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**Stefano Gualeni, *The Clouds. An experiment in theory-fiction*,
New York, Routledge 2024, 160 pp.**

Examining the genesis of a text like *The Clouds* appears relevant specifically from a philosophical viewpoint due to the hybrid nature of the work, which combines contemporary philosophical questions with the realm of fiction. There is a foundational question spurring from this book: is it possible to engage in philosophy effectively through modalities that differ from the traditional ones? *The Clouds* addresses this query as another novel effort in communicating philosophical ideas undertaken by Stefano Gualeni, Associate Professor at the Institute of Digital Games (University of Malta). In this book, Gualeni draws extensively from his academic experience and research, revolving around the potential offered by fictional and virtual worlds in general (see: “*Virtual Worlds as Philosophical Tools: How to Philosophize with a Digital Hammer*, Basingstoke, Palgrave 2015; co-authored with Daniel Vella, *Virtual Existentialism: Meaning and Subjectivity in Virtual Worlds*, Cham, Palgrave 2020; *Il Videogioco del Mondo: Istruzioni per l’Uso*, Palermo, Timeo 2024). Gualeni is accustomed to such experimental endeavours, although his efforts had primarily focused on video games, also referred to as “philosophical interactive experiences” (p. 95), such as *Doors* (with N. Van de Mosselaer 2021) or *Something Something Soup Something* (with J. Harris 2017), in which he employs video games to convey philosophical meanings and conceptualisations. With *The Clouds*, he forgoes the possibilities offered by the interactive environment of virtual worlds and finds himself compelled to utilize the classical medium of written text. Nevertheless, he does so without losing sight of the potential offered by fictional worlds, particularly in a narrative context.

From this reflection emerges the peculiar structure of *The Clouds*. Firstly, the book presents a main text, a novel, in which philosophical theories are developed, including “the expressive and epistemic use of fictional games within fictional worlds; the possibility for existential meaning within simulated universes; the unnatural narratological trope of unhappening” (p. 98). To achieve this, Gualeni also writes a compendium of the philosophical theories that are present in the narrative. The question of classifying *The Clouds* is part of the analysis of the author. The possibility of arguing theories regarding the reality in which one lives, through tools such as the “thought experiment” or the “what if” scenario, and, of course, storytelling, has always been inherent to philosophy. Hence, Gualeni characterises *The Clouds* as “philosophical fiction” (p. 98), delving into theory-

fiction through an accessible text. Discussing *The Clouds* entails discussing an interdisciplinary object. The predominant part of the book revolves around a narrative that begins with the introduction of Stenton G. and Vamvera Zamdem, who are engaged in testing a new supercomputer commissioned by a gaming company, located in Akureyri, Iceland. Up to this point, the narration appears to be an account of contemporary reality, but the entirety of “The Clouds” aims to surprise the reader, as evidenced by Stenton’s activity of “testing the newly installed SLAGG valves” (p. 1). The SLAGG, something that doesn’t exist in our world, is the first of the “what ifs” used by the author. Although the setting is realistic, in Stenton and Vamvera’s world, advanced automation technologies seem commonplace, with virtual assistants capable of preparing food and launching “holographic” video games. Moreover, the author described the existence of the SLAGG material, which in this case is nothing but a super material, possesses remarkable made-up characteristics, particularly suitable for a hyper technological society. Up to this point, it appears to be a sci-fi tale set not so much in a distant future temporally, despite taking place in October 2080, but rather in an alternate time where such material can exist. However, this story is abruptly interrupted to introduce another narrative: that of Carla Mikkelsen and Marija. It is revealed, or rather, transparently disclosed by the author, that Stenton and Vamvera’s tale is a story Marija is writing and discussing with

Carla, her partner. This narrative device is employed skillfully, resulting in a series of interconnections between the two narrative levels that engage the reader, with a constant shift between them. On one hand, we have Carla and Marija discussing the fates of Stenton and Vamvera and their world, while on the other hand, the reader is drawn into Carla and Marija’s fictional world. Once again, the setting is entirely “realistic”: Carla and Marija reside in Malta in October 2025, with Carla working at the university while Marija is writing a novella and working as a primary school teacher. This stratification of narrative and fictional levels is further complicated by the fact that Stenton and Vamvera’s narrative arc incorporates video games, consistent with a world akin to our own: “Returning Sails” and “Tales of the One Reborn”, the latter with the expansion “Canticles of the True Flesh”. In turn, Carla and Marija have at least one video game at their disposal: “Syderoxylon Online” (p. 107). Therefore, the fictional worlds amount to at least three. The first level is the reality of Carla and Marija. The second consists of the video game worlds available to them, which are fictional artefacts within a fictional world. This second level could coexist, at a hierarchical level of existence, with the novella of Stenton and Vamvera, as both would be fictional constructs generated by the fictional world of Carla and Marija. The third and final level consists of the video games available in the fictional world of Stenton and Vamvera, which would therefore be fictional constructs generated within a fictional world and, in turn, generated by Marija’s imagination, a character within a fictional world. This structure is one of the guiding principles in understanding *The Clouds* and its value as a text. Despite this complexity, the narrative does not become burdensome and flows smoothly, as the narrative elements, novels, and video games, are not unusual in everyday consideration. Furthermore, at a

literary level, *The Clouds* explores different modalities for storytelling, without losing engagement with the reader. The text presents various linguistic registers ranging from direct storytelling through dialogue or inner monologue, to narration via email or chat, to the technical discussion on recent technologies, particularly video game graphics engines.

Considering the author's purpose in using them, they can be divided into two groups. On one hand, we have the video games, and on the other, the fictional worlds that concern Carla and Marija and Stenton and Vamvera. These two realities continually reverberate into each other, not only due to the assumptions and reflections made by Carla and Marija about the novella Marija is writing but also because they offer the reader the same hermeneutic tools regarding the philosophical theories underlying the narrative. In other words, the specificities of the video game world and the world to which Stenton and Vamvera belong become points of reflection for the protagonists of the novel, who find themselves having to explain an unforeseen and seemingly impossible event. *The Clouds* thus explores two powerful narrative and philosophical tools: the what-if scenario and the unwholly. I leave the pleasure of discovering the various twists to the reader.

If *The Clouds* were merely a novel it would only be necessary to delve into the merits and narrative technicalities of the novella. However, *The Clouds* not only contains "themes" of a philosophical nature but also serves a "philosophical and academic purpose". After the novel, the text continues with three academic essays. These essays aim to provide the reader with a continuation and deepening of the philosophical theories carried within the narrative, offering the academic side of the book. In the first essay, *The Expressive Use of Fictional Games in The Clouds*, the author underscores the significance of video games in the novella. Drawing from his studies and research, he makes a series of considerations regarding video games and their philosophical and existential value. Firstly, the video games in the novel are all part of the world offered to the reader, and thus, each of them carries information within. This information may concern details and characterization of the protagonists and the technologies of the fictional world, for example by showing the differences between the real world, like the much

more advanced technology of the world of Stenton and Vamvera; and the analogies with the "real" world, such as the creation of video games for economic and recreational purposes. In addition to the deep analysis of video games as a cultural and philosophical artefact, one other remarkable contribution to *The Clouds* is the author's use of them as philosophical insight for the reader. Carla and Marija begin their considerations on the existence of an entity, such as Stenton and Vamvera, in a virtual or literary fictional world to ask questions about the events of their narrative arc. It is indeed the technical methods through which the virtual world of a video game is generated that provide the leverage for the protagonist Carla's epiphany regarding the unexpected events of the narrative.

In my view, the second essay *Theodicy and Existential Meaning in Simulated Universes* brings much more depth in terms of the philosophical reflections around virtual worlds. The author asks how we can know whether the world we experience is "true" or "real" – a question already well-known both by Descartes

and his hypothesis of the deceiving evil genius (R. Descartes [1641], *Meditations*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press 2013) and the central question of the thought experiment “brain in the vat” – although strangely does not mention Hilary Putnam, nor fully explores the topic of the “brain in a vat”, and limiting the use of this argumentation in his own essay (H. Putnam, “Brains in a Vat” in *Reason, Truth and History*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press 1981). Gualeni focuses not on the possibility of a deceiving deity, but rather on the possibility of living in some form of simulation, aligning with the “simulation hypothesis” (p. 118). The question thus becomes: how can we know whether we are living in a fictional world like Stenton and Vamvera, Carla and Marija, or the characters in their video games? This argumentative leap is intriguing because it completely separates the possibility of inhabiting a simulation from the need for a physical existence that precedes such a simulation. In other words, it is not necessary to speak of a body or even a brain connected to a device, but rather of an entity that exists entirely and solely in the simulated world. This transition is essential to Gualeni’s argumentation as it allows him to draw parallels between the contents of the novel and the philosophical theories he intends to present.

Each simulation, whether generated by a device or not, raises the issue of the relationship between the simulation and its inhabitants with the creator or creators of these simulations. What are the intentions, morality, and nature of these creators? This problem was already tackled radically by Leibniz, as Gualeni reports, who grappled with the idea of an omnipotent and benevolent creator God coexisting with a world perceived as imperfect and full of suffering (G. Leibniz [1710], *Essays of Theodicy on the Goodness of God, the Freedom of Man and the Origin of Evil*, Eugene, Wipf and Stock Publishers 2000). Here, Gualeni immediately highlights a series of assumptions that are functional to the thesis he intends to discuss. He excludes *a priori* the hypothesis of omnipotent and entirely good or evil creators, as these assumptions are sterile for the reasoning he intends to conduct on the hypothesis of living in a virtual simulation. At the same time, he assumes as a foundational hypothesis that the creators of the possible virtual simulation in which we live are interested in and care about the fate of this simulation. The argumentative explanation is that a civilization advanced enough to deploy a simulation like the one we might be living in must be morally advanced as well as technologically advanced. This is the “posthuman morality hypothesis” proposed by the author (p. 121). In other words, Gualeni discusses a morality in which the creators of a simulation also have an interest in limiting the harm and suffering of the inhabitants of the simulation due to the high level of technological advancement achieved. This is a surprising passage as it moves from at least two problematic assumptions: the idea that civilisation progresses simultaneously in technological and moral terms, and the idea that the morality of these creators includes concepts derived clearly from our idea of morality, such as caring for something and avoiding harm to other entities. These are important topics in moral philosophy that might have benefited from further exploration. Considering the limited extension of this academic essay, the philosophical argumentation constantly linked to the content of the novel is very well articulated. The author

displays possible explanations for why the simulation we live in is in its current state. The first of these explanations is the lack of total control of the simulation by the creators, due to either lack of experience or unforeseen results. Among the latter, might be included the advent of entities, human beings, capable of taking care of their existence and asking questions such as “What is right to do with one’s creations?” or “What if we were living in a simulation?”. The second explanation that Gualeni explores is that of a higher ethical purpose for the possible sufferings to which we are subjected, whether concerning us or the community of creators. Lastly, the third and final explanation is that the creators of the simulation no longer have access to it or have forgotten it. The higher ethical purpose that would give meaning to the suffering is not new in philosophical discourse. The use of the other two reasons instead is more interesting and innovative as they do not rely on the idea of an unknowable and unattainable entity like the divine, but on creators who are not difficult to envision as human beings, or aliens, particularly advanced. In my opinion, the ultimate purpose of this philosophical reflection lies in the questions humanity will have to ask itself in the near future: about the new role of humankind, its technological developments, and their impact.

The third and final essay, *On the Unnatural Narrative Trope of Unhappening*, proposes an analysis of the trope of unhappening. In other words, unhappening means: what happens if the narrator or creator of a simulation ensures that something never occurred? Gualeni provides the reader with a series of examples and analyses on the theme, particularly regarding its extensive use in video games – for instance, the ordinary act of restarting a game after the avatar’s death. The author focuses on a central element of the novel: do the protagonists retain memories when the simulation is rewind to a previous point? The value of the essay lies, in my opinion, not only in the excellent bibliographic selection or in presenting the reader with a precise analysis of this operational mechanism in fiction or video games but also in the philosophical argumentation it offers. If the creators of a simulation, ours included, could restart the simulation to avoid unforeseen and/or uncontrollable outcomes, and could rende the memories of its inhabitants consistent with such a reset, how could we perceive ourselves to be living in a simulation? Or how could the protagonists of the novel do so?

The proposed analysis aims to answer a question: what, then, is *The Clouds*? Essentially, it’s an experiment that maybe does not need a label to be understood. The text has undeniable value both in terms of entertainment, thanks to a well-written and enjoyable novella, and in terms of academic divulgation, thanks to the three essays derived from extensive research work previously undertaken by Gualeni. Both the content of the novella and the essays are easily accessible yet non-trivial, and, in the case of the essays, well-supported by a body of sources that provide even the specialist reader with extremely useful research tools. Above all, *The Clouds* demonstrates how philosophy can be effectively conducted without confining it to a few specialized modalities such as textual academic essays. Instead, *The Clouds* shows how it is possible to create video games and philosophical narratives that allow even the less experienced reader to recognize

the philosophical questions and reflections that philosophers have grappled with for ages.

In conclusion, *The Clouds* is a text to be read primarily because it allows various aspects of human production, such as text, video games and films, to speak to each other once again and presents to the reader a new form of interdisciplinary dialogue, serving as a practical example of different ways of philosophising.

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