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THE TYRANNY OF TRANSPARENCY: AUTO-IMMUNITY IN THE TEACHING MACHINE

Abstract: *This article proposes that the prime ideals of the university – those of truth, knowledge, justice, and emancipation – are also those that currently produce unjust practices “outside” (through aiding social stratification) and “within” (through internal hierarchies and exclusions). Using the work of Jacques Derrida and Paul Virilio, the article argues that the central problem of the university today consists not so much of a neo-liberalisation, but of the speeding-up of these ideals through their enmeshment with techniques of calculation, vision, and prediction. The current university therefore suffers from what Derrida identifies as an “auto-immune disease,” in which the acceleration of its foundational aspirations have led to a near-total subjugation of all and everything to an oppressive quest for transparency. However, the article proposes via Virilio that this totalising transparency paradoxically also produces more blindness, accidents, and unknowability. It hopes to illustrate this with some examples in the teaching scene as well by working through some of its own conceptual tensions. The other logic of the university today, the article finally proposes, consists of a “dark” or stealth functionality, opening up the promise of a radically different future and unanticipated resistance despite itself.*

Keywords: *transparency; acceleration; neoliberalism; humanism; auto-immunity; teaching; university; vision*

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Tyranie transparentnosti: auto-imunita ve výukovém stroji

Abstrakt: *Tato studie tvrdí, že hlavní ideály univerzity – pravda, poznání, spravedlnost a emancipace – zároveň produkují nespravedlivé praktiky „vně“ (skrze prohlubování sociální stratifikace) a „uvnitř“ (skrze interní hierarchie a exkluzi) univerzity. S využitím poznatků Jacquesa Derridy a Paula Virilia se článek zabývá důvody, proč klíčovým problémem současné univerzity není až tak neoliberalizace jako spíše zrychlování těchto ideálů skrze jejich popletenost s technikami kalkulace, vize a predikce. Současná univerzita tak trpí tím, co Derrida identifikuje jako „auto-imunitní nemoc“, kdy zrychlování základních aspirací univerzity vede k jejímu téměř totálnímu podrobení všech a všeho represivní snaze o transparentnost. Na pozadí práce Virilia však studie tvrdí, že tato totalizující transparentnost paradoxně produkuje více slepoty, nehod a nepoznatelnosti. Toto tvrzení se argumentace pokouší doložit jak na příkladech z pedagogického prostředí, ale i tak, že rozpracovává některé své vlastní koncepční tenze. Závěrem článek tvrdí, že „temno“ nebo též tajná funkčnost přestavuje druhou logiku dnešní univerzity, která navzdory sebe sama, otevírá příslib radikálně jiné budoucnosti a nepředvídatelného odporu.*

Klíčová slova: *transparentnost; zrychlení; neoliberalisms; humanismus; auto-imunita; výuka; univerzita; vize*

Whither the university?

From its first words on, metaphysics associates sight with knowledge, and knowledge with knowing how to learn and knowing how to teach.¹

But perhaps we need some perspective, some perspective on perspective.²

The contemporary university in Europe finds itself, according to many critical commentators, the target of a widespread neo-liberalisation. This neo-liberalisation, as part of a homogenisation of higher education in Europe, is implemented by member states by way of various mandates of the European Union, for instance the much-debated Bologna Process. These mandates range from enabling student mobility within the Union to generating the opportunity for such a student body to make an informed choice as to their potential programme and country of study. Such a neo-liberalisation therefore arguably not only seeks to render universities more productive in terms of research output and the formation of graduates capable of working in the current economic environment, but also seeks to hold them accountable via goals and outcome-oriented practices just like it would profit-oriented business. In other words, it seeks to render the European university more *transparent*. This new form of accountability, which gets vilified by many of its opponents for many good reasons, can be especially noted in the various forms of calculation, quantification, and metrification around its internal practices, which claim to improve or pay more attention to the quality and efficacy of research and teaching. In the Dutch context for instance, teaching evaluations are exceedingly done via online forms that gather qualitative and statistical data about student satisfaction. This data in turn generates a score on a scale from one to five on various pedagogical and organisational elements of the course, its location, and its lecturer. On the national scale, Dutch undergraduate and post-graduate programmes get a numerical grade via the so-called National Student Evaluation (“Nationale Studenten Enquête” or NSE), in which students fill out an online list of evaluative queries in relation to the programme they attend or have attended. The NSE outcomes are presented in grade-like scores that curiously emulate the

Some parts of this article are also forthcoming in my book *Higher Education and Technological Acceleration*. New York: Palgrave 2016.

¹ Jacques DERRIDA, “The Principle of Reason: the University in the Eyes of Its Pupils.” In: *Eyes of the University: Right to Philosophy 2*. Stanford: Stanford University Press 2004, p. 130.

² Ryan BISHOP, *Phantom Limbs of the Body Politic: Prosthesis, the University and the State* [online]. 2004. Available at: <<http://www.lemmata.com>> [cit. 10. 7. 2015], p. 14.

test-scores that students typically receive at Dutch universities, with grades ranging from 1 (abysmal) to 10 (perfect). This score in turn gets posted on the website of the department that offers that programme in order to ensure optimal comparability, regardless of the wishes of that department.

Besides aiming to facilitate the choice of study and city for prospective students so that, as Graham Allen notes, the student is treated “as a client requiring a transparent and quality product,” the justification of this Evaluation is also to aid the qualitative perfection of these programmes.³ The NSE website for instance also claims that “objective information about universities, schools and their course programmes can be used to improve the quality of Dutch higher education.” “Student ratings,” the website continues, “give unique insights into students’ satisfaction with their higher education programmes. [...] Who better to rate a programme than the students who are already enrolled?”⁴ In other words, the number that the NSE generates for each department is assumed to be a more “objective” and democratically gathered score ‘directly’ coming from actual students, because the “noise” of all kinds of “excuses” by a programme and its staff have been eradicated. Of course, and as many critics have pointed out, these types of evaluative practices are an outflow of the starkly consumer-oriented ideology that pervades the neoliberal economy as such, in which universities need to pay heed to what their present and future clientele needs or wants. Higher education hence seems to have been “downgraded” to a mere business among many businesses that casts its students as mere consumers of knowledge and skills. The result of this is that university staff also find themselves increasingly exposed to economic pressures and rationales.

Those who decry these neoliberal transformations therefore suggest that the superior goals of the traditional university (beyond the merely economic and practical ones) have been squandered under this new regime of neoliberal consumer and product-oriented managerialism. Moreover, they argue that this has a detrimental effect on the quality, if not necessarily quantity, of research output and sound pedagogy. These critical commentators – and I would like to state my sympathy, yet as will become clear later, not complete agreement with this group – lament the neoliberal university as one where the oppression of numbers trumps the necessarily unmesura-

³ Graham ALLEN, “Transparency and Teaching.” *Theory, Culture and Society, Problematizing Global Knowledge special issue*, vol. 23, 2006, no. 2–3, p. 569 (568–570).

⁴ Studiekeuze123. “About the NSE,” [online]. 2016. Available at: <<http://www.studiekeuze123.nl/about-the-nse>> [cit. 6-4-2016].

ble quality of fundamental science and philosophy. They conclude that the neoliberal university has become a place where professors and students are exploited by a management that is largely clueless about and even maliciously resistant to what is perceived as the “true” and more profound purpose of the university – that of independently pursuing justice, knowledge, truth, and emancipation. In “The Corporate University and the Politics of Education” for instance, Stanley Aronowitz and Henry Giroux lament the fact that higher education and business imperatives have become too intertwined, and insist that the university should remain an “autonomous sphere” by upholding the democratic values of “justice, freedom, and equality.”⁵

Understandably therefore, many who decry the university’s entry into the global market press for a return to the “old” independent university in order to counter its neo-liberalisation. In an interview by David Senior, media philosopher Siegfried Zielinski for instance “vehemently” pleads “that they [again] be able to proliferate as gleaming ivory towers. Study at the academy should be more than ever the offer of a protected time and space where original thoughts and ideas can be developed and tried out.”⁶ Likewise, in his short indictment “From Ivory Tower to Glass House,” former chairman of the Dutch Association of Universities Karl Ditttrich chides the contemporary university for having lost its original independence, even if he considers the fact that universities are forced to be accountable to the public a positive development.⁷ Such nostalgic notions of the “old” independent university are however, I would argue, extremely problematic. This is especially because the university was never truly independent at all, whether in terms of its organisation, administration, or intellectual “content.” In fact, many of the original theories, ideas, and regulations of the neoliberal market economy were first and foremost developed by economists and philosophers with either an academic position or at least with a solid academic pedigree. One may think here for instance of Walter Eucken from the Freiburg School and Milton Friedman from the Chicago School, both of whom have developed the cornerstones of the neoliberal economy from within prominent universities. Likewise, as Ryan Bishop points out in “Phantom Limbs of the

⁵ Stanley ARONOWITZ – Henry GIROUX, “The Corporate University and the Politics of Education.” *Educational Forum*, vol. 64, 2000, no. 4, p. 85.

⁶ Siegfried ZIELINSKI – David SENIOR, “Interview with Siegfried Zielinski,” [online]. 2006. *Rhizome*, Friday April 7. Available at: <<http://rhizome.org/discuss/view/20967/>> [cit. 30-8-2015].

⁷ Karl DITTRICH, “Van Ivoren Toren naar Glazen Huis.” In: VERBRUGGE, A. – van BAARDEWIJK, J. (eds.), *Waar toe Is de Universiteit op Aarde?* Amsterdam: Boom 2014, p. 161.

Body Politic,” the university has played “an integral, if almost silent role” in the development of all kinds of information-gathering technologies and engineering-oriented models of “noise cancellation” that typically came out of collaboration with military endeavours, and that have “pried open” the university in order to render it increasingly integrated in the global economy.⁸ The forerunner of the Internet (the ArpaNet) as well as the computational systems and ideologies of “objectivity” and transparency that at base make possible something like the Dutch NSE, were thus developed by a handful Western universities. Not unimportantly, they did this with the help of military monies whose interests were firmly tied up in global imperialism.

What is more (and lest we forget), the university has already since its “rebirth” in the European Renaissance period been entangled with a thoroughly classed, gendered, and imperialist ideology and functionality. Its teaching and research practices have over the last centuries primarily functioned for the reproduction of local and global elites – a fact which can still be gathered from the general Euro- and American-centrism of the curricula of nearly all “reputable” or highly-ranked universities worldwide. In short, the borders between the State, the national and supra-national economy or industry, and the university, were also in the past much more permeable than the problematic notions of “ivory towers”, academic independence, or scientific objectivity suggest. Indeed then, the very argument for objectivity or independence, as I will demonstrate later, may very well reproduce masculinist and Eurocentric ideology.

Either way, the peculiar case is that the university appears to “succumb” to those neoliberal theories and technologies of social selection and quantification that it at least in large part itself has brought forth. This means that it would be a mistake to understand a phenomenon like the new evaluative practices as signifying a mere “onslaught” by the neoliberal economy and the European Union from “outside” of the university walls. The analyses that partly mistake the problem of contemporary metrification and accountability as stemming from a neo-liberalisation, I argue, then do not go deep enough into these complexities. This is firstly because they stop short of thinking through, as I will elaborate shortly, how the classical assumption of “knowledge production, consumption, and communication” has emerged from a dominant understanding of communication and vision in university teaching and research that has its roots in Western metaphysical concepts.

⁸ BISHOP, *Phantom Limbs*, p. 13.

Moreover, they turn a blind eye to how the finally unfinishable (from Derrida's usage of the French "*inachevable*") humanist and Enlightenment ideals of the university get ever more quickly re-performed via ever-more sophisticated communication tools.⁹ This accelerated performance eventually also renders obvious the non-neutrality and violent outflows of those tools and of the university itself as a result of their fundamental entanglement with Western humanistic and metaphysical ideals. Allow me to explain this in the next section by way of Jacques Derrida's "The Principle of Reason: The University in the Eyes of Its Pupils."

The "blind spot" of reason

Although the university has of course by no means been a static entity since its nascence in the European Medieval period, I propose that it is possible to trace back the contemporary obsession with transparency to certain dominant notions that have always surrounded its concomitant founding and re-founding. In other words, the turns in the development of the university certainly concern a number of breaks and changes, but also contain some continuities. These continuities, as will become clearer in the course of this article, circulate around ideals of vision, communication, and community within the European context. While I unfortunately have no space to go into detail for what this implies for each era of university change, these ideals for instance emerge in the Medieval university as the idea of God as the "all-seeing light" around which all persons are in their communal pursuits bound into one entity. The Renaissance university with its Enlightenment and humanist predispositions in turn constitutes not merely a throwback to early Greek models and practices around citizenship, but also to the Christian idea around light and moral uprightness. The Humboldtian university in turn reworked these themes to emphasise personal *Bildung* in service of the nation-state, while the contemporary university sees an intensification of ideals around vision and community in light of a disintegration of the (fantasy of) the coherent nation-state and the ascendance of modern communication tools.

It is for this reason of unaccounted continuities around vision and community, that naively nostalgic renditions of the university should be handled with care. Similarly arguing against the risk of erecting a nostalgic "protectionist barrier" between the university and its alleged 'outside,' Jacques

⁹ Jacques DERRIDA, *Parrages*. Paris: Éditions Galilée 1986, p. 116.

Derrida suggest that the dominant ideals of the university find their first powerful yet problematic articulation in Aristotle's definition of man as the rational animal in *Metaphysics*. Aristotle posits without reservation that "all men, by nature, have the desire to know," because knowledge gathering creates a form of pleasure that points beyond the mere utility of knowledge. In turn, Aristotle suggest that especially the sensory experience of the eyes facilitates this pleasure of knowing, leading Derrida to conclude that the Enlightenment tradition that emerged from this peculiar Aristotelian statement has a "preference to sight just as ... [a] preference to the uncovering of differences."¹⁰ Derrida thus illustrates how the association of knowledge with vision that still dominates Western science and philosophy, is historically and culturally contingent.

However, Derrida immediately complicates any such straightforward connection between sight and knowledge. In order namely to reflect on the knowledge thus gathered and in order to "listen better," these eyes must also at times "close itself off in the darkness of inward thought and sleep."¹¹ Therefore, "the university," stresses Derrida, "must not be a sclerophthalmic animal, a hard-eyed animal [...] a dry glance that always sees," as this would render impossible inward contemplation. This means that the university, in order to keep generating "new" knowledge, by necessity needs darkness or a "blind spot" in its own internal functioning and destination. Since the generating of such a blind spot consists of (a today increasingly high-tech) "diaphragm" that can "at regular intervals" narrow its sight, Derrida provocatively asks whether "the university [is] the master of its own diaphragm?"¹² We will see later that the work of Paul Virilio addresses the issue of cybernetic technology and the university by suggesting that modern technologies of knowing and vision simultaneously seek to elucidate and suppress its "dark side." They do so in particular by rendering exceedingly obscure the memory of the grounds via which the illusion of objectivity is generated. For Derrida, since the principle of reason follows a certain "rhythm" of opening and closing the eyes which cannot think its irrational grounds (since Aristotle's definition is in the end indeed just a compelling story), it "installs its empire only to the extent that the abyssal question of the being that is hiding within it remain hidden."¹³ This means that today,

¹⁰ DERRIDA, "The Principle," p. 130.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 132.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 139.

“this institution of modern techno-science that is the university *Stiftung* is built both on the principle of reason and on what remains hidden in that principle.”¹⁴ This “dissimulation of its origin” is therefore productive insofar it requires that the techno-sciences incessantly cover over the fact that *there exists no pure reason or seeing* through ever-more sophisticated techniques of seeing as suppression. “Computer technology, data banks, artificial intelligence, translating machines, and so forth,” says Derrida, “all have to be pondered as the effect of the principle of reason, or, more rigorously, as a dominant interpretation of this principle.”¹⁵

The argument that I am pursuing, namely that what is called the neo-liberalisation of the university is in fact an acceleration, intensification, and *displacement* of the ideals of the university by techniques developed *by itself*, is also brought up in Derrida’s “Mochlos.” In this piece, Derrida dramatically proclaims “The university, what an idea! It is a relatively recent idea. We have yet to escape it, and it is already being reduced to its own archive...”¹⁶ I am presenting a brief discussion of this text to further illuminate the play between light and dark at the heart of the university by Derrida, who at the same time seems keenly aware of how this reproduces the ideal by “illuminating” such a problem. I would like to note here that the “problem” of the “philosophical illumination of a problem” produces an unresolvable tension my article is also caught in. The Greek term *mochlos* (μοχλός) in Derrida’s title translates as “lever” or “keystone,” which therefore already implies, as Dittrich also hinted at, that there resides a “conflict” at the heart of the university that also constitutes its central mechanism. Derrida’s suggestion here immediately sidesteps the nostalgia around the correct function or responsibility of the university. This is because he stresses that this conflict, “breach,” or incoherence has always been present in various more or less violent forms – the elitist institutionalization of the classic *Bildungsideal* being one of them. Meanwhile, idealistic representations like Humboldt’s simultaneously functioned as a cover for the university’s essential impurity.¹⁷ But such an obfuscation, Derrida suggests, cannot last, as the university’s aim is just as much one of universal uncovering or transparency; its quest remains to render everything knowable in the service of some greater good.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 140.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 146.

¹⁶ Jacques DERRIDA. “Mochlos, or: The Conflict of the Faculties.” In: RAND, R. (ed.), *Logomachia: The Conflict of the Faculties*, London: University of Nebraska Press 1992, p. 1.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

This means that this obfuscation at some point will have to come to light as well.

The university therefore, according to Derrida, seeks to be responsible by means of its incessantly revealing function, and has historically performed that responsibility through great Enlightenment concepts like “the state, the sovereign, the people, knowledge, truth,” and so forth.¹⁸ These concepts, while incessantly re-performed and chanted today via the anti-neoliberal activism of various academic staff and students, essentially gesture towards an *abstraction* or an *absent* addressee. “The truth,” like ‘the people’ or “the students,” is after all a fantasized universal, whereas its actualization is marked by heterogeneity, projection, and fragmentation. And this was always already the case: indeed, Derrida says that in the past, or in a certain idealized representation of that past, “one could at least *pretend* to know whom one was addressing, and where to situate power.”¹⁹ It is this abstraction that constitutes, according to Derrida, the university’s utopian potential as a continuous crisis of legitimation. Trying to close off that uncertainty of the validity of its project thus marks the ascendance of yet another crisis that is thoroughly imbricated with crises of the State, of metaphysics, and of technology.²⁰ Derrida’s sentiment echoes Jean-François Lyotard’s analysis in *The Inhuman*, in which the latter describes the current state of science and philosophy. The justification for these endeavours has according to Lyotard historically been “dressed up in all sorts of disguises: destination of man, reason, enlightenment, emancipation, happiness.” He concludes that these now appear “naked. More and more power, yes – but *why, no.*”²¹

I concur that it is due to this contemporary “nakedness” of the “why” of the university that the sympathetic and useful Aristotelian slogan “knowledge for knowledge’s sake” which is often heard in the Dutch university debate against neo-liberalisation, is foundational as well as misleading. The challenge of the contemporary university rather, I suggest, lies once more in its thinking about – and never quite being able to answer or resolve – what its responsibility consists of. Indeed, Derrida suggests from the outset that everything revolves around the *problem* of accountability of and for a community, in which neither *what* to account for, nor *who* constitutes the “we” of this community, nor even the exact *where* of this accountability can be locat-

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 3, italics mine.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

²¹ Jean-François LYOTARD, “Time Today.” In: *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time*. Cambridge: Polity 1991, p. 54, italics mine.

ed.²² There is then in this shadow-play always a more originary or “younger” responsibility to be had, dislocating the seemingly-solid “old” one.²³ This responsibility cannot run through the “decision of a pure ego-logical subject” who consciously and intentionally makes “minor adjustments *de rigueur* and daily compromises lacking in rigor,” because it is such a subject of intention who merely responds to an institutional law with the aims of making himself a “survivor” within that institution.²⁴ Derrida makes a clear reference to a certain acceleration, when he chides not only a survivalist socio-economic discourse, but also the narrowing of the university’s imagination. He does so by condemning superficial changes and stale protocols as merely leading to a situation in which the university intellectual or administrator “operating at *top speed* [...] accounts and becomes accountable for nothing: not for what happens, not for the reasons to continue assuming responsibilities without a concept.”²⁵

One could read this as a call for a slowing down and taking stock, however urgently; and more particularly as an indictment of the ways in which continuous over-production is fundamentally entangled with the neoliberal techniques that make this possible. One may think here of the steep rise in academic publications and journals, the overwhelming number of exams and amount of marking, the increase in global conference and research travel, and the debilitating emphasis on performance indicators. Yet acceleration is not the university’s only problem, nor will deceleration solve the question of accountability. What is more namely, due to the slippery nature of academic responsibility, Derrida implies that it is only logical that the “factory-like” properties of the university, in which the production of knowledge is treated “like an industry” (Derrida refers here to the words of Immanuel Kant), will have to slide towards an exceeding quantification. Digital technologies are then roped in to help make sense of and organize the huge amount of new information and the ever larger student body. Such a quantification, says Derrida, while seeking to render the university transparent and accountable, becomes exceedingly *irresponsible* insofar it exacerbates the essentially “theatrical representation” of the imagined autonomy of the university by way of delegating it increasingly to a cybernetic machinery designed to close off radical alterity.²⁶ In other words, while the criteria for academic competence

²² DERRIDA, “Mochlos,” p. 1.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Ibid.*, italics mine.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

and performance were in the past seemingly independent (via peer-reviews and lecturer relative autonomy) but actually enmeshed with a patriarchal and Eurocentric politics of the State, such a politics and its criteria for evaluation are now thoroughly enmeshed with the technologies of global acceleration and simulation. Derrida on this point echoes Lyotard's analysis of the ways in which knowledge becomes a product of technological power in *The Postmodern Condition*. Lyotard here notes that academic performativity, besides being "theatrical," also entails the "output of a technical system, a place where knowledge and power are no longer distinguished."²⁷ It is therefore "the publication of knowledge" or the communication and dissemination of ideas that finds itself in "a double-bind, a demand [...] intrinsically in conflict with itself" as communicating more ultimately amounts to communicating less.²⁸ I take from Derrida that it is ultimately the quest for universal knowledge and community as the hallmark of the university, that has also birthed its entanglement with "objectifying" techniques of formalization and quantification. Here too, the acceleration of scientific objectivity and independence as a philosophical ideal has become displaced – that is, its meaning and logic have shifted – into the objectifying techniques of the cybernetic and neoliberal machinery. The argument for autonomy therefore paradoxically has spawned its slippage into an irresponsible rationalization that seeks to stabilize the university project in an extremely problematic fashion.

I therefore propose that the university today suffers from a heightened *auto-immune disease*, and that this disease has been lingering in its core principles. I transpose the term auto-immunity from Derrida's "Autoimmunity: Real and Symbolic Suicides" in which he shows how state terrorism breeds anti-state terrorism.²⁹ Jean Baudrillard echoes this insight, stating that at the heart of every system there resides a logic of "reversibility;" a "blind spot" which consists of "something unaccountable for itself, inescapable but also indecipherable, an immanent type of fatality [...] a type of objective irony."³⁰ Particularly today then, the technological acceleration of

²⁷ Jean-François LYOTARD, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. Manchester: Manchester University Press 1984, p. 12.

²⁸ DERRIDA, "Mochlos," p. 12.

²⁹ Jacques DERRIDA – Giovanna BORRADORI, "Autoimmunity: Real and Symbolic Suicides – A Dialogue with Jacques Derrida." In: *Philosophy in a Time of Terror: Dialogues with Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press 2003, p. 85.

³⁰ Jean BAUDRILLARD, "The Revenge of the Crystal. An Interview by Guy Bellavance." In: *Revenge of the Crystal: Selected Writings on the Modern Object and Its Destiny, 1968–1983*. London: Pluto Press 1990, p. 17.

the neoliberal economy brings the university's auto-immunity ever more to the foreground. This leads to an aggravation of its fundamental tensions. So there is a historical continuity of auto-immunity in the university project all the way from its aspirational beginnings that persists today, even if that continuous element has seen various turns, and has now been displaced towards the imperatives of productivity, "free-market" ideals, and efficiency. Especially the laudable goals of emancipation, truth, and freedom in research and teaching, have themselves from their idealistic beginnings in the Renaissance already been tainted by the demons of oppression, falsehood, and exclusion. The fundamental tension in its project – that what Dittrich calls its "immanent contradiction"³¹ – that led to (the illusion of) progress through scientific and philosophical research and technological innovation, has now become "productive" primarily in the economic sense. The effect is that today, at the heart of the university lies an *aporia* that expresses itself, in a curious reversal of its values and stakes, as a "naked" pretence or hypocrisy. This leads so-called "knowledge workers" at many contemporary universities to find themselves confronted with contradictory feelings and schizoid situations. Examples of this are teaching students the ills of social hierarchisation through education, while also sorting them in hierarchical (alpha)numerical slots according to academic performance – a practice that indeed has boomeranged back to the Dutch universities via the logic of the NSE. The university is therefore the one location in the current economy where the basic conflicting duplicity following the exacerbation of its *aporetic* ideals is most keenly felt, leading to high levels of stress. Sadly though, this auto-immunity gets often suppressed or internalized by many such "workers" and students as either personal failure or a general incompatibility with its institutional demands.

Transparency in the teaching scene

To summarise, my proposition is that the prime missions or ideals of the university as most of us today understand them, and which especially came out of Enlightenment humanism – emancipation, truth, freedom, justice, and knowledge – *are precisely what currently produce exceedingly unjust practices* "outside" and "within" universities. These unjust practices "outside" concern ongoing social stratification via so-called "meritocratic" education and sociological, computational, and psychological objectification of ever more

³¹ DITTRICH, "Van Ivoren Toren," p. 160.

cultures and groups. Meanwhile, the unjust practices “inside” concern those of internal hierarchies, rankings, evaluations, divisions, gatekeeping mechanisms, and exclusions of all kinds. It may be useful to recall at this stage that the term “university” originally designated the Medieval “corporation,” which etymologically comes from the Latin *una* or “one.” The Latin *universitas* therefore at base means “turned into one entity,” designating a “totality” or “total community.”³² The current university and its new forms of violence are therefore an outflow or intensification of “outdated” humanist ideals and techniques that are remobilised by neoliberal capitalism and its machinery of acceleration for their own totalising quest. In other words, the hopeful academic project of “exposing the world and humanity to the light of truth and emancipation,” together with its “evil twins” of oppressive universalism, social submission, surveillance, and colonialism, have caved in onto themselves and become a near-pervasive technologically “exposing-itself” of a fundamentally duplicitous contemporary academic institution. And because the reproduction of its practices at base involve modern techniques of knowing, this article suggests that rather than arguing for a return to the “walled” university (however sympathetic), gaining a better understanding of the intersection of this problematic with modern technologies of communication, visibility, or calculation, is crucial to really thinking the modern university project differently.

The relationship between academia and modern technology therefore consists of a more fundamentally entangled apparatus than most critics of the neo-liberalisation of higher education consider it to be. Many such critics see technology or media as merely applied onto the university from the “outside” or as mere tools for use on the “inside.” The problem of the problematic evaluative practices via course evaluations or via the NSE nonetheless stretches well beyond a neoliberal encroachment, and return also in fields seemingly unrelated to cybernetics. Let me give an example of how some authors forget how also the humanities are just as much part of the problem. Steven Ward for instance helpfully claims that the digital knowledge economy, due to the translation of information into bits and bytes, has forced a quantification of performance indicators in academia, leading to the erasure of certain kinds of knowledge³³ Especially the humanities, says

³² Eric PARTRIDGE, *Origins: A Short Etymological Dictionary of Modern English*. London: Routledge 1963, p. 452.

³³ Steven WARD, *Neoliberalism and the Global Restructuring of Knowledge and Education*. New York: Routledge 2012, p. 126.

Ward, with their ways of communicating knowledge (like the monograph) that cannot be reduced to sheer numbers, suffer from this quantification. This is true whether books are disaggregated into sellable pieces, or made to follow the impetus of fast-paced output.³⁴ While I agree with Ward on this aspect of digitalization, he does not consider the fact that the origins of digital technologies, as I mentioned earlier, *stem* from university research. What is more, he forgets that the technologies of communication and visualization have always been part of the university setup from its Renaissance inception in Europe. One may here think for example of René Descartes' mechanistic view of the material world, the crucial importance of inventions like the telescope and microscope, or the ways in which the dissemination of stories and ideas relied on book printing technology. It appears then that the basic imbrication of academia with media technologies is one of a continuous and ever-growing constitutional yet dialectical relationship, in which these technologies eventually turn out to be much more than a means through which research and teaching is carried out. Instead, due to their constitutive enmeshment with academia's auto-immunity, they expose themselves as facilitators *as well as thwarters* of the academic ideal of total knowledge. The ideals of exposition and omniscience, and the ways these are today carried out through modern data-driven technologies and visual media aids, is itself just as ambiguous and ungraspable.

In other words, the current push for predictability and transparency aggravates the tensions immanent to the university project. This occurs especially in places where the university's promise towards justice, a democracy-to-come, or a radically different future, clashes with the (ir)responsible demand to render the outcomes of this promise measurable. Nowhere do such tensions emerge most obviously in the contemporary classroom, where all kinds of measures that seek to cater to predictable outcomes and learning goals desperately seek to contain and stratify a by definition uncontrollable situation. In its idealised depiction after all, learning is and should be always more than a mere "transmission" of knowledge. Derrida explicates this point by noting with Nietzsche that apparently "The more one does in the area of training, the more one has to think." He hereby refers once more to the fact that the contemplation of knowledge gathered via the principle of reason by the necessity involves seeing *and darkness*, lest the university not be "sclerophthalmic."³⁵ As Graham Allen likewise provocatively asks, "can

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 127.

³⁵ DERRIDA, "The Principle," p. 152.

teaching, the thing that, since philosophy began in the West seems to have to do with irony and subterfuge, doubles and deceit, power and betrayal, ever survive in a culture of consensus, perpetual peace and transparency?”³⁶ Allen posits this question with an eye on the implementation of the Bologna Process in European universities, which sought to render teaching across Europe and the globe to be “comparable, measurable and calculable.” This attempt at comparability, says Allen, is an outflow of the practical but also ethical impetus towards “quality, excellence, freedom of information and transparency”³⁷ – an impetus that I have throughout suggested emerges *from* the foundational ideals of the university. Excellence, or in ancient Greek *arête* (ἀρετή), after all already inhabited the ideal of moral character building that many centuries later re-emerged in the Humboldtian notion of *Bildung*. “Excellence” is thus one of those ideals that has been accelerated and displaced via the notion of the upward citizen of the State towards the economically productive individual as the prime moral goal under globalisation. Moreover, freedom of information, as we saw with Derrida, has been intimately tied to metaphysical notions around the university community accumulating and disseminating knowledge for the illumination and salvation of mankind, as well as the total comprehension of the universe at large. Due to the *aporetic* quality of such ideals, the teaching scene will also thwart what Allen ominously calls “the danger of universities in Europe collapsing into an integrated hall of mirrors, capable of reproducing the same student, the same degree, and the same knowledge at previously unimaginable speeds.” Therefore, Allen notes that while transparency is “in principle a force against conflict [...] one of the things which threatens to complicate the model of a unified, flexible, calculable, transferable European higher education area, comes in the form of teaching itself.”³⁸

An example of how this hopeful complication emerges in the teaching scene is how, in the Dutch context, university departments seek to heed students’ and managers’ demands for more transparency in teaching. I would like to stress here that this example is not meant so much as empirical evidence for my claims, but as an illustration of the university’s auto-immune disease. The Department of Media and Culture at the Humanities Faculty at Utrecht University in the Netherlands for instance did so by implementing the requirement that end goals and methods are made explicit in module

³⁶ ALLEN, “Transparency and Teaching,” p. 569.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 568.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 569.

syllabi and student theses as much as possible, and that courses are to focus on the transmission of definable skills rather than “obscure theory.” But while such attempts at transparency are seemingly generous to the students, they ultimately serve to divorce methods and skills from their grounding theoretical perspectives. The etymology of the term “method” namely points towards the core Greek word ὁδος (“road”), generating the meaning of a ‘higher road’ when combined with the Greek μετά (“after, over”). A μέθοδος is therefore literally a designated way or means of doing something, and in the research context has segued into meaning the “pursuit of knowledge.”³⁹ Methods can therefore be understood as handy roadmaps for research, but are always specific to a certain theoretical tradition and hence can always be questioned for their specificity. The emphasis on prescribed methods thus seems to arise from a fear of an unpredictable and unmeasurable slippage between institutional knowledge and student’s (or staff’s) appropriations of such knowledge. It hence today appears as an attempt to stamp out the “noise” emanating from what Lyotard famously called the “end of grand narratives” in the West and relative loss of global hegemony by Europe as sketched in *The Postmodern Condition*.

This obsession with methods can also be interpreted as akin to cybernetic quantification, which futilely seeks to disentangle the complications of thinking-as-dialectical in the university at large from the larger context of neoliberal acceleration which this cybernetic machinery serves. Most student work in turn increasingly resembles an immoral – because blind to its reproduction of inequalities – form of automated production and an ever more hastily churning-out of essays at this Department. Student theses for instance, having to bow to the demands of a standardised assessment form in which supposedly crucial aspects of the thesis are presented as separate entities, become narrow “assembly-line” write-ups that merely seek to “tick the boxes” without any critical or holistic considerations around rhetoric and perspective. For instance, the method employed needs to be rendered explicit and is separated in the form from the theoretical framework. More disturbingly, students that attempt a more daring piece of writing for their theses run the risk of getting penalised when not explicitly stating the method employed, even if management desperately claims that the form is not meant to be prescriptive.

This well-meant yet deplorable practice is therefore reminiscent of the “factory-like” disciplining of the student (and the lecturer) that Der-

³⁹ PARTRIDGE, *Origins*, p. 449.

rida warns for. The compulsory transparency of goals and methods leads to a situation that becomes blind to how the outcome of the pedagogical student-teacher relationship should *and indeed can* never be fully known in advance, because it concerns a scene of learning and transformation *within* as well as *in tension with* the cybernetic compulsion of the neoliberal economy. In other words, if the pedagogical scene wishes to be as hospitable and promissory as possible so that the student can “truly grow,” it follows that actual module goals remain partly oblique and emergent. Methods and indeed theories too, in order to heed to the founding call for illumination, should always be questioned and unpacked for their partial (often European and masculine) theoretical underpinnings and traditions. After all, the term “theory” is derived from the Greek words *θεωρεῖν* and *θεωρός* meaning respectively “to look at” and “observer”. Etymologically, the term is connected to being an spectator of a play as well as an observer of religious activities, tying the idea of observation to the perspective of the gods.⁴⁰ In the Athenian context, being a spectator or observer in the context of the theatre, in which the problems of the *polis* were addressed, in turn cemented the spectator’s position as a legal part of the citizenry.⁴¹ The term “theory” hence implies not only a partial position and particular perspective (or angle) within a decidedly theatrical setting, but also an element of connection within a supposedly circumscribed legal scene or community. The formulation of strict methods is therefore one particular instance of a problematic transcendence via a dissimulation of the non-neutral grounds of theory. Baudrillard likewise suggests that the crucial aspect of teaching does not reside in the assumedly transparent communication of knowledge and requirements, when he muses that “the communicational process has always seemed to me a little too functional [...] as if things always exist in relation to content, be it pedagogical or moral. I do not believe that the really important stakes exist at the level of communication.”⁴² Instead, in the relation between teacher and student, says Baudrillard, “something else happens: a form of challenge, seduction, or play, which brings more intense things into being.”⁴³ The modern teaching scene therefore showcases the auto-immunity that results from the university’s ideals of social progress and transformation. This is because the imperative that the scene be one of “true growth” for the

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 470.

⁴¹ Jean-Pierre VERNANT – Pierre VIDAL-NAQUET, “Tensions and Ambiguities in Greek Theatre.” In: *Myth and Tragedy in Ancient Greece*. New York: Zone Books 1990, p. 34.

⁴² BAUDRILLARD, “The Revenge,” p. 25.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

student and society appears to be intimately connected with its “opposite” in the form of a stifling cybernetic production-line.

The faculty examination board at Utrecht, anxiously trying to ward off any “noise,” thus seeks to remain accountable, while failing to understand that the end-goal of the humanities is *also* one of questioning and critiquing all forms of non-neutral automation in order to invite a radically different future. Indeed, following Derrida, this “dark” aspect of learning remains crucial to the teaching scene, so that again the Department fails to resolve the question of what its responsibility consists of. And while this generates a lot of stress, this is also somehow for the better. The acceleration of the university’s *aporia* are nonetheless keenly felt around these pedagogical demands from management in my personal teaching experiences at Utrecht University. An increasingly unsure student body demand being taught ever clearer “methods” and “skills,” while at the same time, some students become ever more self-doubting and even recalcitrant, being unsure how to properly understand their own fears and doubts as a logical product of the *aporetic* or hypocritical demands the university and the lecturer makes on them. Also, the rendering transparent of methods and goals while eliding the intricacies underlying them has in many cases the paradoxical outcome of making the students understand less. This is because they cannot comprehend (and lecturers cannot exhaustively defend) why all the great texts of the humanities tend *not* to have an explicit methods section, while they have to explicate methods in their theses. Eventually therefore, any totalitarian attempt at complete transparency does the students and the staff a disservice, even if it seems to dutifully cater to their needs.

The violence of accelerated illumination

The analysis of the enmeshment of cybernetic techniques and academic excellence as products of an “objectifying” accountability of the current university staff and student community, allows us to locate the problem of the university in its foundational ideological and moral outlook. In the last section, I will attempt to “burn up” the ideals and technologies of the university by near-religiously overstating their effects via the work of philosopher of technology Paul Virilio. Often chided for his negativity or alarmism, Virilio’s writing exhibits that the obsession for transparency leads to opaque work. His position can best be summarized as someone who thinks through the effects and accidents (which can be disastrous as well as fortuitous) of the near-religious pushing of technologies of speed and light from a phenomeno-

logical perspective. His work therefore, I suggest, emulates and parallels the near-militaristic yet unpredictable outcomes of the teaching scene, of which the transformative character of reading a provocative book like his can be an instant. Virilio not merely analyses but *demonstrates* the violence done by the under-thought effects of modern technologies as especially a result of their military applications. Famously stating in an interview with James Der Derian that “War was my university; everything came out of that,” Virilio’s work needs to be understood in terms of a bringing to the fore the negativity of totalitarian techniques, both rhetorical and computational.⁴⁴

Central to Virilio’s thought is an appreciation, contra Aristotle’s conception of essential versus accidental properties, of so-called accidental effects as essential to any technology. Digital military technologies of calculation (or cybernetics) increase the propensity for *incalculable* and catastrophic effects parallel to the increase of their controlling and predictive powers. As is often the case with critical theory’s revelations also lying on the rhetorical level of the work, the ways in which Virilio’s prose bedazzles and confuses by way of a rapid concatenation of brilliantly personal observations and historical anecdotes, at times even in full caps, can be understood to imitate not only rapid-fire modern military technologies, but also the relentless rhythms of the modern media and institutional demands. His point – and also mine – is therefore to purposely provoke in the academic reader a reaction of resistance to totalitarianisms.

While Virilio has never explicitly written on the university as a modern institution thoroughly wrapped up in the logic of rapid-fire and spectacular targeting, his work on the “logistics of perception” lends itself to comprehending this institution as today consisting of an *accident of itself* that likewise bedazzles and confuses staff and students. A point in case would again be the compulsion to the increasingly rapid-fire production of articles and books, as well as the ways in which staff and students exceedingly find themselves the targets of a technocratic machinery. So while also his book titled *The University of Disaster* tells us nothing overtly about the modern university as such, the book title implies that the actual contemporary university is an institution exceedingly failing to contain its own ever-growing disastrous or negative aspect – its autoimmune disorder. I suggest that we may read such an interpretation of the university’s duplicity especially via

⁴⁴ James DER DERIAN, “Global swarming and the Bosnia Question.” In: *Virtuous War: Mapping the Military-Industrial-Media-Entertainment-Network*. New York: Routledge 2009, p. 64.

Virilio's *The Vision Machine*, as here once again the book title, together with the analysis it makes of the influence of digital technologies on thought and perception, provides an excellent allegory of the central idea of technological "illumination" propelling universities past and present forward.

Moreover, this allegory (or arrogance) of the modern university as a "vision machine" has over the years become much more than a mere allegory; instead, the term "vision machine" also illustrates a crucial aspect of its current flawed functioning as "teaching machine." This is because, as I discussed earlier, mechanic and especially digital technologies have to a large extent enmeshed the university's ideational and functional spheres. This is moreover a conjunction that also increasingly affects a large section of society (for instance via the so-called "social" media.) Since the university's ideals have in the past remained productive and quasi-stable because the *aporia* at its heart was constantly covered over or projected outside of itself, the technological organisation of the university today becomes one of intense internal contradiction and *stealth* logic. This is because, as Derrida also hinted at, its acceleration renders the disingenuous projection of its *aporia* as outside itself more and more tenuous by *revealing* it as its internal logic. So its delusional game is increasingly difficult to keep up; its hypocrisy, which Humboldt managed to temporarily ward off via the false idea of academic neutrality and coherent community, now has gained full force. This is so much so that to still believe in its baseline emancipatory and progressive function appears exceedingly deluded. This delusion occurs as university staff and students keep compulsively performing this belief until the point of exhaustion, burn-out, and self-blame, which I also noticed with students during their methods-confounded thesis trajectories. But as with so many individualized disorders, the diagnosis of rampant burn-out and self-blame actually points towards the structural exhaustion of a university project that is in the clutches of a disorder mirroring the structural crises of neoliberal capitalism.

Allow me to extrapolate from Virilio's analysis of perceptual technologies towards this auto-immunity of the modern university today by walking through his argument in *The Vision Machine*. I note in passing that I understand the term "vision" to encompass all forms of knowledge gathering. This extension of vision can be made, as I argued earlier via Derrida, because vision has since Aristotle been assumed to be the superior sense or indeed *faculty*, even if he also illustrates that this connection to vision is eventually reliant on other senses. The term "faculty" of course perfectly connects the idea of the hierarchically organised manifold of human senses with the

notion of multiple faculties in the academic institution. Interestingly of course, we can discern in the idea of “vision” as complete understanding and superior knowledge in the “irrational” or faith-based origin of the university project, since the Christian theme of God as all-seeing and radiant light grounds the belief in unmediated access from its inception. For Virilio then, seeking to be loyal to a more “originary Christian responsibility”, to force the ideal of illumination into a mechanistic materialization via various vision technologies constitutes nothing less than a corruption of our phenomenological condition. This is because such a forced mechanization disregards and even seeks to purge the *necessarily* unknowable or mythical aspect of experience and thought together with the necessarily communitarian aspect of moral relations. Besides this couching of his argument about the ethical impact of such mechanization as resultant from such Christian sensibilities (and it behoves us to recall that Virilio has been much engaged in helping the French underclasses), Virilio’s argument in the first chapter of *The Vision Machine* is based on the philosophy of Henri Bergson regarding the fundamental necessity of duration for consciousness and perception. This temporal element of sense for Virilio means importantly that “speed thereby becomes the causal idea, idea before the idea.” He hereby suggests that the technological acceleration of perception must necessarily influence what still can and increasingly cannot be thought; in short, speed starts to ground and limit all knowledge.⁴⁵

Early vision machines like the telescope and the microscope thus remap the relation between the body and its surroundings, so that whatever was ‘seen’ became standardized and disconnected – and hence generalizable – from the physical agency of certain dispossessed human populations and individuals.⁴⁶ It is at this historical stage of the first such vision machines that Virilio locates the emergence of a “logistics of perception” as a form of “spectacular” propaganda at first used by the Catholic Church and military institutions, in turn leading to colonization and labour exploitation.⁴⁷ This propagandistic function was possible because of the resultant agentic disempowerment of the local and colonial non-elites. But it was also possible because the disconnection between seeing and the body and the bypassing of duration resulted in an ongoing loss of memory, of the diversity of

⁴⁵ Paul VIRILIO, *The Vision Machine*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press 1994, p. 3.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

mental images, and of imagination in general.⁴⁸ I suggest that this argument connects to how Humboldt's university suppressed the imagination of the general populace outside the university, both locally and in the colonies overseas, by rendering them the site of "dirty" and "uninformed" politics – a populace that supposedly needs to be enlightened and emancipated. Virilio in turn locates a particular kind of acceleration at the recent historical instant where the early vision machines, which main ingredient was "the speed of light," transformed into those early digital technologies that also use "the light of speed" or electronically or fibre-optically generated simulations. This more modern acceleration, designating the "use of light stimuli in crowd control," in turn has resulted in what he calls "a sort of precocious disability, a blindness."⁴⁹ Today we then find ourselves in what he terms the "zero degree of representation" where digital technologies appear to represent "reality" by absolutely obscuring or dissociating it from our lived reality. The latter after all only gains meaning by way of our embodied and duration-based imagination. It is here that we can also situate Lyotard's claim of the end of grand narratives as in fact the moment where the lack of imaginative and mnemonic force renders all signs meaningless or relative except for the dominant "automated" ideology of technological objectivity.⁵⁰

Virilio in turn suggests in the second chapter of *The Vision Machine* that there is a dialectical relationship between the arts and the sciences. Both are namely involved in a kind of interplay as long as they presuppose their fundamental context of "prime ignorance" and the necessity of unknowability or of the mythical for research. Likewise, since "for the human eye the essential is invisible" so that "since everything is an illusion, it follows that scientific theory, like art, is merely a way of manipulating illusions."⁵¹ The moment that scientific research or philosophical enquiry gets caught up in a totalisation of knowledge via the near-perfect mechanisation of vision or postulation of total objectivity, this dialectical play between the arts and the sciences gets eroded. With this ongoing "depersonalization of the thing observed but also of the observer," we thus enter the era of what Virilio calls "the paradoxical logic" of the image. In this era, near-total illumination, while presenting itself as a democratisation, in fact signals the end of public representation in all its radical diversity.⁵² Virilio further illustrates

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 23.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 30, 63.

the functioning of this paradoxical logic in the third chapter, stating that “omnivoyance, Western Europe’s totalitarian ambition, may here appear as the formation of a whole image by repressing the invisible.”⁵³ Everything and everyone now must be subjected to the violence of illumination. Interestingly, Virilio suggests that famous philosophers like Lacan, Foucault, and Barthes, all admitted to a sensation of terror in relation to their “obsession with the un-said going hand-in-glove with a totalitarian desire for clarification.”⁵⁴ Virilio terms the new media technologies’ propensity for instilling terror by falsely propagating progress modern society’s “Medusa Syndrome.” This syndrome was first unleashed in the 19th century on the lower classes and the colonised peoples, and now comes to hit home in the location where it was first conceptualized: Western academia.⁵⁵ What we therefore live today, both inside and outside the university walls proper, is according to Virilio the “technological outcome of that merciless more light of revolutionary terror.”⁵⁶ We indeed notice here the fundamental relationship between academia’s role in incessant capitalistic productivity and its twin companions of hope and fear by way of a new *tyranny of transparency*. The compulsion for the performance of intellectual optimism incessantly functions to cover over the sense of terror that the neo-liberalisation of the university via new media technologies has subjected their staff (and of course many other groups in contemporary society) to. This is also to stress again that any solution to this situation can and should not lie in “protecting” the university’s functioning from this onslaught of neo-liberalisation. This after all would not only temporarily protect merely the intellectual classes from this economic logic, but would also disregard the ways in which the university has been involved in the acceleration of this onslaught that was unleashed on the dispossessed classes by way of their “total illumination” via census-taking, the statistical social sciences, and finally the hooking up to electronic databases, as in the case of the NSE.

The penultimate chapter of Virilio’s book titled “The Vision Machine” (as if now signalling the crux of its analysis), deals with the state of scientific and philosophical enquiry in our current era that is saturated with the technologies of seeing and discerning. The chapter presents the reader with a distinct change of style: while the previous chapters were more in a clas-

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 34.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 42.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 44.

sically descriptive style, this fifth chapter contains more of the rapid-fire effect of all caps and quasi-conclusive statements. It is almost as if Virilio the teacher starts rambling and disintegrating. The style, I suggest, emulates the “logistics of perception” today in which the reader, researcher, or spectator is “bombarDED” with techno-scientific propaganda, but it is also a style that seeks to forego a dominant mode of philosophical reasoning. I read Virilio’s fifth chapter as an illustration of how the unknowable aspect necessary for any type of knowing does *perforce* return in the assumptions, concepts, and axioms of modern science and philosophy. This is because it is in these that the auto-immunity of the university project shows itself despite (and due to) its totalitarian and omniscient ambitions. Virilio is therefore, I suggest, illustrating how hope and despair – just like control and accident, as well as the visible and the invisible – are fundamentally immanent to one another.

It is perhaps due to the fact that Virilio’s works mirror our own terror that they are unpleasant texts; but their main use, I propose, is precisely that they seek to invoke some kind of libidinal “resistance” or rebellion I also hopefully note in some of my students. Digital technologies for Virilio bizarrely create a “sightless vision,” in which the exceeding cutting-off from the subject’s mnemonic capacities in turn creates an obsession in modern society with “fore-seeing” or prediction via computerized quantification.⁵⁷ It is such “fore-seeing” that seeks to close off the possibility of the unknown returning in the near-future, while paradoxically also *producing* more unknowability. This conundrum, I concur with Virilio, thus signals the fact that subject and object have always existed in a dialectical relationship. Therefore, the teaching scene contains an amount of dislodgment and trickery that for instance Descartes sought to banish via an idea of a god that would not mess with the senses, simply claiming that “God is not a deceiver.”⁵⁸ But the very attempt in the sciences and humanities to erase uncertainty via the accumulation of knowledge that follows as well as generates its fundamental theories therefore eventually exacerbates uncertainty and violence. It is therefore the “automation of perception that is threatening our understanding,” and as a collateral of the totalitarian quest that underlies this threat comes also the increasingly discriminatory effects of such automations.⁵⁹ And such effects

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 61.

⁵⁸ René DESCARTES, “Meditations on First Philosophy: Sixth Meditation.” In *Philosophy of Mind: Classical and Contemporary Readings*. Oxford: Oxford University Press 2003, p. 16.

⁵⁹ VIRILIO, *The Vision Machine*, p. 75.

can precisely be noticed in the Dutch NSE and in the auto-immune emphasis on “method” at Utrecht University.

A beyond of vision and reason?

To conclude, the central logic of the university today currently also consists of a pervasive “stealth” functionality or unknown quality. This is a logical yet paradoxical outflow of the ambiguity of techniques of exposition and transparency, and Virilio’s “vision machine” presents us with a perfectly dominant allegory of this situation. This is because especially the cybernetic technologies that constitute the core techniques of teaching and research today fundamentally rely on *obscuring* or dissimulating their own operations. This in turn segues into the problem that the contemporary university ever more hides its internally oppressive operations in favour of a false image of university “objectivity” and of it “being at the forefront” of knowledge, transparency, emancipation, and truth. This also becomes apparent in the case of the Dutch NSE, where the numerical grade that supposedly “objectively” represents the quality of a programme, is ultimately near-meaningless. After all, it almost completely hides not only how exactly that grade has been calculated, but also how the non-neutrality of the technology that facilitates the calculation of such a number gets dissimulated. The NSE thus *normalizes* – poor students who assume that their vote is empowering – grade-based systems of hierarchisation. Due to this stealth logic, a stifling “productivist” principle reigns in most contemporary universities. This principle relegates everything or anyone that does not comply as undesirable or incomprehensible, as some of us in the humanities or theoretical sciences can attest to. It is this situation that logically gives rise to aggravated tensions and schizoid experiences among university staff and students; but it is also this situation that finally allows us to expose the hypocrisy of this situation. The irreducibly unknown or “dark” quality of the university, in the form of a sort of libidinal antagonism, pops up with a vengeance in a time where one would least expect it. It does this for instance in the teaching scene, where in the Dutch case the emphasis on “transparent roadmaps” leads to more confusion among students as well as the dissimulation of the extreme heterogeneity of and irritated and exhausted staff and student body. Such is the essence of managerialism after all; guided by a principle that resides inside itself, it will only strengthen this principle whenever it wants to banish it more forcefully.

This article has argued that the current university and its new forms of violence are an outflow of “outdated” and ultimately complicit Enlightenment humanist, and even Christian ideals whose auto-immunity has become accelerated by neoliberal capitalism and its machinery of perception. Eventually however, the instabilities, accidents, and ambiguities generated through this technological acceleration also present an in-appropriable possibility and a promise of a radically alternative future for the university, if we still want to call it that. All that modern machines, rendering transparent “society” by foregrounding their own increasing ubiquity, in spite of everything do, is prove that *all* theoretical and democratic representation is in fact unfair fabrication. The NSE is the epitome of this aggravated logic of “sightless vision” by providing a mere decontextualized number, much in the vein of how the computer in the infamous *Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy* concludes with a hilarious “42.”⁶⁰ This baffling situation presents the contemporary *promise* of the university, since it is in the rendering visible of the fact that it is *not* founded on anything universally meaningful – namely that the Western metaphysical conception of vision, reason, justice, and communication is a scam – that the acceleration of the contemporary university presents us with the possibility of a *beyond* of the neoliberal economy. And the prime location where this promise emerges might be the pedagogical scene, thanks to the fact that its singularity can never, much to some managers’ dismay, become wholly transparent and predictable.

⁶⁰ Douglas ADAMS, *The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy*. New York: Random House 1995, p. 279.