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Selves and Things

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Introduction

In her humourous and painfull descriptions of the lives of (former) Yugoslavians, Dubravna Ugresic keenly demonstrates the intimate connection between humans and things. Like Paul Auster in *The invention of solitude*, she traces the unexpected workings of our 'capricious' memory (MUS:77) and its attachment to things that take us back to other times or other places (watches, houses, photographs, bridges). Written from the perspective of an exile her *the Museum of Unconditional Surrender* exhibits the nomadic sense of belonging that is evoked by things that may seem trivial from an 'objective' perspective. The experience of the destruction of the most robust things that constitute the world, as described by Ugresic, adequately demonstrates how our sense of self emerges from our continuous interaction with the things that co-produce our world. And to what extent this sense of self is thus built on quicksands that are ready to take us in at any moment in time (war, earthquakes, tsunami's).

In this paper I will argue that Ugresic demonstrates that we are detectable in our dealings with the things that surround us, rather than in our deepest thoughts about ourselves, while at the same time the meaning of these things depends on our dealings with them. In the preface to *the Museum*

of Unconditional Surrender, after describing the unusual display of the contents of the stomach of Roland the walrus in the Berlin Zoo, she writes:

> 'The chapters and fragments which follow should be read in a similar way. If the reader feels that there are no meaningful or firm connections between them, let him be patient: the connections will establish themselves of their own accord. And one more thing: the question as to whether this novel is autobiographical might at some hypothetical moment be of concern to the police, but not to the reader'.

The fragmented narratives that follow her preface nourish the reader with an abundance of seemingly disconnected little stories that in fact often resist the basic requirements of a story (no beginning, no end, no plot, no significant action). But somehow the reader that stomachs all this, learns to trace the human imbroglio's that emerge from these strange collections of momentary dealings in a devastated world. The reader begins to profile the persons that emerge from the heap of disjointed memories that she is presented with. And it may be the case that from this heap of ruptured enaction a stronger image is concocted of the humans that people this book, than any type of deliberate reflection could have produced.

Behavioural biometric profiling technologies, which build on the correlations between a host of trivial interactions between people and things, may likewise produce a type of knowledge that is more precise, more fuzzy and more intimate than any compilation of sensitive personal data could be. These dynamic profiles, inferred from the interactions with our environments, will impact our sense of self. They will supply service

providers and government authorities with new insights into our anticipated behaviour and allow them to base their decisions on this anticipation. On the basis of this new type of knowledge they may either *deprive us of* or *provide us with* certain opportunities or risks. Perhaps art and literature can alert us to the way these technologies will create a new type of knowledge that may disturb the power balances between individual citizens and large organisations (whether private or public). We may need to rethink the principles that embody these checks and balances: such as privacy, fairness and due process.

The album and the battle of genre

A recurring 'theme' in *the Museum of Unconditional Surrender* concerns the workings of human memory, put to the test in a portrayal of the role played by photographs, attempts at systemisation (the prototypical album, organised chronologically or otherwise) and the inherent fragility of it all (photographs and albums ending up in Berlin's flea-markets; memories lost with the death of their 'owners', a photograph of unknown swimmers appropriated by the narrator of the novel).

Photographs present us with 'a technology of remembering' (MUS:31); 'a photograph is a reduction of the endless and unmanageable world to a little rectangle' (MUS:30). In terms of the philosophy of technology photography can be described as a combination of a reduction and an enhancement of our perception. Our original perception is reduced from three to two dimensions, from life-size to less than life-size, from a

dynamic experience to a static picture and from a full view to a framed slice; at the same time it is enhanced because it is brought from the past to the present, stored independently from our personal memories and taken from the perspective of whoever took the photograph, which may provide us with a new perspective, detached from our own (Ihde 2002). The capacity to store fragments of our past may interfere with our own memory: 'I wondered what I would have remembered and how much if I had not taken any pictures' (MUS:26). It could be that the mere ability to retrieve the past by means of photographs weakens our personal memory, because we trust the external archive we have constructed – an argument that echos Plato's objections to written language in the Phaedrus. In as far as this is the case, the loss of photographs may feel like an amputation, depriving us from the past that constitutes our identity. Ugresic tells the story of a general who was on the verge or destroying the house of an acquaintance. The general telephones his acquaintance to announce the attack and to allow him the time to take some of his photographs. She emphasises the crucial importance of such tokens of our pastness: 'That is why he 'generously' bestowed on his acquaintance life with the right to remembrance. Bare life and a few family photographs' (MUS:7).

However, photographs do not tell their own story, they need someone to connect the fragments into a narrative. Richard, an artist who collects debris from the streets of Berlin, articulates what happens if the slices of reality represented by different photographs are not brought to coherence: 'The world is confused and full of hazards. I only glimpse incidents in the world' (MUS:175). The narrator's mother expresses a similar sense of loss: 'In the end life is reduced to a heap of random, unconnected details.

It could have been like this or like that, it's absolutely immaterial. I wonder where is that point I can still take hold of before I slip into nothingness' (MUS:55). This is where the album comes in, which is the result of classification, order and active organisation. The mother, however, cannot come to terms with the demands of such classification. She devotes disproportional space to photographs of the weddings of people she hardly knew: 'The principles of a chronology of events and their significance in her life was destroyed, it seems, by her inner sense of things. (…) She must have liked wedding pictures' (MUS:19). Ugresic beautifully articulates the inimitable prioritising habits of her mother: 'Either there were too few albums, or there were too many pictures. She couldn't decide or didn't know how to organise them. She had given up the battle of genre at the outset' (MUS:18).

In literary theory, genre is a contested but pervasive concept, which allows a categorisation of texts according to the constraints that constitute a particular genre (Bakhtin 1993). The constraints of an essay differ from those of a novel, and – moving into subgenres – the constraints of investigative journalism differ from those of yellow journalism (if the last still counts as journalism). The decision to make a family album and the process of arranging its contents seem very apt in showing the connections between our sense of self, memory and its narrative structure (Ricoeur 1992). In giving up the battle of genre, the mother renounced a coherent categorisation of the photographs ending up with fragmented subcategories and a lot of loose ends. The pictures have become like brute facts, detached from their context, unrelated to the story of her life, which in fact she cannot reconstruct anymore. Her identity seems up for

grabs, because the progressive breakdown of the world she inhabits disables her capacity to impose order on the past. She is being lived by an environment of which she can longer make sense. Ugresic describes the impact of such circumstances on the identity of a young boy, whose parents, one being Croat and the other Serbian, are forced to live separately and face permanent threats and humiliation: 'At a time when the word 'identity' resounded everywhere like the holy word of God, and people were killing one another with divine ease in its name, the little boy steadfastly refused to learn the pronoun 'I'. He experienced himself – if that was what was going on – in the third person, pronouncing his name only when he wanted…' (MUS:224). If we presume, with Ricoeur, Plessner, G.H. Mead, Bahktin and many others, that our identity or sense of self is constituted in the interactions with others, in a process of continuous reconstitution, the boy's third person perspective exemplifies the moment when this process of reconstitution breaks down in the face of the overwhelming fragmentation of his life-world or Umwelt (Van Brakel, Husserl, Heidegger, Wittgenstein, Taylor). I would like to add that *things* or *nonhumans*, as Latour would say (buildings, shops, bridges, clothes, windows, food, mountains, rain, trains, cafes, to name just a few) form an integral part of this life-world or Umwelt, even if social and cultural theory tends to focus on the inter-subjective (Mitwelt). One of the attractions of reading Ugresic is the unsentimental and deeply moving way in which she draws our attention to the things that constitute both our world and – in many ways – our selves.

The Internet of Things: Ambient Intelligent Environments

This brings me to what has been called *The Internet of Things* (ITU 2005) and the vision of Ambient Intelligence (AmI, ISTAG 2001). To connect these technologies with *the Museum of Unconditional Surrender* and to explain the link, this section will provide a short description of autonomic profiling (Hildebrandt 2007), which is the enabling technology for *The Internet of Things* and AmI.

Profiling is based on data mining, which is understood as the process of knowledge discovery in data bases (KDD, Custers 2004). Autonomic profiling includes an automated machine-made decision (most probably involving machine-to-machine communication or M2M talk). KDD can be divided into three steps: first, data are collected, stored and aggregated in data bases; second, the data are mined for (linear or non-linear) correlations; third, the patterns that emerge are interpreted as relevant or irrelevant in relation to certain decisions. Evidently all three steps consist of many smaller steps and carry along a variety of implications that are often overlooked in a purely technological discourse. Lyotard remarked in 1984, that ‘Along with the hegemony of computers comes a certain logic, and therefore a certain set of prescriptions determining which statements are accepted as 'knowledge' statements' (quoted by Van Brakel 1999:3/15). Translated to the collection of data we should realise that a machine can only record and store transactions (buying a ticket), states (room temperature) or events (entering an office) after transforming them into a format that can be read and stored by machines. Like in the case of a photograph, the machine will take a slice out of reality (reducing it while enhancing it) in a way that allows

machine-readable storage. The core business of data mining is the discovery of correlations. In the case of bottom-up profiling these correlations are not the confirmation of a given hypothesis, but rather the discovery of an emerging hypothesis: the correlations seem to indicate a connection between two or more variables without as yet providing any information on causality or motivation. In fact, service providers that profile their potential customers are hardly interested in reasons or causes: if the correlation that is detected is significant it reveals interesting knowledge that can be used for decision-making irrespective of underlying causes or reasons. This is also the case in scientific research such as genetic profiling. Correlations between genotype and phenotype may predict the occurrence of a specific disease that may be cured or prevented, even if we do not yet know very much about the causal chain between the gene and the disease. Likewise, marketing managers will be very interested in our behavioural biometric profiles to detect how our habits correlate with consumer preferences, even if this does not provide any information on the why (in a causal or motivational sense). The correlations that emerge in the process of KDD are mostly probabilistic, excluding categorical statements. They allow generalisations of a non-universal kind (Schauer 2003). This also means that profiling enables adequate anticipation only to a certain extent: we may be profiled as members of the category of young urban spenders, but this does not mean that all the attributes of this group apply to all its members (non distributive profiles, Vedder 2000). This fact, even if rather obvious, does not withhold profilers (e.g. service providers in the broad sense, like insurance companies, security businesses, restaurants, shops) from

applying these profiles to individual customers, considered to fit a (non distributive) profile.

Now, image that our physical environment is tagged with wireless chips (RFID-tags) that can be read from a distance (RFID-reader), while at the same time sensor devices are employed that detect things like temperature, movement and location. Both technologies (RFID and sensor) are connected to online databases, which allow real time profiling of the incoming data in connection with other available data. This basically means that the environment is animated: all things are connected and aware of your (inter)actions and whereabouts. On the basis of their connectivity these things begin to know you. This brings us to a world in which the material environment itself becomes the human-machine interface that allows real time adaptation of the environment to your inferred preferences. Both the construction of profiles and the adaptation of the environment (lights put on, doors opening, coffee being prepared, news-broadcasts being turned on) are performed via M2M talk and autonomic computing: human intervention regards the design and maintenance of the relevant software, NOT the interpretation and implementation of profiles during the process of adaptation. Even more interestingly, these machines will not disturb us with their invisible communications. *Autonomic computing*, a term coined by Paul Horn, IBM's senior vice president, actually refers to the autonomic nervous system, which 'governs our heart rate and body temperature, thus freeing our conscious brain from the burden of dealing with these and many other low-level, yet vital, functions'. In the same way, AmI should create a technological

infrastructure that regulates our environment without bothering us with requests for conscious reflection.

Art: Mastering gravity without flying

Back to Ugresic. 'The truth', she writes, 'at least as far as our lives are concerned, is evidently not contained in the facts but in the image we have of ourselves, in the power of our conviction' (MUS:216). One way of looking at the family album is to say that if we loose the battle with genre, we loose our identity, we become brittle, disoriented, multiple in a very uncomfortable way. Another way of looking at the family album is to say that if others determine the way we organise our autobiography, we may end up with an identity that is fabricated by others, to their own advantage. So we need, on the one hand, an environment that provides the space to create some coherence, which means that the environment must have some stability, some gravity that allows us to anticipate what is going on. We don't want to loose ground altogether. On the other hand, we need an environment that does not create this coherence for us but rather empowers us to construct and reconstruct our own narrative. If our physical and social Umwelt begin to exercise a type of social control that puts us down, limiting the scope within which we can reinvent our own identity, we may find ourselves in a cage (whether golden or cast iron).

"What is art, Richard?'
'I don't know. An act which is certainly connected with mastering gravity, but which is not flying', says Richard' (MUS:177). Gravity must not be

conquered but mastered. 'And while the majority endeavoured to keep their feet firmly on the ground we defended our right to those ….ten centimetres [elevation, mh]. Being involved with literature helped us for years to maintain a light step' (MUS:186). Art, or literature provide us with a light step, with just enough free space to master gravity: '(..) just as I recall something that never happened in order to remember what did happen' (MUS:233). Or, about a colleague teaching literature at Zagreb university: 'She made up for a lack of wide reading through her capacity to speculate' (MUS:218).

Photographs are slices of preserved reality, part of our external memory, but out of context they remain like brute facts. Albums store these sliced fragments in order to make sense of our pastness, often even to celebrate our identity as a certain kind of person. Digitalisation provides new tools to manipulate our photographs, creating new possibilities to reproduce 'something that never happened in order to remember what did happen'. Even without manipulation of the picture itself, digitalisation creates new possibilities to order (to albumnise) our memory: we can easily and endlessly reorganise our digital albums, fitting the same picture in different maps. The gravity inherent in a well-ordered hard-copy album can be mastered in the digital album and translated into a renewed light step; photographs and albums can be shared and rearranged between distant friends or even between complete strangers. Again, we don't want to loose ground altogether, we don't want to fly, as Richard says. Manipulation of photographs and sharing one's picture with indifferent strangers may at some point destroy one's sense of self.

The reader and the police

In the beginning of her book and my paper we read the following passage:

> 'If the reader feels that there are no meaningful or firm connections between them [the chapters and fragments which follow, mh], let him be patient: the connections will establish themselves of their own accord. And one more thing: the question as to whether this novel is autobiographical might at some hypothetical moment be of concern to the police, but not to the reader' (MUS:preface).

Profiling technologies allow connections between a variety of trivial and non-trivial data to establish themselves of their own accord. Connections that are at first nothing but statistical correlations, which do not reveal causes or reasons, just covariance. Once a degree of covariance in the past is taken as a sign of probable covariance in the future, and used to anticipate human behaviour, the correlation acquires meaning – in the pragmatic sense of that word. If things come alive within the *Internet of Things*, they will – on the basis of these emergent correlations – begin to attribute meaning to your behaviour. And just like the reader of *the Museum of Unconditional Surrender* who – in the course of reading the book – begins to entangle the different fragments, to tacitly categorise them in various fuzzy ways, and – in the end – may begin to identify some of the persons, themes and issues in the book, these things will read you in one way or another and begin to identify you as a certain type of person.

This is interesting, if anything. But not in a vague or general way. It is interesting because it will make each and every one of us detectable as a certain type of person, within a specific context, at a specific point in time. It is interesting because it will produce an unending flow of correlated humans: profiles that identify and represent a human as a certain type of person in a specific context at a specific point in time. Real time – dynamic – profiling means that this process of identification and representation reiterates continuously. As humans, for that reason, we are first of all correlatable – in numerous or rather innumerable ways. The profiles that are constructed on the basis of emergent correlations produce correlated humans, identified as such, accountable as such, solidified as such. Brought within the control of gravity. This, as Ugresic says, is interesting for the police.

On the one hand, Ugresic claims that the question whether her novel is autobiographical is of no concern to the reader. On the other hand, she suggests that it may, at some hypothetical moment, be of concern to the police. To understand why this question is of no interest for the reader we can follow the narrator: 'Oblivion from which one day – stretching up on tiptoe to recall – I would be able to begin to invent reality. Because the invention of reality is the job of real literature' (MUS:225). Paradoxically one could rephrase this as the claim that to write a good autobiography one would need a measure of oblivion, to resist the forces of gravity. To invent one's own reality, one may have to stretch up on tiptoe (not fly yet), to recall things 'that never happened to remember what did happen'. One may have to discard the correlated humans (the character Ricoeur would say) to retrieve the correlatable human that produced them. And

this correlatable human then remains virtual, underdetermined – in the sense of Deleuze (Lévy). However, the police may have something else in mind: the police wants to detect whoever is in breach of the law, violates the public order, illegally transgresses national borders, or – the worse crime of all – lie about one's identity (destroying the preconditions for detection). The police wants to identify and bring to court those that should be held accountable, especially in the case of a criminal offence. The police wants correlated humans, grounded by the forces of gravity, detectable as suspects or witnesses if anything. This makes good sense. If we all go flying, we will all be unaccountable and this will get us nowhere.

However, this is where the law comes in. If the police is after correlated humans, the task of the judge is to check on the reliability of the evidence that indeed this one person has committed the offence he is charged with. Criminal profiling and actuarial justice do suggest some dark scenario's here. Non-universal generalisations may – in some cases - be good for creating a legitimate suspicion, but are not enough for a conviction. On top of that, after the establishment of guilt, a sentence should – in principle – not violate the measure of proportional punishment on the basis of non-universal generalisations. Hare's checklist for psychopaths may provide us with interesting probabilities that we should take serious, but it cannot automatically legitimise invasive sentences that exceed proportional punishment.

On top of all this, the defendant is a subject of law, a legal person who can claim to be more than the sum total of the brute facts of her life. In

this paper I have argued that we are detectable in our dealings with the things that surround us, rather than in our deepest thoughts about ourselves. This, I claim, is what Ugresic saliently describes and this, I claim, is what an *Internet of Things* will confirm in new ways. The problem is that our dealings with the things that surround us are not unambiguous, and as brute facts of life they can be correlated in numerous (Custers 2004) ways that violate our own sense of self. So, even if the police rightly seeks such correlations to anticipate criminal offence the law should provide the subject of law with the legal tools to ward off detection on the basis of incorrect or unjustified inferences and – equally important – provide us with the legal tools to contest the narrative that grounds us as murderer, illegal immigrant or fraud.

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