

Reconfiguring Realities

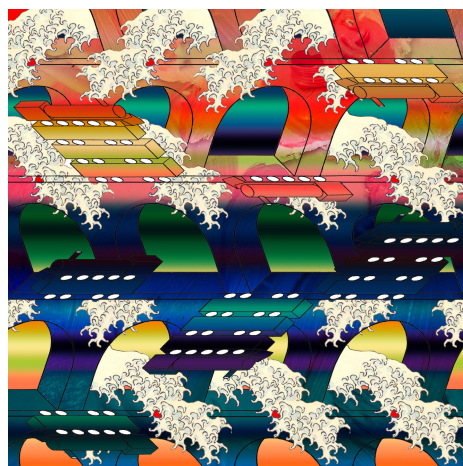
On the Intra-active Liminality of Bridges

Zuzana Križalkovičová

Bridges, traditionally conceived as architectural structures, are examined in this study as complex aesthetic phenomena with distinct and significant ontological and epistemological dimensions. Drawing from Karen Barad's intra-active realism and the rhizomatic ontology of Deleuze and Guattari, the research deconstructs the subject-object dichotomy and conceptualizes bridges as liminal entities with the capacity to form new relationships and meanings. Analyses of Kafka's short story *The Bridge* and multimedia interventions by Svetlana Volic posit the bridge as a performative space that transcends its original utilitarian function to emerge as a dynamic platform for posthumanist inquiry. The study offers an alternative perspective on understanding space, subjectivity and the relationships between human and non-human actors. | *Keywords: Bridges, Posthumanism, Agential Realism, Franz Kafka, Svetlana Volic, Onto-epistemology*

[...] its useless to repeat [...] old experiments:
they must be new to be experiments.

Virgina Woolf (2011, p. 283)



Marko Blažo, *The Bridge*, 2012, © Artist's Image

1. Introduction: Theoretical-methodological¹

Contemporary theoretical paradigms have suggested a growing need for a re-evaluation of ontological categories and epistemological frameworks, and within this context, the bridge, a seemingly commonplace and semantically uncomplicated architectural structure, might prove to be a potentially productive object for deconstructing established dichotomies and examining the complex entanglements existing between entities. The traditional understanding of the bridge as a static structure with a purely utilitarian function broadens to encompass a more sophisticated conception, widening its meaning from that of a physical means of passage toward a more expansive dynamic phenomenon. The philosophical traditions of the bridge as a theoretical object find their roots in the works of Martin Heidegger and Georg Simmel. In his essay *Building Dwelling Thinking* (1951), Heidegger notes that bridges actively generate their own space and meaning: “It is not that the bridge stands in space, but rather space arises through the bridge” (Heidegger, 2000, p. 161). Simmel, in his pioneering study *Bridge and Door* (1909), characterises the bridge as the “triumph of the human spirit over space” (Simmel, 1994, p. 6), emphasising its dialectical role of connecting and separating.

Posthumanist thinkers such as Karen Barad have reconceptualized these reflections by emphasizing that identities do not emerge as stable entities but are instead consequences of intra-active processes, where “relata exist only within phenomena as a result of specific intra-actions (i.e., there are no independent relata, only relata-within-relations)” (Barad, 2007, p. 249). This approach allows us to conceptualise the bridge less as a physical object and more as a dynamic entity, one which is constituted through a network of constantly changing relationships.

Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s concept of rhizomatic ontology offers a model for analysing the bridge as a non-hierarchical and multilineal assemblage; within this understanding, the bridge does not exist as a fixed point but rather as “a set of connections between heterogeneous points” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 21). Rosi Braidotti’s affirmative onto-ethics offers a critical perspective on anthropocentric subjectivity and extends the understanding of the relationships prevailing between human and non-human actors: “Subjectivity is mobile and collective, formed within networked relationships” (Braidotti, 2013, p. 32).²

The study applies these new materialist methodologies to analyse the ontological instability of the bridge in Kafka’s short story *The Bridge* (1917) and Svetlana Volic’s *NON FINITO* multimedia projects from 2017.

¹ Adverbs in subheadings serve here as methodological instructions – they enact pathways along which theoretical concepts can be materially actualized and co-constituted in both analytical and embodied practice.

² I acknowledge that there is some degree of divergence in these approaches; however, I believe that their collective insights can ground broader interpretations of the bridge as a liminal entity that is both a static structure and an active co-agent in co-constituting space and relationships.

The materials selected for this analysis are relationally constituted: Kafka's experimentation with object–subject hybridisation anticipates posthumanist concerns, while Volic's digital interventions actualise these propositions through material–discursive practices.

The study argues that bridges act as paradigmatic posthumanist entities that destabilise anthropocentric dichotomies and constitute new forms of material–discursive agency through their liminal ontology, thereby transcending their purely utilitarian function.

The semantics of the bridge are explored at three interrelated levels. Firstly, the ontological level considers the bridge as a liminal entity that oscillates between subject and object, between stability and dissolution. In Kafka's literary work, this ambivalence is personified in the existential transformation of its protagonist, while in Volic's visual artworks, bridges materialise as transitional structures redefining spatial and bodily experiences. Secondly, the metaphorical perspective examines the bridge as a symbol of the paradoxical relationship between connection and division, or between movement and stasis. In Kafka, the bridge becomes a site of identity disintegration, whereas Volic's works depict its fragmentation as a reflection of the transience of memory and collective experience. Lastly, the posthumanist reading understands the bridge as a rhizomatic and performative entity, in which the bridge emerges as a direct agent disrupting anthropocentric understandings of subjectivity while demonstrating the dynamic processes of intra–actions between materials and viewer perceptions.

2. Franz Kafka: The Bridge

The literary space which the reader encounters in Kafka's short story *The Bridge* is created through a startlingly innovative approach which prefigures new materialist discourses, offering a radical deconstruction of the subject–object dichotomy and reassessing not only the ontological foundations of being but also the epistemological frameworks through which we perceive these entities. The protagonist of this disconcerting first–person narrative is embodied as a bridge, manifesting Braidotti's concept of the nomadic subject – an entity in a constant process of becoming (Braidotti, 2013). The metaphorical structure of the story simultaneously co–constitutes a theoretical model through which the ontological and epistemological foundations of subjectivity in the posthuman era can be reconceptualised.

Methodologically: Fragmentarity as Principle

As is widely known, Franz Kafka's novels and short stories attracted little attention during his lifetime; it is likely that he destroyed the vast majority of his own writings during his life, and he left clear instructions in his will that his unfinished work be destroyed after his death.³ Fragmentariness is then an essential element of our understanding of Kafka, and there is perhaps no

³ Max Brod ignored Kafka's explicit instructions to burn his unpublished manuscripts, ultimately preserving the works that would define Kafka's posthumous legacy (Brod, 1966; Murray, 2004; Stach, 2013, 2026, 2021).

other example in literary history of a body of work in which authorial incompleteness has become an inherent property of the works themselves. This fragmentariness embodies not only the existential uncertainty of the protagonists of Kafka's writings but also expands into broader questions over the epistemological and ontological instability of the modern subject. In his theory of reception aesthetics, Wolfgang Iser emphasizes the significance of readerly gaps that require active participation from readers in order to form meanings (Iser, 1978). In this context, Kafka's fragments acquire the character of open structures that escape any sense of definitiveness in their interpretation, remaining instead in a constant oscillation between various possible readings.

The short story titled *The Bridge* is a paradigmatic example of a text that thematizes an entity existing in the interspaces of traditional ontological categories. The principle of fragmentarity here transcends the structural aspects of the text and extends into the very language from which it is constructed, emphasizing instead its destabilizing effects. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari emphasize that Kafka uses language as a means of deterritorialization, enacting a deconstruction of standard semantic relationships (Deleuze and Guattari, 1976). In this sense, the fragmentary nature of Kafka's texts are less a question of a stylistic choice but rather a deliberately methodological approach that explicitly sets out to challenge classical hermeneutic frameworks.

From the perspective of Barad's theory of agential realism, Kafka's fragments can be understood not as incomplete parts of an absent whole but as individual and dynamic elements which generate new ontological configurations. The bridge in Kafka's short story can be interpreted both as a symbol of liminality and as a performative act of existence, simultaneously existing within the realms of subjectivity and objectivity, of autonomy and functional determination. This line of thinking opens up a space in which literary interpretation can be reconsidered as a process in which meaning is unmoored from established semantic frameworks and performatively constituted through reader intra-actions.

This fragmentariness is accompanied by the extreme condensation of the short story, with the entire narrative of the protagonist's existence being compressed into only a few paragraphs. The text realizes a *literary phenomenology* in which the materiality of language – short, sparse sentences – actively *constitutes* meaning instead of *describing* it. Instead of providing a straightforward account, Kafka performs the being of the bridge through linguistic practices that dissolve categorical boundaries. This performative approach reveals the ontological complexity at the heart of posthumanist inquiry.

Ontologically: A Hybridity of Being

The Bridge operates as a foundational text for understanding posthumanist ontology, where traditional dichotomies collapse in favour of hybrid forms of being. The text's radical interrogation of *what constitutes being itself* – whether

the protagonist functions as bridge, person, or something entirely other – anticipates contemporary philosophical debates about existence beyond anthropocentric categories.

The ontological problems which Kafka explored in *The Bridge* are laid out in a complex triadic structure. The three fundamental existential aspects that Kafka's bridge embodies – a state of complete isolation, an existence entirely determined by external forces, and a permanent tension between activity and passivity – can be interpreted through the concept of the hybridity of being. Rather than merely providing a thematic enumeration, the triad instead constitutes an integral ontological system in which each aspect dialectically determines and is determined by the others.

The idea of a state of complete isolation materialises the primary existential condition of the bridge: "I was stiff and cold, I was a bridge, I lay over a ravine" (Kafka, 2011, p. 903). This isolation is not merely one of spatial separation but also of ontological singularity. The bridge is isolated from its surroundings and denied the possibility of self-definition beyond its functional determination. Engel's concept of the Kafkaesque syndrome of "ontological groundlessness" (Engel, 2010, p. 84) identifies this isolating condition – the bridge physically and metaphysically hangs in emptiness, lacking any ontological foundation.

Existence determined by external forces forms the second aspect of the hybrid ontology of the bridge. The bridge is determined not only in terms of its functional predestination (to be a passage between two points) but also by the physical forces acting upon it. This determinism is manifested in the dialectical tension between autonomy and facticity, which Adorno identifies as fundamental for a fuller understanding of the concept of "paradoxical existence" (Adorno, 1997, p. 237). The bridge cannot transcend its object nature without negating its own existence—confirmation occurs in the key moment in which the protagonist turns around: "And I turned around so as to see him. A bridge to turn around!" (Kafka, 2011, p. 904).

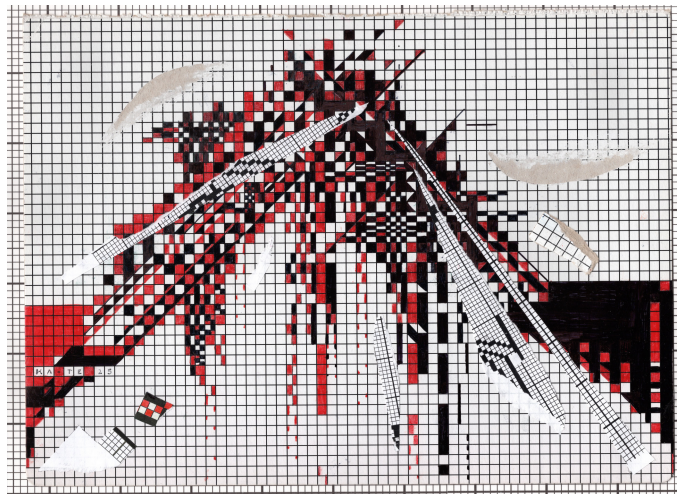
The sense of permanent tension between activity and passivity constitutes the third aspect, but it should perhaps be considered as a synthesis of the preceding concerns. The bridge oscillates between object passivity and subject activity, embodying what Alt defines as "the fate of a hybrid figure typical of Kafka, seamlessly merging the concrete and the abstract in a highly realistic manner" (Alt, 2008, p. 127). This tension materialises itself in the paratactic style of the narration, a formal characteristic which also functions as an ontological expression of the fragmentation of the bridge–subject.

Taken together, these three aspects create a coherent ontological structure that substantiates the concept of the hybridity of being. Isolation generates pressure toward intra-action with external forces; this intra-action in turn produces a tension between activity and passivity; this tension subsequently deepens the isolation of the subject. This creates a cyclical ontological dynamic that culminates in the moment of the disintegration of the bridge – an act that can be interpreted as the ultimate confirmation of the ontological fragility of identity.

The fragmentary nature of Kafka's text is thus not merely a stylistic choice but an organic expression of the fundamental fragmentation of the hybridity of being, a state which cannot achieve ontological stability without denying its own hybrid nature. The collapse of the bridge is not merely a culminating point within the narrative but also a philosophical exemplification of the inherent paradox of the hybridity of being – the impossibility of simultaneously preserving the autonomy of the subject and the functional integrity of the object.

Similarly, the protagonist's sensory experience – “cold, stiff, I stretched myself” (Kafka, 2011, p. 903) – is not merely a literary metaphor but also a realisation of posthumanist ontology and the inherent connections between materiality and affectivity.⁴ In this way, the story transforms the bridge into a dynamic entity transcending traditional dichotomies between the material and the experiential.

Metaphorically: Liminality as an Existential Condition



Ka Te Blažová, *The Bridge I.*, 2025 © Artist's Image

While the ontological level identifies the fundamental tension between isolated existence, external determination, and the bipolarity of activity–passivity, the metaphorical level transposes this hybridity into a broader philosophical framework of liminality as an existential condition.

The metaphor of the bridge in Kafka's short story operates both as a semantic figure yet also as an ontological assemblage that posits liminality as an inherent condition of being. The bridge is simultaneously in a state of connection and division – it embodies stability and vulnerability, movement and stasis. This seemingly paradoxical duality is in an emergent relationship with ontological hybridity; instead of anchoring itself firmly, it continues to transform itself, shifting from the level of existential analysis to the dynamics of metaphorical signification.

⁴ Affective materiality performs a crucial dimension of posthumanist ontology, where corporeality co-constitutes meaning rather than simply representing it.

“Without falling, no bridge, once spanned, can cease to be a bridge” (Kafka, 2011, p. 903), encapsulates the paradox of liminal existence. The bridge is both signifier and signified, denoting the narrator’s state and universal existential condition. As Dieter Pross emphasizes, the bridge’s existence is marked by the tension between active and passive modalities. “The narrator describes their condition as one of passive being—mere waiting, imposed by circumstances” (Pross, 2015, p. 9). Yet this enforced passivity conceals a latent active force, embodying the liminal paradox.

The act (or, more aptly, non-act) of waiting in Kafka’s text encompasses two fundamental levels: the current state of inactivity and the expectation of possible transformation into movement. The inherent paradox of these two states within the same act is a key aspect of liminality in the work. Waiting is not a static moment but a continuous movement between the poles of passivity and the expectation of activity; as the narrator-bridge itself admits: “So I lay and waited; I could only wait” (Kafka, 2011, p. 903).

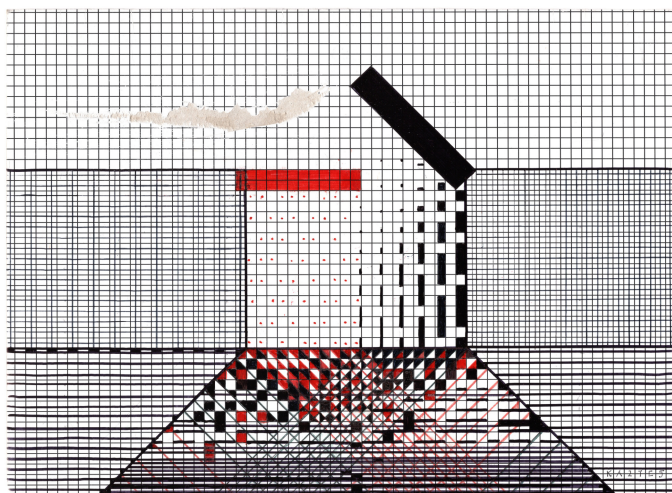
This statement encapsulates the paradox of liminal existence: an inherent activity is defined in contrast to its enforced passivity. The emphasis on the bridge’s spatial isolation mirrors an existential state of solitude, wherein material conditions and sensory perception together form a powerful metaphor for social alienation.

Turner’s concept of liminality as a state suspended between phases, characterised by ambiguity and paradox (Turner, 1967, p. 97), finds its textual concretisation in the syntactic structure that uses the *Zustandspassiv* (state passive) in Kafka’s original German: “*diesseits waren die Fußspitzen, jenseits die Hände eingebohrt*” (Kafka, 2011, p. 903). This particular grammatical form is also marked by ambiguity and trapped between two states, both a formal element and also a metaphorical expression of the ontological condition of the bridge – it is fixed by an anonymous force in liminality. This status is not merely the result of externalised power but exists within an intra-active node of relationships in which the entity of the bridge loses its stature as a fixed object, emerging instead as a liminal phenomenon.

The spatial isolation of the bridge, suspended over its *impassable height*, corresponds with existential isolation and reinforces the metaphorical depth of liminality. The absence of others correlates with the absence of warmth, suggesting that social solitude projects itself onto sensory perception. In this way, material spatial conditions amplify the liminal status of the bridge, intra-wining physical and emotional isolation. This liminal space is one of ontological uncertainty; the phrase *between heaven and earth* merges a sense of spatial suspension with that of temporal instability.

The act of waiting for a visitor, potentially indefinitely, enacts a Deleuzian time-image – the concept of time as an active agent shaping events. The thick temporality inherent in each moment encompasses a rich semantic spectrum, transforming time into a material force in the constitution of subjectivity.

Performatively: The Constitution of Subjectivity in the Act



Ka Te Blažová, *The Bridge II.*, 2025, © Artist's Image

The performative dimension of Kafka's short story transcends traditional understandings of the linguistic act and represents a major constitutive element of the bridge's subjectivity. Austin distinguishes between constative utterances, which describe states of affairs, and performative utterances, which perform what they express (Austin, 1962). In Kafka's text, this performativity can be seen not only at the linguistic level but also at the existential level – the bridge becomes a bridge precisely through the act of *being a bridge*.

The final paragraph of the text features a series of imperatives: "Straighten yourself, bridge, make ready, railless beams, to hold up the passenger entrusted to you" (Kafka, 2011, p. 903); these exhortations embody not only commands but also performative acts that actively constitute the subjectivity of the bridge. Butler defines this type of phenomena as repeated performance acts that establish subjectivity (Butler, 2017). The bridge constantly performs its *bridgeness* through the specific bodily acts of stretching, holding and waiting.

These performative acts operate at multiple levels: linguistically through the bridge's self-exhortations that actively constitute its subjectivity and enact subject-object ambivalence; existentially through the corporeal acts of waiting and holding; phenomenologically through the sensorial experience of stiffness and cold; or temporally through the active expectation of transformation.

The narrator – bridge's encounter with the traveller constitutes a crucial moment of performative reconfiguration: "He came, he tapped me with the iron point of his stick... He plunged the point of his stick into my bushy hair and let it lie there for a long time, forgetting me no doubt while he wildly gazed around him" (Kafka, 2011, 904). This encounter embodies something far more profound than a sequence of simple interactions between two pre-existing entities and should instead be understood as a performative (intra-active) act in which their identities are mutually constituted.

The temporal structure of the text, with its focus on the *permanent now* and *expectation*, is itself a performance of Derrida's *différance* – the constant deferral of meaning and identity (Derrida, 1982).⁵ The bridge thus lies in an indefinite span between what it is and what it is becoming, between its potentiality and actuality. Kafka here anticipates philosophical concepts which would be developed later, which emphasise the processual nature of identity and the performative character of subjectivity.

The climax of the narrative is the fall of the bridge, a catastrophe that materialises not merely as a physical collapse but also a performative rupture in its subjectivity: “I had not yet turned quite around when I already began to fall” (Kafka, 2011, p. 904). The bridge cannot simultaneously perform two incompatible performative functions—that of a stable passageway and an active observer. Its subjectivity is constituted precisely in this impossible tension between various performative requirements. The story thus evokes posthumanist ethics and agential realism to shift the analysis from representation to material relationality.

Posthumanistically: The Bridge as a Hybrid Ontological Entity

As was alluded to above, Kafka's *The Bridge* foreshadows many paths of philosophical thought which would be developed in more detail throughout the rest of the century and beyond. Perhaps the most significant of these for the purposes of this study is that of posthumanism, a philosophy which is itself deeply concerned with questioning the anthropocentric categories of subjectivity and unity. A more detailed analysis of *The Bridge* can allow us to identify an alternative ontological perspective that transcends humanistic subject–object dichotomies.

A posthumanist reading of *The Bridge* requires a systematic reassessment of existing paradigms and the establishment of an alternative theoretical framework transcending anthropocentric hermeneutic models. Unlike existentialist interpretations that localise the distinctive Kafkaesque anxiety within the human condition of alienation (Camus, 1942; Sartre, 1943), posthumanist analysis reconceptualises this *disintegration* as a productive onto-epistemological potential and positions the bridge as an exemplification of *vibrant matter* possessing an agential capacity which exceeds humanistic limits (Bennett, 2010). Critical theories perceive the bridge as a fracture of subjectivity in modern society (Benjamin, 1934; Adorno, 1958), whereas posthumanism understands it as a productive ontological condition, a manifestation of *nomadic subjectivity* operating through a process of continuous *becomings* which supersede static identities (Braidotti, 2011).

Although primarily associated with the poststructuralist tradition, Deleuze and Guattari offer a useful theoretical apparatus for understanding the non–

⁵ Derrida uses the word *différance* rather than the more conventional *difference*. This choice emphasizes that there is a difference we observe in writing is not that we encounter in hearing, and that the written word, and later writing itself, contains the possibility of generating meaning without us, as subjects, as authors of a text, assigning or even knowing this meaning. *Différance* with an *a* is intended to signal that writing contains a potentiality that the acoustic does not possess.

traditional ontology of the bridge. Their concept of the rhizome as a heterogeneous, non-hierarchical structure (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987) aligns with Kafka's depiction of the bridge, an entity which clearly exists outside traditional categorizations. The bridge is suspended in a *between* state – as neither subject nor object, it suggests a rupture in the very foundations of this conceptual dichotomy.

Beyond the apparently simple application of the rhizomatic model, however, it is necessary to emphasize that Kafka's ontological vision cannot be reduced down to a purely poststructuralist understanding. When Deleuze and Guattari analyze Kafka, they emphasize the fact that his writing “deliberately kills all metaphor, all symbolism, all signification [...]. Metamorphosis is the contrary of metaphor. [...] The thing and other things are no longer anything but intensities [...] There is no longer man or animal, since each deterritorializes the other, in a conjunction of flux, in a continuum of reversible intensities” (Deleuze and Guattari, 1975, p. 22).

The inherent limitations of poststructuralist analysis because apparent at the point at which the bridge attempts to transcend its position and become a subject of vision. This moment cannot be understood solely through the lens of textuality or discursive practice – it is a fundamentally ontological problem concerning the materialization of subjectivity. Braidotti, whose posthumanist approach draws and builds upon the work of Deleuze and Guattari, would describe this moment as *transversal becoming* – a processual transformation that occurs across traditional categories (Braidotti, 2013).⁶

The indeterminacy of the identity of the *other* in the question *Who was it? A child? A dream?* (Kafka, 2011, p. 904)⁷ can be seen as a poststructuralist questioning of the stability of the signifier, but it also anticipates the posthumanist re-evaluation of relationships between various forms of being. Hayles defines this borderline position as a “posthuman subject [that] is an amalgam, a collection of heterogeneous components, a material-informational entity” (Hayles, 1999, p. 3) – a description which is also an apt interpretation of the hybrid entity that is Kafka's bridge.

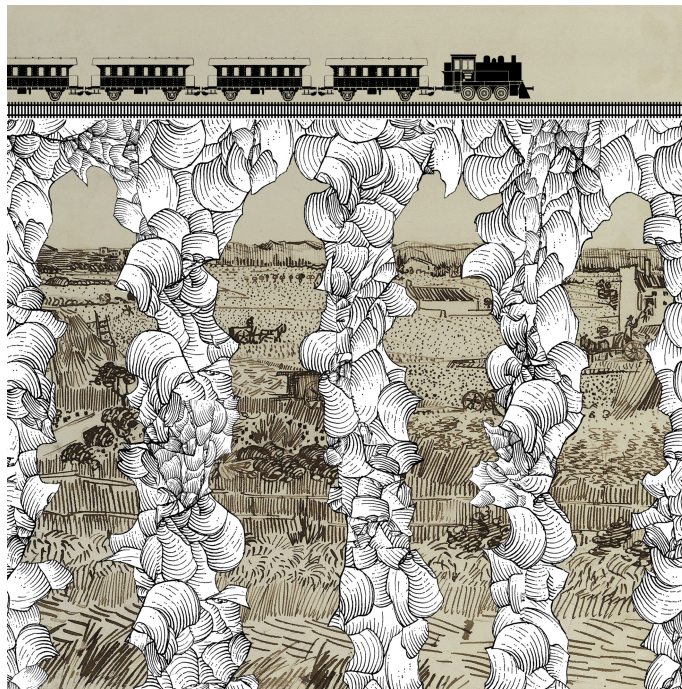
The posthumanist ethics developed by Rosi Braidotti emphasizes the existence of “a non-unitary subject and proposes an enlarged sense of inter-connection between self and others, including the non-human or ‘earth’ others, by

⁶ In line with Barad's intra-active realism, the bridge can be understood as a dynamic agent that co-creates reality through its relationships. These relationships are not one-directionally dependent, rather are mutually constitutive – the bridge exists as a bridge only in relation to the possibility of crossing, while the pedestrian becomes a pedestrian only through the bridge. The encounter between the bridge and the pedestrian constitutes what Barad calls phenomena – “ontological inseparability of agentially intra/acting components” (Barad, 2007, p. 33). The agential cut in Kafka's story occurs precisely at the moment when the bridge attempts to transcend its functional position (being a stable path) and become a subject of view (to turn in order to see): “the agential cut enacts a resolution within the phenomenon of the inherent ontological [...] indeterminacy” (Barad, 2007, p. 140). This cut creates a violent separation between the bridge and the pedestrian, between the object and the subject, thereby disrupting the original intra-active unity.

⁷ Some critics have suggested that the bridge in the story may be a woman, a line of thinking that would be supported by Kafka's typical portrayal of women as projection surfaces or unattainable objects of desire. For more, see Binder (2010) and Gross (1983).

removing the obstacle of self-centred individualism” (Braidotti, 2013, p. 49). Kafka’s bridge embodies this posthumanist ethics when it accepts its role as one of absolute responsibility. The ambiguity over the identity of the other is not a deficiency of the text but a deliberate onto–epistemological gesture that underscores the ambivalent status of the relationship between the bridge and the individual who sets foot on it.

Kafka’s text thus anticipates posthumanist critique of humanistic categories by offering a material–semiotic reconfiguration of subjectivity, employing literary form to enact an ontological liminality which transcends the binary oppositions of subject/object. The text performs what Barad terms *agential realism*, a formulation of boundaries between entities based on intra–active processes rather than pre–existing conditions. The text ceases to exist as an interpreted object, instead emerging as an *intra–active participant* in co–constituting ontological and epistemological practice between material entities, discourses and theories. Kafka’s *The Bridge* reveals how a literary text can function as a theoretical laboratory of posthumanist ontology. The bridge establishes itself as an exemplary posthumanist entity: materially situated but agentially active; functionally determined but ontologically emergent; spatially fixed but temporally dynamic. This type of perspective radically de–territorializes conventional understanding of subjectivity and shifts analysis from the level of poststructuralist textuality to the material ontology of relationality.



Marko Blažo, *The Bridge*, 2014, © Artist's Image

As we have seen, Kafka's *The Bridge* embodies a multi-layered ontological entity that exists in a permanent state of tension between subjectivity and objectivity. Its hybrid nature reveals the fundamental instability of identity that oscillates between subject and object, between stability and dissolution. This liminal aspect of the bridge can be interpreted as a posthumanist metaphor of subjectivity, which is conceived less as a fixed entity and more as a processual phenomenon constituted through the formation of intra-active relationships.

Despite its unmistakable Modernist approach, Kafka's *The Bridge* foreshadows contemporary theoretical approaches questioning Cartesian dualism and essentialist understanding of identity. This shortest of short stories is suspended in a constant tension between functional determination and the desire for autonomy; it reveals paradoxes of solidity and fragility or being and process, dichotomies which are key to contemporary understandings of subjectivity. The permanent state of ambivalence in which the story's protagonist-bridge is trapped cannot be fully understood in terms of a simple dialectic of subject and object but instead requires a more complex ontological perspective.

It is ultimately Kafka's "indelible or irreducible imagery" (Biser, 1970, p. 191) that transforms conventional linguistic structures into a framework for creating a rhizomatic space. This transformation relates to the posthumanist understanding of the bridge as a rhizomatic and performative entity that disrupts anthropocentric understandings of subjectivity while demonstrating the dynamic processes of intra-actions between text and viewer perceptions.

3. Svetlana Volic: Deterritorializations in the Time-Space of Contemporary Art



Svetlana Volic, *NON FINITO, Passageway No. 2: Where the World Ends*, Salon of the Museum of Contemporary Art, Belgrade 2017, © Artist's Image

Almost a century after it was written, the remarkable and extensive onto-epistemological system in Kafka's short story finds resonance in the experimental multimedia artistic concepts titled *NON FINITO* by the Serbian

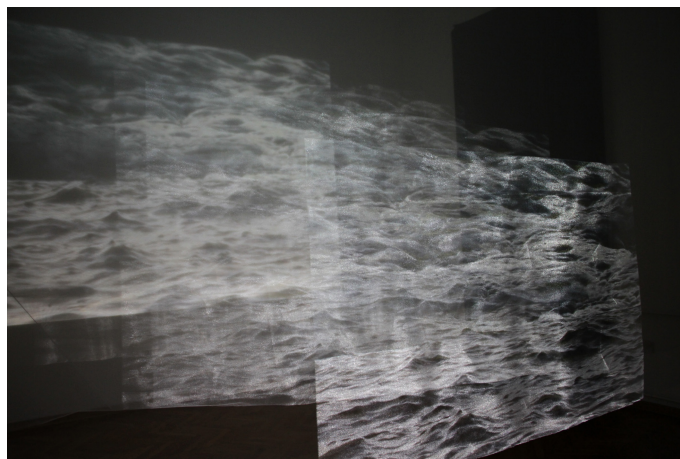
mixed media artist Svetlana Volic. From her first appearance on the art scene in the early 2000s, Volic's work realises a systematic transcendence of traditional representational boundaries and establishes new models of visual epistemology. Her work constitutes a dynamic entity that transcends the limits of perception and materiality, creating fluid time-spaces emerging from intra-actions between the subjective and the objective, or human and non-human, thereby opening up alternative forms of shared knowledge and aesthetics.

The NON FINITO exhibitions transformed the gallery space into a complex intra-active phenomenon. Multimedia installations featuring unsynchronised video projections from various geographical locations created a heterogeneous time-space that can be conceived as a material realization of the Deleuze-Guattarian concept of smooth space.

This sense of fluidity corresponds with the ambivalent nature of Kafka's bridge; the two sets of works are in a simultaneous state of connection and division, both stabilised and destabilized. Just as Kafka's bridge exists in a permanent tension between *being and process*, Volic systematically disrupts the boundaries between object and subject, reality and virtuality, or presence and absence.

The curator Una Popović identified Volic's experimental methodological approach in her introduction to the exhibition: "The exhibition creates a rhizomatic space in which unsynchronized video installations function as multilayered narratives. These narratives transcend the boundaries of traditional perception, offering viewers the opportunity to actively co-create their own experiences and interpretations" (Popović, 2017, p. 51). This rhizomatic structure constitutes a methodological realisation of Kafkaesque ambivalence, where meaning is not a fixed product but an emergent process.

Rhizomatic-Epistemologically



Svetlana Volic, *After the End of Time*, Milorad Bate Mihailović Gallery, Cultural Center Pančevo 2024, © Artist's Image

The Deleuzian rhizomatic concept, which was discussed above in relation to the posthumanistic aspects of Kafka's short story, also provides a useful

analytical prism for interpreting Volic's artistic practice as a systematic implementation of a non-hierarchical and multicentric epistemological model. Her unsynchronised video projections disrupt linear narratives and establish a complex perceptual system that requires active participation on the part of their viewers.

The installation NON FINITO deploys five asynchronous video projectors to create a temporal-spatial montage spanning multiple geopolitical strata: the post-socialist landscapes of former Yugoslavia (Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Slovenia), the EU borderland negotiations of Macedonia and Greece, the migration corridors threading through Hungary, Germany and France, the Mediterranean thresholds of Italy and Turkey, and transatlantic extensions into North America—each sequence capturing movements through what Volic identifies as zones of perpetual transition rather than fixed national boundaries.

This almost *flâneur*-like approach is echoed in Volic's explicit reference to Walter Benjamin's *Passagenwerk* (1927–1940), which she includes in the NON FINITO installations: "Method of this project: literary montage. I have nothing to say. Only to show" (Benjamin, 1991, p. 1030). With this evocation of Benjamin, Volic is openly stating her aim to articulate a concrete working methodology that rejects narrative commentary in favour of granting images, sounds and spatial configurations their own autonomy.

Volic's installations constitute *vibrational environments* – dynamic assemblages of spatial-temporal relationships rather than static objects. Predrag Terzić identified this quality in Volic's work: "Through the newly created virtual gate – portal, the vision is realized through this newly created tunnel" (Terzić, 2024).

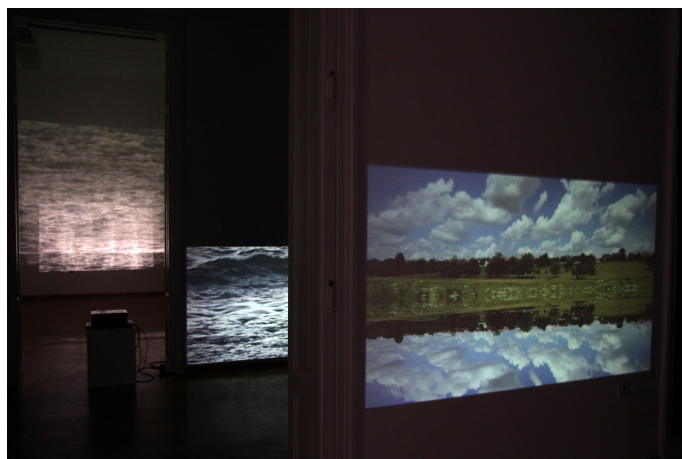
Volic sees movement as key to the work: "The entire concept behind the work on this project is related to the state of movement, from physical movement and recordings of various sights encountered during a journey, to its development in the form of temporary ambient installations. It could be said that it is fluid, like light, water or human thought" (Volic in Popović, 2017, p. 53).

Digitally – Technologically

The Baradian concept of intra-action offers a further reconceptualisation of the relationship between Kafka's bridge and Svetlana Volic's visual artworks. Unlike interaction, which presupposes the prior existence of separate entities, intra-action emphasises that entities emerge through mutual relationships.

Volic's pioneering practice introduces the methodological framework of *digital phenomenology* – an analytical approach transcending traditional distinctions between the documentary and the generative in digital media. Unlike classical phenomenology, digital phenomenology examines how technological mediations co-constitute possibilities of experience through three mechanisms: technological intra-actions function as active co-productive agents of reality instead of mere tools of representation; temporal

condensations (the imposition of 6-minute limits) constitute new temporal modes; spatial re-constellations create hybrid spaces between physical and virtual through unsynchronized projection.



Svetlana Volic, *AFTER THE END OF TIME*, Milorad Bate Mihailović Gallery, Cultural Center Pančevo 2024, © Artist's Image

In the installation *NON FINITO: AFTER THE END OF TIME*, Volic created a virtual portal as spatial intervention. Videos projected at the end of the gallery space create the illusion of a tunnel or portal; viewers approach the work through physical space but are visually *transported* into a digital landscape.

The key innovation in Volic's work is the rejection of fixed camera positions. Some of the shots are filmed from moving vehicles, with the camera capturing continuous movement through the landscape. The resulting films consist of images without clear beginnings or endings – each 6-minute segment is an excerpt from a process of infinite movement.

Volic reflects upon this intra-active principle in her description of the *NON FINITO* project: "The shots recorded during the journey offer no clear position; they instead dwell within an inter-space, lying between the real world and the events which play out there [...] these are not fixed spots on the map, residing instead somewhere on the borderline, 'where the world comes to an end'" (Volic in Popović, 2017, p. 53).

This concept of an *inter-space* can perhaps be understood as an intra-action with Kafka's description of the bridge as an entity existing *between heaven and earth* in a permanent state of ontological uncertainty. Critical analyses of Volic's installations have identified three key aspects corresponding to Kafka's literary metaphors: a decentred perspective that disrupts the traditional visual framework which resonates with Barad's critique of representationalist epistemology; a temporal heterogeneity manifested in the simultaneous overlapping of different temporal planes, thereby disrupting linear temporality and creating a complex time-space phenomenon; and a material-discursive

practice which physically rearranges space and images to actively shape interpretive possibilities, underscoring the Baradian emphasis on materiality as an active component of meaning.

Terzić provides a key reflection on the role of technological mediation in this intra-active process: “After the creation of images was no longer done by hand, as it was in the era of painting, interpretation ceased to be an active task; because, when images are created by optical systems, the interpretation becomes decidedly passive and dependent on the mechanism that produces the images” (Terzić 2024). However, through her methodology of unsynchronised projection, Volic reactivates the interpretative process, thereby creating space for active audience participation.

NON FINITO: AN ONTOLOGY OF INCOMPLETENESS



Svetlana Volic, *NON FINITO*, Passageway No. 2: Where the World Ends, Salon of the Museum of Contemporary Art, Belgrade 2024 © Artist's Image

“The title Non Finito was chosen having in mind a philosophical sense of it, so as to signify an unbroken process of existing, moving and transforming in time and space. Translated from Italian it means something unfinished” (Volic in Popović, 2017, p. 52)

The concept of incompleteness, which lies at the heart of Svetlana Volic's project, can be framed in Baradian onto-epistemological terms, where knowledge is understood not as a fixed state but as a continuous process of reconfiguring the world.

In the installation titled *NON FINITO, PASSAGEWAY NO. 2* viewers encounter three concurrent projections; one shows footage from a research trip undertaken by Volic, another displays a different temporal moment from her video-library, while a third presents yet another *spectacle* captured during her travels between 2013–2016. Three minutes later, the combination shifts, creating new visual-poetic structures where different geographical and temporal fragments intra-sect. Each recombination generates a different

virtual landscape through which the spectator moves, offering possibilities for multi-layered reading and projection as interdependent streams of content continuously reshape the overall spatial narrative.

Each segment captures fragmentary movement through the landscape. Viewers enter an ongoing process and leave it prior to completion; they never see the whole story, always only fragments, which they themselves are given the opportunity to connect into meaningful wholes. This temporal fragmentation corresponds to Kafka's practice of extreme condensation, where the short story *The Bridge*, in its minimal length, compresses the protagonist's entire existence into the moment of recognition and collapse.

Volic's insistence that *no recording exceed 6 minutes* to prevent *narrative effect*⁸ realises an epistemological intention which finds a correspondence in Kafka's temporal condensation. Each fragment constitutes a closed temporal-spatial unit rejecting linear causality.

Volic formulates her strategy as follows: "A spiritual need to find higher meaning [...] record it with image and then return it back to the same world, precisely in the form of a digital recording" (Volic, 2018). The artist is articulating the fundamental paradox of contemporary technological mediality, where technology is applied to co-generate reality itself instead of representing it.

Transgressively: The Potential of Artistic Practice

Volic's art is also replete with the sense of instability, a direct epistemological intervention which can also be identified in Kafka's ontological approach. His bridge became a performative space of continuous transformation of identity, meaning and perception, but Volic's work materialises a more complex posthumanist platform in which subjects are constantly regenerated and brought into being – unfixed and continuously emergent.

The transgressive potential of Volic's work is manifested in a series of intra-connected dimensions of ontological intervention, epistemological reconfiguration and political transformation. Ontological intervention questions the conventional categories of subject and object and creates a hybrid space where boundaries between human and non-human or material and discursive are made fluid and permeable. Epistemological reconfiguration establishes new models of knowing and experiencing that transcend existing dualistic paradigms and enable more complex forms of knowledge. This can even be extended into the social sphere, as political transformation disrupts dominant narratives and power structures, thereby facilitating the evolution of alternative forms of social and political organization.

⁸ Conversation with the author, conducted in 2025



Svetlana Volic, Nemanja Nikolić, Biljana Đurđević, *TIMELINE*, FX Gallery Academy of Arts Banská Bystrica 2025, © Artist's Image

The exhibition by Biljana Đurđević, Nemanja Nikolić, and Svetlana Volic explored intermedial transitions between analogue and digital media, including transformations from drawing to animation. The works perform a posthumanist onto-epistemology in which technology and art function as co-constitutive forces creating hybrid forms of being.

Barad's concept of intra-action offers a reconceptualisation of Volic's installations as emergent phenomena arising from mutual relationships between technology, space and audience. Within the gallery context, intra-space is manifested in a concrete form: viewers are entering a physical space, but their gaze is simultaneously transported into virtual landscapes. The resulting phenomenon cannot be understood as purely physical or purely virtual but instead constitutes a hybrid experience emerging from intra-active modalities.

Volic herself describes how this transformation occurs: "Space becomes an active participant, not just a container for art" (Volic, 2019). Her installations physically rearrange space through the use of projections, thereby creating what can be called *material-discursive practices* – processes in which material configurations of cameras, projectors and spatial arrangements physically generate new forms of visual epistemology.

4. Beyond the Human: Kafka and Volic

The ontological investigations undertaken by Kafka and Volic, despite their temporal distance, reveal striking methodological and conceptual entanglements that illuminate the persistence of posthumanist concerns across different media and historical moments. Rather than treating these works as isolated artistic phenomena, a systematic comparative analysis reveals how both artists deploy similar strategies to interrogate the boundaries between subject and object, materiality and discourse, presence and absence. The following comparative approach identifies four critical dimensions – temporality, perspective, materiality and agency – through which both works challenge anthropocentric ontologies and articulate alternative modes of being and knowing.

Aspect	Kafka: <i>Bridge</i>	Volic: <i>NON FINITO</i>	Theoretical Framework
Temporality	Moment of collapse, concentration of existential intensity in one temporal point	Fragmentary duration, segmented time units lasting up to 6 minutes	Baradian intra–actions, concept of thick time as a non–linear but layered temporal composition
Perspective	Bridge as a knowing, dialectical subject in a process of self–reflection and perceptual reconstruction	Decentred, nomadic camera view that disrupts traditional perspectival hierarchies	Deleuzian rhizomatics as a model for non–linear, multiple and heterogeneous connections of views
Materiality	Literary metaphor with a physical presence and effect that transcends traditional textual boundaries	Digital projection with haptic and sensorimotor effects that extend the dimensions of materiality	Material–discursive practice emphasizing a posthumanist ontology where material and discourse co–create reality
Agency	Bridge as an active, dynamic entity in a process of knowing, with an ontological capacity for transformation	Technological apparatuses as co–agential subjects, co–creating meaning and experience	Posthumanist agency emphasizing the distributed, networked and intra–active nature of agency between human and non–human actants

Temporality - Time as Performative Material

Kafka and Volic both approach temporality as a material that can be shaped and transformed. Kafka's bridge experiences condensed time, with the entirety of the subject's existential crisis being concentrated into several seconds of fall. This temporal compression creates what we can call an *ontological black hole* – a place where ordinary temporal categories collapse and a new form of temporality emerges.

Volic's short length video-segments, however, apply the opposite strategy – fragmentary extensiveness. Each segment functions as an autonomous temporal island that rejects a conventional linear succession of narrative time. The thus formed *temporal capsules* create a mosaic of simultaneous presents in which past, present and future overlap in unstable configurations.

Both approaches are indicative of a Baradian critique of Newtonian absolute time. Temporality emerges from material intra-actions instead of existing as an independent dimension. In Kafka's work, time arises from the tension between the bridge and its self-reflection; in Volic, it is evoked by intra-actions occurring between technological apparatuses and the viewers' perceptual processes.

Perspectively - Spatial Articulation

Kafka's bridge exists in intra-space – it is neither on one side of the river nor the other, existing instead within a liminal zone lying between them. However, this perspectival inconsistency is less a deficiency and more a positive ontological characteristic. The bridge generates a space that transcends the dichotomy of *here* and *there*, creating what we can call *a space between* – a topology of relationality in place of the bounded space of Cartesian geometry.

Volic's projections also create intra-spaces, hybrid zones between the physical and the virtual, where boundaries between the real and the displayed become blurred. Her installations do not function as windows into another reality but as portals that transform the very nature of spatial experience. Viewers find themselves in a space that is simultaneously *here* and *elsewhere*, physically present yet technologically mediated.

Both perspective strategies realize Deleuzian critiques of striated space – homogeneous, measurable and divisible – in favour of smooth space – heterogeneous, intensive and qualitative. Bridges become *spatial laboratories* in which other forms of topological experience are subjected to experimentation.

Materially – Performances of the Ontological

Kafka's literary materiality is manifested in grammatical structures that performatively enact the bridge's ontological uncertainty. The story's syntax, consisting of short, staccato sentences interrupted by long, meandering passages, mimics the rhythm of the bridge's experience and its liminality between stability and decay. Language is not a transparent medium of representation but a material agent co-creating the bridge's reality.

Volic's technological means realize materiality through concrete configurations of cameras, projectors and spatial arrangements that physically generate new forms of visual epistemology. Her apparatuses are not neutral tools for capturing pre-existing reality but co-agents actively participating in creating what is seen and experienced.

In both cases, Barad's concept of material-discursive practices can be discerned, namely in processes in which material and semantic aspects are mutually constitutive. Meaning is not something which is added to neutral matter but is instead a quality which emerges from concrete material configurations. Simultaneously, matter is not a passive substrate for semantic operations but an active participant in the process of generating meaning.

Agentially – Medial Modalities

Both Kafka's and Volic's works activate distributed forms of agency that exceed traditional subject–object boundaries, yet they achieve this through fundamentally different medial configurations. Kafka's literary apparatus generates what we might term *imaginative materiality* – readers undergo corporeal engagement with the bridge's ontological crisis through linguistic structures that operate as material forces upon consciousness. This process remains epistemologically mediated yet produces genuine somatic effects. Volic's technological assemblages, conversely, instantiate *actual virtuality* – immersive environments that directly reconfigure viewers' sensorimotor capacities through material modification of perceptual conditions.

The temporal architectures underlying these agential configurations diverge significantly. Kafka orchestrates what might be characterized as *ontological singularity* – a concentrated moment wherein all existential tensions converge toward irreversible transformation. Volic constructs *processual multiplicity* – emergence of novel configurations among technological apparatus, spatial conditions and perceptual modalities. These temporal modalities generate distinct forms of posthuman agency: Kafka's compressed temporality produces intensive transformation, while Volic's distributed duration enables extensive reconfiguration.

Despite these medial differences, both approaches intra – acting posthumanist strategies. Firstly, they dissolve the epistemological hierarchy separating knowing subjects from passive objects – Kafka's bridge and Volic's technological assemblages function as active cognitive participants rather than mere representational content. Secondly, they reject chronological temporality in favour of qualitative duration – Kafka through temporal compression that collapses past and future into transformative present, Volic through fragmentation that multiplies simultaneous temporal flows. Thirdly, they reconceptualize liminality from a transitional space to a generative condition – the bridge's suspension and the installations' virtuality become productive sites for emergent forms of experience rather than mere passages between established states.

These entangled agencements articulate posthumanist aesthetics as experimental praxis: art that discovers novel forms of relationality among human and non-human actants while establishing aesthetic and political conditions for symbiotic futures.

5. Conclusion

The convergence of Kafka's literary experimentation and Volic's technological interventions reveals a fundamental epistemological shift in terms of the transition from representational to performative ontologies, with the status and role of bridges being transformed from passive objects to active laboratories of posthumanist experience.

This theoretical perspective also illuminates an alternative reading of the case of the *Old Sava Bridge* in Belgrade, which, at the time of writing, is currently being demolished and whose fate remains contested.



Old Sava Bridge, 2024, © Author's Image

The bridge, which was built in 1942 and was famously saved from destruction during the German retreat in 1944 by a local teacher, Miladin Zarić, was scheduled for demolition by the local authorities on the grounds of its alleged poor condition, but opponents of the destruction of the bridge argue that the historically and culturally significant monument has fallen victim to profit-driven plans to gentrify the riverfront in Belgrade. As a result, the bridge has transcended its original functional identity and emerged as a material-discursive entity formed by the complex relationships between its technical condition and the collective memories, political interests and civic activism associated with it.

In a Deleuzian understanding, the *Sava Bridge* embodies a rhizomatic node where lines of history, power and emotion emerge. The protests which have been held objecting to its demolition are not merely a struggle for the continued existence of a physical structure but a performative act of resistance against a gross interruption of the continuum between past and future. This resistance, in the spirit of Braidotti's affirmative ethics, is not merely a reactive gesture but a creative expression of an alternative vision of the future based on solidarity, collective memory and a rethinking of the relationship between human and non-human actors. The *Old Sava Bridge* case embodies the need to shift from technocratic *smart cities* to *living cities* – urban systems in which the agency of architectural structures as active participants in collective life is explicitly recognised and fostered, offering a concrete alternative to neoliberal urbanisation programs based on digital control and profit motives.

In the context of our contemporary era of impending and incipient environmental collapse, bridges become intra-actions, necessary transitions to more ecological forms of coexistence, where Volic's technological installations and Kafkaesque ontological experiments collectively model *climate imaginaries* – the ability to imagine radically alternative forms of urbanity based on symbiotic relationships to the material environment.



Old Sava Bridge, 2025 © Srđan Ilić

Kafka's literary bridges, Volic's technological installations, and Belgrade's campaign of civic protests create an *archipelago of experimental ontologies* – an open topology of mutually resonating attempts at posthumanist forms of being, where each bridge represents an *ontological laboratory* exploring alternative means of organising relationships between time, space, technology and collectivity. The analytical strategy connecting literary criticism, new media theory and urban studies creates a bridge methodology – a hermeneutic approach capable of capturing the complex intra-activity of post-digital cultural phenomena and offering tools for critical examination of other hybrid phenomena of contemporaneity.

As we enter an era of intensifying systemic crises, these experiments become an increasingly vital infrastructure for imagining truly alternative futures, with posthumanist aesthetics ceasing to be an academic discipline and transforming into a practical philosophy of transformation – a bridge toward potential future symbiotic civilizations in which human and non-human actors co-create the conditions for collective survival and planetary prosperity.⁹

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