Life of Im/mobility

Yi Xin Tong

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Instructor: Dr. Laura U. Marks
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Like eddies of dust raised by the wind as it passes, the living turn upon themselves, borne up by the great blast of life.¹

– Henri Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, 1907

**Introduction**

When the first human beings Adam and Eve encountered with the tree of the knowledge of good and evil in the Garden of Eden, an indissoluble relationship of metaphysics between human and tree was formed. The tree of knowledge in the biblical story indicates a human assignation of trees as a symbol of superhuman capacity. Trees are godlike. If collectively considered as a Leibnizian monad, they represent God or the infinite through their body and unique point of view.² However, this could certainly also apply to the humankind as another type of monad. What are the differences of the tree monad and the human monad in expressing a common universe? What points of interest that are generative of signification can be discovered through this comparison? In light of primarily Leibniz’s idea of the monad, Deleuze’s concept of virtuality, and Bergson’s theory of evolution, I will approach these questions through the analysis of Christoph Runné’s film installation *Baum* to explore new understandings of the work and beyond.

**Baum**

Comprised of three film projectors and three hanging screens, the film installation fills the space with *moving* images. One projection of an enormous lush tree points toward the central screen that has glass surfaces on both sides and rotates at a moderate speed.

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speed, so it displays the projected image and also reflects it to the surrounding environment. The image reflected onto the walls swiftly moves and changes, depending on how the rotating screen is distorting and reflecting it and how far the distances are to the projected surfaces. On the other two projectors, Runné adds pieces of glass to the lenses to reflect and refract single projections into two – one is the mirroring images of a tree split onto the two static screens on the front, and the other is a human figure bifurcated at an angle from the back with one projected onto the floor and the other towards the rotating screen (see Figure 1). When the projection of the figure hits the rotating screen, it gets further reflected onto the surroundings, and for the rest of the time, it reaches a farther wall, forming a larger image (see Figure 2).

Figure 1. Christoph Runné, Baum, 2008. The Symbolic Meaning of Tree, Grunt Gallery. Photo with permission: Yi Xin Tong.
Through reflection, mirroring, and division, the images of the tree and the figure are multiplied, similar to the way geometric forms “unfold from a central form,” which is reminiscent of emanationist’s thought of “the universe unfolds from God.”3 Here, what is multiplied are an asymmetrical tree of great posture (even anthropomorphic) and a solidary human figure, but the central form is not these images, but what generates them – the universe. The multiplied tree contributing to the “virtual forest”4 that stands collectively as a monad is analogous to the human figure standing for the mankind, in

3. Laura Marks, _Enfoldment and Infinity: An Islamic Genealogy of New Media Art_ (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2010), 163.

4. Christoph Runné, exhibition interview, _The Symbolic Meaning of Tree_, Grunt Gallery. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l7dl3rA1sN0. According to the artist’s own statement, he wants to create a “virtual forest” with the multiplied and reflected projections of trees.
regard to their relationship to the same universe: they individually manifest it through their distinctive bodies. Runné uses the method of multiplication to generalize these two trees into Trees, but how does he also generalize the single human figure into Human, to be able to compare their symbolic meanings?

**The particular and general figure**

Looking at the figure in detail, it is a middle-aged – senior male in casual clothing. Immersed in a blue tone, this partially bald person standing still has a ghostly presence. In a short interview accompanying the exhibition, Runné says the person is someone he knows from the Downtown Eastside, homeless once but not anymore, and that is all he wants to say about him.\(^5\) This remark makes the image of the person particular and general at the same time. A homeless person from the DTES is a strong signifier for subjects such as drifting, survival, identity, and belonging. However, Runné’s reluctance in providing more information on this person as well shows an intent of generalizing this figure into a more ordinary and folded human being. This generalization is a “differential relation,”\(^6\) which does not filter the potentialities as it normally does, but makes the potentialities more notable. The figure is deliberately kept from full unfoldment, and thus certain virtualities of it are protected.\(^7\)

Another consequence of this generalization is the figure becomes more relatable or identifiable for the viewers. For a work with a strong reflexive nature like *Baum*, the ability of spreading the self-reflexivity to the viewers is important. Furthermore, since

\(^5\) Ibid.


\(^7\) Marks, 15.
“other bodies and body-like things make us aware of our own being,” what contributes to this evocation is not only the body of the figure, but also the body of the trees, which has a formal resemblance to human’s. According to Marks’s understanding of Deleuze and Lyotard, the figural possesses a characteristic of subversion and refusal to the discursive and the clichéd, which include the “figurative” and the “textual.” An immediacy and power of penetration exist in the figural: the figural of the person and the figural of the trees talk directly to the body of the viewers through sensation.

**Information, glitch, and the possible worlds**

Although we would regard these figural images as immediate and affective, they are mediated by information. When the trees we see are the images of trees, and the person we see is the image of the person, what role does information as in between the infinite and the images play in this piece? Instead of a smooth recording, Runné uses a technique he calls “single-frame film,” which means it was recorded discontinuously frame-by-frame and later combined together similarly to a stop-motion. This leads to a flickering effect due to the minute differences between the frames. Motionless the trees and the human are in the film, yet the flickering effect gives an unnatural sense of discontinuity and motion to them. This reduces the illusionistic quality of the film for the viewers while reinforces their awareness of the intervention of information.

While digital media do not normally draw attention to the codes that produce them,
they appear only when there are glitches in the algorithmic layer (intentionally or not). Although different from the digital coding as in video, film is also quantified into frames, single discontinuous frames in this case especially, and the flickering draws attention to the code that produces it. Moreover, at certain instances, the rotating screen shines the light beam from the projector straightly into the eyes of the viewers so that they perceive a glare, which entirely breaks the illusive imagery constructed by the work (see Figure 3). These are all *glitches* in the work, which disrupts the immersiveness of the film and evokes the viewers of its making. What is seen is the reintegrated individual frames/images that come from different temporalities and thus a reconstructed reality, rather than a real-time documentation of reality.


11. Ibid., 246.
A step further, what is seen is essentially light organized by the medium of film to resemble certain aspects of reality. With the film images being close to still images, Deleuze’s cinema as movement-image does not apply in a normal way, but when extending the idea of cinema to the whole installation that has various internal movements of rotation and reflection that cause the moving and distortion of images, the images are moving, and the movement-image is matter. Subsequently, to think of the installation as a whole, all the images perceived in the room are monads of light dominated and arranged to look like fragments of external realities, and the arrangement of the external realities is another reality composed with the set of images chosen by the artist. With Henri Bergson’s theory of the world being made of images, the images constituting the work represent a limited number of elements of the world. The work shows part of the reality, and it also stands as a reality itself, as an “expression of possible worlds.” This is how the entire artwork as a monad unfolds the universe. We normally say there is no single truth, and we might also be able to say there is no single reality. What is seen as reality is the images selected and perceived from the virtual, where all possible worlds are contained in an uncertain state. Baum arouses contemplation of the possible worlds it suggests or even the uncertain state itself.


Tree monad and human monad, their similarities and distinctions

With the layer of information stripped off, we will now look at trees and human beings naked as themselves. A tree is a monad, and a human is a monad. They both can perceive and express the infinite. They are small folds of a single universe that are non-discrete. A tree monad is connected to other tree monads; similarly, a human monad is connected to other human monads. The bond or network existing among these monads increases each individual’s “zone of clear expression” \(^\text{15}\) by expansive activities such as bodily extension, information exchange, and knowledge sharing. Thus it is reasonable to consider trees collectively as a type of monad and the humankind as another one. Trees depend on each other for land occupation and transformation and also their ancestors for inherited information in regard to their survival and adaptation. Analogously, human are social animals – communication between the living individuals and as well with the dead for knowledge and experience improves the capacity of each individual. On a micro level, each tree or human monad bears the entire collective of trees or human, including the past and the present (and even the future?); on a macro level, the tree or human monad as a collective respectively bears the virtuality of the entire universe, through the past and the present (and even the future?). When individual trees or human are generalized into group monads, they lose their own singularities and become merely particular in sacrificing for the singularities of the groups.

Then what are the similarities and distinctions between trees and human beings? Carole M. Cusack claims that in Indo-European cultures the tree as “imago mundi, the

\(^{15}\) Deleuze, *Fold*, 85.
representation of the embodiment of the cosmos” is homologous with human beings.\textsuperscript{16} Even the physical forms of trees and of human call for comparison, “the sap analogous to blood, the trunk to the core body, the roots to feet, and the branches to limbs.”\textsuperscript{17} Human has ascribed many symbolic meanings to trees, even to a degree of worship. The spiritual view towards trees, as a representative of Nature, is a form of Pantheism. To interpret trees and human through Deleuze’s reinterpretation of Leibniz’s notion of the monad, they are two collective unites that are composable and exist on one curve. In spite of all the differences in their bodies and souls, their being homologous determines their immanent connection and similarity. At the same time, they are unique for their singularities and point of view in understanding the universe. They relate to it in different manners. Trees firmly connect to and comprehend the universe through their bodies, and in comparison human have a greater mobility and capability of enlarging their zone of perception, which seen from another perspective could also mean a lack of stability and rootedness. While human live wandering lives in uncertain conditions, trees are firmly rooted – poised, not adrift, and implying a more timeless cycle of life. This line of thought reduces the core of the comparison to a single issue of mobility.

\textbf{Trees cannot move, but human can be still}

“Baum” is a German surname meaning “tree.” The use of it as the title links the human figure to the tree subtly through this linguistic tie. The projection of the human figure hopping among the trees as an event, similar to a Situationist dérive, is effective in provoking the viewers’ thought on the comparison between trees and human. This

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{16} Carole M. Cusack, \textit{The Sacred Tree: Ancient and Medieval Manifestations} (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars, 2011), 11-12.
\item \textsuperscript{17} Ibid., 172.
\end{itemize}
isolated monad becomes a nomad wandering in the other world constructed by the artwork. Although generalized, the human figure is always carrying a sense of instability and drifting against the background of trees’ stillness – this is simply because it moves, and it moves involuntarily according to the mechanical rotation and reflection. In this respect, whether a particular or general figure, it’s merely being a mobile human will suffice for its contrast with trees.

Here arises an interesting point – will. Trees cannot move even if they wished to; however, we should not consider this a lack of free will, since trees might not even want to move, and moving for trees is impossible and thus not an option. But for human, they can instead achieve a certain stillness if wished to, which could range from Buddhist years-long meditation, to living in geographically confined environments with intent (for instance a hermit) or being forced (for instance a prisoner), and to an ordinary material life but with a motionless and serene soul. Degrees of restriction in terms of physical freedom vary. Taking the meditators as an example, they merely occupy a few inches of land, becoming still like a tree – they reduce their bodily area of perception, but increase the freedom and the zone of clear expression of their souls. The correlation or the appurtenance in Deleuze’s word between the body and the soul seems to be disconnected in this situation. Yet, this is non-dualist: the existence of the soul still requires the existence of the body; however, the upper floor of the soul is no longer closed, but with “windows”\textsuperscript{18} – it can now communicate with the infinite directly without the channeling of the body. Therefore, it is not always necessary to expand the region of perception of

\textsuperscript{18} Deleuze, \textit{The Fold}, 4.
the body in order to increase the amplitude of the monad’s soul in telling a story of the universe.

The tendency for human to be motionless is not unnatural, but an expression of a latent desire. According to Bergson’s *Creative Evolution*, movement and consciousness are not nonexistent but asleep in plants; correspondingly, in animal’s bodies, there has always been a propensity in becoming vegetative lives.\(^{19}\) Bergson considers this dangerous and degenerative for evolution, but it can also be advantageous viewing from another angle. Similar to Gilbert Simondon’s notion of the “pre-individual state”\(^{20}\) and Deleuze’s concept of virtuality or immanence, Bergson believes at the root of the evolution of life is the “largest possible amount of indetermination,” which is a powerful “explosive” energy pre-existing of all the differentiation/individuation in the course of evolution.\(^{21}\) So before or at the point of the divergent development of the plant and the animal kingdoms, there were bigger amount of indetermination or virtuality. And specifically for plants, because there has been less specialization in the process of evolution, they have more “freedom of action” in dealing with “future determination.”\(^{22}\) Hence, endeavors of returning/assimilating to the past, when animals shared many features with plants (an important one is immobility), are indeed attempts in reaching closer to a lager pool of indetermination or virtuality. See Figure 4. for a simplified

\[^{19}\text{Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, 88.}\]


\[^{21}\text{Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, 75.}\]

\[^{22}\text{Ibid., 84.}\]
evolution diagram of trees and human concerning this gesture of stretching back, which is also extending or unfolding, towards the root for potentiality.

Figure 4. Evolution diagram for the gesture of stretching back towards the root for potentiality.

**Conclusion: life as an event, and the meaning of life**

With the unidirectionality of evolution and time, the purpose of this gesture is neither to mystify or spiritualize the immanence nor the gesture itself, but to augment the amplitude of the soul, in better perceiving and expressing the universe. But one fundamental question for both the tree and the human monads that seems to be taken for granted in this essay till now is why striving to survive and what is the significance of existence (including perceiving and expressing)? Individual monads appear and disappear in transience, but collectively their existence continues on a much larger scale. However,
we should also not eliminate the significance of the individual, who dies. Each individual is still singular because each individual’s life is singular – “each of us possessed of a peculiar ‘complex’ unfolding through the time of our lives.”

In *Baum*, the figure, no matter particular or general, lives/lived a life. The present or past tense is melancholic. We normally regard a life as something actualized or to be actualized, but according to Deleuze, a life is pure immanence, while being or existence is not necessary. Nevertheless, when the virtual does actualize, the resulting life is singular, and it begins to carry a different value. Life starts and vanishes in time. It is beautiful to consider life as an event, with Deleuze’s predicate as a verb, an event and Whitehead’s event as an extension that unfolds connections between the monad and the universe. Living a life is a process of unfolding and expressing the infinite, naturally like a flower blooming. Maybe the *spontaneity* (of life and of time that are both non-stop) in the event of life is an answer to the probing for the meaning of it. Even to the individual level, no matter painful or happy, it might just be a difference in the colour of the petals.

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