

## The mystery of transformation: on journeying into the unknown

I want to share with you my favourite mystery. It is the mystery of transformation, of moving from the known into the unknown, of changing and being changed. In a time where the world is facing unprecedented social and ecological challenges, the question of how to intervene in the status quo and come up with alternatives is pressing. Part of this question is of an educational nature. If, as Einstein said, we cannot solve problems with the same mindset that created them, then how can we induce a movement from an old to a new mindset? How can we feel our way towards ways of being that are different from the ones that are known to us? Though extremely relevant today, this question has been around for a long time. It was formulated in a dialogue between Socrates and Meno—ostensibly as a paradox:

*How would you go about finding that thing the nature of which is still unknown to you?*

Unlike Socrates, I don't think we are dealing with a paradox here. What I see is a call to go on a journey. A journey with no clear outcome—unlike how most funders would have it—because if you already know where you are going, there wouldn't be much of a chance of finding something new on the way. The metaphor of the journey suggests that it is a learning process, which in itself can be transformative. It is also a practice: you have

to actually go out and do something. You have to leave the places and the ways that are familiar to you. This will lead you into unknown territories. All of this can be scary, unsettling, and uncomfortable. But also, it might be manageable and rewarding. No risk, no fun.

During the first Bridge47 Transformative Learning Journey, 22 educational activists from across Europe came together to explore how they could make their work more transformative, empowering, and emancipatory. The aim: to find novel ways of tackling the root causes of global crises through education. As part of the programme, we were introduced to *The House Modernity Built*, a social cartography developed by the Decolonial Futures collective. Designed to act as a starting point for conversations, it analyses the root causes of the contemporary global crises and points towards alternative modes of being, thinking, and doing. What at first sight looks like a range of fairly simple pictures condenses within it an incredible amount of information drawn from a wide range of sources (see <https://decolonialfutures.net/portfolio/mini-zine-house-mycelium/>). In short, I would say: the house modernity built is not a beautiful house, but a faulty construction that serves as a metaphor for the exploitative, alienating, and destructive paradigm that has shaped much of humanity's recent global, social, and psychological history.

When I was introduced to this model, I was particularly fascinated by the image in the bottom left corner. It shows a box-headed creature which is stuck in ways of thinking characteristic of the Western modern era:

*I think, therefore I am!*

*I say, therefore it is!*

*I own, therefore I rule!*

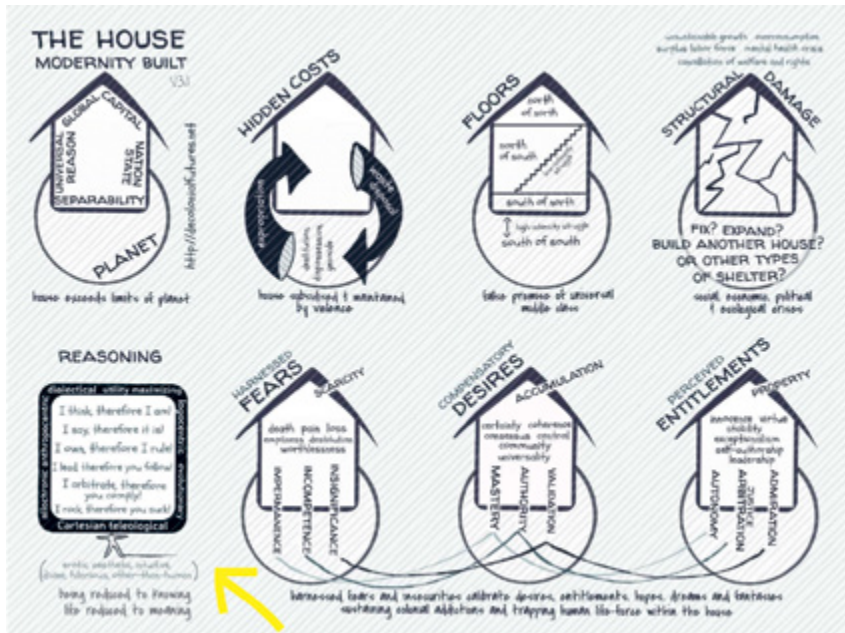
*I lead, therefore you follow!*

*I arbitrate, therefore you comply!*

*I rock, therefore you suck!*

Underneath the box—outside the box—is another list in brackets. It says:

*(erotic, aesthetic, intuitive, divine, hilarious, other-than-human)*



The House Modernity Built / mini-zine / yellow arrow added by me

Right away, this second list captured my imagination. Longing to move on from the stage of diagnosis, I wanted to free these words from their brackets and allow them to unfold. I found myself wondering: what might happen if I take up the invitation to expand on this model, picking up on these words that gesture towards more connective, embodied, and playful ways of being? The story that follows is an attempt to make that move into the unknown and imaginatively venture beyond the house of modernity into the dark forest, with these words as guiding starting points.

## Beyond the house of modernity

### Narrator

Imagine you stand in front of a house. It's a funny house, you can look right through it. It has no door, you could walk straight in. And, even stranger, it rests on a floating sphere. You have never seen such a building before.

Along the roof, the walls, and the floor are words. They are suspended in mid-air. Sometimes they change position and rearrange themselves. When you take a closer look, you notice that they are BIG WORDS. Also, there is a small sign, which says:

*To those who enter the house of modernity – you shall be enlightened.*

*To those who choose to stay outside – prepare to get into trouble.*

All of this seems totally weird and oddly familiar at the same time. Since it is early in the morning and you are still a bit sleepy, you decide to deal with it later and go for a little walk instead. As it happens, the house is surrounded by a beautiful garden. Birds sit on the branches of giant ash trees and sing a greeting to the sun. Daisies and dandelions open their petals to enjoy the first rays of light and warmth. You can smell the soil in the damp air, and something else ... the scent of roses. Your nose leads you around some rhododendrons, and there you are, right in front of a bush with the most tender, pink flowers. An old lady steps up from behind and greets you with a smile.

### Old lady:

I see that you managed to withstand the temptation of entering the haunted house! Didn't you want to be enlightened? Many who go in get lost and never find their way out again. But you are here. And out here is a completely different story! There is a lot to explore. It is by far more exciting than anything the house could ever offer. You do need to realise, though, that if you choose to venture out from here, you don't know where you will end up. You might in fact get into trouble, since you can't foresee what you will find on the way or what will happen to you. The rewards may be great, or not, depending on how well you manage to navigate. And you might not get a second chance to enter the house if you decide to turn around. So, what do you think? Are you curious?

### You: [hesitant]

Well, it's still a bit early for adventures... But hey, since I'm here I might as well explore the place. It's a nice day!

**Old lady:**

Fine. If you're up for it, I'll take you to my hut. It's a good place to start. From there, you could go for a trip into the dark forest.

**You:**

The dark forest? That sounds scary!

**Old lady:**

It can be, but again, it will depend on your navigation skills. I've got a little book that you can take with you. It's a compilation of accounts by travellers who went out there before. They described signs you can look out for and other things that will help you find your way. Not physical signs, more like signals that come from you that you can learn to pick up. You will need to trust that you know more than you think you do.

**You:**

That sounds fascinating, but also a bit ... unreliable. Isn't there a map of the dark forest?

**Old lady:**

You want a map? Hang on. I should have one left.

**Narrator:**

The old lady searches in the pockets of her skirt. Each time you catch a glimpse, it seems like they are way too big and there are far too many of them to actually fit into a normal piece of clothing. It almost seems as if each pocket contains a universe of its own. Finally, she pulls out what looks like a gigantic scroll of paper. It looks like she can hardly bear the weight of it.

**Old lady:**

Here you go. But it won't show you where you're going, only where you're coming from!

**Narrator:**

The old lady drops the scroll on the ground. You untie the band that holds it together, and as you open it, you see a detailed drawing emerge on the blank paper. You shriek with amazement, because when you take a closer look, you begin to see images of your life. From when you were little, a bit older, in different places, meeting people, and it goes all the way up to the present moment. The last picture is of yourself, standing next to a rose bush with an old lady. The haunted house is hovering in the distance. Puzzled, you look up.

**You:**

How do I use this? It's utterly fascinating, but how will I know where to go if I can only see the past? And also, it seems quite big to take!

**Old lady:**

You need to learn to read it properly. You shouldn't just look for what happened on the outside. You can also look into how it felt to be in those different situations, what questions they evoked, and what longings they awakened in you. That is what contains the energy that will help you move forward on your journey. And your own motivations will give you a sense of direction.

**You:**

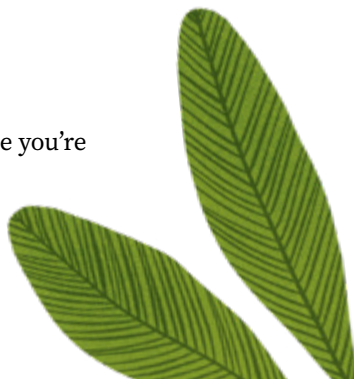
But can't I see all those things without this heavy scroll? Because they are in my memory, right?

**Old lady:**

Of course! So you won't take this with you. Maybe for the better. [Takes the gigantic scroll and tries to fit it back into one of her pockets.] Well, I might have something else for you, then. It's a little booklet—not a detailed map, but rather an invitation for exploring your own dark forest. Do you want to take that instead?

**You:**

I might as well, if it's not that big. Do you also carry it in one of your plentiful pockets?



**Old lady:**

You're not making fun of my skirt, are you? It's a great repository for all matters practical. It contains about everything a lady my age requires.

**You:**

I'm sure it does!

**Old lady:**

All right then. As it happens, I haven't got the booklet with me, but we will pick it up at my place.

**Narrator:**

You follow the old lady down a path. In the distance, you see glimpses of shimmering water between the trees. They open up as you approach a little hut. It is built next to the pond, clearly by someone who knows their trade. She tells you to wait outside, so you sit down on a log by a fireplace. The sun shines on your face, it's warm already. Little waves lap on to the shore. Dragonflies play catch just above the surface of the water. Across the pond the forest gets denser. Over there, the light hardly penetrates through the canopy. After a short while, the lady comes out of the hut. She joins you at the fireplace and hands you a tiny, scruffy booklet.

**Old lady:**

This is all I can give you! It might not look like much, but I'm sure you'll find a way of making good use of it. I've heard that it works well as a guidebook, be it of an unusual kind. Now it's time to go, I have more to do! I wish you all the best of luck.

**Narrator:**

With these words, the old lady turns around and disappears. Before you head off on the path that leads into the woods, you take a closer look at the booklet. Here is what it says:



Things to look out for when you venture into  
**THE DARK FOREST**



### To the Reader

These wisdoms are gleaned from different sources. All stem from people courageous enough to get cobble into the dark forest, which is unknown. From everything they have told me, this is what I remember. I can say from experience that it works well, as a rough guide.  
 Yours sincerely, Annalinde

### Erotic

Eros isn't just about sex. It's about everything that attracts you. What makes you feel excited? What do you love? When you follow the signs of eros, you will end up feeling passionate about the things you do. Get ready to feel heated. Prepare for heart-felt suffering, too.



### Aesthetic

The aesthetic is about more than beauty or taste. One lady who travelled the dark red - Shelley Sacks - found that if it's the opposite of anaesthetics - which numb your senses - it is about all that which makes you feel alive. If you feel energetic, awake, and present with what you're doing, you're on the right way. If you feel tired, bored, or irritated, find out why and do something about it.

### Intuitive

What comes to your mind when you are daydreaming? What thoughts do you have when you've just woken up? Intuition needs time, it won't speak when you're in a hurry. It draws upon everything you've done before. When you immerse yourself into whatever it is that interests you, things will keep on working in the background. The intuitive mode occurs when you tune in, but with a soft focus.





### Divine

You will know it when you encounter the divine. The signs to look out for: a feeling of awe, wonder, and gratitude. It can be blissful and overwhelming at the same time. Nothing special needs to happen, it could just be that you're going about your normal business and are suddenly overcome with the feeling that you're part of something bigger.



### Other-than-human

You are never alone in this world! You are alive thanks to all that is not you. Since all that is not you is so very different, there is a lot you can learn from it. The trees, the deer, the wind, the sun, and the moorhens are all here with you. Treat them with respect, enjoy their company, and they might speak to you in a language so much richer than words alone!

**Hilarious**  
When you get into trouble or when you try to do something in a very serious manner, you might suddenly find yourself laughing out loud about the absurdity of it all. Maybe you don't want to laugh, because you're trying to be angry or cry, but you just can't help yourself. The hilarious reminds you not to get stuck with things. Humour allows for multiple truths at once. A light heart is easier to carry than a heavy one.



### About Ivan

Ivan Kirchgaesser is a queer writer and PhD researcher at Oxford Brookes University. His interests span from social sculpture and transformative learning processes to auto/biographical enquiry. The questions that motivate his work are: how can people become artists of society, and what kind of novel learning spaces could support this process?

[www.artistsofsociety.com](http://www.artistsofsociety.com)

[ivan.kirchgaesser@gmail.com](mailto:ivan.kirchgaesser@gmail.com)