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The return of the inaccessible as monster

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Excerpts from Unverfügbarkeit (Inaccessibility) (Salzburg: Residenz Verlag, 2018).

In many respects, the late modern lifeworld is becoming more and more inaccessible, inscrutable, and insecure. In effect, this means that inaccessibility, as concerns life practices, is returning—albeit in mutated and frightening form—like a self-created monster.

[...]

Yet, technical complexity is not the only thing that generates practical inaccessibility; the same is accomplished by the complexity and speed of social processes that produce inaccessibility, especially with regard to the shaping of the future.

[...]

Fear arises as a result because in spite of the unpredictability and uncontrollability of the circumstances, one is held responsible for the outcome, because one could have, or even should have, known it or seen it coming. Here principal accessibility transforms practical inaccessibility into a threatening “monster,” as monsters are threats that, though they lurk around every corner, we still cannot see and cannot make accessible.

Monsters as such arise anyplace where, in the wake of life’s “digitization,” more and more processes and relations are made parametically visible, that is, accessible in the first dimension: these processes make us aware of more and more bodily parameters (body mass index, blood pressure, pulse, blood sugar level, serotonin, melatonin, etc.), whose respective values we can also influence—without, how-ever, having them at our command. What’s more, we receive more and more “parameterized” information about the contents of a wide array of foodstuffs, as well as the reciprocal effects of these substances on our bodily parameters. This information, however, is highly contradictory and puzzling, which effectively means that many people are becoming more and more insecure with regard to the question of how and when they should or should not eat. Everyday practical activities like cooking and eating, and further, birthing and raising children, and even sleeping and walking, or heating and ventilating, or petting and loving—all of which we had safely at our command for centuries and which were a steady source of self-efficient relation to the world—have suddenly become occasions for experiencing great insecurity and powerlessness. Our own everyday lives are seemingly becoming practically inaccessible, and none of the experts who appear to be the very keepers of “principal” accessibility are in any position to give at least the impression of exercising dominance through computation. Even still, this does not mean that the enhancement of (technical) global reach enhances our self-efficiency; on the contrary, it undermines it. We experience ourselves as powerless or guilty in an irresponsive world. Information about our bodies no longer gives us attunement to our own bodies (for they are categorically inaccessible, even though they are highly responsive); rather, the parameters of medicine and technology confront us as external data, albeit data with which we have no “internal” sentient relation. Our own body becomes practically inaccessible to us.

[...]

Moreover, the impression of a world becoming politically more and more inaccessible is sharpened by the uncontrollable momentum of the media and social networks, which are, in a matter of seconds, capable of unleashing undreamt-of waves of outrage or enthusiasm with gargantuan consequences that are unforeseeable and uncontrollable with regard to their upswell and subsidence as well as their reciprocal effects.

[...]

If making the world accessible means making it calculable and controllable, then today's sociopolitical world is becoming more and more inaccessible at breath-taking speed. The program of making the world accessible threatens, in the end, to engender a radical inaccessibility which is categorically different and worse than the original inaccessibility, because we experience no self-efficiency in the face of it and are not able to enter into any relation of answerability, of adaptability, with it. Nothing is able to symbolize this paradoxical inversion more impressively than the project of nuclear power. With the development of the technical capability to split atomic nuclei and harness the energy set free by this process, modernity rose to a higher pinnacle of the making-accessible of matter; with radionuclide generation capability, modernity brought matter's internal principle of movement, its "core," within our reach and thereby attained a world-generating character. The utopian and optimistic expectations of the early atomic age speak for them-selves. As Susan Boos notes, reflecting on the words of Robert Oppenheimer: The scientists were [...] enlivened by the idea of locking horns with creation. "The interior of an exploding fission bomb is, so far as we know, a place without parallel elsewhere. It is hotter than the center of the sun; it is filled with matter that does not normally occur in nature [...]. In the crudest, simplest sense, it is quite true that in atomic weapons man has created novelty...."¹

Today, seven decades after Oppenheimer's euphoria, one need not mention that this "empowerment" of matter, this radicalization of making-accessible has spawned the most heinous and threatening monster ever known—the demon of nuclear radiation.² This monster is monstrous in several regards: first, because unleashed radioactivity, as in Chernobyl or Fukushima, cannot ultimately be contained or controlled—we can, at best, attempt to "bury" it and thereby stem the radioactive tide, a challenge which hardly has a chance at enduring the millennia required for its success. Radioactivity has proven to be the perhaps most inaccessible counterpart humankind has ever faced. Secondly, nuclear radiation undermines our self-efficiency more radically than every other known threat because it cannot simply be grasped by our senses: it is monstrous because it is inaudible, invisible, unsmellable, impalpable, which, as Martin Repohl shows, categorically alters our relation to the world even in situations where no radioactivity lurks, for we can no longer look at any slice of the world—a bit of landscape, a flower, or an apple—and see or observe whether it is toxic and deadly, or harmless and attractive. It is wholly impossible to enter into an adaptive relation of resonance with radioactivity, as adaptation here would be deadly, and self-efficiency impossible.

Therein, however, is concentrated our core insight, as if in a burning glass: inaccessibility that originates in processes of making-accessible engenders radical alienation. The modern program of

¹ Susan Boos, *Beherrschtes Entsetzen: Das Leben in der Ukraine zehn Jahre nach Tschernobyl* (Zurich: Rotpunktverlag, 1996), 108, quoting Robert Oppenheimer, "The New Weapon: The Turn of the Screw," in H. H. Arnold et al., *One World Or None: A Report to the Public on the Full Meaning of the Atomic Bomb* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1947), 62.

I owe this quotation to Martin Repohl, whose brilliant master's thesis, *Die Weltkatastrophe. Materielle Weltbeziehung und Weltverlust am Beispiel der Atomkatastrophe von Tschernobyl. Ein Beitrag zur materiellen Fundierung der Resonanztheorie* (University of Jena, 2018), gave me the idea to interpret nuclear power in this way. [See also Martin Repohl, *Tschernobyl als Weltkatastrophe: Weltbeziehung in einer kontaminierten Welt. Ein Beitrag zur materiellen Fundierung der Resonanztheorie* (Baden-Baden: Tectum, 2019).]

² For the idea of monsters born from the spirit of modernity, see also Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993).

enhancing global reach, which has transformed the world into a cluster of points of aggression, therefore generates the fear of both the hushing of the world and the loss of the world, two-fold: there, where “everything is accessible,” the world has nothing to say to us, and there, where it has become inaccessible to us in a new way, we can no longer hear it, because it is no longer reachable.