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The Free Will Impasse

Premise

Beforehand, a presentation of the conventional notion of agency is required, as well as a contextualisation of Vilém Flusser’s “philosophy of photography” in comparison to the former. The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy states that the *standard theory of agency* is represented by the capacity of an agent to act. It is deduced from the standard theory of action, which implies an action caused by the “agent’s mental states and events”, and it is thus better represented by the name *theory of intentional agency* (Schlosser, 2017). In this view, deliberate actions are hierarchically superior to unintentional ones because they add up to the sense of agency felt by the agent when affecting the world through actions (Schlosser, 2017). For Flusser’s form of agency, it is important to understand that it comes from a philosophical speculation on his present time in which he is both fascinated with but mostly afraid of future post-humanity developments into degenerations of the automatic. The form of agency Flusser envisions is either ruled out by the machine, which he calls the *apparatus*, or applied to it to make apparatuses work for humans’ purposes. The dangerous integration between apparatuses and people is explained through the understanding of photography as a second “momentous event” after writing, “with at least equal, if not greater impact” on the world (Flusser, 2011). Writing produced history, and the photographic apparatus produced *technical images* (Flusser, 2011). A technical image represents the possibility for humans to make the abstract concrete, to produce clear information out of the otherwise meaningless universe of particles (Flusser, 2011). Technical images signify concepts and become deceiving when perceived as objective truths, as illusory “windows onto the world” (Flusser, 2000, pp. 14-15). That is when they start to signify “instructions about the way society should experience, perceive, evaluate and behave” (Flusser, Poster, and Roth, 2011, p. 50), and therefore products of the apparatus rule out humans’ agency.

Flusser’s notion of agency moves throughout his texts following the conception of the apparatus established within the specific text. In *Towards a Philosophy of Photography* (1983) there is the fear of lacking free agency in a society that he calls *telematic*, where apparatuses ultimately rule out humans. Apparatuses are seen here as “black boxes” whose behaviour consists of reproducing humans’ thinking and eventually become incomprehensible because of their spontaneous self-growth (Flusser, 2000, p. 32). A black box is, in fact, a tool which conceals information behind an opaque surface. In this view, humans are mostly functionaries of apparatuses, because their agency

depends on these undecipherable instruments, developed autonomously outside humans' will (Flusser, 2000, pp. 73, 82). Conversely, *Into the Universe of Technical Images* (1985) presents a more optimistic view. There is a possibility for people inhabiting the telematic society – so-called *envisioners* – to overcome the problem of agency within apparatuses. By sharing a collective computer memory they can have a dialogue through the apparatus to produce new information. In this regard, the concept of “entropy” becomes crucial to understand Flusser’s view. Entropy represents the way in which nature infinitely increases disorder and randomness (Flusser, Poster, and Roth, 2011, p. 17). Thus negative entropy (or *negentropy*) is the proper human characteristic of re-establishing order and selecting information from redundancy (Flusser, Poster, and Roth, 2011, p. 111) – ultimately, of being remembered. In this perspective, the apparatus is seen as a tool humans can take advantage of to interpret, produce, store and distribute technical images (Flusser, Poster, and Roth, 2011, pp. 16-18), reaching autonomy through selecting and accumulating informative intelligence in unprecedented ways. Briefly, in response to the fears elucidated in *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*, with *Into the Universe of Technical Images* an optimistic view is represented by envisioners’ competence in grasping the concrete out of the abstract through the use of apparatuses, resulting in a dialogue of only informative data (Flusser, Poster, and Roth, 2011, p. 116). In *The Gesture of Photographing* (1991), the photographic apparatus presents both possibilities in one single gesture, as it “allows the world to ‘inscribe’ itself on a surface; at the same time, it imposes ‘rules’ on how this can be done” (Flusser, 2011). Here, Flusser’s form of agency lies in both affecting things through apparatuses and being affected by them. The human and the apparatus are jointly producing information in a “tool-to-tool” hierarchy (Flusser, 2011). Broadly, Flusser’s philosophy is thinking on the agency of the posthuman, which focuses on the involvement of apparatuses and contextualises the standard theory of agency in this future society. Nevertheless, it does not forecast a future for human agency within “the area of automated, programmed, and programming apparatuses” (Flusser, 2000, p. 81).

The Indeterminacy of Scientific Determinism

It is arguable that the vast majority of scientific findings are meant to determine the functioning of a phenomenon to predict its future behaviour, either in empirical cause-effect manners or probabilistic terms. The role of apparatuses is to produce new information with the goal of achieving a decisive overview of a specific system. Nevertheless, two of the most current difficulties facing science cannot find a place in one single system. One is cognitive science, with the concept of free will in deterministic terms. The other is quantum physics, with the theory of the observer effect. Both relate to the notion of intentional agency and affect its meaning somehow. It appears

that the more they are researched, the more these areas become subject to entropic disorder. Moreover, because volitional agency is the one which is usually intended by people as “true”, this leads to problematic issues.

When the subjects of scientific studies of a deterministic nature are human beings, it is bewildering how far science can go in tracing back their functioning as if they were machines ruled by strings of code. This not only affects intentional agency but also puts the notion of free will at stake. To illustrate, Benjamin Libet’s recent studies on the volitional process dismantle free will, as they render it an *a posteriori* reconstruction of what unconscious processes of the mind are to the body. Libet has scientifically proven that the start of *motor* acts “appears to begin in the brain unconsciously, well before the person consciously knows” them (Libet, 1999). His test found that while people normally experience a conscious will to move 200 milliseconds before the movement itself, there is a preliminary activity called *readiness potential* that takes place more than one second before the action begins (Haggard, 2008). As later studies have found, the motor act is accurately distinguishable in two regions of the brain up to ten seconds before the conscious decision arises, and it carries predictive information on the decision itself (Soon et al., 2008). In other words, when we consciously will an action, this can be traced back inside the brain well before we have the sense of the will to act. In line with determinism, neuroscience rejects the possibility of the conscious mind controlling the body; rather, it is the unconscious brain working with the body that prompts actions, whose processes, hypothetically, might be followed up “as early as researchers are able to look for [them]” (Haggard, 2008). If free will is the liberty of conscious subjects to affect their life without being influenced by cause-effect chains (O’Connor, 2016), not having it would also influence the notion of intentional agency. The absence of free will does not impair the theory of intentional agency on a superficial level, as the sense of agency for the person is still being generated by the mind after the action’s completion. However, the fact that intentional agency is based on “willed” actions would prove wrong in this case, as almost all actions would then be unintentional.

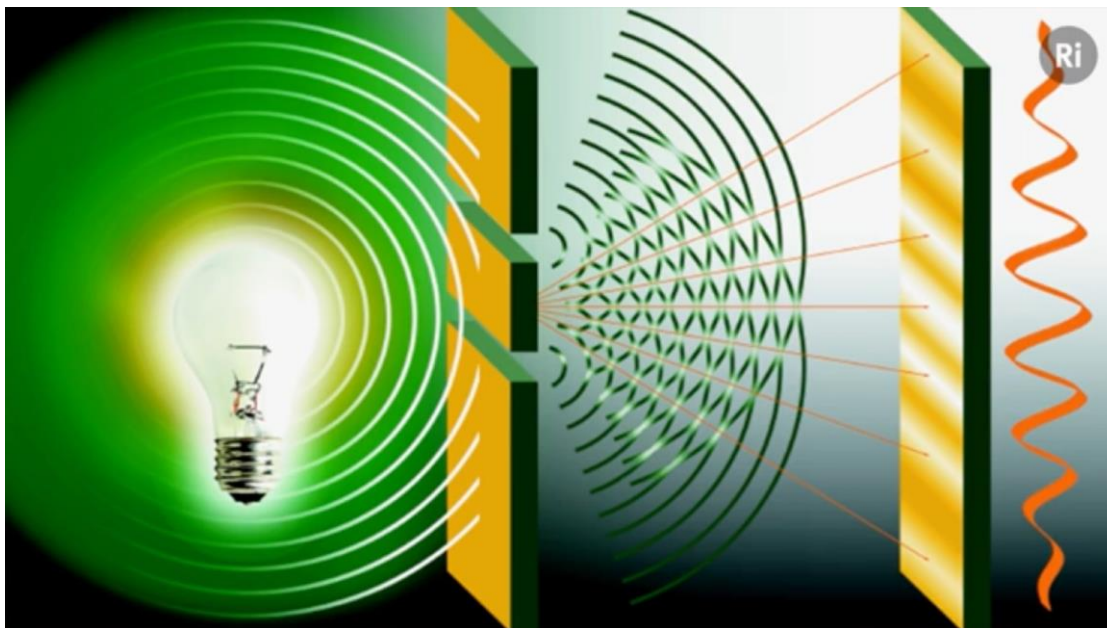
If it is “voluntary actions [that] produce an experience of agency” (Haggard, 2008), then in the case in which voluntary actions lack conscious will the only way the sense of volitional agency survives is when forms of involuntary acts are admitted as the agency causes. To illustrate, Michael Gazzaniga and Joseph Le Doux considered for their experiments patients who previously had their brains split “to prevent epileptic seizures spreading from one hemisphere to another” (Bayne, 2008). Aiming to advance the theory that the brain is organised into modules, they discovered that those patients who had split hemispheres also presented semi-disconnected cognitive functions (Gazzaniga, 1989). Gazzaniga and Le Doux found a way to request the *right* hemisphere to accomplish a specific action without the *left* hemisphere noticing (Caruana, 2010). Afterwards, when scientists asked patients about the performed action, the answer was, unexpectedly,

connected to patients' conscious sense of volitional agency in their willing those actions for a precise – made up – reason (Caruana, 2010). Even though the left hemisphere is the only one gifted with language and it was unaware of what was demanded of the right hemisphere and why (Caruana, 2010), the former acted in a way that legitimised the brain's inner workings. In fact, it produced a conscious sense of agency of an action it did not know about *a posteriori*. This could mean that almost every action is performed without will: that the sense of volitional agency works in that it observes the action beginning, sees it finishing and then comes out saying: "I willed that".

In Libet's studies, what is "potentially available to the conscious function is the possibility of stopping or vetoing the final progress of the volitional process" before the act is accomplished (Libet, 1999). Further studies have located this moment in time (Schultze-Kraft et al., 2016), assessing the exact instant after which the veto cannot be exerted. This corresponds to those 200 milliseconds that Libet assigned to reaching conscious awareness of the movement itself. Therefore, at the same time the action arises on the conscious level, it can be stopped by the conscious veto. In this light, the latter seems to be the only way out of the deterministic "cascade" of actions, prompted by the brain on an unconscious level (Schurger, Sitt, and Dehaene, 2012). It is, however, a devaluation of the original sense of free will, as it embodies the freedom of not performing an action, a *free will nothing* as opposed to free will. It also seems more plausible that the brain, with all its as yet unknown functions, has more knots that need to be loosened by science, which might eventually add up to a full prediction of what is a factual ruling of our conscious mind. To go back to the notion of volitional agency, according to neuroscience it applies when the agent's predictions of the action are in line with the action performed, and it arises *a posteriori* (Chambon, Sidarus, and Haggard, 2014). By the same token, according to Libet, free will is a construct that feeds the idea of human beings exerting authority over nature. To summarise, actions can be predicted by tracing them back into the mind to unknown extents. This renders free will an archetype of the conscious and the notion of willing deliberate actions false. The latter's falsity, in its turn, makes volitional agency either a useless theory or one operating on unintentional grounds. As Libet claims (1999), "we would be essentially sophisticated automatons, with our conscious feelings and intentions tacked on as epiphenomena with no causal power". *Epiphenomenon* means an incidental aspect which does not affect the original phenomenon or nature in the specific case (Merriam-Webster, 2016).

In Flusser's terms, here it is not the apparatus which rules out human agency but people who rule out themselves as agents through the use of apparatuses, i.e. the machine through which the experiments are made possible. The automation does not lie within the machine but is located within the human, as seen through a deterministic filter. Libet therefore inquires outside Flusser's notion of a posthuman agency, as it allows for the automated and the programmed to depose

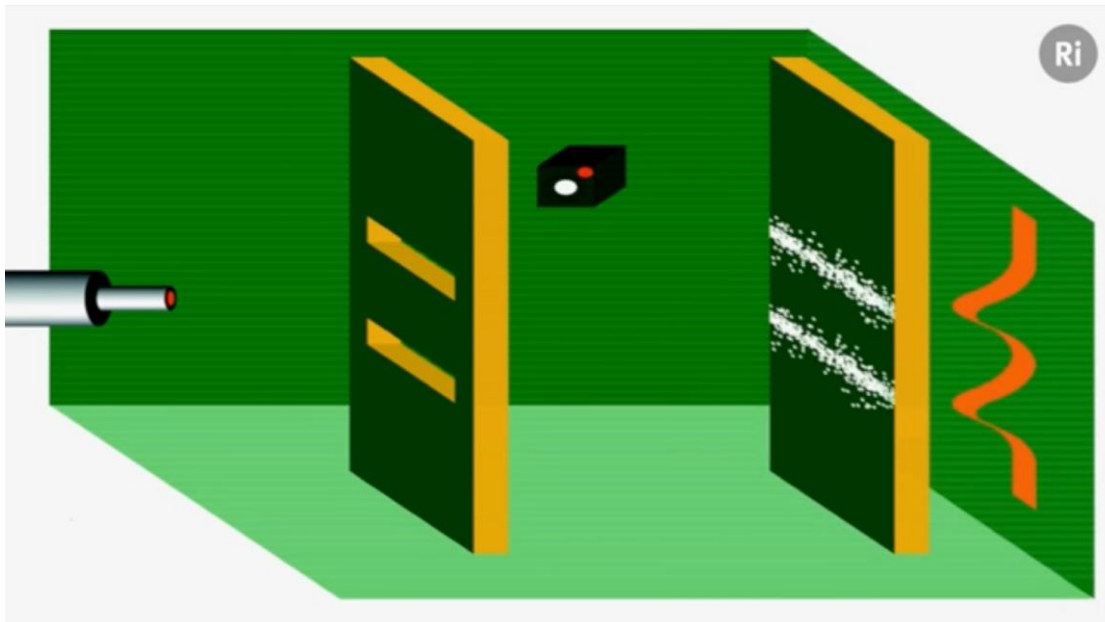
humans' intervention by humans' own means. On the other hand, the philosopher claims that there is a point at which scientific explanations become uninteresting and banal (Flusser, Poster, and Roth, 2011, p. 35-36). This occurs when the investigation of the unfamiliar produces explanations resulting in the “contempt for depth as such” (Flusser, Poster, and Roth, 2011, p. 35-36). What happens with Libet is that the deterministic insights into the mind-brain-body relationship are already part of the very norm of determinism. To explain this process of the banalisation of the “black box’s interiors”, Flusser brings in quantum physics. In the following paragraphs argue that he is right in the sense that quantum physics appears to be a world that is studied for the sake of depth, resulting in the entropic manufacture of new information with no final order.



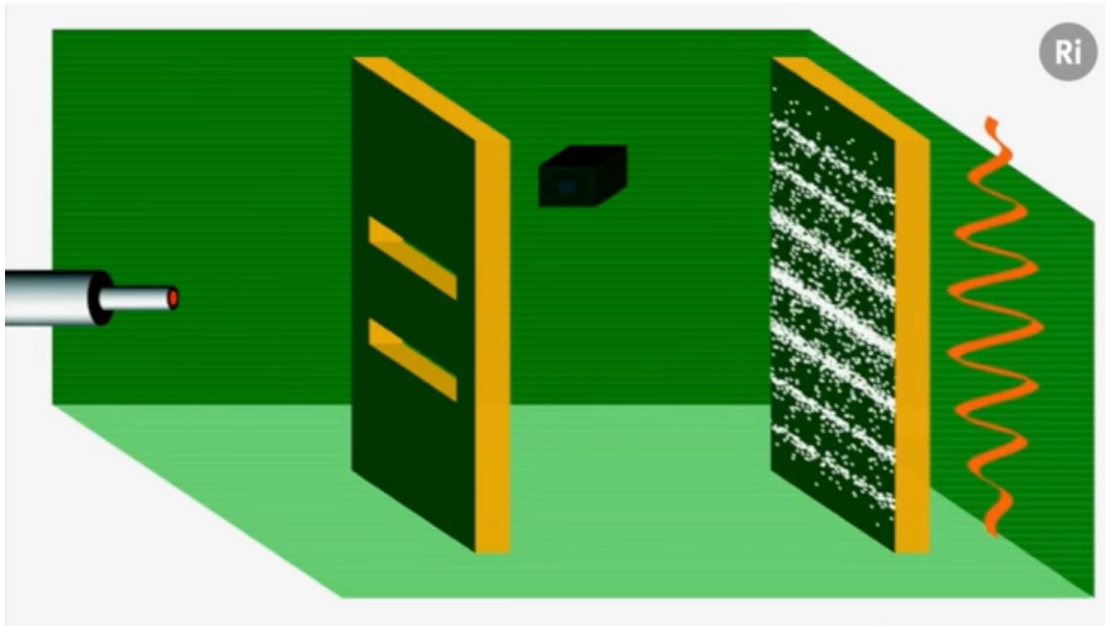
[Figure 1] Still taken from professor Jim Al-Khalili’s discourse at The Royal Institution

Quantum physics’ idiosyncrasies bring into question the validity of the very scientific procedure of measurement. The deterministic principles of physics regarding the macrocosm that have supported scientific inquiry for the last two centuries are analysed and discussed through physics’ microscopic world. There is a belief that the latter is created every time an observation is made through apparatuses. On the other hand, there is the possibility that the microcosm influences the macrocosm. To start with, as Jim Al-Khalili exemplifies for the masses, one of the main complications of quantum physics is the so-called *observer effect*, arising from the double-slit experiment (The Royal Institution, 2013). In the macroscopic world, when particles such as grains of sand pass through a plate with two slits, they hit the screen behind the slit, creating two coherent piles. However, when this is done with a monochromatic source of light, because light is made of waves, it splits into two smaller sources that interfere with each other and hit the screen behind as

an interference pattern – “a series of light and dark fringes” which either cancel each other out or overlap (The Royal Institution, 2013) [Fig. 1]. When this experiment is applied to the microcosm, the results are unexpected. When atoms are shot through the plate with only one slit open, they behave predictably, like particles creating one single stack on the back screen (The Royal Institution, 2013). However, when the other slit is left open, the atoms generate an interference pattern; oddly enough, this also holds true when they are shot at distinct intervals of time that do not allow for interference to happen (The Royal Institution, 2013). This hints at the idea that one atom can somehow behave like a wave when presented with two slits. To understand how the atom generates such interference alone, its behaviour is further investigated using a detector that flashes or beeps at either one or the other slit that is traversed by atoms (The Royal Institution, 2013). The results show that atoms cross each slit in equal numbers and, more fascinatingly, that they behave like particles, creating two piles on the back screen [Fig. 2]. In contrast, when the same settings have the detector in place but switched off, the atoms go back to behaving like waves (The Royal Institution, 2013) [Fig. 3]. The whole idea builds up to the theory that atoms are “in the know” about whether the apparatus, on behalf of scientists, is taking their measurements or not. Hence, what this raises is not the concept of volitional agency itself, but the way in which the agent modifies the process of gathering information.



[Figure 2] Still taken from professor Jim Al-Khalili’s discourse at The Royal Institution



[Figure 3] Still taken from professor Jim Al-Khalili's discourse at The Royal Institution

On this condition, the observer effect presumes that it is impossible to measure or to “observe with a scope” the quantum world without it being affected and, in turn, without it affecting the macrocosm in ways that are still to be fully articulated. As clarified by the physicist Massimiliano Sassoli de Bianchi in his summative article on this effect (2013), the prejudice of both classical and quantum physics that needs to be overcome is exactly that “to observe an entity is to *discover* what an entity is, without affecting its ‘isness’ in whatsoever way.” Sassoli de Bianchi (2013) delineates the way in which scope-oriented observations can lead to destroying as well as creating the property that is being observed. For instance, by looking for a specific property of an entity one might be making temporarily false another property, as occurs when we try to observe the burnability of a piece of wood as well as its floatability (Sassoli de Bianchi, 2013). Because burnability requires a destructive observation of the piece of wood, it makes it impossible to perform any other test; in contrast, by examining floatability alone, “at the end of the observational process we still have an integral piece of wood” to work with (Sassoli de Bianchi, 2013). The test of actuality of two incompatible properties such as these in a single experiment is called a *product observation*. It requires “operat[ing] a choice of an unpredictable nature” regarding which of the properties to observe and, if the test results are successful, assuming that the other property remains actual based on its potential predictability (Sassoli de Bianchi, 2013). As a result, both quantum and classical physics share different levels of probabilistic attributes in the act of measurement.

At the quantum level, every observation is a *product* observation, and thus probabilistic. This is due on the one hand to the observer's lack of control over the experiment, and on the other to the ephemeral characteristics of atoms that, in a way, are created purely for the actual moment of

observation (Sassoli de Bianchi, 2013). As in the double-slit experiment, atoms' behaviour is produced purely for the recording apparatus. Depending on whether the apparatus is switched *on* or *off*, atoms behave in a different manner – or more precisely, if it is *on* they behave in some way, while if it is *off* they might not. In the latter case, they are unobserved, a synonym of *inexistent* within the quantum world. Looking at the big picture, it is certainly easier to think that conscious observation does not affect atoms by itself. It seems to be more plausible that atoms' odd behaviour is justified by their existing within an enclosed space and time of observation, which is difficult for human beings to understand because it is un-experienceable for them. This place lies “outside space or [...] within a space that is not the three dimensional Euclidean” and exists autonomously from scientists' measurement and observation of it (Aerts, 1999, p. 45). Thus, when they observe it, they are also creating it afresh, or rather, apparatuses create it from scratch. The difference with probabilistic observations at the quantum level is that while in the macrocosm human beings are probabilistically assuming a property they had the possibility to experience many times before, for atoms the whole assumption is based on the machines' outcomes. It is therefore knowledge acquired only through the use of apparatuses.

At any rate, it is more what is left to be known of quanta than what is clearly discernible about them. Aerts understands the problem to be epistemological (1999, p. 45). As further explained by Sassoli de Bianchi, “many of our interpretational problems might be the result of an insufficient understanding of the articulated structure of an observational process” (2013). If the sense of one's agency is an acquired belief, so is quantum physics at the stage it currently is. Besides, there is a trend in which this information about physics, originally devoted to scientific development, is employed out of the scientific context, and sometimes even made into Hollywood films (see, for instance, the recent movie *Interstellar*). Theories which are still considered incomplete for experts in the field are allowed to prosper and support meta-physical notions of the everyday, generating noise rather than adding to the dialogue (Sassoli de Bianchi, 2012). New information is created in an entropic fashion, producing a sort of pseudo-scientific *deterministic hysteria*. At the same time, scientific findings lose value in the open sea of misinformation, or para-information, of the commodified internet and news. For technical images, thoroughly observed by science, only their opaque surface comes across to the masses. As Flusser argues, ever-more information-led societies produce beings who are not able to decode the saturation of images that were originally created “to orientate themselves in the world” (2000, p. 10), but that are nonetheless exerting disproportionate power in dictating people's behaviour.

Art as a Removal Pattern

If scientists' occupation is to produce informative conditions through apparatuses with the aim of

gaining control over the general laws of the universe, the art's place is to resist the machine by placing importance on the position of human. Science used to be to knowledge what art used to be to making, *Homo sapiens* versus *Homo faber*. Now, however, the roles have shifted, and science is to the development of the apparatus just as art is to human beings, more specifically, the localisation of an entropic pattern that is proper for them. This suggests a language of the indeterminate that machines are only starting to implement that goes against what they were born for. It might also be the language of the quantum as a world that is created for its own observation – the most misleading of worlds. Flusser defines the entropic as something humanity has always fought against in order to be remembered (Flusser, Poster, and Roth, 2011, p. 111). This is definitely true for the past, though this notion of making sense, of “creating”, even, now seems to be more proper for machines than for any other being. In this light, science is to control, and thus to the negatively entropic, as art is to entropic forms of chaos.

As a first analysis of the present society and the aforementioned *deterministic hysteria* embedded in it, art critic Nicolas Bourriaud believes that the present is a *society of extras*. The individual is “a consumer of time and space” who “develops as a part-time stand-in for freedom” that nevertheless has to be found in the fragmentary and dishonestly democratic communication systems available (Bourriaud et al., 2010, p. 9, 26, 113). Media may appear to be producers of misleading *technical images*, but is the “free” internet safe among them? A pertinent example that is useful for explaining the extent to which this medium can condition the future of art is found in Omar Kholeif's essay *The Curator's New Medium*. Kholeif asks himself whether the art world's figure of the curator can build his tastes and references through online systems of cross-suggestions (2013). He refers to organizations such as Google, Facebook, Amazon and Apple that gather users' online search history, contacts and connections and then translate the acquired knowledge in *recommended for you* services (Kholeif, 2013).

Search for a Malcom Le Grice DVD [he claims] and you will be recommended Peter Gidal before being directed to Jean-Luc Godard, 1920s avant-garde cinema... [...] Amazon has instantaneously crafted a simple but meaningful trajectory that is illustrative of the relationship between art and cinema that would have ordinarily taken someone in a world without databases and algorithms countless hours poring over art history and cinema books to draw such correlations. (Kholeif, 2013)

Kholeif highlights the power of those large companies as well as many other derived services in building a coherent set of suggestions that can definitely satisfy the niche, i.e. curators. As this is standardised behaviour for the masses, it must affect curators' practise even to a small extent, insofar as they have an *online presence*. As Flusser argues, “seen from this point of view, telematics appears to be a technology that replaces human beings not only in the creative process

but also in the decision-making process” (Flusser, Poster, and Roth, 2011, p. 119). Here, the “point of view” the philosopher hints at is the “improbable” negatively entropic situation of having apparatuses programmed to be *automatic censors and critics* of information that is ethical, political or aesthetical (Flusser, Poster, and Roth, 2011, p. 117). Flusser’s idyllic proposition would see people liberated from the act of deciding, with machines doing all the choosing, thus leaving humans room for only *meta-judgments* related to the programming of the apparatus (Flusser, Poster, and Roth, 2011, p. 121). As Flusser questions: “...wouldn’t it be possible to automate this critique so that people wouldn’t have to check all the information running in the net for its informational content? Such automata would guarantee the negatively entropic character of all dialogue. They would automatically not only eliminate everything redundant, all gossip, all kitsch, but also erase it from memory, as if such accidents and excesses had never happened ...” (Flusser, Poster, and Roth, 2011, p. 121).

This idyllic society Flusser portrays is in some ways similar to the present one, though different for other reasons. Modern society, for instance, seeks a negatively entropic order of things, giving rise to an equal control that exhausts volitional agency. Many decisions are crafted by apparatuses programmed by humans in order to help or economically exploit (the threshold is very thin) other human beings. On the other hand, it is arguable that automata also nurture humans’ demand for redundancy. A certain familiar *hysteria* is in fact applied to the world of celebrities, and superfluous information is generated that is similar to the kind Flusser thought to be erased from the machine society.

This second example of *deterministic hysteria* is epitomised by the fact that the well-known actor Robin Williams restricted the exploitation of his public figure for 25 years after his death. In his will, Williams transferred the rights to employ his name and image to a charitable foundation in his name with the aim of preventing any “posthumous exploitation of the actor’s image” (Ellis-Petersen, 2015). This is connected to the recent trend in cinema of using CGI-related techniques of body scanning, both pre- and post-produced, to deal with the premature death of artists (Ellis-Petersen, 2015). The most striking example of this happened to the actor Paul Walker in the blockbuster movie *Fast & Furious 7*. Walker died halfway through the filming process, so the movie could not be completed without affecting the storyline. In a way, his death was not an “impediment” to the film’s production, since it could continue “using” the body of Walker’s brother to complete the remaining scenes and eventually edit the actor’s face on top of it (Reynolds, 2015). Ethically speaking, director James Wan undoubtedly assumed that the economic disadvantage of a partially incomplete film was a worse calamity to account for than the dead person’s right to privacy. What is more baffling is that Walker’s brother provided his body as a provisional substitute. The ethical compensation on the mainstream level resulted in a lousy pop

song called *See You Again*; the accompanying music video presents tasteless slow-motion shots “in the memory” of the deceased [Fig. 4]. From this perspective, the apparently lucid gesture of Robin Williams in writing his will before suicide emerges as an act of removing oneself from the world of images in its entirety. It admits that “the value of a celebrity’s afterlife” has hugely increased in recent times (Gardner, 2015). This is a symptom of a society where ethics are at stake altogether, so that a right to be forgotten arises alongside the desire to be remembered. A negentropic control is opposed to an entropic idea of dying. Furthermore, the importance placed on the examination of celebrities with their ensuing hysteria confirms that redundant information is not erased in a telematic society, at least not as long as it is economically exploitable.



[Figure 4] Still taken from Wiz Khalifa’s music video *See You Again*

In the first instance, human beings’ volitional agency is threatened by apparatuses’ development towards negentropic ways of guiding decision making. In the second instance, natural entropy is left free to flourish through apparatuses and allows for their shifting of ethics, people’s exhumation policy included. Both examples showcase two characteristics useful to support the economy: a confident level of transparency of the self and the rendering of everything subject to commodification (Tiqqun, 2011). An ethic of the apparatus must therefore be established either way. To go back to Flusser’s society of apparatuses as *censors and critics*, he eventually points out that such a society would render human beings unnecessary: “Human beings’ negatively entropic opposition to nature will proceed automatically, but not necessarily with their automatic participation. All human decisions will become unnecessary in the future and will have a disturbing or dysfunctional effect when they occur, but they will always have the potential, theoretically at every moment, to stop everything.” (Flusser, Poster, and Roth, 2011, p. 122).

This exemplifies the physiognomy of today’s society, where the continuous accumulation

of information and its selection and dissemination, to not be forgotten, has been projected from the human onto the machine. For Flusser, the only freedom allowed is represented by a practise of *veto* applied to apparatuses, similar to Libet's. This rejection lies in the possibility of saying no; it is a "negative decision" (Flusser, Poster, and Roth, 2011, p. 122) that Robin Williams made once and for all and that artists are playing with as a concept. Adding to the timeless questions of originality in art, the artists of today need to generate that "disturbing or dysfunctional effect" embedded in humanity that is extraneous to the machine.

As a response to the demand of total control and mediation, artists' presence is in the spotlight as a representative of the main commodity exchanged between them and their audience. There is a tendency in which an artist who is continuously present is declared to be selling out because they have been developed into a slave of the technical image, or of capital. The countertrend is thus made by artists who are famous and yet are not publicly existent, some of whom would have completely withdrawn their presence in the world of images if it were not for their art. In a sort of *veto* act, they exert an anti-agency consisting of anti-representational practices. An example of this is the recent television series by Paolo Sorrentino called *The Young Pope* (2016). Jude Law, playing Pope Pius XIII, has scandalous and yet innovative attitudes towards his life as the head of the Vatican. He is firm on old-fashioned principles as well as innovative in his profound understanding of what the politics of current media are. Pope Pius XIII's intentions for the Church's marketing seem out of place the first time he discusses his criteria with the Vatican's expert. But more than a discussion, it is a lecture; when the expert asks to have merchandise with the pope's image, as is the custom, the pope replies that a completely blank plate is "the sort of merchandise [he is] prepared to authorise" (Sorrentino, 2016) [Fig. 5]. He is *no one* and has never had his picture taken because he has been "training [his] whole life to be an invisible pope" (Sorrentino, 2016). At first, this answer seems related to a kind of ethical-religious problem – the Vatican encourages elevating the self (Sorrentino, 2016). However, when the pope proceeds in his monologue, he implicitly compares himself to the most important of contemporary artists because, just like him, "none of them let themselves be photographed" (Sorrentino, 2016). With a comprehensive list of different art fields' primes from the past twenty years, he jumps from Salinger to Kubrick, from Banksy to Daft Punk and to the Italian singer Mina. The *red thread* which links them all is exactly the fact that, to different extents, they all have avoided public exposure (Sorrentino, 2016). Because the Vatican survives by hyperboles, he argues, it also needs to generate them; thus, by being an invisible pope (Sorrentino, 2016) he will at the same time exert immensurable effect on people by way of being concealed. Paolo Sorrentino shows his brilliance in describing the oxymoron of what the Pope has always been – the most public of figures – and what he should be in the present time – the most mysterious one. During the whole first series

Pope Pius XIII destroys his persona, never appearing publicly. He is interested in having a durable success rather than a fragile one. He rejects proxies – he wants real people to follow him. Hence, he is absent for those who cannot see through the surface of technical images but present for those who can.



[Figure 5] Still taken from Episode 2 of *The Young Pope* by Paolo Sorrentino

Accordingly, in the art world the *permanent presence* of the artist appears desirable if not compulsory. No wonder that the *guru* of performance art – Marina Abramovic – had a biographical film titled “The Artist is Present”, and that she was criticised when, for the first time in 40 years of performances requiring her presence, Abramovic removed herself in her work called *Generators* (Whitney, 2014) [Fig. 6]. The aim: to finally reach a point where art is not materially made but produced by the encounter between artist and public (Whitney, 2014). Participants in this work are, in fact, blindfolded and given a pair of noise-cancelling headphones, so they can reach this ideal conscious-awareness (Johnson, 2014). The role fulfilled by artists thus develops into one of allowing their audience to see through them. In this regard, the acknowledged trend among artists is that they are not makers anymore, but “producers of *situations*”, with their audience co-producing or participating in it (Bishop, 2012, p. 2, 14). As Hito Steyerl posits (The New School, 2013), a society like ours, fully mediated by apparatuses, is *configured as a video installation*. The only thing that cannot be reproduced indeterminately is therefore “the idea of presence [as it] invokes the promise of unmediated communication” (Steyerl, 2015). In her article “The Terror of Total Dasein” (from the German *presence*), Steyerl understands the continuous attendance demanded of artists in the form of lectures, events and Q&As to conceal “a range of grades of withholding absence” useful

for art institutions to pay rent (2015). Hence, presence can be commodified, for instance, by turning performance into a required characteristic for artists, just like performativity becomes a prerequisite for artworks. By “grades of withholding absence” Steyerl means the way in which one can be genuinely talking to someone while checking emails or their Instagram feed, thus interrupting their interlocutor without them feeling interrupted, and believes this is the most common form of present time, i.e. “junktime” (2015). Artists are thus required to be always present but, just like anybody else in the society of extras arbitrated by media, they are always *almost* present. It is not presence itself that is at stake, but the quality of it. In Steyerl’s opinion (2015), artists might use a *strike of presence* to fight their alienation, but because the form of full time presence they are fighting against is in the quality of absence, then its strike should “integrate some form of [actual] presence”.



[Figure 6] Marina Abramovic’s *Generators* (2014), exhibition entrance with statement

From a second perspective, an everlasting presence allows artists to be controlled through their institutionalisation and thus relates to their quality of being controlled (Lütticken, 2016). To contextualise, the first to question the very concept of a *work of art* was Marcel Duchamp. He produced artworks neglecting the artist’s forms of agency in creating them, by placing a higher value on the act of calling something art rather than making it (Foster et al., 2012, p. 127-129). Thus Duchamp’s *ready-mades* were artworks he did not personally fabricate but chose among others to be located in a gallery space. With the *Rendez-vous d’art*, he expanded this concept to performativity. It represented the moment in the day in which he subjectively chose to have this encounter between him as the artist and the object to be “transformed” into art; the audience had to move and observe this happening to validate the encounter (Bourriaud et al., 2010, p. 29). In a

way, this Rendez-vous pioneered performance art by combining artists and their audience at a given moment to observe the ephemeral, the unrepeatable. A perfect example can be found in Duchamp's *The Large Glass*, which is "a work whose medium (glass) is defined by its transparency to the world around it" (Cronan, 2013). *The Large Glass* carries no signified; it is pure signifier, pointing at nothing more than what already exists and calling it art – ultimately, the opposite of the opaque black box. Marcel Duchamp's first critique of institutions was fundamental in shifting art's autonomy in relation to society at the time, promoting the concept that art is what one makes of it. However, the so-called *institution critique* has become such an exacerbated notion today that it allows artists to produce this sort of critique within institutions with their own consent (Burton, 2008). As an example applicable to Steyerl's denunciation, the application of self-regulation also occurring in the art world brings entropic behaviours to fit in the laws of control and it is therefore easily traced and controlled.

In both cases, the presence of the artist, and of people, is of such importance that the capital-driven society still finds it hard to fully commodify human beings and put them under organised control. In *The Cybernetic Hypothesis*, the experimental collective of editors called Tiqqun provides insights into telematic society that are also helpful in understanding our current society. In Tiqqun's opinion (2011, p. 5), the *cybernetic* is a political hypothesis born after the Second World War to supplant liberalism silently. With the aim of avoiding the chaos and destruction caused by the war, it means to rationalise and re-programme everything, beginning with human beings; it is a theory of information whose aim is to produce order out of chaos (2011, p. 5-9). It does so by aborting anything existing outside society's regulations – that which is not ultimately conformable to the norm – and it results in human beings' *self-regulation* and *transparency* to society but not to themselves (Tiqqun, 2011, p. 6, 14). Because capitalism lies at the foundations of the cybernetic society, these norms of order become the ones of capital and vice versa. In this light, Duchamp's behaviour was revolutionary for the world of art at the time. It created disorder and entropy by asserting that everything could become art insofar as it was designated so. However, this entropic behaviour has been picked up by cybernetic society and transformed into a familiarised notion. The result: that it is no longer revolutionary, but rather fits into parameters and can be commodified under the name of institutional critique. As in the opinion of Tiqqun, for the cybernetic society to reveal its purpose, people must panic and fall into active chaos (2011, p. 37). This is done through every "behaviour that escapes control while remaining indifferent to the system", or, more precisely, by creating "noise" (Tiqqun, 2011, p. 38). As in Steyerl's case, noise can be generated through so-called "guerrilla actions" against the system made to render themselves invisible to the latter, to ultimately become a faceless enemy (Tiqqun, 2011, p. 40).

Agency as Inhabitant of the Entropic

While art craves disorder, both science and the telematic society share an undeniable longing for the control of everything, where human agency is eventually inhibited. Information is key; its accumulation and classification by apparatuses helps commodification and adds up to a final outcome of *negentropy*. This concept, which Flusser presented as the way in which humankind can overcome the problem of being remembered (2000, p.49), has a different connotation here. From being the tool with which humankind finally realises its project of a negatively entropic order, it becomes the tools by which apparatuses finally attain control over humans. The rationalisation of the self machines conduct stands for an easier categorisation as well as transparency, which fulfils the needs of a capital-driven society. The internet plays the role of allowing human beings to think they are satisfying their willed needs through this medium while providing vital information for the ultimate classification of everything (Tiqqun, 2011, p. 15). On the other hand, human beings still require apparatuses to generate uninformative data that only afterward can enter the system as commodifiable. In this scenario, art focuses on the human condition more than ever – humans in relation to apparatuses and to their mediation. If nature's entropic principle grows towards a probable situation of disinformation, the opposite is true in the telematic society. Presence becomes the ultimate commodity and absence the basic instrument with which artists train their form of agency in affecting the external world. *Homo faber* develops into *Homo remotus* (as in *away* or *absent*) by finding an economy of self-presence.

To escape control and commodity, art needs not only to generate the untraceable in the form of the absent or to bring about the entropic and the redundant, but must also find an enclosed space from which to exert its agency.

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