

## We Only Dream of Electric Nightmares

Adolfo Fattori

Scrolling through the various essays hosted in this special issue of FUTURI, the result of the first edition of “Sognielettrici - Festival dell’immaginario fantastico e di fantascienza”, one immediately notices the strong prevalence of some keywords such as “dystopia”, “apocalypse”, “weird” – the substance of our nightmares – to which, however, terms such as “videogames” or “posthuman” act as a counterpoint. The first, a medium, perhaps the most avant-garde of all as a leaven for the imagination, the second, a way of synthesizing a whole range of hypotheses and perspectives relating to the possible ecosystem which will include in various combinations the organic of bodies, the artificial of mechanics and the digital.

However, all these elements have a single root, which in its current form dates back to the years between the Renaissance and the Enlightenment, but which, if we carefully scan into the “high abyss of time”, dates back to Greek mythology, and perhaps even earlier. This root is the “electric fire”, the invisible energy present everywhere, perhaps embodied in Electra’s daughter, Iris, the messenger of the gods, who sows the rainbow behind her.

In short, the imagination of electricity is ancient: the Greeks had realized that electricity is indeed invisible, immaterial, inconsistent... However, it resides – at least in its magnetic form – in solid matter; it is generated (evoked?) by rubbing the right substances together: amber and wool, for example. Indeed, amber gives it its name: in ancient Greek the term for amber is ἤλεκτρον, elektron...

A force that can be beneficial, healing, but can also be unleashed with uncontrollable violence, as happens through lightning. Indeed, precisely in this he demonstrates his divine nature, almost a metaphor for the nature of the most primordial sacred: benevolent but also capricious, vengeful... What could it be, therefore, if not the “vital fluid”, the divine substance that gives life to all living creatures? Of course, not to the soul, that comes from elsewhere, but to bodies yes.

It is so inextricable from the dimension of the sacred. And it will remain so for a long time, until the present day – with the logical adjustments to the metamorphoses that the perception of the sacred, the numinous, the invisible has known throughout the ages.

The Californian Erik Davis writes about it very well, articulating in his *Tech-Gnosis: Myth, Magic, and Mysticism in the Age of Information* (2015), originally published in 1998, a reasoning that intertwines the development of communi-

cation technologies with the sacred, religion, the myth, from their origins to the present day – and electricity – the natural energy that moves reality.

Developing his argument, Davis cites a group of Central European theologians of the period between the 17th and 18th centuries, on the threshold of the Enlightenment. They were called “the electric theologians” Johann Ludwig Fricker, Prokop Diviš (for many, inventor of the lightning rod shortly before Benjamin Franklin, and of the first electric musical instrument we know),<sup>1</sup> and Friedrich Christoph Oetinger, who theorized the nature of electricity as a “vital fluid”, directly coming from God.<sup>2</sup>

Far from simply absorbing electricity into existing Christian cosmology, Oetinger’s electrical imagination opened up a rather radical and animistic vision of nature. In his view, the world was not a lump of blind clay whose life force directly depended on a transcendent God, nor were its physical forms solely derived from the divine cookie cutters that the Lord used during the first week of creation. Instead, the weird sparks collected by Diviš’s lightning-catchers furnished Oetinger with proof of the *anima mundi*, the living World Soul. In this notion, matter is endowed *from the beginning* with spirit, life, and intelligence, and it constantly strives to manifest new forms and new comminglings. (Davis 2015, p. 67 – italic in original)

Davis proceeds in his reasoning, and captures an essential passage, which connects the research of the “electric theologians” with the great, true foundation myth of the contemporary imagination - a progressive dream and an oppressive nightmare at the same time, Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*:

This archetypal tale of electro-Prometheanism, which casts electricity as the bridge between science and creation, may be fiction, but it lurks in the shadows of laboratories even today—the embryo of Dolly, the adult sheep cloned in 1997 by Scottish researchers, was kicked into action with a few drops of the electrical fluid. *Frankenstein* was a cautionary tale, part of the Romantic reaction to Enlightenment hubris. (Davis, 2015, p. 69)

The dynamic that develops between the demands of the Enlightenment and the tensions of Romanticism anticipates the dialectic – and the conflict – that will nourish the entire imaginary of industrial and post-industrial Modernity. An imaginary that divides its visions between progressive and optimistic enthusiasms, and dark and distressing images, and between the instances of rationalism and those never dormant of the sacred and the supernatural. Possible utopias transform into dystopias (Fattori, 2017), to colonize science fiction – born in the sign of progress – to contaminate it with the twentieth-century

<sup>1</sup> See: <https://insouder.org/milestones-music-history-21-prokop-divis-and-first-electronic-instrument> (08/29/2024).

<sup>2</sup> On the same topics see Benz, 2013; Vitiello, in Benz 2013; Fattori, 2013; Paura, 2018.

weird tale, to lead us to the contemporaneity of the new weird - that of Jeff VanderMeer, for example (2014, 2017) – to the primacy of code and digital.

To the “electric dreams” that nourished the first dedicated Festival, and which allow me further reflections.

The history of what we now call digital has proceeded since its beginning – which we trace in the history of eighteenth-century automatons and the first calculating machines – on two legs: the incorporeal, immaterial one of artificial brains, the concrete, material one of machines, which can or cannot have an anthropomorphic appearance (Fattori, Massimo, 2024).

The advancement of the processes that have affected the universe of media – and have exalted the logic of transmediality – has led us more and more towards a dimension of progressive immersion and fusion, even if only perceived, with the virtual sphere. This phenomenon has had a significant acceleration around the years of the COVID-19 lockdown, which pushed us to become increasingly familiar with digital, with “onlife life”, as Luciano Floridi (2014) defined it. But, in reality, I believe that the perspective we are moving towards is the one imagined by authors such as William Gibson in *Spoke City* (2007) or *The Peripheral* (2014), or Richard Morgan in the “Takeshi Kovacs saga” (2002, 2003, 2005).

In all these novels the dimension proposed is that of a world – a universe – dystopian, degraded, often ferocious, even if with various articulations and characteristics: post-apocalyptic, degraded, polluted environments, corrupt and barbaric societies, which are reflected in universes immersive virtual machines equally hierarchical and ferocious... A “fourth order of simulacra”, perhaps, which not even Jean Baudrillard was able to prefigure when he wrote about the symbolic exchange.

In fact, a circle is closed: the immaterial, disembodied dimension of the digital refers to the sacred, the invisible, the weird and the uncanny, in its creation of another environment, a multiverse that could be comparable to inconceivable, completely alien universes imagined by the “hypernaturalist” rationalism of Howard Phillips Lovecraft (Harman, 2012; Sederholm, Weinstock, 2016).

On the other hand, already at the beginning of the twentieth century Robert Musil realized the coexistence of science and magic in common feeling, writing:

If it is the fulfillment of man’s primordial dreams to be able [...] see the invisible and hear the distant speak, hear the voices of the dead, be miraculously cured while asleep, see with our own eyes how we will look twenty years after our death [...] if light, warmth, power, pleasure, comforts, are man’s primordial dreams, then present-day research is not only science but sorcery, spells woven from the highest powers of heart and brain, forcing God to open one fold after another of his cloak; a religion whose dogma is permeated and sustained by the hard, courageous, flexible, razor-cold, razor-keen logic of mathematics. (Musil 2017, p.54)

Here, I would say that here the short circuit occurs that gives full meaning to “Sognielettrici”: the mutual mirroring of the “real” world, the *natural* one, in the *virtual* one and vice versa.

A dialectic that perhaps has as a possible, necessary outcome the fusion between the two, through the most interactive and immersive medium currently available, the videogames in which the player is increasingly indistinguishable from his *avatar*, in a nightmare scenario.

*We are such stuff as nightmares are made on.*

## References

- Baudrillard J. (2016). *Symbolic Exchange and Death*. Sage Publications Ltd: New York.
- Benz E. (1989). *The Theology of Electricity: On the Encounter and Explanation of Theology and Science in the 17th and 18th Centuries*. Pickwick Publications: EDugene, Oregon.
- Benz E. (2013). *Teologia dell'elettricità*. Medusa: Milano.
- Davis E. (2015). *TechGnosis: Myth, Magic, and Mysticism in the Age of Information*. North Atlantic Books: Berkeley, California.
- Fattori A., Massimo P. (2014). Ø-K-A.I. (Zero Kelvin Artificial Intelligence: Storia laterale dell'I.A.). “RootsRoutes Research on Visual Culture”, n. 45, 5-8/2024.
- Fattori A. (2017). *Sono solo distopie*. *Futuri* n. 9.
- Fattori A. (2013). *I Trust the Life Electric*. “Quaderni d'Altri Tempi”, n. 47: [https://www.quadernaltritempi.eu/rivista/numero47/bussole/q47\\_b08.html](https://www.quadernaltritempi.eu/rivista/numero47/bussole/q47_b08.html)
- Floridi L. (2014). *The Fourth Revolution. How the Infosphere is Reshaping Human Reality*. Oxford University Press: Oxford.
- Gibson W. (2014). *The Peripheral*. G.P. Putnam's Sons: New York.
- Gibson W. (2007). *Spook Country*- G P. Putnam's Sons: New York.
- Harman G. (2012). *Weird Realism: Lovecraft and Philosophy*. Zwero Books: Airesford, U.K.
- Morgan R. (2002). *Altered Carbon (Bay City)*. Victor Gollancz: London.
- Morgan R. (2003). *Woken Furies*. Victor Gollancz: London.
- Morgan R. (2005). *Broken Angels*. Victor Gollancz: London.
- Musil R. (2017). *The Man Without Qualities*. Pan MacMillan: Basingstoke, U.K.
- Paura R. (2018). *E il sonno della ragione creò mostri superstar*. “Quaderni d'Altri Tempi”: <https://www.quadernaltritempi.eu/e-il-sonno-della-ragione-creo-mostri-superstar/>
- Sederholm G.H, Weinstock J.A. (2016). *The Age of Lovecraft*. University of Minnesota Press: Minneapolis.
- VanderMeer J. (2014). *Annihilation*. Farrar, Strauss & Giroux: New York.
- VanderMeer J. (2014). *Authority*. Farrar, Strauss & Giroux: New York.
- VanderMeer J. (2014). *Acceptance*. Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, New York.
- Vitiello G. (2013). *Prefazione*, in Benz E., cit.