MALLARMÉ'S DIGITAL DEMON

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How do Mallarmé's writings speak to the present? To answer this question, this article establishes a dialogue between one of Mallarmé's early prose poems, *Le Démon de l'analogie*, and texts by the contemporary media theorists Mark Hansen, Steven Shaviro and Eugene Thacker. The article argues that Mallarmé's poem explores how it feels to be a body modulated by code. The poem puts twentieth-century phenomenology with its focus on *human* perception under pressure, and instead presents a very contemporary view of individuation (subject-formation) as a process that is both thoroughly bound up with the environment, and difficult to comprehend and unify. In a final section, the article considers *Le Démon de l'analogie* in relation to the poet's dream about *le Livre*, and suggests that Mallarmé's work as a whole brings together the utopian and the dystopian tendencies that have marked media studies from their inception, and that continue to characterize our relations to the technological object.

> Because our minds process information almost solely through analogies and categorization, we are often defeated when presented with something that fits no category and lies outside the realm of our analogies.
>
> (Jeff Vandermeer, *Authority*)

> Coming into the Virtual World, we inhabit Information. Indeed, we become Information. Thought is embodied and the Flesh is made Word. It's weird as hell.
>
> (John Perry Barlow, *Crime and Puzzlement*)

'The trouble with history', notes the early twentieth-century philosopher and mathematician Alfred North Whitehead, 'is that there is so much of it'.[1] Whitehead was far from being an antihistorical thinker, so we can read his quip along the lines of Nietzsche and Borges: in order to do historical work, one must have a clear understanding of the present; if not, the production of history runs the risk of simply preparing the conditions for forgetting.

Attempting to adopt this logic in the field of literary history, this article examines the significance of Mallarmé's writings today: how do they speak to the present? With this question come two other problems. The first is to determine which of Mallarmé's texts are most pertinent to the present (where should we put the

emphasis?), and the second is to specify what 'the present' means (which conception of the present are we concerned with?).

Let us begin with partial answers to these last two problems. Firstly, this article will focus on the early prose poem *Le Démon de l'analogie* (*The Demon of Analogy*). With a slight hyperbole, it could be said that this poem is so contemporary that only today do we have the vocabulary that allows us to understand it. Secondly, while acknowledging that there are many different ways to conceptualize 'the present', this article will concentrate on the kind of present that is theorized in contemporary media theory. The main argument of the article will be that *Le Démon de l'analogie* explores what it is like to be modulated by code. In doing so, the poem operates with a process-relational understanding of human subjectivity; and it is this very contemporary understanding of the process of 'individuation' (to borrow a term from Gilbert Simondon) that the following article proposes to analyse.

This approach immediately reveals what the article is *not.* It is not a historical reading, examining how *Le Démon de l'analogie* relates to the situation in which it was produced and how it alters what went before (Poe and Baudelaire, most obviously). It is not a close reading of the text, trying to answer the many, very difficult questions that Mallarmé scholars have debated when analysing the poem. Instead, *Le Démon de l'analogie* will be understood as a 'poème d'anticipation'; the focus will lie exclusively on those dimensions of the poem that allow us to interrogate its relation to the present. A first part will offer a short reading of the poem. A lot can be — and has been — written about it. Mallarmé tempts us to write a lot. However, we shall see that there are good reasons to refrain from doing the hermeneutical work that the poem teasingly invites us to do. The second part will focus on the question of individuation, on subject-formation. Here we shall see that *Le Démon de l'analogie*

presents a thoroughly ecological process of individuation that can be analysed with the help of the contemporary media theorists Mark Hansen, Steven Shaviro and Eugene Thacker. This will produce what might seem like a very idiosyncratic Mallarmé. The final part will therefore place the argument about demonic individuation in relation to Mallarmé's work more widely and it will become clear that this work hosts ambiguities that characterize twentieth- and twenty-first-century relations to media and technology. Throughout these three sections, the article aims to demonstrate that despite being bound up with a medium that is becoming increasingly marginal (literature), Mallarmé's work can still contribute to contemporary debates about the ways in which media modulate processes of individuation.

1. Demonic Modulations

Le Démon de l'analogie was first published in 1874 under the title *La Pénultième*. The moment of its conception has been debated, with many critics suggesting it was written as early as 1864.[2] However, as Roger Pearson and others have noted, there is 'no clear evidence that any version existed before Mallarmé sent one to Villiers de l'Isle-Adam in 1867'.[3] The text immediately became a *succès de scandale* in the fairly narrow Parisian circles that read Mallarmé's poetry. In *Symbolistes et décadents*, Gustave Kahn (1902) describes how 'the press (...) welcomed *the Penultimate* with a tidal wave of mockery'.[4] In an oft-quoted sentence, he goes on to explain that the poem 'was (...) the last word in impenetrability, the pinnacle of unfathomability, and the ultimate conundrum'.[5] The poem quickly acquired the status of a challenge: come figure me out, if you can!

This is hardly surprising, given that the poem opens by taunting the reader: 'Have unknown words ever played about your lips (...)?' (*Div.*, 17).[6] With this

question Mallarmé inscribes himself in the tradition of Baudelaire's *Au Lecteur* ('hypocrital reader — my kindred spirit — my brother'), placing the reader between two equally unenticing positions.[7] In Baudelaire's poem, we can accept the friendliness of the narratorial voice, but must then also admit to the charge of hypocrisy, or we can distance ourselves from hypocrisy, but then lose the brotherly relation to the poet. In Mallarmé's poem, we can move close to the poetic voice, but must then also accept the 'unknown words', or we can take on the hermeneutic challenge and begin to separate ourselves from the poetic voice by analyzing the words. In both poems, the ambiguous address floats somewhere between challenge and complicity — and this serves to heighten the stakes of the challenge and limit the sense of complicity.

Multiple twentieth-century critics have taken on the challenge, seeking to explain the ambiguities. In one of the most famous readings of the text, Barbara Johnson highlights this aspect of the poem's reception by noting that no matter how critics interpret the poem they are themselves in the grip of the demon: 'they all use analogy as an interpretative tool'.[8] The poem is contagious.

Unlike most of Mallarmé's later writings, the hermeticism of *Le Démon de l'analogie* does not begin at the syntaxical level. In later texts, the poet — 'scrupulously syntactic'— asks his readers to work carefully with the complicated syntax of the sentences, to determine how subjects, objects and verbs relate.[9] In *Le Démon de l'analogie*, the syntax is more straightforward and the difficulty of the poem lies less in what it *says* than in what it *means*. The strange facts in the case of the penultimate can therefore be paraphrased.

After the opening question, a man leaves his apartment with the feeling of a wing gliding down the strings of an instrument. The poem begins with a sensation,

with a narrator being played like an instrument. Before the end of the second sentence, this sensation has given way to a mysterious refrain: 'La Pénultième est morte' (*Div.*, 17. ['The Penultimate is dead']). The main part of the text then recounts how the narrator tries to get to grips with this haunting sentence.

He first describes — and the poem graphically shows — how the sentence appears 'with a downward intonation' (17), with a line-break after the first two words ('The Penultimate [—] is dead'). This break directs our attention to the syllable 'nul', which has now become the penultimate syllable of the line.[10] As the narrator remarks, the break thereby doubly suspends the sentence 'in the absence of signification' (17): read with a pause in the middle, the verse not only speaks *about* negation, it also, formally, puts emphasis on the negative (*nul*). Having detected this play between semantics and form, the narrator concludes that he has understood the trick of the sentence ('my finger on the secret behind the mystery's artifice' [17]) and prepares to move on: 'I smiled and pleaded, with all my intellectual wishes, for a different speculation' (17).

But the sentence comes back, autonomous: 'it articulated itself all alone, animated by its own personality' (17). The narrator then engages in a pure play with the signifiers. However, this play does not allow him to advance. Instead, he is once again pulled back to the syllable 'nul'. He imagines that the string of the instrument snaps and then he gives gravitas to the pronunciation of 'is dead'. He claims to be adapting the sentence to his own way of speaking ('making it fit my speech', 17), appropriating it, but he seems to overestimate himself: this is rather a case of the narrator adjusting to the sentence, coming under its spell.

The third attempt at mastering the refrain is *lexical*. The narrator seeks out the dictionary definition of *pénultième* in the hope that it will calm him. He explains that

this approach links to his daily practice as a poet, but he nevertheless feels that the detour by the dictionary is a form of cheating. The attempt therefore backfires: the threat of the sentence increases, as if nourished by 'the haste and facility of the affirmation' (18) of the lexical meaning of 'la pénultième' ('of course "penultimate" is a lexical term signifying the next-to-last syllable of a word' [18]).

The final attempt sees the poet-narrator revert to his playful signifier-based modulations. Again, the relation between sentence and poet is ambiguous. Previously, he claimed to adapt the sentence to his own 'speech'; now, he lets 'the sad words just wander on my lips' (18). Clearly, we have returned to the poem's opening question. At the same time, he acknowledges his 'secret hope' (18) to allay his anxiety via these modulations. Overall, no progress has been made: the poet still hopes to control the sentence, but he remains unable to move beyond the threat it carries.

At this point, reality breaks in — in two stages. The narrator suddenly discovers his own reflection in a shop window and sees that his hand is gliding down 'something' (18): the instrument he has been referring to throughout. He recognizes that the voice that pursued him was his own. We thus have a mirror-scene that allows for a brief moment of self-recognition. But then he looks through the shop window and discovers that he is standing in front of an instrument-maker. On display are string instruments adorned with feathers from old birds. The poem previously evoked feathers and instruments, and it therefore seems that the various associations generated by the mysterious sentence have materialized before the eyes of the narrator. Terrified, he ends the poem with a sentence that both speaks about — and performs — the confusion that overwhelms him: 'I fled, strange person, probably condemned forever to wear mourning for the inexplicable Penultimate (18). Here, the unresolved nature of the anecdote is expressed by the narrator's impression of being

forever stuck in a labour of mourning. But rather than offering a clear conclusion on the impossibility of concluding, the sentence resolves to an awkward 'probablement' and the white-flag word 'bizarre': is he calling himself bizarre? Is he describing the incident as bizarre? Is he speaking to himself? This forces the insecurity onto the readers who are left to establish their own way of relating to 'l'inexplicable' — the term that, as many critics have noted, becomes the penultimate word in the poem.

The paraphrase above has presented the struggles of the narrator in four phases. In truth, these phases are difficult to separate. *Le Démon de l'analogie* is a poem about flows and modulations. We go from a circumscribed space (the apartment within which the sensation arises), possibly down a set of stairs (in *Igitur*, this is explicitly stated; in *Le Démon de l'analogie*, Mallarmé instead writes about the mysterious sentence being expressed 'with a downward intonation', employing a *mise-en-page* that visualizes this downwards movement) and into the street where the sentence begins to drift, exactly like our narrator-flâneur. Towards the end of the poem, the narrator briefly stops, before realising he is condemned to perpetual unrest. Throughout the poem, it is thus suggested that all spaces are at the same time physical, mental and textual. *Le Démon de l'analogie* is a poem about a man walking through the streets…, a man walking a sentence through his mind…, a sentence walking across the lips of a man…, a sentence taking a man and his mind for a walk…, a man getting lost in his mind, getting lost in a sentence, getting lost in the streets of a city (that we assume to be Paris).

At this point, two paths open up for the reader. We can part ways with the narrator and try to explain the mysterious sentence-event. This is what most readers have done — thereby (often implicitly) working their way to a negative answer to the opening question ('Have unknown words ever played about your lips (...)?' [17]),

positioning themselves as being wiser than the narrator. An example of this approach can be found in Yves Bonnefoy's short book on the poem, *Le Secret de la Pénultieme* (2005). As the title suggests, Bonnefoy reads the text like a detective story. He draws on a fairly schematic understanding of psychoanalysis, discovers a sexual dimension in the various elements in the shop window; and when he has finished this work of 'translation', he concludes that the poem expresses Mallarmé's semi-ironic regret about inventing a radically new and post-romantic form of poetry. The last sentence in Bonnefoy's book (very emphatically) concludes that *Le Démon de l'analogie* 'is already all of his future works, and a key to deciphering his destiny'.[11] Secrets, keys, deciphering and the perfect anticipation and explanation of everything that was to come — nothing remains 'inexplicable' in this reading.

This article approaches the poem differently, staying close to the narrator and his confusion. I will — perhaps disappointingly — conclude that the sentence is 'inexplicable' and the experience 'bizarre'. From its opening question, the poem puts the reader in the position of the protagonist: we are struggling to understand the sentence. At the end of the poem, we have come no further. *Le Démon de l'analogie* thereby becomes a poem about the inadequacies of textual analysis. In fact, it explicitly thematizes the impotence of some of our best-known interpretative frameworks.

Most obviously, it singles out the limitations of lexical analysis. When the poet seeks help in the dictionary definition of 'la pénultième', he only sinks deeper into the quicksand of the sentence. As Barthes reminded Picard in *Critique et vérité*: words are polysemic, dictionaries do not simply stabilize meaning.[12] Like Jeff Vandermeer (in the first epigraph above), the poem is concerned with the demonic derailment of analogical thinking and its concomitant categorisations. Other textual

approaches prove equally impotent. For reasons that will become obvious shortly, it is particularly interesting for us to observe that the poem puts a conventional phenomenological framework under pressure. In his first attempt at coming to terms with the sentence, the narrator moves smoothly from sense-perception ('the distinct sensation') to a structure of meaning ('putting my finger on the secret') and an accompanying sense of subjectivity ('I smiled and pleaded [….] for a different speculation'). However, it soon appears that something was lost in this process — something has escaped the narrator and the smile disappears. The poet therefore gives up on phenomenology and its prioritisation of perception ('no longer contenting myself with mere perception') and instead tries other, equally unsuccessful approaches.

First among these are the more performative, signifier-based plays with the sentence. The poem clearly warns us against this practice too. We may be able to play around with the sentence, but this engagement with the matter of language allows for no taming of the sentence. Rather, the modulations turn out to be risky practices in which the poet gives himself over to a process he cannot control.

The ending to the poem makes the inadequacy of these various strategies of textual analysis evident. When the narrator finally stands in front of the shop window, we may hope for self-consciousness and self-identity, but this hope gives way to the poet's fall into the bizarre and never-to-be-claimed. But at the same time — and this is obviously crucial — *the sentence works*. Mediation takes place. The poem brings us from the sensation-sentence to the materialisation of the sensation: the shop window, the wings, the instruments. In the end, this is exactly why the words are so disturbing. The sentence produces reality, but the narrator and reader find themselves looped out of this effective mediation between text and reality; 'looped out' and at the same time

influenced by the experience. In other words, the experience of the narrator is of being incapable of accessing what nevertheless influences him. It is this paradoxical 'experience', and its implications for our understanding of individuation, which we shall now attempt to analyse in our second section.

2. Mallarmé, Individuation and Twenty-First-Century Media

To understand and describe the experience of the narrator (and the reader), let us turn to the recent work of media scholar Mark Hansen and, in particular, to his 2015 monograph *Feed-Forward, On the Future of Twenty-First-Century Media.* As its title indicates, this book is not a text about Mallarmé (or poetry) and our borrowings will therefore be selective.

The grounds for this foray into media theory is that Mallarmé shares with Hansen and other contemporary media theorists the idea that we are living in an all-encompassing data-ecology: we are, as one of Hansen's previous monographs put it, *Bodies in Code* (2006). What status do we have in this data-ecology? We are formed in — and of — it; we are part of it, but we are not prioritized. Hansen's recent writings are inspired by philosophers such as Alfred North Whitehead (1861–1947) and Gilbert Simondon (1924–89), and his examination of how we (continuously) come to be — of individuation — therefore begins with the environment, and not with the subject. In *Feed-Forward*, Hansen theorizes with Whitehead.

Hansen explains that Whitehead's 'entire speculative scheme is predicated precisely on the notion that consciousness *is* the function of hosting, that consciousness itself is nothing other than the hosting of other entities that act through it'.[13] In this scheme, 'we know ourselves as a function of unification of a plurality of things *which are other than ourselves.* Cognition discloses an event as being an

activity, organising a real togetherness *of alien things*.' (*FF*, x). This is why Whitehead calls the 'subject' a 'society': 'a certain organization of other, more elemental processes, *all of which are subjective in their own right'* (*FF*, 3). At the same time as being hosts, we are also being hosted. In Whitehead's ontology, the universe is conceived of as '*an entity (the supreme society) that necessarily includes (or as I prefer to say, implicates) humans within it and within each and every element comprising it*' (*FF*, 16). This is, Hansen underlines, a 'radically environmental perspective on agency: (...) every actual occasion implicates *the entirety of the universe*' (*FF*, 10). Hansen builds from this ontology when he theorizes individuation in our contemporary data-environments.

As Hansen notes, most of the traffic on the internet today is between computers and only thereafter, and indirectly, does it involve human beings. Storage is no longer primarily carried out directly by and for humans, but rather by computers, to allow them to communicate as smoothly as possible. In the present media-ecology, human beings are not privileged. And even if we are profoundly 'implicated', a substantial part of this communication escapes the human sensorial apparatus. Traditional phenomenology, with its focus on *human* perception, is therefore under pressure, as the gap between experience and perception is opening:

> Human experience is currently undergoing a fundamental transformation caused by the complex entanglement of humans within networks of media technologies that operate predominantly, if not almost entirely, outside the scope of human modes of awareness (consciousness, attention, sense perception, etc.) (*FF*, 5)

In other words, we are largely unaware of the hosting we do. One of Hansen's aims with *Feed-Forward* is therefore to develop a twenty-first-century phenomenology that is commensurate with contemporary media ecologies. He is not aiming to get rid of the human (his philosophy is not 'nonhuman'),[14] rather his (optimistic) project is to 'remake consciousness so that it can continue to be a crucial resource for human experience' (*FF*, 25). In order to do so, he is interested in the bionic technologies that give access to that which 'largely evades the grasp of perception' (*FF*, 151), to the form of 'sensibility that is prior to the division of the subject from the world' (*FF*, 24). He calls this pre-perceptual region 'worldly sensibility' and describes 'human sensibility as a particular mode of such self-sensing' (*FF*, 30). Drawing on Jan Patočka and Gilbert Simondon, as well as Whitehead, Hansen therefore presents an understanding of 'subjectivity' which recognizes higher-order cognitive functions, but also sees us as collective, processual and ecological becomings:

> (…) we humans can be 'collectives' composed of higher-order agencies functioning in operational overlap with more primordial processes of worldly sensibility impacting us both bodily and environmentally, but in some crucial sense prior to the very division of subject and world that informs the higher-order processes and that typically qualifies our status as human subjects. From this perspective, we are emphatically not distinct, substantial subjects that exist independently from the sensory confound with which we are every moment in contact, but are rather heterogeneous compositions in ongoing and highly complex individuation with and within this confound. (*FF*, 69)

As suggested by these references to early twentieth- (Whitehead) and mid-twentieth-century philosophers (Simondon), the ontology that Hansen presents is not new, but in twentieth-century literary and cultural studies it has been largely neglected. If Whitehead and Simondon have emerged as key thinkers over the last fifteen years, it is because they invite us to think individuation in a manner that we today would call 'Anthropocene', and because they (and Simondon in particular) prompt us to think our relation to technology in a similarly ecological way. In this sense, Hansen is not describing a new situation, but rather a situation that is becoming increasingly clear: 'Life in twenty-first-century media networks reveals something that has perhaps always been the case, but that has never been so insistently manifest: agency is *resolutely not* the prerogative of privileged individual actors' (*FF*, 2). My argument is that in the second half of the nineteenth century, Mallarmé's poem detects the same situation, while offering a less optimistic diagnosis.

As already mentioned, Mallarmé's poem shares with Hansen the view that the data world is all encompassing. The experience of the narrator in *Le Démon de l'analogie* is precisely one of being superceded by text, or code; of being a very limited part of a larger data-ecology, becoming a channel (an instrument) for the sentence. The narrator struggles to come to terms with this situation and during his struggles he experiences the insufficiency of his perceptual apparatus — that of a twentieth-century phenomenology. He also discovers that cognitive ('I smiled, and pleaded with all my intellectual wishes…') and lexical ('"penultimate" is a lexical term signifying….') attempts at controlling the sentence are inadequate. Mallarmé's narrator is thus caught in code, struggling to 'host' — to comprehend — 'his' experience and to emerge from the sentence-encounter as a coherent subject. Ultimately, he fails. On the way to this failure, Mallarmé has written out a conception

of individuation that looks very much like a nightmare version of the ecological individuation that Hansen theorizes. Here, distinctions between the mental, the environmental and the linguistic are broken down in such a way that the sentence dismantles the subject, who is incapable of 'organising a real togetherness *of alien things*' as Hansen put it.

The narrator's attempts at playing the sentence in view of limiting his unease and the implications this play has for our understanding of individuation — of subject(de)formation) — deserve further consideration. I called this play 'modulation' and this allows me to draw on Steven Shaviro's usage of the term in *Post-Cinematic Affect* (2010). Shaviro proposes that contemporary digital media (film, music videos and videogames) operate according to a logic of modulation. The digital signal consists of 0s and 1s that can be combined in an infinite number of ways. A code will determine the nature of these variations and it is impossible for the signal itself to break the code. On this basis, Shaviro distinguishes between *metamorphosis* and *modulation*: metamorphosis allows for change, for the invention of new codes, for the unexpected; modulation, on the other hand, prevents anything truly new and surprising from happening. One of Shaviro's key arguments is that the digital logic of modulation also characterizes contemporary capitalism. Capitalism is full of modulations: in fact, it largely depends on the kind of modulations we call fashions. But despite its apparent openness and malleability — or rather: *through* this apparent openness and malleability — capitalism prevents a systemic shift, a new code.[15]

It is precisely in Shaviro's sense of the word that the narrator *modulates* — and is *modulated* by — 'la pénultième est morte'. Of course, the sentence speaks about the death of the penultimate, about how certain norms of versification are being exploded, about the pressure on fixed forms. It also hints at the invention of new

forms such as free verse and the prose poem. But unlike what happens in later prose texts like *La Musique et les lettres* (1894) and *Crise de Vers* (1897), *Le Démon de l'analogie* plays these themes in a minor key. It speaks from a vacuum, from an uncanny interregnum. There is no productive dialectic between sentence and narrator (who and where is the Demon? Everywhere?), no radical rupture, only an intricate interplay in which boundaries between sentence, narrator and reality fall away. The sensation produced by this blurring stays entirely within the realm of the uncanny. The sentence's stickiness prevents escape.[16]

This brings us to a third dimension in this rapprochement between Mallarmé's exploration of subject(de)formation and the processes of individuation analysed in contemporary media theory. It is important to highlight that the sentence materializes at the end of the poem — mediation does happen. Mallarmé's poem thereby provides an example of what Eugene Thacker calls 'dark mediation'. Like Hansen and Shaviro, Thacker is interested in a form of mediation that exceeds conventional human views on information and communication. Presenting his key concept, Thacker writes:

> Dark media have, as their aim, the mediation of that which is unavailable or inaccessible to the senses, and thus that of which we are normally 'in the dark' about. But beyond this, dark media have, as another aim, the investigation into the ways in which all mediation harbors within itself this blind spot, the minimal distance that persists in any instance of mediation, however successful or complete it may be. Dark media inhabit this twofold movement — seeing something in nothing (e.g., the animate images appearing on the screen or the alchemical glass), and finding nothing in each something (the paradoxical absence of presence of the 'demon' behind each thing).[17]

In this passage, Thacker first underlines that some media operate beyond the human perspective, describing these as ‘dark media’. In a second argument, he notes that dark media make evident that there is a ‘blind spot’ in all mediation. Mediation is demonic because there is a hole in it. On the following pages, he clarifies that this has nothing to do with dark mediation being imperfect. On the contrary, Thacker is theorising the ‘instances in which media work “too well,” that is, instances in which media and mediation seem to operate beyond the pale of human capacity or comprehension’ (90).

Thacker draws on an eclectic corpus of medieval mysticism, negative theology, fantastic literature and Japanese horror films (frequently using mallarméan keywords such as ‘démon’ and ‘grimoire’) in order to bring out the situations where ‘we get more than we bargained for, as specters turn up in our photos, the dead appear on our computer screens, and that videotape, well, you probably shouldn’t watch that’ (102).[18] In those instances, mediation is no longer epistemological: it is not about transmitting knowledge. Rather, mediation is ontological: we are in a logic of appearance, of the occult (including the ‘blind spot’) becoming manifest.

Both of Thacker’s observations about dark media can inform a reading of Mallarmé’s poem. *Le Démon de l’analogie* is precisely a poem about mediation ‘beyond the pale of human capacity or comprehension’. When the narrator stands in front of the objects in the shop window, he clearly ‘get[s] more than [h]e bargained for’. This radically unsettles him. At the same time, it can be argued that the appearance is partially unreal, that the mediation reveals a hole. The experience at the shop window is not simply one of ‘presence’ and ‘appearance’: the objects on display are at distance, behind glass and strangely absent. Mallarmé’s poem contains a word

for this kind of presence-absence: *virtual*. The poem uses the term to describe the mode in which the sentence haunts the narrator ('the sentence came back, a virtual reality' [17]), but virtuality floods all aspects of the poem, dislodging the narrator from an experience that never fully becomes 'his'.

Thacker's text can therefore be used to drive home the point about how *Le Démon de l'analogie* ties into contemporary debates about the weird mediations of what lies outside the scope of the human perception, but nevertheless remains operative and influential. We are back in the territory we visited with Hansen: 'If there is a lesson to be learned from Scholastic demonology or medieval mysticism, it is that our ideas of media and mediation are, perhaps, all-too-human.'[19] Similarly, Mallarmé's text is concerned with mediation beyond the human perspective and the impact this has on the narrator. Indeed, this is what it means to be haunted by 'le démon de l'analogie'.

We have thus seen that the narrator's experience is that of not being able to appropriate an experience in which he is nevertheless deeply implicated. To write this out, the poem relies on a thoroughly ecological but also uncanny conception of individuation. Such a view of individuation resonates with the one contemporary media theorists find in our heavily digitalized and networked societies. Of course, this does not mean that there are no differences between Mallarmé's poem and the ways in which media scholars engage with technological individuation. For instance, Mallarmé's narrator is perhaps more aware of being haunted than most twenty-first-century sensibilities.[20] Nevertheless, Mallarmé's poem anticipates contemporary analyses of how it feels to be modulated by code in the digital society by proposing a media-ecology in which distinctions between text, environment and subject largely fall away. But to what extent do the uncanny logics at play in *Le Démon de l'analogie*

characterize Mallarmé's work more widely? A detailed answer to this question would require a very extensive discussion; here we must settle for a general answer.

3. Media Ambiguities

Mallarmé famously proposed that 'everything in the world exists to end up as a book' (*Div.*, 226) — or, in another version, 'a beautiful book'.[21] He also described this 'Livre' as a 'spirituel instrument' (in a text with that title). In this manner, 'le Livre' became the name of an *instrument* (musical and technical) that would help human beings find their place in the best world possible *and* the name of this *world* in which we would live harmoniously.

When Mallarmé writes about 'le Livre', he imagines an alignment between human and universe via the text (in simondonian terms, he imagines a 'réticulation'). The dream of this ideal man-world-text alignment often culminates in what Mallarmé figures as a moment of illumination. A constellation can be seen against the black sky when man, text and universe fall into place; a firework lights up when 'the world', as Wallace Stevens put it, 'arranges itself in a poem'.[22] This does not mean that Mallarmé is an idealist author, in the sense that the illumination is the sign of a power originating in anything other than a man-made fiction, but it does mean that fiction ('le Livre') becomes both the method through which man and universe can align and the name of that alignment.

An anachronistic way to formulate this idea is to suggest that Mallarmé was 'pre-haunted' by a dream of cybernetics. In the late 1960s, optimistic cybernetics-inspired writers such as Stewart Brand (the editor of *The Whole Earth Catalog*) imagined a man-machine (*homme-instrument*) interaction that would work as a dynamic, self-regulating system, eventually paving the way for a harmonious society.

This would be a system built on a feedback-loop that allowed for the gradual perfection of the all-embracing machine-*livre*.[23] Interestingly, there is a small and exclusive tradition of thinking Mallarmé's instrument-Livre in terms of cybernetics (in the more humanistic version of this diverse field). Already, in 1958 — at the time when Gilbert Simondon, Raymond Ruyer and others were (critically) importing cybernetics to France — Jean Hyppolite offered a cybernetics-inspired reading of *Un Coup de dés*.[24]

Twenty-two years later, Jeffrey Mehlman (1980) followed in Hyppolite's footsteps, again reading *Un Coup de dés* with cybernetics.[25] Considering the looped structure of the poem (it begins and ends with the same four words) and its mathematical, cosmic and metaphysical nature, it is unsurprising that it has been picked up by cybernetics-inspired readers. The overall ideas about the self-perfecting machine, the feedback loop and the poem as a place where cognitive, ontological and existential dimensions gradually align all pull the poem in the direction of cybernetics.[26]

If we now compare *Le Démon de l'analogie* to the mature poetics of 'le Livre', we can read the prose poem as the nightmare version of Mallarmé's dream of 'le Livre'. *Le Démon de l'analogie* also presents a text-world alignment — mediation happens — in this case, between a single sentence and the world. But in the prose poem, the text does not facilitate a process whereby 'Man and his authentic stay on earth exchange a reciprocity of proofs' (*Div.*, 112); as demonstrated, it serves instead to shut out the narrator. Unlike other Mallarmé texts, *Le Démon de l'analogie* therefore presents no final illumination in the sky, no projections from a refreshing fountain, no perfect spider-web, no beautiful lacework, but only a confused, haunted consciousness, caught in a nightmarish web, struggling to host an experience which it

cannot comprehend. In this sense, *Le Démon de l'analogie* is the mirror image of the *Livre*: an anti-*Livre*. And the common ground on which this dichotomy rests is the ecological, networked conception of individuation that we have presented with references to Whitehead and twenty-first-century media studies.

But no sooner has this distinction between the utopian and the dystopian versions of world-text alignments been established, than we need to let go of it and instead recognize that tensions and ambiguities mark Mallarmé's writings throughout. His trajectory has often been presented as a movement from early spleen-haunted idealism, through the crisis years (1866–71) to a more optimistic, mature Mallarmé capable of seeing the 'Néant' as a positive precondition for the work of Fiction. In this account, we go from the unfinished prose of *Igitur* and the tormented verse of *Hérodiade* to the illuminations of *La Musique et les Lettres* and the brilliant playful eroticism of a poem such as *Billet à Whistler*. There is truth to this presentation, but this evolutionary narrative is also too neat. Even if Mallarmé moves from the anguish of the early texts to the playfulness of sonnets like *Billet* and *Salut*, he remains haunted by the demon.

This can be seen in a mature poem such as *Prose — pour des Esseintes* (1885). It is difficult to feel at home in this fantastical poem about a magical — and perhaps non-existent (or virtual) — island where 'The stem of multiple lillies grew/ Too large to be contained by reason'.[27] Here, mediation is happening at an ontological rather than an epistemological level and the narrator is finding it impossible to map the situation. The reader feels uneasy too, unable to fully decipher the poème-grimoire. Similarly, when reading key redemptive, illumination-texts such as 'Le Sonnet en –x' and *Un Coup de dés* it is worth remembering that here the world-text alignments happen either while 'the Master has gone to draw tears from the Styx'

('Le Sonnet en –x'),[28] or when he is lying shipwrecked in the waves, clutching a pair of dice (*Un Coup de dés*). This last text merits further examination.[29] For instance, we can note that the submerged 'Master' is taking advice from 'the ulterior immemorial demon'.[30] The paradoxical temporal structure places the demon firmly outside human temporality — at the same time already far into the past and far into the future, making these 'ends' meet and in the process cutting off human beings and their temporality (note also that here 'ulterior' precedes 'immemorial'). This suggests a looped structure like the one we encountered in *Le Démon de l'analogie*. *Un Coup de dés* drives this point home when it then places the démon in 'nonexistent regions'.[31] Still operative and influential from this virtual space, the demon seemingly pushes the *Maître* to throw the dice. But this act remains covered under a 'veil of illusion'and therefore appears only as 'the phantom of a gesture', a gesture never really appropriated by the Master.[32] While recognising the multiplicity of readings this poem offers, it thus seems clear that in 1897 the ghostly hauntings of demons and the fear of being excluded from the process of mediation have still not been eradicated.

It can therefore be argued that Mallarmé's work brings together two tendencies that have marked media studies since their inception. On the one hand, there is the optimistic cybernetic dream of a self-regulating man-instrument (homme-livre) environment: a process capable of paving the way for harmonious co-existence, a technophile vision most optimistically embraced in the *Whole Earth Catalog* (Californian for 'le Livre'?) and in later ideas about the internet saving democracy and the world. On the other hand, there is the nightmare explored by multiple science-fiction films, in which communication between machine and universe dispenses with the human figure altogether, allowing HAL to continue its exploration of the cosmos without any interference. But what Mallarmé's texts — from *Le Démon de l'analogie*

to *Un coup de dés* — all invite us to conclude is that agency is distributed so evenly across textual, physical and mental environments, that these distinctions only briefly make sense. This conceptualisation of individuation — and the manner in which it links to twenty-first-century media studies — is one reason why Mallarmé's work continues to speak to the present.

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[1] Alfred North Whitehead, *Dialogues of Alfred North Whitehead, as Recorded by Lucien Price* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1954), 24.

[2] See Claire Lyu, 'The Poetics of the Penult: Mallarmé, Death, and Syntax', *Modern Language Notes* German Issue 113:3 (1998), 561–87.

[3] Roger Pearson, *Unfolding Mallarmé* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), 74.

[4] Gustave Kahn, *Symbolistes et décadents* (Geneva: Slatkine Reprints, 1977), 16. Translation my own.

[5] Kahn, 138. Translation my own.

[6] Stéphane Mallarmé, *Divagations,* translated by Barbara Johnson (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 2007). Subsequent quotations will be referenced in the text as *Div.*. (The French original asks: 'Des paroles inconnues chantèrent-elles aussi sur vos levres ?' (Stéphane Mallarmé, *Œuvres Complètes II*, edited by Bertrand Marchal (Paris: Gallimard, 2003), 76).

[7] Charles Baudelaire, *The Flowers of Evil*, translated by James McGowan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 7.

[8] Barbara Johnson, *Défigurations du langage poétique* (Paris: Flammarion, 1979), 197.

[9] Stéphane Mallarmé, *Les Interviews de Mallarmé*, edited by Dieter Schwarz (Neuchâtel: Ides et Calendes, 1995), 95. Translation my own.

[10] See Lyu, 572, n. 21 for debates about versification in the key sentence.

[11] Yves Bonnefoy, *Le Secret de la Pénultième* (Paris: Abstème & Bobance, 2005), 51. Translation my own.

[12] Roland Barthes, *Critique et vérité* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1999), 18–19.

[13] Mark Hansen, *Feed-Forward. On the Future of Twenty-First-Century Media* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2015), x. Subsequent quotations will be referenced in the text as *FF*.

[14] See *The Nonhuman Turn*, edited by Richard Grusin (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015).

[15] See Steven Shaviro, *Post-Cinematic Affect* (Winchester: Zero Books, 2010), 11–34.

[16] Shaviro added a political dimension by arguing that the digital logic was also that of capitalism. To my knowledge, the question of politics has rarely been raised in relation to *Le Démon de l'analogie* but, reading the poem alongside Shaviro's text, it is worth noticing that the narrator's modulations leave him in front of a shop window. This suggests a relation between consumerism and the impasse of the narrator. One may hypothesize that if *Le Démon de l'analogie* had been a poem by Baudelaire, readers would have been more alert to this link between uncanny hauntings and consumer culture, which they might have linked to Marxist ideas of commodity fetishism.

[17] Thacker in Alexander Galloway, Eugene Thacker, and McKenzie Wark, *Excommunication: Three Inquiries in Media and Mediation* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2014), 85.

[18] The videotape that 'you'd better not watch' belongs in Hideo Nakata's horror hit *The Ring* (1998). In this modern ghost story, watching a videocassette releases a deadly curse that can only be deflected by inviting someone else to watch the tape.

Does *Le Démon de l'analogie* reproduce this logic? We may read the narrator's decision to communicate his (ungraspable) experience to the reader as an attempt to pass on the curse. This adds a performative and thoroughly demonic dimension to the opening question: 'Have unknown words ever played about your lips, the haunting and accursed fragments of an absurd sentence?' (*Div.*, 17).

[19] Thacker in Galloway, Thacker, and Wark, 138.

[20] Hansen writes about 'media technologies that operate predominantly, if not almost entirely, outside the scope of human modes of awareness' (*FF*, 5). Mallarmé's narrator is at least semi-aware of being 'looped out', but he remains unable to respond. He is placed somewhere between the twenty-first-century sensibilities described by Hansen and Hansen himself, the media theorist who responds critically to the new situation.

[21] Stéphane Mallarmé, *Œuvres complètes II*, edited by Bertrand Marchal, Bibliothèque de La Pléiade, 2 vols (Paris: Gallimard, 2003), II, 702. Translation my own.

[22] Wallace Stevens, *Collected Poetry & Prose* (New York: The Library of America, 1997), 905.

[23] The parallel between Mallarmé and the hippie cybernetics of Stewart Brand is no doubt a stretch. Nevertheless, reading works such as Fred Turner's *From Counterculture to Cyberculture: Stewart Brand, the Whole Earth Network, and the Digital Utopianism* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2006) and Thomas Rid's history of cybernetics, *Rise of the Machines: The Lost History of Cybernetics* (Melbourne: Scribe, 2016), the resemblances between Brand's ambitions for *The Whole Earth Catalog* and Mallarmé's ambitions for 'le Livre' are striking. As Rid puts it: 'Brand's vision was to turn the catalog itself into a tool. The CATALOG

— he usually spelled it in capital letters — was to form a feedback loop. He wanted it to be a communication device that connected the far-flung community he cared so much about. He wanted the catalog to be part of something that would create an equilibrium. The catalog was part of a whole system, a dynamic and self-regulating system. Brand would collect the crucial negative feedback in the supplement every few months and loop it back to the land by mail, to the readers (...). His publications, as he saw it, were part of an adaptive machine (...). The catalog itself, with its supplements and its community, *was the learning mechanism*' (172).

[24] See Jean Hyppolite, *Figures de la pensée philosophique, Tome 2*, Collection Quadrige (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1991), 877–84. 1958 also saw the publication of Simondon's best known work on the technological object and he defended his 600 page dissertation on *L'individuation à la lumière des notions de forme et d'information*, written under the direction of none other than Jean Hyppolite. In recent years, the significance of this hitherto largely neglected moment in French intellectual life has become increasingly clear. More work needs to be done to map the relations between Simondon and the various thinkers who influenced — and, I would argue, were influenced by — the writing of this dissertation: Jean Hyppolite, Maurice Merleau-Ponty (to whom the dissertation is dedicated) and Georges Canguilhem first among them.

[25] See Jeffrey Mehlman, 'Mallarmé/Maxwell: Elements', *Romanic Review*, 71:4 (1980), 374–80.

[26] One of the best recent books on Mallarmé is Anna Arnar's volume *The Book as Instrument*: *Mallarmé and the Transformation of Print Culture* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2010). This cultural history contains no mention of cybernetics, but Arnar's study of Mallarmé's pedagogy and his wider poetics nevertheless proposes a

largely similar argument: for his English classes, Mallarmé built small machines (see Mallarmé's *L'Anglais récréatif*). Students were meant to interact with these machines in order to perfect their grammar. In the process, they would also become aware of the workings of their intelligence and this might eventually help them to live harmoniously in the world. Arnar lucidly demonstrates how this pedagogical vision for the *Book as Instrument* resonates through Mallarmé's creative work.

[27] Stéphane Mallarmé, *Collected Poems: A Bilingual Edition*, translated by Henry Weinfield (Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 1994), 47.

[28] Mallarmé, *Collected Poems*, 69.

[29] For a different and more detailed account of the relation between *Le Démon de l'analogie* and *Un Coup de dés*, see Jean Dornbush, 'The Death of the Penultimate: Paradox in Mallarmé's "Le Démon de l'analogie"', *French Forum*, 5:3 (1980), 239–60.

[30] Stéphane Mallarmé, 'A Throw of Dice Not Ever Will Abolish Chance (1897)' in *Manifesto: A Century of Isms*, edited by Mary Ann Caws, translated by Tom Csaszar (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2001), 27–49, p. 36.

[31] Mallarmé, 'A Throw of Dice', 36.

[32] Mallarmé, 'A Throw of Dice', 69.