

A CONVERSATION BETWEEN
DIRK VAN DEN IEP AND VECTOR BEETLE.
INTRODUCTION

As the chaos of these new Falls embraces my callous skin I feel under my wooden dermis the familiar prick of my old friend Vector. He always comes this time of year, hoping to catch me in the confusion of the unsurely approaching frost and spouts of final, sudden warmth, when my annual dose of Trig is losing steam and my immune system is in total disarray. But in some way, I continue to hope, and I know that Vector is only a vector for the fungus, that Vector only wants a home and that I am a potential host for him to carve his ancient mythological symbols on my inner tissues while raising his children. In this mutual understanding of need for safety in a changing world, we've formed a sort of friendly rapport, and chat over the goings on of the strange land we occupy, built upon ancient humus and marsh.

The other day, a boy passed under Vector and me, recalling an experience from his wilder days. Upon receiving a delivery from an apparent clairvoyant who claimed he came from a distant galaxy and could see the energies that surround sentient beings (not that he had much care for the nonhuman life on this planet), the clairvoyant informed the boy that he was not of this Earth, but a foreigner who elected in a past life to act as an ambassador for what was known as the Galactic Federation, essentially an association of trade and diplomacy not unlike the European Union. Upon learning that one is such an ambassador, these foreigners, or Star Seeds, can request activation from Gods far away, in one of the earliest star systems, learn the Star Seed cause, and fight to unite Earth's peoples' so that they may one day qualify for admittance into the greater universal community. But this action requires great sacrifice, as the passing boy framed it, and a great deal of remembering what is long forgotten.

Vector was amused, he said such remembrance resembled very much the land in which we live, a union of reclaimed lands and floodplains of a great delta that has long since forgotten its sense of natural, ever-changing life.

You see, over the course of the last midcentury, my kind were nearly lost to a mysterious disease, which we are now familiar with and understand to be transmitted via the fungus that Vector often carries. Global trade carried it from a distant place before it crisscrossed across the Atlantic, mutating a few times and nearly wiping us out. In France, during the 1960's, 97 percent of us disappeared.¹ Luckily, here in the home of the microscope, phytopathologists discovered the fungus and its mechanisms, and began to sort out a cure. By that time, humans had already found other, more mechanical responses, following many strategies present in human pandemics, such as quarantine. Although, they didn't mind jumping to amputation much quicker when it came to us. Today, many of us are as much cyborgs as we are trees, selectively bred for a shared protein that gives resilience,² and, if we are of a certain status in society like myself, routinely injected with the Trig for total protection.³

We have come back. Especially here in Amsterdam, the cultural home of the Dutch for whom the disease, DED, takes its name, which is now known as Europe's "City of Elms."⁴

Vector finds this funny, he's quite a nihilist, politically speaking. He remarks that some of the few that survived the troubles of the pandemic can be found in the mall of Washington DC, a place that symbolizes both American democratic ideals, and the hollowed, zombie form⁵ that their fiscal and social policies embody today. I argue with Vector that perhaps the American ideal was only a myth, that its birth in genocide and slavery only foretold the uncanny, artificial survival of my distant family on the mall, who have witnessed the countless inaugurations of untried war criminals and corrupt strongmen, among perhaps a limited few optimistic reformists.

We agree that thanks to the selective breeding, the chemical resistances, and artificial land we occupy compose a strange shared cybernetic existence, but it is not unique to the postmodern culture we've grown up in. My kind have faced extinction before, with our numbers declining drastically between 6 and 3 thousand years ago.⁶ Many attribute this to an earlier form of the disease (DED) but in truth, it was also thanks to the onset of human historicity: neolithic agriculture. In other words, this foreign landscape, so far removed from the Eden that many green fanatics like to imagine as recoverable, has been gone for millennia, and we can only move ahead within the chaos stirred by our desire to fix things in place, or, at best, sideways, but certainly not back.

agriculture and today's unit economics were overcrowding and oversimplifying the ecosystem, something we cyborg elms relate to. But it pushes for a rewilding of half the planet. I wonder how the humans could manage such a thing without a massive loss of life, and whether or not they would account for the rights to land of the Indigenous communities they supposedly advocate for,²⁰ and if they recognize the Edenistic fallacy of the "untouched" that they have fallen into alongside their counterparts on the political right. Even Tsing looks for "ecologies in which many species sometimes live together without either harmony or conquest."²¹ I also hear tell that the Earth hippies of the 60s were a bit shortsighted in their efforts towards Terran return, and a lot of their work ended up polluting the environment.

These overlapping problems perpetuate the sense that humans are incapable of interspecies cohabitation, a fixation voiced in a 1992 book by Martin Lewis titled *Green Delusions*, when he states that "human society should strive to separate itself as much as possible from the natural world, a notion...labeled 'decoupling.'"²² What becomes painfully clear though, is that much like the oversimplistic idea of an untouched nature is the belief that "green technology" is somehow void of any ecological connection, though we know that through its land use and low recyclability²³ it has the potential to exacerbate problems of waste and encroachment of humanly uninhabited or indigenous lands. Lewis also expresses an idea that economic growth is indeed possible ad infinitum, and that instead of implicating the continuous production of material it only requires dematerialized, *qualitative* improvement.²⁴ I'm just a tree, no economist, but I find it hard to believe that this is possible, or that it is possible without the continuous capture of every element in the lived experience by capital. And whether you stand against capital or not, control without consent is something few like to surrender to.

WHOSE EXISTENCE IS IT, ANYWAY?

At the core of Left and Right disagreements on not only ecological sustainability or technological progress, but the very nature of justice itself, are epistemological oppositions.

In an essay titled "Ecology in the Shadow of Oedipus," Timothy Morton expresses that around 1700, the ontological consensus was that "there is a crack in reality. Facts are given to us but their conditions of possibility transcend them." If humans were already so strangled by their own cognitions, no wonder the information space of 2023 feels impossible to make sense of. Morton argues that nature doesn't really exist, it's a totality, an abstraction that is only real in the mind. And if you begin, rather reductively, to break it into its constituent parts to understand its composition, you begin to add things that are so inorganic and removed from the common image of nature that you end up with "spoons, computer software and traffic cones." They are, after all, fabricated from raw, natural materials.

We begin to deal in "a vast assemblage of entities," and isolating the essence of individual elements becomes impossible.²⁵ Yet again and again, we see this reductionism, this anti-patch culture, pervading common understandings of the way the world works. In reality, if you want to embrace the vast, dense interconnection of both natural life and, well, reality, you have to imagine everything as connected. Make it a game of cat's cradle if you need to. We trees just, well, experience, and don't waste so much time on lexicons and money and shit.

Let's say you imagine that the one steady element of society is agriculture. That a commonality in the millennia of lived social experience is the parcelization of land. This does so much to our perception: we imagine land as something to be sterilized and managed, something which can be flattened into homogeneity and removed of its dynamism. It makes me think of the scientific method itself, with a need for iteration and hermetically sealed control variables—both exhibit the modern, Western, human need for an isolation of a sample which cuts it off from life in the world. It cuts away both the thing's material relationship and its historical ones. Cue again Tsing, who argues that forest management in Finland is similar: as local authorities "clean" and maintain the dominance of particular tree species by preventing northward, climate-driven migration of others, they "stop history" in the forest.²⁶ In this way, a feeling is brought about, one that brings yet another, deeper, sense of isolation, polarization, lack of a potential shared imaginary: the stoppage of time itself.

Ultimately, the idea of essences and reductions to truths will

drive you insane. Just because something is something in and of itself doesn't mean it contains all the aspects necessary for its self-definition when examined out of context(s). If we all keep going along thinking we can manage individual, alienated and scaled things, we will surely meet our demise. This is essentially an aspect of the "deep ecology" introduced by Arne Næss, something he calls the "total-field image" of nature.²⁷ Not coincidentally, Næss also brought the term "ecosophy" into the environmental world, and it was used by Félix Guattari to summarize a connection between environmental, mental and social ecologies that he observed in the work of cyberneticist Gregory Bateson.²⁸ Don't you see, human? The imaginary, the way you see potentialities, regardless of whether they apply to "nature" or not, are bound together with your daily, physical, intrinsically natural experience.

If you were to keep insisting that comprehension of the world's workings was reducible to individual pieces, you would be no better than Descartes, who supported the classic idea that the mind and body were separable thanks to the heavenly inexplicability of the soul, and took it so far as to say that animals were merely robots.²⁹ It was quite the easy justification for the limited understandings of reality back in the early days of the Renaissance, though I find it unsettling that the idea is still holding root in the minds of many men today. Is it so hard to believe that in a world of rhizomatic connections, your perception is rooted materially in the near-infinite number of perceptions that flash through your body every moment?

THE FOURTH ESTATE

Perhaps your hindrances instead stem from often covert confines placed around you by society. A rather attractive bald Frenchman made the case that for a while, people grew accustomed to states that used discipline as the means for controlling their populations. Even when a hospital splinters into a neighborhood clinic, hospice and daycare, things we may recognize as communal resources, one could say they become new weapons in discipline and conformity. In this case, an enclosure is a mold, something like the casing of a sausage, but in these times, it's possible that we're no longer dealing with cases, but instead controls which modulate instead of forcibly directing. Here, "the corporation has replaced the factory," and it is "a spirit, a gas."³⁰

We trees take delight in such fabulation, being a people who communicate through the use of gas. If only your petty flatulence could do so much! But let us continue, "just as the corporation replaces the factory, *perpetual training tends to replace the school.*" The author argues this was brought by "salary according to merit" operating as a "modulating principle."³¹ It is no coincidence that in his observations on the failures of today's mixed economies, which create inequality through the faster rate of growth from saved capital than earned capital, Piketty highlights a culture of "meritocracy" as a bastion for the continued privileged afforded to the technocratic elites occupying the corporate world's boards of directors.³²

But modulating factors like meritocracy, though they may inspire tangible disciplinary mechanisms, are made sinister primarily through their intangible cultural effects. This peaks with Deleuze's argument societies of control are enabled by "new media." That "what counts is not the barrier but the computer that tracks each person's position—licit or illicit—and effects a universal modulation." And more than creating barriers, the new information space enabled by the new, omnipresent media "reduces" our social world "to a kind of market" where our expressions take "the shallow form of advertisement, and where normal human activities of connecting are reduced to their social or market value."³³ In this way, human, your new technologies and unchecked philosophies of science and existence have flattened you into the same patch-blind cells of imprisonment you've afforded to what you know as the natural world. You, just like we cyborg elms, are homogenized, and "cultural homogenization" has become "the moral standard," resulting in your transformation into more of a "cultural sigh-borg"³⁴ than an autonomous, somehow exceptional being. It's hard to resist when you don't know you are in a prison, and harder still when those you communicate with occupy the same space in the market as you do. After all, you don't see canned tomatoes doing very much resisting.

So, according to Jeremy Jae's interpretation of Derrida's near-death observations on democracy: "The question today is less one of opposing the old enemy of capitalism than of creating feasible democracy. When people create or invent new ideas, they do not know if they...produce and put in circulation differences that cannot be assimilated by the dominant state of the world."³⁵ And