

# WS 2015/16 OUR SKY, OUR PROGRAM, OUR WORK. ALGORITHMIC FRAMEWORKS

Mittwoch, 14. Oktober 2015

## Art in the Age of Post-Media I (WS 2015/16)

In his newly translated essay *Post-History*, originally dating from 1983 and a lucid analysis of life under digital conditions *avant la lettre*, author and theorist Vilém Flusser writes:

"Western culture reveals itself as a project that seeks to transform itself into apparatus. What characterizes the West is its capacity for objectifying transcendence. Such transcendence allows for the transformation of all phenomena, including the human phenomenon, into an object of knowledge and manipulation."<sup>[1]</sup>

In contemporary culture, algorithms are the means to carry out this transformation towards the objectification and programmability of all things living and dead, which give rise to apparatus. The term 'algorithm' that derives from the name of the 9th century Persian mathematician 'Al-Khwarizimi' initially designated arithmetic operations with Arabic numerals. By now it has, through the transformation of calculation as a task of the human mind to that of (digital) electronic devices, come to generally stand for computer programs. Since our lives are increasingly intersecting with an ever-increasing amount of such programs, algorithms have a growing impact on all levels of society, from the economical, over the political to the cultural. In this sense it becomes increasingly important to consider the impact of 'algorithmic culture' from the perspective of artistic production and reception.

Thus, in the coming two terms we will engage with the notion of the algorithm and its effect on contemporary networked societies within the framework of art and culture. As Ted Striphas has noted, 'culture now has two audiences: people and machines'<sup>[2]</sup>. Automated ranking algorithms, from Google's 'page rank' over the like-systems in social networks such as Facebook, increasingly create what Eli Pariser<sup>[3]</sup> refers to as 'you loops' by feeding back 'personalized' and thus streamlined information to clustered customers. Such algorithms have become the environments where cultural producers present their works. The process of evaluation of cultural production is slowly shifting from human subjects towards networks of trending algorithms. Although they appear to be objective, these systems are never neutral; and moreover they continuously and dynamically reconfigure themselves through their use, thus liquefying the ground we tread on.

Furthermore, the programs our actions and affects are embedded within are showing signs of becoming more and more autonomous from their makers. As Flusser puts it, 'apparatus always function increasingly independent from their programmers intentions. And apparatus that are programmed by other apparatus emerge with increasing frequency.'<sup>[4]</sup> In order to realize the unprecedented and potentially grave effects that these developments have on our lives, we do not even have to resort to their application in war-machines<sup>[5]</sup> or the silent takeover of the financial markets by HFT (High Frequency Trading) and algorithmic trading. We can also start at home and try to understand what this development means for us as artists, theorists and filmmakers. What does artistic autonomy turn into if our audience is increasingly made up of human/non-human semantic networks? How can political action be conceived in algorithmic frameworks? What is art in the age of deep level Bayesian networks, Google's humming bird semantic evaluation, artifacts ranking, HFT and automated tagging bots? Is it possible to use an artistic perspective to maintain a level of freedom within such environments?

It is precisely at this point, that the text we have selected as a backbone for our investigation might offer some openings, namely when Flusser states that 'freedom is conceivable only as an absurd game with apparatus, as a game with programs. It is conceivable only after we have accepted politics and human existence in general to be an absurd game. Whether we continue to be 'men' or become robots depends on how fast we learn to play: we can become players of the game or pieces in it.'<sup>[6]</sup>

[1] Flusser, Vilém (2013) Post-History, Univocal Press, Minneapolis. p. 9.

[2] Striphas, Ted (2015) Algorithmic culture. URL: <https://medium.com/futurists-views/algorithmic-culture-culture-now-has-two-audiences-people-and-machines-2bdaa404f643>

[3] Pariser, Eli (2011) The Filter Bubble, Penguin Press, New York.

[4] Flusser, Vilém (2013) Post-History, Univocal Press, Minneapolis. p. 25.

[5] For example: Schuppli, Susan (2015) Deadly Algorithms, URL: <https://www.radicalphilosophy.com/commentary/deadly-algorithms>

[6] Flusser, Vilém (2013) Post-History, Univocal Press, Minneapolis. p. 26.

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## WORKS/FILMS

Ditch Plains, Loretta Fahrenholz (video, color, sound, 30 min., 2013)

Parallele I - IV, Harun Farocki (video, color, sound, total ca. 43 min., 2012-2014)

Factory of the Sun, Hito Steyerl (video, color, sound, 23 min., 2015)

IPHONECHINA, Christian von Borries, DE 2014, 69', English subtitles

Additional works by Simon Denny, Melanie Gilligan and others

## READINGS

Required Reading:

Vilém Flusser, *Post-History / Flusser Archive Collection*, edited by Siegfried Zielinski, Univocal

Juli Carson, *Libidinal Economies: Art in the Age of Bull Markets* (unpublished essay)

Additional Readings:

Jacques Derrida, *Marx' Gespenster: Der verschuldete Staat, die Trauerarbeit und die Neue Internationale*

Joseph Vogl, *Das Gespenst des Kapitals*

Maurizia Lazzarato, *Der verschuldete Mensch*

Felix Guattari, *Postmodern Deadlock and Post-Media Transitions*

Howard Slater, *Post Media Operators*

Matthew Fuller (2003) *Behind the Blip: Essays on the Culture of Software*, Autonomedia, London.

*Provocative Alloys: A Post-Media Anthology / Edited by Clemens Apprich, Josephine Berry Slater, Anthony Iles and Oliver Lerone Schultz*