The Poetics of Digital Media

PAUL FROSH

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For Caroline, Gefen, Tomer and Nitzan

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polity

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Last, but really first, there is family. Caroline: my closest companion, love of my life. It would be boring, and lonely, and far too chaotic without you. Gefen, Tomer and Nitzan: my sources of delightful distraction, deepest pride, cool cynicism (mainly about the signified's relation to the signifier) and occasionally useful information (see the notes). This book, you may have noticed, is dedicated to you all.

Author's Note on the Cover Image

I would dearly love to claim that the reasons for choosing the cover image of the blue flower were plain to me as soon as I saw it, but in this case intuition definitely preceded understanding. The flower, marketed by stock imagery company Shutterstock and created by photographer and illustrator BoxerX, was an inspired suggestion made by Clare Ansell (art director), Andrew Corbett (graphic designer) and Mary Savigar (Senior Commissioning Editor) at Polity. I was immediately struck by its enigmatic beauty on the cover mock-up, and by its hazy connotation of 'the poetic'. I also quickly associated the interleaving of petals and the openness of the flower with the ideas of world disclosure and mediated palpability that appear in the book. It was only later that memory involuntarily supplied another connection: Walter Benjamin's comment, itself rather enigmatic, about 'the blue flower in the land of technology', which appears in his famous essay on artwork in the age of mechanical reproduction (1992 [1936]: 226).[1] The 'blue flower' refers to a symbol in German romanticism (traced mainly to Novalis) of yearning for the infinite, union with nature, and of poetry itself: 'the unattainable object of the romantic quest, the incarnation of desire' (Hansen 1987: 204). However, in Benjamin's essay, the idea of the 'blue flower *in the land of technology*' follows a complex discussion of how cinema's technological intervention into reality (fragmentation of the studio space through the multiplication of camera viewpoints, and especially the reconfiguration of viewpoints through editing) constructs a new reality, whose 'illusionary nature is a nature of the second degree' (1992 [1936]: 226). While Benjamin's essay certainly critiques the alienating consequences of this artifice (summarized, roughly, as the 'loss of the aura'), it also contains crucial moments of what Miriam Hansen calls 'redemptive criticism', whereby technologized second nature discloses itself through a medium whose mimetic qualities register 'sediments of experience that are no longer or not yet claimed by social and economic rationality' (Hansen 1987: 209).

Benjamin's comments resonate in multiple ways with the image of the blue flower used on the front cover of this book. The picture is computer generated; it is an image of nature germinated in a digital ecosystem that populates our surroundings with such an abundance of objects that they form a primary experiential habitat, a lifeworld of mediated existence. Furthermore, the palpable detail of the flower in simulated close-up makes the mimetic powers of digital technologies manifest as world-producing forces. Finally, the flower is a stock image – another serendipitous connection, given my earlier research on stock photography. Verging on cliché and kitsch, designed in order to be resold many times for myriad uses and appearing in Shutterstock's online catalogue in numerous versions (with, for instance, backgrounds of different colour), it is perhaps the most generic, commodified and alienated type of cultural product, here fulfilling its destiny in social and economic rationality – a commercial destiny – through adorning and promoting this book. And yet, I hope, it also exceeds that destiny. As the blue flower is plucked for this book from the 'natural' habitat in which it was seeded and cultivated – the digital stock archive – it becomes an emblem of the mediated lifeworld: a sensuously and symbolically condensed incarnation of 'the land of technology' itself and of the possibilities – offered but never guaranteed – for meaningful life within it.

Prologue

Monsters, Inc. as a Poetic Manifesto

Night-time in a child's bedroom. When I was very young, I occasionally believed, like many other children, that there were monsters under my bed. I would be safe from their teeth and claws, I imagined, if only I could keep my limbs from extending into the darkness beyond the edges of the mattress until morning, by which time the monsters would have left, dissolving into the daylight. Curled into a ball which I was too young to describe as foetal, I would spend what felt like hours, but was really only a matter of minutes, furiously wishing away the fearsome phantoms I had conjured out of the night of my own bedroom, hardening my body against the unseen dangers of the dark even as it relaxed into sleep and dreams.

Marcel Proust and Maurice Sendak jointly minister over this scene, shaping its emotional structure as a modern cultural trope.[1] Proust's famous 'Overture' to *In Search of Lost Time* does not describe monsters lurking in a child's imagination but rather the experience of being on the brink of sleep and the oscillation between waking and slumber, world and bedchamber, consciousness and memory, that links the sensations of the adult narrator with the child's bedtime anxieties on being separated from his mother. Maurice Sendak's illustrated classic *Where the Wild Things Are* lovingly depicts the dreamlike metamorphosis of a child's room – as with Proust, following the hero's temporary removal from his mother's affection – into an entire world of monsters; like Proust's wakeful sleepiness, the experience involves the mutation of physical space far beyond the bedroom's boundaries, performing spatial and sensory transformations that Gaston Bachelard (1994), in his analysis of the 'poetics of space', calls 'intimate immensity'. Beyond and against these works is another, older image of darkened inner space – Plato's famous parable of the cave, which is Proust and Sendak's archetype as well as their inherited critique: we are deceived by the worlds we conjure, even as we are undeniably moved by the reality we grant them.[2]

Yet perhaps the richest contemporary elaboration of this scene of world transformation is accomplished by a less canonical text: Pixar Studio's animated film *Monsters, Inc.* (2001). *Monsters, Inc.* vividly dramatizes the power of human imagining; but it also tethers that power to modern media, in particular to their 'poetic' capacities, their ability to disclose and produce worlds. Night-time in a child's bedroom comprises the film's opening sequence – a sequence that utilizes the familiarity of childhood experiences and their dissemination through folk culture and literature, only to confound the expectations of viewers several times as it unfolds.

The scene begins, like Proust and Sendak, with separation from parental protection and affection, as the off-screen voices of a child's mother and father say goodnight, the light is turned off and the bedroom door is closed. The parents' footsteps recede, and the camera pans down slowly from a shelf full of toys to a sleeping boy in his bed, followed by a series of shots of the moonlit interior, the wind wafting the curtains, the clock ticking, and other suspenseful vignettes. The boy wakes briefly and sees the cupboard door ajar. An arm emerges from it; but he returns to sleep when he realizes that it is only his bathrobe stirring in the breeze. A shadow passes across the bed covers. The camera pans down again towards the floor, below the bed. Two eyes glow there, glaring out of the darkness. And here is the first surprise for viewers: for there *is* a monster under this child's bed and, as it rises, many-tentacled, to its full height by the bedside, the child wakes, sits up and screams.

Immediately, there is another surprise: the monster becomes infected with the boy's terror. Responding to his fear-distorted features, the monster screams in turn, wheels away in panic, falls backwards over a ball and finally tumbles – rump first – onto some sharp-edged toy jacks on which it bounces for several startled seconds of pain and distress. Horror gives way to slapstick.

Then follows the most radical blow to viewers' expectations: we hear the shrill sound of an alarm, the lights go up, and an astonishing scene is disclosed. Not only is the monster confirmed as diegetically real – real within the world of the film and not a figment of the boy's imagination at all – but the human child is shown to be artificial: a mechanical upper body lying in a bed, watched in turn by other monsters, all situated in some kind of laboratory-cum-studio. The narrative explanation for this revelation is marvellously inventive. We, the viewers, are not onlookers in a child's bedroom after all but are observing a special facility designed to train monsters in the apparently perilous art of scaring children.

The mechanical child and his artificial bedroom are part of a general apparatus of simulation and training set in what we later discover to be a central power station (owned by the eponymous power company, Monsters Incorporated), itself located in a conveniently English-speaking monster world: the city of Monstropolis. Indeed, given the implied location of our viewing situation, we observe the scene *as monsters*, peering, with our compatriots, over the shoulder of the trainer at the control desk and through a glass barrier into the simulated child's bedroom. The scene is comic and engaging not just because of the way it confounds our expectations – thereby establishing the existence of a monster world as a given fact of the narrative – but also because it subverts conventional human emotions and attitudes towards monsters. It turns out that as well as *not* being 'naturally' scary (since they need to be trained to scare humans), monsters are in fact terrified of children and have to overcome their fear in order to be any use as 'scarers'. It further turns out that the reason they need to risk their safety to scare children is that children's screams are the primary energy source used for powering 'Monstropolis'.

The sequence I have described is what W. J. T. Mitchell (1994: 25), borrowing from Geoffrey Hartman, might call a 'recognition scene': a theatrical scenario of encounter which underpins, distils and concretizes a theory, enabling that theory to become amenable to reflexive knowledge (re-*cognizing* it) and making it visible not only within the particular text that presents it but as a point of reference and discussion for subsequent thinkers and texts. The recognition scenes discussed by Mitchell are enacted within theoretical or scholarly works: his key examples are Panofsky's encounter with a man raising his hat in his exposition of iconology (Panofsky 1972 [1939]: 3–5), and Althusser's 'theoretical theatre' (1984: 48) of a man being 'hailed' in the street in his account of the ideological interpellation of the subject (Plato's cave might be another recognition scene, albeit one that evocatively dramatizes human *mis*recognition). The Pixar sequence, in contrast, is the distillation of a theoretical premise conveyed by a work of popular fiction. The premise, in a nutshell, is that media are systems for the production and disclosure of worlds. Media are poetic infrastructures: they are generators and conduits of poesis as an existential power. The commonplace ideas that media create overtly fictional worlds, while at the same time constructing our sense of the real world, society, community and the body politic, are rooted in the poetic capacities of media.

Monsters, Inc., in fact, is a manifesto for media poetics. It is a 'manifesto' in a deeply poetic sense of the word, since one of the meanings of poetics – which I will outline in the introduction and variously explicate and demonstrate in subsequent chapters – is the making manifest of layers of representation, signification and existence, their palpable disclosure in the encounter with a particular message, text, artefact or device. *Monsters, Inc.* makes manifest fundamental media processes of world-production and world-disclosure.

What is it in particular that is made manifest in the scene that I have described, and how is it '*re*-cognized': made available again for reflection and rethinking? The first level of recognition is of the power of the imagination as a poetic force, and its generality across individual, social and species dimensions. The resonance of the scene for viewers is built upon the privacy of this experience of childhood fantasy and fear, its occurrence in childhood expressly when one is alone – in one's intimate solitariness on the darkened brink of sleep – as well as its familiar commonality, at the very least through fable and folklore, among most or all children in contemporary western societies and the adults they become. We recognize the visual 'existents' of the depicted world – the slant of the moonlight through the window in the darkened bedroom, the breeze catching the corner of the robe and momentarily making it resemble an arm – as exemplary expressions and projections which resemble our own memories, and through these projections we simultaneously enjoy the sharedness of our intimate recollections. What is recognized, then, is the imagination as a general poetic capacity that we all personally share.[3]

The second level of recognition concerns poesis and the unreal. Put simply, what the scene shows is that the child is not alone with his fears in his bedroom. The monster is real; or, at the very least, the monster has been imagined into existence. The same can be said of 'Monstropolis' and its inhabitants later in the film. Imagined beings and entities populate our world. They are connected to it, energized by it, present in it, disclosed as part of it. It is their habitat, and they cannot be confined to detached realms of fantasy and fable. They are even, some would argue, forces that drive our world's most fundamental psychological, social and political processes, among them religious worship and national sentiment.[4]

The third level of recognition concerns our relationship to the unknown: between ourselves, our familiar environments, and beings and worlds which are radically different or 'other' – so different that when they do appear as possibilities, they seem monstrous. The key moment of recognition is the reaction of the monster to the screaming child: the monster is depicted as a mirror-other, one whose response to the presence of humans – fear and panic – is an exact replica of our own feelings about monsters. There are in fact two intertwined moments of recognition in play at this level: the monster recognizes the human child as an 'other', as a member of a class of beings of extreme difference and great menace, whom it has previously regarded as monstrous and consequently learnt to fear. Monstrosity is therefore a product of imagination, and it turns out later in the film that the prejudicial perception of humans as monstrous is as widely disseminated and institutionally inculcated and legitimated (including by state authorities and the police force) in monster society as fear of monsters is in the human world. Yet the film also 're-cognizes' this prejudicial perception and apprehension of the other as monstrous: since we viewers know that *we* are not monstrous, by implication *our own* parallel construal of monsters as frightening becomes reflexively available for evaluation and critique. The very processes whereby we perceive and envisage others – and develop categories of otherness (such as monstrosity) – are disclosed to us for reflection and reformation. Absurd as it perhaps sounds, given the great difference in genres and registers, this recognition of the other as a similarly construed being to ourselves echoes another recognition scene well known in recent media studies. This is the opening to Roger Silverstone's *Media and Morality* (2007), where he recalls hearing an Afghani blacksmith interviewed on BBC radio explain the war going on in his country as a consequence of al-Qaeda having killed many Americans and their donkeys and having destroyed some of their castles in the 9/11 attacks. Silverstone calls this man not simply an 'other' but also a 'double' of ourselves, and the challenge he presents to our own poetic capacities and routines is particularly powerful: 'But can we imagine him imagining us? What will he have seen or heard about the attack? And can we imagine ourselves to be his strangers?' (2007: 2).

The fourth level of recognition foregrounds the power of illusion, a key element of media's world-producing capability. This is the recognition, dramatized by the film as a rupture and demystification of the opening segment in the child's bedroom, that the world we have been hitherto viewing, have momentarily taken on trust, is a technologically manufactured fabrication: a simulation of a child's room, and indeed of a child, which has successfully taken us in because of its crafted verisimilitude, its correlation to our expectations about the look of reality and to our personal and collective childhood fantasies. In the startling revelation of a training centre for monsters, the film takes viewers 'behind the scenes' of technologies and corporations, the source of organized illusions and deceptions, which humankind – still apparently lingering unregenerately in Plato's cave (Sontag 1977: 3) – mistakes for the truth. The power of poetic world creation so quickly established in the very opening sequence is transformed into the disclosure of a prior power, and a different world: the capacity of media technologies to create credible scenarios, however incredible and unreal we may know them to be.

Such media 'world-making', however, is more than simply a theme of *Monsters, Inc.*'s narrative, one among many topics of its discourse. It is a key activity of the film itself, the act that it performs in the experience of the viewer. Every scene and each character, every word of dialogue and soundtrack element, each pixel – from the most imposing visual features of the character's bodies to the most inconspicuous background components – is the result of intense and systematically organized work, the labour of creation by Pixar animators that brings the world of 'Monstropolis' into being, however fully-fledged and replete that world seems when it appears before viewers.[5] Moreover, for the duration of the film as seen by viewers (and possibly beyond), the self-sufficiency of its world is itself perpetually performed, accomplished in the ongoing interaction between the senses and faculties of viewers, the perceptual and symbolic structures of the film, and the technologies which enable it to be screened. The world of the film, like the film which creates it, is not an autonomous object or entity, but the result of an unfinished process of becoming, not least (though not only) because this particular technology – screened animation – depends upon technically enabled optical and psychological illusions which persuade us that there is a 'film' there in the first place, rather than a structured ensemble of rapidly shifting dots and lines flashing indiscernibly across a screen.

World-making activity is not of course restricted to this particular film, or to animation as an art form, though the etymological connection between animated film and 'animation' as the bestowal of life (the *anima* as soul, spirit or vital principle) should give us pause. Nor is the film by any means alone in extracting comedic profit from the reflexive depiction of the generic conventions which make its construction and comprehension possible: this has become something of a staple banality of 'postmodern' entertainment. Nevertheless, the power of Pixar's version of the scene of childhood imagining and the entire narrative of the film which follows go beyond both the performance of its key premises and its conspicuous and enjoyable pastiche.

For the film presents poesis not simply as a psychological faculty or as an aesthetic accomplishment but as a perpetually circulating social and existential *energy*. This is the central conceit of the narrative: that Monstropolis depends for its continued existence on the energy supplied by children's fear, and the conversion of their screams into power.[6] Later in the film, it is revealed that there is an even more efficient way of tapping into children's poetic energy: by making them laugh and capturing their laughter. Notwithstanding the change in the character and amplitude of the response and the power it generates, the idea here is clear: world-making and its associated emotions generate realities. Moreover, poetic energy can be elicited, captured, manipulated and redistributed. In other words, it can be subjected to processes of extraction, management and diffusion through the combined use of institutional practices (such as industrial routines) and technologies.

Within the story-world of the film, poetic energy is extracted and exploited by the physical and social interaction of animated beings – childish and monstrous – from two parallel and adjacent worlds, human and monster. The beings from these two worlds are brought together through a large institutional and technical apparatus: the power company Monsters Inc. Transferred to the level of discourse, however – the level of *Monsters, Inc.* the film rather than the fictional corporation – poetic energy is also produced and exploited through the interaction between beings from two interlinked worlds: in this case the world of the film and the world of its viewers. The encounter between these beings and their environments is also enabled and structured by a set of institutional and technological arrangements. Only here it is the industrial-aesthetic apparatuses of cinema and video that constitute the 'power company' extracting and managing poetic energy. Among the outputs of these encounters are the experiences and entertainment value generated for viewers, and the monetary value and reputation captured by producers, all of which can be further extracted, transferred, processed and circulated. Indeed, they were (though with less financial and critical success), twelve years after the release of the original film, in the sequel *Monsters University* (2013).

Finally, the film presents poetic processes in a way that allows us to 're-cognize' contemporary mediated experience. For the film depicts the relationship between the human world and the world of Monstropolis as one of interlinked adjacency: the worlds exist in parallel, permanently alongside and connected to one another. This relationship of conjoined adjacency, of connected side-by-sideness, is strikingly emphasized by the great symbolic and narrative weight that the film gives to doors. Doors are the entry points between the human and monster worlds: the doors, mainly opening into children's bedrooms, not only connect the physical spaces of the human world but also magically open onto the factory floor of the power company Monsters Inc. Doors are thus not only everyday mechanisms for entering or exiting through walls, as Bruno Latour (1992) describes them, but are metaphysical thresholds and portals linking disparate worlds. As Simmel says, 'life flows forth out of the door from the limitation of isolated separate existence into the limitlessness of all possible directions' (1997 [1909]: 173). They are 'communicating doors', symbolic of the communicative possibilities of being 'next door' – and of its terrors and joys. When the children on the human side of the door are felt to be potentially harmful, the door is labelled 'bad' and destroyed: one of the last acts of the film is the reconstitution of a 'bad' door that, the viewers know, is really good since it links the hero of the film, the monster Sully, to his human-child friend Boo. Even if he can't see Boo, the very existence of the door as a sign of her adjacent presence is a source of emotional and even existential security.[7]

How does this theme of connected adjacency, of parallel presence, illuminate contemporary experiences of mediation more generally? The very ubiquity of media in our everyday lives, increasingly conveyed by the metaphor of 'saturation', means that poetically generated worlds are not simply before us but are continually alongside us and with us: they keep us company. Such worlds and their entities need not be fictional (just as Sully and Boo are not fictional to one another): indeed, the chapters of this book explore media poetics through contemporary practices and objects that are not chiefly oriented to fiction, and that are in many cases routine and unremarkable, but that disclose the worlds we inhabit and their continual production. Furthermore, the company we keep with these worlds is often different from the direct relationship with imagined others constructed through dialogical, spectatorial or otherwise 'frontal' encounters with media texts, or from the organized technical and institutional imagination through which elevated observational viewpoints 'from above' are envisioned (and effaced). Adjacency translates into neither the intensity of spectatorship nor the instrumentality of observation but into the mediate and sociable relationship of companionship, of being-with. Little theorized or explored in communication studies, this adjacency of mediated entities to our lives is often conveyed as a peripheral and background intuition, an embodied registration of ambient co-habitation rather than a direct epiphany or passionate engagement with others.

Ultimately, then, *Monsters, Inc.* suggests that poesis needs to be taken seriously within media and communication studies as an intellectual project for understanding, explaining and potentially shaping our mediated lives. Media are generators for constructing and revealing worlds – including the 'actual' world that we imagine we live in and possible worlds that we propose as alternatives or refuges – and thus for their existence, maintenance and disclosure. It takes a world to make a world, as Nelson Goodman (1978) affirmed: the 'poetics of media' is an attempt to reflect upon how contemporary media perform this work as a matter of routine, and what the implications might be for our lives.

1

Introduction

Media Poetics

Consider the following scenario. You wake up tomorrow morning in your still-dark bedroom, and before you open the curtains and look out of the window, you check for messages on your mobile phone. You notice that there is no reception; no sign of a cellular phone network whatsoever. You open your laptop computer and see that no matter what you do, you cannot connect to the internet. You turn on a portable radio and scan the spectrum in vain for a station, hearing only the sound of static. You turn on the television to be greeted by 'snow', the swirling dots of light and dark that reveal the absence of a signal. Finally, you rummage in the cupboard for an old landline telephone and plug the cord into the telephone socket: putting your ear to the speaker, you hear that there is no line. You still haven't opened the curtains and looked outside. How do you interpret this sudden isolation, an imposed solitude that has little to do with possible expectations about the particular media content you might receive and that has everything to do with the routine experience and expectation of connectivity made possible by your communication devices? What, in the most anxious recesses of your mind, do you imagine has happened? The answer is clear: it is the end of the world.[1]

Media are poetic forces. They perform poesis; they bring forth worlds into presence, producing and revealing them. As this 'disconnection scene' shows, media do this not just through representing worlds, imaginary or otherwise, but by connecting us to worlds beyond our immediate physical perception. The smooth functioning of media signals to us, in ways we usually take for granted and irrespective of the specific content they convey, that those worlds continue to exist even though we cannot directly perceive them. Though they are routinized to the point of invisibility, these signals of connectivity and perpetual world presencing, which we can call 'vital signs' since they are indicators of life elsewhere (see chapter 3), *do* become conspicuous precisely at the moment of their sudden cessation. It is in the *malfunctioning* or termination of what Jakobson (1960) calls the 'phatic function' of communication (the aspect of communication charged with opening and maintaining channels of connectivity, about which I shall have much more to say in the chapters that follow), that this world presencing and its importance for our sense of physical and social being in a shared world with others, frequently becomes overtly apparent.[2]

Of course, to say that media *produce* worlds is not a particularly controversial claim. It certainly appears pertinent to the development of rich and complex imaginary worlds that have accompanied the emergence of digital media technologies, thanks in part to the increasing significance of computer gaming as a cultural experience and the expansion of media franchising (*Star Trek*, *Marvel Comics*, etc.: see Johnson 2013) as a 'transmedial' mode of cultural production which fleshes out fictional universes (Wolf 2012).[3] The tenor of this book so far – with the prologue's attention to works of literature and narrative film, its invocation of middle-class childhood fantasies (and middle-class fantasies of childhood) – might misleadingly situate its concerns within a broadly 'fictive' intellectual school in media and communication studies, where genres of fiction, folklore and art serve as models for other, possibly more prosaic but politically more predominant, genres: the hardcore categories of journalism, news, opinion and documentary. More troubling still, it might also seem to endorse an approach to media that is removed from more phenomenological and ethnographic appreciations of how media intersect with everyday habits, experiences, interactions and lives.

Yet it would be a mistake to restrict media poetics to fictive artistry. The resulting exclusion of informational reporting or everyday communication would reiterate a widely challenged dichotomy, since the importance of narrative, metaphor, conjecture and world-making to journalism, the social and natural sciences and everyday discourse and experience has become a commonplace principle among many scholars in these fields.[4] Moreover, it would also threaten to confine our attention to the overt construction of worlds and to veil the fact that the poetics of media are crucial to world disclosure (Kompridis 1994, 2006) – to making present and revealing our being in a world *already experienced as given*. What can be called the 'fictive mode' of media poetics – usually intense imaginative engagements with conspicuously alternate worlds – is merely part of the story.

So, to repeat: media are poetic forces; they bring forth worlds into presence, producing and revealing them. Accompanying this more inclusive concept of media poetics are two key assumptions. The first is that our relations with media have a profoundly existential significance. This book is deeply sympathetic to recent writings foregrounding media, existence and 'the meaning of life' by such thinkers as Paddy Scannell (2014), Amanda Lagerkvist (2017) and John Durham Peters (2015); it also owes a debt to the prescience of Annette Markham who, in 2003, suggested that computer-mediated communication should be conceptualized as a 'way of being': 'a transparent state wherein the self, information technology, everyday life and other are *vitally* connected, co-existent' (2003: 10, my italics). Or as Peters puts it about media more generally: 'Media are our infrastructures of being, the habitats and materials through which we act and are' (2015: 15). Media are means for living, reflecting upon and defining our lives within shared human conditions and limitations. These conditions are several, and include natality (we are born), mortality (we die), dimensional existence (we inhabit dimensions of space and time), embodiment (we are physical bodies in physical settings; we grow, we decay), sociality (we are social), emotion (we can feel for ourselves and others), consciousness (we think, remember, imagine and are reflective), symbolization (we use symbol systems, primarily language) and – last but by no means least – technicity (we use and