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To Hate Shepherds: Letter to an American Friend about a Jules Verne Story (or Why Technological Objects Sometimes Complicate Our Lives)

Franc Schuerewegen

Are there any shepherds left in America? I suppose you have replaced them with computers or robots. It's less expensive and cleaner. Jules Verne would have liked to live in your country—he was generous with his invectives against the race of shepherders in his novel *Le Château des Carpathes* (1892). You know the book, and I'm sure you recall a passage that I personally find very striking. At first, the tone is rather flattering: "If we approach a shepherd on his idealistic side, he might easily be imagined a dreamy, contemplative being: he converses with the planets, he consults the stars, he reads the skies" (9). The next sentence undoes this portrait. The shepherd is not like that, Jules Verne adds, he is less than that, and one must set the record straight: "In reality he is generally a stupid ignorant brute" (9). In the style of hitting the enemy where it hurts, it would be hard to do better. Jules Verne does not like shepherds, a group that clearly annoys him and gets under his skin. He immediately proceeds to criticize the leading names in the bucolic genre, accusing them of idealism and of a lack of realism, something George Sand had done before him in her preface to *François le Champi* (1864).¹ But this makes his remarks no less violent. One must add, of course, that the majority of shepherds were illiterate at the end of the nineteenth century. They did not therefore constitute for the author of the *Voyages extraordinaires* what we would call today a reading public... But let's not linger on this point.

Things hardly get better when we meet the shepherd Frik on the same page. He is not a particularly pleasant individual—in fact, and I choose my words carefully, he is nothing short of monstrous. In describing this character, Jules Verne repeats Victor Hugo's sentence parodying Virgil in the title of a chapter of *Notre-Dame de Paris*: "Immanis pecoris custos immanior ipse," "of a monstrous flock a herder even more monstrous." This is an allusion to the famous verse of the fifth eclogue: "Formosi pectoris custos formosior ipse," "of a handsome flock a shepherd

even more handsome."² Frik, then, is the Quasimodo of shepherds, the Frankenstein of this bucolic region. As Verne puts it: "The *immanum pecus* were browsing, then, under the care of the said Frik, *immanior ipse*" (7). We can paraphrase in less erudite language: lovers of idyllic and industrious country scenes, please abstain—this book is not for you.

What is more striking still, given the context, is that the shepherd Frik, who has never set foot in a school, presented to us by Verne as a sort of anthropopithecus dressed as a shepherd, is also a character who is respected—even *feared*—in his village. Those who know Frik, writes the author of *Le Château des Carpathes*, consider him to be "a sorcerer, one who could call up fantastic apparitions" (10). The shepherd, in other words, is a magician, a shaman.

You could object, of course, that we do not necessarily have to take seriously what the villagers say and that this could simply be the effect of rumors. But the text ultimately demonstrates that the gossipmongers are right. And we thus discover that Frik is a surprisingly and profoundly contradictory character, who succeeds in being both a perfect imbecile and an ancestor of Harry Potter... This contradiction interests me, and I want to pursue it.

The shepherd's task is to watch over his flock. He thus needs, among other things, a good pair of eyes. The shepherd Frik might well not correspond to the Virgilian idyllic image of the *custos formosus*, but from the point of view of vision, he is perfectly within the norm. Frik, writes Jules Verne, is "doué d'une grande puissance de vision," "endowed with great power of vision" (9). Curiously, while his vision might be excellent, it is not sufficient for him to be able to do without what I am forced to call a form of mechanical assistance. When he needs to observe a distant object, Frik raises his hand to his face, forming what the text calls a "telescope" (*porte-vue*) (8). The shepherd also possesses another gesture belonging to the same family, although it is not for the same purpose: to be heard at a distance, he has learned to turn his hand into a cone; this is the technique of the "speaking-trumpet" (*porte-voix*) (9).³ I would also point out in the same vein that Frik has a true *instrument*, that is, a tool, an *artifact*: a long "a long white-wood trumpet," a sort of primitive bugle, which he uses to call his flock together (10). In short, Master Frik is particularly well equipped for what he does and this is certainly noteworthy.

The gestures that Jules Verne mentions and the tool he describes are not a priori particularly remarkable, I agree. At this historical moment, in this country, all shepherds blow on a horn. As far as the gesture of

forming a “porte-vue” or a “porte-voix” is concerned, who has not done this at least once in his life? Nonetheless, if one has read what comes afterwards in the story, one knows that it is best to be attentive and that Jules Verne has a reason for inserting these elements. On the other side of the valley, opposite the place where the shepherd works, in the Château des Carpathes, precisely, lives the Count de Gortz. He is a crazed music lover who, using a series of machines that he has constructed, attempts to conserve living images and the living voice of an opera singer, whom he cannot seem to forget. The Beverly Sills at stake here is Stilla, recalling both E.T.A. Hoffmann and Offenbach.⁴ Provided we speak several languages simultaneously, this name summarizes the career of the diva: star (*stella*) who was silenced (*Die Stille*) when death came and took her from the arms of her lover. The star who sings no more begins to sing again with the aid of a certain technology.⁵ And if, in principle, the machines used by the Count de Gortz are unrelated to the rudimentary technology of the shepherd, one can still see very well what the two have in common. The depraved music lover whose story is told in the novel is a *manipulator of sounds and images*. But the supposedly “natural” shepherd, in his own modest manner, is also a *manipulator of sounds and images*. One can deduce from all of this that the relations of force initially constructed in the novel, seemingly based on a conflict between the strong and the weak, or, in modern parlance, the “technology haves” and the “technology have-nots,” should be approached with some caution. The shepherd is a mechanical and technological expert in his own right. The “primitive” man is not so primitive. With this in mind, I turn to the episode of the telescope.

Standing before the Château des Carpathes, “planted at the end of one of the castle’s bastions” (9), is a tree, a beech. The shepherd Frik is very interested in this beech, because it is linked to a regional legend. The tree is extremely old and has only three branches. The villagers say that when the last branch falls, the Château des Carpathes will collapse. This is not precisely the case, as those who have read to the end of the novel know. The château does not disappear: on the last page its walls are still standing (241). What happened once can happen again, Jules Verne suggests, in other words, we enter into a vicious circle. But I’m getting ahead of myself.

On the side of the mountain, while he is looking at the beech tree in the manner I described, using his hand as a “telescope,” the shepherd encounters someone. A stranger accosts him, a wandering peddler hawking “telescopes, thermometers, barometers, and small clocks” (10).

Once again, the author of *Le Château des Carpathes* remembers E.T.A. Hoffmann: Copelius in *The Sandman* is also a “barometer dealer” and a perverse scholar.⁶ But this is only a point of departure, and things will quickly go in another direction.

When the wandering peddler begins his sales banter, he has quite a job to do. The shepherd is not interested and indeed expresses himself quite eloquently. Buy a clock? But “I’ve got one which goes by itself and hangs over my heard. That’s the sun up there” (14). The virtues of a barometer? Frik does not need a barometer. Can he not predict the weather twenty-four hours in advance simply by observing the movement of the clouds in the sky? Would he like a thermometer, perhaps? What a stupid question, the shepherd responds: when he perspires beneath his cloak, it’s hot; when he shivers beneath his greatcoat, it’s cold. What else is there to know? Do shepherds need to worry about the whys and wherefores of science? And so on.

Only when Frik spies a sort of tube hanging from his interlocutor’s suspenders does his attitude change. This object visibly fascinates him, and he wants to know what it is. A question is thus formulated: “What do you do with that tube you’ve got there?” And the peddler answers, “It’s a telescope . . . and a good one, too, . . . one that will make you see a long way off” (15). Frik has excellent optic nerves, as the preceding passages in the novel have amply demonstrated. It is thus only normal that he chimes in once again with his habitual protests: “Oh! I have good eyes, my friend” (15). This time, however, the peddler makes short work of his objections: “If you’ve got good eyes, mine are better when I put them to the end of that telescope” (15). At this point a reversal takes place; suddenly everything changes. The peddler proposes that the shepherd try the telescope, he accepts and is promptly convinced: “It’s true enough. It does carry farther than my eyes” (16). Here is what ensues: through the telescope handed to him by the merchant, Frik begins to actively survey the countryside that he knows so well, or thought he knew, but which is suddenly not the same. Everything is more precise and present. But everything has become different as well—unusual, *unheimlich*. Among other things, Frik directs the telescope toward the beech tree mentioned above. And we immediately discover that we have been overly alarmed about it. True, “the fourth branch is down on the ground” (17), and Frik recognizes this with a satisfied air. True as well, the legend says that when the beech tree has no more branches, the château will disappear. The important thing, however, is not the beech itself, but what is right next to it. The important thing that Frik has not

been able to perceive with his eyes alone *is revealed to him only when he uses the telescope*. Smoke is coming out of the keep of the Château des Carpathes. It is inhabited, and the novel can thus begin.

I open a short parenthesis here, which will take us away from Jules Verne for a moment, but rest assured that we shall return to him momentarily. I would propose, in fact, to compare Verne's text to a passage from Marcel Proust's *A l'ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs*. This is a passage in which Proust describes how his hero, still a child, observes La Berma on stage with the aid of opera glasses lent to him by his grandmother. It would seem that this has nothing to do with Jules Verne, but there is a relation between the two. We read the following in Proust:

When one believes in the reality of a thing, making it visible by artificial means is not quite the same as feeling that it is close at hand. I thought now that it was no longer Berma at whom I was looking, but her image in a magnifying glass. I put the glasses down, but then possibly the image that my eye received of her, diminished by distance, was no more exact; which of the two Bermas was real? (1:345)

There is a resemblance to Verne's text here. The telescope or the opera glasses bring a distant object closer. But when they are used, the object itself is not perceived, but instead its image, projected on the glass lens. A difficult choice has to be made, one that Proust finds distressing. Without the opera glasses, one cannot see anything. With the opera glasses, one sees something, but it is not the thing itself, rather, its simulacrum, something standing in for it. The user of seeing-aids is like Buridan's ass: solicited by both sides without knowing how to resolve the dilemma.

From my perspective, it is clear that in *Le Château des Carpathes*, the shepherd Frik is confronted with exactly the same heartrending choice. This is why he thinks that he is the victim of a mirage when he sees the smoke. What he sees is not real, it's not possible, he refuses to believe it, and this is what he *says*: "No, pedlar, no. . . . It is the glass of this thing of yours that's got misty" (17). But even after having wiped the lenses of the tool with his sleeve, when he brings it back to his eye, the image reappears, it is indelible, it really exists. That is, the *image* really exists. But can one really make the inference from the image to the existence of the object? Proust's question already appears here: "Which one is real?"⁷ The smoke becomes visible only with the aid of the telescope. But it is also produced by the use of the telescope. The effect of the visual prosthesis is to render our relation to the real uncertain.⁸

I would add that the epistemological murkiness into which Jules Verne plunges his reader has something to do with the fact that *smoke* is what the shepherd observes through his telescope. I recall that in the typology of signs devised by Charles Sanders Peirce, smoke belongs to the category of the *index*, of indices. The index is “a sign . . . in dynamical (including spatial) connection . . . with the individual object [it designates]” (2:170). In other words, the index is a motivated or natural sign. When one sees the sign, one sees the object as well. One is observing the same thing. The sign is the phenomenon, it is constituted of the same matter, it is an emanation of that matter. But the precise problem of the text we are reading is that the shepherd turns to an *artificial* instrument in order to perceive a *natural* sign and that we thus have a conflict between two visual registers that are not readily compatible. The best way to be sure of the existence of an object is to trust the natural sign. This elementary law of perception is, however, what the use of the prosthesis disturbs. We see the sign, but we cannot conclude from it the existence of the object. There is no longer any evidence. Suddenly we no longer have the right to say that *where there is smoke, there is a fire*.

To pursue the episode of the telescope a bit further, following an onomastic path this time, I must point out as well that among the cast of characters of *Le Château des Carpathes*, we find a learned scholar who answers to the curious name of *Orfanik*. In *Orfanik*, there is an *Orpheus*. This right-hand man of the Count de Gortz has the task of resuscitating a dead person by making her return from the kingdom of shadows. If we accept this reasoning, the living dead opera singer, who is at the center of the novel, is a new Eurydice.⁹ It is, however, more important for our argument that *Orfanik* rimes with *Frik*, and thus that in the onomastic system of the novel, something of a relation exists between the learned scholar and the shepherd. This confirms what we already know, namely, that the shepherd, contrary to what one might at first believe, is not the opposite of the learned scholar. In reality, *Frik* prefigures *Orfanik*, even if it takes some time to realize this. The shepherd is “the man with the telescope,” curiously unable to be satisfied with observations made by the naked eye, as we have insisted previously. But now here is the portrait of the learned scholar, who himself has the same incapacity. Let’s listen to Verne:

Orfanik was of middle height, thin, sickly and consumptive, and with one of those pale faces which are sometimes called ‘death heads.’ In particular he wore a black patch over his right eye, which he had lost in some physical or chemical experiment; and on his nose was a pair

of clumsy spectacles, the only lens being that over his left eye, which had a greenish glow. (111-12)

Thick glasses, a single lens: all of this is evident. Frik and Orfanik are cousins, or brothers. They represent a curiously deficient humanity, obliged to construct objects—remedial tools for what looks very much like a sort of congenital insufficiency on their part. But the objects they build are also, paradoxically, obstacles for them and destabilizing factors. The thing that helps one see better is also the thing that blinds. Pursuing the onomastic route just a bit further, I would add the following: the character of the forester in *Le Château des Carpathes* is a certain Nic Deck. Nic Deck, as you will recall, is a Fenimore Cooperesque figure. In fact, Jules Verne refers explicitly to *The Last of the Mohicans* in his text. The gamekeeper, we read, possesses

that professional instinct, that “animal” aptitude, so to speak, which is guided by the slightest indications, projections of the branches in such and such a direction, irregularities of the ground, colours of the bark, hues of the mosses where they are exposed to the various winds. Nic Deck was too skilled at his trade, and practised it with too much sagacity to go astray even in localities unknown to him. He would have been a worthy rival of Leatherstocking or Chingachook in the land of Fenimore Cooper. (56)

There would be much to say about this character, particularly about the quotation marks Jules Verne puts around the term “animal,” which must be understood at a second level. I will simply point out that the “purely natural” being represented by Nic Deck has a very curious name. Rearrange the syllables: *Nic Deck*. What does one obtain? *Deck Nic*, that is, *technique*. This is another way of indicating that Jules Verne wants nothing to do with bucolic idylls and country utopias. For him, nature is traversed by techniques and the technological, and the author of *Le Château des Carpathes* misses no occasion to demonstrate this.

It is time to conclude, that is, to take stock of what we have discovered and to try to formulate it in a more conceptual and analytical language. I will do this by recalling a passage from Plato that Bernard Stiegler points out in his book, *La Technique et le temps*. The fragment that interests me here can be found in the *Protagoras* (c. 390 B.C.) and concerns what one might call a *narrative of beginnings*. The text is a bit long, but I cannot resist the pleasure of quoting it in its entirety. Here is the beginning of the fable:

Once upon a time, there existed gods but no mortal creatures. When the appointed time came for these also to be born, the gods formed

them within the earth out of a mixture of earth and fire and the substances which are compounded from earth and fire. And when they were ready to bring them to the light, they charged Prometheus and Epimetheus with the task of equipping them and allotting suitable powers (*dunameis*) to each kind. Now Epimetheus begged Prometheus to allow him to do the distribution himself—"and when I have done it," he said, "you can review it." So he persuaded him and set to work.

The passage that follows is less humoristic and more tragic. Epimetheus, who is not a very skillful god, in fact commits an error:

In his allotment he gave to some creatures strength without speed, and equipped the weaker kinds with speed. Some he armed with weapons, while to the unarmed he gave some other faculty and so contrived means for their preservation. . . . *Thus he made his whole distribution on a principle of compensation, being careful by these devices that no species should be destroyed.*

Then the error, or the "fault" as Bernard Stiegler calls it, is occurs:

Now Epimetheus was not a particularly clever person, and before he realized it he had used up all the available powers on the brute beasts, and being left with the human race (*non-aloga*) on his hands unprovided for, did not know what to do with them. While he was puzzling about this, Prometheus came to inspect the work, and found the other animals well off for everything, but man naked, unshod, unbedded, and unarmed, and already the appointed day had come, when man too was to emerge from within the earth into daylight. Prometheus, therefore, being at a loss to provide any means of salvation for man, stole from Hephaestus and Athena the gift of skill in the arts (*ten enteknen sophian*), together with fire—for without fire there was no means (*amekhanon*) for anyone to possess or use this skill—and bestowed it on man. In this way man acquired sufficient resources to keep himself alive. (*Protagoras*, 320d-322a, quoted in Stiegler, 187)

One can thus see that the problem is the same as in Jules Verne's *Le Château des Carpathes*: man is "naked," "without specialized talents," *akosmeton*. He needs technological objects to survive. To say one needs "nothing at all," as the shepherd affirms,¹⁰ is to be a very bad anthropologist: one fails to recognize who one is and from whence one comes. This is indeed why Prometheus gives humans the gift of fire: thus *homo sapiens* can make himself into *homo faber*, and ultimately into *homo prostheticus*. This development is logical. We can say, in other words, that the prosthesis is *necessary* for man, even that it constitutes man.

But our analysis does not end there. What the shepherd also discovers in Jules Verne's novel—and what one must read between the lines in the Platonic myth—is that if man needs objects and if these objects

necessarily take on a technological character, the manipulation of such objects is difficult, even problematic. The question then becomes one of discovering whether or not there is a good usage of the technological object. Indeed, this is not a very easy question. On this point, Verne's text and the myth recounted in the *Protagoras* are in agreement. The "armor" that protects us, the carapace made of all sorts of bric-a-brac that we put on in order to go out, is sometimes a heavy burden to carry — it can suffocate us as well. If one thinks about it, this situation corresponds to the logic of double bind developed by Gregory Bateson: without technological assistance, man would die; with it, with prosthetic devices, he can survive, but he is also condemned to live the life of a handicapped person. The prosthesis is like the convict's chains: it prevents one from walking but cannot be removed. One must therefore learn to live with it.

Bernard Stiegler comes to the following conclusion in his essay, and I would concur:

Discovery, insight, invention, imagination are all, according to the narrative, characteristic of a *de-fault*. Animals are already marked by a de-fault (in relation to being as it is and as it endures through change, and in relation to the gods): they perish. One must understand "de-fault" here *in relation to what is*, that is, a flaw in being. And yet, whereas animals are positively endowed with qualities, it is *tekhne* that forms the lot of humans, and *tekhne* is prosthetic; that is, it is entirely artifice. (193)

The consequence, indicates Stiegler, is rather ill fated for the human species:

The qualities of animals make up a sort of nature, in any case a positive gift of the gods: a predestination. The gift made to humanity is not positive: it is there to compensate. Humanity is without qualities, without predestination: it must invent, realize, produce qualities, and nothing indicates that, once produced, these qualities will bring about humanity, that they will become *its* qualities; for they may rather become those of technics. (193-94)

Man *produces qualities, but nothing assures him that once produced they will become his*. He is thus completely given over to something that is beyond him. He is a hostage of his own "genius." I fear, my dear American friend, that Jules Verne is attempting to tell us the same thing in his novel: anthropogenesis and technogenesis are necessarily joined. The more we become human, the more we become the servants of technology: it is no use trying to disconnect the two, because this cannot be done.

You told me that American English has a term that indicates the overflow of technological objects in our daily lives. This is called, as you indicated, *overload*, for example, when you receive spam, which is very bothersome, as we all know, or when your cell phone rings incessantly and you wish it would stop, or when you want to be left alone, simply left alone, and are not allowed this possibility. I agree that overload is a real threat, which we must resist. However, I do not quite understand how to do this. What I mean is that I *no longer* quite understand after having read Jules Verne. As Bernard Stiegler suggests, overload is our lot, our destiny, the price we pay for being in the modern era. What you call overload is perhaps, seen from this perspective, simply another name for the *human condition*.

The situation is serious, but I hasten add that it is not desperate. Perhaps we can find some consolation in the idea that we have gained lucidity from the autonomy we have lost. In any case, I don't hate shepherds as much as Jules Verne did. I have learned from his novel—and from Plato and Bernard Stiegler as well—that we are all somehow shepherds, in fact, and that we cannot do very much about this. So be it.

Best regards, etc.,
FS

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translated by David F. Bell

Notes

1. "Art, that great flatterer, which always obligingly seeks consolations for people who are too happy, has had its uninterrupted series of *pastorals*. Under the title *Histoire des bergeries* I have often wanted to write an erudite and critical book in which I would study all of these various bucolic dreams, a nourishment upon which the upper classes have passionately feasted" (23).
2. Cf. *Bucoliques*, V, 44 and Victor Hugo, *Notre-Dame de Paris*, Book 3, Chapter 3.
3. Translator's note: "Porte-vue" and "porte-voix" cannot be translated literally into English. Both expressions contain the notion of "carrying" or projecting images or sound over a distance. To call Frik's half-closed hand held up to his eye a "telescope," as the English translation is more or less forced to do, risks some confusion with the actual telescope that quickly appears in the story, as the reader will see shortly.
4. I refer here to *The Tales of Hoffmann*, the well-known operetta, as well as to *The Sandman* (1815).
5. Translator's note: The author uses the French term "la technique" and its adjective "technique" exclusively when referring to technology and technological objects in the article. Unfortunately, the only valid English solution is the more awkward

- "technological," since "technique" in English does not necessarily refer to a technology, but suggests first a skill or a tactic learned and repeated. In French, the first meaning of "technique" contains the immediate notion of an object or practice that belongs to a particular science or art. Only at secondary level does the French "technique" refer to a learned methodology in a potentially broader sense. The argument obviously plays on both of these meanings, but requires that the notion of "technology" always be front and center, hence the necessity of choosing a form of the term "technology" for translating in almost all cases.
6. "A few days ago . . . a barometer dealer came into my room and offered me his wares" (1:137). From this point of view, Verne's opera singer is also a new version of Olympia, a mechanical doll who never lived and who thus cannot exactly die. Count Télék, the man who marries her, cannot seem to understand this. I have written about these issues in my *A distance de voix* (33ff.).
 7. This is also Baudelaire's question, I note in passing ("Laquelle et la vraie?", *Oeuvres complètes*, 1:342).
 8. See Max Milner's analysis: "What Jules Verne senses in *Le Château des Carpathes* is that audio-visual technologies are not simply prostheses added to other instruments at the disposal of man to transform the world: they open gaps in the opaque and compact reality that surrounds us, into which our passion for the unreal and our repetition compulsion are drawn, a manifestation of the death drive" (223).
 9. This has been clearly pointed out by Michel Serres in his *Jouvenances sur Jules Verne* (241ff). Cf. more recently *Jules Verne, la science et l'homme contemporain* (99).
 10. Cf. this fragment of the dialogue. The peddler: "'Well, then,' said the pedlar, 'if the only customers I had were shepherds, I'd find it hard to make a fortune. And so you don't want anything?'" The shepherd: "Nothing at all" (14).

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