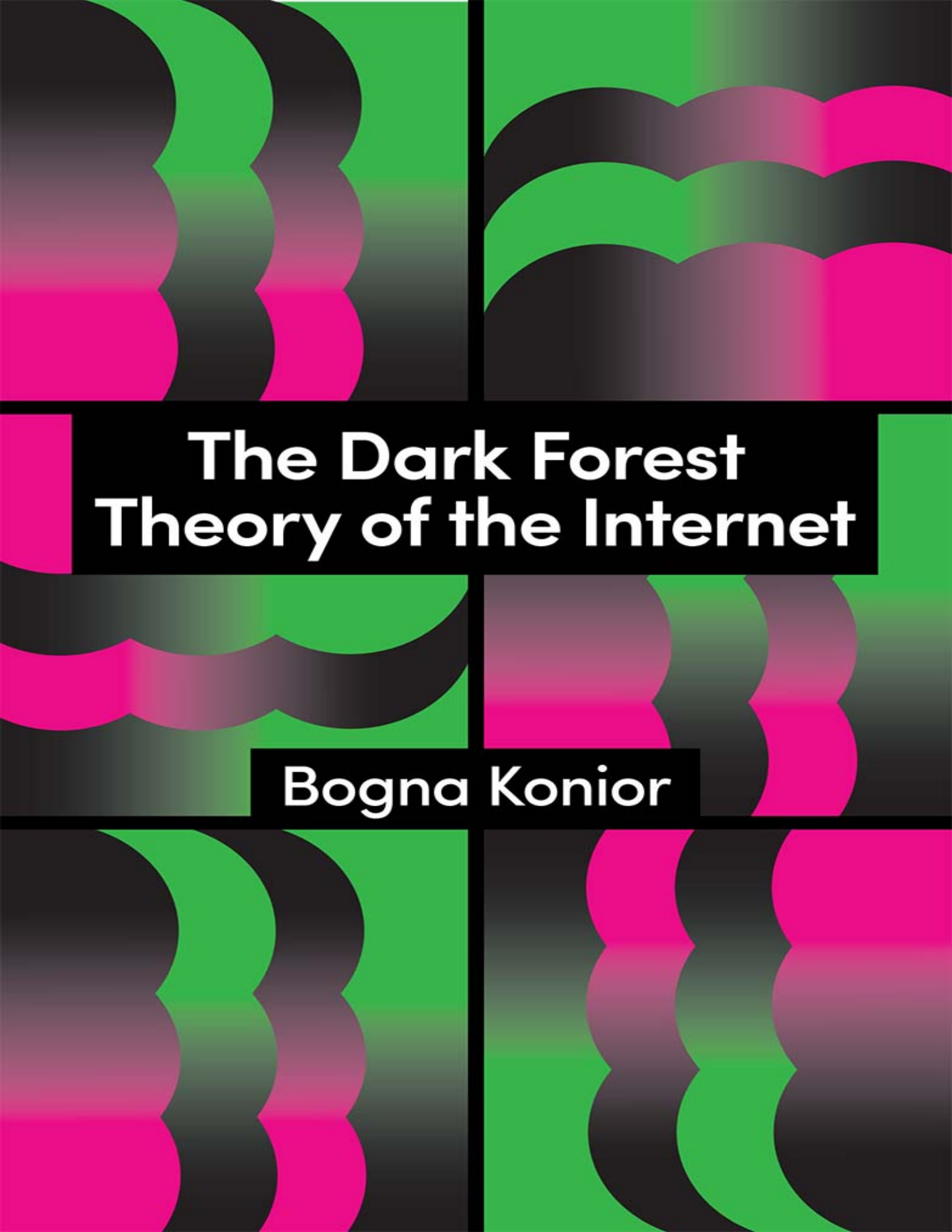
The Dark Forest
Theory of the Internet
Bogna Konior

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Bogna Konior

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Introduction

In the early days of the internet, computation and the cosmos were inextricably linked, in all their vastness and mystery. In the 1960s, Douglas Engelbart's project "Augmentation of Human Intellect" was concerned with remote viewing, precognition, and extrasensory perception. Its outcomes, however, were the computer mouse and hypertext, as well as some of the first ideas about the world wide web, prefiguring the modern computing paradigm. Numerous trailblazers of information networks were also pursuing endeavors concerning SETI, the search for extraterrestrial intelligence, and, more worryingly for those focused on human safety in a cold and silent galaxy, METI, messaging extraterrestrial intelligence.

This connection is apparent in the life of Jacques Vallée, an internet pioneer who helped develop the early communication system ARPANET. He also created the first computerized map of Mars in 1963 and became a founding figure of modern ufology. In contrast to popular imagination, Vallée does not consider alien encounters to be necessarily extraterrestrial in origin, nor does he think of them as discrete things or beings. Rather, he proposes that they are temporary openings and shifts in our sensory and mental experiences, like perceptual "windows."[1] Such anomalous experiences raise questions about how perception and sensation work. Are depersonalizing trances or out of body experiences illusions or psychosomatic facts? Are these states psychological or objective? Do they happen inside or outside the human mind, and where do we draw the border? Is our perception

functioning correctly most of the time and faltering only when we encounter something out of the ordinary, or do we gain knowledge precisely by accessing anomalies? Finally, what is going on in the human mind when it feels that it is operated, as if from the outside, by external signals?

In this sense, we may say that the internet is an alien invasion, where the desire to exhibit, externalize, and express drives us as if from the outside. “Language is a virus from outer space,” William Burroughs said.[2] “The internet is an alien life form,” in the words of David Bowie.[3] To go online is to have one’s perception and experience altered. Vallée’s “perceptual windows” are just like the windows of our browsers. Trances, when time vanishes or bends, are now the order of the day. Whether we have an autonomous mind, agency, and choice, or whether we are hitched to an inhuman algorithm that twists our minds and senses to its own machine rhythm, remains an open question. Philosopher Antón Barba-Kay writes in *A Web of Our Own Making: The Nature of Digital Formation* that the internet is for us a place both real and unreal, similar to how heaven and hell functioned for medieval Christians: a spectral dimension entered daily by our imagination and desire, which we make real by behaving as if it were real, and which in turn intimately rewires how we think and act.[4] Spooling itself across the planet, in the vast zone between satellites in the sky and underwater cables at the bottom of the ocean, the internet is a delirium we keep readily accessible in our pockets. Rapidly and perhaps unexpectedly, we found ourselves tangled in the internet: no longer a technology separate from us but the very machinery of our lives, seeping into our intimate and supposedly autonomous thoughts. Over just a few decades of the internet’s lifespan, being constantly online migrated from the purview of rebels, narcissists, depressives, maniacs, outcasts, addicts, and loners into an everyday

practice for the average person with a computer. With the internet as the very scaffolding of much human life, scholars may in time view our essays about it as fundamental treatises on existence, experience, sensation, and communication. Today, when we read a work of philosophy like Baruch Spinoza's *Ethics*, we understand that what he refers to as "God" is existence itself, easily grasping the relevance of his inquiry beyond theology. So it may be for all of our present philosophies of the internet. As the internet becomes increasingly difficult to unwire from the human psyche and all social activities, it urgently becomes a problem for philosophy, where questions of fate and freedom, agency and control, suffering and courage, humanity and the inhuman are deeply experiential.

Yet, little has been done in terms of a philosophy (or in modern parlance, theory) of the internet. Even though in the past quarter-century countless essays and books have been written about this technology, they most often treat it merely as a proxy for other concerns – economic systems, social and political ills, psychological woes or moral failures. In books as numerous as they are similar, scholars have demystified the internet through analyses of its capitalist economy, material architecture, and political ideology, in an attempt to make the infrastructure of our minds seem as mundane as the roads under our feet. This short book takes up the task of "internet theory" differently, by lifting the internet up to the heavens once more and recovering its connection to our inquiry into extraterrestrial signals. Beside their shared modern origins, of the many similarities between the internet and ufology, both concern communication: between humans, between humans and aliens, between humans and machines, between machines themselves. Communication concerns the known and the unknown, the impulsive and the intentional, and the sayable and the obscure, which

cannot be put into words. On the surface, digital communication concerns signals, with humans, in the language of cybernetics, that function like nodes caught up in feedback loops across biotic and machinic networks. It happens at vast distances but also in immediate and visceral spaces, right in our minds, where other people, and increasingly also artificial agents, are experienced as stimuli. Yet, in a more profound sense, digital communication also concerns our place in the vast cosmos. Could the internet's existence be evidence that the universe is immoral or evil? Or is it a mere tool, reducible to historical and social conditions, which can produce both evil and goodness in the world? And what about us, the users? Are we moved by free will or mindlessly following the oscillation of the stars or the whispers of machines? Are we humans unique or just another "mode" of communication, on a continuum with computers? Are we alone or is anything else out there, inhuman, lurking, watching?

Ufology as a framework for thinking about the internet in light of these questions requires a whole volume of its own. This short book instead engages with one particular theory. In the early 1990s, engineer and writer Liu Cixin created a computer simulation in which each potential intelligent civilization in the universe was simplified into a single point. At its most baroque, "he programmed 350,000 civilizations within a radius of 100,000 light years and made his 286 computer work for hours to calculate the evolution of these civilizations…. [T]he final conclusion … formed the basis and shape of his world view."[5] This worldview, informed by game theory, comes down to the brutal idea that the universe functions like a cosmic war machine. The simulation showed that mortal conflict between alien civilizations is unavoidable. Attempting contact with other civilizations is inherently naive and