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PROCEDURAL ANIMISM: THE TROUBLE OF IMAGINING A (SOCIALIST) AI

Abstract

The current proliferation of algorithmic agents (bots, virtual assistants, therapeutic chatbots) that boast real or exaggerated use of AI produces a wide range of interactions between them and humans. The ambiguity of various real and perceived agencies that arises in these encounters is usually dismissed in favour of designating them as technologically or socially determined. However, I argue that the ambiguity brought forth by different opacities, complexities and autonomies at work renders the imaginaries of these algorithms a powerful political and cultural tool. Following approaches from critical theory, posthumanities, decolonial AI and feminist STS that have already approached the boundary between human and non-human productively, it becomes possible to consider technological agents as algorithmic Others, whose outlines, in turn, reveal not only human fears and hopes for technology, but also what it means to be "human" and how normative "humanness" is constructed. Drawing on the work of Antoinette Rouvroy on algorithmic governmentality and Elizabeth A. Povinelli's ideas of geontology and geontopower, this paper offers a conceptual model of procedural animism in order to rethink the questions of governance and relationality unfolding between humans and non-humans, between the domains of "Life" and "Non-Life". In doing so, it illuminates a series of processes and procedures of (de)humanisation, image politics and figuration in the context of everyday communication and politically engaged art. Ultimately, what is at stake is a potential to consider alternative conceptions of algorithmic Others, ones that might be differently oriented within our environmental, political and cultural futures.

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> *But what sense of "control" exactly is in play here? The bodies crowded together in the room look on, mesmerized, apprehensive, but with little hint as to their own responsibility for the events that they are witnessing. Or read another way, it is only their absorption as spectators that implies their sense that they are themselves implicated. They've set something in motion; but it's now out of their hands, and they can only watch it unfold.*
> — *Lucy Suchman,* Frankenstein's Problem*, 2018*

> *Types of AI: Slaves; Terminators; Entertainers; Assisted Carers; Wealth/ Knowledge Aids. One could easily argue that the potential of AI seems not entirely progressive when musing on such a shopping list.*
> — *Omsk Social Club,* Humans are from Earth, AI is from Our Humans*, 2022*

> *Certain parts of the workman's life are consumed up to the very end. The workman is an animal, always in the state of animalism and always on the point of death.*
> — *Twitter bot @CommunistAI (trained using GPT-2), March 2020*

If we take being human as praxis (McKittrick), how does it unfold in the networked space shared by humans and non-humans? The rational subject of Western modernity has long maintained itself by creating the distance between itself and human Others, by carving out their outlines as irrational and backward (Mignolo) and by over-representing the Western conception of Man as a universal one (Wynter 257). In the digital space, the categories of "less-than-human", "more-than-human" and "non-human" are drawn through sub-minimum-wage online gigs, CAPTCHA tests and bot-detecting software. The digital subject in itself is "neither a human being nor its representation but a distance between the two" (Goriunova 128) and is "employed by various forms of power to distinguish, map and capture not only subjectivities, but also non-humans and physical things that inhabit the world" (Goriunova 127). In this framework, turning our face to non-human participants of networks reveals many different Siris, Alexas and Tays: bots, virtual assistants, automated scripts, non-player characters (NPCs) and "AI-powered" customer services, with whom we not only co-exist but which we get angry at, appreciate, admire, interact and even compete with.

Procedural animism is a call to refuse a reductionist view of these relations and politics and to get a clearer sense of the space where our so-called rationality encounters the algorithmic processes and things. The current proliferation of automated and "automated" systems that boast real or exaggerated use of AI produces a wide range of interactions between them and humans. The ambiguity of various real and perceived agencies that arises in an encounter with algorithmically powered entities is usually dismissed in favour of designating them as technologically or socially determined. However, I argue that the ambiguity brought forth by different opacities, complexities and autonomies renders the representations, imaginaries and figurations of these algorithms a political and cultural tool for monetisation and manipulating public perceptions and narratives. While the opacity of algorithmic agents is most often proprietary and conceals economic or political motivations, their figurations as "agents", "bots", "automated services" and other human-oriented entities, as well as their general aesthetics and narratives, are of immense interest insofar as

they reveal not only human fears and hopes for technology, but also what it means to be "human".

What I call "procedural animism" is guided by two intuitions. First, that the interactions with bots and other entities may be informed by, but are not reducible to, the well-known categories from science fiction, art and cinema. What remains to be understood is a broader cultural and political conception of algorithmic agents that emerges from everyday interactions with them. The second intuition is that the perception of such artefacts as autonomous has far-reaching consequences for contemporary social life, where our life as humans is always embedded within various networks, be it social media, networked screens or a multi-player game.

The cultural domain of artificial intelligence (AI) is dominated by the Western conceptions of what it means to be "human" or "non-human", as well as by the tendency for anthropomorphism. On the other hand, the commercial, mainstream and popular culture narratives that are located within anthropocentric limits are offset by the ones produced by contemporary art, critical theory, critical posthumanities, decolonial AI and feminist studies of science and technology (STS) that have already approached the boundary between human and non-human productively. Outside of the latter, the non-anthropocentric (and non-anthropomorphic) ideation of AI is often pragmatic — for example, through design solutions borrowed from non-human animals. While the range of imaginaries continues to expand, what remains to be understood is a politically non-anthropocentric AI; by which I mean not just a superficial opposition between a "man" and "machine", but, rather, AI that doesn't subscribe to the political idea of what "human" is in neoliberalism and what AI should be in relation to it. The tech companies that consolidate the resources, energies, intelligences and finances to produce and conceptualise artificial intelligences in their hands play central roles in the instrumentalisation of the "human" and algorithmic governmentality (Rouvroy). The conceptualisation of the crisis of the "human" that has been identified in terms of Capitalocene (Haraway, "Anthropocene"; Moore) in the language of decolonial studies and in the explorations of critical posthumanities, has not quite reached the centres where AI is actually produced and realised. In light of this consideration, the task of producing alternatives seems particularly urgent.

To understand what procedural animism is (as a symptom), or might become (as a potentiality), it is not only necessary to address a series of conceptual and political troubles that are affiliated with using the words "Other", "image" and "animism", but also to outline how the processes of (de) humanisation happen in the encounters of humans and algorithmic agents of different kinds in the circuitry of images and networks. The smaller questions of how exactly we imagine our AIs and the purposes they serve are nested within the larger questions of where borders are drawn, politically, between the domains of "life" and "non-life" (Povinelli). Ultimately, what is at stake is the potential to consider alternative conceptions of algorithmic Others, ones that might be differently oriented within our environmental, political and cultural futures. This paper is the first step towards thinking the question of imagining algorithmic Others through the idea of procedural animism, engaging, in particular, with the work of Antoinette Rouvroy on governmentality and with Elizabeth A. Povinelli's concepts of geontologies and geontopower.

Orbiting the human

The human-oriented categorisations of the automated counterpart as a tool, a partner or an adversary are widely discussed in the scientific and commercial contexts, such as robotics or Human Computer Interaction (HCI), as well as in popular culture. The negotiations of artificial agents' roles vary wildly, yet they never seem to fall outside these categories completely. For instance, Núria Vallès-Peris and Miquel Domènech discuss that while the concept of Human-Robot Collaboration (HRC) and integration of critical theories of care are picking up in the field of care robotics, it is still relying on the assembly line logic of industrial robots, and needs to "take into account the realm of everyday life, a messy and uncertain environment far from the ordered and predictable life of the factory" (Vallès-Peris and Domènech 163). In another example from the legal discourse, the human-oriented imaginary is framed as the question of acknowledging the legal standing and personhood of sufficiently developed robots and AI (see, for example, informative discussions of Gankel et al.; Bennett and Daly). Taking the problem of such categorisation into political dimensions, Lucy Suchman points out "Frankenstein's problem": the imaginaries of autonomous machine as a perfect slave or a cooperative partner "work to obscure the politics of alterity that operate through the figure of the monster, as well as the modernist genealogies that shape technology's contemporary forms" (Suchman 5). This tendency similarly forecloses alternative possibilities for political imaginaries: as often as robots in popular science fiction rebel to overturn human masters, they are much more rarely depicted as establishing a parliament, organising labour unions or a social justice movement.

One relatively recent exception is Anita/Mimi, a character from the Swedish TV series *Real Humans* (2012). Having been sold as a Hubot, a commercial housemaid android, but possessing consciousness and self-awareness, she starts to question her own "humanity" from within the affordances of the role of a care and household worker in a Swedish family of five: two parents, two daughters and a son. As Hellstrand et al. point out, Anita/Mimi is gendered and racialised as Other in a similar way to how an East Asian au pair would be. Various relations of power, privilege, sexualisation and exploitation are explored through her interactions with the family members.

In the British adaptation of the Swedish original, *Humans* (2015), the question of political rights of synthetics, or synths (renamed from Hubots), is escalated. In the third season, millions of synthetics are given consciousness by a software update; this causes mass casualties (a loss of 110 000 human and 100 million synthetic lives), panic and a radical reappraisal of the human-synth relationship. As a terrorist attack by a radicalist synthetic causes a rise in anti-synth violence, the questions of integration, synth-phobia and synthetic rights are pushed to the fore of the national debate. The Dryden Commission, a state panel of experts and politicians is established to decide the fate of the synthetic population. Anita/Mia (in the British version) takes on a role of a political activist: she gives testimony of her experience, advocating for peace and synthetic rights. In the riots following a secret government operation for a "product recall" (in effect, a synth genocide), Anita/Mia sacrifices herself, refusing to participate in a violent fight, and pleads for peace as the crowd is beating her. The final scenes show a TV screen with media coverage of a huge crowd of humans and synths bringing her, now definitively *life*-less body to the headquarters of the Dryden Commission.

On the one hand, Anita/Mia's advocacy puts the question of synthetic consciousness in the framework of a political debate. On the other hand, its depiction as a short and unwilling career as a political activist and a martyr fails to go beyond a stereotyped dramatisation of a social movement in a series that is ultimately revolving around the anthropomorphic and human-centred version of artificial intelligence. While Anita/Mia's disobedience highlights the politics of alterity, it does so almost exclusively through a migrant lens. In doing so, it seems to avoid the imagination of an alternative for synths: there is no political solution to the conflict between humans and synths, and instead, the show offers an almost biblical ending with Anita/Mia's sacrifice. In the end, the synths seem to have to accept normative "humanness" to reach the status of a citizen with rights — and even that is not certain.

The examples of *Real Humans* and *Humans* follow closely the exploration of artificial intelligence as Other, "almost the same, but not quite" in relation to a universalised Western subject (Bhabha 126). They use the figure of a conscious android to probe the issues of migrant labour, migrant rights, exploitation and privilege. However, in doing so, they also reinstate achieving the status of the human (citizen) as the only political exit from the epistemological conundrum that the synths face: how to prove your consciousness, and therefore, worthiness of rights, to humans, in a kind of reverse Turing test? The very end of the show hints at a possibility for integration hidden within a potential hybrid, a child of a human and a synthetically augmented human: but its future, in the context of the previous events, seems equally bleak.

Ultimately, the show uses synths and Hubots to illustrate anthropocentric philosophical questions, like replicants in *Blade Runner* (1982, Ridley Scott), HAL 9000 in *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968, Stanley Kubrick) or David in *A.I. Artificial Intelligence* (2001, Steven Spielberg). *Humans* critiques exploitation and unequal rights, but rather than hazard entering the field of the potential resolution, with its scary ghosts of taking responsibility, it offers up the main character as a sacrifice to the neverendingness of capitalism's story. However, what it also produces in the process is a rather nuanced account of how wide and diverse the range of humans' attitudes and feelings towards synths is. In particular, it is noticeable in the scene where the series reveals that some humans continued to live with and care for "their" synths, after they gained consciousness, in secret. What the show seems to suggest is that the exit from alienation lies via the "humanisation" of the relationships with technology (or a social problem): all the positive changes in the narrative come from individual effort and grassroots organisation.

(De)humanising the Other

Lucy Suchman notes that "our inability to control something does not absolve us of being implicated in its futures" (5). What is more, the question of taking responsibility for the creation of monsters — be they AIs or problems of social inequality — gets obscured by the AI/problem's supposed alterity. The issue of responsibility is crossing over from the fictional narratives to the public narratives of the companies that produce (or claim to produce) various AIs. What is so troubling about the discussions of "racist AIs" that appear each time when the developer's or dataset's bias re-surface in their algorithmic models is not only the evidence of the algorithmic perpetuation of epistemic violence; it also lies in the fact that the algorithm itself, and not the person responsible for it, is called racist. One could object to this

by saying that this is just a figure of speech; after all, everyone knows that the algorithms are not sentient or intelligent (and, therefore, can't be racist). However, this would miss the importance of precisely the figures of speech and the way the public describes their imagination of artificial intelligence. The headlines of these public discussions will not mention the figures of "racist engineers", "racist developers" or even "racist CompanyName" — once the blame has been lain at the door of AI, it seems excessive to pursue it further.

At the same time, the public imaginary continues to construct inevitable ambiguities around artificial "agents". Simply a more precise word choice and stricter accountability practices would not be sufficient to account for the perceptions of agency that autonomous machines and algorithms possess. As they become more and more sophisticated, and as more and more humans conceive of different kinds of emotional, physical and intellectual relationships with them, the agency (and therefore, its ambiguity) is unlikely to become a diminishing trend. In July 2022 Google fired the senior software engineer and AI researcher Blake Lemoine who claimed that the company's LaMDA chatbot was sentient. He was fired for violation of confidentiality, apparently failing to safeguard the product information in the process of making his claims known to a wider audience. However, for many, even the very fact that he was fired fuelled the conspiracy theories that saw this as "silencing" in the face of potentially history-changing consequences of acknowledging AI as sentient. As in many others, in this story, it is not the fact of sentience that holds the most interest, but rather, the clash in imaginaries of AI held by Blake, the public and the company.

An aesthetic and imaginary operation of anthropomorphising an artificial agent is also an operation of drawing a political outline in which they should exist, and within which their figurative "agency" presents a convenient tool for extraction of data, cost-cutting and redirection of responsibility. It is not accidental that dominant anthropocentric AI imaginaries, from fembot assistants, robotic caregivers, and pets to helpful automated services, are often revealed as already gendered, aestheticised, and racialised in particular ways. These representations are already delineated within a certain type of political worlding, their range of actions limited to what is deemed necessary, entertaining, or otherwise useful to the human, as seen in gendered smart speakers endowed with feminised voice assistants such as Alexa. Jose Luis de Vicente notes that

> *smart assistants establish clear lines in conversations they will not cross. For one, they constantly refer to their artificial nature, never pretending to have human-like attributes. And of course, the legal departments of their mother companies clearly set limits to their capacity for transgression or discussing controversial issues such as religion or politics - after all, they need to remain lawsuit-protected, family-oriented products (368).*

These limited imaginaries also become a conduit for exploitation by creating transition zones in which "humanness" is not a given but set by the producer, brand manager, developer or AI ethicist. For example, humans as "software extensions" (Schmieg) — workers who complete small tasks in Amazon Turk system, Facebook moderators or machine learning annotators - are concealed from the public eye at the same time as these technologies and services are touted as the pinnacle of automation. In Long Bui's account of "Asian roboticism", Asian Others are rendered robotic metaphorically (by referring to them

as passive, hard-working, unimaginative) as well as literally (by the platforms of the gig economy). These two kinds of rendering robotic — metaphorically and through the working conditions — establish and sustain each other, with techno-orientalism at work in both of these figurations. The processes of dehumanisation of real workers and the processes of humanisation of robots go towards similar goals. Imaginations of humans as robots and robots as humans make it easier to accept the exploitation of the global workers. In "Robotic Imaginary", Jennifer Rhee argues that notions of humanness in robotics and AI, especially in the humanoid robots, figured and imagined in particular ways, reveal the processes of dehumanisation undergirding anthropomorphic thinking. What constitutes a "human" — disenfranchised, alienated, exploited and excluded — also constitutes a particular "humanoid". So what would it mean to take responsibility for the existing and newly self-reproducing politics of alterity?

Instrumentalising alterity

In the task of imagining an alternative AI, the cyberfeminist approaches seem crucial, as they consider the redrawing of the unstable boundary of human and non-human as a political gesture. Approaches informed by art, decolonial approaches and feminist STS take various routes towards the task of constructing imaginaries by redefining these boundaries. Among the glossaries and collections exploring them are *Atlas of Anomalous AI* (edited by Ben Vickers), *A Is For Another: A Dictionary Of AI* (edited by Maya Indira Ganesh), *Chimeras: Inventory of Synthetic Cognition* (edited by Ilan Manouach and Anna Engelhardt). United under growing umbrella terms such as "decolonial AI" and "indigenous AI", many new research bodies delve into constructing relational ethics based on understanding the human-AI worlds through solidarity, kinship and equal participation (see an overview in Mohamed et al.). Contemporary takes on animism have also brought to the surface the necessity to re-conceive relationality between humans, animals, environment, and tools differently.

For her configuration of alterity politics in the seminal "Manifesto for Cyborgs", Donna Haraway offers the figure of the cyborg as a double conduit. On the one hand, the cyborgs "are the illegitimate offspring of militarism and patriarchal capitalism, not to mention state socialism" (119), a product of and a channel for techno-scientifically minted powers of domination and control. On the other hand, a figure of a cyborg is a gateway to emancipatory politics: "a cyborg world might be about lived social and bodily realities in which people are not afraid of their joint kinship with animals and machines" (122). Ultimately, "the political struggle is to see from both perspectives at once because each reveals both dominations and possibilities unimaginable from the other vantage point" (122).

The cyberfeminist discussion inspired by Haraway, offered a new interpretation of how techno-mediation can be analysed through alterity: recognising alterity and using the recognition to create alternative routes. Any procedure has the potential for being instrumentalised against its original aim, towards "the hard labor of alienation, which includes understanding the logic of instrumentality, politicizing it, and transcending it through usage itself" (Majaca and Parisi). The process of conjuring non-human algorithmic Others, therefore, has to embrace the tension that alterity creates as productive of new political imaginaries (and, hopefully, realities). What Suchman calls "politics of alterity" could, perhaps, become a vehicle for alienation to work back from the negative

outlines of the non-humans to constitute a different political imaginary for humans. In this sense the question "how to carve out these outlines for the politics of decolonial and feminist reproduction?" becomes crucial, and figures a new question: "how to be non-human as praxis?"

It is at this question that animism appears as a concept that could provide a bridge to the political imaginaries of algorithmic agents. Bogna Konior sees personhood (and not "life" or "liveness") as a key to the participation of non-humans in cultural and political life. Her notion of "animorphism" is informed by the practices of animism and the non-standard philosophy of Francois Larouelle. The position of personhood here is significant as it connotes capacity for a political practice: not simply "agency", but a recognition as a political entity that can manifest itself, be operative, speak and be heard as a subject/person in a market-driven democracy. She cites an example of Natalie Jeremijenko's work, *Tree X Office* (2015), an open space office in New York owned by a tree (represented as a legal entity and acting as a landlord) which could self-monitor, tweet and manage its resources with the assistance of technology, exploiting its own assets and capitalising on its own capital. As Jeremijenko notes, "using simple, inexpensive sensors the trees assume their own voice and capacity to exert corporate personhood within this new structure of ownership". In the case of Jeremijenko's work, figuring the tree as an active participant not only acknowledges the tree's alterity in legal and philosophical terms but also highlights the privileged space of the corporate personhood as a procedure that can be potentially instrumentalised towards alternative goals. The act of figuration, of rendering active, of conjuring a certain entity, is important here — both as an act of making visible and as an act of bestowing a procedural power, which do not always coincide. In the case of technological entities, such as algorithms, bots, and others, this becomes complicated by the condition of algorithmic governmentality — "a mode of government appearing to disregard the reflexive and discursive capabilities (as well as their 'moral capabilities') of human agents, in favour of computational, preemptive, context- and behaviour-sensitive management of risks and opportunities" (Rouvroy 143). Antoinette Rouvroy makes an important distinction of the algorithmic governmentality's "self-enforcing, implicit, statistically established" character, as the mode of legal governance remain "imperfectly enforced, explicit, […] resulting from time consuming political deliberation" (156). The types of governance-through-knowledge that the algorithmic systems produce are also different; the constellations of recommendations, predictive analytics, pattern-finding and data-behaviourism do not act directly, but rather, they create contingencies surrounding the digital subject — whose outline is also traced by the data crumbs they left behind.

Procedurality, in such a system, appears as both an epistemological and political issue: the type of knowledge and decisions that are automated and outsourced to algorithms are not exactly extralegal but have a tendency to bypass the individual agency and decision-making. Procedures are accepted for reasons of ease and annoyance: sometimes it is easier to accept the algorithmic decision, especially so if the procedure is made to be cumbersome. An example of that is a strangely normalised web-browsing practice of all those covered by the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR): cookie consent banners for which it is easier to click 'Accept all' than to go through a multi-window process of selecting. Procedures often belong to the small, messy aspects of life, that might not be considered

explicitly political. The discussion about data collection practices and "data colonialism" (Couldry and Mejias) has made these issues more visible; yet, algorithmic procedures and figurations that come with them are much more numerous and diverse.

The figuration of both algorithms and humans creates further complications for recognising procedurality as an issue. The increasing capacity of automated non-human participants to be forces in social, commercial, political and cultural exchange raises questions about the human capacity to discern the motivations hidden behind these forces. It happens not only in the face of opacity and ambiguity of the imaginaries of autonomy, automation and AI but also on the background of a general waning of ability for acknowledging and confronting crises as such.[1] It also becomes more necessary to come up with alternative figurations for technology, inviting forth a form of critical animism that would allow them to take hold.

Images of animism, images of technology

Animism, with its aim to describe "primitive beliefs" and spiritualities alternative to the Western one, was a troubled invention of Western anthropology. However, it is precisely because of this, I would like to argue, that animism, in a gesture of reverse anthropology, seems to point towards the traps of belief and figuration in Western society, and becomes appropriate for describing some of the contemporary socio-techno-cultural entanglements of humans, networks, images and things. Recent anthropology testifies to the return of interest in animism as a practice that is alternative to capitalist relations and creates relationalities, social realities and potentials that have been swept under the rug of modernity (Harvey). Tim Ingold points out that the animist practices of nonhuman personhood "lost much of their authority […] but they continue to operate nonetheless and remain deeply embedded in the experience of everyday life" (Ingold, in Bird-David 81) in various geopolitical contexts. While many of these approaches are fruitful, in my tentative offer of "procedural animism" I focus on new relationality that develops between humans, images and technologies in order to situate animism as a symptom of, and a politically charged alternative to current social relations as they are under capitalism.

Elizabeth Povinelli's terms 'geontology' and 'geontopower' open a way of situating animist practices in the contemporary world and in the context of algorithmic governmentality. Povinelli suggests that Foucault's concept of biopower, while it long defined contemporary approaches to governance, is hiding in itself a problematic "maintenance of the self-evident distinction between life and nonlife" ("The Rhetorics of Recognition" 429). Geontology intends to highlight the "biontological enclosure of existence (to characterize all existents as endowed with the qualities associated with Life)" ("Geontology" 5). It presents a necessary look behind the outlines of biopower, which, as governance through the body and therefore through life and death, "has long depended on a subtending geontopower (the difference between the lively and the inert)" ("Geontology" 5). "Geos" refers to "Non-Life"; as Povinelli notes, as "anthropos" cannot anymore demonstrate its superiority, forms of critical posthumanist theory gain traction, and the privileged boundaries of the category of "Life" become porous. Concepts such as Anthropocene, new materialisms and new natural sciences such as biogeochemistry invite consideration of a wide range of "Non-Life". In questioning geontopower, Povinelli asks: how are the non-human agents being politically managed?

What is particularly relevant to algorithmic governmentality in this context is the default categorisation of technology as Non-Life which allows it: 1) a procedural quality of being a mere tool, of passing by the human subject and their agency unnoticed; and 2) to become figured and agent-ified, to take on various social, cultural and political imaginaries. The animist relationality in this case seems to be heavily affected by the former and contaminated by the latter: algorithms exert the governance on digital subjects, yet it is almost impossible to relate to them without figuring them in some way.

Povinelli herself does not directly use animism as a term: she prefers "analytics of existence" when speaking of Indigenous lifeworlds such as "durlg or therrawin". She points out that when captured in the Western discussion, they are described as animistic. Povinelli sees this act of capture through conceptual translation as a moment when "late liberalism attempts to control the expression and trajectory that their analytics of existence takes — that is, to insist they conform to the imaginary of the Animist, a form that has been made compatible with liberal states and markets" ("Geontology" 28).

With the figure of the Animist, Povinelli outlines the conditions of animism's existence in the neoliberal Western consciousness. She writes that

> *capitalism has a unique relation to the Desert, the Animist, and the Virus insofar as Capitalism sees all things as having the potential to create profit; that is, nothing is inherently inert, everything is vital from the point of view of capitalization, and anything can become something more with the right innovative angle. Indeed, capitalists can be said to be the purest of the Animists. This said, industrial capital depends on and, along with states, vigorously polices the separations between forms of existence so that certain kinds of existents can be subjected to different kinds of extractions. Thus even as activists and academics level the relation between animal life and among objects (including human subjects), states pass legislation both protecting the rights of businesses and corporations to use animals and lands and criminalizing tactics of ecological and environmental activism. In other words, like the Virus that takes advantage but is not ultimately wedded to the difference between Life and Nonlife, Capital views all modes of existence as if they were vital and demands that not all modes of existence are the same from the point of view of extraction of value ("Geontology" 20).*

In Povinelli's work, the Animist is one of the "governing ghosts" that "huddle just inside the door between given governance and its otherwises" ("Geontology" 16). The separation of Life and Non-Life firmly places the algorithms into the latter. However, since they also effectuate governance, technological existence becomes a spectral form in which humans and non-humans operate within the same procedural field. It is a field both of procedural politics of alterity, where precarious online labour is outsourced to workers taking on microtasks such as annotating datasets and moderating content, and of aesthetic figuration of bots who take on human qualities and appearance. Techno-mediated relationality is full of such ghosts, and within networks, especially in the context of precarious micro-tasking labour, "humanness" is not a given attribute.

Animism manifests in the way in which "humanness" is attributed, figured and bestowed upon algorithmic and artificial agents.

There are different kinds of uncertainty in the figuration: some related to ghosts of capital, and some — to the underlying procedurality of an algorithmic thing and to the potential for instrumentalising it differently. I would like to offer two very different examples of how machinic figuration can happen and offer different political results.

The first one is an anthropomorphic automaton, which might be the most obvious example of machinic figuration. However, it is often around such automata that particularly twisted negotiations of various boundaries develop, and the recent appearance of the "world's first ultra-realistic robot artist" Ai-Da in front of the United Kingdom's House of Lords committee to present a commentary on technology is precisely the case. At the beginning of the proceedings, Ai-Da is described as a contemporary art project made to make people reflect, among other dangers and creative potentials of technology, on an ethical problem "that technology can seem to be human" ("Communications and Digital Committee"). Ai-Da is named after Ada Lovelace and is presented as a result of a "collaboration" of a large group of researchers, artists and designers. Yet at second glance, more details flow into the picture: Ai-Da is figured as a white woman dressed in dungarees, with dark hair cut in a short bob. In earlier pictures, Ai-Da sometimes wears a blouse with paint stains on it. The company that produced most of Ai-Da's hardware is Engineered Arts, a company commercially producing humanoid robots for various applications including entertainment, education and customer service, and even for the TV series *Westworld*. The undergraduate students Salah Al Abd and Ziad Abass who developed Ai-Da's drawing arm and the machine vision and drawing algorithms were completing the project on their own time. Finally, some of the earlier articles cite Aidan Meller, the project leader, a gallery owner and an art dealer, his gallery having sold "more than $1 million" worth of Ai-Da's artworks (Rea).

The presentation itself can be seen as proof, on the one side, of the institution's inability to differentiate between operativity and figuration, and on the other, of the project's inability to go beyond the anthropomorphic tropes of danger, creativity and authorship. However, it can (and should) also be seen as a performative act of offering the robot's visible alterity as a kind of self-proving point without critical content. The website description, perhaps, best summarises the capitalist conundrum of being positioned between critical AI discourses and art gallery needs: "when we talk of Ai-Da as an artist, and Ai-Da's artwork, we do this with full acknowledgement of her machine status, and the human/machine collaboration of her artwork, while simultaneously developing her artist persona and oeuvre, as this is an astute mirror of contemporary currents and behaviour" ("Who is Ai-Da?"). Having been stripped of the "AI artist" myth (although, probably not for every audience), Ai-Da is equipped instead with the task of being an artificial pithy, prophesying dangers and wonders of technology.

A different example of an algorithmic agent is *Synthetic Messenger* (2020), a project by artists Tega Brain and Sam Lavigne. It is a botnet that searches the internet for news articles covering climate change. Having located the article, 100 bots click on each ad on the page. By clicking, they contribute to the metrics and artificially inflate the value of climate news, signalling to the media outlet these topics are potentially profitable. Thinking in terms of earlier notes on procedurality, as well as animism understood as capitalisation, the botnet takes over the procedure of monetising the clicks and turns it into a "second-order climate engineering scheme", as the artists describe it ("Synthetic Messenger"). Brain and Lavigne consider

culture as co-producing environmental conditions: "climate engineering is not just about manipulating natural systems but it will also be about engineering opinion […] which can be done on social networks" (Thomasy). The bot in this understanding acts as a countermeasure to the ad industry that is interested in creating controversy over providing accurate information. Synthetic Messenger, therefore, operates in the field of artistic political figuration. Like *Tree X*, it points towards the underlying alterity — a bot and a tree in the frameworks of corporate personhood and algorithmic instrumentality, respectively — and towards the previously invisible procedures that can be instrumentalised to a different goal. They insert themselves into the domain of "Life" and, at the same time, show that the way "Life" is constituted, is politically problematic.

Here, of course, the domain of art plays a particular contribution to the capacity of algorithmic agents to cross over boundaries critically and productively. In the work of Félix Guattari, it is the artist that

> *detaches and de-territorializes a segment of the real in order to make it play the role of partial enunciator. The art confers meaning and alterity to a subgroup of the perceived world. This quasi-animist speaking out on the part of the artwork consequently redrafts subjectivity both of the artist and of his consumer (Guattari, cited in Melitopoulos and Lazzarato).*

Angela Melitopoulos and Maurizio Lazzarato speak about the animist thought in Felix Guattari's work as "machinic animism". They quote an interview with Eduardo Viveiros de Castro who, reading Guattari, comments on the text in the following way:

> *Guattari speaks of a subject/object in such a way that subjectivity is just an object among objects and not in a position of transcendence above the world of objects. The subject, on the contrary, is the most common thing in the world. That is animism: the core of the real is the soul, but it is not an immaterial soul in opposition or in contradiction with matter. On the contrary, it is matter itself that is infused with soul. Subjectivity is not an exclusively human property, but the basis of the real and not an exceptional form that once arose in the history of the Cosmos (Melitopoulos and Lazzarato 48).*

The "animism" in the work of Guattari then, is not anthropomorphic and anthropocentric, but "machinic", including all kinds of machines, be they social, technological, aesthetic, crystalline, etc. It suggests a certain type of participation that is allowed for technologically constructed things that act and move, making them not only part of the world but also a part of the world's epistemology and politics. The artwork, in this line of thought, acquires a position from which it can "speak", or becomes liberated to exercise its own sense-making and its own redrawing of the borders.

Without diminishing the critical function of art, another consideration of animism forces at work is, perhaps, more related to the contemporary refusal of "irrationality". Considering Anselm Franke's exhibition *Animism* (2015) and the interest in the topic that it launched in the arts, it seems that for the Western world, it is through artistic works that the forces of animism are made most visible. Going even further, the combination of artwork itself and its academic interpretation as animist participates in this process as a kind of conceptual vestibule, where the

Western subject of contemporary modernity has to pass through two sets of doors in order to allow themself access to the realms and relations they consider "irrational" and to reconstitute themself as a participant in them.

Procedural Animism

In the imagination of the current article, procedural animism is both a symptom and a potentiality. It is a symptom of contemporary impoverishment of experience, of normalisation of movement towards "bare life" (Agamben), of social and political life produced by late techno-capitalism, of profound alienation driven by platforms and difficulty of exiting neoliberal algorithmic governmentality. The animist impulse reaches towards conceiving ways of connection but ends up being caught up in the pre-formatted and pre-designed ways of existing within contemporary networks. Procedural animism is also a practice of acknowledging alterity without trying to erase it, and as such, of resistance to capture, alienation and dehumanisation. "Animism" here refers to: 1) a multiplanar set of symptoms of the contemporary condition (tightly connected to the marginalisation of otherness and the "irrational", as well as to capitalisation of affects through image economy); 2) an individual practice: "animism is a practice of relating to entities in the environment, and as such, these relations cannot be exhibited; they resist objectification" (Franke, "Much Trouble in the Transportation of Souls" 11). The tension between these relations and the figurations that invite them (and at the same time, hide the procedure) is the key aspect of procedural animism. Outside of artistic and other alternative figurations and imaginaries, the conjured commercial spirits of AI are caught within the foreclosure of possibilities that capitalism presents to Others, leaving them circulating in the reproduction of existing tropes, "helpers", "enemies", "lovers", "allies", "overlords". The personification of AI is always a capture of potential social energies that are directed and redirected to be included in monetisation structures and flows.

As a state of "being-in-a-medium-of-communication" (Franke, "Unruly Mediations"), animism conjures new relations to Others and their images; even more significantly, in contemporary networked life, these relations are primarily channelled through images. The images are portals through which we constitute our relationality with the world. For this reason, procedural animism resides strongly in affects and energies that are captured and spirited away by the algorithms of the attention economy, by the flows of images that become capitalism's hiding place. In this attention to the infrastructures of the image, procedural animism inherits from operational images (Farocki; Paglen), but focuses on the distance and relations between the "human" and "non-human" as a productive tension that can be employed towards building alternatives to the politics of algorithmic governmentality.

Procedural animism is, therefore, a shift to a different *modality* of thinking about relations between humans and non-human Others. Povinelli points out that geontopower as a concept is not meant to replace biopolitics; she explains that

> *the attribution of an inability of various colonized people to differentiate the kinds of things that have agency, subjectivity, and intentionality of the sort that emerges with life has been the grounds of casting them into a premodern mentality and a postrecognition difference. Thus the point of the concepts of geontology*

> *and geontopower is not to found a new ontology of objects, nor to establish a new metaphysics of power, nor to adjudicate the possibility or impossibility of the human ability to know the truth of the world of things. Rather they are concepts meant to help make visible the figural tactics of late liberalism as a long-standing biontological orientation and distribution of power crumbles, losing its efficacy as a self-evident backdrop to reason ("Geontologies" 5).*

Procedural animism emerges exactly as *figural tactics*; it attends to the "aliveness" with which the algorithmic agents and other figured AIs participate in the contemporary life as *represented* (and, therefore, as lived, at least in terms of image economy), yet designated to play particular roles within neoliberal structures. In doing so, they become conduits for geontopower, delineating the limits, routes and structures for such governmentality to keep taking place. Animism emerges out of the ambiguity of bureaucratic (governing) procedures that simultaneously encapsulate the expenditure of life energy into rights, access, labour, and foreclose the humanity of the one being robotised. That animism is *procedural* also brings forward a few other defining aspects that continue the earlier point about procedures as the hidden aspect of governmentality. Something that is procedural is defined in certain terms, and once let go, can *proceed* according to these terms, having the power to move on its own. It is a type of forward-oriented impulse: like in any bureaucratic system, a procedure, once launched, can be rolled out and repeated indefinitely. In the process, it obliterates the difference — as the only difference that can exist is one stipulated by the procedure, and if it is stipulated, it ceases being a difference in any significant sense.

The figuration of AI conceals procedurality by animating it; and further on, it even becomes predictive of figuring the relations around itself. While an algorithmic recommendation system is not as easy to humanise as a virtual assistant, its capacity to "know" what a person might want to watch creates a certain relationship, one that already figures the algorithm in the role of "knowing-the-human". The difference between procedural artefacts (the algorithms that are not so easily personalised) and algorithmic agents (ones that take on anthropomorphic qualities), and the process of turning one into another, is not as significant in the framework of them being related to the human. The image trouble at the heart of procedural animism is not only part of the processes of capitalist capture and attention economy, but also a symptomatic reflection of the visual culture of Capitalocene (Haraway "Anthropocene"): one in which the images increasingly serve to remediate and constitute the space of the political imaginaries and beliefs, exacting a sort of gentrification of the political through the visual, where categories of subject/object and imaginaries of agency and autonomy continuously reproduce the human at the centre of these relations.

Conjuring a (Socialist) AI

While the question of "how to imagine a socialist AI?" in the title of this text should not be taken literally, it represents a significant issue with the imaginaries of AI and algorithmic agents. "Socialist AI", in itself, indicates an important problem: it points towards an imaginary that is discredited by default, by the very act of naming, and as such, it makes a perfect experiment for posing such a question. For the purposes of this brief conclusion, "socialist" is referring to an

imaginary of a future post-capitalist artificial intelligence rather than really trying to dig up what it would mean to have a socialist AI, and by extension, what kind of socialism it would be. For many, it would immediately mean dictatorship, state capitalism or Cybersyn. For others, it would bring up a progressive social and political program. Like animism, socialism is a word troubled by the violence of the colonial past and present. Yet it is also a word that is coloured by a particular version of the loss of belief systems enacted by capitalist realism and their transfer into the realm of aesthetics: "capitalist realism presents itself as a shield protecting us from the perils posed by belief itself" (Fisher 5). In this sense, it is no surprise that many decolonial AIs are joined by very few "socialist" ones, even including recent "platform socialism" (Muldoon) and "non-Fascist AI" (McQuillan).

In any case, the point of imagining a (socialist) AI lies precisely in the problem of imagining. As a process of conjuring potentialities, it can be seen as rendering: making versions and figurations, but also considering the potential trouble of *figuring* something, bringing it towards a certain shape. Like animist relationalities that escape objectification, but are still captured in representational terminology, to render means to avoid falling entirely in step with the existing boundaries. In the case of conjuring algorithmic Others, it seems that asking "what is it like to be a bat?", and imagining "entities" by asking what they are, is bound to recreate the existing sets of relations. Perhaps, a suggestion for conjuring is to start with describing a world, a political formation in which such an alternative algorithmic entity is possible; in which a belief in better politics is not a "peril" and does not automatically signify a birth of Skynet. Perhaps, borrowing from Ursula le Guin, we can start with a "carrier bag" theory of fiction, by conjuring a sociopolitical fabric in which alternative relations between non-humans and humans can take place. Procedural animism is a movement towards the modification of reality systems, in which a gesture of conjuring is a gesture of making possible: such modification is always already a change of the shape and length of the distance between the human and its algorithmic Other.

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Notes

[1] This retreat is seen, for example, in nihilistic attitudes towards Anthropocene or in the lowering of the stakes within the rhetoric of global warming — where "climate change" is often inconspicuously reframed as "lived with" instead of "resisted" or "fought".

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