

“ Ereignis is a German word which can mean just a happening, just an event, just taking the train to go to Berlin. But it can also mean something quite different: a happening which defines who you are, an Ereignis, an event, which brings you into your own.

Wolfgang Schirmacher

This book introduces Ereignis as a philosophical concept, as a technology, and as a way of life. In addition to an introduction to the concept written in a non-specialist language, you will find a previously unpublished interview with Wolfgang Schirmacher, and a glossary of key terms. The text is interlaced with award-winning director Stefan Chazbijewicz's photographic impressions of Warsaw.

Dr. Torgeir Fjeld is Head of the Ereignis Center for Philosophy and the Arts.

Stefan Chazbijewicz is a film and theatre director, poet, and visual artist living in Warsaw, Poland.

Professor Wolfgang Schirmacher is a philosopher of media technology.

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Torgeir Fjeld and Stefan Chazbijewicz: Introducing Ereignis

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Torgeir Fjeld and Stefan Chazbijewicz
with Wolfgang Schirmacher

Introducing Ereignis

philosophy, technology, way of life

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by Torgeir Fjeld
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Foreword

Ereignis, a German word, refers to an unusual, even life altering event. Its root, *eigen* indicates ownership, making the verb signify a process by which we take possession of something, or, simply, give sense to an event. *Ereignis* refers to the act of making an event our own.

When our Being reveals itself it is as if we are near the presence of a mystical light. We can refer to this event of nearness as the *Ereignis* of presencing, i.e. the event of coming close to our Being. In our daily lives we tend to find ourselves barred from experiencing such a presence; this blockage, concealment, is a side effect of our metaphysical view of technology, our attempts to dominate life through technical mastery. The cure lies not in accumulating more knowledge, but rather in the ancient admission of Socratic learned ignorance: All I know is that I do not know. As a truth technique this approach can facilitate an experience of the world in its entirety, momentarily, and yet as if eternally.

When we come close to our Being we grasp the entirety of our existence in a glimpse.

To gain a relationship to technology that is governed by truth rather than metaphysics does not entail that we leave the modern world behind; rather, we begin to posit a different relation to the machines: technology should no longer serve to dominate and exploit us and our natural habitats, but rather as aids in our task to become guardians and nurturers of Being and beings.

Thus is the event of *Ereignis*: an opportunity to rethink our lives as a whole. This event is such that it cannot be fully present; like Being itself we approach it, seek its proximity, and then, as the event passes, we begin to grasp it, making it our own.



Ereignis: the thought



Gate. June,
2021.



Ereignis is a way to understand technology and our everyday world, an approach to life, and a distinct philosophy. We begin by unpacking the multiple meanings of the word; we then go on to identify a vision, an obstacle, and a new reality. In the end we ask to what service *Ereignis* can be put to enable us to become who we are.

1. The meaning of *Ereignis*

Ereignis is a complex and intriguing word, even in the German. As a noun (an *Ereignis*) it basically means an unusual or special event, or, simply, something that has happened. However, when we investigate further we realise that there are vast arrays of potential meanings to this term. Synonyms suggested by the dictionary include occasion, interlude, opportunity, experience, happening, thing, and an event. At the etymological root of *Ereignis* we find that this is an event that is derived from the verb *ereignen*, designating something that plays itself out, as if by destiny.



Street life in the city. September, 2020.

One influential interpreter sought to distinguish the prefix *er-* from the stem *eignen*. It is when we consider *eignen* as a cognate of *Augen* that we get a sense in which *ereignen* is intimately connected to our vision, to what we see or have in our view. In German, the derived *zueignen* and *aneignen* means to acquire and appropriate respectively, and the verb *eigen* simply means to own. If an event only truly occurs when it is seen or observed, then what has happened can only be determined with by referring to what observers have called it to themselves, their interpretation, or appropriation, of the event.

To *er-eignen*, then, seems to mean to make something one's own, in by appropriating it, acquiring it's key meaning, or giving voice to its sense. This is important, because at the core of the *eigen* lies *eigentlich*, designating an event's underlying cause, or its reality. In other words, what something really is, or what actually happens, can only come out through appropriation, of by distinguishing what it was that we experienced. This event, then, does not only refer to the happening itself, but crucially also to the act of making the event one's own.

An event is an experience or a happening that fundamentally reconfigures the coordinates of our lives, as a trauma or as a thoroughly exhilarating moment, strictly dividing the "before" from the "after."

A black and white photograph of a tree branch with a knot hole, set against a background of a stone wall. The branch is dark and textured, with a prominent knot hole in the center. The stone wall behind it is out of focus, showing a pattern of irregular stones.

2. Philosophies of *Ereignis*: Heidegger, Schirmacher, Badiou

Ereignis is an experience and an approach to life. Our technological understanding of the world can bar us from this experience. Opening up for the multiplicity of reality we can rediscover the world as a sacred place.



2.1 Heidegger: nearness

There is no doubt that it was the game-changing philosophy of Martin Heidegger (1889-1976) that brought the term *Ereignis* onto the stage of modern thought. In an essay on the German poet Friedrich Hölderlin Heidegger described how it feels to descend from the mountainous Alps, the returning and homecoming, and in this essay he associates this descent with a mystical experience of *Ereignis*.

A *clearing* is the sense we get when we approach a moment of serenity and profound insight.



Plac Zbawiciela. January, 2021.

Heidegger gave the term *Ereignis* the task of connecting Being, or the divine, with our lives. To Heidegger Being reveals itself as a light which enables it to become visible to itself. Being, or the divinity, gives, sends, or destines beings, such as ourselves, in an ongoing unfolding of self-awareness. Heidegger thought of this double movement as Being alternately disclosing or refusing itself, or, in a word, as a “clearing-concealing.” *Ereignis* is a term to describe this sense in which Being is self-giving or self-refusing, or what Heidegger mystically referred to as the “*Ereignis* of presencing.”

To be present, then, or to experience a presencing, is in Heidegger’s terminology to be in the nearness of Being. When Heidegger held that this nearness nevertheless can never be fully present he began from the assertion that the German phrase *Es gibt*, there is, not merely points to an empty placeholder “Es,” it/there, but that it serves to highlight the giving of the *Es*, rendering the phrase as literally “It gives.” In so far as the “It” here refers to Being, the giving that is provided by it is its own presence. However, even Heidegger acknowledges that this “It” is inaccessible to ordinary thinking; therefore we should turn to the poets, and particularly the recollective verse of Hölderlin, to be brought into “It’s” nearness.

The “It” of Being, or the Divine, is inaccessible to ordinary thinking; however we can come into its nearness through recollective, poetic thought.



Square of Three Crosses. September, 2020.

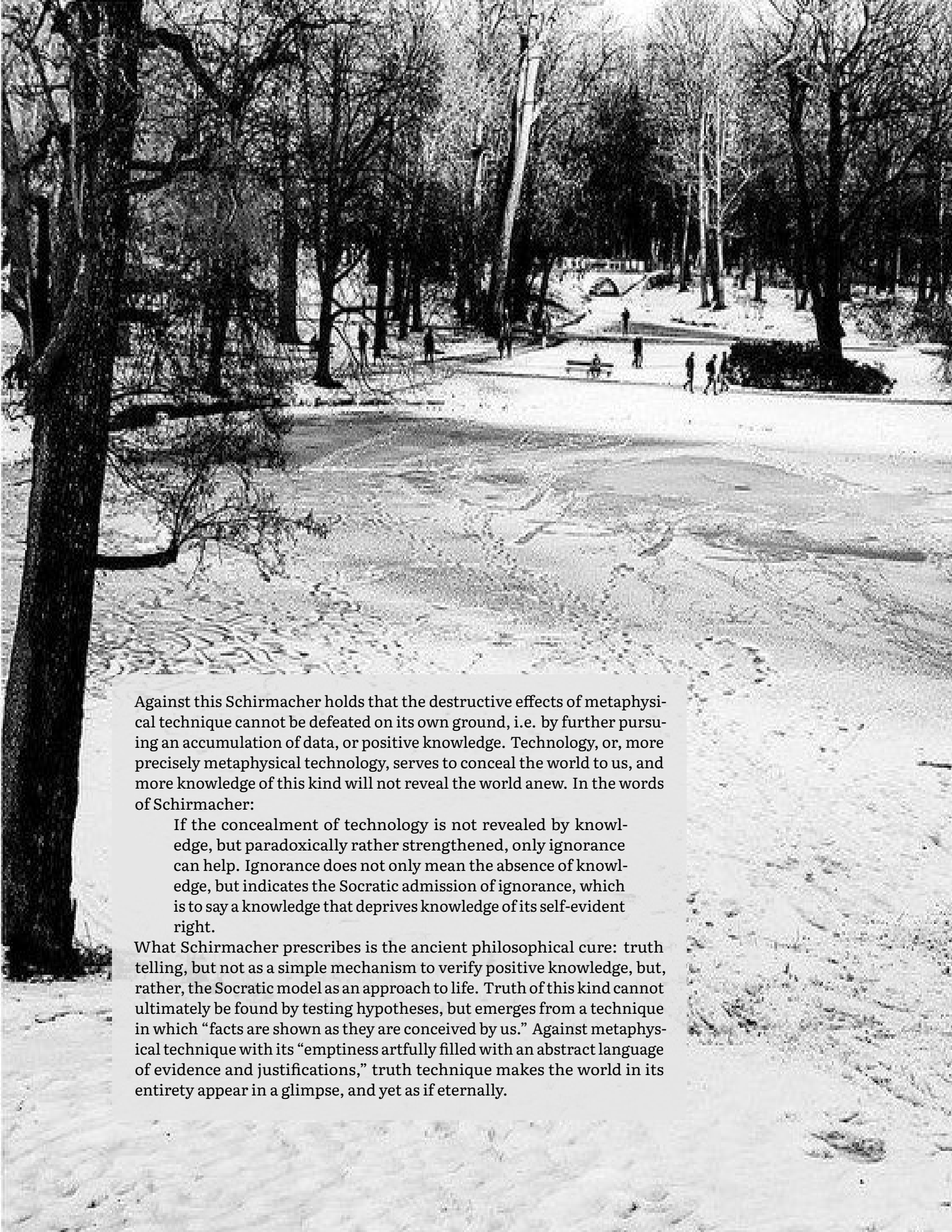
2.2 Schirmacher: metaphysical technique

Now, what is the reason that we find ourselves removed from Being, at a distance from our own existence, in our daily lives? Heidegger was quite clear on this, referring to the reduction of the world from a place of transport and enchantment to an experience where we are oblivious to the things themselves as Gestell. Rather than a world revealing itself as a holy place, and the things within it as radiant, sacred beings, Gestell reduces things to mere resources that can only serve as means to ends. Wolfgang Schirmacher, a philosopher of technology, continues Heidegger's thought to name this blockage "metaphysical technique," a complex expression of attempts to dominate life by technical mastery, a technological fix which we often think of as either technological optimism, or utopianism.

Metaphysical technique reduces our world and other people to means to an end, making us oblivious to the things in themselves, seeking instead to dominate them by bringing the exterior world under our complete control.



Governed by an “instrumental prejudice,” Schirmacher writes, the metaphysical technique is an “ingenious expression of a technology of survival” where all objects, everything we encounter, are regarded with suspicion, as “potentially hostile.” This is why the dominant metaphysical technique seeks to bring the entirety of our external world “under control under all circumstances and by all means.” It is this naïve belief in technological supremacy which leads to the present explanation of all our shortcomings as a “lack of technology:” when our world is gradually brought to an end and destroyed with the aid of modern technology the often misunderstood response is to claim that it is not modern technology, or, rather metaphysical technique, that has brought this upon us, but the wrong use of instruments or an insufficient determination of their purpose; in this view our current fix is due to an incorrect application of technology. When metaphysical technique encounters failure its answer is to stubbornly pursue the same path with even more determination, and to explore and exploit further its beaten path of domination by technical knowledge.



Against this Schirmacher holds that the destructive effects of metaphysical technique cannot be defeated on its own ground, i.e. by further pursuing an accumulation of data, or positive knowledge. Technology, or, more precisely metaphysical technology, serves to conceal the world to us, and more knowledge of this kind will not reveal the world anew. In the words of Schirmacher:

If the concealment of technology is not revealed by knowledge, but paradoxically rather strengthened, only ignorance can help. Ignorance does not only mean the absence of knowledge, but indicates the Socratic admission of ignorance, which is to say a knowledge that deprives knowledge of its self-evident right.

What Schirmacher prescribes is the ancient philosophical cure: truth telling, but not as a simple mechanism to verify positive knowledge, but, rather, the Socratic model as an approach to life. Truth of this kind cannot ultimately be found by testing hypotheses, but emerges from a technique in which “facts are shown as they are conceived by us.” Against metaphysical technique with its “emptiness artfully filled with an abstract language of evidence and justifications,” truth technique makes the world in its entirety appear in a glimpse, and yet as if eternally.

To overcome metaphysical technique it is required of us to pose an entirely different subject, or I, so that we again can enter into an essential and poetic relation to the world. Overcoming metaphysical technique does not mean that we leave modern technology behind, but that we abandon its use as “denizens of the night-time,” and instead treat machines and practice the sciences behind them as “dwellers of the radiant world of the *Ereignis*.”

Somewhere along this path we join in with others who have abandoned the cage of metaphysical technique, fellow travellers who seek to give up on exploitation and abuse so as to become guardians, custodians, and nurturers of beings, and, by implication of the Event itself. Our question is how we are going to conceive of *Ereignis* in this sense.

2.3 Badiou: the new reality

One way to approach this seminal Event is suggested by the philosophy of Alain Badiou. Here, the event is a way to understand how reality intrudes into our everyday experience. To Badiou reality is a void grounded in an inconsistent multiplicity, a structure which cannot ultimately be upheld in any social or personal totality. Therefore, countless elements of this reality are excluded from the totality we perceive as our everyday existence, and it is when any of these elements imposes itself upon us, engendering a complete shift in our structure of perception, that we truly can talk about an Event in Badiou’s sense.

The void is at the core of our existence, an empty space around which our experiences evolve.



After the rain. January, 2021.

To Badiou the event opens up our everyday appearance of normality, enabling a sudden opportunity to rethink our lives as a whole. Since the event can be compared to a ripping open in the fabric of established reality it offers exhilarating possibilities for participants that can nevertheless be experienced as demanding for those who are tasked with assimilating the event. In Badiou's view a real event generates not only new ways of thinking about the world, but also new truths. What previously didn't count, Badiou writes, comes to interrupt the continuity of determinism, thereby generating something completely new.

An utter reformulation of prevalent prejudices and assumptions cannot be programmed in advance. Rather, Badiou holds that a true event can only be grasped retrospectively, and that it cannot have a presence. The event, in effect, suspends the chronology of time, becoming ubiquitous: at the moment of the event it is everywhere and nowhere. In other words, we cannot really realise an event until after it has passed, when we try our best to assimilate it into an opportunity we couldn't have lived without.

An inconsistent multiplicity lies at the core of reality and is generally hidden and concealed.



3. Becoming who we are

Ereignis is about approaching the clearing, letting things stand out as they are, and the festive experience, i.e. the sense in which we let the world reveal itself as a sacred place. When we overcome metaphysical technology, an approach to life that only allows the world and others to appear as instruments or means to an end, we can again be brought into the nearness of a Being that gives and reveals itself. By returning to telling the truth we can experience the void of an inconsistent multiplicity that constitutes reality, and out of this void we can begin to rethink our lives and generate an entirely new reality.

It is when we regain this new ground we can begin to realise and become who we truly are. *Thus* is the experience of *Ereignis*.



Interview with Wolfgang Schirmacher



Summer days.
August, 2021.





Wolfgang Schirmacher.

This interview with Wolfgang Schirmacher was conducted in Dresden, Germany, on February 26 and 27, 2018. Parts of the interview were published in the journal *Inscriptions*, vol. 1 (2018). The present selection is previously unpublished.

Q: You used the term *Clandestine ethics* – an ethics that goes on behind our backs while we go on doing our own business. Can you elaborate on this concept?

Clandestine ethics remains my most provocative idea. Media's most crucial role is to keep us busy so [distract us] that we do not interfere with how life lives and fulfills itself. Philosophy has not talked about this matter because we should not know about it. When we know about it we make it worse by trying to make it better. It's something we always do.

My point is that it is necessary to get at least a glimpse, a trace, an understanding of this ethical process we live under. We get to recognize it and in that recognition itself we have to forget it. And we have now two steps to this, and this is a very important part to this point, because there have been others, such as Nietzsche, who have praised forgetting, but not put it together with recognizing. It is a process of forgetting and recognizing, and this is something that is a mental discipline in many ways.

A very simple example is a good meal or a good place: enjoy the place, feel the enjoyment, and yet you need to totally resist the urge to remember for the next time, or to tell other people about it – “Oh, it was great there!”, et cetera – because if you return there it will never be as it was. It could be that it will be better in some ways – it doesn’t always have to be worse, well, usually it it worse, but it is not necessarily so. For example, I go to [the Mediterranean island of] Formentera every year for 20 years now, and every time there is a different Formentera waiting for me. But this is because I am not expecting certain things when I go there. I live every day as a here and now. I enjoy it, and I trust others. My main point would be that we are so greedy in keeping what is good for the humans because we fear that we might otherwise lose everything.

So is it with notes. When I wake up the next morning I have no idea what I have written. I am most surprised at how smart I have been, and that is good, because I trust that it will come if I need it. So that is why it is very dangerous – and for a long time I was reading papers – until at once I was ready to go in there and let it go. It could be a catastrophe. I sometimes talked to 1.000 people,

when I was president [of the Schopenhauer Association], and to do that without some points or at least some paper that you can look at But my experience is that I was never as good as when I had a structure in mind, when I just went in there and I had a topic or I had a guiding star. Usually the title was the important thing.

Q: You have talked about the demands of our current age, and you have talked about how the technology and the computer inclines us to ask certain questions formulated as problems. Now you bring up our incessant will to record everything and to be in control of our own words. Is this something you see as an aspect of modernity that we somehow are challenged by?

You mean our contemporary culture? Our technological world? Well, certainly, if you want to take advantage of it, then you have to do certain things. There’s a manual to it, you have to address certain things, and you can think that this is the important thing: that it’s not what you say that is important, but how you record it. But that is not true. Because you have to be a pretty strange kind of persona in order not to care. But I cannot remember: don’t remember [laughs].







Fraternité and memory. February, 2021.

Concerning ambiguity: It is in the in-between where life really lives. But no technical apparatus lives in-between. They all operate with decidability. It is this way or that way. If you can't find the right way or you want to change something then you're out. They kind of throw you out. And we are fearing this out and fully so.

Q: A computer solves problem, something you want to achieve, a state of affairs you want to achieve as efficiently as possible. That is one way of thinking, and then there's possibly another way of thinking, and a lot of your work interrogates this way of thinking and whether there is another, more human, way of thinking. Would you want to comment on those terms?

Intentional technology, uh, what's the word for that? Instrumental technology. Nearly all our technologies are instrumental. They can be appropriated. But the fact is that they appropriate us. It's a deal you make: you want the advantages

of Google, Amazon, then you have to do certain steps in order to reach a certain goal. And this goal becomes internalised from an early age so that you will not even think of it that it is not really what you want.

But in the future – a philosopher always thinks 100 or 150 years ahead – well, I'm not so sure any more about all these bullshit stories about “We lose our work” and, well, I told you already 20 years ago, let the robots work and pay taxes. What they are doing now is not really a problem because we have not yet taxed computers. We don't tax machines. We tax income, we tax other stuff, but not machines. But there is no reason why humans, as long as they have still have the political power – and that might not stay on, they can tax the machine. And the only reason – and everybody knows that and they have not talked about it – is that they did not want to stop the industry in developing robots.



Rainy Warsaw. December, 2020.

Q: This is relevant to the debate concerning autonomous machines. If you have a machine that thinks, feels, acts like a human being should it then have rights, and in so far as it has rights should it not be taxed?

Yes, well, the right to tax anything is something humans have. Nobody else. We elect our officials, and while we don't have terminators coming after us we can tax anyone. We are taxing people, the owners of the machines, even if the owner is not really the master of the machine, but he owns it, and he gets the advantages of it so we can tax the advantage. And the only reason we have not done it is that we wanted to come to a point where the human labour is more expensive than the labour of the robots. Because that would be the moment of freedom. That is something Schiller and Goethe, our great writers, acknowledged: as long as we have to work we have no freedom. By work I mean labour just to buy food to

sustain ourselves. Working with something we like to do, that is something totally different. And this difference is something they today are trying to confuse. Amazon and other book stores they say, OK, here is something free for you and you don't have to do anything for it, but in fact you pay for it with labour.

With labour in the world there will never be freedom. Always hope for the moment when this will come. But now it looks like it will be a very ambiguous moment. Because the machines have taken over all the labour since they are cheaper and better than we are. And the singularity of this moment: what will happen to us. Why should we enjoy doing only what we want, doing nothing, having no productive value, and to only have value as customers, and as customers who do not bring anything of value, who are there just to entertain, to give the machines work, if we don't have needs then we would have work in there.





This reminds me of something that happened during a Hegel congress lecture in Rotterdam. It was about needs and the point was that humans have no needs whatsoever. This whole needs based psychology is totally invented. Because we are like the Greek gods. We don't need anything. But we can play with anything. Like Gods we can have fights, have wars, whatever, but it does not mean anything. It is very near to my idea of ethics behind our backs. That was the first time I came close to this idea when I told them that humans have no needs. And I was always able to prove this very simply: I could get out my gun and point it to your head and ask "What do you need so desperately that you would die for it?" The only need you have is to live. Nothing you can substitute will change or make it differently. I am not talking about illnesses etc. Certainly I need health.

Schopenhauer said health is not everything, but without health everything is nothing. So that is certainly true. But my point again is that I would like to see what purpose humans have in a world where the machines do everything, politics, whatever. I am sure in the beginning we would continue to have politicians and media, but this is just a totally unimportant game. We could take everything away and the world would... be a much better place, actually, because we also take away the garbage we produce. What would be the purpose of our existence? Because as you know the only advantage we have in the world is our intelligence. Only because of our brains did we become humans and we became able to torture and kill. We are the greatest killers in the universe, as I call it – which is perhaps an overstatement, since we don't know how many universes there are – but in our world we are really the worst killers.



Plac Zbawiciela with music. December, 2020.

This is the real question, I cannot come up with any idea ..., an intelligence, a self-generating person, could come before the existence of humans. But this is very strange, since the machines wouldn't care about the environment either. Because they can exist one hundred metres down and the entire earth can be burned down. They don't need any of that. They only need materials.

Q: It sounds a bit like Orson Well's *Time Machine*, where the workers live under the earth and the humans live above earth. You talk often about the media artist who makes use of media technology in a creative way, and this is possibly another way of existing, another way of living ethically in this technological age. What does this notion

of the media artist do to Plato's dictum that our power comes from our self-mastery?

You're still in a very old framework here. My articles on this always reach the end. ...You will see that I interpreted Kierkegaard's famous leap of faith as a leap into media in "Cloning humans with media: impermanence and imperceptible perfection." The last chapter "Concealing humanity, media's secret task" states that "Cloning humans reveals homo generator, but it also conceals something. What is hidden from us are the ethical worlds we belong to. ...By cloning freely with media and assigning a life-world in between natality and mortality we pay no attention to the artificial life which has been and always will be generated by humans."





Keywords: a glossary



Before the
winter.
December,
2020.

Nearness

Nearness or “letting-oneself-into-Nearness” can be thought of as a name for our life as a journey. Nearness does mean a small amount of distance, which is demonstrated by the fact that we in spite of our rapidly evolving technological means to overcome distance are still seeking more nearness. This craving can be due to that the “It” of Being, or the Divine, is inaccessible to ordinary thinking. We can nevertheless approach the nearness of “It” through recollective, poetic thought.

Event

An or *the* Event can be thought of as a rupture in a continuous flow of perceptions, a moment of recognition and experience, or as a happening that fundamentally reconfigures the coordinates of our lives, as a trauma or as a thoroughly exhilarating moment that strictly divides the “before” from the “after”. A true event is characterised by a rupture in the fabric of our everyday existence which enables us to rethink reality.

Clearing

A clearing is the sense we get when we approach a moment of serenity and profound insight. It is as if we, when walking through a dense forest, unexpectedly arrive at an opening, where the sun is allowed to illuminate the things around us, and the sky opens up to reveal itself. A clearing occurs when something which has hitherto been shrouded in mystery reveals itself, and as such it is the opposite of concealing.

Metaphysical technique

Metaphysical technique is a way to approach the world and other people that reduces them to means to an end. With this way of using technology we become oblivious to the things in themselves, seeking instead to dominate them by bringing the exterior world under our complete control. Thus, this technique serves to conceal the world from us. With metaphysical technique beings are framed and reduced to a standing reserve of undifferentiated resources available to our use.

Void

The void is the negative of that which exists. There is nothing appealing about the void, rather it is repelling. Nevertheless, it remains a mystery to us, such as when astrophysicists ponder the substance and sense of Black Holes in the universe. In this view, the void lies at the core of our existence, an empty space around which our experiences evolve.

Multiplicity

Multiplicity is an often used, but rarely well-defined term. We can think of the multiplicity in an absolute sense as that which undergirds our everyday reality, but which essentially must be repressed or contained in order for us to function well. The multiplicity is chaotic, inconsistent, and disorderly. When at certain moments repressed content from the multiplicity appears it can be experienced as traumatic, gratifying, or exhilarating; in either case such a revealing provides us with an opportunity to recalibrate our reality.



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Contributors

Torgeir Fjeld is Head of Ereignis Center for Philosophy and the Arts, and has a special interest in research and creative acts on the intersection of technology, presencing, and the event of salvation.

Stefan Chazbijewicz is a film and theatre director, poet, and visual artist based in Gdańsk and Warsaw, Poland. He is interested in forms that interrogate the reality of salvation, i.e. what we are after transformation. His artwork can be viewed at [instagram.com/chazbijewicz.art/](https://www.instagram.com/chazbijewicz.art/).

Wolfgang Schirmacher is Professor and founder of the Philosophy Programme at the European Graduate School, Switzerland. Schirmacher's philosophy of technology is situated where the thought of Martin Heidegger, Arthur Schopenhauer, and Friedrich Nietzsche intersect.



Ereignis Center for Philosophy and the Arts

Ereignis Center for Philosophy and the Arts is an organisation for research, education and dissemination of a distinct approach to Ereignis as a philosophy, technology, and way of life. The Center offers courses online and at on-site retreats, and hosts conferences and open meetings with artists, authors, and philosophers. Tankebanen forlag, with its English-language imprint *utopos*, is our publisher.

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