

UNBOXING the world

Transcript of a conversation between Federico Campagna and z99zzd

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Introduction

This document is a transcript of a conversation between Federico Campagna and z99zzd. It took place in the context of Stimuleringsfonds Digital Culture Scheme (starting grant), Creative Industries Fund NL. It is part of the planned schedule, as essential preparatory research for the development of a film sub-genre, for the granted project “Dogma 96 (unboxing core) PANICCC, Where did I put my soul?”

Consumerism, commodity Fetishism, and Reification

I can recapitulate what we were talking about, the first is the matter of Commodity Fetishism, to look at Marx, the process of Reification.

Names and boxing

The second part has to do with the question of UNBOXING, as referred to names. So the magic work on names, and how revealing a name in a way of UNBOXING a soul makes a person very fragile. So not looking specifically into souls but looking into names, because the process is very similar. The process that you explore, I suggest looking into Cavalism, but also Hekhalot literature, the work on language and names there, passwords. But also in Native Americans, the way in which asking somebody's name is very rude, (unknown) and the Black Feet, I need to check exactly which tribe and which nation.

Kind of Soul

Then we looked into the problem of the Materiality of the soul, and I was suggesting to consider, what kind of soul you are talking about? Because there are many different kinds of souls in philosophy and theology. I imagine, considering your angle, that you might be looking for something similar to a 'material soul', a soul that is an object basically, of some kind. You already know this idea of the material soul you find in (lost in transcription), in 'Stoicism', with the idea of PNEUMA, which has something to do with breath and air, which is also pneumatic. This notion that the soul is material, and connected to Air, also you find it in Hinduism, with the notion of Prana, which is the life energy. So that is the thing about the materiality of the soul, and which kind of soul you are looking at.

Immortality

Then we were discussing briefly the problem of immortality. Consider different kinds of immortality:

- In the case of Koshei it is not really immortality because it is a postponement of the death, and so it is not really immortality postponing, potential immortality, but not really.
- You find the idea of postponing immortality by putting the soul somewhere else, for example:
 - In the Greek myths.
 - A woman that gives birth to a child and it's predicted that he would remain alive until she keeps certain coal, piece of coal intact. When that coal is

burned, he dies immediately. This is a typical thing, you will find it repeated in many instances.

- Another kind of immortality has to do with infinite life.
 - There are two kinds
 - Infinite life, infinitely young. The Olympian gods.
 - And infinite life that is infinitely old. The myth of Tithonus, the origin of the cicada, the insect. The cicada is seen as originated from this man who was made infinitely old, until it transforms into an insect.

Note on Immortality as 'Infinite Life'

A small note on immortality as infinite life: it can also be dependent on something, for example in Greek mythology you have those immortal gods that are infinitely young, they all rely on something else to remain immortal. They usually have feasts and banquets, the gods are always at a banquet. Why? why are they at a banquet? do they need to eat? Yes, the need to eat Ambrosia and Nectar, two foods that cannot be found on earth, and endure that the gods remain infinitely alive. When a god does something wrong to another god, there is a punishment among the Olympians, and the punishment is that this god is no longer invited to a banquet. This is a big punishment because if they do not have access to Nectar and Ambrosia they enter a coma, something like a coma. They are like vegetables, for a period of time, until they are readmitted. So their immortality is suspended, weirdly.

You find a similar thing in Hinduism, in Vedic Hinduism, with the notion of Soma, Soma is a beverage. Beverage of the gods that forms a similar function to the Nectar and Ambrosia in Greek religion. Of course the point is, if you are mortal and get to drink Ambrosia and Nectar you become immortal, in the same way, if you get to drink Soma you become immortal.

However, these things we don't know how they are, and they might not be found in the world.

I suggest looking into Gilgamesh and the Alexander romance, in terms of the Myst, examples of Myst immortality, Immortality that is stolen away from somebody. In the case of Gilgamesh, stolen by a snake, in the case of Alexander the great, taken by a fish. You find the same in the story of Al Kihdr and Moses, in the case of Moses is not stolen by a fish, it is Moses that fails really.

Occultation and Hiding

The next bit is the problem of OCCULTATION, so the problem of HIDING.

When we talk about unveiling, if we would have to say in Greek we would use the word Alétheia, it means truth, literally, so the truth is that which is unveiled, so UNBOXING.

Unboxing something, the Alétheia, is the moment of revelation, so for example when you say apocalypse, in Greek that means revelation. Revelation means, re-velation, so taking the veils off. So literally, once again, means unveiling, UNBOXING. Apocalypse, Aletheia, both these words being UNBOXING. (min 6:00). One refers to truth, in a logical sense, Alétheia. One refers to truth in a scatological sense, Apocalypse, so the general revelation of the truth of the

world. As you imagine, Apocalypse is something that is not for us to do, so we cannot UNBOX the world. There is another force that does it for us, in religion. And in philosophy, Alétheia, also is not within our abilities, so there is an impossibility of UNBOXING the world.

When we look at the notion of Alétheia as revealing, we, first of all, think of the work of Martin Heidegger, a German philosopher of the 20th century, and much of his work is about this, how we unveil the truth of objects. And he suggests that we usually unveil the truth of objects through particular frames. So we never unveil them fully, but we unveil them within a particular point of view, within a particular frame literally. For example, we usually unveil the essence of objects, in terms of their instrumentality, the extent to which they become tools, and he says that this basically allows us to interact with the world in a certain way, but it also adds another veil, adds another BOX, so that we are further separated from the true essence of things. And he says, sometimes is when the instrument is broken that we get a glimpse to the reality of things. So somehow when our UNBOXING goes wrong, to a certain extent. So we have a project of UNBOXING, UNBOXING things in the way that we UNBOX a tool and object, an instrument, and when this unboxing goes wrong, because the object is broken, or we fail to see its instrumentality, then somehow we get a glimpse of the true unboxing, but just a glimpse. So in this perspective, the way in which we appropriate the power of the thing is through UNBOXING, through unveiling.

But there is another perspective on BOXING, and keeping things hidden and not unveiling them, and this belongs well to the Iranian Shia tradition, in particular to the Twelver tradition. In Shia Islam, in the Twelve declination, there is a series of Imams, that is considered a series of spiritual

masters. And the last of these Imams, the twelve, at some point, historically, was persecuted by its opponents, and had to hide. He hid somewhere, probably on a cave. And he started communicating from the cave. He communicated for a few years until he sent the last message saying “I will now go into complete occultation”, ultimate occultation. This total occultation doesn't mean that he dies, he means that he goes to a complete hiding. His BOXING is complete, and it will be revealed only at the moment of the apocalypse, the final UNBOXING of all the truth of the world. In the period of time in between, which is now, basically. When he is BOXED, he is BOXED, yes, but that means that he is immortal, in the sense that he resides in occultation, in the world, all the time, and he has been occulted, hidden. His place is within the soul of each person. So the Twelve Imam, still lives, hidden within the soul of the faithful.

This concept is also taken in Sufism, in the way that there is always the notion of the spiritual pole. So like the North Pole and the South Pole, the spiritual pole of the world, is the hidden master that always exists in every time, in every age, even during catastrophes. Most often nobody knows where they are, this hidden master is the one that is like the king of the world, Rene Guenon wrote about this. The King of the World that holds the world together. And once again, the pole is within the soul of the faithful, that is how you can find it, so the process of Unveiling where this pole really is, it is the process of self examination, and mystical journey.

Games

Now, moving on to the next, the question of GAMES, and then stories.

Note on the term Gamification

Games, now, since you are working on games and gamification, first of all, I would resist the temptation of using too much the word ‘gamification’, because gamification has a particular connotation, basically, gamification is the way of making something that is a form of trading, or a form of capitalist function. Economic process into a game. So it has a bitter taste, the word gamification, maybe try to find another way of expressing that, I would suggest.

Narratology and Ludology

- Ludology

In general, you might want to look into the general work on Ludology. Ludology is the study of games, Ludos. and here you find many authors:

- Huizinga, who is the inventor of Ludology in modern times.
- Roger Caillois, surrealist French, very interesting.
- But also, and most importantly, I would suggest. the person to consider is Eugen Fink. He was a friend of Husserl and Heidegger. Interesting philosopher, he didn't have much fortune in his life, but he wrote an essay which is now contained into a book, titled “Play as symbols of the World”. Because you have a symbolic approach to your narration, you might want to bring back the fact that ‘play’ itself, so games themselves, are enormous symbolic machines. Eugen Fink develops exactly this notion. In the essay and the book “Play as symbol of the World”. How does he do it? I will tell you briefly because the text is a bit complicated, but you can read it, no problem. Basically he starts by looking at Heraclitus, Heraclitus is an ancient Greek philosopher, before Socrates, before philosophy,

the word *sophoi*, before the friends of wisdom, philosophers, there were the wisemen. And Heraclitus was one of these wise men. And in one of his fragments, he talks about how “*Ion* is a child that plays”. *Ion* means Time, but also means World, so the Universe, so to say, is a “Child that Plays”. Eugen Fink's text starts with this quote, so basically, if you want to understand the essence of what the universe itself is, the totality of what exists what it is, he says, “play games are the closest idea that we have”, to what fundamentally reality is, it is a game, is a child that plays. And so he moved from that to develop this notion that when we approach games then we are trying to define a way into the essence of reality itself, as it appears to us. So this could be really useful if you want to reconnect the two things.

- Narratology

Then on games we need to discuss more because I want to understand better how you understand the game. But before we do that, one last thing to consider is, since you are working on character building, then you also have to consider the notion, the question, the practice, of Narratology. Narratology is basically a study, like ludology is the study of games, narratology is the study of narratives. Literary criticism. And particularly that trend of literary texts in which a story is inserted within a story, which is inserted within a story, which is inserted within a story. And of course the first thing that comes to mind is the ‘One thousand and one nights’, but not only that, I mean you can find it also in Roberto Calasso, Italian writer that recently disappeared, “The Marriage of Cadmus and Harmony”, for example, is a story within a story within a story. You find it in many different examples but maybe have a look at also how this process of inserting something within something within something, is replicated also in narrative text.

I am saying this because in the debate around games and particularly around video games, basically Ludology and Narratology, are the two main academic trends, the work on video games, in particular as explored in the past 30 years, the two main theoretical avenues, are:

- people who concentrate on games as games, Ludology
- people who look at games as narratives, Narratology

Now there are new ways of understanding different approaches. Stefano Gualeni, for example. Stefano Gualeni, “Digital worlds as philosophical tools” or “Virtual Existentialism”, these two books are very good. He is one of the best among the new ones. But until very recently Narratology and Ludology were the main ways of understanding video games, so you might want to enter a dialogue with people who have been thinking about video games for the past twenty or thirty years. For now this is my bit, now guide me to the next bit.

- Note on the terms Symbol, Allegory, and Sign

Just a couple of notes here, one is general, because we have been freely using the term symbols. Maybe in the way we are using it here, we should use the word Allegory, is more precise. An allegory is when you have a little sign that stands for something else. So you have a little flower that stands for purity or lion that stands for strength. So when there is this intuitive connexion, allegorical, let's use the word allegory. Otherwise let's use the word sign. If you have the health bar for example, it is a sign. It is not a symbol, a symbol is something that is a visual representation of something that is entirely irrepresentable.

First-person character building, Enrolling, and De-rolling

In terms of character building, and the first person. I think that what is interesting to consider here is also the process of, not just the process of creating the character, because the process of creating the character in itself is fairly simple, you basically create somebody, you create a 'literary object', but the process of Entering the character, and Exiting the character, for the player. That is the interesting, fascinating, and magical thing. So the process of what we could call 'Enrolling' and 'Derolling'. Entering that character and exiting that character. Looking at all the ways in which you create a process to enter, for example in Role Play, specially the old Role Play. When you create your character, it is a long process, and the fact that it is a long process, is part of the thing because it is a way of entering slowly in this character.

In traditional societies you could say that the adult is a character, for example, and when you become an adult you enter this character through the use of rituals, purification, and so on and so forth. So I would suggest considering the way in which you enter this process as a player. Especially in terms of video games, one thing that I mentioned earlier was the work of Stefano Gualeni and Daniel Vella. In the book *Virtual Existentialism* they look at the process of Enrolling and Derolling. Which is specifically interesting in this case.

On Rules, Game-making, and the Activity of Play

Now the other thing is the relationship with rules, that is very interesting and complicated, obviously. When you create a game of course you have to set rules, and to a certain extent a

game is nothing but the rules. It is just rules, a game, fundamentally. And then here you can make a distinction between a game which is fundamentally a set of rules, and the activity of play, they are different things.

A game is a set of rules, the activity of play is to act in relation with the rules in a particular way to the point that you can have absolutely free play, in theory. So, and we are coming back to the beginning, Heraclitus talking about the reality as a 'child that plays', is a child that plays free play. Okay so, then there is this interesting kind of spectrum of how strange you want the rules to be. So how much you want to put the emphasis on the game making and on the play, and the two things are separate, they go together but they are different.

Set rules, chaos, and order, Nietzschean games

Another thing to consider when thinking about rules, is setting a rule is also setting an order, now setting an order is important, because when you create a game, or when you live a life, you always create a landscape, or a setting for the game. However minimal it might be, in order for a world to appear you need to have rules. The world itself, cosmos in Greek means ordered, in Latin mundus, means adorned and clean, basically tidied up. To the extent to which you want to create a game you need to have rules, and once again, as Eugen Fink suggested, here you are using a symbol of the world, as in you are using that particular thing, the rules of the game, the fact that the game has got an order, and a landscape, and a setting. To signify something that is beyond our understanding which is the general total structure of the universe. Not as a chaos, but as a cosmos. Not as a disorder but as an order. Not as a completely unruléd but as ruled.

So then, the problem of changing the rules as you go, allowing the player to set their own rules.

You can allow the player to set their own rules, that is fine, the interesting challenge at that point would be:

- First, are they allowed to modify the rules? as they continue through the game
- and secondly, between one modification and the other, are they allowed to transgress the rules? what happens if they transgress the rules? are they ejected from the game? is the game modified?

So basically here you are contemplating philosophical questions in the shape of a game, and that is exactly the same in Life. Philosophers for a long time insisted on the fact that the world has rules. For example, there is natural order, and you were born male so you have to be a strong, brave, warrior. Another one is born female, you know, those are the rules of the game, so she has to act in a particular way, and so on and so forth.

Giovanni Pico della Mirandola

And then you have other philosophers saying, no, that is not the case, there are no natural rules. Specifically in the case of the humans, Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, renaissance philosopher says “humans are the only beings that have no rules, they can do whatever they like”.

Nietzsche, the ability to say Yes

In the case of Nietzsche, as the ability of the mind, so the point of living is to disintegrate all rules, and then being once again in that position of the child that plays. So in "the three metamorphosis of the spirit", the story through which Nietzsche describes different stages of the mind, basically unconsciousness. It begins with the figure of the donkey that takes all the weight of the world on their shoulder, so accepts all three rules. Then the lion, the one that destroys all the rules, and then the perfection, the child that plays. The child that makes up the rules as they go, and then rechanges and remakes them, beyond good and evil.

- Now, to be in that position however, the position of the child, in the case of Nietzsche, is interesting because of being in that position of absolute creation. In reality what the child creates is not entirely different rules, fundamentally what the child is able to do is to say Yes to life, which is the point in Nietzsche. The point in Nietzsche is not to overcome the world. The *Übermensch*, the superman, in Nietzsche is not somebody who bends the world to their will, but is somebody who is capable of saying yes to everything. Yes to death. Yes to boredom. Yes to the eternal return. Yes to suffering. Yes to joy. Yes to loss. Yes to everything, but to be able to say yes to such an extent that it is as if they decided it.
- So incorporated the rules, to certain extent, not as rules but incorporating the chaos and then turning it into a cosmos by saying Yes to the chaos. So this is a way of understanding the relationship with the rules that you don't find in any video games yet. There are no Nietzschean video games. At the moment there is more like the videogame in the traditional Aristotelian sense: these are the rules, you are this kind of thing, and

then you are that thing. Maximum, you can change it, at some point, that's it, but once set, you have to stick with it.

- Then there is that option of infinite possibilities of the renaissance, which is maybe something they started to flirt with, so the fact of having the possibility of changing the rules as you go. But the final, the tragic sense of playing, in Nietzsche, that one nobody has ever done. So the idea that is the transformation of the chaos into a game, happens within the person who is capable of saying yes to the chaos and turning it into a game. Commercially would be disastrous, philosophically very interesting.

Do you mean, that person is the player?

- Yes, a player that is put into a situation which is not a game, into a situation that is chaos, and they cannot fundamentally modify anything. And also there are no rules to follow, because there are no rules as such, but by accepting the chaos, they transform it into rules, and they say yes. And there are rules that they decide.

Eternal Return, circular time

I know Nietzsche is not easy to grasp immediately, but this is what you find in the notion of the Eternal Return. Nietzsche is famous for having destroyed every notion of truth, so cultural values, whatever value we have, the notion of truth just comes from our decisions, basically, they are conventional, they say nothing about reality. Okay, so this is Nihilism, and then he goes beyond Nihilism, and he says that one thing that we understand, that we can understand for example on the notion of time, and all the events, is that events infinitely repeat themselves.

There is an infinite repetition of time. Time is circular, and things are infinitely repeated. The thought that things work this way, is unbearable, that is why we usually try to think that time is linear. He says this idea of the eternal return is unbearable because you have to think that this particular moment in time will be repeated infinite times. The decision that you are taking in three minutes from now will be repeated eternally, and you eternally will have to go through it.

Now, this says, we have to be able to say yes to this. Yes to this eternal return, but we are not capable of, only the superman, the *Urbemensch*, is capable of saying yes to the eternal return, for us is unbearable. So you see it is transforming chaos into a game within the self, by the way you enter the role, the character. So here I am focusing not so much on the character itself, the character itself is fairly easy to create, it is just a literary game, what is really difficult is to design the way in which the player enters the character and acts as the character. Do they take the character as a task? as a project? do they take the character as a field of possibilities? do they take the character as a challenge to spiritually transform themselves? so to be able to make a game out of chaos? You see there are many options. So what I would recommend if you want to do something beyond the normal discussion of games, at the moment, is to consider in particular the way in which the player inhabits the character. Rather than the creation of the character itself, that is technical. You can do that easily.

One last thing of course refers back to UNBOXING and BOXING, because Enrolling and Derolling, entering and exiting, produces transformations. You BOX yourself into the character, you UNBOX yourself from the character or vice versa. You UNBOX your soul and put it into the character, and vice versa. So you see you keep the same refrain. And so with the same

thinking you try to hold all the objects of your research together. Since you are interested in this passage, think of the relationship between the player and the character, rather than just the character.

Ecstasy, outside of yourself, notes on Enrolling and Derolling

It is interesting because you are now making a connection with the identity of the person and the Role Play in relation to the soul, right? Like, you are sort of exchanging your soul, or something like that. When you Role Play you are just turning into someone else.

- In fact, that is something that we were talking about earlier. In terms of the process of entering, it requires a series of passages. For example, transferring your soul into another one. To be able to do that, first you have to take your self-identification outside of yourself, and then you can put it into something else. Now the process of taking it outside of yourself is strange because then you are outside of yourself.
- Now, there is once again, a Greek word to describe the fact of standing outside of yourself, is 'ecstasy', extasis, is ex-tasis, to stand outside. So you stand literally outside of yourself, so there is an ecstatic quality to this passage. Of course, the mystic remains in ecstasy, so it enters another body, stays in the exis, stays in this between. And you find it also in Tibetan buddhism. This moment of ecstasy refers to death, since you were talking about your grandfather in that way. According to Tibetan Buddhism, after we die, before we are reincarnated, there is a moment in between which is called "Bardo". Bardo is a moment in between lives, in which you stand outside one, and not yet into another. And in

this moment things change and you kind of are directed towards the next life, but it is a very important moment of passage.

- You find this exact moment, in between, before you enrol into another character, in Plato's Republic. You know, Plato the Greek philosopher's most famous book probably is the Republic, which is a discussion about many things. The order of the soul, the order of the state, and it ends with a dream. Plato was just extraordinary, the best writer ever, to be honest, in all genres. Ends with a dream, the dream is of this guy called Er. Er was dead, and they put him in the funerary pyre for burning. At some point he wakes up, and he says "hold on i'm not dead, I just came back to life, but in the period of time that I was dead, I was with the dead, and I saw what happens after the dead, and I saw what happens between one life and the other". They believe in reincarnation, like Pitagoras, of course, the "Transmigration of Souls". And he says, "after you die, you get into this massive valley and you are with all the other dead, and in the valley there is this pile of things, like scrolls I think, and there are the destinies. The destinies of your next life, and the people who have died only once, who are young souls, usually rush into the pile and pick for themselves the best life. They want to be the tyrant of the big city, or a very rich man, or the general of an army. The people who have died many times before usually wait until the end, and then among the leftovers they pick the life of a fisherman, alone with its family. He says "I saw Odysseus, from The Odyssey, he was there with me, and he left everybody else pick their destinies first, because they didn't know, the young souls, that in the destiny of a tyrant there is also the destiny of being killed by your daughter, or being a rich man and being assassinated by your servants". Odysseus, he is a wise man,

chooses for himself the role of being a quiet fisherman living alone with his family a happy and nice life.

- That moment of passage is described in terms of inbetween souls in The Republic, in the dream of Er, that you find right at the end. And it is fascinating because it is literally this, so you are literally in front of so many characters that you can embody, and you pick one. And this is the way in which Plato imagined the very act of coming to life, that means that the life in which you are is a character that you have embodied. Like Darío is a character that a soul that animates now, picked up at some point. This is the game that you are playing, until it ends and you then pick another game. So the notion of ‘transmigration of souls’ and reincarnation is very relevant to this.
- One last thing, you can see this in terms of a game, in terms of fun, so the reincarnation is great, you have another life and you have another try, but you can also see it in another way, which is the Indian way, the cycle of reincarnations, entering characters, is our damnation, we need to break free from characters, we need to find the way to disintegrate ourselves from, disintegrate our characters and never enter a character again. We need to stop the game, and this is liberation, Nirvana, because the game is Samsara, so it is a state of ignorance. So in a sense they would say that this is a state of falsehood and ignorance, a state of being veiled, the opposite of Aletheia, so being under a veil, they call it Maia, the veil, in Sanskrit, the same you find in the greek philosophy. So life, game, is to be BOXED. Liberation is to be totally UNBOXED, from all characters. In a way by creating a character you create a BOX, and the player is BOXED within a character. And within the character they have infinite Lifes, as long as the character has it. The moment that you

step out of the game, you are UNBOXED, and you return. “That fragility could be the aim”, say the Indians, that is liberation, that is Nirvana.

Koshei and the Genie

To go back to Koshei. I was just presenting here some options, not all of them, but some of the other options about the problem. The case of Koshei. I mean, Koshei itself, in that particular way as it is immortal, reminds me in a way of the Genie, of a demon, like in the “Thousand and one nights”. The genies that often are locked within objects, usually a vase, or a lamp in the case of Aladin, but usually in other containers, that is the closest that comes to mind. In the case of the genies it is strange because it is not seen as a positive, it is seen as a damnation. Usually the genies want to be liberated, UNBOXED, and usually it is a bad idea to UNBOX them. Because, apart from Aladdin in the Disney film, most of the genies are evil, in Arabic and Iranian folk tales. They are not nice guys. You don’t want to liberate them. They are unpredictable, they are incredibly powerful, they are a bit like nuclear power. Something that potentially could be very useful but actually if you don’t manage it super carefully would explode. And that is usually what happens.

Koshei is interesting, but what would be interesting to do there is to give Koshei a family. It would be interesting to look at the difference. I suggested a few in the beginning, different examples of other things that resemble Koshei a little bit. And try to give a family to Koshei. A family of all the other characters that share similar characteristics. A category invented by you. The Genies, the Greek hero whose life is dependent on a piece of coal, and so on and so forth.

The Cosmists, a Koshei's family member

Another one is the Cosmists, the Russian cosmists, in the early 20th, late 19th century, in Russia, there was a big movement of cosmists, and they were thinkers, scientists, that basically wanted to achieve immortality. To a great extent through technology, and one of the ways that they thought about was to export their consciousness, for example, inserting it into objects and into machines. That is an old dream that is still alive, people that want to upload their brain into something, you know, those kinds of fantasies. But you might want to have a look at them as well. Boris Groys writes beautifully about the cosmists, but you can also just do a little search online and you will find that another member of the family of Koshei is there. Among the Cosmists.