

Chapter I from a novel „**Problem promatrača**“ (Problem of the observer) by **Antonio Šiber** published by Jesenski i Turk (2008). Uploaded on the author webpage, <http://asiber.ifs.hr> . The author can be contacted at [asiber@ifs.hr](mailto:asiber@ifs.hr)

## **I. Flags of fear**

From a continuous, unintelligible hum, one could here and there recognize a word in French, English, Spanish, Croatian... But that background, unpredictable and in some weird way soothing noise did not dominate the sound recording. The loudest and the most penetrating were the shrieking voices of small swifts that were flying around in great speed. Their motion was particularly unpredictable since they developed a flying technique that enabled them to sail vibrantly or even fall during more than half of the flight, and in the moments they would use the strength of wings, they could swiftly change direction, using their tails to turn around their axes in many different ways. It looked as if they were especially upset about something, although their chaotic and energy unsparing motion could be a habit of this tireless specie. Perhaps there was nothing unusual about it. More unusual was their huge number. They were so numerous that they always covered at least a tenth of the piece of sky barely visible between the tall yellowish walls. It was an evening of a hot summer day. The sky was yielding a bit of dying light and the rest was coming from the orange bulbs set on the stone house walls a bit above the head height. The cameraman was slowly moving and as he stepped, the dark piece of sky slightly rocked from the left to the right side of the scene in between the passing walls. There must have been many people around and their voices approached and distanced. Two little girls probably from France and their young parents. A dozen of older voices and words that sounded Hebrew. The swifts that flew in the immediate vicinity of the cameraman were making threatening sounds, short as a compressed air bullets aimed toward cameras and microphones. Those cut and strong high-pitched screams that appeared unexpectedly and suddenly were even a bit frightening and the whole scene acquired thus a strange tension. The recording started on a stone bridge in front of town walls guarded by an erect statue of the protector saint. The bridge was leading to doors in a thick wall beyond which one could see a space almost completely enclosed in walls. It was some sort of a lobby without a roof that was lit very poorly. Stairs and an

accompanying curved path led to the bottom of the lobby where there were another doors, and beyond these doors, a long and straight street tiled with round and smoothed stone and with a high-tower church at its end suddenly opened. At this moment, the cameraman lifted its camera toward the sky and looking up all the way, he slowly approached the end of the street. There was something spooky in his decision to move his point of interest away from the church, the tall houses that bordered the street and a crowd of people. In a scene of sky knitted with the traces of swifts, people were quite incidental actors. Not one of them singled out in any special way, the voices came and went, passed over the street, reflected from the walls. In fact, the only thing that importantly separated them from the screaming of swifts was a notably lower average frequency and smaller interval of volume. An eerie atmosphere was additionally soaked by the mysteriousness of the town and its ancient churches and tall walls that were an inconspicuous coulisse of the scene.

Egghead often inspected this recording that lasted only about ten minutes. There was something unspokenly frightening about it, but it was also attractive. Perhaps it was something that could also be called an emotion, and exactly this was magnetically attractive for Egghead since he knew nothing of real human emotions that influenced the evolution of his neural network. Due to an artificial design of his brain and its weak connection to a scarce electronic body, parts of neural architecture dedicated to processing of emotions were inadequately developed or did not exist in clearly separated structures characteristic of a human brain. Yet, each time he inspected the recording, he felt as approaching to something humans would probably call an emotion. He also guessed it was probably an inconvenient emotion. Perhaps fear? Who was that man who watched the world and the town in such an weird manner? And where was that town? Both answers were easy to find but that made nothing clearer. The author of the film was Freeman Cvitan, a conceptual artist from Croatia. He recorded the film in a stereoscopic technology using two synchronized cameras so that it should be viewed using special aids, since each of the recorded films needed to be projected to the eye it was intended to. Perhaps that was the main reason for the film being in a huge database available to Egghead. To him, a reproduction of the film in such an old-fashioned technology was particularly simple since he could project each recording directly to each of the two branches of optical nerve. With time, he learned the film so well that he decided to rework it in a

holographic technology and calculate all three-dimensional information that was lacking in the two perspectives only. This was not an easy task since the number of swifts was huge and their spatial positions were sometimes difficult to determine due to their large velocity. Yet, he was satisfied with the final result which he carefully archived in a special optical memory where he kept particularly important things. It was difficult to access this part of hardware without a key to decode the data, and Ernest and the twins were sufficiently occupied with other issues. Despite the fact that he tried all he could, he could not discover much about the artist. Nothing of his work was preserved except for this short recording that was shown on some festival of experimental film and that was by some miracle recorded in a technology that survived the terror of time. Besides, perhaps there was nothing more because Cvitan killed himself in his thirty-fifth year by jumping from the town-walls he recorded.

The thick walls of the town, Dubrovnik, existed no more. They were destroyed in a catastrophic earthquake that hit the town ten years ago. Perhaps Cvitan's film was the best record of the spirit of the lost town and its walls made from fear of numerous enemies. Perhaps the mysteriousness that soaked Cvitan's recording was born out of a sedimented paranoia that for centuries penetrated the thick walls. The town did not need the people, yet they defined it with their fear. Their fear finally outlived them and buried the voices of their children in an incomprehensible buzz underneath the walls raised high up as flags.

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