

# Going Sibylline: On Fortune and Technique

Jordi Vivaldi

## Abstract

Throughout the sixth chapter of the *Aeneid*, Virgil conjugates the zigzagging temper of the Cumaean Sibyl as the probabilistic ambivalence of the cosmos itself rather than as its playful or inaccurate duplication. By wrapping “true things with uncertainty”, the Sibyl’s chants cultivate more sensibilities regarding the “paths of fortune” branching the cosmos, thus engaging with the given in multi-linear and inconclusive terms. This essay suggests that, by conceiving such a cosmic fortuity as a public form of subjectivity to be tempered in a sonic key (*persona (L.)*), the Sibyl’s oracular set-up might be enlivening more ways of engaging with Donna Haraway’s philosophical challenge: the quest for notions of objectivity and subjectivity that constitute one another without abandoning their own purpose. I would like to contend that such a sibylline engagement is an invitation to deploy more feminist lines of flight when it comes to technique’s intertwining with nature. It might offer us instruments to think of the technical and natural as always already enflashed, yet not so much in keeping with the Promethean claim for “making the given” as in pursuit of enlivening unfamiliar forms of coexistence with the given’s probabilistic ambivalence—a conceptualisation making room for thinking of the technical in terms of syntonization, the calibration of attunement processes involving both gymnastic training and cosmetic fashioning.

## Keywords:

Cumaean Sibyl, Fortune, Technique, Soundings, Cosmos, Donna Haraway, Subjectivity, Objectivity.

**Introduction:**

The Cumaean Sybil tangles true things with the uncertain: *involvens vera obscuris*, as Virgil famously writes.<sup>1</sup> Yet, how to think of such entanglement, such a notion of truth? The Sybil is a Sybil insofar as her chants engage with the given cosmos in ambivalent terms; she accommodates things and events into probabilistic proportions, *ratios* that are always already interlaced with nature and its inconclusive character. Is there something to be made of such a sibylline approach, in which contingency and rationality are integral to the given? If we think of it in the context of today's feminist engagements with reason and technology, could the Sibyl's probabilistic temper help us think in emancipatory terms about the interplay between *bios* and *techné* without invigorating nature-culture dualities? Is it possible to conceive nature's givenness in more foliated manners, in manners where technology is not meant so much to change or make the given but to enliven more forms of coexistence with its probabilistic ambivalence? In brief, could the Sibyl's oracular set-up help us deploy more feminist lines of flight regarding the interplay between the technical and the natural with respect to how givens come to be given?

In welcoming rationality and thus embracing the emancipatory figures promised by technical innovation, much of today's feminist affiliations with technology engage with what Donna Haraway considered the philosophical challenge of feminism as follows:

So, I think my problem, and “our” problem, is how to have simultaneously an account of radical historical contingency for all knowledge claims and knowing subjects, a critical practice for recognizing our own “semiotic technologies” for making meanings, and a no-nonsense commitment to faithful accounts of a “real” world, one that can be partially shared and that is friendly to earthwide projects of finite freedom, adequate material abundance, modest meaning in suffering, and limited happiness.<sup>2</sup>

Knowing subjects and historical contingency, real worlds and faithful accounts. Isn't Haraway's quest an invitation to think of subjectivity and objectivity as constituting each other without abandoning their own purpose? And is it utter nonsense to cultivate more variations of Haraway's crisscrossing gesture by pitching camp on the probabilistic givenness sung by the Sibyl so as to accommodate more biophilic—and perhaps less heroic—notions of technology?

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1 Virgil, *Aeneid (Students Interlinear Translation)*, trans. Frederick Holland Dewey (New York: Translation Publishing Company, 1917), 263.

2 Donna Haraway, “Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective” *Feminist Studies* 14, no. 3 (1988): 575–599: doi: 10.2307/3178066.

I would like to catch up with the directionality that these questions draw by circling around to how and whether the Sibyl's *involvens vera obscuris* might be engaging with the question of truth in terms of *sensibilia*: the cultivation of a *sensorium of the rational* enlivening more manners of engaging with "whatever (way) thy *fortune* shall allow,"<sup>3</sup> to put it in the Sibyl's words. Yet, if we think of "fortune" in connection to a public subjectivity that bears (*fors* (L.)) the ratios of the cosmos across all bodies and fleshed in a sonic key, could we conceive technical objects as holding a subjective agency or persona (*per-sonare*)? And, if they are always already en fleshed with nature and its rationality, how to think of their emancipatory dimensions? Perhaps this amalgamation could be considered not so much in keeping with the Promethean claim for making the given but in pursuit of tuning the strings of the given to unfamiliar or even unknown scales. Making things appropriate without appropriating them: what could it mean to think of technology as a material activity propelling processes of syntonisation through and between things and events? And, if we were to propose, in light of Plato's discussion of the four *technai* in the *Gorgias*, conceiving the mechanics at work in such attunements as gymnastic training and cosmetic fashioning, what biophilic articulations with respect to the technical might emerge?

### 1. *Involvens vera obscuris*

With this short yet evocative expression, Virgil enlivens the oracular gesture of the Cumaean Sibyl, the narrative motor of the *Aeneid*'s sixth book. "Tangling truths with mysteries,"<sup>4</sup> "mingling true things with uncertainty,"<sup>5</sup> or "wrapping truth in obscurity"<sup>6</sup> are some of the various translations that, in their diverging formulations, bathe Virgil's Latin expression within multiple *imaginaria*. One term, however, remains stable: *vera*, the Latin for "truth." How to think of it with respect to the Sibyl's chants? Having just set foot on the Hesperian shores of Cumas after a turbulent journey across the Tyrrhenian sea, the Trojan hero Aeneas is led to the heights of the Euboean cliff. Among spiky boulders and swirling winds, a wide flank has been cut into an immense cavity: the retreat of the Cumaean Sibyl, priestess and prophetess presiding over the Apollonian oracle at Cumae. Aeneas is thus received in the Sibyl's cavern, a resounding grotto whose wide volume ramifies into a hundred tunnels driving as many voices: the Sibyl's replies, the chants with which she "wraps true things with the uncertain." *Involvens vera obscuris*; rather than distilling truth from veils of truth, the Sibyl affiliates them: she mingles them, she makes them dance, she puts them into orbit as if they were twin planets, galactic bodies turning around each other in a prophetic ballet swirling across Aeneas' life world.

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3 Virgil, *Aeneid*, 263. (my emphasis)

4 Virgil, *Aeneid*, trans. Henry Rushton Fairclough (London: Roman Roads Editions, 2015), 104.

5 Virgil, *Aeneid* (*Students Interlinear Translation*), trans. Frederick Holland Dewey (New York: Translation Publishing Company, 1917), 263.

6 Virgil, *Aeneid*, trans. John William Mackail (London: Project Gutenberg, 2021), 123.

This spiralling vocation pervades the Latin term *involvens*. *Involvere*, “to roll into,” from *volvere*, “to roll”, connected to the PIE root *wel-*, “to turn, to revolve.” Is it possible to conceive the Sibyl’s gesture as an instrument of revolution, of mobilisation? Could we think of her verses as whirling truth and uncertainty through a circulative motion of probabilities engendering transient equilibriums? A motion working in cycles, a variation of the same. *Da capo*. *Involvens* as turning, turning around and turning inside out, circulation and rebirth, recreation. In what ways does the Sibyl’s oracular setup instantiate such a turning motion? How might Virgil’s allusion to truth be read in their light? Is there not at work a probabilistic form of givenness foliating the notion of “biological fate”, which most of today’s feminist engagements with technology aim at overcoming?

Aeneas’ vows to the Sybil take effect. With a great bang, the hundred doors of the cave burst open on their own. Flowering from a body in frenzy, the Sibyl’s voice quickly pours through the hundred tunnels piercing the Euboean rock. The intersecting rhythms, speeds, temperatures and pressures with which the cavernous winds blow through openings “bear the answers of the priestess through the air,”<sup>7</sup> forming a sonic bouquet of crossings and overlaps hardly integrable into a definitive whole. Mightn’t Plato’s economy of light and shadows adopt, in the Sibyl’s grotto, the form of an ecology of wind? Wind, from the PIE *wendth-*, “to turn, to weave”, connected to “wander”, to round, to walk around, in rounds. Wind as a sliding element moving in cycles—a cyclone?—in no need of assuming an obscurity that is neither seen nor mimed in truth. Couldn’t we think of these verbose airstreams as breathing organs extending the Sibyl’s oracular gesture? For aren’t they fueling her chant’s ambivalence by branching her voice into *eolic* millefeuilles of sound? Sonic kaleidoscopes remain nevertheless intelligible, for sound’s distinguishability in synchrony keeps words from “flying in confusion, the sports of the swift winds”,<sup>8</sup> as Aeneas feared if the verses had been written on fluttering leaves.

Listening is unlike reading: its practice is of a diffuse and contingent materiality demanding reciprocation. “Only do not entrust (thy) verses to leaves,” asks Aeneas, “do thou chant (them) thyself, I pray.”<sup>9</sup> The Sibyl’s verses are shared in *conversational* terms. “Verse” and “conversation”; from the Latin “*versare*”, connected to the PIE *wer-*, “to turn, to bend”. Isn’t it a kairotic coincidence that the PIE roots of the Latin “*versare*” (*wer-*) and “*involvere*” (*wel-*) both invoke the idea of “turning”? What could it mean to chant “in turns”? In revolutions and in cycles, in verses circulating in *conversation*, “turning together with” (*con-versare*). Together with whom? Together with Aeneas’ life-world, of course, but also together with herself, with Apollo, with the cosmos. Rather than performing a clinical experiment *in vitro*, the Sibyl circularises truths and uncertainties through a conversational praxis in which the interlocutors are not neutralised for the benefit of an indifferent truth. Far from claiming prescription and authority,

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7 Virgil, *Aeneid*, 262.

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the multi-voiced and internally dialogised structure of her chants branches the syntax of conventional logical thought, conceiving truth not so much as the light-bringing dissolvent of uncertainty but as a material praxis that is inconceivable without it. Circulating on several planes at once, verses are immediately re-versed, and revelations instantly re-veiled: “O (thou) at length escaped the mighty perils of the sea! But worse remain on land... The Trojans shall come into the kingdoms of Lavinium, dismiss this anxiety from (thy) heart; but they will wish (that) they had not come.”<sup>10</sup>

This zigzagging temperament unsettles definitive truths, yet not in pursuit of the breezy playfulness propelling the collage or the pastiche, but of a material engagement with the cosmos that still considers the spectrum. The Sibyl’s talk holds *cosmological* valences: it is of a public vocation, irreducible to an individual’s expressiveness to be contended in solipsistic terms. Aren’t the Trojans indeed arriving in Lavinium? Aren’t they indeed suffering defeats there? Despite being varied, according to her interlocutors, the Sibyl’s verses are shareable: they turn with the universal, they “verse towards the one”, they potentially participate in the reality of all things and events, yet without saying it all, without exhaustion. Lacunar yet exuberant, the Sibyl’s talk integrates by remaining vulnerable; its inconclusiveness engages with the cosmos by sponging and oxygenating things, by foaming what is taken for granted, by calling for more imaginal worlds.

After silence seizes the conversation, “Aeneas advances casting down his eyes, leaving the cave, and he turns over in mind (with himself) the mysterious issues.”<sup>11</sup> The Sibyl’s *eolic*, *conversational* and *cosmological* turns keep “turning over” in Aeneas’ mind. They didn’t begin with her chants, however: the Sibyl does not expose Aeneas to something allegedly veiled, an enigma requiring elucidation. Everything was there before the encounter: “No form of news rises before me, strange or unexpected, oh maiden,” murmurs Aeneas. “I have anticipated all things and gone through (them) beforehand with myself in mind (in my mind).”<sup>12</sup> What, then, does the Sibyl facilitate?

I propose to conceive the Sibyl’s engagement with truth not so much in terms of disclosure (*aletheia*) or correspondence (*adequatio*), but in terms of sensibility (*sensibilia*): the enlivening of more sensory registers regarding the ratios that articulate the cosmos’ material contingency. *Involvens vera obscuris*, the cultivation of a *sensorium of the rational* that is not enriched—how could it ever be?—through sanitised statements, but through material involvement. It macerates in cycles and revolutions, in turns, in the *verses* that the Sibyl puts into *eolic*, *conversational* and *cosmological* circulation: in her voice’s foliation through an ecology of winds; in her chants’ conversational temper; in her engagement

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10 Virgil, *Aeneid*, 262.

11 Virgil, *Aeneid*, (my emphasis)

12 Virgil, *Aeneid*, 264.

with the universal, with the cosmos' material contingency, with everything that can be considered, yet without saying it all, without exhaustion. Truth neither as untruth nor post-truth nor as the definitive elucidation of an enigma, but as the cultivation of uncharted sensibilities that are not acquired in one sitting; they begin at any point, skip, repeat themselves, go backwards, insist, branch in divergent yet kindred forms, get lost, turn, return.

Thinking of the Sibyl's engagement with truth and uncertainty as the cultivation of a sensorium of the rational is an invitation to conceive rationality as integral to nature. For Aeneas does not bring things into unheard-of proportions by projecting a given set of pre-established ratios on a cosmos allegedly void of them; how could a straightforward projection suffice if they are invoked by the Sibyl in the form of scattered pieces of time-space whose connections are not determined in advance? The Sibyl's chants require manual joining *bricolage*. They need the hands of others, the mediation of tactile values longing not so much for pasteurised descriptions duplicating the cosmos but for sensibilities getting in touch with its ratios. But then, if her verses remain slippery, if they find their voice, their articulation, by giving variations and working out pressures between them, it is perhaps not so much in light of a cynical playfulness irresponsibly celebrating riddle and enigma nor of a cognitive clumsiness threatening the representations of a definite and definitive reality. The sinuosity of the Sibyl's verses might perhaps be better read in this context as embodying the very fact that the multiple and overlapping sets of proportions articulating the cosmos involve the contingency of its materiality. In short: the probabilistic ambivalence of the Sibyl's *fatum* is not so much comic or epistemic but cosmic.

A "cosmic *fatum*"—destiny and fate, yes, but also bifurcation and instability, possibility. Could we conjugate its probabilistic ambivalence in feminist terms? More specifically: could the Sibyl's cosmic *fatum* help us think of more foliated notions of givenness in the context of today's feminist engagements with technology? And could it offer us more footholds from which to attend to what Donna Haraway considers to be the "philosophical challenge" of feminism: the quest for notions of subjectivity and objectivity that constitute each other without abandoning their own purpose? For, in consonance with Haraway's rejection of "Western productionism", the Sibyl's cosmos is not mediated by the "relations of reification and possession" characterising the "human nature" that Haraway leaves behind. It neither appears as "a matrix, resource or tool for the reproduction of man", nor "mother, nurse", nor "a treasure to fence in or bank, [...] an essence to be saved or violated".<sup>13</sup> Haraway's claim that "nature is not hidden and so does not need to be unveiled" could be subscribed by Aeneas word for word when he affirms that there is nothing in the Sibyl's chants that he has not "already anticipated". Yet is this a two-way street? Could Aeneas' claim be endorsed from Harawayan coordinates? This might certainly be a more

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13 Donna Haraway, "The Promises of Monsters: A Regenerative Politics for Inappropriate Others", in *Cultural Studies*, ed. Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson, Paula Treichler (New York: Routledge, 1992), 65.

laborious endeavour: doesn't "anticipation" imply the very givenness of what is anticipated? And, if, troping on Simone de Beauvoir, Haraway's nature "is made, as both fiction and fact",<sup>14</sup> if it is a "co-construction among humans and non humans",<sup>15</sup> isn't it nonsense to cultivate notions of givenness in such Promethean lands? Contemporary allies of Haraway's engagement with technology such as Rosi Braidotti, Beatriz Preciado or Xenofeminism explicitly endorse Haraway's gesture by committing, albeit in different ways, to the claim that "nothing should be accepted as fixed, permanent, or 'given.'"<sup>16</sup> Yet, the givenness at work in the Sibyl's *fata* is neither fixed nor permanent. For, if givenness, commonly associated with a univocal and thus oppressive nature to be eventually overcome through technical beings, is now connected to a cosmos whose materiality is unstable and thus inconclusive in itself, not only is there no archetypal way in which givens come to be given, but what is given is always bathed in ambivalence. It is precisely by virtue of this ambivalence that the Sibyl's *involvens vera obscuris* does not catapult a naked truth to be later witnessed by Aeneas but grows a seed of truth with Aeneas' life-world, a sensorium of the rational. Thus, in the Sibyl's setup, the cosmos is not a construction in which organisms are made rather than born, nor is it anchored in one single form of expression waiting for a salvific being providing change through its technicality. Rather, it is determined in its indetermination, given in probabilistic and heteroclitic proportionalities that are hospitable to multiple forms of coexistence. But then, if Aeneas' life-world participates in the latter's cultivation rather than merely witness how givens come to be given, aren't the Sibyl's words invoking forms of objectivity always already enfolded with Aeneas' intimate life-world? And, in turn, isn't Aeneas' subjectivity hardly maintainable in individual terms? Couldn't there be space to deploy unheard-of lines of flight regarding Haraway's quest for crisscrossing "the historical contingency of knowing subjects" and "the faithful accounts of real worlds"? And what biophilic articulations of the technical could such sibylline lines of flight enliven?

## 2. A Fortuitous Carrier

"Another Achilles has been born in Latium, himself also goddess-born," utters the Sibyl addressing Aeneas again, "nor will Juno be wanting anywhere devoted against the Trojans when as a suppliant in needy crises, what races or what cities of Italy will thou not have entreated!"<sup>17</sup> Who is "another Achilles"? What are Juno's intentions? Aeneas never calls for a more definite talk, one whose objectivity would

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14 Haraway, "The Promises of Monsters," 65.

15 Haraway, "The Promises of Monsters," 66.

16 Laboria Cuboniks, "Xenofeminism: A Politics of Alienation," in *Dea Ex Machina*, ed. Armen Avanesian and Helen Hester (Berlin: Merve, 2015).

17 Virgil, *Aeneid*, 262.

operate as an ultimate court of appeal, for the Sibyl's chants are not supposed to be made the object of an individual subject's enlightening gaze. If their probabilistic ambivalence is not only a motor enlivening more sensibilities but, more generally, the cosmos' givenness at work, their objectivity can hardly take the form of an exhaustive and disembodied foundation to be later folklorised by individual subjects. If what is given is neither "this nor that" nor even something "between this and that", but a dense bouquet of material probabilities involving "both this and that", wouldn't it be possible to think of the Sibyl's objectivity as engaging with the generosity of doubt (*habere duo*) in more en fleshed or even intimate manners? And, in turn, if the cosmos is integral to rationality, if its material inconclusiveness is inextricable—yet irreducible—to the atmospheres of proportionality in which it breathes, couldn't we think of it as suffused with an open or trans-individual subjectivity?

Objectivity, subjectivity; thinking of them as constituting each other without abandoning their own purpose is, in Haraway's words, feminism's philosophical challenge, an oxymoronic need for "a successor science project and the Postmodern insistence on irreducible difference and radical multiplicity of local knowledges."<sup>18</sup> Since it is, of course, difficult to "climb when you are holding on to both ends of a pole,"<sup>19</sup> Haraway switches metaphors and invokes another *imaginarium*: the multiple ways of embodying the sense of vision, offering footholds for thinking of *situated* knowledges where objectivity and subjectivity operate in more spectral terms. Aren't the Sibyl's chants sharing such an attention to locality? For aren't they emerging in conversation with Aeneas' local life-world? Yet, situatedness is here just a departure point: upon entering into a logic where bifurcations bush out around the Sibyl's talk, a space of possibilities widens around Aeneas' universe. One in which it is possible to turn over, where a plethora of paths flourish embodying as many choices: "do not thou give way to ills, but go against (them) the bolder by *whatever (way) thy fortune* shall allow," sings the Sibyl, and she continues, "the first path of safety which thou the least mayest think will be opened by a Grecian city."<sup>20</sup> The paths of fortune, the branches of the given. "Fortune", from the Latin *fors*, "chance", connected to the PIE *bher-*, "carrying" or "bearing children".<sup>21</sup> Instability and destiny, but also fruitfulness, fertility, perhaps even *disfrute* or *fruició*.<sup>22</sup> Through the Sibyl's chants, Virgil bathes the cosmos within a trans-individual reasoning, a distributed instance that tempers the given by bearing or "voicing" its ratios in probabilistic and inconclusive terms, in terms amalgamating both rationality and indetermination.

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18 Donna Haraway, "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective", 575–599.

19 Haraway, "Situated Knowledges," 575–599.

20 Virgil, *Aeneid*, 263. (my emphasis)

21 The semantic shift from "carrying or bearing a child" to "chance" is not obvious. As the linguist and Indo-Europeanist Michiel Arnoud Cor de Vann contends, the sense might be "that which is brought".

22 The Spanish term "disfrute" and the Catalan term "fruició" translate approximately into "to enjoy" in English.



But then, who or what utters such ratios? In other words: how to think of the fortuitous carrier that the Sibyl invokes? As an arboreal and multi-coloured rational propensity? As a diffused impetus? As an elementary breathing, perhaps? I propose to engage with these lines of thought by conceiving such a cosmic carrier as an uttering instance distributed across the given: a fortuitous subjectivity through which givens are given in public terms, that is, in terms of holding a rational spirit that certainly does not exhaust things, but that remains loquacious to everything and everybody, that addresses all what can be considered, yet without saying it all, without exhausting things. A public instance that, nonetheless, is ultimately empty of ego or identity, of being: all bodies and fleshed might talk to it, but none of them is or even identifies with it. How, otherwise, could it remain public and shareable?

The publicness of such a fortuitous subjectivity might perhaps be more vividly brought up by conceiving it in connection to the figure of the mask. In the theatres of Ancient Greece, masks were often conjured up not so much as veils that cover and hide but as interfaces that amplify: by channelling the actors' voice through one single opening, masks increased the strength, the vibration, of the sound, making it easier for the public to hear. The Latin for mask, "*persona*," is in this sense revealing: to sound or to be sounded, to sound through (*per sonare*). In its sonic amplification, the mask facilitates the perception of the actor's fictional character by the audience. In other words: by tempering a persona or personality, the mask "sounds" in public terms the character that the actor embodies. The private goes into the public by becoming personal; it just needs "to be sounded."

It is in analogy to this amplifying gesture that I propose to conceive the fortuitous subjectivity invoked by the Sibyl. For by "sounding" or engaging with the ratios that it carries, things, all material bodies at large, are invited to become active agents in the public arena, talking subjects reducible neither to ventriloquised derivations of a pre-existing unit nor to private voices composing it a posteriori. Just that this public tenor is also personal. Or even: it is public in virtue of being personal, that is, in virtue of vivifying a persona through the "sounding" of fortune's subjectivity. Yet such a sonic interplay or personification does not occur in a vacuum or in vitro, but on stage, under the multi-coloured lights of those things that happen to lie in front of subjects: objects. And precisely because such objects are "thrown in front of" subjects rather than adrift in the open night sky, they have a saying regarding the sounding of fortune's subjectivity: objects calibrate themselves in varying forms with the ratios uttered by the latter, which, in turn, can be opened up again by the unstable materiality of the corresponding subjects.

All bodies and fleshed might then behave as talking subjects in the public space by vivifying a persona, that is, by sounding fortune's subjectivity in the interaction with the objects with which they happen to be involved. Their personality or subjective particularities are then not defined a priori, in a soliloquy,

but to the sound of fortune's subjectivity, that is, of the inconclusive and probabilistic ratios that it utters or carries. And it is true: such fortuitous soundings might be highly disturbing for the insurgent spirit. Doesn't their pervasive nature risk entirely suffusing those beings that engage with it? Isn't its promise to extend the latter's voices across the public arena a subterfuge to ventriloquise them? Conceiving the sonic engagement with fortune's subjectivity in connection to the figure of the mask might extend some lines of flight regarding these concerns. Such an engagement is certainly intelligible, conceptually treatable, but in its sonic tenor, it remains incomplete and lacunar, in motion, as if dancing between vanishing points. Isn't the ephemeral presence and undulatory nature of sound inherently uncertain or unsettled in transit? Doesn't its invisible mobility and distinguishability in synchrony favour the simultaneity of many voices reverberating in the gap between call and response? Sound invites us to a "quasi-medieval view of the relationship between reality and reason," writes Salomé Voegelin, "where reality is not a visible status but an invisible zone within which perception passes through imagination and emotions and is touched by the possibility of phantasms, which deliver it not into trivial fiction, but into the power of creative desire and hope."<sup>23</sup> Imagination and emotions, the touch of phantasms. The loss of anchorage in an univocal rationality does not fade but reemerges in the contingent plurality of the audible. Isn't Aeneas' subjectivity shifting on par with the cosmic ratios in whose ambivalence he moves in and out to the sound of the Sibyl's chants? And doesn't this motion take place by questioning its own obviousness, by both attending and departing from its situatedness, by actively not identifying with its own local or private life-world, with the articulations of its individual cogito? Subjectivity: a hydraulic course that ramifies here, that connects and converges there, that stops here and goes back elsewhere, that repeats itself here and there, that swirls in simultaneous and divergent countercurrents mixing everywhere.

Despite the Sibyl's chants blossoming in conversation with Aeneas' local life-world, her verses remain shareable and public: they can be maintained beyond the individual subject uttering them. After all, aren't they "turning with" the physical materiality of things and events? If, by sounding fortune's public subjectivity—which does not exist outside these very soundings—subjects participate in domains that must count as cosmic, trans-individual, by being enfolded with the private or local life-world of subjects, objectivity acquires intimacy. Rather than thinning out reality through distance and reduction, the objectivity of the Sibyl's verses keeps things rich by actively not comprehending—compressing—Aeneas' universe. Her words orchestrate forms of objectivity, enlivening a floral pitch-complex of resonating elements that remains lucid yet integrable into more than one single stability. For, in its ramifying inconclusiveness, the objectivity of the Sibyl's chants is impregnated—yet not constructed—by these very subjects; it appears as a cloud of sensorial probabilities that are engendered again and again, on the spot, in situ, together in difference with the contingency of uncertain subjects in motion.

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23 Salomé Voegelin, *The Political Possibility of Sound*, (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018), 62.

By sounding fortune's subjectivity in their interaction with objects, subjects cultivate a public persona; by flowering in conversation with the subjects' local or private life-world, objectivity acquires intimacy. Subjectivity and publicness, intimacy and objectivity—isn't this criss-crossing gesture akin to Haraway's claim for interweaving "the historical contingency of knowing subjects" and "the faithful accounts of real worlds"? A claim that, in the fortuity of the Sibyl's setup, would perhaps be enlivened not so much in light of the Promethean call for changing the given but in pursuit of stimulating unheard-of forms of coexistence with the given and its probabilistic ambivalence. Where contemporary feminisms attending to Haraway's work often engage with Prometheanism by privileging "the technical over the natural, the synthetic over the organic and the mediated over the immediate",<sup>24</sup> could the Sibyl's fortuity help us to deploy notions of technology that are more enfolded with the given cosmos? For, in its wish for "making the given" and thus "participat[ing] in the creation of the world without having to defer to a divine blueprint",<sup>25</sup> isn't Prometheanism reinvigorating the culture-nature dualities that Haraway's claim for crisscrossing objectivity and subjectivity aims precisely to circumvent? By stealing fire and *techné* from the gods in order to endow humans with technical ability—with abstraction—Prometheus fosters narratives predicated upon the assumption that the technical is not borne on the body but external to it. Yet, if technical beings, as all material entities at large, are subjective agents cultivating their persona by sounding fortune's subjectivity, would it be possible to think about technicality in more biophilic terms by articulating it as material agency making things appropriate without appropriating them?

### 3. Getting in Tone: Gymnastics and Cosmetics

By thinking of appropriation in terms of adequation, have we made any progress? For a different question now comes to the forefront: what does it mean to adequate things? Or, more critically: when do things become adequate? *Adaequare*, "to equalise, to level with". To synchronise, to bring things into proportion. Yet, how to think of it regarding the Sybil's set-up? Doesn't her oracular gesture assume that things are always already in proportion? Couldn't we even claim that, in their fortuity, things potentially participate in many proportionalities at once? If the probabilistic ambivalence of the Sibyl's chants is not the result of a playful or clumsy representation of the cosmos, but the very cosmos at work, the ratios carried by fortune's subjectivity are indeed multitudinous, arboreal: they do not flatten things

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24 Helen Hester, "Promethean Labours and Domestic Realism" in *e-flux Architecture* (2017), accessed December 20, 2022, <https://www.e-flux.com/architecture/artificial-labor/140680/promethean-labors-and-domestic-realism/>

25 Ray Brassier, "Prometheanism and its Critics" in *#Accelerate. The Accelerationist Reader*, ed. Robin Mackay, Armen Avanessian (London: Urbanomic, 2014), 485.

down to a definite and definitive rational background, but rather underpin the possibility of bringing them into multiple stabilities. And getting in touch with unfamiliar or unknown stabilities is, as we have seen, the horizon towards which the Sibyl cultivates more sensibilities together with Aeneas's local life-world. Yet, does her *involvens vera obscuris* suffice to bring things into adequate proportions, to render things appropriate? Her chants certainly deploy more lines of flight regarding the relations of proportionality with which one can potentially engage, but they do not carry out the engagement itself. For, wouldn't this render things more appropriate at the cost of appropriating them? In other words: wouldn't bringing things into proportion through a position that is exterior to those very things colonise the material agency with which things sound fortune's subjectivity? It is rather *in medias res*, in the midst of the cosmos' inconclusiveness, that Aeneas' local life-world gets in sync with some of the atmospheres of proportionality enlivened together with the Sibyl, rational stabilities gaining more cosmic traction than others regarding the course of certain things and events.

A quest for synchronisation is thus a quest for cultivating some of the multiple proportionalities through which givens come to be given. Yet, this does not oppose the given to an allegedly non-given, for, *stricto sensu*, neither making nor change is at work here. If the cosmos' ambivalence is given in a probabilistic millefeuille of rational stabilities void of archetypal coordinates regarding how givens come to be given, the sedimentation of certain stabilities does not abandon the given but tunes its strings to unheard-of scales. Couldn't we then conceive technology as the subjective embodiment of these tuning processes? In other words, wouldn't technology hold material agency by being integral to nature's ambivalent givenness rather than contending it from the outside or in pursuit of an outside? Then, perhaps, we could articulate technology's affiliation to nature not so much in terms of change or creation, but in terms of resonance and reverberation, in terms of syntonisation. To syntonise: to calibrate two or more circuits to the same frequency. More generally, to be jointly in tone (*syn-tonos*). In tone and in tune, in tension. What could it mean to think of technology as collective processes of toning up always already enfleshed with nature and its rationality?

"The body *perd* or leaks like an old tapped cask," writes Michel Serres. "We populate the world with tools in the form of a fist: sledges or hammers; of an elbow: levers or pulleys; of an eye: magnifying glasses or telescopes; then of a thousand combinations of functions become, outside, unrecognisable; we even measured them with *pouces*, *coudées* or *brasses* without ever wondering how these machines left our organisms."<sup>26</sup> The body leaks. It transmutes its parts into technological objects that form a world evolving outside our bodies. In turn, the world tempers us: it presses on the bodies' physical and cognitive performances, "hominising them in time".<sup>27</sup> Bodies extend into the cosmos; the cosmos

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26 Michel Serres, *Hominescence*, trans. Randolph Burks (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019), 187.

27 Serres, *Hominescence*, 187.

deeply affects bodies. Aren't we enlivening, albeit from different coordinates, André Leroi-Gourhan and Yuk Hui's consideration that, as a general human activity, technics can be understood "as the exteriorization of organs and memory and the interiorization of prostheses"?<sup>28</sup>

Spinning over and over again in a whirling dance requiring dexterity and skill, body and cosmos tone up together in search of more stabilities. Instead of being invoked to change or make one another—as though they originally belonged to disparate realms only to be affiliated later—technology syntonises them into more frequencies by propelling a ceaseless loop that feeds back into itself, not by unbinding our rationality from nature, from the given, but by circulating across the probabilistic ambivalence of nature's givenness and its rationality. Being-with rather than being-as, the momentary attunement of tempos and rhythms, of resonances, of varying pulsations, but also tenacity and discipline, dedication, the need for cultivating certain masteries, a sense of finesse. Aren't we circling around the very notion of gymnastics? For doesn't gymnastics consist precisely in toning up bodies by *training* them, by enlivening certain proportionalities transitorily considered to be more appropriate than others in terms of the cosmos' inhabitation? "Nothing can withstand training," Serres tells us again. "I continually place my body before the unknown; suddenly, it shows itself; it lets itself be known. Therefore training invents."<sup>29</sup> *Inventionem*, to get close, to let something come near. Training behaves not so much as the creation of something new regarding the given but as an intervention taking the form of an *inter-invention*: the collective enlivening of stabilities that are unknown or unfamiliar yet always already interwoven with the given's probabilistic fabric.

Thinking of technology in terms of gymnastics is an invitation to conceive it not only as facilitating more manners of syntonising body and cosmos by way of training a set of skills but also as endowed with material agency by sounding fortune's general subjectivity. Yet, conjuring up the notion of gymnastics in the context of technology brings forth the notion of abstraction. For, despite attending different purposes in light of different horizons, technical objects, similarly to the training of bodily skills, can perform in any corner of the globe: their abstract technicality works regardless of the cultural set-up in which it is activated. If we think of it through the etymology of the term "gymnastics", the "training of the *naked* body", couldn't we conceive the universality of technical apparatuses in terms of nudity? Nudity not so much in terms of Christianity's paradisiacal nudity—nudity always already intertwined with grace—but as the carnal biological functioning of the body, of the Greek *gymnos*, of what is collectively or individually trained in gymnastics. Yet, is nudity ever possible if conceived as the definitive exposure of an allegedly primordial flesh? "Inasmuch as [nudity] is the obscure

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28 Yuk Hui, *The Question Concerning Technology in China* (London: Urbanomic, 2016), 10.

29 Hui, *The Question Concerning Technology in China*, 31.

presupposition of the addition of a piece of clothing or the sudden result of its removal—an unexpected gift or an unexpected loss—nudity belongs to *time and history*, not to being and form.”<sup>30</sup> If, with Giorgio Agamben, we think of nudity not in relation to an original state, to a form or a stable possession, but as an “event that never reaches its completed form, as a form that does not allow itself to be entirely seized as it occurs, [then] nudity is, literally, infinite: it never stops occurring.”<sup>31</sup> Perhaps then, in light of the *gymnos* of gymnastics, technology’s technicality can be thought of as always already interwoven or garnished with “time and history,” like the nudity of a naked dancer, for example, is inevitably “covered” by a plethora of gestures. Gymnastics thus invites us to conjugate technical objects in terms of syntonisation by attending to the abstraction of their technicality as the training of the naked body, but it also indicates, in the unattainability of nudity as a definitive state, that something else is at work. The impossibility of attending nudity in its absolute flesh is the impossibility of attending the technical in its absolute abstraction, of stripping it from the materiality of “time and history”.

Throughout his discussion of the relations between body and *techné* in the *Gorgias*, Plato distinguishes the notion of gymnastics from that of cosmetics. After differentiating *techné* from a knack, which “can give no rational explanation for the thing it is catering for, nor of the things it is providing,”<sup>32</sup> he differentiates those *technai* concerning political life from those concerning bodily life. He further divides them into those dealing with maintenance—legislation and gymnastics—and those dealing with curing—justice and medicine. Then, Plato matches each one with a “false counterpart.” What does this imply? Commonly, the “falseness” of these counterparts has been associated with the Platonic distinction between appearance and reality. In the case of gymnastics, the false counterpart would be cosmetics: while gymnastics is the body’s healthy maintenance, cosmetics *appears to be* the body’s healthy maintenance. However, the rhetorical theorist Robin Reames proposes another interpretation. By associating the Greek term *kommôtikê* with *kommi*, an Egyptian term referring to exotic gums and unguents, rather than with the Greek *komaos*, which refers to hair care and self-adornment, Reames contends that Plato’s differentiation between gymnastics and cosmetics is not so much a distinction between seeming and being, but “a distinction between foreign profligacy and domestic austerity.”<sup>33</sup>

Reames’ unorthodox reading of Plato’s articulation of gymnastics and cosmetics in the context of *techné* might help us set in motion what in gymnastics remains merely insinuated. For, while in its attention to the “training of the naked body,” gymnastics accentuates the abstraction at work in technology

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30 Giorgio Agamben, *Nudities* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011), 65. (my emphasis)

31 Agamben, *Nudities*, 65.

32 Plato. *Gorgias*, trans. Tom Griffith (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 465a.

33 Robin Reames, *Seeming and Being in Plato’s Rhetorical Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018), 23.

by attending to the “decorum” of the technical in terms of extroversion rather than of falseness, cosmetics addresses the concreteness of technology’s social space. Technology’s enlivening of more ways of being “jointly in tone,” of making things appropriate without appropriating them, might then be not just a matter of gymnastic training but also of cosmetic fashioning; cosmetics as the staging of technical objects, as the scenario where technicality incarnates its “time and history,” its socio-political articulation, but also as the plot or storyline performing its abstraction in light of a talk and a narrative, of a cosmology. The Greek *kosmetike*, “the art of beautifying, of anointing or embellishing the human body,” of toning it up, of bringing forth a decorum that, nevertheless, exists in virtue of bearing a sense of order however camouflaged might it appear. Isn’t *kosmetike* derived from *kósmos*, “to order or dispose”? The structure of celestial motion, the allure of the cosmos. Order and decorum. Cosmetics, extroversion and public concreteness, the cultivation of a socio-political materiality that, however, is predicated on a sense of order that remains implicit, insinuated.

Yet thinking of technical beings as tuning the strings of the given to more scales does not convoke gymnastics and cosmetics as two autonomous modes of syntonisation that would be at work simultaneously or alternatively. Rather, they contain each other *in nuce* through what perhaps we could best characterise as a *double-crossed duplication*: gymnastics accommodates the abstraction of the technical by *training* the body in its nudity; yet, in the impossibility of nakedness as such, it also signals the impossibility of stripping the technical from “time and history,” from its decorum. In turn, cosmetics accommodates the decorum of the technical by *fashioning* the body with respect to a cosmological stage; yet, in the impossibility of performing such a stage without gripping onto a more general sense of order, it signals the impossibility of stripping the technical from abstraction. Gymnastics and cosmetics: a chiasmatic motion through which each gains traction from the other by crisscrossing their diverging temper in manners that are diffractively specular. Couldn’t we think of this circulative motion, of this double-crossed duplication, as the spiralling mechanics through which technology’s syntonisation takes place? In other words, isn’t technology “getting things jointly in tone” by involving their subjective agency in the circulative motion that the braided activity of gymnastic training and cosmetic fashioning propels? For then perhaps it is through this chiasmatic motion that technology, when articulated in terms of syntonisation, might be considered as *native* to the cosmos, as belonging to the nature of the universe; for if there is something here connected to our initial interest—namely to think of the technical in biophilic terms by engaging with Haraway’s philosophical quest from sibylline coordinates, then to the degree that, in pursuit of syntonizing things into more frequencies, gymnastic training and cosmetic fashioning limit each other by flourishing from each other, technology might be read more as an exciter than as an alienator: it fluctuates the equilibrium or the energetic distribution of the given, stimulating it, irritating it, inflaming it. But then, its emancipatory potential perhaps does not reside in the promise for a heroic transgression of natural borders but in the subtle

navigation across its liminality, whose foliated consistency is irreducible to a single indivisible line; as a Harlequin's cloak mosaic, it rather takes the form of a colourful and repeatedly folded frontier, one expanding and stretching without tearing, one that is void of a single opposing side, one whose hues and motif can be attended to in many more ways than we could possibly imagine.

### **Coda**

The lines of thought that I aimed to point out in my appreciations here might perhaps evoke a certain pessimism regarding the emancipatory prospects of technology. If, in its syntonising vocation, in its gymnastic training and cosmetic fashioning, the technical is not meant to change or make the given, but to “tune its strings into more scales”, aren't we risking the reduction of technology's field of action to a palliative role? If, by sounding a fortuitous mode of subjectivity, technical beings hold subjective agency and thus are always already enfolded with nature and its rationality, how can we even consider getting closer to what some strands of feminism have recently defined as “technology's ultimate cultural goal: the building of the ideal in the real world”<sup>34</sup>? Yet if the Sibyl's setup is relevant in this context, it is precisely because, in the probabilistic ambivalence with which it considers the cosmos and its fortuity, it assumes that the present constitution of the cosmos' fabric is not univocal but always already foliated, branched into numerous facets. Multiplicity is not something that technical objects bring to nature as a gift or a promise, but it belongs to the very fabric of nature itself. Does this mean that the “ideal,” albeit in an embryonic state, is always already inscribed in the “real world”? For then, Franco “Bifo” Berardi's notion of “futurability” might be helpful to think of the emancipatory role of technology in this context. Futurability: “the multiplicity of imminent possible futures: becoming other which is already inscribed in the present”.<sup>35</sup> A present reality thus contains the future as a wide range of possibilities that technology might help activate in the form of a tendency, “a sort of premonition, a vibrational movement of particles that are taken in a uncertain process of continuous recombination”<sup>36</sup>.

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34 Helen Hester, “Promethean Labours and Domestic Realism.”

35 Franco “Bifo” Berardi, *Futurability* (London: Verso, 2017), 12.

36 Berardi, *Futurability*, 13.



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