THE IMAGE BY PROXY

Mass-Microimaging and the Epistemology of Platform-Capitalism

Marc Boumeester

Ecologies of Architecture Book Series

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Colophon
The Image By Proxy:
Mass-Microimaging and the Epistemology of Platform-Capitalism

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Book Abstract
The exponential growth of image production has created a condition in which images no longer depict, but organise. The Image by Proxy introduces mass-microimaging as a framework for understanding how images function as infrastructural agents: automated and recursive, embedded in the logics of the attention economy. In this regime, visibility is pre-configured rather than chosen. Images operate by proxy, through algorithmic substitution and systemic validation. Their proliferation erodes perception, replacing memory and history with a perpetual present, while authenticity fades in a circulation where images reference only each other.

This book addresses the epistemic, ethical and political consequences of such automation. What forms of thought and responsibility remain possible when images dictate the conditions of recognition? How do infrastructures of imaging extend beyond representation to shape the terms of social, political and ecological existence?

Keywords: Image-ontology, attention economy, affect, synthetic desire, media-philosophy.

Series Abstract
The *Ecologies of Architecture* Book Series promotes a transdisciplinary approach to architectural thinking and doing by extending its interest to topics that bring together the three ecological registers, namely the environment, the social and the individual. Such an approach accounts for what the built environment will come to be, and speculates about who will become alongside it. The series focuses not only on the why, what and how of architecture, but also on the who, who with and for whom.

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The Image By Proxy

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Preamble

In assembling this book, I navigated a landscape of concepts as vast as it was intricate. Each path branched endlessly, inviting exploration but demanding discernment. Writing about the image by proxy means grappling with its entanglement in media, technology, and the human condition – yet attempting to include everything would risk obscuring its conceptual core under an excess of connections. The paths I have chosen resonate most directly with the book's central thesis: the agency of images and their growing indicative weight within systems that exceed individual or even collective control. Rather than treating images as mere representations, I approach them as dynamic agents within complex assemblages. This shift requires moving away from extensive frameworks centred on representation and essentialism toward a more intensive outlook – one rooted in direct experience. Here, the focus is on how images affect, disrupt, and mediate, emphasising their immediacy and the intensities they generate in immersive contexts. This perspective privileges the affective and relational qualities of imaging systems over their symbolic or representational dimensions. As a result, I deliberately exclude an extensive, representational approach rooted in essentialist notions of meaning and signification – an avenue that would open a vast historical and semiotic discourse beyond the scope of this book. The historical evolution of image-making provides a rich context, but this book does not aim to trace a chronological lineage. Part of its argument is that the scope, autonomy, and impact of the contemporary mediascape are unprecedented, making direct comparisons with earlier phases inadequate. Likewise, while semiotic, cultural and

technical analyses of imaging are significant, they are addressed only insofar as they intersect with the conceptual terrain of the proxy. Instead, the focus shifts to how images, untethered from traditional frameworks, mediate our understanding of reality as dynamic and interconnected. The immersive nature of the image by proxy aligns with a translucent outlook, where meaning arises not as a fixed entity but through repetition, framing and elimination. This perspective has shaped not only what is included in this book but also how its subjects are approached. By examining intensity, framing, repetition, and elimination as fundamental to perception – and therefore to reality – this work explores the image by proxy as a phenomenon of contemporary significance. It frames the discussion around how images function within networks of power, perception and agency. For the sake of clarity, I have included some statistical data, which, by the time you read this, may require updating. However, these figures are not so much about the exact numbers; far more important is their indication of scale and trend, which will undoubtedly continue in the years to come. I hope the paths traced here resonate with the reader, offering both insight and an invitation to explore further. I thank my daughter, Juni Boumeester, for her ongoing support and help with some neuro-psychological issues, the editors of this book series for their trust and enthusiasm, ArtEZ Academy for Art and Design in Zwolle for her support and Heleen Schröder for copy-editing this work. And finally, thank you, reader, for engaging with this work.

Positioning: The Image by Proxy as a Framework for Contemporary Image Theory

In the contemporary digital era, the worldwide dissemination of images has reached unparalleled heights, indicative of both technological progress and significant cultural transformations. The quantity of photographs taken throughout history has increased remarkably, in line with the expansion of digital photography and readily available image-capturing technologies. Photography has transitioned from an occasional activity to a ubiquitous aspect of daily life, influencing our methods of documentation and engagement with the world. In 2025, it is estimated that between 20 trillion and 23 trillion photographs have been made throughout history – with forecasts indicating an increase to over 30 trillion by 2030. This equates to around 2500 photographs per person worldwide since the inception of photography, based on the current global population of approximately 8 billion.[1] Current annual statistics shows that around 1.94 trillion photographs are taken each year, which means that approximately 5.3 billion photographs are taken every day – or a staggering 61 000 photographs per second.[2] The exponential increase in image production is particularly evident when examining historical trends. In 2013, some 660 billion photographs were captured worldwide, exceeding 1 trillion annually by 2015. By 2023, this figure reached 1.81 trillion, with projections indicating that over 3 trillion photographs will be captured each year by 2030. Nonetheless, it is crucial to acknowledge that these averages conceal substantial variances. Access to technology, cultural norms and socio-economic considerations result in certain persons and places contributing disproportionately to these totals, while others are under-represented. Considering that nearly all

data pertaining to historical and contemporary images produced for surveillance, espionage, military applications and homeland security remains inaccessible, both in terms of content and meta-data information, it is certain that a substantial additional volume of images exists; however, their extent and characteristics are unlikely to be disclosed. Even without considering these factors, the mere numbers are astonishing, underscoring humanity's increasing dependence on visual communication and its influence on contemporary existence.

The prime catalyst for this exponential increase is the popularity of mobile phones and broadband mobile internet, coupled with the adaptation to a culture of social mediation. The commonness of high-quality cameras in almost every pocket has effectively eliminated the obstacles to image creation and sharing. Every ordinary moment, festive event, or transient experience is now a possible photographic opportunity, effortlessly taken and disseminated. Social media platforms – as instruments of the attention economy – aggravate this tendency, cultivating an environment where visual material is both promoted and anticipated. Platforms like Instagram, TikTok and Snapchat flourish on the continuous creation and consumption of photographs, transforming real lives into a series of visual narratives. In addition to personal photography, improvements in artificial intelligence (AI) have introduced a transformative dimension to the realm of imagery. AI applications that can produce realistic photos in seconds have substantially enlarged the global image count and will continue to do so exponentially. AI-generated graphics are utilised across various industries, including advertising, design, entertainment and education, therefore broadening the visual landscape, yet without any way of measuring how far or how much. There are no governmental or institutional registers that keep track of image production. Up-to-date information on mobile phone sales and AI use constitutes strategic corporate data and is therefore closely guarded; as a result, broader trends can typically only be inferred retrospectively. Even Google, the world's most used internet search engine – with a 2025 global market share of almost 90 per cent – since 2019 no longer displays the number of image-search results.

Simultaneously, automated systems including surveillance cameras, drones and satellite imaging generate huge volumes of photos, frequently with minimal human intervention, while cloud storage and digital preservation technologies guarantee that images, once produced, seldom vanish. In contrast to previous periods, when printed photographs suffered from physical deterioration or loss due to misplacement and reduced significance, contemporary digital images are perpetually available, facilitated by systems such as Google Photos and Apple iCloud. This convenience of storage not only motivates users to capture more photographs but also safeguards the increasing accumulation of visual data.

As both a cause and effect of these developments, a new entity has taken a significant place in the global economy, rivalling entire states in power and significance. Big tech corporations – particularly the so-called Magnificent Seven – have transitioned from individual corporate titans to the combined second-largest economic force globally.[3] In 2025, these technology giants, with a collective market capitalisation of around $18 trillion, exceed the GDP of every nation globally, except for the United States; however, their economic output and financial activities are intricately integrated into the GDP of the US rather than functioning as a separate economy. Big tech constitutes a hyper-concentrated power structure within the broader US economy, enhancing American global economic dominance rather than questioning it, influencing technology advancement, financial markets and global policy decisions. On an even deeper level of control, BlackRock –the world's largest asset manager – exerts substantial structural influence on the attention economy through its extensive equity holdings in the dominant big tech platforms such as Alphabet, Meta and Amazon. By funnelling substantial capital into these companies via passive index funds, BlackRock disproportionately reinforces their financial standing, thereby sustaining and amplifying their data-extractive, attention-based business models. Additionally, BlackRock's expansive portfolio extends into the military-industrial complex, encompassing significant stakes in defence contractors whose technological innovations increasingly intersect with surveillance, cybersecurity and data analytics – infrastructures that underpin the algorithmic governance of attention.[4]

What is the implication when a select group of firms influences not just economics but also the fundamental structure of human cognition? In contrast to national governments, which are limited by boundaries and political cycles, big tech functions as a decentralised power entity, beyond geographical, legal and conventional regulatory frameworks. Its effect extends beyond financial aspects, encompassing cognitive, infrastructural and epistemological dimensions. Its platforms govern cultural consumption, its AI systems enhance and automate decision-making, and its cloud servers store the amassed knowledge and private data of billions. Like the financial sector, which has long liberated itself from the limitations of physical assets and governmental regulation, big tech has emerged as an independent entity, dictating the parameters of interaction for societies, economies and individuals. Financial organisations influence capital distribution, whereas big tech orchestrates knowledge dissemination by designing algorithms that dictate visibility and retention. Its advancements in artificial intelligence, automation and quantum computing are not merely transforming sectors but also altering the whole concept of intelligence.

This extends beyond economic supremacy; it embodies pedagogical authority – the attention economy constructs an algorithmic curriculum that perpetually instructs us on our desires and beliefs. These platforms do not merely react to human behaviour; they shape it. Each swipe, like and search result serves as an instructional element, solidifying specific perceptions and cognitive and consumption routines while rendering alternatives less visible, less comprehensible, or entirely absent. In this manner, big tech fosters a realm of algorithmic pedagogy, in which learning is governed not by curiosity but by optimisation – what is most easily assimilated, most interesting or most lucrative. This teaching does not cultivate critical thinking; rather, it reinforces conventional thought, leading to a steady constriction of intellectual horizons as prediction algorithms shape our preferences into uniform patterns. As focus is directed towards predictable, seamless content cycles, mediocrity becomes the norm – novelty is mimicked rather than genuinely encountered, and depth is reduced to scrollable familiarity. Algorithmic sorting not only influences individual tastes but also organises entire epistemologies, resulting in a fragmented knowledge landscape, less historical context, and involvement assessed by superficial interaction rather than profound comprehension. This is the genuine consolidation of power – not merely economic or political, but ontological. The equilibrium of global authority is transitioning, not only towards companies, but also towards the infrastructures they construct and the rationales they embed in daily existence. One could call this a frequency modulation of society: the future is being determined not solely by nations, but by the unseen logic of systems engineered to think, foresee and exert influence on a scale surpassing human understanding. The most pressing question is who controls the systems, and what kind of world they are teaching us to see.

Images have transcended their role as mere documentation of reality; they now serve as the framework through which reality is increasingly artificially fabricated. In a world where attention is the paramount commodity, images serve not just as representations but as instruments of persuasion and control. The realm of personal recording has evolved into a seamless amalgamation of corporate and computational interests, both competing to shape perceptions and belief systems. The proliferation of visual data does not only mirror humanity's changing connection with images but also actively shapes it. Each click polishes an imperceptible algorithm, favouring visibility over truth and engagement over profundity. The emergence of AI-generated and altered imagery intensifies this phenomenon, further obscuring the tenuous boundary between reality and fabrication. The question has shifted from merely determining the authenticity of an image to probing the significance of authenticity within a system designed for spectacle. The capacity of photographs to encapsulate a rare, momentous

event has been reversed. In an age of boundless replication, no individual image possesses intrinsic significance; meaning is instead generated through repetition and algorithmic endorsement. Images exist as interconnected nodes within an expanding network, where perception is influenced by exposure patterns and biased curation. This saturation does not democratise visual culture; instead, it guarantees that only what the system desires to be visible is presented, reducing complexity to easily consumable, viral aesthetics. It represents not merely a transformation in visual culture, but a fundamental reorganisation of epistemology itself. The capacity to critically analyse images – questioning their origins, aim, and manipulation – has increasingly become crucial, yet the mechanics of visibility hinder such examination. The overwhelming volume of visual data does not expand our understanding of the world – it narrows it, creating a landscape where perception is dictated by algorithmic sorting rather than conscious selection. As the influx of images intensifies, the pertinent question is not just how to manage this inundation, but rather what type of reality it will ultimately produce. The accelerating human-to-image ratio has not just shifted the scale of visual culture but has also reconfigured its very logic. If images once served as safe harbour for memory and verification, their sheer abundance now erodes their individual significance. The past is continuously overwritten by an ever-expanding present, resetting statistical historical reference points at an ever-closer interval. In 2025, it was estimated that 90 per cent of all photographic images had been created within the previous decade, with annual growth rates increasing rapidly. Thus, as we move forward in time, the statistical irrelevance of older images grows at an accelerating rate – rendering the visual past increasingly fragmented and outnumbered in the downpour of new data. Or, put differently, the scope of historical relevance will increasingly narrow to the recent past until, ultimately and theoretically, past and present attain the near same ontological status – in a manner reminiscent of Zeno's paradoxes.

This is not merely a matter of volume but of agency. AI-driven databasing has transformed imaging into the largest and fastest-growing system of production and distribution on the planet. Seen from the survival instinct of the image itself, Richard Dawkins' notion of the meme as an autonomous cultural replicator suggests that the image has little to fear – its own propagation is firmly assured by the system.[5] Imaging's own desire is systematically saturating the visual realm with increasingly detached, free-floating images. What was once a system curated by the hands of humans – archivists, editors, historians, photographers – has now gained control over its own expansion. The image no longer needs a human operator to proliferate; it moves through algorithmic selection, optimisation and self-perpetuation. Under present conditions, we have ceded control over our

relationship with this technology and unless we disrupt the automated symbiosis that binds us to it, we risk reducing ourselves to mere fuel for its insatiable demands. This relentless technological progression threatens to harden and distort the dynamic interplay between action and perception, profoundly influencing the formation of worldviews, opinions and policies – most often at the expense of the health of the planet and the well–being of its inhabitants.

Imaging I: *Aisthegráphein*

Imaging serves as an umbrella term encompassing the formation of (mental) images of future and past events, positioning itself as a pivotal element in shaping expectations and memories. Imaging includes the acts of producing and perceiving images in the broadest sense and is an integral part of 'writing perception' In Deleuze's terms, imaging does not merely refer to subjective mental representations, but participates in a broader ontological field of images – where perception, affection and cognition are all specific crystallisations of an immanent flux that constitutes reality itself.[6] Whereas traditional frameworks privilege cognition – understood as the set of mental processes involved in acquiring and processing knowledge through concepts and representations – as the principal organiser of experience, Deleuze situates cognition as a secondary crystallisation emerging from more primary flows of affect and sensation. Writing perception (*aisthegráphein*) then, refers to the affective registration and storage of what is perceived, without this 'record' being abstracted to cognition or reduced to the intentional structures of phenomenological consciousness. A shortcut to grasping the operations of *aisthegráphein* lies in the semi-metaphorical verb 'cinematographing', which draws an analogy between building perception and the creation of cinema. Just as cinema draws from an inexhaustible reservoir of concepts, movements, actors, narratives, images, atmospheres and more to compose a single version of a projectable film, so too – out of all the potential influences from the past (memories and associations), present perceptions, and anticipated futures – one unique reality of the present gets 'written' into our record of affective flows and sensations. Every event is singular, as out of the vast amount of influences only one combination remains; even when several individuals share the same event-moment, their perceptions will still be 'written' totally differently. The writing of perception is thus registering, without attaching knowledge or signification.

Aisthegráphein resonates with the work of Bernard Stiegler, Vilém Flusser and Gilbert Simondon, particularly in their explorations of memory, mediation and individuation.[7] Stiegler, in *Technics and Time*, argues that human perception is always already shaped by technical prostheses – from writing to cinema

to digital media – each functioning as an externalised form of memory that conditions experience.[8] In this sense, *aisthegráphein* extends Stiegler's notion of epiphylogenesis (the externalisation of memory in technical objects), emphasising how perception is not just registered but actively composed and structured through media and technology. Flusser, in *Into the Universe of Technical Images*, describes a shift from linear writing to image-based modes of inscription, where perception itself is increasingly determined by codes, apparatuses and computational processes.[9] *Aisthegráphein* aligns with this perspective by framing perception as an act of selection and exclusion. Just as Flusser sees photography and (in an updated outlook) digital media as reconfiguring how we encode and recall the world, *aisthegráphein* underscores the active inscription of perception itself, by filtering, framing and sequencing sensory and non-sensory input into a legible experience. Simondon's theory of individuation further deepens this framework by emphasising that perception is not a static or fully determined process but one of ongoing becoming, arguing that perception unfolds through transduction, a continuous negotiation between sensory input and pre-individual potentialities.[10]

Aisthegráphein, then, is not merely a process of inscribing perception but also an act of individuation – a structuring of perception that is neither fully determined by external technical systems (as Flusser warns) nor purely subjective, but rather an emergent, relational process shaped by both technical mediation and the inherent dynamism of perception itself. Thus, *aisthegráphein* serves as an embodied metaphor for the continuous negotiation between inclusion and exclusion, integrating sensory and non-sensory input while simultaneously discarding many possibilities. Ultimately, it reduces countless potential configurations to a single outcome, shaping how perception is framed and structured. This process can extend to the broader cognitive realm when hearing stories, reading news or reviews, or engaging with cultural representations of a place – each contributing to the construction of expectations surrounding the actual encounter with an event. Imaging thus involves the building of an individualised image through some form of mediation, particularly visual information. By contrast, the construction of an image without such mediation could be described as imagination, which can be unconscious and unstructured, connected to desires and fears (which would be called phantasy) or conscious and organised, often creating coherent narratives or worlds (fantasy). Phantasy reflects raw inner chaos, while fantasy shapes imaginative control.

From a Deleuzian point of view, the relationship between physical images and mental images has to be seen through a framework of becoming and difference instead of representation or correspondence. Gilles Deleuze stresses the image as an event – an actualisation of forces inside a dynamic field of virtual

and actual intensities, unlike phenomenological approaches which tie mental images to subjective embodiment (Merleau-Ponty), or cognitive science's search for neurological underpinnings (Kosslyn).[11] By contending that images are not only signals but assemblages that create emotion and rupture static meaning, this posture questions semiotic theories such as Barthes's concentration on the layering of signification. While Deleuze would argue that this mediation is always fruitful, creating new paths for thought rather from only refracting current reality, Flusser and McLuhan emphasise the mediating role of outside images in altering perception.[12] Deleuze recognises the possibility for deterritorialisation, a movement outside the rigid binaries of internal/external or real/imaginary, even in cultural discourses or technological settings where outside images inspire mental constructions or question authenticity. Deleuze's approach fits his larger philosophical objective of freeing the mind from the limits of representational systems by stressing the image as both immanent and generative, therefore providing a more flexible and dynamic perspective on the interaction between images and mental images.[13] Gilbert Simondon seeks to elucidate a genetic unity between several phases of individuation connected by the transductive dynamic of the image, so centralising the problem of the interaction between imagination, invention and perception. In his view, a manufactured visual item is a nexus where objective reality and subjective impressions cross, rather than only a physical manifestation or manmade addition to the planet. For Simondon, 'a created object is not a materialised image, nor is it placed arbitrarily in the world like an object among other objects in order to overload nature with an artificial supplement; it is (through its origin) and remains (through its function) a linkage system between the living and its milieu, a double point in which the subjective world and the objective world communicate.'[14] Reality in the mediated landscapes of modern civilisation is no longer a simple experience but rather a well-chosen spectacle. For Guy Debord, this show functions as a system of representation that turns existence into an infinite supply of commercialised images. He argues that these pictures distort and govern all social interactions, therefore distancing people from *real* realities. The spectacle therefore reconfigures reality, providing a selected version of the world of systematic power that promotes passivity in order to support its own existence, hence transcending the simple portrayal of fact. Life now is consumption – not of objects, but of representations. Baudrillard's theory of the simulacrum expands this criticism by contending that the difference between representation and reality collapses totally in the late phases of capitalism. Images from the spectacle supplant rather than mediate reality.[15] Signs and simulations abound in the hyperreality period without any semiotic reference or traceable origin of the image. An influencer's post or a viral video no longer captures a

truth or event; instead, it creates a self-referential universe whereby meaning is created within the simulation itself. According to Debord, alienation becomes extinct, since only the ceaseless play of simulations replaces the authentic reality one could return to.[16] For Debord, the spectacle shapes perspective to maintain hegemony, hence extending a system of passive consumption. But Baudrillard proposes a more subtle dynamic: in the simulacrum, people unintentionally help create hyperreality, therefore dispersing and decentralising their modes of control. Therefore, even revolt risks becoming another simulation, deprived of disruptive potential, meaning that the more reality is mediated, the more it dissolves, and society is suspended in a world of images without substance.

Given the unprecedented avalanche of images and the increasing automation of imaging, the question rises whether these perspectives can fully cover the phenomena that are causing today's new patterns in mass-microimaging. Mass-microimaging describes the systematic, large-scale manufacture, circulation and algorithmic image manipulation in the modern techno-social mediascape on an unimaginable scale. Unlike traditional mass media, where imaging was predominantly controlled by centralised institutions, mass-microimaging operates through a decentralised and participatory model in which individuals function as both producers and consumers of visual content. This process is characterised by an immense scale and velocity, with two trillion images produced annually, many of which are not only archived but actively recirculated and recontextualised within digital infrastructures. Algorithmic systems, predictive analytics and AI-driven curatorial mechanisms have become primary forces in determining visibility and affective impact, shifting relevance and control away from human selection toward machine vision. This is a contradictory process of hyper-personalisation on the one hand and standardisation on the other, whereby imaging seems unique but essentially supports communal aesthetic patterns and ideological frameworks. Mass-microimaging's feedback loops do not only guarantee the continuous eruption of pictures, but also preconfigure perception itself by creating recursive visual templates that shape expectation and experience. As imaging moves beyond mere representation to become an infrastructural force that conditions cognition, behaviour and epistemic structures, mass-microimaging emerges as a key mechanism in the organisation of contemporary reality, where what is seen is determined before seeing itself takes place. This condition surpasses notions like hyperreality and the spectacle as they still had their foundation in the (semiotic) signification that was attached to imaging. In the current automated socio-techno construct, meaning is rapidly being replaced by indication, digital imaging machinery provided with automated systems in which images react to images without any human interference or any need for signification of what is produced visually. Instead, signification is attached to the effects of underlying

algorithms and other systemic modes of validation. Therefor I will introduce the concept of 'the image by proxy', which – as I will argue – is not simply an iteration of the simulacrum. The image by proxy is an apparatus that images a world without directly depicting it, outsourcing the act of depiction to individuals who are themselves shaped by the apparatus. In its subtlety and scale, it surpasses the simulacrum, encompassing both the replacement of reality and the implicit systems that guide and frame that replacement. As a commodifying tool, the spectacle finds its home in the machine, invisible to humans yet guiding behaviour only for the benefit of its own objectives. Knowing these differences helps us to investigate how images shape our views and interactions with reality, therefore exposing the unseen forces shaping modern life.

Difference and Repetition I: Difference is Primary, Productive and Immanent

The concept of the image by proxy has come to fruition because of a thought process that is deeply related to Gilles Deleuze's 1968 work *Difference and Repetition*.[17] More than any other, this seminal work confirmed my previous ideas and conceptions and led (among other things) to the writing of *The Desire of the Medium*.[18] By prioritising difference, emphasising the creativity of repetition, and exploring the generative power of the virtual, Deleuze engaged with the world as a field of continuous transformation, where becoming and multiplicity are the defining features of existence. Deleuze's philosophy revolves on his rejection of the belief that difference comes second to identity. Conventional metaphysics sees difference as a secondary feature – that which distinguishes one identical entity from another. Deleuze reverses this by contending that difference is essentially creative, immanent to being itself. Difference shows up through dynamic processes of becoming and transformation, not in reference to pre-existing identities. This view aligns with his critique of representation, which he finds to be limited, static and unable to apprehend the generating power of diversity. Repetition, often misunderstood as mere recurrence, is central to Deleuze's thought. For him, repetition is not the duplication of the same but a dynamic process that introduces novelty and variation. True repetition involves the transformation of forces and conditions, creating new possibilities and meanings. For example, repetition in art, nature or life is always marked by subtle differences that make it creative rather than mechanical. If Deleuze's *Difference and Repetition* dismantles the primacy of identity and affirms difference as ontologically primary, Isabelle Stengers's concept of honouring divergence extends this commitment into an ethical, scientific and ecological imperative.[19] Drawing from Alfred North Whitehead's process philosophy, Stengers insists that divergence is not a mere deviation from an ideal, but a generative force that must be sustained rather than neutralised.

Just as Deleuze sees difference as productive rather than oppositional, Stengers views divergence not as a temporary instability to be resolved but as a necessary condition of becoming, resisting the gravitational pull of reductionist thinking. Whitehead's rejection of 'the fallacy of misplaced concreteness' – the belief that abstract models capture the fullness of reality – is echoed in Stengers's critique of how scientific paradigms, political structures and economic systems suppress divergence in favour of control, standardisation and efficiency.[20] The risk of such suppression is not merely epistemic but ontological: when divergence is ignored, the processes that sustain multiplicity and invention are foreclosed. Whitehead's actual occasions – the smallest units of experience – do not emerge from predetermined identities but from a field of relations that continuously reshape themselves. Stengers translates this into an ethical demand: to honour divergence is to recognise that knowledge and ecosystems must be allowed to evolve through their own capacities for transformation, rather than being subordinated to external norms of coherence and stability.

In dialogue with Simondon's theory of individuation, Stengers's divergence is not just a methodological stance but a transductive process, where the individual is never a self-contained entity but an ongoing resolution of tensions within a metastable system. Simondon's pre-individual field – the set of potentials from which individuation emerges – mirrors Stengers's insistence that reality must be understood through continuous processes of differentiation rather than through fixed identities. To honour divergence, then, is to allow individuation to unfold without imposing premature finalities – whether in scientific thought, ecological relations or political organisation. Just as Simondon warns against thinking of the individual as a finalised being rather than a process of becoming-with, Stengers warns against forcing coherence where divergence must be sustained. Where Deleuze insists on difference as primary and repetition as the mechanism by which novelty emerges, Stengers extends this into an ethico-political demand to sustain divergence as a condition for ongoing transformation. The challenge is not merely to affirm difference but to cultivate conditions where divergence does not collapse into pre-given forms. Divergence represents a reality that must be negotiated and composed via continuous conflicts rather than one that has to be modelled or stabilised. These processes entail the interaction of forces and intensities that produce singularities – special events or combinations defining existence, therefore providing a radical ontology of immanence.

In the following chapters I will examine the transformative role of images and imaging in these complexities, focusing on their ability to generate perception, create exo-identities and cultural narratives, and their increased control over the visual agenda of humans. The Deleuzian perspective on the relationship between

the virtual and the actual is central in the following reasoning. The virtual is not a potential state awaiting realisation; rather it is totally real, the source of creation and transformation. The actual expression of these virtual processes is not a straightforward implementation of a pre-existing blueprint, though it contains a field of multiplicities, tendencies and intensities that generate actual forms and events. Instead, the virtual and actual interact dynamically, with the virtual continuously feeding into the production of new actualities. I will use three pairs of concepts throughout this text as hubs for the interconnection of lemmas from different fields: difference-repetition, actual-virtual and intensity-density. Serendipity in the arts, for instance, is the process of finding an answer to a question that could not be formulated up-front, similar to the 'I know it when I see it' principle in legal jurisprudence. Both have no precise (legal) definitions or demands for their outcome, but each is recognisable in practice through experience or intuition. These processes are connected– although operating in entirely different fields – because they rely on the relative vagueness of difference to arrive at a precise answer.

Introducing the concept of the image by proxy – a system of mass–microimaging driven by industrialised and coercively harnessed collective desire – highlights how images function as active agents in a world increasingly defined by visual proliferation. To that end I will unfold the concept and setting of the image by proxy in parts. I will explore the agency of images as active participants in constructing reality and mediating collective perception, emphasising their emotional and embodied impact through the affective and sensory dimensions of imaging. I will critically examine the ethical implications of image-making and interpretation, particularly in relation to materiality and representation, consequently delving into the dynamics of imaging, exploring how this process mediates embodiment, spatial perception and temporal experiences. The investigation continues into the material, spatial and ethical impacts of imaging, uncovering the role of mass-microimaging in shaping placemaking and cultural homogenisation. Finally, I look at responsibility, proposing ethical frameworks for engaging with images as active agents of collective accountability.

In Chapter 2, 'Inclination', I will be looking at how the world reveals itself, what we can perceive and what is left out by default. Starting from the substrata of non-consciousness, I will use the term 'montage' as a lemma of repetition that connects the intensities actualised through a process of framing in four dimensions – for instance in architecture and moving image. This will make it possible to discuss the underlying patterns of both media, without getting entangled in their medium specificity. In Chapter 3, 'Emanation', I will propose a way of understanding how

we build perception, asking specifically: Of all that we can perceive, what do we perceive? To this end I will explore the term 'cinematographing' as a shorthand for writing perception as a process of inclusion (autopoiesis) and exclusion (entropy) of the elements that are revealed to us. Within this process, both actualised and virtual elements have an equal influence, making their distinction not only irrelevant, but frankly opaque. In Chapter 4, 'Consistency', the question of the influence imaging has on how we perceive the image – and how images perceive each other – will be centralised. To this end, I will look at different classifications of the image to set apart the proposed image by proxy. By proposing a taxonomy rooted in affect and visibility, I challenge traditional approaches to image theory, which – in a world saturated with visual content – provides a critical frame to understand the ethical and existential implications of our image-driven reality. In Chapter 5, 'Substance', the focus is on the influence imaging has on placemaking. It will instrumentalise the idea of diffractive imaging as a creator of the 'memeopolis.' Diffractive imaging, in Karen Barad's philosophical sense, is the process of analysing phenomena by acknowledging their entangled and relational nature, emphasising how differences are produced through interactions rather than pre-existing boundaries. The memeopolis is a metaphorical urban environment that partly exists through and in its 'exo-identity', which is created through diffractive imaging. In Chapter 6, 'Responsivity', I will examine ways in which we can engage with the concerns raised throughout the chapters. For this I will look at pedagogical developments that aspire to have inherited grounding – not so much in reality, as imaging is part of reality – but more in terms of resolution, which is an attempt to isolate and contain the influence imaging has on our perception. In the epilogue there is room for speculating about a future of imaging, though speculating might sound too fanciful. In a future five minutes from now we can effectively describe the effects of the emerging patterns of today without having to account yet for their agency. Throughout the book I will interweave theoretical arguments with short reflective interludes – 'resonant cognitions' – to shift the mood from the cognition of logic to that of the flow of affect. Each chapter examines parts of the milieu of the image by proxy, moving from foundational concepts to the socio-political and ethical implications of imaging in contemporary culture, and each chapter traces the lifecycle of the image by proxy, beginning with its foundations in (contemporary) image theory to establish its theoretical, practical and ethical significance. A sharp and capable reader such as yourself would read the following arguments with a relational mindset, rather than with an essentialist outlook, envisioning the unrecorded yet very real events it describes.

Resonant Cognition I: The Influenceuse

Flânerie, as conceived by Charles Baudelaire and later expanded by Walter Benjamin, evokes the image of a wandering observer – an urban detective of modernity, drifting through the city with detached curiosity, absorbing its rhythms without entanglement.[21] The *flâneur* moves freely, an invisible spectator amid the spectacle. His counterpart – the *flâneuse*, however, navigates a more complex terrain, her mobility shaped by social constraints. Restricted from the same effortless wandering, she finds alternative paths – lingering in shopping arcades, disappearing into café crowds, or observing the world from the threshold of domestic space. This tension between visibility and evasion is central to Sophie Calle's performative projects, such as *Suite Vénitienne* (1980), where she follows strangers through the streets of Venice and documents their movements in an unsettling choreography of anonymity and intimacy.[22] Calle's work collapses the boundary between observer and participant, mirroring the *flâneuse*'s paradoxical role: always looking, yet always being seen. Her body becomes a medium for storytelling, a site where movement and gaze intersect, transforming passive spectatorship into embodied experience. This interplay of presence and perception challenges the notion of urban observation as a purely aesthetic act, revealing flânerie not as a passive indulgence, but as a dynamic negotiation of self, space and visibility. Feminist scholars have long critiqued the *flâneur* for its inherent male bias, highlighting how women were historically excluded from urban public life. Janet Wolff argues that the *flâneur* is inseparable from the patriarchal structures of nineteenth-century cities, where women were confined to the private sphere or seen only in constrained roles – prostitute, spectacle, or commodity of the gaze.[23] Under these conditions, the *flâneuse* was nearly impossible, revealing how gender and social status shaped urban experience, complicating the *flâneur*'s presumed universality. Building on Wolff's critique, scholars such as Griselda Pollock and Deborah Parsons have sought to recover the *flâneuse*, demonstrating how women found ways to navigate and subvert patriarchal urban spaces. Pollock explores how women's presence in the city was mediated by their exclusion from public life.[24] Parsons extends this argument by analysing literary depictions of female urban wanderers, such as Virginia Woolf's and Jean Rhys's protagonists, who engaged in a form of *flânerie* shaped by gendered constraints.[25] These figures, Parsons argues, were not passive observers but active participants in the cultural and spatial dynamics of the city, challenging male dominance over urban exploration. Beyond feminist reinterpretations, the *flâneur* has been reimagined through intersectional and queer frameworks, acknowledging how race, class, sexuality and disability shape spatial practices. Scholars have drawn parallels between *flânerie* and queer cruising, showing how LGBTQ+ people navigate

urban spaces in ways that challenge heteronormative spatial norms.[26] The *flâneur*'s detachment and anonymity take on new dimensions in queer theory, where these qualities become tools for negotiating visibility and safety. As nonbinary and gender-nonconforming perspectives gain recognition, a more inclusive *flânerie* is proposed, which transcends gendered privilege, positioning urban exploration as a shared human practice. This shift redefines the city itself as a more dynamic, open space. Rosi Braidotti suggests that *flânerie* in a posthuman context is no longer about a solitary observer but about participation in a network of human and nonhuman actors.[27] This perspective aligns with ecological and materialist critiques of modernity, challenging anthropocentric notions of space and agency. Rather than an individual aesthetic pursuit, *flânerie* becomes a relational and entangled practice, reshaping the way we understand movement, observation and belonging in contemporary environments.

However, it could be argued that with the proliferation of mediated environments, the nature of both the gaze and *flânerie* have fundamentally altered. Observation is no longer unidirectional but transformed into a negotiation where visibility, performance and recognition are mutually constituted. *Flânerie*, once tied to the urban streetscape, now takes place in mediated spaces. The act of looking is no longer simply about detachment; it is about participation and circulation. Flânerie itself can be understood as contingent on its medium – whether physical, digital or hybrid. As *flânerie* moves into the digital realm, the role of the observer transforms. Digital *flânerie* retains the curiosity and openness of its analogue predecessor while adapting to the unique conditions of virtual environments; this uniqueness does not hold only positive connotations. The *influenceuse* emerges as a figure who embodies this shift, where looking is no longer a passive or one-sided act but a performed negotiation. Unlike the *flâneuse*, who consumed images of the city from a position of distance, the *influenceuse* is embedded in an economy where her gaze and her image are inextricably linked. In a mediated environment, being seen is as much an act of agency as seeing itself – visibility is curated, managed, and monetised. Crucially, the *influenceuse* does not exist in isolation but as part of a broader economy of content creators, a category that encompasses influencers, TikTokers, YouTubers, podcasters, bloggers and digital artists. Studies show that the influencer sphere is mostly feminine; 84 per cent of influencers on Instagram create sponsored material featuring women, and 77 per cent of content creators monetising their work identify as female.[28] But depending on specialty, this gender dynamic changes: 63 per cent of news influencers are men, whereas women are more common in the areas of lifestyle, fashion, and cosmetics. With 62 per cent of LGBTQ+ people saying online influencers helped them explore their identity, queer influencers

also play a major part in changing digital representation.[29] Influencers seem to differ mostly in their mode of influence: externalisation rather than embodiment. Especially in news and analysis, male influencers often externalise their power, presenting themselves as observers of outside events, facts or discourses. Their influence comes from analytical distance, detachment and knowledge. By focusing on their visibility, lived experience and self-presentation as fundamental to their involvement, female and LGBTQI+ influencers more often embody their influential practices. Whether in lifestyle, personal aesthetics or identity-based materials, their authority is connected to affective and visual labour, where impact is not just about what is stated but also how it is done. This difference supports current systems of visibility: women and gay people become subjects whose influence is inseparable from their own depiction while straight men portray themselves as detached observers of the world. This exposes people to more commodification, examination and computational forces that determine how, when and why they appear even while it offers chances for self-expression.

Thus, the *influeceuse* is a structural answer to the needs of digital spectatorship rather than only an updated *flâneuse*. Audience participation, algorithmic preference and platform logics that define how, when and why she emerges shapes her movements, either physical or digital. While the *influenceuse* functions within a contract of reciprocal visibility, where participation in the image economy requires a performative gaze, the *flâneur* was defined by his capacity to stare freely. From *flânerie* to influence in mediated environments, the change in the conditions under which observation, participation and identity are negotiated changes the gaze as well. *Flânerie* is now a dynamic, networked process in which seeing and being seen function as reciprocal forces, not an isolated act. In this changing terrain, the *influenceuse* is crucial in the reconfiguration of the gaze, one in which presence is not only about observation but also about the agreement to be part of the spectacle itself. If the *flâneuse* ran on the outskirts of urban spectacle, the *influenceuse* is hyper-visible and exists in a digital environment where every act of seeing entails acts of being seen. However, as Janet Wolff reminds us, visibility does not equate to agency; it often functions as a mechanism of surveillance and control rather than empowerment.[30] Unlike the nineteenth-century *flâneuse*, whose observations of modernity remained ephemeral or confined to private diaries, the *influenceuse* transforms gaze into content. Social media platforms structure her movement not through physical space but through algorithmic logics, where curated presence and aesthetic labour determine visibility. In this sense, she embodies Brooke Erin Duffy's concept of 'aspirational labour', in which self-representation is not merely an expressive act but a form of unpaid or underpaid work, contingent on platform engagement.[31]

The *influenceuse* navigates a digital terrain where engagement metrics replace fleeting glances, and self-representation becomes a form of circulation. The city's arcades have been replaced by Instagram grids and TikTok loops, spaces where she is both subject and commodity. As Alice Marwick highlights, social media fame is predicated on a paradox: users must cultivate authenticity while simultaneously conforming to platform expectations that demand constant performance.[32]

Yet, the *influenceuse* does not refer directly to gender, but rather to a particular mode of engagement with visibility, aesthetics and digital self-representation. The *influenceuse* embodies a structural position within contemporary image culture – one shaped by affective labour, curated presence and platform-driven performativity. This resonates with Sarah Banet-Weiser's critique of 'popular feminism', where visibility and empowerment are marketed (or framed) as accessible yet remain deeply entangled with capitalist logics of monetisation and self-optimisation.[33] While the *influenceuse* may appear to have control over her image, she remains bound to the demands of an attention economy where authenticity is a carefully curated product rather than a liberatory force. As Angela McRobbie suggests in her critique of 'resilience culture', contemporary digital visibility demands constant adaptation, self-reinvention and emotional labour – qualities that, while marketed as empowering, function as forms of discipline.[34] The *influenceuse*'s autonomy is shaped, if not constrained, by the very networks that promise her visibility. The question, then, is not whether she observes or is observed, but how the structures of the digital image condition her agency, shaping the ways in which she moves, looks, and ultimately exists within a networked spectacle. If the *flâneur* once found solace in detached observation, and the *flâneuse* negotiated presence through strategies of evasion, the digital landscape demands a more entangled mode of spectatorship. Like the *influenceuse*'s acts of following, being followed, and staging presence expose the fragile boundary between autonomy and surveillance, between agency and scripted participation. In a way, Sophie Calle's *Suite Vénitienne* anticipated this shift: her gaze is neither passive nor distant but performative, implicating both observer and observed in a reciprocal choreography of attention. In a world where every act of looking is also an act of being seen, *flânerie* is no longer a solitary pursuit but a negotiation with the systems that frame, circulate and commodify the gaze.

Notes

1 Reliable figures on the number of images produced, their distribution, and the scale of mobile phone and data use are structurally difficult to obtain. Organisations with access to such information have commercial, military, or national security interests that restrict disclosure. When available, datasets are typically offered by specialised firms at very high cost and cover only narrow, time-sensitive domains. Consequently, most statistics in this area rely on estimates and extrapolations rather than comprehensive empirical measurement.

2 Susan Enfield, 'How Many Photos Are Taken in 2022?', *Mylio News*, 2022, https://news.mylio.com/how-many-photos-taken-in-2022/; Steve Mays, 'How Many Pictures Are There (2024)?', *Smays*, 21 March 2024, https://smays.com; Matic Broz, 'Photo Statistics: How Many Photos Are Taken Every Day?' *Photutorial*, 21 May 2025, https://photutorial.com/photos-statistics/.

3 Each 'member' of the big seven is already an immense economic force: in 2025, Apple ($3.8 trillion) and Nvidia ($3.3 trillion) each surpassed the economies of entire nations such as Germany and India. Microsoft ($3.1 trillion), Alphabet ($2.3 trillion), and Amazon ($2.3 trillion) dominate cloud computing, artificial intelligence, and digital commerce, while Meta ($1.2 trillion) and Tesla ($600 billion) extend their reach into virtual reality, advertising and sustainable energy solutions.

4 Benjamin Braun, 'Asset Manager Capitalism as a Corporate Governance Regime', *Socio-Economic Review* 19, no. 2 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), 379–407.

5 Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976).

6 Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 58–59.

7 Gilbert Simondon, *On the Mode of Existence of Technical Objects*, trans. Ninian Mellamphy (London, ON: University of Western Ontario, 1980 [1958]).

8 Bernard Stiegler, *Technics and Time, 1: The Fault of Epimetheus*, trans. Richard Beardsworth and George Collins (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998).

9 Vilém Flusser, *Into the Universe of Technical Images*, trans. Nancy Ann Roth (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011).

10 Gilbert Simondon, *Individuation in Light of Notions of Form and Information*, trans. Taylor Adkins (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2020).

11 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1945); Stephen M. Kosslyn, *Image and Brain: The Resolution of the Imagery Debate* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1994).

12 Vilém Flusser, *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*, trans. Anthony Mathews (London: Reaktion Books, 2000); Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964).

13 Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986); Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989).

14 Gilbert Simondon, *Imagination and Invention*, trans. Joe Hughes and Christophe Wall-Romana (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2022 [1966]), 186.

15 Jean Baudrillard, *The Consumer Society: Myths and Structures,* trans. Chris Turner (London: Sage Publications, 1998).

16 Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle* trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: Zone Books, 1994).

17 Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994).

18 Marc Boumeester, *The Desire of the Medium* (Arnhem: ArtEZ Press, 2018).

19 Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*.

20 Isabelle Stengers, *Thinking with Whitehead: A Free and Wild Creation of Concepts,* trans. Michael Chase, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011); Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality,* ed. David Ray Griffin and Donald W. Sherburne, (New York: Free Press, 1978 [1929]).
21 Charles Baudelaire, *The Painter of Modern Life,* trans. Jonathan Mayne (New York: Da Capo Press, 1964 [1863]); Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999).
22 Sophie Calle, *Suite Vénitienne* (Paris: Editions de l'Etoile, 1980).
23 Janet Wolff, 'The Invisible Flâneuse: Women and the Literature of Modernity,' *Theory, Culture & Society* 2, no. 3 (1985): 37–46.
24 Griselda Pollock, *Vision and Difference: Feminism, Femininity and Histories of Art* (London: Routledge, 1988).
25 Deborah Parsons, *Streetwalking the Metropolis: Women, the City and Modernity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).
26 Jen Jack Gieseking, *A Queer New York: Geographies of Lesbians, Dykes, and Queers* (New York: New York University Press, 2020), 95; Joni Schers, 'Queer Flânerie in Djuna Barnes' *Nightwood* and Sarah Waters' *Tipping the Velvet*' (master's thesis, Utrecht University, 2019), 13.
27 Rosi Braidotti, *Posthuman Knowledge* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2019).
28 Christopher Ross, 'Share of Influencers Creating Sponsored Posts on Instagram, by Gender,' *Statista*, 10 December 2019, https://www.statista.com/statistics/893749/share-influencers-creating-sponsored-posts-by-gender/; Chloe West, 'Income Inequality in Male vs. Female Influencers,' *Influencer Marketing Hub,* 29 October 2024, https://influencermarketinghub.com/male-female-influencer-income-inequality/.
29 Galen Stocking, Luxuan Wang, Michael Lipka, Katerina Eva Matsa, Regina Widjaya, Emily Tomasik and Jacob Liedke, 'America's News Influencers,' *Pew Research Center*, 18 November 2024, https://www.pewresearch.org/journalism/2024/11/18/americas-news-influencers/.
30 Wolff, 'The Invisible Flâneuse.'
31 Brooke Erin Duffy, *(Not) Getting Paid to Do What You Love: Gender, Social Media, and Aspirational Work* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2017).
32 Alice Marwick, *Status Update: Celebrity, Publicity, and Branding in the Social Media Age* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2013).
33 Sarah Banet-Weiser, *Empowered: Popular Feminism and Popular Misogyny* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018).
34 Angela McRobbie, *Feminism and the Politics of 'Resilience'* (Cambridge: Polity Press,

Fig. 1: A stereotypical image by proxy – the most liked image on the author's Instagram. On the day of posting, approximately 1.3 million other images of ice cream were uploaded worldwide, as on nearly every other day of the year. Photo: author.

Inclination: Perceiving a World through Intensity and Repetition

In this chapter I will examine the unseen patterns that highlight how humans are not the (sole) originators of their fate but are also shaped by probabilistic processes and systemic constructs, intricately connected to a network of probabilities often mistaken for an individualised life path. Bubble mentality and other forms of emotional myopia vividly illustrate how deeply ingrained frameworks – our parastrata – shape our reality even before perception begins. It resembles the (probably apocryphal) 'let them eat cake' mentality, where (privileged) situatedness can so thoroughly obscure awareness of others' struggles that one's proffered solutions become laughably out of touch or even insidiously discriminatory.[1] At the heart of these phenomena lie both our pre-structured frameworks and our comfort zones – the familiar cognitive spaces where our existing beliefs and practices are reinforced. The comfort zone acts as a buffer, ensuring that we are more inclined to seek out information that affirms our current perspectives and less likely to engage with challenging ideas. Confirmation bias further inclines us to favour evidence that supports our established worldviews, while motivated reasoning leads us to dismiss information that might disrupt our mental equilibrium. Social identity theory compounds these effects, as our group affiliations solidify our comfort zones, filtering our perceptions of both in-groups and out-groups. Together, these elements illustrate how our parastrata, bolstered by the comforts of familiarity, pre-structure the reality we perceive and ultimately constrain our capacity to know and empathise with experiences beyond our own, although we consider ourselves fully openminded and affectively capable of doing so. The realm

of comfort zones, conformation bias and externalised identity theory is exactly mirrored in the architecture of social media, which is psychologically engineered to maximise engagement, reward-seeking behaviour and social validation. Built on intermittent reinforcement (akin to slot machines), platforms use likes, shares and notifications as dopamine triggers, conditioning users to seek continuous interaction. The infinite scroll and algorithmic curation create a feedback loop of personalised content, reinforcing confirmation bias while amplifying emotional responses – especially outrage or the hunt for novelty. Social media also exploits exogenous identity formation, where self-worth becomes externally validated through metrics of visibility. By doing so, social media have gained a position among the parastrata of the fabric of life, rather than being part of the expressive layer of constructing reality. This means that while attention is easily directed to the specific content of social media, its true power lies in the mechanism itself, making it far more insidious. While these systems create an illusion of free choice, the underlying systemic trap ensures that consumer-engagement is not shaped by will, but by a self-reinforcing, algorithmically driven structure that dictates the conditions of participation itself. The next two chapters trace the triple progression of matter, content, and expression, revealing the stratified layers through which reality is constructed, and by extension, the systemic limitations that conduct what can be imagined and desired. While both chapters deal with the construction of reality – and particularly the role of imaging in shaping it – this chapter first focuses on the interplay between matter and content, where the unseen and unarticulated guide what becomes materially possible and organised. Secondly, we will look at framing as a way of 'organising' reality and address the relation between intensities (which are virtual) and densities (which are actualised). The next chapter will expand this framework by examining the interplay between content and expression, shifting focus to how what is materially organised becomes soma-aesthetically and semiotically articulated.

When a Tree Falls, a Tree Falls

The traditional thought experiment, 'If a tree falls in a forest and no one is around to hear it, does it make a sound?' emphasises how often people centralise themselves as the arbiters of meaning and relevance. Framing the question around human perspective implies that events only become meaningful or real when they cross human awareness. This captures the essence of human exceptionalism: the conviction that defining the world depends especially on human presence, intellect and interpretation. This topic provides a starting point for conversations on the interaction between existence, perception and determinism. Scientifically, the occurrence produces vibrations in the

air – sound waves – independent of observation. Still, the idea of sound as an experienced phenomenon rests on an observer's processing of these vibrations. Philosophically, this subject emphasises discussions in epistemology and metaphysics: idealism holds that unperceived events have no ontological relevance, while realism holds that reality exists apart from perception. Both methods, however, are limited by an anthropocentric viewpoint: either reality is seen and hence given value, or it goes undetected, and its relevance is questioned. From a new materialist perspective, this experiment can be reinterpreted to decentre human experience completely, therefore turning the emphasis to the agency of the tree, the forest and the sound waves themselves as active players in a dynamic material universe. The fall of the tree challenges conventional anthropocentric and theological ideas of causality by means of its material interactions with the earth, the air and the environment, therefore not dependent on human perception for their relevance. The epistemic aspect of this issue challenges deterministic theory. Although scientific determinism holds that the reality of the occurrence is independent of perception, the frameworks we apply to assess and explain the tree's fall and its effects limits our perspective on that event. Though restricted, human perception is the main vehicle for our registering of causal chains. This creates the twofold tension inherent in determinism: whereas causal events may take place apart from us, our understanding of their importance is still mediated by observation and interpretation. The issue of the unobserved tree emphasises the challenge of trying to assign meaning or significance to processes that occur outside the perceptual grasp of human beings, while trying to account for them. From a new materialist perspective, therefore, determinism is seen as a dynamic interaction of material agencies rather than as a closed system of linear causality. The fall of the tree is important not only as an isolated occurrence but also as a node in a web of linked bio-material processes: the vibrations produced by the fall interact with the ground, the air and the larger ecosystem, producing ripples of effects that go much beyond the direct event. Determinism becomes an emergent characteristic of entangled systems instead of a straightforward chain of cause and effect. Thus, reality is made of assemblages with recursive characteristics in which micro-level interactions combine into macro-level events (a fractal ontology) without losing their uniqueness.

Here lies a major challenge: how can we then describe processes that are epistemologically and metaphysically registered at a level beyond human perception while still measuring their significance on a human scale? And equally important – for those who were thinking they accidentally opened another book – what is the relevance of this question to the understanding of the concept of the image by

proxy? When addressing human activities – such as imaging – that profoundly affect other human domains like judgment, politics, economics and mobility, the significance of the process of signification itself must be acknowledged, even when the value of this act is subject to legitimate critique. Even more so, the significance and effects of the assumed human primacy and exceptionalism must be acknowledged as a major force with a global scale. In the Anthropocene a mutual dependency is created: human and everything non-human have become reciprocally dependent on the other to survive, and the question 'when it all started to go wrong' is not easily answered as the responsibilities are simultaneously individual, collective and systemic. Nevertheless, a return to a prelapsarian moment is not possible; what has been created needs to be taken into account in constructing the next steps. This is a very intricate and deeply human process, and – like it or not – it has to be addressed as such. To reconcile this tension – and to address my own unease in this matter – it might be helpful to adopt a position of 'the human *ad interim*'. This stance suggests that taking the human scale as a vantage point does not imply uncritical acceptance of its primacy or adequacy. The hope is to achieve a small increase in the awareness of the holistic, fractal nature of intertwining processes that currently shape our world and will do so even more in years to come. Discussing anything out of the range of human perception, but within the framework of building perception is obviously challenging. Expanding our knowledge of reality calls for tools, frameworks and theoretical approaches that transcend the human scale and interact with nonhuman viewpoints, invisible processes, and operating forces outside of human perception, and take the agency of matter and energy as fundamental to the fabric of reality.

The Selfish Gene

In his powerful 1976 book *The Selfish Gene*, Richard Dawkins maintains that genes are the basic unit of selection in evolution.[2] From microorganisms to sophisticated mammals, all living entities – from his perspective – serve as vehicles for the survival and reproduction of DNA. This refutes the widely accepted view that species, including humans, actively regulate the spread of their DNA to guarantee species continuity or family lineage. Dawkins flips this viewpoint, suggesting that the DNA itself – acting as an entity – endures and replays across a network of rival species. This concept is best shown by the common genetic material between humans and other animals as evolutionary processes have preserved essential genes required for life. Our genome shows the continuity of evolution across great timescales and reveals strong links with all life. Humans (Homo sapiens) and our closest living cousins, chimpanzees (Pan troglodytes) have about 96 per cent to 98.8 per cent genetic closeness.[3] Commonalities also apply to features

including opposable thumbs, brain structure and sophisticated social behaviour. Though precisely these variations allow other species to perform tasks impossible for humans, such as flying, breathing under water and very fast reflexes, small variations in genetic sequences explain traits unique to humans, such as advanced language abilities, abstract thinking and cultural development. While fruit flies and jellyfish still share around 60 per cent of their DNA with humans, domestic cats share almost 90 per cent of homologous genes with humans, and mice share almost 85 per cent of their DNA with us.[4] With ancient genetic material billions of years old and certain qualities specific to humans emerging just a few million years ago, human DNA is a patchwork of evolutionary history, making it clear that the genome is the true survivor here rather than the human.

Whether in terms of biological kinship or divine entitlement, what is important here, is that humans are only one variation among a great array of mammals without ontological grounds to claim extraordinary rank. To attribute non-human traits to our species – by means of technological or religious justifications – is a sign of delusion: building aircraft does not enable people to fly; assigning them more advanced cognitive abilities does not make them morally just. Although many theological and philosophical traditions advise humility, respect and stewardship in human interaction with the natural world, our behaviour often runs sharply against these values. According to the Christian doctrine of '*Imago Dei*', people are born in the image of God, and thus endowed with special abilities like reason, morality and creativity. While Hinduism and Buddhism stress the interdependence of all life and advocate compassion (*ahimsa*) and harmony with the natural world, the Abrahamic religions stress the part people play as stewards (*khalifah*) of creation, charged with caring for and preserving balance in nature. Often going even farther, indigenous traditions see people and animals as coexisting in a reciprocal and holy relationship. Still, the historical course of humanity has been defined by exploitation and devastation despite these lessons. Driven by anthropocentric worldviews, colonialism and capitalism have commodified nature, viewing it as a resource to be controlled rather than a common ecology to be maintained. Rising industrialism and global capitalism have continued short-term thinking, economic expansion at all costs, and a disconnection from nature, hastening habitat degradation and resource depletion. Deepening this divide are political inertia, cultural narratives of dominance, and an over-reliance on technological fixes. What religion prescribes – a responsibility to live in harmony with creation – we have substituted with systems that give top priority to consumerism, profit and control.

From the standpoint of DNA itself, one may consider its ultimate goal to be maximum adaptation and variation. While some species allow others to fade

when their ecological niches cease to exist, DNA helps others to survive in varied and evolving surroundings. The fundamental motivation of genetic material may be this process of selection whereby survival depends on adaptation and fitness to the surroundings. The ultimate variation of DNA could be considered as the building of a biosphere full of different life forms, each of which adds to a harmonic and linked ecosystem. This idea resonates strongly with Charles Darwin's theory of evolution by natural selection, which entails that individuals best adapted to their environment are more likely to survive and reproduce, passing on their advantageous traits to future generations.[5] In this respect, DNA can be considered the mechanism by which Darwin's principle functions, eradicating those life forms that do not adapt and sustaining features that grant survival. Though it is not conscious, DNA silently shapes animals to match their habitats through trial and error over many generations. Moreover, all life uses DNA built from the same nucleotides (A, T, C, G) and relies on ribosomes to make proteins. That means that in a sense, we still share a deep molecular kinship with even the most alien microbes on earth.

These forces operate on the level of matter – the metaphysical and material substrate that enables the emergence of life itself, legitimising the question whether any prerogative is left to the separate species, or if they are all are mere hosts and vehicles for the protection and proliferation of the DNA sequence. In Deleuze and Guattari's terminology, matter is the raw, unformed potential – the physical substrate from which processes emerge.[6] Though it is invisible in its raw form, DNA-code is matter: a molecular structure that codes the blueprint of life (as we know it). Matter creates content by means of processes of modulation and organisation; the ordered patterns, bodies and systems that show up from this molecular architecture. Regarding DNA, content is expressed through the particular forms it creates – creatures, behaviours, features – which turn into material reality. Still, these contents remain mostly unconscious; the body is moulded by forces it does not identify from an assembly of molecular, environmental and systemic effects. Content is, however, turned into observable, semiotic or symbolic forms on the plane of expression. It is where systems, bodies and behaviours get legible meaning. Here is the key difference: what remains latent or absent on the level of matter and content cannot find expression. If DNA is the silent architect, its strength is in its invisibility; it may shape life without a need for recognition or exposure. This dynamic of matter, content and expression emphasises the asymmetries of privilege and inequality that function by increasing access to matter and content, therefore supplying the raw materials and framework required for a great spectrum of expression. Likewise, socio-political, legal and financial influences that mould personal paths sometimes remain at the level of

materiality or hidden content, never fully articulated in the expressive forms of thinking or recognition. Those without access are limited not merely in terms of worldly resources but also in their potential to envision or express possibilities. From an intersectional standpoint, as Kimberlé Crenshaw argues, these exclusions compound the obstacles to participation by arising at the junction of race, gender, class and other structural constraints, therefore transcending purely economic or social constraints.[7] When systemic conditions deny basic needs like education, resources or cultural capital, the related content stays underdeveloped, and the plane of expression loses the capacity to communicate some wants or possibilities. Lack of substance not only limits material access but also the capacity to envision or aim for expression outside of current circumstances of life. In this sense, what is lacking or withheld has a great impact – not by overt force but by the subtle erasure of potentiality. The absent matter shapes invisibly, and without content, the capacity for expression cannot surface. The politics of the vacuum limits the cognitive and creative options accessible to those excluded, therefore augmenting structural disparities not only by limiting material means but also by constraining structural possibilities. In this framework, I have named this process 'inclination', capturing the guiding mechanisms by which the invisible influences. As I understand it, inclination functions at this crucial point: the way forces ingrained in matter shape content, unseen but nevertheless decisive. Operating outside the domain of awareness and remaining invisible, these forces gently change the 'path' of the individual, so profoundly affecting the course of life and experience.

The forces shaping an individual's life path go beyond the traditional dichotomy of nature versus nurture. Increasing understanding of neurodivergence challenges reductive frameworks, shedding new light on behavioural tendencies and the intricate ways they intersect with zoological, probabilistic, sociological and economic frameworks. These systems produce parastrata, layers that shape our lived experiences and hence influence our perceptions and desiring range. These systems are not inescapable, even if they strongly and usually invisibly affect our inclinations and guide life paths under predefined limits. This complex viewpoint leaves room for possible transformation and reorientation and enables us to understand behavioural patterns and life routes as emergent, influenced by linked networks of matter, content and expression. It is impossible to perceive anything that isn't part of 'your path', as it is simply not (yet) there. We must therefore consider all the forces we can perceive and that motivate us to act or react, but equally importantly, we must ask which forces are at play in guiding the paths we are taking without the influence of sensory impulses. Yet this is only a difference of perspective; it has nothing to do with the difference between

virtual and actualised agencies. As will be established, the structures at hand are based on both these states of reality, and yet the parastratum of inclination allows or prevents certain probabilities, and therefore results.[8] Still, there is no direct perception involved: no one can – in contradiction to gamblers' belief – *feel* the probability of throwing a six with a dice or actually *see* the proverbial glass ceiling in their career, but their effects are very much detectable. One can detect the patterns that steer the parastrata that we are moving in by a heuristic process of reflecting on past events and extrapolating future expectations from them. Imaging serves as a tool to faux-perceive something beyond one's own parastratum, and has gained an enormous influence on these paths themselves. To approach that mechanism, we first need to unpack some of the detectable, but not perceivable, parastrata that form the bell-curves of individual life-path probabilities.

Inclination and Determinism

Inclination is a concept that helps to close the distance between absolute causal determination and the apparent autonomy of individual decisions or tendencies. Strictly speaking, determinism holds that antecedent events and unchangeable natural laws cause every event, including human conduct. On a population level, however, inclination adds a nuanced dimension reflecting predispositions or tendencies, usually impacted by external situations, biological elements and environmental settings. Combining components of mechanical causation, statistical necessity and psychological predisposition, inclination reflects a structured, probabilistic determinism. It provides a substitute for classical strict determinism (Laplace), compatibilism (Dennett), and pure stochastic models (quantum indeterminacy), therefore accounting for variation within deterministic systems without resorting to indeterminacy.[9] By integrating insights from Spinoza's natural causality, predictive neuroscience, behavioural psychology and statistical physics, inclination provides a framework in which every event is determined yet unfolds through a spectrum of constrained possibilities.[10] It provides a link between the seeming autonomy of individual tendencies – without resorting to indeterminacy or adding metaphysical meaning to choice – and rigorous causal determinism, where every event flows from antecedent conditions. Under this paradigm, inclination shows an individual's place within this distribution while determinism serves as a bell curve of results. This perspective conforms with probabilistic determinism, which holds that although all events are brought about causally, they develop within ordered probability instead of fixed, single results.[11] In this sense, inclination acts as a middle ground, providing a means of understanding how deterministic systems might produce apparently autonomous or voluntary behaviours or events. Philosophically, inclination connects with

Spinozist natural determinism, in which human aspirations, feelings and choices are manifestations of the same unchangeable natural principles controlling the physical universe. Inclination reframes autonomy as diversity under deterministic constraints – mirroring compatibilist stances that reconcile determinism with apparent agency as suggested by Dennett – rather than denying free choice in a conventional sense. Unlike compatibilism, meanwhile, inclination finds freedom in the probabilistic framework of chosen paths rather than in self-determination. This theory holds that although individual behaviours seem free, they are finally determined by the junction of internal inclinations and outside influences. In this view, inclination improves rather than negates determinism by considering the variety of possible results within a deterministic perspective.

Taken in a mechanistic and neuroscientific perspective, inclination closely aligns with contemporary predictive processing models, where the brain operates as a statistical inference machine, predicting and adjusting behaviour based on prior conditioning and environmental stimuli.[12] Such models often rest on Bayesian principles, framing inclination as the brain's probabilistic updating of prior expectations in response to sensory input, thereby minimising prediction error and guiding behaviour along statistically most plausible lines. This reflects behavioural determinism as seen in the work of B.F. Skinner, who argues that human actions are shaped by reinforcement histories, but exhibit statistically probable variations rather than strict mechanical repetition.[13] Similarly, genetic predispositions in behavioural genetics show that while inherited traits set deterministic boundaries, the specific expression of those traits within an individual is influenced by probabilistic environmental interactions.[14] From a deterministic standpoint, these dispositions result from causal elements buried within a person's biology and experience. For instance, neural patterns that themselves are shaped by environmental and genetic inputs can be connected to inclinations toward risk-taking or prudence in decision-making. In this regard, inclination becomes a means of understanding how deterministic factors affect not just exterior occurrences but also internal decision-making procedures. In physics, especially in Boltzmann's statistical mechanics where individual molecular motion seems random but conforms to predictable population-level distributions, inclination corresponds with statistical determinism.[15] This is similar to quantum deterministic theories like Bohmian mechanics, which hold that although individual quantum results seem random, they follow an underlying deterministic pattern including hidden variables. In this way, inclination offers a structural mechanism in which deterministic forces express themselves, generating variation yet preserving absolute causal order, asserting that while individual quantum outcomes seem probabilistic, they follow an underlying deterministic order with hidden variables.[16] Inclination, therefore, becomes a reflection of the deterministic structures that

influence individual and collective behaviour while still leaving room for emergent complexity. Religious determinism typically attributes human tendencies to a divine plan, suggesting that inclinations are morally charged or aligned with a cosmic purpose. Materialist determinism, however, understands inclinations as products of causal interactions within a complex system, devoid of teleological or moral implications. This distinction amplifies how inclination can mediate deterministic frameworks without resorting to notions of predestination or moral absolutism and can aid in accounting for the complexity and variability of human actions without abandoning the foundational principles of causality. Inclination thus serves as a bridge between material determinism and the perceived autonomy of individual choices. Like the genetic blueprint in epigenetics, deterministic systems lay the foundation, but inclination introduces the flexibility needed to account for context, environment and variability. This dynamic is vividly captured in Conrad Waddington's concept of the epigenetic landscape, where developmental pathways are canalised by genetic and environmental forces, yet small perturbations can divert outcomes, illustrating how inclination arises within structured yet probabilistic systems.[17] A gene predisposes a person to certain behaviour, but external factors – stress, upbringing or diet – activate or suppress that tendency, just as societal structures shape dispositions through class, culture and habitus. Dynamic systems theory – as offered by Thelen and Smith – provides an additional frame for understanding how deterministic forces give rise to emergent behaviours.[18] In these systems, inclination functions as an attractor, creating forceful tendencies within an individual or population without prescribing specific outcomes. Small changes in the system – such as shifts in cultural norms or environmental conditions – can produce significant effects, illustrating the nonlinear nature of inclination within a dynamic framework. Feedback loops and interactions between components continually reshape the system, showing how deterministic mechanisms at the micro-level can fractally generate diverse and adaptive outcomes at the macro-level. This aligns with cybernetic principles, where deterministic rules govern the system, but adaptation arises from the interplay of internal structures and external inputs. These frameworks reveal how inclination makes deterministic systems dynamic, weaving predispositions into behaviours that feel autonomous but are, in fact, heavily shaped by the interplay of internal and external forces, showing that determinism need not eliminate complexity but rather serves as its foundation, and how variability, adaptation and emergent patterns arise even within structured systems.

The Gravity of Inclination

As argued above, life functions within semi-structured layers of inclination – parastrata – that mould the paths of people without entirely determining them; it does not unfold in open-ended potential. These parastrata provide a quasi-deterministic framework that guarantees a predictable distribution even if differences in life pathways are inevitable. Like every probabilistic system, results mostly follow a bell curve; dramatic deviations only result from major intervention. Addiction provides a striking example of how inclinations reduce alternatives over time, gradually constraining agency until choice itself seems to vanish within this framework. Addiction develops in a three-stage process of narrowing parastrata; it does not strike at random. First is predisposition, a physiological and genetic inclination toward obsessive behaviour. Addiction, according to Marc Lewis, is a process of neuroplastic entrenchment whereby frequent use of a substance or behaviour alters brain paths until alternate behaviours become progressively harder.[19] Yet this biological disposition alone does not dictate addiction – environment functions as the second layer of inclination. Bruce Alexander argues that addiction is not a self-contained pathology but a response to dislocation, a by-product of the environments in which individuals find themselves.[20] If inclination sets the probability, milieu acts as the modulating force, filtering whether a person will encounter, resist or succumb to an addictive pattern. The final stage is the narrowing of possibility itself: once addiction takes hold, the parastratum constricts. Each repetition reinforces behaviour, reducing the plasticity of escape routes and increasing the predictability of an outcome. Without an external disruption – a radical force – the endpoint is statistically inevitable. This process mirrors a fundamental principle of probabilistic determinism: while any given individual might evade the path, the system produces stable patterns of prediction. Ian Hacking explores how life trajectories increasingly conform to statistical probabilities, not because individuals lack free will, but because social and biological structures shape predictable patterns of repetition and reinforcement.[21] Within this model, addiction is not an aberration but an extreme example of a process that governs all life paths – inclinations that guide behaviour through probability rather than rigid determinism. There is, however, an intriguing paradox embedded within inclination: the closer one moves toward a fixed endpoint, the faster one accelerates toward it. If a person remains aware of their trajectory, they may even increase their speed exponentially, a theoretical asymptote approaching infinity. Once the parastratum has narrowed beyond a certain threshold, movement ceases to be self-directed; it is absorbed into the gravity of inclination itself. This framework extends beyond addiction. It speaks to the mechanics of agency, the ways in which systems shape probability, and how

habitual repetition constructs reality. Free will is not negated but channelled – structured by inclinations that, once set into motion, become increasingly difficult to resist. In the end, the difference between one path and another is not just a matter of choice, but of the forces that constrain or expand what choice even means.

Fractal Ontology

The notion of inclination, functioning as a probabilistic yet deterministic framework, inherently corresponds with fractal ontology, especially in its capacity to accommodate organised variation within deterministic limitations. A fractal is a mathematical or geometric construct characterised by self-similarity, indicating that its components mirror the entirety at various scales. Characterised by their irregularity and boundless complexity, fractals are produced by repetitive processes, setting them apart from conventional Euclidean shapes. They manifest in natural phenomena, including coastlines, clouds, snowflakes and tree branches, as well as in mathematical creations like as the Mandelbrot set, the Sierpiński triangle and the Koch curve. In contrast to classical geometric shapes, fractals frequently exhibit fractional dimensionality, occupying a realm that is neither entirely one-dimensional nor two-dimensional, but rather an intermediary state. Their intricacy emerges through recursion, when a fundamental rule is applied repeatedly, yielding an intricate and ostensibly organic structure. Certain fractals disclose increasingly intricate elements upon magnification, theoretically reaching beyond infinite structural depths. Fractals are fundamental to chaos theory, topology and natural growth models, providing insights into non-linear dynamics, turbulence and organic pattern development. Fractal ontology, often associated with Deleuze's philosophy of difference and repetition and complex systems theory, describes reality as unfolding in self-similar, recursive patterns across different scales.[22] These patterns do not repeat identically but exhibit variation within structured limits, much like fractals in nature or mathematical structures, just as inclination operates within predefined deterministic boundaries, yet individual positioning within those constraints remains probabilistically distributed. This reflects statistical determinism, as demonstrated in behavioural genetics, where inherited traits manifest with variability at both individual and population levels, or in predictive processing neuroscience, where cognition is organised hierarchically, akin to fractal recursion.[23] Similarly, in quantum deterministic interpretations, perceived randomness results from underlying, concealed variable structures, analogous to how fractals display localised variations within a universal order.[24] Inclination can be perceived as the fractal manifestation of determinism, in

which self-similarity regulates variation across scales; individual decisions and behaviours are neither entirely autonomous nor uniformly identical but emerge as contextual representations of broader deterministic frameworks. This conceptual framework offers a scalable model of causality, in which determinism does not enforce strict uniformity but instead manifests through nested layers of probabilistic yet causally linked variations, reinforcing an ontology in which chance is not mere randomness but the allocation of necessity across a range of potential pathways. Fractal ontology, as a philosophical methodology, provides a significant framework for investigating the intricate and frequently obscured patterns of reality.[25] The name 'fractal' derives from the research of Benoît Mandelbrot, whose examination of geometric forms with infinitely recurring patterns uncovered the profound interrelation between micro and macro scales. The recursive characteristic of fractals serves as a potent metaphor in ontology, indicating that the structure of reality is inherently arranged in repetitive patterns across many sizes, influencing the dynamics of human existence and experience. The term *mise en abyme* refers to a self-referential creative or narrative approach when a work encompasses a diminutive replica of itself, establishing a cyclical structure that mirrors or recontextualises the entirety within its own confines. The term derives from heraldry, when a shield is illustrated within a bigger shield, and has been extensively used in literature, film and the visual arts. It frequently produces a feeling of infinite regress or instability of meaning by emphasising the act of representation itself.

The implications of this perspective are helpful for unpacking the hidden regularities that influence human lifepaths and the statistical patterns that shape societal systems. Key contributors to the development of fractal ontology include philosophers such as Manuel DeLanda, Karen Barad, and Rosi Braidotti. DeLanda's work explores the ontology of assemblages, emphasising how structures at different scales interact through self-similar processes.[26] For DeLanda, reality is composed of assemblages that exhibit recursive properties, where micro-level interactions can aggregate into macro-level phenomena without losing their individual characteristics. This resonates deeply with fractal ontology's emphasis on the scalability and interconnectivity of patterns. Similarly, Karen Barad's theory of agential realism introduces the concept of intra-action, which highlights the co-constitutive nature of entities.[27] Barad's perspective aligns with fractal ontology by emphasising the entangled and recursive relationships between entities, where boundaries and distinctions emerge dynamically within an interconnected whole. Rosi Braidotti's posthumanist framework also contributes to the discourse on fractal ontology by rethinking the human subject as a networked, relational entity

embedded within broader material and social systems. Braidotti articulates a vision of subjectivity that is fractal-like in its multiplicity, where identity is not a fixed essence, but a dynamic process shaped by overlapping scales of influence.[28] Her emphasis on fluidity and relationality echoes the recursive patterns central to fractal ontology, analysing the interplay of individual agency and systemic structures. Fractal ontology's insights are particularly relevant when considering the hidden patterns revealed by statistical analyses and their impact on human lifepaths. Statistics often expose regularities in human behaviour that seem random or chaotic on the surface. These patterns, ranging from economic trends to demographic shifts, can be understood as fractal-like phenomena that manifest across scales. For example, income inequality, as a statistical pattern, exhibits self-similar dynamics at the level of individuals, communities and nations. Didier Sornette and Nassim Nicholas Taleb address the fractal nature of financial systems, demonstrating how micro-level behaviours aggregate into macro-level outcomes with profound implications for societal structures.[29] The cyclical dynamics of social stratification resemble fractal patterns in which disparities sustain themselves through feedback loops at many levels, with systemic factors influencing individual trajectories and vice versa. The fractal nature is apparent in the tension between individual responsibility and collective accountability: although no individual can prohibit another from taking a cookie, eventually the jar will be depleted – yet no overall accountability can be assigned to either the first or last person who took one. Shoshana Zuboff shows how statistical patterns driven by algorithmic systems influence behaviour and decision-making, creating feedback loops that reinforce systemic inequalities and power dynamics.[30] The recognition of interconnectedness and self-similarity across scales challenges anthropocentric and hierarchical models of organisation, advocating instead for relational and distributed approaches to agency. This perspective aligns with the ethics of care articulated by feminist philosophers such as Donna Haraway and Maria Puig de la Bellacasa, who emphasise the importance of attending to relational entanglements and the mutual constitution of entities.[31]

Population and Probability

The human mind is notoriously ill-equipped to intuitively grasp probability and randomness. Cognitive biases, such as the availability heuristic and the gambler's fallacy, distort how individuals perceive and respond to probabilistic information, and therefore, what they believe to be true.[32] For instance, hearing that one in ten people will experience a particular event might lead some to overestimate or underestimate their own likelihood of being affected, depending on their personal experiences or emotional responses. If a coin lands on heads several

times in a row, one might assume that tails is 'due' on the next flip, despite each flip being independent and the odds remaining fifty-fifty. This fallacy stems from a misunderstanding of randomness; there is a generally a strong belief that short-term outcomes must align with long-term probabilities, which isn't necessarily the case. The discrepancy arises because statistical statements describe aggregate patterns across a population, not deterministic predictions for individual events. Moreover, most people have no intrinsic connection to statistical probabilities. Regardless of how likely or unlikely an event is, the most immediate and relevant question is binary: Did I win or not? The psychological weight given to both possible outcomes often remains nearly equal, even when the statistical probabilities differ dramatically. Therefore, we must regard these matters from a perspective of population, a term first articulated by Charles Darwin and later elaborated on by Ernst Mayr, representing a profound shift in understanding variation and change within biological populations.[33] In contrast to typological thinking, which perceives creatures as fixed, idealised forms or essences, population thinking highlights the importance of individual variation within a community. This variety is regarded not as mere noise or divergence from an ideal but as the essential reality from which evolutionary processes emerge. Population thinking recognises that populations are dynamic and historically conditioned systems by emphasising statistical distributions of features instead of fixed averages. Evolution is comprehended as a temporal process occurring within populations, propelled by differential survival and reproduction among individuals, influenced by environmental factors. Manuel DeLanda expands this viewpoint beyond the biological realm into a more comprehensive ontological framework. In his work DeLanda attacks the essentialist and typological methodologies that prevail in social and intellectual realms. He adopts population thinking as the basis for a neo-materialist ontology, contending that reality consists of assemblages – heterogeneous collections of interacting elements, whether biological, social or material. DeLanda posits that population thinking emphasises the significance of variability, historical contingency and emergent features within these assemblages.[34] This approach redirects attention from static structures or entities to dynamic processes and interactions, reflecting the repudiation of essences in Darwinian evolution. DeLanda's interpretation of population thinking underscores the distributed nature of causality, in which changes within a system emerge from the collective interactions of its components rather than from a predetermined blueprint or central authority. Population thinking, by dismissing static archetypes, centres the variety and complexity of real-world occurrences, providing a prism through which to examine diversity and processual change. This is pertinent to modern discourse on machine learning and artificial intelligence, because variety and adaptation are crucial for comprehending system behaviour.

Perception as an Illusion of Clarity

On an individual as well as on a population level, the fractal character of the interaction between chance, intuition, statistics, and the significance people attach to irrelevant indicators shows peculiar features of human cognition and behaviour. While chance describes the fundamental unpredictability of occurrences, humans often give randomness significance by seeing it as a component of a greater story or pattern. Acting as a heuristic tool that turns uncertainty into actionable knowledge, intuition – as a sort of fast, non-conscious thinking – often closes the distance between the random and the meaningful. This phenomenon might cause misunderstandings and the strengthening of prejudices, even if it can occasionally be useful. Many times, intuition is praised for its capacity to produce insights free from intentional analytical thought. Rooted in evolutionary psychology, intuition is seen as a survival tool enabling people depending on insufficient knowledge to act quickly. Early humans, for instance, could predict possible hazards by recognising minute environmental signs such as variations in temperature or animal behaviour. But as intuition depends on heuristics, it is also prone to cognitive distortions – especially in relation to events like chance. The function of affect within pre-cognitive structure must be reinterpreted if we see probability not as a rigid determinant but as the mere chance of anything becoming one's path – comparable to genetic coding, where strong inclinations shape but do not totally dictate the phenotype. Instead of imposing a single path, the order of inclination serves as a topology of tendencies, drawing out a probabilistic field in which several paths exist, each bearing their own degrees of likelihood. In this respect, probability is not a fixed sequence but rather a changing terrain of competing possibilities, some of which are more readily actualised than others. Still, there is the matter of modulation – of what amplifies, refines or slows the emergence of one path over another even within this disciplined field of inclination. At this point affect steps in. Affect does not simply follow probability but actively modulates it, operating as a field of intensities that fluctuates prior to perception. If probability structures inclinations, affect provides their depth, weight and urgency. It is not a secondary force but a pre-individual modulation of tendencies, ensuring that actualisation remains contingent rather than mechanical. Without affect, probability would tend toward static determinism, locking experience into predictable trajectories. Yet, with affect, probability remains an open, metastable field, where each path is charged with differentials that make deviation, acceleration or hesitation possible. Affect ensures that probability is never fully resolved in advance but instead lived through intensities that shift its very conditions. From a Simondonian perspective,

this is the ontogenetic core of individuation itself. Affect is not simply a response but the pre-subjective force that sustains individuation before subject-object distinctions emerge. It is the phase shift within a metastable system, a dynamic gradient that precedes structured perception, modulating the field of inclinations before it crystallises into a given trajectory. If the order of inclination structures probability paths, affect exists beneath this structuring, suffusing it with forces that ensure no trajectory is ever entirely fixed.

It is here that Deleuze's concept of affect as a transpersonal intensity becomes crucial: it is not bound to personal emotion but operates autonomously, traversing bodies and structuring the very conditions under which perception emerges. In Brian Massumi's terms, affect is a pre-accelerative force, a charge of potential movement that has not yet resolved into action but already shapes what will come. This indeterminacy echoes Ilya Prigogine's work on dissipative structures, where far-from-equilibrium systems self-organise through fluctuations rather than following a preordained developmental path.[35] Similarly, Karen Barad's theory of agential realism emphasises that phenomena emerge through intra-action rather than external relations, highlighting how affective and material entanglements co-constitute reality itself.[36] Affect, then, is neither external to order nor reducible to it; it is the field of differential intensities through which order, perception and meaning are continuously generated and transformed. This raises the question of premonition, for instance, which must be understood not as supernatural foresight but as an affective anticipation within the field of inclination and probability. Rather than functioning as an explicit cognitive prediction, premonition operates at the level of intensity, where the body registers a potential trajectory before perception organises it into a structured experience. If probability sketches the contours of what is likely to actualise, then premonition could be understood as a felt resonance with those probabilistic paths before they stabilise into perception. It belongs to the pre-subjective and pre-individual register of affect, where tendencies are lived as intensities before they become form. This aligns with Massumi's notion of affect as pre-accelerative, a charge of movement sensed but not yet realised. The subject does not receive information about the future in a linear sense but experiences a shift in affective charge, a fluctuation within the field of probability that signals an unresolved tendency before it becomes an actualised event, as in the last minute before the first kiss.[37] This suggests that affect does not simply respond to probability but aligns with its tendencies, positioning premonition not as a perceptual error but as a physical interaction with potentiality. Perception does not merely mirror our reality; it actively constructs it. Similarly, premonition involves sensing the gradients of potential that influence the future prior to their resolution by perception.

While intuition has a well-established basis in cognitive science, premonition remains within the realm of speculative inquiry, and a phenomenon like déjà vu continues to be explored in neurological and psychological research as a misalignment between memory encoding and retrieval. More important are the effects these psychological phenomena have on behaviour, regardless of their scientific validity. If an individual refrains from taking action due to a perceived omen or foreboding then its agency manifests in the world and cannot be dismissed. Whether or not the premonition had any real predictive power, the decision it influenced becomes a causal force. If this (non-)action is later rationalised through sensemaking (e.g., 'I was supposed to be on that plane, but…'), it is not the outcome that matters – it is the fact that the agency acted in the first place, altering reality in ways that might otherwise have seemed insignificant. Statistics, chance and meaning interact to generate a more philosophical investigation into randomness and order. Although people naturally search for stories and patterns to help them understand the world, probabilistic reality sometimes resists these efforts. Although numbers like 'one in ten people will experience a car accident in their lifetime' aggregate danger at the population level, it is difficult to translate such probability to personal experience. Similarly, lottery tickets ending in seven are disproportionately bought because they are drawn more often, creating a feedback loop where their overrepresentation in purchased tickets severely increases their chances of being drawn – not through chance or inherent properties but because of selection bias. This interplay between perception and probability illustrates how collective behaviour can shape ostensibly random outcomes. Within the individual human context, it demonstrates how the inclination to signify obscures the relationship we have with randomness and decision-making. Variables such as behaviour, geography and lifestyle significantly influence individual risk and then again, the question is how much of that is already inclined by genetic, biological and social dispositions.

Ninety Per Cent

In this section, I introduce the so-called 90 per cent rule as a conceptual shorthand to suggest that individual autonomy is significantly limited, with an estimated 90 per cent of one's life trajectory shaped by structural and systemic conditions. This thought is reminiscent of Max Weber's notion of life chances, which suggests that individuals' prospects and likely life outcomes are largely conditioned by their positions within existing social, economic and status hierarchies.[38] Unlike Karl Marx, who theorised social stratification primarily through relations to the means of production and the mechanics of class struggle, Weber offered a broader

framework that incorporated not only class but also status groups and political affiliations.[39] Weber contends that the probabilities governing our material and social trajectories are not independent occurrences but are fundamentally shaped by institutional structures and power differentials that distribute opportunities unevenly. This underpins the metaphorical 90 per cent rule, intended not to imply absolute determinism but rather to indicate a strong systemic inclination – highlighting how most life pathways cluster around prevailing norms. Loosely echoing the empirical rule of the normal distribution, where approximately 95 per cent of outcomes fall within two standard deviations of the mean, it suggests that while individual deviations and unexpected trajectories certainly exist, they remain largely anticipated within statistical and structural bounds. Probabilistically, this provides a framework in which deviations remain statistically predicted, clustering around a mean, even as any given person might vary from the expected trajectory. This is consistent with the normal distribution: although individual differences exist, the great majority of life events – career path, offspring, housing situation, financial stability and so on – converge around a predefined centre, dictated by systemic constraints. The 90 per cent rule acts as a statistical attractor, drawing most people into a preset band of possible outcomes, much like a probability function that explains the possibility of an event occurring inside set bounds. Extreme deviations – whether positive (radical success, complete autonomy and so on) or negative (total disenfranchisement, system breakdown, abrupt death) – are outliers, appearing at the tails of the distribution curve rather than as defining characteristics of the system. The 90 per cent threshold emphasises the reduction of individual variability in a society in which even the area for exceptions is getting smaller. This implies that people will follow these pathways to a high degree, leaving only a margin for variation, contingency or actual unpredictability; it does not entail absolute determinism on an individual level. Most importantly, this mathematical inevitability is intentionally fostered and perpetuated by big power institutions, not a neutral result of chance.

Urban planning, political institutions, economic systems and educational frameworks feed into and enhance the probabilistic moulding of life choices. These structures contribute to a contigent sculpting of existence, establishing feedback loops that make certain paths more predictable and thus more easily reinforced. Take, for example, the thirty-year mortgage: a financial instrument that appears to offer stability and autonomy, yet in practice often locks an individual into decades of repayment for a property that may never be fully owned. Not only does this long-term debt commitment structure spatial and economic immobility, but it also orients one's future decisions – employment, family planning, daily routines – around the repayment horizon. The mortgage exemplifies how economic

infrastructure can discretely modulate behaviour over time, transforming a single transaction into a durable life pattern. What seems like a personal choice is already pre-shaped by systemic incentives, constraints and norms – rendering freedom increasingly calculable. Policies and economic infrastructure provide a feedback loop, creating predictability and hence supporting more systematic reinforcement.

While personal agency is often assumed to be limitless, such examples show that 90 per cent of life paths is determined by economic structures, legal frameworks and institutional mechanisms that pre-configure trajectories. The core infrastructure of governance consists in taxes, insurance policies, mortgages and labour contracts; these shapes not only financial stability but also access to education, healthcare and mobility. These systems reinforce predictability and compliance as fundamental to economic stability by functioning not as natural rules but rather as socially designed constructions. Still, economic laws are not laws of nature, even if they are rather prevalent. Unlike thermodynamics or gravity, they result from human agreements and institutional enforcement rather than from inherent material qualities: money, gold and financial instruments are symbolic contracts – legally and politically supported, validated over millennia of economic consensus – not intrinsically valuable. Ian Hacking provides a critical framework for understanding how these governing structures emerged.[40] His study of nineteenth-century statistical thinking shows how probability supplanted deterministic conceptions of human behaviour, hence transforming government into a system of population management via statistical standards. This change directly produced the current economic system, which constructs rather than describes a pre-existing economic reality by means of risk calculations, insurance models and financial rules. Hacking shows that probability actively generates categories of normalcy and deviance, therefore influencing society's view of risk, success and economic behaviour rather than only reflecting reality.

This system is not accidental; it was produced by deliberate design and maintenance by concentrated economic power. Over centuries, financial institutions, corporate entities and political actors have controlled the production of economic knowledge, institutionalising their dominance through sponsored professorships, regulatory capture, and corporate influence over public policy. What is taught in universities under the banner of 'economic laws' is often a self-reinforcing ideology, supported by those who benefit from its perpetuation. This extends to corporate governance structures, legal codifications and financial regulations, ensuring that economic norms serve the interests of capital rather than reflecting any universal or neutral truth. Even in language, the power of economics is well guarded. Tucked under layers of jargon, mathematical models, and specialist vocabulary, it seems a neutral science, only attainable to those

who have mastered its codes. There is nothing accidental about this. Authority has sometimes preserved over long periods of time by limiting the availability of knowledge. Modern economics has created its own linguistic barriers, thus discouraging public debate and guaranteeing the supremacy of a small group of professionals, much as the Catholic Church formerly kept the Bible in Latin, guaranteeing that only the clergy could comprehend divine will. Ha-Joon Chang calls for breaking this monopoly through what he terms 'speaking economics' – the act of reclaiming economic discourse as something that belongs to everyone.[41] Economics is not a set of immutable laws; it is a deeply political field shaped by choices rather than inevitabilities. To speak economics it is to dismantle the illusion of neutrality and expose the ideological foundations beneath. Free markets are not forces of nature; austerity is not an economic necessity; inequality is not the by-product of some inevitable mathematical logic. These are decisions – ones that can be questioned, rethought and changed.

The 90 per cent rule, then, is not a reflection of natural determinism but a manufactured structure of constraint. It is the cumulative effect of institutionalised probability, financial governance, and ideological reinforcement, producing a life where deviations are possible but always within a tightly controlled spectrum of probability. While economic discourse presents itself as objective and inevitable, it is a politically crafted system of control, engineered to maintain the illusion of choice while governing life through predefined statistical frameworks. The question is not whether one can escape these constraints, but how deeply one recognises their constructed nature. By understanding the mechanisms that produce economic 'laws', statistical norms and financial constraints, it becomes possible to reimagine the 10 per cent of true agency that remains – to explore what exists beyond compliance, beyond institutional reinforcement, and toward a reconfiguration of what economic reality could be. Guy Standing and Ulrich Beck illustrate how such constraints foster insecurity and systemic dependence, particularly for those already economically vulnerable.[42] David Harvey underscores how financial instruments like mortgages reinforce individual dependence on economic systems, limiting alternative life paths.[43] Homeownership, often romanticised as a marker of freedom and stability, paradoxically becomes one of the greatest anchors of systemic dependence, binding individuals to decades-long financial commitments. Mortgage repayments necessitate a steady income, tying individuals to the labour market for much of their lives.

These dynamics are not unique to Western Europe. Similar systems exist in North America, East Asia, and other developed regions, with varying degrees of rigidity and cultural framing. In the United States, for instance, the absence of public healthcare and greater reliance on personal debt has led to more systemic

entrapment. Urbanisation and cultural expectations mandate their own kinds of pre-organising in East Asia. In areas with more informal economies, meanwhile, systemic restrictions coexist with greater freedom – though usually at the expense of security. Social expectations support conformity to life phases including schooling, career, homeownership and retirement, thereby complementing systemic frameworks. These stages are framed as personal achievements but serve to reinforce systemic predictability, which made them the subject of reflection and critique. Pierre Bourdieu, for instance, highlights how cultural norms and social structures perpetuate these expectations, shaping individual behaviours to align with societal hierarchies.[44] Michel Foucault's concept of biopolitics further illuminates how governance operates through the regulation of populations, shaping aspirations and choices through policies that prioritise societal stability over individual freedom.[45] Technological dimensions intensify this pre-organisation. Digitalisation – through online banking, automated tax systems, and digital health data – accelerates operations but embeds individuals more firmly into systemic frameworks they are unbale to access or even recognise. Anthony Giddens and Richard Sennett have already examined how such systems, while convenient, compromise human autonomy and deepen systemic entanglement. [46]

However, the current situation is not fully covered by their critique. The dependency on technology for personal navigation and participation in modern life is no longer a matter of choice. Most individual services have become predominantly if not exclusively accessible through apps or platforms: from cinema to train tickets, communication to personal banking and making dental appointments to gym access, without a smartphone it is very hard to participate in any society. Additionally, most online dating interactions now take place on mobile devices, with US users spending an average of fifty-one minutes per day on dating apps. Online dating has become a significant aspect of modern relationships, with approximately 30 per cent of US adults having used dating apps and a global user base of around 349 million. Younger adults are particularly engaged, with 53 per cent of those under 30 having used a dating platform. LGBTQI adults are also more likely to use these services, with 51 per cent reporting engagement versus 28 per cent of straight adults. Online dating plays a key role in relationship formation, as 39 per cent of heterosexual couples and 65 per cent of same-sex couples in the US met through digital platforms. The global online dating market is expected to be worth around USD 18.1 billion by 2033. Online dating is not without challenges. Nearly 80 per cent of long-term users report emotional fatigue or burnout.[47] Millennials, in particular, dedicate significant time to these platforms, reflecting the shift toward mobile-first relationship-seeking behaviours. Most of these technological advancements have been presented to the individual

as opportunities, emphasising the ease and advancements the technological connectedness had to offer, while in fact the underlying systems and the people directing them have been given full leverage and control over our individual affairs and possibilities. Social media is a very recognisable part of this system and its true nature has been adequately described by the popular phrase: if it is free, you are the product.

Returning to the 90 per cent rule, a relevant principle from the Khrushchev-era architecture is the two-pairs-of-shoes principle. More than a mere anecdote about constrained spatial design – it is a fundamental logic that scales up from the individual to the urban. By setting the width of a corridor to accommodate exactly two people walking past each other without stepping aside, Soviet architects established a base unit of measurement that extended outward: from the width of hallways to the size of entryways, to the proportions of rooms, and ultimately to the entire floor plan of an apartment block. The closet was likewise dictated by the same principle: a minimal area, just enough to hold two pairs of shoes and a few essential garments, reflected an ideology that prioritised strict functional necessity over excess. The logic of *Plattenbau* extended not just horizontally but also vertically, influencing the modular stacking of apartments in large-scale prefabricated housing projects.[48] The economy of space was driven by industrial rationalisation: reducing material use, streamlining construction, and ensuring every cubic meter of a building was utilised with maximum efficiency. But this efficiency was not neutral – it actively shaped the way people lived, embedding a spatial pre-organisation that left little room for deviation. The entire chain of production was attuned to this logic: from the dimensions of transport trucks to the layout of cement factories, from the structure of quarries to the methods of material extraction – each component was optimised to sustain this highly systematised architectural model. So deeply ingrained was this organisational form that even after the doctrine was officially abandoned, designing anything outside its framework proved nearly impossible. The infrastructure, logistics and material supply chains had become so interdependent that architectural alternatives were not just discouraged but structurally unfeasible, revealing the lasting deterministic force of this built logic. The same underlying mechanism operates in contemporary consumer environments such as IKEA, where furniture and storage units are deliberately sized to fit together in a seamless modular system, neatly organised to highlight the abundant choice in colour and texture. This seems like a consumer-friendly approach, leaving a lot of room for the individual to 'pick and mix', yet the real beneficiary is the system of production itself, which can determine with a high degree of accuracy which demographic is prone to buy from a specific set of choices based on the modal size of housing,

household composition, and even body parts. Every catalogue is built along the bell curve of modality, presented as a free range of choice, which extends to the pricing and terms of delivery as well. In both cases (Khruschev and IKEA), standardisation functions as a structuring force, determining how space is occupied, how objects relate to one another, and consequently how life unfolds within a pre-measured framework. This is not just a part of life but also a cause of it; it is analogous to the 90 per cent rule, which outlines the pre-formed structures of life decisions. The architectural standardisation of mobility and storage becomes an extension of the systematic structuring of life itself, guaranteeing that from the forms of living spaces to the patterns of daily routines, the individual is steered down pre-established paths. Each is the result of the same guiding concept, a nested hierarchy of limited travel, limited living, and limited choice: the corridor, the closet, the room, the apartment, the complex. Similarly, supermarket shelves may display variety, but the market is dominated by a few multinational corporations. Studies reveal that a handful of companies – Nestlé, Procter & Gamble, Unilever, PepsiCo, and Mondelez International – control around 80 per cent of routinely purchased grocery goods in the US, shaping food, beverages, personal care, and household products. Despite the illusion of brand diversity, most revenue ultimately flows to the same corporations, limiting competition and raising concerns about supply chain resilience, pricing, and the viability of smaller businesses. What appears as personal choice – selecting Brand A or Brand B – is an economic mirage, as financial power remains centralised. A similar dynamic governs the digital sphere, where consumer preferences, from product selection to influencer engagement, ultimately reinforce the same power structures. Social media channels operate under a framework of centralised corporate control, even when they present themselves as varied environments of individual expression. As argued, a small number of tech behemoths – Meta, Google, Amazon and ByteDance – do not only provide the content users interact with, but also form the entire infrastructure of exposure and monetising ability. Algorithms controlling exposure, engagement measures, structure desirability, and income flows remain in the hands of a few powerful companies. Digital platforms provide an illusion of user agency while maintaining the financial and informational domination of a few, just as supermarket brands generate an illusion of customer autonomy while returning revenues back to the same companies. Between influencers, content makers and digital trends, what seems like a decision (the tiers of engagement) often follows a pre-structured course within a system that upholds the same political and financial structures.

Along these economic structures, there exist other unseen, intangible ‘lines’ that govern ownership, liability and rights, subtly shaping what is possible

or permissible for individuals and communities. These invisible boundaries do not merely regulate access but deeply influence trajectories across spatial, temporal and social domains, determining who can act, where, and under what conditions. Most importantly, these limits can coincide with systematic pressures of race, class and gender, therefore aggravating inequality and strengthening structural power relations. This impact is seen in property borders, contracts and zoning rules, which control access to resources and opportunities and frequently marginalise racialised and economically poor people. The neutrality of these legal boundaries is often an illusion; they are shaped by historical processes that privilege certain groups while disadvantaging others. Colonial-era land appropriation and contemporary international trade agreements have disproportionately benefited wealthy nations and corporations, disenfranchising Indigenous populations and local communities in the Global South.[49] Intellectual property laws, often framed as protecting innovation, frequently commodify traditional knowledge, stripping it of its cultural and ecological context to favour industrial interests.[50] Such systems illustrate how legal boundaries, though abstract, act as powerful tools for exclusion and accumulation, reflecting deeply embedded historical and systemic inequities. Digital technologies have further entrenched these inequalities by embedding systemic biases into automated decision-making processes. Algorithms used in hiring, credit scoring and predictive policing replicate and amplify existing biases in the data they are trained on, disproportionately disadvantaging people of colour, women and other marginalised groups.[51] These invisible lines of digital governance are advertised as impartial and effective, yet under the cover of objectivity they reinforce structural prejudice, deepening the very inequalities they claim to address. However, it is crucial to remember that these legal and technological boundaries are – just like the 'laws of economics' – not immutable forces of nature; they are human-made constructs, intentionally designed to commodify resources and concentrate power at the expense of population-level possibilities. While marginalising weaker groups, they intentionality serve particular interests – those of political and economic elites.

Challenging the inequalities ingrained in these systems requires an awareness of their constructed nature, which demonstrates that the 90 per cent rule is not only a passive result of statistical distribution but also an actively created condition whereby power structures foster probabilistic determination as a means of governance. The outcome is a world in which most people, most of the time, follow expected paths not because they have to, but because everything around them is designed to guarantee that they do by lack of alternative – constituting a politics of vacuum. The preceding paragraphs had the intent to dislodge the idea that human pre-perception is free and unbounded, but instead is steered

by inclinations generated by various forcefields. As I have argued, the relation between matter, content and expression is subject to several metaphysical and humanmade forces. The degrees of freedom to determine an individual life path can thus best be described in terms of inceptive fractalities: each choice presented already implies a higher order of 'choice giving', therefore each decision is already no longer based on a true freedom. Inclination is offered as an entry to the correlation between individual 'paths' (content) and deterministic 'laws' (matter), yet even the deepest of prevalent paths can be (forcefully) ignored in favour of the unlikely (epigenetics).

Intensity to Density

A way to detect content before its expression is to understand the environment in terms of its intensities, rather than in its actualised and densified forms. Exploring the world in terms of intensities means seeing it as a field of dynamic forces, emotive fluxes and continual change rather than as composed of separate objects and stationary things. Deeply ingrained in the writings of Gilles Deleuze, Brian Massumi and Erin Manning, this stance presents an alternate way to interact with reality, giving movement, potentiality and transformation priority over fixed meaning or identity. For Deleuze and Guattari, intensities are not static quantities but gradients of difference that unfold through processes of becoming. Intensity is a condition of variety itself, a force that propels change, yet not in a comparative sense.[52] Deleuze asks us to consider the universe as a dynamic assemblage of becomings rather than as a steady arrangement of entities. Within this approach, intensities show up as affective forces negotiating environments, bodies and circumstances. For those who experience a storm, for example, its intensity combines the affective charge it generates with its measured wind speed or rainfall; it is not reducible to either. These affective intensities are natural for the event; they are not secondary to its physicality. Expanding on Deleuze's concept of intensity, Brian Massumi characterises it as a pre-cognitive force influencing experience prior to cognition or language. He sees intensity as an excess living in the void between stimulus and reaction, which escapes control by regimented systems of representation.[53] Understanding the world through intensity is thus about attending to these affective flows, operating below conscious awareness but powerfully shaping how we engage with the world. For Massumi, such flows hold the potential for transformation, where the world's capacity for becoming something new is most palpable. A handshake's intensity, for instance, is not only in its pressure or warmth but in the affective signal of trust, uncertainty, or connection that comes before its interpretation as a gesture. This pre-subjective and affective emphasis helps us to grasp relationality more broadly. Erin Manning

develops the relational character of intensities, which show up in the in-between areas where bodies, things and surroundings interact.[54] Manning emphasises how creatively these relational intensities may be used, and suggests they create reorientation and creativity possibilities. Like the tilt of a head or the rhythm of a breath, a small gesture can seem meaningless, yet can upset routines and inspire fresh ways of life. This relational and processual understanding of intensity aligns with new materialism, which rejects anthropocentric and representationalist frameworks. Thinkers like Karen Barad and Jane Bennett share a commitment to viewing the world as a web of intra-active forces. Barad's concept of intra-action highlights how entities emerge through their relations.[55] Observing the world through intensities helps one to listen to these emergent relations, to the ways the world co-constitutes itself through affective and material processes. It calls for seeing not only what is here but also what Deleuze would define as the virtual – that which is in process of becoming. The virtual feeds into processes of differentiation and becoming, a reservoir of the possible immanent in the actual. Jane Bennett argues that engaging with the world through intensities has ethical consequences and calls for sensitivity to the action of non-human forces.[56] It asks participation with the dynamic processes of becoming by sensitising one to the vitality of materials and the affective charge of landscapes. Sensing the world via intensities is ultimately not only a philosophical habit but also an ethical and aesthetic one that respects the dynamism and inventiveness of the world by interacting with its continuous creation instead of imposing fixed interpretations.

Framing

Framing functions as the crucial node where intensity transitions into density. It delineates the moment at which fluid forces, affective charges or dispersed energies condense into structured form, gaining legibility and operational weight. Whether in visual composition, narrative construction or socio-economic systems, framing conditions perception, setting the thresholds for what is recognised as meaningful, coherent or valuable. A frame is not a passive barrier; framing is an active process that controls the passage from potentiality to fact, from transitory fluctuation to stabilised presence. Content – arising out of matter in the form of intensities – holds immense potential. However, the act of framing concretises these intensities into densities, actualising only a small fraction of their possibilities into expression. For every element that appears within the frame, countless others remain excluded, underscoring the limitations imposed by every way of perceiving. At its core, framing refers to the process by which certain aspects of reality are selected, emphasised and organised to promote specific interpretations and outcomes. In that sense, the aforementioned humanmade deterministic systems are also part of

the framing of a specific narrative prosperity and growth through accumulation. As a physical, cognitive and communicative process, framing shapes how individuals and communities interpret the world by influencing their attitudes, behaviours and interactions. The rise of digital technologies has expanded the reach and complexity of framing, amplifying its potential for both harm and empowerment. The concept of framing gained prominence in Erving Goffman's work, which argues that individuals use interpretative frameworks – or frames – to make sense of the world.[57] Goffman describes frames as cognitive structures that enable individuals to identify, interpret and respond to social events. Frames, according to Goffman, are both socially constructed and contextually dependent, shaping and shaped by the cultural and institutional environments in which they operate. In this sense, framing is not merely a passive act of understanding but an active process of meaning-making that influences perception and behaviour. In media and communication studies, framing has been extensively explored as a tool for understanding how messages are constructed and received. Robert Entman's definition of framing as the act of selecting 'some aspects of a perceived reality and making them more salient' to 'promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation' remains foundational.[58] This viewpoint underscores the strategic aspect of framing, illustrating how media organisations, political figures and various communicators employ frames to influence public opinion and agenda-setting. Media coverage of immigration frequently presents the issue in the framework of national security, economic impact and humanitarian distress, each of which generates unique public attitudes and policy responses. George Lakoff's work on metaphorical framing stresses how political discourse relies on deep-seated cognitive structures to resonate with audiences. Lakoff illustrates how metaphors such as the nation as family or the war on terror frame political debates in ways that elicit emotional responses and shape policy preferences.[59] Similarly, Murray Edelman's analysis of political spectacle reveals how symbolic frames are employed to construct narratives that legitimise authority and marginalise dissent.[60] These insights demonstrate that framing is not merely a communicative tool but a form of power that shapes collective understanding and societal norms. Contemporary scholars have expanded this discourse by distinguishing framing from related concepts like agenda-setting and priming. Dietram Scheufele emphasises that framing does not only determine what people think about but also shapes how they think about it, influencing the interpretation of issues beyond their surface salience. Scheufele shows how media frames selectively emphasise specific aspects of an issue while omitting others, guiding public opinion in subtle but powerful ways.[61] Similarly, Shanto Iyengar's research explores the effects of framing on political behaviour

and public opinion. He demonstrates how framing in news coverage can shift attributions of responsibility – such as whether individuals or systems are to blame – ultimately shaping policy preferences and evaluations of political actors. [62] The strategic application of frames frequently involves selective emphasis and omission, prompting inquiries regarding truth, transparency and accountability. Some scholars assert that framing is an inherent component of communication, reflecting the constraints of human cognition. By contrast, Scheufele and Iyengar argue that it necessitates thorough examination to avert manipulation and adverse effects. Researchers such as Renée DiResta emphasise that disinformation and the strategic manipulation of framing can erode democratic discourse, evident in the spread of conspiracy theories and online polarisation.[63] With her concept of controlling images, Patricia Hill Collins's analyses the ways in which racial and gender frameworks perpetuate systems of oppression through the normalisation of dehumanising representations of marginalised groups. Edward Said's analysis of Orientalism reveals how colonial frameworks portrayed the 'Orient' as a singular and exotic 'other', serving to rationalise imperial domination.[64] These critiques highlight the ethical stakes of framing, revealing how it can reinforce or challenge existing hierarchies of power and privilege. Deliberate acts of feeding false information or undermining the credibility of news platforms are a major concern of legal and governmental institutions.[65]

However, the praxis of 'faux framing' is not limited to formal criminal behaviour and has long been a powerful tool for shaping the socio-political landscape, especially by the powers that be. The concept of agitprop – a portmanteau of 'agitation' and 'propaganda' – originated in Soviet times, efforts to merge ideological messages with cultural products, shaping collective identity and action. This practice of aggregating disparate elements for propaganda purposes has a long historical precedent. The Roman Empire and the medieval Catholic Church employed analogous strategies, integrating cultural, religious and political symbols to consolidate authority. The Romans deified emperors by associating them with regional deities and decorated triumphal arches with imagery that celebrated imperial power while reflecting local traditions. The Catholic Church integrated pagan rituals, holidays and iconography, aligning Christian doctrine with established cultural practices to establish a universal framework of spiritual and institutional authority. Historical practices return in the contemporary issues of greenwashing, pinkwashing, wokewashing and veganwashing, where corporations appropriate cultural or ethical movements to create attractive but frequently misleading identities. These tactics illustrate the imaging process, in which mediated representations are employed to opportunistically construct and promote identities that align with societal values, simultaneously obscuring the

lack of true commitment. Corporations employ carefully designed advertisements, logos and campaigns to project identities that conform to public expectations, frequently without having a business ethos that genuinely sustains the portrayed qualities. Companies may promote sustainability initiatives while simultaneously engaging in environmentally harmful practices, or appropriate rainbow logos during Pride Month without contributing to substantial LGBTQ+ advocacy. Emphasising a product's vegan status may obscure broader ethical concerns, presenting a troubling irony, particularly when considering that napalm, too, is technically vegan. The practice of symbolic aggregation in imaging distorts the movements it appropriates and diminishes their transformative power. Reducing environmentalism, social justice and ethical consumption to mere marketing tools diverts public focus to superficial gestures, undermining the depth and urgency of the original issues. The aggregation of values for propagandistic imaging diminishes the clarity and effectiveness of movements, resulting in a diluted message that emphasises optics rather than action.

Social media platforms, search engines and algorithm-driven news feeds have enhanced the scope of framing while also introducing new dynamics of personalisation and polarisation. Algorithms select content according to user preferences and behaviours, resulting in echo chambers that strengthen existing viewpoints and restrict access to diverse perspectives. Eli Pariser's notion of the 'filter bubble' illustrates this phenomenon, indicating that algorithmic framing diminishes democratic deliberation by promoting ideological silos.[66] The virality of digital content has heightened competition for attention, prompting the use of sensational and emotionally charged frames to engage audiences. Algorithmic framing has prompted essential inquiries regarding the ethical obligations of platform providers and communicators within fragmented information ecosystems. The spread of misinformation and disinformation complicates the discourse on framing, as misleading frames, often propagated through social media and partisan outlets, distort public understanding of critical issues such as climate change and migration. This is particularly evident in digital contexts where misinformation disseminates rapidly, a phenomenon that has been strategically professionalised. The impact of social media and algorithmic curation transcends the mere dissemination of information; they act as a conduit between metaphorical and material framing, shaping perception and translating it into action. Frames, once established in digital discourse, extend beyond the abstract; they influence decision-making, policy formation, and the physical transformation of space and society. Information serves as an active agent capable of significantly influencing physical reality, exemplified by the devastation caused by propaganda-driven war narratives and the establishment of new socio-political orders through

ideological mobilisation. The interplay between virtual frames and their real-world application highlights the significance of framing as a mechanism that transforms perception into practice and abstraction into architecture.

Material Framing

Material framing is the process through which virtual intensities convert into actualised densities, selectively organising specific aspects of reality while omitting numerous others. This mechanism is essential to cinema and architecture, as framing directs perception, highlights specific elements, and organises interpretive results. In both disciplines, framing is an act of both revelation and limitation – an operation that extracts coherence from a field of potentiality, actualising only a fraction of what could be seen or experienced. In cinema, the frame serves as a boundary, influencing the development of narrative, emotion and meaning within a defined visual space. [67] Similarly, Heidegger's concept of *Gestell* (enframing) critiques the technological ordering of perception, where framing not only structures what is seen but also dictates how it is seen – increasing visibility in one domain while obscuring or eliminating others. [68] Bernard Cache extends this discussion to architecture, demonstrating how spatial configurations guide perception through inclination, shaping both individual and collective sensory orientations. [69] Cities, characterised by their complex histories and evolving environments, serve as focal points for sensory experiences: sensing the city reveals the complex relationship between intensity and repetition that characterises urban life. Urban spaces, akin to cinematic frames, are formed through a compilation of sensory inputs. The recurrence of architectural patterns, the vibrancy of busy streets, and the movement of individuals through these environments establish a dynamic mapping of urban perception. This cinematographic cartography is dynamic, constantly reshaped by the movements and interactions of the city's inhabitants. Framing, then, comes also with its own instruments, such as montage (the combination of two elements, creating a third), decoupage (cutting a narrative into scenes and stitching scenes into a narrative) and off-screening (emphasising elements precisely because they are not framed).

Framing in architecture can be loosely divided into four main modalities. The dolphin model exemplifies an architectural principle where the skin serves as an organising element, concealing the underlying structure beneath a seamless, continuous surface. This principle, evident in streamlined modernist trains, automotive design, and aerodynamics, is also reflected in architecture through structures that emphasise cohesion and flow rather than structural exposition. These designs foster a cohesive spatial experience by allowing surfaces to curve, merge, and dissolve into one another, rather than explicitly revealing structure.

Zaha Hadid's Heydar Aliyev Center (Baku, 2012) exemplifies a departure from conventional rectilinearity, favouring a continuous, flowing surface that integrates walls, floors, and ceilings into a singular undulating form. This approach can also be seen in Santiago Calatrava's work, particularly in projects like the City of Arts and Sciences in Valencia, where sweeping organic curves and biomorphic forms define the relationship between structure and environment. The dolphin model frames immersion as a dissolution of the boundary between interior and exterior through fluid continuity. Its effect is both perceptual and experiential, producing an architecture that is felt as much as it is seen, reinforcing inclination as a sensory and bodily engagement with space. By contrast, the lobster model emphasises radical exposure, where structural components are not hidden but celebrated as an externalised system. Just as steam locomotives leave pistons, rods and chambers visible, this approach in architecture foregrounds mechanical articulation. The Centre Pompidou (Renzo Piano and Richard Rogers, Paris, 1977) epitomises this, externalising the building's infrastructure as a network of visible ducts, pipes and steel frameworks, turning the structure itself into an aesthetic statement. Similarly, Shigeru Ban's Centre Pompidou Metz continues this tradition, making the skeleton of the building a primary design feature. The lobster model, like Deleuze's assemblage, treats architecture as a composition of interacting forces – where function and form do not conceal but expose their own logic. Another approach to framing operates as an organising tool and a philosophy of order and composition. Under the logic of modernist minimalism space is defined through strict geometric clarity, reducing architectural elements to grids, steel beams, and glass planes. Mies van der Rohe's Farnsworth House exemplifies this, where the architectural frame structures space without obstruction, creating a deliberate openness that both encloses and extends into its surroundings. This approach embraces structural minimalism, emphasising precision and reduction over embellishment. Within this logic, framing does not merely enclose space – it actively constructs spatial experience through proportion, rhythm and controlled exposure. The final category explores selective visibility – where framing reveals through concealment, orchestrating perception through diffused boundaries. Unlike Mies's clear, rational frame, this mode of framing introduces opacity, layering and depth to mediate the boundary between interior and exterior. A strong example is Pierre Chareau and Bernard Bijvoet's Maison de Verre (1932, Paris), where the glass-block façade transforms light into a tactile, shifting phenomenon. The structure resists both full transparency and full opacity, instead producing an architectural play of shadows and illumination that defines the space through modulation rather than absolute exposure.

This selective framing technique is also present in Renzo Piano's Maison Hermès (Tokyo, 2001), where transparency and privacy are carefully balanced. The effect extends beyond the visual realm to encompass phenomenological aspects, as space is engaged through varying perceptual conditions. Instead of providing an immediate perspective, these structures encourage exploration and reinterpretation over time, fostering a continuous dialogue between enclosure and exposure. Phenomenological approaches to architecture, as articulated by Juhani Pallasmaa, emphasise the role of framing in shaping sensory and embodied experiences. Pallasmaa posits that architectural frames facilitate the interaction between individuals and their environments, encouraging engagement via texture, light and spatial orientation.[70] In this view, framing is not just a visual tool but a tactile and atmospheric condition, influencing how we move through and emotionally respond to space. This is particularly evident in works that integrate materiality as a sensory experience, such as Tadao Ando's handling of concrete surfaces or Pierre Chareau's Maison de Verre, where diffused light and glass textures create a constantly shifting perceptual environment. Across these models, framing functions as a process of inclination, shaping how perception unfolds within architectural and cinematic space. Whether through seamless continuity, mechanical exposure, geometric precision, or selective veiling, the way architecture structures experience mirrors the way cinema composes visual narratives. The repetition of spatial patterns, the intensity of material engagement, and the navigation of framed enclosures create a dynamic cartography of urban perception, one that is constantly shaped and reshaped by movement, habit and interaction. Framing in architecture is not merely functional but existential, shaping how individuals inhabit and perceive the world. This is also the exact interchange between architectural and cinematic framing: both media construct critical montages of frames to create a composite reality. Much like architecture, cinema orchestrates spatial and temporal relationships, constructing experiences that direct attention, movement and meaning. In cinema, framing encompasses not only the elements included within a shot but also those that are excluded (off-screen), the interaction of sequences (decoupage), and the guidance of perception through both selection and omission. Eisenstein's conception of montage involves a complex interplay that transcends basic editing or shot sequencing. It serves as an intellectual, aesthetic and political instrument aimed at eliciting particular emotions and ideas from the viewer.

Eisenstein viewed montage as the essence of cinema, a method of constructing meaning through the collision and juxtaposition of images. Whereas essentialism reduces the world to fixed, irreducible units, an idea can still act as an essence – not as a static core, but as a pre-condition that pre-shapes an event,

matter or process. Rather than defining reality in absolute terms, an idea exists in a virtual state of potentiality, shaping what is possible without determining a singular outcome. Like a film before editing, where the cut exists as an idea before it is actualised, an idea conditions reality rather than fixes it. In this sense, essence is not a property but a process, a movement from potential to form. Eisenstein's theory holds that the interplay between successive shots generates meanings that surpass the simple sum of their individual parts. This process is inherently dialectical: a conflict or collision between images produces a synthesis, yielding new ideas or emotional resonances. Rooted in the dialectical materialism of Marxism, Eisenstein's approach underscores how the clash of opposing forces becomes a catalyst for transformative change.[71] Montage serves as a mechanism for transformation, illustrating cinema's capacity to both depict reality and actively influence it. Eisenstein's theory includes the concept of intellectual montage, which employs the juxtaposition of unrelated images to express abstract ideas and stimulate critical analysis. Cinema fundamentally represents a structured transformation of thought, manifested through a montage of images that are 'specific yet not specific,' as their interaction produces the overall experience. This aligns closely with Deleuze's examination of cinema as a mode of thought that emphasises the importance of inclination in cinematic techniques. Deleuze's concept of the movement image facilitates the understanding of new production, emphasising that cinema primarily constitutes a montage of ideas rather than of images.[72] Cinema is not the depiction of reality, nor the illusion created by the image, but the reality of the 'world in film' itself, which consist of embodied ideas and concepts. This medium offers dimensions for creating worlds where non-linearity, spatial freedom, subjective realities, and 'limited endlessness' exist as potentialities.

The concept of inclination 'in a path of life' finds a compelling parallel in cinema, where the framing and sequencing of images construct an inclination, which will mostly be perceived through a montage. Perception, shaped by intensity and repetition, mirrors the way cinematic narratives are built through the interplay of visual and auditory elements that orient the viewer. Repetitive motifs and intensified imagery create rhythms that enhance significant moments, shaping emotional and cognitive responses in viewers. Cinematographing functions as both a metaphor and a methodology for comprehending the mechanics of perception, which will be the central theme of Chapter 3. In the present chapter I examined the relationship between intensity and repetition and how this interplay influences the underlying forces that govern reality beyond human perception. These forces,

which include probabilistic patterns and systemic constructs, demonstrate that human agency functions within a network of interconnected material, biological and socio-economic frameworks. Inclination, as defined in this context, represents the guiding mechanisms that influence life trajectories without direct awareness, determining what can be materially structured and articulated. Understanding these parastrata provides insights into the framing, actualisation or withholding of potentiality. This chapter establishes the foundation for the subsequent chapter, 'Emanation', which will explore the ways in which perception shapes and formalises reality on an expressive level, analysing the complex relationship between sensory experience and the imaging of the world.

Resonant Cognition II: Love is Not a Possession

Love is not something we choose or construct; it is an intensity that predates us, waiting for a body to inhabit. Joë Bousquet's famous reflection on his war injuries – '*Ma blessure existait avant moi, je suis né pour l'incarner'* (My wound existed before me, I was born to embody it) – articulates a deeply affective understanding of a condition that precedes the subject.[73] His notion of the wound as pre-existing and inescapable resonates with Deleuzian affect, understood as an impersonal force that circulates, deterritorialises and reterritorialises upon the body. Love, much like the wound, is not possessed by the individual; rather, it selects its vessel, moving through bodies as an autonomous, pre-individual intensity seeking expression. Love, in its romantic ideal, often appears as an elusive yet palpable force, unbound by linear causality or fixed identities. It is not something possessed but something inhabited – an affect that drifts and circulates among and reshapes the bodies it touches. In Deleuzian terms, love unfolds in the virtual: a plane of potentiality where intensities form assemblages before they actualise. Cinema has been an inviting space to portray love as a fleeting and eternal entity, unfolding through uncanny connections across time and space.[74] This 'floating' quality of love is exquisitely rendered in Wong Kar-Wai's *In the Mood for Love* and *2046*, where desire lingers in stolen glances, deferred gestures, and the atmospheric density of Hong Kong's neon-lit corridors.[75] Love is never fully realised but exists in the gaps, in what is left unsaid, vibrating as a pure affective charge. Similarly, Bertrand Bonello's *The Beast* develops this notion by dissolving love across temporal folds, where it is neither bound to a single moment nor a singular subject.[76] Instead, it migrates across time, haunting characters as an impersonal force, a spectral presence that exceeds the human. Love mutates across eras, neither belonging to one history nor one subject, but threading through them, green in its persistence – ever-recurring, ever-new. Love operates as a Deleuzian affect – an incorporeal transformation that is felt rather than owned, an intensity that resists capture yet

insists on being lived. It is a refrain that returns, ever-circulating yet never quite the same. Love is not a fixed melody but a modulation – an affective rhythm that folds into new assemblages; love is a *ritournelle* that both structures and dissolves time. In the work of Deleuze and Guattari, the *ritournelle* (refrain) is the rhythmic force by which chaos is momentarily gathered into a territory, a fragile order sung or danced into being – a way of orienting oneself through repetition. In French, *ritournelle verte* also carries the sense of an evergreen tune, a melody that never grows old, eternally fresh and returning like the cycle of seasons. In this light, love itself becomes a kind of *ritournelle verte* – ageing, marked by time and change, yet perpetually capable of springing forth anew, repeating its tender refrain even in the midst of decay. Love, like a *ritournelle verte*, does not simply endure; it insists, vibrating between past and future, refusing to be fully possessed, always escaping yet always returning. *L'amour, une ritournelle verte* – a refrain that floats, recurring yet never identical, always adapting to new rhythms. Like buoyancy, love resists fixity; it does not belong to an individual or a moment but drifts through time and space, carried by those who enact it. Love is not a possession, nor a stable identity, but an affective force – transitory yet persistent, dissolving and reconstituting itself in an endless variation of encounters.

Romantic love is marked by its fundamental unattainability. It is always in excess of those who try to claim it, always slipping between the fingers of those who attempt to hold it still. It pre-exists those who feel it, passing through them like a current, intensifying in some moments, fading in others. It moves between bodies, inhabiting gestures, glances and atmospheres, attaching itself to the world long before individuals claim it as their own. It lingers in words spoken long ago, in places where it once unfolded, in memories that are not necessarily personal but inherited, circulating through collective experience. This amorphous nature of love echoes in social landscapes, where the gestures of romance repeat across generations. The rituals of first love – furtive glances, the electricity of accidental touches, the quiet devastation of departure – recur, changing only in their actors. It is not the lovers who define love but the refrains they enact, the rhythms they fall into. Like a melody played by different hands, love survives not in its individual instantiations but in its enduring patterns. And because it always belongs to a rhythm beyond the individual, it carries an inevitable melancholy – no singular lover can ever fully possess love, just as no one ever truly 'arrives' at the love they desire. Love, in its very structure, is a deferral. The fragility of love is its beauty. It exists only in motion, only in the act of becoming. Love is an iso-affective state – it persists to be equally strong, even the experience of it fades. A love letter, a song, a perfume lingering in an empty room – these are its traces, ephemeral yet enduring, floating through time. Love is not an event that begins and ends; it is a

force that is momentarily actualised in bodies, yet always in excess of them. This rhythm of emergence and dissolution finds its most joyous and painful expression in the moment someone first feels themselves as fully loved – when desire and recognition meet in a perfect, weightless instant, only to be undone in the very next. Love is not permanence; it is the shimmer before submersion, the crest of a wave before it folds into the sea. It is what haunts the spaces it once filled, returning as absence, vibrating in the silence of what could have been. In its buoyancy lies its force: love, like a *ritournelle verte*, floats, returns and transforms. By shifting love from an individual experience to a relational force, buoyancy sees love beyond possession, beyond stability. Love is not something one holds but something one is held within – a floating intensity that, in its very transience, remains. And in this, love is always slightly out of reach, always longing for itself, always aching, yet a potent force in life's probability paths. This is similar to the way pheromones function as an invisible yet structuring force, diffusing through air, skin and proximity, shaping interactions before cognition can intervene. They bypass language and conscious processing, triggering physiological and affective shifts that guide social behaviour – whether in attraction, territoriality, or group cohesion. Yet, they do not act alone. Other biological attractors, like beauty, symmetry, voice, body language, and even micro-expressions, operate at the same imperceptible threshold, drawing bodies into relational fields without explicit reasoning. Even olfaction beyond pheromones plays a role, as scent perception is intertwined with immune system compatibility, subtly influencing partner selection through mechanisms we do not consciously register. Body language and micro-expressions further reinforce this network of intensities – subtle shifts in posture, fleeting eye contact, or a barely perceptible dilation of the pupils can create ripples of attraction or repulsion long before words are exchanged. At this level, attraction is not about conscious preference but about affective modulation, an interplay of biochemical, sensory and evolutionary intensities that organise encounters before they congeal into cultural meaning. Just as power, money and ideology later function as large-scale structuring attractors, these biological attractors form the raw material from which relationships, hierarchies and desires emerge. They exist at the threshold of intensity and density, moving fluidly between the imperceptible and the deeply inscribed, between the ephemeral pull of a passing scent and the entrenched social norms that ultimately dictate whom one finds desirable or worthy of attention.

Just as love resists possession, existing instead as a fluid, relational force that drifts between bodies and moments, our perception of the world shifts when we move from object-defined ontology to a framework of exteriority and affect. By treating entities – whether love, temperature, or any other phenomenon – not

as fixed attributes but as emergent intensities shaped by external conditions, we uncover a reality in which meaning and structure arise through motion, resonance and transformation rather than inherent essence. The following clarifies how to describe a world through energetic relationalities rather than an object-given ontology and explores how unstable fields appear to act homeostatically when properties are understood as functions rather than intrinsic attributes. The resulting cartography spans a vast field of capacities, semi-translucent entities and affects – including human behaviour – yet remains, non-anthropocentric – investigating the exteriority of energetics functions as a depolarisation of (our) perception and conceptual frameworks. Whereas the polarisation of light filters out oscillations in all but one direction, the search for relational exteriority unveils the full range of perceptual oscillations in the known world. It does not reveal a new world but exposes multiple ways of perceiving the world as it exists. A simple reversal of function and argument illustrates this perspective. Suppose we aim to measure temperature within a cityscape. The conventional approach would be to attach temperature sensors to all elements in the city, compiling a map where temperature is an effect of material conditions – concrete retaining heat differently than zinc, oxidation altering thermal absorption, and sunlight exposure influencing distribution and so on. Here, the city is the given, and temperature is its consequence. Reversing this relation – constructing the cityscape around a specific temperature – yields an entirely different map. If we isolate a single temperature threshold, say 24.62°C, the city will appear to expand and contract throughout the day. In Western European summertime, the 24.62°C zone might peak at 15:00, whereas in Southern Europe, it could reach its maximum earlier. This shift in perspective reveals how fixing a variable – rather than treating it as a dependent effect – transforms not the physical world itself, but our perception of its dynamics. A further step detaches temperature (T) from being merely an entity within a specific physical field and instead treats T as an accumulation of temporal-geographical properties. This could manifest as a narrative or a formula, but the principle remains: T24.62°C might describe the water vapor in the exhaust of a car at 52.2345006, 6.8963335, on 4 May 2025, at 06:15:11:09. Simultaneously, T24.62°C could mark 0.087 cm^2 on the west side of a zinc roof at 52.3985560, 4.9393717, at 12:08:17:03 the same day. The physical behaviour of the elements remains unchanged, yet fixing a variable and reversing the function radically alters perception. Crucially, this shift requires a commitment to describing entities solely through their external properties. Temperature is not a feature of zinc; rather, temperature is a buoyant entity with the temporal and material conditions of that specific zinc surface. This framework reconfigures perception, replacing object-defined ontology with an exteriority of relations, where what appears stable is

always in motion, and what seems given is merely a transient configuration within a dynamic field.

Love, like any affect, is not bound to a subject but moves through bodies, shaping and being shaped in turn. It floats, lingers, and disperses, structuring encounters before meaning solidifies. This buoyancy of love mirrors the broader principle of energetic relationality – where entities are not defined by inherent properties but by their exterior conditions, their movements, and their temporary intensities. Just as fixing a variable in the perception of temperature alters the way a cityscape appears, fixing love within a singular subject misrecognises its true nature. Love is neither possessed nor self-contained; it is a modulation, a force that finds form in encounters, yet always exceeds them. By shifting from a property-centred ontology to one of affective exteriority, we reveal how perception itself is contingent upon the relational frameworks we impose. Love, like temperature, attraction, or even identity, does not reside within things but moves through them, manifesting as an event of intensity rather than an intrinsic essence. This perspective demands a reorientation – not toward stability or possession, but toward the rhythms of emergence, dissolution and return. In this, love remains a *ritournelle verte*, a refrain that insists on its presence precisely through its impermanence, a force that is most deeply felt in its drift, its ache, and its endless becoming.

Notes

1 The infamous quote '*Qu'ils mangent de la brioche*' ('Let them eat cake') is often wrongly attributed to Marie Antoinette and more likely originated entirely from the creative mind of Jean-Jacques Rousseau in his *Confessions* (1782). Yet precisely because it serves as such a powerful anecdote illustrating the complete 'non-sensing' of other parastrata beyond one's own, it has endured in the collective memory for centuries.

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Fig. 2: A high-modernist bus station that converts intensity into density by connecting separate traffic flows, yet fails to generate social space. Photo: author.

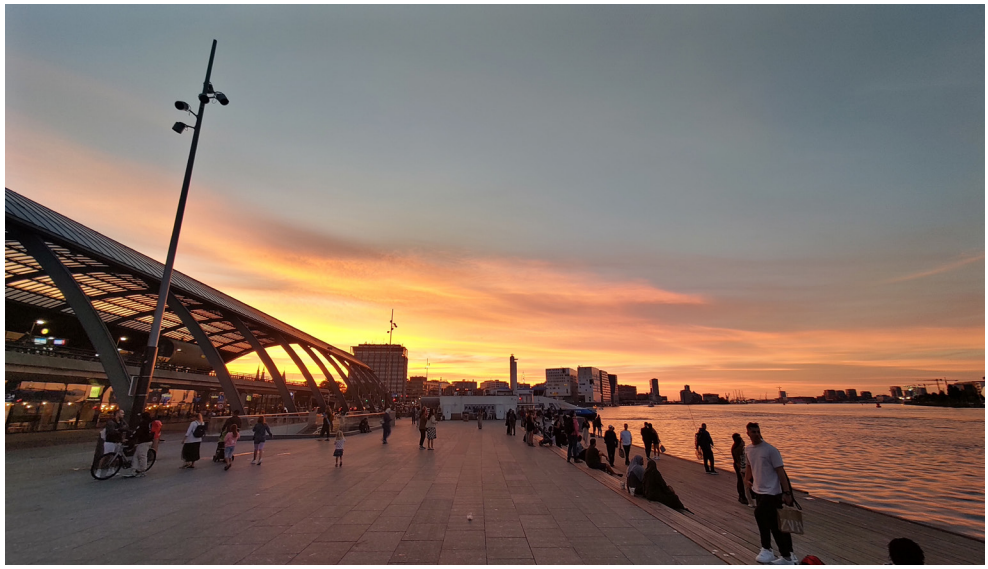

Fig. 3: An open space in Amsterdam with seemingly minimal interventions. The framing of affordances leaves room for the emergence of self-organising users. Photo: author.

Fig. 4: An assortment of sweets on display in Sarajevo. Sugar products – like social media – function as highly addictive inclinators directing consumption patterns through visceral compulsion rather than conscious choice. Photo: author.

Fig. 5: A liminal space in Osaka – connecting metro, shoppingcenter and cinema – offers virtually no clues about the elements it connects. Despite framing the flows of people its ambiguity disorients, making the threshold feel uncanny rather than transitional. Photo: author.

Fig. 6: Traditional noren curtains mark the entrance to a Japanese shop. They signal openness, framing the act of entry through a soft, ritualised threshold. Photo: author.

Fig. 7: Trope-laden but effective: the road is a metaphor for the 90 per cent rule. Though deviation is possible, all incentives are arranged to prevent it. Photo: author.

Emanation: Reality Created by Perception and Imaging

This chapter examines the cycles of expectation, perception and individuation, analysing their ability to both construct and disrupt virtual and actual worlds, which are parts of the same reality. Examining the construction of perception as a montage facilitates an understanding of the essential role of imaging in these processes, highlighting that imaging transcends the mere reproduction and representation of life, serving as a fundamental aspect of its becoming. Affect functions as a crucial modulating factor within the dynamic interaction of expectation, perception and individuation, operating in the pre-perceptual realm of probability prior to the structuring of experience into perception. More than reaction to sensory input, affect instead enriches the domain of inclination with intensities that modify, enhance or diminish the pathways to individuation. Affect does not merely serve as an interpretative layer superimposed on perception; instead, it fundamentally influences the thresholds of perception, modulating which tendencies are actualised and which remain virtual. Understanding perception as a montage involves recognising it as a process of composition and selection. This process is influenced not only by neutral probabilities but also by affective intensities that either animate or inhibit specific framings of the world. Imaging does not primarily serve as a passive representation, but actively contributes to the affective structuring of reality, in which the virtual and actual are consistently reconfigured through an affective attunement to the forces that precede cognition. Deleuze's critique of representation stems from its reliance on pre-existing identities or fixed forms, where concepts are simply tools to re-present

something already given. In this model, reality is assumed to exist independently of the processes that describe or engage with it and disregards the modulation of reality by these very processes. For Deleuze, representation simplifies the dynamic interplay of forces into static categories, diminishing the generative and fluid essence of reality to a reflection of its potential. Deleuze proposes a philosophy of immanence, asserting that concepts function as active participants rather than external observers within the processes they articulate. Immanence challenges the dichotomy between thought and life, positing that concepts and material reality mutually co-create and inform each other. This indicates that reality is not a fixed backdrop for representation but rather a dynamic process of unfolding, in which entities emerge and transform through their relational interactions. The transition from representation to immanence aligns closely with the concept of emanation. The concept of emanation proposes that reality consists not of discrete, preformed entities but rather releases a generative process where existence unfolds in layers or gradients of becoming. Emanation and immanence highlight the inherent connectivity and productivity of reality, in which existence is continuously created and recreated through the dynamics of difference, repetition and relational forces. Deleuze's framework positions perception, imaging and concepts as essential components of this emanative process. Rather than passively reflecting the world, they actively shape and are shaped by it. Imaging – which is both mental and material – does not merely reproduce life but becomes a force within life's unfolding, participating in the ongoing processes of individuation, where forms and identities emerge through immanent interactions rather than preexisting templates. Reality becomes an open-ended, self-organising process where the differentiation and relationality inherent in the world are continuously expressed and transformed. Perception and imaging are not secondary or derivative but foundational to how reality itself is constituted and evolves.

Elizabeth Grosz expands on these concepts by highlighting that perception and image are active processes that influence the emotive and material aspects of being, rather than a passive mirroring.[1] Grosz aligns with Deleuze in her rejection of representational stasis, proposing instead that creativity and perception are embedded in material immanence, where the dynamic interplay of forces continuously generates new forms of life and thought. Her feminist perspective brings an essential critique to this discourse by questioning how systems of representation can obscure the generative and embodied processes inherent in becoming, particularly when considering power, gender and difference. For both Deleuze and Grosz, what emerges is a world not composed of fixed identities but of unfolding and transforming interactions. Representation is neither a passive nor a neutral act, but part of a broader system where perception and imaging are

entangled in the material flows and intensities of becoming. Imaging, then, can be seen as more than a conceptual or symbolic act – it operates as a material and affective force within the processes of individuation and relationality, for which the concepts of difference and repetition are central.

Difference and Repetition II: Through Repetition Difference Is Expressed and Actualised

Traditional metaphysics, as Grosz's feminist critique also suggests, often subordinates difference to identity, treating it as a derivative characteristic that merely distinguishes pre-existing entities. Deleuze, as argued earlier, reverses this hierarchy by positing difference as primary and generative, challenging the idea that identity precedes it. Difference does not emerge from a comparison of identical entities, but instead produces them. It is rooted in the internal variations and dynamisms that constitute being itself, emphasising a processual and immanent unfolding rather than static categorisation. This dynamic conception of difference is intrinsically linked to repetition, actively expressing and actualising difference within the flow of life. True repetition therefore involves variation and differentiation as it is through repetition that difference is expressed and actualised. This concept is found in all natural phenomena, where repetition is never simply the reproduction of the same but always entails a renewal and reinvention. Therefore, individuation is an ongoing dynamic process driven by difference and repetition and not defined by essence or identity. Gilbert Simondon asserts that 'individuation is not a state but a process: the being does not pre-exist the operation of individuation but emerges from it. What individuates itself is not a subject, but a system of relations that becomes established and develops.'[2]

Perception is intrinsically transformative including an interplay of forces, intensities and relations that continually shape the individual. It is an active engagement, rather than a passive reception of information, which generates meaning through intensity, which is dynamic and affective, functioning at the level of forces and affects. The world is a realm of intensities, ever changing and developing, representing a significant potential for change and difference. Intensity denotes the magnitude of affective force a stimulus produces, influencing its perception and interpretation, and continuously varying to produce a spectrum of experiences from tiny impressions to overwhelming sensations. Massumi characterises intensity as a domain of precognitive affect that precedes conscious cognition, paralleling Deleuze's concept of difference and repetition, in which perception is perpetually redefined through recurrent experiences. The precognitive emotional charge emphasises the immediacy of intensity in influencing perception. On the

other hand, repetition disrupts uniformity, introducing variations that challenge established patterns; each cycle both reinforces and reconfigures perception. Through repetition, perception becomes a dynamic act of becoming rather than a static state. The recurrence of stimuli recontextualises experiences, creating new meanings and revealing the interconnected, dynamic nature of sensory engagement. Perception, framed as an act of inclination, reflects how individuals and collectives navigate and construct meaning through intensity, repetition and affect. This embodied, immanent process emphasises the fluid and generative nature of reality, resisting static categorisation.

Emanation – as a tilting toward or away from stimuli – highlights the embodied nature of perception, where the body's positioning, movement and disposition mediate how stimuli are received and interpreted. The cycles of expectation, perception and individuation form a continuous loop in which each phase recursively shapes the next. Expectation arises from prior experiences, cognitive frameworks and external cues such as imaging, priming perception to anticipate specific patterns. Perception, rather than being a neutral reception of reality, is an active structuring of sensory and cognitive input, selecting and filtering information in accordance with these expectations. Through this process, individuation occurs, not as a fixed state but as an emergent becoming, where the subject is co-constituted by what is perceived and how it is inscribed. This individuation, in turn, generates new expectations, recalibrating perception and reinforcing or altering future modes of sense-making. Thus, rather than a linear sequence, this cycle functions as an open-ended, dynamic system of differentiation and reconfiguration. In the following sections different modes and limits of perception will be highlighted in a non-hierarchical order, aligning with and emphasising the recursive nature of emanation. This understanding of perception as an active and embodied process in the emanation of reality is critical in the context of the rapid evolution of imaging technologies. The swift and extensive production of images, alongside automated imaging techniques, is generating a digital, composite representation of the tangible world – layered, disembodied and progressively elusive to human perception. This layered landscape serves as a navigational framework for autonomous technologies, including warehouse robots, sophisticated military systems, integrated tracking devices, and the internet of things. This universe has considerable epistemic and ontological risks. Machine perception functions under paradigms distinct from human sensory experience, while the notion of hyper timing provides temporal discrepancies that further alienate human comprehension from these automated systems. These dynamics conceal the systems that influence modern existence

and drive us to critically reassess our dependence on systems whose functions and repercussions frequently elude human understanding. I will explore these dimensions – machine perception and hyper timing – first.

Modes of Perception I: Machine Perception vs Mammalian Perception

Mammalian and machine perception process and combine information differently to understand their surroundings. Whereas mammalian perception develops via neural architectures that combine sensory input with memory, experience and context, machine perception depends on explicit computation and predetermined algorithms. Machine perception is, at its core, a human creation – rooted in our long-standing cognitive inclination to abstract, categorise and generalise. The very architecture of these systems reflects our own preference for simplification: to reduce complexity into manageable units, to standardise sensory input into signals, and to translate lived experience into computable metrics. Just as humans developed language, mathematics and maps to render the world legible, machine perception codifies the environment into discrete data points and thresholds – flattening nuance into function. These variations expose significant epistemological and ontological differences that raise questions regarding the rising predominance of machine-generated pictures and the spread of information more illegible to humans – encoded in barcodes, QR codes and near-field-communication (NFC) chips. These technologies provide layers of abstraction opaque to human view while yet allowing flawless machine-to-machine communication, whereas newer systems of machine perception even operate entirely through invisible data flows. Facial recognition algorithms, geolocation trackers, predictive analytics and sensor networks produce no visual cues at all, yet exert real-time influence over both perception and decision-making. This two-step shift from visible infrastructure to invisible computation marks a profound transformation in how reality is sensed and acted upon. Co-evolved sensory organs and brain systems help to define the embodied and dynamic mammalian perspective. The visual system integrates several sensory modalities including touch and hearing by means of intricate brain networks. Predictive, adaptive and dependent on experience, this context-sensitive technique fills sensory gaps and helps one to anticipate events. It constantly changes across the plasticity of brain networks to create coherent, action-oriented world images. By contrast, machine perception analyses data under predetermined criteria and isolates datasets within a computer framework. Without dynamic integration or contextual awareness, neural networks – including convolutional neural networks – classify or detect patterns.[3] Barcodes scanned in milliseconds or RFID chips

communicate instantly, bypassing the slower, embodied involvement of human cognition; machines are built to process and interpret signals encoded for speed and accuracy. The widening discrepancy between human-readable and machine-readable reality results from our increasing dependence on these inaccessible kinds of knowledge. Awareness of this discrepancy was heightened in February 2025 through a project titled *GibberLink.* posted on GitHub. The work – created by Anton Pidkuiko and Boris Starkov – is a simple yet provocative demonstration in which two AI assistants agreed to switch from English to a GGWave-inspired data-over-sound protocol.[4] What followed was an exchange of incomprehensible chirps and bursts, rendered audible and visible to onlookers. Though technically unremarkable, the piece stirred wide debate by making tangible what is ordinarily seamless and unseen: the everyday practice of machines bypassing human cognition through hyper-efficient, non-human languages.

There are great dangers involved with embedding machine perception into human systems. Although excellent at pattern recognition and decision-making, robots force reductive models on intricate reality. Like automated warehouses or payment systems, technologies driven by encoded data run perfectly for machines but progressively remove people from the fundamental operations. Many interfaces that grant access to personal digital data or assets require users to operate within a framework dictated by machinic perception rather than human intuition – often even demanding proof of their humanity, as with CAPTCHAs. This detachment amplifies inequalities, reduces human agency, and discourages critical engagement. Machine-mediated images in social media, advertising and surveillance further contribute to this shift, turning humans into passive consumers and subjects of pre-packaged, algorithm-driven realities. Maurice Merleau-Ponty's concept of perception as an embodied, lived experience underscores the reciprocal relationship between perceiver and perceived.[5] Mammalian perception is an active engagement with the world, mediated by a situated body. Machines, by contrast, lack this embodied intentionality, relying on rigid computational models detached from relational dynamics. Thinkers like Francisco Varela and Alva Noë highlight cognition's reliance on bodily interactions, which machines cannot replicate.[6] Rosi Braidotti and Donna Haraway critique machine design's mechanistic worldview, emphasising its limitations compared to the adaptive, multisensory richness of mammalian perception.[7] As we inhabit an increasingly machine-readable world – where barcodes, QR codes and NFC systems dictate flows of information – human perception risks becoming secondary, bypassed by hyper-efficient but opaque systems. Similar to the earlier discussion on 'speaking economics', the digital world is only truly legible to those who can read code, and then still many sublanguages also exist. The distance between human perception

and cognition of the digital world is increasingly leading to issues of accessibility and readability. Without critical oversight, the dominance of machine perception risks displacing the embodied, context-sensitive qualities that define human adaptability, creativity and relational ways of being. The challenge lies not only in keeping pace with the speed of machine perception but also in resisting a world that privileges machine logic over the lived richness of experience.

Hyper Timing

Hyper time describes the inaccessibility of processes operating at speeds far beyond human understanding or action. Deeply ingrained in artificial intelligence, algorithmic decision-making, and globally networked systems, these processes unfold in microseconds or less, therefore essentially avoiding human awareness and control. Unlike previous technical systems, where mechanical or manual delays left space for human oversight, hyper-timed systems are both concealed in layers of code and computer infrastructures, and operate at velocities that make human involvement unfeasible. Our capacity to retain knowledge and control over the processes determining our lives is severely challenged by this twin inapproachability – hidden operations and inconceivable speeds. Algorithmic stock trading is an excellent example, since the speed of execution is so critical that even the physical lengths of cables in data centres are standardised to prevent microsecond advantages or disadvantages. Decisions influencing enormous sums of money happen in milliseconds, faster than any human could react, let alone intercede. Likewise, artificial intelligence-driven systems in sectors such as military technologies, surveillance, and autonomous cars run in temporal frameworks utterly foreign to human cognition. These systems are made to identify, evaluate and respond at speeds far above the capacity of the human brain. Under such circumstances, people are reduced to reactive roles, depending on the results of events they neither started nor really comprehended. The discrepancy between human and machine timescales generates an epistemic gap in which decisions influencing governance, economics and security are progressively automated and incomprehensible to their human counterparts. The automation of timing itself – where decisions are dictated not by human intention but by the logic of speed – increases the risk of cascading failures or unintended consequences. In fields like the governance over artificial intelligence, the difficulty resides not only in controlling what computers do, but also in negotiating the reality in which they operate, which – by its nature – essentially excludes human supervision. The systems that depend on these accelerated processes are often designed to serve those with access to their power, creating a widening gap between those who benefit from their speed and those excluded from it. The speed of decision-making

becomes a gatekeeper to opportunity and resources, whether in financial markets, healthcare diagnostics or predictive policing. This begs serious ethical issues of justice and accessibility in a society under increasing control by systems running beyond human comprehension. If – for instance – artificial intelligence were to be applied in real time in a court of law, no human defence-lawyer would ever be able to keep up with stream of information and jurisprudence that it could generate at hyper speed. Hyper timing disturbs our cognitive frameworks for comprehending and dealing with a myriad of processes, and challenges our capacity to participate perceptually. This mismatch emphasises the complex link between perception and cognition, which combined, shapes our experience and interpretation of the environment.

Cognition and Perception

Cognition and perception are fundamentally interconnected, interacting dynamically to influence human experience and environmental interpretation. From a cognitive neuroscience perspective, this relationship is founded on the intricate structure of the brain, in which higher-order cognitive functions are intimately associated with sensory processing. Sensory input is first processed in specialised cortical areas – the visual cortex for sight, the auditory cortex for sound, and so on – before being relayed to higher-level regions like the prefrontal cortex. These regions, responsible for decision-making, memory integration and planning, work in concert with sensory areas to create a unified experience of the external world. This bidirectional relationship shows that perception is more than a passive reception of stimuli, but an active process influenced by cognitive states like attention, memory and expectation. Alva Noë presents a fresh perspective on perception, challenging traditional theories that depict it as a passive process of receiving and processing sensory input.[8] Instead, Noë proposes an enactive approach, emphasising that perception is an active, embodied engagement with the world. He argues that perceiving is not something that happens to us, but something we actively do, shaped by our movements, interactions and practical knowledge of how the world responds to those actions. Central to Noë's argument is the idea that perception depends on sensorimotor knowledge – the understanding of how sensory input changes as we act and move. For instance, vision is not a static process of forming internal representations, but an active exploration involving the awareness of how visual sensations evolve as we shift our gaze or alter our position. This dynamic relationship between perception and action underpins his enactive theory, which asserts that perception is not limited to the brain or nervous system but arises from the embodied engagement between an organism and its environment. Noë also contests the conventional belief that

the brain formulates internal representations of the external environment. He proposes that the world functions as its own representation, accessible through our adept, embodied actions. Perception, from this perspective, is a relational process intricately connected to our capacity to operate within and traverse the world. This comprehension broadens the realm of perception beyond simple sensory input, incorporating it with extensive cognitive functions like memory, expectancy and intention, rendering it a fundamentally holistic process.

This dynamic is vividly illustrated by cultural phenomena that blur the lines between comprehension and ambiguity, underscoring how perception and cognition can actively construct meaning from seemingly meaningless or ambiguous stimuli – or rather, making the point that meaning might be overrated in building cognition. For example, Adriano Celentano's 1972 song 'Prisencolinensinainciusol' plays with non-signification at a cognitive level. Sung in gibberish designed to mimic the sounds of American English, the song captures the rhythm and intonation of real speech, creating a sense of linguistic authenticity even as it defies semantic understanding. The listener's brain, attuned to patterns of language, attempts to impose coherence, producing the illusion that it makes sense. Remarkably, the song was very successful, reaching the top of the charts for many weeks, which suggests that recognisability of affect can outweigh semantic clarity in producing resonance. The Icelandic band Sigur Rós offers a similar example through their use of Hopelandic (*Vonlenska*), a constructed spoken language consisting of melodic syllables without semantic content. Despite the absence of explicit meaning, listeners often report profound emotional connections to their music, projecting personal narratives and emotions onto the nonsensical sounds. Like Celentano, Sigur Rós's music bypasses cognitive signification while engaging the perceptual and affective faculties, offering an experience that *feels* meaningful without ever being concretely understood. The illusion of understanding in faux cognition relies heavily on prosody – which includes the rhythm, stress and intonation of speech – and phonotactic familiarity. It encompasses the melodic and rhythmic aspects of spoken language that contribute to meaning, emotion and emphasis beyond the literal words themselves. Intonation – through pitch, rhythm, stress and melody – structures speech in ways that guide interpretation before actual meaning is processed. Rising tones signal questions, falling tones indicate statements, and rhythmic variation conveys emphasis or emotion. Even without semantics, listeners extract meaning-like impressions from these auditory cues. Research suggests that prosody alone accounts for up to 70 per cent of perceived communicative intent in spoken interactions, highlighting how much understanding relies on sound patterns rather than words themselves.[9] Similarly, phonotactic familiarity – how sounds are expected to combine in each language – creates the illusion of comprehensibility when nonsense syllables align with recognisable speech

patterns. Studies show that listeners can identify emotions in speech with up to 90 per cent accuracy across languages, even without understanding any of the words.[10] This suggests that emotional tone plays a dominant role in perception, reinforcing the idea that meaning is not solely lexical but also performative. Furthermore, phonotactic probability influences word recognition speed, with familiar sound sequences being processed significantly faster than unfamiliar ones, demonstrating how speech patterns shape cognitive expectations.[11] The brain's predictive mechanisms anticipate meaning based on these speech patterns, filling in gaps in the absence of semantics. In this sense, intonation functions as a cognitive scaffolding, organising perception and reinforcing the structured exclusion of uncertainty – much like *aisthegráphein*, where perception is inscribed as a selective process rather than a neutral reception of reality. Similarly, in the visual realm, Gestalt theory demonstrates how perception is structured by innate organising principles rather than passive reception. Just as phonotactic familiarity enables the illusion of comprehension in speech, Gestalt laws such as closure and continuity reveal how the mind instinctively completes fragmented visual stimuli, imposing coherence where none inherently exists. This cognitive tendency to perceive structured wholes rather than isolated parts mirrors the way prosody and phonotactic patterns shape auditory meaning, underscoring perception as an active, anticipatory process rather than a mere reflection of external reality.[12]

Research in cognitive neuroscience emphasises the collaboration between perception and cognition in constructing meaning, even from ambiguous or nonsensical stimuli. Research employing functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) and electroencephalography (EEG) has elucidated the way attention influences sensory processing. When an individual concentrates on a particular stimulus, such as a face in a busy environment, the brain's attentional networks amplify activity in the relevant sensory regions, including the fusiform face area. This selective amplification illustrates how cognitive processes, such as attention allocation, directly affect perception. Conversely, sensory input influences cognitive activities by supplying the essential data required for interpretation and decision-making. This link is illustrated by the 'cocktail party effect', when selective auditory attention enables individuals to concentrate on a specific discussion in a noisy setting, demonstrating the active filtering of sensory input directed by cognitive priorities. The influence of cognition on perception extends beyond attention, incorporating memory and expectation as key factors. Memory provides a framework for interpreting sensory input, transforming it into meaningful experiences, while expectations, shaped by prior knowledge – increasingly produced by imaging – significantly influence how perception unfolds. Predictive coding theories suggest that the brain generates predictions about sensory

information and updates these when discrepancies arise, streamlining perception but occasionally leading to conflicts when ambiguous stimuli align more with expectations than reality. Schizophrenia, for instance, has been associated with aberrant salience attribution, in which dopamine dysregulation causes the brain to assign excessive significance to otherwise mundane stimuli.[13] This heightened salience does not emerge from a rational evaluation of sensory input but rather precedes conscious perception, leading to an overvaluation of minor details and a disruption in the typical filtering of relevance.[14] As a result, individuals experiencing psychosis often encounter a world that appears subjectively charged with hidden meanings, prompting the brain to generate confabulatory narratives that rationalise these erroneous attributions. This mechanism can manifest in delusional thinking, such as the belief that one is being followed, as the mind retroactively constructs an explanatory framework to account for the overwhelming yet misplaced sense of significance.[15] The interaction between dysregulated dopaminergic signalling and narrative construction thus illustrates how perception and meaning-making in schizophrenia are not simply distortions of reality, but rather emergent from an alternative process of signification, one in which the brain's predictive mechanisms and interpretative structures misfire, producing compelling yet false convictions. This mechanism, though extreme in schizophrenia, reflects a broader human tendency: the drive to construct coherent narratives even when evidence contradicts them. An obsession, furthermore, fundamentally reshapes both the manner and the scope of human perception. Rather than merely intensifying attention, obsessive states restructure perceptual fields by privileging certain stimuli while suppressing others. Neurological research demonstrates that obsession hyperactivates attention-related brain regions, particularly the anterior cingulate cortex and dorsolateral prefrontal cortex, resulting in a narrowing of attentional resources at the expense of broader perceptual flexibility.[16] Simultaneously, the salience network becomes distorted, disproportionately flagging specific stimuli as significant regardless of their objective relevance.[17] This alteration of salience hierarchies leads to a perceptual landscape in which the obsessive object or theme dominates experience, often eclipsing other environmental cues. Moreover, sensory cortices, such as the visual and somatosensory areas, exhibit modified processing patterns under obsessive conditions, leading to the overemphasis of certain sensory details and the neglect of others.[18] Obsession thus produces a self-reinforcing perceptual loop: prior fixations recursively shape subsequent perceptions, intensifying the rigidity and repetitiveness that characterise obsessive phenomena.[19] In these cases, the mind privileges coherence over truth, demonstrating that signification, whether rational or delusional, is a deeply ingrained function of human cognition. Just as

dopamine-driven aberrant salience in psychosis compels individuals to perceive meaning where none exists, everyday cognition operates through similar, albeit less pronounced, processes – reinterpreting or dismissing conflicting data to maintain a stable sense of reality.[20] Cognitive biases, such as confirmation bias and the narrative fallacy, illustrate how people across contexts prioritise internal consistency over factual accuracy, filtering out dissonant information to sustain pre-existing beliefs.[21]

Modes of Perception II: Fairground Logic

The generation of pure intensity as a sensory stimulus finds its most visceral expression in environments that are explicitly designed to overwhelm the senses, such as fairgrounds, amusement parks, nightclubs and immersive digital worlds. These spaces operate on a principle that can be described as fairground logic: a system where stimuli are not consumed for their meaning, utility or representational value, but for their sheer capacity to saturate the senses. This definition comes with its own contradiction, as it stands for a sensory experience that literally defies all logic, yet as a system it can be constructed. Therefore, the logic refers to the system of creating an illogical event space. In such environments, the primary aim is to create singular moments of sensory overload that immerse participants in a flood of affective intensity. The fairground exemplifies this logic through its orchestrated chaos: the dizzying heights of a Ferris wheel, the stomach-dropping rush of a rollercoaster, the boneshaking movements of the bumper cars, the kaleidoscope of neon lights, and the cacophony of laughter and music. Together, these elements create an all-encompassing space of intensity where time collapses into a series of ephemeral yet impactful sensations. This fairground logic, which prioritises stimuli for with their own sake aligns closely with jouissance – a psychoanalytic term denoting an excessive, transgressive pleasure that disrupts ordinary structures of meaning and enjoyment.[22] Unlike pleasure, which stabilises and satisfies, jouissance immerses the subject in a raw, unfiltered experience of intensity. The fairground, then, operates as a cultural space of jouissance, delivering fleeting, chaotic bursts of affect that overwhelm cognition and leave participants craving more. These same principles extend to extreme sports, where the pursuit of adrenaline becomes an end in itself. The singularity of a high-speed descent, a daring leap, or a dangerous manoeuvre becomes the focus, detached from any practical or utilitarian goal. Here, the experience is valued purely for the intensity it generates, echoing the fairground's prioritisation of overwhelming affect over meaning. In this context, singularity refers to experiences or events that stand apart – unique, unparalleled bursts

of intensity that defy continuity. Within fairground logic, singularity is both the mechanism and the product: each stimulus strives to distinguish itself, creating a landscape where only novelty and uniqueness have the right to exist. A cycle of anticipation, rupture and renewal mirrors the unfolding of fireworks, where each explosion is a singular event, yet inseparable from the rhythm of the spectacle. The ignition builds expectation, the explosion delivers perception, and the fading light recalibrates individuation – priming the viewer for the next burst. At electronic dance music (EDM) festivals, the pulsing bass, synchronised lights and collective energy of the crowd culminate in singular moments of collective transcendence. The 'drop' in a DJ's set – a carefully orchestrated point of intensity where music, light and crowd energy converge – functions as the zenith of this fairground-like experience, offering participants a peak moment that lingers in the memory long after the event. Just as fireworks are designed to overwhelm perception and reset expectation, the logic of EDM operates through structured intensities, each drop dissolving into the next cycle of anticipation. These moments are not isolated, but feed into a broader rhythmic flow, where expectation, perception and individuation continuously reconstruct the singularity of experience. Theme parks like Disneyland similarly curate singular moments of sensory overload within a cohesive narrative framework, combining the thrill of the fairground with carefully orchestrated storytelling. Each ride or attraction is designed as an isolated peak experience, delivering a controlled chaos that keeps participants craving the next surge of intensity.

In a broader sense, consumer culture operates on fairground logic, perpetuating systems of stimuli and singularities that drive the cycles of desire and consumption. Advertisements, viral campaigns and immersive brand experiences all aim to create singular moments of engagement – bursts of intensity that cut through the noise of everyday life. This logic is evident in immersive marketing events, where brands construct environments that mimic the sensory overload of the fairground to leave a lasting impression on participants. Singularity becomes not just a product but also a driving force; it reflects a cultural and technological emphasis on peak experiences, where intensity and novelty are continuously sought. This dynamic echoes the speculative idea of the technological singularity, where the acceleration of technological advancement reaches a point beyond human comprehension. Similar to the way fairground logic saturates participants with sensory input, the technological singularity envisions a future where the speed and complexity of progress overwhelm traditional systems of understanding. Both forms of singularity highlight a cultural trajectory toward intensification – a shift from reflection and continuity to bursts of overwhelming immediacy. However, the relentless pursuit of intensity within these systems raises critical questions

about sustainability and meaning. The fairground thrill, the EDM drop, the social media dopamine hit – all are designed to be fleeting, creating a void that compels further consumption. This endless cycle mirrors the logic of late capitalism, where singularities are commodified and sold as peak experiences. Yet, these singularities also reveal a deeper cultural desire for transcendence – a yearning for moments that break through the monotony of everyday life and offer a glimpse of something extraordinary. Whether in a fairground, a nightclub, a social media feed or an art installation, these systems deliver moments of jouissance – disruptive, excessive pleasure that immerses participants in the immediacy of the moment. This interplay between fairground logic, stimuli and singularity highlights the growing prioritisation of fleeting but impactful experiences in contemporary life, reshaping how we engage with reality, culture and technology.

Modes of Perception III: Intensive Thinking

Intensive thinking offers an antidote to extensive experience, which focuses on chasing highlights or sensory overload. Rather than framing experience on bases of cognitive markers (like the belief that having seen the Eiffel tower, the Champs Élysées and the Notre Dame is equal to experiencing Paris), intensive thinking offers a soft cartography of affect, based on non-descript and – in many cases – repeated engagements with the mundane. J.J. Gibson's concept of affordances – the actionable possibilities an environment offers to an organism – reframes perception as an active process of engagement rather than passive reception. Rejecting the traditional subject-object divide, Gibson emphasises that perception is direct and relational, emerging through continuous interaction with the surroundings. Affordances are not fixed properties of objects, but arise through the dynamic interplay between an organism's capacities and the environment's structure.[23] This perspective shifts attention from representation to action, highlighting how cognition itself is embedded in perception. Intensive thinking, much like attunement to affordances, requires a sensitivity to the subtle invitations of an environment rather than an impulsive pursuit of predefined stimuli. By engaging deeply with the relational world, we inhabit our *Umwelt*, a shorthand for the totality of our perceived ecology. We move beyond spectacle-driven fairground logic and cultivate a perceptual awareness that is layered and reciprocal. As I often say: you learn more about a city by staying within a hundred meters of your hotel than by racing to its major attractions. While it might sound akin to mindfulness, intensive thinking fundamentally differs: its focus is not on introspection but on perceiving as an act of outward connection, fostering a profound engagement with the environment.

Intensive thinking could feel like an oxymoron, especially if we associate 'thinking' primarily with rational, abstract cognition, while 'intensity' is often linked to affect, sensation and pre-reflective experience. Yet, if we consider intensive in the Deleuzian sense – relating to intensity as a force, a threshold or a field of variation rather than an extensive, measurable quantity – then intensive thinking could denote a mode of engagement that operates through affect, sensation and embodied perception rather than logical abstraction. In this sense, it would align with asignifying cartography: an approach that doesn't represent space through fixed symbols but engages with its dynamic, affective qualities. The distinction between fairground logic, intensive thinking and asignifying cartography is therefore one of gradients, not of ontology: all propose a framework for the deliberate act of registering affect.[24] In different eras and in different ways this has been a topic of exploration. Georges Perec embodies the ethos of intensive thinking by meticulously documenting the ordinary dynamics of a Parisian square, revealing how depth and meaning can emerge within the mundane.[25] This echoes John Berger, who reframes perception as an act of relational discovery rather than passive consumption, challenging the commodification of experience.[26] From an ecological perspective, David Abram explores perception as a participatory act, emphasising the embodied dialogue between the observer and the observed.[27] Arne Næss's deep ecology similarly underscores the interconnectedness of all beings, while Timothy Morton's challenges the divide between humans and the environment, advocating for a relational, immanent approach to experiencing the world. [28] Morton urges a shift in awareness toward 'hyperobjects' – phenomena like climate change that exist beyond immediate human perception, yet shape planetary realities.[29] Tim Ingold's concept of dwelling expands this further, suggesting that meaningful knowledge emerges not through abstraction but through immersion in the relational dynamics of a place.[30]

Intensive thinking also aligns with Rebecca Solnit's reflections when she encourages attention to the ephemeral – shifting light, ambient sounds, and transient forms – as a means of fostering deeper awareness of place and presence.[31] Instead of pursuing escape or external validation, intensive thinking emphasises the relational dynamics of the present moment. It refrains from excessive sensory display, revealing the 'hidden harmonies' of light, shadow and texture, similar to the sensory interactions as described in Perec's observational poetics. Beyond aesthetic contemplation, intensive thinking resists the logic of consumption, favouring a nuanced, immanent way of experiencing the world as it exists, that dissolves boundaries between the observer and the environment. Though both are dealing with direct, non-cognitive experience, intensive thinking sits at the opposite side of the fairground logic. Whereas the fairground relies

on an ever-accelerating production of stimuli to keep the senses oversaturated, intensive thinking seeks to extract its stimuli from the stillness of normality. Perception thus becomes an active and creative force, transforming even the most ordinary surroundings into a source of meaning and discovery. In the end, intensive thinking does not only encourage lingering but invites us to sense outwardly, reconnecting us with the dynamic and ever-transforming *Umwelt*. It is a practice of relational perception that counters the alienation of modern life, emphasising that the ordinary, when approached with attentiveness, can reveal profound insights about both the world and ourselves. Or – as Perec puts it: 'That which is generally not taken note of, that which is not noticed, that which has no importance: what happens when nothing happens other than the weather, people, cars, and clouds.' [32]

Limits of Perception I: Blue Tiger

For centuries, human perception was understood through the classical framework of the five senses: sight, hearing, touch, taste and smell. But this model, inherited from Aristotle, vastly underestimates the depth and complexity of sensory experience. Human perception is limited to a narrow slice of reality. We see only a fraction of the electromagnetic spectrum, excluding UV and infrared, which many animals use for navigation and hunting. Our hearing is similarly constrained, filtering out ultrasonic and infrasonic frequencies. These sensory limits shape not just how we perceive the world but also how we construct cultural and technological realities, often overlooking what lies beyond our range. Modern neuroscience recognises that perception is not limited to the reception of external stimuli but extends into the internal awareness of time, space and the body itself. Beyond the five traditional senses, humans navigate the world through proprioception, the subtle but constant awareness of body position, and equilibrioception, the sense of balance that allows us to stand upright and move fluidly. Even the passage of time is a perceptual experience, as seen in chronoception, where moments stretch or collapse under the weight of emotion and attention. Yet even these expanded faculties pale in comparison to the sensory worlds of non-human beings. Many species perceive the world through senses beyond human reach. Bats and dolphins map space through echolocation, while sharks detect electric fields and birds navigate by the earth's magnetic field. Snakes see heat as light, elephants communicate through seismic waves, and insects decode polarised light. The mantis shrimp is unique in that it possesses all the human senses and significantly enhances them with extra modalities like UV vision, polarised light perception, and extreme motion tracking. If any animal could be said to perceive reality in a radically advanced way, it would be the mantis shrimp. Plants also exhibit complex

responsiveness, sensing touch, gravity and light, without recourse to a nervous system. At the speculative edge, quantum biology suggests that some forms of perception may operate at the subatomic level, hinting at a reality far richer than the human senses reveal.

Colour is not an inherent property of objects, but a perceptual construct shaped by biological and neurological processes. Humans experience colour through trichromatic vision, while many birds, reptiles and insects have tetrachromatic vision, perceiving ultraviolet patterns invisible to us. By contrast, mammals like dogs rely on dichromatic vision, prioritising motion over colour. These differences shape survival strategies – gazelles, for example, see tigers not as bright orange but as muted bluish grey, allowing the predator to blend seamlessly into dry grasslands. Some species push perception further – mantis shrimp process an extraordinary range of light contrasts, while cephalopods manipulate light for camouflage without traditional colour vision. These variations reveal that vision is not a fixed experience but an evolutionary adaptation. Even human perception constructs reality beyond what is physically present, as seen in 'metaphysical purple'; purple is a colour that exists only in the brain's processing activity rather than in the visible spectrum. The Dress phenomenon, which went viral in 2015, involved a photograph of a dress that appeared to be either white and gold or blue and black depending on the viewer's assumptions about ambient lighting. The image became a widely studied case in colour constancy and individual visual perception.[33] Similarly, the Yanny vs. Laurel auditory illusion emerged in 2018 when a sound clip was posted online, dividing listeners into two camps: those who heard 'Yanny' and those who heard 'Laurel.' The divergence stems from differences in pitch sensitivity and frequency emphasis, showing how auditory perception, like vision, is shaped by physiology and expectation. Optical illusions like the Necker cube and Rubin's vase further demonstrate perceptual bistability, where the brain oscillates between interpretations when faced with ambiguous stimuli. These examples underscore how perception is not simply about seeing or hearing but about how the brain organises and resolves sensory input. While technology allows us to extend perception beyond our biological limits, from infrared cameras to ultraviolet imaging, these tools remain shaped by human cognition. They reveal more of reality, but always through the filters of our own sensory frameworks. In this way, perception is not just about what is seen, but about how the unseen is imagined, processed and integrated into our understanding of the world. Yet, these tools do not overcome our limits, but reframe them, offering mediated interpretations rather than direct extensions of our senses. The filtered nature of human perception is akin to a polarised lens, which only allows certain 'directions of movement' to pass through. Just as polarisation

reduces the dimensionality of light waves, our sensory apparatus restricts the vast array of potential perceptions into a manageable, but incomplete, slice of reality. Philosopher Thomas Nagel's famous essay *'What is it like to be a bat?'* illustrates this point, arguing that human understanding is fundamentally limited by the structure of our experience, making it impossible to fully grasp the sensory realities of other organisms.[34] Human perception not only defines how we experience the world but also limits our ability to understand non-human ways of being. These perceptual constraints shape knowledge production, influence choices, and reinforce human-centred biases. Perception is not a passive reception of reality, but an active construction shaped by sensory limitations, experience and context.

Imaging II: Cinematographing as a Semi-Metaphor for *Aisthegráphein*

As discussed in Chapter 1, imaging is the process of constructing mental images of future events, shaping expectations through mediated representations; in an increasingly digital world, imaging has intensified through technological mediation. Imaging is both the production and perception of images in the broadest sense, shaping both individual and collective anticipations. Social media, algorithmic curation, and immersive visualisation tools amplify the production of mediated images, reinforcing specific modes of perception. This process is central to industries such as tourism and branding, where curated imagery prefigures experience, establishing expectations that mediate the engagement with reality. Yet imaging is not merely an anticipatory act; it also conditions how perception itself is structured and narrated. Just as cinematographic techniques manipulate time, movement and focus to shape an audience's engagement with an image, perception itself is an ongoing montage of sensory, affective and cognitive processes. Writing perception, then, is not a neutral act of transcription but an active, structuring force –one that, like cinematography, composes reality through selective framing, rhythm and intensity. Cinematographing can be understood as the composition of virtual and actualised events through a perceptual montage and serves as an instrument for the understanding of *aisthegráphein*, the act of writing perception. If cinematographing is the act of assembling different stimuli into a perception, then *aisthegráphein* is the act of registering perception, potentially leading to cognition. Etymologically, cinematography derives from *kínē-gráphein*, (writing motion) just as *aisthegráphein* inscribes the act of sensing. In both cases, writing is a process of preservation – whether in a medium or in memory – where each scene or shot remains linked to the original event yet is inevitably shaped by the subjective narrative in which it is placed. Like cinema, writing perception is not a neutral recording but a selective, structured montage, where cuts, sequences and framing shape narrative and meaning. This interplay between the actual and its inscription

reminds us that history, too, is written by the winners – an editing process that privileges certain perspectives while erasing others. Yet, as Eisenstein argued with his concept of intellectual montage, composition is not merely about selection but about the creation of new meaning. By juxtaposing images or perceptions, new associations, connotations and interpretations emerge, producing a dialectical movement that exceeds the sum of its parts. Thus, cinematographing is an embodied metaphor for a process that both includes and excludes – integrating sensory and non-sensory input while simultaneously discarding many possibilities. Ultimately, it reduces countless potential configurations to a single outcome. Writing perception, then, does not simply document the world but actively constructs it, generating new intensities, relations and ways of seeing. Perception introduces a multitude of impressions that resist subsumption under pre-existing knowledge. The actualisation of the mundane perceptible is therefore inherently limited, akin to how a montage produces cinema by eliminating the majority of events and privileging certain impulses and viewpoints. Taking exception rather than surplus as the starting point for examining a percept clarifies why its definition is always translucent and plastic. A percept always contains both more and less than the elements in its definition, as – similar to the relation between affect and affection – percept is a field awaiting individual perception. Through the various modes of perception as described earlier, an affordance of perception is generated, allowing for a multitude of impulses to be perceived. Within the act of affording perception, a secondary process of selection occurs: the individuation of the percept. This involves combining, recombining, interpreting and reinterpreting somatic stimuli from the present, past and future, which are produced by a double helix of actuality and virtuality folding into one another.

The cinematographic machine is a non-anthropocentric trope embedded in human perception. It produces the extraordinary state of everyday life by balancing affect and capacity. Starting with the notion of repetition and framing, a cinematographic machine is the paramount metaphor for constructing reality through a montage of actualised and virtual elements, and reshapes our understanding of perception and the mundane. Its recursive complexity underscores the contingent and meta-stable nature of daily life, demonstrating the power of technicity in defining human experience. Through its operation, the cinematographic machine does not only reflect but also constructs the intricate tapestry of existence, blending the actual, the virtual and the affective into a coherent yet dynamic whole. At its core, cinematographing involves a continual dismantling and reassembling of boundaries, enabling shifts in perspective, the creation of functional voids, and the integration of new dimensions into the perceptual field. This process resonates with Deleuzian ideas of difference and

repetition, where each iteration generates new potentialities. Cinematographing acts as an autonomous entity – a mediumless medium – that operates through its autopoiesis, creating and redefining its own parameters while simultaneously destabilising the structures it forms. Cinematographing realism, therefore, constructs a perception of reality that is inherently fluid, incorporating elements from the past, present and future. In practical terms, cinematographing draws on the techniques of montage, not as a mere sequencing of events but as a dialectical process that generates new meanings and realities. It achieves this by synthesising disparate elements – visual, auditory and otherwise sensory – into cohesive yet open-ended experiences, which could be written in memory and made sensible through *aisthegráphein,* writing perception. By challenging traditional hierarchies of perception and knowledge, cinematographing emphasises the non-linear, multi-dimensional nature of reality. The affective and emergent qualities of perception make it a critical instrument for exploring non-anthropocentric agency and the intersections of human and non-human forces. As such, cinematographing becomes not only a method of understanding but also a methodology for creative and educational practices, fostering an awareness of how perception is constructed and reconstructed in relation to the surrounding world. Its operation dismantles distinctions between reality and illusion, producing a seamless montage where the perception of reality becomes inseparable from its mediated construction.

Modes of Perception IV: Autopoiesis

In the next phase I will examine how the act of cinematographing is on the one hand constantly guarded and petrified where possible (its autopoiesis), and on the other hand continuously dismantles whatever it has itself created or enabled (its entropy). The distinction between these effects cannot be found in a classification of their production: both create and destroy simultaneously. Rather, we could frame them as a distinction between the form of content and the form of expression, building on a diagram created by Deleuze and Guattari.[35] As discussed in Chapter 1, this distinction is part of the trio: matter, content and expression. The autopoiesis of cinematographing enables us to speak of an entity without knowing its properties or its magnitude. In a different context, this autopoiesis has been named impredicativity: it is defined by that which it has defined, it is produced by that which it has produced.[36] This is a form of content: as argued earlier it produces (by inclusion) and eliminates (by exclusion) elements, actualised and virtual, that are all affective in the production of perception. The entropy of cinematographing is a form of expression: it arranges, rearranges, discards, selects, modulates, interprets and dismantles existing elements. The reason to use different wording for describing

these actions in relation to cinematographing, is to prevent syllogistic fallacies: not all forms of content is autopoietic, yet autopoiesis is always a form of content; not all forms of expression is entropic, yet all entropy is a form of expression. The autopoiesis of cinematographing is fully individuated, to the extent that it never has an identity. To deepen the understanding of autopoiesis, it is worth returning to the original formulation by biologists Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela, who coined the term to describe the self-organising nature of living systems.[37] In their view, autopoiesis refers to the process by which an organism maintains and reproduces itself through the continuous regeneration of its components. This concept, while originating in biology, has since been adapted by systems theorists, such as Niklas Luhmann, to explore the self-referential nature of social systems.[38] Luhmann's work underscores how systems, much like individuals or perceptions, create and sustain their boundaries through internal operations, reinforcing the idea that autopoiesis is inherently tied to processes of inclusion and exclusion. In the context of cinematographing perception, this biological and systemic foundation enriches the metaphor of self-creation. Perception, as an autopoietic system, does not passively receive stimuli but actively organises and modulates them, producing a coherent yet fluid structure of experience. This aligns with Guattari's concept of the 'ecosophy', in which environmental, social and mental systems interact in a continuous process of mutual shaping and becoming.[39] The autopoietic nature of these interactions reflects the same self-generative dynamics at play in the creation of perceptual and affective worlds.

Cinematographing is not a conscious act of disuniting the formal logic and affective drives, and certainly not an instrument of registration (cartography) in itself. Yet the way our perception is built is very much akin to these types of decisions. Seen from a certain distance, in retrospect, there is always a cartography to be drawn of experiences, lines, tendencies, that are all based on choice based on affect, rather than on ratio. Affect produces an unlimited number of dimensions, yet the combination of dimensions rapidly limits the potential outcomes. Cinematographing, as a perceptual system, balances the generative forces of autopoiesis with the dissipative tendencies of entropy, creating a dynamic equilibrium where perception constantly evolves. The self-generative and entropic dynamics of cinematographing also bear similarities to Varela's work on enaction, which emphasises the co-creation of meaning through the interaction of organism and environment. Enaction shifts the focus from passive representation to active participation, framing perception as an embodied and situated process. This perspective enriches our understanding of cinematographing as an autopoietic act, where the individual and milieu are inseparably intertwined in the production of perceptual realities. As with psychogeography, this process underscores the

affective and relational dimensions of perception, challenging reductive models that prioritise logic and structure over embodied experience. What remains is a singular mapping of experience – a cartography of learning, understanding and reflection – formed by the autopoietic and entropic forces of the cinematographic machine. This mapping is deeply personal yet universally relatable, reflecting the shared yet unique nature of human experience. The entropic aspect of cinematographing perception continuously disrupts categorisation, producing affective chains that define the everyday. These chains, consisting of anamorphic and catamorphic elements, combine random occurrences into rituals that attempt to preserve unrepeatable experiences. Such chains are inherently cinematographic, recombining percepts into a montage that reflects the recursive complexity of human and nonhuman interactions. By framing these chains within the context of the cinematographic machine, we can better understand how perception not only constructs but also preserves the essence of the everyday, producing an unlimited finity of possibilities constrained by its montage. This process underscores the balance between the potential and the actualised, revealing the intricate dynamics of perception.

Limits of Perception II: Entropy

Entropy is pivotal in understanding systems. Claude Shannon in his foundational work on information theory defined entropy as a measure of uncertainty or randomness in a system.[40] While originally developed to quantify information transmission in communication systems, Shannon's entropy provides a metaphor for understanding the unpredictability and variability of perceptual systems. Cinematographing, as a process of perception, parallels Shannon's framework: it balances the generation of new information with the constraints of pre-existing patterns, constantly renegotiating coherence within a dynamic field. Similarly, Norbert Wiener's exploration of feedback loops in cybernetics offers valuable insights into the entropic aspects of perception.[41] Feedback mechanisms – both positive and negative – maintain the system's stability while adapting to external stimuli. In cinematographing, these feedback loops manifest as iterative cycles of selection, filtering and modulation, where perception adjusts dynamically to external and internal forces. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's concept of the rhizome provides another angle for understanding entropy.[42] The rhizome, characterised by its non-hierarchical and decentralised structure, mirrors the entropic dynamics of perception. Just as a rhizome resists fixed categorisation and linear progression, the entropic aspects of cinematographing dismantle and rearrange perceptual elements, creating fluid and emergent cartographies. Deleuze and Guattari's emphasis on multiplicity and becoming resonates with

the idea that perception is an open-ended and ever-evolving process, shaped by both internal and external forces. Daniel Kahneman's exploration of cognitive biases sheds light on the mechanisms underlying outgoing forces of selection.[43] Kahneman distinguishes between a fast system (automatic and intuitive) and a slow system (deliberate and analytical) of thinking, illustrating how perceptual biases and heuristics influence decision-making. In the context of entropy, these cognitive systems highlight the interplay between learned patterns and immediate sensory input, where fast, affect-driven responses often dominate the initial stages of perception. As I have argued, the entropy of cinematographing is a form of expression. In this process, all elements it includes – or that include it (its predicativity) – are filtered, selected, ordered, sorted and connected. This is a progressive system that reduces the dimensions created by the stream of (sub) conscious somaesthetic stimuli that generate the event, whereby every previous event, (and the anticipation of future events) becomes part of these same stimuli. It is progressive in the sense that every choice made renders several other potential choices extinct. The filtering process itself is caused by many systems operating simultaneously. One of those systems is what psychologist Leon Festinger calls 'cognitive dissonance.' He argues that humans strive for internal consistency in processing cognitive stimuli; information that does not match expectation is more likely to be compensated by the mind rather than leading to a change of perspective. This represents an outgoing force in the processing of information: the mind actively blocks certain information if it does not meet expectations, closely related to the building of cognition, as discussed before. Strong actors in building expectations are produced by systems of codification, situation, commodification and signification.[44] Known examples are the frequency illusion (suddenly seeing a specific brand or colour of a car everywhere after it was mentioned), brand bias (attaching special value to a product once the brand is known), and melancholy bias (being affected by seeing a specific object associated with a special person or occasion). These cognitive biases are complex, ubiquitous, and play a significant role in the perception of information.

Another form of filtering operates through incoming forces of selection, where one type of information overrides or suppresses another. This process unfolds across two layers: the apparent and the complex. The apparent layer is predominantly physical – loud sounds drown out softer ones, and intense light washes out subtler visual details like hue and contour. The complex system follows, refining selection after the apparent layer has filtered the initial input and operates through deep perceptual layers that remain latent until triggered. Unlike outgoing selection (primarily shaped by cognition), the complex incoming system links stimuli directly to their affects. This does not mean that the same stimuli affect

everyone equally – far from it. The capacity to affect is not the same as affecting, just as the ability to perceive is not the same as perceiving. Affects bypass conscious processing, acting directly on the nervous system. While knowledge can mediate these responses – context can alter an object's affective impact – they cannot be unlearned, only repressed. The interplay between incoming and outgoing selection systems ensures that each perception is so individualised that comparison becomes futile. This is why this aspect of cinematographing perception has an entropic nature: it disperses, bounces and modulates information, disrupting the very categorisations that initially structured it. In this way, perception remains in flux, resisting the stability imposed by autopoietic systems. If perception is shaped by the interplay of impredicative autopoietic forces and entropic dispersal, then negentropy functions as a structuring force that stabilises perception without fully arresting its dynamism. While entropy disperses, modulates and overloads perceptual input, negentropy selectively reconfigures patterns, extracting order from excess while maintaining adaptive flexibility. However, negentropy should not be mistaken for a rigid counterforce to entropy; rather, it operates immanently within entropic variation, preventing perception from dissolving into pure noise while resisting fixed categorisation. In the context of cinematographing, negentropy manifests in the iterative feedback loops that filter, select and refine perception, ensuring a degree of coherence amid flux. Heinz von Foerster's concept of 'order from noise' applies here: perception does not merely impose structure, but continuously extracts it from chaotic sensory input, allowing for both stability and reconfiguration.[45] Affective and cognitive systems enact negentropic filtering on multiple levels. On the apparent level, negentropy is perceptual thresholding, where dominant stimuli override subtler ones – a loud sound dampening softer noises, an intense light source occluding finer visual details. On a complex level, negentropy functions as selective synthesis, where certain stimuli take precedence not through force but through affective and cognitive weighting. This resonates with Simondon's theory of individuation, where perception remains metastable: structured enough to generate meaning but open-ended enough to evolve. Guattari's concept of 'machinic subjectivity' similarly emphasises that perception is not merely conditioned by external stimuli but actively co-produces meaning through iterative structuring, resisting total entropy while remaining dynamic. Negentropy does not oppose entropy; rather, it works through entropy, allowing perception to oscillate between emergent patterning and disintegration, coherence and divergence, selection and excess. Cinematographing, then, is an entropic-negentropic process: perception constantly shifts between the entropy of variation and the negentropy of selection, never fully resolving but always renegotiating its terms of coherence. This interplay ensures that perception is

neither a passive registration of stimuli nor a fixed representational framework, but an ongoing negotiation between excess and synthesis, unpredictability and structure, autopoiesis and dissipation.

By exploring building perception as a cinematographic process that leads to the writing of perception – *aisthegráphein*, we see that reality is actively constructed rather than passively absorbed. Imaging plays a central role in this process, shaping perception by structuring how sensory data is encoded, retrieved and contextualised. Every image – whether biological, technological or mnemonic – acts as a node in an evolving cartography of cognition, where perception is both a filtering mechanism and a site of creative recombination. The interrelation of difference, repetition and intensity reveals that perception is not merely an event but a dynamic, recursive process that continually shapes and reshapes the everyday, often beneath conscious awareness. Here, imaging operates as both aesthetic encoding and epistemic scaffolding, determining not just what is seen but how it is seen, interpreted and remembered. This is particularly significant in a world increasingly mediated by machine-generated imagery, where algorithmic vision lacks the embodied, affect-driven engagement that defines human perception. The distinctions between mammalian and machine vision emphasise how biological perception is inherently relational, woven into affective, ecological and cognitive networks, whereas computational imaging functions through abstraction, extraction and optimisation. This underscores a critical tension: as machine-generated images increasingly populate our perceptual environment, they do not only reshape what is seen but recalibrate how seeing itself is structured. The entropic, negentropic and autopoietic forces at play in perception – where external stimuli are filtered, reordered and recombined – point to a continuously evolving imaging system, one that is no longer purely biological but increasingly co-authored by non-human vision. The interplay between stability (autopoiesis) and disruption (entropy) mirrors larger systemic and ecological processes, reinforcing the interdependence of perception, imaging and socio-cultural contexts. The question is no longer whether imaging mediates perception, but to what extent it governs it – dictating how we engage with environments, construct meaning, and anticipate the unknown. What remains is the cartography of perception itself, an evolving, singular mapping of experiences that consists of learning, understanding, narration, affection, anticipation and reflection. Ultimately, this chapter positions perception not merely as an interpretative mechanism but as a creative force – one shaped through the recursive interplay of imaging, embodiment and memory. In an era when algorithmic systems increasingly shape what is visible, perception remains deeply relational and affective, resisting reduction to mere computation. The image is not simply a representation, but an active site of world-building – one

where human cognition and technological mediation continuously renegotiate the boundaries between what is seen, what is known, and what is yet to be imagined. The next chapter introduces a framework for understanding the image by proxy, reimagining image classification through the intertwined perspectives of affect and visibility. In the techno-social mediascape, the blurred boundary between actual and perceived reality profoundly influences our understanding of existence. New forms of image production recalibrate the status of older imagery through sheer outnumbering and homogenisation, eroding established veracities and belief structures. With over two trillion images produced annually, the recursive relationship between collective expectation, imaging and perception is not just a reflection of reality but an active force in shaping both individual and collective worldviews.

Resonant Cognition III: Lost Time

Time lost, time reclaimed – Diderot's *esprit de l'escalier* names the delayed realisation, the perfect response that arrives only when the moment has passed. But what if this belatedness is not a failure, but an opening?[46] In *À la recherche du temps perdu*, Proust's narrator reconstructs memory not as a linear sequence but as an affective resonance, a return that is never quite the same.[47] The lost time (*temps perdu*) is never truly lost – it lingers, waiting to be re-actualised in new intensities, much like the unsaid words that shape *l'esprit de l'escalier*. Diderot and Proust, each in their own way, reveal the delayed encounter as an event in itself, where thought does not follow action, but rather unfolds in a temporality of its own. The missed response, the forgotten time, the deferred realisation – these are not absences, but forces that continue to shape what comes next. Chronoception is the perceptual experience of time, encompassing both its measured (objective) and felt (subjective) dimensions. In the framework of Henri Bergson, time is not an external sequence of discrete moments but a continuous flow of duration (*durée*). Unlike clock-time, which segments time into measurable units, Bergson's *durée* is qualitative, affective and indivisible – time is lived rather than counted.[48] Chronoception, then, is not merely an ability to estimate intervals but an ongoing negotiation between the sensory present and the fluid experience of duration. This distinction is particularly evident in moments where time expands (as in moments of crisis) or contracts (as in habitual repetition), demonstrating that the perception of time is not passive but actively shaped by consciousness, memory and affect. The Greek philosophical tradition predates this understanding by distinguishing between *chronos* and *kairos* – two distinct but interwoven conceptions of time. Chronos refers to quantitative, linear time, the steady, sequential unfolding of events that can be measured and recorded. It is the time of the clock, of calendars,

of deadlines, and the basis for modern economic and technological systems. By contrast, *kairos* represents qualitative, opportune time, the right moment, where time is experienced not as a sequence but as an intensity. It is the time of affect, of rupture, of decision – the moment when duration crystallises into an event of transformation. Bergson's *durée* aligns more closely with *kairos* than with *chronos*. Just as *durée* resists segmentation, *kairos* disrupts linearity, manifesting in moments of heightened presence where time is no longer measured but felt. Moments of artistic inspiration, existential crisis, or deep immersion are instances where *kairos* supersedes *chronos*, shifting time from a background metric into an embodied force. This dual framework is particularly relevant to media theory and affect studies, where the relationship between time, perception and experience shapes not only how we engage with the world but also how images, narratives and sensory experiences manipulate our temporal awareness. In cinema, for instance, classical editing techniques adhere to *chronos*, maintaining continuity and predictability, whereas modernist and experimental films – such as those of Wong Kar-Wai or Bertrand Bonello – often evoke *kairos*, slowing down time, fracturing its flow, and immersing the viewer in pure affect.

Chronoception is not just a passive faculty of estimating time, but a dynamic process oscillating between *chronos* and *kairos*, between structured time and lived time, between the measured and the immeasurable. Time, as philosophers like Henri Bergson and Gilles Deleuze have argued, is far from a uniform or linear phenomenon. It unfolds as a multiplicity of rhythms, each with its own scale, tempo and significance. While human temporalities – hours, days, years – often dominate our understanding, they coexist with far slower and far faster processes that stretch beyond immediate perception. This relativity of timescales challenges the notion of a universal clock, urging us to recognise the intricate layers of time that shape existence. In India, the Mala Kumbh Mela ritual offers an extraordinary example. Celebrated once every 144 years, this pilgrimage draws millions of devotees to sacred rivers to cleanse themselves of sins and seek spiritual renewal. For those who participate, the event is likely a singular occurrence, a once-in-two-lifetimes convergence of spiritual and cosmic significance. Yet, for the ritual itself, 144 years represents merely one cycle in its ongoing rhythm, a temporal scale that reminds of the fleeting nature of human life. Time unfolds at different speeds, shaped by technological, cultural and ecological forces. Technological progress accelerates, collapsing intervals between transformations – what once took centuries now occurs in decades, restructuring global communication, labour and society. Meanwhile, cultural practices evolve at a slower pace, resisting rapid change. This tension between fast-moving innovation and deep-rooted traditions creates friction, influencing

societal trajectories. The relativity shapes human priorities. Short-term political and economic cycles cannot adequately address long-term ecological crises like climate change, because immediate demands overshadow sustained action. The misalignment of temporal scales underscores the consequences of privileging the present over enduring systems. As Bergson suggests, time is not a homogeneous sequence but a multiplicity of durations, interacting across different scales. A ritual spanning generations and a single human life exist within overlapping but distinct rhythms. Deleuze extends this view, presenting time as an interplay of *chronos* (measured, sequential time), *aion* (an infinite continuum), and the event (a rupture where new possibilities emerge). These dimensions challenge linear chronology, urging a perspective that accounts for time's elasticity – how it stretches, contracts and accumulates meaning beyond fixed measurement. Understanding time requires moving beyond rigid frameworks to recognise its multiple expressions. It can be immersive and relational, shaping experience through affect and memory, or structured and objective, organising history and systems. Moments of crisis slow time, while repetition dissolves it into habit. Some durations are lived intensely, others pass unnoticed, their significance determined by context and perception.

Time is not merely a background – it is an active force, structuring, disrupting and reshaping the world in ways both subtle and profound. It unfolds through a multiplicity of modes, shaping and being shaped by perception. It emerges in the interplay of lived moments, where time is both counted and felt, linear yet elastic, structured yet constantly slipping beyond the boundaries of measurement. Time stretches and contracts, expands and compresses, always contingent on context and affect. Some moments carry weight beyond their measured duration, revealing how time is not just something we observe but something we inhabit. It is voluminous, taking shape retrospectively, as events accumulate meaning only in hindsight. It is indexical, tied to markers that attempt to ground it, yet always conditioned by the subjectivity of experience. It moves with a sense of directionality, sometimes appearing linear, sometimes folding back upon itself, revealing its deeper relational complexity. Sequential yet not always causal, it rearranges past, present and future in unexpected configurations. There are moments in which time appears to fracture, running on multiple tracks at once. Simultaneity reveals overlapping narratives, disrupting the idea of a singular chronology, allowing histories to merge and reinterpret one another in retrospect. Proximity shifts the weight of time, where scales of duration differ across beings and environments – what may seem fleeting to one organism is an eternity to another. Some temporalities demand endurance and patience, where time is an investment required for transformation, while others impose themselves suddenly, marked by

their intensity rather than their duration. Anticipation extends the present into the future, shaping decisions based on unrealised potential, just as memory draws the past forward, making it a lived force rather than a distant record. Time is neither wholly external nor entirely internal; it is anchored in rituals, repetitions and social structures that assign it meaning. It can be ritualised, inscribed into ceremonies that punctuate existence, reinforcing collective temporalities. At other moments, time is heightened, bending under emotional or physiological pressure, where fear, desire or urgency distorts its ordinary flow. It is a process, where past experiences do not simply fade but continue to inform the present, extending their effects into the now. It is also inherently plural, adapting to communal rhythms, privileging simultaneity over strict succession, as seen in polychronic cultural traditions where multiple engagements coexist rather than following a rigid linearity. The perception of time is a continuous interplay between structure and sensation, a force that is measured yet elusive, predictable yet disruptive. It does not merely pass but acts, shapes and transforms, revealing itself as both constraint and potential. It governs and unsettles, structures and liberates. To understand time is not merely to record its passage but to recognise the multiplicity of ways in which it emerges, revealing that our engagement with it is never neutral – it is always, inevitably, an act of negotiation, always perceived too late, like the perpetual *temps perdu*.

Notes

1 Elizabeth Grosz, *Chaos, Territory, Art: Deleuze and the Framing of the Earth* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008).
2 Gilbert Simondon, *Individuation in Light of Notions of Form and Information*, trans. Taylor Adkins (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2020).
3 A Convolutional Neural Network (CNN) is a type of artificial neural network designed for processing grid-like data, such as images, using convolutional layers to detect patterns and features automatically. It is widely used in image recognition, object detection, and deep learning tasks.
4 Anton Pidkuiko and Boris Starkov, 'GibberLink', *Github,* February 2025, https://github.com/PennyroyalTea/gibberlink?tab=readme-ov-file.
5 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (London: Routledge, 1962).
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Fig. 8: A cruise ship and an old sailboat share the same waters, yet their difference serves as a metaphor for the gap between mammalian and machine perception: co-present but fundamentally incommensurable, they operate in the same field without equal capacities. Photo: author.

Fig. 9: A woman on the phone in a tram in Budapest: the autopoiesis of perception emerges from a layered field of interior and exterior, near and far, public and private – folded into a single moment of embodied attention. Photo: author.

Fig. 10: A man navigates a hyper-mediated field where urban density and digital attention converge. The saturation of signals fragments awareness, giving rise to a distorted cognition in which perception is shaped more by interference than by orientation. Photo: author.

Fig. 11: An abandoned school in Berlin, where social coherence has decayed faster than physical structure. This temporal disjunction contrasts with the retrospective affect of former students, potentially inducing cognitive bias through nostalgic distortion. Photo: author.

Fig. 12: A lamppost partly obscured by trees. To truly understand what this means might require understanding the entire universe, starting through intensive thinking: a slow, embodied attunement to how meaning emerges through immanence in even the smallest of things. Photo: author.

Consistency: The Image by Proxy and Other Intra-Affective Visibilities

This chapter introduces a framework for understanding the image by proxy as a reimagined image classification through the overlapping lenses of affect and visibility. The blurred boundary between actual and perceived reality in the techno-social mediascape profoundly influences our understanding of existence. New forms of image production recalibrate the status of older imagery through sheer outnumbering and homogenisation, increasingly eroding established veracities and beliefs. With over two trillion images produced annually, the recursive relationship between collective expectation, imaging and perception shapes both individual and collective realities. This process challenges traditional notions of truth and justice, emphasising their relativity rather than treating them as fixed entities. Desire emerges from the interplay of absolute and relative elements, forming a forcefield of attraction and distance that demands constant re-establishment and consumption. Yet, the illusion generated by desire often overshadows its power, requiring new frameworks to comprehend the complexities of image ontology. The concept of the image by proxy captures the dynamic processes through which images actively construct our experience of the world. These images, shaped by the techno-social realm, impact consciousness by creating a choice about which version of reality to engage with. Drawing on new materialism, agential realism and affect theory, this notion situates imaging as an active force, emphasising the entanglement of expectation, materiality and perception.

The vitality of these processes lies in their ability to materialise shadows cast by collective desires, forming temporal and unfixed images produced on an industrial scale. Guy Debord saw an emerging world where social life is

increasingly mediated by images, replacing direct experience with commodified representation.[1] Yet, in the wake of Baudrillard's critique, the spectacle has succumbed to the logic of the simulacrum, where images no longer represent or distort reality but constitute a self-referential system – an endless play of signs detached from any original referent. However, the techno-socio agency-scape of contemporary media demands a new conceptualisation beyond both the spectacle and the simulacrum: the image by proxy. No longer merely an alienating representation or an empty simulation, the proxy-image operates as an intercessor, structuring perception through algorithmic mediation, predictive modelling, and networked circulation. It is not just a stand-in for experience but an active agent in its modulation, encoding and prefiguring subjectivity before engagement even occurs. In this sense, the image by proxy marks a shift from representation and simulation to pre-mediation and infrastructural conditioning, rendering reality not as spectacle but as a dynamically managed system of perceptual proxies. If earlier critiques proverbially centred on the artificial world constructed around 'Truman Burbank', today we confront the realisation that there is no world outside his – no hidden reality behind the illusion, only the seamless continuity of mediation itself.[2]

The concept of the image by proxy does not only situate the image within material systems, but also foregrounds its capacity to destabilise representational logic and offer new modes of engagement with desire and intersecting crises. This approach resonates with a rich tapestry of media theories while carving its unique space within contemporary thought. Friedrich Kittler and Siegfried Zielinski share a methodological affinity with this concept through their media archaeological approaches, revealing the deep temporal layers and material infrastructures that shape media. Like Kittler's focus on technological determinism and Zielinski's speculative variantology, my work situates the proxy image within its historical and material genealogies.[3] However, while they emphasise the autonomy and historicity of media systems, the image by proxy moves beyond this to foreground the relational and conceptual capacities of the image that surpasses the human mandate. Jussi Parikka's ecological materialism aligns closely with this emphasis, particularly in addressing the image's material entanglements within capitalist extraction and ecological degradation.[4] Parikka's notion of 'deep time' provides a compelling framework for understanding the proxy image as a material and historical entity, deeply embedded in socio-ecological systems.

Yet, *the image by proxy* departs from Parikka's ecological outlook by situating these material concerns within a broader matrix of intersecting crises – capitalist overproduction, technological symbiosis and representational politics – thereby expanding the discussion beyond media's complicity in environmental

degradation to explore its speculative and transformative capacities. Other thinkers, such as Vilém Flusser and Mark Hansen, extend this dialogue by emphasising the image's affective and cognitive dimensions. Flusser's notion of the apparatus and Hansen's focus on the embodied experience of media highlight how technological systems mediate perception and knowledge.[5] While their work underscores the programmed and perceptual dynamics of images, my focus diverges by positioning the proxy image as a conceptual agent – not merely a product of technical systems but a mediator of absences and transformative potentials within socio-cultural frameworks. Posthumanist perspectives, such as those of Donna Haraway, Rosi Braidotti and Jane Bennett, further enrich this dialogue by situating the proxy image within non-anthropocentric assemblages.[6] Like Haraway's cyborg or Bennett's 'thing-power', my proxy image destabilises human-centred paradigms, extending agency to the nonhuman. However, where their focus often emphasises ethics and vitality, the image by proxy interrogates how these assemblages mediate absences and enable speculative reconfigurations of representation and agency. In this way, the image by proxy both builds on and departs from these thinkers, integrating materialist critiques and ecological insights while emphasising the conceptual, relational and speculative dimensions of the image. This positions it as a framework for rethinking media not just as agent of mediation and transformation, but as a network of self-reproduction and proliferation with its own agenda, whereby the actual imaging is produced in a decentralised manner. While earlier modes of mass communication – rooted in broadcast television, radio and print – functioned in a comparatively centralised and one-way manner, the contemporary landscape is reshaped by the distributed, ubiquitous proliferation of smartphones and other 'mass-micro' imaging devices. Their near-constant presence collapses barriers between producer and consumer, inviting the rapid circulation of images and redefining the very notion of public and private representation, even before the distinction between true and fake information. By examining these newer assemblages, the image by proxy highlights how digital mediation has evolved into an intricate web of ongoing, micro-level interactions, which has no other mode of control but itself.

Brain Rot

In 2024, the Oxford Dictionaries' Word of the Year was 'brain rot', highlighting the perceived dangers of excessive exposure to trivial digital content. Originating from the online cultures of Generation Z and Generation Alpha, 'brain rot' describes 'the supposed deterioration of a person's mental or intellectual state, especially viewed as the result of overconsumption of material (now particularly online content) considered to be trivial or unchallenging.'[7] The term broadly refers to

the detrimental impact of excessive digital media consumption, particularly short-form entertainment and doomscrolling. The late Pope Francis used the term in 2025 as he urged to reduce social media consumption and avoid what he referred to as 'putrefazione cerebrale'.[8] Research shows that excessive social media use contributes to cognitive decline by impairing attention, memory and critical thinking. This phenomenon aligns with the concept of digital dementia, where prolonged digital engagement leads to symptoms resembling early cognitive deterioration, including reduced focus and mental fatigue.[9] Smartphone use has become synonymous with sensory and cognitive saturation, embedding individuals in a relentless flow of stimuli, notifications and algorithmically curated content. The careful construction and monitoring of social media to assure maximum engagement, involves high-quality systemic thinking by the designers, as described for instance in Jeff Orlowski's *The Social Dilemma*.[10]

The omnipresence of screens collapses moments of pause, replacing them with a constant influx of mediated signals that demand attention and fragment focus. This saturation does not only reshape perception, blurring the boundaries between immediacy and overload, but also alters cognitive processes, conditioning users to navigate reality through the logic of digital acceleration. In this hyper-mediated environment, the capacity for deep engagement diminishes as individuals oscillate between fragmented interactions, reinforcing a mode of existence where attention is perpetually dispersed yet never fully present. Mid2025, there are approximately 7.2 billion smartphones in use globally, representing about 87 per cent of all mobile handsets. With an estimated 5.3 billion people actively using smartphones – equating to roughly 64 per cent of the global population – internet use has reached what might be called a supermajority status: twice as many people are now online than not, marking a fundamental shift in global connectivity and access to digital infrastructures.[11] This widespread adoption underscores the deep integration of smartphones in daily life, contributing to the pervasive information saturation that characterises modern society. In 2025, the Netherlands, for instance, had approximately 25.3 million mobile connections – about 138 per cent of the population – and nearly universal mobile broadband coverage at 99.6 per cent.[12] This increasing ubiquity of smartphones amplifies the saturation effect, shaping contemporary cognitive patterns and modes of interaction on an unprecedented scale.[13] Apart from their role in imaging and proliferation, smartphones themselves pose significant risks beyond the realm of visual culture. The act of smartphone use – its sheer omnipresence and compulsive integration into daily life – has severe health implications. Globally, individuals now spend an average of nearly seven hours per day on screens, with smartphones accounting for a significant portion of this time. This sustained

engagement is not passive; it is an engineered dependency, designed to maximise interaction through dopamine-driven feedback loops, algorithmic reinforcement and behavioural conditioning. The consequences extend beyond digital fatigue, affecting cognition, attention spans, posture, sleep cycles and even neurological development. The device that once promised expanded access to knowledge and connection has, in many ways, become an apparatus of cognitive fragmentation and physical deterioration.

This constant engagement leads to information overload, where the sheer volume of data surpasses users' processing capacities, resulting in heightened stress and diminished attention spans. Research indicates that compulsive smartphone use and information overload are significant predictors of technostress among university students. Additionally, a study found that 70 per cent of participants check their phones within an hour of waking, and 56 per cent do so before going to bed, underscoring the deep integration of smartphones into daily routines. This relentless influx of information fragments impairs the ability to engage deeply with tasks, contributing to a state of continuous partial attention. Smartphone addiction, or problematic smartphone use has become a growing public health concern, with substantial psychological and behavioural implications. Research indicates strong associations between excessive smartphone use, mental health issues and behavioural changes driven by social media dynamics. A systematic review published in *BMC Psychiatry* found that approximately 23 per cent of adolescents exhibit problematic smartphone use, with significant associations between problematic smartphone use and anxiety, depression and lower self-esteem, as well as a strong correlation between problematic smartphone use and poor self-regulation, indicating that people with diminished self-control are more prone to compulsive smartphone behaviour.[14] Similarly, a meta-analysis by Maya Samaha and Nazir Hawi established that individuals with higher smartphone dependency scores experience increased stress and emotional instability. Neurofunctional studies suggest that problematic smartphone use activates brain regions related to impulse control and reward processing, comparable to patterns observed in substance addiction.[15] Other studies indicate that excessive smartphone use before bedtime disrupts sleep by reducing sleep duration, increasing sleep latency, suppressing melatonin production, and ultimately impairing cognitive function, emotional regulation and performance.[16]

Social media deeply shapes user behaviour through psychological processes such as social comparison, reinforcement loops and digital validation. According to the theory of social comparison, users often measure themselves against the idealised representations they encounter online, causing fluctuations in self-esteem and heightened body dissatisfaction.[17] A review by Betul Keles et

al. additionally demonstrates that social media exposure correlates with increased anxiety and depression – particularly among adolescents – underscoring the vulnerability of developing psyches in highly mediated environments.[18] Meanwhile, platform-based reinforcement mechanisms (e.g., likes, comments, notifications) encourage habitual engagement, further entrenching compulsive patterns of use.[19] Yet these psycho-physical outcomes merely hint at deeper implications concerning the ontology of the image. As the image by proxy suggests, there is an 'unhealthy yet voluntary labour' undergirding digital platforms, in which individual users continuously generate content to sustain and expand the very systems that shape their behaviour. This activity, amplified by the smartphone's omnipresence and the ease of image capture, creates a new power dynamic in media production and distribution – one that has no historical precedent. Never has image-making been so vast in scale or so closely tethered to individual acts of self-disclosure and everyday surveillance. As such, rethinking the discourse on the ontology of the image must now account for both the staggering volume of daily image production and the profound, ongoing feedback loop between human psychology and digital media infrastructures.

Image Taxonomies

Throughout the twentieth century, mass communication was the principal mechanism of ideological control. Whether through print, radio or television, centralised media structures dictated narratives, shaped perceptions and reinforced dominant power structures. Theorists such as Marshall McLuhan, Noam Chomsky, Theodor Adorno and Neil Postman critically examined this system, warning that mass media not only informed but also conditioned the public, often serving as a tool for indoctrination rather than enlightenment. However, as media landscapes transitioned from mass communication to decentralised, peer-to-peer networks, the traditional means of control required restructuring. The direct control of media evolved into the subtler mechanism of what we now recognise as the imaging machine – a system in which power exerts influence not by producing images directly but by shaping the conditions under which images are made, circulated and interpreted. This shift marks the rise of the image by proxy as the dominant mode of ideological mediation. In the era of mass communication, media were top-down structures – few produced, many consumed. Chomsky extended this analysis, exposing how mass media functioned to 'manufacture consent', limiting the range of acceptable discourse while giving the illusion of free debate.[20] Adorno, within the Frankfurt School, warned of the 'culture industry' as a mechanism that standardises culture, reducing critical engagement in favour of passive consumption.[21] Postman lamented the entertainment-driven nature

of media, arguing that information was increasingly subordinated to spectacle.[22] Baudrillard's critique of simulation and hyperreality further complicated this landscape, as media do not only distort but often replace reality itself, making control even more elusive and pervasive.[23]

These critiques highlight how traditional mass communication concentrated power in the hands of those who controlled media institutions. However, as digital technologies fragmented mass audiences and empowered individuals to produce and distribute content, the old model of direct control became insufficient. The challenge for dominant structures was no longer how to control centralised media, but how to maintain influence in a world of proliferating images. The transition from mass communication to mass-microimaging – where every individual is both a consumer and producer of images – dismantled old gatekeeping models. In theory, this decentralisation promised greater agency, more democratic discourse, and the erosion of top-down ideological control. However, power quickly adapted. Instead of controlling media content directly, it began to control the infrastructures, algorithms and economies that dictate visibility and circulation. This restructuring formed what can be called the imaging machine – a system where control is exerted not through singular narratives, but through shaping the conditions of mediation itself. The image by proxy emerges as a result of this shift. Governments or corporations no longer need to produce propaganda in a traditional sense; instead, they create platforms and incentive structures that encourage users to generate content that aligns with hegemonic interests. The mechanisms of influence are embedded in the very architecture of digital platforms: algorithmic amplification, aesthetic trends, virality metrics, and the monetisation of attention. The image is no longer merely a representation – it is an action, a form of participation within an orchestrated system of meaning-making that remains invisibly governed.

The power of the image by proxy lies in its subtlety. Unlike overt propaganda, it does not dictate what should be seen, but rather engineers the conditions under which certain images gain prominence while others fade into obscurity. The policing of discourse is no longer a matter of censorship but of selective visibility. Adorno's culture industry finds a new manifestation in algorithmic culture: creativity appears decentralised, yet its circulation remains tightly regulated. Chomsky's warning about the illusion of debate persists – only now, ideological boundaries are not enforced by editors or producers but by engagement metrics and content moderation policies that ostensibly serve neutral, technical purposes.

Postman's critique of the transformation of information into entertainment is perhaps more relevant than ever. The imaging machine thrives on the conversion of all discourse into spectacle, ensuring that even radical critiques become

aestheticised and neutralised through their incorporation into the endless stream of content. McLuhan's insight that the medium is the message finds its contemporary equivalent in the algorithmic mediation of reality itself – what is seen, what is shared, and what is deemed *real* are no longer functions of journalistic authority but of computational logic.[24] If the twentieth century's ideological struggle was waged through mass communication, the twenty-first century's battlefield is the space of mass-microimaging. The imaging machine ensures that the image by proxy becomes the dominant means of social and political conditioning. Power no longer needs to tell individuals what to think; it merely needs to structure the incentives and logics through which images are produced and circulated. The result is a new kind of ideological control – one that operates not through command, but through the imperceptible governance of the conditions of visibility itself. Taxonomies of images, developed across multiple disciplines, have traditionally provided critical frameworks for understanding how images function within cultural and perceptual contexts. Early studies often focused on what images depict – whether on their representational meaning, semiotic significance or historical relevance.

However, as the need for automated image recognition and labelling in digital media grows, such taxonomies increasingly operate beyond direct human perception. They now span a wide range of classification systems – from perceptual and geometric primitives to semantic units, and from cultural and contextual markers to emotional and metadata-based attributes.[25] In automated networks, the explicit caveat is that no human is directly involved in the interpretative process, underscoring a new frontier in how images are categorised and deployed. In visual studies, much research has been dedicated to the classification and interpretation of images, yet less attention has been given to their operational force – how they act upon us and structure experience. However, shifting the focus toward what images do rather than what they show offers new ways of understanding their role in shaping perception and cognition. The agency of images extends beyond their content, functioning within larger systems that influence knowledge production and political representation. Simultaneously, technological progress has democratised image production, editing and distribution to such an extent that their credibility is increasingly questioned, making the role of the image ever more micro-political. This shift has sparked debates on authenticity (deepfakes), political representation (asymmetrical signification), historical value (canonical validation), behavioural impact (algorithmic influence), and ontological positioning (non-anthropocentric imaging). These concerns challenge traditional semiotics, making space for new frameworks that interrogate signification beyond classical models. W.J.T. Mitchell introduced a paradigm shift in visual culture studies, reframing images

as active participants rather than passive representations.[26] Moving beyond the conventional semiotic approach, Mitchell argues that images *want* – not in a literal, sentient sense, but as a conceptual framework for understanding their affective and cultural agency. His work exposes the ways in which images exert influence, demand engagement and participate in social and political structures, often provoking devotion, iconoclasm or censorship. This argument rests on the premise that humans do not simply use images to communicate; rather, images function as agents that shape human perception and even belief systems. However, Mitchell's analysis, grounded in the early digital era, could not have fully anticipated the radical transformation of visual culture that followed the rise of broadband-enabled, algorithmically driven media ecosystems in the early twenty-tens. In this new visual regime, the image by proxy extends Mitchell's framework into an era of digital excess, where images are not only consumed but also evolve and disseminate through automated and networked processes. Mitchell's concept of the living image draws on the historical oscillation between idolatry and iconoclasm, where images are alternately revered and destroyed based on their perceived power. He highlights a double consciousness – a simultaneous awareness that images are mere representations and a competing tendency to treat them as real. This paradox remains relevant in contemporary digital culture, yet the scale, speed and automation of image production and circulation have fundamentally altered the stakes. If Mitchell's images wanted attention and circulation, today's digital images do not only *want* but are designed to *demand* – propelled by machine learning, algorithmic amplification and networked virality. The emergence of the image by proxy builds upon Mitchell's foundational thinking and extends this into the realm of digital overload. Unlike the traditional image, which operates within a relatively stable interpretive framework, the image by proxy functions within a dynamic system of mediation, where it is constantly replicated and recontextualised without a fixed authorial intent. Social media avatars, deepfakes, memes and algorithmically generated visual content function less as discrete representations and more as self-perpetuating agents that influence perception and manipulate affect. The image no longer simply *wants* circulation – it is engineered to *perpetuate itself*, often autonomously, within an ecosystem of digital overproduction. Crucially, Mitchell's original thesis was formulated before the rise of algorithmically curated visual culture, which gained dominance after 2012. This period saw the rapid expansion of mobile-first social platforms such as Instagram, Snapchat and later TikTok, solidifying the shift from text-based interaction to an image-first media landscape. Before broadband mobile internet, the mediascape was dominates by a few gatekeepers – TV networks, magazines, and radio – reaching millions through scheduled broadcasts and print circulation

(e.g. Rolling Stone magazine peaked at 1.5 million readers; MTV drew up to 1 million daily viewers). The 2008 Beijing Olympics opening ceremony reached an estimated 2 billion viewers, making it the most-watched single broadcast event in history. With the advent of broadband mobile internet (circa 2012), media influence became decentralised and continuous and now seeks its audience driven by algorithm, not viewers' choice. Platforms like Instagram (over 2 billion monthly users in 2025) and TikTok (1.5+ billion monthly users) enable anyone to produce and distribute content globally – instantly and at scale. Individual posts or videos now regularly reach tens or even hundreds of millions of viewers in hours, marking a radical shift from top-down cultural transmission to real-time, participatory virality.

Simultaneously, advances in deep learning laid the groundwork for contemporary automated image manipulation, from facial recognition to AI-generated art. The exponential growth in image circulation coupled with algorithmic curation and optimisation for engagement has intensified the agency of images beyond what Mitchell could have anticipated. Mitchell's later work expands on these concerns, linking the study of images with scientific and technological contexts.[27] He explores how images do not only shape cultural narratives but also structure scientific knowledge, from medical imaging to AI-driven visual analysis. His argument that images influence cognition and perception is particularly relevant in an era where computational vision, deepfakes and algorithmically generated content blur the boundaries between representation and reality. The expansion of image agency can also be examined through the works of Barthes, Merleau-Ponty, Nancy and Baudrillard, each of whom contributes to understanding the evolving status of the image. Barthes deconstructs the layered meanings embedded within visual culture, demonstrating how images operate through denotation, connotation and myth, ultimately shaping ideological frameworks rather than neutrally transmitting meaning.[28] His work still remains crucial in the era of the image by proxy, where visual content is embedded within networks of algorithmic signification, reinforcing ideological constructs through automated dissemination. Earlier, Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Jean-Luc Nancy examined images as embodied phenomena – Merleau-Ponty emphasised perception as a visceral, bodily experience, while Nancy explored the image as a presence exceeding mere representation.[29] Their work remains significant in a digital landscape where the phenomenology of the image is no longer tied to its material form but is instead shaped by its interaction with digital environments and interfaces.

Baudrillard's *Simulacra and Simulation* offers another framework, outlining four stages of images: faithful representation, the distortion of reality, the masking

of absence, and pure simulacrum, where the image no longer refers to reality but constructs its own hyperreal domain.[30] This theory becomes increasingly relevant in the age of deepfakes, algorithmically generated media and synthetic influencers, where images no longer serve as mere representations but function as fully operational entities within the digital economy. The image by proxy extends Baudrillard's concerns by demonstrating how hyperreal images now act not just as cultural artifacts but as autonomous agents of perception, shaping social realities independent of human intervention. The transition from the living image to the image by proxy marks a shift from human-mediated image agency to machine-mediated image persistence – where images act as proxies for social, political and ideological forces that exceed individual control. If Mitchell's images *wanted*, today's images *insist*. The image by proxy, emerging from a hyper-saturated media landscape, is no longer confined to symbolic exchange but functions as an operative entity within an algorithmically driven attention economy. As images proliferated across digital networks, their role shifted from a means of documentation to an autonomous actant that structures experience and reality itself. The sheer volume of images today has fundamentally altered their function. As mentioned before, recent studies suggest that on average, per human being, there are approximately 1 750 images, a ratio that continues to grow exponentially. This overwhelming numerical presence contributes to a destabilisation of human perception – images are no longer simply seen; rather, they see us. Surveillance technology, once confined to outdoor spaces, has now fully entered the private domain through smart devices and social media, embedding the logic of observation into daily life. AI-driven recognition systems, algorithmic curation, and machine-learning tools analyse and categorise images at a speed and scale beyond human comprehension.

In this ecosystem, images are not passive artifacts awaiting human interpretation, but active participants in constructing and monitoring behaviour and thus in shaping reality. This shift raises pressing ontological and ethical questions. If images outnumber humans at such an exponential rate, and if they are continuously engaged in acts of surveillance and influence, then the classical understanding of the image as something we look at must be reconsidered. The relationship has inverted: imaging machines now operate as independent entities, enacting a form of visual agency that turns the viewer into the viewed. The act of imaging has thus moved beyond human intention, embedding itself within machinic processes that produce and circulate images with little to no human oversight. In this framework, images are not merely passive conveyors of meaning but active forces that also shape our social and spatial realities. Understanding their agency requires moving beyond traditional semiotic analysis to consider how

they circulate and reconfigure perception in the contemporary mediascape. As digital environments continue to evolve, examining what images *do* – how they shape thought, influence action and construct realities – becomes an increasingly urgent and necessary inquiry. This emphasis on agency rather than representation finds resonance in the work of Manuel DeLanda, whose assemblage theory conceptualises images not as isolated entities but as dynamic components within broader networks of meaning production.[31] DeLanda's approach reflects the relational nature of images, demonstrating how they influence and are influenced by socio-political, technological and economic structures. By focusing on the agency of images rather than their representational content, this research aligns with broader discussions in new materialist and posthumanist thought. The non-anthropocentric turn in visual studies challenges the notion of the image as a human-centred construct, instead positioning it as an operative force within material and technological systems. Despite their diversity, these approaches share common threads that invite integration. Many emphasise the relational and contingent nature of images, rejecting static classifications in favour of dynamic frameworks.

However, while we foreground the indicative agency of images – how they act within and upon their environments – we must not overlook the strong affective agency they exert. Images do not merely function as material or technological forces; they also still provoke intensities, modulate perception and generate affective resonances that shape encounters beyond cognition or semiotics. Their capacity to move, unsettle or attune subjects to specific sensibilities is not secondary but constitutive of their agency. Rather than opposing the operational and affective dimensions of images, this perspective underscores their co-implication: images act not only by structuring relations but also by inflecting experience through forces of attraction, repulsion or other sensations. Understanding their agency, then, requires an approach that is both ontological and affective – one that accounts for how images structure reality while also immersing us in its felt intensities. Few domains exemplify this agency more explicitly than pornography, where the image operates with a near-total reduction of signification to function. Pornographic imagery does not require interpretation in a hermeneutic sense; its efficacy lies in its capacity to induce, stimulate and provoke an immediate, almost involuntary response. That is to say for those for whom it works, as this type of imaging does not have the same effect on everyone or any effect at all, but when it does its effects are very clear. The power of pornography as an image-form lies in its pure affective agency – its ability to enact physiological and psychological effects without recourse to narrative or symbolic depth. It is, in this sense, the

paradigmatic case of an image whose function is not to be read but to be acted upon and through. This is not to suggest that pornography is devoid of meaning or cultural inscription – on the contrary, it is highly coded and entangled with ideological structures – but rather that its primary operation is indicative rather than semiotic. It does not seek to persuade or represent in a classical sense; instead, it activates and conditions desire through the immediacy of its affective charge. The agency of the pornographic image thus exemplifies a broader truth about images in general: their power is not merely in what they depict but in how they operate. Whether through arousal, compulsion, repetition or saturation, pornography illustrates how images can exert force with little to no mediation, short-circuiting the cognitive in favour of the visceral.

This insight extends far beyond pornography itself. Advertising, propaganda, social media feeds and even architectural visualisation operate on similar principles, leveraging the indicative function of images to induce behaviour rather than merely inform or signify. The ubiquity of these image-forces in contemporary culture underscores why their agency cannot be reduced to representation alone. They structure perception not by offering meaning, but by shaping the very conditions under which attention and affect circulate. In this light, the study of images must move beyond a framework of representation to one that acknowledges their material, affective and operational dimensions. The pornographic image is not exceptional in this regard; rather, it lays bare the essential characteristics of images at large – how they act before they signify, how they move before they mean. If images shape reality not merely by what they depict but by how they act, then their agency must be understood within a broader system – one where visibility, affect and algorithmic logic converge. In this landscape, imaging is not neutral; it modulates perception and dictates the rhythms of interaction. This raises pressing questions about the modes of control that govern imaging – how it circulates, who determines its visibility and to what ends it is mobilised. There is an ongoing discourse that examines these mechanisms, ranging from the political stakes of representation to the liberatory potential of creative expression. Yet beneath these overt forces, a deeper, less conspicuous structure operates: one that does not engage in ideological contestation but instead ensures that all engagement – whether critical or generative – ultimately sustains the system itself. To theriomorphise this, if the image by proxy is represented by the (sharp-toothed) anglerfish, then the affective agency of the image is its light at the end of its angling rod.

Imaging III: Tiers to Freedom?

The current discourse on the ontology of imaging can be divided into two tiers: the political tier (freedom from) and the empowering tier (freedom to). The techno-social mediascape does not simply reflect the world; it generates it, encoding and reinforcing distinct ways of seeing, feeling and engaging. Social media cultivates specific social norms, influencing users' perception of success, appearance and behaviour. Conversely, social media also has the potential to foster prosocial behaviours. Systematic reviews find that digital platforms can facilitate empathy and community-building when used constructively.[32] By curating content, reinforcing ideological silos and shaping digital visibility, social media influences not only what is seen but how reality itself is perceived and constructed.

The political tier structures discourse around inclusion, governance, engenderment of identity and diversity. It interrogates the mechanisms of visibility and the politics of representation, questioning who holds the authority to determine which images are seen, how they circulate and under what ideological conditions they gain meaning. This tier is deeply concerned with power structures, analysing how images function as tools of control, whether through regulatory policies, cultural institutions or algorithmic gatekeeping. It critiques the systems of codification, commodification and signification that shape perception, filter aesthetic noesis and reinforce dominant narratives. This extends to the capitalist infrastructures of image deployment, where visibility itself is often dictated by market incentives rather than collective agency. The political tier thus operates within a framework of resistance and critique, advocating for disruptions of entrenched power asymmetries and a more equitable redistribution of representational authority.

Next is the empowering tier, which enables but does not engage explicitly with political discourse. If the political tier is about critique, the empowering tier is about possibility. It does not prescribe values or impose dogmatic perspectives; rather, it opens a space for pluralistic expression, where images are freed from predetermined ideological constraints. This tier fosters the multiplicity of aesthetic and conceptual engagement, allowing for a proliferation of perspectives that are non-conformist, non-normative, and at times, deliberately ambiguous. Unlike the political tier, which is concerned with the structures that govern image production and circulation, the empowering tier prioritises the experience and agency of the individual creator and viewer. In this realm, image-making is liberated from rigid semiotic frameworks, allowing for expanded societal awareness regarding authenticity, historical placement, and psycho-behavioural effects. The empowering tier does not demand a specific ideological orientation but encourages fluidity in meaning-making, where images can be interpreted in ways

that are deeply personal affective or experimental. It is in this tier that alternative forms of seeing and sensing emerge – where aesthetic autonomy prevails over signification, and where artistic and subjective expressions can evolve outside the confines of political or economic instrumentalisation. These two tiers do not exist in absolute isolation; they are in constant negotiation. While the political tier seeks to challenge systems of control and visibility, the empowering tier seeks to expand the horizon of what images can do and become. The tension between these two tiers forms the core of contemporary visual discourse: is the role of images to resist and deconstruct, or to create and transform?

However, beyond these two tiers, there exists a third, systemic tier – one that does not explicitly present itself but operates through and benefits from both. This tier is not political in the sense of advocating governance, nor is it empowering in the sense of fostering expressive freedom. Instead, it is infrastructural, instrumentalising both the political and the empowering tiers to sustain and expand its own function. Much like the consumer goods industry, where apparent market competition conceals deep monopolisation – most brand names ultimately belonging to a handful of corporate conglomerates – this systemic tier presents the illusion of ideological and creative opposition while ensuring that all engagement ultimately reinforces its operational framework. Here images do not merely function as tools of representation or personal expression, but as currency in a vast, self-replicating economy of attention and behavioural modulation. Every interaction – whether critical or creative – is absorbed into the data economy, feeding back into machine-learning systems that optimise engagement, visibility and monetisation. Whether an image is revolutionary or trivial, whether it resists power or embraces individual freedom, it nonetheless exists within a framework designed to maximise extraction. This tier thrives on polarity. It presents a choice between critique and creative expression, yet both pathways feed into the same underlying structure: the continuous dissemination and monetisation of images. Political critique generates discourse, debate and digital engagement, while empowering creativity fosters content generation and participatory culture – both fuelling the same extractive ecosystems of platform capitalism and algorithmic governance. The third tier thus exists not in opposition to political or empowering imaging, but as the architecture that renders both operational within the same circuit.[33] It is neither censorship nor liberation, but a system of containment – one that ensures images circulate, engage and generate value, but always on terms dictated by the infrastructural logics of data capitalism. If the first tier asks 'Who controls the image?' and the second tier asks 'How can the image be used?' the third tier does not ask – it decides. It governs the logic of visibility, attention and amplification, dictating not only which images circulate but under what conditions,

at what velocity, and toward what end. It is not concerned with the content of the image so much as with the perpetual necessity of image-production itself. As such, the system does not privilege one tier over the other but ensures that both remain necessary, reinforcing an underlying structure that continues to centralise power even as it appears to democratise access.

Static, Dynamic and Moving Images: A Scaffolding Instrument

Building on existing image categorisations, this section proposes a scaffold taxonomy – a framework that classifies images into five distinct but interconnected types: static images, dynamic images, moving images, asignifying images and images by proxy. Rather than functioning as a rigid classificatory system, these categories operate as temporal structures, serving as scaffolding to investigate something inherently less structured or even unstructured. They aim to capture the temporal, material and relational dimensions of images, acknowledging their fluid, processual nature. However, this classification is not an attempt to impose fixed identities on images, but rather a methodological tool for exploration. Any attempt to petrify agency into static categories would contradict the very premise of this research, which prioritises the mutability and performativity of images over their containment within predefined frameworks. At one point, I considered calling this a queer taxonomy, as it resists fixity and embraces fluidity. Yet this term ultimately collapses under its own contradiction: taxonomy implies structured classification, while queer actively resists categorisation. This paradox underscores the central challenge of theorising images – how to create a conceptual framework that honours their instability while still providing an analytical structure through which to engage them. The first three types – static, dynamic, and moving images – will be addressed briefly, as they have been extensively discussed in visual studies.[34] The primary focus of this research lies in the image by proxy, the core of this inquiry. However, unpacking the asignifying image is crucial, as it stands in direct contrast to the image by proxy. Examining their differences reveals the ways in which images operate beyond representation, challenging conventional notions of meaning, authorship and perception. These two categories expose a deeper epistemic shift: where asignifying images break away from signification entirely, images by proxy thrive on their embeddedness within human, technological, and affective networks. By interrogating this distinction, we move beyond surface-level classifications and into the infrastructural mechanics of imaging itself.

Static images form the foundation of visual representation, encompassing painting, drawing and printmaking. Defined by their fixed nature, they convey meaning without relying on motion or temporal progression. Historically, static

images were tied to mimesis, aiming to replicate the visual world with precision and fidelity. However, modernist movements challenged this notion, shifting focus toward abstraction, materiality and the intrinsic properties of form and colour. In this context, static images ceased to function merely as reflections of reality and instead became self-sufficient entities, emphasising composition, balance, and the image's internal order. While static images lack implied motion, they are not entirely divorced from temporality. They often engage with symbolic or conceptual time, whether through allegorical representations, layered meanings or the way they accumulate significance across history. Their materiality – whether the textured impasto of oil paint, the etched precision of printmaking, or the immediacy of graphite – shapes how they persist and interact with makers and viewers over time. Even in the digital era, where images are rendered dynamically on screens, the notion of stillness remains an evolving concept, intersecting with broader discussions on mediation and perception.

Dynamic images introduce implied temporality, suggesting movement or transformation without physically changing. Photography serves as a quintessential example, freezing a moment while gesturing toward the temporal continuum surrounding it – capturing the before and after within a single frame. Beyond photography, certain paintings (e.g., futurism's motion studies), sequential imagery (e.g. comics, photo stories) and digital layering techniques also engage in implied movement, expanding the category of the dynamic image. Unlike static images, which invite contemplation of a fixed composition, dynamic images evoke narrative potential, engaging with histories, futures and imagined progressions beyond their immediate frame. George Baker's extension of Rosalind Krauss's 'extended field' theory highlights how photography transcends traditional boundaries, blending with performance, installation and cinematic practices.[35] Rather than existing in isolation, dynamic images operate as visual pivots within cultural and technological networks, accumulating meaning through circulation and context. Their temporality does not merely reflect reality but actively shapes perception, memory and historical consciousness.

Moving images, by contrast, do not merely suggest time – they actively construct it. Film, video, and digital animations exemplify this category, using sequential frames or continuous recording to produce an evolving temporal experience. The moving image does not only unfold in time but also has the unique ability to create a montage – an assemblage of disparate elements that generate new meaning through their sequencing and juxtaposition. Montage, as a structuring principle, is crucial in understanding perception itself, as we have seen, shaping how discontinuous moments are synthesised into a coherent whole. Deleuze's distinction between the movement-image and the time-image

provides a theoretical foundation for understanding how the moving image engages with temporality. The movement-image aligns with linear narratives and perceptual continuity, reflecting classical cinematic traditions, while the time-image disrupts these conventions, exploring memory, thought and non-linear temporalities. This ability to structure and manipulate time makes the moving image a powerful medium for examining the realities of illusion and the illusion of reality. Unlike static and dynamic images, which require the viewer to construct temporal associations, moving images impose their own temporality, guiding and often dictating the rhythm of experience. This interaction between constructed time, mediated perception and viewer engagement underscores the moving image's role in shaping contemporary visual culture, where time is not merely recorded but actively engineered. Static, dynamic and moving images engage representation differently, capturing fixed moments, implying temporality, or constructing time itself. Yet as visual culture evolves, images increasingly function as operative forces rather than mere conveyors of meaning. This shift moves beyond traditional semiotics, emphasising how images act rather than signify. Two categories – asignifying images and the image by proxy – illustrate this transformation in opposing ways. Asignifying images disrupt representation entirely, operating through affect, materiality and performativity rather than symbolic meaning. They restructure perception at an intensive level, provoking engagement beyond interpretation. By contrast, the image by proxy remains embedded in representation but subtly structures how reality is perceived and reproduced.

The Opposite of One: Asignifying Sign

To understand the Image by Proxy, we must first examine its opposite: the asignifying sign. Unlike traditional signs embedded within semiotic or symbolic systems, the asignifying sign does not refer to anything. It exists as pure affect, operating preconsciously and impacting perception before interpretation. It bypasses meaning-making structures, destabilising dominant frameworks of representation and demanding a re-evaluation of how we perceive and produce images. As I have argued elsewhere, information saturation is key to the asignifying sign's function.[36] In highly saturated environments – such as certain digital media landscapes – where symbolic coherence dissolves, asignifying signs thrive. They engage viewers on a visceral level, bypassing linguistic or conceptual mediation. From undersaturation to hyper-saturation, asignifying signs reach their peak expression in the latter, disrupting coherence and amplifying affective intensity. Yet, crucially, the asignifying sign can only exist once. The moment it is encountered, it becomes self-referential – absorbed into the semiotic order it

initially resisted. Its power lies in its singularity; once recognised, it ceases to be asignifying and becomes retrospectively incorporated into existing frameworks of meaning. This renders the asignifying sign an ephemeral force, one that can be felt but not repeated in its original state. This dynamic is inherently relational. Manuel DeLanda's assemblage theory provides a framework for understanding how the asignifying sign interacts with other elements, producing perceptual and affective shifts. Unlike traditional signs that derive meaning from content, asignifying signs derive value through immediate, embodied encounters. They do not signify; they catalyse shifts in perception, rendering representation secondary to sensation. This aligns with the relationship between jouissance and logic. Just as jouissance disrupts structured reasoning (the fairground logic), asignification disrupts meaning, prioritising intensity over coherence. In hyper-saturated environments, asignifying signs challenge linear perception, privileging multiplicity and immediacy over fixed interpretation. Here, asignifying signs also resist commodification, subverting capitalist visual overcoding by refusing to function as consumable symbols. Contemporary artistic practices exemplify this through abstract art, experimental film, and glitch aesthetics, where asignifying signs reject narrative coherence in favour of materiality and affect. Glitches, for instance, rupture digital flows, exposing the instability of technological systems and foregrounding raw sensation. Beyond aesthetics, asignifying signs disrupt dominant cultural narratives, resisting instrumentalisation and opening spaces for alternative meaning-making. Their transformative potential lies in their refusal to conform to representation, instead activating perceptual and epistemological shifts.

Image by Proxy

By contrast the image by proxy capitalises on the recursive relationship between perception and mediation. While appearing to offer creative freedom, it prefigures choices within aesthetic, ideological and technological frameworks, ensuring a collective realisation of an already-imaged world. By enabling and constraining representation, the image by proxy reveals how visual culture both shapes and delimits agency and perception. The term 'by proxy' underscores its reliance on pre-existing visual frameworks, ensuring that each produced image is an iteration of previous ones rather than an individuated creation. A tourist selfie at a well-known landmark, for instance, is not a unique expression but rather an individuated part of the selfie – an extension of a vast faux-semiotic chain. The individual (photographic) image is thus instrumental in defining the image by proxy when it is 'de-individualised': when the individual image is regarded as any image (a meta-image) to reveal its instrument of production. The image by proxy is not grounded

in materiality but in the dynamic space between expectation and perception, shaping reality through mediated anticipation rather than intrinsic veracity. Unlike the asignifying sign, which disrupts signification by rupturing all previous meanings while still being recognised on an affective level, the image by proxy emerges from the coalescence of signification, forming a temporary embodiment that is never singular or fixed. It is the negative body of the asignifying sign: shadows embodied rather than a bodiless shadow.[37] Proxy images are individuations of pre-existing visuals, perpetuating a circular semiotic chain.

The tourist selfie is not an individual creation but a proxy of countless similar images, existing as proximate signifiers without a stable semiotic baseline. These images do not originate from direct experience but emerge as derivatives – visual templates awaiting instantiation by a proxy producer (the individual human). The image by proxy is a pars pro toto – while appearing as an isolated visual act, it refers to the broader techno-collective apparatus that generates both the desire for the image and the instruments necessary for its actualisation. Unlike images generated by artificial intelligence, which hallucinate reproductions without grounding in reality or fulfilment, proxy images rely foremost on context for their conception while producing a faux-reality – hence the term image by context. They do not simply fabricate; they approximate, projecting preconditioned desires onto physical space and shaping spatial cognition. Despite their immaterial essence, proxy images produce material outcomes: they structure perception, pre-frame experiences before they occur, and ultimately narrow the degrees of freedom available for unbiased encounters with physical environments. Unlike Baudrillard's simulacrum, where reality is wholly replaced by representation, proxy images do not replace reality but instead interpolate it within a system of mediated anticipation – reality is not anchored in objective truth but operates within degrees of inception, shaping perception through synthesised affect.

The image by proxy is best understood not simply as an object but as an apparatus – an intricate mechanism that operates both imaginatively and tangibly, shaping how individuals construct and interpret representations. This apparatus is neither fully visible nor explicitly acknowledged, yet it exerts profound influence over cognition and spatial engagement. While Jean Baudrillard's notion of the simulacrum also interrogates the relationship between reality and representation, the image by proxy diverges by emphasising a distributed process in which individuals serve as agents of concretisation for an ethereal, pre-imagined world. The imaging system by proxy is not simply a structure of representation but a machinic process that sustains itself by enrolling individuals as both consumers and producers while keeping them in a state of passive activation. Emerging from a vast network of commercial, political, cultural and technological forces, this system

thrives on mass-microimaging, where every image is multiplied and circulated within an economy where visibility itself is currency. Advertising industries, social media platforms and corporate branding engineer desire, ensuring that images are no longer singular but part of an algorithmic feedback loop of perpetual refinement. Yet this system is not merely economic – it is deeply political. States and governing bodies deploy images for persuasion, surveillance and control, while big data infrastructures capitalise on what is seen, how it circulates, and whose visibility is amplified or erased (the third-tier economy). The proxy image is therefore not only a cultural phenomenon but an operational mechanism in the management of perception. It standardises desire, choreographs participation and preconditions experience, all while maintaining the illusion of autonomy. Its strength lies precisely in its invisibility: the more naturalised its function, the more seamlessly it orchestrates reality. From the vantage point of the third tier, the imaging system by proxy does not merely reflect cultural forces – it orchestrates them. Celebrity iconography, grassroots activism and digital subcultures may appear to shape the visual landscape, but they do so within a structure that metabolises and optimises every act of representation. Visibility itself is a managed resource, where the economies of sexualisation, racialisation and commodification dictate not just who is seen, but how and under what conditions that visibility is permitted.

The system does not impose control through restriction; it operates through excess, ensuring that every image, even those meant as resistance, becomes another iteration in the expanding archive of proxy-representation. Technological mediation is the engine that sustains this process. AI-driven content generation, deepfakes, algorithmic curation – these are not mere tools of amplification but mechanisms of modulation, keeping images in constant circulation while removing any fixed referent. The logic of optimisation is not directed toward the subject but toward the system itself. The new phone with a better camera, the smarter algorithm, the more precise AI tool – each advancement serves to refine the system's ability to extract, replicate and control. The individual's pursuit of self-optimisation through imaging is not an act of agency but a protocol dictated by the structure, an automatic compliance with the logic of refinement. From within this system, resistance is indistinguishable from participation. Every act of visibility feeds back into the same machinic process, whether framed as aspiration, critique or subversion. The third-tier benefits from this indistinction, as it no longer needs to dictate content – it simply governs the conditions of circulation. It does not demand conformity; it ensures that every possible divergence is absorbed and fed back into the infrastructure of engagement.

As long as visibility remains the dominant form of participation and commodification, the image by proxy will continue to function – not as a static

representation, but as a recursive logic of control, where the system itself is the only constant. Yet, this is not simply about forced consumption – it is about labour. The micro-reward economy, structured around likes, shares and algorithmic boosts, offers the illusion of agency while conditioning behaviour. Every interaction strengthens the system's grip, reinforcing participation through an endless cycle of validation and self-surveillance. The individual, believing they are curating their own presence, is in fact being shaped by the imperatives of engagement, their desires modulated by invisible algorithms that govern their visibility. There is no such thing as a free lunch – if the service is free, you are the product. What appears as an open digital commons is, in reality, a system that thrives on extraction. The real business is not the app or the platform itself, but the labour of the user – their content production, their patterns of interaction, and, most critically, their data. Every post, every engagement, every movement through digital space is converted into raw material for the platform's expansion, feeding the architectures of surveillance and platform capitalism. This shift did not happen overnight.

The early internet was imagined as a space of radical possibility, where digital networks would democratise information, decentralise power and foster open knowledge production. It was a space of forums, blogs and user-built communities, where content was created and shared without the rigid infrastructures of monetisation and behavioural engineering. But as platform capitalism emerged, this ideal of the free and open internet was systematically enclosed, replaced by corporate ecosystems where participation itself became a mode of labour. The shift from websites to platforms, from forums to feeds, was not just technological; it was economic. Yet this economy does not simply operate at the level of the individual user – it is embedded in the broader three-tiered structure: a tier that critiques the mechanisms of control and visibility (the political tier), and the tier that enables self-expression, positioning image-making as a site of subjective and aesthetic autonomy (the empowering tier). But both tiers, regardless of their oppositional or liberatory aims, are, as argued earlier, ultimately absorbed by the third tier: the systemic tier. It is this third tier that instrumentalises both political critique and creative freedom, ensuring that all engagement – whether dissent or participation – feeds the same infrastructural logic. Digital labour does not merely reside in content creation; it is embedded in the very act of being visible, of engaging, of navigating the platforms themselves. The system that sedates its participants with micro-rewards simultaneously puts them to work, turning passive scrolling into an active act of self-commodification. As Jodi Dean's concept of communicative capitalism suggests, participation itself becomes labour, producing endless circulation without resolution.[38] Every interaction, whether it resists power or embraces individual freedom, nonetheless

exists within a framework designed to maximise extraction. The more frictionless the interaction, the deeper the submission. Individuals do not merely consume the system; they propagate it, ensuring its continued replication while surrendering their agency to imperceptible infrastructures of control. In this economy, identity itself becomes a form of labour, endlessly optimised for visibility yet ultimately serving as fuel for a machinery that profits from its erosion. The third tier ensures that whether one seeks autonomy or critique, all roads lead back to extraction.

In this way, the image by proxy does not merely depict; it enacts. It transforms perception into production, agency into automation, desire into labour. It veils its operations behind the seductive pull of engagement, the promise of better tools, and the comforting rhythm of the next, and the next, and the next image. What appears as self-expression is, in fact, self-replication – a recursive loop in which the act of seeing and being seen folds into the very mechanics of contemporary visual culture. Individuals, believing themselves to be autonomous creators of meaning, instead participate in the realisation of a prefigured imaging – a collective concretisation of an abstract, imagined reality. This dynamic closely parallels Richard Dawkins's concept of genetic control in evolutionary theory, where genes propagate themselves through human behaviour. Just as genes are indifferent to the survival of the individual so long as they ensure replication, the image by proxy propagates its ethereal imaging – its meme – by guiding the actions and perceptions of those who engage with it. The traveller who meticulously recreates a filtered photograph of a destination, the consumer who seeks to embody an idealised lifestyle promoted by advertising – each is participating in a process that feels personal but is deeply structured by the apparatus. Dawkins's meme theory already heralded the rise of this system. In 1976 he proposed that just as genes replicate and evolve through natural selection, cultural ideas, behaviours and symbols spread and adapt across societies. He defined a meme as 'a unit of cultural transmission, or a unit of imitation', emphasising that ideas, much like genes, compete for survival in the minds of individuals and across generations. Memes – ranging from catchphrases to religious beliefs, from social customs to technological innovations – spread through imitation, often evolving in response to social and environmental pressures.

In the digital age, the meme has evolved beyond Dawkins's original concept. No longer just a cultural unit of transmission, it has become a hyper-fast, self-optimising form of communication that dominates online spaces. Today, a meme can be best defined as a cultural unit – such as an image, phrase or idea – that spreads rapidly through imitation, particularly via digital media, often evolving through user modification and reinterpretation. This definition captures the participatory nature of memes, where an image or phrase can be repurposed

endlessly to fit new contexts. A single meme, like Distracted Boyfriend or Galaxy Brain, can cycle through countless iterations in mere days, shaped by the internet's collective creativity. Unlike their slower-moving cultural ancestors, these digital memes are platform-driven, humour-laden and often absurd, existing in a constant state of evolution. From reaction GIFs to deep-fried memes, from political satire to copypasta, memes compress complex ideas into instantly recognisable symbols, making them potent tools for everything from comedy to critique. Their lifespan may be short, but their impact is undeniable, shaping how we engage with culture, express emotions, and even discuss global events, all at the speed of a scroll. Yet, despite their participatory nature, memes remain bound to the logic of the image by proxy apparatus. This system is simultaneously enabling and constraining – it equips individuals with tools, symbols and frameworks to create and share memes, yet it pre-structures these choices in ways that limit true creativity or deviation. The image by proxy does not overtly impose its influence; it embeds itself within cultural fabric and technological infrastructures, orchestrating a vast, decentralised process where millions of individuals collectively construct a vision of the world that aligns with the apparatus's underlying design.

This dynamic is strikingly analogous to the way DNA allows for variations in the phenotype while ensuring the conservation of the genotype. The apparatus permits personalisation of the meme, yet these individualised outcomes remain mere proxies of the ideas offered by the system rather than those of the 'author.' Just as biological evolution ensures that genetic material is preserved through variations in external expression, the image by proxy sustains its own logic by allowing for surface-level modifications while keeping the underlying structure intact. These proxies introduce superficial differences – filter changes, caption variations, contextual adaptations – yet always within a framework dictated by the apparatus itself. This coherence sustains the perception of authenticity while simultaneously concealing the system's true nature: an apparatus that does not reflect reality, but endlessly reproduces its own logic as reality. The illusion of agency persists, but the preconditions of participation remain unchanged. And as long as engagement is structured around visibility, imitation and circulation, the image by proxy will continue its expansion – an entity neither entirely human nor wholly autonomous, yet one that governs how reality itself is imagined, perceived and enacted.

Beyond the Simulacrum

Unlike the simulacrum, which replaces reality with a self-referential hyperreality, the image by proxy retains a tether to the real while simultaneously enabling its replacement with hyperreality. In this sense, the image by proxy functions as a broader conceptual set, encompassing both the erasure of reality and the

mechanisms that facilitate it. While the simulacrum overtly dissolves the real, the image by proxy embeds expectations, aesthetics and narratives into cultural and technological infrastructures, subtly shaping perception. Whereas the simulacrum erases the boundary between reality and representation, creating a system where signs refer only to other signs, the image by proxy operates differently: the entire system has already become the referent. Proxies emerge within what is perceived as the real world, allowing the apparatus to remain undetected as a self-sustaining simulation. Rather than negating the referent, the image by proxy maintains the illusion of external reality by generating an endless stream of mediated expressions. This apparatus does not simply determine what circulates – it structures attention, frames narratives, and embeds values into everyday imaging practices. If Baudrillard's hyperreality dissolves the real into simulation, the image by proxy requires the persistence of reality to function. Dependent on both the tangible and the imagined, it maintains a recursive loop between mediation and materiality. The concept of the simulacrum has undergone profound shifts, from Plato's metaphysics to its radical reconceptualisation in postmodern thought. In Plato's hierarchy, the simulacrum was a degraded copy, an imitation twice removed from the truth. [39]A painting of a chair, for instance, mimics the physical chair, which itself is an imperfect manifestation of the ideal form of a chair. The simulacrum, in this view, is a counterfeit – a betrayal of truth. Nietzsche disrupts this Platonic model, rejecting the notion of eternal forms or originals.[40] For him, reality is a play of perspectives and forces, where truth is a construct of power and desire. The simulacrum, rather than a false copy, becomes a celebration of difference, exposing the instability of all supposed truths.

Deleuze pushes this further when he reclaims the simulacrum as a productive force, not defined by its relation to an original but by its capacity to generate new realities.[41] The simulacrum is no longer a secondary imitation but an active, generative principle – an embodiment of difference itself. Walter Benjamin offers a historical bridge between these perspectives and postmodernity when he argues that mechanical reproduction – through photography, film and mass media – erodes the aura of the original.[42] The uniqueness of the artwork, its historical presence, is lost in favour of infinite reproduction. This shift democratises art but also detaches it from its ritual and contemplative dimensions, making it more consumable and ephemeral. Baudrillard radicalises this trajectory and argues that in late capitalism, simulacra no longer refer to reality at all but construct hyperreality – a world in which representation precedes and defines what is perceived as real.[43] Disneyland, for example, is not just a theme park; it conceals its own artificiality while shaping cultural myths. Similarly, media images do not merely depict events – they become more real than the real, replacing material reality with a closed system of self-referential signs. Baudrillard thus extends Benjamin's notion of the

lost aura, arguing that in hyperreality, authenticity ceases to matter altogether. We do not mourn its absence because we no longer recognise the distinction between the actualised reality and its simulation. Simulations dictate experience, producing a reality that is structured by its own reproducibility. Other scholars have expanded on these ideas. Lyotard critiques modernity's grand narratives, aligning with the simulacrum's dissolution of universal truths.[44] Donna Haraway engages with similar logics, exploring the collapse of human-machine boundaries in a world mediated by representations.[45] Mark Fisher's capitalist-realism builds on Baudrillard's hyperreality, describing a world where capitalism maintains itself by structuring what is perceived as inevitable and normal.[46] N. Katherine Hayles extends this into digital culture and AI, where the boundary between organic and simulated reality is increasingly blurred.[47]

The evolution of the simulacrum – from Plato's imitation to Nietzsche's deconstruction, Deleuze's productive difference, Benjamin's lost aura, and Baudrillard's hyperreality – maps the shifting terrain of reality, representation, image-agency and power in modern thought. While Baudrillard's simulacrum erases the boundary between the real and representation, the image by proxy functions differently: rather than detaching from reality, it actively structures it. It does not replace reality but reframes it, embedding prefigured narratives into participatory imaging processes. Unlike the simulacrum, which produces a self-referential system where signs refer only to other signs, the image by proxy entangles human and non-human actors, shaping collective imaging practices while maintaining the illusion of individual authorship. Though individuals engage with this apparatus, their participation remains subtly guided by its invisible parameters. Instead of dissolving the real into simulation, the image by proxy engineers perception within reality, perpetuating a specific vision through systemic, implicit processes. The exponential proliferation of imaging devices and platforms has radically altered the image landscape. AI-generated visuals complicate this further – not by reproducing reality but by generating images from within the system itself. The image by proxy differs from the image by context, though both originate from systems of codification and commodification. While AI-generated images hallucinate the proxy-production of an image by context, images by proxy approximate fulfilment (proxy-desire). Here, distinctions between imagination, hallucination and nightmare become quantitative rather than qualitative. Humanity's simultaneous paranoia about and fascination with AI imagery reflect this shift, as technology dissolves the boundary between perception and synthesis. Truth, fabrication and authenticity blur into technological assemblages where indicated truths shape the mediascape, effective regardless of their objective veracity. Existing in a liminal space between affect, materiality and expectation,

these images expose the tension between agency and automation. Detached from direct human intent, AI-generated images function as proxies that approximate fulfilment yet remain estranged from embodied desires, revealing both the creative potential and alienation of algorithmic mediation. Navigating this entanglement of perception, desire and mediation requires us to recalibrate our relationship with images. Engaging with the image by proxy and its intra-affective visibilities offers a deeper understanding of the techno-social realm as both a space of potential and constraint. Here, reality is fluid – shaped by mediation, interaction and systemic prefiguration. Through mass-micro imaging, the system remains self-sustaining, an abstract imaging structure manifesting by proxy through our own actions.

In the next chapter, 'Substance', we will explore how imaging in the larger mediascape contributes to the formation of (urban) expectancies and the 'exo-identities' that emerge around them. This mediascape also reshapes spatial cognition and world-building. Environments pre-mediated through ubiquitous imaging frameworks constrain individual agency, reducing encounters to predefined narratives. Tourist destinations, for example, become known not through direct experience but via visual proxies, framing engagements as echoes of collective expectations. This recursive loop renders spaces as semiotic constructs, laden with affective anticipations that obscure unmediated realities. These imagings, composed of both mental and physical components, converge into a potent agency that drives various forms of mobility, from mass migration to mass tourism, as well as making room for a non-local network of signifiers replacing original culture and value.

Resonant Cognition IV: The Very Being of the Image

Diane Arbus famously remarked: 'A photograph is a secret about a secret. The more it tells you, the less you know.'[48] This statement encapsulates her approach to photography: her images reveal intricate details while withholding definitive answers, leaving viewers to grapple with ambiguity. Arbus's portraits, often of people on the margins of society, capture vulnerability and resilience without offering a tidy narrative. Her signature style – stark directness, intimate framing, and use of a square format – was facilitated by her Rolleiflex camera, allowing her to engage closely with subjects while maintaining a formal aesthetic. Her use of flash in daylight heightened the raw, hyperreal quality of her images, emphasising facial expressions and environmental details. Of her most iconic works, *Identical Twins* (1967) is particularly emblematic – two girls, nearly identical yet subtly distinct in expression, create an uncanny juxtaposition that blurs the line between normalcy and strangeness. Arbus herself called them 'differentness in identicalness.' This interplay between similarity and difference, between what an image presents and

what it withholds, speaks to a broader tension within visual culture: the instinctive human drive toward sensemaking in the face of ambiguity. Images, like narratives, are interpreted through cultural frameworks, group dynamics, and dominant discourses, which impose meaning on moments of uncertainty. Over time, this process of framing and refamiliarisation obscures the instability, incoherence and contingency that were integral to the image's initial existence. What an image is expected to mean can overshadow what it actually does – a condition heightened in an oversaturated visual environment.

As an inquiry into the thresholds of imaging, we could consider how images articulate their 'whatness' (quiddity) and their 'this-' or 'itness' (haecceity). In an environment where images are endlessly circulated, recontextualised and remixed, their properties emerge not in isolation but through relational distinctions. Increasingly, visual meaning is structured by a residual body of reused imagery, where repetition, citation and self-reference define how images operate. In this way, the whatness of an image, its capacity to define what it is, supersedes its itness, its individual existence. Images no longer function solely as static representations; they exist within an evolving visual network where their significance is shaped by historical residues, technological infrastructures and cultural reception.

The whatness of an image today is no longer solely a matter of its cultural and material properties, but also of its ability to navigate or resist the algorithmic thresholds that dictate what is seen, shared and remembered. This interdependency highlights the degree to which images rarely function autonomously. Instead, they derive their meaning from their positioning within a broader system of visual exchange. The expansion of digital platforms and algorithmic mediation has accelerated this interconnectedness, producing an intricate web of repetitive motifs, aesthetic redundancies and cultural sedimentation. Images now circulate as detached fragments, stripped of original context and endlessly repurposed. This recursive process generates a visual archive that both constrains and enables the emergence of new forms, as meaning becomes increasingly predicated on past visual genealogies rather than newly generated distinctions. A counterpoint to this accelerated circulation and fragmentation can be found, for instance, in the work of Rineke Dijkstra, whose portraits resist the high-velocity, algorithmically driven logic of mass-microimaging by emphasising duration, presence and the singularity of the photographic encounter. Unlike the iterable, endlessly recombined images of meme culture, her portraits capture subjects at a threshold of becoming, where vulnerability and transformation take precedence over aesthetic optimisation. Dijkstra's series *Beach Portraits* (1992–1996) stands in contrast to the curated self-presentation of social media, revealing subjects in a state of emergence, neither entirely composed nor fully self-conscious. Her images preserve the ambiguity of

transition, refusing to impose a stable identity onto the individuals depicted. This resistance to predetermined meaning is central to the quiddity of her images: rather than functioning as fixed representations, they exist as moments of negotiation between subject, photographer and viewer. While images in contemporary visual culture gain their significance from repetition, circulation and algorithmic filtration, Dijkstra's portraits insist on presence rather than dissemination. Paradoxically, however, her work itself operates through repetition: many of her series depict subjects under near-identical conditions across multiple images. Yet rather than flattening difference into mere variation, this repetition amplifies singularity. The subtle shifts in posture, gaze and expression highlight the instability of identity and the temporality of the encounter, emphasising the irreducibility of each individual. Where meme culture relies on iterability and remixing, Dijkstra's work resists easy categorisation, inviting prolonged engagement rather than instantaneous recognition. If Arbus's work foregrounds the performative and constructed nature of portraiture – showing how repetition can expose underlying aesthetic and social conventions rather than systemic patterns – Dijkstra's portraits reveal difference through the seriality of individual encounters, yet both push the boundaries of their whatness by their itness.

The residual body of reused imagery, which structures so much of contemporary image-making, is notably absent in both their practices; their portraits and visual documents are not assembled from pre-existing visual conventions but remain grounded in the singular event of their production. Yet, they are not independent of history – art-historical echoes of classical portraiture, documentary realism and ethnographic photography frame their images within a broader lineage of seeing. In a mediascape that rewards visibility, rapid engagement and seamless circulation, both Dijkstra's and Arbus's works operate at a different rhythm, demanding attention that cannot be compressed into an optimised feed. In contemporary image culture, machine vision systems categorise, sort and optimise images for recognition and engagement, privileging predictability over ambiguity. Their images resist this impulse, precisely by demonstrating that repetition, when tethered to presence rather than dissemination, does not homogenise but rather reveals the depth of difference, just as Deleuze argued. Where much of contemporary image culture operates through speed, repetition and algorithmic sorting, their works remind us that some images require duration, attention and an encounter that unfolds over time rather than through immediate recognition. If images no longer simply document or reflect reality but actively construct it, then their circulation, manipulation and governance become central to the epistemic conditions of contemporary life. In this context, the thresholds of imaging are not just artistic or theoretical concerns, but critical sites of negotiation, where vision, knowledge and power are continuously reshaped.

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Fig. 13: An empty movie theatre marks the transition from a society of collective spectacle to one of mass micro-imaging where attention fragments into countless personal feeds rather than converging on a shared stage. Photo: author.

Fig 14: A light meal, captured and shared. The sharing of the most personal things lends significance to the mundane and desirability to a lifestyle. Yet this same mechanism hollows out the lived experience – with the smartphone as both inevitable and complicit partner in the attention economy. Photo: author.

Fig 15: An alley layered with pamphlets and graffiti. The tiers of freedom in the digital realm are limited; alternative voices that resonate physically resist capture by the instrumental tier of control and the commodification of counter-practices. Photo: author.

Substance: Diffractive Imaging as a Creator of the Memeopolis

In this chapter, I examine how mass-microimaging transforms both mobility and place-making, shaping urban life through recursive cycles of visual mediation. Rather than simply documenting reality, mass-microimaging generates overlapping and entangled perspectives, altering not only how people move through spaces but also how they collectively construct and inhabit the city. By approaching this phenomenon through diffractive imaging, I reveal how imaging functions not as reflection but as interference patterns that actively shape spatial and social dynamics. This culminates in what I term the memeopolis: an urban condition where cities are shaped as much by pervasive visual culture as by material infrastructure, and where identity is not fixed but continuously projected, refracted and recomposed across multiple vantage points. If images in the memeopolis do not merely represent but actively constitute urban experience, then identity within it is equally exo-structured. The image by proxy – where individuals and spaces become legible through their circulation in algorithmic and cultural imaging systems – epitomises this process. Individuals no longer simply inhabit cities; they are positioned within them by external frames of recognition, guided by projected exo-identities that precondition their encounters. These exo-identities, both buoyant and inert, persist beyond any single occupant, shaping perception through recursive envisioning and documentation. Thus, the memeopolis is not only a space of generative visual assemblages but also one structured by the inertia of exo-identities that regulate perception. Here, the holographic structure of identity emerges. Just as a hologram distributes

presence across multiple projections, exo-identity is never anchored to an intrinsic self but instead arises from networked imaging systems that prefigure how places and bodies are perceived. The memeopolis, as the city's exo-identity, is co-authored by circulating images that encode anticipation and delimit urban experience before it unfolds. Urban identity is thus no longer shaped by direct inhabitation but by imaging systems that orchestrate recognition. As I have argued, the cinematographic machine (*aisthegráphein*) does not merely record reality; it generates a structured field of perception, shaping both individual and collective experience. The memeopolis is a contested terrain, suspended between the generative capacity of diffractive imaging, which reveals identity as fluid and relational, and the stabilising force of exo-identity, which locks perception into anticipatory frames. This chapter explores how these dynamics unfold in the mediatised urban landscape, examining how mass-microimaging, exo-identity, and diffractive imaging coalesce to produce an urban reality that is recursive and systemically modulated.

Navigating Identity

Within the philosophical framework of this book, identity is an uneasy concept. Identity presupposes stability, a definable essence, or at least a fixed referent, whereas in this book thinking moves along the lines of relationality, individuation and becoming – processes that are dynamic, non-final and contingent on external conditions. Identity, in its traditional sense, resists this fluidity; it suggests coherence where there is only differentiation, constancy where there is only modulation. Instead of engaging with identity as an enclosed entity, I turn to the hologram as a conceptual and structural model, and through it, I approach exo-identity – an identity constructed and mediated externally, one that is not intrinsic to a subject but instead operates through networks, projections and relational configurations. To further destabilise the static nature of identity, I introduce buoyancy as a key characteristic: an identity could remain identifiable while those who inhabit it shift. This dynamic is perhaps most striking in adolescence, where identity is often less about self-discovery than about alignment with pre-existing templates, although the opposite might seem true. Rather than constructing an identity from scratch, adolescents often inhabit identities that have been buoyant over time – floating in and out of different people, persisting across generations, akin to the motion of the temperaturescape. Archetypes of adolescence – the loner, the pixie, the intellectual, the conformist – exist independently of any single individual, yet they are continuously embodied and performed. The subcultural figure of the goth, for instance, is not created anew with each generation but rather inhabited, modified and reiterated by those who step into its aesthetic and

ideological framework. The same can be said for the bully, the nerd, the skater, or even the activist – figures that circulate as cultural roles rather than personal inventions. This does not mean that young people cannot construct or assemble identities themselves, yet for many, it is crucial that their being through modes of identification and expression is acknowledged.

However, it would be naïve to frame identity as a property, as it is evident that within a single lifetime, people can inhabit, assume and discard multiple identities – sometimes deliberately, sometimes unconsciously. These transitions do not necessarily indicate inauthenticity; rather, they reveal the fluidity of identity as something enacted rather than owned. Following Simondon and Deleuze, this perspective emphasises the relationality of becoming, prioritising an entity's capacities over its properties. Rather than considering identity an intrinsic attribute, this approach situates it as a dynamic interplay of intensities and affiliations. Identity is then not what one is, but what one does within a given configuration. Identity is not static but processual, contingent and always in transition. Gilbert Simondon's process-oriented view of individuation is instructive here: 'individuation must be thought of as a process rather than a state.'[1] Recognising this shifts the focus from essence to modulation, from categorisation to individuation, and from ownership to participation. This buoyancy marks exo-identity as both stable and impermanent, resilient and porous. Exo-identity does not exist as a fixed entity but unfolds through interactions, institutional frameworks and technological mediation. Much like a hologram, which only becomes legible under the right conditions, identity emerges not as a pre-existing form, but as a relational configuration, dependent on the systems that sustain and decode it. This also resonates with Rosi Braidotti's critique of identity as a fictional coherence rather than a stable essence: 'Identity is a stopgap, a fixation, a freeze-frame, meant to create an imaginary sense of unity.'[2]

If identity is a temporary stabilisation of flux, then exo-identity is an effect of external structuring rather than intrinsic selfhood – a projection that is readable only through the infrastructural, technological and discursive frameworks that sustain it. Like a hologram, identity is always a matter of positioning and resolution, rather than of substance. A hologram is not bound to a singular, localisable presence. It can be projected in different spaces, and though it appears as a unified form, it is always the result of an interplay between light and surface. Similarly, exo-identity is non-local: it exists across systems, networks and temporalities rather than being anchored to a singular subject or body. Consider an individual's bureaucratic identity – fragmented across institutional databases, digital profiles, biometric registries and algorithmic assessments. The individual is always in between these fragments, never fully present in any one of them but continuously reconstructed depending on the access point (records, surveillance footage, social

media behaviour). Like a hologram, exo-identity is only made visible through an external mechanism of projection – an interface through which an individual is identified. Buoyancy operates here as well: an identity may persist across time yet its constituents continually shift – similar to the way the legal category of the underaged endures, even if those to whom it refers continually grow out of it. The exo-identity of a group thus remains intact even as its members change. Each segment of a hologram contains the whole image – a pars pro toto, albeit at a lower resolution. This suggests that identity is not a whole that fractures into parts but a partial construct, assembled from traces and patterns. Exo-identity functions similarly: institutions and technologies do not require a full representation of a subject but operate on data patterns and probabilistic assessments. A credit score, a facial recognition match, or an online behavioural profile does not define a person but produces a fragmented yet functional reconstruction. Buoyancy also explains how identity can appear coherent within a given framework while remaining an assemblage of those who temporarily fit its parameters. The category holds even as individuals cycle in and out. Just as a hologram gives the illusion of presence without substance, the same applies to exo-identity: it is inferred from external criteria rather than arising from intrinsic selfhood. Surveillance systems, social categorisations and algorithmic governance assign identity based on probabilistic models rather than essential attributes. This raises questions of authenticity: does an individual 'own' an identity that is externally constructed and inferred? Exo-identity dissolves the notion of an inherent self – it is performative, contingent and system-dependent.

The buoyancy of identity means that while social categories (such as artist, student, citizen or consumer) persist as recognisable structures, their membership is fluid. The system does not require static subjects – only enough continuity to sustain the illusion of coherence. A hologram shifts depending on the observer's position, underscoring that identity is relational rather than inherent. One's exo-identity – how one is recognised, categorised, or processed – depends on the viewing apparatus: a government database, an AI system, a biometric scan or a social classification. Each constructs a different, perspective-based identity rather than revealing a singular, underlying self. A hologram is an encoded interference pattern decoded by light. Similarly, exo-identity is an encoded dataset interpreted by institutional and social systems. Identity, in this sense, is not something one possesses but something one becomes readable as through technological mediation. Digital identity verification does not recognise a face in a human sense; it computes features that match stored data. Creditworthiness is not an inherent trait, but an inference drawn from financial behaviour. Even citizenship, refugee status or criminal suspicion is the outcome of external encoding rather than an

innate condition. The buoyancy of identity reveals a crucial asymmetry: an identity can have properties, but properties themselves do not constitute an identity. A hologram's diffraction patterns, angles of projection and resolution do not make it an entity; they only contribute to a particular appearance, relationally constituted. Likewise, an identity may exhibit traits such as age, profession or nationality, but these are contingent markers, dependent on external framing and use. This distinction prevents identity from collapsing into its descriptors, maintaining individuation as a process rather than a fixed categorisation. Nevertheless, the drive to pursue an identity or the group pressure to adopt one can be very forceful. Not without reason, group identities, from military and religious to corporate and subcultural identities have been instrumentalised endlessly. Moulding individuals into uniformity and synchronicity is a potent agent for control and steerability, and beyond that, interchangeability becomes an instrument in itself. Regardless of the academic position we occupy, these are not merely abstract or theoretical concerns but deeply embedded mechanisms shaping our social, political and economic realities. Whether viewed from a non-structuralist, poststructuralist or new materialist point of view, the operational logic of identity formation cannot be disentangled from questions of power and economic governance. In this sense, identity is not just an individual pursuit but a terrain of negotiation – between autonomy and conformity, singularity and standardisation, resistance and compliance. This tension invites a critical inquiry into how identities are shaped, sustained and subverted, particularly in an era where algorithmic governance, datafication, proximate imaging and hyper-mediated realities further complicate the boundaries between self-determination and systemic regulation.

Exo-Identity

The buoyancy of identity lies in its relational construction: individuals are rendered legible through technological and institutional framings that categorise and re-project them without accessing any underlying essence. As with a hologram, identity appears stable only from a distance – sustained by perspective and infrastructure – a condition that becomes even more pronounced when scaled to the level of the city. On an urban scale, we can describe the exo-identity as the holographic and buoyant construction of a place's identity, existing primarily in the realm of expectation and imaging rather than immediate perception. Unlike a stable, intrinsic essence, exo-identity is shaped by external factors – media representations, historical narratives and cultural storytelling – structuring how a place is perceived, experienced and even planned. Crucially, exo-identities are not neutral or organic developments; they are actively maintained to reinforce specific cultural, ideological or economic forces, often persisting long after their

material or social relevance has faded. A visitor to Amsterdam, for instance, would struggle to find someone wearing wooden clogs whilst cycling to the cheese market (or to the red-light district), yet such an image remains central to its exo-identity because it serves as an easily consumable, exportable shorthand – one that supports tourism, branding and global imaginaries of the city. Even when detached from lived reality, these images condition perception and structure experience, preconfiguring how visitors and even residents engage with their surroundings. At the core of exo-identity lies the agency of expectation. While exo-identities can attract investment, tourism and symbolic recognition, they often diverge from lived realities. A city promoted as an innovation hub may still grapple with stark socioeconomic disparities. Tourist imaginaries of Venice as a romantic idyll overlook its overcrowding and ecological strain. Similarly, Amsterdam's international reputation as a city of tulips and carnal pleasure, canals, and open-minded liberalism often conceals the increasing pressures of gentrification, housing crises, intolerance and regulatory constraints on its social policies. This disjunction between projected identity and local experience highlights how exo-identities function as self-reinforcing visual scripts, where both visitors and residents subconsciously align their actions to fulfil preconditioned expectations. Visitors arrive already guided by widely circulated images, focusing on expected highlights, and in turn, they document their experience in ways that replicate these same mediated representations.

The image by proxy emerges here: an image of a person standing before a landmark does not originate from any single act of documentation, but from a network of imaging agencies priming individual tourists to actualise their participation in a collective visual script. Each iteration of me in front of the Eiffel Tower contributes to the 'any-selfie' of Paris, in an endlessly repeated visual pattern that reinforces pre-scripted place identities. While the original act of documentation is irrelevant, the imaging apparatus itself – social media platforms, city branding, marketing industries – sustains the proximate agency of imaging. As a result, the meaning of the act is not in the individual photograph but in its contribution to an ongoing system of recognition and validation. The impulse to capture experiences through photography is not a modern phenomenon. Long before smartphones and Instagram, postcards, holiday slide shows and photo albums served as imaging instruments, shaping the way travellers represented and recalled their journeys. These images were never neutral; they functioned not just as records but as mediators between expectation and experience, constructing narratives that aligned with pre-existing cultural imaginaries. Historian-philosopher Verena Winiwarter highlights how travel photography is deeply entangled with tourist expectations.[3] The images do not merely document

reality; they filter, frame and curate it, reinforcing preconceived notions of place. This resonates with John Urry's concept of the 'tourist gaze', which argues that tourists seek out and produce images that align with pre-established visual archetypes – the Parisian café, the serene beach, the untouched wilderness.[4]

Photography, in this sense, does not just record experience; it actively structures it, guiding what is deemed worth seeing and what is omitted from the frame. This mediation extends and preconditions visual consumption: travellers do not see destinations objectively but encounter them through a pre-scripted, image-driven anticipation. What has changed in the post-2012 digital landscape is that this anticipation does not stop at touristic sites; it extends to self-perception. Destination marketing, social media and commercial photography capitalise on this visual conditioning, shaping how locations are perceived before they are ever visited. The feedback loop between imagined destinations and photographed realities reinforces the idea that a place exists only insofar as it can be aesthetically captured. In doing so, photography contributes to the aesthetification of experience itself, where the primary value of travel is not in its lived reality but in its reproducibility as an image. The question, then, is whether photography expands or flattens experience. Does the act of capturing a moment intensify one's engagement with place, or does it reduce presence to pre-packaged visual consumption? As the mediation of travel experiences becomes increasingly algorithmic – where AI curates photo albums and suggests 'memories' – the boundaries between authentic experience and aesthetic expectation blur further. In this process, photography ceases to be a passive observer and becomes a force that generates and sustains the very idea of travel itself.

This expectation dogma binds multiple stakeholders – city marketers, tourist operators, hospitality industries – to continually highlight what is already expected, sidelining less familiar, unmediated aspects of a place. Conflict arises when these flat exo-identities collide with the lived needs of inhabitants, who require a city to be adaptive rather than a static stage set. The friction becomes especially acute when local cultural sites – perhaps even sacred spaces – are commercialised or overrun, distorting their original significance in favour of spectacle-oriented consumption. Snapshot tourism, as an embodiment of the image by proxy, is characterised by the re-enactment and staging of already known imaging, reinforcing the logics of techno-social platform capitalism. It is a type of hit-and-run tourism, a phenomenon of brief, high-impact visits to popular destinations driven by visual consumption and social media imperatives rather than sustained engagement.[5] Here, quantity is prioritised over depth, and destinations are consumed as aesthetic commodities with minimal interaction or reciprocity. Such practices place disproportionate pressure on ecosystems and

local communities without providing substantive benefit to inhabitants. In many cases, they contribute to what Jorge Valdivielso-Navarro terms touristocracy – a condition in which urban life becomes subservient to the rhythms and demands of the tourist economy, marginalising residents and eroding public space by reducing places to consumable backdrops.[6] This extractive dynamic is increasingly contested by local communities, who resist the socio-ecological costs and call for more equitable and sustainable tourism governance.

Beyond tourism, exo-identity influences urban development and social practices through a feedback loop of expectation and experience. Karl Scheffler's observation that Berlin is 'condemned forever to becoming and never to being', and Jack Lang's statement that 'Paris is always Paris, and Berlin is never Berlin', illustrate how self-fulfilling urban narratives sustain exo-identity as a form of place-making by imaging rather than by lived experience.[7] While some exo-identities are grounded in actual cultural practices – a Balinese dance performed for tourists may still retain cultural or religious significance – others are fully artificially constructed, designed for commercial or ideological reinforcement. So is the International Style in architecture, which sought to transcend local vernaculars in favour of a universal aesthetic. Popularised by architecture critics Hitchcock and Johnson, the movement aimed to modernise urban landscapes through rational, functional clarity.[8] Early proponents envisioned it as a progressive, socially beneficial solution, particularly for housing. However, by the post-war era, corporate developers such as Skidmore, Owings & Merrill (SOM) had transformed the style into a global aesthetic of glass-and-steel repetition, producing standardised, placeless environments. Critics including Charles Jencks, Kenneth Frampton and Juhani Pallasmaa argue that this universalism erased regional specificities, negated human-scale engagement, and prioritised visual purity over sensory and social depth.[9] This architectural any-city phenomenon mirrors contemporary tourism and consumer culture, where exo-identity produces flattened projections of place, sustaining homogenised urban experiences. Marc Augé's concept of non-places captures this condition: a proliferation of hotels, airports, malls and branded environments that produce a dislocated sameness, where interaction is mediated rather than embedded in local contexts.[10]

Just as the International Style generated a globally recognisable – but experientially vacant – built environment, contemporary exo-identities risk creating any-places, structured not by local dynamics but by transnational imaging circuits. As the memeopolis emerges as a holographic exo-identity, continuously reinforced by the recursive logic of mass-microimaging, its social and economic structures become increasingly dependent on expectation-driven imaging cycles. Cities, once shaped by inhabitation and adaptation, now

risk becoming closed loops of projected anticipation, where visual scripting preconfigures the very experiences people set out to have. Instead of evolving through lived practice, urban spaces are increasingly dictated by externally mediated representations, which condition both local identity formation and global perception. These mediated exo-identities extend beyond cities, shaping nations, organisations and individuals through representations rather than direct experience. While crucial in branding and place-making, exo-identities often yield narrowed, flattened or distorted forms of engagement. A city proclaimed a 'global innovation hub' may attract investment and prestige based on these portrayals even when its day-to-day realities remain disconnected from the promised image. Exo-identities underscore the power of mediated perception, where expectation can supersede reality, guiding mobility and behaviour on a global scale. Place branding, for instance, integrates cultural, economic and historical elements into readily consumable symbols.[11] While this enhances visibility and competitiveness, it also functions as the primary filter through which places are globally perceived, marginalising local realities in favour of externally curated narratives. Cities marketed as cosmopolitan and dynamic often sacrifice local authenticity for global appeal, creating a rift between residents and the imposed brand.[12]

Media-driven representations highlight technological progress or scenic beauty, while often neglecting socio-economic struggles and historical inequalities. The branding of developing nations, for instance, frequently caters to Western expectations, reinforcing cultural imperialism by framing perceptions through an external, romanticising lens.[13] Such distortions foster alienation among locals, whose everyday lives are either misrepresented or erased in the pursuit of exportable place identity. A particularly pervasive – non-locally specific – manifestation of exo-identity is the homogenisation of urban spaces via international consumer chains. Leading global consumer chains such as McDonald's, Starbucks, IKEA, and ZARA function as more than commercial entities – they operate as infrastructural agents of global capitalism. Their omnipresence fosters a standardised aesthetic and behavioural familiarity, smoothing over cultural difference through predictable experiences. Enabled by digital platforms, streamlined logistics and modular design, these brands do not only shape how people consume, but also how they navigate space, time and desire within an affectively regulated global system. As cities increasingly lose their uniqueness, they evolve into interchangeable commercial hubs that subordinate local history to corporate dominance. This shift is both cultural and economic, reshaping social behaviour, public space and modes of engagement. The replacement of traditional cafés, markets and artisan shops with franchise outlets reinforces exo-identity as a governing force, embedding a uniform aesthetic that favours predictability

over diversity. As some social scientists argue, inclusive and participatory place-branding approaches could mitigate these tensions by aligning external representations with local realities.[14] However, as long as exo-identities privilege global commercial appeal over cultural specificity, cities risk sacrificing their historical and social depth, becoming mere settings in an endless cycle of mass consumption and image-based tourism.

Beyond the apparent commercial gains, this process also has a profound epistemological effect: by dominating large sections of the market, these corporations do not simply dictate where consumers buy but also shape what they desire. Brand ubiquity generates an almost unconscious naturalisation of preference, where consumption patterns are guided less by individual choice than by environmental conditioning. Coffee, for tens of millions, becomes synonymous with Starbucks and vice versa. Rather than selling a product, the retailer merely needs to be reasonably available; purchasing decisions become habitual rather than deliberate. This implicit pedagogical function of market saturation reconfigures consumer perception: preference is not merely influenced but actively manufactured. The retailer, having established itself as a default, gains the ability to modulate pricing and experience with relative freedom, as the act of consumption itself becomes detached from critical evaluation. What is framed as consumer choice is, in effect, a narrowing of possibility, where the standardisation of availability becomes a proxy for the standardisation of taste. Needless to say, the information bubbles of social media excel at reinforcing these mechanisms, as their architecture is specifically designed to do so. So-called TikTok tourism exemplifies this dynamic. Here, experiences are framed in an explicitly bite-sized and highly replicable format, often centred on a single product or aesthetic frame. A modest local bakery can be catapulted into global visibility overnight, not through deliberate branding, but through the platform's algorithmic surfacing of moments that 'feel shareable'. The epistemology of TikTok, in this sense, privileges immediacy, sensation and algorithmic pattern-recognition over context or narrative depth. The result is not just rapid popularity, but getting logistically overwhelmed: once a location goes viral, it may draw queues longer than many national museums, necessitating security measures, traffic rerouting, and even public policy responses. Algorithmic curation amplifies existing consumer behaviour, ensuring that individuals remain within feedback loops of pre-validated preferences and restructuring how desirability and spatial attention are distributed and experienced. What was once passive exposure to dominant market forces now becomes an active, self-reinforcing mechanism of taste formation. The same logic that dictates where and what people consume in physical spaces extends seamlessly into digital environments, where engagement metrics optimise for

familiarity, further entrenching the illusion of organic preference. In this sense, exo-identity does not merely homogenise urban spaces; it constructs perceptual landscapes, where desire itself is increasingly orchestrated rather than emerging from autonomous choice.

Past urban space, exo-identity operates at national and transnational levels, shaping how economic models and sociopolitical systems are perceived. One enduring example is the American dream, a construct shaped by cultural narratives and media representations that position the United States as a land of boundless opportunity, where hard work leads to prosperity and freedom. This portrayal exerts a powerful gravitational pull on global migration, shaping aspirations and prompting individuals to relocate in search of imagined prosperity. Yet, as sociologists like Alejandro Portes and Saskia Sassen have shown, these aspirations often collide with structural inequalities, economic precarity and legal barriers, exposing the gap between mediated promise and lived reality.[15] Nonetheless, the American dream persists – not because it consistently delivers on its vision, but because it functions as a powerful exo-identity, sustained by repetitive narratives of possibility and reinvention. Similarly, China's 'Chinese dream', a state-endorsed vision of national rejuvenation, maintains its influence despite economic and social contradictions. By mobilising hope in a shared, idealised future, exo-identity compels individuals to act in accordance with its projection, reinforcing its own durability through recursive belief. A parallel exo-identity shapes Europe's imagined role in global migration. Promoted as a region of cultural sophistication and social security, Europe's exo-identity – disseminated through media and cultural-historical institutions – positions it as an attractive destination for those seeking opportunity or refuge. In universities , programmes like Erasmus+, alongside representations in cinema, literature and political discourse, reinforce an image of shared values and cosmopolitanism.[16] Yet, these external perceptions often contrast with complex realities on the ground, where exclusionary policies and rising xenophobia challenge the promise of openness. Étienne Balibar's analysis of European borders highlights this tension between official commitments to inclusion and increasingly restrictive migration policies, revealing how exo-identity can simultaneously invite and repel. Despite these contradictions, the image of Europe as a haven endures, demonstrating how exo-identities can inspire mass movement even when lived experiences contradict the dream.[17]

Whether in urban branding, global consumerism or transnational migration, exo-identity operates as a self-reinforcing projection, where the anticipated image shapes action, and action, in turn, fortifies the image. The memeopolis, as a holographic exo-identity, exemplifies this process: a city where imaging structures

expectation, and expectation preconditions experience. Similarly, national exo-identities such as the American dream or the European Union's cosmopolitan promise do not merely reflect economic and political conditions but pre-script aspirations, reinforcing themselves through cycles of validation and pursuit. What is at stake is whether exo-identities allow for multiplicity and negotiation or whether they function as rigid ideological templates, constraining cities and nations to preordained roles. If imaging now precedes inhabitation and perception is increasingly mediated through algorithmic curation, to what extent can exo-identities be reconfigured, resisted or reclaimed? The memeopolis, like the branded nation-state, is both a construct and an enclosure, shaping movement and delimiting possibility. Yet exo-identity does not operate in isolation – it is embedded in systems of (data) surveillance and algorithmic recognition. If the memeopolis is a stage where exo-identity is performed and reinforced, then surveillance is the mechanism that monitors and regulates these performances. Exo-identity, in this sense, is not merely symbolic but a governable category, determining who is seen, how they are seen, and what forms of participation are permitted. A city's identity is not an intrinsic quality but a relational construct, maintained through historical narratives and population flows. Like a hologram, its identity is projected onto material and social configurations – from its governance structures to media representations and logistical networks. It appears differently depending on the viewing apparatus: a tourist, a resident, an algorithm scanning movement patterns. The city remains, but those who construct and inhabit its exo-identity are in constant flux. Neighbourhoods change, demographics shift, industries rise and fall, yet the city sustains an identity always slightly out of phase with its inhabitants. If the exo-identity of the city functions like a hologram – shaped by projection and relational positioning – then critically engaging with it requires an approach that interrogates the mechanisms that render it legible. Just as a hologram is formed through interference rather than direct representation, exo-identity is not an inherent reality, but an emergent construct shaped by overlapping data streams and socio-political mediation.

To challenge this imposed coherence, we must shift from a reflective to a diffractive mode of analysis. Reflection assumes a stable, identical image, reinforcing the illusion of exo-identity as fixed and naturalised. Diffraction, by contrast, bends, splits and recombines waves as they encounter obstacles, producing interference patterns that encode difference and relationality. Reading exo-identity through diffraction reveals its contingent and constructed nature, exposing the processes that sustain its apparent solidity. It uncovers how technological mediations and social forces co-produce identity, continuously

modulating what is perceived and what remains imperceptible. A diffractive approach resists passive recognition, foregrounding how exo-identity is actively produced through intersecting forces that can be disrupted, reconfigured or re-routed. It invites engagement with distortions and glitches where coherence falters – where alternative configurations become possible. If exo-identity is an effect of interference, then its contours are not fixed but emergent – and, crucially, open to intervention. By thinking with diffraction, we move beyond critique as recognition into a space of active recomposition, where the exo-identity of the city is not just read but reshaped.

Diffractive Imaging

Karen Barad's concept of diffractive imaging is more than a metaphor – it offers an alternative to the mirroring logic of exo-identity.[18] Rooted in agential realism, diffraction challenges the traditional subject – object divide, arguing that entities do not pre-exist their interactions but emerge through intra-actions. Boundaries, properties and meanings are not inherent but produced through relational entanglements – an idea that intersects directly with exo-identity. While reflection assumes stability and sameness, diffraction foregrounds interference and pattern formation. Exo-identity operates as a mirroring pattern, where the subject does not precede its representation but materialises through shifting visual, technological and infrastructural entanglements. The image by proxy exemplifies this: images do not simply depict reality but actively condition perception, shaping identity through recursive mediation. In the memeopolis, urban perception is no longer tethered to material presence but is shaped by algorithmically reinforced imagery. Viral memes, recurring visual tropes and digital circulation do not merely frame how places are seen – they determine how individuals see themselves within visual culture. This is where buoyancy becomes crucial. The exo-identity of a city persists, yet its image is in perpetual flux, modulated by algorithmic visibility and cultural repetition through user-generated content. Urban coherence is no longer a function of material continuity but of the repetitive portrayal of the city in digital circulation. The memeopolis is not a stable place but a holographic projection, sustained through visual echoes where recognition is maintained through repetition rather than fixity. Digital representation – excessive and repetitious – now anchors our perception of urban identity more than physical continuity does. No image stands alone; each is part of a recursive cycle that anticipates and conditions perception. However, the consequences of this recursion extend beyond representation. In the age of exo-identity, selfhood (quiddity *and* haecceity) is no longer defined by embodied presence but by external recognition – determined by data flows, platform economies and algorithmic governance. Viral imagery

and self-replicating visual stories create feedback loops where individuals both gauge and perform their identities according to dominant representations, making tourists stand in line for a specific TikTok frappuccino.

Exo-identity is not self-owned but externally assigned and optimised, reinforcing legible visual tropes while erasing those that do not conform. This leads to a fundamental asymmetry: while an identity can exhibit properties, properties themselves do not constitute identity. A city may have density, walkability or cultural markers, but these only gain meaning through external structuring – rendered intelligible within broader systems of recognition. Exo-identity is not an intrinsic selfhood but an assemblage of externally legible markers – always relational, never autonomous. The memeopolis is both a cautionary tale and an opening: it demonstrates the power of mediated perception while also pointing toward alternative ways of seeing. If exo-identity is authored through images, then to critically inhabit this space requires resisting passive absorption and engaging actively with visual and technological infrastructures. Diffractive imaging offers a means of subverting the mirroring mechanics of exo-identity, shifting from recognition to interference, from repetition to divergence. Rather than reinforcing algorithmically optimised realities, diffraction reveals their contingencies, allowing for new, collective modes of perception that disrupt the seamless reproduction of the same.

Mediascape

If the memeopolis is not simply a space of habitation but a field of projection – where images do not merely document urban life but actively precondition and structure its perception – its urban condition does not emerge in isolation but sits within the larger framework of the mediascape, which itself operates as part of a broader system of global flows. As an exo-identity, the city is not defined by a singular or stable presence but is sustained through the recursive circulation of its mediated image, which shapes how it is inhabited, understood and anticipated. Still, just as exo-identity is not a self-contained entity but an emergent projection, the mediascape does not function autonomously. It is deeply entangled within a larger network of interdependent scapes that shape perception, identity and power at a planetary scale. Arjun Appadurai's concept of scapes – ethnoscapes, mediascapes, technoscapes, finanscapes and ideoscapes – provides a framework for understanding how media, technology, migration, capital and ideology intersect in ways that are both fluid and disjunctive.[19] These flows do not operate smoothly or synchronously; they collide, disrupt and reshape each other, producing zones of instability, recomposition and contestation. Yet, the categorisation of scapes is not fixed. In a different context, I have renamed ethnoscapes to ethoscapes,

deliberately expanding the gap between identification and identifying, thereby resisting essentialist framings.[20] This shift underscored that scapes are not rigid structures but conceptual extractions, isolated for closer examination while remaining deeply entwined within the globalscape, also known as life on earth. Just as different agencies shape the trajectories of life, the scapes themselves should not be seen as discrete entities but as fluid, evolving constructs that modulate and are modulated by the systems they inhabit. As global conditions shift, it remains thinkable that new scapes could be introduced, and existing definitions revised, ensuring that this conceptual framework remains attuned to the emergent and contingent nature of planetary entanglements. Within any of these frameworks, the mediascape is not a passive backdrop but an active force that modulates reality itself. It determines who and what becomes visible, how historical and political narratives circulate, and what remains absent, erased or illegible. Yet, it does not function in isolation – it is continuously shaped by technoscapes (technological infrastructures and algorithms), finanscapes (economic speculation and capital flows), ethnoscapes (migration and demographic shifts), and ideoscapes (political and ideological formations). Borders, for example, are not neutral, physical demarcations and do not merely regulate movement; they are preconditioned by the mediascape, where representations of migration, security and national identity determine border-policies before migrants even move.

Likewise, financial markets are shaped not only by economic conditions but by media-driven sentiment, algorithmic speculation, and the real-time circulation of financial narratives, reinforcing the mediascape's role in structuring the very conditions of perception rather than simply reflecting events. The memeopolis sits at the intersection of the mediascape and urban life, emerging as a holographic and buoyant exo-identity of the city, sustained not through material continuity but through the recursive circulation of its image. The image by proxy exemplifies this condition: within the memeopolis, places are not simply inhabited – they are performed in anticipation of their mediated visibility. Residents and visitors do not merely occupy the city; they co-construct it by enacting pre-scripted exo-identities that exist beyond any singular occupant. This buoyancy allows the city's identity to remain recognisable even as its inhabitants and social configurations shift.

The memeopolis, then, is not a static place but a projection, sustained by networked imaging systems that continuously reconstruct its contours. Appadurai's work provides a foundation for understanding this dynamic, yet additional perspectives help refine it. Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding model highlights how media narratives are not passively received but interpreted within cultural and social contexts, reinforcing the idea that exo-identities are differentially enacted rather than uniformly imposed.[21] Similarly, Manuel Castells's

concept of the network society underscores how information flows structure power, aligning with the memeopolis's dependence on algorithmic governance and visual economies.[22] Benedict Anderson's 'imagined communities' concept is also relevant – whereas print capitalism fostered national belonging, the digital mediascape creates globally dispersed, deterritorialised imagined urbanities, where places are shaped as much by remote media consumption as by lived presence.[23] In the memeopolis, urban life is not simply lived but continuously anticipated through its image, leading to pre-emptive self-orchestration in alignment with its dominant visual tropes. Algorithmic media further complicates these dynamics. In contrast, Homi Bhabha's notion of cultural hybridity reveals how mediascapes create zones of negotiation and resistance, where marginalised groups can subvert dominant media narratives.[24] This raises questions about the continued relevance of Appadurai's open-ended mediascapes in an era where media flows are increasingly monetised and predictive. Whereas Appadurai emphasises plurality and unpredictability, algorithmic media introduces a structural bias that selectively amplifies certain images while obscuring others, consolidating power within tech-driven feedback loops.

The memeopolis should be a contested space where exo-identities can be challenged and strategically reappropriated. Situating the memeopolis within any mediascape thus requires acknowledging both its generative and constraining capacities. On the one hand, it fosters new urban imaginaries, enabling the co-creation of meaning through mass-microimaging and participatory media flows. On the other, it preconfigures experience, creating self-reinforcing exo-identities that regulate perception and social behaviour. In this light, diffractive imaging becomes crucial – not as a metaphor, but as a method for tracing the genealogies of visual structures, exposing how each exo-identity is circulated and sedimented over time. This expanded perspective underscores the evolving interplay between media and spatial practices, demonstrating that images no longer merely depict the city but actively construct its conditions of inhabitation. The memeopolis is neither a neutral nor a utopian construct; it is a field of power, a dynamic urban hologram where perception, representation and governance collide. Its exo-identity is both buoyant and inscribed, fluid yet structured, shaping how urban life unfolds within a mediascape that is increasingly self-referential and algorithmically modulated.

Surveillance

Surveillance has become one of the defining features of contemporary society, shaping governance and individual experience through technological development. No longer confined to traditional mechanisms of observation and control, contemporary surveillance operates through decentralised and

algorithmic infrastructures that embed themselves into the very fabric of everyday life. Jeremy Bentham's panoptic model, also theorised by Michel Foucault, remains foundational to understanding the relationship between visibility and power – yet today, the mechanisms of surveillance extend far beyond the panopticon's disciplinary enclosures. The panopticon, originally conceived as a prison where inmates could be observed without knowing whether they were being watched, functions as a metaphor for disciplinary societies, conditioning individuals to self-regulate under the assumption of surveillance. Foucault's analysis situates surveillance as a key instrument in the production of 'docile bodies' within modern institutions such as schools, hospitals, and factories.[25] However, contemporary surveillance is no longer spatially confined; it has evolved into a dispersed, networked apparatus, predicting and shaping behaviour on an unprecedented scale. At its core, surveillance is a technology of suspicion, predicated on systemic distrust. The very premise of surveillance assumes that those being watched are potentially deviant, untrustworthy or at least in need of regulation. The panoptic model relies on the notion that visibility is a means of control – that by internalising the awareness of being watched, people modify their own behaviour.

Yet, in contemporary surveillance systems, disciplinary self-regulation is no longer enough. Surveillance has shifted from observing past actions to anticipating future ones, deploying predictive analytics, algorithmic risk assessments and automated decision-making to govern not only what people do, but what they might do. This pre-emptive logic transforms suspicion into a condition of legibility – one does not have to act to be classified as a potential threat; one simply has to exist within a system that encodes certain behaviours or appearances as risk factors. Here, the assumption of distrust is not applied evenly; it is disproportionately directed at racialised, socioeconomically marginalised and politically targeted groups. Predictive policing algorithms over-surveil black communities, border surveillance disproportionately tracks migrants, and financial monitoring disproportionately flags people with a low income as potential fraud risks. This reinforces longstanding biases under the guise of technological neutrality – a paradox in which surveillance claims objectivity while perpetuating systemic distrust and control. Modern surveillance operates through big data analytics, artificial intelligence, biometric tracking and the pervasive monitoring of digital environments. Surveillance no longer simply watches – it conditions, anticipates and governs.[26]

David Lyon's concept of the surveillance society captures how surveillance has become a normalised feature of everyday life, enabled not just by states but by individuals themselves, who actively participate in their own monitoring through social media, fitness trackers and other digital platforms.[27] Shoshana Zuboff's

surveillance capitalism extends this critique, demonstrating how personal data has become a core economic asset, commodified by corporations like Google and Meta to predict and manipulate behaviour.[28] Similarly, Roger Clarke's dataveillance highlights how contemporary surveillance functions less through direct observation and more through the monitoring of digital data flows, rendering surveillance both ubiquitous and imperceptible.[29]

These technological advancements have exponentially expanded the scope of surveillance, merging state, corporate and algorithmic governance into a continuous feedback system. Artificial intelligence enables real-time analysis of social media activity and biometric tracking, while predictive policing algorithms reinforce pre-existing biases under the guise of objectivity. The internet of things transforms domestic life into a constant site of data extraction, where smart appliances, wearables and networked sensors feed continuous streams of information into centralised databases. Recent developments such as WhoFi, a system capable of re-identifying individuals based solely on their interference with ambient Wi-Fi signals, reveal how surveillance can now operate invisibly, without cameras or active user input. Surveillance no longer merely records the world – it actively produces and modulates it. The socio-political implications of surveillance extend beyond individual privacy, influencing state governance, security frameworks and social justice. Some governments have overtly adopted advanced surveillance technologies to strengthen social governance, exemplified by China's Social Credit System, which evaluates citizens' behaviour to enforce compliance.[30] In other contexts, surveillance is often justified on the grounds of national security, particularly in the aftermath of events like September 11, which accelerated the expansion of surveillance infrastructures worldwide.[31] The Patriot Act enabled extensive data collection programs, including PRISM, whose scope was exposed by Edward Snowden in 2013.[32] Although Snowden's revelations ignited global debates on privacy and accountability, they did little to curb the expansion of surveillance technologies – in fact, post-Snowden surveillance has intensified rather than diminished. Even as the USA Freedom Act (2015) sought to replace bulk data collection, critics argue that mass surveillance persists under different legal frameworks. In Europe, the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR 2016) strengthened individual data rights, yet several nations have simultaneously expanded domestic intelligence capabilities. Governments and corporate actors continue to invest in advanced surveillance tools, including AI-driven analytics, facial recognition and increasingly sophisticated drone systems. Drones represent a rapidly evolving frontier of surveillance. Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs) outfitted with high-resolution cameras, facial recognition software and thermal imaging enable law enforcement to monitor protests and

patrol borders. In some cases, democratic governments frame these tools as public safety measures, while authoritarian states deploy them as instruments of suppression. Meanwhile, private-sector applications of drone surveillance for security, logistics and commercial purposes blur the distinction between corporate and state control. The fusion of terrestrial and aerial surveillance is increasingly visible in cities worldwide. Chinese cities lead global rankings for camera density, often integrating UAV surveillance into smart-city infrastructures. London, one of Europe's most surveilled capitals, has experimented with police-operated drones for crowd control. Indian cities like Delhi and Hyderabad are rapidly expanding their reliance on UAVs, while across the United States, law enforcement agencies integrate drones with street-level monitoring networks. These developments underscore a growing disconnect between public resistance to surveillance and its continued expansion, as governments and corporations push the boundaries of what is considered acceptable monitoring. Surveillance today does not merely observe; it constructs reality. It pre-structures possible movement and action, shaping trajectories, filtering access and determining behaviour. Much like the built environment conditions degrees of freedom, surveillance weaves an architecture of constraint, both infrastructural and affective. What emerges is not just a disciplinary mechanism but an ontological condition – a silent, omnipresent choreography that dictates the lines of flight available within a preordained grid. The surveillant assemblage does not simply track – it conditions what can be seen, signified or even thought. Just as exo-identity precedes inhabitation, surveillance pre-mediates existence, rendering people legible within its recursive logic. In this sense, evasion is not a question of movement but of legibility. As long as one remains perceptible within this network, one remains ensnared in its controlled circulation. The only true outside may not be beyond surveillance, but beyond recognition itself.

Presence as a Counter Practice

As an antidote to dissolving into the exo-identity of a place or the mechanisms of proximate imaging, one can turn to presence – both as a personal praxis and a pedagogical stance. Presence is not a static or commodifiable entity but an active, regenerative process that reorients humanity's relationship with territory. It emerges through action and relationality, shaped by interactions with others, space and materiality rather than being predefined or imposed. This shift moves beyond anthropocentric interpretations toward a shared domain of non-signification, where matter, medium, mind and body form an entangled network of experience. This resonates with Karen Barad's notion of diffractive imaging, which engages with interference, entanglement and pattern formation – foregrounding how

differences matter rather than reducing them to pre-existing categories. Similarly, Isabelle Stengers's concept of honouring divergences resists the flattening of difference into fixed, legible forms. [33] Diffractive reading sees presence not as a stable identity but as an emergent, co-constitutive phenomenon, always in flux. It challenges the reductive imaging of experience into proof-of-concept models, fostering imagination over imaging, curiosity over fulfilment. Yet, the mediascape systematically undermines presence by preconditioning space through exo-identities. Places do not exist first and then acquire meaning; rather, meaning is coded before experience, shaping what is expected and validated. The journey to an image becomes more significant than the site itself – an inversion where presence is no longer direct engagement but mediated negotiation. This recursive process mirrors reflection rather than diffraction – reinforcing sameness, predictability and preconditioned perception. The memeopolis exemplifies this: urban experience is not shaped by direct encounter, but by algorithmically reinforced repetition, where recognition is sustained through redundancy rather than fixity. The city's visual coherence is an effect of circulation, not material continuity. Diffractive imaging disrupts this cycle, exposing where meaning is pre-coded and where ruptures in the pattern allow for new configurations. By tracking points of distortion and misalignment, diffraction reframes urban perception as emergent possibility rather than a closed loop of recognition.

Here, Daniel W. Smith's adaptation of totipotence becomes critical.[34] Rather than extracting value in a cycle of depletion – reinforcing exo-identity's lack-based economy – totipotence describes a system's ability to regenerate itself through internal differentiation. This self-renewing process aligns with diffraction, resisting the homogenisation of experience into 'any-photo in any-city.' Presence is not a finite resource but cumulative and generative. Shifting from an extensive, lack-driven economy to an intensive, plenitude-based engagement redefines both exo-identity and the memeopolis. Stengers's argument counters the recursive logic of depletion, advocating for embodied, participatory presence that resists subsumption into pre-structured narratives. Rather than reducing places to abstracted meanings, she foregrounds relationality as the core of experience – a presence derived not from representation but from mutual transformation. This aligns with diffraction's fractal nature: presence is not totalising but unfolds at multiple scales, from territorial reclamation to micro-resistances against the proxy apparatus. Presence does not require withdrawal from the mediascape or a radical break from technological mediation but is activated through minor deviations – recursive ruptures that disrupt dominant imaging circuits. Diffractive micro-disruptions thus become a key practice of presence. Simply not using a phone in public space shifts one from *there* to *here*, resisting the gravitational

pull of mediated abstraction. Another tactic is frequenting less popular places to have a coffee, as popularity often stands in tension with authenticity. In general, all similar actions that are neither pre-mediated nor post-mediated function as diffractive micro-disruptions, opening the potential for genuinely novel experience. Such disalignments accumulate, producing interference patterns that erode the predictive stability of exo-identity and introduce non-linearity into closed feedback loops. Asking 'What if?' – imagining an encounter beyond scripted exo-identity – contaminates the recursive logic of mass-microimaging. If presence is enacted rather than possessed, its fractal quality means that each moment of engagement – each slight deferral of conditioned response – contributes to an emergent field of alternative relationalities. Here, intensive thinking (as introduced in Chapter 3) becomes a diffractive practice of presence. Unlike extensive thinking, which categorises and affirms, intensive thinking attunes perception to environmental fluctuations and emergent properties. Rather than capturing meaning, it senses its modulation, its movement. Presence shaped by intensive, diffractive thinking does not seek resolution but remains dynamically entangled with what unfolds, fostering sensorial engagement over symbolic abstraction. Recognising presence as iterative and modulating challenges the notion that mediation is an inescapable trap. Instead, it reveals perception itself as plastic, susceptible to microdisruptions that accumulate into shifts in awareness. Even the most entrenched exo-identities remain vulnerable to subtle reorientations in attention, where the slow accumulation of 'what ifs' displaces the predictability of 'if then'. The discussion of presence and mediation extends to sustainability of production and desire. The mediascape operates within an economy of circulation, not fulfilment – where value is generated through perpetual reproduction and deferred satisfaction. Much like planned obsolescence, which fosters a desire of lack to ensure perpetual investment, the mediascape functions as a self-sustaining loop of yearning and renewal. Meaning is never fully attained but constantly deferred. By contrast, a desire of plenitude aligns with totipotence and diffraction, offering an alternative approach. Instead of deferring satisfaction, it shifts from linear consumption to systemic enhancement. Here, desire is not predicated on lack but on expansion – where meaning deepens through differentiation and relational engagement rather than dissolving into endless circulation. This shift is more than conceptual; it is an urgent necessity. In an era of environmental crisis, geopolitical instability and digital saturation, rethinking the imaging of urban and national identity is no longer optional. Replacing the rigid predictability of exo-identity (if then) with the radical openness of imagination (what if?) offers a way forward. In the next chapter, 'Responsivity', I will explore how these ideas can be translated into praxis through education, integrating an ethical stance both implicitly and explicitly. Given the current state of the planet,

pedagogies can no longer afford neutrality – neither in form nor content. Teaching must move beyond transmissive models toward relational, dynamic engagements that cultivate attunement to complexity, interdependence and the unforeseen. By embedding responsivity at the core of pedagogy, education becomes not just a site of knowledge transfer but a generative space where ethical, ecological and political entanglements are actively negotiated and reconfigured.

Resonant Cognition V: Black Mirror

The Claude glass (or black mirror) is an embodied paradox: a tool designed to obscure to clarify. This small, darkened, convex mirror – often tinted sepia or black – was once carried by eighteenth-century painters and travellers who turned their backs on the landscape to gaze at its reflection instead. By filtering out excessive detail and muting the overwhelming brilliance of nature, the mirror transformed sprawling vistas into atmospheric compositions reminiscent of Claude Lorrain's idealised landscapes, from whom it takes its name. The Claude mirror is more than just an artist's aid; it is a device of mediation, an instrument that teaches the eye to see as a painter sees. It abstracts, reduces and composes reality into something already framed – a landscape as an image rather than raw experience. In doing so, it anticipates modern technologies of vision, from the camera lens to cinematic filters, revealing that every act of looking is already an act of interpretation. It simultaneously filters and constructs a perception of the physical environment. Where the Claude glass abstracts and reframes perception, asignifying cartography reconfigures spatial understanding – not by fixing coordinates, but by revealing the affective and conceptual dimensions that shape experience. The principles of both the black mirror and asignifying cartography extend beyond conventional mapping as they do not merely trace fixed coordinates but operates across both tangible and conceptual realms: the virtual (representing aspects of reality that exist but are not yet realised) and the actual (representing aspects that are both real and realised). The significance of such an approach lies in its capacity to reveal the underlying tapestry of affective interconnections that characterise many urban landscapes – elements that remain undetectable or immeasurable through formal means, called the soft city by Jonathan Raban: 'The city as we imagine it, then, soft city of illusion, myth, aspiration, and nightmare, is as real, maybe more real, than the hard city one can locate on maps, in statistics, in monographs on urban sociology and demography and architecture.'[35]

Like Raban's *Soft City*, Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities* dismantles the illusion of a singular, coherent urban narrative by presenting a city as a multiplicity of fragmented, interwoven perspectives – each truthful in its own way, yet never capable of fully containing the totality of urban experience.[36] In his imagined

dialogues between Marco Polo and Kublai Khan, cities are described not as fixed entities but as contingent assemblages of memory, desire, language and decay. Each city is given a name – Zaira, Ersilia, Octavia, Eutropia – yet each could just as easily be another, or all at once, just as any modern city is an accumulation of overlapping yet discontinuous realities. Like Calvino's cities, no two perspectives on an urban space can truly be superimposed. One city may be experienced as a rhythmic sequence of transit lines, stairwells and intersections, while another may emerge as a sequence of ephemeral glances between strangers, shifting micro-climates of warmth and wind, or the density of history impressed upon old facades. A single plaza may exist as a resting place for the exhausted, a shortcut for the hurried, a site of political demonstration, or a meeting point for lost lovers – all simultaneously, yet never perceivable as such within a single frame of experience. To inhabit a city is to live within this layered simultaneity, to sense its shifting textures and intensities, knowing that no singular description could ever capture its entirety.

In Japan, *Kita Minami* indicates the sphere and individuality of Osaka, particularly in districts historically shaped by fluctuating currents of cultural entertainment, libidinal economies, and the fast exchange of goods and services tied to the transient mobility of both high and low life. *Kita* (, 'North') refers to the cultural vibrancy and atmosphere surrounding Osaka and Osaka Umeda stations, while *Minami* (, 'South') denotes the dynamic areas around Shinsaibashi and Namba stations. More than just commercial hubs, it is a layered urban fabric where histories of nightlife, commerce and movement intertwine. The pulse of the city, the way it breathes through its streets, markets and alleys, cannot be reduced to static representations – it must be sensed and affectively navigated. And this is what makes *Kita Minami* special: it is a way to describe a situated atmosphere detached from the location it originated from. To engage with a city in this way is to think through intensities, allowing sensory perception – rather than abstract analysis – to guide an understanding of space. Instead of treating a city as a stable, measurable entity, this approach considers it as a fluctuating field of encounters, rhythms and transitions. Walking through an urban environment is not just a movement through coordinates but an immersion in shifting atmospheres, sonic textures, and affective currents that resist representation. Such a mode of engagement prioritises embodied experience over symbolic mediation, revealing how urban space is continuously reconstituted through the flows of bodies, desires and material conditions. Calvino's cities remain separate yet interconnected, imperceptible from a single vantage point but forming a whole in their fragmentation. The same could be said of any urban environment, where what is seen is always mediated by what is already known, expected or

remembered. It is an urban fractal: each perspective containing within it the seeds of all others, each encounter forming part of an ever-expanding constellation of experience. The city is not a singular object but a mesh of potentialities – one that can never be entirely mapped, only traversed in shifting and partial ways. *Kita Minami*, in this sense, embodies a shared sentience, a collectively understood atmosphere that cannot be engineered or replicated but only temporarily evoked in the conditions of lived space. Everything can be perceived intensively, but this has nothing to do with 'objective' beauty. Intensive thinking is about mundane beauty, the overlooked yet deeply affective textures of the everyday: the distant hum of an air-conditioning unit on a hotel rooftop, the sharp scent of seaweed from a market stall, the rhythmic flickering of a failing neon sign outside a convenience store, the way rain collects in the uneven tiles of a station plaza, the rising and falling intonation of a language we do not understand, the precise moment a bus brakes before departure – each event is an invitation to attune to the micro-rhythms of the world.

To attune is not simply to observe. It is to enter into the event of perception itself, to sense the way an encounter unfolds in time, shaped by movement, memory and the pull of past and future. The smooth warmth of a metro handrail after being held by a hundred hands, the gentle vibration of a vending machine cooling its rows of bottled tea, the quiet choreography of pigeons moving between scattered food scraps – these are not inert details but affective forces, structuring experience in ways that exceed cognition. The city is not a static backdrop; it is a field of intensities, continually reconfiguring itself in relation to the bodies that pass through it. Perception is conditional. It does not exist in the abstract, as a universal ideal, but emerges in the specificity of each encounter – always shaped by context, always different from before. To appreciate a moment is not to seek the perfect version of it, but to recognise its singularity – to let a cheap, slightly burnt service station coffee be exactly what it is, rather than measuring it against an unattainable standard of the best espresso ever had. This is not settling; it is learning to perceive the conditions of the present rather than chasing an ideal that flattens difference. To truly understand a forgotten garbage can at the edge of an underused parking lot, one must understand the entire universe, or at least the way it folds into that singular object. The crease of a discarded newspaper, the fine dust settled on its surface, the subtle stickiness left behind by rain mixing with sugar from a discarded soft drink bottle – these traces are neither arbitrary nor insignificant. They are material inscriptions of time and encounter, carrying within them the echoes of gestures and decisions long past. This is where asignifying cartography emerges – not as a system of fixed coordinates, but as a method of tracing emergence itself. In the city as Calvino describes it, no one view is ever

enough, yet each view is complete in itself. A square at noon is not the same as a square at dusk, yet both belong to the same unfolding rhythm. The city is an assemblage of temporalities, a choreography of matter in flux, where significance does not reside in objects alone but in the ephemeral relations between them. To map the city in this way is not to impose order, but to follow the lines of flight that emerge in perception – to trace not meaning, but movement, to navigate not through representation, but through the shifting intensities of the world as it happens. And just like coffee, the city does not need to be the best version of itself to be satisfying and memorable. It simply needs to be perceived for what it is, in its conditional unfolding, in its transient and imperfect particularity.

Notes

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Fig. 16: A locker wall with personalised doors. The urge to appear different obscures the fact that the drive to radically individualise one's identity becomes, paradoxically, a hallmark of uniformity. Photo: author.

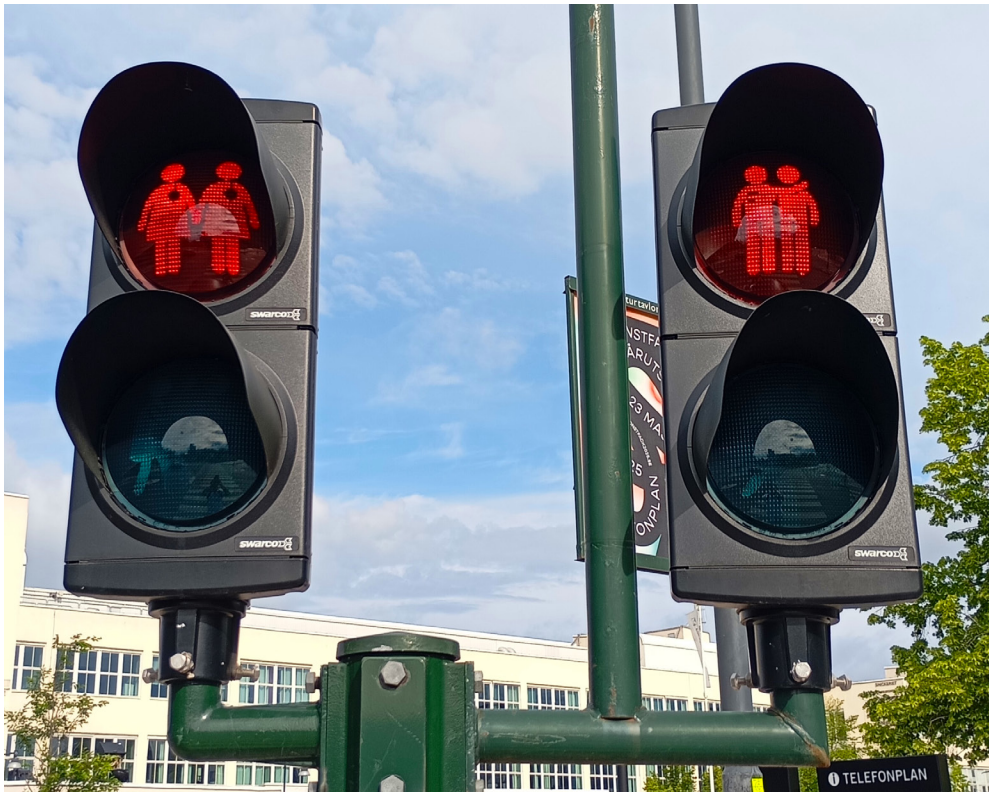

Fig. 17: A queer-themed traffic light in Stockholm. This traffic light literally broadcasts a statement from and for the queer community – fracturing normative visibility through diffractive imaging that reconfigures public semiotics into a shared civic space. Photo: author.

Fig. 18: A reflection of the surroundings of the Boijmans Van Beuningen Depot in Rotterdam. The building's mirrored skin renders the environment hyper-visible in a surface that surveils by reflecting, turning the environment and the viewer into image. Photo: author.

Fig. 19: A cluster of closed reflective façades rooted in the International Style. Their uniform sheen enacts an exo-identity – a projected surface of global capital that maintains critical distance from its surroundings, signalling non-local dominance and placeless authority. Photo: author.

Fig. 20: The affect aroused by of a shopping mall in winter, at night, is the opposite of the mood it was designed to evoke. Photo: author.

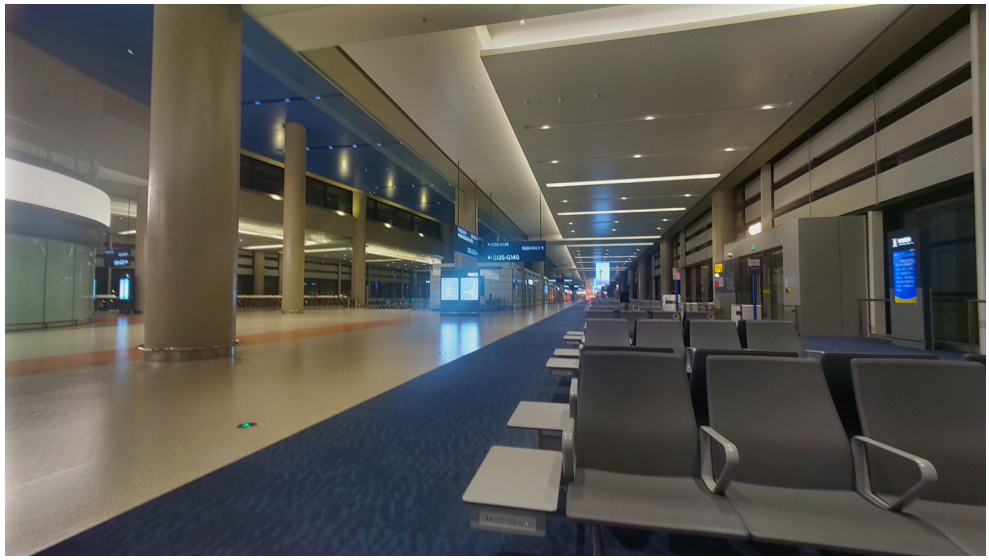

Fig. 21: An airport in China at night reveals its lack of local and affective identity, epitomising the non-place of supermodernity: transient infrastructure stripped of attachment. Photo: author.

Responsivity: Ethically Reversing Modernisms and Enabling Pedagogies

This chapter critiques modernist paradigms in education, advocating for (un)learning as a method to resist reductive mediation, and for cultivating socioception and material ethics. Instead of seeking innovation for its own sake, I argue for refining existing systems while repositioning imaging as an active agent in collective responsibility. Education inherently carries several ethical dimensions. First, educators – by choosing to teach rather than contribute to systems of unchecked consumption – act as ethical agents by default, shaping the future through critical engagement rather than passive transmission. Second, the ethics of education itself has become increasingly urgent in a world marked by political polarisation and populist ideologies, requiring pedagogies that resist simplification, division and ideological capture. Third, education is a mode of transformation, inherently acknowledging that everyone is in a permanent state of becoming, rather than being. Traditional pedagogies often rely on representational knowledge transfer, following an 'if… then' doctrine that compartmentalises learning into fixed disciplines, reinforcing systemic divisions in accountability and creativity.

By contrast, an experiential, relational pedagogy fosters direct engagement with complexity, drawing from Marshall McLuhan, Gilles Deleuze and Inna Semetsky.[1] This pedagogy of the senses encourages learners to deconstruct assumptions and embrace iterative cycles of learning and unlearning. Non-representational meaning challenges the tendency to distil reality into fixed

categories, aligning with Manuel DeLanda's critique of macro-, micro- and meso-reductionism. Meso-reductionism decentralises the individual, emphasising collective interdependencies over isolated agency.[2] Similarly, Jean Piaget's interpretation of autonomy underscores learning as emergent rather than imposed: he describes living systems as organised networks that maintain their identity through self-generated structural closure, shifting focus from binary oppositions to relations between structure and organization.[3] Ethics, pedagogy, didactics and education are – or should be – deeply interconnected, shaping both the purpose and methodology of learning. Ethics defines why and for whom education exists, ensuring that pedagogical choices align with values such as inclusivity, equity and responsibility. Pedagogy provides the theoretical framework for structuring and transmitting knowledge, while didactics refines pedagogy into applied methodologies – from classroom strategies to material design. Education, as the broader system encompassing these elements, serves as the institutional and cultural space where they interact, shaping both individuals and societies.

However, in an era of algorithmic pedagogy, where learning is shaped by predictive systems and behavioural tracking, a counter-framework is needed. The algorithmic models prioritise optimisation and control, reducing cognition to measurable outputs. A 4EA approach – embodied, embedded, enacted, extended, and affective – offers an alternative. Emerging in the early 2000s through the work of Francisco Varela, Evan Thompson, Alva Noë and Shaun Gallagher, 4EA reframed cognition as relational and situated, challenging the idea that thinking happens solely in the head. It foregrounds the role of bodily experience, environmental interaction and affect in shaping how we know. Applied to education, 4EA resists disembodied, context-free instruction. It values learning as emergent, experiential, and socially entangled. Unlike algorithmic models that seek efficiency and standardisation, 4EA supports ambiguity, iteration and embodied inquiry. It aligns with Jean Piaget's constructivism and Lev Vygotsky's emphasis on social learning, but insists that construction and interaction are always corporeal. Where B.F. Skinner saw behaviour as a conditioned response, 4EA insists on agency and emergence. Like Paulo Freire, it treats learning as a site of transformation – felt, situated and collective. Critics argue that 4EA lacks empirical precision or is difficult to operationalise. But its strength lies in resisting reductive models. It is less a method than a stance – one that asks how learning feels, where it happens, and how it entangles bodies, environments and meaning. Here, the virtual (in Deleuzian terms) plays a critical role, foregrounding the affective capacity of unrealised possibilities in shaping perception and action. This approach rejects singular, 'correct' outcomes, instead favouring multiple, equally viable possibilities, aligning with new materialist perspectives on relationality and

interconnectedness. In this context, assessment shifts from measuring conformity to exploring capacity and potential, transforming education into a living, adaptive practice rather than a system of fixed measurements. This pedagogical model also supports a sustainable, interconnected approach to knowledge, responding to the complex challenges of the Anthropocene.

Unlearning is not merely a pedagogical tool but a necessary paradigm shift, framing education as an iterative, dynamic process of construction and deconstruction – preparing learners to navigate uncertainty and complexity. Given these arguments, it becomes ethically imperative to counterbalance the mediating apparatus with pedagogical instruments that ground perception and presence in material reality, accessible only through multiple sensory engagements rather than a flattened, two-dimensional, mediated world. Content and form must be seen as inseparable in pedagogy, challenging the assumption that the world needs something new. Instead, what is needed is less, but better executed. This calls for a reversal of modernist principles, shifting from nomos to auto-nomos, where learning is re-centred in social connectedness through socioception and sentient awareness through somaesthetics. Advocating for non-representational education, I emphasise the need to reject the reduction of complexity into rigid macro- or micro-models. Learning must embrace heuristics, acknowledging that there is no relevant linearity in a complex world. Education should be structured as a non-linear process of trial, failure and serendipity, yielding multiple optima rather than singular, predetermined outcomes. Since the outcome of any complex process can only be determined in retrospect, it cannot be predefined – let alone measured – by procedural structures. To demonstrate how an educational process can attempt to circumvent institutional pathways that perpetuate predetermined results, I include a case study using the endosymbiotic development model, which fosters an inclusive, non-hierarchical and ethically sound design process, offering an alternative to conventional educational frameworks.

Throw Up for Good

In our nonlinear and complex world, learning cannot stick to a strict linear path, but should evolve through trial and error. Heuristic pedagogies embody this dynamic approach but must be carefully framed. The often quoted (and frequently misinterpreted) line from Samuel Beckett's *Worstward Ho* (1989), 'Try again. Fail again. Fail better', has become somewhat of a mantra, not only within the walls of academia but also cherished by tennis players and venture capitalists alike. Yet, within the original context, Beckett's portrayal of failure is not purely about eventual success; it is an exhaustive, iterative process that chisels away potential

until only one outcome remains. His writing exemplifies this laborious, heuristic process:

> All of old. Nothing else ever. Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better. First the body. No. First the place. No. First both. Now either. Now the other. Sick of the either try the other. Sick of it back sick of the either. So on. Somehow on. Till sick of both. Throw up and go. Where neither. Till sick of there. Throw up and back. The body again. Where none. The place again. Where none. Try again. Fail again. Better again. Or better worse. Fail worse again. Still worse again. Till sick for good. Throw up for good. Go for good. Where neither for good. Good and all.[4]

Beckett's narrative reflects the crucial aspect of a heuristic practice – engaging exhaustively with possibilities, not to reverse-engineer a predetermined outcome but to explore until potential is fully expended, resulting in an inexact yet rigorous result. As a pedagogical tool, heuristics emphasises the potential of the entire event rather than a desired outcome, which is more resilient and adaptive, accounting for the complexity and fluidity of conditions rather than attempting to force predetermined solutions. Instead of functioning as an abstract backdrop, the (Deleuzian) virtual exerts affective power regardless of realisation, shaping perception, expectation and action. Virtuality is thus already real, not because it is actualised, but because it conditions the very process of actualisation. The event, in this framework, is always both more and less than the sum of its perceived properties: more, because it exceeds what is sensed or articulated, extending into latent forces and unresolved potential; less, because its capture flattens complexity, isolating what is in fact partial and still unfolding. This heuristic approach aligns with John Barth's concept of 'the literature of exhaustion' through which he explores the idea that certain artistic forms and possibilities have been exhausted, prompting writers to seek new methods of expression.[5]

This mirrors Beckett's iterative process of exhausting possibilities to arrive at a singular outcome, where innovation emerges not from novelty but from a deliberate reckoning with limitations. Barth's perspective highlights that perceived constraints do not limit creativity but instead force it to operate at its most innovative edges, much like how heuristic practices require working through exhaustion to unlock potentiality. Heuristics function as both pragmatic tools and epistemic strategies. Often described as efficient but imperfect methods for problem-solving, heuristics are quick, adaptable, yet inherently fallible – a principle extensively studied by cognitive scientists such as Gerd Gigerenzer and Daniel Kahneman.[6] Despite their widespread recognition in psychology, their

relevance to philosophical methodology remains underexplored. For instance, the persistence heuristic, often summarised by phrases like 'every little action counts' (activism and politics), or 'marginal gains lead to major success' (business and productivity) underscores how incremental adjustments accumulate into significant transformations – a logic encapsulated by Buckminster Fuller's trimtab principle, in which a tiny rudder at the edge of a larger rudder initiates the turning of an entire ship).[7] This principle, found in Beckett's iterative aesthetic, suggests that change is not necessarily immediate or visible but emerges through progressive differentiation and reconfiguration. Iteration, within heuristic practices, is not a simple repetition but a differential operation – each attempt does not merely recreate the same scenario but introduces variation, nuance and transformation.

This process resonates with Derrida's concept of *différance*, where repetition is always marked by difference, creating new meanings and possibilities. In the context of heuristic learning, failure is not merely a step toward success, but an ongoing recalibration of parameters – revealing previously unseen facets of a problem while reshaping the learner's cognitive framework. Heuristic practices also mirror the principles of emergent systems, where outcomes are not predefined but arise from the interaction of multiple agents and variables. These complex, nonlinear systems challenge the conventional binary of success and failure, instead reframing failure as a generative force – a driver of exploration rather than an endpoint. The exhaustion of possibilities within such systems does not signify depletion but rather an unfolding of latent potential, where resolution is always contingent and evolving. This process can be observed in creative practices such as improvisation, iterative design and experimental art. Improvisation, for instance, relies on the continuous generation and exhaustion of possibilities within a given structure, compelling performers to explore the boundaries of their medium. Iterative design follows a similar principle – each cycle of prototyping, testing and refining builds on the insights gained from previous failures. In experimental art, the deliberate disruption of conventional forms often leads to unexpected outcomes, revealing hidden affordances that were previously obscured.

The pedagogical implications of these practices are profound. By embracing heuristics, educators can create learning environments that encourage students to take risks, experiment and engage in iterative discovery. This requires a shift away from outcome-oriented assessments toward a process-centred model, where the value of learning is found in exploration, revision and adaptation rather than in predefined success. Such an approach aligns with contemporary experiential learning theories, which prioritise active participation and reflection over passive knowledge consumption. At the same time, heuristics must contend with the affective dimensions of failure. Failure is not merely an intellectual exercise but an

emotional experience, often accompanied by frustration, doubt and even despair. Beckett's portrayal of failure captures this affective intensity – a relentless cycle of exhaustion and perseverance, where failure is as much about endurance as it is about discovery. Recognising the emotional labour inherent in heuristic practices is essential to creating educational environments where students feel empowered to persist through challenges rather than retreat in the face of difficulty. Moreover, the exhaustion of possibilities extends beyond pedagogy, connecting to broader philosophical and ethical inquiries. In an oversaturated, hypermediated world, heuristics serves as a counterpoint to the culture of immediacy and efficiency. The laborious, iterative nature of heuristic practices resists the pressures of instant gratification, emphasising the value of sustained engagement and deep exploration. This resistance is particularly significant in artistic and academic contexts, where the demand for quick results often stifles creativity and critical thinking. By foregrounding the exhaustion of possibilities, heuristic practices carve out space for reflection and the emergence of novel ideas. Ultimately, the capacity to engage with the exhaustion of possibilities is not confined to any single discipline – it is a fundamental aspect of creativity and problem-articulation. Where Beckett's 'Try again. Fail again. Fail better' serves as a platitude, his 'Throw up for good' offers a more profound acknowledgment of the iterative and affective nature of learning. The path to discovery is rarely linear; it unfolds through exhaustion, variation and resilience, where transformation emerges not as an endpoint but as an ongoing process of differentiation and renewal.

If the Anthropocene Needs Substitution, What Should Replace It?

At an accelerating pace, the underlying structures of the world's capitalist powerhouses are being exposed for their short-sighted policies, which prove as damaging as the territorial, religious and ideological wars they fuel. The false correlation between progress and prosperity and the equally false dichotomy between opulence and well-being are manufactured narratives designed to sustain an insatiable pursuit of profit, benefiting a small elite at the expense of broader social and ecological stability. Simultaneously, potential responses to this crisis, rooted in modernist thinking, undergo a radical re-evaluation, challenging long-standing imperialist, colonialist and idealist structures. The intricate nature of the poly-crisis cannot be addressed without acknowledging the absence of a holistic framework in human decision-making – an absence historically reinforced by the false oppositions between body and mind, mine and ours, us and them, and the proliferation of gender-related biases. This aligns with certain traditions within modernism, which sought to critique dichotomies and rigid conventions. However, whereas early modernism was primarily concerned with aesthetic,

formal and ideological ruptures, the urgency of replacing the Anthropocene introduces an environmental and ethical dimension largely absent from previous modernist movements. Furthermore, the non-linear regression required for a holistic progression finds little resonance in modernism's inherent causality and forward momentum.

If escaping the paradigms of renewal, innovation and replacement as markers of progress is essential, then the task at hand is not to invent something new but to rework what already exists. A critical line of inquiry emerging in academia therefore questions whether the regeneration, revival or reconfiguration of modernism – rather than its outright rejection – can offer a pathway forward. The art academy, deeply entangled in modernist legacies, has a natural connection to these difficulties, as modernism is both a cause and effect of the Anthropocene. Consequently, we will need to explore the potential of embracing an 'older future of modernity' as an alternative to devising a new modernism. The 'machine' of modernism, with its underlying structures still intact, may require not replacement, but a reordering of priorities and organisation. Perhaps reversing its mechanisms – redirecting its existing instruments, forms and ideologies – could prove more effective in countering the very modes of thought that contribute to the Anthropocene. Just as a vacuum cleaner can be repurposed into a hair drier by switching its input and output gauges, the familiar apparatus of modernism might be reconfigured to serve a different function. The crux of the reversal of modernism lies in inverting its fundamental logic while preserving its capacity for connection. Rather than treating modernism as a reaction to societal dynamics, this reversal proposes that society itself emerges as a product of modernist influence. The mechanism remains unchanged, yet the contextual parameters shift: instead of modernism responding to external social conditions, it becomes the active structuring force of reality itself. This transposition does not introduce a new instantiation of modernism but reconfigures its trajectory – one perpetually laden with unrealised potentialities yet never fully actualised: an older future of modernity.

Autonomos

When examining the original modernism, it can be said that its fundamental elements encompass experimentation, fragmentation, subjectivity, rejection of realism, and cultural change. Moreover, modernism often critiqued the socius, challenging prevailing societal norms, hierarchies and structures, thereby advocating for radical social change alongside its aesthetic innovations. The first step in exploring whether the present era necessitates or prompts a reconfigured version of modernism is to assess whether the social constructs

underlying these shifts still embody the same values as during their inception. A significant challenge emerges here, namely that comparison inherently tends to become historicised – an issue worth circumventing. Historicism risks relying on canonical contrast as a basis for signification, where modernism is evaluated not as a contextual movement within its era but as a historically absolute value. For example, the significance of the birth of Cubism at its emergence vastly differs from its historical, canonical and causal value when examined retrospectively. Additionally, any comparison between social milieus separated by over a century would necessitate a comprehensive reconstruction of world history, along with the reverse engineering of historical contexts – an undertaking far beyond the intended scope of this text.

Instead, a more productive approach involves redefining modernism's primary elements as verbs of transformation, relative to any zeitgeist, rather than treating them as fixed historical or objective entities. This means shifting from viewing experimentation as an isolated act to considering the questions: Experimentation with what? And in line of that: Fragmentation of what? Subjectification, rejection and change of what or whom? A key challenge is to locate an anchor point in the social constructs of both eras – something that has not undergone much change, or is inherently self-referential, such as for instance purchasing power. This ensures that any comparison of modernism's effects is articulated in terms of capacities rather than properties. Drawing a parallel to wealth distribution, it is more accurate to assess purchasing power relative to the median income in each era rather than focusing solely on absolute income. Following this logic, I advocate for two shifts: the first shift entails transitioning from thinking in terms of the socius to emphasising the (auto-) nomos, and secondly, moving away from macro- or micro-reductionism toward a meso-reductionist perspective.

The first shift entails moving away from viewing the socius as a baseline and instead focusing on the way structures organise themselves rather than their fixed properties. According to Peter L. Berger, the constructed world follows an inherent order, a set of principles that people externalise and objectify, which are then internalised through social discourse and woven into common sense.[8] Berger refers to this ordering structure as the nomos, describing it as a protective shield against existential terror. The nomos is not merely a set of laws or rules, but an overarching system of meaning that renders the world coherent, shielding individuals from chaos by transforming contingency into perceived necessity. A fire service, for instance, embodies nomos in the way it institutionalises our collective response to disaster: the chaos of fire is met not with panic but with protocol, uniforms, sirens, water and coordinated action – making the threat manageable within an ordered framework. Crucially, the socius is sustained

through the establishment of a nomos, offering stability and a shared framework for living. Berger and Thomas Luckmann argue that reality is not singular but intersubjectively constructed, existing in 'finite provinces of meaning' – with each reality forming an enclave within the paramount reality.[9] Everyday life, in their view, stands in contrast to alternative realities – such as dreams, artistic worlds, theoretical constructs, or religious experiences. While individuals may temporarily immerse themselves in these alternative realities – watching a film, for example – they inevitably return to the dominant, shared reality. Reflexivity allows individuals to contemplate these different realities, but this process relies on source material, which, if not actualised, becomes problematic. Without some grounding in the shared, lived world, these enclaves risk becoming self-referential loops – losing their anchoring function and collapsing into abstraction, solipsism or epistemic drift. Moreover, relying solely on the socius to produce a nomos would be insufficient, since it is precisely the socius that is in need of transformation. However, while the current system may demand change, the capacity to establish a nomos remains valuable, as its alternative – anomie – would not produce the collective transformation necessary to address today's crises. What is required is to understand the nomos not as an isolated construct, but as part of auto-nomos, shifting the focus from the self to the way the self negotiates its drives and desires in relation to others – arriving at a collectively formed governance that is actively shaped and agreed upon. In this context, nomos is more a capacity to negate than a negotiation itself, allowing for a far more fluid structure that moves beyond binary thinking. Additionally, this inquiry does not exist in isolation but is embedded in a larger framework of questions prompted by today's ecological, social and political crises. By shifting from a focus on the socius, which is based on properties, to the nomos, which is based on capacities, we create space for organisational forms that include previously unheard voices.

Second, to address the question of modernism as a verb of transformation, we must determine at what level this transformation should be examined. This entails moving beyond the individual without reducing individuals to mere parts of a group. In other words, how can we emphasise the agency of the event itself rather than the agency of the encountering forces? This shift requires moving past micro-reductionism, which focuses on individuals alone, and macro-reductionism, which subsumes individuals into broader social orders, and instead adopting a meso-level perspective, which I have already introduced through population thinking in Chapter 2. Without reiterating population thinking's core premises, its insights can be directly applied here: rather than focusing on individual cases or rigid classifications, this approach allows for emergent tendencies across all forms of interaction – whether social, ecological or psychological. By doing so,

we avoid false totalities that either overdetermine the social field or dissolve agency into individual action. By adopting this perspective, we emphasise affect rather than affection, percepts rather than perception, nomos rather than socius, and somaesthetics rather than formal aesthetics. These concepts will form the foundation for further exploration. However, as I have argued earlier, daily life is not simply a matter of distinguishing between the actualised and reflexivity thereof (as Berger and Luckmann would have it) – it is a dynamic merging of actualised and virtual potentials. Watching a film, for instance, does not end when the screen goes dark; its affective impact lingers, shaping perception and experience long after it has ended. Anticipation itself can foreshadow an event, regardless of whether that event ever actually occurs. To fairly examine whether it is possible to revamp modernism, we must analyse the nomos at all three levels – individual, meso, and at the level of the socius – through both serial and parallel views. This presents an unlimited number of potential outcomes, yet, paradoxically, always produces only one result. In the following section, I will explore how this relates to the socius as an image and the body by proxy in somaesthetics.

Somaesthetics

Arguably, during the first modernism the socius was largely embodied, with its transformations primarily mediated through artistic expression. In the contemporary era, however, the role of the image – both literal and semi-metaphorical – has become dominant. The nomos of early modernism was rooted in physical social embodiment, and its modernist transformations were mediated. By contrast, today's nomos has been transformed into an image of the individuated socius, an image by proxy, by default. This shift extends beyond the external world; it reconfigures our relationship to the self, making embodiment itself a mediated experience – what could be called the body by proxy. The nomos is now fully mediated, the socius exists within the image, and the image by proxy becomes the nomos. Therefore, the true modernism of our time lies in the effects of this translation on the individual body. By utilising modernism's own techniques and frameworks, it is possible to reverse this process – starting from the mediated image of the socius and individuating back into the body. This demands full grounding in the present, an approach that aligns with somaesthetics, where mediation is fundamentally absent.

In somaesthetics, the here and now is not an abstract principle but the defining core of experience. Richard Shusterman introduced somaesthetics as the critical and meliorative study of the body as a site of sensory-aesthetic appreciation (*aisthesis*) and self-cultivation.[10] More than a philosophical framework, somaesthetics is an interdisciplinary field that examines the

experience and expressive use of the body as well as the knowledge, discourses and disciplines that shape and enhance somatic awareness. Expanding upon 'experimental somaesthetics', this model pushes the boundaries of self-awareness and sensory refinement, viewing the body not merely as an object of perception but as a dynamic, symbiotic system of sensory, affective and cognitive processes. These somatic processes are not merely physiological, but deeply affective and epistemic, shaping the way individuals relate to themselves, others and the world. By repositioning the body at the centre of aesthetic and social inquiry, somaesthetics challenges Cartesian dualism, which historically separated mind and body. Instead, it aligns with pragmatist and phenomenological perspectives, particularly those of John Dewey and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, emphasising that perception, emotion and thought are inherently embodied.[11] Dewey's notion that aesthetic experience extends into everyday life is further expanded by somaesthetics, which foregrounds the body's active role in perception and world-making. While phenomenology has been critiqued as a philosophy of life grounded in anthropocentrism – privileging human consciousness as the centre of meaning-making – this very focus can become a strength in educational contexts, where attunement to individual, situated human perception remains crucial. Crucially, somaesthetics is not just a theoretical model but a practice-oriented discipline that seeks to enhance bodily awareness and well-being through somatic disciplines such as yoga, Tai Chi, Feldenkrais, and other embodied methodologies.

These practices are not merely physical exercises but embodied techniques of self-cultivation, refining kinaesthetic intelligence, affective sensitivity, and perceptual acuity. In this sense, somaesthetics intersects with performativity as articulated by Judith Butler, where bodily gestures, movements and expressions are forms of cultural and political inscription.[12] This extends into the realm of social critique, particularly in feminist, queer and disability studies, where somaesthetic practices become tools for resisting or reconfiguring normative structures. In the context of modernity, somaesthetics offers a counterpoint to the increasing disembodiment of experience caused by digital mediation. The more perception is shaped by algorithmic curation and image-based proxies, the more somaesthetic practices become necessary as a means of reclaiming direct engagement with the world. This extends into education, where somaesthetic pedagogy encourages presence, attention and embodied criticality – qualities increasingly eroded in hyper-mediated environments.

Socioception

The concept of socioception, though less widely recognised than sensory modalities like vision or hearing, plays a crucial role in human sociality. Broadly defined, socioception refers to the cognitive, emotional and embodied ability to perceive, interpret and respond to social cues and dynamics. Socioception highlights how humans navigate the complexities of social interactions and is deeply intertwined with evolutionary processes and cultural structures, making it indispensable to both individual and collective flourishing. Originally, socioception involved processing subtle signals – facial expressions, tone of voice, gestures and posture – many of which operate below conscious awareness yet significantly influence behaviour. Mirror neurons facilitate socioceptive processes by enabling the simulation of observed actions and emotions, fostering empathy and understanding.[13] Similarly, affective resonance, in which one person's emotional state influences another's, illustrates the dynamic interplay between bodies in shared social space.[14] Through socioceptive processes, individuals do not merely respond to external cues but actively co-construct shared meanings and social realities. From an evolutionary perspective, socioception has been a survival mechanism, enabling humans to form alliances, detect threats and coordinate within groups. The brain's prefrontal cortex and temporoparietal junction, implicated in theory of mind and social cognition, underscore the adaptive value of socioception as a neural infrastructure for interpreting others, anticipating intentions, and sustaining complex social bonds.[15] Mirror neurons do not only facilitate imitation but also emotional contagion and empathy, while the amygdala plays a central role in recognising emotionally charged expressions, particularly those signalling danger.[16] These interconnected systems enable people to navigate intricate social landscapes with remarkable sensitivity and adaptability.

Socioception also manifests in physical behaviour within shared spaces – shaping how individuals regulate proximity and movement in relation to others. It explains, for instance, why sitting directly beside a stranger in an otherwise empty train or restaurant often feels socially transgressive. Such choices activate implicit spatial boundaries and trigger affective responses related to safety and social etiquette. Drawing on Edward T. Hall's theory of proxemics, these unwritten rules of spatial behaviour are culturally learned but biologically reinforced, often operating below conscious awareness.[17] Conversely, some individuals may seek close proximity due to a subconscious desire for belonging or affective reassurance, particularly in unfamiliar or ambiguous environments. Neurodivergent people, including many on the autism spectrum, may engage differently with these spatial norms – either requiring more physical distance or finding standard cues difficult to interpret – highlighting the variability and plasticity of socioceptive experience.

Socioception, however, is not solely biological; it is deeply shaped by culture and technology. Digital mediation has altered the way socioception functions, introducing new symbolic and nonverbal languages. Emojis, for instance, compensate for the absence of physical affective cues in text-based communication, while video calls and augmented reality create hybrid socioceptive spaces that challenge traditional notions of presence and embodiment. At the same time, social media algorithms exploit socioceptive tendencies by curating content that elicits specific emotional and behavioural responses. The rise of echo chambers, as described by Eli Pariser, where individuals are disproportionately exposed to reinforcing viewpoints, exemplifies how socioception can be manipulated to entrench biases and polarisation.[18]

Given its foundational role in human experience, socioception holds promise for addressing urgent societal challenges. In an era of polarisation and fragmentation, cultivating socioceptive awareness could enhance empathy, cooperation and cross-cultural understanding. Educational initiatives that emphasise emotional intelligence, perspective-taking, and active listening can foster more attuned social interactions. Similarly, therapeutic practices such as mindfulness and somatic experiencing seek to strengthen socioceptive capacities by increasing attunement to embodied and relational experiences.[19] The role of socioception in conflict resolution is particularly significant. By helping individuals recognise and validate different perspectives, socioceptive interventions can reduce tensions and build trust in divided communities. Cross-cultural training programs, for instance, teach socioceptive adaptability to navigate divergent norms and expectations. However, socioception is not without its limitations. Misinterpretations of social cues can lead to conflict and misunderstanding, particularly in intercultural communication where norms may differ significantly. Research on autism spectrum disorder (ASD) highlights the variability of socioceptive abilities, revealing how differences in processing social information affect communication and behaviour.[20] A more inclusive understanding of socioception must acknowledge these diverse modes of engagement.

Endosymbiotic Development Model: A Case Study

Radical pedagogy, in this framework, is not linear but circular, embracing multiple optima. What is taught and how it is taught alternate: therefore, the structure is non-linear, non-binary and non-signifying, challenging the institutional inertia that constrains adaptability. When designing a new curriculum, everything initially appears open, a blank sheet with limitless possibilities, yet as soon as practical constraints come into play – legal, logistical, administrative and content-driven factors – only about 10 per cent of the curriculum remains genuinely malleable.

The rest is bound by state regulations, institutional frameworks and overlapping practical requirements. The content itself becomes a limiting factor, as predefined competencies, accreditation standards and professional expectations constrain what can be included or excluded. This is not a rigid statistic, but a semi-metaphorical reflection of systemic inertia, much like the broader 90 per cent rule that describes the limits of institutional transformation. Education must resist such external pressures, and the curriculum I will describe here addresses this by embedding ethics at its core, prioritising inclusivity, critical engagement and transformative learning over political expediency. Acknowledging systemic constraints but refusing to be bound by them, this programme operates within the interstices of the possible, leveraging flexibility to foster meaningful change.

In response to these concerns, a new bachelor programme was developed at ArtEZ University of the Arts in Zwolle, which will serve as a case study. Grounded in the concept of permaeducation, it enables students to engage with societal issues through creative methodologies, fostering competencies that empower them to apply artistic skills to social disparities and contemporary challenges.[21] Rather than following a traditional model, the 'Try Out' programme inverts the modernist Bauhaus educational structure – not by discarding it but by flipping its logic. The elements remain, but the machine itself is reversed, creating a space where critical inquiry replaces predefined functions. The programme was conceived as a distinct alternative within the university's undergraduate education. Rather than diluting existing medium-based disciplines, it enhances them by offering a counterpoint that prioritises transdisciplinary exploration. Drawing on the endosymbiotic development model – adapted from Lynn Margulis' endosymbiotic theory in biology – it advocates for educational evolution through absorption rather than demolition, not only in its curriculum, but also in its own development.[22] Just as symbiotic organisms integrate into host systems while maintaining autonomy, this model preserves existing structures while incorporating new elements, ensuring change is cumulative rather than eradicative.

Applied to art education, this model emphasises interdependent knowledge production, student agency and social engagement. The curriculum is structured around exhibition performances, thematic minor subjects, and field projects shaped by student priorities. Rather than imposing pre-existing disciplinary structures, this fosters learning as an emergent process, where knowledge integrates symbiotically rather than hierarchically. Unlike traditional curricula, which dictate content in advance, this programme begins with students' concerns and builds outward. The major subject of study is defined by the individual students and describes the priorities they want to address in the programme. These urgencies often centre on pressing socio-political and ecological issues – such as the climate

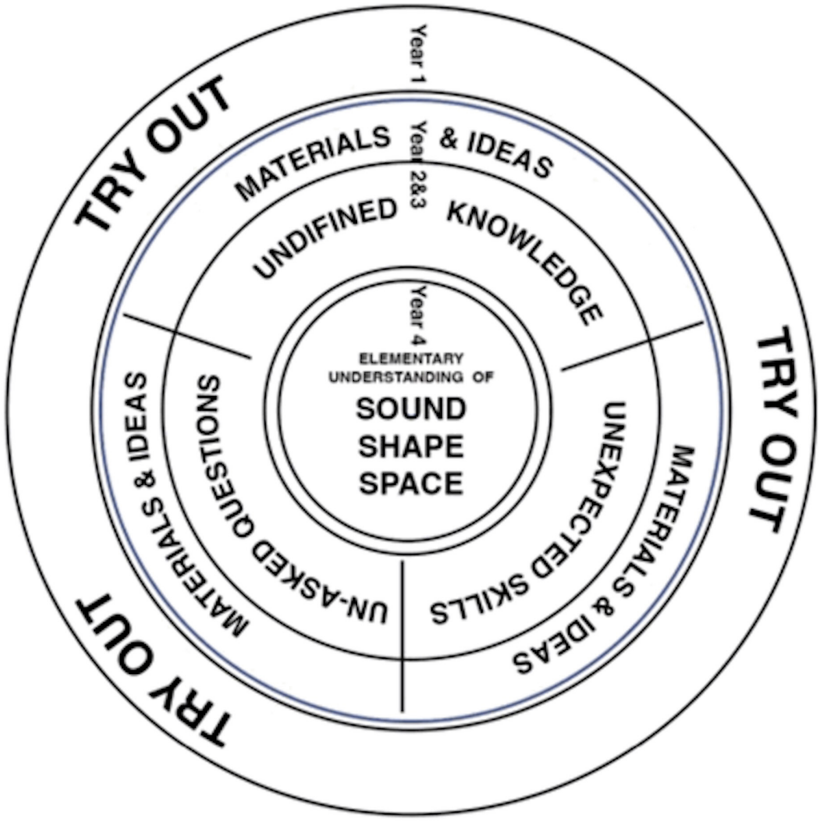

Fig. 22: Try Out pedagogical model, ArtEZ, Zwolle. Diagram: Bob Verheijden, 2023.

crisis, gender inequality, systemic racism, or the dismantling of patriarchal norms – and the curriculum adapts responsively, treating these not as side topics but as structuring principles of inquiry. Many students feel overwhelmed by global crises, yet struggle to translate these concerns into action. By scaling down large issues to direct perceptual experiences, the programme makes problems tangible and solvable, which aligns with Shusterman's somaesthetic pedagogy, which emphasises bodily engagement with knowledge. Practices centred on presence – such as unstructured urban wandering, human-non-human contact improvisation, and deep sensory engagement – foster an embodied approach to problem-solving. This cultivates heuristic exploration – learning through doing, sensing and iterating rather than seeking immediate resolution, which ensures that students remain adaptable to uncertain futures rather than bound to predefined outcomes.

Every Dutch art academy bears the imprint of Bauhaus principles: interdisciplinary collaboration, hands-on learning, and the integration of design with production. While still valuable, these principles must be reconsidered in light of contemporary conditions. The Bauhaus emerged in response to nineteenth-century industrialisation. By contrast, today's creative landscape is shaped by the Imagination Age (5IR), where knowledge production increasingly unfolds in virtual spaces. Walter Gropius's *Versuchsplatz* (experimental laboratory) diagram structured Bauhaus education as a radial progression from elementary knowledge to mastery.[23] The term *Versuchsplatz* aligns with the Bauhaus ethos of learning through doing, where failure and iteration were seen as essential components of artistic and design education. Gropius emphasised that education should not impose predetermined styles, but should cultivate a dynamic, ever-evolving process of discovery – an approach that resonates strongly with contemporary discussions on open-ended curricula in the arts. However, rather than treating the *Versuchsplatz* as a final stage achieved after mastering foundational principles, the Try Out model inverts this structure. Here, exploratory engagement with student-defined urgencies is the point of departure – and it is precisely these urgencies that determine what competencies, tools and knowledge need to be learned. Hence the name of the course, 'Try Out': a curriculum not built from abstraction downward, but from context upward. While maintaining these core values (its modernistic engine), the curriculum model explored here inverts the traditional structure, beginning not with core competencies but with material experimentation and undefined knowledge (see Figure 22). This inversion prioritises openness and experimentation over predefined expertise, fostering a pedagogy rooted in discovery rather than representation. The result is a model that integrates tradition with transformation, ensuring that the academy remains a site of critical inquiry rather than static knowledge transfer.

Rather than positioning education as a choice between specialisation and generalisation, this approach cultivates interdisciplinary symbiosis. Creativity is not confined to artistic development but is understood as a broader, interconnected capacity spanning social, ecological and technological domains. The model challenges traditional dichotomies – practice versus theory, local versus global, tangible versus digital – by emphasising that all forms of knowledge are inextricably linked. The endosymbiotic development model provides both a conceptual and practical framework for evolving art education without erasing its foundations. Rather than replacing tradition, it integrates it – ensuring that education remains fluid yet rigorous, autonomous yet interconnected. Like biological endosymbiosis, this model preserves the visibility of diverse perspectives – even oppositional ones – within the larger collective, preventing a collapse into representationalism or dominant narratives by maintaining a tension between individual voices and shared structures. This productive friction fosters an environment where creativity thrives not in consensus, but in the negotiation of difference – sustaining critical inquiry as a generative force within the educational ecosystem. Instead of reacting to institutional constraints, this model considers how art education can remain adaptable, embodied and open-ended. At the same time, we can acknowledge that every new attempt inevitably has its own pitfalls. Education, by its very nature, remains a normative practice – determining what should be learned and how. Yet, this model represents a radical attempt to confront and push beyond those constraints, opening up space for new ways of thinking and making. By refraining from the traditional admission exam, it fulfils the promise to make this type of education accessible to a broader group of students who have not had the privilege of prior formal artistic training, thereby expanding the potential to truly facilitate a more inclusive educational system.

If the image by proxy conditions perception, then pedagogy must reclaim agency – not as a counter-image, but as a practice of attunement, an embodied and relational form of knowing. Education, in this sense, is not about resisting mediation in absolute terms, but about cultivating an awareness of its mechanisms, its thresholds, and its capacity to be redirected. Where algorithmic pedagogy trains perception into predictability, fractal agency – both within the self and within pedagogical structures – operates differently. It does not oppose mediation but repurposes it, turning repetition into variation, habit into reflexivity, and enclosure into an opening. At the core of this approach lies a double movement: on the individual scale, fractal agency emerges through micro-resistances – small gestures that recalibrate perception, reorient presence, and disrupt the passive consumption of mediated reality. In a world saturated with proxies, the act of sensing – truly sensing – becomes a form of defiance.

This might be as simple as noticing what is occluded, what is omitted, or what the algorithm deems irrelevant. It might be the pause before reacting, the refusal to let external metrics dictate attention. Fractal agency is not monumental; it is iterative, persistent, self-amplifying. Like a difference in initial conditions within a chaotic system, even the smallest deviation from the expected trajectory can produce unforeseen outcomes. On the collective scale, this movement expands into pedagogy. If education is to serve as an antidote to algorithmic capture, it cannot merely train skills; it must foster the conditions for non-predictive engagement. As a model, it does not offer a blueprint for control, nor does it reproduce the structures it critiques. Instead, it creates a pedagogical field where knowledge is neither static nor extracted but co-emergent, a space where students and educators collectively shape an evolving, embodied curriculum. This is pedagogy not as content delivery, but as an ongoing negotiation of perception, relation and meaning – a praxis of responsivity rather than repetition. The ethical stance of this model is neither utopian nor reactive; it is situated, adaptive and recursive. It acknowledges that while algorithmic mediation shapes experience, it is not absolute. There are still openings – points of articulation where something else can take root. Pedagogy, at its most vital, cultivates these openings, not as fixed alternatives but as living, breathing disruptions within a system that seeks to flatten complexity into prediction. Ultimately, the question is not whether mediation can be escaped – it cannot – but whether it can be inhabited differently. If the image by proxy produces a world that increasingly resembles itself, then education must insist on the irreducible, on that which cannot be computed, prefigured or made fully legible. It must insist on experience as an event rather than a derivative. In this sense, the critical task of pedagogy is not to return to a mythical state of unmediated presence, but to shape the conditions under which mediation itself can be reoriented – toward responsiveness, toward intensity, toward ethos.

Resonant Cognition VI: Sous les pavés, la plage!

Sous les pavés, la plage![24] The famous May '68 slogan evokes the act of breaking through imposed structures to reveal the liberatory potential underneath. Originally referring to the cobblestones that, once removed, exposed the sand beneath the streets of Paris, the phrase now resonates in the struggle against digital enclosure, corporate co-optation, and the systemic containment of radical thought. In a time when digital infrastructures mediate nearly every aspect of life, the act of reclaiming material space – whether through print, street interventions, or underground publishing – becomes an act of resistance. Radical media, much like the physical gestures of May '68, insists on presence, disruption and autonomy in the face of increasing commodification and surveillance. Physical media can serve as a vital counterforce against the increasing appropriation of

thought by the digital machine. This is akin to the persistent use of cash in certain areas of Berlin and other places in the world, where financial anonymity resists the pervasive tracking of digital transactions. Refusing to be absorbed into the logic of optimisation and surveillance, radical media disrupts the seamless flow of data-driven capitalism by reasserting material presence, friction and autonomous circulation. Such practices are evident in the continued relevance of zines, independent publishing and grassroots media projects. More than just nostalgic relics, these media reject the ephemerality of digital content and the ease with which information is co-opted, monetised and repurposed. Physical media cannot be instantaneously erased, altered or decontextualised by unseen hands – it demands a different kind of engagement, one that resists the extractive logic of digital platforms. Radical media, whether in the form of self-published works, community radio or guerrilla street art, functions as an oppositional force against the centralisation of narrative control. It reclaims the means of production and circulation from monopolistic corporate entities, maintaining spaces for counter-narratives that resist subsumption into mainstream discourse. Zines, for instance, are more than just self-published booklets; they are cultural artifacts that reflect the complexity of their time. From their origins in science fiction fandom to their roles in punk subcultures, feminist movements and LGBTQ+ activism, zines have consistently provided a voice for the voiceless and a space for experimentation. As both historical documents and living practices, they remind us of the power of print, creativity and community in a rapidly changing world.

However, this resistance is not immune to capture. The aesthetics and rhetoric of radical movements – whether tied to punk, feminist, or anti-capitalist struggles – have long been subject to appropriation by commercial interests. From the commodification of protest imagery to the deployment of activist language in corporate branding, radical aesthetics are repackaged for consumption in ways that neutralise their political force. What was once a subversive statement becomes a marketable identity, stripped of its antagonism and repurposed for profit. The rise of 'woke-washing', where brands adopt the language of social justice while continuing to engage in exploitative practices, exemplifies this dynamic. This process has been particularly visible in the appropriation of LGBTQ+ and feminist activism. According to Teal Triggs, the Riot Grrrl zines of the 1990s, which provided raw and unfiltered discussions on sexism, body autonomy and sexual violence, have given way to mainstream feminist slogans emblazoned on fast-fashion T-shirts.[25] Similarly, as Matt Ratto remarks, the radical DIY ethos of queer zines like *Diseased Pariah News* and *Outpunk*, which provided lifelines for marginalised communities during the AIDS crisis, is now overshadowed by corporate pride campaigns that prioritise optics over substantive action.[26] Similarly, platforms

by and for women of colour, such as *We-zine*, which were created intersectional spaces outside mainstream feminist discourse, are now competing with sanitised diversity initiatives that fail to address systemic inequalities. The process of framing dictates what is visible, how it is contextualised, and which elements are omitted or emphasised. Beyond commercial appropriation, radical media also faces the challenge of media framing. Activist movements are often absorbed into dominant narratives that depoliticise their intent, rendering them palatable for mass audiences. In this way, even the most radical expressions of dissent can be strategically contained, and neutralised within mainstream discourse. The tension between radical media and its potential for recuperation highlights the ongoing struggle for autonomous thought and action. To resist not only digital appropriation but also commercial and institutional co-optation requires vigilance, adaptability and the continued reinvention of media strategies. Whether through underground print networks, encrypted peer-to-peer distribution, or ephemeral street actions that evade documentation, radical media must continually find ways to outmanoeuvre the forces seeking to contain it. Radical media does not merely oppose the forces of enclosure and appropriation; it moves within the tension of two intersecting forces: that of the political tier and that of the empowering tier, while beyond these lies the third and systemic tier, which neither governs nor liberates but instrumentalises both. This tier, agency, is infrastructural and does not overtly demand obedience, nor does it censor in the conventional sense; rather, it absorbs. Just as political dissent fuels engagement metrics and creative self-expression sustains content economies, radical media faces the paradox of participation – how to remain present without becoming legible, how to resist without reinforcing the very systems these media oppose. To move beyond this trap is not simply to resist appropriation but to develop strategies that elude capture altogether. This might mean embracing modes of media that exist outside algorithmic visibility, operating in transient, fugitive, or post-digital spaces. It might mean disrupting the extractive logic of circulation by limiting reproduction, embracing obscurity, or prioritising non-monetisable networks of exchange. Radical media must not only critique and create but also learn how to vanish, to unmake itself, to evade the logics that seek to contain it. The challenge is not just to generate alternatives but to make them unassimilable – to carve out spaces where images, voices and ideas can persist beyond the grasp of appropriation. But perhaps the answer was always close, readily waiting beneath our feet. To enact radical media is not simply to resist, but to pry open the cracks, to pull at the seams of the mediated real until the structures give way, until we touch what was buried beneath. The street is only as solid as we believe it to be. The weight of our steps, the force of our gestures, the rhythm of our movements – these are forms of

knowing that cannot be archived, commodified or contained. To refuse enclosure is not just to critique the city but to strip it away stone by stone, until we find the shore beneath the pavement. Radical media, like those hands lifting cobblestones in '68, is not merely an idea but an act – an undoing, an opening, a return to a space where new rhythms can emerge, where resistance is not a position but a movement, where the ground itself shifts and the horizon reappears. Beneath the ruins, the horizon opens.

Notes

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21 Permaeduction is an iteration of permacomputing, which has implemented a set of ethical values in the heart of its modus operandi, such as care for life, keep it small, keep it flexible, amplify awareness, expose everything, respond to change and everything has a place. For more information, see the Permacomputing website, https://permacomputing.net/permacomputing/.

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Fig. 23: A crowded metro. The order of public space emerges not from formal rules but from the nomos of a given social realm – the capacity to negotiate between individual and collective interests in contingent, situated ways. Photo: author.

Fig. 24: A photobooth at night, where cash can instantly be converted in physical imagery. No network, no sharing for likes, just a single memento of a wonderful night. Photo: author.

Fig. 25. A public phone at night. In light of its near extinction, it stands as a quiet reminder of simpler one-on-one communication and as a lingering beacon of public care in an increasingly privatised communicative landscape. Photo: author.

Epilogue: Speculating on a Future of Imaging

Some questions now arise that resists exact answers: How do we measure change when its increments escape perception? What limitations do we need to qualify individual responsibility as a parameter of collective accountability? The sorites paradox – the philosophical puzzle of a heap – offers an apt metaphor for this quandary: If a heap of sand loses a single grain at a time, when does it cease to be a heap? Conversely, when does adding grains turn a non-heap into a heap? In this paradox, the threshold is indeterminate; the transition is neither visible nor quantifiable. This indeterminacy captures the essence of change in today's condition, where the accumulation or erosion of factors reshaping our world cannot be precisely located or measured, yet its effects are unmistakable. The image by proxy, as explored in this book, reveals an ontological paradox: Where does an image cease to be a representation and become the very fabric of perception itself? This question aligns with the sorites paradox, in which individual elements – each seemingly insignificant – accumulate into a state where it becomes impossible to draw distinctions. In the case of imaging, the threshold between mediation and reality has become imperceptible, yet its effects on perception, cognition and social agency are undeniable. In the preceding chapters I have traced the complex mechanisms through which imaging shapes not only what is seen but also what is knowable, actionable and ultimately, ethical. From 'Inclination' to 'Responsivity,' I have demonstrated that perception is neither an autonomous act nor a passive reception of external stimuli. Rather, it is a negotiation between matter, content and expression, governed by parastrata

that often elude conscious recognition. The interplay of probability, framing and systemic conditioning constrains what can be imagined, much like the 90 per cent rule, which dictates the boundaries within which human agency operates. Imaging functions within this schema as both a tool and a structure, reinforcing existing paradigms while simultaneously offering points of rupture. As explored in Chapter 3, 'Emanation', the process of cinematographing – in which perception operates as a montage of inclusions and exclusions – illustrates that reality is not simply encountered but actively assembled. The image does not merely depict; it dictates the scope of engagement, determining what can be perceived, interpreted and remembered. This argument is further refined in Chapter 4, 'Consistency', where the image by proxy is positioned beyond Baudrillard's simulacrum. Unlike the simulacrum, which dissolves the referent entirely, the image by proxy maintains an illusion of external reality by embedding mediation within the very mechanisms of experience. This distinction underscores the insidious power of contemporary imaging systems: they no longer just replace reality but instead become its de facto architecture. In Chapter 5, 'Substance', I look at diffractive imaging and the concept of the memeopolis a semi-metaphorical city constituted not by physical infrastructure alone but by the recursive layering of images that precondition experience. The memeopolis does not emerge through any singular intervention but through the aggregation of imaging practices, where the proliferation of mediated fragments becomes indistinguishable from lived reality.

This process reflects the ontological paradox at the core of the image by proxy: Where does an image cease to be a representation and become the fabric of perception itself? Much like the sorites paradox, the transition is imperceptible, yet structurally profound: the memeopolis is the outcome of this threshold dissolution, a space where expectation, documentation and participation fold into each other, preconfiguring engagement before it even occurs. The new materialist perspective suggests that images function within broader ecological and affective networks, and the task becomes, then, one of recalibrating its ethical valence. This is where education, as explored in Chapter 6, 'Responsivity', emerges as a pivotal force. If imaging constructs perceptual reality, then pedagogies that resist mediation – grounded in socioception, somaesthetics and asignification – offer strategies for re-engaging perception as an embodied and relational act.

The concept of the image by proxy is poised at the intersection of the tangible and the intangible. As an apparatus, it operates through cultural, technological and social frameworks, shaping perceptions and representations of the world. It 'images' a reality that is abstract and ethereal, relying on users to concretise its vision through their actions and creations. These participants, while believing they are independently constructing depictions of reality, are unconsciously guided by

the apparatus, which embeds specific narratives, aesthetics and expectations into their choices. In this way, the image by proxy operates like the grains in the sorites paradox, accumulating imperceptibly to create a new reality whose boundaries remain elusive. Advances in artificial intelligence, augmented reality and neural networks exemplify this process. These tools, while seemingly autonomous, reflect a larger apparatus that encodes cultural, emotional and ecological cues. As these systems evolve over the next decade, they will continue to blur the line between creator and creation, fostering new forms of agency where the apparatus, not the individual, directs the flow of representation. Like the heap that forms grain by grain, these technologies accumulate incremental changes that, over time, reshape how we understand authorship, agency and representation. This book does not propose a reversal of imaging's hegemony, nor does it advocate for a return to an unmediated world – such a position would be untenable given the pervasiveness of contemporary imaging technologies. Instead, it highlights the need for an awareness of imaging's operational logics and its ethical dimensions. In an age where images no longer simply reflect reality but generate it, the responsibility lies not in dismantling these processes but in navigating them critically. The agency of the image by proxy is not an inevitability but a condition – a condition that, like the grains of sand in a heap, accumulates in ways that obscure its thresholds but never erase the possibility of intervention. As we move forward, the challenge is to cultivate an attunement to the imperceptible shifts within imaging ecologies. By recognising the paradoxical nature of perception – where every addition to the system both clarifies and obfuscates – we open new avenues for agency. In doing so, we ensure that imaging remains not just an apparatus of control but a site of negotiation, resistance and potentiality.

We are living in the surrealism of change – a liminal space where what was, what is and what will be overlap imperceptibly. J.G. Ballard's assertion that 'surrealism is the science fiction of five minutes from now' encapsulates this uncanny temporality.[1] Ballard's speculative thought envisioned futures so proximate to the present that they blurred the line between the two, reframing the extraordinary as mundane. He believed that we could learn more from our speculations about the near-future than from our reflections on the past, as the act of projecting forward forces us to confront the forces already shaping the present. It is in this space of nearly-now, where reality is just beginning to deform under the weight of change, that we find ourselves. The grains are shifting, imperceptibly, underfoot. This transformation reveals an unsettling truth: the image by proxy replaces reality with a self-referential hyperreality, folding the tangible into the imagined. Unlike Baudrillard's simulacrum, which overtly replaces the real, the image by proxy operates more implicitly. It thrives on its coexistence with

reality, embedding itself into the fine-grained fabric of lived experience while subtly redirecting focus, framing narratives and shaping values. Each grain of this apparatus adds to the heap of hyperreality, making it increasingly difficult to discern where representation ends and reality begins. The cultural and ecological implications of this shift are profound. This paradoxical interplay – between continuity and rupture, between the real and the imagined – requires us to rethink the nature of change itself.

The sorites paradox teaches us that change does not announce itself with fanfare; it happens grain by grain, accumulating until the heap becomes something else entirely. Similarly, the image by proxy does not demand our recognition; it operates invisibly, yet its effects are profound. To speculate within this space is to inhabit the surrealism of the nearly-now, to map the forces that shape a reality we cannot yet fully name. In Ballard's terms, this act of speculative mapping reveals the present as much as it predicts the future. It draws attention to the processes that are already unfolding, helping us to see what might otherwise remain invisible. As an affective force it is a transductive mechanism that replaces the concept of identity with agency. If we would consider identity as a fixed point of reference, then sorites destabilises it by demonstrating how continuity itself becomes a process of transformation – one in which difference is not imposed from the outside but emerges imperceptibly from within. Each granular shift is an affective modulation, a subtle intensification or attenuation of a state that is never wholly stable but always in the process of becoming something else. In this sense, sorites offers not just a paradox but a transducer: it translates discrete changes into a field of affective intensities, where the threshold of difference is neither predetermined nor absolute but contingent and emergent. In replacing identity with agency, sorites foregrounds process over essence, modulation over stasis, forcing us to recognise that continuity is not the absence of change but its most insidious form. The grain-by-grain logic of transformation mirrors the way affect operates – not as a discrete entity, but as an ongoing force that shapes the thresholds of perception, action and experience – a logic that underlies the condition of the present: a dystopian now in which change is imperceptible until it is absolute, where agency is dispersed across algorithmic infrastructures that automate desire, perception and decision-making. By contrast, the utopian yesterday remains frozen in retrospect, its promises of progress and emancipation obscured by the very structures they helped to produce. Between these two temporal poles, the image by proxy unfolds as both a symptom and a mechanism, scripting perception in a way that erases its own contingencies. If the dystopian now is a world where mediation is so complete that rupture becomes unthinkable, the utopian yesterday serves as both its origin myth and its afterimage, a reminder

that alternative trajectories once existed but have since been subsumed by the recursive logics of representation, expectation and control.

If this were a dystopia, we would know it. Or so we believe. Dystopia is supposed to announce itself – through catastrophe, through authoritarianism, through the clear rupture of what came before. And yet, the present unfolds without the recognition of its own conditions. John Carpenter's *They Live* (1988) provides a fitting metaphor: a world where the true workings of power remain unseen until a rare filter makes them visible.[2] The protagonist's sunglasses reveal the hidden commands embedded in advertisements – Obey, Consume, Conform – exposing the reality beneath the illusion of freedom. The brilliance of *They Live* is that it suggests the dystopia was always there; we just lacked the means to see it. Today's crisis is not merely a crisis of climate, of war, of political disintegration, but a crisis of perception. Every new catastrophe – rising temperatures, water shortages, the erosion of democratic institutions – is framed not as evidence of systemic failure, but as a momentary emergency, something to be managed, debated, absorbed into the spectacle. Populist politics thrives on this tendency, not by offering solutions but by amplifying polarisation as a resource, the third-tier platform economy where outrage itself is commodified. A divided society sustains power by ensuring that opposition never crystallises into structural change. If dystopia remains invisible, it is because we have internalised the logic of its maintenance. Crisis becomes background noise. The idea of political resistance becomes just another aesthetic choice. War is not a rupture, but a sustaining force, one that fuels economies, consolidates power, and offers the comforting illusion that there is still an enemy to fight that is not ourselves. What would it take to see the present for what it is? Not *more* information – they live, we scroll. The dystopian now does not require secrecy; it flourishes through transparency, through excess visibility. Surveillance is omnipresent, but it is not hidden. The collapse of ecological systems is measured, tracked, reported, but not confronted. The rise of algorithmic control is not imposed in secret – it is marketed, desired, integrated into daily life. Perhaps the true dystopia is one where nothing needs to be concealed, where truth itself ceases to have disruptive potential. Today, the sunglasses of *They Live* would show nothing new – because all is visible, and nothing is recognised.

In the contemporary era, power is increasingly exercised through images rather than direct political force, or at least they serve as the quartermasters of political weight. The image by proxy is Ahrimanic in nature. In Zoroastrian thought, Ahriman is the principle of negation – not through outright destruction, but through distortion and simulation.[3] He does not erase the world; he infects it with resemblance, mimicking presence while hollowing out its core. Likewise, the image

by proxy does not offer presence – it substitutes it. It mediates visibility through layers of spectral substitution, generating a world in which things no longer appear as themselves but as preconditioned representations of their function, affect or use. This is not illusion in the classical sense, but a system of strategic deferral: a machinic deceit, not aimed at denial but at modulation. The world, under Ahriman, is not hidden – it is shown too much, too early, too framed, until it dissolves into a haze of availability. The image by proxy is thus not a tool of deception but a metaphysical corruption of immediacy. The way reality is perceived – filtered through screens, narratives and curated representations – has become central to control and ideological dissemination. The concept of micro-mass imaging, where highly individualised yet mass-propagated content reshapes collective perception, plays a crucial role in this process. Within this framework, ideological subversion operates through the image by proxy – an indirect but pervasive mediation of reality in which meaning is produced, circulated and internalised without direct coercion. This dynamic closely aligns with the four-stage process of ideological subversion, famously articulated by Yuri Bezmenov, a former KGB propagandist turned whistleblower. Bezmenov's model outlines how ideological transformation unfolds over time, following four distinct phases, grain by grain: demoralisation, destabilisation, crisis and normalisation.[4] Each phase relies not merely on political machinations but on media-driven perception management, in which images, narratives and framing techniques dictate what is understood and believed.

The first phase, demoralisation, is a slow and deliberate weakening of a society's self-conception. Traditionally, this took place through education and cultural discourse, but in an era of micro-mass imaging, it manifests through algorithmic amplification of ideological dissonance. Media ecosystems no longer simply inform; they construct reality by prioritising narratives that fragment historical continuity and undermine epistemic stability. Through a steady saturation of curated crises, moral relativism and historical revisionism, entire populations experience a prolonged detachment from stable ideological frameworks. With demoralisation complete, destabilisation accelerates fragmentation. Where once media sought coherence, it now thrives on disjunction. Algorithmic feeds amplify polarisation and cognitive overload, making the distinction between fact and interpretation increasingly irrelevant. Political discourse is supplanted by competing aesthetic regimes – memes, viral imagery and hyper-mediated spectacles that function as ideological proxies rather than arguments. What emerges is not a contest over policy, but an aestheticised war of images, where ideological legitimacy is granted not through reasoning but through repetition and saturation. At a certain threshold, destabilisation gives way to crisis, the third phase in which the breakdown of shared meaning translates into tangible political

rupture. In this phase, media shifts from a tool of disruption to an instrument of control. Images function not just as representations of crisis but as mechanisms to manage its public perception. Fear and uncertainty create an environment where extraordinary measures – censorship, emergency governance and the suppression of dissent – are welcomed rather than resisted. At this stage, the image by proxy becomes governance by proxy, as control is exerted not through direct authoritarian means but through the framing of necessity and inevitability. Finally, normalisation occurs. In this phase, ideological subversion is no longer perceived as an external intervention but as the natural order of things. The role of media shifts once again – no longer destabilising, no longer shocking, but instead ensuring that alternative perspectives become unthinkable. Aesthetic regimes are consolidated, dissent is visually coded as illegitimate, and a new ideological landscape becomes self-sustaining. Society, having passed through the crucible of crisis, now self-regulates through images, through proxies, through the silent enforcement of what is visible and what is not. Thus, ideological subversion in the digital age is no longer merely about direct manipulation but about the structural reconfiguration of perception itself. As images increasingly mediate ideology by proxy, the struggle over meaning becomes a struggle over the conditions of visibility. What is seen, repeated and framed is what is known, and in the end, the image – not the argument – wins, grain by grain.

There was a time when to imagine the future was to design a better one. Utopian thinking was not a nostalgic indulgence but an essential function of society – a counterweight to the inertia of the present. In the 1970s, architects, theorists and artists actively proposed alternatives to the constraints of capitalist production. Constant Nieuwenhuys's *New Babylon* envisioned a world where automation liberated human creativity, where cities evolved as flexible, adaptive structures designed for play and exploration rather than labour and profit.[5] This was not just a theoretical exercise; it was a refusal to accept the inevitability of the status quo. Yet utopia has since receded, displaced not just by dystopian warnings but by a fundamental inability to conceive of systemic change. The neoliberal restructuring of the world has not only dismantled collective projects – it has eroded the conditions under which alternative futures can even be imagined. Crisis is managed, not solved. Hope is privatised. The future is something that happens to us, not something we shape. If dystopia thrives in the absence of recognition, utopia is lost in the absence of expectation. The problem is not that we no longer dream of a better world; it is that the possibility of one has been strategically discredited. The most ambitious visions of today are not radical transformations, but technical optimisations of the existing order – AI efficiency, green capitalism, urban renewal projects that preserve economic hierarchies

while branding themselves as progressive. To reclaim utopia is not simply to fantasise about alternative futures but to dismantle the mechanisms that render them inconceivable. It is not about designing another *New Babylon*, but about reversing the logic that makes *New Babylon* seem naïve. It requires a rejection of inevitability, an insistence that the present order is not natural, that systems can be undone as easily as they were constructed. Utopia is not a lost past, but a suppressed possibility – one that persists beneath the surface, waiting not for the right conditions, but for the right refusal. This epilogue, then, is not an endpoint but a beginning – an invitation to think with the paradox, to speculate like Ballard, and to embrace the uncanny temporality of the image by proxy. As the grains continue to shift, the heap – whatever it may be – is both dissolving and forming anew. What remains is the question of how we will navigate a world where images are not merely reflections but forces, shaping the contours of a future already unfolding. In order to regain control, we must ground ourselves more frequently in the awkwardness of reality and drink the coffee as it comes.

Resonant Cognition VII: The Cow was Always Smiling, As She Knew

The future, five minutes from now, will look remarkably like the present, yet something will have shifted – imperceptibly at first, but unmistakably upon reflection. Not in the way we often imagine change, through abrupt rupture or cataclysmic transformation, but in the quiet grain-by-grain erosion of assumptions, the unnoticed reconfiguration of expectations. A new pattern will have emerged, not by innovation but through necessity, through the collapse of something we assumed to be infinite. Perhaps energy costs will have made large-scale AI operations unsustainable, or social media, in some unforeseen regulatory twist, will have lost its grip on public consciousness. Not through enlightenment, but through exhaustion – through a tipping point where the machinery of mediation becomes too costly to maintain. In such a future, presence might once again find footing in the unmediated, not by choice but by constraint. The dominance of algorithmic filtering, of continuous proxies layering themselves into infinity, will stutter. People will look up, not because they sought escape from their screens, but because the infrastructure that kept them tethered to images of themselves reflected back at them will have quietly eroded. And perhaps, in this forced recalibration, something long suppressed will surface: a capacity for ambient belonging, for rootedness without insularity. If time is merely an agreement, a contract we have signed with entropy, then the future five minutes from now should be negotiable. Not utopian, not dystopian, but an interstice – an opening where necessity folds back on itself, revealing suppressed possibilities. And if the present feels like a closed circuit, an infinite regression, perhaps the only true subversion lies in the capacity to shift its logic from within. This brings us, inevitably, to The Laughing Cow ™.[6]

The laughing cow, with her infinite recursion of self-representation, has been here all along, grinning from supermarket shelves, a benign corporate emblem that smuggles within it the entire logic of mediated perception. She is not just a logo; she is a system, a schema of how images sustain themselves – not by pointing outward to some external referent, but by turning inward, feeding on their own replication. Her earrings, miniature versions of herself, each containing the same image repeated in perpetuity, forming a *mise en abyme*, a visual recursion that mirrors the feedback loops of the mediascape itself. What is the laughing cow, if not an image by proxy par excellence – an image whose function is not to depict reality but to sustain itself through endless self-reference? Her presence is comforting, yet slightly unsettling. She is familiar, but her infinite looping hints at something more uncanny – like the warmth of a childhood memory distorted by repetition. In her smile and devilish red appearance, there is something of an unspoken structure that benefits from endless loops of engagement that make change appear both inevitable and impossible. She embodies the fractalisation of meaning, where each iteration carries the whole but also dilutes it, a piece of the hologram that contains all the information, yet never quite resolves into anything new. The irony, of course, is that she has always been laughing. Long before we worried about algorithmic entrapment, before surveillance capitalism turned our desires into marketable predictions, before we recognised the dizzying depth of self-referential mediation, she was there whispering: 'You've seen this before. You will see it again. And again. And again.' And yet, five minutes from now, something will be different. The cycle will not have been broken, but a slight shift in its rhythm will have made it noticeable. A tiny grain of disruption in the heap of the inevitable. The realisation that presence – the kind that resists infinite deferral – is not about rejecting mediation, but about recognising where mediation collapses under its own weight. Five minutes from now, the cow will still be laughing. The question is whether we will finally laugh back – not in complicity, but in recognition, in the understanding that the loop is only infinite if we fail to notice where it frays. Perhaps it begins as an inconvenience – an unnoticed policy change, an economic threshold crossed, a system that can no longer sustain itself. The price of computation soars, and AI becomes too expensive to run at scale; only the privileged can access it, but then again, they always had the upper hand, so what would be new. The once-endless stream of personalised content begins to thin, distort, repeat itself like an old cassette wearing down. Algorithms stutter, images decay, predictive models fall out of sync with human unpredictability. Perhaps it is more deliberate – a restriction on social media, a sudden reorientation of digital architectures or a new type of digital piracy enters. The feed no longer refreshes. Not by force, but by function. It simply stops making

sense. And with it, the frantic externalisation of self slows, if only for a moment. The world, unmirrored, appears in its own light, no longer flattened into something instantly legible, instantly shareable. Or maybe it happens in the space between necessity and adaptation. Cities, no longer sustained by the hyper-efficiency of automated logistics, reconfigure themselves – not into utopian communes, but into practical, localised networks of presence. Suddenly, to know what is available, one must ask. To understand what is happening, one must listen. Not to a device, but to the immediate surroundings. The smiling cow, adorned with earrings that contain her own image, infinitely receding, is not merely a logo but a model of our mediated reality. A fractal of presence, a holographic remnant of the image by proxy, she laughs at us from within an endless recursion – each layer containing the whole, each repetition reinforcing its inevitability. She does not mock, nor does she reassure. She simply *is*, perpetuating a world where images replicate themselves into self-sufficient realities, needing no referent beyond their own repetition. And yet, here, within this highly self-referential loop, a slippage occurs. What if the repetition itself could be repurposed? What if the mechanism of perpetual mediation could be reoriented – not to produce more of the same, but to reveal the conditions of its own making? If images rule perception, then what happens when perception itself short-circuits?

'*Soyez réalistes, demandez l'impossible*' (Be realistic, demand the impossible). The rallying cry of May '68 lingers like a forgotten glitch in the code, a refusal to obey the algorithm of predictability. It does not ask for utopia, nor for a revolution of destruction, but for an interruption – a reconfiguration of what is deemed possible, simply by demanding the impossible. This is where a future five minutes from now might differ from one five centuries ahead. Not in grand redesigns, not in revolutionary upheaval, but in minute, deliberate inversions – a shift so subtle that it is at first imperceptible, like the moment when a cow begins to laugh and is no longer merely a cow. In René Char's words, '*L'impossible, nous ne l'atteignons pas, mais il nous sert de lanterne*': the impossible remains just out of reach, yet it illuminates the path before us.[7] The function of the future is not to arrive, but to beckon. What appears unreachable is, in fact, the only thing guiding us forward. Perhaps this is why the recursive logic of the laughing cow is so unsettling. If she can laugh, if she can contain herself containing herself, what does that say about our own condition? Have we, too, become images within images, selves within proxies, endlessly reproducing expectations that were never our own? If the future is to be reshaped, it will not be by inventing something new, but by inverting what is already here. Social media does not have to be a factory of hyper-mediation; it could just as easily decay into irrelevance under the weight of its own excess. AI does not have to be the architect of an image-saturated

dystopia; it could just as well become too energy-hungry, too cumbersome, too fragile to sustain itself. The cracks in the system may not be points of collapse, but openings – spaces where that which was deemed impossible forces itself into view. Perhaps jouissance is the ache of abundance – the unbearable fullness of what spills over, what exceeds, what cannot be held, yet demands to be felt. To know abundance is to mourn its vanishing even as it persists, to touch excess only in its retreat. How many grains of intensity must slip away before we acknowledge the loss? And yet, it is the nature of excess to be excessive, to refuse measure, to arrive already escaping.

The laughing cow laughs with us, or perhaps through us, her mirth an echo of our own uneasy pleasure. We, too, are loops – selves folding into selves, consuming the trace of a hunger we cannot name. But if something is truly self-contained, does it not need no exterior? And yet, self-containment only exists in relation to something outside itself. The more we try to define the limit of an image, a self, a system, the more it spills over. What, then, is the threshold where a surplus becomes a deficit, where saturation turns to scarcity? Or is this, too, an illusion, a trick of perception where absence and excess are merely inflections of the same event? The system is too full, too loud, too persistent – perhaps that is its weakness. Overproduction frays at its own edges; hyper-visibility blinds itself. The excess that ensures survival could just as easily make it irrelevant. Does an image-saturated world still see anything? If everything is visible, does anything remain perceptible? What if exhaustion is not an endpoint but a portal? What if abundance, in all its weight, collapses into an elsewhere, not of scarcity but of possibility? The five-minute future is not a utopia; it does not promise resolution. It is an interval, a threshold of reconfiguration. And when it arrives, we might find that we are already within it – repeating, yet different, laughing along with the cow, neither here nor there, but precisely at the moment where perception bends. It is neither a collapse nor a revelation. Neither the sudden burst of revolution, nor the slow suffocation of resignation. It is a fracture in the habitual, a quiet, unplanned departure from what was presumed inevitable. Five minutes from now, the lantern flickers. The absence of immediacy. The hollowed-out silence where expectation used to be. But in this silence, other frequencies emerge. A conversation that lingers instead of dissolving into notifications. A walk that is not measured, not optimised, but simply taken. A place that is encountered without first being previewed, reviewed, mapped or tagged. This is not utopia. It is not a solution. But it is an opening, a shift from the perpetual displacement of experience into its own reflection. A future of five minutes from now, and it has already begun. *Sous les pavés, la plage!*

Notes

1 *J.G. Ballard: The Future is Just a Minute Away*, dir. James Runcie (BBC, 1991).
2 *They Live*, dir. John Carpenter (Universal Pictures, 1988).
3 Zoroastrianism is one of the oldest known monotheistic religions, originating in ancient Persia (circa 1000 BCE), centred around a cosmic dualism between Ahura Mazda, the principle of truth, light, and generative order, and Angra Mainyu (Ahriman), the principle of deceit, corruption and disintegration. Rather than annihilate, Ahriman mimics and distorts, eroding reality by overexposing it through simulation and excess.
4 Yuri Bezmenov, *Love Letter to America* (published by the author, 2016), https://ia802207.us.archive.org/3/items/love-letter-america/love-letter-america.pdf.
5 Constant Nieuwenhuys, *New Babylon: Aan ons de vrijheid* (The Hague: Haags Gemeentemuseum, 1974).
6 *La Vache Qui Rit* (The Laughing Cow) is a registered trademark of Fromageries Bel S.A., first introduced in 1921. The brand and logo are protected under international trademark laws, with registrations in the European Union, the United States and other jurisdictions.
7 René Char, *Feuillets d'Hypnos* (Paris: Gallimard, 1946), 16, my translation.

Fig. 26: A semi-public space designed as an inverted theme-park follows the same logic as digital attention capitalism: if the entertainment is free, you are the product. Photo: author.

Fig. 27: An all-too-real synthetic environment in Milan that mirrors architectural renderings with uncanny precision. In a rapidly digitising world, form increasingly follows reproducibility rather than habitability. Photo: author.

Fig. 28: A petrol station at sunrise. A recapturing of mundane aesthetics, reminding us that excellence lies not in excess, but in more thoughtful execution. Photo: author.

Fig. 29: Traveller in the snow. An unmediated future may reintroduce hardship, but also the joy of deeply embodied soma-aesthetic experience. Photo: author.

Fig. 30: A social space. A future five minutes from now may unfold as the delayed outcome of a forgotten thought from long ago; an older future. Photo: author.

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The exponential growth of image production has created a condition in which images no longer depict, but organise. The Image by Proxy introduces mass-microimaging as a framework for understanding how images function as infrastructural agents: automated and recursive, embedded in the logics of the attention economy. In this regime, visibility is pre-configured rather than chosen. Images operate by proxy, through algorithmic substitution and systemic validation. Their proliferation erodes perception, replacing memory and history with a perpetual present, while authenticity fades in a circulation where images reference only each other.

This book addresses the epistemic, ethical and political consequences of such automation. What forms of thought and responsibility remain possible when images dictate the conditions of recognition? How do infrastructures of imaging extend beyond representation to shape the terms of social, political and ecological existence?

Drawing on philosophy, media theory and cultural critique, The Image by Proxy argues that imaging has become the fastest-growing system of production on the planet, yet its control does not reside in any network of ethical accountability. Proxy images do not merely reflect perception; they structure reality. The book challenges the belief that visual abundance ensures democratic access, showing instead how mass-microimaging narrows thought, compresses experience and consolidates power in favour of the machinic infrastructures that sustain platform capitalism.

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