

SENTIENT ENCOUNTERS

A person with short, vibrant pink hair and glasses stands on a train platform. They are wearing a pink sweater and a dark skirt. They are looking towards a yellow and blue train that is stopped at the platform. The platform has blue plastic chairs and white pillars. The background shows the train and the platform structure.

A PAPER FOLDED IN HALF WITH
A PEN PUNCHED THROUGH IT

A film night on thresholds
in science fiction

@ AKI Auditorium, Enschede
On: 29 November 2022
16:30-19:30

A paper folded in half with a pen punched through it

The novella *Story of Your Life* (1998) by Ted Chiang, the basis for the film *Arrival* (Denis Villeneuve, 2016), positions an alien “first contact” narrative as a linguistic challenge, an engaging attempt at communication that leads to shifts in perspectives of time and causality. The central characters are Louise Banks, a linguist, and Gary Donnelly, a physicist. They’re tasked with working together, having regular meetings with their alien counterparts they call “Heptapods” via a screen-link technology referred to as a “looking glass.” Breaking new ground on communication is long and difficult, beyond creating associations between words in each language, how does grammar and syntax function to order the words into something resembling coherence? Slowly they make progress in deciphering the alien language, realizing that they have separate versions for speaking and writing. A further breakthrough comes via the science team with a “repetition” or seeming mutual understanding of “Fermat’s Principle” with the Heptapods.

Imagine a diagram of a light ray passing through water. It refracts upon contact with the liquid surface, changing its trajectory through the water. This is the fastest path for the light, as it moves slower in water. Extrapolation reveals that if the light ray would have remained in a hypothetical straight line, its travel time increases. From this it can be deduced that light follows the path of “least time.” However, in some “situations light follows a path that takes more time than any of the other possibilities. It’s more accurate to say that light always follows an extreme path, either one that minimizes the time taken or one that maximizes it” (Chiang, 282-3). It’s a “variational principle” which in turn begins to inform understanding of the Heptapod languages by the linguist through how the tenses of time are experienced and conveyed:

“When the ancestors of humans and heptapods first acquired the spark of consciousness, they both perceived the same physical world, but they parsed their perceptions differently;

the worldviews that ultimately arose were the end result of that divergence. Humans had developed a sequential mode of awareness, while heptapods had developed a simultaneous mode of awareness. We experienced events in an order, and perceived their relationship as cause and effect. They experienced all events at once, and perceived a purpose underlying them all. A minimizing, maximizing purpose” (Chiang, 319).

The more the linguist understands the Heptapod languages, and can think through and dream in them, the more the perception of time in her life becomes simultaneous in glimpses of past, present, and future. This comes in waves, and though these glimpses are made possible by what is gleaned from the Heptapods, they provide more insight for her on a personal level, then a connection to the way these “alien” visitors live and understand their lives.

When considering the example given of Fermat's Principle, it's useful to take a step back and think about the role of water in the scenario. Water causes the light to refract, teasing out ruminations on why light takes the pathway it does. Water is performing a crucial service; it is the threshold, or way in to asking more questions. Thresholds are essential to Science Fiction, to speculate from, to form ideas on the precipice of something, when we are coming from somewhere else.

There's a recurring image of a threshold in a number of texts/films considering wormholes and faster than light travel. Like all good analogies, it bears repeating. In *Thor: Love and Thunder* (Taika Waititi, 2022) the character Jane Foster relays two examples of this analogy in a meta-textual way to explain the principle of the Einstein-Rosen Bridge. She recommends that to understand travelling through a wormhole one ought to watch the films *Event Horizon* (Paul W. S. Anderson, 1997) and *Interstellar* (Christopher Nolan, 2014). In each of these films a character describes traversing great distance in infinitesimal time by folding a piece of paper in on itself and puncturing it with a pen. In the analogy, space folds in on itself like the paper; its furthest and desired point to reach (B) is place directly over the traveller's starting point (A). With (A) and (B) points now existing in the same space and time, as caused

by whichever specific sci-fi engine the narrative has described, the travelling vessel can pass through to the destination near instantaneously, like the pen through paper. Though the space-vessel/pen is dynamic in its scientific or even magical (Thor's Bifrost Bridge) capability of achieving this feat, it's the paper that deserves our renewed focus. The paper is the threshold, the part of the equation from which it is possible to see both behind and ahead. The paper is the realm of possibility, and in the moment of (A) and (B)'s convergence so much is not known that it's formed its own space and agency.

Thresholds play pivotal roles in each of the works of the program *A paper folded in half with a pen punched through it*. At times these thresholds are crossed, back and forth, all while crucially giving these in-between spaces their due and room to breathe. At other times these thresholds allow glimpses toward the further beyond, just out of our senses' reach. From thresholds there are known-unknowns. Perhaps as a species and through our particular grouping of sentience, human beings (an already tenuous category teeming with unique perspectives) can configure a space for the agency of the unknown, an ever-shifting holding place that we can imagine into existence. Difficulties arise when one tries to fill in that space with approaches from within our understanding. We can get stuck in our own sentience, turning around in circles. Through creating frames (writing/making art/literal frame of the camera lens and resulting screen image...) around the stopgap of the unknown, perhaps we can have hints or blips of what an "alien" agency might be or do, via how we would interact with it. It seems that by allowing for the space to be a moving openness in our stories, not filled in with too much detail that ultimately situates the "alien" too far inside our understanding, we can conceive of/work with/through that which defies our own understanding.

Erik Martinson

Screening Program

Openings !!!,
Petra Szemán, 2022,
18:06

Portal: The Disappearance of Francis Lain,
Felix Rose Kawitzky &
Marianne Thesen Law, 2016,
27:31

BREAK

Luces del Desierto (Desert Lights),
Félix Blume, 2021,
29:58

The Golden Chain,
Adebukola Bodunrin &
Ezra Clayton Daniels, 2016,
13:20

curated by Erik Martinson

Openings !!!, Petra Szemán, 2022, 18:06

“Inhabiting the interstitial zones of anime credit sequences, video game loading screens and regional train journeys, *Openings !!!* (2022) intensifies the gaps between the layers of animated imagery in an attempt to grasp the kinds of experience that may lie beyond human perceptual boundaries. The video follows the protagonist ‘Yourself’ as they ride local trains through intermedial landscapes. From this uniquely conceived and drafted kinetic viewpoint, fragments of different worlds segue into view, signalling perceptual ruptures that seemingly force subjectivity outside of itself, into strange new relationships of interdependency and intoxication with the moving image.

Part of the artist’s ongoing exploration of the radical potential of animation and fandom, *Openings !!!* rejects its own filmic boundaries, surrendering instead to the free play of a multi-planar and ultimately elusive meta-worldview.” (PS)



***Portal: The Disappearance of Francis Lain,
Felix Rose Kawitzky & Marianne Thesen Law,
2016, 27:31***

“On the 1st of September 2016, the day of the Solar Eclipse, paranormal research enthusiast Francis Lain mysteriously vanished.

Their comrades from the anarchist, portal-hunting collective, The Warp Demons, have mobilised to try and locate their missing friend.

The Warp Demons suspect that Francis may have found the portal they've all been searching for.

Perhaps in finding their friend, they'll end up stumbling into another dimension...

Meet Flamo, Zethu, Radar Jones, Farron, Cosmos the Traveller, Titus the dog, Shredder Orpheus and Josh Stan as they search for an interdimensional gateway, and begin to discover what lies beyond.” (FRK & MTL)



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Luces del Desierto (Desert Lights),
Félix Blume, 2021, 29:58

“Some strange lights appear at night in the Mexican desert. The residents tell us what they’ve seen: fire, a fireball, lights flying, lightning falling from the sky and a flash. The singularity of each experience builds a complete story narrated by a choir of people. An encounter with this strange phenomena can be surprising, dangerous or even fatal.

The night isn’t as dark as it seems. The desert is full of all kinds of living beings. This emptiness is the place for everyone. *Desert Lights* invites us to open our eyes wide in the twilight and to listen to the sounds hidden in the blackness. A horror movie, in the darkness of the desert.” (FB)



The Golden Chain,
Adebukola Bodunrin & Ezra Clayton Daniels,
2016, 13:20

“The distant future. A Nigerian space station in a remote corner of the galaxy orbits an artificial pinpoint of matter so dense it cannot exist in our solar system. It is a recreation of the birth of the universe itself, contained for the purpose of study, and overseen by Yetunde, sole crew member on the space station Eko.

The Golden Chain is a first time collaboration between experimental filmmaker Adebukola Bodunrin and graphic novelist Ezra Clayton Daniels. Fluent in very different disciplines, the two artists found common ground in their passion for Afrofuturism. Bodunrin has thrived exploring the loose structures and formal play of experimental cinema, while Daniels has met acclaim with rigid, cerebral science fiction graphic novels.

The Golden Chain finds the two artists intertwining their contrasting aesthetics to revisit the themes of the Yoruba creation tale. Obatala’s descent from the heavens to create the earth and mankind becomes an astronaut traveling to the edge of the galaxy to create a new Heaven. Blending traditional motifs with hard science fiction, Bodunrin and Daniels create a world at once fantastical, yet almost plausible, in order to ask the question: “Where will we go, given where we came from?” (vtape.org)



Biographies



Agnieszka Anna Wołodźko received her PhD at Leiden University in 2018. She is a lecturer and researcher teaching contemporary philosophy and art-science at AKI Academy of Art and Design ArtEZ since 2017. At AKI she has initiated a biolab space where she runs a BIOMATTERS, an artistic research programme that explores how to work with living matters. Her research focuses on post-humanism, ecocriticism, affect theory and new materialism at the intersection of art, ethics and biotechnology. She is also a

curator and writer. Selected recent publications include: “Ars Demones*2022*Manifesto,” in *Footprint. Delft Architecture Theory Journal*; “Demonological re-enchantments – or how to contaminate through intimate stories of commons without consensus,” in *Technoetic Arts: A Journal of Speculative Research*; ‘Living Within Affect As Contamination: Breathing In Between Numbers’ in *Capacious: Journal for Emerging Affect Inquiry*; ‘Materiality of Affect: How Art Can Reveal the More Subtle Realities of an Encounter’, in *This Deleuzian Century: Art, Activism, Life*, edited by Rosi Braidotti and Rick Dolphijn. Currently finalizing her book *Affect as Contamination. Embodiment in Bioart and Biotechnology*, published by Bloomsbury in 2023.



Erik Martinson (Canada/Latvia) is an independent curator and writer. Current research threads include: Speculative fiction(ing), genre conventions (and their subversion) as productive restraints (with focus on Science-Fiction, New Weird, Horror, and Folk-Horror), example: screening ‘Not really now not any more’, Kunstnernes Hus, Oslo, 2019; plant sentience, empathy, interspecies relations, examples: ‘All Flesh is Grass’ exhibition project/

online LARP-RPG with public programme, Kim? Contemporary Art Centre, Riga, 2020, online/mail art project ‘Suggested for You’ with Sandra Kosorotova, part of *History of Joy, Part 4*, 2021; *Stone Tape Theory* – ghosts as recordings/traces in physical objects, forensic as well as supernatural approaches, examples: screening

'Like slow breathing, it seemed to emanate from inside the walls' at LUX, London, 2016, 'Stone Tapes' exhibition/publication project in development; Remote Viewing/Astral Projection as metaphor for exploring diasporic experiences, examples: screening 'Tell me about the ones who sleep through storms: Films and Videos from the Baltics' at Toronto International Film Festival's Wavelengths Series, 2017, exhibition 'The Surface of the Sun' at Contemporary Art Museum of Estonia (EKKM), Tallinn, 2018, screening/live-reading 'There was a Forest in the Ceiling' at Rupert, Vilnius, 2019; and Language-as-a-virus, examples: screening series 'Its origins are indeterminate' at Whitechapel Gallery/Close-Up, London, 2018, screening/performance/live-reading 'Self Does Not Understand' at Cubitt, London, 2019.

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Sjoerd van Oevelen (1974) is a visual artist and researcher based in Amsterdam. He studied at the Gerrit Rietveld Academy and the Architectural Association in London. Since 2001 he has been collaborating with artist Elodie Hiryczuk under the name Hiryczuk/ Van Oevelen.

Their photographs explore the workings of perception and systems of perspective, as well as humankind's relationship to nature and the landscape. The differences and similarities between Western and Eastern traditions of painting and photographing nature deeply shape their work and thinking. Hiryczuk/ Van Oevelen regularly publish essays on their blog *The Detached Gaze* and in magazines such as *Philosophy of Photography* and *EXTRA – Photography in Context*.

In addition to making art he co-founded the practice and research-based art platform *Radical Reversibility* co-curating international art exhibitions *Seeing Without A Seer* (2018) and *From Seeing To Acting* (2021). He is head of the *Moving Image BA* at *ArtEZ AKI Academy of Art and Design* and currently pursues a Phd research entitled *Towards A Gaze Multiple* at *LUCAS Center for the Arts in Society* at *Leiden University*.

www.hiryczukvanoevelen.com / www.radicalreversibility.org

About ArtEZ Generale

ArtEZ Generale organize all kinds of events, lectures, workshops and make podcasts and publications. Always about the urgent questions that play a role in society and art today. Ranging from immediate societal issues to abstract concepts, from climate crisis to identity issues. You are more than welcome to attend our programs for free and to talk and think along with us. Check our website for upcoming events and the latest articles and podcasts. If you subscribe to our newsletter we will keep you posted (ArtEZ students and staff receive the newsletter automatically).

Please write to us in case you have any suggestions and ideas for collective gatherings such as workshops, lectures, film nights @ AKI Enschede! studiumgenerale@artez.nl

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About the film series

Sentient Encounters

The word sentient denotes a conscious feeling and an awareness of one's carnal experience as well as one's existence. For this reason, the word sentient was equated to intelligence and awareness, and was deemed to be characteristic of only select bodies—human bodies. The word became a means to order matters of the world and enforce (existing) taxonomies and hierarchies between species and their differences. As such a regulator of order between bodies, the word sentient became to enforce anthropocentric worldview – the belief that the human is the measure of all knowledge about the world.

In this series of film screenings and discussions, we propose to reimagine and reclaim sentience to describe relations with bodies that are still excluded from meaning-making practices. We will encounter bodies that are ignored and not recognized as existing because of these taxonomies, and because of power structures and hierarchies that define what a body can be.

Rather than rejecting the word sentient, we propose to contaminate it with multiple relations, which are present in more than visual encounters. Importantly, we aim not to expand the definition of sentience while keeping the division between sentient and non sentient intact. Rather, by multiplying it, we want to shake and reimagine different understanding of bodies and our practices as 'liminal' – as already in a state of in-betweenness of fixed categorizations and identifications. By naming encounters rather than bodies as sentient, we pay attention to modes of practices and relations that generate and mutate these bodies. The way we practice bodies, the way we relate, does matter. All relations are sentient, and all relations are risky, as they may lead to creation or may cause harm, as they may make bodies flourish or perish. By recognizing encounters as sentient, we aim to reimagine and bring together differing stories of how to live and practice multispecies bodies and our becoming.

Sentient Encounters is a collaboration between Sjoerd van Oevelen (Department head of Moving Image, AKI Enschede), Agnieszka Wolodzko (initiator and lecturer AKI BIO MATTERS), and supported by ARTEZ studium generale.

