The year 1953: Metabletical contemplations on the advent of metabletics

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Introduction: the birth of metabletics

In 1956, Jan Hendrik van den Berg published his book *Metabletica*, which was translated into English as *The Changing Nature of Man: Introduction to a Historical Psychology* (1961). The term ‘metabletica’ ('metabletics') literally means 'doctrine of change'. It is not a 'history' of psychology, but rather (as the English subtitle aptly indicates) a historical (phenomenological) *psychology* of history. Metabletics, moreover, was not merely the title of a book, but rather of a whole series of books, and destined to become the title of an oeuvre. Before 1956, Van den Berg had been a phenomenological psychiatrist, a member of the Dutch phenomenological school, - an intellectual movement without a formal leader, although F.J.J. Buytendijk (1887-1974) was without doubt its most prominent representative, both in the Netherlands and abroad. By publishing *Metabletica*, Van den Berg became a *historical* phenomenologist, using phenomenological methods to probe the past and present of Western science and culture. He became, one could say, a psychiatrist of Western society as such. In his metabletical writings, he from now on combined acute assessments of remarkable individuals (scientists, politicians, novelists, etc.) with scholarly interpretations of broader historical trends. His book exemplifies what Gaston Bachelard and subsequently Louis Althusser have referred to as an ‘epistemological rupture’. There is continuity, but also discontinuity between his earlier (phenomenological) and his subsequent (metabletical) writings. By publishing *Metabletica*, he inaugurated a research field of his own. And, as he described in his recently published memoires (2013), most of his phenomenological colleagues deplored this move.

Metabletics builds on a number of ‘principles’, but eventually, one of them would become quite prominent, namely the principle of simultaneity or synchronicity. It is reminiscent of the concept of *Zeitgeist* as developed by Hegel and others, and of the concept of synchronicity as employed by Jung, but works in a rather precise way. Whenever a decisive event takes place, the metabletical question is: what happened in other realms of culture at the same time?
Simultaneous events, occurring in various domains of culture, independently from one another, may mirror and mutually elucidate one another.

For instance, in order to understand the meaning of Darwin’s *The origin of Species* from a historical-phenomenological (metabletical) perspective, a ‘metableticist’ will ask: what happened in other realms of culture in the year 1859 (or thereabout), the year of publication? By listing and closely studying concurrent events, such as book publications, political occurrences, technological inventions and scientific discoveries, our understanding of Darwin’s scientific best-seller may be deepened. We will better understand why this book was so astonishingly successful all of a sudden: why it was called for as it were.

We may also apply the metabletical principle of simultaneity to metabletics itself and question its own origins, as was already done by Van den Berg (in 1999 for instance) who, in various publications, points to the concurrency of the discovery of blood circulation by William Harvey (in the biomedical domain) and the devotion of the Holy Heart (in the religious domain) as one of the first instances of ‘synchronicity’ that attracted his attention. This line of research (‘the metabletica of metabletics’) was recently taken up by Marvin Zayed (2013) and Bertha Mook (2013) in Issue 6 of the *Journal of Metabletica*, with quite intriguing results. For instance, whereas Marvin Zayed compares metabletica with the work of Maurits Cornelis Escher (1898-1972) and others, Bertha Mook makes a connection with the ‘social cultural school of psychoanalysis’, initiated by Karen Horney, Eric Fromm and Harry Stack Sullivan in response to the mental health crisis plaguing Western societies in the fifties (the years of the so-called ‘silent revolution’). She notably refers to Van den Berg’s inaugural address entitled: *Over Neurotiserende Factoren* (*About Neuroticizing Factors*, 1955) in this respect.

Following the principle of simultaneity, however, it is tempting to subsequently raise the question whether it would be possible to pinpoint the emergence of metabletics to a particular date. If we focus on 1956, for instance (the year of publication, which seems an obvious thing to do), the question is: what other, simultaneous events can be reported, besides the publication of Van den Berg’s book, in the year 1956? And then, we may point to, for instance, the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (where Khrushchev denounced Stalin), or to the debut of Elvis Presley (who recorded his first single), or to the introduction of the videotape.

Yet, this latter example immediately shows that, in order to apply metabletics in a considerate and accurate, rather than in a mechanical (or even parodying) fashion, some further preliminary inquiries are indicated. Simply browsing the historical files for convenient dates (an easy task, moreover, in the era of the Internet) would amount to a caricature of Van den Berg’s
approach. It would fall short of what Van den Berg referred to as finesse. The first question we have to ask ourselves is, when and where did metabletics really originate? In other words: is Metabletica really the first metabletical publication? Or does the concept perhaps precede the heading?

In order to address this question, I would like to point to a ‘transitory’ work entitled *Kroniek der Psychologie* [*Chronicle of Psychology*], published in 1953. On the one hand, this book belongs to the phenomenological stage of Van den Berg’s writings. Due attention is given to phenomenological psychologists and their predecessors. Yet, at the same time, a metabletical intuition is already discernable, notably the principle of simultaneity. There are, however, several editions of the book, and in subsequent editions, the ‘metabletical turn’ becomes increasingly noticeable. If we compare the original version, published in 1953 (which is still predominantly phenomenological in style and outlook) with the version published in 1973 for instance (which clearly belongs to Van den Berg’s metabletical oeuvre), the epistemological distance that separates both editions is quite significant.

The original 1953-version is essentially a review of phenomenological psychology. Other, more quantitative and experimental approaches (such as the Weber-Fechner-Law, p. 27) are mentioned in passing, with one exception: the Kinsey report on human sexuality, to which Van den Berg devotes an extended critical review (no less than six pages) that will be discussed below. On the final pages, however, the idea of simultaneity is considered, albeit in an explorative manner. On p. 63, Van den Berg points to some remarkable “parallel” developments in psychology and other aspects of Western culture, notably novel-writing. The “changes” that can be observed in psychology correspond with similar changes in literature, he argues. They both witness and reflect the profound cultural changes, the ‘silent revolution’ that is taking place. Van den Berg notably refers to the experience of “absurdity” (the estrangement between individual and society) as a common theme (p. 68), - although *Waiting for Godot* (*En attendant Godot*) - a classical exemplification of absurdist literature, which premiered on January 5, 1953 in Paris - is not mentioned. Indeed, in the 1953-version, these ideas are still in an exploratory and embryonic phase. The remarks about absurdist experiences in psychology and literature, one could argue, constitute a metabletical intuition *avant la lettre*.

In the 1973-version, however, the author presents his ideas with much more self-confidence. This version of *Chronicle of Psychology* reviews the history of psychology from a partisan point of view, starting from the year 1540 (when Melanchthon published the first modern psychological treatise, entitled *De Anima*), via the year 1590 (when the signifier ‘psychology’ for the first time appeared in print, in Greek letters, in a publication by Rodolphus
Goclenius), up to the year 1950 (the era of phenomenology and its rivals). I use the term ‘partisan’ because Van den Berg reconstructs the history of psychology as a struggle between two basic methodological attitudes, namely the \textit{esprit de géométrie} (culminating in contemporary quantitative experimental psychology) and the \textit{esprit de finesse} (represented by phenomenology). And it is the latter approach, of course, which has his sympathy. The author shows how, time and again, psychologists try to make their field more ‘scientific’ with the help of measurements and quantification, resulting in a rather paradoxical research practice, namely: a ‘psychology without a psyche’. Time and again, Van den Berg points out what is lost in such an approach: the human person, dwelling in a meaningful world. On the other hand, in the absence of measurements and quantification, phenomenology runs the risk of becoming mere ‘poetry’. Therefore, a dual strategy (seeing \textit{géométrie} and \textit{finesse} as complementary approaches) seems optimal. But without \textit{finesse}, psychology will run into a cul-de-sac.

And in this 1973-version, the principle of simultaneity is fleshed out with much more precision. The Weber-Fechner Law for instance, discovered by Ernst Heinrich Weber in 1834, but reformulated by Gustav Theodor Fechner (his scholar) in 1880, is now discussed in more detail. Their Law states that the just-noticeable difference between two stimuli is proportional to their magnitude. Fechner would later rephrase this by saying that the subjective sensation of the stimulus is proportional to the logarithm of its intensity. Van den Berg now explicitly discusses this Law from a metabletical, rather than from a phenomenological perspective: why was it discovered in 1834? Is there a connection with simultaneous events?

Indeed, there is, the author argues. Notably, he points out that, in the 1830s, the first railways had been built. And this implied a drastic change in human mobility. From now on, human beings began to rely increasingly on machines. They soon found out that, when it comes to travelling by train, one better heed the Weber-Fechner-Law. Otherwise, lethal accidents may well occur. Thus, through trains, and later automobiles, the Weber-Fechner-Law quickly pervaded the human life-world, affecting human mobility and human perception, as well as our sense of space and time. In the case of fog, for instance, Van den Berg explains, we need stronger headlights to be able to cross the stimulus threshold. Without such lights, our car would not be noticeable by other drivers. In short, the Weber-Fechner-Law is tied up with the advent of machines. The Law allows us to respond in a reflex-like manner to the stimuli we perceive while travelling on a modern road, surrounded by traffic.

Thus, the various editions of \textit{Chronicle of Psychology} allow us to trace the development of metabletics all the way from its initial conception (around 1953) via its moment of birth (1956) up to its coming of age (the period of self-confident application). The exposé on mobility in the
1973-edition is a genuinely metabletical exercise, an elaboration of what in 1953 was still a fairly embryonic idea. And yet, one could argue that, like in the case of ‘psychology’ itself (where the term ‘psychology’ was used for the first time in 1590 by Goclenius, although one could argue that Melanchthon had already published the first modern ‘psychological’ treatise in 1540), the metabletical intuition preceded the actual introduction of the term. The ground for what was boldly introduced, in a self-conscious fashion, as a new approach in 1956, and even more so in 1973, was prepared in 1953, - the year in which the book *The Interpersonal Theory of Psychiatry* by Harry Stack Sullivan, a like-minded spirit, was published (Mook 2013; Van den Berg 2013, p. 136). And, as I will argue in the next section, there was something about the year 1953 that seemed to *call* for a metabletical approach. This is my basic claim in this paper: in 1953, a metabletical methodology was *called for*. And in response to this ‘call’, metabletics was not yet born perhaps, but at least conceived.

What happened in 1953?

To begin with, 1953 was the year of Stalin’s death. It was a year saturated with events pertaining to the Cold War, such as the end of the Korean War, the *Volksaufstand* in the German Democratic Republic (DDR), which started on June 16, and the arrival in Germany of the first wave of released prisoners of War (as Gulag Archipelago survivors), while President Harry S. Truman announced that the U.S. had successfully developed a hydrogen bomb and the Nobel Prize for Literature was awarded to Winston Churchill. These were big political events that exemplified the political backdrop (or ambiance) of the era.

There are a number of other events, however, outside the realm of global politics, which I would like to point attention to. I will first present them in chronological order:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>January 5</th>
<th>Premiere of the absurdist play <em>Waiting for Godot</em></th>
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<tr>
<td>January 31</td>
<td>The North Sea Flood (‘Watersnoodramp’) kills 1,836 people in the Netherlands</td>
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<tr>
<td>February 28</td>
<td>James Watson and Francis Crick announce their discovery of the structure of DNA</td>
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<tr>
<td>May 28</td>
<td>Edmund Hillary and Tenzing Norgay reach the summit of the Mount Everest</td>
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<tr>
<td>August 18</td>
<td>The second Kinsey report, <em>Sexual Behavior in the Human Female</em>, is published</td>
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<tr>
<td>September 4</td>
<td>Eugene Aserinsky and Nathaniel Kleitman publish the discovery of REM sleep</td>
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<tr>
<td>November 18</td>
<td>Jacques Lacan inaugurates the first in a long series of <em>Séminaires</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>December 30</td>
<td>the first colour television goes on sale</td>
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These events can be grouped as follows:
North Sea Flood and Mount Everest expedition
Kinsey report, REM and colour television
Lacan’s seminar and the discovery of DNA

The first two events pertain to the relationship of humankind with the ‘elements’, with nature as ‘physi’. To discern their ontological import, Heidegger’s *Introduction to Metaphysics* (published in 1953, although based on lectures presented in 1935) should be consulted. In this book, Heidegger refers to Sophocles’ *Antigone* where it is said that, whereas nature is ‘deinos’ (terrifying and forbidding), the most awesome entity on earth (to deinotaton) are we ourselves: humankind as such. Our sway over nature has become downright uncanny. A process that was started many centuries ago, namely the taming of nature, now finally seems to bear fruition.

From this perspective, the two events listed above suddenly become saturated with meaning. By climbing the highest mountain on earth, the subjugation of nature seems completed. Mountain climbing reveals the dimension of verticality in human existence, moreover. We are dissatisfied with what and where we are, and consistently aim to transcend and surpass our natural position. To conquer Mount Everest, the apex of sublimity, seems to imply that the end of a long history (of struggle between humankind and nature) has been reached. At the same time, in the same year, however, this illusion had already been destroyed by the North Sea Flood. We remain vulnerable to the destructive force of nature. Self-complacency is out of the question. The North Sea Flood took us by surprise, at night, awaking us from our narcissistic, anthropocentric slumber. Yes, we have reached the summit, but nature still occasionally strikes back. As the Dutch poet Hendrik Marsman phrased it: beyond the boundaries of our man-made environment, the voice of nature, with her eternal calamities, can still be heard.1

The next series of events pertain to the realm of psychology. *Sexual Behavior in the human Female* was a best-seller written by biologist Alfred C. Kinsey. Although it was a sequel to a previous book (entitled *Sexual Behavior in the human Male*, published in 1948), the 1953 publication caused much more controversy, not only because of various methodological issues, but also due to the provocative claim that Western women were sexually much more active than was commonly acknowledged at the time. Kinsey’s approach is severely criticised by Van den Berg in *Chronic of Psychology* (in the 1953 as well as in the 1973 edition). As is already indicated by the title, sexuality is no longer regarded as a meaningful, intimate experience, a profoundly human relationship (a dialogue or a narrative), but rather as ‘behaviour’. This is reinforced by the phrase

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1 I am referring here to the final lines of his famous poem *Denkend aan Holland* (‘Thinking of Holland’) published in 1936, depicting the Dutch landscape as a peaceful, stable and quiet place, but ending with a note of caution: “And in all the provinces / The voice of the water / With its eternal calamities / Is feared and heard”.
‘human female’ / ‘human male’. Human beings are apparently seen as research animals. Sexuality is not explored in terms of otherness, devotion and calling, but as something that is quantifiable. For Van den Berg, quantitative information about the frequency of, for instance, premarital or extramarital sex only makes sense insofar as one knows what marriage means to the person in question (1953, p. 140). In Kinsey’s reports, however, sexuality is not interpreted from a first-person perspective (as a phenomenologist would do), but from a third-person perspective. Human beings are treated, not as ‘subjects’ of experience, but as mere ‘objects’ of research (what type of sexual behaviour?; how often?; under which circumstances?; etc.). Psychology without a psyche.

A similar interpretation fits the discovery of REM (‘rapid eye movement’) sleep. It is an episode within the human sleep cycle (within human ‘sleeping behaviour’) which actually corresponds to the moment when dreams occur (when dreams are reported by experimental subjects). From a phenomenological perspective, I am a dreamer, the subject of my dreams. Dreams, as Freud argued, are meaningful events. Phenomenologists will approach dreams from a first-person perspective. What do they tell us? In the work of Aserinsky and Keitman, however, dreams are approached from a different angle. By reframing night dreams in terms of REM sleep, dreaming is suddenly redefined as ‘dream behaviour’, to be studied from a third-person perspective, in a laboratory setting, with the help of modern technology.

The introduction of colour television is also part of this aggregate of events. We become passive consumers of broadcasted input. Whereas in the case of silent or black-and-white movies the distinction between television and real life was still clear enough, in the case of colour television it becomes increasingly difficult to distinguish reality from ‘reality TV’. Colour television provides us with an interminable, technically reproducible, standardised, pre-formatted, seemingly realistic daydream. Our behaviour, as target audience, can now be analysed, moreover (What do we watch? How often? During prime-time or after hours?; etc.). In short, a ‘family resemblance’ is discernable connecting these events.

And phenomenology (as an intellectual movement) no longer seemed to be able to take a stand in view of these occurrences, seemed to be overruled and overwhelmed by them. Increasingly, phenomenology was seen as powerless and past its prime. These new developments appeared to call for a different type of response than traditional phenomenology could offer. In France, in the early 1950s, phenomenology had seemed the impassable horizon of its time (to paraphrase Jean-Paul Sartre). French (notably Parisian) intellectual culture was imbued by the phenomenological perspective on life. But now, it suddenly began to dawn on the intellectual avant-garde that phenomenology (in the traditional sense of the term) was no longer able to live
up to the challenges of the time, was losing terrain. In the year 1953, Michel Foucault (at that time an acknowledged expert on phenomenological psychology) began to read Nietzsche, who, as he would later phrase it, awoke him from his “phenomenological slumber” (Foucault 1994, p. 431). Although his publications – such as his introduction to the French version of Ludwig Binswanger’s *Dream and Existence* published in 1953, and his own book *Maladie Mentale et Personnalité* published in 1954 – still adhere to the genre conventions of phenomenological discourse, a subterraneous ‘epistemological rupture’ is silently evolving. Before long, he will unleash his ambitious project, a polemical rereading of the history of the human sciences from a structural perspective, proclaiming the death of the subject, of the author and of man as such. Indeed, Foucault and Van den Berg are contemporaries: their intellectual vicissitudes mirror one another, as I have more elaborately explained elsewhere (Zwart 2002, 291 ff.).

In that same year 1953, Jacques Lacan, who had been well-versed in the techniques and the vernacular of phenomenology as well, launched his famous seminar, using it as a platform to flesh out a post-phenomenological understanding of human existence: unfolding within the confines a pervasive symbolic order dominated (pre-structured) by the language and gaze of the Other. 1953 was an important turning-point for Lacan in many other respects as well, moreover (Roudinesco 1993): he left the *Société Psychanalytique de Paris* (SPP) to become co-founder of the newly established *Société Française de Psychanalyse* (SFP), presented his famous *Discourse de Rome* (one of the key texts of his oeuvre (Lacan 1953/1966)) and formally married his mistress, the actress Sylvia Bataille née Maklès (former wife of his companion Georges Bataille).

All these new intellectual trends had one thing in common. Whereas phenomenology started from the primacy of the subject, in these new approaches (often grouped together as ‘structuralism’ or ‘anti-humanism’) the human subject was now drastically decentralised. The first-person perspective was from now on regarded as an effect of language. In the case of Michel Foucault, for instance, it is clearly noticeable (in books such as *The Birth of the Clinic* and *The order of Things*) that the author is intimately familiar with the techniques and language of phenomenology. And yet, the basic view on human existence has completely changed: individuals have become anonymous voices imprisoned within an all-powerful linguistic and epistemological order (the ‘épistème’), pre-structuring our acts and utterances. The same goes for Lacan. Edmund Hillary, although he is able to conquer the highest mountain, is not an autonomous individual at all, but rather a craving subject suffering from discontent and fuelled by an irresistible dive, a plaything of the forces of verticality that pervade human existence, willing to risk his life in order to spend a few minutes on a glimmering summit: the object of his desire. Interestingly, Freud (1932/1940), while visiting the Netherlands, compared the unconscious to un-reclaimed maritime
nature beyond the dikes. In 1953, the North Sea Flood symbolised the persevering force of the unconscious, while even conquering a mountain does not liberate us from the pervasive dynamics of desire.

Whereas in the writings of Freud the unconscious is presented as a fluid, diffuse and even diabolical force, Lacan in his Séminaires, launched in 1953, develops a rather different approach. Building on modern linguistics, he persistently announces that the unconscious is 'structured like a language'. It is a series of signifiers, an unconscious code. And here, the connection with the discovery of Watson and Crick can obviously be made. They likewise discover that a similar code, a similar series of signifiers (namely the strands of the nucleotides, represented by a minimal alphabet: the letters A, C, G and T) actually constitute the quintessence of life. The basic (linguistic) congruity between DNA and the unconscious is explicitly acknowledged by Lacan (for instance: 2005, p. 31-32). Elsewhere, I have elaborated more fully to what extent the Lacanian unconscious can be regarded as the ‘psychic genome’, and to what extent the genome (DNA) can be regarded as the biological ‘unconscious’ (Zwart 2013).

In all these cases, the common denominator is (once again) the idea of decentralisation. The autonomy of the human subject is considered to be illusory, to a considerable extent. Our life is orchestrated by powerful codes: not only by the social codes as analysed by Levy-Strauss and others, but also by molecular codes (such as DNA) in combination with a psychic code (the Lacanian unconscious as the language of the Other).

At this point, it is tempting to make a connection with the work of Escher, building on the article by Zayed (2013) already mentioned. In 1953, Escher produced one of his most famous artworks, a lithograph entitled Relativity. We discern a space dominated by staircases moving in various directions, reminiscent of the extended, spiralling staircase of life known as DNA – the spiral staircase that allegedly dominates (pre-programmes) the stories of our lives: the genome as the inner structure around which the events of life revolve. Moreover, the lithograph exemplifies the core theme of decentralisation, depicting a neutralised, homogeneous world that is definitely without a centre (as well as without a summit) and where all sense of direction proves illusory. We are faced with a multiplicity of cellular, compartmentalised localities, interconnected and

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2 The work of Escher was an important source of inspiration for Lacan, who in his seminar of 1963 refers to Escher’s famous drawing of red ants climbing a Möbius-ring, published in that same year (“L’insecte qui se promène à la surface de la bande de Möbius … peut croire à toute instant qu’il y a une face qu’il n’a pas explorée, celle qui est toujours à l’envers du celle sur laquelle il se promène” (2004, p. 161)).
repetitive: elementary spatial constituents that can be combined and recombined in various
manners, so that everything (indeed: space as such) has become relative: a series of combinable
and re-combinable aperiodic spatial crystalline modules, the architectural equivalent of DNA. We
humans are no longer in control. We have become the anonymous, gaze-less inhabitants of this
interminable series of modules in post-Euclidean space, so that all our (automatic, pre-
programmed, conditioned) activities seem pointless. Like the ants moving on a Möbius band
(another famous Escher lithograph, published ten years later, in 1963), these nameless human
individuals seem entangled in an interminable pointless promenade. They seem to be heading,
not towards a recognisable destination, but rather towards the next stairway (connected to the
one they are already climbing). They move about like particles in an omnipotent, omnipresent,
compartmentalised topology, engaged in a stereotypical behavioural repertoire. The world as such
emerges as a neuroticizing, psychiatric ward, a claustrophobic metropolis, an exemplification of
absurdist architecture. Instead of subjects experiencing and constituting their own unique world
(the phenomenological view), we are completely dominated by the topology, the structure of the
situation, which effectively guides our movements from one preformatted position to another.
This type of space is ‘uncanny’ in the literal sense of the term: unheimlich, not simply ‘strange’ but
un-familiar. The apparent familiarity of the localities (stairways, gardens, corridors) and of the
activities they evoke, reinforces the experience of utter estrangement. That is why the summit of
Mount Everest allures us: towering as a final exit, a final illusory possibility of escape; illusory
because, ironically, even here, in the wake of the Hillary / Norgay performance, staircases have
now been built. The system finds it impossible to tolerate any externality. Access to anywhere for
all, that is the motto. The lithograph displays a hotel-like exemplification of the unwavering logic
of modern global tourism. It is an absurdist nightmare, depicting the pre-formatted, ‘spinal’ type
of mobility which Van den Berg so vehemently criticised in Chroniek van de Psychologie (the 1973
version) and other, like-minded works, such as De Reflex (‘The Reflex’), published in 1973 as well.
But it also depicts the final victory of the spirit of geometry, leading us collectively into a depressing
cul-de-sac.

Indeed, it seems to present a final situation, a ‘final’ answer to the question who and where
we are as human beings. Now that we have reached and explored nature in all its dimensions,
from the highest peak of the macro-world down to the most minute molecular structures of the
living micro-world, the Hegelian end of history has apparently been reached. We are completely
dominated by the topological structures of an ‘inhuman’, uncanny, man-made environment.
Escher’s lithograph envisions the end of history.
It was in this context, emerging in 1953, that metabletics was called for. On the one hand, there is ample congruity (‘family resemblance’) between metabletics and the oeuvres of contemporaries such as Lacan and Foucault. Metabletics is the Dutch variant of a European discourse, a Continental intellectual ‘turn’. Coming from a phenomenological background, a metableticist to a certain extent adheres to this tendency towards decentralisation. The principle of simultaneity basically claims that, unwittingly, our key insights, discoveries and initiatives, as well as the flaws and failures connected with them, are actually inspired by the spirit of the time that speaks through us. There is a connection with simultaneous events, although we ourselves are usually not aware of it at the time. On the other hand, it is clear that, in the case of Van den Berg, the epistemological rupture with phenomenology is less severe, while the embrace of a style of thinking that stresses human heteronomy is less unequivocal. For indeed, Van den Berg writes his metabletic treatises basically to raise a word of protest against the precedence of system over subject, of topology over experience, of structure over creativity. Like his contemporaries Lacan and Foucault, he acutely notices what is happening in the modern world (the ‘death of the autonomous subject’, i.e. the subject of Humanism and Enlightenment), but he refuses to live with it or go along with it. We are neither completely determined by the language or the architecture of the Other’, nor by our DNA, nor by the visual-acoustic ambiance created by mass media. The objective of metabletics is to open up this ‘inhuman’ type of space that had unfolded in the post-Euclidean epoch (Cf. the final pages of his Metabletics of Matter, 1968). In the folds and margins of these pervasive topologies, there is room for manoeuvre.