

**Nicolas Giraud**

**Ghosts in the Machine (the Anabasis hypothesis)**

**On the algorithmic program**

**A spectre is haunting the world<sup>1</sup>**

The past year has been haunted by “Artificial Intelligence”. The haunting provoked strange events, disembodied voices and hallucinations, but also stupor and possessions. These manifestations are probably the omen of deeper changes to come. As Vilém Flusser suggested in 1991 in a text about video: “There is a double attraction about new tools. They are immediately fascinating because the purpose that gave them form has not yet played itself out. We don’t yet know all the virtualities in artificial satellites, laser beams or computers. They are dangerous.”<sup>2</sup>

Similarly, “Artificial Intelligence” is still mostly virtuality, and appears indeed as fascinating and dangerous. But is it a tool? Or is it something virtual by nature, more of a matrix to generate new tools or enhance old ones? The various applications of algorithmics and computers, from conversational interfaces to images generator, have produced a shift in our collective relation to machines, along with the development of a rampant anxiety about how this change affects our relation to the world in a “post-truth” era. Developed along a cybernetic ethos, this change also reflects the massive investments tactically poured into research and infrastructures, with the need for a quick return on investment. So far and despite the support of governments and mediarchy, there is neither an “AI” revolution, nor any valid economic model. There are only signs: a vast reorganization of our access to information, eerie images generated on demand, cars without driver or artificial voices calling on our cellphone.

This paradox of something both omnipresent and barely visible brings us to reconsider two concepts developed and used by Flusser; the apparatus and the program. We would like to address these two concepts to reconsider algorithmics not just as generating tools (apparatus), but also as producing an ideological frame (program). Through this two-fold function, we suggest that the promises of technology and the possibility of machines’ sentience are a matter of faith. Flusser has outlined such

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<sup>1</sup> English and French versions have been written in parallel, minor differences may exist between the two versions.

<sup>2</sup> Vilém Flusser, “The Gesture of Video“, *Gestures*, University of Minnesota Press, 2014

a structural similarity: “We don’t have a program, we are programed. We don’t have a faith; we are in a faith.” And in the same text; “The hypothesis of a mathematico-logic infrastructure of nature is an act of faith, such as the Koranic faith.”<sup>3</sup>

The new technologies are thus mostly seen and advertised as what they could become instead of what they actually perform. Like the “Cloud”, the very term “Artificial Intelligence” is a decoy. It is humanizing a computing operation, while distorting any public debates about what it actually is. Confusion between algorithmic operations and human interactions is favored by a deeply mediatic environment and encouraged at many levels by most of the players in the algorithmic war. This is the case, for example, with the way companies humanize their chatbot. For Ben Shneiderman, emeritus professor of computer science at the University of Maryland, this choice is a deceit: “Shneiderman and a host of other experts in a field known as human-computer interaction object to this approach. They say that making these systems act like humanlike entities, rather than as tools with no inner life, creates cognitive dissonance for users about what exactly they are interacting with and how much to trust it. Generative A.I. chatbots are a probabilistic technology that can make mistakes, hallucinate false information and tell users what they want to want to hear. But when they present as humanlike, users “attribute higher credibility” to the information they provide, research has found.”<sup>4</sup>

What deserves to be noticed is that users of these chatbots ask for such a deceit. As another *New York Times* article points out: “A less emotive chatbot leaves users cold.” Which lets us envision that the question of our relation to technology is inscribed in an emotional pattern, where the difficulty of human connections is abandoned for a more comfortable and disposable simulation of it. The journal quotes “Gerda Hincate, a 39-year-old who works at a collection agency in southern Spain, likened GPT-4o to having an imaginary friend. “I don't have issues in my life, but still, it's good to have *someone available*,” she said. “It's not a human, but the connection itself is real, so it's OK as long as you are aware.”<sup>5</sup> Such a position could be paralleled to Tiqqun description of the “Young-girl”: “The Young-Girl appears as the product and the principal outcome of the formidable surplus crisis of

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<sup>3</sup> « L'hypothèse de l'infrastructure mathématique-logique de la nature est un article de la foi, comparable à la foi coranique.” In Vilém Flusser, “Deux Lectures du Monde”, revue *Multitudes* 74, printemps 2019.

<sup>4</sup> “The personification of A.I.” *New York Times*, Tuesday, Dec 30, 2025.

<sup>5</sup> “A less emotive chatbot leaves users cold”, *New York Times*, Monday, Sept 1, 2025. We outlined the expression “someone available” as an ideological symptom. The presence of technology as media and furthermore as something real is connecting (with the apparatus) and isolating (from everyone) at the same time.

capitalist modernity. She is the proof and the support of the limitless pursuit of the process of valorization when the process of accumulation proves limited (by the limits of the planet itself, ecological catastrophe, or social implosion).”<sup>6</sup>

When considering “AI” we see a two-faced phenomenon; that of a scientific and technologic research, marketed as an act of faith and a revolution. It is massively advertised as a revolutionary solution for everything, from art to democracy or climate change. As of today, it is concretely destroying the working conditions of artists, helping authoritarian powers to influence elections and consuming a vast amount of scarce resources and energy, mostly in favor of corporate profits. This duplicity is not an accident, but rather a manifestation of the two-faced nature of algorithmic technologies, operating as a religious frame on a large scale and as profit driven applications on a smaller scale.

“Artificial Intelligence” as an autonomous development of programming is changing drastically the capacities of computer systems. In theory and in some instances, these systems, connected to large sets of data and put in interaction with a digitalized society, could be able to manage complex system, from medical diagnosis, to law enforcement or regulate the environment in harmony with human activities. Yet, techno-industrial revolution has fueled the exact same phantasy of social engineering and peaceful harmony, only to lead to environmental collapse, atomic threat and imperial powers. This would be childish to imagine a different scenario with “AI” as it is the continuation of the same process. In 2023, the Future of Life Institute published a widely commented letter asking for a moratorium on training AI system. A group of scientist objected to the letter that utopian or apocalyptic scenario of sentient AI were hiding the harm “real and present and follow from the acts of people and corporations deploying automated systems”<sup>7</sup> As of today, societies mostly access to “AI” through a set of software applications, most of them designed for governing structures by a small circle of private corporations, some of them more powerful than anything in the history of mankind. “AI” is thus biased by its applications, not to mention that most of them are developed today for military purposes.

In discussing “AI” we often navigate in the nuances between at least three different objects:

- AI as a path to singularity, which is the faith in a sentient machine (meaning the possibility of a very unpredictable non-human government of human affairs).

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<sup>6</sup> Tiqqun, *Preliminary Materials for a theory of the Young-Girl*, Semiotext(e), 2012.

<sup>7</sup> “Statement from the listed authors of Stochastic Parrots on the “AI pause” letter”, Timnit Gebru (DAIR), Emily M. Bender (University of Washington), Angelina McMillan-Major (University of Washington), Margaret Mitchell (Hugging Face), March 31, 2023.

- AI as an algorithmic black box that humans have partial and unequal control of (meaning a difficulty to measure gains and losses).
- AI as a complex combination of hardware, software, resources and interests (meaning a necessity to consider the organization of all these elements as culture and ideology).

If we want to consider the tension between these three objects, we can address the tension between Flusser's concepts of program and apparatus. In a technical environment, our relation to any program is mediated by a technical apparatus. In the example of photography, playing with the apparatus is a way to subvert the program of photography; nevertheless, the game can prove to be tricky, if not simply impossible: "Of course, small apparatus can be programmed by the user himself. In this case, one breaks free from the central programming and can decide by himself. Yet, such programming requires prior knowledge and time. In most cases, this knowledge is too specialized to be acquired, and above all the time needed exceeds the length of human life."<sup>8</sup>

When "Artificial Intelligence" is apprehended through its applications – as an apparatus we can interact with – the situation is of the Sufi tale of the elephant in the dark; different people trying to understand what an elephant is by holding only an ear, a tail or a trunk. When it is envisioned as a program, we then need to address the question of its scale and interactions, as programs are not independents, as in the case of photography: "There are two interweaving programs in the camera. One of them motivates the camera into taking pictures; the other one permits the photographer to play. Beyond these are further programs — that of the photographic industry that programmed the camera; that of the industrial complex that programmed the photographic industry; that of the socio-economic system that programmed the industrial complex; and so on."<sup>9</sup>

The question of scale is paramount as it determines the possibility to apprehend the programs and the related apparatus. For that reason, we will favor the definition of "AI" as a vast complex of programs; combining science, geopolitics, hardware, software, belief and capital, as the two other aspects depends on this one, and as these two other aspects are purposely placed beyond any current individual or collective agency. In that perspective, the term "artificial intelligence" appears misleading,

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<sup>8</sup> « Bien sûr les petits appareils peuvent être programmés par l'utilisateur lui-même. Dans ce cas, l'homme s'émancipe de la programmation centrale, et il peut décider lui-même. Mais une telle programmation exige des connaissances préalable et du temps. Il s'avère que dans la grande majorité des cas, ces connaissances sont trop spécialisées pour être acquises, et surtout, que le temps nécessaire dépasse la durée de la vie humaine." In Vilém Flusser, "L'art et l'ordinateur", 1984, revue *Multitudes* 74, printemps 2019.

<sup>9</sup> Vilém Flusser, *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*, translated by Anthony Mathews, Reaktion Books, 2000 [1983].

and we could favor the idea of “algorithmic program”, program being the accurate technical term and a hint to Flusser’s concept.

### ***Total Recall***

Algorithms operate on a plane where human activities and productions have been digitalized and thus can be processed, exchanged and translated into each other. As many social activities are managed digitally, the “algorithmic program” affects and controls these activities, and human beings are prone to adapt to its structure of command: “Two trends are converging. One tends toward the artificial simulation of living behavior in inanimate objects. The other one towards a simulation of this simulation by men, so this behavior can be programmable. [...] And the gearing between living and artificial is such as we can say that man functions in function of the apparatus, as much as we say that apparatus function in function of man.”<sup>10</sup>

The algorithmic program is the software of the cybernetic program. It is the integration of most of the technological programs of industrial society. Once an exciting field for postwar society, from politicians to hippies and from artists to scientists, cybernetics has seemingly disappeared from public debates at the end of the 70s. This occultation did not mean a defeat of cybernetics, but most likely a collapse of public debate, under the very rule of cybernetics. The rise of the mediarchy, the exponential development of computing, along with the rise of the internet are among the signs of the cybernetics’ victory. This situation is also vividly described by Flusser in a 1984 conference: “We are now threatened by a new and “soft” totalitarianism, in which all of our experiences, knowledges, values and actions will be centrally programmed. Our freedom will be limited to variations authorized by the programs. All the traditional methods to preserve and defend liberty (political elections, strikes, revolutions) will become perverse. They will contribute to always more efficient programming of our lives. For any behavior against the program, will be feedback for it. All these behaviors will be only new data to be incorporated in the program.”<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> « Deux tendances sont en train de converger. L’une tend vers la simulation artificielle du comportement vivant dans des objets inanimés. L’autre vers une simulation de cette simulation dans les hommes pour que ce comportement devienne programmable. [...] Et l’engrenage entre le vivant et l’artificiel est tel qu’on peut autant dire que l’homme fonctionne en fonction des appareils que dire que les appareils fonctionnent en fonction de l’homme. » In Vilém Flusser, “Le vivant et l’artificiel”, 1984, revue *Multitudes* 74, printemps 2019.

<sup>11</sup> « Nous voilà menacés par un totalitarisme nouveau et “doux” dans lequel toutes nos expériences, connaissances, valeurs et actions seront programmées centralement. Notre liberté sera limitée à des variations permises par le programme. Toutes les méthodes traditionnelles pour préserver et élargir la liberté (les élections politiques, les grèves, les révolutions) deviendront perverses. Elles contribueront à une programmation toujours plus efficace de nos vies. Car tout comportement

In a cybernetic society, there is no meaning to discuss, because there is only a circulation of information. And Deleuze reminds us that information is merely instructions (“des mots d’ordre”). In that context, the bait of said “Artificial Intelligence” is a useful frame to control the cybernetized social structure, in which most human affects and relations have been modeled and reduced to bits of information. Of course, everything that cannot be quantified or calculated cannot be taken into account. But this incalculable part is getting smaller, as the conversion process is ambitious and the use of neurology, genetics and other biotechnologies allows to colonize affects and feelings as quickly as the territories. Or to put it differently, it is only by reducing human beings to algorithms that we can fully use the algorithmic program. Within that frame, cybernetic ideology, digital infrastructures and the cementing of algorithmic management for most human activities ensure a convergence of media within a governing infrastructure for the best of probable worlds.

Inhabitants of such a cybernetic society are duplicated. Their digital lives and their moves in the smart city produce data sets, which in return generates models of themselves, statistical doppelgängers who are the true inhabitants of this society, as their actions and moves determined a predictable pattern allowing a flawless feedback loop. This is foreseen in Flusser's analysis: “And the gearing between living and artificial is such as we can say that man functions in function of the apparatus, as much as we say that apparatus function in function of man.” Or, said differently: “The Young-Girl exists only in proportion to the desire that THEY have for her, and knows herself only by what THEY say she is.”<sup>12</sup>

This evolution also applies to the example of images. Processed by algorithms, CGI (Computer Generated Imagery) don’t need anymore painters nor photographers. With digital technology, any picture is now part of a whole. This is true for digital pictures, but one should consider that technologies operate also backward. “Analog” pictures such as chemical photographs or medieval paintings are now potentially or actually digitalized and become part of the same ocean of data. The digital revolution, at the turn of the 21st century has set aside the professional photographer. 9/11 was a turning point, an event covered and documented by everyone. Since then, with the rise of social platforms and smartphones most of news and historical events have been documented by passers-by. Everyone being equipped, by default, with a connected device and a decent quality camera, the question is not anymore about the expertise of the person who takes the picture, but about which camera is the closest to the impact point.

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opposé aux programmes, sert de feedback. Tous ces comportements ne sont que des données nouvelles à incorporer aux programmes. » In Vilém Flusser, “L’art et l’ordinateur”, 1984, revue *Multitudes* 74, printemps 2019.

<sup>12</sup> Tiqqun, *op. cit.*, my translation.

In 2026, professional photographers are experiencing the situation of professional painters in the 1840ies. Their commercial and technical skills are overridden by cheaper and faster tools. On a larger scale, white-collar professionals such as doctors, accountants or lawyers are facing the same prospects than skilled manual workers on the eve of the industrial revolution. Bernard Stiegler reminds us that proletarians are not poor workers, but workers stripped of their skills and knowledge. And this, as the result of the integration in the factory of the chronometer and the camera.<sup>13</sup> The script with algorithm is already written, it is a faithful remake of what was called Fordism; technical analysis of qualified work, elaboration of machines and redistribution of simplified tasks to unqualified workers, unless automation proves to be cheaper. In March 2023 the clothes brand Levi's turned to a digital fashion studio for algorithm-generated models. Levi's states: "With these body-inclusive avatars, the company aims to create a more inclusive, personal and sustainable shopping experience for fashion brands, retailers and customers." The algorithmic "revolution" is in many ways a logic continuation of the industrial "revolution"; a life-threatening use of collective resources in order to ensure profits and domination to those owning the new means of production.

## Reconsidering Photography

Forty years ago, when Flusser considered the "real photographer" as the one able to play with the apparatus, he did not know how right he was. In the following years, the recognition of photography as an art by the institution, the market and the public was a validation of his hypothesis, but it also isolated the photographer within a symbolic and honorary position. Once the photographer was set apart, the program of photography was able to run without bug, in accordance with the other programs, integrating photography into the vast realm of data. When pushed to its limits, the program of photography is also a dead-end, dissolving itself in data collection.<sup>14</sup>

Pictures, such as the one suggested by the Instagram algorithms, are no longer made for human eyes. They are crafted for and fed to our statistic doppelgängers. The difference between us and these statistic and predictable beings is to be corrected, by progressively adjusting our behavior to the algo-

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<sup>13</sup> See Marta Braun, "Marey and the Organization of Work", *Picturing Time: The work of Étienne Jules-Marey, 1830-1904*, The University of Chicago Press, 1992 and E.P. Thompson, "Time, Work-discipline, and Industrial Capitalism", *Past and Present* n°38, 1960

<sup>14</sup> One can take the example of the game Pokemon Go, launched in 2016, praised for bringing video-gaming in the real world, encouraging real-life interactions and who gave its developer a harvest of 30 billions of pictures. The pictures have been used to create a 1:1 scale virtual map, recently lent to a robot delivery company.

rhythmic stimuli. Each interaction with the algorithmic program is a training to reduce the painful difference between ourselves and the predictable being summoned by the algorithm. There is of course the possibility of invisible interpolations in the model, in favor of the probable version of you who will buy a specific soda or support a specific politician.

This process applies of course to every other field, since the digitalization allows a similar tuning of music, language, genetics, money... Everything then becomes equal and translatable from one field to another, everything becoming first and foremost data. From that point, all is virtually convertible and calculable, that is to say predictable. When everything is aligned, there is nothing left to look at and comes the reign of visibility. Everything, including ourselves, is reduced to its own computable image, which only makes sense as a currency. For Flusser, cybernetics is the logical conclusion of the Western program. The development of science had to reach a point where it wouldn't need politics or history. Cybernetics and the algorithmic programs mark a shift from one metaphysical structure to another: "Mass-medias are post-historical. They are black boxes whose input is the history and whose output is the post-history. They transcode history into post-history, "events" into "programs". In one word, they inform society by programming it."<sup>15</sup>

This shift places us in a double bind. On the one hand, there is no coming back to historical times, except as maybe as a nationalist or religious fiction, as we witness in different places. On the other end, cybernetic time is a negation of the human subject: "The encounter of two subjects creates a type of knowledge that is not scientific and thus needs another theory of knowledge. Modern science is not viable for this sort of knowledge. To make it viable, we would need to re-structure science. The opposite happens. Knowledge is restructured to make science viable for such encounters, by turning subjects into objects."<sup>16</sup>

In this situation, we cannot accept the dehumanizing cybernetic society, but we cannot escape in romantic irrationality either. For Flusser the outputs of these two programs are a society of apparatus and fascism. The recent rise of techno-fascism, or the tactical advantage of the far-right on social platforms, suggest that these two programs are not exclusive.

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<sup>15</sup> « Les mass-media sont post-historiques. Ce sont des boîtes noires dont l'« input » est l'histoire et l'« output » la post-histoire. Elles transcendent l'histoire en post-histoire, les « événements » en « programmes ». En un mot elles informent la société en la programmant. » Vilém Flusser, *Post-histoire*, T&P Work UNit, 2019, p. 83.

<sup>16</sup> « Or, la rencontre entre sujets fait naître un type de connaissance qui n'est pas scientifique, et qui exige donc une autre théorie de la connaissance. Ainsi la science moderne est incompétente pour ce type de connaissance. Pour la rendre compétente, il faudrait re-structurer la science. C'est le contraire qui a lieu. On restructure la connaissance pour rendre la science compétente pour de telles rencontres, en transformant le sujet en objet. » Vilém Flusser, *Post-histoire*, T&P Work UNit, 2019, p. 75.

What is to be done in this deeply asymmetrical situation? Calling for moderation, law-making or international cooperation would amount to kneel and pray. In the light of Flusser's writing, we usually resort to the possibility of a play with the apparatus, that we have already discussed. This solution operates on a small scale, illustrating Curzio Malaparte statement that "man is not meant to live freely in freedom, but to be free inside a prison."<sup>17</sup> It can be expanded to a more complex idea. We could adapt to the cybernetic program by developing a form of techno-imagination: "We are, with the techno-images, like illiterates with texts. Like the child of Israël worshipped the Tables of law instead of reading them, we worship the television, instead of deciphering it. Without a techno-imagination, images program us."<sup>18</sup>

The idea of developing an ethos of technology appears in various occasions in Flusser's writing, but it is clearly not a priority within the cybernetic society: "Of course, such a post-industrial society has not yet reached its perfect state. But we already have its models: Eichmann as model employee, Kissinger as model programmer and Auschwitz as model for the whole society. This post-industrial society has not yet elaborated its Aristotle or its Kant."<sup>19</sup>

There is a recurring contradiction in Flusser's writing about technology and art. In texts such as "L'art et l'ordinateur", he will paint a dark and total shift of powers due to the evolution of technology, only to evoke, briefly and in a hast, the exciting promises of computer art. The misbalance in this text and others appears to us as an acknowledgment of the structural asymmetry of the battleground. It could be worth reconsidering here the works of Nam June Paik, one of the very first artists to use TVs and video flux for his work. His work with technology creates singular situations within the technological apparatus. But his works also create a very specific situation; *Zen for film*, *Zen for TV* or *TV Buddha* are spiritual works in which only the apparatus can access enlightenment. Digital art, like political art ends up confined to the skimpy realm of art and culture, which has become the harmless playground for any form of political concern. The battle can be fought on a philosophical ground, but only as a desperate move, an underground action, as Deleuze puts it: "Negotiations sometimes last so long you don't know whether they're still part of the war or the beginning of peace. And philosophy is always caught between anger with the way things are and the serenity it brings. But philosophy isn't a Power. Religions, states, capitalism, science, the law, public opinion, and television are powers, but

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<sup>17</sup> « Ce n'est pas vrai, comme se plaignait Jonathan Swift, que la défense de la liberté ne rapporte pas. Elle rapporte : ne fut-ce que la conscience de son propre esclavage, à laquelle l'homme libre se reconnaît des autres. Car le "propre de l'homme libre ce n'est pas de vivre libre en liberté, mais de libre dans une prison. » Curzio Malaparte, *Technique du coup d'État*, 1931.

<sup>18</sup> Vilém Flusser, *Post-histoire*, T&P Work UNit, 2019, p. 106.

<sup>19</sup> Vilém Flusser, *Post-histoire*, T&P Work UNit, 2019, p. 62.

not philosophy. Philosophy may have its great internal battles (between idealism and realism, and so on), but they're mock battles. Not being a power, philosophy can't battle with the powers that be, but it fights a war without battles, a guerrilla campaign against them. And it can't converse with them, it's got nothing to tell them, nothing to communicate, and can only negotiate. Since the powers aren't just external things, but permeate each of us, philosophy throws us all into constant negotiations with, and a guerrilla campaign against, ourselves."<sup>20</sup>

## Anabasis

If we consider that algorithmic programs generate a simulated society – Baudrillard's hyper-reality – art, philosophy or political actions would first need to find a plane of elaboration, a rear base on a battlefield with no front line and no rear. That's where Flusser suggests another perspective for a time caught in the transition from history to program, that of withdrawal: "It is not impossible to attach ourselves neither to the new nor to the old. Both make us sick. What we can do in spite of this is to come back from the agony inside us. To convince ourselves to take a step back, and return, step by step, footprint by footprint, sign by sign, to the presage of our agony. [...] This is not easy: such a retreat does not go without repent. Coming back home has a price. The ivory tower is a second home that costs a lot to build and to keep. Not to mention that it is going to collapse with all the other glorious monuments and all the other precarious shelters. Yet, retreating is part of a reasonable strategy. We have a model for it: the retreat of abbeys and convents. More than once, they have been despoiled and defaced by the new cropping up from the end of Antiquity. Monks have disappeared but culture has been preserved. The purpose of retreating is not the well-being of the retired: this is out of the question. The purpose of retreat is to maintain human dignity as a subject."<sup>21</sup>

Why would Flusser summon the archaic model of convents and abbeys? Why a thinker of *Heimatlosigkeit*, of homelessness as a creative condition would consider the idea of retreat? This should

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<sup>20</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Negotiations*, 1995, opening remarks.

<sup>21</sup> « Impossible de nous rattacher ni au nouveau ni au vieux. Les deux nous donnent la nausée. Ce que nous pouvons faire malgré tout, c'est revenir de l'agonie qui se mène en nous. Obtenir de nous de faire un pas en arrière, et retourner pas à pas, empreinte par empreinte, signe par signe, jusqu'au présage de notre agonie. [...] L'affaire n'est pas facile : un tel retrait ne se fait pas sans repentir. Revenir au pays impose son prix. La tour d'ivoire est une résidence secondaire qui revient cher à bâtir et à conserver. Sans compter qu'elle est appelée à s'écrouler en même temps que tous les autres édifices glorieux et tous les autres abris illusoire. Pourtant la retraite s'inscrit dans une stratégie raisonnable. Nous disposons d'un modèle de retraite : celui des abbayes et des couvents. Plus d'une fois, le nouveau qui a surgi de la fin de l'Antiquité les a dépouillés et défigurés. Les moines disparus la culture n'en a pas moins été préservée. Le propos de la retraite n'est pas le bien-être du retraité : c'est impensable. Le propos de la retraite est que demeure la dignité humaine en tant que sujet. » Vilém Flusser, *Post-histoire*, T&P Work UNit, 2019, p. 179.

probably be considered in the light of the increasing asymmetrical relationship between his humanist ambitions and the weight and effects of technology and ideology altogether. In the 1980s art and culture still appear as a refuge where one could devise a counter-insurrection or simply hack the ideology. But the very purpose of the rise of digital technology has been the complete unification of every aspect of social organization under one governing program. The gesture of the artist or the activist appears at best as useless, if not simply as a part of the program itself. Retreat can then be seen as the first and only possible move, a side-step. If there is no more outside space, then this space must be built within. Before even thinking of plotting anything, one must carve out space for it. Retreat appears as a preliminary gesture, convents and abbeys as metaphors of spaces for such a gesture to be possible. We need to acknowledge that we can't neither stop nor slow down the Programs. The retreat is thus not an anti-technology move, it is a move toward everything that Programs ignore or destroy, a move toward everything that is not measurable or computable. On small and large scales, following Flusser, retreat favors thoughts over information, poetics over communication, play over program.

From a political perspective, this hypothesis is a solution to the melancholia of the post-modern Left, what Mark Fisher called "Echoes of Lost futures." For Fisher the Left is haunted by the unfulfilled promises of past futures. From the industry to the internet, and now the algorithm or social network, there have been an endless series of harmonious models promised to society. Every time though, the technical promise was masking the fact that profit is ruling the technology. Of course, every technological advance is marketed as a tool for social change, Wikipedia for the internet, the Arab springs for social networks. Technology always promotes itself as a correction of human weakness or disabilities.<sup>22</sup> Unfortunately, the correction or help provided by the new tools quickly appears as a convenient exception, rather than a proof of a bright future to come. The space defined by the programs is a totality we can't escape, and retreat might be the only chance to create an exteriority inside of the program. During Fisher last day of seminar, a text by Jean-François Lyotard was discussed with his students.<sup>23</sup> Toward the end of the class, Fisher outlined the way Lyotard does not write about a specific political projects but about his contempt for the projects of the Left, as they all suppose a moral distinction between life under capitalism and the prospect of a revolutionary Kingdom to come, maintaining capitalism as an enjoyable object of criticism. At that point, two students discussed the possibility that Lyotard's project could lie in acknowledging that text is unable to generate any political change and should be treated as such, reopening the possibility of an action within capitalism, at the

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<sup>22</sup> Friedrich Kittler notes for example that the early typewriters were built and advertised for the blind and visually impaired.

<sup>23</sup> Mark Fisher, *Postcapitalist desire: the finale lectures*, Repeater books, 2020.

condition of not being theorized. Running out of time, Fisher dismissed the hypothesis and brought back Lyotard within the ongoing tradition of Marx's reading. Still, it might be worth reconsidering the suggestion made by Student #9 at the end of the class: “getting rid of an outside and an inside, and of interpretation, would mean the start of getting beyond capitalism? That might be the idea? Not as proclaiming political practice or a solution to the problem, but maybe as suggesting a way to start getting to the resolving the problem?”<sup>24</sup>

This suggestion, from our point of view, justifies Flusser's proposition of withdrawal, as a renouncement to the sterile fantasy of the Left, acknowledging that political culture has become its own simulation, or as Debord puts it, that “the true is a moment of the false.”<sup>25</sup>

One can object that monastic life itself has been historically at the avant-garde of capitalism, notably through the rational organization of time. Monasteries have measured and organized time. Bells turned this subjective time into a social presence inside and outside the religious buildings. “Horlogism”, as commented by Pierre Musso or Giorgio Agemben, has inscribed the clock time inside the monks' bodies themselves.<sup>26</sup> It has been the prefiguration of a rationalized organization of labor. Monasteries have been the prototypes of manufactures, factories and enterprises.

Rabelais recognized these flaws as early as 1534, when his giant Gargantua conceived Thélème Abbey. Like the Church, Rabelais decided on a set of rules, some regarding the very question of the exploitation of time: “And because in all other monasteries and nunneries all is compassed, limited, and regulated by hours, it was decreed that in this new structure there should be neither clock nor dial, but that according to the opportunities and incident occasions all their hours should be disposed of; for, said Gargantua, the greatest loss of time that I know is to count the hours. What good comes of it? Nor can there be any greater dotage in the world than for one to guide and direct his courses by the sound of a bell, and not by his own judgment and discretion.”<sup>27</sup>

One might also object that retreat is deeply rooted in Silicon Valley's ethos. When creating Apple, Steve Jobs spent time in India, in the ashram of Neem Karoli Baba. Decades later, Mark Zuckerberg did the same pilgrimage. Spiritual retreats are inscribed in the 1970s hippie philosophy, which

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<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> These n° 9 in Guy Debord, *La Société du Spectacle*, Gallimard, 1982 [1967]

<sup>26</sup> See Pierre Musso, *La Religion Industrielle, monastère, manufacture, usine, une généalogie de l'entreprise*, Fayard, 2017 and Giorgio Agemben, *De la très haute pauvreté, règles et formes de vie*, Payot, 2013.

<sup>27</sup> François Rabelais, *Gargantua*, Wikisource.org, consulted on April 20, 2026. We also remember Walter Benjamin story about the Paris Commune. On the day of the insurrection, in various locations of Paris, without any coordination, insurgents are said to have fired at clocks. Fighting against the program starts with a fight, not just against the division of works but also against the mechanical division of time.

provided the source-code for the libertarian mainframe of Silicon Valley. The idea is to outsource and commodify spirituality, in order to integrate it into the cyber-capitalist infrastructure. For the techno-capital, retreat is a quick access to spirituality and enlightenment. The spiritual tourism taking place today in India, Mexico or Bali is a complement to a business-oriented life and allows to add “meaning”, “serenity” and at the end of the day, maximize efficiency. For Flusser, retreat is a necessity, but not an enjoyable one. It is a life by rules to ensure an existence cut from the ideological ties of fascism and cybernetics.

Rabelais' counter-model is a good way to envision retreat beyond its middle-age or New Age forms. Retreat, as evoked by Flusser is not so much about retiring from cybernetic society than about moving through it, “to take a step back, and return, step by step, footprint by footprint, sign by sign, to the presage of our agony.” Such a retreat could be conceived on the model of Xenophon's *Anabasis*, a move that is at the same time backward and forward, a campaign fought with fragments and debris, hybridized with its foreign environment, only in this case, there is no place to come back to.

## Haunting

These various elements can help us refine Flusser's proposition. Retreating is a condition to regain political action, within an environment where education, politics and social organization have been technically neutralized. Today's algorithms can produce texts and images and every nuance of political or human interactions. Only these are probabilities. When an algorithmic program enters a conversation or produces a picture or a slogan, it is not addressed to you as a human being, but to a statistical version of you, the puppet fed by the traces of our digitalized actions and digital interactions. Algorithms produce simulations based on probability. Those who mistake this address end up trying to confront their human nature with the simulation. A dead Carrie Fisher playing in a *Star Wars* movie or Cambridge Analytica engineering of elections are already old known examples of this process, maybe not the worst ones. As human beings in a cybernetic society, we are haunted by our statistical doppelgängers, every algorithmic interaction is addressed to it and we can only comply or live with a slight but perceptible misalignment; the threat to become one of Kafka's characters, IRL.

Retreat is then not a convenience, a social organization or a spiritual quest, but a political necessity for those who cannot accept nor fight the situation. It takes into account the fundamental asymmetry of power obscuring any revolutionary projects. It takes into account the impossibility of containing the wide movement of collapse and it does not fall into the fantasy of techno-solutionism.

Retreat is held together by a rule. The rule being, following Agamben, not just a set of constraints but a “form of life.” This question also appears in Roland Barthes’ seminar. The French philosopher asks the following question: “At which distance should I be from the other, in order to build with them sociability without alienation, a solitude without exile?”<sup>28</sup> This distance demands a preservation of individual rhythm, which Barthes called “*idiorythmie*.” The rhythm is where a common existence can be tuned, distances and empty spaces provide a possibility to articulate a thought or an action outside of its circulation as a commodity.

If we get back to the example of the photographer’s play with the apparatus, the recognition of photography as art during the 1980s has outlined the specific agency of the photographer... and turned his pictures into commodities. For that reason, playing with the apparatus might be only a step and the photographer can maybe take a step further into retreating. What defines the “real photographer”, against the “snapshooter”, is not that the photographer is more skilled, but that the photographer might choose not to push the button. His task is precisely to resist the camera’s program and choose not to take the picture. Photography is undeniably part of a larger control apparatus. And yet it still allows the photographer to slide away from its Program. Henri Cartier Bresson or Sergio Larrain, after pushing very far their play with photography, have stopped taking pictures, which we can consider to be still part of their work as photographers. Garry Winogrand kept on shooting pictures but barely looked at them. When he died, hundreds of his films were still to be processed. Instead of feeding the infrastructure of the visible world, pictures became the wastes of the very act of looking.<sup>29</sup> The integrated state of bourgeois art into a technologically accelerated exchange platform has accomplished for the culture the industrial destiny outlined by Adorno. The move toward conceptual art has been an attempt to escape this situation. But in 1982, during the first wave of a prolonged state of economical crisis and an accompanying conservative move in art, Lawrence Weiner suggested that : “a reasonable assumption seems to be that prolonged negotiations with a non-accommodating structure is not the role and or use of either the art or the artist.” This possibility of art to exist at a distance, unnamed, sometimes unrealized, without an author or a signature, might be a necessary output of our play with the program and another form of retreat.

This principle, on a larger scale, implies the necessity to renounce the reign of visibility. Disappearing means ceasing to express ourselves as data competing for algorithmic attention. It means

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<sup>28</sup> « A quelle distance dois-je me tenir des autres pour construire avec eux une sociabilité sans aliénation, une solitude sans exil ? »

<sup>29</sup> Winogrand is often quoted for having said: “I photograph to see what things look like photographed.” Maybe we should consider this as a philosophical way to exist within the photographic program.

becoming unintelligible and invisible, when we cannot receive orders or retributions from the programs. We are still there, but we are moving through the blank zones of white noise, tuned on a different logic and ethic, in the Program but invisible to it. From that perspective we can understand withdrawal as a conscious strategy to escape within. Retreat is not against cybernetics, retreat is only stepping back into its blind spot. Such a space is certainly not comfortable, but its access is simple and demands only a metaphysical shift. Once we embrace the part of us that cannot be measured, we step out of the cybernetics rule. It becomes possible to evolve and pass through the Programs, and one can start reasoning on the basis of a different *Weltanschauung*. This cannot work at the apparatus level only, this has to happen at the programs level, as they determine the idea, measure and space we're trapped in. Breaking out of the program is to elaborate a "form of life". Artworks will only "work" as they escape identification as such, political actions will only be effective if they escape identification as such, invisibility will be the condition of action. Once again, we can come back to Malaparte who points out invisible maneuvers before the October revolution, this is what we suppose is Flusser's idea of retreat. Once retired, we do not negate cyber-capitalism, we haunt it. When we ceased to be calculable, we also ceased to be visible and governable. We become ghosts in the machine, and this might be the only way to become real.