as the mode of communication par excellence between different perspectival positions – and therefore as both condition of possibility and limit of the anthropological enterprise.” (Viveiros de Castro 2004b, 5)

Control.

The distinction is a crucial one, though, from the standpoint of how an anthropologist comes to understand and explain the situation he experiences. The fieldworker's belief that the new situation he is dealing with is a concrete entity, a “thing” that has rules, “works” in a certain way, and can be learned, will help and encourage him in his attempts to come to grips with it. And yet in a very important sense he is not learning the culture the way a child would, for he approaches the situation already an adult who has effectively

internalized his own culture. His efforts to understand the subjects of his research, to make them and their ways meaningful, and to communicate this meaningfulness to others, will grow out of his abilities to make meaning within his own culture. Whatever he “learns” from his subjects will therefore take the form of an extension or superstructure, built upon that which he already knows, and built of that which he already knows. He will “participate” in the subject culture, not in the way a native does, but as someone who is simultaneously enveloped in his own world of meanings, and these meanings will also participate. If we recall what was said earlier about relative objectivity, we remember it is the set of cultural predispositions that an outsider brings with him that makes all the difference in his understanding of what is “there.”

If culture were an absolute, objective “thing,” then “learning” it would be the same for all people, native as well as outsider, adult as well as child. But people have all sorts of predispositions and biases, and the notion of culture as an objective, inflexible entity can only be useful as a sort of “prop” to aid the anthropologist in his invention and understanding. For this, and for many other purposes in anthropology, it is necessary to proceed as if culture existed as some monolithic “thing,” but for the purpose of demonstrating how it is that an anthropologist attains his comprehension of another people, it is necessary to realize that culture is a “prop.” (Wagner 1981, 16)

To follow the late Roy Wagner, research is about the question of what is controlled. When doing fieldwork and writing an ethnography, it is important to approach the field with a belief that what one does will yield some truths. Not eternal truths, but truths as knowledge that is valid within currently functioning research paradigms. One has to bracket one's awareness that it is all constructed, ideological, historical, fabricated. If one were to always approach the field not as a ‘thing,’ but as something constructed by the researcher, one would too easily slip into actively (not implicitly) inventing the field. It of course is always co-constructed by what the researcher body brings and the things encountered. This is a question of the attitude a body takes while doing research. With an attitude always aware of the invention going on, of how what is encountered and selected is already conditioned, one might fail to notice any resistances by local occurrences and instead take it all as mere projection of one's own culture. This is what the Writing Culture people pointed out, and it is something that can happen all too easily with those without any awareness of this process, with those

posing an independent reality, an independent researcher and independent methods as existing. With Wagner, what makes the method so potent, is that both the invention and the world encountered operate concurrently, without assuming the priority of any (the common realist and anti-realist fallacy). Which part is being held stable makes for different knowledge production:

When we use the nonconventionalized and differentiating controls of nature in this way, we objectify and recreate our collective Culture with its central ideology of the “natural” versus the “cultural” and artificial. When we use these controls in the study of other peoples we invent their cultures as analogues not of our whole cultural and conceptual scheme but of part of it. We invent them as analogues of Culture (as “rules,” “norms,” “grammars,” “technologies”), the conscious, collective, “artificial” part of our world, in relation to a single, universal, natural “reality.” Thus they do not contrast with our culture, or offer counter-examples to it, as a total system of conceptualization, but rather invite comparison as “other ways” of dealing with our own reality. (Ibid., 100)

This incorporation as self-invention would disappear the moment the field is too consciously engaged as constructed, when the controlling entity is theory. However when experimenting with knowledge so attained, that which is the controlling entity becomes freed and speculation is enabled, and the writing of that which is becomes a consciously creative endeavor. Hence, speculative ontography. Figure and ground can be reversed in countless ways. “To engage this move in critique, we must become familiar and comfortable with figure and reality as simultaneously both contrivance and context [...]” (Verran 2005, 35) From any composition some elements remain stable, they are reiterated with negligible variation, and come to serve as ground against which other elements appear to change, they are figures to be experimented with. Some of the experiments done on the following pages aim at making into figure elements that are hegemonically perpetuated as ground, as self-evidently existing and stable. This is a continuation of anthropological practice, set as it is at the meeting of words, only informed and transformed by encounters with media theory and thought made possible by cinema.

Field. Much of the Thai landscape is constituted of what appears as rice fields to the eye of someone untrained in Southeast Asian agricultural practices. And it has been changing over the centuries in ways that are not immediately obvious, unless one learns to perceive the empirical with

concepts and cosmologies. (Baker 2003) The immediately given, the sensorial, is mediated too. It is constructed, as Buddhist teachings have been raising awareness about for centuries. Meditation, not the occidental kind however, has been concerned with practices that make this apparent not merely intellectually but in the very physical sensory corporeal constitution of experience. The practical and conceptual field one goes to as an anthropologist is one that has to be cultivated. The Latin *colere* (to cultivate), from which the world culture is etymologically derived, opens up philosophical possibilities for thinking culture more as a naturecultural practice than something people have. (Krämer & Bredekamp 2013) Much like working the field transforms it and leads to the growth of produce to sustain other bodies, so does working the ethnographic field transform it and hopefully yield produce to sustain others and help them cultivate whatever is needed. All comes to be formed from and in relation to other elements, it's just more challenging to notice with less material things such as writing and thinking, the products of research, and if stabilized enough to not immediately disperse into parts of other things, what is formed reenters the circulation of the world to enter into new connections. In a more Deleuzian language, this can be phrased as reterritorialization of objects (always partially) encountered onto the assembled montage that is this work, things transformed into information becoming parts of new assemblages. A thing, an image of the thing (in the conventional sense), a description or mention of that things are all slightly different if connected entities, and each has other capacities to shape what it will come into contact with, each as a body can affect different sets of types of bodies. An encounter in all its complexity splits and multiplies as its occurrence gets stored in ever greater sets of media – if only a few human and animal bodies are present, the causal reach will mostly perpetuate through direct encounters with these bodies, and if it was very unremarkable for participants, the effects will be negligible. But if it somehow makes it into an object that can travel independently and reproduce the information put together as an effect of what happened, say as a journal article, its reach and power increase rapidly. Diffractive multiplicity in complex webs of causation and contact all the way. Object-images as conceived here are not merely visual, but aural, cosmological or conceptual ones too. In fieldwork encounters all these are important, even as language has been overstressed to the detriment of other elements all too often. This is an issue for too many reasons to list here, so you will keep to only a few. Interlocutors have varied motivations when talking to the researcher, they may want to lie, make jokes (not necessarily being aware that the researcher is unaware of the joke), become used to Westerners denigrating their knowledge and only saying what they already know the (not as inquisitive nor open as they like to project themselves) *farang* wants to

hear. People might also just not know much about the subject at hand. It is well-known in some research circles that most people practicing different kinds of Buddhist activities don't know much about them and they don't seem to care, at least not in the same way Occidentals obsessed with purity and clear cut categories do. That is because practice is the concern here and not any sort of *logos*. Thus, as an aspiring fieldworker observant, part of the language one has to learn is to see with Buddhist concepts and figures, which is precisely what disappears when reality is approached primarily through language and its material constitution is taken as self-evident, unified and irrelevant.

Translations. As for a foundational issue and one that is still typically mystified in anthropological textual production, the ironic description by an anthropologist decades ago is on point: “Someone may have studied French at school for six years and with the help of language-learning devices, visits to France and exposure to the literature and yet find himself hardly able to stammer out a few words of French in an emergency. Once in the field, he transforms himself into a linguistic wonderworker. He becomes fluent in a language much more difficult for a Westerner than French, without qualified teachers, without bilingual texts, and often without grammars and dictionaries.” (Barley 1983, 44) Even if one were to become a linguistic wonderworker, which will only happen if the researcher also follows local, contemporary and historical, popular and elite (but still public) cultures, and anything in between, as there is infinitely more to any society than language and language itself is anything but a unity, one will remain partial. What is gained through such transformation is a ground against which local complexities and innovations can appear that would otherwise remain invisible (Tsing 1994). Over the years, a realization has dawned about how elitism vis-a-vis the cultural production of the other, especially when it comes to pop culture, prevents scholars from even becoming aware of the issue that culture (in the sense of art, etc.) significantly shapes worlds, and cultural objects that came to be formed in very distant places travel and can be impactful in a new place. Something typically of concern for film studies, visual studies or comparative literature is no less part of society as humans and religion or other more typical anthropological subjects. The field is constituted of countless elements with language being just but one among them, and this won't change regardless of how much linguistic reductionism emanates directly from the ideological, idealist conditions and misconceptions of Occidental modernity and its foundational (ethnic nationalist) myths. Language itself, or rather the practice and constitution thereof, composes of various elements, such as imagery, concept, word, grammar, habit. Its use pulls elements together and is transformed by it. Language in the

narrow, idealist sense does not so to speak cut it, as it cuts off the imagery and other associations that make their appearance with more complex engagements with worlds – all that overlapping, meshing, fluidly flowing into other worlds. Again, a common miscategorization occurs for those reared in the metaphysics of the Moderns: the separation of language as an entity is a necessary operation to study it and to perceive patterns and such, and generates new knowledge and even linguistic possibilities, however that does not mean that language simply exists separately and cleanly delineated somewhere out there.⁴⁵ Tools had to be created in order to separate language as an entity in the first place, however much it appears self-evident today. The way we learn languages co-constitutes how we come to think (of) them. These conventions may habitually disappear from sight, which doesn't deny their operativity. Then there are the translations that continue to operate in whatever is being done, the awareness and continuing presence of which is a challenge to integrate into a text (in order to undermine the aforementioned metaphysics). What the employed words are combined or rather combineable with, is not a given but something that changes in history and ontology. What is and is not an adequate knowledge of language comes to be redefined, and unclear if thought in relation to some kind of implicit ideal of what knowing a language means. Thus, it becomes important to gain awareness of the limitations of one's skills and what can and cannot be gleaned based on these limits. And, when putting together writing, to make clear the fault lines out of which a text is composed.

Middle. It is the fault lines that interest him, given the stated implicit goal of working at the edges of a number of disciplines. When an object is composing it is crucial for it to gain some sort of consistency, otherwise it is in danger of falling apart rapidly and becoming integrated into other compositions without effectuating any significant change in them, without creating any friction through resistance. It will only undergo change itself. These pages will be a balancing act between two movements – a centralizing one aimed at holding together and a decentralizing one aiming to destabilize any easy ground against which to understand figures. The words, images, styles and structures that will be used do both movements at once, it is the force by which they do it that differs. We are always already in the middle, we start there. The middle here is a world where most people

⁴⁵ It is the positing of ruptures that characterized the cosmo-practice of the Moderns: “Modernity comes in as many versions as there are thinkers or journalists, yet all its definitions point, in one way or another, to the passage of time. The adjective ‘modern’ designates a new regime, an acceleration, a rupture, a revolution in time. When the word ‘modern’, ‘modernization’, or ‘modernity’ appears, we are defining, by contrast, an archaic and stable past. Furthermore, the word is always being thrown into the middle of a fight, in a quarrel where there are winners and losers, Ancients and Moderns. ‘Modern’ is thus doubly asymmetrical: it designates a break in the regular passage of time, and it designates a combat in which there are victors and vanquished.” (Latour 1993, 10)

don't know 'about' Buddhist teachings, and when asked a direct question, a common answer is to delegate to a monk. And monks like to delegate to senior monks. Of course, there are well-read enthusiasts among laypeople. Many may be unable to speak about or in the name of Buddhist teachings, but they certainly know what and how to do. It's said to be an orthopractical tradition after all. Interviewing will get you only so far. Observation is the name of the game. And finding the right conditions for said corporeally passive sensory activity. He is in the middle of something composed, the composition of which he enters and co-shapes. The I too is multiple, not just in past and future, but in the present – the 'he' employed here is neither accidental nor frivolous. I don't perceive and don't intellectually construct any totality of the situation. I have unlearned the latter, after coming to understand it's but a rhetorical trick of a certain metaphysical tradition. Thai ways enter into this composition too, and so do the laboriously acquired conceptual and writing skills. This is not a representation of a field out there. It is woven out of many sources and connects to many more, the field as lived and transcribed by my past now changed self makes only for a part. However integral it may be. There are always gaps anyways, gaps to be filled, gaps to be left. The shift enacted is into one of these gaps, the disappearing middle of the imageric (in the sense used here) taken as its mediated mediating own. Some things have to be slowed down, whether they be intensive or extensive, so that the conditions for this composition can emerge, in the field experienced out there as well as the field constructed on these pages. Bodies have to slow down and speed up, so some things can appear at all. So they can be translated into an academic text. So they can be split in the present and come to act in different spaces, far beyond where an encounter happened to occur. Thought too is dynamic. Let it be bogged down by the strangeness encountered that doesn't lead to simple questions, much less answers. Let it be propelled into unknown directions with the right question posed. Bifurcating along the way. Creating. Appearing and disappearing. "Chaos is defined not so much by its disorder as by the infinite speed with which every form taking shape in it vanishes. It is a void that is not a nothingness but a virtual, containing all possible particles and drawing out all possible forms, which spring up only to disappear immediately, without consistency or reference, without consequence. Chaos is an infinite speed of birth and disappearance. Now philosophy wants to know how to retain infinite speeds while gaining consistency, by giving the virtual a consistency specific to it." (Deleuze & Guattari 1994, 118)

Image. Perhaps it is necessary to continue (pre)figuring some of the philosophy of the image so basic to this project. Deleuze's "argument dispenses with the usual way of distinguishing between

subject and object. There is no object distinguishable from its image, which is to say, the set of actions and reactions that it incurs or to which it submits. This web of actions and reactions is ultimately universal.” (Rodowick 1997, 29) A web of actions and reactions; funny, how accounts of Deleuze's universe as metacinema take it in the direction of Buddhist teachings. Insofar as all phenomena arise from a process termed interdependent arising, a kind of web imagery wouldn't be entirely out of place, even if not developed per se in these traditions. In a world, where things are determined as actions and reactions, any clear separation between image and thing falls apart. Moulard (2002, 329) notes that an image thought with Deleuze's cinema books has two sides. The past that is, the present that acts. And sometimes, they inverse each other. The past that is only acts when it becomes present as involuntary memory. The past we as images regularly remember, whether corporeally habitual or as internal memory, is not real past. It is present, since it is a habitual part of the action-image. Cinema composes images by reterritorializing images present at a scene onto its technical apparatus, realigning them in new ways in order to produce new effects. The assemblages are multiple – more than one and less than many. The image that assembled into this machine continues acting on other images in its own way, while as part of cinema it comes to act independently, in other space-times, all the while not being entirely different. Diverging series. On some level, even if words work differently from images, something analogous happens with fieldwork. Images have an effect, come to be recomposed in an ethnography in different series to act elsewhere. Figurality is one of the forms that connects, or perhaps better grounds (however tentatively) the relation between ethnography and the presumed encounters that gave rise to it. I will expand on figural thought later, mostly following Deleuzian cine-thinking of researchers like Nicole Brenez (1998) and Vincent Amiel (1998). And, lastly, for now, the cinema question enters the question of science and philosophy:

Science approaches chaos in a completely different, almost opposite way: it relinquishes the infinite, infinite speed, in order to gain a reference able to actualize the virtual. By retaining the infinite, philosophy gives consistency to the virtual through concepts; by relinquishing the infinite, science gives a reference to the virtual, which actualizes it through functions. Philosophy proceeds with a plane of immanence or consistency; science with a plane of reference. In the case of science it is like a freeze-frame. It is a fantastic slowing down, and it is by slowing down that matter, as well as the scientific thought able to penetrate it with propositions, is actualized. (Deleuze & Guattari 1994, 118)

Medium. About a week later, he left this place in the Western mountains, near the end of the scenic railway going over the river Kwai, named after the local waterfall. The then current condition was not one to give him any hope for productive research nor a tolerable life. He headed to the capital on the wide river with its high rises, overbearing heat, crisscrossed by canals and traffic heavy roads, where he hoped that research would come easier. Or at the very least living more manageable than in a mountain village, cut off from everything unless he would learn how to ride a motorcycle. There is much to learn and various skills to acquire, when entering new worlds. And sometimes, a body refuses, for this possible reality, this fork in time, never happened, he never learned to ride a bike and explore mountain temples, instead the later urban displacement proved prescient and he came to participate in such things he had never once read about in his years of study, even though when there, they often kept staring him in the face. Sometimes the thought that it pays to love cinema and learn to notice the sensory constitution of things crept up on him. Usually, he cast it aside, gathering there must be other reasons for obviously visible components of reality disappearing in the process of translation into research. Whatever the case, he was and you continue to be guided by the curiosity about the medium, the middle between given categories that makes them appear but in the very process disappears. What does this third element do with thought and research if one is to start experimenting with the appearing of such disappearing? As he arrived in the metropolis, he wasn't yet too aware of how much ongoing colonial legacies shape physical environments, even less how cosmologies are woven into the very fabric of the world. While modern Occidental delta engineering developed from a land-based conception of the world, here, deltas were seen as extensions of sea into land. (Morita & Jensen 2017) This had multiple effects. Here, houses used to be built on stilts, some were even rafts, floods were expected occurrences and the way jungle and urban landscape interacted was flexible. It is such "changes in the design of delta infrastructures over the past 100 years that have dramatically influenced the adaptability of cities to floods. Yet it is not only the built environments that have changed. The 'natural' delta environments have also been transformed due to the extensive construction of water management facilities, such as irrigation dams and canals." (ibid., 121) Land-based engineering seeks to eradicate and control water flows, even in monsoon areas, and with this come other transformations that include transformations of the biological too, as trees and other plants become rarer. Bangkok is increasingly becoming hotter than surrounding areas, an occurrence termed with the self-explanatory 'urban heat island'. (Khamchiangta & Dhakal 2019) As he arrived in the metropolis, he immediately

melted in the simmering heat of the streets.

Heat. This is what cities mean to me. You get off the train and walk out of the station and you are hit with the full blast. The heat of air, traffic and people. The heat of food and sex. The heat of tall buildings. The heat that flows out of the subways and tunnels. It's always fifteen degrees hotter in the cities. Heat rises from the sidewalks and falls from the poisoned sky. The buses breathe heat. Heat emanates from crowds of shoppers and office workers, the entire infrastructure is based on heat, desperately uses up heat, breeds more heat. The eventual heat death of the universe that scientists love to talk about is already well underway and you can feel it happening all around you in any large or medium-sized city. Heat and wetness. (Land 2012b, 444)

Infrastructures. Cities that were once built around water in its local specificity, with cosmological frameworks shaped in their histories through adapting to singular problems posed by the developing landscape (and not a putative true Nature or Science), accepted the inevitability of floods in the flat Chao Phraya Delta, and infrastructures and architectures were built and experimented with accordingly. Occidentalization, which is something that historical modernization has so far imposed wherever it came to have enough power (Greenspan 2014) has as a central component an organization around the One, whether God, Nature or Truth. And an inbuilt transcendental assumption mistaking the material-semiotic conditions of emergent reality as but passive matter to be shaped by the true form. So cities and landscapes came to be reshaped according to imposed models, which made them so that at times they are nigh unlivable. Imposing models of architecture is an obvious ontological activity for those worlds, where things exist first and relations second, and thought and materials and compositions are not something to emerge from reacting to local conditions and problems, but merely hylomorphic idealism, where such entities can be put onto disembodied unhistorical hierarchies of general architecture. And the remedies to the heat are more of this Occident, as living with a/c (with all its detrimental longterm effects on the global scale) becomes normativized only to eventually worsen the situation. “Reducing air temperature, however, proved to be a more difficult undertaking than increasing it, and the practice only emerged in modern history.” (Redfield 2000, 220) Much of such misapprehensions of the situation has to do with the limits of human perception and the concurrent mistaken reduction of the world to that which appears to be immediately perceptible, more often than

not without noticing all the mediating technology that enlarges said world, only to again reify whatever newness emerges into the fantasy that the real simply precedes the human. Not only “Americans are vulnerable to this kind of manipulation because their belief in the reality of the nature invented through their Cultural controls is grounded in a conviction based on experience.” (Wagner 1981, 99) And this personal, onto-historically constructed experience is then retroactively extrapolated, generalized as universal.

Reality. Ignorance does not change that the world becomes without the human nor that reality is made and decentralized. It is not self-same, it's a more than one-world world. (Law 2015) This holds for all strata of emergence: “Henri Bergson, one of Deleuze's major philosophical influences, understands this as a skeletalization of objects: we perceive only that which interests us, is of use to us, that to which our senses have, through evolution, been attuned. That is, life, even the simplest organic cell, carries its past with its present as no material object does. This incipient memory endows life with creativity, the capacity to elaborate an innovative and unpredictable response to stimuli, to react or, rather, simply to act, to enfold matter into itself, to transform matter and life in unpredictable ways.” (Grosz 2008, 6) Again, a return to unpredictation. It seems to be a central task for a future science that has first to unlearn its imperialism before it can begin creating ways of worlding that take into account its multiplicity and impermanence. Reality is anything but simple.

Whither now? Hence, the next chapter will engage realism, or perhaps it should rather be immediately said, polyrealism. (Skafish 2020) Thought as a limit point tackled from anthropology and cinema at the same time. Realism as the third that is simply assumed, but whose very constitution can be genealogically traced and the existence of which is never simply given. And it is with cinema, where the world as reality is slowed down, shaped into a somewhat coherent object and made graspable, or rather certain parts of the world, where this problem can be tackled. Before turning the page, or scrolling to the next chapter, a few inspiring words to ponder over, as they concisely express a central concept employed in this inquiry:

Let me first clarify an important point. By “image” I do not simply mean “visual image,” though New Irelanders often show a predilection for the visual. A cultural image can be verbal, as in the tropes, conceits, and other word pictures that carry much of the force of

Shakespeare's expression; it can be expressed in the nonrepresentational forms of music; or it can be kinesthetic or architectural, as it often is in New Ireland. An image has the power of synthesis: it condenses whole realms of possible ideas and interpretations and allows complex relationships to be perceived and grasped in an instant. (Wagner 2012, 535)

07. Cinema Worlds, Polyicony and the Multiplicity of Realism

A human sensory apparatus is constituted in ways that let it perceive only parts of the world. Other sentient beings with differently composed bodies have different limits and capacities. We all in effect perceive something else, with the overlap between what some animals sense and what humans do being minimal.⁴⁶ Some things have to be slowed down, before they can become generative of thought. So-called reality is one of them, and cinema is such a wonderful technology when it comes to making things graspable that otherwise wouldn't even appear. Both as a material tool for certain entities to appear in thought (and become manipulable) and as a conceptual means drawing on material technology in order to think in new ways. Meanwhile, if there is one line that connects the various strands of what has come to be named the ontological turn in anthropology, it is the adage of “taking different worlds seriously.” (Pickering 2017) While this has been fairly worked through conceptually within general anthropology, what I aim to do here is connect it to questions raised by the status of the image in/as cinema and grasp ontological problematics with cinematic tools. In many ways, an ethnography can be conceived as a slowing down of a scene (composed from a variety of elements), entering it and exploring it, much like one does when analyzing a film. Such exchange between almost analogous methods and conceptualizations of objects of inquiry will happen throughout, and is not limited to this part. There is evidently no simple, independent reality out there, and doing away with body as a mediator co-constitutive of what appears as reality is one of the catastrophic foundational acts for and of thought. Neither is it very fruitful to take thinking about bodies as an end-point – they too are parts of complex, generative interdependencies. And as not all bodies, even among humans, sense the same, for bodies are formed in environments and develop different skills, what comes to be reality is anything but straightforward nor is it universal.⁴⁷

Documentary more so than fiction or experimental film offers a conceptual problem for this mode of inquiry: by virtue of its supposed more direct (be it constituted merely habitually) connection to an assumed ‘real,’ natural world (preexisting the human and immediately accessible without having

⁴⁶ The intersection of anthropology and ethology is an increasingly explored field, coalescing around the multispecies ethnography. (For recent overviews, see Schroer 2019, Hartigan Jr. 2021.) What I employ here draws on the work of von Uexküll with a heavily Deleuzo-guattarian inflection. (Cf. Buchanan 2008, Cimatti 2019)

⁴⁷ Thailand is famous for a super-abundance of what Moderns would consider supernatural beings and the sensing of ghosts and other such entities does not fit the categories (or skills) of occidental Moderns: “In our Thai narratives, a full two-thirds of those who had experienced the supernatural (66 percent; 50 out of 76) felt this energy directly on their skin. Almost all of them (92 percent; 70 out of 76) said that they sensed this presence directly even in the absence of physical sensation.” (Cassaniti & Luhrmann 2011, 42)

been affected by the new images made), the tradition of categorizing something as documentary and what is made within it naturalizes the world of the Moderns thereby reducing the status of a wide variety of entities in the world to the status of illusion. What is excluded from the real, are all the entities commonly classified as supernatural and therefore objectively unreal or, its flipside, merely subjectively real. For all its valorization of the individual, in the end such a body can be but an anchor of personal illusions but not real reality. The entities excluded need not be supernatural in a strong sense, since after all, concepts with minimal material reality such as society, power, reality, the so-called human or, say, kamma, none of which are simply universal (Tsing 2005), can also only be expressed through film form and nothing in the image itself, much less any reality outside. When entities not already taken for granted by Moderns appear in cinema, they are habitually assumed to lack a reality beyond the image. Images point to images, to a history of images of supernatural entities, but not ‘outside.’ There is haunting going on in the problematic status of entities not easily perceptible through the sensory makeup of (post-)humans, as they are present yet absent at the same time. Modern science, or rather scientism, follows in the footsteps of a Christian tradition that has thrown out all entities beside God and that which we consider self-evidently existing, even if much of this existence is mediated not just by the sensory composition of human bodies (which is itself historical) but also by extensive technological apparatuses without which the entities would not appear in ways graspable by the human sensory and conceptual apparatus (as in the case of bacteria or viruses) in the first place. The structuring principle here is the figural fulfillment of the past through the Christian salvation narrative, and, as a by-product of such teleology, everything gets streamlined into one world without any real difference.⁴⁸ Donna Haraway (1997) termed this type of worlding Christian realism, pointing out how narratives of progress reiterate this in the guise of technoscientific salvation. A seemingly real Nature that operates out-there serves to ground reality and select images (Culture) as either real or unreal. Researchers, anthropologists among them, have increasingly produced evidence for alternative ways of practicing reality (into reality). Stephen Muecke (2009) for example pointed out that cultural studies in general continue to be structured by the nature-culture dichotomy, leaving the real untouched, as something to be settled by the natural sciences, whereby any engagement with other cultures, however conceived, leaves the reality-making capacities as mere epistemological variants of the real ontological

⁴⁸ The same operation is active in the common Darwinism, indoctrinated as scientific at schools, that constructs the past and its species always in light of what exists today, that is as an idealist reduction, a projection of what is as necessary, while evolution if anything would operate arbitrarily (as seen from any historical position), ateleologically and keep opening up the world with new species – environment constellations. Evolution and natural selection have complex, evolving relations, what is a relatively stable environment for one set of bodies, can be very fluid for others as it keeps changing due to the effects bodies have. (See e.g. Pearson et al. 2010, Grosz 2011)

work done by Western sciences. The frame of reference here is multiple and includes, among others, a nature-cultural habit (realism) and academic discussions of the topic (which according to Muecke commonly share the same ontological framework). What I try to operationalize here specifically, is the possibility of retaining the concept of ‘realism’ while tying it to more than one world. That is: realism does not have to be associated with Christian realism qua some kind of mimetic representation of visual as if unmediated givenness, grounded in the stable One of a Nature with unchanging essence. Figurations don't have to be reduced to a binary of real/unreal based on whether they can be fulfilled in modern imaginations of Nature. Furthermore, Christian realism here operates on at least two levels. On the one hand it is a way of choosing and organizing images when making films, and it is also a culturally habitualized that is onto-epistemological approach to films and the world in general. It operates in the making and viewing of films alike. This makes its operations much harder to disentangle, make apparent and dislocate. Thus, I do not move within apparatus theory to make the viewer into a fully passive receptor of ideology. (Anderson & Anderson 1993) It is rather the repeated, ritualized coming together of certain cinematic forms and historical habits that support the largely preconscious convention of Christian realism constitutive of Euro-colonial modernity. It is the making of dominant forms of imaging and thinking part of the ‘natural environment’ we move in – wherever one turns an element is there that confirms the simple distinction between documentary and fiction, objectivity and subjectivity, fact and fantasy. In fact, the very convention of independent facts participates in this and thus cannot be easily used as arbitrator, but rather it has to be complexified so as to remain scientifically productive. Such habitual constitution does not preclude any conceptual grasping of other realist possibilities, however much it is impossible for me to ‘actually experience’ a different kind of image of the same image for now. It is only through one body (as constituted through techno-historical conditions) that one can experience. While ‘my’ world is perpetually changing it is thereby also historical and impossible to simply be left behind by some metaphysical trick of escaping situatedness. The worlds I write with here are conceptual, their efficacy tied to an opening of thought. (Skafish & Viveiros de Castro 2016) A body can however learn to attune to perceiving changes and thus become aware of the intricacies of reality construction – as will be explored later, this is an important part of Buddhist meditation techniques.

“Different worlds – the fact that other social groups understand and act in the world differently from ‘us’ – have been with us for as long as there has been contact between cultures.” (Pickering 2017,

134) Such anthropological practice relates directly to the more technological question: “Can film show the invisible?” (Suhr & Willerslev 2012) When dealing with other worlds, one soon learns that Christian realism has its specific history and the worlds elsewhere are composed of other elements that do not easily fit with any straightforwardly ‘real’ world. Entities populating such other worlds are generally classified as supernatural by willfully naive, imperial, reductive realism. Nonetheless, as anthropologists continue to demonstrate, such entities are, or at the very least can be, very real. There is, unsurprisingly, less unanimity among the various methodological traditions as to what exactly makes something real. For now, it should suffice to assume that real is that which has effects. (Mol 2002, 2010) In other worlds relations between things are constituted differently; a creativity which is much easier composed and extended within fictional than documentary codes. And, perhaps most importantly for the present discussion, images themselves are understood to be and to act differently. In order to proceed, I will engage a Hong Kong scholar's engagement with the topic of different realisms, which will enact an opening for thought fertile for cultivation with the anthropological and cinematic tools at disposal. She chooses certain scenes that are good to think with, at least when it comes to making it possible to think different conceptions of realism and image. This will then be refocused through the operations enabled by *Krabi, 2562* (2019) a recent Thai-British collaboration that reconfigures the image-reality relation in a multiplicity of ways. Indeed, a film which, as I will demonstrate, makes it a film that thinks ontologically in the sense used above. What is being done here, in good Deleuzian fashion, is to relate cinema and the problems and possibilities it poses to the nominally extra-cinematic, so as to be able to think what is otherwise unthinkable. Instead of reducing cinema to some existing conventions of a world, one can enhance the conventions of the world by provocations to thought enacted by films.

Toward Polyicony

Rey Chow presents the different ideas of reality/image relation Michelangelo Antonioni encountered after filming *Chung Kuo–Cina* (1972) upon invitation by the Chinese government: “We could be looking at the same images, but the ways that we talked about them were usually different, or presumed to be different by both sides.” (Chow 2014, 16) While the Italian film-maker thought he was filming life ‘as it is,’ in the small, unguarded moments, beyond what was for him considered conventionally important, the Chinese side was not concerned with such bourgeois European ‘authenticity.’ The

making of an image in China at that time was considered a chance to present an idealized version of oneself.⁴⁹ Which, as a side note, makes sense in worlds where there is no stable self preceding the world as it has come to be in Christian-Secular, liberal realities. Private authenticity would be just another performance, for after all, the realm of images is always a sort of falsification and hence a source of creation. The images captured and put together by Antonioni were considered an embarrassment, attempts at presenting China to the world as backward. This is to be expected, as the long shadow of colonialism is still today felt in image-making practices where the so-called ‘West’ continues to wield more power in depicting its putative ‘Others.’ Since *Chung Kuo–Cina* was specifically commissioned to present China to the world through the creativity of a leftist master filmmaker, there is little wonder that when he filmed laborers picking noses this met with little appreciation.

Nevertheless, Western commentators of course had to classify Chinese practices as retrograde, and not as alternative and valid ways of developing with technology. (Chow 2014, 19) Chow goes on to quote Susan Sontag: “In China, ‘taking pictures is always a ritual; it always involves posing and, necessarily, consent.’ If one follows people around and shoots their picture while they are unaware of one’s intention to do so, one is depriving people of ‘their right to pose, in order to look their best.’” (Ibid., 20) While today, in the so-called West, a liberal formulation of consent is all the rage, at that time this Chinese habit was apparently not met with much understanding by cosmopolitan whites. To be clear, I write ‘at that time’ as the example discussed here ought not represent any real, much less unchangeable China out there, but rather is a source of introducing a specific difference into my very much located thought to enable an opening, all the while maintaining a tentative, but real historical link through which these events entered academic discourse. Perhaps ironically, the times discussed in the article appear to be long gone given the surveillance state of the CCP. Importantly Chow goes on, that a first step is to “not treat the photographic image – perhaps the image in general – as natural or free.” (Ibid.)

“The act and the art of striking a pose in a dignified manner may be residual practices from earlier times, but they are also eminently modern, indeed contemporary, as many of us can tell from our

⁴⁹ I feel compelled to add, that, according to Liu (2014) Chinese audiences watching the documentary today are apparently bemused by the now otherworldly commitment to socialism many of the people shown in the film demonstrate. However, within citing Chow's work, he points out the same issues raised by her a year earlier.

own personal experiences with photography.” (Ibid.)⁵⁰ Chow then elaborates that photography for Chinese (at the time) was about social space and how it is/can be negotiated with its surroundings. This is then a different world from the realist naturalism of neutral ground assumed as neutral by Antonioni and Western commentators. She goes on to compare the belief in photographic realism to a kind of religion alluding to a transformation of God's gaze to a machinic gaze. These are by no means accidental parallels to Haraway's concept of God trick, which she uses to describe the ideological move of positing contingently produced scientific knowledge as universal and pre-existing the production of knowledge. (Haraway 1990) Rey Chow thus implicitly points out that the camera, far from being an objective, disappearing medium for the depiction of the real, is an actively technological intervention into the constitution of realities. The Chinese here appear to be those who are more aware of the technosphere as productive than the cosmopolitan Christian realists. And the images reproduced are already constituted by and constitutive of cultural ideals.⁵¹

The conceptual problem is laid out directly: “[if] the documentary is driven conceptually by the principle and agenda of producing a record,” (Chow 2014, 26) then what exactly is the referent once it becomes apparent that there is nothing that is self-evidently real. Now, Rey Chow goes on to discuss how the famed Chinese film-maker Jia Zhangke tackles the issue. The case of Jia is used as a conceptual operator (linked to Chinese worlds) and not as a stand-in for China in general. While he too is at times criticized for creating ungainly views of China (for the ‘external’ world), his style is ambiguous insofar as his films look like documentaries but are composed with self-consciously fictional elements. Either mode of image-making doesn't take precedence, acknowledging, to my eyes, that documentary is always-already fictional: by way of deciding on a topic, on a focus, a way of organizing images, the intertextual connectivity of each frame, gaining meaning through the difference with other frames as well as the repetition of pre-existing clichés to make it recognizable in the first place, and then, when gathering materials, deciding what to film, from what angle, and which sounds to make audible, the way toward the creation of the first documentary image is already a path of fictionalization. And indeed, this parallels the work of ethnographers, who, in the field, also necessarily select what will and will not be noted in a notebook to later base written research on. Historically, film-making, photography, and ethnography were closely tied in the early days, only to be eventually

⁵⁰ Social media such as Instagram have thoroughly transformed practices in this regard, though dominant discourse appears to still draw on notions of authenticity and other oppressive fantasies.

⁵¹ For a discussion of how the notion of a stable subject is being constructed/performed in/through Western photography, see Gad (2013).

institutionally separated. (Grimshaw 2001) And even today, anthropology (like most scientific discourses) remains dominantly textual and that textuality more often than not realist in its literary style, with images being treated as secondary support. The society of the Moderns, while inundated in images and image-making technologies, is for all practical purposes a textual one, another Biblical echo. Abilities that would pertain to communicating, whether critically or not, with any other medium, such as images, bodily movements, non-linguistic sounds, are not even considered as legitimate options – humans are thus shaped as passive receptors in all but words.⁵² The anthropological image operating in the over-developed world is one that is decidedly confined.

I will call the concept to deal with work such as Jia Zhangke's *polyicony*. Polyphony is commonly taken to consist of two or more lines of melody, so I take polyicony as a type of audio-visual texture consisting of more than one simultaneous series of reality-images. Or, to put it in more anthropological words: it is cinema as a more than one-world world.⁵³ The concept is further related to Haraway's cyborg: “my complaint about socialist/Marxian standpoints is their unintended erasure of polyvocal, unassimilable, radical difference made visible in anti-colonial discourse and practice.” (Haraway 1990, 159) The point being precisely to not reduce (cinematic) reality to one common, pre-critical grounding. Furthermore, polyicons are images that insist on referring to more than one thing, as is the case with the infamous rabbit/duck image. Among the points being that while both are ‘there’ and can conceptually be grasped as such, it's impossible to perceive them simultaneously (and hence any God's eye view or final synthesis is unfeasible).⁵⁴ They are a favored source for thinking multiplicities after the ontological turn and the anthropologist Mario Blaser (2016) employs them to show that caribou and atiku (indigenously conceived caribou) are and are not the same animal. There are significant overlaps without either subsuming the other. As such each image connecting to multiple worlds will always be more than itself, undoing any notion of easy reference. It opens up toward the outside, the beyond the frame in cinema toward change.

⁵² This is not to deny the primacy of the visual for Moderns, which has been attested time and again – the focus on developing skills of seeing is a different manner than presupposing vision as the main and most reliable of senses.

⁵³ This does not mean that there is another world beyond this one, but that this world is multiple.

⁵⁴ Similar games with perspective, seeing and impossibility have been played by painters, perhaps most famously in Hans Holbein's *The Ambassadors*. A skull is painted into the image in an anamorphic manner so that it can only be seen from a different angle than the main painting – a play on recognizing either death or life, but not both concurrently. (Mersch 2006)

Derealizing Film: From Reflection to Diffraction

The thought organizing naturalist realism (God having structurally transformed into Nature that is beyond history/culture) can be grasped as one of reflection. Donna Haraway puts the issues with this model of thought succinctly: “Reflexivity has been much recommended as a critical practice, but my suspicion is that reflexivity, like reflection, only displaces the same elsewhere, setting up the worries about copy and original and the search for the authentic and really real. Reflexivity is a bad trope for escaping the false choice between realism and relativism in thinking about strong objectivity and situated knowledges in technoscientific knowledge.” (Haraway 1997, 16) While her concerns lie with scientific research specifically, the words can be adapted to fit discussions around cinema/image. Once the camera apparatus is not thought as taking images as reflections of the real, new lines of thinking the cinema/world relation open up. Haraway suggests another optical metaphor, that of *diffraction* instead. Importantly, for creating the metaphor, she does not reach to some othered outside of Western tradition. She merely searches her ‘own’ history in order to actualize something in a new context, with that something even remaining an optical metaphor, thus displacing the original ever so slightly, yet to radical consequences.⁵⁵ Indeed, optics played a major role in the activities and the conditioning of Early Modernity and Early Modern philosophy embroiling it especially through Galileo and Spinoza with the development of scientific methods. (Maull 1986, Vermij 2013)

Haraway (1997, 268) writes, “[d]iffraction is the production of difference patterns in the world.” And what technology is there that produces more difference patterns in the world than cinema? Each image taken already differs from that which it is an image of. And then images are edited together to create patterns of similarity and difference, of presence and absence, of figures and forms, of shadows and lights. Montage might be the most radical aesthetic capacity unique to (pre-digital) cinema. *Chung Kuo–Cina* then is not an image of how China really is, neither are autochthonous or state-driven projects of ‘representing’ China any more or less real. Each act of cinema diffracts patterns in a world toward different worlds. It always points to the future, or rather to many futures, as it opens up reality toward becoming other. This does not mean that all diffracting worlds act the same. Antonioni's documentary epic does different work than any of Jia Zhangke's creations, it engenders other possibilities. Diffraction traverses genres and conventions. Documentary and fiction become thus

⁵⁵ For a more thorough discussion, see Barad (2007, 71–98).

distinct not in their truth claims (which have to be taken at least as partly performative anyhow), but in the codes they employ and the habitualized expectations they mobilize.⁵⁶ Hence the issue remains: most cinema-goers over here appear to be used to documentaries being true in the realist representational sense of the word, while fiction is not, albeit the truth claim of photographic imagery operates in fictional pieces too and it doesn't appear to be uncommon for people taking self-evidently fictional depictions of other societies and humans to be real – how else could we, when there are no other images to construct the other. This is exactly where filmmakers such as Jia and the objects unleashed through them onto the world enter – by systematically mixing codes, their activity destabilizes either convention and makes away with any simply preexisting, precultural reality. As such, they do the work of anthropological theory and can help to think through issues of other worlds in ways common anthropological (or cinema studies) work doesn't make possible.⁵⁷

A New Image: For a More Than One-World World

From here on now, my own compositional practice will focus on an even more curiously slippery film than those of the internationally recognized Chinese master, one that I consider to be more straightforwardly anthropological than Jia's for at least two reasons: it was made by an intercultural team and, one of the directors, Ben Rivers, is mostly known as an avant-garde ethnographer (of possible futures and deep strata), while the other, Anocha Suwichakornpong, often combines documentary realism with cosmological excursions. Both seek out the edges of any easy sense of realism that visual ethnographies⁵⁸ continue to hold on to much like documentaries in general as cosmological questions are rarely tackled. When an 'I' encounters other worlds, donning the cloak of an anthropologist, much labor awaits in order to be able to articulate say, a world with cosmic Buddhas, in the linguistic and imageric conventions of Western academia with its implicit Christian realism/one-world naturalism. Even a cursory glance at most visual ethnographic work betrays its reliance on a conventional realism of a world where deities, celestials, chthonic powers, spirits and the like have no substantial reality. The anthropocentric work of Ben Rivers retains certain elements from these

⁵⁶ One might want to point out that once images become personal memory, it is impossible to disentangle where they came from: an image of a Chinese person in a fiction and documentary film becomes indistinguishable.

⁵⁷ Chaos, cosmogony, cosmology, and the habit of seeking a single order – in short a large part of the apparatus of one-world metaphysics developed in the Western philosophical doctrines of classical antiquity – are more or less alien to classical and perhaps contemporary Chinese metaphysics. Indeed, it can be argued that the latter does without a single universe. (Hall & Ames 1995)

⁵⁸ Even the works of the Harvard Sensory Ethnography Lab, while non-anthropocentric, enact a one-world world model.

conventions such as topics, choice of words and at times choice of shots, but combines them with SF imaginaries and a focus on the irreverent all within a decidedly post-humanist world – thus it brakes any easy certainty of what really exists and opens the world to new futures. Meanwhile Anocha Suwichakornpong is mostly known as a Thai art film-maker in the shadow of Apichatpong Weerasethakul, whose output also charts the edges of the conventionally real. (Cf. Ingawanij & MacDonald 2006, Jeong 2013) Her work is engaged in extending and articulating a specifically Buddhist cosmology cinematically, i.e. how to articulate kamma or Buddhist conceptions of time by cinematic means. Both also offer ways of making and connecting images that point toward an outside of any easy Realism.

Before moving on to a more intricate engagement with the many worlds in *Krabi, 2562*, the title employing the Thai calendar enacts a destabilization of temporal certainty for Westerners who generally only live the one temporality of secularized Christian time, it seems necessary to elaborate on the issue of many worlds as it relates to cinema.⁵⁹ Hopefully it was evident from the discussion of Antonioni's film that not all worlds are equally powerful in sustaining themselves creatively through time. More often than not, they are destroyed by the capitalist-imperialist machine or even when managing to transform into something compatible with it, are still treated as lesser by those living in the worlds that control most resources. (See Bear et al. 2015) Part of what takes away the ability of other worlds to survive, is the scientific endeavor itself, at least in its descriptive aspirations: once Western science, in this case the classifying representational humanities, describes something it is caught in time, habitually projected as what 'it really is.' A China or Thailand are described many times, different schools different intellectuals different politicians or commoners argue about what it really is, without as it seems acknowledging that it isn't anything, but many things, including whatever one has just claimed in relation to that entity. Thus, each new cinematic form that can be related to China or Thailand or Buddhist practices adds to whatever these may be, and often in the impermanence of the world, some forms and ideas disappear into the past, perhaps to one day be actualized again by archaeological work. The iconic French film scholar Nicole Brenez (2014, 64) writes the following: "Whether in fiction or documentary, essay or scientific, cinema is an art of description. And description, being first and foremost a literary form, finds forms of fulfillment, or even

⁵⁹ Amusingly, the Cinema Scope review mentions Antonioni. (Koehler 2019) The creation of ambivalent mystery, of destabilizing the reality of the real (via strange disappearances) is after all very Antonionian – the classic auteur seems to have merely 'forgotten' about these techniques when dealing with China.

accomplishment, thanks to silver print. ‘Description is a figure of thought by development, which instead of simply pointing out an object, makes it somehow visible, with the vivid and animated exhibition of its most interesting aspects and circumstances’” Furthermore, she discerns that two preconceptions “born of literary disciplines continue to reign over cinema” (ibid.): accuracy in describing the world and the technical recording by the cinematic apparatus is taken within the framework of identification or definition. This is something that all kinds of film-making must struggle against. Once one takes cinema as a description that does not simply point out, but makes visible, then it becomes an ontological operator drawing contours of possible worlds. The conventional expectation of cinema pointing toward a reality outside of it becomes but a subset of its figural capacities in relating worlds – cinema is always already engaged in ontological politics.⁶⁰ And, as for description in general, however treated, is that not one of the central operations of ethnography? The question however is and always will be: what exactly is being described, as well as how will a redescription differ? And, it is also this: which elements from any situation or world are being extracted and stabilized through a description, made more ‘real,’ and which ones disappear? Once we do away with the notion of a preexisting reality ready to be represented, it becomes self-evident that any description is a creative act that brings together existing forms and conventions (accessible to the body doing the describing) and whatever was encountered. This counts for any world, including the one doing unacknowledged self-perpetuation when compartmentalizing other possibilities through research into things past without the power to co-create futures.⁶¹

In a related field of research, the STS scholar Christopher Gad writes the following on the topic: “[...] the dynamic relations between people and materialities create emergent worlds, giving rise to new forms of politics, technology, and cosmology in continuously unfolding processes.” (Gad et al. 2015, 75) Ontological politics then is about varied emergent realities that are connected but not

⁶⁰ Isabelle Stengers (2018, 85) expands on ontological politics in the following manner: “My point is not to extend the passions of philosophical ontology to political epistemology, but to claim that in order to accommodate ‘ontology’ with ontological politics we need to disentangle it from epistemological presuppositions implying a mute reality available for many worlding and wording ontologies. The problem with ontology is not knowledge or representation, but engagement with and for a world ... Speculation here is defined against the power given to the definition of a state of affairs that logically leads to war. It implies the trust that this definition might not be the last word. Ontological politics, however, implies another kind of speculation, more akin to what physicists call a ‘thought experiment.’ There is, indeed, one powerful protagonist that cannot be trusted because it is not equipped for agreeing about peace as a possibility. It is what I would call, among other denominations, the global West.”

⁶¹ The irony is of course, that this cosmo-practice of Moderns makes it impossible for most to recognize that these others, most of all China, actually continue shaping the world and future, and by being unable to grasp any of this, the image most of those in the West have of the world and the world keep drifting apart until eventually they will probably have to break.

identical, and it “demands that we take seriously the existence and power of other-than-human beings.” (Stengers 2018, 100) This is not a classical perspectivism with different views on one world, each perspective being judged based on its accuracy in describing the allegedly inaccessible world. We are thus not in a realm of beliefs which can be true or false, or just tolerated or respected within a liberal multiculturalism. The scholar John Law (2015, 127) summarizes it in the following words: “If we are liberal then we will respect the differences and we will not try to impose our own version of the world on those who see it differently. But even so, and however nice we are, we have not abandoned our basic commitment to the idea of a single all-encompassing reality. Neither have we really stopped assuming that Aboriginal people have got it wrong. Their idea, the idea that the world is a set of differently woven, specific, and heterogeneous creating practices, is a story, but it is not the way things actually are.” It becomes a question of which elements of realities carry into other worlds (with Western universals carrying well due to the infrastructure build up over centuries of colonialism and capitalist extraction). But also, for those of us who learned to be mindful and perceptive of the complexities of the material constitution of the world, it is evident that the liberal order is not neutral as material transformation of reality: it is imperial at its very center, seeking to restructure whatever is into dependent and extractive relation to the so-called West. The very creation and maintenance of unified measurements, infrastructures, communications is not neutral and what more is ecologically devastating, as regions of the world very actively differ in what types of architecture or urban design can be accommodated. The one-world world has been a distinctly Christian fantasy from the start, made real through imperial force, but the world resists, for it is always more complex and unruly than any projection can account for.

John Law reminds the reader that the overdeveloped ‘North’ itself is also composed of different worlds. There is and never was a radical separation between ‘our’ world and ‘theirs,’ all are built as localizing heterogeneity. He calls it a *fractiverse*, “[t]he idea that reality is a set of contingent, enacted, and more or less intersecting worlds in the plural.” (Ibid.) What is important for my engagement is that cinema as a figurative machine that, following Benez, renders visible new capacities already virtually inherent in the world is a very special actant (to also be appreciated as such), as the worlds composed in local conditions can travel easily (most commonly as a digital file nowadays) and connect with other practices. One might say, a redescription of what cinema can do is necessary for its continued existence and relevance in the future. “There is no ‘overarching.’ Instead there are contingent, more or less local

and practical engagements.” (Ibid., 128) At least if those coming into contact haven't already settled what there is in the world. Not that the figurative capacities really mind, as they fit very well the Latourian hybrids which proliferate among those who have never been modern.

So here, Law's dictum is taken to be of central importance: “But even in the North we do have a choice. If we do not opt for a one-world metaphysics, then this opens up a whole field of intellectual inquiry that is at the same time a field of political intervention.” (Ibid.) It is all related to the problem of difference: do we take films to be difference engines or identitarian representational machines? Here thinking with Haraway's most famous concept, the cyborg, proves useful. As STS researchers point out about it: “[...] one central aspect of the cyborg figure is precisely that everything, from metaphysical concepts to coffee makers, insofar as they act and thus exist, are relational, semiotic and material entities – all at once.” (Gad et al. 2015, 75) A film then acts, that is insists as a material-semiotic entity. Following a distinction made by Brenez (2006), many industrial films, to differentiate them from an avant-garde that tends to reconfigure all it relates, are still woven so that they won't shatter the one-world metaphysics presumably shared by the makers, so the way they relate appears pre-given and merely confirmational of existing attitudes. Though as Chow (2014) concernedly writes, there are many films composed in non-Western societies the idiosyncrasies and worldings of which are translated away by the Western viewer or critic such as Susan Sontag – the self-appointed ultimate arbiters of the Real. Following ontological turn scholars, difference is expected in the realm of culture and identity in the realm of nature, and cinema straddles both: world cinema is expected to be different, exotic, but its claims to reality are taken as mere fantasies unless coded in familiar ways. It is on this terrain that Jia Zhangke and the *Krabi* film play. These polyiconic tapestries use montage to put different worlds side-by-side without clearly grounding in one or the other. Readers might recognize here the Deleuzian time-image and its fundamental undecidability, rendering the actual virtual and thus open to change, the emergence of the new. What then constitutes a polyiconic film? That the succession of images cannot be easily reduced to a one-world world, whereby it enacts an ontological politics – whereas most films may express different worlds, but they don't as a rule enact a differentiation in worlds; at least not as individual ‘objects.’ “Furthermore, practical ontology offers a vantage point from which to consider the fraught issue of incommensurability between worlds. Nothing allows us to claim, in principle, that worlds are either commensurable or incommensurable. There may well be worlds that are mutually incompatible, whereas others can be compared or related with little problem. Indeed,

many worlds are continuously related and compared.” (Gad et al. 2015, 76) Movies as relational objects that open up (to) other worlds are then perfect for enacting relations or comparisons with other, possible worlds.

What does this specific film generate in the me who is partly formed through Buddhist traditions, so that I can share this world? That is, how can I show the structuring presence of another possible ontology to those unfamiliar with any such perspective? After all, Western perspectives travel much easier than those of others. Western arts and narratives have for centuries influenced or at least provoked reactions all around the world, while those of others have been contained or denied instead of giving the opportunity to influence, provoke, actively transform and enrich the so-called West and the exclusionary canons it projects, all the while acknowledging these connections.⁶² I in many ways diffract as much as the film – thus: “[T]hat’s the whole point of diffraction. Not everyone yearns to know about the same things.” (Smith 2012, 333) *Krabi* relates different worlds, and one of these, as I will strain to demonstrate is a specifically Buddhist one, not so much in the iconography employed but in the more ephemeral composition of audio-visual montage.

Krabi, 2562

There seems to exist a perpetual magic hour in the world of *Krabi*. When one enters the film, children, framed at distance, are reciting the hymn to Thai royalty. Traffic passes in the background as the costumed youngsters perform as multitude, linked by an imperative but their habits not yet being able to perfectly synchronize. Not yet made same by decades of conformity coding. Some, perhaps, will reappear later, on the back of a *songthaew* (literally: two-row) when talking to one of the many uncertain protagonists who wander the image-worlds of *Krabi*. Among these, even later, one will learn there are those who are linked to even other figures one encounters. These relations are only ever established visually, one's memory has to do the work of association. Yet, there is a link, a connection to be made, however fleeting, be it among the singularities of each student or the generality of their age group.

Looking back, one notices such patterns, but when living *Krabi* linearly, the way life today is

⁶² The internet is changing much here, as for individuals it becomes easier or even normal to have sustained encounters with the productions of non-Western (but still capitalist or socialist) societies.

commonly experienced, at least when reared in Christian realist societies, the flow appears to be but a succession of almost incidental images connected by form, place and the convention of having feature films. As any diligent student of Buddhist teachings will know, untangling the complex webs of relations that bring about the world is no small task that any mere mortal can hope to achieve without the guidance of correct teachings. Mistaking surface effects as experienced in immediate daily life for all of the causality of the world is not just a category mistake made by Western common sense causality.⁶³

Within this universe, there doesn't appear to be any systematic privileging of one life form over another. Myth and 'our' conventional reality are not clearly isolated. School children, a young local guide, a Thai actor, a European director, a film crew, the night, a hotel employee, a cave, a *naga* (serpentine water deity), a wat, a projectionist, a projector, landmarks, an archaeological site with a skeleton, spirits and spirithouses, boats, kayaks, a woman of uncertain goals and existence, streets and roads, trees, palms, beekeepers and bees, futuristic scientists in white pandemic suits with blue gloves looking for an uncertain something, an ex-boxer sitting in the liminal space of a door, sunlight, black and white insert of a girl finding gold bars and making a golden conch,⁶⁴ a neanderthal couple, the beach, a shaman, mudskippers, American tourists, the camera becoming a view through a microscope, a buffalo, a cock, an old cinema and horror movie posters, a flock of birds, restaurants and a karaoke bar, rain, 2562/2019, Krabi. The list, as many a Latourian litany, could go on. (Bogost 2009) How to make an inventory of images and things? Reality can never be exhausted. An anthropologist writes the following words on Thai Buddhist worldings: "This is not a Linnaean-style classification system, not a hierarchical logic scheme in which lower-order components nest under higher-order categories. The possible combinations of component parts (i.e. of possible mind states) are functionally infinite – contingent on particular circumstances." (Aulino 2020, 31)

According to scholar Christine Gray (1995, 226) "[i]mages are regarded as language in that Buddhism, like Hinduism, often privileges visual over verbal media in the communication of truth or dhamma." With Buddhist *dhamma* being the cosmic order and the teachings of the Buddha, and in some schools of thought phenomena, this central concept (in a sense *dhamma* is 'reality') is already

⁶³ Which itself has been elegantly dismantled by Nietzsche following Hume. For a concise discussion, see Culler (1982, 86–88).

⁶⁴ The conch mobilizes knowledge of the Thai literary classic *Sangthong* (The Golden Conch) composed by King Rama II (r. 1809–1824) and based on Thai/Lao folk narratives.

multiple. Here there is not merely ‘doing things with words,’ but doing things with (and as) images. If indeed one might perceive a slight tilt toward human vantage points, one might also think about how geological structures form part of the images in Krabi. It is not merely the repeated, conscious presence of landscapes and elements that act as both background and connective tissue between scenes. They, most especially the cave, are things that link temporalities, stories and activities. In one take, a cave might go from enjoying resplendent sunlight to being entered by a small human figure, thus rendering it for our habitualized perception into a background to anthropocentric activities. In Thai worlds, caves take on important roles and mythological activities. Here too, it is made explicit. A spectator hears, told by a young girl, who is by all appearances a travel guide for both *farang* and other Thais, the myth about how the cave came to be.

The camera slowly pans across the walls of the cave. Voices as if disembodied but lingering from two figures met in the previous scene:

- There was an old couple who wanted to have a child. So they proposed to a *naga* – a sea serpent – that if they were granted a daughter, she'd marry the *naga*.
- And if they had a son? (Notice: the Thai woman visiting Krabi for reasons that are, much like her physical existence, never stabilized, goes along with the story. She asks a question from within the narrative logic, not from a disbelief without.)
- Maybe Phra Nang Cave wouldn't exist now (laughter). However, it didn't turn out as they'd agreed. When their daughter grew up, she decided to marry someone else. The *naga* found out and got very angry. He turned into a human and stormed the wedding.

At the cave entrance, a beach, the camera eye shows dozens of people including climbers mounting the rock.

- There was a shaman living in the cave nearby. He tried to stop the fight, but to no avail, so he turned everything to stone. The bride and groom's house was turned into Phra Nang Cave.

The voices become reembodyed. The woman ‘probably from central Thailand,’ as is much later inferred by a female police chief, and the young local female guide walk on the beach. Their bodies, their faces,

the pace of their steps. The wavy (ir)regularity of seawater on sand makes for a third of the frame.

- What about the groom?
- He probably turned into one of the islands (laughter).

A sailboat softly rocking on the water, islands in the background. The soothing sounds of water inundate the atmosphere (cut). The two young female characters almost in close-up. Such images are rare in Krabi. The guide pays respects. The visitor, always in a light blue shirt takes a glance and imitates her. It's just a fast, half-hearted paying of respects. Perhaps it doesn't matter in a Buddhified world where intentions are just a subset of actions. Doubling makes the difference visible. One may notice the praying beads around the younger girl's wrists, as the one in blue attentively checks out how the off-screen shrine looks. One can follow the movement of her eyes, waiting if as a spectator one will get to see the shrine.

- This shrine is popular with women who want children. Women from all over the world come here to ask for children.
- Well, I really don't want any children (the younger one laughs at this and smiles).

Finally, the shrine. Many colored penises phallicizing from the ground up. The backs in medium shot. As locals and anthropologists know, there are many fertility shrines in Thailand, even at least one in Bangkok.

- Shall we go to the next place?

As the laconic statement disappears into the past, the camera lingers on the shrine.

The story will be repeated when the guide talks to the American tourist couple. She, the beach and the shrine are the only clear link between them and the rest of the figures encountered. Such doubling is a common strategy here. Starting with the fact that the film has two directors – a parallax view. Or a diffraction perhaps. The woman in blue is doubling herself, as a ghost maybe, or an alternative version. The projectionist relates a story about how a woman he conversed with suddenly

disappeared. Later, we see her who presents herself to different people as having different reasons for visiting Krabi descending from the cinema's rooftop, never to be seen again. The former projectionist and her had a talk before, continued on the rooftop. – It's beautiful up here. – Yes, it is. ... What's that? (she points to the left of her, to the right of the image). – Kaew Temple, the official temple of Krabi. – There's a shrine up here? – It's a shrine for the guardian spirit of the cinema. It used to be next to the well behind the cinema. But sometimes, people saw the spirit climbing up here so we moved the shrine.

The Thai actor we met standing in the water dressed in prehistoric garb, apparently filming a commercial and being the one who makes contact with the male neanderthal, also doubles her. They are shown to be in the same hotel room, one might presume at different times. I write presume, because like with many events, no stable grounding is ever achieved. The past in the present. The cinema lingers on through time. Cinema is after all a place where past, present and future meet. They destabilize the real. (Lim 2009) Both cinema as an image producing apparatus and the space of screening and losing oneself. This is masterfully shown Ming-Liang Tsai's 2003 film *Goodbye, Dragon Inn*. The Malay-Taiwanese director is obsessed with the melancholy of time passing as it reverberates through the problematic posed by the fleeting stability of the cinematic image. Once one begins to notice doubles, they become endless. Little wonder in that a camera is the technology of doubles, doppelgängers and hauntings. This has been picked up on and thought through by the earliest filmmakers. (Kittler 1999) As the play of doubles becomes infinite, the (un)grounding issue of ethnographic writing returns: reality is infinite and whatever analytical framework is employed, complexity is not reduced, it proliferates. The list of doubles would be endless and anybody approaching Krabi intent on doubling would encounter new ones. Hence another reason for the move to partial connections and diffraction. And, as Marilyn Strathern (2013, 157) puts it “images *contain* events.” Though she argues this for Papua New Guinea realities, given what researchers such as Gray attest for Buddhist traditions, it would hold there too. And anyways, what we ‘do’ in research is applying concepts and theories sourced from one place to another. Strathern elsewhere demonstrates how what is figure, that which is interpreted and not taken as simple ‘reality,’ and ground. That which is presupposed as self-evident (not only in images in a narrow sense), differs between a Western and differentiated Papua New Guinea people and is (for certain images at least) differentiated for Moderns as well. (Strathern 2002) In short, proliferating cinemas of *polyicony*.

Felicity Aulino (2020, 30ff.) argues that Thai Buddhists operate with an image of the mind and the world that she terms *kaleidoscopic*, unlike Thai converted Christians, who while keeping some Thai ways generally transform into less permeable modes, firmly grounded in God as a one-world world.⁶⁵ It seems to me that it's like habits are sedimentations, layers of preconscious action and thought that persist. Aulino notes that while Thai usually think about what to do for a spirit whenever they encounter them, that is they think about what the spirit could want from them, for Christianized spirits native to the region (even those of relatives) are always coded as demons and as such evil within a binarized world. There are hard lines that ought not to be trespassed. She writes that the reality of spirits “would not be of primary concern” (ibid., 37). It is not so much that these converted Christians question the existence of spirits – after all, they just appear, so why question their existence – it's that they lead to a “disavowal of any potentially positive, constitutive relationships with them.” (Ibid.) As for the Buddhist mind and the related ways of world-making, she writes: “Like a turning kaleidoscope, the ‘mind’ here is understood to draw together component elements in an endless array of richly textured combinations. Of course, certain patterns arise with greater frequency, and the ever-changing unfolding of existence is in turn shrouded by a powerful illusion of continuity.” (Ibid., 32)

Precisely this image of mind can be discerned as an organizational principle of *Krabi*. The film clearly does not perform any Christian realist sense of ontological unity, but one of multiplicity and its concomitant uncertainty. *Krabi* is multiple, it holds two worlds at once. Certain figures traverse the spaces in *Krabi*, and such continuities can often be only construed retroactively. As the film unfolds, since it uses uncommon conventions in editing, it's impossible to tell or predict how a new image relates to a previous one. The way figures are framed, or the way speech is often not linked to any clear source on screen, and further contemplates the existence of ghosts, leads to the necessity of thought, by which here I mean (following Deleuze-Bergson) actively reaching into memory to find an adequate image to the one presented. It would be impossible to create these thoughts if not for technologies of slowing down, playing on repeat, or frame-by-frame, of easily accessing a film in order to do this. The film differs from itself and makes different thinking possible, has different effects, depending on the

⁶⁵ It is important to note the complexity at play here in how conversion is described: humans and the social environments co-constituted are complex and transform at different speeds. This is a way of acknowledging some specifically Christian effects (conversion) without reproducing Christian cosmology, one that is obviously naive in its projection of immediate and total transformation. One might thus notice how enormously persistent Christian conventions are in imagining how the world works, again a reminder that Western secularism remains a variant of the Christian tradition, and will remain so unless seculars begin acknowledging a world of continuous transformations instead of radical breaks.

techno-cultural constitution of the viewing situation.⁶⁶

Ghosts, they are ubiquitous in Thailand and it's production in popular and art cinema. I myself, during my fieldwork, have not had any encounters with ghosts I was aware of, though their presence was implied through various material artifacts and some conversations. Being a *farang*, the people I met (generally educated middle-class) were vary of relying to me any ghost stories except after significant trust was established. And even then, the topic rarely came up. In *Krabi*, and one might presume not only in this cinematic version, ghosts are ubiquitous. Not as appearances through literally visualizing special effects. They are there as recurring topics in interviews and through montage. Film can after all show the invisible. Ghosts in *Krabi* are talked about, narrated, edited through sudden absence, but never directly shown. After all, that is what makes them ghostly, haunting and not shocking. It matters how the invisible is shown.

Beyond the Limitations of One Reality

The reason I situate the question of reality of the real and of images within the anthropological is because ethnographic writing and cinema encounter a problem that is specific to their mode of inquiry. Documentary work of those creators formed within hegemonic forms of realism noticeably does not have to contend with the possibility of other worlds. The Antonioni example starkly demonstrates that even 'radical' white filmmakers, when it comes to the issue of the real, can remain resolutely stuck within Christian realist worlding. Earlier, I added: paradoxically, as the Italian auteur's fiction films are heavily invested in taking apart (neo)realism and have had a deep influence on, ironically, Chinese cinemas. (Pollacchi 2014) In her reflections on ethnographic film and experimental cinema, Catherine Russell (1999, 10) expands on the "inherently contradictory mode of film practice" that the former is. Due to its (all too often continued) scientific commitment to objectivity, film was often taken as merely being there to provide empirical evidence. However, stabilizing rules have never been successfully established. Partly, this would have to do with the contentious history of how image-making and

⁶⁶ One of the most fundamental limitations of film studies continues to be the unquestioned operation of an assumed existence of a film as an entity onto itself, disconnected from projecting/viewing conditions it comes to have an effect in. Film critics and researchers appear to (implicitly) think these conditions do not co-constitute what they can make of a film, and with this continue perpetuating a hierarchy between critical and common film-viewers. Whenever science and (higher) schooling fails to acknowledge material conditions that make the production of (critical) knowledge possible, only to fall back onto (liberal) humanism, it projects hierarchy and self-importance onto a world where otherwise only variety in combinations would be discernible. Humanism and its projection (but not analysis) of primary equality is hierarchy. It matters how and where knowledge attained is disseminated.

writing science relate within the field of anthropology. (Grimshaw 2001) This lead to the infamous anthropological iconophobia, described by Lucien Taylor. He summarizes how a variety of anthropologists continue(d) to denigrate images, for their “detachment of words and things” (Taylor 1996, 67), as if that were not also the general condition of writing. They consider the cinematic to be at the same time too literal, that is closed, and too open for it, and unlike text, the image is said to provide no real context. What they don't see is how the play of signifiers in texts cannot ever provide full context either, not to mention that language is always contaminated by image. (Mitchell 2005) Much of this has to do with anthropology remaining caught within Christian realism, and with it its colonial history, and taking cinema to be a representation of the (uncontaminated) Real. Funny how images made, words written somehow are as excluded from being real as supernatural entities of others, or in the past even other humans. Yet all of them continue to change the world(s).

The history of anthropology has continually contended with this issue, precisely because the anthropological unconscious (by which I mean that of the anthropologist, not any general human condition) emerges within the tensions of the coming together of different worlds. One might then claim that it is precisely the fear of losing the power over defining the Real that motivates many of these skeptical attitudes toward cinema. For once it is accepted that there is no unambiguous self-positing reality to ground scientific inquiry, a new world opens up and all that was solid melts into air. “Here science is *fiction*.” (Lyotard 1993, 253) According to Catherine Russell (1999, 10), the “history of ethnographic film is thus a history of the production of Otherness.” And once one stops domesticating this co-produced Otherness by imposing a definite context (as has been done by the relational/ontological turn in anthropological theory), ethnography becomes “liberated from its bond with the real, and from its assumptions about truth and meaning.” (Ibid., 11). What has to be left behind is, as Russell notes, reflexivity, as it is tied to the real. Which is why I introduced diffraction. This then, is the other part, to the ‘partly’ I mentioned above: visual ethnography has continually contended with questions of the multiplying real not merely due to a possibly arbitrary intertwining of cinematographic technology and anthropological knowledge production, it is because the enmeshed difference between word and image, and with it, a multiplicity of worlds, is the very condition of the relational practice of this scientific field. The importance of Deleuziana here is that it is a tradition of thought that enables to theorize and artistically tackle this problematic.

Image and thought are in a profound kinship: “We start off neither with the image nor with thought, but in the middle, where each melts with the other one into a common plane, the plane of immanence.” (Martin 2000, 61) What is real, image, thought, is always a combination and thus open to manipulation as fabulation (in a positive sense, once admitted) and change. It is in this that affinities with Buddhist worldings, where speech and image are both language-qua-communication, arise. If then, we take images to be something all sentient beings necessarily produce by living (images as picture being a mere subset of this, that is images stabilized into something that can be detached in space-time), the focus on renunciation and undisciplined chatter (Gray 1995, 227) regains a new significance entirely missed by Christine Gray (and, as far as I know, by all Buddhological research): the ascetic ideal is one where the kammic production of images-qua-actions with effects on the world is minimized. When images are speech, and many Buddhist texts remind of dangers of excessive speech, the only logical conclusion is that excessive living is subject to the same effects. Now, what I am attempting to do here is not to promote the attainment of *nibbana*, but a specific kind of science as conscious, regulated and attentive intervention into the world, so as to have some kind of control over the direction future worlds might take. To gain some sense of control over ever-changing reality, it is necessary to rethink the image-word-reality triad, and how we insert ourselves into it: “The image is born in the middle, between the two, in the crucible of being and thought, as a new reality, an entity that comes to live an autonomous life that is impossible to place in me or outside of me. Images are floating souls, souls of the world that science knows precisely nothing about.” (Martin 2000, 81) If in the future science were to fall back onto the one-world world most academics continue to pretend to live in, it will be impossible to deal with whatever the contemporary future throws at the present. To reiterate a definition of Christian realism: it's a reductive activity that takes contemporary forms as fulfillment of the past, all organized around the One, whether it be God, Jesus, the Bible or the more recent transformation into Nature. It ties the new to the old, making it seem as if the world was as is forever, cutting off the exciting and productive connections to have been and will be made (or at least not acknowledging them). Past forms can be taken as being fulfilled in future ones in worlds conducive to the emergence of new forms, without a centralizing, unifying thrust. Rather, endlessly diffracting and transforming, as it would appear in Buddhist realities where forms proliferate. One might just take a look at the immensity and acentrality of the Buddhist canon and compare it to the Bible. The task is not only to find or create new forms and acknowledge them, but also to find or create new infrastructure to connect the forms. As in cinema, where images are connected through editing, the latter being

technically invisible, but definitely there. Dissimulating multiplicity is the defining characteristic of Christian realism: worlds created through histories of images/figures, which are thus always in the process of becoming and never simply real independently of newly produced images, become a reality simply out there, as if the reality of seemingly natural entities were not co-produced through images. No wonder the world always seems one step ahead. I hope to have shown that both Buddhist post-realism (as thought) and the film *Krabi, 2562* (as image), can offer fruitful paths for shaping whatever reality might come (without implying that linking Buddhist practices with science does not create new worlds, only partly related to historically existing Buddhist ones). *Krabi* then opens onto new worlds because its texture offers no final grounding reality – it is a polyiconic cinematic machine that can operationalize the change envisioned. It certainly has done so to the author composing these wor(l)ds. But now, let us turn our attention onto ethnographically sourced materials, and the role of creativity with particular attention to that which tends to disappear. The scene composed will be polyiconic too, it's multiplicity irreducible to one, which was at times keenly felt by this body as it remembers being present there. In future chapters, as scenes and images are developed, stabilized and connected in a variety of ways, it's assumed that polyiconicity is operational.

08. Mediating Anthropologists, Relating Relations, Creating Worlds

“The sky above the port was the color of television, tuned to a dead channel.” The opening of Gibson's *Neuromancer* (1984) is an iconic example of how technology or more precisely a specific new kind of noise has seeped into the description of so-called nature. Such is the power of language: it creates, it does not represent.⁶⁷ Much like the countless tongues of this world will co-create worlds differently, will write the same ‘scene’ differently, conceptually tying it to varied cosmic frameworks, extracting different senses, associations, potentialities. Anthropological writing all too often hangs on to 19th century humanist notions of realism, constantly drawing on language and metaphors created when much effort was built into separating nature from culture and pretending that technology is something entirely outside, and the (neatly separated, in an all too Christian fashion) human is the central organizing principle of writing a world. In other words, realism in writing is treated as necessary, natural(ized) and thus remains underexamined, unwittingly making it work against some of the innovations anthropology manages to bring about in theory, where awareness of the limits of humanism, as well as its racist and sexist consequences, has been very much present for decades. One of the motivations for drawing on the work of Roy Wagner here is that he manages to make the creative activity of the anthropologist graspable, thinkable, he opens the position of the anthropologist in-between two worlds up to generative analysis, which is one of the reasons his classic book on the invention of culture remains potent and unique. It offers a way to deal with the concept of culture as historically created and not simply existing out there, without having to deny its existence altogether (as it happens in deconstructive critiques, which inadvertently keep reaffirming it in their more hidden operations). He managed to make generative his encounters with some of the most other others anthropologists have engaged. That nothing is self-evident, given or otherwise eternal, becomes discernible in encounters that destabilize new parts of what once seemed so necessary as to not even appear as a problem, and the cracks that thus materialize can act as sources of potential freedom from the tyranny of unrecognized habit cloaked in the undergarments of necessity and, crucially a tyranny enforced onto others. Such meetings are composed of myriads of parts, among which is the one doing the encountering (themselves multiple) as well as later translations into textual production for research purposes with none of them being identical to another. How to write them in a way to contain this difference is an almost entirely other, yet indelibly related matter. How to let worlds of others and other

⁶⁷ Taking it as representational is not inherent in language, but a way some human societies came to treat it.

worlds contaminated and transform one's conventions as they swirl and contract around the final textual product, pulling it here and there, establishing new connections and cutting off one's too outdated conventions. How to let other humans and other-than-humans speak. The low hum of clouds and light pollution that tirelessly hang over the capital could be translated into words in countless ways, yet *Neuromancer's* opening sentence describes all too accurately the night sky over Bangkok, a city where old televisions glowing their noisy light over street food stalls can still be encountered. They signal the inextricable complexities of multiple temporalities.

The figure of the anthropologist is invariably one that is in-between and as such it is one that relates at its very core. In the middle of that which brought it forth, the so-called home, and that where research is being done, the so-called field. This medium position appears through the situation one is brought into and the encounters that make things appear. Now, for anthropology and in keeping with its Greek nomenclature, encounters and the habits of noticing have been organized around the human. This does not mean that related topics have not appeared in the field itself (see e.g. Ingold 1997, Bateson 2000, Leroi-Gourhan 1993, Mumford 1934, Kirksey 2014), but if one were to open almost any ethnography that is not explicitly situated in the field of STS and the key organizing principles for better or worse are the human and something called 'culture,' hierarchically separated from technology and mediation: "The basic anthropological implication consists in the retrojection backwards into the dawn of species developments: what we call the human is always already an emergent product arising from the processual interaction of domains that in time are all too neatly divided up into the technical and the human, with the former relegated to a secondary, supplementary status." (Winthrop-Young 2013, 10) The challenge for writing the world in an anthropological mode and as a significant transformation of this continuing humanist tradition, of making the creative leap into an other kind of writing, one that experiments with any kind of encounter, condition and point of view, is to do it in a way that will neither end up as media theory nor as philosophy of technology. Both regularly write their varied versions of the world, but such where the human is fully decentered, disappeared even, frequently focusing on infrastructures or assemblages that are highly material, can at least to some degree be cognitively grasped but not sensorially represented, and that at the same time can only ever be partially experienced via interfaces. (Galloway 2012) Now, from Yuk Hui (2016) and other scholars, we know that technology, media, but also any other assemblages that make up the world, including humans, are anything but simple self-identities, but will differ with different cosmics, and in turn shape

further cosmics. There is no independent technology or discourse on technics, whatever their material constitution, (technical) things and their relation to ‘culture’/cosmological frameworks is not determined nor determinative. In other words, elements are cosmogenerative. Concurrently, cosmotechnics, which for Hui is the unification of the moral and cosmic order through technological activities, or varied ontologies (how worlds are and could be) aren't anything that we might take in directly through the human sensory apparatus. They are not out there to be encountered like a bird or a Buddha, like a birdsong or chanting. They are ways of connecting parts that are encountered through senses such as texts, speech, images, but all kinds of things including entities to be sensed through other means than the visual, at least if they are trained. They are habitualized and never fully coherent background against which things appear, which organizes human bodies and senses along trajectories to develop in certain ways. They are embedded in the world, in the things that make up a world, including thoughts and writings, but each of the elements can become part of a different such framework and shift slightly as a result. They are shifting and as other cosmological frameworks can be partially conceptualized (at least with tools developed in the fields engaged here), they can be somewhat consciously modulated, as if against the resistances of one's immediate surroundings.

Cosmologies, ontologies, cosmotechnics, they all must be (re)constructed and then experimentally brought together with other data, in order to find a pattern in the sensory phenomena combined for research purposes. The same appears necessary for what one actualizes habitually in one's own common practice, for that too is one among many. That is, one must and can show, that the world actually works differently in different places. Everything always happens in the middle of things – the world is already happening.⁶⁸ Furthermore, showing different workings of worlds is something to do from the middle as in ‘in-between,’ being fully part of neither, as otherwise these possibilities would not even appear – the world would look self-evident on the surface (though even the surface changes

⁶⁸ What is meant here, is that since language, concepts, images, representations, habits, institutions, etc. all co-constitute the world, the world actually differs. It's not different representations of the world, as in the one nature multiple cultures ontopractice of Moderns, because the different so-called cultures are as productive as said supposed nature. This means that the activities of those working on where (radically) different worlds meet are less about showing others what really is happening (say with diseases), but more about trying to conceptualize where misunderstandings appear and what things to create so as to mediate between differences without reducing the one to the other. Scientific, mediating practice then includes constant critical reconceptualizing of one's own activities with this field of forces, as the relate different entities, interests and implicit onto-epistemologies. In other words, I am formulating here a radically practice oriented cosmopolitics (Latour 2004) that includes media, infrastructures, technologies. Related conceptions of what it is that an anthropologist does in face of the ontological turn, can be found in e.g. Jensen (2012), de la Cadena & Lien (2015), Blaser (2016).

once you attune to difference). Meaning not the Deleuzian milieu⁶⁹ as middle, or being always already in something and not an independent point of departure, and caught in movement, that too of course, but the middle between two distinct somethings that make breaks and rifts appear. The middle, the medium, all already multiplies. The illusion of representational linguistic precision, of one word for one thing, fractures. Entities overlap. Thus, it becomes very much about framing and change, and in this sense, inherently cinematic. In cinema too, that invisible in between is important: cutting and pasting images make things appear that otherwise wouldn't be possible to grasp. Which has been adapted to anthropological thinking at its borders. (Suhr & Willerslev 2013, Taylor 1996) Change, difference is central: it is not the same world that is perpetuated, rather new combinations arise from the various pressures, tensions, possibilities. As for framings, even within one assumed cosmology, as I will further elaborate, they are varied. More than one and less than many. Whatever one comes across in the role of scientist will too be affected and changed by the very same encounter. As time forks in events, one path among the many possible ones will come to be. These are some of the pertinent, yet general conditions of anthropological encounters and the subsequent transformations into communicable objects such as texts following conventionalized rules and media materialities for simplified and unified legibility. The figure of the anthropologist appears in the middle of this:

An anthropologist experiences, in one way or another, the subject of his study; he does so through the world of his own meanings, and then uses this meaningful experience to communicate an understanding to those of his own culture. He can only communicate this understanding if his account makes sense in the terms of his culture. And yet if these theories and discoveries represent uncontrolled fantasies, like many of the anecdotes of Herodotus, or the travelers' tales of the Middle Ages, we can scarcely speak of a proper relating of cultures. An 'anthropology' which never leaves the boundaries of its own conventions, which disdains to invest its imagination in a world of experience, must always remain more an ideology than a science. (Wagner 1981, 13)

This is no armchair fantasizing, one must put oneself in the middle, both physically for and as experience (assembled as it is from different parts too) and conceptually (to be built off past conceptual

⁶⁹ "The middle is by no means an average; on the contrary, it is where things pick up speed. Between things does not designate a localizable relation going from one thing to the other and back again, but a perpendicular direction, a transversal movement that sweeps one and the other away, a stream without beginning or end that undermines its banks and picks up speed in the middle." (Deleuze & Guattari 1987, 28)

and imageric infrastructures but developing in a controlled way through encounters). What role do Herodotus or medieval tales play? They serve as a contrast for an anthropology that uses the ‘other’ as a control, and through that movement leaves the boundaries of its own conventions. Such old tales, and in a further chapter I will elaborate on this topic, today appear as nothing but projections (inquisitive, creative and possibly even in good faith) of own conventions onto an other, composed only tangentially from sensory, material experience with it. As an analogy, in our own times, all the orientalizing, othering, xenophobia, but also research paradigms that don't explicitly include feedback loops to ensure that change is integral to them, and not merely an uncontrollable occurrence that comes from the outside, and thus can project themselves as a simple and eternal truth. In short, Orientalism. All of these may be composed of different parts, and on the surface level appear unrelated (we know that Herodotus fantasized these creatures! How naive of him, we are so rational now!), but in the way they make the world and relate to an otherness (other of itself, not the so-called essentially Other) are the same (are orientalizing stereotypes all that different from monsters? Is Orientalism not intent on making monsters of the other merely in the guise of forms commonly recognized as ‘natural’ and not ‘monstrous’?). Concurrently, even a mostly projected other, in other words one the construction of which includes little empirical interaction, but a lot filling in with speculation, can act creatively within the conventions one is working. As Rey Chow points out, Jacques Derrida's understanding of the workings of the Chinese script and language is entirely misconceived (based on popular imaginations), yet still it enabled him to enact a deconstruction of his own conventions of phonetic writing: “without the cliché of Chinese as an ideographic language, as a writing made up of silent little pictures, the radical epistemic rupture known as deconstruction could perhaps not have come into being in the manner it did.” (Chow 2002, 63) Derrida taking on the cloak of anthropology didn't stop at claiming this or that prejudice about others, but used a cliché to counter-invent own conventions.

And so, about two months after the initial displacements in the Kanchanaburi mountains, after I had already spent some time in Bangkok, I set out, one evening of particular anthropological-minded preparedness, ready for experiences that would make it necessary to leave boundaries of my own conventions. To go out and act ‘as if there were culture,’ or maybe even find out a new concept instead of culture ‘to act as if,’ to mediate qua translate whatever I might encounter and make it pass through the frameworks we take for granted (such as religion, ritual, technology), and then perhaps, something new might come of it. The descriptions are composed based on fieldnotes and videos taken that

evening, bits and pieces of data stored in media technological support infrastructures that introduce another differentiation by becoming memories to draw on, and co-compose with more directly somato-cognitive ones.

Our paths join at the southeastern end of the BTS from there on moving in each other's company for the rest of the evening. The line that continues already exists in the signs of the Bangkok Mass Transit System. The actual train ends here for now. Temporalities meet. The skytrain always has an air of the future. Here, it is somewhat eerie, finished but unopened. Hovering over you, unlit emerging from darkness, bringing darkness, unlike the already functioning parts. A skeleton close to coming alive. Where I usually live, you don't see structures like this. The roads, the streets are less busy, less overwhelming, in terms of people and all other things that move and grow, and shuffle about. I came here, at the end of the old line, to meet Pot, a director, and his scholarly boyfriend Pol. They invited me to visit a temple fair, งานวัด or ngaanwat at the วัดพระสมุทรเจดีย์ or Wat Phra Samut Chedi in the Samut Prakan province just outside of the capital. Of course I arrive early, excited about the opportunity and not yet familiar enough with the public transport to intuitively arrive on time. The sky is turning to ever darker blues enlightened by the luminescent noise from the millions of lights that make up the sprawl of Bangkok, a reddish aurora that is also white. If you frame it right with these dark clouds, almost pure noise. We meet and chat a bit, not knowing each other well apart from an intense discussion on cinema we had at a Bangkok-wide art event a few weeks back. They know I present myself as an anthropologist and, having both studied at university with Nawa⁷⁰ even being at CalArts, have an idea of what that brings with. They tell me that in times past this province, the one we are heading to, was like an entry fort for foreigners, since all ships had to pass through it to get to this City of Angels. For Bangkok is officially transcribed as Krung Thep Maha Nakhon, composed of Pali and Sanskrit roots, with Thep being a derivation of deva that is deity, here often translated as angels. Perhaps because the deities here travel between realms like angels are said to do, except they are not defined as those that deliver messages from God as angels, the arch mediators, are. They are invisible to the human eye, perceptible only to those who have opened their divine eye. The divyacakṣus/dibbacakkhu by which a Buddha or advanced practitioner who has gained insight into dhamma can perceive all arising and passing away in various worlds. If these celestial kammic beings intervene in human affairs it tends to be through advice. Perhaps this is a place on earth where

⁷⁰ Personal names have been changed.

Buddhist celestials walk among us in larger numbers, but the body that I am for now is definitely not yet capable of discerning their energies. The capital's full name is City of angels, great city of immortals, magnificent city of the nine gems, seat of the king, city of royal palaces, home of gods incarnate, erected by Vishvakarman at Indra's behest." The name of the province meanwhile derives from Sanskrit/Pali; samudra translating as 'ocean' or 'sea' and prākāra as 'fortress.' Everything here is composed of so many parts that extend elsewhere. We grab a small bus – the two have been at the temple fair before and know very well how to get to there. Nawa tells me the inauguration of the new BTS line will be on the king's birthday December 5th, 2019, even though it has been a some time since construction was completed.⁷¹ He says in Thailand events such as this always wait until an official date comes up, often related to a king, to inaugurate. I see there are more temporalities than I am accustomed to, and they shape the material environment and the possibilities of movement for human bodies. This unfinished finished construction in the sky between tall buildings, street lights, and dark trees keeps the fact that the city is always in differentiated processes of change very clearly present.

But here the question arises of how much experience is necessary. Must the anthropologist be adopted into a tribe, get on familiar terms with chiefs and kings, or marry into an average family? Need he only view slides, study maps, and interview captives? Optimally, of course, one would want to know as much as possible about one's subjects, but in practice the answer to this question depends upon how much time and money are available, and on the scope and intentions of the undertaking. (Wagner 1981, 13)

Optimally, of course, but how could this optimal even be achieved in time, in history? Much of the conceptual infrastructure developed by anthropology was done so in small scale societies (however much the entities engaged today as matters of concern might differ) and it shows in the whole problematic surrounding the etic/emic distinction (continuing to secretly operate in variations, esp. whenever an authentic, uncorrupted outside to research is posited through research). Wagner is evidently riffing on these expectations in his slightly exaggerated framings of when sufficient conditions for an anthropologist to get the real experience would appear. And yet, immediately, he includes capitalist media artifacts and modern research techniques, and the question of finances so

⁷¹ The official date now is December 4th, 2019.

obviously playing a role when you look at where anthropologists are typically from and what networks must be in place for the anthropological generation of knowledge to occur (in the implicit image this field carries). Anthropological inquiry, like any other, is composed of many elements and, as Wagner will further elaborate, it would be a mistake to think research as being differentiated by more or less well representing a real reality to be found out there. Just by entering a world, a new element, the anthropologist body with its history, is added (even if otherwise such a world were generally assumed to be a closed set) and by all accounts one (the anthropologist), to paraphrase Deleuze and Guattari of the opening sentence of *A Thousand Plateaus*, is always already many. Each situation is composed of an infinity of elements. As Marilyn Strathern remarks, however one frames it and whatever might be the level of analysis (object, society, discourse, technology, Buddha), complexity is not reduced: “The amount of realisable information does not itself increase or decrease, then; the proliferation or differentiation of detail simply increases one's perception of it.” (Strathern 1991, xxii–xxiii) All connects horizontally and wherever a cut is made, a new reality appears, as new connections emerge and others disappear. Such productive limitation pressed itself vehemently on my experience, as I was intensely made aware of being in Bangkok without an already established infrastructure of existing connections made by previous generations of (un)intentionally imperial anthropologists: all I will ever do will be partial. And that is good. I just have to rethink the relation between knowledge production and its putative outside. Not one of more or less adequate representation of a real, but reality composing ‘as if’ itself.

Reality not as something relatively stable out there to be inferred from the text, instead reality as that which is composing here and now where the text enacts operations on bodies, including the body multiple of each reader. An operation combining different elements to produce something new the effects of which are to be related to certain conventions, so that the object produced will become and for a while remain intelligible or just generally perceptible at least within the (intellectual) space in is aimed at. To adapt Viveiros de Castro's discussion of Zeno's arrow, the reader never sees where it was shot from (the fieldwork site), she only ever perceives its arrival: “if there is one place, therefore, at which ‘we Western intellectuals’ have to start – because we never manage to leave it – it is at this ‘vision’ of Zeno’s immobile arrow, floating in a supranumerary dimension equidistant between the two poles of meaning and nonsense, subject and object, language and being, self and other, the near and the far side of experience.” (Viveiros de Castro 2011b, 142) The middle here that might disappear if

communication is successful. The middle is also those more material media that are almost certain to vanish from conscious presence, like the technologies that make reading and writing easy, or those infrastructures that brought this writing body to the field and back. It is the one that makes sure that certain connections will be able to be made wherever the arrow keeps arriving. The anthropologist must have arrows “that connect disjunct worlds like the earth and the sky, or the two banks of a wide river of meaning. She must have arrows that serve to make ladders or bridges between where we are now and wherever we must be.” (Ibid., 143) Note, that in the text the Brazilian speculative ontographer operationalizes the image of a quiver, of a variety of arrows, introducing multiplicity and different transformations. The quiver and the arrow are the middle: “[t]he archetypal mediator of action at a distance and one of the most ubiquitous images of effective intentionality in folklore the world over [...]” (Ibid., 141) To twist it slightly into Buddhist terms: the arrow that is shot both is and isn't the one that arrives.

It is dark already, early November that has nothing of the November I know as it occurs in temperate Mitteleuropa. The black skies here reflect a little less of the urban lights than in the main city, or maybe there is no big difference, only reflecting clouds disappearing in the meddle of the many colors of the dark illuminating the fair. We pass overstuffed streets, the type well known from ordinary events in Thailand full of food, people, small attractions and all kinds of stalls, and above all full of neon lights or rather uncovered elongated tubes of white light hanging like decommissioned laser swords in their afterlife. The main part of the fair awaits us on the other side of the river, and as we are carried over the dark waters, our motor droning out all other sounds, I can't really hear the stories Nawa tells me about visits to fairs in his youth. He will repeat them many hours later, when we sit in a quieter place, a restaurant, them having invited me to dinner, as appears to be typical of Thais. It will be the first time in my life that I enjoy the flavors of one hundred year eggs. We glide among much larger ships on the Chao Phraya, a dreamlike reality, they seem like whales floating on water; soundless, almost motionless. Compared to us, I have to remind myself, as the intellect can grasp things the senses cannot, and vice versa. The river bank on the other side promises excitement. The cloudy skies all fuzzy from the distant capital. The chedi and other structures are decorated with lights, expounding their presence at night (otherwise hard to be seen, except on full moon days). In all the years of engaging academic texts on Buddhist teachings, I have never read about such sights. Or at least I never noticed it, given one tends to read and see what one is taught, what one already thinks (the

conservatism of convention). Readers will be aware not just of the commonly orientalist image of Buddhism constructed in the West, as well as the techno-orientalism (Roh et al. 2015) shaping the imagination of East Asia, but generally not that of Southeast Asia. A region mostly constructed as a spiritual fantasy for the Western seeker, and spirituality remains dominantly coded as a sort of anti-technological asceticism. As fellow researchers raised in the overdeveloped world with Christian legacies also shared, seeing orange robed monks walking around shopping malls with smartphones in their hands, and similar all too common imagery comes as a shock. The images of Buddhism constructed are those of renunciation, even luddite in their relation to technology. Of course, conversations about monks and their use of smartphones or other pleasantries are frequent among locals, as was also noticeable in interviews I will later conduct. To make it clear: to do research that opens up the world, one must learn to see the new and unlearn to keep projecting some sort of idealist convention of what it is that is out there. Image comes before discourse here, and the ways to combine the two are manifold. Curiously perhaps, the image of Buddhism and that of techno-orientalism seem to almost exclude each other, even though if anything Mahāyāna Asian Buddhist practices very heavily innovate the intersection of human/machine. (Travagnin 2020, Baffelli 2021, Cheong 2021, Rambelli 2018, Gould & Waters 2020, Tarocco 2017, Shin 2016) Displacing to Thailand, I expected to find similar new combinations of Buddhist ontopractice and technologies or technological worlds. Having to face the fact that the enmeshment of such worlds was much more minimal, and as interviewees confirmed, rather uncommon, since according to them Thai Theravāda practice is much more conservative (in the relation to technology and general experimentation) than Mahāyāna worlds, was one of the factors driving the intellectual endeavor of this research. I did not want to give up the cosmotechnical framing and instead searched for ways to look at the data differently. And in the process all elements came to be transformed. This difference between Buddhist worlds goes far back, for at least in Japan some ancient doctrines held that even the inanimate or nonsentient can achieve nibbana. (Rambelli 2001) Retrospectively, it is impossible to tell what influences, imaginaries, and speculations came to form that me that moved to this country where one is reminded of one's corporeality through the heat and dust and night incessant noise. The amount of readings one wades through exceeds any mnemonic certainty. Ideas and images come from everywhere and nowhere. This extends to the challenges I kept facing situated intellectually as I used to and often continue to think from within a Mahāyāna milieu.

“The only way in which a researcher could possibly go about the job of creating a relation between such entities would be to simultaneously know both of them, to realize the relative character of his own culture through the concrete formulation of another. Thus gradually, in the course of fieldwork, he himself becomes the link between cultures through his living in both of them, and it is this 'knowledge' and competence that he draws upon in describing and explaining the subject culture. 'Culture' in this sense draws an invisible equal sign between the knower (who comes to know himself) and the known (who are a community of knowers).” (Wagner 1981, 13)

Things get more complicated, once awareness arises that neither of the two entities simply preexist research. As I've been trying to elaborate, to know both of them is an activity preconditioned by implicit knowledge of each. The entity I relate to as well as the one I relate from, as well as me as an operator of relations are inexorably linked. What appears as an object of knowledge does so on this ground constituted before thought and perception. As highlighted by Wagner, the I here becomes part of that ‘culture,’ as it is only through this operation of relating that culture appears. It's the ‘as if,’ and it will differ based on the implicit knowledge (and its implicit separation between here and there) carried along. Employing the concept of culture will enact different cuts, than if one were to employ cultural technique, or cosmotechnics, or media – and so different relateds will appear and in this process transform the relatee. The activity of the anthropologist is indeed also a ‘culture’ or rather the ‘culture of culture’ (though difficult to grasp through the concept), a practical ontology (enacting a certain version of the world, inclusions, exclusions) or cultural technique. The latter category might perhaps be the most generative way to grasp this activity, as it explicitly includes techniques with culture, and with it stresses the operation of ‘culture’: “Let’s recapitulate the outlines of the cultural-technical perspective: cultural techniques are (a) operative processes that enable work with things and symbols; [...] (f) [it] opens up new exploratory spaces for perception, communication, and cognition; and (g) these exploratory spaces come into view where disciplinary boundaries become permeable and lay bare phenomena and relationships whose profile precisely does not coincide with the boundaries of specific disciplines.” (Krämer & Bredekamp 2013, 27) Whatever concept will be operationalized, it remains important to not exclude that activity from the process of creating the object of study, or else the illusion of a simple out there as if unrelated to the activity of the researcher will inadvertently creep back.

It is a night of excess. Of senses, impressions, lights, movements, ideas – information. Overload. I walk, we walk, they tell me things, I barely hear, communication is drowned out, bodies are caught and dragged by the crowd's incessant movement. And lights, lights everywhere. Colored lights, lights of different shapes, lights of different movements. From far away, the night sky looks lit, like static. In the middle of all this electricity, the sky looks dark, a flat ground against which life happens waiting to overwhelm it all. Perspective, the position one takes, changes what is seen. I am on the edge. I feel physically ill and disoriented when too many movements external to mine flow around me, push me, bump and turn. For a while, I lose the two. Soon, their sight and later presence are regained. A play is performed on a stage. With neon lights of course, and a lot of pastel. Sensory overload. Very unlike the ascetic, world-renouncing image of Buddhism one has internalized in Europe, whether as popularized aesthetics or the discourse of Buddhist studies. That Protestant Buddhism stripped of all the excesses so as to fit the aesthetic sensibilities of the Modern Occidental craving absolution and peace. Even anthropological research on realities informed by Buddhist world-making didn't decenter such preformed often preconscious images and expectations. This is a different kind of experience. When one reads, one always adds shreds of other sensory realities. What one reads differs radically from techno-culture to techno-culture. (Oh, the challenges of falling back onto usage of 'culture' in a non-representational way! The power of convention is all but too strong, for it was inbuilt into language, into reality as Modernity.) It's not merely the cosmic frame, but also the images (sounds, affects) words are habitually connected to. Text travels easily, but also transforms easily. It is, to spin it in a variation of the words of Annemarie Mol and John Law (2001), a mutable mobile: texts are mobile, they travel effortlessly (compared to unrecorded speech), and while their materiality remains mostly immutable, that is stable, their content is highly mutable, as it enters other contexts and new so-called meanings (qua effects) arise.⁷²

When experiencing otherness, one transforms too – unless a system is put into place to ensure bodies retain their similarity to their place of origins more than local worlds, i.e. colonialism⁷³ – and

⁷² I should note, that what they explore is the mutability of the materiality of the traveling object and not its hermeneutic potentialities. In any case, their framing is an efficient way to articulate the constant mutability of sense.

⁷³ Jean Gelman Taylor (1983) in a classic study explored the challenges the Dutch Empire faced before figuring out how to ensure that the Dutch living in Batavia (today called Jakarta) will not go local and create new 'cultures,' how to bind Dutch bodies to their 'homeland' so that this link will remain stable, and Dutch bodies won't rapidly become Batavia-Dutch through interactions with locals, whether by marriage or other means (it was achieved via enforcing white wives and not letting these leave Europe). The anthropologist is similarly stabilized by that link to a 'home' that ensures her difference in the local context, which makes certain that the productivity of the displaced body will in the end mostly act

begins filling these gaps (in discourse) with other images, many of them sourced from cinema or ads or any other image-composing technology. Researchers dealing with the world, not just anthropologists and not just those that engage something conventionally considered other, who do not include the images, popular stories and other artifacts produced by societies will end as nothing but the medieval storytellers of our time, the Orientalists that fantasize sensory composition, overestimating the relevance of the word. Those that put an ideal-type entity over enmeshed realities and enact the cut to secure the integrity of this ideal-type even before any actual engagement with any other, anything that might provoke a shock and lead to thought occurs. Mere reiterations of what has already been established as true and existing and cleanly separated from what it is not. Most Occidental Seculars are after all very excessively Christian in this, the purification of things. Most of the scientific infrastructure, whether material or immaterial, actually continues to construct such a world. (Haraway 1990) Or more precisely, an image of the world with clear separations, while worlds continue happily occurring in much higher complexity. (Latour 1996) The practicing into existence of a world of neat separations preexisting complexity includes all those debating (phallo)logocentrism, deconstructing it, but never moving outside. The Heideggerian end of metaphysics indeed cannot happen, so long as philosophers and researchers will continue making the category mistake of taking writing as representational (thus eliminating the many middle steps to arrive there, including the material constitution of the very privilege and calmness needed to be able to spend years of our lives sitting, thinking, reading, writing). Such logocentrism is commonly projected onto Buddhist traditions, with the Occidental focus on philosophy as thought, even with the oh so obvious practicality and becoming in and through the senses of Buddhadharma. Not to mention the immense imageric wealth of this varied tradition, in materiality, forms and thought.⁷⁴ At times, when writing, the same block from overstimulation appears as when I stand in the unregulated flows of people, sounds, smells and winds attacking, transposing me from all sides at once. How does one translate excess into discourse? What are the conditions of noise becoming signal? How many different signals can form out of noise? Where does that excess remain once part of it is domesticated for research purposes?

to enhance that far away place, where it is to produce scientific knowledge for academic audiences, and makes sure to keep that body from going entirely local as a new combination of elements with little contact to where it came from. It remains of central importance to pay attention to the material organization of the world that makes for nationalism and identities seeming real and eternal in order to not fall into the essentialist trap that necessarily occurs when taking culture or individual as a point of departure.

⁷⁴ This translation of other world-making traditions into nothing but representation, and hence belief and questions of right and wrong (representation of the real world), with the unarticulated Western position always being right, and foundational and definitely not a belief, is of course a cornerstone of colonialism.

We might actually say that an anthropologist “invents” the culture he believes himself to be studying, that the relation is more “real” for being his particular acts and experiences than the things it “relates.” Yet this explanation is only justified if we understand the invention to take place objectively, along the lines of observing and learning, and not as a kind of free fantasy. [...] In experiencing a new culture, the fieldworker comes to realize new potentialities and possibilities for the living of life, and may in fact undergo a personality change himself. The subject culture becomes “visible,” and then “believable” to him, he apprehends it first as a distinct entity, a way of doing things, and then secondly as a way in which he could be doing things. Thus he comprehends for the first time, through the intimacy of his own mistakes and triumphs, what anthropologists speak of when they use the word “culture.” (Wagner 1981, 13–14)

Or doing technics, worlds, realities, one might add. Why limit these potentialities to so-called culture? With Wagner, whatever practice guidelines his research might offer, one seems to remain in too vast generalities. Apprehending ways of doing things, and a new way of doing own things. What disappears here, if this joke is allowed, is any notion of the thing in itself. What of these different things, or even same things doing different things? We cannot speak of culture anymore, as it is not solely on the human side that things happen. As this chapter goes on, I will suggest a way that combines the anthropological way of relating with a thinking of and through things. To some degree, as the activity of the researcher, it is an analogous process, for one “apprehends it first as a distinct entity,” that is, as mentioned above, something is being separated from the interconnected flow of all so as to be stabilized and connected to the conceptual things in research. But the thing also changes, as the focus on humans doing things, shifts toward things doing things with humans.

The temple fair is held at the anniversary of its founding during the time of Rama II (1767–1824 of the Christian secular calendar). Here, in Bangkok, this would appear to be rather ancient. I have no sense of age with the buildings encountered in these parts. I was not raised, not dominantly formed here. Anything non-modern could be any age. Instinctively, even though consciously I know it to be wrong, I filter it all through Central European conventions and immediately make it all out to be much more ancient than the actual historical construction. Nawa tells me his boyfriend never visited the fair before and Nawa wants to show it to him, on account of having been raised here. Earlier, when we were

on the bus to the fair, he showed me some images made at other temples when he was scouting locations. One of them had a machine for making offerings. It was electrically powered and consisted of many bowls (each assigned a function, such as for good fortune, luck or prosperity) and it was turning in a circle. I've never seen or read about anything like it. I think to myself: this must be very effective in dealing with crowds of laypeople wanting to improve kamma for luck or rebirth. The director tells me that when he was small, he used to visit with his parents and there were many more attractions, including movie screenings. But today people can enjoy the many things capitalism has to offer elsewhere and temple fairs have mostly become markets. History moves on.

The fieldworker's belief that the new situation he is dealing with is a concrete entity, a “thing” that has rules, “works” in a certain way, and can be learned, will help and encourage him in his attempts to come to grips with it. (Wagner 1981, 16)

I have long given up on this belief, not because there are no rules, but because there are too many and my very entering rearranges the whole situation to make other rules. Life (here) is too complex. There are feedback loops, let us not kid ourselves. Let's not dissimulate our effect in the world, pretending to do disconnectedly objective work as if removed from reality. History too is overwhelming. All is excess; such a Buddhist way to put things. I think I should focus on finding something surprising and use that to conceptually innovate, disregarding any status of a thing that works in a certain way. The way will be different from whatever I construct anyhow. If not today, then tomorrow. History moves fast as capitalism does.

Culture is made visible by culture-shock, by subjecting oneself to situations beyond one's normal interpersonal competence and objectifying the discrepancy as an entity; it is delineated through an inventive realization of that entity following the initial experience. (Wagner 1981, 17)

Sometimes I need a time out, so I recall how I got here. We meet at 6 p.m., the time the sun sets, so by the time we get to the fair, it is dark. Nawa tells me the temple is on the other side of the river and that we will go there too. After pushing through the streets past stalls selling all kinds of imaginable and unimaginable foods and produce through the neon-lit, we finally make it to the boats. The night

ride is very cinematic, all movement, shadows, the boat's wake, distant shapes gliding, dark shores and the illuminated night sky. My director friend, like me, commits many pictures and videos to digital memory. On the far side of the river the temple's chedi is glowing bright from all the lights its wrapped in. In seeming silence (our boats motor drowned out any sounds) huge shipping boats are making their way up or down the river, eerily. Toward the north one can glimpse the lights of the southern reaches of Bangkok. And, when I look back, I see the neon colors of the riverbank we just left. Ahead, in the dark of the night, gradually lights of the other river bank emerge. It is much less lit and seems calmer than the first bank. Will we get to a more relaxing space?

The flood of sense impressions drowns me. And I have to keep up the new flow of information coming from my new acquaintances ‘as if’ in the role of informants. All becomes a blur, the world moves too fast for me to be able to grasp it. Everything becomes nothing. Will anything stabilizing ever occur? An ethnographic moment say, that will keep its differential force all through the process of composing a research text. But I am not there yet. I am getting ahead of myself writing in the future of what I am describing. Writing and thinking tends to collapse time, creates the conditions for all that research proposing itself and the world as atemporal, eternal, unchanging, always already fully given. I don't want that. That is the basis of modern domination and the condition for lies (in the moral and not extra-moral sense). For clinging onto false images of the world afraid of actually confronting it as it changes, as one becomes. Persuasive fictions. When do they lose their persuasion? When do they become persuasive?

[H]e is a professional stranger, a person who holds himself aloof from their lives in order to gain perspective. This “strangeness” and the “in-between” character of the anthropologist has been the cause of many misunderstandings and exaggerations on the part of those he comes into contact with [...] Insofar as he functions as a “bridge” or point of relation between two ways of life, he creates for himself an illusion of transcending them. This point accounts for much of the power anthropology has over its converts, its evangelistic message: it draws people who want to emancipate themselves from their culture. (Wagner 1981, 17)

A bridge, another middle that makes something appear. A point of relation. The media theorist

Bernhard Siegert explores the operations of doors and bridges, as they relate two sides: “What Martin Heidegger, drawing on Georg Simmel, suggests about the bridge also counts for the door: ‘the bridge does not just connect banks that are already there. The banks emerge as banks only as the bridge crosses the stream. The bridge designedly causes them to lie across from each other.’” (Siegert 2012, 8) A bridge is a relatively stable intervention into space and is continuous. Much like the banks emerging, two cultures emerge in the crossing of the anthropologist, a body interested in differences. It is at once relating and separating. Were one to go ‘fully’ local, this production of two cultures would not occur. Rather a gradual mixing eventually becoming almost entirely part of the new, transformed situation. I do not aim at going local, I remain rather stably linked to the institutions I came from, even as I come out changed by encounters, adapting and adopting a variety of techniques and concepts into my daily life. Writing as an anthropologist however, there is always a tension between two worlds, created by this activity, and one of them is dominant, as it is the conditioning one. The one that is written, the one the techniques of which commonly disappear as the ground (that includes form and style of writing) for the creation of the other within academic writing.

The original impression is confirmed when we arrive. Initially that is. We head toward the temple. At first there are only a few people, but gradually one can sense the ruckus in the distance. Once we approach the temple, which I doubt I would've managed by myself, as I admire the ability of my companions to find their way through the crowds, the heavy air's drone is gradually intensifying. All kinds of attractions are playing at their loudest, or so it seems. Pol shares that he has forgotten how loud these fairs were. Apart from ferry wheels and ghost houses, a theater troupe is performing a Thai play. Boys and girls are playing. Pol tells me it was a well known bit, one about romance on the rice field. Silent parts are traded in for loud singing and music, with countless players of traditional instruments at the back of the stage. Only when one approaches the stage does the performance come to somewhat drown out all the other sounds. Right by the stage a troupe of young girls, around 10 years old, made up in traditional Thai dress and fake hair are waiting for their chance to shine. I enjoy the sound of this performance a lot, but we press on through the crowds to the temple. This is where it gets loudest. I walk on, lose them for a while. Stop, swirl, turn, movement everywhere. Blinding lights.

Roy Wagner's illuminating writing on the invention of culture is astute when it comes to working through the problem of encounters with and in and as the world. “A context is a part of

experience – and also something that our experience constructs; it is an environment within which symbolic elements relate to one another; one that is formed by the act of relating them.” (Wagner 1981, 35) I use framework here as an analogy to context, thereby enabling to tie the function of the concept to frames in cinematic thought, whether in Deleuze or others. What more, “[t]here are no perceptible limits to the amount or the extent of the contexts that can exist in a given culture. Some contexts include others, and make them a part of their articulation; others may be interrelated in ways that do not involve total inclusion or exclusion. Some seem so traditional as to be almost permanent and unchanging, and yet new ones are created all the time in the production of statements and situations that is everyday life.” (Ibid.) To the perceptive, all that appeared simple comes to be seen as more than just a little complex, and without adding the problem the ethnographer assembles: bringing in even more contexts within this varied, multiple world of many frameworks. Analogously in cinema, as perhaps gleaned from the previous chapter, frames contain other frames and many elements, and they may be interrelated in various ways, all within total inclusion or exclusion.

Sometimes it is apposite to reiterate, and take another, marginally divergent fork in the path, just to experiment and see what happens when ingredients alter slightly. What is seen, changes based on what is looked for. The same goes for films, and it is here that alternative film-making practices can shock the viewer into awareness of habits of perception and transform the whole body in such a way that perception becomes more open, playful and attentive even when not watching any moving images. Funnily, this will eventually connect to Buddhist conceptions of corporeal perception and the possibilities of recoding bodies and thought through guided repetition, that is learning as transformation. A pedagogy that conceives of body-minds, and by extension makes it easier to think of infrastructure and materiality as part of teaching, in order to get away from the idealist conception of pedagogy of minds and morals that (conceptually) cuts off all that actually renders it possible (making it impossible to include it in thought). What is the ground against which figures appear? Is it religion, ritual, electricity, infrastructure, Thainess, capitalism? Whatever I try to consciously choose (and much remains preconscious), what is important is to unground the ground, not keep it as the universal given (as modern European thought practice so often does). In other words, modern conventions of doing worlds act as the medium, the disappearing middle, as they are treated as so self-evident as to not just be out there in the world, but be the world. They act as the necessary, yet unperceived ground against which images (including all that is ‘other’) appear. In controlled environments, tied to a chair, body

slowed down so that the energies can go into other explorations, one can experiment with other worlds, shift grounds until the metaphorical earthquakes and real infrastructures of thought crumble to make way for alternatives. Even an object (conceptualized) might become the ground and an ontology the figure. What if I were to reframe the past scene slightly, what other directions might thought be carried towards?

We press on through endless crowds, patches of free space, the ancient stone buildings looming above. Not too tall, kind of spread out, yet centered. Like what some would call cosmic trees, except that any such association appears to be mostly in the conditions in which some occidental minds came to be formed. A play is performed, all movement and lights, and my friends tell me what it is about. I can't wrap my head around all the impressions. Information overload, it almost all becomes noise. One thing is as clear as the illumination emanating from all around – without electricity, this scene wouldn't be the same. I wonder how temple fairs might look like without electric lights, indeed, it seems improbable for them to be taking place after sunset. And yet, without the labor of research, it is impossible for me to reconceptualize the scene taking electricity, its production sites, networks and effects on the organization of space and human activity as the ground. I am too accustomed to see more commonly anthropological elements, and to see different requires time and work on habits of perception and connection.

Hui (2016) conceives of cosmotechnics as the unification of the cosmos and the moral order (the latter left underdefined) through technical activities. What is implied, is that technics come to be worlded in different cosmoses. In other words, to bring this closer to the topic at hand, different frames of reference come to be different worlds. A cosmos is not alone. Materiality is not in itself. It overlaps in immaterial frameworks. It is multiple. Multiplicity, following Deleuze and Guattari (1987), is the intensity of relations that make up a thing. These are not simply accessible through sensory make-up – that is extensive. Much like cosmological frameworks, to be intelligible, i.e. perceptible for a subject, they have to be made accessible. Each fieldworker actualizes her own frameworks, overlapping and multiple, idiosyncratic attunements through which sensory data passes, as what is seen is already filtered before it reaches consciousness, where again further filters do their work. The world is there and not there. Heterogenesis. As time, the whole is the open, as the Bergsonian Deleuze of the Cinema (1986, 1989) books put it. In other words, continuous variation. Attention is organized long before the

thinking subject emerges. Without feedback loops relating the internal and external, we would turn around in circles, like cultural realists, I mean idealists. Putting theory above the empirical does just that. Putting the empirical above theory obfuscates the theory that makes the empirical. Real change in the (re)presentational only occurs when it is tied to its outside.

A word or some other symbolic element receives its conventional associations from the part it plays in the articulations of the contexts in which it occurs, and from the relative importance and significance of those contexts. When an element is invoked outside of such a context, we draw upon and make use of the character, reality, and importance of the context as “associations” of the element. In this regard a word or other element can be said to relate all of the contexts in which it appears, and to relate these, directly or indirectly, through any novel usage or “extension.” (Wagner 1981, 36)

The recurring question: what is ground, what is figure? How does anything even appear? There are at least two steps of transformation involved: capture and translation of the excesses of reality into something to be worked with, and then, once back in a materially stable context where one can actually write and think thoroughly, at spatiotemporal distance that also makes for a perceptual and conceptual shift as it is the notes made that are mostly related to, and the field only indirectly, at a remove, the translation of the already slowed down into another form again, partly speeded up (in the conceptual immaterial) but slowed down, shaped even more so that communication with the outside can flow. Ekphrasis. Rewriting reality. Realism. That is one of the trades of anthropologists. Who decides what is real? What to include and to exclude? Why do technologies keep disappearing from ethnographic descriptions as much as that termed supernatural? Always framed as that excess of what the world really is. Why is it so difficult to write reality differently than that drab realism which excludes all kinds of entities from really being, from having an effect in the world? Of course, partly we know and can see why, as Haraway (1990) has shown with her cyborg manifesto and supplied us new tools that introduce fresh differences into the world. Once one manages to see the human figure against the ground of the cyborg, that is switch the common ground of a human bounded body according to modern Western standards, the world changes. Bodies are full of technology, of the outside becoming inside through a variety of transformations and modulations of bodies. Just as an example, glasses would appear as an external tool, and yet, if one were to analyze their effects, it would become evident

that glasses are internalized, as they prevent eyesight deterioration, and oftentimes leave dents on the bridge of the nose. They might even influence bodily comportment so as not to be lost. Where is inside, where is outside? Clear borders cannot be drawn, even with this simple example. When, as rare as it is, one combines the cyborg toolbox with (preconscious, techno-cultural) images, one can begin to actually see a different world, and thereby, as one and one's activities are part of the world, the world changes. This is one of the meanings of the whole is the open. (Deleuze 1989) At each moment a slice of reality could be made, the world is fully formed, and yet it will change, it changes. This is openness. And, one can then experiment, say with indigenous conceptions of the human, and actually, as I will later, work on actively integrating Buddhist conceptions of bodies into generative research. And I stress this in case it was not clear: this is a corporeal experimentation as much as conceptual-imageric, for it is the body that connects it all. Actually, one might say that what I will do here, is to take an element and put it in another context. As Atsuro Morita (2014) explores, things can take part of their original context with. They were formed as solutions to a materially concrete set of problems, and when they travel, part of this set of problems can be different and hence they must be adapted in order to work. Thus, if resistant enough, they come to act as comparisons themselves. What I suggest, as this practice that combines anthropological and media inquiry, is to take an element and invoke it outside its context, at least conceptually.

It is as if the temple, draped in lights, radiates sound. Sermons, chanting, shaking incense sticks blended with penetrating music and attractions, like the oh so delicious smoothies I drink every night. We cannot enter through the main gate without having to take off our shoes (at which my companions show surprise, since you usually only have to take them off inside). I notice people gluing gold leaves on the Buddhas seated at the entrance. In the distance others can be made out standing in a circle. Nawa informs me they are selling good luck charms and other such trinkets. Walking around, we move on up the radiating chedi. From here you can overlook the whole place. Directly wat adjacent, a small garden, English style, with a swan statue at the center. More humans stand around the rather empty garden. All the turning wheels of light make it difficult to gaze too far into the night. After taking a tour of the chedi, up and down the stairs and around, we descend to the side of the wat. There are two open tent-like stalls set up under which monks sit cross-legged on elevated stages, facing the laypeople lower down. Over the speakers, in a very loud voice, a monk keeps reminding the visitors to take of their shoes and keep an eye on their belongings. As I am writing this, I frequently check the visual materials

collected that night. It turns out that my camera phone remembers differently than my internal memory.

Anthropology is the study of man “as if” there were culture. It is brought into being by the invention of culture, both in the general sense, as a concept, and in the specific sense, through the invention of particular cultures. (Wagner 1981, 17)

The ‘as if’ is perhaps the pivotal operator here. The question of whether there really is culture out there, in a realist sense, is suspended. The edifice of anthropology is restructured. Culture can definitely be affirmed to exist, as a concept for a part of the world, and as such it does something. Namely, create the convention that there are simply cultures, as well as culture in general out there, the very creation of said category disappearing in the process. Wagner attempted the impossible, which is to actually follow the relations between entities without making a clear break between material and conceptual (a variation on the nature-culture division), all the way from what he encountered in his fieldwork to the most basic concept of cultural anthropology. Once this black box (of culture as concept and its application) is opened, it also means that one can study man or anything else ‘as if’ there were any new category. For ages now those dominating have acted ‘as if’ an individual simply exists, so why not try something else for once. For example (cosmo)technics. Or kamma. Or Daoist immortals (to take a left-field example). Will that be a different world? One where we study man ‘as if retention techniques helped achieve immortality,’ while also working through a Daoist conception (however much that itself differs) of immortality, one that is markedly different from a Christian-Secular one. Immediately, it becomes apparent that even a small otherness introduced links other differences, possibilities, worlds. And the coming together of various language worlds, for obviously English and Chinese and Thai engender other possibilities, the point being made here to be conscious of mutual transformation. Constant conscious open-ended redefinition of words and concepts (as ontological anthropologists suggest). This happens too when new concepts developed within academia are plugged in: what transforms when moving from ‘culture’ to ‘cultural techniques’ to ‘cosmotecnics’? For one, and that is certain, the structuration of attention through which topics for research appear and the possibilities of connections to be made.

Yet, we must be cautious, if we want to remain anthropological. “Anthropological practice would cease if it could not implement in some way or another a working ethic of humanism.”

(Strathern 1987b, 290) Or perhaps it is precisely the point to exit the humanist castle, in order to regain the human out of the post- and pre-human. As I am (re)writing these ethnographic passages, awareness arises of the limits inbuilt into the conception of world from the get go. The way I describe, where I put focus seems to actively prevent a writing of the world where human is just partial. Incoherence between the forces that pull through media theory and Buddhadharma, and those of ethnography so heavily coded through a modern, 19th century derived conception of the human that I only noticed the issue once I began writing. I can point toward the technologies present, and how they render possible whatever is occurring, but that is all. Something resists, I will have to reconceive ethnography if I want to affirm the media theoretical ungrounding of the mediating role of the anthropologist, and of including technology and Buddhist world-making as something generative and not once again secondary to the human. Yet, in keeping with a weak version of Strathern's dictum, I don't want to lose the human entirely.

Under the first tent, monks are holding sermons, and also reading requests. One of the four monks is taking images with a smartphone. Under the next one, laypeople and monks recite suttas, all connected through thick white strings formed as a whole structure. Usually, these strings, called sai sin, are laid out as the rite progresses, they lie on the ground, going from one hand to the other, forming a snake-like shape if seen from above, from one side to the other, then to the row behind, and so on, starting from the monks. Here, for the first time, I see a new arrangement – a veritable machine for producing good merit powered by monks, but decentering them in a way. A media infrastructure that disappears for participants focused on karmic activity but is very obvious for an observer interested in media. I wonder why I've never read of it in any research. Even when talking to people here, or when doing interviews in the future, many seem unaware of this kind of installation. It really is disappearing. Only when I show a picture awareness arises. It seems so common for locals as to not care to notice. And for researchers, who knows? Maybe it really is the reframing of the 'as if' as something other than culture that makes this appear as a point of interest, an ethnographic moment. Here, strings are tied around the heads of laypeople, while three monks and a wax figure of a monk hold them in their hands, clasped together with microphones. People are also holding bowls with small yellow flags in their hands. A couple of places are still free, the strings just hanging suspended, touching the floor. Like nooses. The whole installation seems like a machine for creating good karma (bun), designed for a world of overwhelming numbers of laypeople. Then come the monks selling charms. Nawa reads the

poster behind them and tells me its charms for basically anything. A couple of monks are also just hanging out, chilling it would seem.

So here it is, an unexpected encounter. On one level, its function is rather obvious: adapt a material infrastructure for the production of good merit (*tham bun*) to a new situation. In an anthropological mode, I might inquire into what it does for humans and how various locals understand it. I might even go digging in the past to find when such contraptions, such machines might have appeared. But that would perhaps be more of a media archaeology and possibly entirely in vain, given that the moment newness appears is rarely the moment it gets hypertrophied into a more stable memory via mnemotechnical devices such as cameras or writings. And, after all, when inquiring Thais about this thing, only the rarest were even aware what I was talking about in the first place, which itself is interesting. It certainly bespeaks of its mundanity. The appearance here has one clear function within my fieldwork: I begin noticing them in future situations. The form is something that has become part of my world, as an image more than anything else. I do not follow the humans but things, and start thinking about how this reorganization of *sai sin* reconfigures chanting and other situations where it is used. Yet, the goal is not (merely) to describe what is happening, what is being done. It's to conceptually inquire whether this innovation can lead to a new possibility for karmic production (not based on anthropological fieldwork, but rather media theoretical speculation) in comparison to the commonly encountered arrangements. In other words, to see whether this arrangement thinks differently. It's research based on sense impressions that takes into account that sensory materiality is co-produced by the immaterial. Following Strathern, the ethnographic moment is one that can occur both in the field and when going through notes noticing the unexpected. Before fieldwork one can never know what happens, that is, that which one can expect is not interesting, that is merely the replication of (hegemonic/conventional) knowledge already established. Real work can be related to what the media philosopher McKenzie Wark (2021, 13) calls hacking, as an activity constitutive of a new social class: "By hacker class I mean everyone who produces new information out of old information, and not just people who code for a living." Importantly, for intellectual laborers, there is a relation to more material workers: "What we all have in common is producing new information but not owning the means to realize its value. And yet the way we go about this is not quite the same thing as labor, just as being a worker is not quite the same thing as being a farmer." (Ibid., 14) And this immaterial labor produces things that are more easily tradeable and transferable (now that the

infrastructure is in place) than material ones. The capture of this merit-producing infrastructure, bringing it into contact with other worlds (media theory) and fashioning something stable and effective already changes the world. When reconceptualizing the activity of an anthropologist through Wark's concept of hacking, it becomes possible to analyze and think the creation of newness in the process, as well as the relation of these bits and pieces of information to the situation it emerged from.⁷⁵ Indeed, Wagner also adroitly describes different stages of creation: "This invention need not take place in the course of fieldwork; it can be said to occur whenever and wherever some 'alien' or 'foreign' set of conventions is brought into relation with one's own. Fieldwork is a particularly instructive example because it develops the relation out of the field situation and its ensuing personal problems." (Wagner 1981, 18) The experiment lies herein, bringing into relation different conventions, being the mediating element in invention. Or rather will, as I will deal with this possibility, as well as another experiment based on temple encounters, in the next chapter. For now, I have to return to a more directly Wagnerian topic, namely, how to ensure this work doesn't fall into full on speculation of the Herodotian type. In other words, how to make speculation creative, with an awareness of co-constitution, instead of projective.

As the anthropologist uses the notion of culture to control his field experiences, those experiences will, in turn, come to control his notion of culture. He invents "a culture" for people, and they invent "culture" for him. [...] And yet the creator cannot be conscious of this symbolic intent in pursuing the details of his invention, for that would nullify the guiding effect of his "control," and thus make his invention self-conscious. A self-conscious anthropological study or work of art is one that is manipulated by its author to the point where it says exactly what he wanted it to say, and excludes that kind of extension or selftransformation that we call "learning" or "expression." (Wagner 1981, 18)

So it comes to be a question of control, of frame(s) of reference. Within the whole process of generating knowledge, of immaterializing hacking, there are many steps and each is a forking path. At each crossroads, one road taken makes the other impossible. Wagner helps analyze, take apart into more discreet elements, make graspable a process that otherwise would appear as one continuous path

⁷⁵ This will be explored in detail in a later chapter.

from which one cannot even stray, for it is so straightforward. If this is not in a sense a Buddhist practice (analyzing impressions to take them apart and discover emptiness), I don't know what is. Nevertheless, life, time goes on in a myriad ways. Like there are myriad possibilities in the encounters made during fieldwork and later connections to be made. As there are many ways to experience and describe a field that already constitute forks in the road suffused in unreal light.

We take our shoes off and enter the temple. The room is unexpectedly small and well lit. Some laypeople are just shaking incense sticks to tell their fortune. On the pillars posters are hanging so that you can read your future based on which sticks you got. It's the same system as in China, at least to my layman's eyes. Nawa even informs me that it probably came with Chinese people and that Thais just like to incorporate anything that comes around, not to mention the generally large population of Chinese descent, including innumerable Sino-Thais, as I learn about an hour later easy to spot by their long surnames. What strikes me again, is how loud this incense fortune telling is. While usually, when I walk through a town, I smell incense sticks lit at the small altars all around (very pleasant), here I don't remember smelling anything anywhere except for the food. The loudness and light kind of drown out all other senses.

Invention is “controlled” by the image of reality and the creator's lack of awareness that he is creating. His imagination, and often his whole management of himself, is compelled to come to grips with a new situation; it is frustrated, as in culture shock, in its initial intention, and so brought to invent a solution [...] A good artist or scientist becomes a detached part of his culture, one that grows in strange new ways, and carries its ideas through transformations that others may never experience. (Wagner 1981, 18–19)

Control happens through lack of awareness that one is creating, otherwise it could all too easily transform into fantasy. Yet, with a media theoretical approach, one comes to be aware that it's also about experimenting with control. That which one is unaware of, the disappearing middle of a relation, is not set. If going to this fair and having all these encounters is controlled by the assemblage of dominantly material things and my conceptual and perceptive habits, then thinking in a later stage is controlled by the assembled philosophical framework against which solutions are invented. There is no simple reality to act as ground, but different images of reality enacting different conditions for new

solutions.

To phrase a clear distinction: a 'good' scientist, occupying the middle between worlds, whether human or not, can carry ideas through transformations impossible for those untrained in the appropriate practices of controlling invention. To carry through here, is to retain some sort of coherent connection or relation to that which was encountered. This doesn't imply identity, but just to keep something that will operationalize a difference in the context into which it was carried. Importantly, it is necessary for something to shake up the conventions of the scientist in order to encounter an idea to be carried through. Actual invention (as a creative integration of a 'new' idea into one's world through which both will change) only happens when the initial intention (qua projection of conventions onto the other) breaks down, is thwarted, otherwise research will remain nothing but projection as that of the medieval creators and contemporary orientalists. Conventions have to crumble, so that real thought can emerge. All of this obviously doesn't mean that every part of the invention is entirely unrelated to schemas and conventions preexisting in the world the researcher translates into. That would be impossible and indeed would constitute a reproduction of an image of the world I am seeking to exit. There is nothing unconnected or neutral. The work here is about the reconfiguration of parts that lead to (in)direct effects on other elements. This is no project universally valid everywhere and anywhere at all times and beyond time. That would be the learned convention that renders noticing of (relational, not essential) newness impossible. It makes one powerless and lost to actually deal with a world that is developing, constantly changing, and partly due to one's own adding of things to the world, while leaving others out, to stay in the past, only retained as indirect effects on today. Perhaps one day to be actualized out of their virtuality to have direct effects again. Research built on the implicit image of one world, one rule, one perfect possible description everywhere makes one as lost as the sensory excesses of the world. And it hides itself, its own effects in the unrecognized middle of one's own activity. Its own contextualization too, naturalizing one's own frame of reference as the real world. Shouldn't this activity be acknowledged in writing itself? After all, if writing texts didn't have an effect on the world, if they were not parts of the world, if the way they were composed did not matter, why would they be composed in the first place.

Once in a calm restaurant, by now it's drizzling outside where the night skies glimmer and we are hidden under a makeshift roof, they tell me about legends and fairytales. I hear there are hundreds.

And they can't agree on whether many were Buddhist or Hindu, or a mix, or any other possibility. I experience such overabundance and proliferation constantly, on all levels. It seems more like a society based on combining and transforming than excluding. They tell me I should look into Three Worlds According to King Ruang, a book of Thai-Buddhist cosmology, even though it's long and they never actually read it. They try to recount stories and in general can't agree on how they go, and sometimes even integrate what I know to be Greek mythology. When one does it, the other criticizes this step, so in dialogue a certain exclusion arises. What most of these tales I couldn't write down or record have in common, is that they feature an incessant becoming different of protagonists. Through rebirth or other means.

Finally, it would make the selection and use of explanatory “models” and analogies from our own culture obvious and understandable as part of the simultaneous extension of our own understanding and penetration of other understandings. We would learn to externalize notions like “natural law,” “logic,” or even “culture” (as Rembrandt did with his own demeanor and character in his self portraits), and, seeing them as we view the concepts of other peoples, come to apprehend our own meanings from a truly relative viewpoint. (Wagner 1981, 21)

I learn many secrets. I extend my own understanding into that of others. I want to transform my own through encounters with others. It is recursive, not a one-way street of legislation. The Marxist innovator Karatani Kōjin (2017) might even call it an actual dialogue, unlike the Socratic monologue so dominant in Euro-modernity. The Japanese philosopher explores the Ionian coast as a meeting place of many kinds of peoples in contrast to the exclusionary Athenian *agora* so fetishized by Moderns. In his research, he conceives of a Ionian isonomia, a system where equality is realized through the freedom to immigrate and participate. This would make for a better model for anthropological encounters for those of us reared so thoroughly in a world where the slave-based female excluding Athenian democracy has been normativized as an ideal by hiding that exclusion and social hierarchy which made it possible in the first place. All too often in research based knowledge creation, those others that also participate in this complex activity that brings together many actors are excluded, if only through the convention of assigning individual names to research results (and the monetary and career gains that might go with it). The slight shift in view of Euro-modern practices and foundational

myths the Japanese position enables, unearths how the arts of dialogue were developed on the Ionian coast, where many different worlds would meet on an equal level, unlike in the Attic one where one image appears to have dominance (as retrofitted through the dominance of Plato's and Aristotle's image of said world).

In the taxi ride back, Nawa recommends I go to Wat Priwaad, where there are statues of Popeye and Superman and all kinds of other pop culture icons. Later, I will do so and hearing about it does not prepare me in any way for what I will see. He tells me his mother would often spend copious amounts of money on temple donations, hoping to get good merit, instead of investing at least part of it more pragmatically (for him). Apparently, their worlds only partially overlap, while his and mine do so to a definitely larger degree than that of his mother would. She also taught him to say anumathanaa bun, which would produce good merit anywhere without having to attend a temple. Again, something I don't remember encountering in any literature so far. He further narrates, that two weeks after she went to a temple, she would tell her son to put his palms together and say the words, and he would get all that she generated in the temple (it was effectively doubled). Independent of time and place. So we talk about this seemingly boundless production of merit and how it's similar to capitalism. I continue encountering this excess of ideas and stories I don't remember reading about, that could lead to innovating a great many fields. I arrive in my small 8th floor apartment overlooking a bridge taking cars through one of the city centers around 11 p.m., and ponder how to rethink machines and production. It continues to surprise me that there are days, even weeks that pass without anything generative occurring, where all I meet already fits the images I have acquired, and then in just a few hours I come to be overwhelmed, shocked, forced to eventually innovate. I will have to decide which of the threads to pursue. Reading these words, it is already clear.

Here, I have dealt with a few issues that have important methodological consequences. The following questions used to bother me: how many people have to confirm a 'fact' so that it becomes real enough for anthropology? What is the relation between one statement and a fictionalization of a whole society? As I struggled to hack something new out of the transformational ethnographic moments of my fieldwork, these questions disappeared, as the entire way of relating elements changed. I do not use description as representation, but rather description as fictioning and changing of own conventions (Wagnerian invention). So the problem of enough data is moot: the data that produces

thought is important. The ability to put together information in a generative way is a skill to develop. As mentioned earlier, quoted via Wagner, any society in itself will be multiple so no statement will be 'fact' everywhere, as was made clear by all that Nawa and Pol told me, especially in those stories about the former's mother.

To return to the opening query: How to redescribe the world, a performative speculative literary realism, in drawing on 'new' things and 'other' things? Ethnographies displacing the nature-culture distinction based realist foundationalism of old, thereby rendering it just one among many. This shouldn't be a free speculation or fantasizing: "We might actually say that an anthropologist 'invents' the culture he believes himself to be studying, that the relation is more 'real' for being his particular acts and experiences than the things it 'relates.' Yet this explanation is only justified if we understand the invention to take place objectively, along the lines of observing and learning, and not as a kind of free fantasy." (Wagner 1981, 13) It is networks of relations through the anthropologists acts and experiences, that is real material connections with elements 'out there,' things composed in such way that they resist easy appropriation, and through resistance engender cracks or openings in the anthropologist's world. Such things then transformed, translated along relational chains, composed with many others into the objects that come out as research. All this while acknowledging that whatever is composed is always already done so with a speculative edge that fills in the gaps, by convention or, for those where awareness of such activity arises, controlled and experimental invention. The worlds thus encountered and made are interlocking, overlapping, and optimally composed in an obviously polyiconic manner. In other words, that the ability to connect what is written to different cosmological frameworks is part of the text. By frameworks here, I mean even those differences within posthumanist scientific practice, where the bits and pieces encountered and translated can be done so into a technological framework as much as a defiantly human-centered one. The sky above the distant capital might have definitely looked the part of a television tuned to a dead channel (however little this image means to those born after 'dead channels' ceased in their ubiquity), yet it was and will be other images too. Imagery that ties together new, unexpected elements that might one day include digital bodhisattvas traveling on that analog noise. It is of immense importance for researchers to also engage literary, audio-visual and other arts from the worlds engaged in order to learn to see the world anew and integrate singular solutions to the tensions that arise between different worldings, so as to prevent the possibility of projecting a simple one world realism onto scientific and other writing. Or, conversely

treat it all as an uncontrolled fantasy.

09. Cosmic Frameworks of Perception

Circling back to that night at the temple fair, dragging with the memory of experiencing a version of it through senses or words. Are the impressions assembled in the past chapter still alive in the reader's memory? The scene is multiplying, each iteration combining singularly. The world is emergent, whether here, where this is being read, or there, where materials for the text were composed. Imagine for now, the situation of 'being there.' What is the there to the there?

I.

When a(n anthropologist) body enters a situation, the whole (situation) changes, body included. The previous chapter explored the there to the there of the whole changing situation and how it connects with its outside(s) through the conceptual generativity of the mediating anthropologist. Here, the focus shifts on the body problematic by way of the anthropologist. Each body⁷⁶ brings with it a past, memories, corporeal and ideational, stabilized through habit. What does habit, repetition, reiteration do in a world conceived as flux? "For those who affirm perpetual change, Heraclitan variation or Bergsonian duration, habit is an anchor, the rock to which the possibilities of personal identity and freedom are tethered, the condition under which learning is possible, the creation of a direction, a 'second nature,' an identity." (Grosz 2013, 219) Habitual memories that shape what is perceived, that render perception, learning, controlled change in the first place. The body in order to perceive, has to subtract information as it passes through the various senses: "To begin with, the brain's extraction tends toward a kind of subtraction, for what is living tends to perceive what interests it and to disregard the rest; in fact, for Deleuze the definition of subjectivity, and its unfavorable connotation, derive principally from this subtraction. By subtracting or 'framing' the image, the subject already undertakes an 'analytic' preparatory to action: in the interval, the delay, elements are selected and thus made ready for action (or, more properly, re-action); the delay allows the brain to 'select their elements, to organise them, or to integrate them into a new movement.'" (Flaxman 2000, 16) The body is also a complex and malleable interface, new capacities of which emerge with new technologies, which didn't go unnoticed by Marcel Mauss in his anthropological classic *Techniques of the Body* (1973). This foundational text's

⁷⁶ "In the first place, a body, however small it may be, is composed of an infinite number of particles; it is the relations of motion and rest, of speeds and slownesses between particles, that define a body, the individuality of a body. Secondly, a body affects other bodies, or is affected by other bodies; it is this capacity for affecting and being affected that also defines a body in its individuality." (Deleuze 1988, 123)

reception in anthropology betrays the power the foundational figure of the human (posed both as concept and as biological body, as ontologically prior to any context it may appear in) continues to hold for this field, for the connections with technology and bodily techniques presented there have been sidelined for decades. Framing is constrictive and productive, enables some connections while making others impossible. The image Mauss brought into the sciences remains potent and worthwhile to think with, as new connections can be productively established to build other futures for the field and beyond. (Morita 2012, Schlanger 1991) It is one where the new and by then widespread technology of moving images effectuates a change Mauss observed in nurse's gait. He found himself tied to a sick bed in New York, his body held immobile, observing the movement of female nurses that sparked an association, searching in memory, he realized he knows this walk from young women in Paris who had acquired it from American movies (how many reversals!). A body slowed down comparatively that makes it possible to notice subtle kinds of difference in the surroundings, is almost ironically apt, for it is a common condition for both film viewing and ethnographic techniques of observation. To return to the image Mauss conjures, it's as if habitual conventions of gait from the United States traveled and shaped those of young women in France: now, to some degree, worlds can travel independently of human carriers. "There is the fact of a specific technique, walking, which is disseminated and conditioned by a new technical medium, the cinema. Equally important is that the cinema itself – by breaking the actions of the human body down into a series of discrete, serial movements – makes Mauss's concept, techniques of the body, thinkable." (Geoghegan 2013, 71) Taking movement apart, analyzing it, brings with it new possibilities – as bodies formed by elite sports know well and as has been discussed by the example of crawl by Marcel Mauss himself, where he also takes note of how pop-culture, via the first Tarzan Johnny Weissmuller, enters the quotidian unconscious of gestures, postures and movements. (Cf. Leveratto 2010, 88ff.) Mauss (1973, 71) somewhat unexpectedly conjures in an almost Benjaminian⁷⁷ manner the steamboat to describe how French men thought of themselves while learning to swim at the turn of the century, a neat condensation of how technology and technique, imagery and history are inextricably entangled. Such analytical experiments of separating and reconstituting movement go back to the beginnings of cinema qua moving image in the works of Etienne-Jules Marey and Eadweard Muybridge and were tied to expansionist military projects (Virilio 1989), industrial regularisation (Brenez 2006), but also directly connected with anthropological

⁷⁷ "A child not only plays at being a grocer or a teacher, but also at being a windmill or a train. The question which matters, however, is the following: what does a human being actually gain by this training in mimetic attitudes?" (Benjamin 1979, 65)

ones later expanded by the boundary pushing anthropologist film-maker Jean Rouch. (Schüttpelz 2010) The media philosopher Geoghegan (2013, 71) points out “that these studies were allied with the late-19th-century racist and classist ethnography that sought to inventory types, such as the gait of Africans, Europeans, workers, and soldiers. Through motion photography, movement itself became a symbolic system characterizable by discrete series that could be quoted and recursively modified. These series could articulate difference between cultures (‘European’ and ‘African’) and within a culture (upper and lower classes), and they also refined existing cultural distinctions.” Whatever the uses and influence, the interest here frames at its center the following: through habitualization, the outside becomes the inside, all mediated, transformed, caught and liberated by new technologies, all generated within webs of power(s) or techno-biopolitics.⁷⁸ Long before any kind of conscious⁷⁹ effort on part of any singular body enters the scene. Would Mauss's text have traveled so smoothly across time and space without the scenes so skillfully weaved with theoretical generalizations? Whatever the reader may think, it is certain that the body that was overwhelmed at the temple fair, had also already acquired various skill sets and was supported by various tools, based on previous ethnographic research and countless readings on such practical matters. Indeed, it had already shifted in that awareness had arisen that it is the out-of-the-ordinary that was to be looked for, in other words, based on other readings, ethnographic practices had been coded to include a sensitivity to human-technology assemblages as the center of the frame. But how would it go about recognizing these?

Luckily, there's more elements to play important roles in the whole situation the body found itself in. With new reproductive technologies, images travel easier, at least in certain directions. Outside becoming inside, mingling. Above it was about gestures, ways of holding bodies, modulating. Bodies not centered on (visual) perception or other senses. When refocusing on perception, it becomes clear that images bring other elements too, not directly related to somatic processes. Not only ‘formal(ized)’ movements travel through cine-imagery, also images more straightforwardly conceivable as content, as a ground against which new perceptions will appear. Images to act directly as the sensorimotor schema:

⁷⁸ This is how Mauss framed techniques: “Zugleich sagt Mauss, dass diese Techniken, die Körpertechniken, allen anderen Techniken vorausgehen: Sie waren die ersten Techniken. Was das in seiner Konsequenz heißt – ontogenetisch, phylogenetisch, technikhistorisch –, wird von Mauss nur angedeutet. Eine Konsequenz wäre vermutlich folgende: Der Technikbegriff kann nicht durch eine Exteriorisierung körperlicher Organe begründet werden, wenn das erste Objekt und Mittel technischer Tätigkeiten der Körper war und bleibt.” (Schüttpelz 2010, 110)

⁷⁹ Importantly, (human) consciousness is conceived in a particular way: “Phenomenologists, however, begin their analysis by presuming the existence of consciousness, whereas Bergson makes the startling claim that he commences simply with a universal flow of matter-images and then ‘deduces’ consciousness as a particular kind of image within that flow.” (Bogue 2003, 29)

“A ‘sensorimotor schema’ organizes and coordinates the perceptions, feelings, and actions of each living image, and from that schema issues a particular configuration of the world centered on that given image.” (Bogue 2003, 4) The images that travel via the relays of reproductive technologies act on the images as *centers of indetermination* that perceive them. “Of course, perception is strictly identical to every image, in so far as every image acts and reacts on all the others, on all their sides and in all their parts. But, when they are related to the interval of movement which separates, within one image, a received and an executed movement, they now vary only in relation to this one image, which will be called ‘perceiving’ the movement received, on one of its sides, and ‘carrying out’ the movement executed, on another side or in other parts.” (Deleuze 1989, 31) All the operations enacted here are analytical separations that make it possible to think (a world otherwise too complexly differentiating to be grasped), with the different parts being more of a focusing on a point within an ever-changing continuum. Perception, to be clear, is a way of receiving movements, “an instrument for translating an external movement via the senses into an ensuing motor action.” (Bogue 2003, 30) It takes time, repetition, practice to (un)consciously habitualize other ways of thinking mind-bodies, one-self. Simply reading a text is not how one learns to be Deleuzian. Repetition and experimental application in the everyday world is what will rewire neural systems to achieve directed change. Images of worlds, whether formed through technologies of reproduction or seemingly simply out there, come to be internalized through repetition – they are all around, one isn't even aware. Images of thought, infrastructures of thought, they too are of this world, but as it's rather the way that sensory impressions are connected, that is, they are not directly perceivable through the senses, but rather as varied and variable immaterial connections between parts.

It is the more sensorially direct images that are of concern at this moment, and the role they play in new worlds are continuously being co-constructed – worlds outside a singular body and those a body perceives, is affected by. A body becomes in a given milieu and what is seen is shaped by what has been seen given that location, and what a body has learned to perceive (cultures of habit). Bodies do, affect and are affected by differently other bodies based on where they come to be composed. Memories are parts of bodies, muscle memories, emotional memories, sensory memories, visual memories. Following what Deleuze, drawing on Bergson, does in the *Cinema* (1986, 1989) books, all is images and sentient beings are a particularly complex kind of image: “Because they only owe this privilege to the phenomenon of the gap, or interval between a received and an executed movement,

living images will be ‘centres of indetermination,’ which are formed in the acentred universe of movement-images.” (Deleuze 1986, 62) The living image “may be viewed as a system for relaying movements – for receiving movements from outside and generating its own movements from within.” (Bogue 2003, 30) Upon contact, and it must not be forgotten that everything is always in contact with something, a neural impulse is transmitted to the center of the nervous system, where neurons are most concentrated, from where further impulses travel to a complex assemblage of muscles and other parts to execute a usually automated, habitualized movement. All without the necessity of consciousness in the common sense. A slight delay is introduced by the neural system, the living image, between the external movement and the movement generated internally. All of which is necessarily acquired through habit, an outside becoming inside, while being conditioned by the specific assemblage that each body can do.

Contraction around a living image composing as the sensorimotor schema: “[It] provides the commonsense temporal and spatial coordinates of our everyday world, and the signs of the movement-image, which are the signs of the classic cinema, ultimately conform to the coordinates of that commonsense world. In the modern cinema, however, the sensorimotor schema breaks down, and with the collapse of that schema new images appear – time-images – as well as new kinds of signs.” (Ibid., 5) The commonsense world differs, as anybody who has engaged the knowledge produced by anthropologists or has lived in different parts of the world and actively tried to engage the difference therein. Such quotidian entanglements can and do break down, not just in situations when an anthropologist body travels to an elsewhere. There is a limit, when images no longer interrelate according to spatio-temporal conventions of this or that commonsense world. That is, when the immediacy of habitual reaction, of the automatic relay of input (perception) to output (reaction) fails, because what is encountered does not fit any known cliché, which is a sensorimotor image of the thing. Keeping in mind that things are points of view, and me (qua living image/thing) viewed from the position of the thing is a different kind of subtraction than me perceiving the thing. To paraphrase the famous quote on Daribi misunderstandings by Wagner (198): its perception of me is not the same as my perception of it. An automatic preselection occurs before perception as it is ordinarily conceived, with those aspects of things that do not interest a body are being ignored. Hence what appears as a dog's body will be different for a human, another dog or a tick, for each is composed of ‘other’ possibilities of gathering sense-data, coproduced in the interaction of bodies. Entities are more and less than as if ‘in

themselves.’ Perception as subtraction (based on how each body is constituted), but also, in a sense, addition: “We perceive objects through our accumulated experiences of them, through our memories, fears, desires, and plans, loading them with characteristics that extend into complex patterns of association and anticipation.” (Bogue 2003, 110)

It is a specific type of encounter in the world that interests the Deleuzian materialist anthropologist: when objects lose their conventional contexts and associations. Recognition of world is based on habit and what is around a living image. This splits, or doubles – the world (actual) and the memory (virtual), carried with that singular body: “[...] the very real doubling of the present – in perception, which forms part of our ongoing, largely unconscious sensorimotor action (the automaton/actor), and in memory, which is mental, reflective, free from the constraints of action, but also passive (the spectator).” (Ibid., 119) Recognition of an object is an operation that combines the revival of its past memory and its associative resemblance in the present object, something that is commonly automatic and unconscious. Habitually, memory and new perception are linked in webs of action, reaction. Automatic recognition of well known surroundings, say the city I've lived in for years, almost becomes one with its perception. At the temple fair, much of what is there combined rather smoothly with automatic recognition, which doesn't mean that a slowing down of the perceiving body to make attentive recognition possible wouldn't have yielded cracks in the automatism and with that new (scientific) territories to explore. The same can happen in the places we know most, though it may be exceedingly improbable. Automatic recognition executed by a body is, importantly, an action, not a representation. To recognize is to know how to use. It's in attentive recognition that more conscious attention is being paid to an object, so as to summon images from memory to superimpose on what is perceived. Circuits that are minimized in automation extend, and, if a situation, an object are encountered that don't fit any easily present memory, the body comes to a halt and vast expanses of memory must be explored in order to be able to react. Or, of course, any incongruities can be ignored and automation can take over, until perhaps one day, such a discrepancy will appear as to bring an end to the body.

Any reader with the experience of learning a new language, especially if it involves a different script, will be able to actualize from their memory the moment(s) they noticed how much of habitualized reading involves a preconscious projection or anticipation of what will come next. Future

lines not yet appearing as words are already scanned by the eye, years upon years of experience beginning with childhood, typographies standardized reducing the effort with each new book. This experience combines probabilities of words that will follow with the material shapes on the pages. It's a sort of synthesis of past and future that makes for smooth presence. When learning a new language, this habit doesn't yet exist and will eventually be built only after innumerable reiterations, if at all, for it takes immense time-spans for activities to become so effortless, a body doesn't even realize they were learned in the first place. The same process operates in all recognition and action – and some situations a body is faced with are so unknown that the immediacy of reaction breaks down.

What is described here are closed feedback circuits, where that which is outside (of this loop) gets habitually misrecognized or ignored in favor of the feedback stability and illusion of integrity, stability, essence.⁸⁰ Some encounters can effectuate an opening of this circle, at least for those who acquired the capability for openness, for noticing that which doesn't fit without dismissal. Perception not as projection, but transformative, partial connection. With cinema, especially those where the sensorimotor breaks down (from which arises the time-image),⁸¹ as will be expanded later on, one can learn to see anew and by acquiring new habits of perception via cinema, and recondition perception even outside of a directly cinematic assemblage. Most of the scenes I take as sources for thinking here, are about the recognition of the new, however minute the modulation. Attentive recognition with a passive body and automatic recognition with an active one differ in the complexity of circuits established, not qualitatively. “As we pay closer attention to the object, we summon up memory-images from broader and more distant past.” (Bogue 2003, 112) It is when habitual linkage between memory, perception, action is most relaxed, that objects can give rise to virtual images, memories, dreams, thoughts. When the body is held somewhat stable, does not have to react to environmental pressures, new circuits can appear. The conditions for this had to be constructed too, and within a media theoretical post-humanist frame, can be taken as an extended milieu of the living image. Constructions, accumulations of the labors of dead generations to stave off part of the flux and of biological necessity. For were one to imagine a living image under direct pressure of immediate survival, the option of

⁸⁰ Nick Land (2012a) demonstrated how an analogous operation is executed in Kant's philosophy, colonialism and capitalism, where the circuits established by the modern white man actively exclude any feedback from outside, rendering modern thought and expansive practice effectively incestuous.

⁸¹ “The image had to free itself from sensory-motor links; it had to stop being action-image in order to become a pure optical, sound (and tactile) image. But the latter was not enough: it had to enter into relations with yet other forces, so that it could itself escape from a world of clichés. It had to open up to powerful and direct revelations, those of the time-image, of the readable image and the thinking image.” (Deleuze 1989, 23)

slowing down and exploring memory circuits would in all likelihood not make the cut (whatever those who posit an independent, disconnected individual at the start of everything might fantasize themselves into). This can happen in a cinema assemblage, or a ritual assemblage, which will be explored later. There are other situations too, of course. Once infrastructures for technologies of reproduction are in place (with their radically lowered transmission costs) and systematically upheld (otherwise they would fall apart, both materially but also as practices for bodies that interact with them) make images circulate that are far outside of what one would encounter in the ‘immediately’ surrounding world without such technologies. And with that, memory qua virtual archive is enhanced, there is much more that can become part of the circuits, once automatic recognition breaks down. Thus the world became one with a radical potential for cross-pollination and newness, where (some of) what was once considered totally other can now become part of one even when the body/living image doesn't travel itself – displacement is not necessarily physical in the narrow sense of the word. Cinema enhances memory incomparably. The memory Deleuze and Bergson conceive is not individual consciousness. Rather it is the past that preserves itself. The present splits into memory/past and the disappearing present. “[A]nd it is we who are internal to time, not the other way round. That we are in time looks like a commonplace, yet it is the highest paradox. Time is not the interior in us, but just the opposite, the interiority in which we are, in which we move, live and change.” (Deleuze 1989, 82)

So, a body finds itself in a situation where sensorimotor automatism breaks down. Answers must be sought in actualizing virtual memories, in other words “internal sheets of memory and the external layers of reality.” (Ibid., 209) Cyborg bodies where inside and outside mingle, co-constituted by the imageries that circulate. All emerging from technological webs of externalized memories far in excess of the personal that become actualized in and as bodies. Cinemas as ‘cultural’ memory containing an excess of unintentional information (Taylor 1996), made to be shared and to travel easily in ways hitherto unimagined. Meanwhile, human bodies are made of specific components, assembled of organs and sensory possibilities that make them differ from other bodies. And yet, each is singularly composed, individuated and keeps becoming with the surroundings to perhaps realize entirely new potentials. With this, I redefine anthropology into ‘the study of the world as a human body,’ in the potentials that can be achieved, for it is only when the condition of knowing the world as a human body (keeping in mind that it is singular bodies and not a general one that is my concern) is understood that

any thorough engagement with different techno-cultures can happen.⁸² It is a way to get out of the typical anthropological exclusion of technology as secondary and not co-constitutive of humans, while keeping a distinction from media theory and other such fields that ‘as if’ blend out the human, or understand the human as viewed from the position of machines and infrastructures. “We do not know yet what a body can do.” (Deleuze 1988, 60) And bodies can do different things, when connected to or conditioned by other entities, including technologies, body techniques and imagery. One has to let go of the image of an organic, clearly delineated biological body (constructed under the conditions of modernity) as that what is the essence and limit of body – which is exactly what Haraway suggested to bypass with the cyborg, something as much conceptual as imageric. One has not just to learn to think with the cyborg, but to see.

The world moves, most passes by a body. Is filtered out for not being of interest to the survival of the body. Only what is slowed down, stabilized to speeds and elements perceptible to the body anatomically constituted as human will come to be a source of knowledge for bodies composed in the same manner as humans, perhaps transformatively extended in different ways through a variety of techniques. An awakened one (Buddha or bodhisattva) is a different body and as many a sutta tells us regular sentient beings, perceives far greater amounts of components of this world. So does a monk's body, even if to smaller degrees. Or a local layperson's, as differentiated as all of these are. After all, categories are just ways to organize the things of the world, and never exhaustive of any thing. Classification does something else than the bodies classified. A scented candle on a night table and one lit at a Buddhist altar in Bangkok are both candles, yet are composed of different parts and do different things. Only the idealist habit of taking the word or concept of candle as having precedence over any actual material composition and operation leads to the inability to engage the world as complexity, context and change. Words are but parts of worlds. Worlds are made as bodies. And bodies can be conceived as organisms, or assemblages of various organs, each of which is a solution to a problem.⁸³

⁸² A different recent (re)definition comes by way of Viveiros de Castro (2004b): comparing comparisons. The two are far from being mutually exclusive, as it is impossible to compare without bodies, and compose bodies without comparing. Both approaches are constructed as alternatives to “the ‘psychic unity of mankind’ or of any other purportedly universal principle.” (Jensen 2011, 7)

⁸³ “If the organism is a solution, it is at once a solution to its own problem. What is the problem? [...] Deleuze is actually describing two simultaneous accounts of this living thing that we call ‘organism.’ On the one hand, we can call any and all living beings an ‘organism’: I’m an organism, a cat is an organism, you’re an organism, that orchid over there is an organism. This offers a certain solution in that it accounts for the actuality of this or that living being. And yet, it presupposes many – no, a multiplicity, infinite – factors that go into the actualization of any being we call an organism. . There is therefore also a problem—namely, how to describe the factors that contribute to the composition of living things. The problem of the organism is, from this perspective, the very question of Deleuze’s ontology; in asking ‘how to

(Living) things are composed in an infinity of ways. As the famous example of the tick goes: “For example, the tick, attracted by the light, hoists itself up to the tip of a branch; it is sensitive to the smell of mammals, and lets itself fall when one passes beneath the branch; it digs into its skin, at the least hairy place it can find. Just three affects; the rest of the time the tick sleeps, sometimes for years on end, indifferent to all that goes on in the immense forest.” (Deleuze & Guattari 1987, 25) A body, composed as it is, is composed so that it is affected by and affects only some elements of the world, and as such it makes an own world. Thus, worlds here are co-constituted by and as bodies. They are connected but not identical. Those bodies categorizable as human will be composed in such ways, as to be affected by most of the same elements of the world in general, yet the different senses can be trained and change with techno-history. (Benjamin 2008, 23) Co-constitutive worlds emerge continuously, there is no Cartesian primary distinction between body and mind, material and symbolic. “[Strathern] notes that the sorts of ethnographic approaches that take worlds as emergent, refusing the category distinction between the material and the symbolic as a priori, are the sorts of studies for which anthropology is renowned. She insists that they are important for contemporary research in fields far beyond anthropology.” (Verran 2001, 39)

How to conceive of a situation where knowledge is created? Deleuze's film books continue to be useful here, based as they are on considerations of movement and time. They are also, unlike what their dominant reception in film studies might suggest, books of (performative) ontology: they propose a theory about how (part of) the world works, and what cinema does in such a world.⁸⁴ It is here, where Deleuze (1986) tweaking Bergson shows cinema not as a false or illusory movement, but the movement of the world. Cinema as a technology offers something no other, even photography, can: it makes it possible to experiment with ‘the virtual’ but also, implicitly, to think the world as movement, as flux.⁸⁵ The universe as meta-cinema, which can be conceptually integrated with anthropological

“make” the body an organism,” Deleuze is asking us not to remain complacent with understanding the organism as a contained, stable, and self-same entity, since different factors coalesce into the making of the continual becoming of this thing we identify as an organism. In other words, rather than remaining satisfied with describing the organism as a certain substance of this or that type, with these or those qualities, extended in space and time, Deleuze is instead asking what goes into the genesis of this living process. What makes the body? What can a body do? What relations compose this individual? How does the body articulate itself? This is the problematic posed by the organism. It is both solution and problem.” (Buchanan 2008, 152–13)

⁸⁴ To clarify, it is not an ontology of cinema, as classic film theory tried to define it. (Casetti 1999) These approaches in general just take the world as given, and try to fit cinema into that pre-existing theory of what is, without ever really casting doubt onto how world and reality itself are conceived.

⁸⁵ As for a difference between cinema and the computer: “If cinema is, in general, an ontology, the computer is, in general, an ethic. The computer instantiates a practice, not a presence. Perhaps a useful way to understand the difference between the two is to draw a distinction between a language and a calculus. A language operates at the level of description and

constructs and interests. (Kapferer 2004, 2010, Pandian 2011, Handelman 2013) Before cinema technology came to be in the world, however differentiated it is, the world could not have been cinematic in this or any sense. Thus, to be as clear as possible: what is being done here is not film theory, but thinking the world as it is made possible by cinema. Meanwhile thinking through cinema would be different, it would be making films. Deleuze is clear on that. Cinema thinks itself, human thought is a different process. Deleuze doesn't think about cinema, but translates what cinema does into a different medium, that of thinking with words and written phrases. "Deleuze conceptualizes thinking as machinic, the machinic being defined by its autonomous and automatic nature." (Huygens 2007) Machines conceived as that which relates, operates, that which connects varied elements (it is conditioned to perceive) to pass on an effect (with little loss) from input to output, in other words a movement as qualitative change. With the advent of cinema, a new complex element is introduced and a new world emerges – one where the automatic and the mobile becomes thinkable in a new way. "It is as if cinema were telling us: with me, with the movement-image, you can't escape the shock which arouses the thinker in you." (Deleuze 1989, 156) It is important not to enact a cut between human thought and the general material-technological conditions (without proper acknowledgment). It is a world where the material infrastructure of cinema makes for new possibilities in the much less material infrastructure of human thought. Perhaps, this is not all that new, when traditions from all over planet are concerned, as for example Theravāda Buddhist teachings and meditation practices have been about performing the taking apart of the flow of reality into parts (which is also how reality works, according to the teachings), experimenting with them and coming to experience reality as empty, that is, constructed and without essence. (Klima 2002) Even here the emergence of cinema as a new element in the world undoubtedly enables something else, if not for monks then for the researcher. As will be explored later, such teachings enact an active transformation of a body and its affects, in order to cut through the automatic effects of karmic and habitual webs. Automatic thinking is mostly actual, draws on habits and immediate preconscious recognition. When this sensorimotor schema breaks down, a/the 'real' thought emerges, that which actualizes a virtual, to find new solutions and with that conditions for different futures. In other words, perception as a fabulation, as that which seems most immediate, the senses, is also constructed and conditioned by worlds around. And an anthropologist's body, always in the middle, is one that gets itself on purpose into situations where given schemata break down, because the worlds encountered are different. This is inbuilt into the profession's practice and as such

reference. To encode the world: this is the primary goal of language. [...] A calculus, on the other hand, operates at the level of computation and process." (Galloway 2015, 186–87)

has become a cliché, a given, that does not necessarily ensure the advent of real thought. That is, it cannot be the fieldwork situation alone that gives rise to thought. Luckily, the situation is always more than merely ‘there.’

Deleuze's film books are also, among other things, a theory of sets and frames.⁸⁶ One that makes it possible to think what is there, and what is not, that is the inside and the outside (out-of-field). “Framing is the art of choosing the parts of all kinds which become part of a set. This set is a closed system, relatively and artificially closed.” (Deleuze 1986, 18) A theory of a world not given, not external to corporeal or mental action, but changing. Always larger than what appears. A world that does not precede human activity, but one that is shaped with activity and changes sentient beings in return. World as movement = transformation: “Movement is a translation in space. Now each time there is a translation of parts in space, there is also a qualitative change in a whole.” (Deleuze 1986, 8) Movement as a qualitative change. “Movement always relates to a change, migration to a seasonal variation. And this is equally true of bodies: the fall of a body presupposes another one which attracts it, and expresses a change in the whole which encompasses them both. If we think of pure atoms, their movements, which testify to a reciprocal action of all the parts of the substance, necessarily express modifications, disturbances, changes of energy in the whole.” (Ibid.) New things are composed, whether beaver dams, the technology of cinema (as varied as it is), a research paper. The material and semiotic mesh, the whole changes. The newly assembled become part of the world which through them becomes different. An alternative to defiantly Christian metaphysics of realism and representation, where the creation of things such as research is not taken to change the world, for how could any human creation challenge that of God? The essence of the world must remain untouched, eternally true and universally valid in the same way. Strange though, isn't it for us alleged seculars, because why else would one be producing research if not to have an effect? Why continue practicing an image of the world that is fundamentally unchangeable, already fully created in all its potential? A world where the whole appears to precede its parts. No matter that this reaches back to Aristotle in its resilience, just because it is ancient doesn't make it right or useful, or able to fulfill its own promises. (Nail 2022)

⁸⁶ “The whole and the ‘wholes’ must not be confused with sets. Sets are closed, and everything which is closed is artificially closed. Sets are always sets of parts. But a whole is not closed, it is open; and it has no parts except in a very special sense, since it cannot be divided without changing qualitatively at each stage of the division ... The whole is [...] that which keeps it open somewhere as if by the finest thread which attaches it to the rest of the universe.” (Deleuze 1986: 10)

The Deleuze-Bergson alternative operationalized here is so potent precisely because it shows the whole to be what makes closure impossible. It's not just a reversal of terms, but a displacement, a refraction. No final set of sets. The whole is the open – there can be no end. “A description of all relationships, as a whole, can never reach closure itself. It is the ‘whole’ then, which forces open the sets, allowing for relationships between the parts. Even if the relationships between sets are out of the field of the frame of enquiry, the relationship still persist.” (Schienke 2009, 170) As for the world, so for the more limited, framed situation; I can never fully describe a situation in a sense that would close it. The world is fractal, complexity is never reduced, a situation is never exhausted. World(s) are always in the making. With each thing added, that which was there is changed. On a more immediate level, this means that whatever description of a situation is composed, it changes the situation it was composed in, the ones it connects to and the world in general. Actions have ontological effects, they change what is.

II.

Once a set is established through a frame, as arbitrary as it might be, and these cuts are always contingent, it becomes possible to think, analyze, create: “[F]or knowledge claims to be made and decisions to be actualized, choices are made about a cut, about what to leave out [...]” (Schienke 2009, 168) And circuits of memory that operationalize difference through each body present in a set. The set is already multiplying and neither of the points of view embodied are objective. “[A] *subjective perception is one in which the images vary in relation to a central and privileged image; an objective perception is one where, as in things, all the images vary in relation to one another, on all their facets and in all their parts.*” (Deleuze 1986, 76, italics in original) Thus a film is more objective than human perception, as it is closer to the objective, indefinitely varying, acentral flux of the world, a “see[ing] without boundaries or distances.” (Deleuze 1986, 81) Integrating variety into research, without reducing it to sameness, is also more objective than a simple solipsist organization. What does variety here mean? Isn't this just a baroque way of describing classical research? Neither yes nor no. On some level, this is a necessary way of constructing a field of knowledge. However, when all difference is subsumed under identity, research takes the form of a subjective vision, and hence loses this objectivity gathering as a field. It becomes a *subjective centralized perception*. Only when the many is not reduced to one is the tendency toward objectivity actively present. Schienke, integrating Deleuze's cinema thought into an STS context, calls this *networked perception* “where every significant relationship

within the system is connected and measured in relation to every other. In other words, networked perception is the complete subtraction of the other, or rather, the negation of the subject-object dichotomy – as there is no observation that exists outside the network.” (Schienke 2009, 172)

So the anthropologist's body, the living image, enters as subjective perception: “[f]rom the point of view which occupies us for the moment, we go from total, objective perception which is indistinguishable from the thing, to a subjective perception which is distinguished from it by simple elimination or subtraction.” (Deleuze 1986, 64) This subjective perception is an effect of colliding bodies, and is co-constituted by its past that conditions perception, whether automatic, or in case of a breakdown of the sensorimotor, actualizable memory. The body that enters a set or frame, however arbitrarily the cut may be made, brings with an outside from the past which conditions what is perceptible for it. Though perhaps arbitrary is not the most precise word: “The closure of a set is not arbitrary, but rather is produced or arrived at through a variety of possible contingencies and limits of description.” (Schienke 2009, 169) The *farang* anthropologist body enacts a different difference, different limits and contingencies than a local commonly attending temple fairs, or the so-called informant, and each will perceive something else and, when stopping to think, to understand, actualize different sets of sheets of memory to match. Or, in the case of a strong ethnographic moment, realize there is nothing to fit, to bridge this gap, and later seek to find an adequate response, thereby creating new research frameworks. Now, this body can't but have subjective centralized perception, but adding other perceptions, and most importantly, other framings to that which is encountered, experimentally expands the field through a sort of montage. Positions are to be constructed of other human or non-human bodies, though of course the methods and techniques that put together the latter seem more challenging than the former, at least for anthropologists. The technologies and methods that make non-humans speak, that make their communication translatable have only recently began to be integrated into the anthropological toolkit. (Hartigan Jr., 2021) Importantly, when gathering these positions, it's prudent to be mindful of writing so that no one position is simply taken as reality, not even the whole text as the gathering of multiple positions that it may be. Both the situation (taken as an experimentally closed set with an outside) and the text (a more clearly defined closed set with an outside) are assemblages to connect with others. Whatever connects, forms part of a set, it's necessarily but part of what would be the ‘thing.’ “Categories of classification require that a part can belong to more than one set. For example, a small stand of trees (as a part to be looked for as a cluster of pixels) could be

categorized as a kind of broader land-use/land-cover set, as a subset of a vegetation index (NDVI), as a resource for fuel wood or food, as a pixel of particular colour and size, as an ecological construction project, as an invasive species, as shelter for other species, as shade, etc.” (Schienke 2009, 169)

Now that movement is somewhat stabilized, the scene can be reentered. Of course, it is not the same as being there. Rather, a retroactive co-construction of a model through which to think. Much like when (re)entering a filmic space to think and rethink and overthink. Evidently, whatever was seen, was polyiconic. But that would be too fast, first we must consider how an image comes to be an image. Without a frame there is no image. A frame marks an inside and outside. A frame does something. And is something once we start thinking borders. Then the frame expands, as one zooms in on it, to become a topic itself. Which is not the concern for now, so the focus shifts back onto that which is enframed. But out there in the world there are no frames! some naive realists will clamor. Yes and no. Always in the middle. “All framing determines an out-of-field.” (Deleuze 1986, 16) Keep in mind that amid the flux, frames are zones of indiscernibility, as images transform into other images, they are clearly distinct but only analytically separable. My perception already enacts a framing, gathers some elements, while leaving others out. Hence, accounts of a situation come to be so different. It doesn't begin with the translation into words, perception, what one is affected by, already differs. So let's leap back into the scene that is somewhat coherently slowed down here and transformed into an object of sorts to explore. Remember, objects appear as such due to their relative speed of change to perception. Now on to situating in an anthropological body.

The world is always in excess of what a body perceives, and this sensing extends to all faculties: “The living thing has an exterior milieu of materials, an interior milieu of composing elements and composed substances, an intermediary milieu of membranes and limits, and an annexed milieu of energy sources and actions-perceptions.” (Deleuze & Guattari 1987, 313) So bodies perceive that which enhances their life, as “perception is subtractive and selective, since it is a function of the interests of the subject.” (Angelucci 2014, 319) By way of memory, of habit, to perceive the world in terms of bodily interests becomes determined by the past, and what was acquired there, does not necessarily correlate easily with new situations encountered. As such, there is more to this assemblage. Bodies connecting via nervous systems are plastic and have histories, are histories. Whatever has been repeated often enough, sediments, in other words slows down comparatively to the surroundings.

Secondary difference appears. Bodies come to be points of resistance compared to the multiple flux of the world, moving at different speeds. “Thus the living thing has an exterior milieu of materials, an interior milieu of composing elements and composed substances, an intermediary milieu of membranes and limits, and an annexed milieu of energy sources and actions-perceptions. Every milieu is coded, a code being defined by periodic repetition; but each code is in a perpetual state of transcoding or transduction.” (Deleuze & Guattari 1987, 335) Internal images of blood, of sound, of image, of, to follow Buddhist distinctions, any sense that accords their respective stimuli, are actualized when coming into contact with external images. These common images, or clichés in Deleuzian terms, that are “only what we are interested in perceiving.” (Deleuze 1989, 20) What bodies have been taught to perceive. Agents of sameness and misapprehension.

Here then, as everywhere, there are cuts. Not that images need fit seamlessly. They must be similar enough in order for ‘sense’/information to be formed. A repetition of some elements must occur in the following image, so that a temporary stability of form will be reached, all of which (in perception of a body) connects to the habitualized forms acquired before. This is much like when in cinema a cut separates/connects two images and only through adding the other one will information from the previous appear. Bodies frame by separating what is not of (habitualized) interest for them from what is. That is a sort of (media) infrastructure that makes appear, or rather, so as to not fall into a simple phenomenological account of perception (i.e. one that starts with the subject), enables some connections to be made while disabling others. A cut qua enframing then. One that separates and connects, gathers and disperses. Any pretense to that which seemingly neutrally appears to a human being a reality simply and directly out there crumbles. It is already co-constituted through: 1. human bodily constitution (as per Buddhist teachings too) that keeps changing through time as it is plastic (even if perhaps less so as age/entropy of each singular body proceeds) 2. memories that through association make intelligible and through these new encounters change. The difference is given in the specificity of bodies.

So what one sees, is a question of habit and milieu. So how one sees, is too. We don't know yet what a body can do. And much of what bodies do is ‘externalized’ into material systems that are used without a body needing to know how: “There is a growing divide between ‘knowing how’ and ‘knowing that’; skill and knowledge are going their separate ways. The daily use of operative signs

removes the burden and complexities of interpretation. Calculus is always already a kind of ‘mechanism of forgetting.’ In order to calculate correctly, we don’t need to be able to provide an answer to the question, ‘What is a zero?’ Calculating correctly does not require a theory of numbers or algorithms, and for that very reason ushers in an unforeseen explosion of mathematical competence in daily life.” (Krämer & Bredekamp 2013, 26) The same goes for reciting suttas correctly, or generating merit. If one frames what is seen merely as focused on the anthropos, much of what is happening is missed. That is how the humanist mis-apprehension of world as culture appears. And culture as something internal to humans, somehow magical and outside of actual contingent practices. A secondary creation by the Western modern, the ‘as if’ explored in the previous chapter.

Each body composes of different sources, and especially today, when US hegemonic artifacts above all circulate freely on the mostly one-way infrastructures, built as a very material (neo)colonialism, that aim to extract materials from the world, and in parallel on other networks impose imaginaries, there will be much overlap between bodies (in terms of accessible memories) of different worlds transformed by capital. Even if their habits, that which shapes corporeal infrastructures continues to differ. Here, we do not want to fall into the apprehension of the same, of worlds through the framework of culture that enacts a random cut between a so-called natural organic human body and the forces that bring it forth. Haraway (1990) reminds us of this: Christianity strikes again! This is not to say that symbolic systems, whether naturalized as Nature (as among Western Moderns) or not (as among many others), have no role here: “On their own, concepts, bodies, filmstrips, and politics are techniques; but as components of an integrated symbolic system, they become a cultural technology. Although such symbolic systems may be integrated into a single technology or dispositif, such arrangements are at best temporary consolidations until emergent practices and technologies displace and rearrange the constituent parts.” (Geoghegan 2013, 72) Concepts such as culture, implicit images such as a Cartesian delineated body – they do things. Regardless of their truth content as conceived in a representational metaphysics, whether or not they are verifiable, whether or not verifiability is verifiable. That is why some bodies come to perceive and live the world naturalized by Euro-colonial modernity. Such a world is there, is real, it's just not the only one, even within the spaces most directly materially composed as these modern conventions. Regardless of what sense-impressions might lead one to believe, what is perceived is neither independently given nor immediate. The argument here is for a specific kind of sensory realism – what is sensed has connected, but it is a process of construction

and not a reality simply out there, neutrally correlative of senses.

Moving about at the temple fair, in that overflow of light and sounds and movements, an inexperienced *farang* body can hardly stop and refocus. Pushed from assemblage to assemblage, parts of other parts larger parts connected parts and maybe partial wholes, fields of experience with zones of indiscernibility interpenetrating, an open series, never fully defined. The world as memory precedes the subject. “Memory is not inside the individual mind, but each mind is inside memory, like a fish in the ocean.” (Bogue 2003, 119) Yet, there is feedback from the individual mind to the memory, as new presents pass into the past. At the fair, caught tightly in the automatic movement of the world, it is not dissimilar to ritual assemblages, where personal consciousness recedes and the experience of voluntary choice is minimized: one comes to feel that one is conditioned, free of any illusion of simple liberty. An experience that can be folded back critically onto the experience of free will so commonalized by Moderns, in order to analyze under which conditions such liberation might be possible. At the fair, always caught and propelled by different assemblages with perception barely consistent enough to create continuous sense impressions. Looking back, it becomes clear that the experience introduced a distinction into the corporeal memory, one that can now be mobilized for different thought experiments. Once sense impressions get synthesized, metastable images come to be graspable, connectable on a partly conscious level emerging from the flux through randomized habitually conferred cuts. An example: three bodies meet, two of them composed so that they can be classified as human. The third element is seen by the two others. Both are what their memories are. Both see the third body, yet what each perceives, differs slightly based on what is being synthesized from all that was seen by this or that body before. Each subjective view enacts a slightly different subtraction, is affected in a somewhat different manner by the third term. The images (as subjectivized from each of the two bodies) will significantly overlap, each integrated into the series convalescing around the living-images coming into contact, without ever becoming identical. A low-key variation on the rabbit-duck picture, where one image is different entities depending on how it is viewed. This is the *polyicony* elaborated upon earlier: images consisting of more than one reality-series, so each body will perceive and be affected differently. And image, if and when separated and stabilized, contains more than one world which flowers upon connection with other bodies. Interior associations mingle with the exterior.

Made in between dominant tendencies, in between worlds, the body of an anthropologist. A

specific center of indetermination. Each anthropologist body is different (from others) and differs (becoming). Take the one through which this writing passes, one that is significantly conditioned by its copious and continuing encounters with (East) Asian cinemas, literatures and arts in general, as well as Buddhist studies, among other elements which made it so that now, it has gotten accustomed to seeing Buddhist and other elements in the world immediately, notices references to so-called imaginary worlds that circulate in the wider region, in ways that demonstrate the thoroughgoing sedimentation of Asian worlds as part of its formation. Without the media infrastructures such as the internet that, while requiring significant effort in finding and normalizing, nevertheless make it comparatively easy to access (certain) products from other parts of the world, this formation couldn't have happened in the way it did. Now, as a body in an anthropological role, not only can it engage in pop culture conversations in Thailand about Asian films and music, but sees the local world with eyes already imbued with many conventions implicitly contained in the materiality. And, as an anthropologist body, it is affected differently in this world than those of the other participants. It brings together other parts of what is there and a different set of effects is produced therewith. Action-reaction differentiates. Action-perception-affection-action. In the in-between of indetermination the past enters, the sheets of memory composed of a variety of elements. Here is where anthropologists among themselves will start to be differentiated even more strongly. Different habits of perception and attention. Different images and concepts through which things come to appear. So this body that writes is shaped not just by an idiosyncratic anthropological unconscious, but came to also be molded by distinctively cinephilic affections and Buddhist studies imaginaries. Among others. A singular ever-evolving living-image assembles, enters this loud and bright world, collides and reframes. Many of these potencies are larval, virtual. A body is not always aware. Images stored as and transformed into memories are made through encounters. They always come from the past as much as from the future. Preformed through attentive education and habit, actualized in a concrete situation, when stabilized (differently than the common ways of framing here or there or everywhere) they come to clearly point to different futures. Always there latently.

“However, if the framing necessarily determines though its process of constitution an out-of-field (*hors-champ*) – which is not only an extension of the scene, a ‘relative elsewhere’, but also and most importantly a ‘radical Elsewhere’, a ‘dimension of the spirit’ – then the duration of the film is also an opening to the absolute.” (Angelucci 2014, 317) The anthropologist, inventing the (immaterial)

framework of culture. The post-anthropologist, inventing any framework they can without losing the human body as the perspective from which world becomes. From cosmology to cosmogenesis. Much like the pro-filmic construction of an event captured, stabilized, slowed down by the technology as (conventional) image comes to travel the world independently of the original point of assemblage and create future worlds by being plugged into concrete situations and concepts. The cosmos is always, anyways generated through combinations of elements, it doesn't simply preexist as a framework or ground. The two levels are articulated simultaneously. And differently, in that people practicing a world (in the field, in the world, one encounters actors doing things, not articulated cosmologies or statements) and researchers practicing their framing of other worlds are not the same types of cosmology. The stabilization of a cosmological frame within (scientific) discourse is another thing than whatever people do, and again another than the objects where parts of it are expressed, contained, transformed. They are not identical, neither are they wholly separate. The reconstruction of the cosmos is an experimental research proposition and necessarily happens within the frame of the modern conventions and assumptions of the academic's world. In other words to phrase or to read cosmological propositions from other worlds, be they Thai, Buddhist, animist or something else entirely, is to do so from within different conventions than were those of the people conceiving them. Frames within frames within frames, overlapping differently, even skipping over micro and macro distinctions, assembling the sensory and conceptual.

It is of importance not to mistake propositions of what is sourced from written words with the world. Empirical research is such work that operates an awareness of the irreducible complexity of world and the variety of ways that objects can be connected so as to create meaning. Those research practices that take written sources as something to extrapolate worlds from, as something to be decoded so as to construct a culture or religion, could profit from applying such methods to their own immediate surroundings and explore how they relate to the complexity of life. Such practices switch an image for the world, extrapolations filled with conventions of one's surroundings are made to stand in for other worlds with other conventions and affordances. In order for a research construction to significantly overlap with the world it proposes to be sourced from, heterogeneous and even discordant sources have to be accrued so as to pull the inherent speculative dimension of such endeavors as much as possible away from the self-confirming certainties of projective habits. Complexity increases with the variety of connections established, that is not any absolute amount of sources. Complexity increases with the

awareness of how and what things could be different based on engaging with research from other fields of research and other regions of the world.

Empirical research includes significant conceptual, imageric and material displacements of bodies. Meanwhile engagements that base their research exclusively in the textual comparatively fill in much more of what they construct through extrapolation from own conventions, easily sliding into Orientalism. Even if at the time that some piece of information was actually gathered and somewhat corresponded to some element of a world encountered, because of the lack of interaction with the world that changes, such information becomes little other than a cliché eventually. In other words, the difference from the Herodotian type of knowledge-making becomes negligible, a difference lying only in the figures mobilized therein, for what is considered realistic has changed. The more (materially) disparate elements inform research, the more perspectives, and with that the more objective will it become (in the sense used above). More importantly even, the more varied the elements engaged, the more apparent the need to think about how they relate. How does a statement relate to its outside? How does a text exist in this or that situation? How can it connect to other parts? How do the anthropologist and her methods enter the scene? The more varied the elements, the further is the researcher forced out of her habitual world and forced to find, trace, construct new frames for what has been encountered. Precisely because the more varied the elements are, the bigger the challenge of establishing a pattern which can then be communicated as knowledge, and the more challenging such encounters are, the more intense the shock to a body, the more it is forced to think and look for solutions in unexpected places. Such an in-between position can be a veritably metaphorical Procrustean bed at times, but one must, if possible, not cut off that which doesn't fit in order to remain in the safe haven of already established theoretical conventions, for that is a downhill road straight into the projection of cultural clichés. Besides, the out-of-field will not disappear by being ignored, it will only become more unruly. Yet, the out-of-field is twofold: one that is not yet seen, but can become part of a new closed set, and one that “does not belong to the order of the visible” (Deleuze 1986, 17), one that opens up a closed system to duration, in other words one that makes so that no set can be ever fully closed. No planetary or cosmic set of sets is possible.

When translated from cosmic to anthropologically epistemic problematics, the out-of-field generates further thoughts. It is not exactly an imaginary space in relation to the concrete space within,

for that already integrates that other into what is (a projection say as in Orientalism). The unknown that is coded as an unknown is but a particular version of the known, a projection of fears and hopes more often than not, but not an unknown. For an out-of-field that is actually unknown, cannot be predicted based on projecting from past experience. Prediction here is preconscious sensorimotor automation, one that must be shocked by a new image (hitherto out-of-field) in order to think. The unknown then appears as something that does not fit already existing patterns and categorizations, because it wouldn't have been possible to project as any sort of combination of what is actual (by a subject). Such an encounter would be an event, something that renders the separation between the actual and virtual, real and imaginary, objective and subjective indiscernible. "A zone of recollections, dreams, or thoughts corresponds to a particular aspect of the thing: each time it is a plane or a circuit, so that the thing passes through an infinite number of planes or circuits that corresponds to its own 'layers' or its aspects. A different, virtual mental image would correspond to a different description, and vice versa: a different circuit." (Deleuze 1989, 44) For each body, based on where and how it becomes, what can produce such shock will differ, and so will the capacity to establish new, functional circuits. Those formed in sites fully dominated by an other, might even end up caught in constant instability and shock, unable to react, to fall back into reconstituted sensorimotor automatism. The anthropologist body, like those of merchants or travelers of old (unsupported by the massive colonial infrastructure ensuring stability of Western bodies), is one trained specifically to be able to reestablish circuits in face of lack of comprehension. Of course, it helps that most anthropologist bodies squarely belong into those categories that travel easily. Still, the planes accessible are not the same for all, and so different descriptions and circuits are established. What is seen is (the objective thing ensures some convergence) and is not the same (the effects and descriptions can differ, radically, especially for things of which the semiotic dimension is significant). As with the duck/rabbit image. To remind the reader, what is being operationalized here, is thinking enabled by the emergence of cinema, just in other contexts, for it makes possible to conceptually grasp, make thinkable something new, something that is there, virtually, but to be made actual requires specific tools.

So this particular assembled body can actualize compositions sourced from Buddhist studies, anthropology from all over the world, as well as Asian cinephilia and literature, where many Buddhist conventions are actualized in a variety of ways. Such knowledge, especially when it came to films made in Hong Kong, was repeatedly a way to connect with Thais. This body can experiment with

associating frameworks. It is not a simple reality out there that is encountered. This body, by training, learned to see differently. It is searching for anything that would appear out of the ordinary. The ordinary being the conventions of representation for Thai Buddhist things. First it must be able to slow down in the frenzy. As it happened high on that *chedi*. Then it comes into contact with that installation of *sai sin* and garish colors in the background of orange-robed monks. The body composes different sources, including localized perceptions and stored memories of Buddhist worlds. Images combine. Perception happens. Thought arises in gaps. Part of this amalgam is translated into notes. That is discourse and concepts. A certain style of writing, with its own conventions. And then onto these pages. Perhaps a few steps in between.

The composition of these pages here seeks to produce a couple of different yet related effects. A sense of becoming through being there, drawing on the affects making for that particular situation. And then, based on the thought induced there, on those gaps encountered in the field (which includes textual research) explicate in precision how it is possible that different people see different things in the seemingly same world and how other anthropologists, given a different memory, would have been prone to miss certain things. So the frameworks actualized, at different times in different places, at times intersecting, at other times separate, through this ethnographer body combine anthropology, philosophical questions, cinephilia, and film/media theory, as well as Buddhist studies and some engagements with other East and Southeast Asian cosmogenetic possibilities, all passing through the spaces cleared by the ontological turn. It is important to note that not all of these can serve the same function, as many theories are dominantly formal while research such as that in anthropology, film or Buddhist studies, also generates (othering) content. In its ideality this remains an analytic separation, and it is precisely the combination of a variety of research fields that makes some of the rifts and overlaps appear, including the now quite obvious fact that even the most so-called abstract thought combines with ready-made images of the world, its alleged outside, when becoming through bodies. A reality constantly assembling without any center. The task of any inquiry is to add other points of view, to make it more objective, like film, closer to the flux of the world without mistaking itself for the world. To transformatively engage other worlds on immaterial and material dimensions. Or perhaps 'just' propositions of other worlds. To think in such ways that those immaterialities as concepts or cosmological frameworks one takes as a simple given in Euro-modernity, such as individual or society, or politics and biology, or religion and ritual, or (nature-culture or any other) dichotomizing, appear as

the contingencies they are. As entities formed and transforming. As having an effect on the world. Ultimately, all is empty (of self-being).

The (con)temporary I, the now passed into the past, this I that is also a he, the medium, composes and translates. Reality differs. The world doesn't head anywhere. Once this sinks in, practicing certain rites to get a feeling of control in a world that is inherently unstable starts making a bit more sense. The creation of stability through repetition, localized and networked. Not simply immediately universal as in the Christian-Secular realism. All this composing, or rather part of it, translated that is transformed into writings to which others connect, whose gaps are filled with other images and imaginaries. The text doing different things in different spaces, never the same. Suttas, especially in Mahāyāna worlds, are at times even self-consciously performative and through that exceed the analytic reduction Buddhist studies like to indulge in. (Greene 2004) Doing things, not just meaning things, including the presentation of discursive imaginaries on which local materializations draw combining sensory sources that are never centrally organized.

There remains a power to descriptive ethnography, in its difference to anthropology: the translation of other worlds into writing. As Tim Ingold (2008) makes clear, anthropology is not ethnography. Yet in the surrounding discussions the power of description, the power of composing words and experimenting with the frameworks to gather various elements gets undersold. (Ingold 2017, Rees 2018) With feminist technoscience and media theoretical interventions informing the writing of worlds new pathways open up. Perhaps less as ethnographies than cosmographies. Descriptive texts, aware of how language works, become something between science and literature. Both create. As literature that is, the composition would have to mobilize the affects in a situation but assembled of different materials/flows. This is especially challenging when actualizing manners of thought introduced by the ontological turn, where cosmography is sidelined in favor of philosophy. Research focusing rather on conceptual experiments, on translating what was encountered into thought and enacting conceptual differentiation in 'our' world, at the expense of engaging the sensory, the material in a descriptively generative way. What is attempted here throughout is to not forgo the problematization of sensory 'reality' while engaging in conceptual experimentation, to face the challenge of writing reality after the invaluable lessons of the ontological turn. It treats cosmography as the 'disappearing middle' in an anthropology caught between fieldwork and conceptual

experimentation, all too often leaving reality to the naive realists.

On another level, this means to experiment with cuts, dividing and gathering the ‘field’ in arrangements other than the still prevalent humanism of anthropology.⁸⁷ When so-called reality is divided in ways that simply confirm (liberal) humanism, affirming modern research categories (as transhistorical, i.e. metaphysical), cuts in the world are made even before anything is engaged, so that other connections, those perhaps enacted and enabled by local worlds, don't even appear. They are precluded by the misconceived arrogance of the modern. Not all cosmologies map alike, and for the individualist connections between past lives, or other beings, or with Buddhas and gods will not be there, they will only ever be add-ons to what is taken as neutral ground of an already finished reality. While for those for whom sentient beings emerge from myriads of connections, the individual will be the add-on, the illusion. Or say, as I will write later, the figure of Christ becomes something else to what expansionist Christians desired, intended, expected. The same ‘thing’ already differs. The eternal tension mediated by Jesuits and anthropologists alike: how to make oneself understood, how to keep ‘truth,’ while adapting. Series of translations – the big difference being between how much of it is a one-way street. How much conscious self-transformation is allowed for. How terribly the tyranny of the One is allowed to rage and eliminate awareness of internal difference.

So this is a description. Partial. A description is always a translation. And a production. Of reality as imagined out there and of reality as effectuated around the reader. A description of part of what was happening. And also an attempt to grapple with that which was happening, given the constraints of what this body brought there and which problems were thus encountered. One can think of all that remains outside the description as the out-of-field, which includes all of the frameworks and materially present things that typically get ignored in humanist focus. “The out-of-field refers to what is neither seen nor understood, but is nevertheless perfectly present.” (Deleuze 1986, 16)

Images, there and those habitually from the past brought there with a living-image, connect to produce that which is conventionally termed experience and perception. A body such as the cosmographer's creates a temporarily closed set (all of the elements that come to make what is

⁸⁷ I.e. the ‘human’ is taken as pre-existing, as given and only secondarily modified by culture. Instead what is explored here, is the ways (post-)humans come to be differently in the first place. The ‘post-’ refers to a world where the concept of the human is no longer simply taken as given, and not to the biological assemblages categorized as human.

recognized/perceived) through cuts. What is thus made always comes from the past and points to a future, the other images to connect to. And, when transformed into research, a text, they come to be separated from this situation, they are constructed and stabilized across media (with variations) and can travel the world more freely (on the various media networks in place) to act onto emergent futures elsewhere. Which is what ethnographers have been doing – constructing objects that enact heterogeneous differences. While much of this research seeks to confine the power of difference and ultimately translate away many of the most impossible bodies and images, they continue to linger. As is well-known from the work of E. E. Evans-Pritchard (1937) – a ‘logical’ dismissal of the full reality of Azande witches and their containment to an imaginary other-space (of Africa and/or anthropological literature) nevertheless keeps performing a certain version of them. They, through a series of relays and transformations, in fact come into existence for the readers of anthropological literature and will continue to exist so long as these texts (and what they influenced) will continue to be engaged. The variants in which they exist might perhaps not ever recognize each other. After all, an anthropologist must ask herself: would I recognize myself in the descriptions/depictions of the other? Commonly, they come to be connected with modern, patriarchal imagination of witches and dismissed or ridiculed on other levels (regardless of what the anthropologist set out to achieve). Concurrently, in their very existence as entities in anthropological literature, there will always be the potential of enacting radical change at least on those bodies not entirely claimed by Western self-delusions. Different concepts and different images plug in and make worlds. The more a human body will be able to actualize a wide variety of memories that make possible to grasp new elements in the world, the more capable will it be, as it can deal with a world that is always changing. To be able to draw from extensive archives qua memories is a sign of increased plasticity, adaptability, ability to deal with the unexpected – whether as an organic or socio-technical body.

To conclude, a return to the anthropologist body in between and how it connects to the conception of the brain in Deleuze's cinema thought. “For Deleuze, the ‘brain is a screen’ that emerges in the world of images, and although this formula will prove crucial in the cinema books, it is not specific to the cinema. In essence, the screen constitutes the development of the plane of immanence: ‘the brain is a screen’ in the sense that it is a filter that extracts itself from chaos. This screen is a form of relation, of interchange, of mutual synthesis between the brain and the universe; as Deleuze explains, ‘if the world is in the subject, the subject is no less for the world.’” (Flaxman 2000, 16) All this

operates in a world conceived materially, as connections, hence Deleuze's preference for neuro-biology as a way to model how thought and bodies work and the connections to cybernetics it enables. (Gray 2022) When all is connected and affects each other, organs tie in or limit certain elements, assembling into larger organisms. Thus borders appear and with that entities that can appear to be strictly separate to the untrained eye, even as connections remain. What is a brain here, is the interval between action and reaction to stimuli, to affects. "This difference in degree is not spatial so much as it is temporal or 'interval,' for life is simply a moment's delay or cut (*écart*) introduced into the image-flux: from the earliest protozoa, which constitute barely any interval, the course of evolution introduces ever-larger synaptic gaps, images in which the flood of the world is captured. The human brain constitutes the largest of these gaps, like a kind of photographic plate on which convolutions of light are momentarily 'prehended.'" (Flaxman 2000, 16)

In the end then, why not take the anthropologist body literally as the 'brain' or the interval which enlarges the space between 'automatic recognition' and the sensorimotor schema? If only for the fact that such a body enters situations where it doesn't know what to do on account of coming from elsewhere and not sharing immediate recognition. The gap between received and executed movement, the middle. And the memory to draw from is one that is expanded, or worked upon in research, in other words includes what is nominally external to the body, by reading science beyond any disciplinary boundaries, but also engaging arts, everyday objects, local practices, and any other source of possible innovation linked to the problem that opened the gap in recognition in the first place. It is the searching in memory that concretizes frames, makes clear synthesis of cosmos and perception. While each body already sees something different, multiplicity, the hardening into different worlds happens through practices of discursivation, or the so-called 'culture.' Meanwhile techno-culture of cultural techniques as conceptual technics participate in this issue, but to a lesser extent. They are more open to the outside (the whole is the open). Why? Because it is ever so clear that the frame employed in the analysis selects but parts of the situation and could always be different, and as such they become consciously performative. There is no closed system (set). It certainly isn't culture in the common sense. "In my new working images/stories, worlds emerge all of a piece. The imaginary refuses a priori separation of the symbolic and the material, although it recognizes that such category separation might be achieved." (Verran 2001, 37) What emerges are different assemblages, of which words or symbols are but changing parts. There is no reality to which a neutral anthropocentric description would correlate. This

is a category mistake by the typical post-Kantian modern, who takes their contingent tools and perceptions as simply objective. Correlating acquired clichés with an alleged world out there, cutting off any feedback loops of said world. There are ways out of Christian realist one world colonialism based on exclusion, or at least disavowal of historically very real external influence, which continues in much research that makes a distinction between theory and the empirical that can only be bridged by theory, which is always projected as only occidental. We need to put bodies in situations where immediate action is impossible, and thought as creation is forced and the conditions for widening and experimental feedback circuits are in place. A thought that while conceptual here, can also be somatic or technological, or anything. There are no transcendental limits to combinations, reminds the cyborg. It might be prudent to consider analogically the movement of thought (is there even a difference?) whereby the ontological turn is all about introducing a gap, not falling into the automation of one-world realism. The larger the conceptual and imageric toolkit of the researcher, the larger this ‘brain,’ the more occasions to split off into other possible futures. What will be the there to the there?

Ritual & Cosmological Experiments

10. Of Strings and Other Felicities

“The cyborg is a condensed image of both imagination and material reality, the two joined centres structuring any possibility of historical transformation.” (Haraway 1990, 150) The works of the famous technofeminist researcher offer tools to think (the human body) as a site where imaginaries and materiality contract, neither necessarily taking precedence, neither existing in itself or accessible independently. In the habitualized mode of automatic perception imaginaries would tend to overcode the surrounding materiality as mediated by the senses, so long as the forms more or less fit, but this can break down. Imaginaries are by no means immaterial, just more elusive, more difficult to stabilize, slow down, grasp and productively work with than more heavily material elements. There has to always be some body, however dispersed, however disappearing in the process of making them appear, to carry them. And with materiality come resistances, dissonances and adaptations. It depends on what is framed and how. Bodies composing as material imaginaries, humans complexified with/as circuitries between actual and virtual. Is it the interplay of variously imagined bodies (not always actual) that is gathered through a frame, or perhaps one body as it contracts a set of figures? As movement-images, materiality and (dominant) imagery contract in such ways that they overlap almost entirely, creating the condition for the emergence of the mistaken attribution of a ‘natural’ perception, and its extrapolation onto the world in general. ‘As movement-images’ combines two possibilities: bodies as ‘movement-images’ as world, bodies ‘conceived as movement-images’ in a conceptual experiment of a body doing the thinking. A body might even retain very close and complex ties after the split into these two trajectories, but it's not the same. The image of an integrated human body, self-sufficient, disconnected from the world at large, operates so that the actual materialities that constitute and sustain a human body (not just) today disappear from direct sight. One has to train to see the cyborgian, like with anything else. One has to train to notice how forms feed into what one sees, how it is anything but neutral and immediate to ‘see a human as human.’ One has to train to see how what is seen is already co-constituted by hegemonic ideological interests in control of mass media imaginings. Once perception is becoming recoded with other imaginaries, material connections to technological (support) systems come to be seen. Not as ultimate ground, true reality, for such an operation would once again cut away the productive role of imaginaries and present a world unconditioned by them. Rather, as a way of seeing that makes other connections, perhaps ones more expedient for our times, easier to establish (or notice). Noticing too is making connections and it matters which connections get made

and unmade. New imaginaries appear, not all of them necessarily based in empirical research, and connect with materialities, affecting each other. In a world where anything that affects and can be affected is a body, Haraway's cyborg isn't reducible only to human bodies now coded as cyborgs, for they are always connected, without ultimate essence and ones where outside becomes inside, open to the environment. The cyborg is a way to learn to see the arbitrariness of cuts and connections enacted through perception as bio-techno-historical formation. "I learned early that the imaginary and the real figure each other in concrete fact, and so I take the actual and the figural seriously as constitutive of lived material-semiotic worlds." (Haraway 1997, 2) Learning this makes one sensitive to the implicit naturalizing operations of research and the languages it employs. It raises awareness of what words do and how a word, a concept or a figure in one context written for one audience might do one thing, but when quoted somewhere else, do something different. Some words hide more than they reveal, for they stave off inquisitiveness through labeling something as not worthy of attention because either too common or too unreal. In concrete fact, it always matters what connections are made and unmade.

Now, the world as cyborg; expansions and contractions of circuits between actual and virtual, acentred, ateleological process. Worlds as combinations of various imaginaries that make for their differences, overlaps and transformations. Temporary meta-stabilizations, material and imageric composition mixing, assembling – becoming graspable and tractable with technologies of reproduction. Change directed, mapped but not controlled, for there will always be too many unknown variables. Imaginaries made image. Even when slowed down and reproducible by a machine, condensed, sensible, complexity remains unreduced, images composed of other images, partial connections, crisscrossed by figures.⁸⁸ A dance of new materialities becoming apprehensible for perception. The perceiver's memory is always to some degree part of the perceived, though only rarely will such a misalignment occur that the certainty of imageric habit will crack.

Such entities captured (images) are reproducible within techno-social assemblages that

⁸⁸ Figures are those shapes that gather as similar forms constructed in media of different material composition, i.e. a Buddha figure is something emergent in the act of perception that ties together dispersed materials such as wall painting, a statue, a character in a film, etc. Each figure, if analytically separated, is supported by very different material assemblages, each with their own figurative capacities combined with local techniques, conventions of depiction and skillsets. As a play of similarity and difference, new shapes that come into contact with the perceptive process can become part of the 'figure,' if they are close enough as a variation of past shapes gathered, thereby transforming it. There are no figures independently of perception and local conventions, and as such, any figure is always already different from itself and can come to be something very other, such as when when Jesus came to be confronted with (Southeast) Asian traditions, which will be explored later.

necessarily differ materially but customarily produce the impression of identity of the images projected. Since the advent of home video and subsequently video editing software, the capability to modify, replay, examine moving images has become widespread. One can take the data collected in all its variety (inside and outside of the body as integrated yet open biological entity) as analogous to the apparatus that reproduces a projection of once captured information so that it can be explored in varied ways. This would be unthinkable before, both in the sense of impossible in the world at large, and in that a conception of research as zooming in, reframing, montaging speeding up parts and slowing down others, would not be available as a way to think thinking. And the next pages will be built on this capacity to explore a set of arranged images, reframings and partial overlaps, in order to see what happens to research when the location of the object examined within the dataset changes. A variation on: “I am kino-eye, I am a mechanical eye. I, a machine, show you the world as only I can see it. Now and forever, I free myself from human immobility, I am in constant motion, I draw near, then away from objects, I crawl under, I climb onto them [...] Now I, a camera, fling myself along their resultant, maneuvering in the chaos of movement, recording movement, starting with movements composed of the most complex combinations [...] My path leads to the creation of a fresh perception of the world. I decipher in a new way a world unknown to you.” (Vertov 1985, 17–18) It matters which cuts are made and where, for other connections are enabled. In this case, I will examine *sai sin* in order to experiment with what changes if its position in the field of relations is moved around. *Sai sin* is commonly translated as white cotton thread, sometimes with the inappropriately Christian derived epithet ‘holy.’ It will be examined in order to experiment with what changes if the position of the string in the field of relations is moved around. Crucially, not the position of the string in the scene encountered at some time in the past, but in the focus within the construction enabled by the gathered data. The experimentation with the establishing of circuits is made possible through the relative slowing down of the movement-image (my body) through which connections happen, condensed images of imagination and materiality. And with that, a certain *sai sin* contraption came into view that appears to have been hitherto unnoticed.

1. Anthropocentrism

There is always more to what you see. Come along, reenter that merry scene at the fair. What do we see? Some human bodies. The frame is distant. We observe them kneeling, reciting, monks facing

laypeople. Zooming in, it appears that something is connecting them. Why are the people there? They are producing merit through chanting. Of course. What else would people be doing in a space with monks. A fair is fun and you can make merit. Always make merit, unless your body has been significantly caught in Western worlds and merit appears ineffective. Still, you can go. There are many varied activities, most in some way generative of merit. How do you make merit, *tham bun*? Well, you go to places where you can make merit. It's common sense, isn't it? It's easy, just do what you were taught growing up. You don't even have to think. It's better to do it where there are fields of merit, that is where there are monks. Buddha images can also be fields of merit. (Skilling 2005) A field of merit or *punyakṣetra* in the ancient tongue is intensified based on the meritoriousness of the entity producing it, cultivating it: kamma was often linked to agrarian metaphors, linked to cultivation and the planting of seeds. (Salguero 2013)

An ideal Theravadin society (*pativēda sāsana*) envisions social life to be replete with countless sources of merit like monks who ideally embody enlightenment, kings who rule justly in accordance with the Buddha's teachings, and ordinary people who live prosperous lives free from danger, calamity, war, and misfortune. Such acts of sharing the benefits of ethical performance with others create a field of merit where multiple sources of merit are present. Such conceptions account for a hierarchy of place where some locations are deemed more auspicious and powerful than others. These sensibilities about the presence of sources of merit explain why one finds small pagodas erected in seemingly out-of-the-way places, such as the edge of a rice field or along a forest path where people find refuge and seek to make merit by reciting incantations or practice meditation. (Schober 2022, 119)

While merit-making practices are intertwined with and productive of social hierarchies, they are also chaotic, as fields of merit overlap, and various bodies, even those considered inanimate in Christian-Secular worlds, can be productive of merit and hence attract practitioners seeking to multiply theirs. The action of merit-making is never identical, context as local reality matters. So why go to the temple fair? There's something ineffable there, at least for those untrained in perceiving fields of merit, something to ensure that *tham bun* will be more than 'itself.' In silence a reader might think to themselves: as if there was an itself there in the first place!

So, efficiency and amplification have been part of these worlds where space is never self-same, and locales combined with the bodies that dwell there can produce forces impossible elsewhere. It's nothing that would show from the surfaces an untrained body perceives, except perhaps through the numbers of laypeople that indicate particularly meritorious fields. The same with *sai sin*, สายสิญจน์, white cotton thread used in rituals, just looking at it, classifying it as a subset of strings in general, one wouldn't see what is there to see and make of it a different thing that the locals. This body has moved through temple space⁸⁹ on the cusp of being overrun by laypeople, and even earlier, as monks and some helpers were preparing the open territory surrounded by walking galleries and other buildings for utmost efficiency. Maybe a tad over two meters up in the air, above that open space where people usually stroll at different speeds, the cord is woven from one side to the other, and then turned by ninety degrees to do the same and create a pattern without beginning or end. Chairs are needed, for the humans here are not tall enough to set it up without some elevation. One walks under this. At other temples it can be observed that the networked pattern of *sai sin* up in the air crosses from inside a wat to the outside, touching any object that can be connected, including the large flat screen TVs set up so that those outside are audio-visually connected to the inside. This is a way to connect *sai sin* with other instances of it, in order to construct a general category with specific qualities of that string.

It is indeed the most common procedure, as evidenced in Terwiel (2012), even though what has been observed in 21st century Bangkok differs from a much smaller-scale set-up studied by the anthropologist decades ago. A scene that furthermore does not seem to include any modern technological objects, nor achieve the expansive networking witnessed in the capital. Not only in research, one must necessarily trust that work has been done in good faith (for the event of collecting is singular and not repeatable), even when doubts set in about whether the researcher body actually could've seen all there would've been to be seen for a different body. It is noted that, “[it] is believed that beneficial, protective power is emitted by the monks as they chant the Pali texts and that this travels through the cotton thread.” (Ibid., 212) Connection to a Buddha image strengthens that power. Here, against the screaming blue background of the poster mounted behind the monks as an improvisational wall, the cords hang from the pattern up above, and when you follow the white cotton

⁸⁹ So as not to overload the text with Buddhist architectural specifics, in general I refrain from using Buddhist terms or discussing architecture. Meanwhile an implicit image of temples keeps operating, based on my experience, and an academically articulated version of a temple was used for research. (Cf. Nongmar et al. 2013)

with your eyes, you will see it connected to statues and monks' clasped palms, passing between index finger and thumb. Pali chants resound, making it through the aural noise as one approaches. In what can be considered a typical situation, *sai sin* is laid out at the end of a ceremony, woven between participants in the/a snakelike shape, from front to back, connecting bodies, ends remain free. The string is then cut into smaller pieces and taken by participants as good luck charms in the form of bracelets. The string as a mediator, in between the bodies that produce merit and those that need it. By virtue of connections established, the merit is multiplied.

Observing the scene, you see people in rows, not stacked very deep, just three or four, so they fit under the ad hoc built open air stalls. Lit from above by white neon lamps, and replaying the audiovisual materials gathered suddenly Buddhist flags, yellow with a red center, spring out at you, they were lost in memory, unnoticed by perception at the time of neuro-mnemonic inscription. Oh, and small altars are also there, of course! It's almost as if the background burned out the foreground. All those posters in garish blue with yellow! Writing on them making up for the walls of the stalls hurt the eye and create so much visual noise that it almost drowns out the human figures. The monks, in orange robes, sitting, slouching, hunched over. Other bodies pass apace, horizontally to those kneeling, as if to not disturb the view, though laypeople with strings on their heads are busy reciting with eyes firmly closed. Displace by a few steps and you might not even hear the chanting anymore. Some hang around waiting to be the next ones to chant. Not all of the monks are active, some are idling about in sight seen, fiddling with their smartphones.

So there it is, the white cotton string, one element among many. With skepticism appropriate to the Moderns, its less naturalistic properties can be evoked, but only with the requisite distance the word 'belief' operationalizes. Other *sine qua non* yet foreign to Western common sense elements at the scene are mentioned to, at times with minimal exploration of their connections, but rarely if ever as attempts to engage the variety of them relationally, that is in the ways they would mutually condition and transform each other. Things appear mostly as self-same entities the naming of which through words is transparent. All the while it remains tacitly understood that it is humans who are the sole movers of the world. Much like going to the temple for generating merit, it is something you do, simply because you do.

Sometimes what is done simply because it has always been, breaks down. Cracks appear, they always do. Often, practitioners haphazardly slap some liquid cement on the fracture, waiting for it to dry and leaving the nooks and crannies do their hypogeous work. Through the cracks, other worlds are peering in. They don't just go away when human sentients stop thinking about them. If one were to carry with one thing from urbanized tropics, it's that no amount or combination of modern materials will withstand the buoyancy of a seed carried into a nook or cranny, unnoticeable even to the untrained human eye. Reality is written habitually (how many methods of ethnographic writing books to tackle style and realism are there?), yet underneath the straightforward surface connections and imagery operate of their own accord, not always presencing into a subject's conscious-coded awareness. Reality, patched up or not, has to be taken care of, attended to, so it doesn't dissipate due to entropy. Much like buildings and other material things that especially in temperate regions at first seem self-sufficiently durable have to be constantly taken care of. If a detour is allowed, in the old Ship of Theseus experiment some crucial activities tend to be missed. Whether or not it is or isn't the same ship (as the thinker trained in Buddhist thought practices immediately knows: it's both!), the material as well as the conceptual constituents have to be cultivated, tended to, otherwise both the ship and concept (were it not reiterated through the materiality of neuro-corporeality and mediators such as writing and sound) would disappear. Those who saw the ship seemed almost a little too focused on the most idealist parts of the questions it could pose, to the detriment of so much else in the world doing its silent work pushed outside of the commonly upheld fields of attention. Transformatively translating what is perceived and surveyed at a place into fitting discourse includes doing so for the connections you are trained to notice. Focus intently on the human and see what is around. You observe monks' and laypeople's bodies, linked by white cotton thread, and weave connections outside of the directly apprehended: to the general category called 'chanting,' to all of the other instances of chanting you witnessed or even participated in. This being a particular example of a distinctly human-centered activity. There are some paraphernalia of course, at the edges of the frame. Buddha statues and carpets, water bottles and smartphones, gaudily colored banners, and of course *sai sin*, that ubiquitous white string weaving itself through this chapter. All these and many more that went unnoticed are translated into words, that hang out in the text, mentioned but not systematically inquired into, not given any weight, any resistance in a cosmology of the doings of humankind (even if no human is mentioned in dedicated passages).

Translating is never a straightforward task, whether between experiences and words or different language worlds. Pretending to linguistic innocence in research betrays political commitments. Relying on a neutral language model leaves out all that is challenging. For a common realist, it is obviously but a piece of cloth with some Buddhist meaning projected onto it. So a few examples to fill in the imagination of the reader might be in order, something to connect words with: “‘Soul-calling ceremonies’ bring in monks and other respected elders to ‘call’ the *khwan*, which then regroup in the individual, symbolized in white string bracelets (*sai sin*) worn around the wrist. *Sai sin*, intended as protection and help in keeping one’s spirits together, are often given before someone goes on a trip or engages in other potentially dangerous or uncertain activity.” (Cassaniti & Luhrman 2011, 41) Narrated within the common realist framework, one cannot help but take away that they are in fact just pieces of string onto which meaning is projected. “Like it was in 1995, the open area in front of the statue is at present also ‘cordoned off [...] by white sacred strings, or *sai sin*, commonly used to mark ceremonial territory in both Buddhist and black magic rituals.” (Cohen 2009, 51) Oh, Erik Cohen, you liberal individualist so manipulatively using fantastic language (by referring a newspaper article written by a Thai journalist for an English speaking audience) to tacitly denounce Thai worlds. At times, it borders on outright propaganda, as when discussing the treatment of animals, where again an implicit goodness of the liberal order is simply assumed as ground. (Cohen 2013) Black magic rituals and white cotton string connections. Are you sure you weren't aware what effect using ‘black magic’ as a further unexplored combination of words would have on a reader without education in this field? Just because something is a naturalized translation of certain practices doesn't make it neutral or not othering. A good rule to follow: if translating is too smooth, if words used for uncommon practices are ready-made, if research doesn't include slowing down automated thought processes, maybe we are not really paying enough attention to the intricacies of worlds, those of others and our own. (Stengers 2018) Attention though, a crack appears: not all can be easily domesticated into realist writing, and coding it as superstitious doesn't make it go away. Not for a thoroughgoing materialist research it doesn't. This beauty, from the Routledge Handbook of Religions in Asia, pries open the daubed construction with a swift yank: “Criss-crossing the large enclosed building is sacred unspun white thread (*sai sin*) linking the various images to alters, which in turn drain their potent ‘charge’ into ritual containers for collection, like some bizarre sacred chemistry laboratory. The sacred ‘charge’ is usually transmitted by monks' chanting ‘protective’ *Paritta* verses.” (Taylor 2007, 225) While the inverted commas often signify the so-called, here they also enact another operation: how to translate a concept and an activity

that has no equivalent in English? One option is to delve into fields that operate analogously, in this case, that of electricity, for a cable and a string seem not too distant as images to think with in terms of what they connect, and the power that courses through these inorganic veins is by all accounts imperceptible to the eye. What more, the author injects a dose of imagery from another scientific field of research, chemistry: the sacred space as a lab. All the while distancing himself through the word ‘bizarre,’ as if afraid what a thoroughgoing comparison between the two scenes might yield. The image operationalized as connective tissue so as to bring the otherness closer to the assumed audience of the academic text might have been intended in the best of ways, and yet one feels a certain denigration – it cannot be like a chemistry lab, but it must be ‘bizarre’ and ‘sacred.’ An immediate operation pushing *sai sin* and the operations of merit into the realm of the fantastic, all the while keeping the habit of treating concepts such as ‘sacred’ as part of a social scientific world merely pointing toward something else out there but not really there. The problem is that the overlap of such imagery is not really explored, filled in, contrasted and compared. If it is like a chemistry lab, why not investigate such a scene, and how these imageries and their mutually enriching possibilities connect and transform? Connections established and immediately cut short, so as not to have to deal with the apparent reality of the power of chanting *paritta* verses has to others. Still, an excess remains absently present.

What is pried open here is the space between translations. How to make other concepts, whether language or experience based, enter into a world different to them? An activity that is always and necessarily open ended, and that can be reset each time. Or at least each time a mediating figure, say the anthropologist, begins to feel that the sets of tools and conventions offered in a language, academic or not, are too compromised, too much of a Procrustean bed, too afraid of the challenge of radical destabilization of reality sense and reference. Which images to conjure so as to walk the fine line between making sense/ible without full-scale reduction and keeping otherness without producing dismissal or orientalist projection? A field so ripe with tensions even professional writers might break into a tropics-sized sweat. Tweaking W. Somerset Maugham's words compiled in his record of Southeast Asian journeying for other ends: “The crisis came. The sweat poured from me so that soon my bed was soaking, as though I had had a bath in it, and well-being descended upon me. I could breathe easily. My head ached no longer.” (1935, XXXI) I, the ethnographer body, have let go of the pressure of a myriad possibilities of composing the never-ending process of translation and am letting the words stand as they were put on the digital page.

Imageries linked, associated, montaged, transforming. The nexus between materiality of things and their discursive appearance fragmenting in face of resistant encounters. It is not that things entirely disappear whenever the focus of inquiry retains anthropocentric conditioning, it's that they never fully appear in manners that would afford complexity and think itself into a position of challenge to the simple naturalist givenness of them. The *sai sin* can thus never be but a culturalist add-on to the universally valid and constant existence of white cotton string. White is white, cotton is cotton, string is string. Meanwhile, with fields of merit and other such occurrences, a Buddhist world is anything but one where there would be a universally valid neutral disappearing ground. As long as a one-world world universal reality is assumed as a ground for the follies of human activity, the ethnographic mannerism is the following: comment on the existence of a special object but don't wonder about its exact (speculative) operation, then add some details that are assumed to be cultural projections onto an otherwise self-explanatory object. And why would you, the content anthropocentrist, labor more on this case? After all, locals generally take its efficacy as self-evident, so why should you inquire more? Things are passive, dead, anyways. Little does it matter with matter what it makes humans do, what becomes possible and impossible. And all that these things that don't easily fit into your world are said to do by locals, it's all superstition anyways, even if today you aren't allowed to write it outright anymore. It's still there in the way reality is written. For those who have been sensing the cracking of simple reality assumptions, Latour (1992, 229) is meanwhile as apposite as ever: "As a more general descriptive rule, every time you want to know what a nonhuman does, simply imagine what other humans or other nonhumans would have to do were this character not present. This imaginary substitution exactly sizes up the role, or function, of this little character."

Such slipshod translations are happening all over Thailand and beyond. The more cohesion and givenness are presumed, the more spatial or temporal change and that of the things themselves must remain outside any conceptualization. As well as any agentivity individuating materiality or a media archaeology formulating the relations of cotton (strings) with wider formations might have. A string is just something there, within the frame, but not really. Just strings in general, instantiated here in particular, with its *sai sin* qualities being nothing but empty symbolism. Only humans merit attention. Framing obscures and reveals. It is generative of connections with the outside. The cyborg meanwhile rumbles: all that is are condensed images of imaginations and material realities. Sometimes you do things just because you don't even know they could be done differently. At other times you do things

differently and don't even realize that is what is happening. It's called living.

The focus here is squarely on images as pictures, the visual sense, with tentative awareness that further senses play large(r) roles outside of the realities of Moderns, constructed as they are over centuries.⁹⁰ Notes have not been taken on smells or other elements, neither have recording technologies been developed or made accessible and the less of my corporeal memory of senses outside the visual said the better. It goes to show however that the (protective) operations of *sai sin* can be felt by bodies trained to sense, for better or worse, what mine cannot. It is like not seeing something while staring straight at it. One senses disquiet, as if missing something crucial. Was I, the reader, not teased with an exploration of a particular kind of white cotton string configuration?

2. Sivocentrism

Reentering as a minor perspectival displacement. An experiment in becoming-thread. What makes for *sai sin*? A white thread that is a connector between human and other bodies. A previous in-between now reframed as the center. With human bodies at its ends. In a play on Latour's reminder, reenter and explore the agency of a thing we already know humans in this type of ritual situation couldn't do without. Not as 'if I were a horse fallacy' armchair speculation, but as systematic construction based on material engagements. What if I were a string? I am nine-stranded, white cotton cord. Regularly, I am *dai*, a simple thread, one that "means something that made by webs such as spun cotton or silk and then brought it to spin as a thread for sewing weaving etc." (Choosukhserm et al. 2020, 62) Contact with specific arrangements transforms me: "in auspicious activities and funeral rites of Buddhism, it is called '*Sai-siñcana* or *Sai-sin*.'" (Ibid.) In funerary rites, I even become *sai-yong*. I am a conduit for power. With other objects classified as sacred by some humans and activities such as chanting, we mutually reinforce power. (Terwiel 2012; Scott 2020) I become many things. I am manifold. Once I become I cannot unbecome. I will be "placed in a special container reserved for storage of such sacred objects." (Salguero 2017, 310) I can do more. Controlling spirits and energies, delineating protected spaces, binding beneficial influences to patient's bodies, trapping and removing evil influences. Am I not powerful? Sometimes, I even split into smaller parts, to be tied around a human's wrist, as a

⁹⁰ This is also central to apprehending entities that don't fit squarely into modernist naturalism: "Local orders of knowledge are not as ocularcentric as naturalist common sense and the eyes are therefore not the primary sensory organs to apprehend these numinal presences." (Baumann 2022, 140) For a general review of the research on sensory differences between societies as done in the anthropology of the senses, see Pink (2010).

portable blessing. In some places, I even multiply into colors. “Somewhere, the monks use 5 colors of thread and silk to knit as the rope and then recite an incantation over the thread with mantras. After that, they contributed holy threads to their followers. Some monks did not use only bare thread but they also bind the Takrud. Some monks used *Sai-siñcana* to bind or knit it with colorful stones to be the holy amulets.” (Choosukhserm et al. 2020, 63)

There are three important ways by which I am made. (Ibid., 63ff.) 1) The three characteristics of existence (*tilakkhaṇa*) – impermanence (*anicca*), suffering (*dukkha*), and non-self (*anattā*) – are twisted in the form of three threads into a rope. 2) The seven latent tendencies⁹¹ (*anusaya*) – sensual craving (*kamaraganusaya*), aversion (*patighanusaya*), conceit (*mananusaya*), fallacy (*ditthanusaya*), scepticism (*vicikicchanusaya*), craving for existence (*bhavaraganusaya*), ignorance (*avijjanusaya*) – in the form of seven threads. 3) The nine supermundane states or nine-fold *lokuttaradhamma*⁹² in the form of nine threads. I am a string, I will not go further into the details of the *abhidhamma* and the pleasures of endless classification and numbering. I imagine the regular lay user too will have little additional information to fill in these classifications with further details. As a thread or *dai*, I connect to the Sanskrit *sūtra*, the Pali *sutta*. Its root, based on philological inquiries, is **siv* (the root of the title of this subsection) and in English connects to sewing, weaving, knitting. *Suttas* played roles in the practices of the Indian Ancients but connected differently than in those developing as Buddhist worlds: “The holy thread combined with 3 threads or webs which meant the high gods of Hinduism namely: The Brahma, Visnu, and Shiva, or it means knowledge, Karma, and devotion. This thread indicates that the children are responsible for their parents, society and knowledge pursuit.” (Ibid., 64) Meanwhile, in “Thai society in the past until the present, thread or *Dai* is used in a variety of activities such as fabric weaving, making clothes by the time of tendency of each region. Moreover, the thread is also applied to the ritual.” (Ibid.) Although different in most ways, there is a commonality: “Thailand and India use the threads like a media to connect belief and the way of life together to create morale and unity in the family’s member and society.” (Ibid., 83) I connect, transform, and empower. I am in the middle and all around. I can be hung from the ceiling, spun and woven over all temple grounds at special occasions. Without me, no merit would be transferred, shared or intensified. Monks and engaged laypeople

⁹¹ “The term ‘anusaya’ is seemed comparable to the Freudian id-forces. The PTS’s PaliEnglish Dictionary defines ‘anusaya’ as: ‘bent, bias, proclivity, the persistence of a dormant or latent disposition, predisposition, and tendency. Always in bad sense.’” (Tan 2018, 332)

⁹² “Finally, there are the eight kinds of world-transcending (*lokuttara*) consciousness; these types of consciousness have *nibbana* as their object, and are experienced only at the time of attaining one of the eight paths and fruits of stream-attainment (*sotdipatti*), onceretum (*sakaddgamita*), non-return (*anagdmitt*), and arahant-ship.” (Gethin 200, 163)

prepare spaces for future visitors, weaving across the emptiness between walls, the space where rows upon rows of human bodies will connect with me. For hours on end, I just hang there waiting for that which is to be connected. You can look at me and see the hanging ends writhing like snakes or used condoms of the *nāga*, or any other visual association, really. I have minimal control over what you, human reader will associate me with, see me through. Mostly however, I am as inconspicuous as white cotton string can be. When you look at me, you wouldn't notice all the power I have. Thoughts arise: Was the author teasing? We still haven't found our way to the promised string machine. What delays in gratification!

3. Machinocentrism

Shut the eyes again, and reopen – what appears now? A white cotton thread installed with an entire contraption connecting bodies. A merit-producing infrastructure put in place so that vast amounts of human bodies can pass through. Now, bodies connected to a machine operating in silence, transmitting energy imperceptible to the regular sentient being. Efficient. Rotating bodies. A string, a noose. Kneel and put it on. Around the forehead. Recite. Next. All prepared well in advance. *Sai sin* strung around whole temples, in lines, to create a web, weaving to and fro, up above the humans and from each, in regular intervals one of these nooses hanging, waiting to be activated. Constructed for human use, the human decentered. Merit production intensified. Suffused in the low hum of chanting. Or the cacophonous pleasure of a temple fair drowning out chanting's distinctly calming aural comforts. A string organized by a contraption becomes something else, no longer can its parts be simply detached for each practitioner before a new group readies itself, as I observed much later at other temples. A cotton string is never just a cotton string. *Sai sin* is also an image that affects other images. It does different things and an image of it can be detached and made part of the complex compositions of a researcher's experimentation with context and contact. The string, without a shadow of doubt, generates effects. The reaction it effectuates in this anthropologist body differs from those getting in touch with it for merit-making. Caught in the string's doing, my thought was transformed.

A machine can be characterized as “a performative object that generates an effect based on its internal relations.” (Morita 2013, 229) One that passes through different spheres, connects heterogeneous entities, be they technical objects, changing temple infrastructures, Buddhist operators,

merit-making bodies and the backgrounds that condition perception. Analogously, a machine is a performative device that “transforms existing concepts.” (Ibid.) Such as those explored in different arrangements of perceptive connections and the depth of a thing. “Reimagining an alternative means of contextualization is crucial for this experiment because an analyst’s own conceptualization of the nature of connections impinge upon how s/he constructs context, that is, connections among things encountered in the field, in order to make sense of them. Thus contextualization plays a pivotal role in mediating the conceptual and the empirical in ethnography.” (Ibid., 230) The machinic infrastructure introduced to make merit-making in especially potent spaces more efficient when dealing with the pressures of demographics and, what I assume is safe to presume, the intensified temporalities under capitalism, also brings with other types of resistances between the bodies of sentient beings and those of the string. Operations such as cutting off a part of the string to carry its power home become impossible, and perhaps new innovations will appear, or already have but went unnoticed by this researcher-body. New habits had to be acquired by the bodies that put the string on their head. How to move efficiently and discreetly, and the directions where to move, so that the new batch of merit-makers can enter the field under the *sai sin*. Space has to be organized, ways to enter and leave without bodies becoming too much of cogs in the flow must be devised in and around temple architecture constructed ages ago. Time moved at a comparatively different pace then, people were fewer and distances by all accounts experienced as larger. Time is not a container, time is a central transformation.

It matters where a cut is made, and which imaginations and materialities coalesce. Perception for Haraway (1988) is always cyborgian, embedded in technical as much as organic devices, as well as situated. Thus there is nothing simply universal, unchanging as it moves. One cannot even discount that bodies formed in different worlds can sense what to others is unsensible, such as all that merit-supporting energy concentrating at a temple space. The cyborgian condensed image of imaginations and materials will, as explored with Deleuze, be a different image depending on the image-body doing the perceiving, or, in other words, the imaginations to connect with materials are co-constitutive and changing. There is no thing to precede the phenomenon, and no thing appears alike to another, yet material basis is not foregone. One might say that what has been operationalized here is an exploration of surfaces, of that which pertains to perception, in other words aesthetics in an experimental, relational and cinematic mode in a world of contractions and expansions.

11. Fracturing Realities: Fiction is the Landscape or How to Pluralize Ways of Seeing

Part I: Framing Examples

So, framing as the way of the world, the way of the body. Practically unseen borders separating and gathering, unless materially articulated in artworks where the borders are very much seen, become problems themselves. Which is why all kinds of arts can come to be so useful resources in thinking worlds. Here, as before, the generative possibilities of the cinematic are mobilized. The capacity to disconnect 'images,' snapshots from what a body frames as common surroundings. Of course, it helps to be trained through photography or videography, to have actual practical experience with these technologies – not all graphies are alike. Those only used to reading privately (as established in Enlightenment practice), only passively consuming images see differently than those trained to make images actively, whether through practicing some types of meditation or the creation of images as 20th century technologies. Perception and technology melt and mingle, as fictionalization keeps operating silently, patching the gaps opening up as worlds, perceptions and things transform at different speeds. Every reframing contains a speculative dimension, a gathering of elements that to an ever so slight degree must be treated as a fiction compared to the previous one, for new elements enter as old ones leave, elements that not necessarily in smooth continuation of the before. With the formation of cameras and editing, perception is freed with the technology, as Vertov (1985) so forcefully showed over a century ago. It becomes evident that all is empty, all is constructed, all is assembled, a question of habits that can be changed, hacked. Metastable entities to connect other metastable entities to produce new perceptions and thoughts, temporary worlds. And with changing worlds new concepts are needed. What the practice of an anthropologist thus at times entails is “to invent concepts to make visible what is emerging.” (Rabinow et al. 2008, 64)

Similarly, the body composed to be a source for the illusion of my self might not immediately experience the world as one formed in and as Thai Buddhist practices, but it can nonetheless experiment with perceiving differently, a sort of controlled, aware transformation, unlike the changes we regularly undergo without even noticing. In other words, doing random cuts and entering new assemblages, slowing down the immediate pressures of surroundings (and kamma), inserting new images into established series. Remixing the world. (Boon 2010) Ways of seeing (Berger 1972),

radicalized. A (one world) realist may ask: is this legitimate? The retort: Well, at the very least it is possible, so why not explore? We are looking into a future, not the past. Furthermore, as Lawrence Chua (2021) painstakingly demonstrates: contemporary Bangkok is assembled out of a bottomless variety of cosmologies and cosmograms⁹³ materializing and dematerializing as architecture and landscapes. It is never a simple unified Christian realist world, where things are unproblematically themselves, stabilized into eternity or until God or Nature gets finally too annoyed with the selfcenteredness of the modern human. And, as Chua lays out, parts of this palimpsestic metropolis or *mahanakorn* in Thai (skrt. *mahanagar*) were directly built as if to instantiate Buddhist felicities.⁹⁴ Worlds other than our common one. Levels of the Buddhist cosmos mix, scramble, cannot be easily disentangled. With so-called modernization, “Buddhist cosmography wasn’t dismantled but reworked and refined so that it could coexist with other constructions of reality.” (Chua 2021, 23) Spectralities keep proliferating, as do feedback loops with Euro-American cultural objects that systematically make it into the region's imaginaries. It's almost as if (urban) modernity weren't as self-consistent nor universal as it (pro)poses itself to be. (Klima 2006; Ancuta 2008, 2014; McDaniel 2011a, 2021; Johnson 2013, 2015; MacDonald 2017; Baumann 2018) Reality fractures. Cosmologies cosmologic.

The interest here is how elements come together to create perception, how to understand different bodies seeing differently, even different things, and how to connect this to the creation of common (as in shared), but not identical worlds? Common sense realism reiterated: to an eye formed in the ontology of the Moderns (which includes concepts, practices, materialities and more to guide and train senses), there is just one ‘neutral, natural’ world out there. As research keeps demonstrating again and again and again, it can be other, multiple; and I want to construct a principle that makes comparison across secular/sacred and other randomized modernist distinctions viable. To do away with the habitual crutch of passing through a reality a pre-philosophical common sense out there and shared by everyone, and if not, labeling that world as not worth taking seriously. (Viveiros de Castro 2011b, 132) It's easier after all to exclude what doesn't fit easily than to adapt one's theoretical framework, even more so when it comes to a general outlook of how life works and how one's body is inextricably implicated in the complexities of worlds. *Buddhadharma* is good to think and act with, as it is very

⁹³ “[...] starting from the fact that people do represent the universe as a whole to themselves and to others in objects – in concrete, visible artifacts. [...] human groups have always created external depictions of the elements of the cosmos and the connections among them. These are cosmograms.” (Tresch 2007, 92)

⁹⁴ “The discourse of felicity as a whole is a form of ideological power, in Foucault's terms saying ‘yes’ as well as ‘no,’ running through the social body (of the elite) inducing pleasure and forming knowledge – materially and imaginatively – of both non-ascetic and ascetic kinds.” (Collins 1998, 19)

much concerned with how bodies constitute and are constituted, and how differing bodies proliferate. All of this is of course partly speculative (fiction). Experimenting too, is the key, whether in an armchair or a less stabilized environment. What happens when different images collide? What follows is the staging of three very different kinds of temples in succession and an exploration of what the arrangement of such multiplicitous images renders possible to appear. A way of learning to see what is inaccessible to the senses formed in disparate traditions. Possibilities that open when thinking landscape, urban architecture and sense-impressions via a meeting between Buddhist thought, media theory and cosmotechnics.

An Exploration in Three Scenes

Wat Prayun

Inside *Wat Prayun*, accessible to the eye directly from the sidewalk, but surrounded by a fence, *Mount Mo* or *Khao Mo* is an immediately arresting composition. It is a replica mountain with temples surrounded by a large pond with turtles. The mountain is a sort of rock garden, made of fake rocks and on them miniature *stūpas* and *chedis*, a pavilion and plants. There is even a cave-like part with Thai style painted Buddhas on red background, while the other constructions are both in Thai and Chinese styles. I will not consider the complexity of local architectural histories, merely attend to obvious surface associations.⁹⁵ The mount, however much it has changed, has been around for almost two centuries. The word *Khao Mo* derives from the Khmer word *t'mor* meaning rock and was created to represent Mount Meru.⁹⁶ “Stone mountains or *khao more* are formed by piling or cementing rocks together to represent Mount Meru. They are often interspersed with a pool or small statues. Adopted from China, *khao more* were built in Wat Pho and other temples in Bangkok and palaces constructed during the 19th century.” (Boonjub 2009, 48) It is said to be the largest and oldest replica mountain in Thailand. “In the past, the Khao Mo was the reproduction of a natural mountain and of a place believed to be the abode of divine figures. This means that the Khao Mo was the replica of an actual physical

⁹⁵ “Chinese culture has had a strong and recurrent influence on Thailand's architecture from the beginnings of Thai history thanks to trade, diplomatic exchange and immigration. It is easily seen in the ornament of religious and royal architecture: lacquer painting, mother-of-pearl inlay and decorative motifs.” (Sthapitanonda & Mertens 2012, 214)

⁹⁶ Mount Meru is a five peaked mountain considered to be the center of all universes. At times the prefix *su-* is added, meaning excellent Meru, from which the Thai เขาวพระสุเมรุ *Khao Phra Sumen* (Hill Venerable Sumeru) derives. The location of Sumeru within temple and village grounds has been subject to change. (Sthapitanonda & Mertens 2012, 104)

form and, at the same time, it also portrayed the belief in a physical form.” (Pradittasnee 2016, 48)

The location multiplies: The mount is also known as *Khao Tao*, turtle mountain, or the whole temple as *Wat Khao Tao*, turtle mountain temple, because the pools around it are full of turtles. Some of the other entities to encounter: flamingo statues, Chinese sages (outside a small cave), a life sized boat (that barely fits into the pond), Chinese style decorated bowls with water and lotuses (found in most temples I visited), Bonsai (a rather rare sight). Naturally, there are also turtle statues. Also, a Chinese and very colorful shrine with a deity inside is there on that mountain, right above the pond. It is a veritable microcosm around Mount Mo that also kind of is Mount Meru. Some claim that “[t]he Indians and Chinese shared a belief that the tall mountains and deep forests were sacred lands, the dwelling place of angels and gods [...] The further one goes up Sumeru mountain, the more one finds oneself in the territory of those who are without suffering.” (Ibid., 46) Whether the either statement can be substantiated or not, the latter does bring to mind the observation that the nature-culture distinction in the region is not dualist, but a continuum, or even a series of overlapping continua – the further away from a center of power, the more nature it becomes. And in this kind of nature, entities are prone to unstable becomings. (Langford 2013) All the while this being a continuum from order to disorder, and as is unsurprising, order can be made from disorder: “we speak here about the Thai idea of *thammachaat* (ธรรมชาต, literally order of what is)—a nature that is not mentally constructed in contrast to culture, but to disorder. Nature is a world in itself, where everybody has to find their place so that everything, every phenomenon is in order ... or not. The construction of Thainess (*khwaam pen thai*, ความเป็นไทย) or other regional identity like Lanna, is thus articulated with a distinctive way of building one’s relationship with their own environment, be it cultural, natural, or whatsoever.” (Renesson 2019, 10) A similar operation with regards to distances from a center is contained in the famous mandala galactic polities as outlined by Stanley Tambiah (2013). The more nature qua disorder, the more transformations occur and stability is lost, appearances become deceptive. And, of course, there are numerous centers of power. And, as elaborated on previously, fields of merit also act in decentering/recentering of power across space: the more renowned, charismatic, powerful a monk, the stronger the field of merit. And monks are countless in these lands, so statistically even powerful ones must be a few. *Thammachaat* meanwhile is obviously not static, it changes as locals from different backgrounds and classes come to be influenced by other worlds, not in the least when studying in Western countries. (Stott 1991) And, even *thammachaat* (*thamma/dhamma* + *chaat/rebirth*) is

considered a relatively recent creation, as there is no traditional word for ‘nature’ in any of the Thai dialects. (Davis 1984) The new word seems to be used in a way that *pa hu'an* was used earlier, that is for wild forest. (Stott 1991) “The forest, on the edge of the social and religious domain of the muang and the ruler’s influence, was the world of wild, dangerous and unpredictable beings, including tigers, bears, gods, spirits and non-Tai hill peoples.” (Darlington 2003, 131) With the terraforming of Thai landscapes and general transformation of the world with new technologies, changes in concepts and their employment are to be expected.

Into these overlapping fields, variants of a mountain enter. A mountain of immense importance in those Asias that partly came to be through Indic traditions. “Thus, *Abhidharma-kośa*, the founding text of Buddhist cosmology, describes a world centred on the holy Sumeru Mountain, which is surrounded by seven ranges of mountains forming concentric squares (later often represented as concentric circles) and seven seas between the ranges. Outside the seventh range, a vast ocean is encircled by a circular iron mountain range that prevents the ocean from flowing off the world. There are four continents in this ocean; on one, Jambudvīpa, people live. Taking the form of a concentric mandala, this world is called ‘one Sumeru world.’” (Morita 2017, 234) The indefinitely forested Southeast Asia of old, with communications between large and small settlements being mostly carried out via watery worlds of rivers and seas, was one where countless such centers overlapped, and new ones kept springing up. This so-called center has always already been an ‘imaginary’ place, a simulacrum without a direct original. For even if there at some point were some original mountain in the Pamirs (as some researchers today propose), few for whom Sumeru plays a role would've experienced it, less so even without first experiencing the copies springing up like mushrooms after the rain over large swathes of land. The same would go for Vulture Peak, *Gridhakūta*, the Buddha's favorite retreat and actually localized, even if until rather recently, very few travelers would've made it there. Fewer even, I imagine, would've been interested in triangulating the peak of their imaginations, the various architecturally designed peaks of their commonly lived surroundings, and the peak as a geographical location in the narrowest sense.

The connections operating here are complex, some structural, some aesthetic: “As part of the [general] wat's cosmological ground plan, cloisters represent one of the layers of mountains or oceans around Mount Meru, which is symbolized by encircled buildings. In the Ayutthaya-era temple layouts,

the *chedi* or prang was the main temple structure. During the Rattanakosin period [late 18th century of Christian-secular calendar until abolishment of kingdom in 1932], the ordination hall or the assembly hall became the prime structure surrounded by cloisters. In both periods, the importance of the building was determined by the significance of the relics or the Buddha image that were housed within the structure.” (Boonjub 2009, 68) The place under examination then is composed of a wide variety of elements. That a wat assembles a range of lineages is obvious even to the scantily trained eye-memory combination of this researcher with very moderate education in Siamese and Chinese art history, and all that is brought back through activities such as that gazing at photographs while preparing to write this chapter. As for the elements connecting the Sinosphere, they might be somewhat less commonplace, but not entirely unheard of. “It is also obvious in elements such as temple and palace roofs built in Chinese style, and in courtyard elements such as Thai bonsai and stone mountains. Chinese-style imagery appears in many Thai murals, and the use of the colour red to decorate temple interiors is probably a result of Chinese influence.” (Sthapitanonda & Mertens 2012, 214)

Each wat is singular. There are reportedly around 40'000 temples in the boundaries of the country today. There is no central planning or church structure or even centralized state support. This is a statement about organization not about ideological commitments of large parts of the *sangha*.⁹⁷ Each has to innovate, to differentiate itself to make laypeople come and give donations. This doesn't have to happen through theme parks (Anderson 2012, McDaniel 2015), virtual reality or light shows,⁹⁸ or other such technology related innovations, as mentioned charismatic monks or just reliable ones, or those very good at chanting also work, not to mention kids' attractions, pop culture integration (most obviously in the famous *Wat Pariwat* decorated with American and Japanese pop culture figures as well as Greek and other deities), famous spirit shrines or creative ways of feeding animals. What is rarely seen is this obviousness of an assemblage such as it happens to be at *Wat Prayun*, where Ancient Northern India with its immense mountain ranges and peaks, or rather its imaginary version mixes with

⁹⁷ The efforts to reorganize temples and communities of monks based on Christian-colonial models to control them and integrate so-called Buddhism into a national project were extensive, as earlier commitments were mostly local. This process of ‘rationalization’ also sought to purify of endless hybridization and establish certain texts as central. (Kirsch 1977) It is easy to notice that such activities are the coming together of very distinct cosmologies, one dominantly centripetal, the other centrifugal. This combination seems to prevent the easy formalization of state control. For a detailed examination of this and related issues, see e.g. Harrison & Jackson (2010).

⁹⁸ Only by chance did I find out about *Bodhi Theater*, tagged as Buddhist prayer re-told, at the *Wat Suthi Wararam*, when I walked by one hot humid day, too late to be able to attend. It's an attempt to bring people back to temples, not through force or obligation but attraction. (Kamolvattanavith 2019) Meanwhile, famous tourist temples today can be explored as virtual worlds from home.

Chinese imaginaries, with nature recreations – some more ‘natural,’ some less, as well as seemingly random elements such as the flamingos. This also shows in the different sizes of the elements, with the birds being about half or the third a size of the building replicas, with the live turtles of course and the boat being regular sized. What is found then is a combination of very disparate elements, some ‘copies of real’ some fully ‘imaginary,’ random mixing of sizes. There is no original source, no original plan, nothing to be straightforwardly copied. It is hyperreal, as a sum, a free mix of parts that conventionally considered (in a world of essences at least) would belong to different regimes of signs, but here are found next to each other, with a necessary ground. Variations of this can be found at many a temple, though perhaps variations is unfitting, as there is no unified model or original. (Oh the conventional constrictions of language and their implicit metaphysics!) Even the ground plans (suggesting Mount Meru and oceans) are easily forgone to fit the space. The inquisitive reader can indulge in more examples from pre-modern cosmologies a wat can actualize in a multitudinous ways, so as to fit the surrounding material conditions:

The southern *wihan* housed a Buddha image in the pose of subduing Mara with five disciples, called Phra Phutthajao Thesna Thammajak (Buddha preaching the sermon on the wheel of *thamma*), and had murals on the theme of the sermon on the wheel and the sermon at Tavatimsa. The western *wihan* housed a Buddha seated under a naga with the rear in the design of a *jik*, or Indian oak tree, and had murals on the theme of the Buddha’s hair relic. The northern *wihan* housed a *Parileyya* (Palelai) Buddha, newly cast (the only image cast at Wat Pho), with statues of an elephant offering a water pot and a monkey offering a honeycomb in front of the image, and had murals on the Three Worlds cosmology including depictions of Mount Meru, the seven mountain ranges, four continents, five rivers, Himavanta (Himaphan) Forest, and Anotatta (Anodat) Lake. (Prakitnonthakan 2014, 4)

What structures and ground plans point to, is not an abstract elsewhere or a transcendence (for such things technically do not exist in Buddhist cosmology), but other worlds in space/time. Buddhists heavens, worlds, are part of the same plane – one can be reborn there, the entities can and do interact (in some stories), they are just composed as different karmic bodies. Now, for somebody raised in Christian realism, I still have to conceive it as an imaginative practice constituted by bodies that share

my world. This doesn't take away from the differential construction of the webs of relations and mimetics. Different elements, some more abstracted like the wheel of dhamma, some less such as *nāgas* and trees and Buddhas, some almost entirely experiential, conducive to atmosphere, combine. What I am gesturing at is less the conditions of hyperreality, than the always already extremely varied (to the point of fragmentation, at least to an Occidental) elements that make up a wat. With the more glaringly contemporary incursions not being a manifestation of a new reality in general, as much as a process that has been ongoing, only now there are new elements to be include and through which to change. And the accumulative effects such combinations have, for it might be easy to forget that what I am writing here is a world organized around effects rather than essences.

Wat Saket

Over a year and a half prior to visiting *Wat Prayun*, in 2563 of the Thai solar calendar, a previous composition of this body that is writing entered *Wat Saket*, one of the most touristically renowned temples, with another body composed among other things of friendly inclination. This other body was a young university educated Bangkokian who had been introducing the ethnographer to her customs, ideas, tastes and conceptual as well as aesthetic associations for some time. *Wat Saket*, the Golden Mountain, full name *Wat Saket Ratchawora Mahaviharn*, another of the countless Sumerus in Bangkok. Before heading up that imposing hill that is all temple and 318 steps, as all tourists do for the panoramic view of the estuary city, we strolled around the circle formed around the hill filled with many a wonder I am not inclined to list here. One moment we entered a hall, one I recalled sitting in front of on a bench years earlier in the form of a naive tourist, and drinking water in the afternoon heat. Again it was sweltering and we were wiping sweat off our foreheads. Stepping in was like entering another world – cool, calm and full of synthetic colors. Tourists and other *farang* bodies don't seem to ever enter (as I observed on other days), and even local seeming bodies were few and far between at this time of day.

It was the first time I saw what I saw, or at least became aware of it. Not only was the decoration and the objects around the Buddha statues even more positively baroque than is frequent in its fantastically golden hued intricacy, under the Buddhas and behind them, pastel neon lights kept blinking and changing. Blue green red orange violet. On the wall, painted blue like the sky with devas

and other beings, a large Buddha sitting on a blinking mountain, another mountain with a palace on top painted around him. In front, a much smaller *stūpa* and then an even smaller Buddha on another blinking mountain, at a faster rhythm. Red green red green red green. The floor a red carpet swallowing sounds. Many more objects are found around this ‘altar’ of course, but I have to bracket them here, put them outside the frame, for they are variants of what appears commonly and if one were to minutely focus on listing every single thing at a Thai Buddhist altar, one would end up investigating something different: in these worlds, offerings are personalized, each serving to connect donors to the Buddha, which makes for something else and serves to remind of the irreducible multiplicity of things. (McDaniel 2011b) The floor, a red carpet that swallows sounds. Keeps out distractions. Helps organize the focus of a mind-body that enters.

Enticed and bewildered, a whisper: – What is this? Why do they do this? And my female companion, after a few pensive beats, with an answer: – It's to create the atmosphere of heaven, which makes it easier to meditate. It was the first time in life as lived or academic literature as imagined that I remember encountering such an explicit statement of (ambiance) performativity. Technologies, or combinations of them, are used in order to create specific effects. It would come to reorganize my perception of other spaces, more obviously fitting imageric preconceptions of what a Buddhist temple or meditation hall ought to look like, ought to be made of. A slightly alien yet soothing atmosphere. Is it heavenly enough for you?

One learns, on some level, wading through literature on Buddhist worlds and thoughts that there are no essences. And yet, almost all of these possibilities seem discursively bound, rarely if ever with an engagement of more material planes of composition and how such worlding would world itself. And yet, when doing research in lands strongly shaped by Buddhist forces, encounters such as these become habitualized – it is not so difficult to notice that the world works differently here than in Europe, however much its modernist ontologies have co-shaped what is perceived. Lawrence Chua (2021) mentions repeatedly how structures, cities even, were built to copy heavens or other Buddhist so-called holy spaces. Here, one finds a very compact example. In the next room, a painting on the wall, again in the bluest of blues, combines imagery drawn from space exploration of our solar system with devas and other sentient beings flying in between. Images then that I never thought I would encounter outside of anime, where (for occidental conventions) entities also mix and transform rather freely.

Two similar, but not identical questions arise: 1. Do (Buddhist) heavens change too as technology evolves and radical cosmic reorientations⁹⁹ occur? (I visited the Bangkok Planetarium with a group of monks and their Filipino English teacher, and the story of the universe told therein through a variety of exhibitions has a defiantly Buddhist slant.) 2. Do people really only/dominantly perceive things as effects without projecting this world's characteristics onto heaven (i.e. how to construct the complex causations between other worlds and this one)? By the time these questions emerge, I am far away working through fieldnotes, writing a thesis. A pandemic is raging. The world has changed.

Bang Khae Mall Waterfall

Cut. Jump in time. One can do these experiments in life that has passed. A few days after the turtle mountain, I was to meet an acquaintance at the Bang Khae Mall in the farthest southeastern reaches of Bangkok. That is the Thonburi side. It is where the Skytrain ends. No plans for extension yet. A very different there than the South where I had continued to the temple fair at another time. Bangkok is a city of far reaching displacements. Only this time, I was just about to explore an unknown area and a temple of a different kind – a temple of consumerism. Ever since exploring some during my first research stay (unlike when visiting as a tourist, when I never entered a mall) I came to value these concrete giants with, at least around Central, fluid facades. It's cool and pleasant, the music in stores is much less loud than in Europe. The same holds for scents, which I usually experience as aggressively entering my body and driving me out of shops. Here, any break from the melting heat and dust and noise is welcome. Bodies are semi-permeable entities. Many of the varied malls I had been to tended to feature unique architectural elements and some included art exhibitions, ice rinks and other activities. No wonder I was told by young locals that they like to go hang out at malls as a free time activity.

Never before had I witnessed a scene in this *mahanakorn* (skrt. for megalopolis) that would forcefully recall my time in the Kanchanaburi mountains, in that settlement at the end of the train line with those refreshingly damp waterfalls and pools. Except inside and with masks to prevent the spread of disease. At the center of the mall, all the way to the top, there is a waterfall. Under it, there are a few

⁹⁹ The fractures that appear where space exploration, astronomy, critical theories and different cosmopractices meet, has increasingly become a field in its own right. (Cf. Battaglia 2012; Praet & Salazar 2017; Valentine 2017; for Thailand specifically, Reid 2023a, 2023b, 2024)

pools with different kinds of fish. Small bridges cross over them. People sit, chat, stand, relax. An unthinkable world in a concrete jungle, in areas so hot that air-conditioning became associated with civilization in the world-saving missions of European orientalists. (Chua 2019, 118ff.) The atmosphere is very much one of relaxation, water bubbling, an employee feeding the fish. I can't believe how many fish there are and marvel at their size. Me and my acquaintance stuff our Korean sandwiches into our eager hungry mouths.

It is impossible to say where the so-called real ends and the allegedly fake begins. This rings a bell. Above all, it doesn't matter. At least as long as we remain unconcerned with ecological paradoxes. These abound immediately on the surface, much as with the Buddhist practice of setting animals free for merit, where animals first have to be caught so as to be set free by others. Such considerations I leave out of frame. As with temples, mimesis doesn't seem to be the concern, rather the intensity and effects of shapes and colors. When put next the two previous images, cases to enter, this mall waterfall becomes an example of Buddhist cosmopractice – one that transforms landscape (outside and in) as a free mixture of elements, some imagined, some replicated, some conventionally real. Buddhist hyperreality.

It is this possibility to put seemingly disparate elements next to each other that makes the 'unseen' appear, and the world become estranged. One's habitualized conventions of perception and naturalized assumptions becoming destabilized. If one were to put another image next to these, one say sourced from Central Europe, perhaps the series would make an even different invisible regularity appear. That is not my concern for now, as Europe whether real or imaginary, is not a Buddhist space in any sense, as the material and imageric composition has not for now been significantly shaped by Buddhist cosmopractices. There are no enormous golden Buddhas whenever you turn around a bend in the mountains, there is little of the free mixing of very disparate elements even in the most capitalist of spaces. But, who knows what the future will bring? This experience, the ability to perceive the unseen in the seen, is made possible through a specific composition of a body in-between, such as that of the mediating anthropologist. One that has learned to see more than there is, as well as less (unlearn seeing its own conventions). In other words, to open up a space of speculation based on problematics encountered. A differential experience. One that, as an extension of Viveiros de Castro's argument (2019) makes it possible to populate the imaginaries of those projecting their own very reduced

versions of the cosmos with the innumerable beings actually found in natureculture. The montage of these three examples, fragmenting as it may be, opens up the following question: what makes for a Buddhist material reality? Here, not in the sense of: how to see as a Buddhist (i.e. techniques materialized through a sentient body)? Though this is necessarily part of the conceptualization. But: how do Buddhist principles and imaginaries materialize (i.e. techniques materialized as non-sentient bodies)?

Part II: Buddhist Cosmotechnics

“It is not a strict ecological determinism that is solely responsible for the variations within human technical environments [...] Technics in general, i.e., the human tendency to exteriorisation in the inorganic, and cosmotechnics, in the sense of different, culturally related understandings of this exteriorisation, should be more precisely distinguished.” (Pavanini 2020, 31) For now, let's keep the primal cut that Yuk Hui (2016) makes in his thought, where we commence in the idea and remain unconcerned with the material conditions for ideas to emerge, travel, communicate and remain stable. And then proceed to where there are already different worlds composed as different cosmotechnics. The challenge I am tackling is how to think the encounter between worlds through bodies that might not at first appear to be different. In the scenes above, the aim was to write a reality that is there but only actualizes for bodies shaped in different world-making habits. To shatter the one-world world with a simplified and binarized sacred-secular distinction in landscape and architecture. One that takes away worldmaking powers for non-Western cosmologies (or minoritarian ones within the so-called Occident) even when they are directly observable.¹⁰⁰ The compartmentalization of Buddhadharma into religion (i.e. something private, a question of belief) so eagerly practiced by large sections of religious studies and most of academia, not to mention popular practices (in general historically rooted in academic inquiry), is precisely an operation aimed at taking away the forces of other traditions in shaping material worlds and in the same movement hiding its own world-shaping activities. Of course, Buddhadharma is just one among many wordlings stripped to make fit. The ultimate aim of (white European) Christianity, with modern Western secularism being the epitome, is to make everything the

¹⁰⁰ A reminder for the curious reader: the Occident is very much a fantasy, an ideological construction, one that posits itself as originary, continuous, autochthonous, disavowing the multitudinous connections that sustained and keep sustaining it, not just directly materialist (trade, colonial exploitation; technological, architectural innovations from all over), but also conceptual (the Greek lineage only via Islam, the generative role for modern philosophy and statecraft and mathematics through the reception of Chinese and Indian, but also much smaller traditions like that of the Iroquois confederacy).

same, to spread everywhere, by enforced love¹⁰¹, by sword and fire and exploitation, those that see themselves as representatives of this order always projecting themselves as good no matter what they cause. (Bouteldja 2016) It is an immediately and forcefully universalist project, projecting unity and salvation in the same manner for everybody. Today, it transformed into capital, another religion of salvation with priests and all that, always positing something transcendent as timeless universal principle, except with a much more sophisticated material-semiotic infrastructure. One thing that can be learned from Benjamin (1996) is not be swayed by surface classifications and discourse, and instead analyze functions and how capitalism and science organize the actual world so as to see similarities with Christian constructions of the world. Recognizing the lineage of the one, of the making of all into the (identity based) one is necessary. Conceptually, or intellectually, I can entertain a possibility of another world, even if, at least for now, I cannot immediately live it. It's a process. So as research, I want to offer and as I hope partly already have an alternative account of what is perceived. Of the one being not so much one. Now I will connect some common modern assumptions about the functioning of the world to larger Buddhist cosmogenetic assumptions. They differ from Judaeo-Christian possibilities in that the genetic part of the cosmos is never done, there is no single act (or even multiple) of creation, and then the thing runs by itself. Cosmogogenesis is a process. Karmic principles run and produce reality. The assumptions connected to here are so general as to be present in all Buddhist schools and it would seem present in everyday practice. So again it comes to be about framing and fictioning: how to create a conceptual-imageric cosmoframe against which the examples can be unified more complexly to offer an experimental alternative to a simple: temple vs. mall distinction. In the sensory, the conceptual also combines and co-produces.

“They perform the unification of the symbolic dimension with the technical, bodily and material components of a culture; as symbolic machines, they enable the exteriorisation of cognitive processes on technical media; in doing so, they allow the one performing them to abstract from the empirical referents of these processes, opening up a symbolic, yet technically embodied, domain; they build up an episteme, since their performance always falls in the background, constituting the implicit common frame which renders possible single intentional cognitive operations.” (Pavanini 2020, 36) Such activities are obviously practiced at temples, both when they are being built and when all kinds of

¹⁰¹ We love you therefore we must save you from going to hell. We love you and love is always good, therefore what we do is good. Taking Christian love as self-evidently good is already being biased in favor of Christianity, instead it must be studied how Christian love is practiced, how it manages to deal with leaving others be other.

activities come to be performed there. The same goes for malls, these temples of consumerism, and other ‘secular’ entities, even if the activities and the spaces differ, and only overlap in certain domains (such as relaxation, atmosphere and hyperreality). They do something, they are ‘technical media’ that effectuate change (that if you are attuned enough can be perceived).

Buddhist Media-Cosmics

I will forgo a focus on those Buddhist tenets that organize it around a (human/sentient) body, its limitations and conditions, and the problem of ending suffering. Somatic (un)grounding is explored through many other combinations all around. Here, I am interested in describing a cosmic structuration or map or ground, in comparison with which (implicitly) modern secularism will emerge as a thoroughly Christian figuration. Against which the aforementioned examples will emerge as easily connected figures. It is also a retrojective construction made possible by the practice of contemporary anthropological and media theoretical science – it is not something just found out there in a Buddhist world, because until recently, the tools employed did not exist and there were no worlds interested in creating and employing them, at least not in the manner done here. Science, if it’s to be worthy of its professed ideals, is always active at the edges of worlds, whether human or inhuman. It has certain rules of productive engagement through which new entities emerge. Only, for most of the time, this activity is hidden, naturalized, presented as a black box¹⁰² – becomes an ideological, Western supremacist operation. The point is to open this black box, stop pretending it’s a natural and uncomposed activity, and let other possibilities enter its composition.

Suttas and wall paintings with their dark shades, in large *wats* even the very architecture itself and the distant reaches of the murals, perform one essentially cosmological operation: they decenter the human body. *Kalpas* (aeons) and multiplying worlds and bodily beings. Endless rebirths. Even the Buddha went through cycles. There are multiple Buddhas. One can be reborn in other worlds and as other entities, and one can come back to this one in eventual rebirths. There are innumerable tales of the Buddha’s previous lives, commonly collected as the *Jātakas*, ‘birth stories,’ while the Thai word for it is translated as allegory or fable into English. They bolster “the utility of the *Abhidhammic* theory of

¹⁰² Blackboxing is “the way scientific and technical work is made invisible by its own success. When a machine runs efficiently, when a matter of fact is settled, one need focus only on its inputs and outputs and not on its internal complexity. Thus, paradoxically, the more science and technology succeed, the more opaque and obscure they become.” (Latour 1999, 304)

mind for understanding the common sense logics by which people navigate their worlds and care for one another [...] this tradition encourages appreciation of what emerges from a cast of characters. Like the contingency of the component parts of the mind itself, the variability of any given situation requires a subtle discernment of karmic cause and effect or the guidance of a trustworthy other.” (Aulino 2020b, 7) There is no center, no world-historical event to define all that came before and that will come. No One (Jesus reverberating) to organize all previous figures as precursors of the new one.¹⁰³

All is impermanent (*anicca*) and empty (*suññatā*). Emptiness meaning having no essence, nothing that would be left over after change, regardless of how things appear. While conventional or provisional experience creates a world of mostly stable entities, on another level all *dhammas* (phenomena, mental states, physical states) exist depending on others, all arises interdependently *paṭiccasamuppāda*.¹⁰⁴ It should not be forgotten that this does not cancel the operations of the conventional truth, after all that is the one integrating singular becomings into the general *samsāric* process.¹⁰⁵ This conceptual infrastructure offers an elegant way to think this world as immediately appearing materially stable (unless a body learns to see based on Buddhist practice) and at the same time as changing (accessible through meditation, i.e. practical-conceptual application of Buddhist teachings as will be explored in a later chapter), all the while remaining compatible with constructivist materialisms.¹⁰⁶ *Suññatā* is an expression beyond good and evil, an ontological proposition to explain why immediately graspable objects seem stable, but when experienced in longer time spans, are not. As

¹⁰³ Auerbach (1953) explored figures as they are read through others, which unsurprisingly became a generative manner to engage cinematic figures. “His work is a historical endeavour: to understand and elaborate a culturally and artistically powerful, very coherent system of interpretation – in particular, interpretation of the events recorded in the Judaeo-Christian Bible – and to trace its evolution from philosophy and theology through to literature and other art forms. Auerbach’s special genius was to discern this specific system, this category of thought.” (Martin 2012, 12)

¹⁰⁴ All this must be understood performatively: “... [w]atching (*anupassati*) *dhammas* as *dhammas* originally signified contemplating (as *anupassati* is often rendered) or thinking about the teachings of the Buddha.” (Gethin 2004, 529) The article meanwhile is a great example of the essential and naive realism (separation of thought and world) of countless Buddhist studies scholars, unable to connect elements so that thought, speech, conceptual application is co-constitutive of world.

¹⁰⁵ Again, when following research and general literature on this topic, it seems impossible for most thinkers, in true Christian fashion, to accept and operationalize that two truths work at the same time, even as their effects differ or even counteract each other.

¹⁰⁶ Whether *dhammas* or things or bodies, all of these are not entities as instantiations of a general type, as they are commonly taken in Euro-modern reality practice. After all, the whole Plato-Aristotle line of thought has not come to shape these regions until recently. Funnily enough, in contrast to hylomorphism (which to my knowledge never came to be formed in Buddhist Asia), there appeared at least at certain times of Buddhist development of thought an entirely different way of thinking the clay/maker imagery: “For example, if clay is considered the substance, and the form it assumes (jar, etc.) its characteristics or states, then clay itself would be taken as the cause, while the potter, and the potter’s wheel, etc., which give clay its shape, would be only subsidiary conditions. Thus, all evidence, textual as well as doctrinal, proves that the Sarvastivadins were the first to make a distinction between a cause (*hetu*, *yin*) and condition (*pratyaya*, *yuan*).” (Kalupahan 1975, 63)

such it is intimately related to impermanence. And with it comes discontent or unsatisfactoriness (*dukkha*)¹⁰⁷ which I will leave out of the frame now, as it has minimal import on what I do here, even as it has extreme import on what temples and teachings and monks are supposed to do. Framing gathers, framing separates, framing hides, framing makes appear. Framing makes thought possible in a world that is excess.

Impermanence, in other words, can be coded as entropy. And the *sangha* (the community of monks) ought to operate to slow down, if not reverse dissipation. Dhamma as cosmic truth discovered by Buddha, coded as teachings and practices, would in and of themselves disappear from the world, because after all, the world changes.¹⁰⁸ Suttas, practices, temple spaces and all that serve to uphold the operations of dhamma as teaching. Emptiness connects well with the concept of simulacra – there are no originals, no essences, no ideas in a world beyond. Furthermore, reality as experienced is produced, conditioned. Which includes both stability as experienced by a regular body and impermanence as perceived by the trained ones. Kamma is a two-fold operation: action and the production of consequences. Understood in media theoretical terms then, we have the production of information. Something to communicate outside of its originary appearance, an abstraction, a material decoupling from immediacy. And because of this, it is immediately operational. Conditionedness is a co-production of reality through webs of influences, often expressed through the image of Indra's net. All is connected. And only the awakened body would perceive it, a mere sentient being, however powered up it may be as a deity, will only ever perceive part of the influences. Kammic history that produced what this body is doing today is given, but actions today create future *kamma* so there is constant change – interaction between past, present and what will be. This can be hacked through merit-making and merit-transfers which will be addressed later.

Because all is empty, connected and about actions/effects, there is no easy original/copy distinction, as was confirmed by interlocutors. It even shows in almost cryptic passages written by

¹⁰⁷ Much like with the common Christianization of emptiness as nihilism, a translation of *dukkha* as suffering (how eminently Christian a concept!) is commonplace, creating a version of Buddhist worlding that appears essentially negative and pain obsessed, while unease, discomfort, difficulty also offer themselves and create a very different image of these traditions. Translation is anything but innocent. Translation is connecting and it matters which connections are enabled and which aren't. Again, a matter of framing.

¹⁰⁸ The danger of corruption of teachings that increases with time has been a continuous concern for the varied traditions, and more often than not intimately linked with sexism. According to tradition, those opposing the ordination of women, starting with Buddha's aunt Pajapati, expressed fears that such an opening would shorten the time-span of dhamma on earth.

modern researchers on the practice of building *stūpas*: “the copy had to *be* like the original, not necessarily to *look* like it.” (Griswold 1960, 37) This kind of likeness is ensured by literal contact or touch. (Peleggi 2011, Irwin 2022) The play of resemblance and appearance we know from Platonist simulacra is displaced. It does not come to be a question of sensing correctly or being duped by a simulacrum that does not carry the truth or its copy. Similarity and authenticity are not necessarily linked. As such, from the vantage point of simulacra, all is hyperreality. The distinguishing operator is a/the direct contact or the actual integration of part of the original. The latter being a mere relation in terms of temporal precedence. Compared to looking like, being like leaves many more options. As explored by the anthropologist Michael Taussig (1991), this is a copy/contact world, rather than one of figurative fidelity and mimetic representation. Which does not deny the operativity of figures or similarities. A continuity through history, but not one that is easy to be traced by common sense(s), much like karmic webs. Again, any immediate sense impressions and one-world perceptions are decentered. What is seen can be other. The connection can come from any part.¹⁰⁹

Engaging research on Thai Buddhist architectures, notably *stūpas*, a pattern emerges: previous cosmologies come to act as ground. In other words in material history, Buddhist principles were and are materializing. *Stūpas* are said to ‘represent’ Mount Meru, but what does this word do here? To what degree does the meaning operationalized overlap with common use? “In their solid construction they retain the original concept of the burial or memorial mound.” (Byrne 1995, 269) Further elements combine: “A *stupa*, whether or not it has been built on the site of a *phi* [local spirit] shrine, is thus an empowered object in its own right, partly through having been ritually sacralized at the time of its consecration but mainly by virtue of this chain of symbolic connection.” (Ibid., 271) Different elements must come together for a *stūpa* to become an empowered object, not to mention that in order to appear so to a sentient being, the latter must be entangled in such processes to feel their power. To ensure entropy won't do its steady work, different times require different effort. In olden times, where landscapes and technologies looked different, time was much vaster than in today's world of accelerated material connectivity. I imagine what it would take to uphold series of replicas of the same complex structure and ensure that visitors notice entangled relations whether through somewhat obvious visual similarities or less obviously aesthetic or narrative connections. For a minute I think

¹⁰⁹ To acknowledge, on some level, there stability was, whether actively or not, conceived: dhamma itself is ‘timeless’(Pl.: *akaliko*) and somehow ontologically shown to be situated beyond history as mundane temporality but linked to tradition. Still, the following question has not been systematically posed: does dhamma change (i.e. is there a feedback mechanism, is it ‘empty’)?

about what technological innovation it might require, not to mention material-energetic investment, so unless this is of central importance for a tradition, it would not occur. It matters which images are taken to think pasts and presents with. This is not so much a question of mimetic correctness, but of not even making all the varied and complex conditions of life in a given space part of research in the first place. “Fragments were also taken by local people as objects of veneration, a custom widespread in the north-east.” (Ibid.) Practices then that ensure enduring connectivity through fragmentation of an ‘original’ object.

Phrased differently: any part can become disconnected and active elsewhere, if the conditions are right.¹¹⁰ No centrality, no essential meaning – just transformation through effect, effect through transformation. “Next to the circulation of relics and images, the erection of stupas marked the landscape as having been brought into the Buddhist domain at the same time that it memorialised such an accomplishment.” (Peleggi 2011, 58) It also makes for a stabilization of a Buddhist imaginary (however non-exclusive it may be) in a landscape. Other worlds come to be in this one, and the more infrastructure is constructed, the more complex and extended the network of *stūpas*, the more stable the presence of Buddhadharma. This is also described for other, faraway regions: “What could not be directly moved across large distances, such as temples or large icons, was transferred from one place to another through images, architectural plans, and narratives, which in turn became the templates for a vast number of ‘copies,’ more or less accurate. Thus, many locations throughout Buddhist Asia claim to be reproductions of the Jetavana Grove or the Vulture Peak in India where the Buddha spoke some of his most remarkable *sūtras*.” (Rambelli 2017, 4) How to bring incessant variation back together without forgetting that any framing gathers and excludes in one motion?

It must be restated that in pre-modern times, there was no Buddhism as such. This is meant in a very material, sensory sense: the shapes as which Buddhist practice came to be were by all accounts not easily comparable or even noticeable. The Buddhist world shared an idea and (vague) cosmological imagination related to what is now called India as the place where Buddhist teachings came from and where Buddha Gautama lived, though without modern scientific, cartographic and reproductive

¹¹⁰ A thing draws power comes from two sources: “Aura is thus a feature of both the authentic – that which was part of, or in contact with, the Buddha’s body (including the *Udhayana* icon), and the replica – copies of that first icon that are ‘enlivened’, or endowed with aura,” (Peleggi 2011, 60) Farther East Fabio Rambelli observes: “if a distinctive Buddhist way to deal with objects exists at all, it is a double tendency toward what can be called a metonymic use, that is, treating objects as directly related to what they represent [...] and a nonhermeneutical use [...]” (Rambelli 2017, 5)

technologies there was little to hold the varied imaginaries together. The world has changed. New objects and concepts were created that proliferate, having been spread along (more often than not one-way) infrastructures of colonial powers. Today, we live in a world with many object-networks to make countless similarities apparent, to bring some entities closer and entrench gulfs between others. All the while even the things that already were, change with surroundings. All is empty, we should stop positing entities as simply preexisting other entities, contexts, diffractions. Such worlds are the result of centuries of work, labor even, of material-symbolic creation. It is a different world than before Europeans started colonizing Asia and creating religions and essences. If the cosmologic described here is followed, this comes as no surprise – forms are easily mutable, what connects spaces is the creation of atmosphere and soteriological goals. Buddhist world-making is famously mightily morphable when in contact with local traditions.

This process is paralleled when we return to the creation of Buddhism through objects that make some connections appear and others disappear. Some travelers, especially from China with its strong literary traditions, undertook the activity of establishing connections between sites, making materially real (for them) what they until then only new from stories and imaginations (as their readers would continue, albeit transformed by new information). Furthermore, there had always been long-distance trade routes and it can be presumed that some of the information on other Buddhist spaces traveled along these, much like Buddhist teachings did. However, this had never been stabilized in a way that happened with the modern conception of Buddhism and all that pertains not just to academic engagement, but the spread of hegemonic culture that makes it comparatively easy to access its products in far flung areas. The objects that came to be through these travels, such as Faxian's, Yijing's or Xuanzang's travelogues, were of a similar kind to *suttas*, in that they were texts (only without the performative, recitative qualities), but not infrastructure (to be maintained) or anything to sustain constant contact and exchange between areas shaped heavily by Buddhadharma. They did also bring Buddhist texts with them, and with that too changed what was possible in the regions they connected. When engaging such topics, it is not enough to just trace that some humans practicing Buddhist rites and teachings, such as merchants and sailors, had contact. It requires focused and sustained labor to create stable connections between how (universalizing) traditions, especially those without any clear centers to continuously reorient developments toward some sort of sameness, as they spread, transform, appear and disappear.

Breaking small pieces off of *chedis*, bringing partial news from Buddhist areas. A dispersion as literal parts are taken elsewhere without anything resembling central planning or even attempts to control. Copy and contact in contemporary theory as developed by Michael Taussig (1993) via a combination of material collected in Colombia and Frankfurt School Marxism, operating as partialities, not any (easily presupposed) wholes. Structures arising in jungles. Structures being swallowed by jungles. When a Buddhist cosmology is already established, there is a human motivation for such activity: “[T]he great majority of *stupas* in Thailand have been built by pious Buddhists intent upon acquiring the considerable store of merit (*bun*) to be gained from such acts, the acquisition of merit being essential in ensuring a better reincarnation. One cannot alter the karma one inherits but one's actions in the here-and-now will be what determine one's karma later in this life and in the lives which follow.” (Byrne 1995, 271) Meanwhile a contrasting motion contained in the same process, an ‘active’ entropy as carried out by human bodies: “It might almost be said that merit making is a practice which ushers old stupas into a state of ruin. Ruin, however, is preceded by abandonment, and abandonment is the outcome of a complex social process. The state of a temple's merit is determined by a dynamic relationship between the stupa, the monks, and the community.” (Ibid., 272) Not just the jungle taking back constructions, time swallowing memories of teachings, but humans motivated by dhammic habits at once supporting and dispersing Buddhist infrastructures.

Similar dynamics persist today (even if conditions changed drastically), insofar as temples so as to be effective have to attract large crowds. Without visitors, no funding. Without funding, no longevity. The busier a place, the more wear and tear. The more attendants to ceremonies, the more *sai sin* is necessary, as pieces get carried away as lucky charms. *Wats* are economics activities, constant inflow and outflow of entities has to be organized. Here, royal support or any strong connection to wealthy donors goes a long way. Concurrently, temple grounds are treated as exempt from regular capitalist workings and privatization, are accessible to all, and for now continue to be treated that way. A sort of transformation of flows into a Buddhist commons (Boonjubun et al. 2021). A place to relax and perhaps enjoy a cultural activity without having to spend money (MacDonald 2017), not entirely dissimilar to hanging out at a mall. Buddhist worldmaking (with its central awareness of impermanence) as a constant vying between unbecoming and stabilizing. Even in the modernizing/Westernizing updating of ancient activities, any simple mimesis or copying didn't apply: “Mongkut carried through a classic act

of Thai restoration, namely a restoration of the idea and prestige of the original stupa rather than of the physical form of the ‘original.’ He produced a copy of the original by a process [where] the act does not require precision [...]” (Byrne 1995, 274) Indeed, as the author points out, precision decreases with scale. King Mongkut, titled Rama IV, ruled 1851 to 1868, in times where increasing pressures from Western colonial expansion were felt in the kingdom, and many technologies, not in the least in statecraft and cosmology, were (transformatively) adopted. (Morita 2017)

Worlds are mixing. “Nirvana (P. *nibbāna*) and other Buddhist felicities were often imagined as cities that could be measured in finite distances like the *yojana*. Even before the Chakri monarchs established their capital in Bangkok, Southeast Asian kings – informed by Pali textual culture – lived in palaces and cities modeled on representations of those in the heavens. The centers of dynastic power in early Buddhist and Hindu Southeast Asia were fashioned as models of the central cosmos.” (Chua 2021, 2) And these, in good galactic polity fashion, overlap and multiply. The elsewhere is imagined through the here, all the while some otherness is contained in the here through histories of technopraxis and the shapes that emerge, come to be codified, and sometimes decoded. Buddhist landscapes multiplying across Southeast Asia so as to bring practitioners closer to the geographies lived by the Buddha, as researchers point out. (Duncan 1990; Blackburn 2007, 2010; Peleggi 2017) Such transformations of (not just urban) landscapes and reiterative uses of texts, imagery, ritual techniques act as stabilizations of Buddhist lineage and a society's understanding of itself as continuing it. They also bring such other worlds closer to the conventionally living. Actualizing such Buddhist worlds, perhaps especially as landscapes and architectures, points not just to the past and faraway places but also the future, a Buddhist world that could be.

The *chedi/stūpa* thought with here is but an example of how a landscape becomes Buddhist through the building of nodes in networks, the nodes being able to expand and contract, often free transform in ways that non-Buddhists might not even notice, used as say we Christian-Seculars are to mimetic/representational copying of a general shape as the only basis for similarities. It appears, also, that you have entire parks simulating hell, or sculpture gardens on wat grounds and other such theme-park-like landscapes (McDaniel 2015, Anderson 2012), and as with the *Bang Khae Mall* example, Buddhist cosmotechnics can and does shape what to the untrained eye appears entirely non-Buddhist or autonomously secular. It is with this cosmology that it appears unsurprising that any kind of technology

(in the conventional sense) can be employed to have certain effects. Anything is allowed (in the grand scheme of things), even as historically the practices surrounding temple construction were specialized and required specific rituals. Different rites keep being practiced, at times as with the delayed inauguration of a new Skytrain line at great financial cost.

Part III: Perception Beyond Perception

As with the three examples in the opening section, what is seen is anything but straightforward. Nothing is simply there, giving itself unmediated to the fully formed senses of the modern observer and carrier of the ultimate truth of what is and isn't. Bodies combine in worlds composed of the perceptible (by senses) and imperceptible (by senses), the latter nevertheless co-constitutes experience through perception. As a research opening futures (instead of closing down worlds), data can be gathered and combined in ways to demonstrate that even the seemingly immediately unmediated and self-evidently given is never so, and in fact alternative accounts, other organizations, multiple connectivities of sensory data can be presented. As a body, or more specifically anthropologist body becoming between worlds, even as one can sense perception/connections changing through complex interactions with what was once other, the world will not be the same as that perceived by bodies formed in other techno-imaginaries.

In Buddhist teachings, (human) bodies are composed of six senses (and their object-fields), the sixth being the mind, the faculty that senses and combines the sense-impressions of the other five. (Gethin 2004) They are articulated via body parts and what they sense: eye/visibility, ear/sound, nose/smell, tongue/taste, body/touch, mind/mental objects. Engaging worlds in this way, the Buddhist conception of senses makes, so to say, a lot of sense, especially in its unexpected radical materialism of bodies taken apart into smaller units, not a priori treated as a black box to be opened secondarily. As well as offering a way to take apart the less material things such as thoughts, feelings, perceptions, sense impressions that constitute the objects of mind, or sense-media, as it is also called. This a highly connective, almost neurological conception, far away from solipsistic mind-body dualism. And while Buddhist ways of thinking have in assorted ways grappled with how the past conditions the present (including perception), especially with regards to rebirths which is often thought via the imagery of a candle/flame, the element that is a constant is that memory (past habits/perceptions) conditions the

perceptions of today.¹¹¹

So what one has, as in many traditions albeit articulated through other techniques and concepts, are bodies that transform, that are not simply given. And with said transformations other worlds emerge – through practice new things can be seen, elements otherwise imperceptible (but no less real for that). Transformation is supported by technology conceived as exteriorization (of cognitive processes), then folded back onto these neuro-motric bodies. Cosmo-practice involves space, architecture, images, landscapes, other organic bodies, all interacting to produce and stabilize certain lines of change. When all is empty, and efficacy comes to be important, one comes to ask: what effect does a building, practice or infra/structure have? Any technology (in the common sense), any combination of objects, can be conducive. And if it's not, as many researchers point out, *chedis* and *wats* and other places fall into disrepair, because they don't fulfill their promises. Perhaps this could also be a way to think about humans, especially figures such as the politician, party member or a *cakkavatti* (Wheel-turning Sacred King).

In such a world, as I am writing this, it becomes a question whether the concept of simulacra makes sense in the first place. Based as it is on a distinction from the original/copy distinction. It would appear that in a Buddhist world there the distinction is not made to begin with. With that, perhaps a new world can be entered. As demonstrated repeatedly throughout this text, in such a world it appears that the interplay between resemblance and identity, between true and false perception, does not operate as a binary. Daniel W. Smith (2006) summarized Deleuze's engagement with (the Christian manner of) simulacra, specifically how they found a way into a very particular anthropology. In the Buddhist path, human bodies while special are just one among all manner of sentient beings and are karmically connected to those other shapes and figures. The way one appears to the common senses (whether visually or more complex) is not the ground for resemblances. Rather, it's merely another element in

¹¹¹ “Buddhagosa maintains: Just as the flame of a burning lamp, without leaving the area of the wick, breaks up then and there and when it burns or flickers in succession throughout the night it is called a lamp, even so, taking the succession [of states] this body is presented as enduring for a long time.” (Kalupahana 1975, 83) Noticeably, it matters what parts of a candle are being used to think with (how images are framed and montaged), as Descartes famously also proposes “that interventive experiments testing hypotheses about actual structures can demonstrate things about wax candles and their flames that direct observation never will.” (Kelly 2014, 265) Wax impressions, wax seals, as sort of copies, meanwhile operated in Ancient Greek philosophies of (not just) perception. (Caston 2015) Complex interactions with the surrounding world co-constitute thinking, and two people might see very different things in the same scene, unless they work on specifying their application of words. The ‘outside’ world has always already operated on the ‘inside’ and ensured the endless, open-ended variety of and for thought. This also become clear when thought-worlds meet: even the most dematerially phrased philosophy and the most innocuously quotidian language carry traces of how it was formed.

the endless complexity of causation and relation. In Christian anthropology, the human form relates to that of God, circling around that one inaccessible center.

This is how the story goes: Man (of course) is an image that lost resemblance. God created man in his image, *imago dei*, so man resembles God, but because of sin, as resemblance ended, the image remained. Resemblance is externalized, all that remains is semblance. The old Platonic simulacrum is operationalized here: the surface makes man appear like God but there is no internal similarity. It's all effect, so to speak. The image, 'purely' aesthetic, on the surface, in comparison to the icon, with its internal resemblance, is demonic. Rephrasing it in a way not found in Smith's Deleuze summary, the connection of man to God after the fall has a reduced complexity. A variation thereof operates today (be aware this does not imply continuity!), God displaced onto Man, in all the talk of authenticity, being true to your self, one being criticized for merely copying others and all that relates. An inside quite obviously accessible only through an outside, in a twist nevertheless posited as primary, authentic, something before enmeshment with an outside, or the aesthetic, the surface. Still something strangely accessible in a way that seems to by-pass the performative surfaces deemed inauthentic. Furthermore, in a way that recalls the non-resembling resemblances of Buddhist world-making, just categorized as (morally) bad: "The simulacrum still simulates the effects of identity and resemblance, but these are now completely external effects (like 'optical effects'), divorced from any internal principle, and produced by completely different means than those at work in the copy." (Smith 2006, 92) Except in the tradition I draw on for thought, signs don't point somewhere beyond, they are complex non-mimetic interconnections, appearing differently to each body. And the morality that operates is one of good or bad actions (in relation to dhamma and kamma) and conducive/non-conducive to the perpetuation of dhamma as teaching. Anything like authenticity is classified according to efficacy and veracity of lineage, not abstract dogma. Indeed, I'd wager, the latter cannot even arise as a concept in such a world (not excluding that phenomena can arise that can be classified as dogmatic).

"If simulacra later became the object of demonology in Christian thought, it is because the simulacrum is not the opposite of the icon, the demonic is not the opposite of the divine, Satan is not the Other, the pole farthest from God, the absolute antithesis, but something much more bewildering and vertiginous: *the Same*, the perfect double, the exact semblance, the *Doppelgänger*, the angel of light whose deception is so complete that it is impossible to tell the imposter (Satan, Lucifer) apart

from the ‘reality’ (God, Christ), just as Plato reaches the point where Socrates and the Sophist are rendered indiscernible.” (Ibid.) Sameness is what operates throughout this God's world. As the philosopher points out, this is where deception turns into the ‘powers of the false.’ There's always a way out for those who want to leave behind that paranoia machine (is it or isn't it true) overhauling all differences into the seemingly same. Satan is only ever secondary to God. This is not “the great antagonism of Good versus Evil, but variants on the complex insinuation of the Same: How does one distinguish a revelation from God from a deception of the devil, or a deception sent by God to tempt men of little faith from a revelation sent by the devil to simulate God’s test (God so closely resembling Satan who imitates God so well [...]).” (Ibid.) I can never be certain. Everything might be a lie, for truth and falsehood cannot be told apart. Whatever this God may desire, the world as it is continually coming to be offers irreducible alternatives for those who care enough to be trained in sensing difference without coding it as entirely the same. Those experiencing excitement and joy from a cosmos that continues to provide new challenges.

A difference of worlds can be explicated. Felicity Aulino (2020a) demonstrated how in Northern Thailand Christian converts experience encounters with ghosts and ancestors as a radical duality, always an attack on their integrity as humans.¹¹² The whole world or reality is possibly corrupt, no negotiation is possible. Senses deceive. Only breakdown or full exorcism. While Thai Buddhists (remaining materially in these worlds, not systematically attending church readings of Christian doctrine) interact with such ghosts in a variety of ways. Questions that come up for those not becoming Christian include: how to react? What does that other body want from me? How do I understand that body? Either way, one doesn't question what appears, because what appears is simultaneously correct (because while sense impressions are constructed/mediating, they are also natural and can be trusted, at least until the body changes) and incorrect (there is always an excess of world to what is perceived, as a different body, one that practices correct teachings and techniques, will ‘see’ differently). Aulino (2022) further shows and explores how the either/or dichotomy does not operate among those she studied, which includes first generation converts. It seems almost as if when the drive to create logical consistence in a timeless world falls away, as all is impermanent and there is no position outside of this world where eternal truth would eternally be true, not everything has to be turned into conflict or contestation, whether resolvable or not.

¹¹² As is customary in the region, the existence of ghosts is taken for granted (hardly surprising if one keeps feeling their presence or meeting them directly), only now it becomes impossible for them to be good or to change.

Or perhaps another framing, one that relates simulacra, copies, and bodies. The ‘truth’ of the dhamma is achieved through a transformation of the body as *bodhi*, awakening and achieving perfect knowledge, which tills entirely different semantic fields than the commonly used ‘enlightenment.’ When such change is achieved (and there are different ways according to different schools), the world experiences changes with it. Somewhat analogously, the practice of anthropology can be conceptualized as one where a body must transform in certain ways to learn to see ‘anew,’ to see the complexity of the world, the difference in similarity and similarity in difference, and become aware that there will always be more, an outside; that there cannot be a simple representation to account for it all. And with that come different types of anthropological bodies, those, such as mine, steeped in imaginaries of the regions engaged whether classical or contemporary pop-cultural, and imaginations enabled, will come as other anthropological bodies than those still reared in the fantasy of (scientific) discourse being able to ultimately represent it all. Even if this ideal is never to actually be achieved. The cosmopractice of projecting an ideal that can't be achieved or even positively proposed, but nevertheless continues to operate, in other words, a slight transformation of God that is external to history and sense(s), and immediately universal, is hard to shake. It also tends to operate in ways that generate blindness toward the many connections that come to make worlds. To make see societies as only built on so-called humans, excluding other agencies and their myriads of externalized and variously internalized and diffracting activities. (Latour 2005a)

This world seems to fit very well with simulacra based thought. The spread of *chedis* through random displacement of parts, recalls the copy without internal similarity: “The simulacrum, in other words, is constructed on an *internal difference*, a fundamental internal disparity, which is not derived from any prior identity.” (Smith 2006, 94) Difference is change, movement as time. The constantly evolving and acentral spread of Buddhist networks through nodes such as *chedis* or *wats* can be grasped very well with such conceptualization. And, much like Lawrence Chua's Bangkok, worlds where perspectives, possibilities, practices overlap, mingle, and separate again. “It is not enough to multiply perspectives in order to establish perspectivism. To every perspective or point of view there must correspond an autonomous work with its own self-sufficient sense.” (Deleuze 1994, 69) While representation has intimate ties to the world of One: “Representation has only a single center, a unique and receding perspective, and consequently a false depth [...] Movement for its part implies a plurality

of centers, a superposition of perspectives, a tangle of points of view, a coexistence of moments which essentially distort representation.” (Ibid., 55–6) This early Deleuze so to speak prefigures the later cinematic one employed in earlier chapters: montage in cinema offers such a plurality of centers, as does the employment of montage theory in constructing a scientific narrative. Such an ontology that begins with constant displacement suggests an alternative to common writing practice. There a Thailand continues to appear as if it were simply Buddhist, used as we are in Christian-Secular one-world ontology to ‘religious’ adjectives to represent closed, preformed and delineated identities, and not constantly evolving enmeshed practices and techniques, that in certain moments, through certain cuts, can be described as thoroughly Buddhist (with the caveat that Buddhadharma is a practice of transforming connections) and at others they might not appear like that at all, while still being demonstrably organized on such principles, and at even others with little to no such connection at all. Even in our times of mass schooling where Theravāda is taught in a somewhat unified way as a state religion.

As with the three examples experimented with, hyperreality makes it impossible to clearly distinguish between original and copy. As all is always already mixed. A world where things are not always turned back toward a center, one where proliferation abounds.¹¹³ Plato, ever obsessed with containing general proliferation, fearing the world, must introduce a moral distinction from outside to enact a random cut to stop his edifice from falling apart: “Imitation takes on a pejorative sense in Plato only when it is applied to the simulacrum, which does not reproduce the *eidos* but merely produces the effect of resemblance in an external and unproductive way, obtained neither through true knowledge (the user) nor right opinion (the craftsman), but by trick, ruse, or subversion, an art of *encounter* that lies outside of knowledge and opinion (the artist or poet).” (Smith 2006, 93) And all too much research continues to be governed by this image of thought. One where thinking itself is inherently posed as closer to truth than to the liberating practice of artists that build new things, new objects for a world, instead of those that are mostly to serve as a conservation and reiterating confirmation of old structures.¹¹⁴ A shift toward imagination and fictioning is meanwhile occurring in a variety of fields, not in the least in anthropology. (McLean 2017) The concept of hyperreality itself might insidiously or playfully do some obscuring work here, and replacing reality with fiction could offer new possibilities

¹¹³ For Buddhist tradition, in its typical concerns with undoing the ties of *kamma*, the term *papañca* translated as ‘conceptual proliferation’ is a way to grasp part of this process as it operates in thought. (Ñāṇananda 1971)

¹¹⁴ The function of thought that is disavowed in the conceptualization of thought/language not having a direct impact on world, of them not being part of the world.

while covering a similar ground. The late Mark Fisher did invaluable phrasing work on this account: “This, then, is hyperfiction: a process whereby fiction and reality are radically smeared. [...] What is crucial is not the representation of reality, but the feedback between fiction and the Real. [...] Hyperfiction, then, can be defined as fiction which makes itself real. What connects hyperfiction with animism is precisely the escape of agency from the subject. Fiction itself gains an agency, an ability to intervene into the Real.” (Fisher 1999, 174)

What I attempt to show, in variations, is that the fiction(ing) is always already there in how bodies operate in environments that in their material and less material compositions enable co-constitute whatever comes to be experienced without being independent and untouched. Of course, there is more to what there is outside of what any single body, however composed or transformed through techno-cultural affordances, can connect with. Through the experimental practice of conscious framing and reframing, of continuous displacements with a practice of awareness toward the ever so slight changes that make things, such fictioning can become partly modulated. To bring this back to a sort of anthropology, one must (re)consider how bodies are composed and how such compositions co-constitute what is perceived, noticed even before anything is written in a notebook, inquired from so-called informants, and other techniques. When (re)framing it is important to experiment with the sensible, the non-sensible (conceptual framework that shows how the materially empirical is multiple) and the body that combines sensible/non-sensible (and is itself change). One is always in the realm of cultural techniques: making distinctions between knowing how (to engage) and knowing that (some operation leads to a certain result without understanding the operation). This makes inquiries based primarily of ‘what is there’ in the sense of interviews and ‘realist’ participant observation too ‘little,’ because much of the insensible is missed, as we often do not even know that we are doing something, much less why. Observation ought to be composed of different sources, including ‘media representations,’ as a variety of elements neither of which containing the true blueprint of reality. And with this, comes a reconceptualization of such research: it comes to be about generating new ways of how to engage the world, instead of capturing a truth based on a random cut and concomitant reduction of multiplying realities to a simple one out there, immediately to be grasped by the senses.

12. Assembling Chanting

A definition:

uadmon translated as ‘chanting,’ composed of two words:

suad ‘offer a prayer,’ recite; มนต์ *mon* ‘mantra’

You could walk with eyes closed and still immediately feel the change. Thailand is never quiet, and Bangkok doubly so. Either the buzz of modern automata speeding up the rhythms of the world, or the incessant white noise of the jungle. And suddenly, a space of rest, where all sounds seem distant and one can finally breathe with their entire body. “In a situation, things hanging in the air are worth describing,” writes the anthropologist Kathleen Stewart (2011, 447) known for bringing affect theory and anthropology to mutual enrichment. Here, the absence of intense walls of sound hangs in the air, as much as its presence does outside. Only it feels kind of elevating, freeing. One thing is for certain, it is not neutral. There is no neutral place. All is matter, whatever its modes. All affects. When you enter such spaces at given periods, you will be engulfed by other frequencies. A gong announces certain times of the day. Unless you spend a lot of time lounging around temple spaces, it possibly won't even reverberate through you. It lasts an elongated instant and then disappears. Gongs here are not as loud as Christian church bells that can be heard from far away and are ear bursting when close – I know, because I've had the pleasure of living near one for a while. At other times one hears the repetitive, vibratious hum of low monk voices with answers in somewhat higher registers by the laypeople. It can go on for hours, with only slight variations in rhythm and composition. This is not about meaning, as I will show, it cannot even be. The materiality to the shapes of words, their resounding, are the part to be noted. Away from the meaning-obsession of European oh-so protestant so-called secularism of the more dominant strands of not only Buddhist studies. Or with Christianity and Western Secularism in general. (Engelke & Tomlinson 2006) What hermeneutics, a popular technique of engaging so-called other religions through texts, misses, is the entire apparatus that creates the conditions of sustained (re)reading, and that includes techniques of reading, of engaging texts themselves, which will differ over time and space.¹¹⁵ The method enacts an image of the world where reality is given and the

¹¹⁵ While there continues to be a dearth of research on other sonorities and the impact of European-style modernization, there is a thorough study of the shifts in Theravāda Sri Lanka: “The ethical underpinning of Protestant textuality brought with it transformations in the materiality and ideology of textual artifacts and in the praxis of textual production. These transformations resulted in textual shifts from the poetic to the prosaic, from an aesthetic of the power of sound (*nāta*) to an ethic of denotational rationality (*logos*), from a sonocentric to a logocentric universe.” (Bate 2021, 39) These transformations include the integration of the concept of religion that brings about a shift toward textuality:

creativity of the human is interpretation based (how biblical! one text, many interpretations) without actually affecting reality, and meaning is all one can get from a different tradition. This operativity continues the effectuate itself even with traditions that are explicit in their writings about the performative efficacy of their sonic instantiations. And so, entering a temple space at fortuitous times, at least if it is a very frequented *wat*, you will be engulfed by the rhythm of chanting. It too has a distinctly atmospheric effect. The goal here, on these pages, isn't to grasp, make tangible the effervescent ambiance created in Buddhist temple spaces (and elsewhere). Be it that a stated goal of the tradition is to enact realities conducive not just to achieving the cessation of rebirth, but also to create situations in order to enhance receptivity for its teachings. Hence the way Buddhist spaces are built and organized, what atmosphere is created and how it all affects attention and general well-being is of utmost importance. Mental and other immaterial corporeal operations don't function independently of material composition, of concrete assemblages of changing traditions.¹¹⁶ I am after something equally intangible here, and will draw on a different Deleuzian conceptual affordance than affect and in addition to assemblage, namely the machinic: “[...] the concept of machine admirably captures the essence of entities as beings that function or operate. To be is to do, to operate, to act.” (Bryant 2014, 15) It too precedes any human body that enters its fold, yet draws as much on human bodies as it gives back. Part of the effect of these assemblages is the creation of an engulfing atmosphere. It does not end here, for they operate on the corporeal. It is a cyborg corporeality, a ground without easy separations between body and surrounding, body and technology, a ground against which it is to be traced how figurative bodies appear. In other words, one has to undo the habit of seeing (human) bodies as primary in any assemblage and taking them against the ground of the humanist human body posed as

“Contemporary Theravada Buddhism, too, developed as a new understanding of a great many earlier communicative practices. For Theravada Buddhism, the ‘game of religion’ was played out through a series of public debates beginning in the 1840s and reaching their apogee in the late 1860s and early 1870s. It was also played out in the transformation of the Sinhala *dharmadesana*, these days translated as ‘sermon.’ But prior to a reformation of sorts [...] in the late nineteenth century, it was basically a highly systematized and ritually elaborate recitation of Pali texts [...] most listeners prior to Dharmapala’s time would not have been concerned with the actual denotationality (or semantic coherence) of the texts but rather in the evocational experience of the sheer sound of the text, an aesthetic experience that in itself was generative of merit.” (Ibid., 44–5)

¹¹⁶ To note: “The English word ‘assemblage’ is the common translation of the French word *agencement* used by Deleuze and Guattari. This translation has two problems. First, the English word ‘assemblage’ does not mean the same thing as the French word *agencement*; in fact, the two come from completely different etymological roots. According to Le Robert Collins dictionary, the French word *agencement* comes from the verb *agencer*, ‘to arrange, to lay out, to piece together.’ The noun *agencement* thus means ‘a construction, an arrangement, or a layout.’ On the other hand, the English word ‘assemblage,’ according to the Oxford English Dictionary, comes from the French word *assemblage* (*a-sahn-blazh*), not the French word *agencer*. The meaning of the English word ‘assemblage’ is ‘the joining or union of two things’ or ‘a bringing or coming together.’” (Nail 2017, 22) I, for the sake of convenience, follow the established use of the Anglophone.

preexisting the world, and instead learn to analyze what is encountered on two levels: the body as it appears conditioned conventionally and the corporeal as it comes to be in complex connections to immediate surroundings.

One evening I head steadfastly to *Wat Pathum Wanaram* as earlier that day some young monks in the temple compound amid toweringly endless malls had told me to. In my ethnographic naïveté (assuming things I should know not to assume), I don't realize that the chanting which was to start at 6 PM will go on for endless hours, seeing as all that I had attended before were far shorter sessions with an amount of participants you could count on one, barely two hands in the wat in Prague, where I had conducted research years earlier. Actually, it will be about five hours, and then quite a few participants will continue with walking meditation in the temple garden. What I also don't expect is the radical decentralization of perception and self that would occur through the material organization of the whole event. Walking or sitting meditation would require a different analysis, and produce another kind of (related) knowledge, as the way singular bodies come to enter the assemblage is looser than in chanting. And, anyways, the assemblages would not be the same given that this ethnographer body assembled of various elements also connects and thereby changes the whole combination. However much depending on the point of connection, this new element might be unnoticeable, certainly in terms of the overall local effect, it definitely comes to be defining in terms of the effect far outside of its initial occurrence. For it is this atypical part that comes to be the connector between chanting and writing. A notable difference when thought through assemblage theory (DeLanda 2016) comes in terms of the anthropologist's body and memory that enters: compared to most other research on Buddhist chanting in practice (Harvey 1993; Mabbett 1993; Hanh 2002; Chen 2004; Greene et al. 2004) or research on rites in general (Stewart & Strathern 2021), where the latter barely gets more than a mention as part of what happens in temples.¹¹⁷ This body, formed by the time it traveled to Bangkok by thought that includes itself in the analysis, was already prepared and open to slowing down thought to better grasp and analytically take apart the hitherto black box of chanting. For, as I have been at pains to show throughout the pages being read here, what is at stake is the very composition of material realities that differ between worldings. Far from being questions of only symbolism or human-based thought, ways of doing the world in fact and in deed exceed and decenter the anthropos qua conscious subjectivity. It must be granted then that what we have come to live in, is in fact a complex process

¹¹⁷ It should be noted that DeLanda (2016) doesn't consider the Deleuzoguattarian notion of assemblage a fully fledged theory. Meanwhile Thomas Nail (2017) demonstrates to the contrary.

involving many actors and very intensely material constructions that produce and support the experience (for some) of so-called free actors or individuals.

The discrepancy of freedom when it comes to movements of all kinds appears immediately as a great difference between an anthropologist at the very least looking the part of a Westerner and any locals encountered. Freedom as minimization of friction with other bodies in that widest sense of entities of various powers capable of affecting and being affected. A human body carries with itself whether it knows it or not certain aspects that under given conditions appear in a way that affects said body's possibilities. A body classifiable as a *farang*, a Westerner, is afforded privilege, of course, but also constant attention especially so in spaces where it is not expected. An anthropologist body in how the discipline has come to be established is expected to become local through spending large amounts of time, establishing trust, habitual presence, in other words becoming enmeshed to such degrees that knowledge otherwise unattainable will become possible to be gathered. The field that is cultivated so as to bear desired fruits thus is composed of the anthropologist body too, although it rarely includes inquiries into the colonial legacies and ongoing privileges that certain institutions and states and indeed (white codifiable) bodies continue to hold.¹¹⁸ Meanwhile, the image that operates in the background is one of an ultimately (im)possible attainment of perfectly local knowledge. Meaning, the ideal of long-term participation binds knowledge production to a potentially full description of the world, thus privileging extended temporality over say the conceptual and practical toolbox a body brings with to the field. Different kinds of distinctions can be made, especially once the production of knowledge ceases to be tied to the (im)possibility of full description, and instead how the coming together of lived worlds and concepts is productive of critical newness. With that a shift happens, one where a short-term stay is not merely a worse version of a long-term one, where the field does not start when a body is displaced, but includes pre- and post-production, and so even the hypothetically identical place assembles differently with differently pre-produced anthropologist bodies (including the concepts, images, conventions that constitute them and what they can perceive) entering. Another kind of freedom has appeared as we return our attention back to the constructed field.

I have been going to *Wat Pathum Wanaram* for a while, trying to establish contact with the

¹¹⁸ Research on alternative ways of conceiving the work of ethnography and anthropology is increasingly common, even if to my knowledge never from the position assumed here, be it that these particular strands of anthropology rarely, if ever draw on Deleuze & Guattari's *What Is Philosophy* (1994) which makes this analysis possible. (Cf. Mills 2011, Dumit 2014, McGranahan 2015, Günel et al. 2020.)

young monks learning English there. Always undercut by some misunderstanding. “I will meet you in the temple gardens at this hour.” I am waiting, where are you? I never figure out why it is so difficult to meet somebody who professes they want to speak to me, or at least make use of me so as to improve their English language skills. Everyday interactions in the so-called ‘Land of Smiles’ continue to bewilder me. None of this is exclusive. Each reiterative reinscription of a scene produces new fruits, new connections, new versions. Elements are connected – words that narrativize and express concepts, and sensory images that mutate into words to which the reader will connect their own imaginations. Whatever was perceived is displaced. Transformations abound. This is easy to notice once you let go of a simple reality out there mediating creation, stabilizing it onto a one-world world – one that is curiously inaccessible (whether as Ding-an-sich, God) yet definitely foundational. I will explore the role of repetition and variation in a future chapter, to retain focus on a machinic assemblage here. Reality keeps splitting, knowledge is always produced partially. A future ritual in the same place would be composed of much of the same elements, being ensured by a certain template or diagram.¹¹⁹ In and of itself, it is impossible to say when and where and how the rite ends or begins. As the diagram comes to be transcendently (in relation to this singularity), but also always transforming, as even if it were to be somewhere noted down, in whatever way, to make it ‘real,’ other elements are always to be added, not in the least the human actors each with their own habits and memories, as I will demonstrate. On some level, participation in this kind of rite or ceremony, the latter being the English word Thai people typically employ (I never encountered anybody using the word ritual), comes to be experienced as a contraction or intensification of the regular flow of experience lived.¹²⁰ In the words of the anthropologist Bruce Kapferer (2004, 48), who researched a Sinhala Buddhist sorcery rite (unknown as far as I know in Thai practices): “However, through its slowing down and temporary abeyance of dimensions of ordinary flow, it is an engagement with the compositional structuring dynamics of life in the very midst of life’s processes.”

A rite, compared to other assemblages bodies pass through, can be defined by relatively low entropy.¹²¹ In information theory, high entropy describes a state where there is an equal probability that

¹¹⁹ And carried by a variety of heterogeneous actants, not just the monks and laypeople, but the organization of space, etc., that has been coded to enable a specific type of ritualization.

¹²⁰ “[...] ritual as disrupting ordinary relations with things can be put alongside their observation that a ritual act is a modification of what is ordinarily part of an act, that is, of its intentionality. There are of course divergences as well as echoes here [...] talks of divine worlds as alienating the everyday sense of reality, everyday life is constantly encountering little alienations from it, not least when it itself becomes the subject of representation, analysis, or simply description.” (Strathern 2012, 403–4)

¹²¹ “Aside from such ethnographic and comparative methods integral to anthropological research, it is specific to this field

an element can be encountered anywhere whatsoever in a place, while low entropy describes more constrained states. As Bryant demonstrates through examples: “The case is similar with people milling about in Times Square in New York. This system is highly entropic because there is a high likelihood of a person appearing anywhere in the system. By contrast, a society is a low entropy system because it is stratified into different classes, identities, functions, roles, and so on. Claiming that a society is stratified or differentiated is equivalent to claiming that there is a *low probability* that people will *indiscriminately* appear *anywhere* in the social system.” (Bryant 2014, 94) In Bangkok, depending on the district, entropy tends to be high as in any city.¹²² What people do and don't do, what kind of people you encounter, will be rather chaotic. Coming closer to special places of general significance (i.e. not the very local shrines) certain acts will become more predictable, as many people *wai* (a typical Thai greeting with clasped hands and a slight bow) when passing a wat or a Hindu shrine. At times such as when chanting occurs, gestures and movements will be rather predictable, not just out of acquired habits, but as I am demonstrating here because of the entire composition of the scene. One need not be reminded that entropy in a location held as a stable variable will differ according to the scale or framing – were one to focus on the generative life of microscopic organisms or debris in a temple, the question of entropy would look quite different, even as it remains linked to what a place such as a temple gathers, which includes cleaning activities and conventions. Entropy, like anything else, is relational. Complexity doesn't decrease with scale. Be it as it may, even the most rigid assemblage requires some openness to transformation, in other words randomness, flexibility to accommodate unpredictability (of an outside affecting it), otherwise it will have a hard time to be replicated in any variant: “A degree of entropy within a machine amounts to plasticity. A rigid machine is a machine whose entropy is so low that its selective openness to its environment is more or less fixed – again there are different degrees of rigidity – and that can only operate on inputs in a fixed and mechanical way. As a consequence, such machines are unable to develop new forms of openness to their environment and create new operations for responding to the new and unexpected.” (Ibid., 105)

I arrive at *Wat Pathum Wanaram* ostensibly a tad late. It is dark. It is always dark in Bangkok

of study that rituals be understood as public events that – in their own way – follow a particular script and sequential order in the performance of ritual acts and utterances.” (Kreinath 2021, 351)

¹²² Nick Land (2014) points out that cities also reverse (thermodynamic) entropy, that is the tendency of things to fall apart, to dissipate. As such, they reverse time (understood as entropy), cause things including activities such as habitation mutually stabilize each other, even attract further habitation. A localized reversal of entropy. Just think of an abandoned house and how quickly it falls apart, even in areas outside tropics. Buddhist teachings, as I engage elsewhere in the text, is very much concerned with this kind of entropy, only is it conceptualized as *anicca*, impermanence.

after seven. Near the equator days and nights don't have much variation to them in terms of light. Neither do the temperatures. The same cannot be said of the daily amount of rain. Dark of course has its own meaning in an electrifying urban space such as Bangkok. Typically, a chanting hall in Thailand is a rather open space. A roof above and poles to hold it. It is elevated, you take a couple of flat steps to reach it. Mind you, take off shoes first. Easy with flip-flops, somewhat more ritual threshold performing with sneakers. Shoes populate the entrance of any closed space in a temple. At those frequented the most, I at times wonder many pairs inadvertently find new owners. But once inside, despite being open, sensory events from outside appear somewhat muted. There are different combinations, of course. And different parts of a wat offer different degrees of openness. Architecture organizes sensory perception, makes for atmosphere. The chanting hall is maybe 20 meters wide and 40 deep. As always gold Buddhas and other statues stare back at you at different angles, sitting there deep behind the monks in the front you face. You see mats, slightly elevated, for the monks to sit on. Now, as I enter from the back, I only barely notice how many monks there are. Too nervous to pay this kind of attention, I above all don't want to clumsily intrude and behave inappropriately. Later, I notice only very few of the young monks I have met are there. These are seasoned professionals. In the following days, when I inquire about things, I learn a lot about practical issues, including that monks have to learn to chant. And not every monk will be good at it. Indeed, a form of charisma¹²³ monks can acquire is built on their chanting skills. All over the country, there are different kinds of monks and different reasons for an average person to visit them, I learn from those I engage with extensively.

People sit on the mats that had been prepared before. Each has one of their own, they are generally white and decked out with even spaces in between. The space is just wide enough to pass easily, and a little tighter than the mats. During chanting, people arrive and leave constantly and discreetly. Arrivals outnumber the departures, the latter are more of a trickle. As one of my frequent interlocutors will later tell me, when I press her on the topic: “Yes, in theory it is easy to leave Buddhist ceremonies, but in practice one does feel the pressure to stay.” Though here various people patently do know each other, and some come in groups, it is as evident that this temple is not built around a local community, but around the working middle-class from all over that comes here to ritualize and

¹²³ Charisma is a power of an individual with special skills or talents to hold and influence people and the world, to help people acquire what they want or make them feel empowered. The more projects a monk or temple brings to fruition, the higher the charisma through reputation. It is because such power rests in individuals, places, ghosts and the *samgha/saṅgha*, that even only in unambiguously Buddhist coded spheres many different forces enhance or undermine each other. It appears to be not unrelatable to the ‘Big Man’ concept in anthropology. For an exploration, see Kawanami (2009), for an analysis of *barami* the specifically Buddhist concept often translated as charisma, see Jory (2002).

sometimes socialize. (Cf. Vorng 2011) As I arrive, many of the small mats remain unoccupied. Already there are dozens in attendance. A few white clad women, the female monks *mae chii* pass through the rows. Chanting has yet to begin. They are laying two different chanting books [describe what they look like, how they are made] on each mat. I cannot tell how much time passed. Almost all mats are occupied and those who came late stand or sit in the back, in general out of luck, that is without the memory support that chanting books offer. I am wrong to fear embarrassment for want of being able to find the correct pages. However frenetically I turn pages, grasping to hear the sonic forms of the chant, while eyeing the immediately neighboring bodies or even some people farther away and deducing the chant from the layout of the page, I cannot orient myself. One of the ladies sitting next to me smiles, and shows me which page to turn to. Soon I notice that trying to find a footing in the chanting books is what more than half the laypeople are doing in one way or another. Only they are better at reading Thai script than me, even if the words are Pali. Some laypeople leave, new ones keep coming. Furthermore, for me, this is mostly the first time I encounter any of the shapes of words. Repeatedly my eyes pace around the hall, so evenly lit that the night outside comes to look like a wall. A constant flurry of people checking their phones, some near some far, alternating, taking pictures or videos. These seem much calmer than the bodies similar to mine pressed to find the right chant. All of these chanting along. The low hum of the chant suffuses the air and the bodies. Vibrations abound and expand. I find myself fully engulfed. Sometimes the monks switch positions. It is not always the same one to lead. New monks also arrive. Some of the chants take on more of a dialogic relation between monks and laypeople. We all sit on the mats, one next to the other with a space in between. I feel pain in my legs. Other people too change their position. Dear reader, a word of advice: don't wear jeans or other hard materials if you plan on attending.

And, as you are already directly addressed, I'd like to make use of this refocused attention to note that the following paragraph depends heavily on the memory of the earlier chapter on frameworks of perception, for it brings together the discussion of (movement/time) images and machinic thought. A frame gathers indiscriminately, well, as long as that which is there communicates in such a way as to be captured by the sensor. The body that enters the assemblage and is being shaped there. And hence, as the Kapferer (2004) noted, Deleuzian film theory is very useful in articulating dynamics while integrating an entire range of material elements within the scene, a true activation of events as *mise-en-scène* (what is put into the scene by the movement of the cosmos) and how they come to affect the

body of the perceiver. Assemblage is one thing, another is the specific position for this body that is enabled therein and that affects it. They are connected, yet should not be conflated. If we take humans in their daily life to be movement-images, that is images within a cycle of exchange (action, affect, reaction) with other images, then this rite or ceremony effectuates a caesura to these quotidian dynamics. (Cf. Massumi 1996) One's movement is very much preorganized and any stimuli to provoke further individualized movement, whether material or immaterial, are minimized. Much that is not conducive to chanting is filtered out by the organization of demarcated space. A body entering what is so assembled comes to be caught in the limited possibilities inherent in the situation.¹²⁴ A reminder: Deleuze articulates the time-image as emerging when the sensorimotor schema breaks down, and the body cannot simply act when faced with certain situations but must establish circuits with the virtual to figure out a way to react. Now, one does not fragment, or not necessarily, into the time-image, into expanding circuits between actual and virtual in a quest to find appropriate images to react to a new situation.¹²⁵ What occurs is somewhat different. The sensorimotor schema of everyday habits does not exactly break down, rendering the body unable to react to a situation, but another schema becomes dominant, one where the 'I' as the main organizational principle is replaced by a different one. There is a reaction to a situation, and for the new body circuits are established as it seeks to perform actions adequate to the context sourced from the surrounding bodies and memories of previous chanting events. Yet, based on the ceremonial assemblage works the actions to be performed compose the human body so that its subjectivity hangs in abeyance. What is being produced here is not a conscious human in any occidentally conventional sense, and this very fact puts into question any theories about the human that simply take its conscious subjective existence as primary and preceding of wider material connections and conditions. "Rituals like collective enunciation mechanisms produce the body as they manufacture an enunciation. But in one case as in others, it is not a question of anthropomorphic productions." (Melitopoulos & Lazzarato 2012, 246) This is only possible through the material organization that puts a stop to conventional habits and dynamics, to open the participants to chanting time. After all, in chanting, the participant bodies are mostly static, movement appears on other, less immediate planes. Much like in a (much more complex Sri Lankan) rite described by Kapferer (2013, 33), the participant "is given up to the senses in themselves, to their potentialities relatively freed from their determination and embedding in the interactive engagements and projects of everyday life." A

¹²⁴ The body can doubtlessly be disrespectful and operate in discordant demeanor that increases entropy. Such acts will inescapably remain framed by the ceremonial assemblage as they take on other force or meaning and will lead to other reactions than in less rigid contexts..

¹²⁵ Which can happen nevertheless happen in other Buddhist rites elsewhere. (Cf. Kapferer 2013)

break is enacted with the outside world that cannot be seen, heard or otherwise perceived by the senses (despite the temple being an open space). It is present only in (future) memory once the transformed subject recollects itself. Though perhaps a certain reflexive, inquisitive potential does open up when the common existential movement is channeled into a differently organized corporeal-incorporeal space. That is however not the concern here. “The ritual, like assemblage, is a machine that concomitantly determines the action of the cosmic and molecular fluctuations, of real and virtual forces, of sensible affects and corporeal affects, and of incorporeal entities such as myths and universes of references.” (Melitopoulos & Lazzarato 2012, 247) The parallel employment of assemblage and image points to the material reality of being both at once, and at the impossibility of the conceptual articulation of this, as at least two concepts are operationalized in the analysis. The world of language and concepts has its own particular affordances and one shouldn't mistake its specific conditions for those of reality in general. Regardless of how popular that category mistake might continue being in some circles that take thought and language as representational of it all.

We jump around the two books while chanting goes on for hours. I get lost in time, despite my phone and my sound recorder beside me on the mat. I check both, but don't really notice the time. I am lucky, my mat is next to professionals! The two women next to me, to the right, one directly and one to the front right, always know what page to turn to. They always smile and eagerly help me and others who are lost. Soon, I improve my adeptness at noticing patterns of pages, so it becomes easier to follow chants and participate by adding my timbre. A new arrival behind me taps me on the shoulder to ask which page we are on. I turn and she gasps quietly (first in Thai, then in English): “khot na kha (sorry [softened by the particle na])!” I look around, a lone *farang* among Thai bodies, I must stick out once my faciality emerges. I definitely and literally stick out once it all ends and we stand up straight.

“‘Machine’ is thus our name for any entity, material or immaterial, corporeal or incorporeal, that exists. ‘Entity,’ ‘object,’ ‘existent,’ ‘substance,’ ‘body,’ and ‘thing,’ are all synonyms of ‘machine.’” (Bryant 2014, 15) It's all operations – material or immaterial. “To be is to do, to operate, to act.” (Ibid.) It is important to not reduce machines to ‘rigid machines’ (machines in the common usage), as there are machines that are capable of learning (on different levels). Neither are there just material machines in any vulgar sense. Objects (can) have incorporeal aspects that may even lie dormant for a long time before beginning to act on others, if the conditions are right. There are further differences in complexity

and composition between machines. An important one is the following: “Incorporeal machines, by contrast, are defined by iterability, potential eternity, and the capacity to manifest themselves in a variety of different spatial and temporal locations at once while retaining their identity.” (Ibid., 26) Incorporeal machines require corporeal machines to manifest in the world and have an effect. They are incorporeal because they can instantiate more than once concurrently, can be reiterated or copied (with comparatively little resistance, friction and effort in comparison to material machines). A given ritual practice is thus more of an incorporeal machine, precisely because of its iterability. No singular chanting assemblage will be identical, it is not about instantiating an ideal type. Chanting is an incorporeal machine connecting to other machines, however due to its complexity (being made of many other elements) any instance will differ, even just slightly, from another one (between or even within temples). Rituals, I claim, would typically emerge as corporeal machines, since their iterability (or the parts of them that will become iterable) will have to be negotiated, not just among human actors but also other actants, wider material-semiotic conditions, including such things as weather conditions, though once formalized in a tradition, they will become incorporeal machines. As such they need to be meta-stable, find an existence that is flexible enough to appear in different situations, but stable enough to be recognizable in their adaptations. And it is significantly through corporeal machines that traditions become transferable (for the immaterial is always and only accessible through the material), as well as shareable and thus able to develop and adapt. There is no eternally unchanging tradition, no identity preceding impermanence, while there are those built in a way so as to secure as much as possible relative stability of those parts deemed important, such traditions will face much larger hurdles in reproducing themselves in the face of large-scale encounters with their other. Meanwhile, traditions can also be flexible and generative, making it easy to transformatively incorporate newness, with that which remains relatively stable making up only a small part of the assemblage. As new corporeal machines, by way of a transforming world outside of the what the tradition acknowledges as existing, appear and connect to an assemblage, the tensions between iterability of incorporeal machines and entropy of corporeal parts grow, and the incorporeal is pressured to change if it is to retain power. Such a change can include throwing overboard much of the surface-level elements that make it while retaining ‘deep’ structures, such as happened in Euro-Modernity's so-called secularism that retains much from Christianity in its basic operation. In one place different incorporeal machines overlap and connect corporeal ones in various patterns. Worlds are more than one. It matters how they are composed.

I am immersed. Fully enveloped. Most of my actions are prescribed. There are few other options. There is some leeway for actions that do not directly pertain to those that are to be reiterated by all participants, yet they still inevitably organize around the central ones. Just to keep up requires effort, attention and perception fragment into the process. The 'I' disappears. Consciousness of self disappears. Only resonances moving the body inside out. Even though I cannot claim to have mastered the coordination between eye, hand, mouth and brain, all interacting through the nervous system to bring forth sounds from my body to at the very least not go against the dominant pull, it doesn't matter. The individual disperses into the surroundings, unable to reconstitute itself. Scattering attention. The central axis to connect it all on a habitual basis, the self, is unmade in its pretension to unity and givenness. Corporeal resistances. I am never really taken out of this immersion, despite not having the personalized habitualized skills to straightforwardly fit in. Except for the minimum negative skill of not wanting to disturb. When I force my attention to wander away from the rhythms of the chants to observe the going-ons, it is fast reconnected to them. All of this leads me to think about how this whole event is organized materially. I know that the content of chants is of little hermeneutic significance for practitioners, definitely so in the moment of chanting, which isn't to discount meaning as a possible component altogether. Sometimes it is part, at other times, as indeed in this specific assemblage, it isn't. One shouldn't transpose conventions from entirely different situations and pretend they are always given in the same manner. "Chanting, a form of meditation, serves to transform the mind by helping it develop clarity and stability. By repeating a mantra over and over again, it is hoped that the mind will become focused, distracting thoughts will cease to arise, and the devotee will enter into deep meditation." (Tiyavanich 2003, 244) It also produces merit, regardless of how one enters the scene. So those that come just for a short stint and, unlike me, manage to not get caught in the action, have reason to do so beyond 'community pressure' or anything of that sort.

To continue thinking chanting as an incorporeal machine (disregarding the specifics of how these machines differ among Buddhist traditions as well as time and space more generally), which parts does the concrete assemblage compose of and what does it connect to? The elements will become media, in the sense employed by Marshall McLuhan (famously taking every medium as an extension of man): "Following McLuhan, we will thus say that when one entity enters into structural coupling with another entity, it functions as a medium for that entity." (Bryant 2014, 30) However, in an important difference to McLuhan, relations in the thinking mobilized here are external to their terms, that is,

“machines do not have a use or purpose, but only take on a use or purpose in being structurally coupled to another machine.” (Ibid.) This entails a modification to McLuhan's¹²⁶ somewhat simple, essentializing model. Levi Bryant writes: “A machine functions as a medium for another machine not only when it amplifies or extends a sense-organ, but also whenever it modifies the activity or becoming of any other machine.” (Ibid., 33) This is a two-way street, to use a Benjaminian expression, not only will the chanting machine modify its parts, the parts will modify the machine. Bodies (not just participants' bodies) become media for the chanting machine to become corporeal, the chanting machine becomes a medium for bodies as it modulates them. Any machine is already more than one. How it will appear to the body qua machine coupled to it, is conditioned by the point of view from into which it is plugged in. Thus, the parallel theorizing employed here: a machinic reconstruction decentered by perception and a cinematic one organized around my body and experience. Every time such an incorporeal machine will appear, it will differ. This is intensified for machines that in order to function are composed of wide varieties of other machines that might offer a lot of friction, such as is the case with many rites.¹²⁷ The more heterogeneous the elements that plug in, the larger the spaces for friction, the more elements the larger the entropy, the more tensions working against the compositing of the (incorporeal) machine – “a machine is composed of parts that impose constraints on each other's movements.” (Morita 2012, 45) Part of any effectivity lies in how movement is constrained. In this, chanting rites are similar to cinema, a possibility to be explored later, where one's constrained movements also open perception up to other dimensions. Thus machinic assemblages, corporeal and incorporeal parts, are always changing, perhaps more as silent transformations (Jullien 2009), especially so long as most parts also remain somewhat stable. When enough of the parts come to change, say because under capitalism many elements evolve rapidly, or because of imperial or other interventions that enforce a hegemonic restructuring of space, infrastructure and symbolism, breaking points will appear, where innovations that would enable to a ritual to appear in a version still relatable to previous ones will not occur fast enough for it not to disappear in the mists of memory or a nationalist fetishizing image of the past put into museums. “It is important to recognize overall that the concept of ritual encapsulates two apparently opposed features, those of continuity vis a vis [sic] those of creativity. Rituals may appear to be unchanging, and their enactors may even stress this as a requisite, yet in practice we find that the field of ritual is dynamic, encompassing change and

¹²⁶ See e.g. Galloway (2011) for a detailed critique and mapping of limits of McLuhan and theorists that follow him too closely.

¹²⁷ E.g. as compared to books, which are composed of far fewer corporeal machines in order to function.

generating creativity.” (Strathern & Strathern 2021, 1) Those too are machines of course, their function and composition however is radically different, even as parts overlap. As mentioned above, parts by being plugged in, becoming media, effectively change.

The rhythm and speed of the chants, meanwhile, comes as variations.¹²⁸ Different melodies¹²⁹ do appear, but the general effect can be said to be unified. Obviously, as such modulations are precisely what creates the condition for what I have been describing here. Still, some favorites form and I feel happy when one of them is picked up at a later moment, after it seemed to be over. Chanting, the rhythmic recitation of *sūtras* or *dharanis/parittas*¹³⁰ is, in some areas, also called *bhasa*,¹³¹ recitation of scriptures with melody. Chanting is always collective, in settings similar to the one described above. Further, even during other daily services, there is some responsive chanting: the monks chant and the group responds. Here, some of the chants feature an interplay between the delays of monk and lay people chanting. It is all very sophisticated, and for a contemporary music enthusiast it reminds of drone (music), except with all the sounds being produced by human bodies and not electronically. The monks' text is slightly ahead of that of the lay people, until at some point they converge again, and then depart. This practice is very dynamic indeed. As Chen (2004, 84) writes about Chinese chanting practices: “Philosophically, while music in our modern cultural understanding (associated with the contemporary Western concept) is often seen as thinglike, a work with complete and clearly defined boundaries, a Buddhist chant is perceived and therefore is conducted as process-like, a process that truly reflects the chanters' physical and mental states.” Participants and chant become indissociable. The incorporeal machine of chanting mingles with the corporeal, organizes and transforms, at least

¹²⁸ Buddhist conceptions of music and their historical and contemporary effects are complex and understudied. (Cf. Chen 2001, Liu 2018) The research only rarely engages the entire material complexity of a chanting situation, even when reliant on fieldwork. One thing appears definite: they differ from Occidental Christian ones that came to serve as a basis for modern musical theories. To generalize: music is never just music. Further distinctions are established in practice: “The other decisive distinction between reciting, chanting, and singing involves melodies. One can use any tune for singing, but the tunes for reciting and chanting are carefully regulated.” (Liu 2018, 731)

¹²⁹ “In this context, reading without melody should be understood as reciting, and reading with a melody should be understood as chanting.” (Liu 2018, 733) Again, we see that things are not conceived substantially, but relationally or contextually.

¹³⁰ These are Buddhist chants, mnemonic codes, incantations, or recitations, usually the mantras consisting of Sanskrit or Pali phrases. Believed to be protective and with powers to generate merit for the Buddhist devotee, they constitute a major part of historic Buddhist literature.

¹³¹ Liu notes that while “[t]he practice of reciting has been described with different verbs in Buddhist texts written in various Asian languages [...], [t]he first Sanskrit verb for ‘recite’ is *√bhāṣ*, which occurs in a conversation between the Buddha and a novice monk Śroṇakoṭīkarna.” (2018, 724) And that often verbs translating as ‘to inspire’ are used. I note this to point toward the semantic complexity that fragments any straightforwardly philological engagements with Buddhist tradition.

temporarily.¹³² While there is a proper form, or succession of the chants, as led by the monks, lay people are not particularly concerned with that, if at all. Indeed, the lack of form or clear boundaries, the chants blending into each other, as a large part of the voices is trying to catch on to create greater expansiveness to the chant. To note a difference to singing in Christian churches: here, one sits alone and is engulfed by the flow of sounds, there is no sense of community that would appear (based on being able to see each other and to focus on the meaning of the lyrics).

A list of composite elements. This is not an exhaustive list. In fact, it is impossible to do one, due to the fractal nature of complexity and any scene's openness of the world (the inside of the frame always relates to the outside), even if an inside/outside distinction is to some degree established and stabilized by the machines operating: the design of the space, as both the temple and the layout of the mats, statues and monks, form part of the machine. As do the participants, including me that brings a different kind of opening of the machine to its outside. The monks, especially the leading monks who have acquired bodies that are adept at chanting. They learn it, perfect it; though not each monk achieves the same proficiency. Some laypeople also carry the chants, which is noticeable when a monk loses the rhythm, but the group goes on, until the monk(s) join again. The machine preexists any participant, at least once it starts working, operating, performing. The sound flows by itself, as one becomes part of it. Further parts are the microphones and speakers, as well as the ubiquitous lights and fans. Other incorporeal machines plugging in. Flowers surrounding the Buddha statues. The flowers at small altars at the back of the space, where one can do offerings while others chant. This is not disruptive. Offerings are almost silent, certainly drowned out by the chanting. Participants, unless forcefully doing so for ethnographic purposes, don't turn their heads to look back. Here limit spaces occur. They are and are not part of the machine. They are, because they are there, but they are not because they have an agency of their own that does not entirely harmonize with the main machine. Much like the Deleuzian concept of the concept with its 'zones of indiscernability' (Deleuze & Guattari 1994).

As for media, as described, I sensed retroactively, how I had lost myself and my body (sitting

¹³² Wei and Homsombat (2016, 34) note that “[i]nstrumental sounds in a Buddhist context invite the audience to search for the ‘Buddha’ inside, through and beyond the sounds. With a view of ‘emptiness,’ which implies an ‘empty’ nature of the sounds, the ‘Buddha’ in music, if one can see it, can even encompass all forms of sound: whether it is apparently distinguishable as instrumental or vocal, musical or non-musical, Buddhist or non-Buddhist.” In other words, awareness (via teachings) and material conditions must align for full effectivity. This does not contradict the argument I develop here that transformation occurs to every body that comes in contact. It means however that to stabilize said transformation after the ceremonial assemblage is left behind, the teachings become indispensable.

mostly still) while chanting. There were moments when I came out of it and became conscious of myself, but in general, my subjectivity receded into the flow of sounds. Stressful page turning did not reposit my subjectivity as present, I too became lost in the movement (of eyes seeking guidance and hands turning pages and body channeling rhythms) which preceded and conditioned my presence, as it was instantiated by the incorporeal machine of the chanting.¹³³ “A machine is a system of operations that perform transformations on inputs thereby producing outputs.” (Bryant 2014, 38) Part of that output is the formation of participant sense-perception and subjectivity. Given that ritual is based on repetition within and between events, regular participation would shape the plasticity of participants sensory makeup. Subjectivity will become decentered, especially if we work with extended mind hypothesis (where material surroundings also partake in constituting mind), as proposed by Andy Clark (2011) and connected to music in religious contexts by Joel Krueger (2016), and consistent with Buddhist thinking. Chanting is soteriologically effective, but not ultimately. And it creates the conditions for becoming Buddhist (which one does by doing, not by believing). The affective-aesthetic dimensions of Buddhist traditions, as infinitely varied as they tend to be, are integral to what it does and not a mere externality to the truth-content of the teachings. (Greene 2002) The aim of chanting, as Pi-yen Chen (2001, 35) notes based on research she conducted in the Sinosphere, “is to aid the chanter in attaining a decentered (unfixed) subjective state.” An important part of monk education is to learn to chant, and not every monk becomes a master of techniques, as I've been told. It is important to learn to modify their voice. “The chanting voice had greater loudness, a higher fundamental frequency, and stronger pitch strength than a normal voice, suggesting the Buddhist sutra is chanted louder and with higher and stronger pitch.” (Soeta et al. 2015, 76) Also, as Chen notes and I too observed for my case, monks are also part of the audience. Where I or rather my experience departs, is when Chen mentions that participants should be aware of how sound impressions arise and dissipate (much like in Buddhist meditation, where the goal is to reach awareness of transitoriness and construction of being). Such focus on how the Buddhist mind ought to operate, is, I think, unnecessary. Advanced practitioners may indeed be able to operationalize this within the pressures of the assemblage, but what is interesting is precisely that desubjectifying effects precede this more classically Buddhist analysis that remains too human centered. Cultivating mindfulness is easier here, perhaps, but on another level it appears to me that mindfulness brings the subject far more into play than common participation. Meanwhile,

¹³³ The primacy of the ritual assemblage in relation to the body entering has been noted before: “Rather, [the ritual researchers Humphrey and Laidlaw] describe rituals as ontologically prior to the actors’ performance and intentions; in ritual you both are and are not the author of your acts.” (Strathern 2012, 404)

investigating such issues remains challenging due to the difficulty of articulating such process by laypeople and the necessary Buddhist-inflected composition of any statement about such issues by more advanced practitioners. The experiment here is that the body that came to do research retrospectively examines itself with Buddhist and Deleuzoguattarian tools and finds a discrepancy, a material impossibility for the mind-centered Buddhist rendering to simply be the inevitable outcome of chanting.

And then it ends. Chanting books are collected, bodies leave, some stand around, some engage in talk, white mats are gathered. Outside those that will stay prepare for the meditation. When I go there, what was once a wall of black in the night becomes differentiated. There are small lights in the garden and the glow of the city hangs above. I loiter a bit, observe the movements, dispersions. I am equally exhausted and strangely energized. For a while, low-key chatter fills these usually silent spaces. As people scatter, I decide to go home. I pass by groups of four, five walking slowly in focused silence. The air lies still and warm. Memories hit me, memories of the effort and focus it takes to systematically follow a gait whose rhythms differ significantly from those of habit. When I step out the door, motorcycles and cars and tuktuk flit by. Immediately images of Tsai Ming-liang's post-narrative and ongoing 'Walker' series¹³⁴ are conjured: A monk walks at infinitely slow speeds in different places in cities of the world. It is impossible to imagine the slow motion rhythms of enacted walking meditation without having witnessed them – whether as a participant or observer. Indeed, observing the slow-moving monk over an extended period of time makes the observing body partake in the rhythms, however differently composed the rest of the environment may be. Observing is participating in rhythms on a molecular level, and the common practice of participant observation that limits significance to the straightforwardly anthropocentric (as based in humanist definitions of what makes a human) remains a prime example of mistaking the molar for the molecular.¹³⁵ As Lim (2017) writing on Tsai's post-cinema points out, Buddhist teachings wouldn't conceive of experiential events as happening in time, but as time. Soon, I reach my regular walking speed that is far too intense and sweaty for this weather. Adapting the most corporeal of habits proves the most challenging. Resistances

¹³⁴ In 2022, the following entries were completed: No Form (2012), Walker (2012), Diamond Sutra (2012), Sleepwalk (2012), Walking on Water (2013), Journey to the West (2014), No No Sleep (2017), Sand (2018), Wandering (2021). The monk, played by the long-term collaborator and main actor Kang-sheng Lee (usually appearing as the character 'Xiao Kang' throughout Tsai's filmography), is named 'Xuanzang,' the historical Chinese monk who traveled to the West, i.e. Buddhist India, and later served as a basis for the famous novel 'Journey to the West.'

¹³⁵ Following Deleuze & Guattari (1988) molar is that which is perceived as clear and stable and molecular that below the threshold of perception. Nevertheless, they are relational terms and not designations of clear separations out there. Whatever is molar and molecular will change based on what is engaged.

abound, whether or not I desire it.

13. Sketches Toward a Buddhist-Derived Conception of Rite and Sound

There are other ways to enter the previous scene(s), to splice up, slow down and redistribute elements and connect them to that which is called theory. To make for different theory. To no longer pretend that what is analyzed precedes the theory all the while already pre-packaging the world into neatly separated components to fit one's theory. Does a tree make a sound when it falls and nobody hears? The game is rigged, language has already proposed at least four elements: a tree, a sound, falling and a position from which to hear.¹³⁶ Why these and not others? To riff on Nietzsche, grammar is the metaphysics of the people. The people being those who project their linguistic convention as universal. This has nothing to do with background or education. More operations are at work here: reality is simply posited as existing, regardless of who for, regardless of contact. Sound is proposed as to exist in itself. Indeed a very banal tradition of thought that turns the world into separate mystical black boxes that somehow are, but are not to be analyzed further. Except, one element is weaker than the rest, for the question turns around it, makes it open to uncertainty. Sound has an ontological uncertainty in this world, perhaps even undecidability, given how continually productive of conclusion-less conversations the status of sound is. Ontology turns in a hamster wheel. Does it gain pleasure from it like the hamster that can leave? Sound is connected to hearing here, the uncertainty in the proposition is whether sound exists with or without a listener. If the logic were consistent, one would arrive either at the conclusion that sound just happens regardless of who is there, or sound happens only when there's a body to witness. The first proposition is unverifiable and must remain purely speculative. In the second some sort of scientific engagement is possible, for empiricism (still tied to naive realism) emerges (tho it is still based on an unverifiable assumption that precedes any confirmation process). Such a scene can be imagined and analyzed in more detail, much more indeed than the commonly employed reductive image does. It matters which images we think problems with. It matters how we imagine scenes to think with.

If there's nothing to witness the event of falling, it simply doesn't happen (for us). The witness can be a mechanical capturing of said event, with or without sound, or a passerby present enough to eventually communicate the event in a manner intelligible for others interested in it. Thus it gains

¹³⁶ Grammatical (im)possibilities, conditionings are even more difficult to notice, much less learn to think differently. For an exploration of some alternatives to the subject-object dichotomy, see Course (2010). I want to stress here that the issue is not with the implicit metaphysics of a linguistic system, the problem is with its projection as universal.

reality. A bee passes by and presumably has little interest in communicating the falling tree to a human. Meanwhile, the falling tree, hypothetical now, has immediate material effects on its surrounding. These may yet reverberate in unexpected ways to have an impact on the body asking the hypothetical question. If there is an impact, one might seek tools to reconstruct the complex chains of enmeshed effects and end up with the proposition that a tree has fallen and made a sound. This is a different event than the tree falling and being heard, much more different even than that hypothetical manipulative question that keeps pretending that epistemology and ontology are separable and not instated in one and the same (separating) gesture. Some language(s) can't help it. Or maybe it can, but not in the ontology being composed from the tradition I have come to be and think and write through (well, before coming to engage with non-representational theories in any case). Some people will ontologize all they read. The game is rigged in favor of the ignorant powerful, or powerfully ignorant. Others won't. There are claims that Chinese thought, that behemoth when it comes to (uninterrupted) time-span, integration of otherness and number of participants, is not ontological. (Jullien 2003, Hui 2021) In the location I am at, the networks I move in, I already propose a way the world works simply by writing about it. Indeed, the text writes a world. Writes an anthropology. A ritual theory. When images, experienced as the flow of life or as images, are added, they might resist the world made by the text, or support it. When a body enters a new situation, the material-semiotic support networks that somewhat stabilized it, might continue that support until it returns, almost unscathed by all the newness, always already intent on self-sameness. When another body enters, it might not have the same support networks to ensure stability, or it might have practiced attunement to changes ever so slight. Another even, might use such attunements for a temporal redirection later, to reenter that image of the past, and try to conceive of an alternative to what had happened to it.

The world rumbles, differences proliferate. They enact openings, however troublesome it is to actually write such images and connect with slippery concepts, using a medium against itself. What else is one to do when the academic industry keeps operating on the principle that there is some straightforward line connecting great or even lesser textual works. That the so-called Occidental tradition somehow, magically, self-evidently connects. “Western culture is not just a collection of ideas; it is a collection of ideas that are taught in textbooks and discussed in lecture halls, cafes, or literary salons. If it were not, it would be hard to imagine how one could end up with a civilization that begins in ancient Greece, passes to ancient Rome, maintains a kind of half-life in the Medieval Catholic world,

revives in the Italian renaissance, and then passes mainly to dwell in those countries bordering the North Atlantic.” (Graeber 2007, 289) When put like this many might shake their heads: but we take seriously others now. This illusion dissipates the moment one tries to publish an article that puts non-Western thought explicitly on the same level as that of the great self-proclaimedly universal tradition. Immediate, (not always) subtle push-back: you have to explain this and this and that. Other concepts, concepts of others can't just operate, they have to be reduced to what already exists. Rarely does anyone ask: what if I'm just assuming the concepts and images I employ are self-evident and easy to grasp? What if a text can never actually include it's own explanation and one must always defer elsewhere? Not just a textual elsewhere, of course. Unironically pretending that writing is a neutral and self-consistent way to express research, describe (in images) a world and humans or to even think is one of the pastimes of many academic elites with their pretensions to easy universalism. It is operating at the very base of modernity and has far-reaching colonial conditions. This has been demonstrated in various ways. (See e.g. Goddard 2021) As Peter Skafish writes in the Introduction to Eduardo Viveiros de Castro's *Cannibal Metaphysics* (2014, 18): “Once it is accepted that an alien body of thought is indeed thought, and there is no longer anything to decipher except for what its coordinates, values, suppositions, and truths are, and how these throw our own into disarray by depriving them of universality and transforming them.” It is of note that how one engages other thought is a question of practice or a practical relating that precedes intellectual engagement qua interpretation. It operationalizes the famous Deleuzian dictum: monism = pluralism. (Deleuze & Guattari 1987, 20) The more than one-world world is still one world for there is no other planet (Nail 2022): one-world ≠ one world. Dhammic production, far from being as docile as it is generally made out to be by the colonial edifice of Buddhism, at times shines through in its otherness in a variety of research. I have been connecting these minor aberrations to assorted problematics that destabilize notions all too eagerly projected as necessary and settled. Sound and rite, in Buddhist worlds, have a rather direct connection to textuality, as will be evident as the argument eventually circles back. Now let's recall, reenter, tweak and reimagine the chanting scene explored previously.

Buddhist Chanting and the non-Subject

A far-reaching sound resonates. It carries calmly through bodies. It surges from bodies and purifies them. Makes shake from the inside, join and reverberate. Sometimes it speeds up. Sometimes it slows

down. Voices, deeply resonant add only to disperse immediately in the rhythm of the sonoric commons. Pure as a small roaring waterfall. Subtleties differentiate it, sometimes get lost as a new swell surges, or a new rhythm transforms. An attentive lull making good feelings. Never excessive, tranquility persists. The there-ness of sound. A reverbing hum. When contact occurs, the conditions are in place. The consciousness of the ear grasps the form of the sound. Groupings of sound finding correspondence in material flow and auditory faculty. These groupings here deliver Buddhist doctrines. Their shapes make positive feelings. Deeply resonant, they lead to calmness. Joyfulness is felt. Subjectivation would appear, were the sounds composed differently. A subject that grasps and misgrasps conditions and thinks stable what is not. Here, consciousness appears, but no illusory stability. It is a compound of previous actions, acting as conditions for future actions. The sound here enters those futures, perhaps liberatory. Yet, it is pleasant, attachment could occur. That is the paradox of teaching the dhamma – what is needed to teach it, is also the condition of attachment. Otherwise, it would be simple, now wouldn't it? Here, conditions appear that share moods to draw one to the teaching – peaceful, thundering, warmhearted, rapturous. Sound transforms. Different sound transforms differently. Perhaps such moods will compel to return or support a practice elsewhere. Help to intensify focus, if just for a while, or carry a happy humor to make life easier to deal with.

So, what if one were to write a generally Buddhist theory of sound? Not just let it hang empty in the air, but even relate it to the assemblages under study. Make it resonate. When materiality is not simply separate, when it can be neither directly accessed nor not accessed at all, it's all about combinations and effects. For a soteriological Buddhist teaching, there are inherent challenges in the sensory: “I find that the Buddha's concerns about the potentially distracting aspects of musical sound have shaped the metric rhythm of the Pali texts, and also affect the sorts of melodic and rhythmic sounds produced in chanting practices today.” (Greene 2004, 45) These rhythms have developed, have come to be codified into varied chanting styles for the different sects. (Greene et al. 2002, 153) Chanting has to navigate a field of tension between disinterested laypeople and the dangers of attachment, of too much decoration, too much melody. These sonic patternings will have entered fields shaped by varied local practices, needs and imaginations, and have to direct mindfulness to Buddhist concerns and even texts. Additionally, the patterns are there to aid monks and (advanced) laypeople to memorize chants, both as form and textual content. Chanting and the reciting of verses for different purposes thus act as media for many related patternings of reality and conditionings of subjectivities.

Simultaneously, the emergent forms, clusters of sounds and their melodic developments, beautiful thought they may feel, shouldn't make forget about impermanence. They are to stay away from extremes, and in general refrain from melodies in favor of rhythms, which, as anyone that ever heard Buddhist chants, resonate very deeply from and in bodies. To my untrained ears any of the modulations different schools might have was and continues to be beyond differentiation. In any case, these concerns organize the higher strata of sound. Already arranging into rhythms and refrains. Buddhist concerns with attachment and enlightenment begin ontologically earlier, even as the experience of all this happens at once. Theravāda Buddhist meditation practice is after all about techniques to take apart this seemingly continuous flow to show discontinuity of experience and the emptiness of forms that constitute it.¹³⁷ Crucially, Buddhist teachings have shaped practices of making sounds as well as the spaces within which sounds expand. These sounds are to have deliberate and controlled effects on participants. Effects that are multiple and will differ between common laypeople, advanced practitioners, and monks. Effects that at the most common but also least conscious are to bring about states of awareness and tendencies in feelings that are, for lack of more precise vocabulary, good or positive. And, experimental research as well as my interviewees, attest to the precisely such beneficial effects attending Buddhist rites, including chanting, have on (human) bodies (cf. Walsh 2007, Peterson 2022; on possible pitfalls in encounters with scientific method, see Fauré 2017). Bodies entangled in exchange cycles of merit-making and sharing, and practices that help achieve good mental states generally indicated by the words calmness and happiness.

As for the content of suttas, music is mentioned without typically being called so. And, when it appears explicitly, “it is usually in the context of the activities (singing, playing) of celestial beings.” (Chen 2001, 26) This is after all an activity that makes life pleasurable, indicates well-being, and in doing so indicates good rebirths but also less than optimal conditions for attaining nibbana.¹³⁸ Analogous tensions are to be negotiated at altars and meditation halls, with the play of neon lights and the generally soothing ambiance. The actualization of heavenly affects on earth ease meditation

¹³⁷ In stark contrast to how ‘presence’ is commonly conceived in (not only) common sense, typical Western Buddhist practitioners or phenomenology: “Ironically, Buddhist meditation disciplines are often and wrongly considered to be similar to phenomenology because of what seems to be their valuation of attention to experience ‘just as it appears.’ But in practice Buddhist meditators display attitudes toward ‘experience’ that are very different from those of popular phenomenology.” (Klima 2002, 213)

¹³⁸ For it is from human bodies only that it can be achieved, as they are in the middle of pleasure and pain, compared to celestials, animals or those populating hells.

practice by creating conducive atmospheres, concurrently they produce attachment. They might be conceived as acoustic milieus, designed for sound to happen. (Wang 2018) In order for Buddhist sound to happen, other sound has to recede. As explored previously, different spaces make for different reality (effects). In Mahāyāna sūtras at least, “[t]here is a rich lexicon in Buddhist literatures on terms used to describe the quality of sound: wonderful, far reaching, sonorous, resonant, deep, loud, pure, tranquil, thunderous, surging, compassionate, charitable, magnanimous, joyful, intelligent, wise, and so forth.” (Chen 2001, 26) Associations with auspicious conditions or conditions conducive to achieving Buddhist virtues can be tied to a single body or communal ones.

Sound and music are not the same. Distinctions are in order. The instrumental sounds that enable “devotees to see ‘Buddha’ throughout and beyond the religious ceremony, and the attributes of its undertaking can be summarised as: – A sound that delivers Buddhist doctrines and/or positive feelings. – A sound that is modifiable to appropriate a condition. – A sound that avoids short-lived sensations. – A sound that avoids musical aesthetics as well as the arousal of human desires but leads to the direction of calmness. – A sound that feeds lay Buddhists but should be void at an advanced stage.” (Wei & Homsombat 2016, 34) The Theravāda love of lists permeates even research articles! This is quite an analytical yet context-based list. Sound is not just sound. It relates to other bodies, to sensing. There is no general sound, rather differing levels of advancement on the path, which operationalizes differing effects varying sounds have.

To further understand the conceptualization of music and sound in Buddhist thought, one must have an adequate image of how Buddhist teachings understand the composition of individual existence. Famously, one of the central tenets is that of no-self, *anatta* in Pali, more commonly known in the transcription from Sanskrit *anātman*. Anthropologists have continually noticed that this shapes everyday reality in areas that have long histories of being materially formed by Buddhist traditions. “Above all, according to standard Buddhist doctrine, there is no unified cognitive being-as ego, or self, or I. In Buddhism, what we call a ‘being,’ an ‘individual,’ or an ‘I’ is only a combination of ever-changing physical and mental forces or energies, which may be divided into five groups or aggregates. They are the aggregates of Matter, Sensations, Perceptions, Volitions, and Consciousness.” (Chen 2001, 26) Potent images for thought for those tired of simply auto-positing selves. Selves are aggregates, with advanced practitioners being able to take apart the flow into parts in practices that extend analytics into

materiality, (re)composing flows of different elements.¹³⁹

As such it operates analogously to music. Composed of parts, experienced as continuity. Yet, under Buddhist analytical powers continuity falls away as an ultimate ground of experience, as it does with sound. This is not to deny any protention/retention dynamic in the process of constructing an always differing and personal experience of music, film, or anything, one that builds and connects past and future. (Stiegler 2014) It shows rather that even such deeply seated automated corporeal processes can be cut if the appropriate techniques and cosmological presuppositions are operationalized.¹⁴⁰ Once again, the frameworks, concepts, images and practices that are related to matters, no matter how challenging it might be to one's habits to not ultimately fall back onto a universe of essences already finished.

“Sound in the context of the five Buddhist aggregates is understood as Matter, as in effect an object in the external world that corresponds to our faculty of hearing.” (Chen 2001, 26) Sound, like all world, including emergent (no-)selves is constant flux. Appearance disappearance too fast to notice for the untrained. Music as grouping of sonic activities. That is a certain form, a certain cut – one that makes perception possible by separating some of these materialities from others, so that sounds emerge as sounds in the first place. “When auditory contact happens, *viññāṇa* is the there-ness of sound.” (Klima 2002, 214) Without there-ness, no sound occurs. Sound is not something simply out there, but the coming together of a range of elements. No sound-consciousness without sound-occurrence. There is no simply pre-existing consciousness, nor flow or continuity thereof to grasp sound. The outside and the inside are not just connected, they become together. Such a conception of consciousness disaggregates any simple body-bound one: “Consciousness has six domains: the consciousnesses of the eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, and thought organs. Each domain performs two functions:

¹³⁹ Theravāda compared to Mahāyāna is said to be more pragmatic in the statements about the world and emptiness it enables. For Mahāyāna all is empty, a groundless ground. Theravāda is concerned with sharing teachings and tools to be able to grasp emptiness without claiming that as the ultimate (non)ground. So the claim and confirmed experiences of practitioners that the flow of experience can be taken apart into smaller constituents that for the layperson succeed each other in such a fast manner as to be unnoticeable, like frames in cinema. Which in turn can be reconstructed into a flow, thus showing that neither is actually the ultimate ground, is a thoroughly performative statement. (Klima 2002)

¹⁴⁰ Stiegler's technicity-conscious updating of Husserl is necessary to mention not just for its cinematic construction of consciousness, but also as it brings phenomenological accounts actually close to Buddhaharmic conceptions I actualize here. In the end, Stiegler suggests “that human consciousness has its own technicity, which is hard-wired to be mechanically reproduced and then reinternalized by the consciousness, Stiegler returns to a cynical notion that human beings are enslaved to technics and technology” (Fan 2022, 16) and thus remains within the metaphysical confines of a world and human already formed.

differentiating forms from one another and manifesting such differences as an image.” (Fan 2022, 15) It would be a mistake to consider any of these as an ultimate reality. There are no sounds as such, quite like consciousness, just movements with certain qualities that can be perceived by the ear organ, a faculty equipped to recognize, pick out certain materialities but not others.¹⁴¹ Still, mindfulness as practice is always apposite. “As sense data, sound in Buddhism is regarded as dust (*guna*)-things that can cause the human delusion in which misconstrued objects of attachment appear to have an abiding reality. Thus Buddhist teaching dissolves away any self and aims to see things as they really are.” (Chen 2001, 27)

Earlier I demonstrated that machinic theory makes this apparent in the composition of the chanting rite. The research there occurred temporally prior to my armchair research into Buddhist sonorities. Dissolving the self becomes an immersive material-performative activity, not just an effect of consciousness (as in meditation where the aim is enacting a cut where inner and outer sense data connect), but something that modulates all five aggregates of clinging.¹⁴² Chanting creates auspicious conditions and effectuates good mood. However, sound also potentially binds, as mentioned, thus chanting will not be the ultimate practice for achieving soteriological goals, just one part of the compositing path. As the incorporeal machine of chanting spread, it adapted to the linguistic particularities of the new spaces it entered and was in turn adapted through them. This was perhaps easier, precisely because the material form and its effect on the participants is crucial, and not the semiotic/linguistic content. The latter gains its force only once systematic interest is established, for it, just on pragmatic grounds, requires infinitely more devotion, and thus a material support system that enables ‘leisure’ or ‘non-productive’ activity (if we frame it in a Western secular economist cosmology).¹⁴³ The many hours of chanting do not contain any explicit verbal commands, one just struggles to keep up with those who know which page to turn to. And is carried with the shared rhythm. This is said to be the same in Chinese Buddhist rites explored in Chen (2004). Teachings and visual

¹⁴¹ “These six domains operate interdependently. With them, the abilities to *nāmarūpa* (name and give form) are dependently originated. *Nāmarūpa* refers to the differentiation between the *saḷāyatana*s/*ṣaḍāyatana*s (internal *rūpa*s or forms: eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, and thought organs) and the *āyatana* (external forms: sight, sound, odor, taste, touch, and thought). As the internal and external forms make *phassa*/*sparśa* (contact), *vedanā*s (sensations and affections) and *taṇhā*/*trṣṇā* (longing or desire) are dependently originated.” (Fan 2022, 15)

¹⁴² The so-called *skandhas* (Skt.) or *kandhas* (Pali), the five mental and material factors through which clinging arises, are: form (or material image, impression) *rūpa*, sensations (or feelings, received from form) *vedanā*, perceptions *saṃjñā*/*sañña*, mental activity or formations *saṅkhāra*, consciousness (*viññāṇa*). One might notice the complexity of the system, as terms make their appearances in different contexts, to connect and shift meanings.

¹⁴³ Given the beneficent effects that attending temple activities has for laypeople, a strictly productivity oriented separation is of course non-sensical.

aesthetics tend to be very different between (*de iure*) traditions, however much they (*de facto*) actually mix on the ground, yet, general tendencies in the organization of materiality and its preconscious effects on subjectivities, as well as basic tenets, do exhibit affinities. Buddhist teachings do condition realities as much as Christian-Secular ones do, even if the latter are taken to simply be neutral (for encounters with otherness never occur on equal terms) – and much effort by those hegemonic powers is being put into taking away the force of any other worldings, whether Buddhist or not, to (co)shape futures.

Bidhikamma: Ceremony, Connectivity and Intention

So what if, connecting to Buddhist theory of sound, a different ritual theory is written? Perhaps one that draws on local ways of dividing the chaosmos. It still writes a world where there is a thing such as ritual. Only maybe not as simply as the dominant tradition might project it. The point is, with any characterization of ritual whatsoever, even disregarding its specific history as a series of Christian transformations of Roman practices (Asad 1993), to consistently apply its formal definition to the sensory world. A pragmatic experimental approach then, less concerned with contingencies than with performative consistencies. Applications to a reality, regardless of one's habitualized classification of what is immediately perceived, or what immediately associates. The projected image need not fully overlap with the perceived image. So the concept, whatever it may be, and research in general, actually and consciously comes to act its full emancipatory force, to change the world and not just in a typical colonial fashion merely classify reality (co-creating in the same act) into a hierarchy that preexists science.¹⁴⁴

When in Thailand interacting in English, I didn't hear the word ritual, except out of my own mouth. It was always and only ceremony. I throw the ritual ball, and the ceremonial one comes flying back. While the academic discourse has its own varied takes on the difference between ritual and ceremony (Grimes 2014), those are not my focus here, as frankly, they amount to little more than semantics, word-play hiding a naive realism so typical of analytical philosophy and all too many

¹⁴⁴ Philosophical rigor has always been the downfall of metaphysics and a path toward openness. As much as (not only) philosophers keep mistaking their own imaginaires for reality, as well as misperceiving the effect of philosophy in the intellectual practices of humans and institutions (the remnants of theology in all sciences are still with us), at times it happens that thought goes on not being held in check by any kind of preconceived image. Spinoza, the prince of philosophers, comes to mind.

research paradigms, even those that nominally draw on the same (meta)theoretical tools as I do. I do not care to investigate the history of translations between Thai, English or other languages to trace the reason for the common use of ‘ceremony’ and the lack of the use of ‘ritual.’ I am interested in how ceremony might be alternatively defined here and what this definition does when taking on the world. A recent Thai research paper, which as far as I can tell is neither intentionally Buddhist nor Thai, but presents a ritual theory as universal as any other only from a Thai Buddhist positioning, enacts an immediate displacement: “Rite or ritual, rendered into Thai word as ‘Bidhikamma,’ means a ceremony. This word ‘Bidhikamma’ means religious worships or forms practiced.” (Choosukhserm et al. 2021, 61) So straightforward are the equivalences, as to almost seem comical for a ritual studies scholar. And surprising given the non-use in daily Thai anglophone life. Not only is no difference between the three words made, equivalence is explicitly posted. Throughout the piece the words are treated interchangeably (that is both are used). Importantly, *bidhikamma* or พิธีกรรม is composed of two parts *bidhi* or พิธี and *kamma* or กรรม. *Bidhi* is commonly translated as form, ceremony, formality or observance, not as ritual, and can compound with other words to create ceremonial meanings, including wedding, house warming, ordination, graduation, water sprinkling, baptism and many others. And *kamma*, pronounced *kam* in Thai, translates as action, act or deed, that is *karma* in the Buddhist sense, not the one common in the Western cultural subconscious: “*Kamma* is a Pali word meaning action. In its general sense *Kamma* means all good and bad actions. It covers all kinds of intentional actions whether mental, verbal or physical thought, words and deeds. Whatever you do with your limbs is physical action. Verbal action means the words that you utter. Mental action means the thoughts that occur in your mind. In its ultimate sense *Kamma* means all moral and immoral volition.” (Vati et al. 2018, 162) That renders *bidhikamma* into something else than mere formality, repetition of already instated patterns. For actions beget other actions and were themselves conditioned by previous ones. Still, material conditions must be right, must be there, for sensing to occur. Like with acts and their (longterm) fruition, that happens in appropriate conditions. Sense organ and corresponding material flow as thereness. The coming together of internal and external forms is *nāmarūpa*. In case something doesn't fit in an experience, that's a matter to investigate. In interviews I conducted, participants referred to karma as acts and their consequences. This seems a part of Thai ways of doing the world. From a complex Buddhist position, the everyday conception of kamma necessarily overlooks complexities, is an ad hoc variant for laypeople. Regardless, it makes for a different world. I know my world changed when I began thinking and acting in kammic terms, regardless of my beliefs in their

truth-content. I became more aware of acts, their causes and consequences, deconstructed my self, my body into smaller parts, awareness of connections and being conditioned complexified and that of unity and givenness receded. As discontent, *dukkha* came to be part of everyday explanations, the perceived deeds and misdeeds of others came to be experienced more as a result of the difficulty of living without awareness and the feeling of personal offense disappeared entirely. Almost as if compassion, *karuṇā* was the logical effect of making Buddhist kammic worlding actively real in life.

What we have here, is a partial overlap of definitions. What is seen, what appears is and isn't the same. As with the rabbit/duck image, except there the overlap is full but different. Or with the irreducibility of the images constructed in *Krabi*, 2562 (Suwichakornpong & Rivers 2019) to this or that ontology. One must keep in mind that when thinking (in) Buddhist worlds, nothing is simply disconnected and self-contained. A ritual or any act does not secondarily enter into exchange with other acts. All acts are in some ways transformations and continuations of previous ones. Under certain auspicious conditions like buddha-fields, certain acts take on a stronger force. Acts, or at least correct ones according to Buddhist practice, come to be something else entirely compared to worlds that continue to inadvertently ontologize a primary neutrality the moment they inscribe ritual or ritualization as dualistically special.¹⁴⁵ Here, all is always already entangled and entangling, a separation between inside and outside ritual must be established elsewhere. The authors of the article continue. “*Bidhikamma* means ritual action that completes the wanted result or ritual action that leads the wanted action. It is the mutual activity of the community, the tool that trained self-control or the basis to develop other virtues such as training the body and speech to be in self-control which causes the happiness to happen in that society.” (Choosukhserm et al. 2021, 61–2) I want to slow down here and enter this definition. One that really introduces a new element compared to common ones found in research.¹⁴⁶ Well, more than one element, in fact. In the first sentence, a formal definition, for it is not

¹⁴⁵ The separation has been deconstructed by Hollywood (2002), however, as she is following the Anglosphere humanities reception of Derrida, Butler, etc. line of thought, then explores Bourdieu and Bell, with their slightly different approaches. The author arrives at an unacknowledged impasse, as no larger or positive conclusion is being proposed, for in the end her writing inadvertently posits some reality or world preexisting performativity. World as such haunts her. One that exists and is not in the process of being composed. Rather it must forever remain outside, in good Derridean fashion.

¹⁴⁶ In a dictionary definition of ceremony and rite, one might notice the multiplicity of the term and how a specifically Euro-Christian history is being actualized:

“Ceremony (or ‘ceremonial’ as noun). 1. Following conventional Roman Catholic usage, the actions of worship as opposed to its words, which are referred to as ‘ritual.’ 2. Following Victor Turner, rituals that confirm rather than transform. 3. Following Berard Haile (in the study of Navaho religion), religious rituals. 4. Following Ronald Grimes, the legally or politically significant layer of a ritual.” (Grimes 2014, 339)

“Rite. 1. In liturgics, sometimes used to designate the words sung or spoken in worship as distinct from ceremonial,

stated what the wanted result or action would be. So in fact any act that fulfills its purpose fits, assuming from the previous part that it is tied to something so-called religious, which, in a typical way to scientific definitions acts as an external grounding. One that is simply assumed but never explained. Look, there, I see a ritual! Like hailing a ritual into existence. Everywhere but in the secular world of the Moderns. Researchers typically, almost parodically can point to one but not actually ‘purely’ formally conceptualize one, much like with the concept of religion. This has been taken apart, deconstructed thoroughly and repeatedly before. Theories of ritual, much like all other definitions cannot be entirely consistent, they must refer to something outside in order to stay limited to the field of so-called religion as thing out there. As such they are metaphysical objects that propagate the implicit ontology of their makers, without them ever being able to describe a ritual without resorting to contingent externalities. When this is deconstructed, we move to a world of ritualization, where the difference between ritual and non-ritual becomes blurred. (Hollywood 2002) It remains fascinating to unearth the images operationalized by various thinkers in their definitions and deployment of concepts. Those lucky enough working on so-called Asian worlds and with some sensibility to cracks appearing in the ideological edifice of modern categories are fast faced with the dilemma of either keeping the theory (modern image of the world) and throwing out the world (empirics), or the other way around. Luckily, there are alternatives to such dualisms, other conceptualizations of worlds, of relation between world and representation, outside of the demands of all or nothing. If one were to continue down this path, it could lead to a pragmatic experimentalism: since there is no simple way to distinguish ritual from non-ritual without resorting to some kind of common sense essentialism, which itself is constructed and contingent, why not see what happens when we apply a formal definition of ritual (we happen to employ at the moment) to random externalities beyond that of ideological common sense? I am getting ahead of myself, the powerful lure of speculation. I wrote earlier about slowing down. The next sentence, somewhat predictably and in line with most automatic movements of research on ritual introduces community, a concept-image that faces the same constrictions as any other, as per what was explained above.¹⁴⁷

It is in the second part only of the article that uncommon elements are introduced. They are

what is done. 2. Also used in liturgics to designate one of the seven Christian liturgical ‘families,’ e.g., the Roman rite, the Byzantine rite, the Gallic rite. 3. Following Ronald Grimes, a specific enactment in a specific place and time, synonym for ‘a ritual.’” (Ibid., 343)

¹⁴⁷ Take note that the community here ontologically precedes ritual, the way it is phrased. While I would, in this context maintain, that the two co-constitute each other.

immediately Buddhist and tied to that tradition's 'virtues,' considered as "a tool that trained self-control" and a basis for developing "other virtues such as training the body and speech to be in self-control." (Choosukhserm et al. 2021, 61–2) Which, importantly, are also verifiable means to cause happiness.¹⁴⁸ The world made here is definitely one that differs from the Christian-Secular universe stubbornly actualized in Western research on ritual. It does not pretend neutrality, at least not from the position I find myself in. Even formalized actions lead to something, or at least ought to – the issue of whether ritual is or isn't effective (with special focus on meaning and belief), so long a point of contestation in the very Protestant history of religious and other such studies (and the related general pretension of textuality organized around one truth principal as a neutral ground for science), isn't an issue. Action after all begets action. The distinctions to be made would be between kinds of effects on what kinds of bodies. Hence the Buddha or other awakened beings teach differently to different audiences, and suttas feature context dependent solutions. Causes and effects are intertwined, albeit not in obvious surface level ways as in the commonly naturalized Cartesian mechanism of (post-)Enlightenment Western ways.¹⁴⁹ It is a combination of effects on a singular body, in terms of training to self-control and the common good of happiness. Some effects, entangled in magical materialities, can be unlinked and taken elsewhere – a pocket of felicitous conditioning, as with the *sai sin*, cut and redistributed. Some have asserted its effectiveness in interviews, even while expressing skepticism as to common explanations of its mechanism. Ritual here then as something that acts in between, so to speak, directly forming private corporeal habits that lead to more incorporeal social effects. As mentioned above, chanting effectuates all manners of bodies, whether biological or social or other. While the criterion of happiness (whether or not defined in a Buddhist manner) is rather free and open to interpretation, it does introduce an element that will not make each and any 'ritual' (classified according to Western common sense) pass the bar. The focus and the general approach echoes throughout my encounters with Thais, who keep talking about how all religions are fine as they promote social well-being and good behavior. There are merely different traditions in different parts of the world.

"So, Bidhikamma is an activity, culture, tradition, and behavior that human beings supposed it *up by intention* according to their beliefs, has its steps in clear communication and action to attain the

¹⁴⁸ Self-control comes to be a different thing in this world of no-self to that of Christian-derived conceptions an Occidental reader might habitually fill in. It appears that modulation is a more fitting word than control, the latter of which implies a top-down consciousness first conception, the former one of constantly shifting milieu of a self devoid of essence.

¹⁴⁹ For a summary, see Kalupahana (1975), 54–60.

hope, happiness, abundance, rich, safety and other *objectives that one expected*. Bidhikamma is a way to create the fundamental discipline, support spiritual power to live together, living one's life and the beginning point to develop other virtues high by the principle of Bidhikamma in that religion." (Ibid. 62, my emphasis) A further, very Buddhist element is introduced – that of intention. Intention is conceived as *cetanā*. "The one that prompts these three actions is nothing but the mental concomitant, *cetanā-cetasika* that occurs in the mind of beings. *Cetanā* impels you to perform a certain deed because *Cetanā* is responsible for the completion of every Kamma action." (Vati et al. 2018, 162) It is intention, *cetanā*, that is also called action, kamma. (Klima 2002, 275) In Buddhist thought, and this was also something expressed in interviews (without necessarily linking it to Buddhist teachings), thought is action and intention matters. In general, in Buddhist teachings, there are three types of action – bodily, verbal, and mental. It is part of the Noble Eightfold Path.¹⁵⁰ Now, obviously, Buddhadharma considers a different set of intentions as right or correct or good than other teachings (if we follow the conceptions of other 'religions' as teachings). So this definition here is very much in a secular vein – except that it demonstrates that there is no such thing as a neutral secularism (which most certainly is not the secularism of individual containedness and neutral public space), in fact, there would be multiple ones. Ritual activity has to lead to objectives one expected (or was promised by the rite) – this is a personal effect of an activity that also has other, social effects. It is multiple. It is a formal definition, where this or that so-called religion comes to be plugged in with which the disciplines, virtues and personal goals will change. It leaves space for its outside. The concept of religion here too is left unexamined, and presumably, given the previous phrasings, it would be a system of virtues that enhance happiness and make communal living easier. Perhaps coordinate disparate interests and preferences that appear because everyone is different.

The nigh pervasive insistence of 'feeling good' and 'doing good' by those encountered in fieldwork, regardless of their 'religious affiliation,' points toward strong permeation of Buddhist ethics in these worlds.¹⁵¹ Analogously to how Christian manners of thought and aesthetics operate in so-called secular Europe. Worlds differ not because humans are different, humans are different because all manners of elements constitute worlds, and certain patterns emerge based on complex movements of

¹⁵⁰ The Eightfold Path consists of right view, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness and right concentration. For elaboration, see Finnigan (2017).

¹⁵¹ This implies neither that 'feeling good' is only a Buddhist concern, nor that 'feeling' and 'doing' and 'good' are self-same anywhere. The 'Buddhist' proposed here is a framework constructed via a combination of empirical inquiry, Buddhist and Western theory, so as to make other possible worlds appear where commonly only givenness might be projected as being there.

the past conditioning futures, that in turn shape pasts. So what if I were to use this definition, with its ‘Buddhist’ framing? Many otherwise self-evident rites would not pass the bar, while on another level of analysis, even solitary actions would fulfill it – most certainly when other media are employed to enhance meditation or focusing or other such practices. This conception of ritual cuts across established divisions and points to other possible worlds. In one of the few texts on the problem of ritual in Buddhist tradition (Sharf 2009) many important and astute observations are made when it comes to distinguishing individual and communal action. While the latter in general is a commonly assumed presupposition for ritual, the former because the individual is just assumed to be and is rarely tied to anything ‘self-evidently’ religious are usually left out of consideration. (Cf. Bielefeld 2009)

And while there are literally dozens of indigenous Asian terms for different varieties of Buddhist ceremonies and rites, and many more terms referring to stages on the path, there is no precise Asian Buddhist analogue to our distinction between ritual and meditation. From the perspective of Buddhist epistemology, the distinction itself is suspect: traditional Buddhist exegesis holds that all cognition, including exalted “meditative states of consciousness,” is mediated and contingent, since consciousness of any sort arises in codependence with its object. The inner/outer, subject/object dichotomies that underlie our distinction between ritual and meditation might seem to be confuted by indigenous analysis of Buddhist practice. (Sharf 2009, 260)

While I will engage the meditation/mediation tension in a future chapter, the issue is worth mentioning here, because what is put into crisis when engaging Buddhist worlds, given auspicious conditions for such awareness to arise, are separations themselves. Both as they would be (as if ontologically) outside of perception, through the fitting organ of perception, and as that (as if epistemologically) which one gets to experience and think. And among these are the no longer self-evident nor self-positing separations between individual and society, action and thought, inside and outside. In short, there is nothing that wouldn't be contingent in a Buddhist world (if one were to be consequent), except for dhamma as a cosmic or ‘natural’ law¹⁵² – so one cannot treat actions seemingly (for the Western observer) pertaining to the individual and those that are social separately. In a similar manner, because such worlds turn around effects and not essences, one comes to understand that all research organized

¹⁵² This makes for a different ‘Nature,’ of course.

around questions as ‘what is (a ritual)’ to be very much the effect of one particular history of thought and the ontological propositions in its tow. It is not and does not have to be the only one.

Thought continually moves away from the realist image with its muddled Christian metaphysics of an always already finished world with transcendence lurking everywhere. Rarely is it left to wander though, as countless bodies labor to keep it at bay. Not least in the practice of most sciences and their literary production that continue to pretend that language and the generated truth are somehow beyond history and at the same time universal and same. Even as the theory employed nominally acknowledges contingency or directly offers alternative infrastructures and practices of thought. Reading countless Buddhist suttas, though arguably it is more common in those associated with Mahāyāna, one enters a world where writings announce their own performativity: “In Buddhist societies, canonical texts are considered to be intrinsically potent, as if imbued with the power of the Buddha’s speech. Specific texts express an awareness of their own protective power and speak about this explicitly [...]” (Shulman 2019, 216) – something curiously often ignored by research on Buddhadharma. In other words: the edifice of Buddhism, an actualization of Western metaphysics. The horrifying destructive power of obsession with truth and essence as organized by the One can but lead to exclusion of that which is deemed unfit, disrupting. The problem for any metastable system is how to enable flows between its outside and inside without dispersing, how to adapt to new circumstances, or even be able to acknowledge them, without disassembling into flux or other more stable entities. Buddhist teachings cut right across seemingly ontological categories and have varied histories of articulating such manners, albeit with unexpected tools (linguistic or not) that can transform entire edifices of thought, practice and infrastructuring.

In order to give force to other thought, to not contain it in some fantasy of ineffective culture (while conveniently only leaving the Western tradition to keep not just positing, but defining Nature and Reality), such other formulations of common concepts such as ritual must be fashioned in new ways, based on complex and equal encounters, and given their own proper power. (Cf. Jensen & Morita 2012) Buddhist traditions are undoubtedly in countless ways much more than what is drawn on here.¹⁵³ Everything connects, without fitting directly like pieces of a puzzle. Rather, like machines the insides

¹⁵³ I am not denying the hierarchies that are part of the tradition in different ways and cosmologies that go with it, that offer splendid tools for building empires. The argument relates to the establishment of borders, to treating inside and outside, to eternalizing differences and hierarchies.

of which are visible. There's always friction in machines, as heterogeneous elements align to have an effect. The conception of sound and of *bidhikamma* are not easily separated. Feeling good and doing good, or rather being conducive to these two effects in the connecting bodies, are basic operations of both. Good is here aligned with happy, content, of positive intent, and all those actions that support the attainment of such states in others. Activities conducive to such states are of importance, and these need not be dependent on the humanity as an entity. When connected, further elements must be thought through. Adapted, changed. These are no mere metaphors, the world changes when other thought combines. Hence it is such a challenge to do such research that doesn't just project a convention, a definition from above, pretending the world just fits, cutting off what doesn't without an afterthought. A world constantly composing, in a text and outside. In chanting, the very way it came to be, already effectuates conditions for felicitous intentions etc., making the ceremony more effective. As to where anything starts and anything ends, it's perhaps a wrongly posed question: the application of concepts does something and each inquiry will enact a different cut.

When a tree falls, does it make a sound? Theravāda Buddhist tradition permutes this, categories are destabilized, settled reality unsettles: when a tree falls next to a body, but the body is unconscious, does hearing occur? “Without *viññāṇa*, there can be no occurrence of phenomena, that is, they are not there, such as when an unconscious person is kicked. In that case there is the sense object (a boot), the sense organ (the nerve receptors in the body), but no *viññāṇa* (no consciousness, no actual there-is-ness).” (Klima 2002, 214) A no resounds through the ages, as phenomena appear only when consciousness appears. These appearances are related. In fact, the meaning of to appear transforms. Meanwhile, the tradition offers practical tools and spaces to hack regular consciousness and disengage from the pressures of the common condition. That is, now, attention can turn to meditation and how it changes with the emergence of cinema, or other new technologies to do and think. As for this anthropologist body, once chanting ceases, it moves on elsewhere. It never even entered the situation with the appropriately auspicious intentions. Yet, it was transformed. It felt joy, tranquil elation and positivity for a while at least. The conditions for connecting to what some interviewees said about their reasons for going to temples and at times even attending events. It creates positive feelings and helps to focus. Regardless of how much one is invested in the soteriology of it all.

Historical Encounters of Worlds

14. Historical Images, Transforming Encounters

The anthropologist multiplies. He becomes archaeologist, unearthing a layer of first contact, where neither Siam nor Buddhism were yet a solid construction in the Western practice of culture, or even present at all. As some show on material from other, distant parts of the world, but connected through the network of Jesuit activities, there was a time when neither culture nor religion were stable conceptual or even separate entities. (Viveiros de Castro 2011a) What connects all the varied activities at the borders of a world accepted as known and knowable, was the problem of how to intellectually articulate the encounter with the new and unknown. This is what puts Jesuit efforts into direct conversation with those of the anthropological endeavor. And, unlike sailors and other such bodies mingling with otherness, Jesuits were eager to write things down in their efforts to understand in order to convert and their systematic solidification of long-distance networks of stabilized knowledge. (Harris 1996) This was long before any literary realism was developed. Long before any of the scientific conventions that have been overturned countless times even appeared. How does one engage such a world?

The basic operation remains the same, only effectuated with different material: to construct and explore images of encounters and otherness in a generative way. The sources for such construction are necessarily varied, though details will be dominantly drawn from two French travelers' writings, both of which arrived in Siam as part of embassies. The Jesuit Guy Tachard (1651–1712) traveled with the embassy in 1685 and in 1687, the latter being led by Simon de la Loubère, a diplomat and mathematician. Their travelogues serve as primary sources. These I conceive as primary not because they were there, for the same (if not more) challenges as with anthropological being-there and source interpretations appear, but rather thanks to the difference their writings bring into the contemporary world, as they followed other customs, perceptions, conventions. With every text read, if habitually treated as representational of a past that was there before the text, one fills in the gaps with conventions simply assumed to be true by way of habit, however much they change through time. Secondary sources provide analogous supplements in mobilizing contemporary concepts, imaginaries and techniques, for no text is ever full. It always connects to an outside, often through the body of the reader and its habits and surroundings. The way primary sources are employed here is to amplify difference in the fashioning of 'otherworlds,' both as the worlds the two travelers encountered as

filtered through their conventions and as those a reader enters here. This implies the taking seriously of what is written, even if it appears orientalist. Not as in: this is what the Frenchmen really saw. It's about trying to construct a world where what they wrote down would make sense, a world that works differently. A combination then of the methodological proposition of the ontological turn (taking seriously) and the speculative turn (what if the world were different). As for dealing with sources in general and creating a historical backdrop for the problems explored that does not merely reiterate conventional orientalist tropes masked as historical realism, it is pertinent to think and write with Donna Haraway's (1988) concept of *situated knowledges*, an affirmation of the partiality of knowledge given one's historicity. Objectivity is not acceding to a view from nowhere, the God's eye, that is impossible as is, even as an ideal-type orientation for the eventual accumulation of all knowledge, rather objectivity rests in acknowledging limits and conditions. Instead of projecting one's own position onto the world, it enables the transformation of this position through encounters with what is new or other for that situation.

It becomes evident from their writings, that there are connections to be made between the two and an anthropologist, or even this researcher body specifically. If, with Wagner (1980), the figure of the anthropologist is somebody who in trying to understand a relationally constituted 'other,' has to invent 'culture' to accommodate this difference thereby enacting newness within one's own conventions, then the writings of those two envoys definitely fit into the anthropological category. What differs is the world, the background against which they innovate, for the world has after all changed, as a whole and for the specific conditions of anthropological encounter specifically, the concept of culture has appeared and become stabilized. The mediating relation of accounting for the other in terms of the same in a way that exceeds reduction and enables some transformation is paralleled. Reading the travelogues, one senses that some encounters really fractured the Frenchmen's certainties and they did not just dismiss, but had to think, to create to accommodate what they encountered.

Thus, I treat these two 17th century figures as (proto-)anthropologists who in their encounters with what was for them unknown, save for imagery and concepts drawn from earlier, often rather fantastical accounts, reformulate their own cultural conventions in acts of counter-invention. In this they contrast with quite a few other earlier travelers, mostly missionaries, who were nothing but

dismissive of anything they encountered. (van der Cruyssen 1992) There had of course been images, narratives of the ‘outside,’ of what today is stably established as the so-called Far East and elsewhere, much of it sourced from Ancient writings and imaginations, but by virtue of being present in the cultural field, these were not actually images of an outside. (Cf. Phillips 2013) One ought to rather treat these as interior to the world, at once projecting outward and protecting from that otherness which could disintegrate what seems stable and given. The ‘other’ of (Medieval) Latin *Christianitas*, or more precisely, of the self-image of *Christianitas*, as otherwise one would imply a unity within Europe that was not.¹⁵⁴ What I here term the ‘outside’ is in a sense doubled, as it is both the practical-material outside of the concrete experiences of most people whose contact with (not only) the Far East was mediated by chains of exchange, and the imageric-conceptual outside of cultural representations of the world or cosmos as constructed in elite and popular circles of the colonial powers to be. The age of concern here was one where practical contacts with that ‘outside,’ due to intensifying direct trade, colonial ambitions (of direct control and exploitation) and other contacts made it necessary to reformulate the latter, make it part of the cosmos in a way that transformed its basic constituents, leading up to the foundations of modernity that seem all too eternal to many today. An outside that is so forceful in its difference combined with economic and political power, perhaps even the sheer awe it evokes in travelers, that it cannot just be translated away into variations of existing conventions. In other words, images of the other become heavier, they are thicker with information and detail. They resist. All images as conceived here would always be *partial images* as compared to a more common usage of the word. (Maniglier & Zabunyan 2011) With the sensory richness of images in difference to textual encounters or hearing stories, less is being filled in through the habitual memories sourced from other senses. A more resistant otherness, like with complex iconicity of the (cinematic) image that overflows with concrete information and is at the same time more open to interpretation due to its conceptual openness. (Taylor 1996) The feedback loops connecting bodies, memories and encounters, inside and outside attain greater complexity. It is because of the conceptual openness and informational overflow that noticing the elements I work with here is so challenging. This does not mean that they

¹⁵⁴ It is further notable that what counted as most alien in the imagination of Christian writers shifted through the Middle Ages. The European North and Northeast continued to be associated as kingdoms of the other, of evil even after Christianization. This was in continuation of a general Roman cosmographic frame, though details differed greatly, as well as the Bible. (Fraesdorff 2002) The changes to such codification also connect to emerging technologies: “With the increasing practical use of the magnetic compass during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, however, the cardinal direction north came to be representative not of the presence of evil, but of locatability.” (Akbari 2009, 49) The Orient meanwhile, as a direction, was the location of earthly paradise, with maps being oriented with the East at the top. It was the early direct contact with various Orients by Occidental-Christian travelers and the narratives and imagery they brought with that also contributed to transforming the cosmo-geographic framework of the Middle Ages. (Ibid., 11ff.)

cannot be discerned and connected to other research concerns. What is certain, is that research habits honed solely on textual grounds make bodies blind to all of this.

Such cosmological transformation is traceable in the changing representations of the world as Europe passed from what came to be conventionally termed the Middle Ages to the Renaissance and beyond. (Rubiés 2017) The activity is nevertheless specific, in that this sort of invention is not a universal. All natural history, for there is no simple line dividing nature and history, is transformation of forms, all happening locally, even as conventions appear to project forms originating from specific conditions universally, after certain worlds achieve hegemonic powers. Nevertheless none of these are fully consistent and always contain minoritarian otherness. New forms, infrastructures, concepts keep being formed, even without awareness of such process. Evolution is open-ended natureculture transformation. These travelers' creations are also noteworthy for the study of how capitalist modernism emerged, for they were active in the time when technologies to govern vastly different and distant lands and societies began to be formed.¹⁵⁵ The global project was at its inception. Other empires, while not as immense as Western modernity as it was eventually formed, also necessarily had to have organizational technologies for governing immensely varied lands or seas. What differentiates this new formation is that it was conceptually organized by a universalism drawn from Christian tradition and its basis in essence, sameness, and the unchanging One.

The jurist and political theorist Carl Schmitt (2003) operationalized the word *nomos*, or rather, 'second *nomos*' for this specific formation, one that is closely related to Westphalian states as what we have today. (Legg 2011) Here I aim to trace the limits of the emerging modern universalism as rooted in a specifically Christian tradition which, though in the process of being formed and stabilized in the 16th and 17th centuries, reaches back to late Antiquity. (Buck-Morss 2007) This new territory, imagined and practiced as a plane where anything can be connected (with hierarchies being secondarily imposed and often unacknowledged by the original proposition of sameness) could only appear after the arrival of Christians in what came to be known as the Americas, which conditioned a radical change in how the world could be thought and made.¹⁵⁶ The Schmittian *nomos* is a world where European powers imagined and eventually formed the world beyond their 'internal' lines, where laws and treaties

¹⁵⁵ I use technologies as they are thought in STS. Technologies thus include both material and conceptual parts. For a discussion of technologies used for Western empires, see Law (1984).

¹⁵⁶ The violent Columbian exchange also led to immense biological migrations and interactions.

were to be upheld. In this ‘outside,’ force and violence may be used freely and native territories are considered as free lands to be taken, much like treaties with other powers, including empires such as the Chinese, were not to be upheld. (Ruskola 2010) Of course, it helps to have nominal allegiance to God and Christianity, and with that to classify the others as unequal or even inhuman. When God or Truth or Humanity or any variation of such concepts takes precedence over actually existing relations, anything goes. While breaking treaties was hardly unknown in the world, many of those outside did not expect whites to continually break their own treaties – whenever they felt more powerful than others. (Allen 2000) It would seem as treaties were made in bad faith from the start. As some like to point out, the Americas would not have been colonized if locals wouldn't have helped whites, if they treated Christians the same way these treated the indigenous the moment they felt strong enough to prevail. While in the Americas (after the early toppling of extensive empires), passing through God or Christianity all local lands were systematically appropriated by the settler colonial system (Bauman 2009), in Asia where strong, recognizable and above all large and powerful state formations existed, direct land grabbing was more difficult, so it was through legal means and manipulative wars that a restructuring of material worlds occurred over centuries in order to extend Empire and make all value flow in one direction with giving little back. (Pitts 2012, Belmessous 2015) (Pauline) Christianity is a nifty little thing, it ties you to God and not to the world around you. You come to speak in forked tongues, separating categories so as to never have to always be able to pretend to uphold own moral standards with regards to humans while at the same continually breaking them. Always alternating about claims of what there really is in the world, yet definitely always denying the realities of others. (Latour 1991) If only white Empire could be more Nietzschean instead of taking centuries to build a complex system of lies in order to protect a Christian moral self-image rooted in resentment. Undoubtedly, as world-building is highly complex and enmeshed, to be able to perceive this reality one is made into from a displaced position and through that as neither given nor necessary does not come easy. It can begin with an openness to other images and images of oneself through the other. Endless accumulation of data and experimenting with ways of connecting it is necessary for alternative worlds (from which to see the radical contingency of the one onto-socialized in) to emerge. All worlds must be practiced into existence, regardless of however much they are already here.

Images connect, layer, collide, metamorphose, even exclude. It is crucial to put next to each other scenes from varied corners of the world, to evade bringing it all back to some unarticulated, yet

always assumed European neutral reality as the ground. The text will be thinking Siamese-French encounters and the figure of the anthropologist through a couple of variations without hierarchy. Ayutthaya is a focal point, a contraction, not a privileged site for such explorations in general. Each scene is a staging of comparisons and uncertainties in terms of what exactly it is that is encountered, of European observers attempting to create a framing so as to understand irreducible difference encountered in a manner that it talks back to them. A seeing oneself in the work of the other, staring back in a way that displaces certainty. An outside as other possibility of world is acknowledged, however begrudgingly. Here, these sites are put into communication by being put next to each other. Jesuits, whether or not as part of diplomatic missions, were among the first to establish and uphold long-distance networks along which information, as well as goods, could travel in relatively stabilized forms as sort of proto-corporations as well as conditions for modern science to emerge. (Law 1984; Harris 1996, 1998, 2005; Wu 2017) It is the establishment of such networks that rendered it possible to stage comparisons between scenes set apart in time and space such as here. It is the establishment of such networks that is a condition for the project of (modern) anthropology as it came to be.

It is not just networks that establish connections here, the figure of the (proto-)anthropologist reappears in variations throughout. The scenes sourced from different parts of the globe will serve as imageric-conceptual backgrounds for the further discussions against which new elements in the writings of Western-Siamese encounters will appear. This is the contraction mentioned above – in focusing on scenes composed of an Ayutthaya long gone while organizing other images and concepts as that through which patterns appear. Ayutthaya constructed from these old travel writings as a focal point. And that which can therefore be perceived, can then be stabilized and used in other contexts. Nothing is self-same, all appears different based on the webs of images and concepts into which it is enmeshed. One and the same thing, say a statue of Jesus, is different for a European and for a Siamese. Of course there is an overlap, this is not to deny a connection, yet in a world focused on effects over essences, awareness arises that a complex connection and overlap should never be mistaken for identity.

A conscious comparison is indispensable to at least partly dethrone any implicit image of (European) neutrality we have habitualized with Christian realism. It matters what scenes we think other scenes with, or figures or matters or concepts. To be as explicit as possible: I don't take the two

sources (treated as primary) as ‘truthfully’ describing whatever they may have encountered, if this word is taken in any referential sense. Such naive realism has been shown to be untenable by more authors than could fit these pages, including the other chapters I composed. I take them to be ‘truthful’ in the sense that I take them at their word, but their words here mean an extension and reformulation of their own premises. To some extent and as a heuristic device I take it that they did their best, that they did not consciously manipulate, that they were not aware of their own acts of constructivism. It is also in this that they are treated as anthropologists, for, as discussed extensively in an earlier part, it is necessary to leave awareness of one's own construction of the object of knowledge out-of-frame. (Wagner 1980) Their knowledge is situated, and I make certain assumptions about the situation through which I understand it. The fact that knowledge is situated still leaves many versions of the situation, many frameworks through which the situation can appear. I further take them to think in a strong sense, for the event of encountering something that was hitherto external to their world made it necessary to extend and reformulate what would have previously appeared as incontestable. Real encounters are events, they shock, disturb, make aware that worlds are not set in stone. The creation of new conceptual tools to deal with such events becomes paramount. Guy Tachard (1688) and Simon de la Loubère (1691) found themselves between worlds and became *inventors (of culture)*.¹⁵⁷ What they wrote is to be taken as the emergence of a framework that is a transformation of previous Occidental-Christian cosmological conventions. If one wants to get a whiff of other cosmological framings sourced in related times and places, unsurprisingly Chinese sources are also available. (Reid 1988, 1993) The last centuries were an intensification (not creation as modern myths would have it) of more direct contacts between worlds leading to cosmological transformations so rapid they could be noticed, while before they had been interlocking localities, or chains of markets. The increasing density of encounters with concrete Otherness, by elites and commoners such as sailors, led to the reduction of more ‘fantastical’ accounts of Asia and other worlds.¹⁵⁸

During the rainy season of 2228 of the modern Buddhist era¹⁵⁹ Guy Tachard, more commonly

¹⁵⁷ On the complex history of de la Loubère's writing, see Love (1994).

¹⁵⁸ It is important to note that ship crews were composed of people of a wide variety of origins, mixing and mingling and communicating. (Mack 2013, 29) The most radical of such ad hoc communities only ever half controlled by state power came to be the pirates as studied by anarchist historians today. (Rediker 2004) Europeans have always had very multiple contacts with so-called Others, none of it can be reduced to the official stories of the landed powerful and their projections of identities to serve as the fictional basis of national states.

¹⁵⁹ When referring to activities in Siam in this section, I will consistently use the modern Buddhist calendar, or rather the Thai solar calendar, which was itself based on the Burmese calendar and became the official version in 1888 CE. Other calendars, such as the lunar one, continue to be used for ritual events. The difference in years is 543 ahead of the

known as Père (Father) Tachard, a Jesuit arrived, after a long and according to his writings somewhat arduous voyage in the river city of Ayutthaya, or as he and his French contemporaries called it, Siam. The city appears to have been unlike anything he had seen before, as his overt fascination with local customs and imagery found in his writing attests. The Jesuit Father had traveled far and wide, as far as the Caribbean to the West about eight years prior to this voyage. Indeed, recent research has made it evident that the institutional structures of the Jesuit empire ran parallel to the emerging ‘East India Companies,’ both of which have become precursors to our contemporaries, the global corporations. (Harris 1996) Father Tachard, on his second trip to Siam, two years later and one year prior to his first writings on Siam being published, was accompanied by a diplomat and mathematician, Simon de la Loubère, who later exchanged letters with Gottfried Leibniz about the famous ‘Siamese method’ for creating n-odd magic squares, on an expedition with the *Compagnie française pour le commerce des Indes orientales*. Today, the word ‘Siam’ commonly stands in for the whole of Thailand, a state entity that was yet to be formed, and adapting to a world where its reference differs is easily undercut by intellectual habit. Systematically enforcing the association of Siam with a historical Ayutthaya is impossible, as with other words employed here, we cannot but fill in gaps and references through our habits and bring a past closer to the present, always fabulating despite conscious efforts not to. Among the phenomena that received constant attention in Tachard's writings is the encompassing presence of water in the city, the adaptation of local ways of world-making to this water world, the combination of excessive ritualism and extreme pragmatism in the comportment of ‘natives’ and an uneasy relationship with the *talapoins*, the then common way to refer to Buddhist monks in Southeast Asia by Occidentals.¹⁶⁰ Indeed, in the writings of de la Loubère similar preoccupations also keep appearing.

There are those that, basing their research on Chinese accounts of the polity demonstrates and contrary to previous theories of statehood that presuppose that all states formed in the same way based on land, the emergence of Ayutthaya occurred from the water, the sea, as a commercial center and not as an empire based on agricultural hinterlands. (Baker 2003) That is, it formed as a polity controlling the flow of goods, trade routes, supply sources only eventually becoming a territorial power. The city is

Gregorian calendar. Any encounter between societies is also an encounter between different times. (Eade 1995)

¹⁶⁰ According to the Collins dictionary, *talapoin* is a French version of the Portuguese *talapão*, in turn taken from the Mon *tīla puin*. The latter is composed of the Mon *tirlaa*, meaning Lord, and Pali *puñña*, meaning merit. A *talapoin* is then a Lord of Merit, or, the Buddha. Alternatively, it is a version of the Mon *tala pōi*, taken to merely mean Our Lord, which appears to me as a very Christian rendering of whatever these words might have meant. Here, I will not engage the implications of the possible convergence or identity of singular Buddhist monks with the Buddha. Suffice to note the central importance of merit.

furthermore said to have been immediately urban, in an implicit criticism of the teleological assumption that all societies develop from rural to urban, which gets projected onto the region. (Baker & Phongpaichit 2017) Thus, the rural Siamese realities a hundred years ago would not have been any primordial condition of a one directional development, but the effect of historical circumstances that led to a ruralization. Southeast Asian territorial formations generally shared sovereignty over smaller entities with other powers, and borders that were permeable. In this competitive environment political success meant legitimatizing rule as an exceptional *cakkavattin* by gathering allies, which included collaboration with the other powers such as the Dutch. (Winichakul 1998, 85–8, 233) When reading about rulers in the region and how power was maintained, comparisons to Big Men, known from anthropological accounts where exceptional humans through charisma and talent concentrate wealth and power only for it to fall apart at their deaths, seem obvious, except already meshing in combination with Hindu-Buddhist state technologies that enable more stable foundations. It is indisputable that territorial conceptions differed from the then emerging modern polities in Europe as described by scholars such as Schmitt.

The multiplicity of worlds in the wider area is nicely expressed in the inscriptions left more than two centuries earlier by the famous Muslim Chinese admiral Zheng He in Sri Lanka. They were “[a] Chinese language record of his donation to a local Buddhist shrine, a Persian language recording of his donation to the shrine of a Muslim saint, and a Tamil language record of his donation to a Hindu temple.” (Hall 2010, 112) Traditions here do not operate as exclusive identities based on eternal truths, rather in the ways the powerful sought to pay respects to many, to make use of all manners of knowledge and backgrounds for governing purposes something else and far messier than the modern concept of (homogeneous) culture is operationalized. The concept of culture, or rather the ontology performed through and with Culture (as ontologically bounded category), has a very specific history tied to its Christian realist one-world world origins and is in manifold ways connected to an exclusivity that does not fit well with the ambivalent complexity of the worlds Siam was part of. When traditions are not necessarily organized around truth and falsehood, inside and outside, or other conceptual binaries, but rather around practices and participation, a different kind or realities is fashioned, with other sets of challenges and conventions. How and what culture is one to assign to people that follow a variety of practices and may change them according to the places they are in, as appears to have been common among traders in the Indian Ocean? (Reid 1988, 1993) One where it appears that people were often multi-lingual, as was the case in polities built on trade such as Siam. It is this world-making that I

try to engage here in a generative way so that the encounter may lead to some transformation in the cosmological framework habitually employed.

“We may, above all, think of these months and years on the road and at sea as a continuation of their training, when new skills were acquired and knowledge learnt back home was put to the trial of an unfamiliar and arduous setting for the first time.” (Wu 2017, 60) The distinction between home and abroad, pragmatically considered, is one of continual transformation through experimentation, never a clear-cut binary. That distinction is a framing operationalized so as to ensure the stability of identity and with it allegiance, identification. An analogical procedure to what held together Jesuit networks and identity occurs with the anthropologist. “Jesuit missionaries navigated across different long-distance networks, and their work was accordingly oriented in various directions.” (Wu 2017, 52) The world is vast and to build an archive of knowledge assistance from locals and access to existing infrastructures were and continue to be necessary. Such vastness and continuing transformation acts as a centripetal force. It's only from on high, living and thinking in and around the very centers of power that the becomings of the world appear self-evident and uninteresting. The very conditions most researchers live in appear to be what lends itself to idealist projection. For knowledge to be accumulated, things must be put into place that act centrifugally, to ensure bits and pieces will not disperse, and all will remain more or less mutually intelligible and compatible. The infrastructures that condition the possibility of exploration and comparison in the first place, whether established as more or less hegemonically unified (with notable exceptions) as today or as sets of varied networks as when early Jesuits and diplomats traveled, a possible object of study themselves, disappear from the common anthropological view, focused as it is on comparison and human activity rather than media-technological mediation. Here, images of encounters between worlds are focalized, and according cuts are made. The infrastructures established are what render the layering of and experimenting with images possible.

The scenes brought together move from Ancient Siam as the site from which the two travelers' observations spring to three historical moments drawn from the work of more contemporary researchers that treat the encounter of Europeans with another, how in these meetings borders were reformed, and traditions enmeshed, and how these anthropologists draw radical possibilities for other futures based on their studies. These three will be the encounter between Charles Darwin, his shipmates

and Fuegian Indigenous peoples as described by Michael Taussig (1993), the now legendary scenes at the Caribbean beach between the indigenous and Spanish crusaders as found in Claude Levi-Strauss and creatively dealt with by the Brazilian anthropologist Eduardo Viveiros de Castro (2011a), and the encounters between Chinese sages and Jesuits as drawn from the historical works of Jean Gernet (1985) by Marshall Sahlins (1996). In these chapters, I will also focus on the very material differences in the circumstances of these encounters and those of Tachard in Siam. Subsequently, I will turn to his writings, and to a much lesser extent those of Simon de la Loubère, to see how the previous chapters make it possible to read them in new ways. How a Christian cosmos came to perceive a Buddhist one, and vice versa, all of which evolve and acquire new cosmological frameworks in the process. The centering of scenes of encounters with other worlds and the destabilization of certainty that goes with it is what brings this historical section squarely into the field of anthropological questioning and as such a variation on the other chapters. Cinema thought enters in a variety of ways too, as is fairly obvious. I would like to point out a method that recent transformations of cinephilia made appear that has evocative resonances with what is fabricated here: each cinematic artifact as project can be taken as a proposition of a world, of the (im)possible characters peopling it, of gestures and movements and types of bodies, of actions and reactions, of what elements and politics and possibilities are there, and of how, sometimes, the film stares back at the viewer, a moving point of view that can take on such force as to dislocate the world of the observer. Texts can be fashioned analogously, especially when the organized around idiosyncrasies and strangeness with a view toward expanding and complexifying circuits of prehension instead of compartmentalizing into orientalist tropes.

15. Commercial Worlds of Water and Ritual

After the sacking of Ayutthaya by the armies of Pegu (in today's Burma) in 2310 most historical documents gathered up to that time in the kingdom were burnt. Thus, apart from inscriptions there are few local written sources from the past. These inscriptions do not pertain to the encounters with *farang*, the occidental foreigners, and are thus of limited use for the project here, namely to deal with the limits of cosmologies. Also, in order to reconstruct historical worlds, archaeology combined with foreign written sources, often Chinese but also European, have been among the most important. It is evident that images of the past are multiplicities. They are made up of parts of different provenience, held together by the very idea that there were unified scenes of the past, if only one can shed the cultural additions of the various sources. For now, I will follow this method.

So what is it that early occidental travelers noticed the most? By early I mean the first one's at the cusp of the forming capitalist territory a hundred or more years prior to the sacking of Siam, from which resulted a significant power shift toward Bangkok, which is a settlement mentioned in the writings I will work with later. That is around 2200 of the modern Buddhist era. Such authors, often using the genre of travel writing¹⁶¹ worked under different rules than today, where travel writing is at best a diversion for the masses; however important a role it may play in the imagination of the world, as opposed to anthropological writing (meaning, that travel writing is still quite evidently engaged in the perpetuation of Western cosmology without any strongly differentiating encounter with the Other). As for the genre in earlier times, “[t]he demand for truthfulness refers to the fact that in the early stage of Enlightenment in Europe travel literature was not only regarded for fiction and light reading, but also to be of great importance for the scientific knowledge of the world.” (Trakulhun 1995, 77) Into the early 20th century of secularized Christian time, travelers¹⁶² repeatedly noted three motifs: the presence of water, something they often considered to be excessive ritualism, and what we would today call multi-culturalism, or at least something to appear as such.¹⁶³ The first of these is certainly present in today's academic imagination, as Southeast Asia is commonly considered to be a “world of water”

¹⁶¹ Historically linked to anthropological writing techniques and aesthetics. (Clifford, 1997)

¹⁶² Apart from the two that I reference, e.g. Nicolas Gervaise, Duarte Barbosa, M. de Ribadeneyra. The accounts of Forest Monks, in the late 19th up to the mid 20th century, sourced mostly from Western travelers' writings by Kamala Tiyanich (1997, 2004) are also full of such imagery, albeit without the massive rites, given the regional context far away from the centers of power.

¹⁶³ Multi-culturalism has of course a Christian-Secular genealogy and definitely differs from what travelers encountered in Southeast Asia at least in that a neutral ground (hegemony) is assumed as natural and all other people's (assumed) practices and beliefs are cultural and secondary.

(Boomgard 2007) and for example Chris Baker (2003) reads Siam against this background. As for the other two, the court ceremonial used today wasn't introduced until the time of King Rama IV (r. 1851–1868 CE). Earlier, the power of the monarch was constituted through an elaborate ritual that some consider to be more suited to a divinity than a mere human. (Terwiel 1991, 38) But then again, reality as experience is co-produced through ritual and one should not presuppose what a human is or can be. (Kapferer 2004) According to one European observer, “there has never been any court anywhere in the world more ritualistic than the court of the king of Siam.” (Trakulhun 1995, 78) Within this allegedly hyperritualistic framework, there was room for a wide variety of non-locals who entered this ritualized space through ritualized activities that formed part of a larger ceremonial system. These foreigners generally fit the category of ‘ambassador’ and were but a small subset of all those who had been living and trading in Siam. Apart from the many merchants and foreign enclaves in the city, non-locals were also found in ‘regular’ employments (a few Europeans, but also various Muslims and Chinese), as well as in the entertainments. (Tachard 1688, 185ff.) Given that at least some of the people living in the enclaves stayed for generations, it seems unfitting to use the concept of a foreigner, which naturalizes a world-view where locals belong solely to one ethnic group. While there did not appear to have been any attempt to fully change the foreign into the local, as in contemporary Western onto-political practice, this does not mean that locality is solely defined by ethnicity (itself hardly a universal concept). Rather, the number of foreigners in a space was considered a sign of wealth, of prestige. But what does this mean when linked with different cosmologies?

The discursive construction of a pre-modern cosmos as well as any other is always a fabulatory, not in the least as living a world and describing said world are already different things. This world is one where there would seemingly not have been any dominant signifier to organize and essentially subordinate varieties of life is all the more challenging, given how naturally modernist metaphysics come to most doing research.¹⁶⁴ The Thai state slowly began participating in this modern world, when kings, informed by Western thought and technologies, started working on creating a history for the Thai ‘race.’ By all accounts the main reasons were so that the English, French and other colonial powers wouldn't see the Thai state as uncivilized and could thus not conquer it with military power under the excuse of a ‘civilizing mission.’ Though this process originated in the 19th century of Christian-Secular time keeping, media archaeology has further made evident that the technology of photography played a

¹⁶⁴ The ritually elevated role of the monarch did quite evidently not serve to override difference or anchor the entirety of the symbolic system qua transcendental signifier.

central role in another reinvention of royal power from the late 24th century of the Buddhist era onward, as photography made it possible for the King to be in every place at once, so to speak. (Morris 2009) Transformations abound, and unlike in the surrounding state formations, they did so with significant input of the local elites, as they too rearticulated their position in the new world. As to the material organization of real space, Western engineers hired by the powerful from the early 25th century onward began reorganizing space according to principles familiar to them: land is the basis from which to think and make reality, and land extends into water. The aim of public engineering is to subdue the water by eliminating its presence. Historians of science have shown that earlier, other cosmologies shaped such practices, namely those based on thinking with water. They coin it as a difference between terrestrial and amphibious ways of intervening in deltas. Land as a variation of water, and not water as a variation of land. (Jensen & Morita 2017) While, as a Thai friend of mine told me during my fieldwork in Bangkok, in her town of Nakhon Si Thammarat in the country's south, as well as other regions, people were still dominantly using waterways and not roads twenty to thirty years ago, at least the centers of power in Thailand had been extensively remade on this model during the past century. Unsurprisingly, nowadays, the whole of Southeast Asia is commonly subjected to large floods which are hard to deal with given this Euro-infrastructure, which may have made practical sense in low lying Holland but not in rainy and humid lowland Southeast Asia.¹⁶⁵

These are just some of the radically altering reality processes that distance a contemporary from the realities encountered by and lived through by early visitors to the area. The world of Siam literally differed. I aim to use images provided by early travelers to organize the material I am working with. Not that I can take their claims fully at face value, but as I relate them to different methods that open up once the operations of Christian realism have been substituted, I hope to achieve a certain liberating alienation that brings the text somewhat closer to an affirmation of SF, science fiction, speculative fabulation. The practices of the sort of realism where the world is always already done and precedes any non/human activity are also already speculative, they entail cutting off some elements that don't find this kind of world-making. The practices of attention the ontological turn and media theories introduce make it possible to notice such operations and experiment with what could happen when non-Christian based conceptions of reality are plugged in. This I do because it ought to make it easier to

¹⁶⁵ The Dutch engineer Homan van der Heide was hired as an irrigation planner by the king Rama V and, being an engineer, in an eminently material way introduced an entirely different way of thinking water-land relations. (Morita & Jensen 2017)

engage other conceptual worlds after that which appears to be immediately given in its objectivity has been reconstituted in a way other than one is used to. As a further method of alienation, I quote extensively from the ancient English translations of these old texts and keep their images and strange linguistic conventions, without always pointing them out with a ‘sic.’ All too often practices of translating previous versions of contemporary languages normativize (for the sake of convenience) a linguistic reality that is anything but eternal. Second-order awareness of such difference and material-semiotic encounter of it are not the same. Further, I am too much of a materialist to be content with a mere engagement of conceptual worlds.¹⁶⁶ I hope then that the early sections will implicitly lend greater credulity to the more speculative work done by me and the two travelers in the last section. To organize readers' perceptions I focus on some motifs found in Tachard's and de la Loubère's accounts. They are intertwined and thus not clearly separable:

I.

“As he [the ambassador] went ashore, he was received by a great number of *Mandarins* drawn up in two ranks, having the Governor of *Bancok* and *Piplis* at the head of them, and he was conducted to the Lodging that had been prepared for him in the Town. The Streets through which he past were perfumed with *Aquila* which is a very precious wood, and of a rare smell.” (Tachard 1688, 153) Indeed, such scenes of movement crossing the uncertain borders between two elements, this coming and going ashore is a very common image in his account. Processions with ships of various shapes and sizes are also recurring. Often these scenes are described in ways that stresses the presence of all kinds of personnel taking part in ritualized activity. Another thing to notice here are the perfumed streets. At least in Buddhist tradition, smells are an important part of technologies of life and are discussed in various suttas, in relation to humans and Buddhas. (Schopen 2015) This makes one think of how reality might have been experienced in places where such culture was influential in shaping materiality. Imagine walking through perfumed streets! Makes for a wholly different bodily experience. It reminds me of how pleasing it is to spend time in Thai malls to me, as opposed to any I've visited in the so-called West. A different world, one where other sets of values have ecological-aesthetic impacts.

Later, the author mentions a Siamese prince actively participating in a water ritual: “He was

¹⁶⁶ For a discussion between the more generatively materialist approach to the ontological turn by STS, as parallel to and extensive of the linguistic-conceptual approach most common in anthropology, see Gad et al. (2014).

accustomed on that occasion heretofore, to do the Ceremony of cutting the Waters, that's to say, to strike the River with his Dagger at the time of the greatest inundation, and to command the Waters to retire : But this Prince having found by many years experience, that the Waters encreased sometimes, for all they were ordered to abate, hath left off that ridiculous Ceremony, and though it enough this year by going as in Triumph to the Pagod, to show the zeal he has for his Religion.” (Tachard 1688: 187) And again we get elemental images with nigh Tarkovskian¹⁶⁷ vibes: “About two Leagues from the Town upon a vast Plain covered with Water, and reaching out to fight, we met with a new Spectacle ; and that was the Obsequies of a famous *Talapoin*, chief of the Religion of the *Peguins*. His Body was laid in a Coffin of Aromatic Wood. The Coffin was mounted upon a Funeral Pile, round which were four great Pillars of gilt Wood, which carried an high Pyramid of several Stories. This kind of burning Chappel was accompanied with several little pretty high and square Towers made of Wood, and covered with Pastboard very rudely painted, with a great many Paper Figures. All this was surrounded with an Enclosure built square, upon which several other Towers were placed at competent distances. Four of them were as high as the Pyramid in the middle, and stood in the four Corners [...]” (Ibid., 191) The olfactory sense makes its appearance once again, and what more, the *Peguins* hold an elaborate ceremony in the waters around Siam. This was not a space reserved for ‘local’ rituals only. One might even notice that this rite was very elaborate and materially expressive, not anything people would do if they had wanted to remain inconspicuous.

Inside the palaces, ceremonies were held too: “When the door of the Court is opened, the Ambassador appears prostrate with the Interpreters of his Nation, and the Gentleman who commonly serves on such occasions as Master of the Ceremonies. All together perform before his Majesty the *Zombaye*, which is a profound inclination of the Body ; and then come creeping along upon hand and knees, till they come to the middle of the Court, then raising themselves thrice on their knees, with their hand joined upon their head, they bow down and knock their forehead as often against the ground. When that is done, they advance, creeping as before till they come to a pair of stairs betwixt the two Halls where the great Men are prostrate, and there having made the *Zombaye*, the Ambassador waits till the King do him the honour to Speak to him.” (Ibid., 155) While our French traveler obsesses about excessive ritualization, it is important to note that royal encounters and international embassies were ritualized in France too at the time, though possibly to a lesser extent if viewed comparatively by a

¹⁶⁷ The Russian director Andrij Tarkovskij being famous for combing above all water and fire in the same images, with long takes and impossible spaces, with interiors dripping and fires burning while rain is pouring.

Modern.¹⁶⁸ On the following page Tachard describes the many mediating figures between the king and the audience. The system appears to take the form of chains of communication, which would not have been allowed to be broken, thus making the royal reality one of distance. He also mentions how commoners avert their eyes when royals enter common spaces. The material-semiotic organization of space and practice seems to have aimed at engendering a distance between commoner and royal. At the same time, there is a tension in this account. When royals or ambassadors arrive, it is an event for the people: “The Shouts that the Water-men made, according to the Custom of the *Siamese*, as if they had been going to charge an Enemy, brought Crowds of People to both sides of the River to be Spectators of that August Ceremony.” (Ibid., 162) Reading the account, one is not sure which of the parts it's composed of can be trusted, taken at face value even for speculative purposes, as this interplay between curious proximity and ritualized distance is never explained or elaborated.¹⁶⁹ Other Europeans complained about these ceremonies, as they took them to interfere with their work, because the preparations for ceremonial and festive activities took a lot of time and human power, which organizations such as the Dutch East Asia company needed for its functioning. One can discern the distinction between a specific European capitalist utilitarianism and what stands in the way. This world then while commerce based was not capitalist. The profit motif and constant pressure of time or time as lack were something that was forming in Europe, but was and is not the only way to do business and shape the world. As scholars have shown, even in Europe it took much violence (especially against women and the poor, but also the aristocracy) and power-struggles for this cosmology to become really real. (Federici 2004) The violence operating in the Americas and other continents meanwhile has become general knowledge. Those who wrote about ‘other’ worlds, be it Siamese or not, did so from their partial perspectives and situatedness, whether Jesuit or merchant. As mentioned earlier, there would be some cosmological overlap between these two positions. Meanwhile the perception of the destitute lowly European sailor or the aristocrat, who rarely made it into these regions for obvious reasons, left fewer traces, which reminds us mostly to not universalize or even generalize onto European worlds the sources available. Rather it would be prudent to seek cracks in these merchant renderings of the worlds encountered. Joost Schouten, a member of the council of the Dutch East India

¹⁶⁸ The fact that European diplomacy was ceremonial, yet the ritualistic nature of Siamese diplomatic ceremony appears to be a source of differentiation for the authors smacks of Orientalism. Whites often have double vision, denouncing among others what they do themselves. For discussions of European ceremonial procedures of these times, see Roosen (1980) or Anderson (1993). For a critical account of the encounter between two differing ceremonial systems, see Havard (2007).

¹⁶⁹ Perhaps strange, given there was no hereditary aristocracy and powerful families could fall to commoner status as easily as other could accede. Or perhaps precisely this proximity could link to such distance-creating ritualization.

company, was a chronicler of local ceremonials as well as a chronic complainant: “[We] could not obtain any labourer because everyone accompanied the King on his voyage. This month [October or November] is the most inopportune period of the year when the nobles and the common people spend time on making offerings to gods and recreational trips so zealously and uselessly, as if their life and well-being depended on this.” (Quoted in Ruangsilp 2007, 83) The highly ritualized ways of European aristocrats of the time might have given rise to a different conception of this.

Ruangsilp (2007) in his work on Dutch merchants in Siam stresses that taking part in these ceremonies was productive of merit and thus important for locals’ lives, reframing the issue of the relation between Buddhist cosmology and work/trade. Moreover, he mentions that others complained not about the use of material resources for court and other ceremonials, but about the greediness, and arrogance of Siamese and their exploitation of foreigners. This, and I will come back to it later, stands in marked contrast to what other Europeans, including our two Frenchmen, wrote about Siamese.

II.

“Betwixt *Bancock* and *Siam*, you meet with a great many *Aldees* or Villages, that almost everywhere border the River. These Villages are no more than a great many Huts or Hovels raised upon high Pillars, because of the Inundation.” (Tachard 1688, 146) Settler patterns are organized around waterways and yearly floods. One may also notice the pillar architecture prevalent into the mid- to late 20th century of our time.

The observer also noted: “The Kingdom is divided by many Rivers, and watered with frequent Rains, which for six Months of the year and more, overflow all the Countrey. That abounds in Rice, Fruits and Cattel. The Houses are commonly of Wood, and raised upon Pillars because of the Inundations, without any thing of the Grandeur or Regularity that is to be found in the Houses of *Europe*. The *Chinese* and *Maures* have built several pretty neat stone-houses in *Siam*.” (Ibid., 265) Tachard was attentive to building styles and returns to the usefulness of wooden houses, as well as to the general minimalism in how the houses were furnished. Architectural styles and technologies were varied based on the origins of the builders. He notes how the local commoners spend lavishly on rituals

and (Buddhist) temples, but don't seem to own much in personal objectified wealth.¹⁷⁰ (Ibid., 265, 306) Reading this, I am reminded of the practices in Bali described by Gregory Bateson (1972, 125): “There are very few Balinese who have the idea of steadily maximizing their wealth or property; these few are partly disliked and partly regarded as oddities. For the vast majority the ‘saving of pennies’ is done with a limited time perspective and a limited level of aspiration. They are saving until they have enough to spend largely on some ceremonial.” After all, as mentioned, food grows with relatively little effort, and some researchers today point out that it was not until our 19th century that large parts of Thailand became agricultural, with the forests removed, whereas before it was a combination of making life off rivers, with some riziculture and a lot of commerce. (Baker & Phongpaichit 2017) One can see how Bateson's experiences of Bali around the middle of the past century could apply: “Essentially, we are dealing with an economy of plenty rather than an economy of scarcity. Some, indeed, are rated ‘poor’ by their fellows, but none of these poor are threatened by starvation, and the suggestion that human beings may actually starve in great Occidental cities was, to the Balinese, unutterably shocking.” (Bateson 1972, 125) Commerce was important in the whole region, which was well connected with the whole known world at least since the times of the Romans. (Basa 1994–5, Hall 2010a) And, as argued by historians, there was never a reason to be afraid that commerce would end, as Southeast Asia lies at the crossroads of many trade routes. (Wolters 1999) It appears that local rulers only very exceptionally attempted to control the sea and any general maritime peace was not disturbed. It was only once Europeans, in recognition of this, started to control at times very distant parts militarily in order to bring trade under their control. These lands then cannot be thought of as closed and only recently opened, but rather the whole region was permeated through lines and connections. And if anything, it would have been more open, in some senses, than today. Among the lines that traversed the ocean were those of Buddhist teachings, which later became the foundation of modern Southeast Asian state ideology of unbroken transmission. (Blackburn 2015) Recent research further emphasizes the connection between trade and Buddhist monks' travels. (Tripathi 2017) There was, as demonstrated by Baker (2003), no inside preceding an outside. At the same time, difference was not absorbed into one multicultural hodgepodge. Variety, differentiation was a part of this space. Asia was not a pre-contact zone, the difference that came about is the directness and amount of contacts with Europeans, as well as the new technologies developed in the West, including of course, governing technologies and modernist cosmotechnics of unified states and ethnicities with clear borders.

¹⁷⁰ One might infer the relationship to a merit-making cosmos organized around *anattā* or no-self, insofar as personal property is necessarily organized around a self, while supporting a temple isn't.

Engseng Ho (2004, 217) points out how other notions of space and sovereignty arrived with the modernizing Europeans in the Indian ocean: “In the fifteenth century, the Indian Ocean hosted a transregional network of peaceable trade and social exchange that was experienced by its diasporic natives as an extensive domestic realm. The transformation of that realm by the Portuguese, into an arena of military and commercial geo-strategy, was to give both religion and diaspora new meanings, in this first encounter of a Muslim transoceanic world with Western empires.” As stated by the Sultan of Makassar in today's Indonesia: “God has made the earth and the sea, and has divided the earth among men and made the sea common to all.” (Lockard 2010, 219) Though in contrast to Portuguese and Dutch expansion, early French policy was “connected rather with national interests. As a result, Gervaise intended to give a ‘complete knowledge of the habits and propensities’ for those, who ‘go there for the intention of settling there.’” (Trakulhun 1995, 78) Hall (2010a, 113) called this “poly-centric networked realm,” as there was no hierarchical or centralized trade structure.

Bodies played a role in establishing connections. In her overview of female sexuality and social position in the region in the times discussed here, Barbara Watson Andaya points out that sexual relations were often in the form of short-term marriages and were used to gather commercial allies, as she puts it, “to welcome traders in the community.” (Andaya 1998, 13) There was a continuum linking sex, gifts, and hospitality. Furthermore, it was women who controlled retail trade, so sexual unions were not only kinship alliances but also the establishing of paths to gain goods. If a woman had foreign partners, it was considered as desirable, positive and powerful, since that meant she would be able to do better business due to all the possible new relations she had access to. Such focus on relation-making with strangers naturally led to many ‘mestizo’ offspring and oftentimes easy assimilation or creation of new arrangements between the seamen (only exceptionally there were seawomen among the emerging dominant ethnicities), which eventually became thorns in the eyes of consolidating colonial powers. Ruangsilp (2017) writes about how locals did not mind mixing, only the whites, meanwhile rulers did use children of foreigners as hostages. A century later the position of the ‘temporary wife’ was replaced by that of the patriarchal prostitute.

It appears that there was very little gender differentiation in outward appearance (documented at least until the end of the 24th century BE), at any rate as perceived by the Jesuit: “The *Siamese* are not magnificent in their Apparel. The inferiour sort of People Men and Women are Cloathed much alike.

They have a *Longuis* which is a piece of very simple stuff about two ells and a half long, and three quarters of an ell broad. They put this *Longuis* about their Body, so that it makes as it were, a kind of Coat reaching from the Girdle below the knee, but the Womens come down as low as the Ankle.” (Tachard 1688, 266) The modest clothing of commoners would seem to fit the aforementioned frugality of their accommodations. All this in the *City of Angels*: “The meaning of that is, Angelical, admirable and extraordinary Town ; and they call it Angelical, because they think it impregnable to Men. Seeing all Nations are well received at *Siam*, and that People are suffered to live there in the free Exercise of their Religion, there are some of almost all Nations in that Country.” (Ibid.) This openness seems to already form in the daily habits of the locals: “The *Siamese* are very good natured and civil, they live in good intelligence one with another, and they are not wanting in compleasance to Strangers.” (Ibid., 267) This stands in stark contrast to the negative views on the Siamese mentioned earlier. One of the stranger things Tachard mentions, which doesn't entirely fit with what I have been describing here, is that women get respect by men turning their backs toward them. The Jesuit does not comment on it any further and neither does this peculiar custom appear in other sources. Reality doesn't fit into neat patterns.

III.

Tachard stresses how ‘pious’ locals were: “The multitude and magnificence of their pagods, and their liberalities to the *Talapoins*, are Arguments of their Piety. They say that in the Kingdom there are above fourteen thousand Pagods and fifty thousand *Talapoins*. What ever is within those Temples is looked upon as Sacred, and to steal any thing from thence is death ; about five years agoe five Robbers were surpris'd in a Pagod, and they were Roasted alive by a gentle fire.” (ibid., 272) Surely, not an activity associable with any Buddhist tradition in its contemporary image. And then, “[i]n their morning prayers which they never miss, they call to mind three things. God and the Law which he hath left them to observe ; Their Parents and the benefits which they have received from them ; Their Priests and the Reverence they owe them ; when a Missionary would speak to them of our Religion, for a Present he may have free access to them, and that also will dispose them to hear it.” (Ibid.) He sees monks as similar to Christian priests, though with differences in social organization and attire. Here and elsewhere one senses that Tachard may be exaggerating for his own audience in France, to render them more pious too. To show them an image of piety so as to remind them of theirs. He is after all a priest.

One might also note the translation of what certainly was not God into said concept. As a historically situated actor, Guy Tachard could not draw on other possibilities for linguistic conceptualization, which does not mean his use of God was in bad faith, that is deliberately and consciously Christianizing. As I will show later, he appears to have actually put effort into coming to terms with a different world by extending, even subverting the conceptual tools his world had to offer. Much like an anthropologist would.

Life in Siam seems to have been somewhat laid-back: “Seing they live upon a small matter, and that their countrey supplies them with all that is necessary for life without much Labour and Husbandry, they spend their time in Idleness. They improve not their minds by any Science and are curious about nothing but future contingencies. To know such they not only consult Astrologers, but make use of also other means full of Superstitions.” (Ibid., 272) Apart from becoming a colonialist ploy, idleness is here linked to the lack of interest in science, whatever that may have meant at the time. Though in other travel writings, it is evident that some elites evidently were interested in Western scientific artifacts and then forming practices. (Morita 2017) Tachard notes this right next to the apparently excessive interest in predicting or influencing the future. Is there a way to understand this as not superstition, thereby normativizing one's own world, but as the effect of a different cosmology? Not to mention that astronomy and astrology were overlapping practices in Europe, as any clear separation was beginning to be constructed in Tachard's time.

If we concede locals lived in a world intensely shaped by Hindu-Buddhist cosmotechnics, Buddhist and other Indic ritual and ethical practices, with animist ones continuing in various shapes without being subordinated to the more universalist traditions, then it was one where impermanence and thus uncertainty is ontologically central. A world that has not been made by a Creator-God and only given to humans to look after, but not affect in any significant way. It is a kammic world, one where today's actions co-shape the future, which thus is and is not set, as much as past actions in complex webs of influence-production shaped what appears now. As for the environment, this was and at times still is an area with perpetual flooding (and houses built on stilts or floating), immense storms, uncontrollable natural growth and fast-paced commercial change, not to mention the instability of long-range trade routes. Given the uncertainty people lived in and which was the focus of influential teachings, this obsession with the future seems to make good sense. Perhaps this even fits the

‘heterarchy,’ formulated by Hall for the greater region: “A heterarchy is defined as including horizontally linked equitable urban centers that shared common goals, acknowledged the political independence of its ‘members,’ and included multiple networked power centers that had different levels of connectivity, and were based upon some degree of acknowledged cultural homogeneity.” (Hall 2010a, 113) One can see how such dispersal of power possibly creates a world of greater uncertainty. And, as expounded by Stanley Tambiah (2013) in his writing on the galactic polities of Southeast Asia, the borders of these state formations were permeable and more than one could symbolically claim the same geographical place. After all, much of the area was formed by and from near impenetrable forests. Much like any clear notion between outside and inside of a polity seems to fall apart, so does uncertainty and instability make more sense as a part of the fabric of life.¹⁷¹

While Ayutthaya was oriented toward the South China Sea, Engseng Ho's account of the Indian ocean is still useful to perceive a difference in the conception of space and sovereignty: “From the European perspective, what was strange about this rich world of the Indian Ocean and its international economy was that no one state controlled it, or even had the idea of doing so. The Portuguese, with the scientific geographers assembled by Prince Henry the Navigator, were the first to think of this ocean as a unity and to thereby dream up a systematic strategy to monopolize the means of violence within it.” (Ho 2004, 217) The innovations that Europeans brought around this time lay in a new combination of existing technologies tied to an ontological reconceptualization of space: “The marriage of cannon to trading ship was the crucial, iconic innovation. Whether markets were free or not, power over the ocean itself needed to be monopolized. Portuguese and American views, which cap the period at each end, share this assumption, and strategic security becomes an end in its own right, first among all goods.” (Ibid., 218–19) This market, at least within Siam worked differently: “Likewise, the Abbé De Choisy, who was a French diplomat to Siam in 1685, saw no good in the way the Siamese Kings hoarded gold and silver in their treasuries, instead of spending them, thereby allowing them to circulate in the

¹⁷¹ While Ayutthaya was oriented toward the South China Sea, Engseng Ho's account of the Indian ocean is still useful to perceive a difference in the conception of space and sovereignty. He makes it clear, that before space became something to be occupied by only one power, there were lines of relations traversing the waters. Of course, without a consolidating power, piracy was also common, though given the number of wars brought about by colonization, violence was certainly not higher through piracy. Though pirates repeatedly appear in traveler's accounts. Ho (2004, 217) claims: “In the fifteenth century, the Indian Ocean hosted a transregional network of peaceable trade and social exchange that was experienced by its diasporic natives as an extensive domestic realm. The transformation of that realm by the Portuguese, into an arena of military and commercial geo-strategy, was to give both religion and diaspora new meanings, in this first encounter of a Muslim transoceanic world with Western empires.” Meanwhile Wolters (1999, 46) mentions that locals turned to piracy only after Western incursion that led to a breakdown of open trade routes, commerce, and hospitality.

country's economy.” (Ruangsilp 2007, 88) We have here a world fundamentally at odds with that of the Europeans, yet still compatible enough for trade and other relations to flourish. As Anna Tsing (2005) has demonstrated for the current global economy, people don't have to share the same ideas or worlds to be able to cooperate. Much like machines and the operationalization of heterogeneous elements that bring about (not necessarily compatible or perceptible) effects without any synthesis. (Morita 2014)

IV

There is another motif in the Frenchmen's writings, one that has a curious affinity with Christian colonial complaints about the indigenous of Amazonia, namely their inconstancy. (Viveiros de Castro 2011a) Travelers object to how locals cannot be trusted, because they keep changing. And, specifically on Siamese, whoever that may be a reference to, de la Loubère writes about how they see no problem with concurrently holding contradictory opinions,¹⁷² and locals even recommending occidental travelers to not hold onto their views too much, since tomorrow they will have changed anyways.¹⁷³ This is almost comically Buddhist, given it's central principle being impermanence, that is inevitable change. The difference to a regular Modern with contradictory opinions is that with them, the official position is denial of contradiction and fragmentation, whereas here it appears that this condition is affirmed. “For as to the Orientals, all know that they tell thing not as they are, but as they fancy you could wish they were ; wherefore they little care to contradict one another, as to matter of Fact they have declared, provided they comply with the inclinations of him that puts the question to them ; so that it they be taken in any contradiction, it does not at all trouble them to be told of it. [...] What pleased you yesterday, will the say unconcernedly, displeases you to day, and that makes us speak to day in another manner then we spake yesterday.” (Tachard 1688, 264)

Such a world did not produce subjects to whom the Christian creed had much to offer. While King Narai appeared to be enthusiastic about Christian knowledge, as well as other, mostly

¹⁷² In Buddhist tradition Nāgārjuna, and I am not claiming this thinker was influential in Siam at this time (if anything that his conclusions come from a Buddhist world, i.e. a world organized by Buddhist teachings works differently and makes some conclusions more probable than others), demonstrated the non-viability of the excluded middle thus throwing some of the most cherished Western ontological principles into stark relief. (Garfield & Priest 2003)

¹⁷³ As anyone self-aware enough realizes, even with the principal of essence and constancy operating, one's opinions change even if perhaps slower. One also holds contradictory opinions, because society is rife with contradictory opinions and thoughts. Consistence is a mere mirage even for Christians, for how else would it come to be that theology, given it is based on the principle of the unchanging One, cannot agree on anything? Of course, the active presence of the concept of basic consistency and that of constant change makes for different worlds.

astronomical tools¹⁷⁴ and let Christians proselytize freely, generally few locals in Southeast Asia converted, except for a child here and there, though without accumulative effects. (Halikowski-Smith 2011)¹⁷⁵ Jesuits, not being able to see outside of dualism, mistook this openness of the King for eagerness to convert and at first wildly overestimated their (possible) influence. Christian ways seem to have been more of a way of gaining prestige within and beyond the court by establishing connections with foreigners with an access to science. Westerners had learned in China that elites were very interested in Western science in general,¹⁷⁶ and astronomy in particular and applied it in Siam too. (Ruangsilp 2007) What meaning scientific artifacts and processes might have took on in Siam is challenging to construct. The lack of interest, at least as stated in the writings of Tachard, has manifold origins. Among the reasons, and I will go into more detail later, were a different conception of the private-public distinction, the strangeness of the Jesus figure and also a general pragmatism, when locals lost their regard of Portuguese once they were of no further use. (Tachard 1688) As for those members of the Portuguese community that were not evicted, they left due to the changing circumstances, were executed after the governmental overthrow of 1688, and some eventually assimilated. (Halikowski-Smith 2011) At least initially it appears that local worlds continued in the cosmopolitical relation-making, without aspiring to a world that would be “monolithic, transcendental, universal, unified.” (Ho 2004, 27) Viveiros de Castro (2011a, 1ff.) in his rethinking of Amerindian worlds and the very concept of culture writes that Europeans “grow into statues of marble” while Indians “grow into statues of myrtle.” The former, formed in a society that takes stability and essence as given or at least desirable grow to become according to their ontology. The latter are meanwhile receptive to any shape, they are ‘anthropophagous,’ symbolically and literally, eating the other to become. Europeans, as they came to be, did not not literally eat the other (unless in extreme conditions), but did like to work the other to death, systematically, while appropriating the value created. In this sense, some variant of eating the other can too be discerned, however perversely.¹⁷⁷ According to Jesuits they were also, much like people in Siam, ignorant of the principle of non-contradiction or at least it's alleged universal necessity. Culture can no longer be taken as something

¹⁷⁴ According to Ruangsilp (2007), Nidhi Aeusrivongse has convincingly explained that King Narai used foreigners in his service to counterbalance the power of indigenous administrative officials. His explanation emphasizes internal politics – instead of the contacts with the West – as a moving force in the history of the period.

¹⁷⁵ What this implies for social bonds is anyone's guess, though I assume these children had been abandoned.

¹⁷⁶ Something akin to Science had been practiced in China, at least, though the conceptual worlds and with them the ways of producing technological artifacts and knowledge differed. See the ground-breaking study by Yuk Hui (2016).

¹⁷⁷ Christian obsessive focus on anthropophagy cannot be unlinked from their own practice of eating the human turned God, whether literally as for Catholics or symbolically for Protestants. It is one of the practices strangest to those they encountered.

one has and carries through time against the onslaught of the outside. Rather, as the Brazilian anthropologist-philosopher suggests, it can be taken as “a set of potential structurations of experience.” (Ibid., 34) Neither firm belief nor fixed identity were crucial for these structurations, the arrival of the Portuguese in Brazil offered them an opportunity to change their identity. Now, Siam certainly differed from the situation in Brazil. For one, Christians had no problem identifying a ‘religion’ with ‘priests’ and ‘temples,’ even if their meanings, functions and productivity were different from what Christians imagined and practiced. And while anthropophagy was neither commonly practiced, nor symbolically constitutive in any sense, it does help notice one important operation: openness toward the outside as a chance to change. And, similarly, inconstancy was singled out by Tachard and, if we gather some of the reports by travelers, Siamese were at the same time described as generous and greedy. Perhaps the reason why different travelers had divergent experiences, apart from being conditioned by their differing interests and ideological aims, is that these peoples' subjectivities were not organized around a constant identity as in the Christian-Secular tradition, but at least heavily influenced by the Buddhist tradition which famously argues against a self and constancy as being basic ontological categories.

Given the above described practice of making reality, which includes incessant mixing of elements, who or what is Siamese or Thai or local or Buddhist or Hindu-Buddhist or animist, is impossible to say. James Clifford (1988, 344) once wrote: “Yet what if identity is conceived not as a boundary to be maintained but as a nexus of relations and transactions actively engaging a subject? The story or stories of interaction must then be more complex, less linear and theological. What changes when the subject of ‘history’ is no longer Western? How do stories of contact, resistance, and assimilation appear from the standpoint of groups in which exchange rather than identity is the fundamental value to be sustained?” This seems more fitting: a nexus of relations and transactions. And many formulate this nexus for Southeast Asia through the figure of the stranger-king, to which I will return later, when discussing scenes composed by Viveiros de Castro. For now, I turn to encounters at the edges of the emerging capitalist territory. Places where what is real is put into question.

16. Worldly Encounters

Darwin's Mimesis: December 18, 1832 [Sailors and Naturalists]

It is said that the name Tierra del Fuego, used in the modern Western cosmos for the south of the South American continent, comes from the journey of the infamous Charles Darwin on the HMS Beagle to the area. The crew of the ship had sighted fires presumably lit by the locals upon seeing the vessel. Two days later, the sailors went ashore. This scene has been described by two sources – in Charles Darwin's notebooks and in those of Captain Fitzroy. The anthropologist Michael Taussig in his seminal work *Mimesis and Alterity: A Particular History of the Senses* (1993) presents an analysis, so to speak “across the colonial divide,” while playing these two perspectives against each other to make evident the limits and through them the creativity of the Western self-image as always constructed through the other. (Said 1978) Such images of the other are not innocent and can lead to viciously savage acts, when white settlers see the other through or only in their own images of the savage other leading to horrific behavior on their part against natives who in turn are also affected by this. (Taussig 1987)

The more influential of the two expresses fascination at what he considers to be excessive adeptness of the indigenous at miming the European sailors after they have set foot on the shore. Darwin even goes so far as to write: “All savages appear to possess, to an uncommon degree, this power of mimicry.” (as quoted in Taussig 1993) He presents an image, a scene:

perched on a wild peak overhanging the sea and surrounded by woods. As we passed by they all sprang up and waving their cloaks of skins sent forth a loud sonorous shout; this they continued for a long time. These people followed the ship up the harbour, and just before dark we again heard their cry and soon saw their fire at the entrance of the Wigwam which they built for the night. (Darwin quoted in Taussig 1993, 73)

One does not even have to reach for the prose of Joseph Conrad to be transported into a world of darkness and looming savagery. A description and style noticeably different from those written almost two centuries earlier in Siam. Notice already how non-language is creeping in with the sonorous shouts. Decades later, the Austrian priest and ethnologist Martín Gusinde took iconic photographs of

the Fuegians. The first time I encountered these, and even later, in the Chilean director Patricio Guzmán's *Nostalgia de la luz* (2010) which presents the lands of Chile as seen by the indigenous from the coastal areas and references the voyage of the Beagle, what astounded me most is how utterly the boundaries between human and non-human are erased visually. These are new forms, new bodies as known only from the most fantastic of cinemas. The way human bodies flow into the unconventional shapes of headgear, covering faces entirely. At times even the whole body. It would appear that a completely different conception of the human, of clothing, of shapes, and of borders structured these phenomena. By now, the Selk'nam people as they are today referred to, are all but extinct or assimilated. In the late 19th century, during the Gold Rush, they had been actively hunted by whites, so that by the time the ethnologist came to the area, only 279 remained.

I would not have believed how entire the difference between savage & civilized man is. It is greater than between a wild & domesticated animal, in as much as in man there is greater power of improvement. The chief spokesman was old & appeared to be head of the family ; the three others were young and powerful men & about 6 feet high. from their dress etc etc they resembled the representations of Devils on the Stage, for instance, *Der Freischutz*. [sic] The old man had a white feather cap, from under which, black, long hair hung round his face. The skin is dirty copper colour. Reaching from ear to ear & including the upper lip, there was a broad red coloured band of paint; & parallel & above this, there was a white one; so that the eyebrows & eyelids were even thus coloured. The only garment was a guanaco skin with the hair outside. This was merely thrown over their shoulders, one arm & leg being bare; for any exercise they must be absolutely naked. (Ibid., 74)

Now, what is interesting here is the wealth of 'similarities' Darwin employs, that he ties together, ranging from metallurgy to opera. It is evident that reality here is being made through an enmeshment of all kinds of references and building blocks, which is why it is impossible to untangle and pinpoint any one clear source that would be the last principle on which 'objectivity' would reside. The naturalist continues:

they are excellent mimes: as often as we coughed or yawned or made any odd motion,

they immediately imitated us. Some of the officers began to squint and make monkey like faces; but one of the young Fuegians (whose face was painted black with white band over his eyes) succeeded in making far more hideous grimaces. [...] The Australians, likewise have long been notorious for being able to imitate and describe the gait of any man, so that he may be recognized. (Darwin quoted in Taussig, 74–5)

Mimicry for Darwin becomes the sign of difference between civilization (defined negatively by what it is not) and the other, all the while of course having to take recourse the mimetic faculty, the faculty to perceive and create similarity, to be himself able to notice similarity in the activities of the now-called Fuegians. The fascination with adeptness at imitating is a recurrent motif in colonial literature and one that, given some of the Orientalist motifs through which East Asians are being denigrated, continues to operate today. (Cf. Havard 2007, 540) Now, the eminent naturalist's description or perhaps rather construction of the scene may appease those who think themselves superior, but Captain Fitzroy sets the scene slightly differently. The Captain, according to Taussig, can be taken as a sort of theoretician of culture, in that he appears to be more thorough than the naturalist, much like I will later take the Jesuit Tachard:

Fitz Roy's [sic] explanation of *why* looking at the savage is interesting is that such looking is in itself a form of theorizing society and historical process. The first reason he gives is that one should appreciate that we British were once like the Fuegians, and that is how Caesar found us – painted and in skins. The second reason is that there is something absorbing in observing people displaying childish ignorance of matters familiar to civilized man. And the third reason is the interest occasioned by the Fuegians' healthy, independent state of existence. (Ibid., 75–6)

Specifically, there is one element omitted by Darwin that shines a new light on the whole encounter:

“They expressed satisfaction or good will by rubbing or patting their own, and then our bodies; and were highly pleased by the antics of a man belonging to the boat's crew, who danced well and was a good mimic.” (Fitzroy quoted in Taussig 1993, 76)

All of a sudden, the originators of movements are unclear. Is it the sailor or the locals? Indeed, the imagination of a Western sailor as to how indigenous people would behave also enters into this relation. The anthropologist also reminds his readers that this is something already described by Walter Benjamin, when he notes how adults act like children (how they imagine children to behave), which is what the child starts imitating, as that is the behavior it is surrounded by, thus becoming the very image adults imitate. Orientalist trope or perhaps just personal cliché, material act, imitation of imitation become one event, whatever the further effects on reality. Encounters at the ends of the world come to be productive of new worlds, where fact and fiction, difference and similarity, virtual and actual, become indistinguishable.

I do not want to enter into the discussion of the mimetic faculty and how this scene helped Michael Taussig formulate his revolutionary approach to anthropology. I merely want to draw some connections to the scenes in *Ancient Siam* I will be presenting later. At the edges of territories encounters happen and they came to be folded into the very fabric of the territory itself. Outside the perception of which is conditioned by the inside becomes inside that conditions the perception of the outside. In this case, mostly on the level of forms, though these too are already enmeshed with concepts.

Last Decades of the Era of Wanli Emperor, Ming Dynasty [Jesuits on Earth]

In his account on the limits and Christian underpinnings of modern capitalist cosmology, or, what one Japanese reviewer termed ‘reverse anthropology’ in the text's comments section, Marshall Sahlins summarizes the encounters between Jesuits and Confucian literati. “They detest life,” it says in the title of the passage. “When Jesuit missionaries installed themselves in southern China in 1583, they opened a cultural debate of cosmological proportions with the Confucian literati.” (Sahlins 1996, 414) This series of meetings appears to have been radically different from the one taking place in *Tierra del Fuego* two and a half centuries later. Here there were encounters by what would have been considered the intellectual elite from two highly hierarchic societies, and of course, early European travelers were famously vowed by the grandeur of the Sinosphere, if less than enthusiastic about its teachings. It was not until centuries later that China lost its admirable status in Western eyes. The encounters are

linguistic and conceptual, but no less concerned with similarity and difference. In describing these debates, the anthropologist draws on the work of the French sinologist Jacques Gernet (1985). While the accounts of such meetings in Siam also quite apparently draw on debates with elites, the Chinese situation is different, because there are Chinese sources discussing them, while whatever sources there might have been in Siam, are lost.¹⁷⁸ Sahlins plays these two perspectives out against each other, making evident the radically different understandings of events. Pointedly, he writes “the Western and Eastern intellectuals differed not just on particular points but fundamentally – ontologically.” (Sahlins 1996, 414)

For the Chinese literati, Western dualism made little sense: there was no distinction between creature and creator, self and world, sensible and spiritual. Given this cosubstantiality of Heaven and Earth, the locals proved resistant to ideas about the fall and basic sinfulness of life. Confucian tradition is said to be inherently optimistic about life, the goal being tranquility and goodness; whatever we Moderns might think today of the effects Confucian notions of goodness actually had on the earthly life of all. This very different orientation, one without the fall, but an expectation of the seed of goodness in every man (woman?), led to the reaction when confronted with Christian teachings: “They detest life.”

The famous Jesuit Mateo Ricci was similarly unenthusiastic: “If I were to tell foreign kingdoms that in China there are educated men who say that animals, plants, metals and stones are all intelligent and of the same kind as man, they would be dumbfounded.” (Ibid.) But, perhaps the most interesting point Sahlins makes is one that presents two different notions of materialism: “In the end, the Jesuits concluded that the Chinese were materialists, since they considered ‘brute matter’ and Heaven to be all of the same substance. The Chinese literati for their part concluded that the Jesuits were materialists, ‘since they deprived the universe of its invisible forms, turning it into brute matter directed from outside and lacking the spontaneous intelligence that all creatures display.’” (Ibid., 414)

Worlds vary. Conceptual, habitual, sensory dimensions can differ and are contingent. An encounter with a radical and powerful other does not necessarily create an opening, or rather perhaps a break in bodies certainty strong enough to be irreducible to a mere extension of dominant conceptual habits. The more some worlds become dominant, the less equal the encounters, the more difficult it is

¹⁷⁸ With the notable exception of murals. (Halikowski-Smith 2011) Meanwhile, what exactly to interpret based on images of Westerners is challenging to reconstruct. (Skilling 1997)

for a breakdown of certainty to force itself through the networks of protective mechanisms. There is an outside to every system, every world, yet not every world and everyone therein is propitious at establishing circuits with it. Obviously, any outside will become culturally coded in its influence, as described above. What makes for an outside too transforms. Still, such an event will make preconceptions one has appear in a way that could otherwise not have happened. That which is so natural as to not appear at all can at times become evident as historically contingent. Meeting otherness in different places will result in varied transformations, conditioned by singularities of each assemblage. Something that comes from the outside and brings new elements into the world. Chances to experiment and make new connections, at least for those open enough. And, habitually, regular people engaging in trade and other professions often went local, adding new elements to traditions that change with them.¹⁷⁹ Though these people living their lives as pragmatically as they could generally did not become theoreticians of culture. These would be innovations that just happen as the world changes. They are experiments and new connections, but it is not the creation of culture in the Wagnerian sense which happens on the propositional level: culture as thought, not as lived (if for a moment we indulge such a clear-cut distinction).

Even for Jesuit literati this challenging encounter then led to innovations, though not necessarily essential ones. Though if we are to follow what was going on in Jesuit encounters in India around the same time, these scholars asked the Vatican to be able to reclassify Brahmins from a religious to a social group, thus making it possible for Jesuits to ‘go native,’ go Brahmin and adapt their teaching, practice and habits to local tastes. (Chakravarti 2014) Tachard mentions how Brahmins were reclassified by the Vatican as class and not religion based, so that Jesuits are allowed to adapt and adopt local customs: “It was considered at *Rome*, and it being represented to the Cardinals that the Habits the *Bramens* [sic] wore were no Mark of Religion, but of Nobility and eminent Quality, they permitted that Father and some other Jesuits who approved his Judgment, to try that last way for the Conversion of those people.” (Tachard 1688, 204) Similar mimetic adaptation was practiced on the Japanese archipelago. (Colla 2008) Likewise, in Southeast Asia, preachers adopted and adapted to practices that while remaining orthodox (within the evolving convention) were powerful to impress local converts, especially since they were interested in practical efficacy (traversing the very modern distinction between natural and supernatural). “His opinion echoed the views of his predecessor. Although Van

¹⁷⁹ Reid (1988, 1993) is a treasure trove of examples.

Nijenrode was rather impressed by the religious tolerance of the Siamese, he, too, was disturbed that the Siamese ‘waste great sums of money and copious means on their gods, shrines and temples,’ which was yet ‘of little help to them.’” (Ruangsilp 2007, 88) One wonders what practices Van Nijenrode indulged in others might see of little help to him.

One more thing is crucial here. Marshall Sahlins takes this example from a Japanese turned Jesuit turned Buddhist monk.

And among the many who commented on the disproportion between the first crime and the punishment, Fabian Fucan wrote in 1620 from Japan [...]:

A holy law forbade Adam and Eve to eat the *macan* [a Portuguese term used in Japan to denote a kind of persimmon]. It is really the height of absurdity! It is like setting out to fool an old woman or gull a child. A persimmon could not possibly be a direct or indirect cause in an affair as important as attaining the highest Heaven or else falling into hell. In all the five prohibitions and the laws of Buddha and in all the Buddhist codes of discipline, I have never found any precept that warned against persimmons. (Sahlins 1996, 414)

The persimmon is not just a variation of the apple, if we follow the intellectual trajectory of the ontological turn, it becomes something entirely different when read through the imagery of Buddhist or Chinese tradition. Interestingly enough, the attitude that a fruit is just a fruit and cannot be the cause of anything cosmic, or more generally a thing being just a thing, has been explored for 19th century Japan, as there illness was taken to be illness, something to take away from life and to be healed if possible, without any kind of additional meaning. (Karatani 1993) The point here being that the ways the world comes to be made are varied and the ways Western tradition does things (pretension towards being objective) might actually be further away from its own projected standards than others. Such differences in perspective, in reality, return in Tachard's account of why many Siamese and other locals had essential trouble accepting the significance of Christ on the cross. But more on that later.

16th Century, Brazil and Puerto Rico [Ontological Experiments]

Intensifying relations between the European backwaters with the powerful and glamorous realms in Asia famously led to the eventual nigh annihilation of the populations and exploitation of resources of the newly accessible continents. In this process, there were all kinds of encounters with one of these finding its way into the anthropological imaginary. Jesuits wrote a lot about their conversion attempts in the Americas, where they faced an entirely different set of obstructions than in Asia. While in much of Asia, with a few exceptions, they were unsuccessful, because people were not interested or had intellectual tools that made the inadequacy of Christian doctrines apparent (Halikowski-Smith 2011), many indigenous in what is Brazil today had no trouble adopting Christian beliefs and practices. The problem, it seems, started later – when they found out they have no use for it, they let it go. It is related to an entirely different world without priests, institutions, liturgies or theologies. (Viveiros de Castro 2011a) One can also sense that whatever was adopted, it was not the general cosmological framework. The technologies of conviction Christian history had to have created, were not enough to deal with this new situation. Like a displaced inversion of the encounters in Asia then. Viveiros de Castro notes that a further issue for Jesuits was the apparent non-existence of religion, of priests, rites or anything else that would have reminded whites of Christianity. In Asia on the other hand, people perform many practices at the same time. On one side of the territory encounters with no religion, on the other with too much of it. On one side encounters with seemingly eager conversion, on the other with almost none. And whether there is too much of it or too little, uncertainty appears about whether these are religions at all. And, as far as traditions like Buddhadharma and the teachings of Confucius go, these ambivalences persist, for locals and researchers. (Josephson 2012)

But before any such encounters could have appeared, there was one event from today's Puerto Rico, thus presumably the participating parties were Spanish and Taínos. Claude Levi-Strauss recounts an anecdote, creates an image, which he had taken from Oviedo's History:

In the Greater Antilles, some years after the discovery of America, whilst the Spanish were dispatching inquisitional commissions to investigate whether the natives had a soul or not, these very natives were busy drowning the white people they had captured in order to find out, after lengthy observation, whether or not the corpses were subject to

putrefaction. (Lévi-Strauss 1952, 12)

The image is actually two. A court, the ‘Valladolid controversy,’ investigating the immaterial dimensions of the natives, and a physical experiment in water investigating the quality of the bodies of whites. Both can be said to have inquired into the humanity of the other – an encounter of cosmological proportions indeed. As Viveiros de Castro understands it, these two practices belie two radically different cosmologies. The whites are extending a multi-culturalist world, where humans share the same nature, but differ in culture, the soul. Animal bodies quite evidently for them do not have souls and are thus not subjects of tribunals.¹⁸⁰ The islander natives meanwhile did not doubt whether those that arrived has souls, but were in doubt about the being of their bodies. (Viveiros de Castro 2011a) Or, even, paraphrasing Latour (2004a), whether they had bodies at all.

To put it in the words of the Brazilian anthropologist: “the other of the Other was not exactly the same as the other of the Same.” (Viveiros de Castro 2014, 51) Latour summarizes the encounter: “Each side conducted an experiment, based on its own premises and procedures: on the one side to determine whether Indians have souls, and on the other side to determine whether Europeans have bodies. The Amerindians’ experiment was as scientific as the Europeans’.” (Latour 2004, 452) If the conquistadors drowned and rotted, it would have been clear they were human, if not, they could have been spiritual entities. Claude Lévi-Strauss wrote it perhaps most elegantly, at least as worded by Bruno Latour: “the whites were invoking the social sciences while the Indians had more confidence in the natural ones.” (Ibid., 452)

As far as I know, no such experiments happened on the shores of the Chao Phraya river. Much like with the encounters in China, but unlike those in Tierra del Fuego, neither side doubted the humanity of the other. Though some imagery through which the ‘East’ was perceived was already made, the Orientalist colonial machine was in its infancy. After all, commerce had been an ongoing relation-making activity for centuries. And yet, the encounters were far from symmetrical, not only because the concept and connected imagery of the human differ vastly. In the next chapter, I will explore these asymmetries based on the images I have presented here, as they made it possible for me to see the materials in new ways. Or, to put it differently, I analyze the following data from the point of

¹⁸⁰ One may note here, that such a cosmology was not yet formed in the Middle Ages, where animals and humans were conceptualized as being in greater proximity rather than separated by an unbridgeable gulf. (Cohen 1994)

view of the questions the images hitherto presented.

17. Recentring Siam

Siam, 2221 [Rationality & Wisdom]

In the following passage, wherein the author evaluates the behavior of Siamese (it is unclear which classes are being referred to), his judgment is somewhat ambivalent:

In general they have more moderation than us [...] They act only by necessity, and do not like us place merit in Action. It seems not rational to them that Labour and Pains should be the Fruit and Reward of Virtue. They have the good Fortune to be born Philosophers, and it may be that if they were not born such, they would not become so more than we. I therefore willingly believe what the Ancients have reported, that Philosophy came from the Indies into Europe, and that we have been more concerned at the Insensibility of the Indians than the Indians have been at the wonders, which our Inquietude has produced in the discovery of so many different Arts, whereof we flatter ourselves, perhaps to no purpose, that necessity was the Mother. (de la Loubère 1693, 76)

Seeds of treating the entire Orient as one undifferentiated entity are present, noticeable in the swift jump from Siamese to Indians, this despite a large part of the book being devoted to the complicated voyage through many different societies between which he does notice differences. Then arrives the trope of sloth, commonly ascribed to tropical peoples, and that of Asian wisdom, here for now still expressed as the origin of philosophy. Indeed, and this is unexpected, when compared to later orientalist tropes, indigenous are still seen as philosophers, though not through learning or work but innately. Technology and the interest in it becomes a marker of difference. While in some parts of the writings, Siamese or other locals are presented as negative inversions of the author's image of his society, and in others, those concerned with their devotion, as positive models to be emulated, here the relation is more complicated. At once natural inheritors of the philosophical inclination of the Ancients (as opposed to the presumably non-natural inheritors, the whites) and insensible to or disinterested in the achievements of the Occidentals. Perhaps one can hear more than faint echoes of the experience in China, where whites wanting to trade encountered the problem that they could offer very little of interest to the locals of all classes, while having enormous interest in Chinese products. It was not until

centuries and countless manipulations such as the Opium Wars¹⁸¹ later that whites as they came to be changed the rules and flows of world markets. However, these words by de la Loubère transform when combined with other passages of his contemporaries. Additionally, images, deconstructive reading practices, bits and pieces of information and conventions sourced from this contemporary world as it comes to be drawn together by this body writing enmesh with these old writings. Conditions must be right for some things to appear. Nothing is just in and of itself. Such a world would be too simple, almost ready-made to be immediately grasped by those denying difference, contingency, impermanence against the clamor of worlds.

Père Tachard was born in 1691 of the Buddhist era and entered the Jesuit college in Bordeaux in 1711, being ordained as a priest in 1722. In 1723 he joined Jean II d'Estrées, a naval commander under Louis XIV who had fought battles in the Caribbean against the Dutch before, on a voyage to the West Indies. He spent four years in and around (not yet) Latin America. He was thus an experienced seafarer and had encountered all kinds of otherness before becoming part of the embassy to Siam.¹⁸² The journey to Siam as described in his writings led him to many stops along the way, from the Cape of Good Hope to Batavia. He was thus acquainted with the far reaches of the Empires under construction and, based on his writings, seems to have always attempted to actually form an understanding of local situations, albeit necessarily with an eye towards eventual conversion. Simon de La Loubère, born 1685 in Toulouse, became the secretary of the Ambassador to Switzerland after studying law in Paris. He was much less experienced in encounters with otherness and sea voyages than the former. It was the Jesuit's second journey to Siam that their paths overlapped.

Tachard and the other Jesuits, accompanied by diplomats like de la Loubère, had two goals: to establish or expand commerce and to convert the Siamese King. (Tachard 1688) The two were intimately intertwined. It seems evident that in Southeast Asia it were not just things that were exported and relations established, but a whole cosmology was to be imposed. King Narai, the Siamese ruler at the time, on the other hand appears to have had interest in the commerce, technology (especially and for his own personal pleasure that relating to astronomy), but not so much the conversion. (Alberts 2013) Indeed, Tachard repeatedly laments this while at the same time as if overstating the king's

¹⁸¹ Graeber (2011) argues that in China there existed markets without capitalism, but rather they were promoted by the Confucian bureaucracy, which of course the emerging Western capitalist empire had to violently recode.

¹⁸² Wu (2017) shows how many Jesuits in general had experience from all kinds of encounters with 'others,' as they were part of many journeys and each single one of them necessitated meeting wide varieties of ways of doing the world.

inclination toward the Christian creed. It seems as if technological objects, commerce and to some degree technology could travel without having to carry a whole world with them. Tara Alberts (*ibid.*, 9) notes also the difference between what conversion would have meant for Christians and non-Christians, for in Southeast Asia it is more of an “entering a tradition or customs.” The very notion of an all-encompassing religion was and continues to be foreign to the wider region. (Holt 2017) Rulers had always employed tools from a variety of traditions.

In a world without any concept of conversion, one where the concept of entering into a tradition operates instead and the related variety of religio-social positions such as monk or brahmin, the Jesuits had to become creative.¹⁸³ As an example, the Portuguese in Vietnam used the entirely non-anthropophagy associating “entering the belly of the Portuguese,” which would have meant becoming Portuguese, ceasing to be Cochinchinese, which locals allegedly mocked. (Alberts 2013, 10) Just reading those words one might come to the conclusion the Portuguese ate people, metaphorically or otherwise. One wonders whether (cultural) Christians had any sense of humor at all about such matters before the ironies of the Enlightenment. When dealing with the Siamese king other rhetorical strategies were employed. How many of the following words even had equivalents in local linguistic worlds?

“To Submit Your Grandure to this God who governs Heaven and Earth, is much more Rational, Sir, than to refer them to the other Deities that are worshipped in the East, whose Impotence, Your Majesty, who hath so much Light and Penetration, cannot but easily see.” (Tachard 1688 1688, 170) We notice here too, how the language of rationality, of light and penetration (!) enters into the essays of conversion. Discard your gods for the true one, it will be prestigious. This does not exactly sound as a conversion yet. The concern is to present the Christian God as grander than all others – in very abstract terms. In the letter of the French King to the Siamese King (Tachard 1688), the former evokes not only the knowledge of the true God and the holy law, but also eternal happiness after. For societies reared on different notions of rebirth and awareness of impermanence offers of eternal afterlife can appear quaint, naive or just generally unappealing. In arguing for the excellence of Christianity, there is always the danger of going too far, as Jesuits and representatives of some other orders not receiving papal or systemic approval knew well. It's these dangers the immediacy of which disappeared as the colonial

¹⁸³ More generally, and this is something that can be extended from the modern Vietnamese context Tara Alberts (2013, 11) mentions, is the difference between words for ‘ancestral teaching/to follow a doctrine’ or *sāsana* and ‘belief/to look up to’ or *chua* in Thai (today associated with trust and obeying).

orders of truth became more established to flow into the reactionary late 18th and 19th century's philosophical grandeurs.

If these scenes remind rather of the encounters in China, there are other moments that draw more on the mimetic. In the description of entertainment, the encounters in Tierra del Fuego echo: “Betwixt the *Chinese* and the *Laos* there was a Troop of *Siamese* Men and Women, cast into a Ring, who danced after a pretty odd manner, that is to say, with their hands as well as feet, making as many Figures with the one as they did with the other. The voices of some Men and Women, who sung a little in the Nose, joyned to the noise they made with their Hands, regulated all the cadence.” (Tachard 1688, 185) The whites are unnerved by techniques of the body, which work with a body, where each performative part can work separately. At least from these words it would appear that the acting was cinematic *avant la lettre*. Walter Benjamin (2008) famously observes how acting for the camera apparatus entails a decomposition into acting, or the repetition in variants of gestures and expressions, with body parts, later recomposed as a succession of images. Some anthropologists have noted that until recently at least, there were views of the body in the region where each body part has its own spirit. (Holt 2017) Here we don't have that mimetic feedback loop, as this was a court performance and not an encounter between whites and locals seeking to establish common ground. Still, bodies become sites of difference.

As far as the rest of the bodies are concerned, the Father notes: “The perswasion they are in, that it is undecent for a man to have his Teeth white like Beasts, makes them take a great deal of pains to blacken them. For that end they make use of a Varnish made for the purpose, which they renew from time to time when it begins to wear off. That they may give the colour time to stick on, they eat nothing for some days, and even dispencc with *Betle* and *Areca*.” (Tachard 1688, 268) It would seem then that what makes a human human in this world of rebirth is the cultural technique of blackened teeth. What does this make of Europeans or Chinese who did not blacken their teeth? Black teeth as a sign of differentiation between man and beast. Distinctly a different world than the (post-Renaissance) Christian one where human and animal are separated by an ontological gulf. A gulf Moderns seem to be very invested in, perhaps because what else would remain for them to see themselves as exceptional? A quaint hang-up indeed for a society allegedly tied to an ideal of equality. The color of teeth appears, at least to a Westerner, hardly as an essential quality. Perhaps this is unsurprising, as in Buddhist and other

cyclical cosmologies humans, deities, ghosts and animals share an ontological affinity by virtue of the possibility of being reborn in any of these states. The same basic unity, where the difference between humans and animals is a matter of “combinations and degrees,” appears in the criticisms of Christianity by Chinese scholars. (Gernet 1985) And presumably for animist cosmologies which continue to persist and adapt in the region. (Århem 2016) “For the *Siamese* believing the transmigration of Souls into other Bodies, kill no Animals, for fear, as they say, for driving out from thence the Souls of their Relations, which may very well be lodged there.” (Tachard 1688, 144–5) The Jesuit has taken note of this cosmodifference, never mind that at other times he describes how locals kill mosquitoes and deal in very violent ways with elephants they aim to domesticate. Notice the “may very well be lodged there.” This is a world of uncertainty, one where the future is not yet set, one where engaging in activities aimed at influencing or predicting what is to come makes pragmatic sense. One may also note how far back the Western construction of Buddhist tradition reaches, notably also the practice of not actually trying to understand how a Buddhist society would work, as I wanted to show with the issue of violence against animals. Viveiros de Castro (2014, 131) writes about indigenous multinaturalism that “when everything is human, the human is an entirely different thing ...” and something analogous is at play here.

Mirror of Christianity: Creating Images of Buddhist Worlds

Some encounters are expedient to keep in mind when doing humanities based research on (half missed) encounters of worlds. What mingles in the analysis of Rey Chow (2002) is her anthropological straddling of two worlds, Chinese and English-speaking, a body part of both that has the skills and knowledge of actual workings of languages and projected tropes, all the while making use of this middle position not to denounce one but to articulate a new position that enables to see what is usually missed: the orientalist misconception of Chinese writing by Jacques Derrida, drawing on a long line of misconceptions of Western scholars, is what enabled his deconstruction of Western logocentrism. The French philosopher attributes to Chinese characters a pure ideography, while in real practice it is a phonetic system of notation, considered to also be logocentric by many. The Hong Kong scholar here shows how stereotyping can be productive. What comes to play here is also the entanglement of mimesis as these stereotypes do emerge from a real encounter with the otherness of Chinese writing (it is not imagined as fantastical beasts populating the East in medieval cosmology), but not out of a

thorough engagement with how a different tradition would work. The essentialization of both an imagined East and a half-imagined West is also necessary for this deconstruction. Of course, the racial stereotype of the ‘inscrutable Chinese’ is also activated, as it is the reduction to a surface that operates in taking Chinese writing as exclusively ideographic. The important thing to take with from the analysis is that surface readings, half-truths and general misconstructions can be productive in ways that go beyond the perpetuation of a stereotype. This is a process that happens in recent times as much as in earlier encounters. What Derrida and the travelers discussed here share are the attempts at theorizing the world beyond ‘immediately practical’ concerns of what I assume were present for most Occidentals traveling to Siam. In other words, experimenting with frameworks to which to tie the phenomena analyzed.

In his encounter with a different world, Father Tachard qua Jesuit perhaps above all tries to understand why there are so few converts and in order to do so he constructs a cosmology based on his knowledge of local tradition. A recurring motif is that of two figures, which tend to converge in his account: that of the doctor and that of the monk, the *Talapoin*. As one learns in contemporary Buddhist studies, in Buddhist traditions these two were often one and the same, yet it is curious that Tachard rarely presents them as the same. Meaning that he either writes of *Talapoins* or of doctors. I do not have access to information as to be able to discern whether these two figures were separate at the time, nevertheless the use of the word doctor here is curious: “interested Doctors, teach, that the more Experience is made in the Obsequies of a dead man, the more advantageously his Soul is lodged in the Body of some Prince, or some other considerable Animal. In that Belief the *Siamese* many times undo themselves by making magnificent Funerals.” (Tachard 1688, 193) Here, he notes the importance of the material constitution of the funeral for a better rebirth, which again is an activity that makes pragmatic sense.

As Tachard (*ibid.*, 275) is trying to grapple with Buddhist teachings, he writes: “The *Siamese* believe a God, but they have not the same notion of him that we have. By that word they understand a being perfect after their manner, consisting of Spirit and Body, whose property is to assist men. That assistance consists in giving them a Law, prescribing them the ways of living well, teaching them the true Religion, and the Sciences that are necessary unto them.” Much like in China, this is an immanent system without duality, and similarly to the above mentioned Confucian tradition and some Ancient

Greek teachings, it is focused on ‘living well.’ Those familiar with Chinese history and thought know that what ‘living well’ means, is far from agreed upon within and between traditions, and the same goes for the region engaged here. Even the comment on the ‘Sciences’ can be framed so as to make sense, insofar as Buddhist teaching is said to be open to new things, as long as they are effective in relation to the soteriological aim.

“The perfections which they attribute unto him are all the moral virtues, possessed by him in an eminent degree acquired by many acts, and confirmed by a continual exercise in all the Bodies he hath past through.” (Ibid., 275) A perfection acquired by acts throughout many rebirths. “He is free from passions, and feels no motion that can alter his tranquility ; but they affirm that before the arrived at that State, he made so prodigious a change in his Body by struggling to overcome his Passions, that his blood is become white. He hath the power to appear when he pleases, and also to render himself invisible to the eyes of men ; and he hath such wonderful agility, that in a moment he can be in any place of the world he pleases.” (Ibid.) Here, the Buddha, the ‘God’ appears closer to Mahāyāna conceptions as conceptualized in Buddhist studies today. “He knoweth all without having ever learnt anything from men, whose Doctor and Master he himself is, and that universal knowledg is inherent in his state, having possessed it from the instant that he was born God ; it consists not as our does, in a train of consequences, but in a clear, simple and intuitive vision, which all at once represents to him the Precepts of the Law, Vices, Virtues, and the most hidden secrets of Nature, things past, present and come, Heaven, Earth, Paradice, Hell, this Universe which we see, and even what is done in the other Worlds which we know not.” (Ibid., 276) While in the passages before the French envoys wanted to convert the Siamese king through the knowledge of the supreme God, this here shows the limits of their approach, since Buddha already knows everything, awakened in time (not before), gaining knowledge in an instant. An immanent awakening that appears to bring all the knowledge of a transcendent God. And again, the confluence with the Doctor.¹⁸⁴ Buddha further remembers his past lives, though it is strange our author feels the need to mention it, since he is supposed to know every secret of the world – perhaps individual chains of rebirths are not conventional parts of nature, or perhaps Tachard feels the need to stress the kammic system. However the Buddha figure is not merely a universal being, but intimately enmeshed with locality.

¹⁸⁴ The are varied connections of the Buddha, the figure of a doctor and medicine, not in the least many suttas with imagery distinctly connected to healing. (Salguero 2009)

After recounting Thai (mytho-)history, Tachard writes that he considers it necessary to know it in order to understand the history of “*Sommonakhodom* (so the *Siamese* call the God whom at present they adore).” (Ibid., 289) Buddha used to be referred to as *Sommonakhodom* in early European writings on this being, but few are aware of that today.¹⁸⁵ In order to account for the locals' disinterest or occasionally even strong aversion to Christian teachings and imagery, Tachard retells Thai cosmology in his own words. This retelling appears as a localized cosmology that combines a wide variety of elements, which I do not want to disentangle since it is precisely these local, ever-evolving versions of Buddhist tradition that are, well, Buddhist. These early travelers and missionaries had noticed certain similarities between teachings and practices in the wider Asian region, but the occidental construction of Buddhism as one religion needed a much more stable infrastructure for travelers and scientists to be put in place.

Tachard recounts what a Buddhist monk told the Jesuits while they were visiting a temple. The explicitly Buddhist narrative that enters into this is the schism between Buddha and his brother (or in Indian contexts usually cousin and brother-in-law) *Thevathat* today commonly spelled Devadatta. “Being a person of much wit and address, he found the way to make a new Sect, wherein he engaged several Kings and much People, who embraced his Doctrine and imitated his examples. That was the Original of a Schism which divided the world into two parts, and gave a beginning to two Religions, whereas before that all Mankind had but one.” (Ibid., 293) The two had been tied kammically for many rebirths, with Thevathat having killed his brother when they were monkeys or apes. In their rebirth as humans, when the schism happened, the younger brother gathered support of many princes through his ‘evil’ words, even though he could not compare to the miracle working power of *Sommonakhodom*. “Ambition made him desire to be God, but not being really so, he was ignorant of a great many things, which his Brother perfectly knew, and because his haughtiness would not suffer him to listen to *Sommonakhodom* he did not learn of him what was done in Hell and Paradise, nor the Doctrine of the Transmigration of Souls, nor yet the changes that had been and were to be in all ages, from whence they conclude that it is not to be wondred at, if we who are his Disciples find nothing of all those things in the Books he hath left us; if our Scriptures be full of obscurities and doubts, and that if being wholly ignorant of Divinity, we have so great a mind to reason and dispute with them. For since *Thevathat* our Master knew nothing of that himself, he could not instruct us therein.” (Ibid., 293–4) Tachard continues

¹⁸⁵ At times in these writings *Sommonakhodom* becomes *Sommonokhodom*. Apparently, it is a creolization of *samaṇa Gotama*. (Skilling 2014)

to focus on how what Thevathat did was ignorant of secrets of curing men, but also of making or discovering precious metals. For the locals believe that precious metals are hid in unknown places, and only lack of virtue makes common humans unable to see them, even if they were right before one's eyes. Here knowledge gained is about bodies and about the earth, much like humans and animals are closer. Buddha as opposed to Devadatta knows how to cure and how to find precious metals. Wellness and scientific extraction are situated on the same plane.

Now, some Portuguese Jesuits had produced an inverted image more than a hundred years earlier, which contrasts nicely with what the monk tells in Tachard's account. They were convinced that Christianity had reached the region earlier and considered the Buddhist institutions as corrupted versions of their own creed. These views of Jesuits are also reported by Simon de la Loubère (1693). The reasons for why what they encountered was different was ascribed to the influence of the Devil. It was up to the missionaries to change these teachings and practices to make them correct again. (Alberts 2013) The differences to be noted are the focus on monasticism here, whereas the inverted images of the Buddhist monk are on a cosmological level, and the fact that, of course, Christians discussed everything in terms of making others same.

As if out of nowhere, Tachard (1688, 294) continues: “They also object to us that we cannot work many prodigies, which they pretend they can do, and are the Essence of Magick, because *Thevathat* having as little skill that way as in all the rest, he could not teach us. But tho *Thevathat* was not God, and that by consequence he had neither the agility nor subtilty of Body, nor the other perfections of Divinity, yet he excelled in several Sciences, especially in the Mathematicks and Geometry. Now as it is of him, if we'll take their word for it, that we have received these knowledges, it is no wonder if we be good Geometricians, and be perfectly well skilled in other arts.” Thevathat and Christ are seen as the same figure, and Christianity is but an imperfect Buddhist teaching, while Occidentals have sciences too, but only some, those that the Buddha's brother excelled in. While in the mathematician's writing the lack of interest in scientific thought in Siam takes on an almost obsessive character, Tachard presents an account wherein the West is said to be less scientific than the East, which would explain the lack of interest on the basis of cosmology.¹⁸⁶ Whatever the image European-

¹⁸⁶ This has come to be established as a common orientalist trope. (Hart 1999) The question of technology in Asia, especially China, but also globally has increasingly come to be approached with an image of the world that bypasses the immediate ideological positing of science as exclusively of Western descent – tracing the histories of knowledge-production is a messy affair. (Elshakry 2010, Fan 2012)

descended societies came to create of what they projected as the non-scientific Other, worlds are composed of cultural techniques that at the very least operate analogously to sciences and engineering, otherwise their material realities wouldn't have looked the way they did and do. (Hui & Lemmens 2021) Difficulties in discerning systematic discourse on science and technology does not imply the absence of sophisticated techniques of how to intervene into the material composition of surroundings.

The monk figure in Tachard's story said: “In the new Doctrine which he published he foisted in a great many things, which he had taken out of his Brothers Religion: and that hath rendred both Laws so like one another in several points” and “[t]hey differ however, in that *Thevathats* Law is far less severe than that of *Sommonokhodom*; for it allows Men a great liberty of killing and eating Animals, tho the use of them be unlawful and criminal.” (Ibid., 295) Dharma, the Law. Christianity is cast into Buddhist world-making: a law discovered and created by a sentient being which can accord with the universal law. Would a Christian talk about their ‘religion’ as a law? Indeed, the human-animal relation has been repeatedly addressed by Tachard. Earlier, he mentioned that, of course, Buddha and others have been and can be reborn as animals. And, while describing a sort of Siamese Ragnarok, end of worlds, he recounts: “Moreover these great Changes shall be observed in Beasts as well as men, and they shall degenerate by little and little. Nay, they have already lost the use of Speech, which, whilst God lived upon the Earth, was granted them through his Merits.” (Ibid., 287) Animals here, and this is unknown in Buddhism as constructed by Western Buddhology, were once humans.¹⁸⁷ Tachard doesn't expand on what came before humans had become so by being rewarded for their merits. What is evident, is that different cosmologies are mingling here (if we take that at least some of this isn't purely Tachard's invention) and that they need not be experienced as a mix of various cosmological frameworks by those living them.

The monk as main interlocutor proceeds to chastise Christians for it “enjoyns not Men to comfort and assist Beasts in their necessities.” (Ibid., 292) As is commonly known from Jātakas, the tales of Buddha's countless other rebirths (which point toward Buddha definitely not being all the time everywhere all at once) and suttas, Buddha offered himself or parts of himself repeatedly to animals to save them or their little ones. “They differ however, in that *Thevathats* Law is far less severe than that

¹⁸⁷ How this gradual, yet necessary decline fits in with the rebirth system, where one can become human and then animal and then human, is beyond me. It may be related to the notions of the gradual and necessary decline of dharma, the Three Ages of Dharma, known from Sino-Japanese medieval worlds. (Marra 1988)

of *Sommonokhodom*; for it allows Men a great liberty of killing and eating Animals, tho the use of them be unlawful and criminal.” (Ibid., 295) Occidentals have until recently had much less qualms eating meat in general (however limited the access to lower classes) as animals were made by God for humanity. After the Siamese world's end recounted in the account, “[m]oreover these great Changes shall be observed in Beasts as well as men, and they shall degenerate by little and little. Nay, they have already lost the use of Speech, which, whilst God lived upon the Earth, was granted them through his Merits.” (Ibid., 287) Once again men and animals appear on the same level of existence. And “[t]hey gave liberty to Beasts, thinking them capable of good and evil, and worthy of punishment and reward.” (Ibid.) This seems a very Christian, yet still different way of thinking natureculture. Commonly, in a kammic system whatever happens to an animal is the result of past acts, not a question of free will in the here and now. Whatever the case, actually practiced human-animal relations or their conceptualizations form a part of the dispute, and are assigned to the incomplete teachings of Devadatta.

The locals are rather apathetic: “So when we would explain to them the Articles of our Faith; they take us always up short, saying that they do not need our Instructions, and that they know already better than we do, what we have a mind to tell them.” (Ibid., 297) It is however not just teachings as discourse that create this situation, but also imagery. And probably the most forceful image is when the issue of Christ on the cross is discussed. “That which most confirms them in their prejudice, is that we adore the Image of our Crucified Saviour, which plainly represents the punishment of *Thevathat*.” (Ibid., 297–8) Christ on the cross appears through the image of *Thevathat*. Not just that, the issue is that if someone is punished by dying on the cross, it means, that such a being cannot have been good: “They look upon these last as Rogues, whose Crimes make them deserve all kinds of Disasters. And thence proceeds the Horror which the *Siamese* have for the Cross of Christ. For, in short, do they answer when one speaks to them about that, if he had been a just man, his Justice and good Works would have saved him from the shameful punishment he suffered, and protected him from the fury of his Enemies.” (Ibid., 281) A short stop to think about this image, for it offers a ‘reverse anthropology’ of Christianity and the conception of sin. In the world we have here, a world where none have fallen but are reproduced in cycles of rebirth and entanglement with other beings, one man cannot make a sacrifice for all of humanity (thereby bringing forth a very specific concept of humanity). It is impossible to conceptualize. In all his rebirths, whenever the Buddha offers his life, it is in concrete

acts of kindness in delineated situations. Jesus on the cross has no clearly discernible cause for his extreme suffering, so he cannot have been but an evil-doer. Punishment inflicted by an authority is seen as legitimate, an earthly convention, for why would somebody who does good be punished so cruelly unless that sentient being, by virtue of being awakened and thus understanding the laws of kamma, chooses to undergo it to save another being. But only specific beings or groups, not the entirety of humankind through the ages before and after. Effects are always localized even as they resonate throughout the webs of interconnections. There is no universality from above. Buddha, through his own efforts conditioned by past lives, achieved an understanding of kammic laws, which did not fundamentally alter the shape of the universe, at least not in the singular yet universal way Christ did, but introduced teachings that will help others.

As for immanence, Tachard also grapples with a different understanding of heavens. “Angels are corporal, and as there are different Sexes amongst them, so they may beget Sons and Daughters. These Angels are never sanctified nor deified. It is their part only to take continual care of the Preservation of Men, and of the Government of the Universe.” (Ibid., 283) What is called angels here are no messengers of God (with uncertain ontological status). They are merely beings peopling a different, but not entirely separate realm. The life of angels or deities in Buddhist traditions is much more pleasant than that of humans and precisely because it is so pleasant, it makes it harder to perceive the truths about the world, especially the truth of suffering. This in turn makes it unlikely to turn into a situation wherein a being will reach a state conducive to awakening. “They acknowledg no other Devils but the Souls of the wicked, which coming out of hell where they were detained, for a certain time roam about the World, and do men all the mischief they can.” (Ibid.) This immanence puts the Devil into crisis too. Where does evil come from, when there is no Manichean devil or one merely secondary to the unqualified goodness of God?

Tachard further notes that the world is not created: “They reckon the Heaven and Earth to be uncreated and eternal, and cannot conceive how the World could ever have a beginning, or that it should have an end.” (Ibid.) All stars and planets are inhabited by particular angels. There is nothing outside of a materially conceived cosmos. However what constitutes matter can be rather different, although some sort of connection to sensory perception is necessary. Unexpectedly, this cosmology, at least as recounted by Tachard, is not of a round globe, but flat. In this flatness, water returns. It is all

around. Not everything in ancient texts can be made to speak to a contemporary audience.

Connections

To come full, flat circle after countless detours, even if in the times I write about whites had not yet crossed the Pacific, the Jesuit company's representatives encountered otherness at all ends of the network. The encounters in the farthest reaches of the West have, through the works of Viveiros de Castro, become a *cause célèbre* beyond the confines of the field of anthropology in recent years. They have acquired a force of their own and are something to think with in manifold contexts. In many ways the immanent conception of the cosmos here bears resemblance to these Amerindian cosmologies encountered by whites around the same time. The Brazilian anthropologist mentions that “[h]umans and gods were consubstantial and commensurable” and that “humanity was a condition, not a nature.” (Viveiros de Castro 2011a, 30) Here, neither transcendence nor bad conscience (another of those tropes Judeo-Christians, especially psychologists, like to project onto the general human) was possible. And it is reminiscent of Asian worlds where humans, ghosts, deities, animals and all the other myriads of beings are not separated by an ontological gulf. He further writes, “[t]he Tupi could not conceive of the arrogance of a chosen people, or the compulsion to reduce the other to one's own image.” (Ibid.) While Europeans saw the indigenous as animal-like labor power or potential Christians, the Tupi “desired the Europeans in their full alterity.” (Ibid.) Which here meant an anthropophagous relationality. Except of course, that Europeans in Siam would have been at best conceived as stranger-kings, or merely as one of the many trading contacts, and not the alter to be digested.¹⁸⁸ They are, in the cosmology recounted by Tachard, not really other. They are already part of the cosmos, by virtue of being *Devadatta's* followers, even if one may wonder when this cosmology, detailed as it is, was created and how non-whites figure in it. “So relational affinity, not substantial identity, was the value to be affirmed. Let us recall that the ‘theology’ of some Tupian peoples gets formulated quite directly in the terms of a

¹⁸⁸ The relationship with the other however is incomparable to the Amerindian situation: “These were the central motor and main motif of the society, responsible for its centrifugal tendency. Mortal war to enemies and enthusiastic hospitality to Europeans, cannibal vengeance and ideological voracity – all expressed the same propensity and the same desire: to absorb the other and, in the process, to change oneself. (Therefore it was as much the case that the Tupinamba ‘wanted to turn White’ as it was that they wanted the Whites to turn Tupinamba. The Jesuit letters abound with complaints about bad Christians going native, entering into polygamous marriages with Indian women, killing enemies in the central square, taking ceremonial names, and even eating people.) Gods, enemies, and Europeans were figures of potential affinity, different transforms of an alterity that attracted and that needed to be attracted – an alterity without which the world would sink into indifference and paralysis.” (Viveiros de Castro 2011a, 31–2) No desire to absorb the other seems to be working in the region, rather to connect and make the best of it.

sociology of exchange: the difference between gods and humans is explained in the language of a marriage alliance, the same language that the Tupinamba employed to think about and incorporate their enemies.” (Ibid., 31) He also mentions the “refusal of personal mortality” (ibid., 32) which is something that resonates in kammic worlds.

Bruno Latour mentions that one of the most baffling, or idiosyncratic aspects of the still very Christian European atheist tradition is their “belief in belief,” something he argues is a category mistake. (Latour 2005b, 33) It is indeed something the awareness of which arises in dealing with literature on Asian traditions, not only in relation to Christianity as is Latour's concern. Researchers insist that their objects of study ‘believe’ in Buddhas, bodhisattvas or ghosts, whereas people just live in a world where they are present, much like other entities such as animals or bacteria, though perhaps in different modes. Just because one has been socialized in a certain world doesn't make that one the only reality. And in dealing with the world, senses play crucial roles. As indeed sense perception and belief are something discussed by the Jesuits in Brazil: “I am far from thinking that the Arawete ‘do not believe what they do not see;’ but they take great care to distinguish what they have seen from what they have heard, and this distinction is especially marked in the case of cosmological information that they give or request. I do not doubt that they believe in their shamans, but in a way that Vieira would probably describe with the phrase, ‘even after they have come to believe, they are unbelieving.’ For it certainly has no similarity to a revealed truth, and the notion of dogma is completely foreign to them.” (Viveiros de Castro 2011a, 41) Similarly, the issue of seeing and not-seeing is important in Tachard's account of what the monk told him – since *Thevathat* does not have all the teachings, his followers cannot see what the Buddha can see. This is the general condition of the non-awakened, however, for whites, the condition is doubled, since the source of their teaching can never reach correct perception. In the Buddhist complex interplay of seeing/not seeing or absence/presence any concept of a ‘revealed dogma’ makes little sense. The tradition is built on practices that help achieve something, and these practices can, in theory at least, be discovered by anybody.

Viveiros de Castro writes that where there are no true believers, there can be no heretics. There is no orthodoxy, just many different shamans. There's an analogy to be found in Buddhist and Hindu-Buddhist world-making: Buddhist teachings are not organized around any kind of orthodoxy, but for reasons of convenience around orthopraxy in the sangha, the community of monks. This regularization

is said to have practical origins, as say going on almsrounds at different times would be immediately detrimental for alms gathering. As for the formerly numerous forest monks, the situation was such that they were very different among themselves and charisma plus creativity play a large role in becoming a successful monk. (Tiyavanich 1997) To this a misconception by whites is related, one that has been ghosting at the edges of this text from the beginning: Jesuits operate with an image of power where if the king converts, the rest will follow. But given the 'religious' multiplicity and ritualist focus, this image and the worlds encountered were somewhat at odds, something that history confirmed. No significant circuits between them could be established, power or no power. Not all transformations or effects are possible at any given time. Conditions must be right. As has probably become apparent by now, no Westphalian *cuius regio, eius religio* makes sense here. As Portuguese missionaries noted about Siamese rulers, although he is second only to God (whatever God might refer to here), he is not the lord of souls, but only of bodies, and hence doesn't force any tradition onto the populace. (Alberts 2013) A ruler might introduce new rites, techniques and symbols that seem powerful and useful to him, though not at the expense of all that was before. One might presume that if something new is introduced by the powerful and prestigious, it will travel easier and spread among the populace; unless it is prohibited in order to create class-difference, then it might travel as parodic variants. The making the other same is never total (as secular Christians would have it in their projective habits) in Buddhist or other such teachings. Otherness is a matter of establishing connections and with it new tools to deal with this world. Accordingly, Siam was and continues to be a place of confluence of influences. (Siani 2018) The thought experiments of Tachard and the mathematician, however much they appear to sincerely draw on local knowledge, are necessarily enmeshed with their own conventions. Yet, this is why their reading today is so generative, the encounters clearly rendered their own reality in a new light, making evident that some things taken for granted can be very different. This is what makes it legitimate to treat the two as proto-anthropologists, which in turn generates interesting resonances with other encounters with difference.

The expanding *nomos* of the West continued to have troubles convincing anybody of its imagined essential superiority. An open, inquisitive attitude toward Western teachings and technologies appears to have existed, and indeed Buddhist tradition specifically is said to stress that one ought to experiment to verify what works and what doesn't. The in many ways fundamental incompatibility of approaches was remarked upon by others:

The *talapoins* never dispute with anybody about religion. Talk to them of the Christian or any other religion, they approve whatever you say of it. But when a man offers to find fault with their religion, they answer coldly: “I have been so complaisant to approve of your religion, why do you then not approve of mine?” This was written in the Memoirs of the count de Forbin, who was also part of diplomatic missions to Siam in the late 17th century. About two hundred years later, the ambassador to King Mongkut Sir John Bowring noted other Siamese objections: “If God be the father of us all, why did he not reveal His will to Eastern as well as Western nations? ... If miracles were worked out to convert your forefathers, why do you not work miracles to convert us? ... How are we to know that your books are true? You tell us so, and we tell you our books are true; and why do you not believe us, if you expect us to believe you?” (van der Cruysse 2002, 141)

Bowring was told that in different countries spring different religions, and one cannot tell which is right or wrong, but it would be nice to pray for blessing to all or at least your respective gods. This is a logic of the ‘and’ – it is better to add deities than to subtract. An unknown Jesuit of the 17th century expressed his irritation at the locals in less than pleasant words:

Each person gives his own reasons for this extraordinary inflexibility of the Siamese, but all agree that the extreme stupidity of these people and the beliefs they hold from the priests of their idols are the two principle causes. The desire to learn, so natural in man, seems entirely extinguished in the souls of these barbarians. They have no taste for painting; they are without curiosity for the mysteries of mathematics; they set little value on watches and those kinds of jewels which are the passion of all other nations in the Indies and which provided the first entry for all the missionaries of the Gospel to all the kings of the Orient. (Ibid.)

One can but wonder who it is here that is without curiosity and perhaps fold this wonder back onto one's own research practice. I merely hope that this text has offered an account of a very different cosmos, one that explains part of the radical difference between these two worlds that had been in indirect and direct contact for quite some time. Tachard is here, to me, a ‘true’ anthropologist in

Wagner's sense for he, unlike countless others, attempted to understand difference as difference and thanks to that he created concepts, images, and narratives which show his own Christian tradition in an entirely different light. They are transformative. These encounters, as those in the very south of Latin America, or those in Chinese cities or on the shores of the Caribbean, were not symmetric, as each participating side understood the other somewhat differently. After all, and I paraphrase Viveiros de Castro (2014) here, the other of the Other is never exactly the same as the other of the Same. On the one hand a cosmos which has to make everything the same, on the other one where difference, change and variety is the stuff of life. And everybody seemingly, albeit differently wanting a piece of the economic pie. In the midst a Jesuit who creates a partial mirror in which there is a world, where his own tradition is but a subset of the teachings of the *Talapoins*.

As the research on the past has drawn almost exclusively on texts, written at that by people not particularly aware of technologies, media and other non-human conditionings, the nexus of media and Wagnerian culture has become a distant variant. It will now return as the focal point turns toward the speculative present and future.

Future Is Now

18. Karmanetics: A Media Theoretical Recoding of Buddhist Ontogenesis

This is an experimental act of reframing and redescribing.¹⁸⁹ Instead of the common practice where a researcher or lay enthusiast points out that this or that doesn't make sense, is or isn't compatible with (a monolithic conception of) science or doesn't fulfill the criteria of Western feminism and morality, these pages are built on precisely those moments where logic seems to break down. This is where thought happens and what such fragmentation enables is to put into question the common Western framework within which Buddhism is created. What is kept as stable as possible is the prospect of a Buddhist worlding and what is exchanged is the modern Western ontological framework typically projected as inevitable. Instead a framework constructed from media theory and other fields that enable non-representational operativity is generated. A central challenge when dealing with Buddhist potentialities as put into words has always been that words seem to project a stable world, while Buddhist teachings affirm primary change. Habitually, this meant that Buddhist truths are ultimately ungraspable by language. However with new conceptual tools at disposal a more fluid world can be written. What connects many critical theories and Buddhist thought is the challenge of putting into words and concepts something that eludes such stabilization. This is what makes certain philosophies so challenging to engage. Thought occurs where certainty and habit break down and the entire infrastructure and imaginary have to be reconstructed. Practitioners of classical Buddhist studies and their unconscious ontological projections might find themselves bewildered. Countless elements of worlds are brought into contact with Buddhist thought that are outside of what is typically taken for granted. This leads to a transformation of the entire infrastructure of Buddhist worlding or Buddhaverse, as well as the one derived from the contemporary theories that are actualized. Any reception, any thought occurs in specific historical conditions of complexity that make it possible as well as limit it. Complexity is such that things don't line up neatly and can't be fully grasped – the illusion thereof arises from the practice that just assumes primary coherence which precludes any efforts to actually trace the conditions from which one thinks and acts. Once the position of a thinker is included in thought, once the conditions of research become part of research, all becomes dynamic. The world (in general and as a body's affordances) is changing continuously, multitudes of new objects and concepts and possibilities have appeared and made it into scientific imagination – few of them have

¹⁸⁹ The development of the chapter has been heavily conditioned by the media theorist Christopher Vitale's blog *Networkologies*, particularly the posts on all things Buddhist. It is the first time, countless years ago, I encountered an engagement with Buddhist tradition outside of the dominant individualist, humanist framework.

made it into the worlds that engage Buddhadharma. The writing here is a correction thereof and came as a necessity as the impossibilities and limitations inbuilt into the ontological presuppositions disclosed themselves as irreformable face to face with how Buddhadharma as well as other worldings developed. As with many fields, once they are firmly established feedback circuits are closed off or minimized. As institutions and definitions are mostly settled, once fluid and emerging categories and objects of thought become heavy with world, they become real and appear as given or simply existing by themselves (in some parts of the world). Most research that remains based in disciplinary divisions turns to be surface play of signifiers, scholastic debates that can't touch the reality of things, critique of categories that can run on endlessly, for critique produces itself, without leading to any material-semiotic reorganization of matters: critical approaches (not just in Buddhist and religious studies) demonstrate the contingency of foundational categories and finish at that. In other words, they remain idealist in practice even if they are based in materialist analyses. And even within the general scheme of being only as thought, as contemplation, the encounters with otherness that are staged don't impinge on the infrastructure of thought, on the basic constituents of the Moderns such as projective universalism, a neutral ground or the human as individual preexisting any other reality. Critiques point out that such entities are not universal, but in order to actually change anything, it is necessary to work out alternatives.¹⁹⁰ The following pages are a speculative discursive materialization of such a project. The point is to reorient thought in such a way so as to cut habitual ties to what is taken to exist (representational thought based in identity) and instead attempt to let future possibilities actively enter into what is being put together. The former, the reality as is, those categories that are already established enter anyways, they have been made part of the world, their weight, their reality exhibits a pull on any speculation that arises from thorough engagement with what is – speculation that emerges from frictions and fractions, speculation propelled by resistances, speculation that is materialist in the sense that materials (however composed) are confronted in ways that makes new connections/combinations arise. A democratic research practice in that it doesn't try to hide its own operations, its own propagation of some things in the world as given and others as subject to change.¹⁹¹

¹⁹⁰ For example by taking the Buddha and some Buddhist propositions for thought as given (such as dhamma, Thai ghosts, bidhikamma), as existing, instead of inquiring into their reality (i.e. historicizing, relativizing them), I can build an alternative to the practice of taking the categories of Moderns as given (including entities such as society, culture, morality, universalism, nature vs. culture, the self-congratulatory image of scientificity and rationality, many of which are clearly Christianity-derived) thereby destabilizing their naturalization. In this I follow scholars such as Viveiros de Castro (2014).

¹⁹¹ This is precisely what decolonial framings lay bare: the modern constitution silently propagates itself through engagements with its others. On the surface it pretends to be open while the actual operations remain closed to the Other.

Preliminaries

Karma has no equivalent in contemporary languages formed in the Greco-Christian tradition.¹⁹² Indo-European onomastics is obviously not everything. There is more to languages and worlds. Productive limitations all too often unacknowledged. Translations transform it into action and its effect. Or possibly also work or deed and consequence. Already connections are multiplying. Continue pretending words of different worlds neatly map onto each other and cut off the networks of associations and philosophical uses they have. Other research practices are possible. Buddhist teachings add one more element into the mix, it's action-effect driven by *cetanā*, intention. Karma accumulates to yield fruits, that is have effects. Accumulative effects of internal causes (*hetu*) come to be expressed under according conditions, or rather external causes (*pratyaya*).

The word cybernetics is composed of two parts, with unsurprisingly attic linguistic origins, drawn from Platonic dialogues, of parts that have had little influence on so-called Western thought until recently. *Kybernētikē* meaning all that pertains to governing, navigating, steering. Ancient Greeks were of course famous (for everyone but philosophers) for their seafaring capabilities and as merchants, and hence kept establishing transformative connections with others. However much that is ignored by the majoritarian edifice of philosophy and the image of Ancient Athens in favor of some culturally monolithic fantasy of patriarchal exclusionary democracy that still remains dominant in society at large.¹⁹³ The science studies scholar Andrew Pickering (2011) points out how there were immediate connections in early cybernetics and cyberneticists' ideas of/influence by so-called 'Eastern traditions.' Research as active philosophical engagement of similarities and differences, connections and crosspollinations meanwhile has been rather meager (Varela et al. 1991; Macy 1991; Varela & Poerksen 2006; Garland 2007; Shen & Midlgey 2007a, 2007b, 2007c; Moussavi 2010; also Pickering 2017 gestures in this direction) – as expected given the division of labor infrastructured by the separation and consolidation of disciplines. This here is a speculative writing of connections between karmic operators and cybernetics, mediated by the concept of *pratītyasamutpāda*. What is shared is a conception of the world that is generated through connections, where humans are a mere subset, and what we see is

¹⁹² As this chapter is thought to speak most decidedly to a general discourse on things Buddhist, I will use the Sanskrit derived versions of words as they are commonized, while in other chapters, as mentioned in the preliminaries, I employ Pali derived versions so as to stress the connection to the Thai fields I have been intellectually cultivating.

¹⁹³ For an alternative framing of the Ancient Greek world, one that is organized around openness and based on the Ionian coasts and islands of Anatolia, see Karatani (2017).

brought about via a generative matrix of experience. With *karmanetics*, Buddhadharma additionally actualizes in the crucial problematic of what a body perceives and how reliable sense impressions are. In the ever-changing matrix of emergence, nothing is and isn't entirely ever what it seems, as it is a result of complex webs of causes and conditions, temporarily appearing as stable to the body that experiences it. Another crucial distinction is that with *karmanetics*, karmic processes take the function of navigator, and they don't tend toward centralization.

What is operationalized here is a way of composing a text and the thought it makes possible that is rather distant from the cultural techniques of Buddhist tradition.¹⁹⁴ There thought happens through sūtras and oral preaching, as well as non-discursive imagery, architecture and practices.¹⁹⁵ The way modern writing and thinking operate is very different. An almost necessary ontologization happens, as the aim is for a coherent and consistent rendering of how the world works, albeit perhaps only in a small subset of the world. Buddhist teachings tend to be integrated in such a way to not destabilize basic unquestioned tenets, which shows among other things in the way research is written. New avenues must be sought instead. This here is one such possibility, a proposition say. As will be demonstrated, full coherence is impossible, and so the text itself cannot add up to any whole. But then, what does, once a sentient leaves behind the cultural presupposition of preexisting wholes. The Buddha was wary of those practices that betray a craving for certainty such as logical proofs. Hence the proclivity for paradox, even by the great Buddhist so-called logicians who demonstrate the impossibility of ultimate stability.

Buddhist thought is organized around practice and achieving effects, so in general not written/shared 'ontologically' as in being composed in a way toward coherence of an integrated system, clear descriptions of a world external to the words put together. Habit is what ties bodies to cycles of rebirth, even matter can be conceptualized as habit of energy. At one time habits were innovations, it is their success in a world that makes them coalesce into something that appears as a necessity. The tools developed by the various Buddhist traditions aim to introduce breaks in habits. This is eminently practical, regardless of the conceptual and imageric complexities achieved. What 'we' Western

¹⁹⁴ Buddhist tradition uses the term *saṅkhāra/samskāra* translated as formations, or 'that which has been put together' and 'that which puts together.' It refers both to conditioned things (that is all aggregates in the world) and more specifically to mental formations based on past conditions creating future ones, and as such relates to karma and dependent origination. There are countless alternative translations of the term. (Waldron 2003, 102–12) In short, composition, formation, fabrication and related concepts are integral to the tradition.

¹⁹⁵ And presumably everyday dialogues, which remain inaccessible for scientific appropriation.

Buddhist researchers (and practitioners arguably) do, is transform a tradition into the mediatic coding of a different kind of thought-practice, while most keep pretending (the obedient bourgeois idealists they are) that the way a thought is written, stored and passed on has no impact on that thought for matter and thought are considered a priori separate. What operates here is the assumption that words represent the world and more or less perfectly map onto it, and that translating from other languages and other forms does not lead to any significant transformation or difference (otherwise philology and linguistics would have moved on to a generative or connective model of translation or non-representational linguistic models). Not only the world is untouched by words, ideas are conceived as stable entities represented by words, and as is the world, they too are unchanged by translation into a different language and the cosmology it actualizes. It is commonly pretended that writing Buddhist teachings organized around entirely different principles of putting arguments together, more often than not vacating the thought of as much imagery as possible (the modern Puritans with their imperial illusions of a neutral language!) somehow does not constitute a major recoding on innumerable levels.¹⁹⁶ This text too is a recoding, albeit one that acknowledges this process and the creativity inherent in translating worlds. It is an affirmation of the force of different traditions of thought and the possibilities that connecting them open up, hopefully on equal grounds and not as has been customary in the Modern constitution, as a one-way street. Connection is transformation.

An Improper Manifesto

1. The world is never finished. Karma begets karma. Act(ion) begets act(ion). There is no clear division between objective world out there and subjective one in here. Imaging and imagining are and are not the same.¹⁹⁷ Karma is always at work. The world has always existed. When all is connected nothing just

¹⁹⁶ This is a tradition, a thought suffused with mandalas, parables, colors, beings and architectures, a thought in which even a unit of measurement begets a story, all intimately connecting to material practices. A profoundly material manner of constructing time: *kalpa* as a measurement of time is defined by a monk walking in circles around a boulder, his coat swiping the boulder every once in a while because of a rare breeze; when the stone erodes to dust completely by nothing but those occasional gentle sweeps, a single *kalpa* has passed. It is pregnant with this potential, as not all is actual in all variations of the endlessly developing tradition. These potentialities can be discerned retroactively as new things appeared and patterns that keep repeating demonstrate the dormant powers in the more straightforwardly pragmatic versions.

¹⁹⁷ “On a day-to-day basis, we, as human beings, often consider imaging as an operation of the consciousness, a process in which vision – our neurological system's bare cognition of a field of photons – is turned into recognition. Thus, the resulting image out there confirms our knowledge of reality, sense-certainty and subjectivity. The image, and the sentient body that images, are also believed to have their own existential values. Meanwhile, imagining is considered a mental process that relies on memories of previous perceptions and recognitions, seemingly without the aid of any external sensorial stimulations. The resulting imagination, or even the imagining mind, appears to be ungraspable, transient and non-existent. However, what makes us so certain that those sense data that we claim as being external to our body, which

begins and ends.

2. There is a speculative potential to be accessed in the way Buddhist dependent arising would describe the world. Propose a description of the world. Think with an ephemerally acentral networking continuously transforming imagination that offers no ultimate ground. One from which the One is not even thinkable, as all is immediately many. No tower of Babel in sight and neither the image of tracing the language-ethnicity complex to a single origin which so persistently keeps organizing much of modernity.¹⁹⁸ One where localities are intensified interdependence enmeshed.¹⁹⁹ One where perception is the effect of such ties of the past composing into the present future. The common mistranslation when reworking the Buddhist cosmos is automatically filling in an image of reality as given and preexisting the human as a general, substantive category. All the while, the two truths (*dvasatya/dvasacca*) state clearly that what is seen by a human body composed of the six senses is a karmic construction. Imagining and imaging are distinct and inseparable operators. A generative tension in Buddhist worlding as practical conundrum: one shouldn't cling, but only something relatively stable will enact the difference for controlled transformation. And, in a variation, how to use conventional pointers without making them into/treating them as independently stable ground. Change is relative to the position of a body. Absolute change, pure transformation, cannot be grasped by a common body. (Deleuze & Guattari 1994)

3. There are two truths.²⁰⁰ What is commonly described is what is seen, that is the conventional truth. Here, countless sentient beings reborn as humans make category mistakes: they project their own conditioned perception as a general one, the same for all the world (naive realism). They think: what I see is reality independent of my bodily constitution. Body, self and world are treated as disconnected. The second truth, called ultimate, says all reality is empty of inherent characteristics. In other words, it

constitute the difference between imaging and imagining, are not part of our imagination?" (Fan 2020, 364)

¹⁹⁸ By now, multiple origins, but the principle remains as well as the orientation of attention toward past linguistic commonality to the detriment of continuing creativity and interaction. Nowhere is this more strongly felt than in Indo-European linguistics. What world could be if linguistics and philology would start building their theories and implicit assumptions on indigenous languages of the Americas or Africa?

¹⁹⁹ The complexity of interdependence in a node (body+location/internal+external cause) of *praṭīyasamutpāda*, if viewed from there, increases (at least before the recent technological transformations of the world). While a body as *karmacode* in a distant location might be connected through pasts, bodies surrounding each other in the present necessarily co-create shared karma to much larger degrees than more distant ones.

²⁰⁰ A distinction is made between the conventional, common sense language (*saṃvṛti/saṃmuti*) and 'ultimate' language (*paramārtha/paramattha*). Common language employs metaphors and doesn't directly express higher truths. One might be aware of related uses of linguistic distinction in the uses of common language and philosophical or generally research conventions, as well as the unfortunate convention of many, even among researchers, mistaking the one for the other.

is non-perceptible, for perception by common sentient beings reifies and makes appear as stable, what is actually changing. Bodies are conditions and limits. As for what the Awakened perceive, it's hard to access for the common body. So this here is a speculative proposition, a redescription of the world where all that appears conventionally takes on different operations when put in relation to dependent arising networks. Phenomena that appear to a perceiving body are not the ultimate reality.²⁰¹ “However, Buddhists acknowledge that, because the ‘right’ view needs to be locally defined, different views of rightness will exist. Therefore, overcoming ignorance is an ongoing process requiring dialogue, not an end state that can be achieved once and for all.” (Shen & Midgley 2007a, 179) Thus there is more (or less), there are no entities/objects/things/concepts in general, all are local occurrences secondarily subsumed into categories for practical reasons, namely communication.²⁰²

4. All is determined that is conditioned and hence empty of own-being (*svabhāva/sabhāva*): “For Buddhist scholars, all forms are initiated and extinguished, from one moment to another, from a layout of interdependent relationships. Hence, forms are by definition empty of existential values. The substrate-form divide is therefore a logical violation of this axiom.” (Fan 2022, 7) The general law of dependent co-arising (*pratītyasamutpāda*) lays out a pure relationality as all emerges in an interconnected process of becoming. Causality here is complex and non-linear. Common sense causality, even in societies that operationalize karmic knowledge, is but a simplification of this complexity. Alternative translations of *pratītyasamutpāda* include interdependent origination or interbeing. Because everything arises interdependently, all that is depends on other parts and as such is impermanent (*anicca, anitya*). A mental experiment: if only one thing changes, as all is connected, indirectly all others will change as well. All things then are empty of essence or intrinsic nature (*asvabhāva*). *Dharma* is both “universal cosmic law [...] and corrective process [...] both the source of cosmic order and a means of liberation from the world.” (Olson 2006, 80) *Dharma* as teaching is the corrective process, and when thought in this way, it becomes evident that Buddhadharma is about intervening into the constitution of the cosmos as well as employing an accurate description of some of its processes, so as to increase the intervention's effectivity. Meanwhile *karma* can be taken as a subset of the general law of causality and dependent arising. It is the one where *cetanā* or

²⁰¹ *Anātman/anattā* commonly rendered as the doctrine of no-self or more precisely without self-existent essence, relates to all bodies, not just the human subject. An indicator, if anything, of an an-anthropocentric conception of the world. Any focus on subjectivity has practical reasons, as it is the position from which a common sentient being necessarily experiences world.

²⁰² Innovators such as Nāgārjuna excelled at playing games with categories/concepts, at using language against itself, demonstrating their emptiness and their arbitrary relation to an outside of discourse. (Waldo 1975)

intention/volition/directionality combines with causes. Directionality is a potent image to think with. As acts including intentions appear continuously – a world on auto-pilot producing this complex connective tissue that binds – but only when the directions match, when there is an overlap, is karma specifically generated, otherwise it's just the regular entanglement in dependent arising. Here, the singular mind-body enters the scene. Causality is expanded by an element and at the same time somewhat reduced as intention must combine with a given action. If anything, it is an intra-action.²⁰³ One must be cautious to not immediately insert the concept of a subject or individual, for this remains a world built on discreet but relational units of actions or acts combining in different ways, making the subject experience an effect. The experiment here is to reframe in such a way that the common experience of subjectivity will disappear. Karma as a sort of memory of the universe, as well as a personal trail, that is subset of the cosmic karma. An externalization or coding of what remains of acts (past) that condition new acts (present/future).²⁰⁴ In short, *karmacode*.

5. All is determined and not determined. The anthropologist Alan Klima (2002) paints a picture, a differentiation between humans and animals. Sentient beings share an a priori connection by virtue of karmic operations. This does not have to be thought as primary connection and secondary (bodily) difference – if multiplicity is applied, then it becomes possible to conceive sentients as at the same time sharing a connection and being different. Commonly, humans remain determined by passions, yet there are those enacting correct practices to eventually escape that determination. In other words, enact a break with habit. So, first, the composed, composing, decomposing entity (always changing) that is a body with the emerging self-image (based on the interaction of the five senses and mind) has to be mostly determined (*saṃsāra*), otherwise what good is all that which the Buddha discovered? One would find oneself in a world where the concept of the subject is self-positing as in Euro-modernity. But no, Buddhist teachings show the relationality of all. *Pratītyasamutpāda*. Nets or webs that link past action to present in various degrees of complexity, indirectness and delay.²⁰⁵ Which is one of the many

²⁰³ Unlike 'interaction' which postulates bodies existing before participation in mutual action and with that action as an inherent property of a body to be exercised, 'intra-action' conceives of agency as a dynamism of forces where all entities are constantly diffracting, mutually causing and inseparably operating. (Barad 2007, 141)

²⁰⁴ This can be famously modulated and further entangled with contemporary practices such as merit generation and merit transference. It's like hacking into a local memory carrier (hard disk) connected to the vast and growing world wide web to change the information, which leads to a transformation of the whole web. Said hacking of course being conditioned by the web in the first place.

²⁰⁵ In Japanese Buddhist worldings, *pratyaya*, external causes, are translated as *En*, and explicitly employ the imagery of webs: "More broadly, en connotes ties or relations (*enishi*), invisible orders beyond human knowledge, which form webs around all things in the universe. One can neither predict nor comprehend the design and work of en. However, though usually invisible, the threads that connect humans and nonhumans may be brought to attention through unexpected

places doctrinal disputes set in. “The actions we do, with our feet and hands as well as with our mouths and meanings, indeed, even with our thoughts and intentions, leave traces on the spirit, leave their imprints in the heart, and echo long after in the mind. Most people have some awareness of this causative relationship.” (Klima 2002, 270) The anthropologist draws on a scene an orange-robed monk once used to explain the operation. In this text it is recoded into a different kind of language than used in the reference and refracted, splitting into more versions as each thing is a multiplicity. It is here that different worlds are created, in the scenes that are used for thought and become common in a society's imaginary. It must be pointed out: which Greco-Abrahamic entity has ever thought with an example composed in this way? It is the scenes to think with, to do ‘empirical philosophy’ with that come to form different worlds, and the intuitive manners thought composes will differ. (Mol 2002, 2021) A further unspecified human kicks a dog. This splits into two possibilities, two futures. The human feels bad, has some (refined) sense of consequences. Doesn't feel bad, goes on kicking, over time becomes increasingly less sensitive to suffering (that which Buddhist teachings want to eliminate), unpleasant feelings stop arising when causing suffering to others, this insensitivity making it less likely to notice what is being done to the mind, eventually if enough repetitions occur one's character becomes changed in this direction and more and more such acts will be committed leading further down the insensitivity path and so on and so on.²⁰⁶ Acts beget acts and give rise to feelings and perceptions, all conditioned by the past. The past as actions already done coded according to the laws of karma, driven into the future. Acts of futures past. A different human feels bad about kicking the dog. Insight arises and next time the human and the dog meet, perhaps no such direct suffering is perpetuated as self-control is enacted. Other solutions to the annoyance of a barking dog sought. Which eventually accumulates to different habits and a different set of past actions comes coded as that which this human has come to be.²⁰⁷ “In the Buddhist reckoning of kamma, thoughts piled one atop the other eventually spill over and become intentions. Intentions piled up become actions. Actions accumulated become habits; habits amassed become character, and a character sustained becomes a destiny. In this model, significantly, generosity is skillful: it gives you beneficial thoughts, beneficial intentions, and leads to beneficial actions, habits,

meetings. Actualized through chance and coincidence, en forms the reason (*kotowari*) behind all things in the universe.” (Jensen et al. 2016, 160) Though there has been no systematic study of cosmic net/web imagery in Buddhist traditions, there have appeared very popular image-concepts such as Indra's net already in the Indic tradition.

²⁰⁶ This is a principle that works regardless of how any individual act is classified.

²⁰⁷ “Habituation is when thoughts and actions become ingrained and automatic, while de-habituation involves the interruption and removal or replacement of habituated behaviors. Habituating forces come from action (karma) and its residues (*vasana*; *samskara*) while de-habituating forces come from analytical insight (*vipasyana*). Liberation comes from removing cognitive, perceptual and emotional limitations, which can be achieved by a process of contemplative exercises, including meditations.” (Shen & Midgley 2007a, 172)

to a beneficial character and, eventually, to a destiny.” (Klima 2002, 270–1) These are ideal-type cases at each end of the spectrum of possibilities. In the flux of life, all kinds of action mix, and often whether it is wanted or not a habit will undermine good intentions. Karma is habit in a sense, though conceptualized more broadly than just pertaining to bodies. And the dog? A slight reframing of the focus in the scene yields a complex answer: *karmacodes* entangle, hitting and being hit connect (to) two different bodies. The canine too comes to be different by being hit, by which past bad actions are undone. The boundary between (non)self and other is muddled, as in complex feedback loops actions on others beget actions on future selves. It matters which scenes are used to think with. It matters which parts of the scene are used to think with.

Non-human animals here have less options than humans, as they are more intuitive meaning directly influenced by stimuli, by their immediate surroundings. One could say, more in line with contemporary science and in a variation on von Uexküll and Bergson, that the higher the complexity of a sentient being, the more of a potential gap is there between input and output of action. This is the ‘center of indetermination’ articulated by Deleuze (1986, 62). “Free or indeterminate actions are ones delay re-action, meaning that action is no longer restricted to a present one that is always beginning again.” (Pearson 2005, 1116) It is in this spacing that the transformation usually coded as learning occurs.²⁰⁸ A dog learns too, even if different breeds learn differently, and might stop perpetrating the action that led to her being hit. An action, viewed from the middle, from within the action is not so clear. On its one end, it might be karmically bad, on the other good, as it is negating past bad karma. Media theoretical shifts in perspective, explorations of a scene, enable new thought, such that is not contained in the Buddhist canon, yet remains Buddhist insofar as it explores manifestly Buddhist scenes, connections and concepts.

6. So there is determination, via repetition/accumulation as *karmacode*, but also something in outside of it, a sort of disengagement from karmic cycles. Where is such indeterminacy located? “And no one could survive very long without some ability to detach from cycles of kamma. They would just

²⁰⁸ Spacing here occurs as spacetime relative minimization of direct causation of some elements. It has nothing to do with an empty space of nothingness as conceived in Occidental tradition. It is however consistent with emptiness of Buddhist teachings as emptiness points to a dynamic made possible by everything having no essence, thereby being continuous change and the making and unmaking of connections. The conditions of such spacing can be thought as overdetermination, in the sense that because karma is so complex, there will necessarily be internal causes that in certain external causes contra-act each other, thereby enabling almost imperceptible changes that can eventually add up into a systematic redirecting.

follow their first impulse and, who knows – splat – be hit by a car because they saw an ice cream stand across the road.” (Klima 2002, 270) Animals and humans under the spell of their immediate desires and whims, or alcohol and other substances that take away the distance to surrounding conditions (social conventions can be included here) afforded by a body as sense-mediation, will be more tightly bound by these cycles and with it immediate reactions to stimuli. The indeterminacy however is stochastic, it can appear anywhere – the difference would be in whether or not constantly appearing indeterminacies will eventually accumulate into a divergent path. Spacing between action (external) and reaction (internal). Generally local conditions and personal *karmacode*. All is entangled. The Buddha found ways out of this determination. These are encoded into the world as Buddhist teachings. As technically, part of the dharma is beyond language (for language reifies and cannot fully communicate the dharma, and as such, cannot ever be fully representational), all manner of practice is necessary.

7. As there is indetermination, paths are multiple. This much is obvious in the path of the Buddha and the different ways to achieving nirvana by humans, the *pratyekabuddha/paccekabuddha*, ‘a buddha on their own,’ being particularly intriguing to think with. Those that inadvertently walk the path of this ‘solitary Buddha’ or *pratyekabuddhayāna*, achieve liberation from the cycles of karma on their own without a teacher. Insight can be achieved because that is the way of the world, though this insight might be accidental (from the position of the practitioner) compared to doing so following Buddhadharma and connecting to the institutions that ought to support its transmission. There is something in the world that makes it unpredictable. *Pratyekabuddhas* have a crucial limitation – they cannot teach the dharma and usually are considered to appear only once the teachings have been lost. Only those that attained the omniscience and supreme compassion through complete awakening (*samyaksambodhi/sammā-sambodhi*) may do so. Attaining nirvana by oneself doesn't generate supreme insight into the workings of the world in ways that can be shared. Correct dharmic knowledge, the one attained by the Buddha, increases certainty²⁰⁹ and enhances the personal path far beyond the borders of the incessantly composing individual *karmacoded* body.

8. In a Buddhist world where all occurrences/events have a cause, condition and effect, the

²⁰⁹ Even when guided, much more so when without a teacher, practices such as meditation (even more common ones) are dangerous for the body, after all, they aim at radical restructuring of all elements: “As I have explained in the incident of the crazed monk, I have witnessed people go into nervous breakdowns, for lack of better words, during the practice of Buddhist corpse meditation, including what clinicians might identify as psychotic hallucinations and fantasies. At the temple there is a short but significant history of the meditators whose ‘minds cracked’ (*sati taeg*), as they term it, at the sight of meditation imagery; most of them never recovered.” (Klima 2002, 203)

problem of how to relate these, especially given that past karmic conditions or *pratītyasamutpāda* networks aren't immediately cognitively accessible. (Shih 2000) A body must practice attention and attunement through repetition and thereby transform so as to improve the understanding of world and change one's relation to these known and unknown determinations. A localized body (only Buddhas and bodhisattvas achieve delocalization through omniscience and universal compassion) needs to constantly update their image of the world of causes past, present and future, and the relation between all elements. Karma may be produced and work automatically, but gathering indeterminacies into a larger effect is anything but. "Cause is the 'inner' (or immediate) requirement, while conditions are the 'outer' (or contextual) requirements for the effect. Therefore, in Buddhism, the cause is primary and the condition is the secondary requirement leading to the effect." (Shen & Midgley 2007a, 177)

The two truths are always a messy affair from the position of the unawakened. Cause, condition, effect, while distinct, relate directly and are hence inseparable. In their daily lives humans perceive the limited causes afforded by conventional tradition and remain reluctant to explore further, to unearth greater complexities, including their own actively contributing position within the configuration. Tacitly separating one's own actions from an external situation, as if they were not connected, is all too common. The 'self' position remaining unmarked, conceptualized as neutral, invisible. Misapprehending the complexities of interbeing tends to shorten the time-spans within which the world is conceptualized, with only that which appears as most direct causes and conditions of the past are taken into account and projected onto the future. The arbitrary cuts a tradition or culture enacts between the elements that can be related in the world and those posited as outside of reach, as eternal, ahistorical, Natural, Other or simply too insignificant to heed (within a naturalist framework) are what guides attention and leads to illusory projections of what the world is like. In itself this is the condition of *samsara* and not an unsurmountable hurdle. It becomes a problem when it comes to be mistaken for the entire world that is reified, to use a popular critical term. When what a singular human perceives in the world is swapped for the world itself, when the ego projects its particular condition onto universality.

9. Actions make deliberate things happen when cause and condition are favorable. "If the cause and conditions are not propitious, no matter how hard one tries, nothing will happen through the simple exercise of choosing a particular path. It must be emphasized, however, that Buddhist thinking does not

accept the idea of ‘destiny,’ because if all has been decided by destiny, nothing would exist that has not been foreordained, and there would be no purpose in evaluating actions as right or wrong.” (Shen & Midgley 2007a, 180) If all were destined, there would be no indeterminacy. If all were destined the slow accumulation of a different path through small repetitions guided by correct teachings would be unfeasible. Indeterminacy is possible, because the world is not finite, not a closed set, and not happening in one timeline, but rather time as myriad rivers of whirls, rapids, forkings and reconnections. The future would be closed, or at the very least if these were the teachings, sentient beings wouldn't be motivated to improve. Past actions have been completed and their effects will eventually come to fruition. The future however is ever so slightly open, with the relational conditions of the webs that bring about reality in general and a subject's in particular. All that is caused is itself cause. All that is caused is impermanent. Reality is an effect of past actions and perpetually transforming.

10. Reality in the Buddhism of Western worlds is often associated with illusion. Yet, not all illusions are made the same or of the same stuff. Different cosmologies bring with them varied conceptions of illusion. Different worlds compose of varied elements and different mixtures of material and immaterial parts. The illusion here is not one created by a demi-urge to mislead humans on their road to God, operating a binary: all I perceive is either entirely true or entirely false. (Aulino 2020) It is no world of idealist solipsism that starts with the human disconnected from the wider world and in the end arrives at nothing for it has already taken away all the creative powers of the earth and of the body, or rather the ability to perceive at least some of them in the making of one's body and reality. Once the a priori assumption of radical separation of self and world as infrastructured into the Christian realism of the Occident is learned to bracket, another Buddhist illusion-reality connection emerges. The world as such is not an illusion, rather what is experienced as immediate sense-impressions is. Or rather, mistaking the world as experienced, the one mediated by the senses, for the ultimate world is the illusion. As in the *Matrix* sequels (The Wachowskis 2003), what is seen by a human is a simulation, only not produced by malicious robots, but by the complex networks of causation. Whatever happens in the simulation, continues to have effects, is connected to the ‘real’ world of the anthro-robotic war. It merely isn't the ultimate reality, and, as what happens in the simulation has impact on what happens outside of it, neither is the other. Though it may be composed in more heavily material ways. What different, but similarly composed bodies perceive in one location is for each conditioned by personal

karmic history, yet will overlap as local conditions also enter the process. None of this denies the reality of the illusion itself. So-called illusions though they may be, they still have effects, such as tying a body into *samsaric* cycles, but also in more simple everyday effects as bodies always do things. If one body perceives a ghost and the other doesn't, a difference is introduced between the two, as one is affected by the encounter and the other isn't. Both are effects of different but overlapping networks of effects. The reality of neither is truer, however much it will seem to each to be so. Disputes about what is or isn't more real in general are futile, more about the ego attachment and only cause division. The only 'neutral' ground is the non-action of achieving nirvana and the body naturally disappearing without producing further attachments, ceasing to have effects in the networks of causation. So, adapted to a scientific framework without Buddhist soteriology, there is no neutral, disconnected position. There are however techniques (and accompanying discourse) that create experiences that feed back into common life in a way that bodies and their realities radically transform. A regular sentient being in a Theravāda world can, through the practice of meditation, learn that what is perceived is constructed, learn to swap different images of the outside which naturally implies that what is seen, is constructed and can be changed. (Klima 2002) Such are the achievements possible if a body follows the legitimate teachings in appropriate places. Inappropriate practices remain a necessary option. Experiments with thought are as possible as those involving complex corporeal techniques: Replace the 'reality' image with an 'emergent webs' image. Reality as seen by an individual body is conditioned, can be different, and should not be extrapolated as a stable thing out there. Each body moves through and as spacetime. What is seen is in a constant process of being composed through the activities of the world as described above.

11. This can be conceptualized as a surface/depth relation. The surface is conventional perception, as well as immediate reactions to stimuli taken. The depth is the past actions begetting today's, the complex causal networks. The world is depth and surface. Sentient beings are depth and surface, yet commonly mistake the surface for totality. For depth to feed back into surface consciousness takes work. Depth is complexity, connectivity and uncertainty; or at least awareness thereof, for a sentient can never grasp all of karmic causality: absolute depth is the lack of artificial cuts, relative depth (accessible to the unawakened) is the awareness of enacted cuts. Depth produces surface. Surface feeds into depth. Arising indeterminacies ripple through both. For all is connected. When all is connected, all is real. What is real, changes.

12. Buddhist teachings and practices (as if they were separable!) ensure that the most can be achieved of indeterminacies in the complex karmic causality.²¹⁰ These are Buddhist bodily techniques and the non-sentient infrastructures that support and enhance them. In a conventional framework this can be rendered as systematizing instructions for leaving the determinations of the past into futures alternative than the ones projected through accumulated past actions. Indeterminacies in and of themselves don't add up to different paths. After all, they are random. Buddhadharma, the teaching of the Buddha here becomes a tool that spaces out these (non)spaces that randomly appear between causes and effects. Being reborn as a human creates optimal conditions, as humans have a constitution that makes a relatively stronger unlinking of environmental cause and bodily action possible.²¹¹ Gradually the tradition came to form other, more material spacings. The ancient *samgha* for example, a formation that carries the teachings and around which varied technologies were developed in order to store the teachings outside personal human memory (among them the community of monks itself and the rules and innovations to prevent strife and separation), as well as architectural knowledges that include implicit information that bodies can transfer by working next to each other but can't exactly be put into words, plans or manuals. And all the connected bodies that carry with the implicit knowledges of human/technological practices and techniques that enhance conditions for bodies to be open to teachings and temples, the small objects, gestures, intonations that create conducive atmospheres, that support the propagation of Buddhist virtues such as compassion and equanimity.²¹² They are conditioning surface spacings that enhance human activities in transforming stochastic indeterminacy into different paths, new *karmacoding*, and eventually perhaps nirvana.²¹³ Small changes must be

²¹⁰ The relevant framework the 'most' refers to here is leaving the cycles of rebirth and helping others to achieve the same. Directly through teaching, or indirectly through all other kinds of support.

²¹¹ Deities and other celestial beings live in worse conditions in relation to awakening, as their environment tends to be pleasant and thus the desire to leave the cycles is reduced. Bodies and environments evidently relate, even as bodies can be displaced into other environments and carry certain conditions with them (see above, point 9). Internal and external causes are never entirely separable – a 'good' rebirth relates to a correct body as much as environment.

²¹² Virtues always combine with acts, one does not want to reduce Buddhist worlding to a kind of contemplative virtue ethics focused at what is good at the expense of how to achieve a world where more beings will act accordingly to what is considered good. To paraphrase a typical attitude of the Buddha: one can debate what is and isn't good for all eternity without doing one act that would actually enhance goodness in the world. From such a Buddhist position with its ontological base in acts (*karmology*), talking and contemplating the 'good' in the end appears to be more about ego projection/protection than anything else.

²¹³ For the inorganic is not karmically or otherwise conditioned for most of the Buddhadharmas that evolved on this earth for now. Only in medieval Japan did teachings appear, where everything in the world is karmic, dependent on arising. (Rambelli 2001) Meanwhile, plants have always been considered borderline in Buddhist worldings. (Findly 2009) This is to point out that the relative dearth, or general lack of awareness that Buddhist thought has tackled such problems, has more to do with Modern Western humanism/Christian realism than with anything integral to Buddhist teachings. Sharf (2013) analyzes how the always uncertain borders between sentience and insentience have been an issue for Chinese

sustained so as to systematize into larger ones, especially in an impermanent world this requires effort and complexity.²¹⁴ Material networks in the conventional sense must be established so that bodies transforming through spacetime (it itself transforming) can do so in support systems that stabilize the gains, that reiterate the openings afforded by indeterminacy. In other words, Buddhist teachings, practices, temples introduce spaces into networking determinacies or stops into these flows. Networks are at the same time processes, are as constant motion. As continuous change, any thing is always more and less than one thing. Any act is always more than one act, as it connects different karmic pasts by embroiling more than one sentient being. All these Buddhist cultural techniques and paraphernalia are performative and impermanent. They perform the spacing, enhance conditions for accumulating indeterminacies into a new path. They are temporary spaces where change can be effected. An infrastructure through which bodies (in the most extensive sense) are connected, mixed, slowed down, sped up, reoriented. Temple spaces, meditation practices as experimental laboratories where other realities and corpotentialities are touched, learned, found, outside of conventional life. As all is effect, practices alone can even in less propitious conditions lead to large transformations, yet they work best when combining with the conditions created by temples. Their constitution being honed and fine-tuned through centuries of adaptation.

13. When all is impermanent, all is subjected to determined differentiation. There are various kinds of beings with more or less intensive affordances which can reshuffle the configurations within flowing networks. The Buddha is beyond these categories and all of them at once. But that body is not of concern here, as the aim is to construct connections with scientific practices by articulating Buddhist worldings as ontological discourse.

14. An important difference is made. There are karmic entities (organic entities with *cetanā*) and non-karmic entities. Sentient beings produce *karmacode* that is stored and conditions the future of this ever-changing composition of karma and six sense-organs constituted through acts. Non-karmic entities, roughly analogous to the non-organic, influence the *karmacode* of sentients but don't produce any that would constitute their own. They have no 'internal' cause, they are all condition. Yet, the two

translators. Apparently unlike for translations into Western worlds, where the issue in general is sidelined. There is no neutral ground for translation and understanding.

²¹⁴ Locals, at least in Thailand, give many reasons for attending temples, or bringing parts of temple conditions through meditation apps. They attend temples to feel better, to be more determined in achieving goals, to calm the mind (playing games before sleeping seems to also do the trick for some), etc. Some for whom the Buddhist world is more present, there is also the possibility of more 'magical' activities to help with careers and loves.

mix in the webs of *pratītyasamutpāda* as all entities are effects. This is implicit in all teachings and made explicit in *Mahāyāna*: “That is, because all human (and non-human) actions are mutually influencing, we are connected in an ‘intricate web’ of karma, which is constantly changing. Recognizing this causes us to overcome a narrow, isolated view of the self and to then ‘engage meaningfully with others and pursue collective happiness.’” (Clayton 2021, 107) So to a certain extent *karmacodes* contain traces of asentients, most notably those of temples and ceremonial paraphernalia. Teachings and practices hover directly at the edges between sentient and asentients. Sentient beings differentiate through the complexity of karmic determinations or the affordances of indeterminacy. The world changes, new non-sentients appear, partly by mixing human things with non-human ones. Buddhist teachings and insights feed into the material-mediatic constitution of the world. Realities untouched by Buddhist teachings have different conditions. Realities touched by Buddhist teachings conceived idealistically, that is without them mingling with infrastructure, architecture, spatial and other organization, also differ, and in all but the smallest differences will in this regard be the same as the untouched ones. Nowhere is ever fully Buddhist, as these are teachings of connection and transformation. And yet there are degrees of intensity. Buddha-fields one might say, reconceptualized onto things.

15. Insight arises from analysis, by applying ‘correct’ teachings. Insight transforms that entity composed of six senses and a mostly coherent *karmacode*. Insight, an action, conditioned by *karmacode* enacts changes that feed back into the code, as the path seemingly laid out for the future changes. Actions made possible by the spacings in determination and sustained by Buddhotechnological infrastructure create circuits with the past/memory as *karmacode*.²¹⁵ These circuits are non-linear and span times too vast for a common being to perceive. An individual life (as conventionally conceived) is but that what is between two cuts of a karmic life/stream in a world without beginning. A karmic life is one of which rebirth as different sentient beings are just instances or rather continual variations. A common life of an individuated body, the experience of the world from birth to death is the phase between two edits of a vastly more expansive stream. Rebirth is a cycle of expansion and contraction, the material parts dispersing (radical transformation), the karmic carrying on as less radical transformation, until they combine again, as a new mixture at the birth of a new body. Rebirth is often explained with the famous image of a flame and two candles. The flame from the first

²¹⁵ *Karmacode* here is used to make distinctions easier, as in Buddhist tradition proper, this is just called karma.

lights the second, it is and is not the same flame. Causes, conditions, and effects. Karma affects the next life, but disappears once the effect is caused. *Karmacode* is an infinite swarm of karmas happening. The flame carries over the energy, like an effect, but is not the same flame, it just appears to be so. It is an effect of previous versions of the flame. *Karma/code* metamorphs continuously.²¹⁶

16. For Theravāda world-making, the way senses compose one's experience is through alternation too quick to be perceived without appropriate training so that it produces a continuous experience.²¹⁷ “According to Buddhist meditation theory, the magic of being operates by the fast succession of sensory occurrences, making it possible for one to cling to a singular self-identity, in this case as a ‘knower’ of phenomena, when in fact all that has happened is that phenomena were there.” (Klima 2002, 213) Translated into the language operationalized here: there are spacings between sense-impressions. Alan Klima uses the imagery of an electric fan rotating so fast as to appear a continuous swoosh. It is unclear whether this is his example or shared by one of the monk interlocutors. It is through memory as habit that these gaps are being bridged to make for continuity out of fragments. “It may seem to be seamless when we inattentively reflect on our *memory* of ‘experience’ in life as it is lived, with relatively low awareness. But when one pays careful attention, under appropriate circumstances such as reclusive meditation, practitioners report that it is not too difficult to see, for instance, that phenomena change from seeing, hearing, touching, and thinking, back and forth in a most fragmentary and startling way.” (Ibid.) Fragmentarity is primary, notably not a whole broken into parts to be reconstituted again into a whole that preceded. Rather, bits and pieces ever-changing and composing into the experience of reality as experienced/perceived by a body composed of the parts that make for a human, a process at once active and passive. This is why Klima mobilizes the analogy of cinema, a seamless motion created as a succession of images too fast for common human perception to notice. It is not just analogical, but ontological. The primary sensory constitution of the world as succession of fragments drawn from different senses experienced as continuity. This is not so much a statement about a fragmentary world but about body-world interaction. The technological dispositif of the projection system as a condition for extended cognition. Where sentients and non-sentients mix.

²¹⁶ The candle/flame image here operates analogously to film projection and even digital formats: what is experienced is the continuity of form via perception, yet underneath, that which carries and produces the form experienced continues to change. The form can travel so as to be carried by other material substrates made of the same components. The cinematic image or the computer interface are and are not the same. And there is always the subject that perceives all of this, that habitually creates continuity or mistakes one thing for the other.

²¹⁷ There is more to this than written here, with especially the concept of *viññāna* playing an important role. However, a variation of it was discussed in an earlier chapter, so the focus is on the parts most straightforwardly pertinent.

Meditation is a form of hacking the *karmacode* via material-habitual transformation. Training to make the world flexible. Teachings/practices mingle with bodies. Experience as well as dharma can never fully be put into words. Words used to describe meditation can be seen as more of a pointing toward the limits of everything, where disentangling from the endless cycles occurs. A common technique is the focus on breathing, where the borders of a body are traversed, on that activity, that mingling of elements that sustains life. Victor Fan, with a particular proclivity for the word ‘gradually,’ puts it this way:

When I pay attention to my breathing, I am gradually focusing on my biological mechanism of self-sustenance, thus allowing me to disengage myself from the immediate assemblage of causes and conditions that constitutes my state of anger. Gradually, the karmic impulses that initiate my process of becoming no longer operate on autopilot. Instead, I gradually engage myself in and know clearly the karmic impulses that are responsible for my consciousness’s initiation and extinction from one moment to another. By engaging myself in and knowing the generation and extinction of these impulses, I gradually become mindful of how each awareness functions as an assemblage of causes and conditions, which will inevitably produce consequences. I can then begin to take agency to ensure that these causes and conditions are initiated out of mindfulness, instead of letting my impulses run on autopilot. I can then make microperceptual choices between causes and conditions that would produce further mindful awarenesses and causes and conditions that would produce afflictions. (Fan 2022, 248)

The interplay of dependent co-arising, karma and indeterminacy as continuously discontinuous operation, its expedience differentiated according to conditions without a universal projective-descriptive rule. Whether in a (temple) space, deep dark caves, the presence of a Buddha, different parts of the body or in *Mahāyāna* worlds, on the internet and with robotic sentients.

The speculations proposed here are and are not Buddhist teachings. Unlike in a Buddhist cosmology, there are no soteriological aims, even though they cannot entirely be left out of consideration, as they are what conditions Buddhist knowledge-production. Some things, generally those in the furthest past countless kalpas ago, as the Buddha well knew, are impossible to know. The

same goes for conceptual work. Some starting point has to be chosen and affirmed, but not reified, essentialized. The speculations here aim at actualizing Buddhist principles into contemporary research. To lay out in some way that it is at least possible, and definitely generative, to engage other traditions in a way that the grounds for a two-sided communication with science are constructed. New worlds, new futures open up when classic disciplinary divisions are not merely disregarded, but actively reshaped in those conventions that seem so self-evidently necessary that often they don't even appear at all. This becomes possible the more implicit assumptions of a tradition come to appear for consciousness to grasp, which happens at the equal meeting of worlds, at least conceptually, whether they be coded as 'cultural' (in anthropology) or more material (in media theory, science studies), philosophical (in Buddhist studies) or at the rarest occasions, imageric (in anthropology, Buddhist and film studies). The goal of much recent research in posthumanities and related fields is to open the future to becoming different than the determinations we seem to be stuck in now. Which this text hopes to do by adding certain unexpected things and thinking them through as systematically as possible, as well as some propositions for writing different realities. To make the topic crystal clear, here at the very end, a paraphrasing of the endlessly inspiring and generative work of the feminist techno-science scholar Donna Haraway (2016, 176) offers itself: What if Western conceptions of reality had been developed from the start within Buddhist Connective instead of Christian Realist ways of worlding?

19. Generative Comparisons: Meditation and Cinema

1. Configuring Spacings

Whatever the level of analysis, neither complexity nor possible connections decrease. (Strathern 1991) Now, to reframing the analysis onto a spacing, where body (in a narrow sense) and environment enmesh to delay immediate action-reaction circuits so that new ones might be established. Where body affects and is affected, and, crucially, an incremental recoding of affect can be achieved. Affect is the capacity to form relations, which in turn are virtual links with other bodies that don't have to be actualized. Buddhist teachings and practices such as meditation are about reaching into the ways of the world and shifting, ever so slightly, what before appeared necessary, unchangeable.²¹⁸ Not so much representations of the world as tools or hacks. They come to be also countless other things. So, zoomed into one such spacing of the continually developing net of nets. A sentient body, a sensorimotor body, a center of indetermination as an expandable spacing in the fortuitous alignment of internal and external conditions conditions. A non-sentient infrastructure built so as to enhance rupture in the action-reaction circuits of sensorimotor immediacy and intensify virtual-actual circuits. All to increase indetermination: “Free or indeterminate actions are ones that delay re-action, meaning that action is no longer restricted to a present one that is always beginning.” (Ansell-Pearson 2005, 1116) Here, the Deleuzian and the Buddhist conception intertwine, as distinct cosmic frameworks chaotically inseparable. It is an affirmation of the necessary interconnection of thought worlds, of the articulation of the other through a known, of mutual transformation and entanglement. No pretense toward direct, unmitigated access to some eternally unaffected ‘-ism’ outside of history and material entanglements or other kinds of magical thought so prevalent in the statically imagined worlds of Moderns.

The media theorist Mark Hansen constructs a complex figure out of the intertwining of spacing, image, affect and milieu. He writes: “[A]ffectivity is precisely that mode of bodily experience which mediates between the individual and the preindividual, the body and its ‘virtual’ milieu: whereas perception appeals to structures already constituted in the interior of the individuated being [...]” (Hansen 2004, 8) There is some degree of heterogeneity in relation to individualized reality. A being is

²¹⁸ Prayer and other forms of Christian meditation are notably oriented toward and around God, as such are oriented away from body and experience as immanent process. Thus they have little in common with Buddhist meditation, especially once the actual practices and effects, as well as cosmological and ethical assumptions are analyzed.

never complete, never a closed set. “As the mode of experience in which the embodied being lives its own excess, affectivity introduces the power of creativity into the sensorimotor body.” (Ibid.) All framing, in a reversal of Deleuze's movement from body to frame, “reflects the demands of embodied perception, or more exactly, a historically contingent negotiation between technical capacities and the ongoing ‘evolution’ of embodied (human) perception.” (Ibid.) The sentient body as center of indetermination already is a framing function. Plugging Hansen's elaboration into the thought developed here, one might want to add a reminder: where there is framing, there is reframing. Centers of indetermination can be expanded with supporting infrastructure that reframes and with it modulates the virtual milieu from which individuation occurs. Immediate socio-environmental pressures to keep short-circuiting the virtual-actual relays of the sensorimotor scheme onto already stabilized and verified patterns are delayed in ritual sites. New circuits can be explored and stabilized, carried as transformed bodies outside of the ritual space. The preindividual milieu changes with the milieu in general. The outside becoming inside is never the same, and some spaces are built so as to enhance this possibility, so as to open bodies more than they are habitually. Cinema, however conceived, is also one of these spaces. Shared imagery leaks into so-called private ones, whether or not actively acknowledged – only there was never an entirely private individual-constituting memory to begin with. Most experience is shared for it emerges from shared spaces, though each sensorimotor body-image contracts what is around singularly.

Indubitably, bodies must come to be formed in environments that foster openness, so not just any sentient being from any society at any time will have the capacity for transformation. Especially those that came to be in societies of definite boundaries with fixed identities assumed to begin with might experience confusion or indeed nothing much at all. Open living is practice. Reading processual, decolonial, experimental research is practice. Everything is practice. Thus, even living as the illusion of being a fixed entity is practice. Meanwhile, praxis can here be defined as the active, conscious, aware bringing together of thinking and doing in a transformative way: a performing into existence of new combinations with awareness coded as feedback loops. Certain assemblages, here defined as ritual spaces, bring about conditions for praxis to emerge, that is practice that includes awareness, in combination with discourse composed of such concepts that makes it possible to stabilize such distinctions in each transforming body. These skills can be carried over to living through other situations, at least if conditions of direct heteronomy are reduced, if spacing between immediate

causation can appear. Once one habituates to open living, it becomes practice, with openness being an attitude and atmosphere, but not always an actively transformative learning. Following Tsing (2005, 1) it resides in the “sticky materiality of practical encounters,” which include practices and infrastructures and media. It is where things happen. Bodies habituated to not noticing incremental change, to transforming any small difference into already established sameness, until a large one hits them and they go into reactive shock, will not be able to learn and change and live.

If you look to God or ideas or Truth or whatever might be there up above the skies, without even triangulating with immediate surroundings, you end up dualized: either your version of the world or the world. Bodies habituated to some circuits to the exclusion of others. There are (ritual) spaces, such as the modern schooling system that operationalizes precisely this version of the world only to efface its own constitutive activity and posit the individual as primary, that enhance the turning away from the world toward an image of the world. There is nothing necessary about taking a random representation of what should be over constantly emerging versions of what is and could be. In order to achieve this, all varied experiences have to be cut off, designated as illusions, not in the active sense but as a developed and techno-culturally stabilized habit. With Buddhist(-derived) practical teachings bodies can learn to notice the emergence and dis/continuity of reality as experience. The relation between perception as already constituted structures and affect as occurrence from preindividual milieu comes to be experienced. The spacing and associated practices operate on a variety of distinct levels and have crucial effects: “Buddhist meditation could be very close to what Deleuze means with ‘radical empiricism’; it is a way to express openness towards the world (‘mindfulness’) as a first step in the dissolution of the subject (because, Buddhism and Deleuze agree, the subject, as representational, is an illusion). Whereas Western philosophy often exclusively relies on reason to gain knowledge of and insight into reality, thought, for Deleuze, has little or nothing to do with rational argumentation. He calls his thinking ‘intuition’ and ‘creation,’ leading to an openness that is, both in Deleuze and Buddhism, not the goal or the result of the practice of meditation or thinking, but rather an effect of it.” (Justaert 2017, 375)

Back now from general conditions of entering (ritual) spaces to the specifically Buddhocinematic configurations of the spacing entered here. Taking as a scene to think with one where cinema and meditation are said by a Thai Buddhist monk to operationalize analogously. Karmic spacings can

be enlarged as appropriate infrastructures based on centuries of experience and knowledge are built. Centers of indetermination made more indeterminate as the sensorimotor scheme receives a break from the immediate pressures of re/action. While ritualization as reiterative stabilization in principle operates continuously, these marked mediatic frames can be conceived of as ritual spacings where the virtual can actualize as variation in a more stable form. As Kapferer (2004) points out, ritual is a suspension of ordinary reality, and what is learned there can be used to pragmatically intervene outside of the ritual situation. A body enters, it is a nexus/interface in both cinema viewing/making and meditation/Buddhist ontogenesis. What happens here can be conceptualized by treating karmacoding or cinematic becoming as comparatively stable and overlapping ground: the Thai filmmaker Apichatpong Weerasethakul mentioned in an interview that a Buddhist monk once told him that meditation was like filmmaking. And that meditation makes film redundant. (Quandt 2009, 184) How to make sense of this? When conceived through Theravāda onto-genesis – one of its basic propositions being discontinuity between experiential instants – cinema and extra-cinematic reality show themselves to work based on overlapping principles, and in such a world cinema can operate as meditation. Cinema here refers to the situation and material organization of film viewing with the minimization of corporeal movement being crucial, whereby it obviously also plays a role which film is being screened. As for Buddhist teachings, here meditation specifically will be detailed. This will serve as a basis for the generative analysis of the operations of one of Apichatpong Weerasethakul's short films, *Ashes* (2012), as well as variations of this analysis with more industrially produced cinema. Through these it will be elucidated how a specific film can enact the *dhamma*. While each situation is singular in its composition of interacting elements and as such no film (whether or not considered as part of a situation) is self-same, the knowledge that can be constructed based on a coming together of elements (such as the use of unexpected theories) can be made to travel, that is disentangled to some degree from the situation of production, and subsequently aid in making certain possibilities in other film-going situations more stable, that is more real. This is an exploration of how the two grounds – cinema and meditation – while held separately for analytical purposes nonetheless enmesh. An articulation of a series of contrasting comparisons.

Cinema can be transformative. A body learns to see anew. Senses are reconfigured, if conditions are fortuitous. The same goes for meditation: “[...] meditation works. Now to a qualification that makes things more complicated: what it means for meditation to work – the work meditation does – is

different, sometimes radically different, in diverse contexts.” (McMahan 2017, 21) They work both metaphorically, as in being effective, and literally, as in materially laboring to achieve a certain effect, one that locally transforms reality for engaged bodies. In both situations the interest lies in the production of subjectivity. Meditation seeks to performatively cut habits of perceiving and mistaking what is seen for simply real, stable and given. Meditation works to undo the karmic ties that bind to *samsāra*, the cycles of rebirth, the continuous automatic production of causality. This is not directly accessible to common sentient bodies, only the effects on the constitution of experience as composition of perceptions are, which come to be the foci of meditation practices. *Karmacode* is the medium, the disappearing middle not appearing to consciousness, yet active and transformable nonetheless. In the Buddhist world of effects, the borders that separate a cinematic image and a common perception become indistinct, as all images act on the sentient body in one way or another. Reality is an effect of what a body, memory (past heteronomy) and the environment (present heteronomy) do in co-producing experience. For the images created in and as cinema to take effect, in general, sentient bodies must enter spaces where they are slowed down and kept stable, so as to free perceptive faculties and attention to be organized around that which is screened. A spectator becomes part of the cinematic economy of a film, its rhythms, forms, relations and transformations. A body is memory-habit and it is against and through such ground that new images connect and gain effect. There is an infrastructure made for enabling the cultivation of new feedback circuits of bodies entering and the virtual as past expanding with the images experienced, it persists through time. A sentient being (as memory-habit) and a concrete artwork are plugged in, the latter comes to be part of the image-body as memory. Regardless of where cinematic objects are produced, their effects always constitute via the body-memory coming into contact with them, in conventional modern words: they are dependent on culture. Because they enter into different worlds, they become different themselves. More than one and less than many – a connection of course is retained, which is why later in a different situation, a discussion for example can take place, as an actualization of a shared, but never identical memory. The act of thinking and of understanding through thinking is fundamentally different from the act of experiencing. Their effects differ.

Subjectivity individuates from surroundings, especially in situations built so as to make the borders between body and outside more permeable. Bodies, depending on where they are shaped, come to be permeable to different degrees and reactive to different stimuli. (Aulino 2020a) The cinema

assemblage is one of particularly desubjectifying powers, as anyone absorbed in a tensely constructed succession of images and information will be able to remember. The body is a nexus or interface in both cinema viewing/making and meditation/Buddhist ontogenesis. It is the position from which all this is accessible for a sentient being, unaware as it may be of preindividual milieu from which individualization occurs – the boundary ignoring affect. Two types of cinematic co-production can be proposed, reconfigurations of the action-image and the time-image. The *classical construction* found in industrial, narrative film-making is one of absorption, of becoming part of the cinematic economy of processual metamorphosis (of one discontinuous image into another) that conscious subjectivity disappears. It is a somewhat paradoxical experience as for the duration of absorption, a subject is by definition not aware of itself, and only when distance is gained, when for whatever cause the preindividual field regrounds itself more stably around the spectator's body and borders become refortified, can conscious awareness of any process arise. Hence, if as is habitual projecting this conscious experience onto experience in general, it is easy to misconstrue or ignore what was happening. When one begins with assumptions of Buddhist meditation techniques which focus on taking apart the flow of experience so as to notice glitches and discontinuities, such processes are easier to take note of. The *experimental construction* meanwhile is one that organizes attention on surfaces and rhythms. Its visuality can be said to be straightforwardly haptic. (Marks 2000) It's as if the surface of an outside stood directly against the surface of the inside, at the borders of the body qua integrated sensory system. And with that, sensing arises as something not simply given, but as something that develops, changes, something capable of learning. Immediate links between surrounding and perception are cut, open to aesthetic reconfiguration. Cinematic artifacts in general are composed of both, though one or the other will dominate as an effect, at least for untrained bodies. In the experimental pleasures of interacting surfaces, subjectivity qua consciousness can disappear too, as its focal point shifts toward the borders between inside and outside. Indeed, there is something meditative (in the common modern Western sense) in the effects of experiencing these types of cinema.

The cinematic apparatus as assembled singularly with each projection (which includes the film shown, seating arrangements, lights, atmosphere, what any human or non-human spectator brings with, etc.) produces a spectator position, a preindividual milieu, a virtual field which (temporally and conceptually) precedes any actual experiences of a spectator's body entering the assemblage. It operates a cut between experience outside and within. In other words, it enframes. What effects will or will not

succeed, are, in a Buddhist world, modulated by *karmacode*. Meditation aims at cutting the immediate ties to the surrounding from which experience emerges as an effect. A sentient body might be only composed in a way to become conscious of its effects, but that doesn't take away from the operativity on the preindividual. As for cinema, phrased by Richard Rushton (2009, 48), “there are only subjectivities formed by the cinema, by the act of going to the cinema and experiencing a film.” He names this a fusion between the spectator and the screen, implying an undoing of any clear separation between inside and outside, self and non-self. Such processes are challenging to grasp discursively, as the articulation occurs on levels of perception that are usually taken not just as self-evidently given and transparent, but are also (at) the very limits of perception. Something, that in good Buddhadharmic fashion has to be applied and experimented with by each body itself, to be verified and learned the usefulness of.²¹⁹

2. Traveling Technologies

World is transformation, immanent non-teleological evolution. Stability is relative resistance, not fixity or essence. New things material and immaterial form as various configurations, and some have widespread impact both desired and undesired, intended and unintended. Before cinema and after is a world of difference. Cinema as a general concept and technology and each film in particular relate always singularly to their outside. Indeed the gradual spread of cinematic media technology is one of the constitutive moments of modernity, recasting ontology and anthropology in a new light. (Kittler 1999, 115–83) It too happened through negotiations, human and non-human, and exertions of political and infrastructural power in the sticky materiality of practical encounters. It enacts new modes of becoming, perhaps also because of the uncertain ontological status of cinematic images, which in turn, in a fortuitously Buddhist manner, renders the realness of extra-cinematic reality unstable (Fan 2015, 193). A film as technology can exist by itself (the question is in what ways) and engenders a different reality effect than there would have been before (LaMarre 2009), which further differs with developing image technologies such as video. (Denson 2016) “Film historian Sophia Siddique Harvey has used the term ‘sensuous citizenship formation’ to describe the ways that cinematic effects like sound and

²¹⁹ “People may also not talk about their experience meditating because they feel that talking about one’s own experiences is to express a kind of hubris in focusing on one’s self excessively. They may also feel that part of the purpose and training of meditation is to decrease discursive thought and speech. Yet even with these shared tendencies away from narrative elaboration, understanding what mindfulness is like in meditation, and not just in social lives, is important, because it is through meditation that people train to develop and improve mindfulness, and it is through meditation that many of the lessons of mindfulness can be shared with others.” (Cassaniti 2018, 63)

experimental narrative reconfigure an audience's way of perceiving the world around them [...] As film reconceptualizes the audience member's sensory systems by opening up new ways of seeing, hearing, and feeling, the audience member leaves the cinema with a transformed sense of the city as a place." (Chua 2021, 106) Modes of perception and consciousness change, they can turn to day-dreaming, drifting off, of breathing spaces in worlds of constant pressure. Some of it specifically due to the material-atmospheric environs of cinemas. (Hanich 2019) It is the complexity and unexpected innovations arising from frictions of practical encounters of which cultural techniques form a part that resist any technological or other determinism present in so many theories unconcerned with the actual ways of worlds. Cinema and spaces related to it, co-produced by it can take on many functions and compositions, including commonly "invisible infrastructural interventions" (Chua 2021, 106) as they travel, translate, transform. Often techniques and signifiers of modernity and modernization, in Siam for example the fact that they were air-conditioned and could be public meeting places for heterogeneous audiences had important effects on the formation of what came to be. Ingawanij (2018) describes the emergence of itinerant makeshift cinemas, especially active in the northeastern and southern borderlands that connected anti-communist propaganda, spirit offerings and other activities. Films can also be made and projected specifically for spirits and at the same time create a space for underclasses to relax and watch films for free. (MacDonald 2017) Indeed the many forms that arose in the meetings of practices and challenges in Thailand can almost be said to be a subgenre of ethnography at the nexus of art and anthropology. Technocultural affordances will often remain invisible and unpredictable from on high and far, until they happen and are investigated on the ground by bodies trained in noticing the new without reducing it to the old. Worlds and things and bodies and everything changes when new elements are plugged in. As per the Humean Deleuze, relations are external to their terms, nothing is determined by the context it was formed in. (Baugh 1993, 20ff.) Yet, any thing, whatever it is composed of, brings with itself resistances, so neither will it be entirely determined by the new context. Some things are more mutable than others while still retaining significant consistency, others might appear to be the same, but when thoroughly analyzed, turn out to have changed irrevocably. Thus, just because some thing, however immaterial it may be, appears the same to some, its operations and environment have to become part of any engagement. When technological objects, highly complex entities with very often high resistances, travel, they change to some degree, and what elements exactly can transform or connect differently for an object (which includes the ways it relates to the environment including habits and conventions), will only come to

materialize through the frictions and resistances to where it has come to be displaced.²²⁰ Here, the interaction with specifically Buddhist elements of worlds return as the focus. How does a thing like cinema (which includes the technology, aesthetics, thought, imagination directly related to it) change, come to operate differently after touching Buddhist world-making? To construct conceptual infrastructures that relate to the material ones already put into place while honing the arts of noticing (difference) is the challenge.

The formation of various Buddhist world-making projects and philosophies obviously predates modernity as well as many nowadays common technological innovations. Even though many influential technical apparatuses draw on inventions from Buddhist or Buddhist-related traditions (such as printing, reproductive technology, cotton/celluloid, ...), the way they have come to be was dominantly articulated in the context of an emerging Occident as it is assumed to straightforwardly exist today. Technologies continue to travel, they are not exclusive in their attachments and allegiances. They enter into different assemblages, active arrangements of heterogeneous elements that continually produce reality. They are some of the many interacting constituents of worlds, always differing with place and time. While composed in (and transformative of) a Christian-Secular milieu, the specific assemblage of technologies, practices and imaginaries that came to form cinema, once stabilized, can leave and connect with other worldings to achieve other effects. In some areas of the world things like a self-contained individual, mind-body dualism, the concept of belief or a (seemingly) clear distinction between reality and representation simply exist, orient and do their work (varied as it may be). In others kamma, open bodies and shifting boundaries between what is and isn't real operate dominantly, while also changing. What Buddhist meditation techniques are or do in the first of these worlds is not the same as in the second. There may not even be significant overlap especially in the neoliberal appropriation of some of these techniques to enhance productivity. (Purser 2019) It cannot be overemphasized that kamma and related concepts are not beliefs, but as the anthropologist Julia Cassaniti (2015) phrases it, they are organizing principles of life. Much like liberal individualism or the belief in belief operates elsewhere. It is said that kamma is “both part of the self and part of nature.” (Cassaniti 2012, 304) As compounds of kammic causalities (beings) come to interact, effects never fully align. It is in these gaps that meditation comes to be practiced. Worlds where Buddhist traditions have been significantly stabilized and made present in their creative powers thus differ wildly from the

²²⁰ Resistance here means, it's not easy to make them work, often many other connected things are required, they are much more directly affected by environment than organic entities or thoughts.

Christian-Secular. Naturecultures, as per Haraway (2003), operate locally and differentially, not universally, and mix and develop. And cinema produces new modes of perception, which can enter unexpected contexts and become distinctly other. Bodies come to see different, and some bodies that honed their perceptive skills especially diligently through cinema can become attentive to the whispers and rhythms of the world that others might not ever learn to sense.

Spacing here is also a play of self-modulation and abandonment. Whatever the dominant composition of bodies and concepts in a place might look like, meditation techniques (especially those perfected and handed down body to body for centuries) work to undo conventional borders between inside and outside, between control and abandonment in one way or other. When conceived as corporeal techniques, meditation and shamanic practices come to be directly comparable and contrastable: “The shamanic techniques described by Kopenawa are better seen as technologies of abandonment, followed by a restabilization of the self in the world of the *xapiri*.” (Pickering 2017, n. 15) Conceptions of body and world make it into these techniques, Buddhist meditation (of whatever kind for there are many) makes Buddhist teachings real wherever it is applied, real at least to some extent. They also depend on where any continuously forming self can be stabilized enough for awareness to emerge from flux so that knowledge can be articulated and carried over to other realms and communicated to other bodies. Most Buddhist techniques as compared to shamanic practices from the Amazon don't seek to communicate with spirits but to undo the ties that bind past and future through the emerging present.²²¹ In experiencing a film, one is also carried into a multi-sensory realm other than what is generally taken as immediate surroundings – the environment disappears, becomes a medium. Techniques and technologies travel, plug in, transform and are transformed. Much of what happens does so outside of the realm seemingly easily grasped by language, and as experiences or rather memories thereof are translated into linguistic communication, it matters substantially whether this is done in a world where language is considered primarily fixed and separate, or one with awareness of linguistic creativity as well as potential limits of current grammatical structures.

²²¹ Shamanic practices are very much present in the region. (Brac de la Perrière & Jackson 2022) It can tentatively be stated that since Buddhas, bodhisattvas, and devas can travel between realms, similar techniques must not be entirely foreign to Buddhadharma.

3. Body as Nexus

The arts of noticing alteration between experience and articulation can be perfected. But first the common, idealist image of subjectivity as a separate interior experience with no distinction between senses, thoughts, words and experience is made, has to be swapped for a more open and less mysterious or mysteriously authentic concept of self. Employing Buddhist techniques without this occurrence certainly won't have radically transformative effects, only temporary soothings for productivity's sake. Subjectivity must not only settle in the body and gradually in the different meeting points of inside and outside, it must also grapple with the functions and compositions of words. Once a body learns to be in such a way that the space between world and word becomes part of everyday perception, with its operations of the body will also open up as anything but self-evidently happening. Body might be habitually framed as entirely separate from the surroundings and tautologically experienced as such, yet it is always connected, affected. The body nexus between subjectivity and environment co-constitutes both, is border that filters what is unnecessary for survival otherwise the system would overload and break down. Some environments and techniques make it possible to experiment with such limits, or experiment themselves and make it possible for these occurrences to arise to consciousness. Change is what is registered, so a body running in its habitualized ways through known spaces will hardly come to be shocked into awareness of processual minutiae. Spaces for such and other experimentation must also be experienced as secure and comfortable, so as for the body be somewhat freed from other automatic responses that enable its persistence.

Cinema is one such assemblage that significantly reconfigures the relating of body and environment, and with it the preindividual milieu from which subjectivity actualizes. Boundaries between self and outside shift. And so do the ways of past connecting with present, as other memories come to be actualized when experiencing a film than are sitting in a chair or walking. The Buddhist techniques thought with here, focused as they are on a body and its boundaries, also reconfigure the relations between body and environment, however they come as part of the body (the outside already become inside). Shamanic practices are also of the body, yet aim to leave the body and require a lot of another world to come with, the one to be restabilized in, wherever that may be sourced. What will be experienced and how, what remembered and what put into words, is conditioned by the world one lives in (far outframing awareness of it) and how it has come to be as memory to be actualized. The body-

subjectivity-environment-imagining complex can take on very different combinations and effects.

Buddhist meditation often organizes around attention and awareness, and the work it does is not only that which it would say so on the surface: “According to this participant, the body anchors the mind, i.e. it rescues participants from mind-wandering, the unending flow of thoughts that characterizes non-meditative subjectivities. But, according to interviewees, meditation goes beyond coming back the body; in fact, a new version of the body is enacted, illustrating the ontological capacity of meditation. While focusing on the body, practitioners report that it starts displaying new properties, often described as pins and needles, tingling, vibrations and warmth.” (Carvalho 2021, 10) And, further: “They became aware of patterns – and sensations – beyond their individual selfhood, often mentioning ancestors and family members, suggesting that meditative affect challenges ‘strict boundaries and separations between the historical and the personal, the psychological and the social and the material and immaterial.’” (Ibid., 11) Other effects reported by very dedicated Western practitioners include becoming “more receptive to vulnerability, extending [...] awareness to the fact that reality is impermanent and that there are no fixed boundaries between self and non-self.” (Ibid., 12) There is no doubt that meditation does something. There is no doubt that the language one lives in, has access to, will co-constitute the stabilization of its effects. Perhaps even the experience itself, but that is impossible to access and verify.

Buddhist techniques of self turn to body and process, fragmenting a seeming whole, and in doing so transform bodies. The insights into impermanence effectuated come with states of absorption, of ego dissolution, shifting borders. Subjectivity as formed by combination of body and environment, autonomy (i.e. heteronomy linked through time to previous environments, outside having become inside) and immediate heteronomy, internal and external cause, with meditation focusing on those mediating spaces, the borders to gain insight into constitution of the world as impermanence that is continuous change. From modulated shifts in attention arises awareness of the instability of self, and hence awareness of self not being the ultimate ground of anything. When watching a film, especially those of a dominantly classical construction, conscious subjectivity disappears as the environment from which it is formed expands. Experience produced from an environment more extensive than a body's conventional borders, which disappear in the process only to eventually (or periodically during the experience) reappear as borders (however porous). There and back again, but changed of course, as

nothing stays the same. As consciousness of self is generally the condition for thinking and experiencing the self, a habitual tendency to project that state into the past and future as always present appears. It takes work and appropriate tools to notice the alterations between different configurations of subjectivity. Importantly, different configurations of a separation/borders from the complex connective webs of causality enable the appearance of varied new elements. And it matters how these come to be linked back to the wider complex webs of social lives and imaginations.

With the tools Buddhist teachings offer, one can analyze what was before a black box of the experience of watching an absorbing film, and with that, cut some of the ties that bind. Experimental film with its orientation of attention to surfaces, another kind of absorption, one that highlights the production of new sensations and the borders between bodies like the most wide-spread kinds of Buddhist meditation operationalizes cuts more directly with less of a Buddhist framework necessary for awareness of such processes to arise. All continues to be a play of mediation – one remembers: a medium is the relational disappearing middle that shifts with attention. A body, a self, a technique, a technology, a world all can come to function as mediators and temporarily disappear. Nothing can ever be simply present in and of itself. What all of the scenes related here share, through the making and unmaking of connections, are glimpses of other worlds and with a destabilization of the necessity of what can appear as a given world. They can be framed as practices of speculation.

4. Details of Meditation

To experience a film is impossible without a body, no matter how much the conscious experience of a body disappears into the background with the classical construction, while experimental, haptic configurations of cinema surface a body's functionings to awareness. In any case, experiencing cinema is a continuously alternating double movement, one of identification and of separation. A film is a series of perspectives. Not perspectives on a world, but perspectives as world. Becoming part of a cinematic image economy is a unique type of continuous metamorphosis for bodies that become part of this assemblage. The world is always in the making, any ontology is always ontogenesis. Coming to realize that one's experience is a continuous process of production, a very material fictionalization, comes easier with the surface discontinuities of cinematic editing. When co-articulated with Buddhist tenets, worlds emerge where the shift from clear separations between reality and representation to

unclear distinction between the two makes it possible to analyze complexities in the interplay of realiting and fictioning in the material-semiotic compositing through one's body.

The overlap between cinema and Buddhist ontogenesis is not a necessary constituent, rather it makes for a possible world, as others where cosmological fictionings combine in varied ways with emergent materialities. No world is necessary. Theravāda Buddhist ontogenesis in particular is experimented with here, explored based on the body nexus as operating in meditation. According to the *Buddhasāsana* or Buddhist teaching, the human body is that which may serve as a way out of *saṃsāra*, the cycle of rebirths. It is that which links *lokīya*, the conventional worldly realm continuing *saṃsāra*, and *lokuttara*, the ‘supramundane’ states, that is the dhamma way.²²² Two frameworks for bodies to become within, nothing ever has to be what it seems. It is only through and as a body that conventional perception and with it karmic production might be altered. The effects of such practices transform bodies in everyday life: “By crafting calm and coolhearted emotions, one is able to more easily let go of affective attachments.” (Cassaniti 2015, 31) The conception of heart here differs significantly from English. ไฉน, *jai yen*, *yen* meaning cool and *jai* heart in the mostly Buddhist sense, that is heart-mind, i.e. emotional and cognitive states. The body is thus the nexus to link two worlds, two perceptions. Buddhist virtues such as equanimity are part and parcel of the techniques engendered: “care is considered in Buddhism to be an engagement with benevolence, compassion, empathy, and equanimity. In meditation, a practitioner can train themselves by scanning the life of an enemy or a loved one, and by engaging their consciousnesses in this person’s life from the moment of their birth until the present. The practitioner is not to think and analyze the experience. Rather, the practitioner is to be mindful of the subtle affective changes that in-form this experience. Usually, the practitioner would experience benevolence, as they perceive and conceptualize what they scan as the experience of the other.” (Fan 2022, 171) Meditating loops back into everyday life. One does not immediately attain nirvana. This may be the ultimate aim, but partial steps effectuate changes in bodies.

²²² “In many works in Buddhist and Southeast Asian studies, these two terms have been interpreted as expressing a dichotomy between ‘secular’ or ‘this-worldly’ versus ‘sacred’ or ‘other-worldly’, and have been applied to differentiate the world-renouncing path of the monk from the this-worldly path of the laypeople. Yet, quite problematically, this translation and interpretation of *lokīya* and *lokuttara* itself discloses a secular framework. In a more careful analysis of the terminology, by contrast, *loka*, the noun on which the adjective *lokīya* is based, means ‘this world’ but also includes other realms of existence in the whirl of *samsara*, the endless cycle of Buddhist rebirth, such as different heavens and hells. *Lokīya* might thus rather be translated as a ‘customary mode’ of traditional practice that contrasts with a mode of existence that has already gone beyond (*uttara*) this cycle – *lokuttara*. With both terms part of the same cosmology, *lokīya* describes a conditioned attachment to this world that has been left behind by those present in *lokuttara*.” (Streicher 2021, 19)

Meditation is a time consuming practice, each step may take hours or even weeks. (Klima 2002) It is a practice handed down through generations as time-tested bodily practices. Early steps involve cultivating the basic ability to concentrate on an object of mental attention. *Samadhi* (concentration) is the enactment of concentration on a sensation, most commonly on the point where breath passes the nostrils, until one is able to hold this one point easily without the need for the sensation to be present. (McMahan 2017) In other words direct sense-contact is being replaced with a memory of it strong and stable enough to persist. “Being mindful of our breathing enables the consciousnesses to be mindful of the most fundamental karmic impulse that keeps one alive: the impulse to breathe.” (Fan 2022, 134) A body's immediate ties to the environment are being severed, at least at that one spot. “The point, however, is not to reject these impulses. Rather, in the exercise, we are to embrace them and accept them as the way it is. By being mindful of every act of inhalation and exhalation, we come to realize that we exist neither in the past nor in the future, as the consciousness of the past is ungraspable and the consciousness of the future is ungraspable. If so, the consciousness of the present, the here and now of our existence, is fundamentally empty.” (Ibid.) Cassaniti (2015, 57–8) writes about how people in the village she did fieldwork in most commonly attend a *wat* to cultivate detachment or ‘coolheartedness,’ and this they do “by practicing and repeating certain kinds of bodily and affective comportment.” Repetition is the key, a body and dispositions don't change just like that. This is a world where the body is considered to be composed of six sense organs, the mind or thought organ being one of them, and “people who follow Buddhism in Southeast Asia see the mind as an intentional agent that, through training, changes what it encounters.” (Cassaniti 2018, 19) Each sense organ is conditioned by its own history of interaction with sense-data.²²³ Reacting on the other sense organs, the mind is material like them but has as its objects “the appearance of any phenomena which do not have material contact as a condition of their immediate possibility.” (Klima 2002, 563) Among them count thoughts, intentions and thus implicitly memories. The word ‘immediate’ is crucial, as it reminds that in chains of (re)activity thought organ phenomena are related to the presence of material sensations. Moreover each of these emerges from *paṭiccasamuppāda*. This means that any eventuation is caused and causing at the same time, all the time. Conventional existence meanwhile is based on the perception of a continuum of experience, but this is not an ultimate perception, as it does not take note of the being-constructedness based on successive sense-perceptions of thereness, thereby leading to activities that reproduce *saṃsāric* becoming. (Klima 2002) Indeed, they reproduce *saṃsāra*, since in Buddhist

²²³ For a more detailed discussion, see e.g. Boisvert (1995) and Anacker (2005).

ontogenesis the cycle of transmigration is at once the cause of transmigration and produced by transmigrating. An always-embodied subjectivity or subjectivation emerges from interconnected webs of causation, of elements/images ‘bumping’ into other images, whereby both are transformed. This ‘bumping’ is what is called *viññāṇa*, commonly translated as consciousness or life force, but perhaps best translated as thereness (ibid.), it is something without which sense-perception and thus subjectivity cannot occur.²²⁴ The soteriological goal of course being for it to cede occurring thereby reaching nibbana. And in meditation, one's body learns to interrupt this causality of sense-emergence, or rather displace *viññāṇa* from sense-immediacy to memory-*viññāṇa*. This operation is analogous to cinema, where images of the immediate environment are replaced by images of the projected film, which come into contact with the senses as the rest recedes. Sense-perception is a process of construction, which works by itself in immediate reaction to karma-environment interaction, but can be incrementally transformed in practicing meditation. And in no small part do arts of indirection operate here, as virtues such as equanimity come to be formed through breathing exercises.

In meditation, the goal is not to realize emptiness in a substantivist manner, since that is obviously impossible. *Suññatā* or emptiness is something in between. One of the meanings of emptiness refers to the condition of the world, in that there can be no thing that has an essential being, everything and anything is empty of essence, because everything changes. Attaining this state is one of the aims of meditation. Thus, in some kinds of meditation, one has to learn to switch between various constructed bodies/perceptions. (Klima 2002) This activity is evident in the infamous Buddhist meditation practice called *asubha kammaṭṭhāna*, where one meditates over decaying bodies. There one has to first learn to see one's own body as decomposing. Meditators, if they are successful and don't ‘crack’ eventually see all bodies as decomposed. Memory-images partly overcode direct sensations from the environment. The imagery of decaying bodies has become part of the body from which perception is constructed. This reconstruction of perception becomes reality, the sensorimotor scheme breaks down and is reconstructed differently. In later stages of practice, the goal is to reconstruct the previous, conventional view of the body. And then, to learn to alternate between views, thereby performing emptiness and with it the constructedness of experiential categories, of that which conventionally appears to be most immediately real.

²²⁴ In Thai traditions, oftentimes the word *citta* is used instead of *viññāṇa*, since *vinyan* is taken to be that which transmigrates, or if it fails to migrate, that which becomes a vengeful ghost.

If at one time Theravāda sourced propositions of how the world works seem fictional, by virtue of being applied, passing through bodily practices, they become real. The distinctions proposed in theory are applied, and at the very least it can be said that material reality does not contradict or resist the Theravāda proposition of fundamental discontinuity: “The mind perceives a series of still film-frames, fluttered too rapidly for anyone to be mindful of their change from one to another, and so the mind experiences a life-like movement and seamless reality in film. In fact it is life-like and above all because we already are cinema, because in life we also let sensory contacts pass by too rapidly to observe how they arise, linger, and pass away.” (Ibid., 574) A body, the becoming of bodies constructed through sense-perception presence is cinematic, it is a series of images, with intervals between these parts, where the future one is articulated through the anterior one, whereby past, present and future are continually being reconstructed. Cinematic images act upon bodies, edits shake the immediacy of the given and show possible alternatives. The viewing body follows the at times rapidly changing perspectives organized by editing. (Gonçalves 2015) Such sensory overload or shock (Benjamin 2008) can give insight into how sensory contacts arise, linger, pass away. “Brian Massumi points out that both Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari call such a sensual shock a ‘microperception’: not smaller perception, it’s a perception of a qualitatively different kind. It’s something that is felt without registering consciously. It registers only its effects. According to this notion of shock, there is always a commotion under way, a ‘something doing’ cutting in, interrupting whatever continuities are in progress.” (Fan 2022, 140) Meanwhile, meditation operates slower speeds²²⁵ compared to most cinema: “In this process of becoming over the course of a day, the guests slowly become mindful of the almost undetectable transformations between boredom, exhaustion, invigoration, pleasure, displeasure, anxieties, and peace.” (Ibid., 136)

What migrates between different supporting infrastructures are figures. In *asubha kammaṭṭhāna*, now that it is forbidden to meditate over actually rotting corpses, images of the dead are used as a source for reconstructing vision. A deceased organic body's figuration moved to a photograph and from there onto a living organic body's sensory capacities that co-constitute what is seen. Cinema meanwhile

²²⁵ Apichatpong Weerasethakul combined the various elements discussed here explicitly for *Sleepcinemahotel*: “In this process of becoming over the course of a day, the guests slowly become mindful of the almost undetectable transformations between boredom, exhaustion, invigoration, pleasure, displeasure, anxieties, and peace. The guests become mindful of the initiation and endurance of each thought, speech, and action that triggers these subtle changes: ‘I know I am sleeping; I know I am eating; I know I am brushing my teeth; I know every part of my body is engaged in this anthropotechnical milieu.’ In this state of mindfulness, the anthropotechnical body endures in chronometric time as a perpetual initiation-extinction of circuits between recollections and anticipations. Yet, posited at the here and now, the consciousness is mindful of its own technicity and the overall process of interbecomings.” (Fan 2022, 136–7)

can be conceived of “as a figuring machine, that is a machine which receives, treats, and produces a figure.” (Game 2014, 47) It opens up new possibilities for “bodies without support,” recontextualizing the common reductive operation of treating only the organic body as a carrier of figuration. (Brenez 1998, 32) Furthermore, in meditation, practices where one imagines oneself through other bodies, or even the image of the Buddha are not uncommon. (Sharf 2005) One's sense-perception is effectively reterritorialized on and with fictive bodies, making these subjectively real and ontologically actual. Cinema enables to think corporality without a primary integrated organism, much like it has come to be formulated in most Buddhist teachings and experimented with experientially in appropriate spacings. And with that it becomes evident that the bodies one perceives are always already enmeshed in surrounding aesthetic practices. In other words: “‘man is not the end of the body’, which means one fundamental thing: the body is not given, it is to be built.” (Game 2014, 49) By extension, what the body perceives as and through body, is to be built. The (cinematic) body for film theorist Nicole Brenez (1998) is fragmented and can be reconstructed – like the actualizing Buddhist body. Figures are never just self-enclosed figures. Bodies as they appear to senses are never self-sufficient bodies untouched by figures around. All could be different, all becomes different, nothing is closed and fundamentally separate. At the confluence of worlds explored here, fundamental instability and hence openness of world appears – dangerous and hopeful.

5. Operationalizing Ruptures

An exploration of a film composed in the experimental framework can demonstrate more thoroughly how the thematized effects come to be. One enters the space of a projected film, the rest disappears as mediating environment. Apichatpong Weerasethakul is not just the most internationally recognized Thai film-maker, he is also somebody to actively and expressedly experiment with a variety of cinematic assemblages and effects, especially dreaming and sleeping, and frame these activities with Buddhist connections. (Malaina 2022) Evidently, for him, cinema is never just cinema. His affirmatively experimental short film *Ashes* (2012) operationalizes a complex set of media potentialities specific to analog film-making technologies, both historical and contemporary. It was made as a part of an initiative by the company *Lomo* (famous for its retro stylings of photography and camera technology), where the filmmaker was challenged to create a piece with the hand-cranked *LomoKino* camera. The media-specificity of the hand-cranking technology in particular makes some

aspects of media performativity found in the director's work more readily apparent. *Ashes* serves as an optimal entry point into *lokuttara*, the 'supra-mundane,' as an elucidation of how a film as a medium can be understood as enacting Buddhist concepts (thereby enacting them) and as an entry point into learning to see not just Weerasethakul's films working in Buddhist ways. It does this through three strategies that act as materializations of *Theravāda* Buddhist ontogenesis.²²⁶ Projected images as surfaces composing here consciously bypass symbolic readings.²²⁷ These are actualizations of Buddhist ontogenesis in the inter-subjective experience-space of cinema. All of the works signed to his name and the crew he works with "engender reality of a performative nature." (Ingawanij 2013, 91) Three elements make the constructedness of cinematic perception of *Ashes* co-present with its reality effect.

I. The co-presence of different moving images in one frame, that is a quasi-split screen that renders both actual parts of the image concurrently virtual. If meditation's goal is to cultivate the ability to alternate perceptions, this is the filmic equivalent. Putting two perspectives in one frame is necessary (spatial), since cinema itself is already an alternation of perspectives (temporal) most humans have become used to. Moreover, the two shots are usually from the same pro-filmic event, and neither discloses information that would produce narrative surplus, as e.g. in films where the split-screen is a form of parallel editing or a double subjective take where the two POV's will collide (famously in the Hitchcockian split-screen work of Brian de Palma). What Weerasethakul does here is to present two half-related perspectives on one diegetic event, where the temporal relationship between the images remains undefined. And this uncertainty is played out mostly in the dimension of space.

II. The lack of discernible difference between a classical edit and the space in between film frames that makes every edit a potential jump-cut, thus the sensorimotor scheme can in no way anticipate (qua reduction of uncertainty of future) common edits. The uncertainty produced by the editing style reverberates to create new conditions for the entire montage. Indeed, one might even say that it is not so much a question of editing, as it is of the medium (hand-cranked camera) itself. For the hand-cranking just makes the intervals between images perceptible to the human body-mind apparatus, that is, as a monk would say, without the conventionally constructed immediacy which usually integrates different sense-perceptions into one flow. Wherever one might want to situate the causes for

²²⁶ It is important to take into account that new ways of film-making are necessary to shock the sensorimotor scheme into uncertainty, since innovations become normalized.

²²⁷ Which is what makes it more easy to discern the operations explored than in the film-maker's more narrative works.

the effects, this again renders the certainty of perception problematic, opening up the conventionality of image succession to the virtual. Given the formal quality I mentioned before deconstructs spatial presence, then this one undoes temporal presence. Or as May Adadol Ingawanij (2013, 91) put it, when writing about a different work by the director: “We perceive non-synchronicity of time and indeterminacy of space [...]”

III. A palimpsest-like layering of images that more than anything else suggests memory at work, while playing games with visibility and sense-perception. Layering images upon images is another technique that shows actual perception to be limited, to be just one possibility. It is archaeological, in that it plays with the dimension of depth. Archaeology is here understood as the unearthing of layers piled onto each other so that they enmesh and the temporal succession is at times indiscernible. Stacked sheets of the past remind that what one sees or hears is conditioned by the figures one had perceived before, however much it might conventionally be difficult to become aware of. Memory becomes part of a sensorimotor scheme, but that does not mean that the memory that one has at any point is necessary, that is only memory. “[I]n Apichatpong’s work, a memory is crafted that troubles an account of recognition. This is not a memory for that which is known, for a past contained. It is a memory of a futurity, a memory of a trace.” (Manning 2017, 14)

As with meditation, the images in *Ashes* enable to hold two or more visions concurrently, assigning neither as the ultimate ground on which reality could be based. It can be tentatively stated: meditation is a materialization through the subjective body as composed of different parts, while cinema is a materialization through inter-subjective technology awaiting embodiment. A further effect that connects meditation and this kind of film-making is obvious. Apichatpong Weerasethakul’s films perform and induce a meditative, calm, even sleepy state. (Hassoun & Gilmore 2017) These films as well as installation work like *Sleepcinemahotel* (2018) operate increasingly explicitly on the liminal states between waking and sleeping. Similarly soothing effects are precisely what many meditators stress when they talk about meditation. (Bordeleau 2017) The aforementioned meditation over decaying bodies obviously does not immediately yield calming effects, rather initial steps act to the contrary. This is the case for most bodies that begin meditating, whatever the concrete practice might be. “When I first started meditating it was uncomfortable and not easy, but then I got better at it, and now I find it peaceful.” (Cassaniti 2018, 63) It is after all the almost forceful transformation of bodily

comportment into regularized gestures and postures, an outside becoming inside as a process one is aware of. Frictions are bound to appear. Sometimes, shocks must be induced so as to undo enforced conventions – it is crucial to have supportive and communal healing infrastructures in place, be it that each body has to do the work as itself however much boundaries of outside and inside are experimented with. As a body and its constituting sense-organs become part of a concrete actualization of the cinema assemblage, in this case the projection of a piece by Weerasethakul, his films summon “us to imagine and experience our own bodies as part of a meshwork.” (Stern 2016, 21) Calmed bodies enmeshed with the wider world, much as it is stated in Buddhist teachings through *paṭiccasamuppāda*. In this relaxed state, the enmeshed subjectivation becomes open to other modes of seeing. What some people say about other filmmakers, most typically perhaps the work of Philippe Grandrieux, namely that “haptic images can give the impression of seeing for the first time” (Marks 2000, 178) also applies to the images produced by Weerasethakul. There are different ways of unlearning conventional perception.

Grandrieux's cinema is one of direct sensory excess composed in a way to prevent its easy absorption into conventionalized modes of seeing. Playing significantly with lack of focus, distances and rhythms. In an interview the director makes it explicit that the goal is to bypass novelistic psychology (as in realism), “a bad hangover from the nineteenth century.” (Hainge 2017, 201) One must keep present in the thought organ that ways of seeing do not precede the world and its technologies – it is all coproduced. And the establishment of ‘modern’ perception and what it leaves out was anything but a smooth, linear endeavor. (Morris 2009) Nineteenth century novelistic psychology, an evident basis for much of modernist individualist ontology, makes real models of the human unconnected to the wider material world and lived environment. It reduces the creative role of senses and impressions to at best afterthoughts, turning attention away from complex formational processes to idealist models. Plugging in a bit of Buddhist meditation is precisely what keeps the powers of other worlds in check, be they cinema or Buddhadharma. The works of Grandrieux can be experienced as directly working in ways compatible with Buddhist teachings. Something similar can be discerned in more straightforward pieces of industrial cinema, especially so in action films – hardly surprising, after all cinema is literally the writing of movement. Steven Shaviro calls these works *post-continuity*: “In contrast to both classical and modern cinema, post-continuity filmmaking abandons the ontology of time and space; it no longer articulates bodies in relation to this. Instead, it sets up rhythms of

immediate stimulation and manipulation. The shots are selected and edited together only on the basis of their immediate visceral effect upon the audience moment to moment. There is no concern for any sort of pattern extending further in space and time.” (Shaviro 2010, 225) Here, any concern for continuity is trumped by “a preoccupation with immediate effects.” (Ibid., 147) One can notice here that attention shifts from content to surface effectivity of images, sounds, edits and digital manipulation in post – one might call it “intensification of surface.” (Martin 2014, 105)

Ramped up, reversed and slowed down. Always moving, never coalescing into simple wholes. Seemingly the opposite of works such as Weerasethakul's, a film critic describes *Domino* (Scott 2005), an industrial genre film, in the following way: “Expressionism, here, has leapt beyond the shooting phase to fully enter the realm of postproduction, of digital editing and pictorial treatments that imbue an overall colour scheme and enforce a clipped rhythm (created from a dizzying number of images) upon any event whatsoever. Scott is never content with using just one stylistic overlay strategy; he piles on his entire bag of tricks almost every time. In that bag: super-saturated colour, variable motion (*speed-ramping*, as it is known), superimposition, rapid editing, editing mismatches, hyper-coverage, and a host of manipulations of sound on every level (dialogue, voice-over narration, music, noises).” (Martin 2014, 103–4) Images here resist integration into a smooth reality flow, only the habits engendered by a society built on the prevention of awareness of complexity and connection ensure that most will sequester from conscience and active work all such operations and merely take away the violent patriarchal poses enacted by the figures (without awareness of the ironies and contradictions the film also lays bare). “When media change, our sensorial experiences also change. Even our bodies are altered – extended or ‘amputated’ – as we activate new potentialities, and let older ones atrophy.” (Shaviro 2016, 368) The aesthetics are disruptive much like meditation ought to be, even if through the opposite of calmness. When placed against the background of a proposed Buddhist cosmology, films that seemed entirely disconnected come to have similarities previously unimaginable. One must only construct the conceptual infrastructure to enact these new worlds in an academic environment and elsewhere.

Losing one's body in cinema, becoming different through cinema, in the darkness of cinema. These images can “stick to the heart” as some Thai people say. (Klima 2005, 569) They can eventuate a sense-reconstruction. Such images do not re-present, even if classical *découpage* attempts to create such an effect, they organize forces into figures that act on other figures. (San Martin 2008) The

spectator becomes together with them, however the figures may have come to be and however they may appear. (Ibid., 26) It is “the interpretation of one worldly event through another; the first signifies the second, the second fulfils (sic) the first.” (Brenez 1998, 66) Deconstructing imagery can be fulfilled through meditative practice as rooted in bodily unperception. The power of new media has been noted for long. It was the most classic of all media theorists Marshall McLuhan (1994, 18) who noted how newly formed media “alter sense ratios or patterns of perception.”

The affective conditioning performed by certain styles of film-making can intensify openness. There is perpetual double movement, that of figural causation (Aumont 2007) and of material/dhammic causation. Figures pass into the sensory network of the spectators, as the perception of forms is being constructed based on sense-data combining with past experience, thereby connecting with previous figurative habits, and by extension ways of seeing and thinking. Cinema can invent all kinds of figures that disrupt quotidian *lokiya* certainty, figures that won't easily connect with what a body is used to seeing. For those attuned to Buddhist worldings this can have ontological effects, in that it enables to leave the cycle of rebirth or at least effectuate a calm disposition. The disruption caused by certain images performs the constructedness of sense-perception, which lingers after returning from the shared film-space. Cinema as a conserver of complex sets of sensory traces from the past, makes present the impermanence of the world for the future. It presents traces as external memory that introduce a distinction into the past other than the contingent mnemonic transformations operated by the internal, personal memory drawing on the archiving capacities of a body. It invites the audience (once accustomed to being without an independent reality concept) to imagine what was there before. And it pushes the audience to recognize that which is here now, could and perhaps will be different. Some films serve as a better entry-point into such reconstitution than others. Much like not all meditation techniques are fit for any kind of practitioner, and don't have probable but not necessary results. Conditions and capacities, outside and inside must align for effects to appear. A world where causation is far too complex to be easily grasped, the causative models one operates with everyday remain but pale reductions contingent on connective thought practices of where a body was formed.

6. Comparative Entanglements

Such ruptures and destabilizations of the certainty of senses and with that the world as experienced occur when bodies become parts of cinema projection assemblages (where the environment disappears in the process), and with the appropriate tools which include discursive articulation, can become parts of bodily habits and capacities. With that, part of what happens to a body as a direct environmental relation can be transformed into something co-constitutive of the body even when the situation it was formed in through experience is left. What occurs in various configurations as both cinema and meditation, is an effective dissolution of the subject and later restabilization as emergent from a body with clear borders, enabled by environments that make its appearance possible in the first place. Awareness of these processes is no easy task, as awareness tends to come with consciousness, self. Buddhist practices here turn toward awareness of processes that make self appear, and subsequently enable experimentation with them. Not as a simple contradiction of self qua non-self, rather as an experiential understanding of impermanence and connection. Becoming aware of emergence, becoming aware of perpetual transformation, becoming aware of ruptures (a specific kind of transformation) leads to awareness of identity (of self) as nothing but a projection through habits that operate in ways that turn attention away from actually ongoing processes and complexities. Habits that make a body a plaything to effects of the immediate environment and past environments as acquired habits. The occasional break enacted by cinema will not be enough to change this (with exceptions), which is why teachings are crucial as connectors and supportive stabilizers for reorienting how a body operates its connection to other environments.

Depending on how it is composed, the supportive infrastructure that enlarges spacing within causal chains of action/reaction (whether or not within a Buddhist cosmogenetic framework) will operate differences that can be later classified together, but must not be collapsed into actual sameness. However, the conceptual and perceptive infrastructure that can be constructed as it has been done here, can feed back into the wider world and effectuate the composition of material infrastructures that will enhance spacings so that incremental redirections might accrue to significantly divergent paths and increasing numbers of sentient beings might connect, modulate, recode. As pointed out, such activities operate not just what is discursively presented, but have also indirect effects. Such a world can never finish, bodies here can never be fulfilled, for there will always occur some things that cannot be

foreseen – whether explained through the excessive complexity of causation or the lack of capacity for a human body to even perceive part of the effects. Experiential insight into impermanence and the current, local limits of what a body can do, can effectuate a future transformation that changes such limits, including to what can and cannot be thought. All without falling back onto the habit of projecting what presently appears as real and given and stable onto eternity and universality. And, if time-tested Buddhist practices are applied, coolhearted emotions and equanimity will be cultivated. Whether paths add up to nibbana or varied divergent futures for bodies and worlds is not of particular concern here. One of central components of the writing is after all to show the possibility of research that draws much of its infrastructure from Buddhist teachings so as to displace some of the continuing influence of Christian infrastructures of thought. Whatever happens as such spacings, in order to not disappear without effect in time, it has to be stabilized and plugged into wider circuits which include ways of thinking and connecting thoughts to everything, whatever the exact manner of its composition, they can be connected to. Everything might be ultimately connected, but some connections to be built yet, especially those composed in very different manners, are resisted more than others, just as some connective tissue has been systematically accumulated (whatever the unintended side effects) to continue resisting other possible directions and circuits. Purposeful transformation never comes easy, that which does come with little effort is precisely that for which the currently dominant illusions of a world are already made for. Only incremental accumulation of overlapping directions can come to be of any larger significance.

Yet, meditation is a solitary endeavor, even as it draws on inter-subjective sources. Cinema is generally a shared project, which influences how these assemblages will come to develop what they affect. (Szymanski 2017) Why cinema is needed, is best said this way: “If only our relation to the world wasn't so distorted and alienated, we wouldn't need any memorial support or external projection organ – in short, we could dispense with the cinematic apparatus.” (Bordeleau 2017, 94) But it is not. Conventionality, even as it is impermanent and ever-changing, more often than not appears to be objective, necessary, and unshakeable. This is one foundational way of a distorted relation to the world. It was already Walter Benjamin, most famously among scholars, who saw the potential in cinema's shock effect to make uncertain again that which appears most conventionally objective. And while any medium's and technique's novelty effect wears off as it becomes conventionalized, the unique material-semiotic conditions that the cinematographic apparatus brings to the ontological figuration of the world

continue to lend cinema a special power in making the world continuously appear anew. As does mediation. And sometimes, at fortuitous and painstakingly constructed situations, with an appropriately trained body as a nexus and the presence of a conceptual apparatus that stabilizes what was experienced after the event, cinema can act as meditation in the strongest sense possible, without ever becoming identical.

20. Redescribing Research in a More-Than-One-World World

This will be a chapter in three scenes, each overlapping partly in time and concept. It is not a chronology. It is another experiment in reframing, only now the conventions and infrastructures of research also make it into the frames. No cut and clear separation between these motions is possible. All fragments fragmenting and reconnecting. Like with any production of knowledge, there is no clear start nor end, no easy separation between inside and outside. The first scene, one that is composed of immaterial things, takes place in a moment of knowledge-production located inside academia and is composed of multiple experiences, all of which are linked by a related problem, namely the persistence of what Helen Verran (2001) calls foundationism. It takes a sort of macro perspective on the generation of knowledge. The second, taking on a rather micro perspective, zooming in on something seemingly easier to grasp, enters a fieldwork situation and will with the help of McKenzie Wark's *A Hacker Manifesto* (2004) entail an articulation of what exactly is occurring in this process doing so in a different framework than is common in anthropology.²²⁸ The last takes what is learned in the previous sections and composes it into an alternative image to think knowledge-production with. All occur in the space opened by the research that shows that ours is a more-than-one-world world (Law 2015), which necessitates a rethinking of the Christian derived universalism embedded in the (post-)Enlightenment academic project.²²⁹ All parts are re/descriptions of a world that enact different cuts than is tacitly supposed by realism and relativism alike in order to be able to perceive the randomly imposed limitations of knowledge-production and articulate alternatives. This has come to be very pressing ever since the incommensurability of worlds appeared as a research topic. The focus on description after representation has been a consistent effort throughout the preceding pages – it matters how a world is described. And here, a more detailed consideration of what goes into even the most innocent seeming description will be offered. It is also an attempt to formulate an image of academic activities that takes Deleuze's (1994) critique of the dogmatic image of thought, of the image of thought based on an implicit good will, seriously.

²²⁸ Wark's *A Hacker Manifesto* (2004) is organized as a collection of numbered propositions. The quotes here refer to the number of the proposition and not the page.

²²⁹ Aside from the challenges brought to the one-world model in STS, the ontological turn in anthropology (Holbraad & Pedersen 2017) and the rethinking of technics/technology as being tied to cosmologies in philosophy (Hui 2016) enact a similar opening. They at times intersect as examined in Lemmens (2020).

I

He has been working at the borders of a couple of fields, the differences between as well as the deep dives he has taken into them generating conditions for multiplying perception and awareness thereof. Much appears only through displacement elsewhere – integral to the anthropological tradition if nothing else. A construction as in cinema of subsequent frames, different positions without a preceding assumption of a real to preexist each. Such a shift can occur on many levels, whether physical, conceptual, narrative or imaginary. As constant motion between fields, he came to form a proposition about two kinds of (humanities) research: there are those that continuously create new (partial) images of the world, colloquially considered empirical in one way or another (disregarding the images of thought employed). They tend to minimize thorough engagement with philosophy or theory, treating it as methodology to be applied as hylomorphism continues resounding through spacetime. Then there are those fields that engage thought itself, while generally disregarding that new images, new worlds continue appearing and at times make it into the wider academic imagination. Neither framework, bare occasional exceptions, begins with a world in the making, and as such doesn't take itself as productive. The world is taken as basically finished in its creativity. Reading philosophers as an anthropologist or as a media theorist or somebody steeped in feminisms, he is shocked at what images are tacitly mobilized (and thus upheld). What both types operationalize is an image of thought where thought and world are fundamentally separate. Empirical research that doesn't (consciously) impact theory and philosophy that remains essentially untouched by the world. Thus it remains unnecessary for more empirical minded academia to thoroughly read that which is taken as a source for methods, and for most people who see themselves as theorists to keep up with up-to-date (or even rather outdated but still more current than common sense imagery) research in other fields. Variants of this separation are stacked within different levels of the academic enterprise, whether as shown by Verran (2005) in those approaches that pretend there is an independent world out there or those that consider it to be constructed by humans.

This can be easily discerned in discourses surrounding Orientalism, especially as it became normalized. All critique and no positive work of building/integrating ever new images based on an engagement with the sensory world. Where is the work done by those that engage theory to integrate new images? Always pretending that thought might operate without the sensory. The simplest mind-body dualism reigns supreme in the modern constitution, even if it's operations are more hidden in

some versions (relativism) than in others (realism, universalism). It is important to point out that just by writing and thinking non-dual theories one does not do a non-dual world. Especially in social constructivist approaches merely proclaiming I am decolonial, i.e. using this work as a research category, does not make one's practice decolonial. Saying 'I do posthuman research' while the only thing one does is looking for posthumanist motifs in easily accessible cultural artifacts such as novels or films does not make for posthumanist research. What is extended is most of the material conventions and divisions of the world as they are, with a small surface refocusing occurring to make it look like more of a paradigm shift than it is. Unless the whole infrastructural edifice of what brings about research as well as that of thought itself (in how it operates and what it connects) changes, academia will remain a variant of the modern university developed in the 19th century, bouncing between nationalism²³⁰ and cosmopolitanism, particularism and universalism,²³¹ between building a community being constructed and never-ending critique. (Readings 1996) So long as a separation between the world and research, and within the edifice of research between theory and data is upheld, little can change.²³² From a certain position there is no difference between realism and relativism.

He remembers the first time he encountered the writings of Helen Verran and how the work she had done made possible other connections than the prevailing alternatives he was surrounded by. She details her own development from a critical relativism to a generative approach.²³³ According to her the metaphysics shared by both universalists and relativists alike is characterized by the following points: "Worlds are physical, knowable orders of matter set against empty spacetime. (Universalists and relativists disagree on the origins of that order, the first locating it in the physical, the second in past human work.) Knowledge is representation of abstract or ideal categories. Knowing is located in minds of removed, judging observers of order(s) in the physical world, who formulate knowledge." (Verran 2005, 34) She terms this foundationism as it prescribes ultimate meanings and it fails to recognize itself doing so. What both share is the denial of any real kind of difference, i.e. a one-world world where

²³⁰ "Readings recalls, in broad strokes, the early theorizations of the modern university carried out by Von Humboldt and Kant, and shows (quite deftly) that the modern university was conceived as a vehicle for the transmission of national culture, a sense of shared Bildung for a nation." (Nealon 2012, 80)

²³¹ As the knowledge attained is supposed to be valid everywhere, the universal 'human' remains a tacit presupposition, a concept constantly operating (without having to be explained) in an academia still organized around humanism.

²³² "After all, the specificity of the modern University that the German idealists founded was its status as the site of critique. As Fichte put it, the University exists not to teach the information but to inculcate the exercise of critical judgment." (Readings 1996, 6)

²³³ Both the situations studied in the field, as with Verran's concern with the coming together of very different ways of doing numbers in Nigeria, and in the activity of academic practitioners themselves as is the concern here.

knowledge, science and art are representational without acting on the world or indeed being part of world.²³⁴ While realism denies difference upfront, with the alternative it's more difficult to notice. "Being unacknowledged, the impulse to legislate uniformity in relativist argument is more difficult to deal with. Foundationism is a metaphysics that denies it is a metaphysics." (Ibid., 32) This links (among others) with the concept of "[u]niversalism, with its image of knowledge as symbolic representation referring to underlying givens of either the world or experience of it, brings with it a specific ontology that, with its framing imaginary, enables a particular realness." (Ibid.) A universalism then that legislates itself as real in the same way everywhere without recognizing the labor done for it to appear.

Such an image can be discerned as operating in most anthropological research, in the way it relies on more-than-human infrastructures for it to become possible, while leaving them out of the 'proper' research frame. So, the description: a researcher heads out there, into the world (nature), moves through spacetime without it being altered and engages bits and pieces that are fundamentally knowable within the framework of modern science (even as it may be contested as to who and what profits from such a knowledge, and acknowledged that paradigms change) and all parts will remain fundamentally unaltered through this engagement. As anthropologists such as those he imagines himself to be in the vainglorious lineage of keep encountering entities the status of which is not always certain in this physical world, nor as the results of past human endeavors, tremors of these uncertainties keep finding their way into the literature composed after these bodies have returned to more stable shores. The world is always more wondrous than the expectations and tools one has set out with the recognize. He has taken on different personae over the past pages to explore some of these impossible worlds as the encounters throw ripples onto the still depths of certainty. Even awareness of these conditions has not made him evade these patterns and cliches. The metaphysics inbuilt into the whole enterprise work independently of his personal will – from fieldwork, to writing, to the reception. A tendency toward universalism, whether affirmed or (officially) denied while still tacitly performed when assuming that there is only one world, one nature, all throughout time and space.²³⁵ The same goes for those that research cinema or literature or other such objects – the fundamental structures of

²³⁴ Of course one of the reasons is that studying the effects of artworks or science is methodologically challenging. Still, what I mean here is that research that is basically a critical interpretation of an artwork and focused on meaning remains hegemonic, as tools that Deleuze for example offers rarely, outside of media theory, lead to innovations in terms of how objects and theories can relate to their outside.

²³⁵ See also the Beck-Latour (Latour 2004a) debate on cosmopolitics, and the recent reexamination by Blok (2020).

the world and the beingness of each category, including that of the researcher, remain unaltered. The research is not concerned with its own activity of reframing these objects and the work of these objects in conditioning and orienting research, in co-producing these new things that are changing subjectivities of researchers, published articles or funding and teaching infrastructures.

Another element co-constitutes the stability of foundationism and it operates above all in the 'reception' part of the process. Itself composed of different parts. Whether in articles or other written contributions, at conferences or in classrooms, often it is presupposed that one first has a methodological introduction and then applies it to the data. The main part, the one with data, is expected to be presented in such a way that any interested academic will be able to follow regardless of their philosophical background. Some readers might recall conferences where an eager audience member might be very vocal about criticisms while betraying a fundamental ignorance of an approach that operates differently than said critic is able to grasp. The same goes for blind peer reviews in journals. Now, apart from the before mentioned metaphysics that separates theory from the world, another set of conventions is operational here, namely the Habermasian ideal of speech. (And, importantly, they don't just function in the minds or participants, but are part of the whole material reiterative assemblage.) "Academic discourse follows the regulative idea of the ideal situation of speech, according to which everyone can make claims and criticisms on equal terms, and only the better argument will count – no matter who speaks and what institution he/she belongs to." (Münch 2014, 15) What does this contain? It assumes that different research paradigms or discourses are simply mutually intelligible and commensurable. Further, it assumes that speech is equal regardless of whether one is from elite universities or not, whether or not one is from a minority (or not native), whether one tries to radically innovate conceptual possibilities or just reiterates paths already stabilized.

Yet, as researchers such as Elizabeth Adams St. Pierre (2021a, 2021b) take great pains to demonstrate, once one actually works with so-called poststructuralist and related philosophies, one enters incommensurable worlds. She shows that what philosophers such as Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze and others have done, is not developing methods to be applied to the world so much as ways of opening up the world. (St. Pierre 2021a, 4) And simply "[a]dding a rhizome or an assemblage or a few references to Foucault or Derrida to a qualitative study" (ibid., 5), as is all too often taught in graduate classes and seen at conferences, is not actually working with those philosophies. The fracture enacted

by poststructuralism makes it possible to discern a further concept operating in the regular academic universalism of (expected) simple intelligibility and sameness.

He argues to himself that perhaps (academic) commons²³⁶ are an appropriate term for this kind of knowledge produced under the aegis of easy intelligibility based on representationalist thought expecting a reality out there somewhere to ground all that research.²³⁷ Now, conventionally commons in academia can be understood in the following way: “One can argue that knowledge and skills that are created and shared at universities are part of the commons. Academic knowledge creation can be considered as a social process. Academics create knowledge that is based on preceding knowledge of society, share these outcomes with society so that further knowledge can be created in society, and so on.” (Allmer 2019, 605) What he is after meanwhile, is a more elusive conceptual operation that would grasp that expectation of a shared intellectual/cultural space where the encounter with new research occurs under the assumption of almost immediate intelligibility and conceptual commensurability (at least once one reaches the higher levels of education with the appropriate diplomas). A commons then not just as practical and material sharing but also the image of thought most easily associated in the concept. These commons operate as a *de iure* image, an ideal, while *de facto* academic knowledge-production is one defined very much by enclosures (such as prohibitive entry costs, both in terms of accessing the information produced, the spaces it is produced and the investment necessary to gain cognitive and practical access). In the idea of immediate accessibility of understanding (for the conventionally educated elites) operates a construction of a particular plane of intelligibility and general equivalence that projects itself as universal and simply real. On that plane the translation costs between (supposedly) different kinds of information get reduced, the work done (both by the dead and the living) in order to achieve this specific encoding is conveniently erased so as to pretend a neutral

²³⁶ “A new notion of ‘commons’ will have to emerge on this terrain. Deleuze and Guattari claim in *What Is Philosophy?* that in the contemporary era, and in the context of communicative and interactive production, the construction of concepts is not only an epistemological operation but equally an ontological project. Constructing concepts and what they call ‘common names’ is really an activity that combines the intelligence and the action of the multitude, making them work together. Constructing concepts means making exist in reality a project that is a community. There is no other way to construct concepts but to work in a common way. This commonality is, from the standpoint of the phenomenology of production, from the standpoint of the epistemology of the concept, and from the standpoint of practice, a project in which the multitude is completely invested. The commons is the incarnation, the production, and the liberation of the multitude. Rousseau said that the first person who wanted a piece of nature as his or her own exclusive possession and transformed it into the transcendent form of private property was the one who invented evil. Good, on the contrary, is what is common.” (Hardt & Negri 2000, 302–3)

²³⁷ Academic commons are notably not as commonly accessible as the name would imply. Only actual open knowledge activists such as Alexandra Elbakyan try to make that promise real, and are punished for it, while academia in general is built on exclusion and privilege. Academic commons, compared to classically understood commons are furthermore dispersed and impossible without global infrastructures for producing, storing, accessing.

universality exists. This is rather ironic, as those doing the work (let us pretend for now that it is mainly academics) thereby make large swathes of their efforts disappear – work is not recognized as work because it is taken as a natural process occurring as if without human efforts, thus enabling the projection of the plane onto eternity (that is to assume a world pre-given to research, untouched by the theories and manners of writing constructed). The labor done to uphold this plane disappears conveniently (from presence to consciousness) and the current order seems to be simply there, pristinely guaranteed somewhere somehow by God or Nature or some other centralized foundational principle. In the meantime, there are obvious advantages, even necessities to such commons: “Ideally the commons is an open infrastructure that frees us up precisely because it can be assumed. It should be designed to be taken for granted (at least from moment to moment). Good infrastructure is self-evidently enjoyed, not noticed. It is simply there, and works. We should not always have to ‘work on the commons.’” (Lovink 2019, 125) The point here is not to decry the hiding of this labor, this automation of knowledge into infrastructure, but to open a space where it is not hidden. Comes to be opened for debate, from which possible alternatives might arise, that then themselves might after enough labor come to be automated into pre-conscious operations no longer noticeable by the individual working in a field. Freedom of individual creation and expression will always go against the freedom enabled by automation. (Bratton 2019) The incessant operationalization of foundationist metaphysics and naive expectations of academic commons persists, because in the modern world at least that which makes it possible in the first place, that which reduces friction between different entities and kinds of information, is hidden for the fantasy of personal freedom (that most central ideological building block of Euro-Modernity) and uniqueness to be able to persist. But then, if “[a]s Derrida (1993/1994) explained, deconstruction is not necessarily intentional – it is what ‘happens’ – and categories like the research process, the interview, the field, data, data collection, and data analysis simply fell apart,” (St. Pierre 2019a, 5) then comes a world where such research, where each contribution requires the learning of a new language, of new concepts, problems and solutions. The learning costs and translation costs (for the individual and the infrastructure) will be much higher than the automation of today. Indeed, it will require new techno-social imaginaries of what it is that (humanities) research does, for one thing is certain – it does not simply describe a world out there, the bits of pieces of which can be added eventually into an integrated image that is at the same time constructed, but also always already precedes the world (is reality).

All of this has direct impact on methods, before one even begins to apply them. “The concept data collection is itself problematic because it points to an ontology that assumes data are separate from human being and so can be ‘collected.’ [...] It refuses representationalist logic that relies on a two-world ontology, which assumes there is the real out there and then a representation of the real in a different ontological order.”²³⁸ (Ibid., 6) The entrenchment of this particular metaphysics is so complex, operates on so many levels (parts of the process of knowledge production, all supported through a different set of infrastructures and practices), that it comes as no surprise that theories that offer explicit and complex alternative ways of thinking and doing get recoded into the method/data distinction which takes away the force of the concepts and manners of thought in them. One comes to be so naturally habituated to the expectation that, because one considers themselves educated, any new text encountered coded as the result of research will already be easily understood, because we all build together toward the common(alized) knowledge of the world.

“In this sense, scientific knowledge is a collective good issuing from collective efforts and advancing the collective of the scientific community further in its search for knowledge.” (Münch 2014, 16) The image of thought of philosophy critiqued by Deleuze continues operating in common scientific practice across different fields, namely that thought simply and self-evidently tends toward truth and the good.²³⁹ How do such commons appear in the first place, he asks himself. And also, is there a way to account complexly for their emergence and continuation? Hardt and Negri (2000, 358) have a possible answer: “Indeed, labor is the productive activity of a general intellect and a general body outside measure. Labor appears simply as the *power to act*, which is at once singular and universal: singular insofar as labor has become the exclusive domain of the brain and body of the multitude; and universal insofar as the desire that the multitude expresses in the movement from the virtual to the possible is constantly constituted as a *common thing*. Only when what is common is formed can production take place and can general productivity rise.” He notes that the framework is basically Marxist (however Deleuzian in parts) in its one world universalism. But then, with all the recent research on different worlds (Lemmens 2020), it becomes clear that Deleuze and Guattari's *What*

²³⁸ Note that here the term two-world is a different concept than the worlds referred to in STS that is otherwise employed in this text.

²³⁹ For a discussion of Deleuze's image of thought, see Dronsfield (2012). Throughout the text, the concept of ‘image of thought’ is used in a more varied sense, namely any kind of unarticulated ‘common-sense’ image of how thought functions not just its drive toward truth and the good. So, for example, a particular conception of universalism that is pre-philosophical is considered an image of thought, and sought to be displaced. For if anything happens in anthropologically framed encounters, it's the breaking down of common-sense.

Is Philosophy (1994) traces the one plane of interaction of concepts,²⁴⁰ much like capitalism seeks to create one plane of general exchange (while hiding the work done in order to create the conditions for equivalence).²⁴¹ In the quote, general intellect is mentioned, a concept that too pertains to academic knowledge production. “General intellect is a collective, social intelligence created by *accumulated knowledges, techniques, and knowhow*. The value of labor is thus realized by a new universal and concrete labor force through the appropriation and free usage of the new productive forces.” (Ibid., 364, my emphasis) Academia (if he were to separate it from general entanglement through a series of random cuts) also composes of accumulation of knowledges, techniques, and knowhow, all the while not all knowledge produced within makes it into informing the techniques and infrastructures (the conservatism of infrastructure/system). Since words matter, he thinks about the associations something like ‘general intellect’ actualizes. “The danger of the discourse of general intellect is that it risks remaining entirely on the plane of thought, as if the new powers of labor were only intellectual and not also corporeal.” (Ibid.) One should not locate the intellect in minds or thought then. Rather he thinks of it as emergent from infrastructures that connect various very material parts.²⁴² The way bodies (as articulated within infrastructures) are composed already predisposes to certain kinds of thought.²⁴³ One does not simply of one's own accord consider methodology as separate from data, of research as separate from the world. For the obvious position would be to notice that it has an effect in the world, indeed that is what one wants to have and thus cannot be neutral. The world must be built in a certain way so that this nonsense comes to us as common sense. Yet, as all the levels lock in so smoothly and forcefully, it is not at this institutionalized sphere where he finds a way out. One must move elsewhere first, into the world where knowledge is gathered before becoming codified to perhaps build alternatives. A displacement in concerns too, and more anthropological at that for making a cut that enables a centering around human activity, while leaving the infrastructural conditions making the

²⁴⁰ Grosz (2017, 9) offers a lean summary: “[It] is the order in which all ideas take place, the ‘place’ where one concept can encounter another, enhance or diminish it, and which other concepts must attain in order to engage in the domain of concepts. This is not a Platonic order, in which ideas exist in their perfection, but an actual order in which the particular, true or false, well-formed or not, concepts and texts—each historically produced work of thought—can function beyond the context of its production.”

²⁴¹ See Easterling (2014) for an account of what goes into the material creation of infrastructure necessary for capitalism to function somewhat smoothly (the labors of which in general remain hidden), as for example through the unification of conventions.

²⁴² Immaterial labor, a concept otherwise connected, is severely limited by its very name, the effects of which can be noticed in Lazzarato's and related research, where their attention wanders away from all the material work being done in order for a part of the world to be able to engage in immaterial labor. Wark (2017) offers a related critique. It seems almost as if concepts start working on their own to make some things appear and hide others, and orient the thought of those that employ them.

²⁴³ One might also think this issue into the direction of ‘knowledge-socialism.’ (Peters & Neilson 2020) However, that approach remains based in a one-world world model.

activity itself possible in the background. Alternatives through a description (always ontological in what it proposes the world is made of) that makes other connections than is common in the anthropological performance of a world.

II

And he thinks again about the basic anthropological methods such as fieldwork, a going somewhere in spacetime, a somewhere that is already considered objective and preexisting before it gets objectified and deconstructed into an article or monograph. A place where the humans living there will be affected, because he comes as a human among them, and only what is properly human can affect the human in a tacitly humanist paradigm. And he thinks about all that gets left out in this framing, all that in the world that makes it possible. He is increasingly queasy about the entire endeavor since awareness has arisen that knowledge-production is anything but a self-evident process: you go somewhere, from Euro-America, to study and gain knowledge that you bring back. Sounds mightily like resource extraction, even if the resource is less material than the more obvious ones. For what? Not truth anymore, neither hopefully for colonial purposes of organizing subjected peoples for further exploitation (though that keeps hanging like a dark cloud over all the research considering it can always be taken as a description of a world out there). What is being done without a doubt is to bring something out of a differentiating world into a space of mutual intelligibility. He thinks of the Jesuits and other early intellectual explorers that in a fittingly Christian manner tried to bring all they encountered onto this one plane of knowledge of the world. A sort of objectification of own practices into the world at large.²⁴⁴ One at that, that keeps enacting cuts to dissociate local actors that help co-produce the knowledge, whether human or not, from the production process (and hence any kind of ‘reward’ and ‘acknowledgment’) only to assign a personal ‘name’ of the privileged researcher to a process (a splitting off of a local reality that then travels elsewhere) that materially is made possible only through the labor of collective action of the (more-than-)human multitudes.

Based on his notes, he makes present a scene a former self of his partook in to think through the problems gestating in and through him. What am I doing, he asks himself again, going far away to

²⁴⁴ Continued through the realism of the camera that takes objects etc. as particular instances of the general, where for some peoples there are no general things, all that is are relations. (Strathern 2002) That is cuts are being operationalized in an entirely different manner and there is no simple materiality/objectivity preexisting perception/concept.

extract knowledge? He feels the common anthropological practice of giving something back to the locals by engaging some kind of work there is not enough, because of the power difference encoded into the very structure of the world as it is now. He doesn't know yet what can be done about it, so he prepares to dive into the scene reconstructed from his notes. How do we get from life observed to research written? The reader is advised to keep in mind that what is described is always in excess of the description and what serves as source for thought contains more than what it comes to be connected to. The thought then is also in many ways more than what it is drawn from. Levels don't map onto each other. Only one part of the process is followed here, while the way reality is written is such as to make clear that there is always more there than what can be made useful.

It was on the second day of new year according to the Gregorian Calendar. His friend Gung, a lawyer who side hustles as a mathematics tutor, wanted to go to lunch with him in an area of Bangkok he had never visited.²⁴⁵ Out of all the people he visited temples with, she is by far the most devoted. She told him she goes at least once a week. On that day her mother visiting from Khorat would join, as well as two of her childhood friends. Lunch would be merry. After sitting around a table with such extensive amounts of food that an entire group of scouts could've been nourished, they were on their way to a temple. *Wat Phrom Wongsaram* (วัดพรหมวงศาราม) in the northeast of the city, where she goes once a week. Google Maps remembers his visit there. This is already an abstraction. Out of the myriad parts that compose what has been happening only a fracture make it into the account and come to be immediately linked with orientations external to the material situation proper, yet brought inseparably into the mix by the bodies entering.²⁴⁶ Going in, he is not particularly concerned with noticing something new, something to induce thought. Still the following words are relatable: “We are the hackers of abstraction. We produce new concepts, new perceptions, new sensations, hacked out of raw data. Whatever code we hack, be it programming language, poetic language, math or music, curves or colorings, we are the abstracters of new worlds. Whether we come to represent ourselves as researchers or authors, artists or biologists, chemists or musicians, philosophers or programmers, each of these subjectivities is but a fragment of a class still becoming, bit by bit, aware of itself as such.” Wark in her *Hacker Manifesto* (year, 002) manages to articulate a theory of creation that is labor based, takes into

²⁴⁵ The nickname is altered to protect the interlocutor as she is a private person.

²⁴⁶ “To think with orientations is to think of how we are involved in worlds; it is to write from our involvement.” (Ahmed 2014, 95) Ahmed also cogently argues that material artifacts bring certain orientations with them, which can be readily verified in any temple. Learning to perceive them, or become aware of them, is another matter and depends on body privilege. What is meant here, are specifically the orientations brought that are not expected by the composition of a site, such as what the anthropologist body brings with.

account intellectual/immaterial labor, and is not immediately recoded onto a unified one-world world as in more common Marxist versions. It is a decentred world that is constantly evolving with new elements appearing and those who do this work come to form a special social class, which however is not of interest to him here. He thinks back at being in the field and the arduous process from participating and experiencing to forming this data into information according to standards in the relevant academic fields. Perhaps it is best to enter one of the scenes of his past and follow the fracturing line while acknowledging the forks that don't make it into the final product.

When they arrived, the first thing to do was to buy offerings at a nearby shop. He was reminded by Gung one should only bring food in the morning, in the afternoon one should bring useful things like detergent, toothpaste or food you can store for a long time. They bought such after lunch groceries for about 300 baht a head. Then they all headed to that low modern square-like building with a lot of glass that is usually close to the entrance. Daily ceremonies are being held there as in the other temples he had observed. It is only by visiting many temple spaces that patterns in layout become apparent, variations and similarities. Each temple is unique, some more so than others. Yet, he had never really read about this variety and all the things one might encounter in Thai *wats*. These realities had not yet systematically entered the imaginations of academic Buddhist studies, much less outside of related fields. "Hackers create the possibility of new things entering the world. Not always great things, or even good things, but new things. In art, in science, in philosophy and culture, in any production of knowledge where data can be gathered, where information can be extracted from it, and where in that information new possibilities for the world produced, there are hackers hacking the new out of the old. While we create these new worlds, we do not possess them." (004) Doing fieldwork, one easily arrives at places that yet have to be written into the general academic discursive reality. He does not remember this random temple in Bangkok ever being mentioned before. There would be many ways to engage with this temple, and with the people that he accompanied there. His avowed interests which include a decentering of the human (as concept, figure and body) and the general layout of the writing to come predispose him toward noticing and noting some aspects over others. Connecting bits and leaving other bits out of the frame. And as he goes on with research in all the various registers, he starts noticing how much has been left out of these academic conventions, the ways of writing the world. So much in excess of anything he had expected, so much in fact that it seems paralyzing.

The eight day of the week Buddhas were in the back of the room, though Gung was the sole member of their little group to eventually bow to them. Up front, or rather to the side of the entrance, a monk was reciting to a group of people following his vocal rhythms. Right behind them, in straight line from the monk's eyes, a new group was already busy waiting. This was a bustling early afternoon. He knew this chanting ceremony from the little *wat* inside a villa in Prague (now moved to a new, bigger building), and here, he was told, one can come at any time of day to participate and gather merit. He hears that the water pouring, a standard part of this ceremony, is specifically for deceased relatives. Gung told him that they pour it for a recently departed cousin. What is experienced here is already connecting to what was experienced elsewhere. His corporeal memory becomes a site for such connections, the way other bodies, those not formed by this specific research, could not operationalize. Perhaps even some unexpected relating might occur. After all, almost every temple visited offered some surprise, a dash of the unexpected. "Abstraction may be discovered or produced, may be material or immaterial, but abstraction is what every hack produces and affirms. To abstract is to construct a plane upon which otherwise different and unrelated matters may be brought into many possible relations. To abstract is to express the virtuality of nature, to make known some instance of its possibilities, to actualize a relation out of infinite relationality, to manifest the manifold." (008) He perceived what he encountered through his previous knowledge about temples and monks, about adequate comportment and what to not to wear. He knew what to expect for what appears are related forms. Only in the abstracting process of writing, of transformation from the sensuous to the discursive will all this in one form or another come to enter the plane where it can come into relation with other elements. Of course, for most matters this transformation will follow habitualized patterns laid out by previous researchers, including his earlier selves, institutionalized conventions, and to many may appear as so evident as to be unworthy of attention, thus becoming transparent, neutral and so necessary as to seem like a direct print or copy, the only representation of what occurred.

His companions put the offerings on appropriately prepared plates for it. He notices that some of the others waiting to perform the chant had bought the prepackaged offerings available at the temple. The group made up of different smaller parts, basically couples, in front was in the middle of the ceremony, repeating what the monk had chanted. He noticed two large boards, each showing the text to recite. External aids appear present everywhere all the time. He wonders quietly how it worked before modern mass schooling. "The virtual is not just the potential latent in matter, it is the potential of

potential. To hack is to produce or apply the abstract to information and express the possibility of new worlds, beyond necessity.” (014) In any situation or scene as bodies enmesh and separate again what each abstracts (if it has the capacity to do so, beyond necessity) will differ. Even just the human bodies presencing in the *Wat Phrom Wongsā Ram* on that day will abstract something slightly different, if overlapping (much like the duck/rabbit image in earlier chapters). The plane on which a Thai Theravāda Buddhist monk's abstractions will be situated does not coincide with that of a researcher. For information from the one to make it to the other, transformations need to be enacted. The same goes for Gung, her friends and mother. If any abstraction occurred, and as with monks there is a large chance of none happening, as this is in general an activity of habit, the plane constructed is one where lay understandings of Buddhist issues mixed with other cultural patterns mix. A world of forking paths. Conducting interviews can make some of these paths cross. In other words information is transformed so as to be able to interact on another plane. If another researcher's body were present, a different, if overlapping abstraction would have occurred.

The chatter of the people waiting for their turn was what he thought rather loud during the ceremony. Nobody seemed to mind and the next group, the one waiting their turn before his, behaved in the same manner. Then his companions were up. He took note that almost everybody had to read the *Pañcasīla*, the five precepts, off of the board. To his surprise, given that at the very least Gung by her own account went through this once a week. The precepts even if uttered in Pali didn't seem to be such an excessive amount of sounds to remember for people growing up with them. Perhaps Plato's fears apply here too and it was the presence of the boards and other externalized mnemotechnics that prevented a thoroughgoing internalization of these sounds. “Abstractions release the potential of the material world. And yet abstraction relies on the material world's most curious quality—information. Information can exist independently of a given material form, but cannot exist without any material form. It is at once material and immaterial.” (015) For the abstractions enacted by the body that writes these pages to travel, to be able to come into contact with others, not just their objectification onto some carried but also networks are necessary. Heterogeneous networks dedicated specifically to carrying certain kinds of abstractions while keeping them rather stable. (Law & Mol 2001) These networks are materially far reaching, as they include the energy necessary to sustain them, and the labors of all the dead and living, whether material or immaterial, whether acknowledged (financially, symbolically or otherwise) or not. As critical researchers will be well aware of, networks like those of

more obvious capitalist resource extraction are built to be one-sided. Analogous but differently composed networks are in place so the Pañcasīla can spread and do the work that human memory at times can't.

Scanning the room he noticed there were water containers (refilled by the male assistant who also brought the offerings to the back of the room) for the vials used in the ceremony. As he had already witnessed and partaken in before, people were touching when offering a plate together to a monk or just had one vial for more than one person. As he pondered each group leaving and the next moving up, the monk repeating the gestures and chants and all, he thought of industrial rationalization. Organizational innovations to deal with the sheer numbers of lay people interested in making merit. An automation even, as practitioners were clearly habitualized to this conveyor-belt intensification of the ceremony. And everything was set up to make it smooth. The a/c was on, rather gently, and fans were there too, with a private one for the monk, and the humming of fans by then seemed to him like an integral part of temple space interiors. It does have a similarly calming quality as these interiors after all. He thinks to himself again in wonder how it can be that he keeps encountering new elements in these temples that don't seem to not even have been commented upon in previous publications. Almost as if the codification of religion or Buddhism in certain kinds of research makes it impossible for the anthropologist to notice the new in temples and only see what already fulfills the image generated elsewhere. “‘To qualify as a hack, the feat must be imbued with innovation, style and technical virtuosity.’ The terms hacking and hacker emerge in this sense in electrical engineering and computing.” (071) So not all abstraction qualifies as a hack. What would fit is Elizabeth Adams St. Pierre's (2021b) conception of research as open-ended creation, and not the blind repetitively ritualistic (in the common sense) application of a method or model onto data, imposition of form onto material. That is mere habit, a process of selection of which parts of the world fulfill the transcendental model, a continuation of the world proposed by the model, but not that emerging in encounters. It's only perceiving what one already knows in the field, based on cliches and prejudices one has acquired at home, whether as common culture or academic representation short-circuited as reality out there. Occasionally, a break appears as innovation, a new paradigm, a new theory, to once again be reiterated endlessly. Change here comes from without, as an accident, as something to be made by great innovators. And tirelessly brought back to be filtered through some reality-grounding. A tool to reorganize description so as to fit the new theory, with the steps from experience and the sensory to

discursive presentation always miraculously disappearing from view.

But what if research was reoriented onto creating (conceptual) tools to enhance the variety of solutions readily available to (post-)human societies to deal with problems that necessarily appear in the world? And the material organization around it refashioned into ways that facilitate the access to this archive? All of that without pretending toward identity and a final description of the world and what humans in it do. One can acknowledge that what Buddhist practitioners do and a researcher does is not the same, the latter not somehow encompassing the former. It's different practices that may or may not come into contact, may or may not enhance the capacities of each.

The monk held a microphone. His words resounded from speakers as electric candles warmly glowed in front of the Buddha image covered by a glass container. The amount of young couples in the room surprised the fieldworker. Until now at temples, and he had rarely visited this specific area of a *Wat*, always set close to an entrance, it was mostly middle aged and elderly women who attended and performed the ceremonies. At every twist and turn then something to stick out against a background normativity habitualized by his attendance of temple spaces. Each part full of possibilities for connections and new ideas. Without being there in Bangkok and spending hours upon hours in *wats*, oftentimes without any direct result, no such pre-conscious ground against which exceptions arise as figures to be grasped would appear. The place would have been just an instantiation of a general Buddhist temple. Nothing to see here, move on. "To hack is to abstract. To abstract is to produce the plane upon which different things may enter into relation. It is to produce the names and numbers, the locations and trajectories of those things. It is to produce kinds of relations, and relations of relations, into which things may enter. Differentiation of functioning components arranged on a plane with a shared goal is the hacker achievement, whether in the technical, cultural, political, sexual or scientific realm." (083) Once we do away with the habit of an untouchable reality pre-existing, we will all become hackers in one way or another. Without expecting immediate intelligibility, mediated by the expectation of a real, the act of production or creation, of taking tiny steps into the unknown rises to awareness. The world comes to be seen as composed of different things that can come to be put into new relations, relations of relations that can be constructed, that are never simply given. Where even those existing come to be seen as unstable, conditioned by impermanence, and as such their continuing existence (through minute not excessive transformation) being rendered possible through on-going

productive activities. Some things may have to change in order for others to appear the same. Due to temperatures rising in a South-East Asian city urbanized according to Euro-American architectural standards and imaginations, all kinds of innovations must be included so that the ceremonies can continue. All of these changes require the upkeep of old and the establishment of new networks, such as electricity grids and practical services. The creation of spaces the presence in which is agreeable for bodies in overheating cities comes to act as another motivator for attending, at least for the urban poor. (Macdonald 2017) Sometimes cooling off can be more motivating than receiving and reciting the dharma.

At the edges of the temple space was a wall with graves. He only noticed them because of a chat about graves he had a few weeks back with one of the locals. The absence of European style cemeteries didn't immediately open up the problematic of how dead are buried in this world. This had surprised him to no end, as once arisen to consciousness, the difference appears so obvious. Gung told him that here everyone was burned and buried separately and that for Buddhists the body was not important, not a source of identity. At each step questions upon questions and endless possibilities for research. So many paths not taken. Always something, no, much much more than just something, that remains outside, an elsewhere, a possible endlessly multiplying road not taken. "A hacker history challenges not just the content of history, but its form. Adding yet more representations to the heap of history's goods, even representations of the oppressed and excluded, does nothing if it does not challenge the separation of history as representation from the great productive forces that make history in the first place. The educational apparatus of the overdeveloped world would make even the unscripted voice of the subaltern peasant part of its property, but the productive classes have need only of the speech of their own productivity to recover the productivity of speech." (095) The issue with (latently) realist anthropology, is that it wants to subsume all humanity into one, however varied (representation). It can't stand an outside. But how to give up on such a universalism in one's own practice when its habits are so ontologized?

When he asked what the whole thing was about, he was only told that it was for merit. Like everything one does. Except when you go to small shrines. They went to check out one such shrine within the temple, it contained a statue of a many-handed, three-headed Hindu deity. Shrines are for specific problems, such as success, luck, health, etc. Sometimes even something more determined.

Whereas merit appears to work like money or information in the abstract, a general kind of exchange between different spheres supported (as in produced, carried and consumed) by continuously changing bodies. Bodies that at times (rebirth) change so much that they are unrecognizable on the surface. “Information is immaterial, but never exists without a material support. Information may be transferred from one material support to another, but cannot be dematerialized— other than in the more occult of vectoralist ideologies. Information emerges as a concept when it achieves an abstract relation to materiality. This abstracting of information from any particular material support creates the very possibility of a vectoral society, and produces the new terrain of class conflict—the conflict between the vectoralist and hacker classes.” (126) Like rebirth, information opens the problematic of the relation between the material and the immaterial. Like rebirth (in Buddhist worlds) the problem is of the materialist kind. There is no self without the support of the five sensory aggregates. There is no self, because the self keeps changing. How much can the material components change (i.e. rebirth) so that a no self can still be considered the same yet different no self? The same goes for pieces of information. Who are those that gain control over the vectors of information? Who are those who gain control over the vectors of no-selves (not a classically Buddhist question, but one that naturally arises today)?

Gung said the problems a deity can address are based on the symbols it has. So this one has many hands and thus many symbols so it's good. Simple mathematics. He also saw a space with large, almost life-size figures telling Buddha's story (birth, ascetic period, awakening, death) in the back of the temple area. These were said to be there just as decoration. Memories of all the research on the aesthetic narrativization of the various *jātaka* stories of Buddha's rebirths in temples and their pedagogical import sprung to his mind. (Wyatt 2004) Surely the presence of such statues in these arrangements enacts more than a simple decorative function. He is tempted to think that the accumulation of such arrangements in a space comes to constitute a Buddhist world, for this makes such stories and figures and imaginaries ever present, much like so many Christian things are there in Europe and most of us don't even notice. “Information, when it is truly free, is free not for the purpose of representing the world perfectly, but for expressing its difference from what is, and for expressing the cooperative force that transforms what is into what may be.” (139) When one truly attempts to describe the world fully, grasp all that appears to the senses in a randomly defined spacetime in words (or images), one notices the impossibility of such an endeavor. Still, the most common strategy remains the one where the way of thinking isn't changed, in other words the representation is chosen over the

messiness of reality. Realist fiction even in its guise as scientific description bares itself as necessarily partly fictional, because the world exceeds it, as much as it exceeds the world, albeit both in different ways. A mere slice recombined with other elements not found in the scene as if proper. Such a writing, by being able to move from the location it came to be, can travel and effectuate transformation elsewhere, so that a future body encountering the writing and returning as if to the place described, will already carry (part of) this version of reality with, its attention being guided by the knowledge acquired from the text (as both the material form and information). Only a habitualized awareness of difference or again an attempt at the most thoroughgoing redescription will make the impossibility of perfect representation arise for consciousness, and lead to thinking through connecting issues.

Anything he encountered in *wats* was for aesthetic purposes (to create a calm mood conducive for Buddhist teachings) or merit, usually both. Any object or type of light can be used, so long as it has the desired effect. This didn't appear as a world of true or false representation, but one of effectivity conditioned or constrained by local histories and conventions. Attentively moving from one temple to another in all their astounding variety this becomes rather obvious. "All representation is false. A likeness differs of necessity from what it represents. If it did not, it would be what it represents, and thus not a representation. The only truly false representation is the belief in the possibility of true representation." (208) He eventually came to ask himself: what is the reference of all those varied representations? Who is it that decides that a Buddha statue does not represent an entity out there in the real or natural world, whereas a tree statue does? Is it not that in a paper written for research purposes one freely mixes without hesitation words that can be taken to refer to actual, material things out there that can be pointed at and those that can't, such as categories and entities foundational for and of the modern constitution? Not to do away with the reality of such matters, it's about learning to discern the wide variety of material/immaterial composition even things taken for granted as really existing for Moderns have. It's engaging with other worlds so as to attune to the ways they might have at the same time more and less in common with ours (albeit on different degrees of reality than is normatively assumed). It's introducing new concepts and categories and methods of comparison and thought. (Latour 2004b, Jensen et al. 2016) Once he did away with a reality out there, the very notion of true representation disappeared and the manipulative liars turn out to be those wielding the oppressive powers of true representation against anything (the priests didn't just go away they just transformed into new figures) and everything they have arbitrarily and largely unconsciously decided to be incorrect. It

is those actualizing a Christian world of one God, one truth, one reality that must battle the unruliness of the world. (Land 2012c) The same ones that locate thought and innovation and everything into a mind that is miraculously disconnected from the world, removed from transformative forces all the while pretending that mind-body/spirit-matter dualism is no longer a thing. Moving through worlds, the realization finally dawned on him: worlds are literally different because they are made of different stuff. It's the willful blindness, or 'trained incapacity' we are raised with, which is systematically inculcated in schools and stabilized in how our world is organized that even in displacements we rarely notice such powerful difference and explain it away into some sort of identity. (Rabinow & Bennett 2012, 80) After all, isn't this a world made specifically for a certain type of body to move around easier in? Namely, those bodies that can keep imagining an unchanging something above and outside of material history. "Even in its most radical form, the politics of representation always presupposes an ideal state that would act as guarantor of its chosen representations. It yearns for a state that would recognize this oppressed subject or that, but which is nevertheless still a desire for a state, and a state that, in the process, is not challenged as the enforcer of class interest, but is accepted as the judge of representation." (220) Perhaps the question of what do local sentient beings gain from an external's research is incorrectly posed, for it relies too much on anthropocentrism. For it presupposes tacitly a world with eternal 'neutrality' as the ground, and not the already established infrastructures of one-way extraction and institutions organized around simplistic realism and representation. Perhaps what has to be done first is to transform the very structures of academic worlds, and all else is just window-dressing to make the privileged researcher from the overdeveloped world feel morally better about themselves without actually changing anything – that is, the typical move of a liberal subject faced with the horrors necessary to make their world as good as it is to us.

III

Even in a clearly delineated fieldwork situation that only awaits to be connected to other such scenes is it evident that the world is always in excess of whatever will be extracted from it. What more, a different body in that situation will abstract different pieces of information and put them in relation to other kinds of knowledge. In fact, the whole scene differs when an other body comes to be part of it. He thinks of himself moving through different spheres, having to actualize what he produced in different ways for that knowledge to become intelligible to other actors. It seems as if it were

information as constant transformation. Much like the body that he is that is incessantly metamorphosing by entering other arrangements, when in some a couple of frameworks may even overlap and operate concurrently. Nothing is all-encompassing once one comes to analyze, that is conceptually take apart the world into smaller pieces (as one would with Buddhist meditation practices, albeit employing a different set of tools to different ends). He continues to move through different spheres of production, not least those of officially designated fieldwork and a more quotidian one of non-academic encounters where he is regularly situated. Unlike many an anthropologist, he doesn't manage to uphold a strict separation between field and home in terms of approaching it with the tools sourced from anthropology. He doesn't even want to, for the interesting questions always seem to appear when such alleged certainties are ignored. Perhaps that is the result of a changing world, him being used to constant connectivity and never-ending struggles without respite.²⁴⁷

Returning to that *wat*, imagining that perhaps some of what happened there lead one of the monks to think in new ways. Maybe because the inquisitive and at times almost stupidly ignorant active presence of an anthropologist's body and the questions emanating from it created an unknown situation that must be solved. Certainly the conceptual and imageric apparatus including the ways of connecting various parts operationalized by such a body will differ from what happens as his body. However much he practices openness and being affected by local conventions, he will not compose thought in closely related ways. His activity is not the same as a monk actualizing Buddhist thought and never will be, or that of laypeople for that matter – or else he would unbecome a researcher. After all, the different scientific fields have their own appropriate tools and histories that are (or at least are expected to be) effective for their aims. It is also not the same as surface level importing of some Buddhist concepts while retaining an analytical infrastructure (as is common in Buddhist studies). That is a precise example of the employment of dualism described in part one. The aim instead is to achieve a transformation of thought that includes concepts, conceptual infrastructure and imagery based on thoroughgoing engagement with an (allegedly) different tradition. There is a reason for moving in Deleuziana as both a research and ontological paradigm here. The anthropologist Peter Skafish writes about the works of Eduardo Viveiros de Castro: “If Deleuze was at all needed, first of all, it was again because he provides the conceptual means for orienting us in a thought-world as strange as Amazonia so that something can be done with what we learn there, and Viveiros de Castro is thus right to cast

²⁴⁷ In a following chapter a Buddhist conception of connectivity and a reformulated universalism will be proposed.

perspectivism and multinaturalism as the becoming-Amazonian of Deleuze (and not the interpretation-through-imposition so much ‘Deleuze and anthropology’ devolves into). Far more important, second, is what this becoming consists of and where exactly it goes.” (Skafish 2014, 15) In order to not lose the strangeness of Buddhist worlds, and by God! can they be strange.²⁴⁸ And it was, for him, an immense challenge to find approaches/conceptual means that make it possible to draw creatively on those other worlds. That is so that something can be done with what he learned there. He now lives a world where thought does not represent but does. “What has been shown so far is that according to Deleuze’s philosophy thought is always already thought as practice. It is a practice of actual construction, whose significance shows itself in every instance.” (Thiele 2010, 39) Thought moreover requires bodies. Bodies that solve problems, that combine a variety of elements so that thought (as concepts or ideas) are never self-same when encountered by a human.

This is a world of problems and possible solutions, not of truths and correct representations. A problem can have different solutions, each creating different worlds and other problems. The planes from which solutions can be actualized are manifold. The new solutions constructed can draw on different sources, while creating concepts. Not everything thus created can simply interact with any other kind of thought. Connections must be built too, and these will transform the planes. The work and solutions of a Buddhist monk will not straightforwardly interact with those of a researcher. They actualize different thought. Skafish summarizes the different ontology that comes to be through the encounter between Deleuzian non-representational thought as practice and anthropology succinctly:

To a certain extent, the nonreferentiality and self-consistence of the concept entails, as many other anthropologists have realized, that it has a built-in capacity to overcome the (metaphysical) ethnocentrism of the humanities and social sciences, and Viveiros de Castro simply exploits this to turn philosophy into the self-displacing, decolonizing endeavor that it turned out not to not be in Deleuze. Because the relevance and critical power of the Deleuzian concept does not depend on whether it correctly characterizes things or effectively generalizes them, simply

²⁴⁸ Christian and Christian-Secular Europeans always eliminate that strangeness, that excess of forms and possibilities, all its darkness and (for us) immorality. When sharing life with people from Buddhist societies, living in such areas and engaging art coming from such traditions, it becomes painful to see what most research has been doing to this world, how utterly reductive it has been. This has been a consistent topic of a certain strand of anthropology-related work done on Thailand and South-East Asia.

treating Amerindian cosmology as though it were composed of concepts immediately accords an autonomy to it that would be lacking were its significance only decidable through an account of its relation to practices or histories supposed to underlie it. Once it is accepted that an alien body of thought is indeed thought, and there is no longer anything to decipher except for what its coordinates, values, suppositions, and truths are, and how these throw our own into disarray by depriving them of universality and transforming them. The permanent mobility philosophy acquires from the concept therefore also entails, in principle, its permanent decoloniality: a constitutive inability to arrogate to itself unlimited intellectual authority, and an equally constitutive dependence on other ontological powers. (Skafish 2009, 18)

It is not as if so-called Asian thought was entirely alien to Occidental philosophy. From the very first encounters between Jesuits and other worlds, to fascination with and influence from Chinese thought in the 18th century via Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz and Christian Wolff (Goddard 2021), to Indian thought and German romanticism/idealism via G.W.F. Hegel or Arthur Schopenhauer (Halbfass 1990) and the Heideggerian projections onto Zen and back (Heurtebise 2019), as well as the populating of common imageries by orientalist imagery and tropes that nevertheless are not only projection but at times come from some contact with those lands far away. The same goes for all manners of encounters with other others, most infamously perhaps the impossibility of the American democratic ideal without the techniques developed by the Iroquois league. The arrogance of Western philosophical techniques parallels that of Western Capitalism – they cast themselves as universal, change and develop through contact, but disavow any real mixing or influence. Hence the incestuous tendency toward fascism and racism because reciprocity is denied. (Land 2012a, Viveiros de Castro 2014) While he does not exactly trace and explore a Buddhist world populated by concepts (as Viveiros de Castro does with Amazonian worlds), he does take the conceptuality of Buddhist thought as a given and experiments with what happens when some of them are plugged into research frameworks directly and on the same level as those of occidental provenance. For he does not want to disavow the traffic between worlds that changes both and perhaps creates entirely new ones. That is after all the issue with the modern constitution: it denies what it actually does, much like it's practitioners. The issue is not that something is taken from another world, it is that this connection is being denied. And that our modern world and

all the infrastructure that upholds it are built on this denial.²⁴⁹ Individual thinkers will not change any of this, except perhaps in small bubbles they manage to sustain. What is necessary is (infra)structural change. When he thinks about what sustains this difference in him and as him that makes it possible to think outside of the professionally established and policed boundaries of fields,²⁵⁰ it is certain that the internet and its ability to establish unexpected connections and sustain them, in a variety of forms, including the possibility to build a world through cinemas of the other, is integral to any such endeavor. Other worlds lurk even in the most apparently unified reality. Nothing maps onto each other perfectly. And so each affirmative redescription of what is, based on sustained critical inquiry into the world, serves to open that world if only by hacking out a frame to connect what before seemed to be disconnected and offer it to be grasped by a consciousness.

So he moves through different spheres where all manner of infrastructures meet to think through him. Some are more stable, make for what 'he is' and can be mistaken for the real 'he,' but he knows, after years of practicing attention that he and the thought produced could become different, very different, if only those 'other spaces' and their operations could be stabilized into something more permanent. It's the movement between, movement as differently stabilized infrastructural space that creates different thought to be or not to be put in touch with concepts on that plane where things might come together and transform. What will happen if such planes are affirmatively traced from all kinds of spaces, not just classrooms and offices? Maybe if we stop pretending there is a clear-cut separation between knowledge and life, new thought might emerge, one oriented toward enhancing the toolbox with which problems can be solved. After all, all that is emerges from interdependent arising, is already connected even if from the position one is in, this is not to be grasped immediately. New material infrastructures can be built to make circulation between spheres easier, not just for the bodies to which knowledge-production is ascribed, but for those bits and pieces of information produced. And as all is connected and new images must be constructed to lead out of the interlocking world of the foundationalism of the modern constitution, speculative thought propels him further.

He thinks a world where humanity is finally imagined outside of a humanist social Darwinist projection. One where (e.g. via Grosz's combination of Deleuze and Darwin) techno-cultures are

²⁴⁹ For extensive discussions of the basic racism and consistent disavowal at the center of the Enlightenment and modern fictionalization of a self-contained European tradition, see e.g. Park (2013), Stromback (2019).

²⁵⁰ On boundary policing of specialists and how this tendency is inbuilt into the language of research, see Davies 2007, 36.

studied not as essences (nor critiques thereof) but as always singular responses to locally formed problems and the solutions societies (including the non-human actors, all to be scaled up or scaled down, frameworks to be experimented with) come up with, and the way such solutions come to be stored (for access beyond the initial emergence) and automated. All a ceaseless continuation of non-teleological evolution, where ideas, deities, habits, technologies and other non-organic entities that mingle are as much part of it, as what is easily categorized as organic or biological. What constitutes the human here is the material composition of bodies (and hence those other parts of the world that can be perceived) and all that which can be put onto planes where it can come to speak to each other, regardless of the number of planes. (Grosz 2017) Encounters between such worlds (of somewhat stabilized cultural techniques and their easy accessibility for some) lead to the creation of amalgams of such solutions/responses (not just in immaterial thought but also more material solutions such as engineering or social organizations/imaginaries) by those in between, and to new solutions and responses by elements of those worlds now faced with new conditions. The external comes to be transformed into something internal, and at times perhaps equal mergers of traditions appear, neither of which identifiable as the dominant origin. All these admixtures are possible because we are made of the same stuff and can thus interact and influence each other. And if an image of universality is being upheld in research, then perhaps the establishment of infrastructural access, stable yet open to transformation can be established, as well as spaces of experimentation where tools and local problems can encounter each other in open-ended ways, and where failure does not lead to disintegration.

21. Conclusion or Hard Reset

The past pages were written as possible solutions to problems. Problems that appear as different fault lines between and within fields open up and persist, at least for those bodies trained in noticing where certainty breaks down. Problems that appear once the problem of reality has been solved in a way that makes it clear that there is no independent reality out there to be directly accessed and thus act as ground and arbiter for what is, isn't and might be.²⁵¹ (Thought) worlds without certainty open up with a rush of excitement that comes with the awareness of not knowing. A positive not knowing is knowing the current limits of knowing. A knowledge that operates outside the bounds of representation, and with that, bodies that make knowledge become different. Problems are differential multiplicities making heterogeneous expression possible without the need to immediately radicalize it into contradictions. Problems are what all entities face, and as such traverse the material and immaterial. Of course, different entities and different parts that make up entities, are composed in different sets of ways as they relate to the ability to change without breaking up. Not solving the problem of hunger, while connected to other problems a human body can face, leads to somewhat harsher outcomes than the inability to pose a problem that appeared in research anew. What is being done here is possible, because entire worlds have been built so that the transformation of varied energies to sustain a writer's body in Western society becomes automatic, has been externalized long before the body itself has come to be. The problem of how to get food and shelter is mostly one that I don't have to solve in any significant way. It is collaboration (within and between various species and not necessarily in immediately noticeable ways) that makes life possible, even as certain actors keep insisting on excluding many others from the fruits they themselves have not actually cultivated.²⁵² Individualist ontology would be

²⁵¹ As for the correlationist critique (Meillassoux 2006), apart from working with a basically static image of the world with human and non-human activity nullified (in the ironically excessive anthropocentrism of the thinker who tries to get beyond it), as well as the inability of making a distinction between connecting with an object, grasping an object fully (and immediately extrapolating onto world in general) and the still very human proposition that there is a full thing/world there in the first place, Meillassoux and other Speculative Realists are armchair thinkers that generalize from a specific branch of science they take to be ground and unrelated to human-non-human creativity: "Speculative audacity aside, from the point of view of STS these examples have significant problems. De Landa begins with a very specific interpretation of Gilles Deleuze, which authorises a history centering(?) on emergent patterns of 'matter', based on certain kinds of physics and biology. Meillassoux, similarly, begins from a strictly philosophical consideration that leads to the prioritisation of very particular claims from physics and mathematics. Thus, both analyses work within a conventional epistemological hierarchy, according to which objective science provides the foundation for authoritative philosophy. Various scientific claims are ad-libbed and, in de Landa's claim, transposed as underlying explanations of human history. Neither the social sciences nor the humanities are anywhere in sight. Basically, we are in the realm of scientism. This route to ontology is particularly grating to STS scholars who study how scientific facts are made, how they come to circulate and how they are stabilised as facts." (Jensen et al. 2017, 532)

²⁵² It's not just that the human is made up of a variety of organisms, though most may be undetectable to the human eye, but

impossible without the labors and problem-solving capacities of others.²⁵³ Paradoxically perhaps, the more the labors of others have been automatized, become part of the structure of the world one lives, the more difficult it is to notice and care. Awareness is something to be practiced, possible framings of the world multiplied.

Many fields of research treat overlapping ‘things in the world’ without ever really meeting due to the ontologically separating organization of knowledge production, as well as time limits and the expansive limitations of the powers that be. This is one of the niftiest operations of Euro-modernity, the primary proposition of separation that is actually made to become real and with clear borders, and then denied to ever have happened, in the self-presentation of bringing together diversity. Meanwhile, the 21st century of the Christian-Secular era or the 26th of the Buddhist is one where the internet (however much its emancipatory promises of once might have failed)²⁵⁴ makes for a world where knowledge in its vast variety, complexity and contradictoriness is more directly accessible than ever, bypassing more classically structured hierarchies built around schools, teachers and libraries. It is this excess and the obvious inconsistencies that come with it that brought me to really reconsider how to conceptualize the encounter with (speculative) Buddhist worldings, and in the same non-identical fractured transformational movement learn to gaze back at myself, my world(s), with significant assistance of certain approaches cultivated in anthropology, and learn to redescribe worlds not as thoughts and representations and narratives, but as the ceaseless wealth and variation and becoming of all manner of

species even co-evolve in symbiotic ways. The wasporchid imagery is good to keep in mind: “Finally, becoming is not an evolution, at least not an evolution by descent and filiation [...] It concerns alliance. If evolution includes any veritable becomings, it is in the domain of *symbioses* that bring into play beings of totally different scales and kingdoms, with no possible filiations. There is a block of becoming that snaps up the wasp and the orchid, but from which no wasp-orchid can ever descend.” (Deleuze & Guattari 1987, 238) And later: “The line or block of becoming that unites the wasp and the orchid produces a shared deterritorialization: of the wasp, in that it becomes a liberated piece of the orchid’s reproductive system, but also of the orchid, in that it becomes the object of an orgasm in the wasp, also liberated from its own reproduction.” (Ibid., 293)

²⁵³ As Bratton (2019) and Krämer & Bredekamp (2013) demonstrate as (cognitive) operators are externalized as (automated) technology other possibilities for human activity become available and these operators work for a variety of actors, regardless of how they got made in the first place. There simply is no easy distinction to be made when it comes to assigning the origin of things or value produced.

²⁵⁴ “At MIT, hackers worked freely on each other’s code, gave code to others and did not secure their files – to do so would only invite others to circumvent the security. This model of free, self-organized labor took place under very special conditions – in research labs with large amounts of Pentagon funding. Yet it provided an ethic of working with information that spread far beyond this academic setting. The sharing of information became a hallmark of early Internet culture. This was perceived to be an obstacle to its development as a commodity by the new forms of business that wanted to invest in it. The crackdown on hacker culture in its more transgressive sense, and the containment of the hacker ethic in its more benign sense, are two parts of the process of the commodification of computing networks in the interests of restricting the free movement of information and the expansion of the concept of information as private property.” (Wark 2006, 321)

elements, especially those not yet commonly noticed. Above all the last element is one that opens up once one learns to see and think with media theory and STS. After thoroughly engaging different fields including philosophy for countless years, meaning in a way where one tries to understand how philosophies and theories and methods work as compared to others, it becomes evident that much of what is done to the possibilities of thought (not just with Deleuze) is to cut out small parts and fit them into an already finished conception of world so as to in the end stabilize it – a truly Procrustean activity one is taught day in day out at schools built on the model of a finished world and thought and discourse that represent, which comes to be endlessly critiqued but rarely transformed into a different way of relating the elements at play. Deleuze and Guattari's works make for a radical rearrangement, a real liberation from endlessly circular discussions about whether this or that is correct (without any of the participants ever acknowledging they are each referring to a slightly different, always transcendental image of the world, posed as beyond the effect of sentient beings). It is because they introduce a way of thinking oriented around problems without the possibility of anything ever ending (one of the metaphysical baggages carried over from a Christian cosmos) – a direct interaction between world and thought, local, changing, active, beyond the human, without hierarchy, freed from the dogmatic image of thought. Any body that tackles a problem will come up with a different (if overlapping) solution, depending on what it can draw on from its past and where a cut is introduced insofar as relating to other elements operates (in thought, regardless of the connections made in the world). This makes it possible, as an attitude to world, to positively acknowledge, affirm differences without denying the connective tissue.

The philosophical tradition of the 20th century has given a particularly dark response to the idea that thought must be necessitated from outside, when it is not about representing any already given external reality: what makes us think would be nothing other than our own finitude, the very nothingness that “surrounds” us and from where we emerge. Problems and questions would not express any objective incompleteness in our knowledge or life but rather the relation we have to the fact that there is nothing beyond this very finitude. This is for instance what Heidegger and Lacan both argued in different ways. The significance of Deleuze for us consists in having opened up a third way: what he calls the Outside is neither external reality nor the pure nothingness out of which we pop “into the world” – it is the very variation of the different ways of thinking and living.

This, ultimately, is one of the most important ideas one should retain from the “philosophy of difference”: the fact that we could think differently is precisely what makes us think. (Maniglier 2019, 42–43)

Turning toward what makes us think, is a turning away from description, which has always partly operated as classification, mapping, appropriation, colonization. Description as it is practiced in Euro-modernity continues to be an arbitration of what is and what isn't, a decision about what can and cannot be related in the text, and also a relating outside the text insofar as access to the end product is anything but universal. The last element persists in what is proposed here, but when humanities research turns toward the active and conscious creation of tools to deal with problems, or the big problems where tensions seem to be too great to find non-destructive solutions, the entire field is restructured. An image continues operating where humanities are basically assumed to represent the world, and issues turn around the degree of correctness and the power dynamics behind it. Meanwhile, engineering and the more investment-heavy sciences, while generally operating within the same cosmological framework (after all, it's ‘cultural’) create objects and tools to reach into the workings of the world and change what is possible. Sciences then that work with more immaterial elements, that is, humanities, do so too, as texts and thoughts and conventions are produced, only as this activity is not acknowledged what comes to be perpetuated, regardless of what is generated otherwise, are cosmo-practical conventions that prevent a clearer assessment of what is happening. What one can practice to notice, especially with media theory, is all that which is taken for granted, all the while being anything but. Using words, treating communication as self-evident and primarily successful more often than not hides differences and varied configurations. What Deleuze and Guattari can teach is to see how each use responds to a different set of problems, connecting slightly other elements. The crucial issue is: what is being extended, stabilized (however transformed) and what is cut off? And research that continues operating within the dogmatic representational image of thought will continue letting only the modern Western constitution (its delusions and exclusions) to reproduce itself in minor variations, while working hard to contain all other possibilities in the cage of classification. Description organized by an already finished world operates as classification, no matter how creative it is. That is one of the basic operations of the modern system of knowledge production: the containment of the irreducible vivacity of the world, of evolution as non-teleological creation of solutions and forms and new problems. It also hides its own speculative activity, the fabulation of the world by Moderns, as the projection of a preexisting, finished

reality turns attention and scrutiny away from one's own creativity. Gazing at the heavens, it is easy to mistake distance for purity. Looking only upward, one can forget to check what is happening to the ground one stands on. For what is created can be changed, and most Christian-Seculars remain Christian in that they cannot face that anybody but God would actually create. This is evident in the framing of science as a discoveries, in the cutting away of human and non-human capacities that made whatever came to be possible and making it appear as if the world and Nature out there were already finished. This leads to the oscillation common in Modernity between either humans having no power or being entirely free to create whatever they want. Instead, one can come to understand and see the world as different combinations of creative and limiting forces and bodies, of freedom as appearing in the capacity to transform in a somewhat controlled direction a set of limitations currently in place thereby making for new futures filled with things that before couldn't even be imagined. Once the fabulatory process is entered, new worlds open up. It is key here to cease making a distinction between nature and culture, posing whatever humans create or think as outside of evolution.²⁵⁵ There is no eternally remaining essential outside, even if no sentient body at any time can't actually grasp the entirety. And even if it were possible to grasp an entirety, through the act itself the world would be transformed in a specific way as a new world comes to be with a new entirety to be framed.

Movement in and around and as spacings occurs in a variety of ways. Depending on what tools are used to explore all those variations, a slightly different configuration will form a (re)description. They overlap, may even appear as almost identical, yet never are. When appearing from within a different cosmological framework, once different operators might come to appear (almost) same, and seemingly same ones different. Speculation, fabulation are always at play, however innocuously. Often even undetectable to the untrained body of the Moderns, habitualized as it is to consider reality and a certain way of writing it as given. Yet, experience and description are reductions of complexity, connective transformations of elements into other media. The scenes, the examples carefully fashioned here are to varying degrees of direct connection sourced from fieldwork encounters. Constructing scenes to think with, composed of concepts and images and other parts, including operating in the background, an infrastructure put together in such a way that connection and comparison become possible between what would commonly (in hegemonic frameworks) be considered as unquestioningly unrelated. And as a next step it makes it possible to generatively experiment with other ways of

²⁵⁵ This practice can still be kept, experimentally, contextually, for it will remain generative – the issue is its unacknowledged ontologization.

connecting the parts that were put together. An SF that includes experimenting with values, aesthetic baselines, imaginaries, gestures, rites, ontological distinctions etc. Cinema comes as a particularly useful tool for learning to notice, to become attentive to various behaviors, conceptions of humans and non-humans, of relation(ship)s, practices, regardless of how realistic they might seem at the time. What once seemed unreal, habit makes real, unremarkable. A body filters unnecessary and regularized information, turns some of it into instinct, reduced reaction times. If engaging with anthropological and science studies teaches anything, it's that even when we do know, we don't know yet what a body can do – the body not merely the organic body as usually conceptualized, but as a conceptual framework for an integrated, yet open system with consciousness as emergent property always in danger of fundamentally misrecognizing its limits. Afraid of going somewhere or going too far – positive and negative feedback loops interacting in unpredictable ways. Consciousness or so-called rationality as that which emerges through the accumulation of frictions between the infinite, diffracting closed yet open systems a body is (part of).

Learning to (re)see, whether in the experimental space of cinema or Buddhist meditation, comes with indirect awareness of the conditions of perception, complex and direct integration into webs of causation and the powers of a properly trained body to effectuate changes, however incremental, to such determination. Body-world ties are undone and redone, perception trained to notice the ongoing processes occurring beyond the limits of control. At the confluence of conceptual and corporeal training, new paths for futures open up. With such awareness arrives knowledge of complexity beyond a human body's grasp, to be understood only as that which exceeds a body's capacity, but the effects of which can be sensed. Which makes for a relativizing (as in being able to think and perceive within multiple frameworks) of one's condition and troubles. In the sense that experiential distancing qua coolheartedness comes to be a way to be in life, while conscious engagement with bettering one's situation can continue to be practiced. Distance doesn't necessitate non-engagement. What comes to work and how, it all depends on what other cosmological elements come to be plugged in. An awareness of the deep material and locally bounded constitution of the world, from which knowledge of a general relativity of all things comes as a secondary effect. Not as active grasping of the processes that operate before any consciousness appears, grasps, recognizes, stabilizes, rather as awareness of something happening before consciousness and outside of the faculties of the currently constituted body. This includes the becoming aware of past work a body has done, recognizing what at least some

of the labor that lead to today's capabilities. As anyone with even the slightest awareness of the variety of cinema will sense, it takes work, it is practice to learn to watch certain kinds of cinema, and then, by extension, awareness can arise that it did so too for the most dominant formal conventions in a society. Archaeological engagement of the history of forms, of technologies and ideological orientations, to how what is and what isn't came to be enhances this liberatory practice. With a Buddhist-derived infrastructured universalism comes a thought practice that orients toward continuous examination of a situation in terms of its complex webs of causes and effects as tied to that situation.

Whatever knowledge is gleaned from situations where cuts between body and immediate environment are enacted, whether they will add up to significant transformations or be lost in the past without much systematic effect, depends on the framework that is outside of such experience proper. What a modern research environment can offer, given its access to a vast accumulated archive of cosmological, conceptual and technological tools and propositions, is an expansion of sources and opportunities for experimentation. The gaps that open up once direct environmental (which includes social, economical) pressures is distanced are such that seemingly set paths for an individual and a society can be redirected. This is after all just a rephrasing of some of the promises of higher education as is, especially once things are analyzed in terms of what they (can) do and not what is officially said to be true. A more traditionally Buddhist framework would seek to organize the knowledge gained from these gaps into an accumulation toward nibbana, yet as with the transformation of Christian cosmology into the modern Christian-Secular one, much can be kept somewhat stably while bracketing soteriological aspects. The speculative part is also found in this: what to put in place so that change effectuated by cinema or meditation stabilizes outside of it? How to ensure that a viewing body can become aware of the new figures, ethics, imaginaries formed in each cinematic proposition of a world and then carry these possibilities over into life outside of cinema, and not reduce new formations onto what has been dominantly established?

These questions also apply to distinctly scientific practices: how not to reduce engagement with purported otherness (whatever the combination on the material-semiotic scale might be) to already established models but use it for the more or less conscious creation of new combinations, adaptive transformations of theoretical frameworks? One concept to consider is thickness in two senses. 1. The thickness of connections between objects and scenes put together in a text and the places they were

sourced from, however they might be composed. What counts as empirical once the clear distinction between representation and reality (for most so-called objects or subjects of research, accessible only through representation, a process conveniently forgotten) has been unmade, includes concepts, styles of writing, the material infrastructures that make different kinds of research possible, and countless other entities. 2. Thickness of the constructed scenes, in the well-known sense of Geertzian ‘thick description.’ Thickness as irreducible descriptive complexity that includes contradictory elements and comes to act analogously to the frictions of materiality so as to prevent an easy collapse of the different levels of composition onto a proposition of a reality out there, as well as retaining generativity for future engagement. Awareness of such excessive complexities brings with awareness of the random cuts that had to be made to ensure any kind of stability for the object in the making. There is clear affinity between this conception of research description and the (what textual scholars consider) excessive and indeterminate iconicity of the cinematic and photographic image. (Taylor 1996) Strategies of writing will continue developing, yet for a text to operate a cut in the effortlessness with which even texts that actively propose a different world and thought-practice to the modern Christian-Secular commonplace one of representational projection are turned into the same old practices is an uphill battle. Shocks are necessary, in writing as much as in cinema and meditation or elsewhere. The ways texts and other objects produced under scientific conditions feed back into wider circles are infinite, new ones can appear, do appear, and it's only for bodies to learn to attune to the appearance of the new in the immediate surroundings.

Research that has forgone the organizing image of a possibly fully knowable world, for it has come to be aware of the incommensurability of worlds and of itself being part of worlds, comes to be (among other things) about making new comparisons and connections possible, without arbitration of what is and isn't real. That is performed by the labor done in making connections and forms and ideas and habits possible, without the need of doubling down, judge-like from above. Such reorientation away from judging others in the quest of ultimate controlling arbitration of reality toward using what is encountered in order to enhance variations and with that tools to deal with problems sentient beings might encounter, can be conceived of as a therapeutic activism.²⁵⁶ It fundamentally draws on some of the oldest Buddhist ideals and stories, where the Buddha tends toward a pragmatism aimed at healing when pain appears. Discontent, of which pain in the common sense is but a subset, will always appear

²⁵⁶ Szymanski (2020) explores this concept via cinema, including that of Weerasethakul.

for such is how the world works, and Buddha cautions against speculation on things that cannot actually be verified, so it's best to focus on healing here and now instead of speculating about how evil appeared. Plugged into the karmanetic rearticulation enacted here, reassesses the role of cosmogenetic speculation as therapeutically creative so long as it is not taken as an end of itself. This is also where the construction of conceptual and material infrastructures reenters, so that what at a certain moment appears incomparable and unrelated, can be made commensurate and yield new ideas and tools, thereby in some way becoming a controlled modulation of the world. With awareness of the processes of translation that keep operating comes the awareness that none of this is the reduction of the incommensurate to the same. There will always be things outside of whatever is occurring somewhere, and that too is the way of the world.

Bridges can be built, they transform both sides that were connected and that which is beneath them, yet this doesn't mean they render all identical. In order to keep functioning, in order to persist in time, they have to be maintained. This includes knowledge of access, both the knowledge of maintaining them and the knowledge of what they do.²⁵⁷ Bridges can also always be destroyed, and the once connected parts develop in entirely unrelated ways so that eventually even what was once shared will be hard to discern. When research frameworks such as that of anthropology comes to be taken as fashioning scenes to think with from outside of the hegemonic traditions (without denying such sourcing as has all too often been the case), the question of correct or incorrect representation or whether something does or does not really exist disappear. Instead the concern can come to be organized around the applicability of the tools constructed and who they come to serve, as well as who can access them and how access can be enhanced, democratized. It also puts all conceptual tools and writing practices on the same level, rendering commensurable research across fields, breaking down seemingly ontological distinctions of categories that some of us even lived through when they appeared, but habit makes it seem as if they existed forever. So (post)humanities would come to be organized around the creating, storing and accessing of objects, tools, operators to have the widest variety possible for solving problems and reducing tensions, for these always appear in complex worlds.

²⁵⁷ The latter becomes more obvious when various rope or living bridges are considered, for often bodies used to wide, stable bridges won't be able to trespass them, which effectively means they don't work or even appear as bridges (to everybody).

It is the relative slowness of change exhibited by figures and words that gives rise to the illusion of primary stability. The same goes for an inattentive treatment of film images. At the same time, figures and words are operators that make disparate entities qua mostly self-contained processes with clear, if permeable borders with their outside comparable. They bring them closer to each other. Something to be mindful of when translating other worldings into languages of science. It is all too easy under the general Christian-Secular assumption of the Moderns to forget that expression in words is a different operation than doing and experiencing with other media such as a human body. The word did not, does not and will not come first. It is but one of many parts. Nor do spoken and written words do the same things. Knowing in thought that the world is flux at continually differentiating speeds, that a point of view embodied is taking on a specific speed in relation to surroundings, and practicing, shaping or experimenting with bodily faculties until experience of such knowledge becomes possible are different operations. All that appears stable merely changes and moves much slower than what is around. They are easy to link, and the easier a connection is established, the more a danger appears of collapsing different things into one. Different practices of comparison, of thought, of body and technology accumulate as diverging paths to actually different worlds. It matters deeply how thought is thought and what can and cannot be connected. The proposition of different worlds made by proponents of the ontological turn is even more forceful than appears to be generally acknowledged, for concepts, narratives, gestures, models, theories, equations, outright fictions of whatever kind and other less material things also co-constitute worlds.²⁵⁸ It is almost as if taking thinking and creating for granted, due to the underlying tacit assumption that the world is actually already finished and human activity has no substantial impact, takes away all the joy that awareness of this power can bring. It also takes away the possibility to recognize limits to such powers. There is an analogical operation noticeable in ways of thinking: the assumption that I already know, that new pieces of information are at best variations of the already known. That is, an image operates here where the 'I,' like the world, is fundamentally finished. As Nietzsche was very aware, Christian cosmology just won't die, it's more persistent than the undead: we killed God, and here he is again with minor cosmetic surgery, in the form of Truth, Nature, One World, Democracy or whatever. (Tsing 2005) We, the destroyers of worlds, those whose lives are impossible without continuing mass exploitation of other sentient beings, think ourselves the only true Humanitarians. It's as if each step of the so-called modernization, of Enlightenment, of capitalism, is the ongoing unacknowledged naturalization of this totalizing

²⁵⁸ Research into cultural techniques has taught to notice the naturalization of certain operations onto the world, so that new ones appear that would otherwise have been impossible. (Krämer & Bredekamp 2013)

polarizing self-congratulatory creed. It seems prudent to do what is possible to move away from this worlding that goes against life so as to reclaim the world for the variety it once promised. A real, contradictory, challenging variety, not the liberal kind of minimal surface diversity to give a nice advertisement sheen to the underlying unification through exploitation of all. This calls for a rethinking of what sciences of all kinds do, and what role they and the ethics and practices engendered in those spaces where science is made and people are educated can play.

That worlds are composed differently comes with acknowledging that a body dominantly formed in one, when displaced to a different one, won't perceive and experience in the same way as local bodies. One has to acknowledge limits and incommensurabilities that come with not being God. There is the option that with focused work and extended periods of time, a body can transform so that experience will come to closely resemble that of surrounding bodies. Perhaps that is only possible when ties to the place of origin are cut, the place being not merely geographical but also social, class based. Displacements are of many kinds. The anthropologist body here does a specific kind of scientific magic, bridging to some degree two or more versions of self and world, and trying to use this tension that makes differences appear to consciousness productively with the aim of somehow fashioning them into something that can be communicated. The objects produced naturally introduce new kinds of differences and frictions wherever they travel.

Once attention and senses have been trained, friction is noticeable everywhere. Nothing just happens. There is no smooth world with secondary resistances. This all too power cosmological model is a transformation of the Christian proposition, a perfect world created by God with discord disseminated as a secondary operation by Satan. This is a world where a primary utopia or heaven, basically good and assumed as neutral ground, is just taken for granted, and all the evils that appear are in the end due to some variation of free will. Where did the potential for an angel to fall come from in the first place? What generated the conditions of free will? If thinking remains tied to such a model, one where thinking and research just happen, without any acknowledged effect, where ideal models are somehow habitually taken as more real than the messiness of worlds, and their undesired effects being attributed to the effects of free will and misunderstanding, the complex interactions between scientific and other production and other parts that make up worlds will remain mysteriously exterior to thought. The alternative proposed here makes for a world where one would have to always consciously

experiment in connecting what is gleaned from writing with other elements of the world. And with such combining, awareness of (some) frictions can arise. No habitual steamrolling of world by representation. And with such an image of thought and world, different sets of values can come to be cultivated. Not a hierarchy as to who knows more, or is better at pretending to know more and fears being found out, but mutual support and learning with some beings more practiced in attuning to the vagaries of frictioning and being able to actualize a wider set of tools to face the cracks that always appear. Sets of tools that don't add up as hierarchy, but rather as different combinations of overlapping complexity. Friction between all manner of elements that come together living, doing research. Theory, data gathering practices, personal habits, writing skills – the limits of currently existing conventions of research and communication. For those at least that have transformed from basing thought and living in models of recognition into difference.

What happens if this basic preconscious cosmology is swapped for one of impermanence and the (awareness of) discontent that stems from it? Friction and discord no longer appear as the doings of bad actors or unruly material baseness unwilling to submit to elevated rationality and eternal truthfulness of whatever is currently taken as real and perfectly true. Rather it is the complex and always shifting nature of world that gives rises to movements that can at times come to rub against each other, while at other times in other places operating rather smoothly together. The more the beings that come to be formed attach to the images of world they formed over the vagaries that unstable complexity brings with, the more discord will there be. A world without misunderstandings, contrariness, collisions of different speeds is impossible, undesirable even, for it would be a dead world. What is possible is not letting them grow to uncontrollable sizes, not letting them take on a stability and independence of their own. And efforts can be put into creating such tools that reorient paths toward less violent and contrary ones. Practicing awareness for the contextual misapplication of causes, cultivating attention to new elements appearing and learning to improve at letting go of images of the world that have taken on lives of their own in contradiction (and much effort to cut off any feedback) to how the environment has developed. This is not to deny the possibility of establishing circuits even with the most outrageous conceptions of the world, rather it's a practice of learning to take some distance and by experientially encountering excessive complexity managing to achieve some levels of coolheartedness. Correct assignment of causes and effects is, for common sentient bodies at least, impossible, and the creativity that comes with such random cuts feeds back into how worlds will

develop.

Utopias, heavens, SF futures, otherworlds²⁵⁹ feed into this world in a variety of ways. While Buddhist practices might focus on celestial atmosphere, on creating conditions conducive to ending the cycles of rebirth, as well as engendering moods and dispositions that enhance distance from immediate environmental effects, other imaginations of heaven will enact other differences. And, obviously, bodies are habitualized to noticing different elements in utopias and the world around, so that when a proposition of a world travels, the differences and inspirations it entails won't be the same. On some level, every text (in the most general sense) is a proposition of a world and what populates it, and as such a fiction. And fictions, whether dominantly utopian or scientific in their composition, act as motors of change, as something of high complexity from outside is introduced into a situation. Especially when they cannot be easily transformed into existing conventions, but manage to establish productive connections nonetheless. It matters which habits and practices in relating things of the world are acknowledged and valued. It's through an engagement with the entangled frictioning messiness of material worlds, it's once a body learns to distinguish between image/representation and world and make affirmative, experimental use of this difference, that real thought as creation of the new becomes possible. A doing that is not afraid of mistakes, because it is impossible to know when something will finally take on positive effects. Obviously, such a doing is not for everyone, as has been the case for science or other creative endeavors. And that is a good thing: variety, cultivated difference makes for a better world, as more of it also means a wider array of tools accessible to find solutions to challenges that inevitably come with impermanence. A world where mistakes are not punished, but recognized as potentially productive and at times necessary. One where spaces where experiments breaking down conventions on all levels and with uncertain outcomes are created, supported and valued. Much can be achieved once the concept of preexisting, finished reality is undone.

²⁵⁹ Fictionalization is a constitutive process of worlds, fictions are stabilized entities the relation of which to a current state of affairs is clearly one of unverifiability, which does not deny their effectivity. Verification here means the capacity to relate an object, a piece of knowledge, a theory to independent elements without overt contradiction. What was once a fiction can become quotidian.

22. A City as Motion

Now, the hazily tropical urban sun is high up already and as scorching as ever. Late mornings are downtime. Wat Boromniwat Ratchaworawihan, Wat Prayayang, Wat Chamni Hatthakan, Wat Chaimongol. Temple upon Buddhist temple passing by, mostly empty grounds resounding the busy presence of the early hours heavy with merit-making. Each of them distinctive in their own special way. One with a school attached, enchantingly rhythmic melodies expanding through loudspeakers as uniformed middle schoolers dart around expending intense energy on the already heating open space. Another one small and so deserted as to wonder whether anybody ever visits at all. One distinctly Sino-Thai, in the far rear a Pagoda, partly covered, currently in the process of being repaired, a ritual area predominantly red with a fat and jolly Budai enlightening the atmosphere. This Mahāyāna figure appearing from time to time in generally Theravāda spaces. Other elements encountered in the rose glow of the dispersed wall color quietly announce their generic Bangkok Buddhist historicity. In reality becoming, things mingle. Closer to noon, prayers are heard and faint smells of incense perfume the air. Turquoise light reflects intensely from the all windowed front of the adjacent greenhouse, empty of plants but full of statues to offer money to. The glass windows, as is customary, in dark green hues, while the statues, including the row of Buddhas of the week, await their next merit-maker. Always silent, always ready.

A city built on water sometimes shines through all the concrete and high rises, lonesome trees and their shrine friends. Khlongs, the almost 1'700 canals found here, most filled up by modernization, weave in straight lines under low bridges around the backs of houses, rarely touching the countless streets crisscrossing the mahanakorn. Some trees and tree spirit shrines appear to be exclusively accessible from the water side. Remnants of a previous version of urban becoming. Everywhere tiny shrines with offerings to the local tree spirit, often made out of wood right by the tree. There is a chance that not one is without a few glass bottles of fizzy Fanta Red. Some say tree spirits like the color. Others mention sweetness. Some even point out it was the favorite drink of Rama V, King Chulalongkorn, who died almost half a century before it was invented. Quite a journey even for a brand developed in Nazi Germany following sweetness embargoes. Even more theories pop up. Other food and drink offerings remain accepted, but the spirits do seem to have a tooth for this fairly recent creation of excessive gustatory artificiality. They go with the times. Much remains hidden from the

boats much only appears when traveling by boat, long and low and sometimes with a roof, private or part of the transport infrastructure. Cities split and overlap. People slow down and clasp their hands. Pay respect to the tree spirit. Numbers of what to pay respects to are endless, even multiplying, like the Buddha statues and other sacred forms as temples approach. Endless rows of sculptures to be sold, golden shining Buddhas still covered in plastic. Inside, in wooden constructions, or outside, under sunroofs or out in the open. People and things and smiles all around.

Water is everywhere in temple spaces and out. As if spilling over from the general geographic and climactic conditions of the region. In fact, it traverses any notion of outside and inside, of object and space. It is everywhere and nowhere. Contained statically and dynamically. Regularly it happens to be everywhere, especially in monsoon season. Sitting under the sun-dappled trees it seems like nothing much happens. Children shout on the other side of the walls, too far to be more than white noise. Occasionally, monks scuttle by, cleaning utensils in hand to remove fallen leaves and water all plants. A layperson or two seek out the calm, always silent or monkishly soft-spoken. It is cooler here inside the temple grounds than in the city outside the walls. Not all temples are like this, small paradises of respite among the dirt whirling from the dense traffic, some are as barren and shadowless as they come. The wind blows, sunshine shifts as other rays make it through the leafy blanket. Two monks sit at other small stone tables in silence, fiddling with their smartphones. A faint gurgling of water makes it here through the near silence, once the flow of the hose ceases. A butterfly flutters indecisively. A spider's net glistens in a far corner. A speck of dust whirls near the ground remembering the foot that was just there. Paying close attention, movement and change are everywhere, on the surface. Silent transformations scream loudly. Water flows. The world happens.

A largely tourist free area, the farang masses generally keep to where famous temples pointed toward in guides are found in abundance, rarely straying from well trodden paths. Here, tropically accelerated decay and high technology blend happily, reminding of futures and hopes that fall apart before becoming real. Not that there aren't temples all around, including churches and mosques, and Hindu temples and all kinds of shrines everywhere. One almost stops noticing them, they are that common. White turns gray fast here in the damp, heavy air. Locals say, there are three seasons: rainy, hot, cool. The latter here means something else than in those parts where four seasons make for yearly cycles. Occasionally refreshing seems a more appropriate designation. Midday is near, streets are busy,

finally the stroll is approaching areas where shadows become regular in this city without trees to cover a body from sunlight. A traffic system without any say for pedestrians. Locals rarely walk. Cabs and cars and tuktuk. From the BTS Skytrain straight to one of the myriads of motorbikes to the final destination, even if it's just a couple of hundred steps. The sweat drops suspend in sunlight or trickle down the skin, the skywalk is near. Hopefully one of those entrances with an escalator and not just steps.

Water flowing in a circle, carrying small candle floats visitors can light. An installation made of metal and whatnot, about three meters long and two wide, perhaps. At the center a dry space with a Buddha beneath a Naga, and flowers and other things. Little candles of all colors. Lit at the same flame. Same, but different. This wat is very large, not necessarily in terms of space, but in terms of things and architecture. Varied buildings are here, many of them red, parts of the open spaces covered for shade. It doesn't have any trees or bushes, apart from small ones in decorated pots. The space here is very cramped and filled with all kinds of merit-making possibilities, including an Elephant with small elephants offered to it. It is an immense complex with multitudinous merit and luck producing activities, far too many to recount. However singular, far from the only one of this kind, jam-packed with things and possibilities. Three main buildings elevate themselves on a small hill at the center of the temple. Glass covered high-rises loom in the background, throwing back sun rays here and there depending on the time of day. Laypeople are busy engaging the variety of possibilities for interaction, scuttling about. Monks, walking much slower, as they should, are here and there, mingling and popping out. Gongs resound, banged by visitors every now and then. Mallets always ready to be picked up and swung. Others stick plates of gold onto Buddhas or famous monk statues. Whether moving through decidedly capitalist or Buddhist spaces, the things of this world are innumerable.

A wide cut through the city, separating the eastern and western shores. The Thonburi side where the sun sets is less connected than where it rises. Bridges and ferries, some across, some along, some zigzagging, yet all in all a less dense complexity of connections than the busier eastern part. Crossing the Chao Phraya river there are temple spaces allegedly only accessible by boat. These routes are extremely busy. At one such temple, a statue of Ganga, a Hindu deity of water, enthroned above copious offerings. Other places have monk statues robed in appropriate colors, mostly orange of course. In the space between the river and the temple grounds themselves there are markets. No

surprise there. On both sides of the river it's possible to buy things for personal pleasure or as offerings. Flowers, colors everywhere. Temple grounds are often a clearing where the sky reigns far and wide, even if skyscrapers stand nearby. The sound of wind chimes mellows the air. A monk smokes a cigarette behind the temple. Not far away, a few laypeople eagerly listen to another monk sharing knowledge. Around the end of the European New Year a major storm arrives and for a few days, temperatures cool down. The air is actually pleasant. Soon a new batch of visitors will arrive on the ferry. The Chao Phraya separates and connects.

Many kinds of candles can be lit at various altars. Figurines large and small, classical Thai and Chinese style, as well as some as if straight out of a manga with cute oversized heads and eyes. Monks and animals and all manner of entities. Small golden intricate birds perched at the edges of the floating candle pool. From a distance it's uncertain whether the small wicks are alight, as they casually gather in a corner before unhurriedly floating on, tracing a circular movement in this rectangular shallow metal pool. The colors accord to the day one was born. Small jets under the surface ensure constant motion. It's very calming despite all the hubbub around. Among the altars, there is one with an anthropomorphic horse or hippomorphic human, and next to it, a deity with a black head. There are also Chinese sages covered in gold leaves. People take photos, as always. Of the space or themselves in different arrangements. Temples here are made to be interacted with. Surfaces to be touched and transformed.

Up here, the air is breathable and the endless honking and speeding and crossing and turning resounds only faintly. Reflecting windows pass by, the dark glass distorting whatever entity spies itself in them. Most bodies appear too small to be graced with a clear form. This infrastructure is massive, swaying dark green palms in between the concrete sweating tears of dark humidity on its dingy surface every so often turning different colors of neon. Enormous televisions silently flash advertisements, as if to cover how much they scream as they announce their visuals. Their presence obvious on the chameleonic surfaces of the results of past engineering prowess. Up here, where it's calmer, there are pedestrians flowing ceaselessly. Mostly middle class shoppers as the skywalk connects consumerist paradises, where it's nice and cool inside. No walking too fast, or the sweat will start pouring. Underneath and overhead machines containing humans move at other speeds. Looking out, at times a colonial building, a shrine or a wat, where time comparatively stands still. Right now, there are few

bodies streaming in. Pasts and futures mingle in a present too busy to be experienced as such, pulled as it is somewhere else. A green, white, gray reflecting future, where the extremely rich and grandiose sits right next to poverty with little envy or violence to be felt. A city living on many levels, at many speeds, making for a feeling of smallness and insignificance as much as experiencing that there is a future, because all this here, including contrasts and contradictions, lives far too much to just stop. A memory of an awareness of European cities arises, one where history has happened and all that is occurring now is a turning in circles while being convinced that this was the best and worst possible world.

In a far corner of the city by one of the more obscure side arms of the river, a temple dedicated to the famous female ghost Nang Nak stands almost too close to the water. A reminder that at the outskirts the borders between city and nature remain evidently unclear, fluid. Nang Nak, the one that has many movies woven out of the legend of how she and her child lived with her human husband who returned from war and didn't notice they were ghosts. Reality can be a fickle thing. The elements brought together here are even more idiosyncratic than other temples. Overwhelming numbers of instruction boards, being photographed again and again. There's even one that notifies: ask for permission if you take a picture. The smartphone armed crowds speak their own story. A television in the corner projects a random movie into the space. They are both retro, the television and the film. Material memories fragmenting any coherent sense of present. The lo-fi fuzz can almost be felt. The amount of sacred objects standing around to be worshiped is like a figure garden in all manner of styles. Kuan-im, Chinese dragons, lifelike monks, golden Buddhas, Hindu deities, animals, a pond with live fish, monstrous giants or yaks. And of course pictures of the former king and queen. Crowds of people praying, taking images, filming videos. There is something intangible in the air, there really might be a ghost abiding here.

The walls of the Hindu temple are pastel colored. It stands in one of the most frequented areas of Bangkok. Buddhist temples tend to have gray white walls with dark specks and some green just growing, if there is shade. Wat Khaek isn't too large and the central space, usually open aired in Buddhist temples, is covered with a sunroof, not just the stone buildings. A much darker place to experience than a Buddhist Wat. People come here for love or work-related things, there are various accounts of what ritual activities here can achieve. Both options meanwhile are typical for all kinds of

temples and shrines, either one, or the other, or both. It's certain that many attending don't know how exactly to proceed and keep asking the Indian priests working here. Asking about the meaning of this or that image or figure is common too, even in Buddhist spaces, be it that less sentient beings do it. A mother instructs her daughter on the correct procedure. There are image cards as parts of the prepared offerings, those can be taken home. Images show deities such as Vishnu. Cards are for luck. Each offering is accompanied by nine incense sticks and two candles. In Buddhist temples, it's three sticks and at home altars five. Fires are burning here and the two candles are to be put into a container with some water covering the ground after kindling it on a common fire. Incense sticks are lit, a short prayer on the knees comes after and a container next to the candles welcomes the incense. A visit to the stone temple building follows. No images are allowed to be made here. Nobody has their phones out, not even the priests. Signs are very clear, no images and phones in silent mode. Inside, a plate is carried to the priest standing in the far dark back, nearest to the figure of the deity. It's exchanged for a bottle of blessed water to be drunk later, and a bottle with oil for the lamps on which candles and incense are lit. Circuitries abound, fires are renewed. The offerings from the plate placed in front of the deity, the plate returns. It will go on the counter and wait for a new visitor. Countless deities from the Hindu pantheon decorate the walls of the temple.

There it is, the ever-busy Erawan shrine, auspicious timing even, as a Thai dance performance is ongoing. They happen here from time to time. The event is multiplying through the camera phones pointed at it, recording onto external memory just to possibly never be looked at again. From all angles and distances, not just up here on the skywalk. As ever, crowds splitting into individuals make an observant pause to offer a prayer when on their journey past statues or images. Many passersby simply wai, clasping their hands and slightly bowing their head in respect, as is customary when passing a holy site. The small open-air shrine at the corner of two highly frequented roads composes of a small, golden intricately ornamental Thai-style pavilion on a marble base houses a golden statue of Phra Phrom, Lord Brahma, the shrine proper of about three by three meters only to be entered from one side. Bright orange flower offerings hanging in abundance. A few yellow ones also made it to the site. Other flowers in bouquets are placed around the shrine. Incense is lit, the concentration of scents dissipating long before it reaches this upper level. Within the shrine grounds nobody appears to pay much attention to the dancers, all focused on the offerings and prayers and moving on.

Speeding along one of the many khlongs things happen. The world is a little sunk, perspectives lower than along other paths. It's cooler and when in motion, the smells of the fetid waters never materialize enough to become a force. The occasional monitor lizard's placid rhythm accelerates as the long motor-driven boat approaches. At times, another of these low lying colorful vessels pass and greet, the waves merging into a dance of contradictions. Movement here is much faster than on land, as there is almost nothing of the same size to block or share the oily waterways. Slowing down in regular intervals to stop and touch with the shore. It is said that other cities, at least in the south were water centered even thirty years ago. People who moved here in search of better futures remember it. Small boats were the dominant modes of transportation. That was long ago, now with Western styled modernization many waterways are filled with sand and floods are more common. They remind the attentive that the world is far too varied to force one model, one truth onto it. Here, one can't tell what comes to pass under the dark surface. It's hard to believe monitor lizards and other bio-bodies survive. There are times when colorful floats of all sizes, lit by candles, adorn the dark canals after sunset. Floating baskets made either with banana stalks and tiger lilies, or more commonly industrially produced radiant non-biodegradables. It is a festival celebrated on the full moon night of the twelfth month of the Thai lunar calendar. An occasion for joy and new beginnings dedicated among others to Phra Mae Khongkha, Holy Mother of the Ganga and Buddha's topknot enshrined in a heavenly pagoda. The aesthetic experience does indeed hint at something celestial. The putrid fluid of the khlongs never looks as beautiful as at November's Loy Krathong

At times visitors take out their phones and photograph themselves in front of the shrine, after having prayed. Activities at the Erawan shrine develop with the time of day. Some people light candles. Some don't even bring anything. There are many elephant statues in one corner. People wait their turn, as the space is too narrow to make for faster overturn. Observing long enough in the wearying midday heat under the shadow of the BTS architecture, dynamics of ebb and flow develop, sometimes to include a circular motion around the shrine. Flowers, figurines, candles all is sold directly adjacent by an old woman. Moving on, a less frequented shrine dedicated to Indra, Phra In, and then the sky entrance to the Erawan shopping mall comes, the inviting ads making use of the image of Indra, including a distinctly manga-styled version and a figure of the deity. Proximity brings transformation. The shrine and surrounding well-kept bushes organized so that the space can only be accessed from one side, with no circular motion or dances around possible. Meanwhile, much larger amounts of offerings,

including food and many colored flowers, can be made in the dedicated space facing the deity. Countless small statues of animals, deities and other beings form the shrine. As with all such areas, far too many objects and decorations clutter reality to make it into a description. Fresh ones, subject to swift decay, are hastily replaced. And again, camera phones abound.

Hindu gods here are known from TV shows. Many a food stall in Bangkok is showing them, low production values, countless arrays of deities and never-ending stories and all. The walls of the outer temple display schedules as to when the next couple of pujas will be. Hindu temples are comparatively rare. A couple of chairs in a corner, mostly older women sit and chat there. The predominance of female laypeople is unmistakable, as is the stern vibe the couple of Hindu priests give off. The atmosphere has little to do with the relaxation of Buddhist spaces. People seem to stop by to do their own personal ritual and be on their way. Much less to do here than elsewhere. The pastel colored outside contrasts starkly with the austerity inside. The deity remains hidden in the far darkness of the temple.

Some way down, a few steps, just passing by the central temple where chanting happens in the evenings, a small artificial hill topped with a waterfall, flowing into the pool beneath. Surrounded by greens, growing and smelling of wet earth. A cat lies lazily beside the building. It is comfortably refreshing all around. On the reddish earthen irregular shaped tiles that make the ground there are pools of water, large and small. New leaves have fallen. Quaint rustling in the bushes. A slow walk to the gurgling pond reveals the light blue sky, scattered clouds delineated by the sharp sunlight. The smell of wetness in the air, here, where water and heat meet. At other times, when the sky turns dark purple and humans stream in to sit or kneel on their little mattresses and chant, water bottles sit prepared in front of the temple. As people leave, so do the bottles. A pale moon appears in the West, clouds disperse into thin wafts in the South. A caretaker is thickly watering the garden. Helping monks reliably produces good merit.

On the street level, high tech, the boundless energy of the tropical biosphere, decaying concrete and innumerable sentient beings and other deities mingle in currents supplied and vectored from distinct directions. The endless stream of cars, bikes, tuktuk and people, sounds and smells, sweat and dirt, the horrible air, all of it has something slightly dystopian about it. In between all the concrete, things continue to grow incessantly. Grey and green, all heavy with rain past or future. Flora

deliberately placed in pots or just growing wild. Plants around other trees are a common sight. Only, they are not avenues of trees to provide shade. They appear chaotic, as decoration or just because they grow there, with little protective function for the sticky stinky bodies of those farang who don't know how to move in this mahanakorn. Fast, fast, bodies, scuttle into the soothing air-conditioned worlds of the Skytrain or the endless connected malls. Once you enter, days can be spent there wandering in the pleasant interior climate. The streams of people are still interminable, only the air inside feels better, calmer, healthier. Colors and mostly artificial smells fill the air. This is a seductive world that cannot last, its upkeep destroying others, heating the one outside. There were times with significantly lower average temperatures here, before the city was built according to European plans and imaginaries. What bodies and speeds were to be found here back then?

Water flows in Buddhist rites and spaces. Not in large amounts, at least not regularly. Some temple grounds are unthinkable without water, while in others, it could almost be an afterthought. Then there is the local New Year, Songkran, celebrated Mid-April, where water is everywhere. Chaotic splashing and throwing with buckets and water guns and anything and on everyone. The origins of this festivity are written in a Buddhist scripture stored at one of the famous wats of Bangkok. Small acts of pouring water will sum up to myriads each year. In some places, a candle is lit, then put in a container with about two centimeters of water, where the lights are stuck into. Sometimes water is poured into a container around a candle, as in offerings to the Buddhas of the week. There would be much more. Without water in the now parched city, temple gardens of respite and regeneration wouldn't grow. Water is still all around and under, polluted as it might be. Water crosses boundaries and makes for new ones.

Everything is a bit ghostly, both there and not there, never quite what it seems to be. A Thai lullaby is being broadcast from one of the loudspeakers until the sound transforms into a sermon. Modern technology intensifies all senses. Everything here is multiplied to the nth degree. The space doesn't just stay here, it's carried elsewhere with each smartphone, each camera's memory. QR codes lead to apps. Young girls caught up in a discussion with a monk at the entrance. Countless shops and more and more and more figures, as well as some large ones that appear to be made for a children to play with. Preparations for merit-making at the entrance. Ghosts can be vengeful, but also protective. They are everywhere in Thailand, locals know. Shrines can appear just like that, events happen, the

world changes, a shrine pops up. In case that visitors get what they ask for, in case the ghost or deity or monk or any other entity more or less reliably grants wishes, ensures luck, the place will grow. New bodies will be attracted, new things will be added, generally without any central authority. This can happen anywhere at any time. Worlds change. Beginnings are but continuations of other things.

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