

Christoph Schlingensief

Animatograph – Iceland Edition. (House of Parliament / House of Obsession), 2005
Multimedia installation and performance

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Burrowing into the Global Context: Schlingensief's Animatograph, Read through Aristotle and Hegel

MIRJAM

SCHAUB

The soul and the body can always be truly distinguished, but inseparability traces a coming and going between one level and the other. . . . If my body, the body that belongs to me, is a body according to the laws of collections, it is because its parts not only grow and shorten, involve and evolve, but also never cease to move about and go away (“fluxion”). And, when they leave, the monads that are inseparable from either follow them or evade me. Requisites of my body, these were merely “pro tempore” requisites.

Gilles Deleuze¹

Possessing a Soul Begins With Fearlessly Yielding to a Perspective (Aristotle I)

In his book *De anima (On the Soul)*, Aristotle, in contrast to the pre-Socratics, delineates the five sensory organs themselves as being constituents of the soul that have been brought to life, or animated. Why? Because what we call the soul is based on our perceptions alone; they are its fundamental fabric and its elixir of life. We are meant to see, alongside Aristotle, that while our senses *suffer (passein)*, our perceptions do not cause us to experience an excessive amount of pain or desire. Also, Aristotle views the process by which each of these senses is brought to life—that is to say, awakened from its naturally passive state—strictly within the framework of the respective perceptual powers, that is, from *aisthetón*. Aristotle understands the moment of perception itself, or the *aisthesis hetéra*, as suffering—suffering in the sense of a qualitative change (*alloíosis*).² Every sensory organ appears to be temporarily altered by stimulatory input at the moment in which it is affected, be that stimulus light, sound, pressure, a scent, or an aroma. This

leads it through a remarkable process of becoming *like* the very object of perception.³

Aristotle employs the concept of a mean (*metaxy*) to moderate the reversible and temporary change each sense organ undergoes when stimulated. This should prevent the organ from being harmed either by over- or understimulation. Perception itself is “like a kind of mean that traverses the antitheses embedded within that which is perceptible.”⁴ Only a sense organ that maintains a mean between the extremes of possible sensations can be capable of making distinctions (*tò gar méson kritikón*).⁵ This maintenance of the mean, this balancing out of extremes (the desire to fully be the perception itself while yet being anything but that which is perceived) is no simple matter. On the one hand, the task of the sensory organs is to “mediate” real-world experience without associating itself with any particular side. On the other hand, it requires diaphanous, transparent media—such as the air, saliva, or even a thin hymen—to bring about the receptive alterations in the sensory organ. For Aristotle the empiricist, our sensory organs are animated in a strictly “external” way, brought to life through random and multitudinous perceptions, like marionettes via invisible threads. (Perception happens without us willing it or even contributing individuality to it.) Where does this nonpersonal nature come from? It is apparently linked to a neutrality at the “heart” of every sense that one might call diplomatic.

Receptivity remains tied to “mandatory neutrality” for the simple reason that it allows each sense the hope of making its most minute differentiations wholly free of fear. What kind of thing could induce “fear” in a sensory organ? The loss of its own capabilities to differentiate in such a wonderfully nuanced way can. And such a fear is well founded; anaesthetization and hyperaesthetization

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themselves pose virulent threats to sensitivity. Darkness and extreme brightness, silence and extreme noise—every sense *knows*, from its own painful experience, its own deafness, its own thresholds, and all such extremes.⁶ Oversensitivity because of overstimulation, forced insensitivity due to a sudden dearth of stimulation—in the face of these extremes, the flight to the mean suddenly becomes the only logical option. Even for Aristotle, “the excess of perceptible properties,” no matter whether too small or too great, destroys “the perceptory organs.”⁷ Hence, it seems that the senses’ *openness to sensitivity*, won by avoiding or even fleeing extremes, is understood as a tribute to individual oversensitivity and undersensitivity and as an accomplishment in terms of psychological adaptation—but its Pulcinello-like flight from the gaping mouth of the crocodile will never be resolved.

Having a Near-Death Experience Begins with Yielding to an External Movement (Schlingensiefel I)
Christoph Schlingensiefel’s extensive animatographic project (2005–8) demonstrates how easily this Aristotelian accomplishment can be capsized in such a way that it reinforces pain. Overcoming the lassitude of human perception is Schlingensiefel’s pedagogical Eros. His actual pop-culture creed is the holy, healing power of overstimulation and the resolute affirmation of that overstimulation. He confronts the deluge with more deluge, he floods the working machinery of culture by sending its fears, vanities, and claims of significance, back to it, like cultural flotsam. Success in this endeavor requires a holy earnestness alongside a sense of sheer, powerless fun—that childlike astonishment at what appears possible.⁸ Like all Schlingensiefel’s other artistic works and actions, the *Animatograph* is not a *final product* but instead

a model, a stimulus for provoking thought, a mechanism for testing and fine-tuning, in order to allow space to become time. “When I present prototypes,” Schlingensiefel stated, “the dream of evincing a euphoric stand lurks behind them, the dream of showing that it is actually possible to bring such a thing into being.”⁹

Upon exiting the revolving stage first used in Schlingensiefel’s *Parsifal*, the *Animatographs* focus, first, on breaking “out of the box” of the theater as a moral establishment including the audience (as a “fourth wall”) and, second, on discarding the expectation that seeing a film is a one-sided projectional event. Once the revolving stage has left the opera house, it seizes to function as a Ptolemaic theater prop and begins to work like a Copernican one. This compares with Francis Picabia’s notion that our heads are round so that our thinking can change directions. Things begin functioning in a Beuysian fashion as a social sculpture, an intervention. And in all of this, Schlingensiefel borrows from Aristotle the idea of a strictly external process of animation. *Anima* (the soul), *animation* (coming to life through external movement), and *graphein* (writing down, the process of chronicling)—these three defining concepts intertwine within the *Animatographs* like a rotating aperture showing everything multiple times so that it will not flicker too much. But if this is taken in too quickly, the viewer merely identifies the *Animatographs* with the revolving stage—certainly just one pathetic detail with a high degree of recognition. The *Animatograph* provides us with a stand-in for a level of perception that has yet to be enforced; a prototype, half real yet still half conceptual, for the series-like relay of utterly nonuniform installations, films, gestures, sounds, costumes, props—in short, a spontaneous *Gesamtkunstwerk*. In the process, the *Animatograph* produces both thrills and prototypes, tailor-made in their bulkiness,





well calibrated to it, crossing the line of good taste, transgressing the boundaries of profane perceptibility, to be crushed like . . . a pigeon?

The apparatus cleverly cloaks its actual function within all this. In and of itself soulless, it must be brought to life through the potential and opposing movements that are external to it yet that still take place upon it through explorations and encounters. Also, qua its own revolving motion, which leads to nothing, it is free to load itself with the meaning that stems from the place, its circumstances, and of course, the people streaming toward it. This transportable rotation machine lends itself as a tool for manifold projections—an oversize footboard that looks as if it is trapped in its circular motion, revolving around and around itself, while silently relying on the centrifugal forces of the surrounding space. (In an African village made of corrugated metal, where electricity is a precious commodity, it is kept in motion using mopeds.) Being a solid object of the horizontal sphere it transforms into a platform on which the Song of Solomon might rise up to the heavens.

Trans-cendere—so let us rehearse the art of excessiveness, of stepping over the line. You can get a conceptual clue of Schlingensiefel's desire to transcend boundaries from when the work was first installed in Iceland: Right here, in this place, where the Old World and the New World drift 8 mm farther apart every year, is where the Animatographical prototype is emerging: A pen of the soul. A treadable sheet of film. An organic body situated between mankind's most ancient wish for government (Pingvellir) and ungovernable obsessions (Holmur). Here, on the earth's crust, spirits ride our bodies; this is where the biggest film I'll ever make begins. From this fringe, we will travel the earth, crossing cultural and civilizational rape crime scenes to reach the African underworld in October; search for the hammer; bore holes in the walls to our neighbors next door; and, upon the ostrich egg's world announcement,

fly to Nepal, and from there to the plastic coffins inside the American twin tomb. . . . A dream I fulfill for myself. For anyone who gazes on the *Animatograph* exposes it. And anyone who trespasses it is exposed.¹⁰

For Schlingensiefel, it is always about burrowing into the interwoven context of the world as quickly and efficaciously as possible. (Thankfully, in this pursuit, he avoids the shamelessness of Hollywood, with its hypocritical desire to rescue the world.) But we are still left with the suspicion that he and others are systematically overwhelmed. Schlingensiefel's rhetorical first-aid kit for melancholy only temporarily assuages doubts as to the significance of it all. A project like this one threatens to end in exhaustion; he talks about the multiple-room works, which encompass a broad palette of materials (ink, stuffed animals, wooden crosses, grime), media (installation art, film, music, theater arts), and living beings (fish, wet and dry, with eyes or without; chickens, plucked, dissected or not; and, of course, hares). He speaks of them as if he were speaking of a ravenous mechanism that simultaneously functions as a solar disk, as an establishment instituted for thing hosting, as a reception committee for extraterrestrials, a broadcast station for religious proponents, a picture catapult, a means of summoning the heavenly pantheon, a myth centrifuge—in short, as the representative pen of the soul, or “soul writer,”¹¹ for an era gifted with an overabundance of alternative perceptions.

“The *Animatograph* is a translator,” writes Elfriede Jelinek rhapsodically: Everything is possible in and on it, and thus everything is impossible just by happening. A revolving sheet of film that everything that is can get on. All aboard! It presents, especially in permanent revolution, a continually moving “transformational body” (which is to say, one that records all takes and gives back what it plays so it gives you nothing you ever had, because it's playing back all the time anyway, taking and giving nonstop;



it takes and gives everything possible, Schlingensief calls it a “soul writer,” it writes down what’s there but isn’t there—a kind of focus coordinate which can only be seen from a single spot and from none other.¹² Commensurate with the overcodification of possible utilizations, an *Animatograph* must always be awakened and brought to life anew. It is at that point that the division of responsibilities starts to become clearer. If the *Animatograph* does not happen to camp out on our front doorstep, we, the viewers, driven by our sense of curiosity and astonishment and our quest for meaning, must first travel the globe (20,000 km seems reasonable),¹³ make our way through a series of interwoven spaces, descend into a sepulchral cellar or venture into dusty townships, in order to encounter (as in Iceland) unappropriated political slogans (“This is world announcement!”—a pronouncement making the pronouncement singular), before the promise of a Thai restaurant ahead drives us deeper into the memorial shrines dedicated to artistic role models (Joseph Beuys and Dieter Roth) that, along with an assortment of miscellaneous items from the Nordic collection of myths (the *Edda*, in tatters), create the impression of a grotesque, overinflated educational institution for those hungering after meaning. Pregroomed, overcooked, and trash-aesthetically taken to heart to such an extent that viewers—no matter whether enamored of the peaceful abstraction of the *white cube* or the dusky velvet hues of the *black box*—have to let go of all hope, all illusions, and all utopias. We enter the door to hell with Dante. Wait, stop: we can also, on the basis of Aristotle, begin to budget with our own ability to feel and sense things—yes, to scrimp, to protect them from the bodily after a sweeping trump card of visual, auditory, and narrative thrills is played, thrills all shouting the same thing: *I don’t want to be a whole! Not even a part of that strength that always negates and so on.*

**Every Movement Requires Darkness:
The Animatograph as a Rotating Aperture**

Instead, like a hunger artist, we must traverse the plywood wall, allowing the first look through the peephole at the slowly turning, nine-by-nine-meter apparatus. It deflects every glimpse straightaway; the stage is full of obstacles, accessorized with boards as barricades to sight, the remainders of a tongue-in-cheek lesson on the technological basics of the cinema. The plywood walls have more than one purpose, serving simultaneously as projectional walls and as massive-scale apertures. With natural slits that turn with the motion of the disk, they are like the rotating apertures of the film, respectively throwing each of the pictures into shadow at regular spatial intervals, showing them twice each and then reeling on fitfully. Similar to the shutter, a mechanical device that allows light to enter a camera, the rotating aperture of the projector rests in the middle of the path of the light, before the level of the picture. Without the volatile alternation between opacity and the glare of the light, the human eye would not be able to allow the afterimages to be produced on the retina and then to intermittently brighten and fade so the eye can indirectly regulate its own level of stimulus. Without the lassitude of the eye, we would never be able to interpret the individual pictures that are affixed in a film row as actually moving.

The shutter walls on the revolving stage are simultaneously apertures for light exposure and utilizable silver screens, turning away below the pictures cast onto them. As Shakespeare wrote, “All the world’s a stage,” and no fewer than five projectors decorate its space. In a conversation with Alexander Kluge, Schlingensief once again reduplicates his reflexive approach and delineates the idea of people who allow themselves to be carried atop the disk through the room by the rotating aperture—as light as a feather,



like Nils Holgersson atop his goose—hence becoming projectional surfaces themselves, both for the projected film material and for other viewers, while the five projected films ideally edit themselves independently by using the revolving slit of the shutter walls. Such persons rarely get the chance to project their own concepts onto this revolving stage; they themselves, with their own physical being, lurch into the role of a movable projectional surface. Given enough breathing space and desire to, they can observe the multiple projections encircling and orbiting them: a projection of a projection of a projection. The loss of control and any possibility to intervene did not, however, strike fear into Schlingensiefel, who stated: “There is a fantastic scene in the Iceland *Animatograph* where we’re sitting on a sofa . . . and the films are practically cast upon us from the outside but also come simultaneously from behind with a video projector in such a way that the films edit themselves; they are tiny individual pieces like the *Edda*, the Bible, the Koran—tiny pieces of information, tiny verses, apodictic sayings. . . . You take these, and the space and time machine itself splices them together into an endless story.”¹⁴

In order to digest such a story, you must first sit down. And the rotating disk does indeed have a sofa, a grandmother-style standing lamp, and a toilet. The viewer is also wordlessly invited to linger here, breathing, seeing, sitting, perceiving—but what? Some of it reminds me of an old project for the RTL television station: “Schlingensiefel’s guests sat on their sofa as if perched atop the plate in a microwave and rotated around their own axis. It’s TALK 2000: Something’s running amok, emptying out and streaming into tiny escapes and major studio battles.”¹⁵

Everything is there in the Iceland Edition, from battles and fleeing to curses, including the excruciatingly embarrassing

(Odin jerking off with a fish, supplied with the sideline commentary, “Odin is coming”) and highly symbolic (Odin blinds himself together with a fish eye, beating the remaining cadaver on a white cross that is sent across the water on a journey to unknown shores); the critical (in terms of the Iceland genome project); the annoying (Schlingensiefel’s distorted voice attributing the end of the world to the narrow-minded moodiness of the gods); the spitefully gorgeous (like the wash spiders with their bedsheets, fighting a Don Quixote-like duel with the wind); and the beautifully contaminated, like the gigantic stuffed ostrich that trots off before a spouting geyser to fight against Hagen of Tronje. This bombardment, with its half-spontaneous, half-ritual actions, is most certainly designed to help viewers on the rotating stage undergo a kind of near-death experience, dumping piles of pictures on the viewer that are half-familiar, half-undigested, definitely otherworldly, appearing out of nothing just to disappear once again and, just as in the world of Nordic mythology, not organized according to any principle. It is an uncontrollable current that is to the eye what a hemorrhage is to the hearing. The last one is juxtaposed with a recurring acoustic phenomenon situated between Wagner motifs—a pig, squealing for fear of death. Poor swine.

By megaphone, Schlingensiefel promises (the viewers in Neuhardenberg) that all this is “madness”; it is “addictive” to go around in circles like this; and you can build one yourself—after all, the earth is also rotating underneath one. This is the first work that he undertakes not *with* but *through* people. Finally, a cinema in which everyone becomes disoriented, a place where the stage can be dismantled from the theater, where the silver screen is dispatched from the cinema space, where even the idea of projection itself can be







duped in the darkness. For, as in the caves of the Stone Age, humankind discovers the possibility of its own reproducibility (as shadows) on the rotating stage; that is the unhindered good news. Humans experience being that which projects (*vulgo*, shadow throwers) and simultaneously being the projection surface (seeing other pictures on the other viewer), in both a literal and figurative sense (as beings that must each individually furnish perceptions with their own meanings), as a kind of coherence machine. That may be, but it is not true.

The Soul as a Wax Model (Aristotle II) and Hegel's Critique

This *Animatograph* is not a usual recording machine. It does not represent; it interferes. It is a soul oppressor, a calculated torture device, an intensifier of stimulatory input. It flays perception; it takes on every single sense to drive it to the edges of the appalling and of stupefaction. Everything hurts; every visceral impression gives way to disquiet, because the individual's powers of imagination are asphyxiated with each new stimulatory input promising neither desire nor covetousness. Horror is groping around in the middle of the protected art space. The *phantasia*, that which Aristotle discovered as the lithe intermediary of all the many disparate sensory impressions, breaks down here without even the slightest complaint. Should we revise Aristotle in view of Schlingensief?

In *De anima*, at the high point of his postulation of neutrality, Aristotle *himself* posits his own suggestion. He defines perceptions as the inscription of an impression that shapes the events *true to form* without having to absorb them *materially* within itself. The soul makes its appearance as a condition that allows entry or as hot sealing wax left with the temporary traces, impressions, and even the material imprint of the perceptible—but without the perceptible obliged to conjoin its own actual substance or

anything else.¹⁶ Long before the invention of the first animatographs, which English inventor Robert William Paul and photographer David Devant originally conceived of in 1896 in order to arrange overlapping photographs projected on a stage, this “visceral example” of a block of wax and wonders was causing Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel considerable headaches.¹⁷

Hegel defends a model of activity and *Innerlichkeit* (inward contemplation) rather than passivity and externality. He not only recasts the wax allegory by vehemently setting it into motion via sublation but also, analogous to that, attributes to the soul itself the *active recasting of its apparent passivity*. Were the soul like fluid wax, Hegel argues, no impression would be left in or on it. Were it like cooled wax, it would never get away from an impression. But it is, of necessity, a *living memory*. Hence, it transforms the concrete, the fleeting, that which is presented to it as an object, into a new form, into perception, effecting this transformation qua a *conscious act* and thus, simultaneously, transforming it into an acknowledgment of the autonomous existence of that which is perceptible. For that reason, too, the soul is not a formable material but instead the materialization itself of the living process of becoming a form.¹⁸

But is that not identical to Schlingensief's utopic of the *Animatographs*, in the face of all their cumbersome optics, as lithe in nature but also as combustibly dangerous as the hot wax of the soul? Allowing him to grasp the heavenly from the earthly yet driving him out into the open by boarding up and barricading off what seems to be an individual attribute? Does it not all hinge, for him, on rediscovering our vulnerability within passivity and receptivity? Schlingensief develops a sense for both thinkers, Hegel as well as Aristotle. Schlingensief radicalizes Aristotle's emphasis on the passivity of the soul, spelling it out as the prototypical near-death experience, just what



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the uncomplaining, rotating *Animatograph* is made for. “I deeply yearn to find a system that is satisfied with itself although at the same time, everyone involved knows it is a system of betrayal.”¹⁹ Schlingensief caricatures Hegel’s emphasis on the activity of the soul—which does not gladly, uncomplainingly submit itself to torture but instead embraces the new and other—by incessantly changing where and how the installation is placed. This forces the people on the disk to turn away from themselves and to burrow into other media and global and mythological contexts as they interact with each of the other projected films. Here, too, there is a moment of masquerade, yet “the velocity surrounding us [simulates] stability—but is, in reality, a standstill.”²⁰ What if our sensitivity were wounded long ago by all the repetitions and loops of our cultures that have already befallen the “soul writers” of this world? It’s a system that chronicles doomsday feelings, that lurches forward in fits and starts, because it has been operating since the inception of time under other aliases (religion, self-abandonment, purification of the soul, world redemption), and because the object of its desire, animating the unsouled as well as the desouling and resouling of those already animated, remains a Promethean task.

Notes

1. Gilles Deleuze, *The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque*, trans. Tom Conley (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 108.
2. Aristotle, *De anima*, bk. 2, chap. 5, 415b.
3. *Ibid.*, bk. 2, chap. 5, 418a.
4. *Ibid.*, bk. 2, chap. 11, 424a.
5. Cf. *ibid.* In the third book this seeming contradiction is “solved” when the organ itself is described as being made up of water and air; see *De anima*, bk. 3, chap. 1, 425a.
6. “The sense of vision,” for example, directs itself “at the visible and the invisible . . . the darkness is invisible, but vision distinguishes (*krinei*) it as well—and, moreover, what is too bright; because that, too, is invisible, but in a different way than the darkness is.” Aristotle interchanges the adjectives and substantives in a synesthetic way when he speaks of the too “small tones” (*mikros psóphos*), he describes them as inaudible

(*anákoustos*), while the too “large and forcible [*ho mégas kai ho bíaios*] tones” run the risk of becoming invisible (*aóraton*). *De anima*, book 2, chap. 10, 422a.

7. Aristotle, *De anima*, bk. 2, chap. 12, 424a.

8. Destroying the real money of the Deutsche Bank for art’s sake was the only thing he was prevented from doing, as this action would have loaded the symbolic system—the unspoken value of capitalism—with sacrilege. (What a pity that he made the project public so early on; otherwise he might have had the element of surprise on his side!)

9. Christoph Schlingensief: “Wir sind zwar nicht gut, aber wir sind da,” in *Schlingensief! Notruf für Deutschland: Über die Mission, das Theater und die Welt des Christoph Schlingensief*, ed. Julia Lochte and Wilfried Schulz (Hamburg: Rotbuch, 1998), 21.

10. Christoph Schlingensief, citation from <http://www.schlingensief.com/projekt.php?id=to52>.

11. Cf. Jörg van der Horst, “Gesamtkunstslum: Aus isländischen Kellern in die Wiener Burg,” in *Christoph Schlingensief: Area 7: Die Matthäusexpedition* (Vienna: Burgtheater Wien, 2005), 62.

12. Elfriede Jelinek, “Schlingensief,” trans. P. J. Blumenthal, June 1, 2010, <http://www.a-e-m-gmbh.com/wessely/fschlingen.htm#top>.

13. The works were first shown under other titles (editions grouped later according to countries), first in *Iceland* (*House of Parliament/ House of Obsession: Destroy Thingvellir*), later in Neuhardenberg (*Odin’s Parsipark*), at the Volksbühne Berlin (*Karpow City*), in Lüderitz, Namibia, and in Hebbel am Ufer, Berlin (as *The African Twin Towers*), and also at the Burgtheater, Vienna (as *Area 7*), under various auspices. (Projects in Nepal and Brazil were envisioned but fell through in the end.)

14. Schlingensief, in an interview with Alexander Kluge, “Erste-Hilfe-Koffer gegen Tiefsinn,” *News & Stories*, January 8, 2006.

15. *Schlingensief: TALK 2000* (Vienna and Munich: Franz Deuticke Verlagsgesellschaft, 1998), 166.

16. “But we must generally realize [the following] about every perception: Perceptions are receptacles for the perceptible forms without the material, like the wax from a [finger or sealing] ring that takes up the emblem (seal) without the iron or the gold. It takes up the golden or iron emblem only if it is not gold or iron. By the same token, perception (sense) suffers from every object that has color, taste or sound, but not if it is any one of them, just if it is of such a kind and conforms to the basic concept (*katà tòn lógon*.” Aristotle, *De anima*, bk. 2, chap. 12, 424a.

17. Hegel, *Geschichte der Philosophie II*, in *Werke*, vol. 19 (Frankfurt am Main, 1982), 208.

18. “The soul is the form, the form is the universal, and the absorption of the same is not like that of wax.” *Ibid.*, 209.

19. Schlingensief, “Wir sind zwar nicht gut,” 35.
20. *Ibid.*, 29.