

ETHER SMILES

PHILIPP PESS

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It's possible because everything is possible, if you - and you must - believe Peter, the mastermind, the genius, the little-bit-too-confident head of sales at the ARTHA cooperation. This is a cutting-edge market player revolutionising the entire art world with AI technology. The megalomaniac language we consume at the beginning of the film is as much a tortured pleasure as eating three entire Pizzas by yourself.

Philipp Pess' film, appropriately set in the cellar of WAF Gallery (has our exposure to AI been anything other than a descent into a foreign architecture?), is set in an undefined hyper-neoliberal future where the '60s counter-culture and '80s hacker culture have completed their merger into rampant casino-capitalism. Business opportunities are always only one click, one party away. There is no relation that is not informed by capital.

The language - or rather, the techno-linguistic automation of language depicted here - already infiltrates our everyday life. We are promised a lot, the impossible, and we love it. Who doesn't want to call a hotline and secure themselves an eternal supply of energy? In the film, however, the seduction of this promise is severely compromised from the outset, mediated through a bio-crypto-technology that operates not just on us, but within us. *Just follow the mushroom...*

"Anyway, are you interested in a low risk, high value, long term business opportunity?" Hell YES! Art is business and business is good.

The party continues until it doesn't. The film tries less to directly criticise the system in which we already live (or, in all likelihood will live in). Rather its strategy is affirmative: in its embrace and projection of current tendencies in capital reallocation and AI development, it tries to take a speculatively look at their roots. In a frantic mix of '90s web art and Hollywood blockbuster aesthetics, it explores questions like: Why does everything seem so inevitable? What or who's responsible? And how to possibly escape the vortex? Spoiler alert: we can't. But maybe we can still have fun, can't we...?

Despite it's humorous, sometimes satirical approach, there is then at the film's core a set of serious questions. They are placed in a much larger context than just the fate of art production. At stake is human nature itself and its tendency to plot its own decay.

Back in the IRL gallery space, above ground, Pess shows works that combine AI-generated content and hand-made material reminiscent of the film's aesthetic. The objects in the space and the film have a Matryoshka-like dialectical relationship: the logic and the narrative of the virtual blends into the space, which in turn transforms it into a kind of stage that implicitly evokes the question: how much of a Peter are we?

In contrast to its main character - 'a fixer' as he describes himself- the film doesn't have a final answer, nor poses a solution. Pess, in his meticulousness, offers us instead a carnival of clues. The whole movie is teeming with signifiers to glue together into various constellations of cause and effect: from the soup that brings Warhol's iconic Campbell's cans to mind, to the mention of 1999, the year in which The Matrix was released. The strobo-light-like significations are backed up by pointers to greater metaphysical frame works.

There is, for example, the floating talking head in the universe. The head lets us know that the only thing that IS is NOTHING and that is the void in which all our tiny consciousnesses are floating in. One could read that as a somewhat Lacanian understanding of the unconscious or as the pronouncement of a philosophical truth. The fact remains that unlike what takes place online, "life" is not a one-dimensional interface. There is something, albeit dark, whispering behind or underneath, that's worth listening to.

Not that self-knowledge ever put a stop to a hungry soul. "MORE!" screams Peter, and the head obeys: "coming right up". There are still some bio-physical laws that can't be bought-off or out-smarted, it appears. "What goes up must come down" predicts the head, and so the whole AI market crashes because of a bug that was fed into the system way back in 1968 Silicon Valley. Peter wakes up with a hangover and to plummeting stock prices but hardly chastened.

Pess plays complete havoc with the question of what a desirable end of the story would look like. The bug, now a person in flesh and blood, eventually helps the gallerist out of his miserable hunt for success and turns him - voluntarily or not - into an artwork. Is that all there is, we ask? Is this how we'd be better off, with our soaring human desires, hanging on the wall, framed? "You got a friend in me", sings the gallerist as art pice. The hyper-inflated language of cyber-business, is converted into the tame language of entertainment. One doesn't quite know whether to laugh or cry over this outcome.

Could it be, that the failures of our quests, are actually what put us into place? A confined space to muck around in, a confinement, dare I say, we secretly wish to be in? Debatable. However lost the human species-as-cyborg with its techno-subconsciousness might be, it is still not purged of the hope of deliverance from the darkness that surrounds us.

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