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EASR 2023 keynote**

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Towards “River Awareness”: A Response to Bronislaw Szerszynski’s EASR 2023 Keynote

To let an AI have the first welcome address before the usual distinguished speakers like rectors and presidents of learned societies? That may be seen as a bold move – and, somehow, a fun one as well. Why not? After all, the entire EASR 2023 conference was dedicated to technology and artificial intelligence. It is certainly unusual but not really controversial. It is actually the first keynote speech that we need to discuss.

The keynote speaker, Lancaster University’s Bronislaw Szerszynski, did not present the usual scholarly paper delivered in an academic discourse.¹ Far from it. In fact, the paper had the form of an artistic performance that combined Szerszynski’s recitation of a poem of his own composition with an audiovisual mix of images (most likely at least partly AI-generated) and ambient music. To sum up the poem’s message, it went more or less as follows:² The story starts with a Nordic-style creation of humankind from driftwood, the primaevael condition of men living in ancient times, and the prophecy of the “weird sisters” that an age of machines will come and change the world. Then, the prophecy was explained. People, living in the woods among animals, spirits, and numinous beings, slowly started creating their first tools – and the tools started to self-reproduce just as the domesticated dogs did (“and the sticks begot sticks begot sticks”). Slowly,

the tools changed and combined, creating increasingly complex technology and getting humankind through a new and much more rational age of God, angels, and demons. However, the rationality of the tools slowly possessed humans even more. People started to think they could create even more sophisticated technology, completely replacing divinities, spirits, and demons. Finally, computers appeared and assumed the throne that once belonged to the supernatural beings. As they grew more complicated, however, they started to have a mind of their own, a strange, nonhuman mind that differed from their creators’. Finally, they stopped doing the humans’ bidding and started to operate of their own accord, regardless of their original tasks. This part of the poem was complemented with images of burning skyscrapers and smoke rising from electrical power lines.

Ultimately, the machines left even their human-made physical forms behind, moving to new alien worlds and abandoning their creators (this can be interpreted as a poetic version of posthumanists’ technological singularity). Humankind was left alone amid a world that was suddenly neither enchanted nor technological. Gone were the old religions – but gone also was history, which human beings had used to inhabit for so long. What ensued was a strange, timeless void that, as the poem suggests, humans lived in for the rest of their remaining existence. The last image of the visualization was a slow zoom-out from a heap of old abandoned computer junk to two human figures in the forefront. Both were apparently in the process of transforming into trees. “Was it a prophecy?” asked Egle Aleknaite during the discussion following the presentation. “It was a myth,” answered Bronislaw Szerszynski.

Interestingly enough, the beginning of the poem quoted Marshall McLuhan’s famous statement, “the medium is the message”, or, in John Culkin’s words, we shape our tools and, thereafter, our tools shape us. However, we may perhaps remind ourselves of the actual context of McLuhan’s famous provocative quote, which is the idea of “Narcissus’ hypnosis”. In McLuhan’s interpretation of the famous Greek myth, the

1 Bronislaw Szerszynski, “Technology Before and After Monotheisms”, keynote speech, *Conference of the European Association for the Study of Religion (EASR)*, 4. September 2023, abstract available at <<https://www.eastr2023.org/speakers/bronislaw-szerszynski>>.

2 The recitation was not subtitled, and the music sometimes drowned Bronislaw Szerszynski’s words. I may, therefore, have missed small parts of the presentation and slightly misinterpreted others. If this is the case, I apologize.

reason Narcissus wasted away looking mesmerized at his own image was not because he was in love with himself. Instead, the problem was that he *was not aware that it was himself he was in love with*. Had he known it was just his reflection he was staring at, he would have been able to leave the river; he would have recognized the image for what it was. This is what the media are to us, insisted McLuhan: the source of a hypnotic trance in which we stare at fascinating content, absolutely unaware that we are looking at our very selves. That is the reason behind McLuhan's "the medium is the message". It is the river itself that Narcissus needs to be aware of because it is the river that fundamentally defines the situation. And that is what we all need. As much "river awareness" as we can muster.

Szerszynski's image of technology presented during his keynote speech may be seen as an excellent example of Narcissus hypnosis. What we saw was not an experimental academic paper conflated with art: it was a primary material that summarized our image not of AI, but of human nature and the ultimate fate of every generation of people on this earth. It is not the story of the machine; it is the story of old age. Yes, we grow from fairytale-loving children (described by a life amidst animals and spirits) to adolescents that slowly learn to adapt the world to their needs (in other words, "to shape their tools"). From there, we progress to fully mature adults at the height of their power, who, in turn, give birth to the next generation. In this stage, the children are our "tools" and our "gods": we use them to fulfill our needs and, in turn, we worship them while at the same time raising and educating them in our image. And they obey – at least at first. In Szerszynski's poem, this is the moment of the creation of sophisticated technology still acting according to its' creators' wishes. Not for long, however. Every parent knows that the ultimate fate of all the mothers and fathers of the world is to see their kids grow up, form minds of their own, and design whole worlds of their own. Then, at some point, the children are no longer children – and, finally, they leave.

Here is what I saw in that last slide of the video: not just a heap of electronic junk, but an empty children's bedroom with its abandoned computer, an old PlayStation, and a broken television. A room left by the parents as it is – as a reminder, as a monument to its former inhabitants. What follows is a solitary timeless existence, the life "after the machines", "outside of history", as Szerszynski puts it. A fitting image of old age. What is more, the two human figures turning into trees reminded me strongly of the Greek story of Filemon and Baucis. Yes, this is the image of the oldest generation living the last years of its life in solitude, forgotten by the world now entirely in the hands of the young. Not a paradise lost, but definitely a complete loss of agency. And, in the end, comes death.

This is the true myth behind the intelligent machine as it appears not only in Szerszynski's presentation but also in many versions of transhumanism and posthumanism. A myth of ageing, of the inevitable loss of agency, and the transgenerational transfer of power. It is definitely not a new narrative, quite the opposite: it is an age-old story, the inevitable and perennial parent-offspring conflict retold from the earliest times to the present. We have seen it in many different contexts and disguises, from Marduk killing Tiamat to Freud's primaeval fratricide. Szerszynski's presentation (as well as many versions of trans- and posthumanism) strips the intelligent machine completely from its historical uniqueness and gives it the ancient role of the rebellious new godhead that ushers the world into a new age. A Zeus to our Kronos, if you will. As a historical event, the machines are new, exciting, and unpredictable. Nevertheless, like this, unconsciously inserted into an ancient myth that has nothing to do with them, they are nothing new under the sun.

Then again, perhaps there is something new in this situation, given that it appeared on the stage at the EASR: we need to keep in mind that it was presented there not as a primary material to be analyzed but as a keynote speech. True, we may ask ourselves whether we can ever entirely abandon symbolical thinking and immerse our-

selves exclusively in rational discourse devoid of any mythical content. Maybe we truly cannot. However, perhaps precisely at a religious studies conference, the myth should not be presented as a conclusion but rather as a research question. Perhaps, while looking mesmerized at our image (however immensely beautiful we find it), we should not forget the river and how it shapes and forms our thinking. In sum, it was precisely the first keynote of an international scholarly conference in which I would expect the greatest and fully explicit degree of “river awareness”. And I believe Marshall McLuhan would agree with me.

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Jeffrey J. Kripal, The Superhumanities: Historical Precedents, Moral Objections, New Realities,

**Chicago: University of Chicago
Press 2022, 256 s.**

ISBN 978-022-68-2024-8.

In his text, Jeffrey J. Kripal wishes to condense the totality of his studies and experiences into a series of metaphors and observations aimed at reformulating and redirecting the purposes, intentions, and emotions behind religious studies and the field of the Humanities. But what are the Superhumanities? “That core idea goes like this: Pursue diversity until the end, make it more radical, render it ontological. In short, do not just decolonize history, religion, literature, or society, as academics like to say.

Decolonize reality itself.” (p. 14). This approach is not concerned exclusively with conventional intellectual epistemologies but rather with the inclusion and integration of a gnostic and intuitive hermeneutic approach to the field of the Humanities extrapolated from the comparative Study of Religion. In each of the chapters of his book, Kripal explores the principles and the manifestation of the Superhumanities in various contexts. These are theoretical, academic, historical, ethnographic, anecdotal, and literary.

In the first chapter, he illustrates his theory derived from a concerned observation of the state of the Humanities as an academic discipline, too limited by its hermeneutic approach to fully perceive the totality of the various manners in which humans express themselves. The metaphor that he uses is that of the game of chess, which symbolizes human interaction. Contemporary Humanities concern themselves exclusively with the movement of the chess pieces representative of human social and political interactions. The superhuman perspective instead would allow the researcher to understand that the chessboard is not the only game in existence, meaning that there are other human experiences founded on different principles and dynamics. A perspective that he relates to Hermetic Monism is a broadened perception of reality that stands above the rest and can see the vastness of human expressions and perceive them beyond socio-cultural borders. This perception, however, is informed by altered states of consciousness. The latter states, he believes, are best found in religious narratives of miracles and extraordinary events, which, thanks to his comparative studies, he extends conceptually into the realm of science fiction and of popular superhero comics, another artistic and philosophical expression of the Superhuman. These narratives are replete with incredible events and miraculous experiences that rely on hope in the possibility of becoming more than human. The methods are present in many religious expressions from Western Mystery cults to Hindu and Buddhist tantric practices, and ancient Egyptian civilizations, but also in science fiction, through