

IN THE SWARM  
DIGITAL PROSPECTS  
BYUNG-CHUL HAN

TRANSLATED BY ERIK BUTLER



# IN THE SWARM

## **UNTIMELY MEDITATIONS**

1. *THE AGONY OF EROS*  
Byung-Chul Han
2. *ON HITLER'S MEIN KAMPF: THE POETICS OF NATIONAL SOCIALISM*  
Albrecht Koschorke
3. *IN THE SWARM: DIGITAL PROSPECTS*  
Byung-Chul Han
4. *THE TERROR OF EVIDENCE*  
Marcus Steinweg

**IN THE SWARM**  
DIGITAL PROSPECTS  
BYUNG-CHUL HAN

TRANSLATED BY ERIK BUTLER

THE MIT PRESS  
CAMBRIDGE, MASSACHUSETTS  
LONDON, ENGLAND

© 2017 Massachusetts Institute of Technology  
Originally published as *Im Schwarm: Ansichten des Digitalen* in the series *Fröhliche Wissenschaft* by Matthes & Seitz Berlin: © Matthes & Seitz Berlin Verlagsgesellschaft mbH, Berlin 2013. All rights reserved.



The translation of this work was supported by a grant from the Goethe-Institut, which is funded by the German Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form by any electronic or mechanical means (including photocopying, recording, or information storage and retrieval) without permission in writing from the publisher.

This book was set in PF Din Text Pro by Toppan Best-set Premedia Limited. Printed and bound in the United States of America.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Han, Byung-Chul, author.

Title: In the swarm : digital prospects / Byung-Chul Han ; translated by Erik Butler.

Other titles: Im Schwarm. English

Description: Cambridge, MA : MIT Press, 2017. | Series: Untimely meditations |

Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2016031907 | ISBN 9780262533362 (pbk. : alk. paper)

Subjects: LCSH: Internet--Social aspects. | Digital media--Social aspects. |

Communication--Social aspects.

Classification: LCC HM851 .H344813 2017 | DDC 302.23/1--dc23 LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2016031907>

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

My tears are flowing; earth, take back your child!

—Faust



# CONTENTS

PREFACE ix

NO RESPECT 1

OUTRAGE SOCIETY 7

IN THE SWARM 9

DEMEDIATIZATION 15

CLEVER HANS 21

FLIGHT INTO THE IMAGE 27

FROM THE HAND TO THE FINGER 31

FROM FARMING TO HUNTING 37

FROM SUBJECT TO PROJECT 45

THE NOMOS OF THE EARTH 51

DIGITAL GHOSTS 55

INFORMATION FATIGUE 59

THE CRISIS OF REPRESENTATION 63

FROM CITIZEN TO CONSUMER 67

THE RECORDED LIFE 71

PSYCHOPOLITICS 77

NOTES 81



## PREFACE

In view of the meteoric rise of electrical media, Marshall McLuhan observed in 1964: “The electric technology is within the gates, and we are numb, deaf, blind, and mute about its encounter with the Gutenberg technology.”<sup>1</sup> Matters stand much the same today with regard to digital media. This new medium is reprogramming us, yet we fail to grasp the radical paradigm shift that is underway. We are hobbling along after the very medium that, below our threshold of conscious decision, is definitively changing the ways that we act, perceive, feel, think, and live together. We are enraptured by the digital medium yet unable to gauge the consequences of our frenzy fully. The crisis we are now experiencing follows from our blindness and stupefaction.



# IN THE SWARM



## NO RESPECT

Literally, *respect* means “to look back.” It stands for consideration and caution [*Rücksicht*]. Respectful interaction with others involves refraining from curious *staring*. Respect presupposes a distanced look—the *pathos of distance*. Today, it is yielding to the obtrusive staring of *spectacle*. The Latin verb *spectare*, from which *spectacle* derives, is voyeuristic gazing that lacks deferential consideration—that is, respect (*respectare*). Distance is what makes *respectare* different from *spectare*. A society without respect, without the pathos of distance, paves the way for the society of scandal.

Respect forms the foundation for the public, or civil, sphere. When the former weakens, the latter collapses. The decline of civil society and a mounting lack of respect are mutually conditioning. Among other things, civil society requires respectfully looking away from what is private. Taking distance is what constitutes the public sphere. Today, however, a complete lack of distance and deference prevails: intimate matters are put on display, and the private is made public. Let’s call it a matter of stance: Without distance, it is impossible to be in good standing. Understanding also requires a distanced perspective. Across the board, digital communication is abolishing distance and distances. The corollary of dwindling spatial distance is the erosion of

mental distance. Digital mediality works to the detriment of respect. In contrast, isolating and setting apart—as in the *adyton* of ancient Greek temples—generates admiration and reverence.

When distance proves lacking, the public and the private become confused. Digital communication is fostering this pornographic display of intimacy and the private sphere. Social networks wind up being exhibition rooms for highly personal matters. As such, the digital medium *privatizes* communication by shifting the site where information is produced. Roland Barthes defined the private sphere as “that zone of space, of time, where I am not an image, an object.”<sup>1</sup> But if this the case, we no longer have any private sphere at all: no zone exists where *I am not an image*, where no camera is in operation. Google Glass even transforms the human eye into a camera. *The eye itself generates images*. In consequence, the private sphere cannot hold. Compulsive icono-pornography is abolishing it entirely.

Respect is tied to names. Anonymity and respect rule each other out. The anonymous communication promoted by digital media is dismantling respect on a massive scale. It is also responsible for the expanding culture of indiscretion and disrespect. Social media shitstorms are anonymous, too. That is the source of their power. Names and respect are linked. A name provides the basis for recognition, which always occurs *by name*. Practices that involve responsibility, trustworthiness, and reliability are also tied to *being named*. Trust may be defined as *faith in the name*. Giving

answers and promising are also acts of the name. The digital medium—which separates messages from messengers, news from its source—is destroying names.

Shitstorms occur for many reasons. They arise in a culture where respect is lacking and indiscretion prevails. The shitstorm represents an authentic phenomenon of digital communication. As such, it differs fundamentally from yesterday's angry letters to the editor. Inasmuch as letters are tied to the analog medium of writing, they are *named* events. Anonymous letters are readily discarded. Moreover, letters possess a different temporality. As the writer laboriously composes a missive by hand or on a typewriter, immediate agitation and excitement pass. In contrast, digital communication enables affective discharge *right away*. On the basis of its temporality alone, it conveys impulsive reactions more than analog communication does. In this respect, the digital medium is a *medium of affect*.

Digital networking favors symmetrical communication. Today, participants in communication do not just consume information passively: they generate it actively. No univocal hierarchy separates the sender from the receiver. Everyone is sender and receiver—consumer and producer—in one. However, such symmetry exists to the detriment of power. The communication of power passes in one direction—from top to bottom. Now, *communicative reflux* is destroying the existing regimes of power. Shitstorms amount to kind of *reflux*, with all the destructive effects that this entails.

The shitstorm is emblematic of displacements within the economy of power governing political communication. It

swells in spaces where power and authority have weakened. In particular, shitstorms flourish where hierarchies have flattened out. As a medium, power ensures that communication flows speedily in one direction. The choices effected by the intendant of power are followed *silently*, as it were, by the subjects of power. Sound, or noise, provides an *acoustic* cue that power is faltering. The shitstorm is communicative noise, too. The best shield against shitstorms would be *charisma*—that is, an auratic expression of power. Charisma prevents shitstorms from brewing up in the first place.

The presence of power increases the likelihood that my decisions will be accepted by others. As a medium of communication, power increases the probability of yes, given the possibility of no. Yes is significantly *quieter* than no. No is always *loud*. Powerful communication reduces sound and noise—that is, it reduces communicative entropy. An authoritative pronouncement eliminates burgeoning noise in one fell swoop. It generates *silence*, which represents *room for action*.

As a medium of communication, respect operates in a manner that is similar to power. The person granted respect holds views or makes decisions that are commonly accepted and taken on without contradiction or objection. Often, the respected individual provides an example to be followed. Such emulation corresponds to the ready, indeed the anticipatory, obedience of power. Shitstorms, which are noisy, start precisely when and where respect diminishes. A person granted respect does not stand subject to shitstorms.

Respect is constituted by ascriptions of personal and moral value. A general decline in values is making the culture of respect crumble. Today's role models demonstrate no inner values. External qualities distinguish them, above all.

Power is a state of asymmetry. It founds a hierarchical relationship. The communication of power does not occur dialogically. Unlike power, respect does not necessarily imply asymmetrical conditions. Respect is often felt for role models or superiors, yet mutual respect is possible based on symmetrical recognition. Accordingly, a ruler may even have respect for those he rules. Today, the shitstorms that are bubbling up everywhere point to the fact that we are living in a society without mutual respect. Respect commands distance. Both power and respect make space; they are distance-creating communicative media.

Sovereignty needs to be redefined in light of shitstorms. According to Carl Schmitt, sovereignty is a matter of deciding when a state of exception holds. This doctrine may be translated into acoustic terms. Sovereignty means being able to produce *absolute quiet*—eliminating all noise and making all others *fall silent* in a single stroke. Schmitt's life did not coincide with the era of digital networks. It would surely have plunged him into a state of utter crisis. Schmitt's biography reveals a fear of waves that he experienced throughout his life. Shitstorms are also a kind of wave, which escape all control. In old age, Schmitt is said to have had the radio and television removed from his house. In light of electromagnetic waves, he even found it necessary to reformulate his famous thesis on sovereignty: "After the

First World War, I said: 'Sovereign is he who decides on the exception.' After the Second World War, in view of my own death, I now say: 'Sovereign is he who commands the waves of space.'"<sup>2</sup> Following the digital revolution, we need to reformulate Schmitt's words on sovereignty yet again: *Sovereign is he who commands the shitstorms of the Net.*

## OUTRAGE SOCIETY

Waves of outrage mobilize and bundle attention very efficiently. However, their fluidity and volatility make them unsuited to shaping public discourse or public space. They are too uncontrollable, incalculable, inconstant, ephemeral, and amorphous for that. They well up abruptly—and they dissipate just as soon. They are like *smart mobs*. They lack the stability, constancy, and continuity that are indispensable for civil exchange. Accordingly, they defy integration into a stable discursive context. Waves of outrage often occur in response to events of only meager social or political relevance.

Outrage society is scandal society. It lacks *bearing*—reserve and posture. The fractiousness, hysteria, and intractability that characterize waves of outrage do not admit tactful or matter-of-fact communication; they bar *dialogue* and *discourse*. Yet *bearing*, a measured stance, is what constitutes the civil sphere. By the same token, distance is necessary for this sphere to emerge. More still, waves of outrage evince little identification with the community as it stands. The outraged do not form a stable *we* who are displaying *concern for society as a whole*. Enraged citizens, even though they are citizens, do not demonstrate concern for the whole of the social body so much as *for themselves*. For this reason, outrage quickly dissipates.

The first word of *The Iliad* is *menin* which means “rage” or “wrath.” “Rage—Goddess, sing the rage of Peleus’ son Achilles.”<sup>1</sup> So begins the first act of narration in Western culture. Here, rage can be sung because it carries the story of the poem as a whole: it structures, inspires, animates, and gives rhythm. Simply put, it is the *heroic medium of action*. *The Iliad* is a *song of rage*. This rage is narrative—epic—because it tells of certain actions. On this score, rage is fundamentally different from anger, the affect of waves of outrage. Digital outrage cannot be *sung*. It admits neither action nor narration. Instead, it is an affective *condition*, devoid of the power to act. The general distraction and dissipation characterizing society today prevent the epic energy of rage from arising. Rage, in the strong sense, is more than an affective state. It means the capacity, or power, to interrupt existing conditions and bring about new ones. In this way, it produces the future. Today’s fits of outrage are extremely fleeting and scattered. Outrage lacks the *mass*—the gravitation—that is necessary for action. It generates no future.

## IN THE SWARM

In *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind* (1895), Gustave Le Bon defined modernity as the “age of crowds.” He identified it as a critical point in time when human thinking was in the course of changing. It was a “period of transition and anarchy.”<sup>1</sup> In taking form, the society of the future would have to reckon with a new power—the power of masses. Thus, Le Bon laconically observes: “The age we are about to enter will in truth be the ERA OF CROWDS.”<sup>2</sup>

Le Bon saw that the received power structures were falling apart. Now the “voice of the masses” prevailed. The masses, he observed, have founded “syndicates before which the authorities capitulate one after the other; they are also founding labour unions, which in spite of all economic laws tend to regulate the conditions of labour and wages.”<sup>3</sup> Parliamentary representatives are only their stooges. For Le Bon, the phenomenon of crowds expresses a new balance of power. The “divine right of the masses,” he predicts, “is about to replace the divine right of kings.”<sup>4</sup> The ascent of the masses entails the crisis of sovereignty and heralds cultural decline. It means the “thoroughgoing destruction of ... civilization,” for “civilization involves ... conditions that crowds, left to themselves, have invariably shown themselves incapable of realising.”<sup>5</sup>

Clearly, we are facing a crisis again today—a period of critical transition that another upheaval, the digital revolution, has occasioned. Yet again, a formation comprising “the many” is beleaguering the standing balance of power and government. The new mass is the *digital swarm*. Its features distinguish it radically from the *crowd*—the classical form that the many assumed.

The digital swarm does not constitute a mass because no *soul*—no *spirit*—dwells within it. The soul gathers and unites. In contrast, the digital swarm comprises isolated individuals. The mass is structured along different lines: its features cannot be traced back to individuals. But now, individuals are melting into a new unit; its members no longer have a *profile of their own*. For a crowd to emerge, a chance gathering of human beings is not enough. It takes a soul, a common spirit, to fuse people into a crowd. The digital swarm lacks the soul or spirit of the masses. Individuals who come together as a swarm do not develop a *we*. No harmony prevails—which is what welds the crowd together into an active entity. Unlike the crowd, the swarm demonstrates no internal coherence. It does not speak with a *voice*. The shitstorm lacks a *voice*, too. Accordingly, it is perceived as *noise*.

McLuhan deemed *Homo electronicus* to be a man of the masses:

“Mass man” is the electronic occupant of the globe, simultaneously involved in all other people as if he were a spectator in a global ball park. Even as a man at a ballgame he is a nobody, so the electronic citizen is a

man whose private identity has been psychically erased by over-involvement.<sup>6</sup>

In contrast, today's *Homo digitalis* is anything but "nobody." He retains his private identity, even when forming part of the swarm. Although he expresses himself anonymously, as a rule he has a *profile*—and he works ceaselessly at optimizing it. Instead of being "nobody," he is insistently *somebody* exhibiting himself and vying for attention. The mass-mediated nobody, on the other hand, does not claim attention for himself. His private identity is extinguished. He has vanished into the mass. This also represents his good fortune: after all, if he is *nobody*, he cannot be *anonymous*. On the other hand, *Homo digitalis* often takes the stage anonymously. He is not a *nobody* but a somebody—an *anonymous somebody*.

What is more, the world of *Homo digitalis* evinces an entirely different topology. Spaces such as sports arenas and amphitheaters—that is, sites where masses meet—are foreign to this world. The digital inhabitants of the Net do not assemble. They lack the *interiority of assembly* that would bring forth a *we*. They form a *gathering without assembly—a crowd without interiority*, without a soul or spirit. Above all, they are isolated, scattered *hikikomori* sitting alone in front of a screen. Electronic media such as radio *assemble* human beings. In contrast, digital media *isolate* them.

Occasionally, digital individuals come together in gatherings—in smart mobs, for instance. However, their *collective patterns of movement* are like the swarms that animals

form—fleeting and unstable. Their hallmark is volatility. Furthermore, these groupings commonly seem carnivalesque—ludic and nonbinding. Herein lies the difference between the digital swarm and the classic crowd, which—as in the case of workers assembled in a mass—is not volatile but voluntative. Organized labor is not a matter of *fleeting* patterns; it consists of enduring *formations*. With a single spirit, unified by an ideology, it *marches in one direction*. On the basis of will and resolve, it has capacity for *collective action* and takes standing relations of domination head on. Only when a crowd is resolute about shared action does power arise. *The mass is power*. In contrast, digital swarms lack such resolve. They do not *march*. Because of their fleeting nature, no political energy wells up. By the same token, online shitstorms prove unable to call dominant *power relations* into question. Instead, they strike individual persons, whom they unmask or make an item of scandal.

According to Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, globalization has brought forth two opposing forces. On the one hand, it has erected a decentered, deterritorialized, and capitalist order of domination—“empire.” On the other hand, it has produced “multitude”—an aggregate of singularities communicating with each other over networks and acting collectively. Within empire, it resists empire.

Hardt and Negri base their theory on historically antiquated categories such as class and class struggle. Accordingly, they define *multitude* as being capable of communal action: “One initial approach is to conceive the multitude

as all those who work under the rule of capital and thus potentially as the class of those who refuse the rule of capital.”<sup>7</sup> Hereby, they interpret the power exercised by empire as the violence of *allo-exploitation*:

The multitude is the real productive force of our social world, whereas Empire is a mere apparatus of capture that lives only off the vitality of the multitude—as Marx would say, a vampire regime of accumulated dead labor that survives only by sucking off the blood of the living.<sup>8</sup>

It is meaningful to speak of class only when a plurality of classes exists. “Multitude,” however, signifies the *sole* class. *All* who participate in the capitalist system belong to it. In fact, “empire” does not refer to a ruling class that exploits the “multitude”: everyone now thinks him- or herself free, even while working to death. The contemporary achievement subject is perpetrator and victim in one. Negri and Hardt do not recognize this logic of *self-exploitation*, which is much more efficient than *allo-exploitation*. *No one* rules the empire. It is the capitalist system itself, which encompasses *everyone*. Today, exploitation is possible without any domination at all.

Those subject to the neoliberal economy do not constitute a *we* that is capable of collective action. The mounting egoization and atomization of society is making the space for collective action shrink. As such, it blocks the formation of a counterpower that might be able to put the capitalist order in question. *Socius* has yielded to *solus*.

Contemporary society is not shaped by multitude so much as *solitude*. The general collapse of the collective and the communal has engulfed it. Solidarity is vanishing. Privatization now reaches into the depths of the soul itself. The erosion of the communal is making all collective efforts more and more unlikely. Hardt and Negri fail to notice this social development. Instead, they invoke a communist revolution to be achieved by the multitude. Their book concludes with a romantic apotheosis of communism:

Once again in postmodernity we find ourselves in [Saint Francis of Assisi's] situation, posing against the misery of power the joy of being. This is a revolution that no power will control—because biopower and communism, cooperation and revolution remain together, in love, simplicity, and also innocence. This is the irrepressible lightness and joy of being communist.<sup>9</sup>

## DEMEDIATIZATION

The digital medium is a medium of *presence*. Its temporality is the immediate present. Digital communication is distinguished by the fact that information is produced, transmitted, and received without intermediaries. More and more, interfaces are being eliminated. Mediation and representation are viewed as a lack of transparency and inefficiency—as temporal and informational congestion.

Radio, a classic mass medium that works electronically, admits only unilateral communication. Its amphitheatrical structure blocks interaction. Its *radioactive* emissions have no back radiation, as it were. They emanate in one direction alone. Those who receive its message are condemned to passivity. In contrast, the Internet demonstrates a wholly different topology. It is unlike the amphitheater, which has a *center of emission* representing an institution of power.

Today, we are no longer just receivers and consumers of information; we generate and broadcast it. No longer content to consume information passively, we wish to produce and communicate it ourselves—actively. We are consumers and producers in one. This double role is increasing the quantity of information on an enormous scale. The digital medium does not simply provide windows for passive watching. It also offers doors through which we relay the

information that we generate. Windows on a computer are *windows with doors*; they communicate with other windows without intermediary spaces or authorities. Digital windows open not onto a public space but onto other windows. This sets digital media apart from mass media such as radio or television. In fact, media such as blogs, Twitter, and Facebook demediate communication. Today's society of opinion and information is based on such demediatized communication. Everyone is producing and transmitting information. Because of the demediatization of communication, journalists—elite “opinion makers,” indeed, the erstwhile *priests of opinion*—now seem increasingly anachronistic and superfluous. The digital medium is in the course of abolishing all priestly classes. General demediatization is putting an end to the era of *representation*. Instead, everyone wants to be *present* personally and directly—to *present* his or her opinion without a middleman. Representation is giving way to *presence*, or *copresentation*.

The mounting pressure for demediatization is affecting politics, too. This spells trouble for representative democracy. Political representatives no longer serve as transmitters so much as they count as barriers. Accordingly, the pressure for demediatization finds expression as the call for more participation and transparency. Germany's Pirate Party owed its initial success to this development. The mounting compulsion for *presence* that the digital medium generates is threatening the very principle of *representation* in general.

Often, representation serves as a filter. This has altogether salutary effects. By operating selectively, it enables

the *exclusive*. For instance, when publishers offer discerning titles, they promote cultural and intellectual refinement. They cultivate language. Journalists may even risk their lives to conduct a thorough investigation and produce a qualified report. In contrast, demediatization entails massification in many domains. Language and culture flatten out and become vulgar. In an interview, the bestselling author Bella Andre observes that she has no trouble cranking out books; nor does she need to convince an agent first: “I can write the exact book my readers want. I am my readership.”<sup>1</sup> There is no substantial difference between “I am my readership” and “I am my votership.” But “I am my votership” heralds the end of the politician in the strong sense—that is, politicians who insist on a standpoint and, instead of walking in line with constituents, *walk ahead of them with a vision*. The *future*, as the time of the political, is disappearing.

As strategic action, politics demands power of information—sovereignty over its production and distribution. Accordingly, it cannot do without closed spaces where information is held back on purpose. The political—in other words, strategic communication—calls for confidentiality. If everything is made public at once, politics necessarily grows short of breath and becomes short-term; issues thin out into idle talk. Total transparency imposes a temporality on political communication that makes slow, long-term planning impossible. It becomes impossible to let things *ripen*. The future is not the temporality of transparency. Transparency is ruled by presence and the present tense.

Under the dictate of transparency, dissonant opinions or unusual ideas are not voiced in the first place. Hardly anything is ventured. The imperative of transparency produces a strong compulsion to conform. Like constant video surveillance, it gives rise to the feeling of being watched. Therein lies its panoptic effect. Ultimately, it comes to a *Gleichschaltung* of communication, the repetition of the same:

Constant media observation has made it impossible for us [politicians] ever to discuss provocative or unpopular topics and positions openly in a confidential setting. You always have to count on somebody passing it on to the press.<sup>2</sup>

The author Dirk von Gehlen, author of *Eine neue Version ist verfügbar* (*New Version Available*), claims to be making writing itself transparent. Yet what would wholly transparent writing really mean? For Peter Handke, writing is a lonesome expedition. It sets out for the unknown, where no one has gone before. In this, it is like taking action [*Handeln*] or thinking, in the strong sense of the word. Thought, for Heidegger, means setting out alone, off the beaten track. The “beat of ... [the] wing” of Eros touches him “every time” he “take[s] a substantial step and venture[s] onto untrodden paths.”<sup>3</sup> In fact, the call to make writing transparent amounts to abolishing it. Writing is an exclusive activity. In contrast, collective and transparent writing is merely additive; it has no capacity to bring forth the *wholly other*—the *singular*. Transparent writing simply brings information together. The

way of the digital is addition. The demand for transparency is reaching far beyond a call for participation or freedom of information. It heralds a paradigm shift. The demand for transparency represents a normative claim insofar as it declares what *is* and *has to be*. It defines *Being* in a new manner.

In an interview, Michel Butor recently remarked that literature is facing an intellectual crisis, too: “We’re not just living in an economic crisis. We’re also living in a literary crisis. European literature is threatened. What we’re now experiencing in Europe is a crisis of the spirit.”<sup>4</sup> When asked how to recognize the crisis, he replied: “For the last ten or twenty years, almost nothing has been happening in literature. There’s a tide of publications but an intellectual standstill. The reason is a crisis of communication. The new means of communication are remarkable, but they cause tremendous noise.” The medium of thinking is *quiet*. Clearly, digital communication is destroying quiet and calm. Addition—which generates communicative noise—does not follow the way of spirit.



## CLEVER HANS

At the beginning of the twentieth century, a German horse gained fame the world over. Supposedly, the animal could perform mathematical calculations. The horse achieved renown as “Clever Hans.” With a move of the hoof or head, he provided correct answers to simple exercises. When asked, “What is three plus five?,” he stamped eight times, for instance. To clarify this wondrous phenomenon, a committee of scientists was appointed; it’s said that its ranks included a philosopher. The committee determined that the horse could not, in fact, perform calculations. Instead, the animal was able to interpret subtle nuances in the facial expressions and body language of its human counterparts. With his keen senses, Clever Hans recognized that people attending the show involuntarily assumed a tense bearing before the stamp of the hoof that would prove decisive. When he felt this palpable tension, he stopped stamping. In this way, he always gave the right answer.

The verbal component of communication is very slight. Nonverbal forms of expression such as gestures, facial expressions, and body language constitute human communication. They lend it tactility. In this context, *tactility* means not physical contact but the multidimensionality and multi-layeredness of human perception, which involves both the

visual field and other senses. The digital medium strips communication of tactility and physicality.

The efficiency and convenience of digital communication are leading us to avoid direct contact with real people. Increasingly, we avoid contact with the real, in general. Digital media are making our real counterparts fade more and more. Accordingly, digital communication is becoming more and more bodiless and faceless. Digitality radically restructures the Lacanian triad of real, imaginary, and symbolic. It dismantles the real and *totalizes the imaginary*. As a digital reflector, the smartphone serves to renew the mirror stage after infancy. It opens up a narcissistic space—a sphere of the imaginary—in which one encloses oneself. The other does not speak via the smartphone.

The smartphone is a digital apparatus that works with an input/output mode that lacks complexity. It erases negativity in all its forms. Consequently, one loses the ability to *think* in a complex fashion. The smartphone also degrades forms of behavior that demand temporal *range* or *distance vision*. It promotes the short term and shortsightedness, and it covers up what is *slow and slow in coming*. Seamless *liking* produces a realm of positivity. Experience as irruption of the *other*—because of its negativity—interrupts imaginary self-mirroring. But the positivity that is inherent in digital technology minimizes the possibility of having any such experience. It prolongs only the *same*. The smartphone, like the digital in general, undermines our ability to encounter and work with negativity.

We used to perceive a more pronounced countenance or gaze in whatever we encountered—let's call it our counterpart [*das Gegenüber*]*—an image, for example. That is, something that looked back at me, that persisted in its own life, that withstood and counterbalanced me. Now, this self-possessed counterpart—which looks at, concerns, or implicates me—is vanishing. Earlier, there was more of the gaze through which, according to Sartre, the other announces itself. Sartre did not associate the gaze exclusively with the human eye. Rather, he perceived the world itself as gazing. As the gaze, the other is omnipresent. Even things look at us:*

Of course what *most often* manifests a look is the convergence of two ocular globes in my direction. But the look will be given just as well on occasion when there is a rustling of branches, or the sound of a footstep followed by silence, or the slight opening of a shutter, or a light movement of a curtain.<sup>1</sup>

Digital communication is *visually poor* communication. The author of an essay written on the tenth anniversary of Skype observed:

Undoubtedly, the video-telephone creates the illusion of presence, and it has made it easier for people in love to endure separation. However, the remaining distance still is palpable—and it is felt most clearly, perhaps, in a slight displacement. When Skyping, one cannot exchange glances. If you look into the eyes on the

screen, the other party will think you are looking down a little because the camera is installed at the upper edge of the computer. The charming peculiarity of an unmediated encounter—where looking at someone always means being seen, as well—has yielded to asymmetrical gazes. Thanks to Skype, we can be close to each other twenty-four hours a day, but we are constantly staring past one another.<sup>2</sup>

Camera optics alone are not responsible for the fact that we are staring past each other. Rather, it points to a fundamentally missing *gaze*—that is, to the missing *other*. The digital medium is taking us farther and farther away from the *other*.

The gaze also represents a central category in Jacques Lacan's theory of the image: "certainly, in the picture, something of the gaze is always manifested."<sup>3</sup> The gaze is the *other* within the image: it is what looks at, captivates, and fascinates me. As the *punctum*, it tears apart the homogeneous tissue of *studium*. The gaze of the other offers resistance to the eye, which feasts on the image. It undermines the *feast for the eyes* and calls the beholder's freedom into question. But now, the mounting narcissification of perception is making the gaze, the other, disappear.

Tapping around on the touchscreen has consequences in regard to the other. Such motion eliminates the distance that constitutes the other in its otherness. One can swipe or tap the image—touch it directly—because it has already lost its gaze, its countenance. *Pinching* the

touchscreen places the other at my disposal. We tap, swipe, or flick the other away so that our own mirror image will appear instead. Lacan would say that the touchscreen is different from the image as screen [*écran*], which simultaneously screens one off from the gaze of the other and lets it shine through. The touchscreen on a smartphone could be called a *transparent screen*. It does not look.

There is no such thing as a transparent countenance. The countenance that one desires is always *opaque*. Literally, *opaque* means “shadowed.” The negativity of the shadow is integral to desire. The *transparent screen* does not admit any desire, which is always the desire of the other. Where there is shadow, a glance—or gleam—exists, as well. Shadows and glances inhabit the same space: they dwell in sites of desire. Things that are transparent do not glance. Glances and gleams arise where the light *breaks*. If there is no break—if nothing is broken—then no eros, no desire, can arise. Uniform, flat, and transparent light is not a medium of desire. Transparency means the end of desire.

Leonardo da Vinci is supposed to have said of a covered portrait: “Non iscoprire se liberta t’è cara ché ’l volto mio è carcere d’amore” (“Do not unveil me, if freedom is dear to you, for my visage is love’s prison”).<sup>4</sup> These words give voice to a particular experience of the countenance, which is no longer possible today, in the age of Facebook. A *face* that exhibits itself and vies for attention is not a *countenance*. No *gaze* inhabits it. The intentionality

of *exhibition* destroys the *interiority*, the *reserve*, that characterizes the gaze: "In fact, he is looking at nothing; he *retains* within himself his love and his fear: that is the Look."<sup>5</sup> A face on display does not belong to a counterpart with a countenance—one who casts a spell on, and captivates, the beholder. And so, today, the chains of love have given way to the hell of freedom.

## FLIGHT INTO THE IMAGE

Today, images [*Bilder*] are not just likenesses [*Abbilder*] but also models [*Vorbilder*]. We flee into images in order to be better, more beautiful, and more alive. Clearly, we are enlisting not only technology but images, too, in order to drive evolution forward. Yet could it be that evolution is fundamentally based on illusion [*Ein-Bild-ung*]*—*that the imaginary plays a constitutive role in evolution? The digital medium is bringing about an *iconic reversal* that is making images seem more alive, more beautiful, and better than reality itself. Reality, in contrast, strikes us as defective: “Looking around at the customers in a café, someone remarked to me (rightly): ‘Look how gloomy they are! nowadays the images are livelier than the people.’ One of the marks of our world is perhaps this reversal: only images exist and are produced and consumed.”<sup>1</sup>

Likenesses that depict an optimized reality destroy the original, iconic value of the image. The real takes them hostage. That is why, despite—or precisely because of—their massive influx, images now are iconoclastic. After they have been made consumable, they destroy the semantics and poetics of the image, which offers more than just a likeness of the real. Images that have been made consumable have been tamed. Such *domestication* makes their inherent *madness* [*Verrücktheit*]*—*the *displacement* that defines

them—disappear. In this fashion, they are stripped of their *truth*.

The so-called Paris syndrome refers to an acute psychic disturbance that affects mainly Japanese tourists. Victims suffer from hallucinations, derealization and depersonalization, fear, and psychosomatic symptoms such as dizziness, sweating, and a racing heart. These reactions are catalyzed by the marked difference between the idealized image that travelers have beforehand and the reality of the city, which fails to measure up. Presumably, Japanese tourists' compulsive—practically hysterical—tendency to take photos represents an unconscious defense reaction aiming to banish the terrifying real by means of images. As ideal images, *beautiful* pictures screen off tourists from *dirty reality*.

Alfred Hitchcock's *Rear Window* illustrates the connection between the shock of the real, on the one hand, and the way that the image screens off and protects the viewer, on the other. The similar sound of *rear* and *real* underscores this point. The window opening onto the courtyard is a *feast for the eyes*. Jeff (James Stewart) is a wheelchair-bound *photographer*; he spends his time sitting at the window and feasting his eyes on the comical goings-on in the neighbors' apartment. One day, he thinks he has witnessed a murder. In turn, the man he suspects notices that Jeff has been observing him in secret. At precisely this moment, the man *looks at* Jeff across the way. This uncanny *gaze of the other*—indeed, this *gaze from the real*—destroys the visual feast that the

photographer has been enjoying. In due course, the suspect—the *uncanny real*—breaks into Jeff's apartment. The photographer tries to blind the assailant with a flash—that is, to banish the man into the *image* and *repress* him, as it were. But the attempt fails. The attacker is indeed a killer, and he throws Jeff out the *window*. With this, the *rear window* becomes a *real window*. Fortunately, all ends well in the final sequence: the *real window* changes back into a *rear window*.

In contrast to *Rear Window*, the danger of an irruption of the real—and the other—does not exist for digital *windows*. Digital media screen us off from the real more effectively than film does. They are based on a generalized imaginary. The digital medium creates more distance to the *real* than analog media. That is, less *analogy* holds between the digital and the real.

We are now producing images in enormous quantity by means of digital media. Such massive production can also be interpreted as a reaction of defense and flight. What's more, a mania for optimization is occurring, too. When faced with reality, which strikes us as something imperfect, we run away into the realm of images. Today, we do not enlist religion so much as technologies of optimization in order to confront the reality of bodies, time, death, and so on. The digital medium is *defactifying* the world.

The digital medium knows nothing of age, destiny, or death. Time itself is frozen: it is a timeless medium. In contrast, the analog medium *suffers from time*. This aspect

takes the form of *passion*. Discussing photography, Barthes writes:

Not only does it commonly have the fate of paper (perishable), but even if it is attached to more lasting supports, it is still mortal: like a living organism, it is born on the level of the sprouting silver grains, it flourishes a moment, then ages. ... Attacked by light, by humidity, it fades, weakens, vanishes.<sup>2</sup>

Barthes links photography to a form of life in which the *negativity* of time plays the constitutive role. In contrast, the digital image—the digital medium—represents the corollary of a mode of “life” in which growing and aging, birth and death, are all erased. Permanent presence and an enduring now [*Gegenwart*] are its hallmarks. The digital does not blossom or gleam: the negativity of wilting is inscribed in budding, just as the negativity of shadows lies within glancing light.

## FROM THE HAND TO THE FINGER

The verb for history is to act [*Handeln*]. Hannah Arendt understands it as the capacity to make a new beginning, *initium*.<sup>1</sup> Action means performing a deed that inaugurates something unprecedented, something wholly other. Natality, being born, provides its ontological condition. Every birth promises a radical beginning. Likewise, acting means making a new start, opening up another world.<sup>2</sup> In view of the automatic processes to which the world is subject, action amounts to a “miracle.”<sup>3</sup> It is a wondrous “capacity ... bestow[ing] upon human affairs faith and hope.”<sup>4</sup> The soteriological dimension of action, Arendt observes, “perhaps found its most glorious and most succinct expression in the few words with which the Gospels announced their ‘glad tidings’: ‘A child has been born unto us.’”<sup>5</sup>

Is action, in the strong sense, still possible today? Isn't everything we do so fully at the mercy of automatic processes that even the miracle of a radical new beginning can no longer break their hold? Are we still subjects making decisions for ourselves? Haven't the digital and capitalist machines formed an uncanny alliance that annihilates all freedom of action? Aren't we living, today, in a *time of the undead*, when not just *being born* but even *dying* has been rendered impossible? Natality stands at the foundation of political thought, whereas mortality represents the stark

fact that first sparks *metaphysical thinking*. Viewed in this light, our *digital age of the undead* is neither political nor metaphysical. Rather, it is *postpolitical* and *postmetaphysical*. *Bare life*—that is, life that is to be prolonged at any cost—knows neither birth nor death. The time of the digital is a *postnatal* and *postmortal* era.

Vilém Flusser, in a prophetic declaration, claimed that today's human being, equipped with digital apparatuses, is already living the "immaterial life" [*undingliches Leben*] of tomorrow. "Manual atrophy" characterizes such an existence. Digital technology is making human hands waste away. For Flusser, this is a happy event: it means liberation from the burden of matter. In the future, he claims, humankind will no longer need hands. The new man will no longer have to *handle* or *work on* anything: he will have truck not with thingly things but only with unthingly information. Fingers will take the place of hands. The new man will *finger* instead of *handling*—or *acting*—and seek only play and enjoyment. Leisure, not work, will define his existence. In the immaterial future, the human being will not be defined by as a worker, *Homo faber*, but as a player—*Homo ludens*.<sup>6</sup>

The "handless, fingering human being" of the future—*Homo digitalis*—will not be a man of *action*. "Manual atrophy" amounts to the inability to handle anything at all. Handling things and working with them presuppose something that resists. Action must overcome resistance inasmuch as it pits what is new or other against the standing order. Action is animated by *negation*: the *pro* it sets forth is also a *contra*. But now, our society of positivity is steering

clear of everything that offers resistance. In so doing, it is doing away with *actions*. In their stead, only varying *conditions of the same* prevail.

The digital realm provides no material resistance that could be surmounted by work. In this regard, work is, in fact, approaching play; more and more, it resembles a game. However, and counter to what Flusser envisions, immaterial, digital life is not inaugurating a time of leisure and ease. Flusser fails to note the principle of *performance*, which undoes the connection between working and playing. The performance principle removes the ludic element and turns it back into labor. Now, players dope and exploit themselves until they are destroyed. The digital age is a time not of leisure but of performance and achievement. Counter to Flusser's dream, "handless, fingering man" does not mean *Homo ludens*. Playing the game amounts to yoking oneself to the compulsion to perform optimally and achieve maximally. Manual atrophy is followed by *digital arthritis*. In fact, the utopia of play and leisure yields a dystopia of achievement and exploitation.

Leisure begins where work ceases entirely. The time of leisure is a separate time. The neoliberal imperative to perform transforms time into working hours [*Arbeitszeit*]. It totalizes a belabored temporality. Breaks represent only a *phase* of the working day. Today, we know time only as time for working. And so this temporality follows us not only on vacation but even when we sleep. That is why we are sleeping so fitfully. Exhausted achievement-subjects can rest only in the same way that a leg falls asleep. Even relaxation

amounts to a mode of labor: it occurs to regenerate working power. Recreation is not the other of work but its *product*. So-called deceleration cannot generate any other time, either. It is also a consequence, a reflex, of the accelerating working day. It only *slows down* time for work—instead of changing it into *another* kind of temporality.

Even though we now are free from the machines that enslaved and exploited people during the industrial age, digital apparatuses are installing new constraints, new slavery. Because of their mobility, they make possible exploitation that proves even more efficient by transforming every space into a workplace—and all time into working hours. The freedom of movement is switching over into a fatal compulsion to work everywhere. During the machine age, working time could be held in check and separated from periods of not working, if only because the machines could not move or be moved. One had to go to work on one's own; this space was distinct from where work did not occur. Today, however, this distinction no longer holds in many professions. Digital devices have mobilized work itself. The workplace is turning into a portable labor camp from which there is no escape.

The smartphone promises more freedom, but it radiates a fatal compulsion—the compulsion to communicate. Now an almost obsessive, compulsive relationship to digital devices prevails. *Here, too, freedom is switching over into compulsion and constraint.* Social networks magnify such compulsion to communicate on a massive scale. More communication means more capital. In turn, the accelerated

circulation of communication and information leads to the accelerated circulation of capital.

The word *digital* points to the finger (*digitus*). Above all, the finger *counts*. Digital culture is based on the counting finger. In contrast, history means *recounting*. It is not a matter of *counting*, which represents a posthistorical category. Neither information nor tweets yield a whole, an *account*. A *timeline* does not recount the story of a life, either; it provides no biography. Timelines are additive, not narrative. Digital man *fingers* the world, in that he is always counting and calculating. The digital absolutizes numbers and counting. More than anything, friends on Facebook are *counted*. Yet real friendship is an account, a narrative. The digital age is totalizing addition, counting, and the countable. Even affection and attachments get counted—as *likes*. The narrative dimension is losing meaning on a massive scale. Today, everything is rendered countable so that it can be transformed into the language of performance and efficiency. As such, whatever resists being counted ceases to *be*.



## FROM FARMING TO HUNTING

“The hand acts” [*Die Hand handelt*]: such is its essence, according to Martin Heidegger.<sup>1</sup> However, Heidegger does not understand *action* in terms of *vita activa*. Rather, the “properly acting hand” is “the writing hand.”<sup>2</sup> In other words, its essence does not manifest itself as a manual operation [*Handlung*] but in manuscript form—as handwriting. For Heidegger, the hand is the medium of “Being,” the well-spring of meaning and truth. The writing hand communicates with “Being.” The typewriter, which involves only fingertips, draws us away from Being:

The typewriter veils the essence of writing and of the script. It withdraws from man the essential rank of the hand, without man’s experiencing this withdrawal appropriately and recognizing that it has transformed the relation of Being to his essence.<sup>3</sup>

The typewriter leads to *manual atrophy*, the deterioration of the writing hand. Indeed, it entails the *oblivion of Being*. Undoubtedly, Heidegger would have said that the digital apparatus only worsens such atrophy.

Heidegger’s hand *thinks* instead of acting: “Every motion of the hand in every one of its works carries itself through the element of thinking, every bearing of the hand bears itself in that element. All the work of the hand is

rooted in thinking.”<sup>4</sup> Thinking is handi-craft. It follows that the manual atrophy produced by digital technology is making thought itself deteriorate. It is interesting to note how Heidegger removes the hand from the sphere of action and situates it in relation to thought. Its essence is not *ethos* but *logos*. Heidegger conceives *logos* in terms of a farmer, a grower, picking out what has ripened—a hand that “reads” [*lesende Hand eines Bauern*]: “Without this gathering, without a gleaning in the sense in which wheat or grapes are gleaned, we should never be able to read a single word.”<sup>5</sup> As such, Heidegger presents *logos* as the bearing of a peasant or farmer. It is a matter of cultivating, plowing, and tilling language like the soil—communicating with the earth, which conceals and hides itself away, and encountering its incalculability and depth. The farmer’s task is to hearken to the earth [*auf die Erde hören*] by paying it heed and obeying [*gehörchen*]:

If hearing, in the sense of hearkening and obedience, does not immediately concern the ears, this is so because there is something peculiar about hearing and the ears. ... We have ears so we may hear heedingly and, in so hearkening, hear the song of the earth, its trembling and quaking, which remains untouched by the enormous racket that humankind sometimes makes on its worn-out [*vernutzt*] surface.<sup>6</sup>

Heidegger’s world of “earth and sky, mortals and divinities” is also the world of the peasant or farmer. As a “mortal,” man is not one who acts [*ein Handelnder*]. Human being

lacks the natality of a new beginning. Heidegger also conceives God as a deity of peasants, who hark and pay heed. God has a seat in the “altar corner” [*Herrgottswinkel*] of the “farmhouse in the Black Forest,” thanks to “the dwelling of peasants” [*bäuerliches Wohnen*].<sup>7</sup> In “The Origin of the Work of Art,” Heidegger describes the shoes painted by Vincent Van Gogh as those of a peasant. This amounts to a transfiguration of the agrarian world:

From out of the dark opening of the well-worn insides of the shoes the toil of the worker’s tread stares forth. In the crudely solid heaviness of the shoes accumulates the tenacity of the slow trudge through the far-stretching and ever-uniform furrows of the field swept by a raw wind. ... The shoes vibrate with the silent call of the earth, its silent gift of the ripening grain, its unexplained self-refusal in the wintry field.<sup>8</sup>

Today, instead of that raw wind over the field, a digital storm is blowing through the world—the Net. The hurricanes of the digital make Heideggerian “dwelling” impossible. The “earth” of Heidegger’s fieldworker is diametrically opposed to the digital. Heideggerian earth embodies the “essentially undisclosable” and “essentially self-secluding.”<sup>9</sup> In contrast, the digital produces the compulsion for transparency. The earth escapes all transparency. Its seclusion is fundamentally alien to information. By nature, information is something that either *lies open* or is supposed to *lie open*. The imperative of the society of transparency holds: everything must lie open, ready and available for everyone.

Transparency is the *essence* of information: this is the way [*Gangart*] of the digital medium.

Heidegger's "truth" loves to hide. It does not simply lie there, available. First, it must be "torn" from "concealment." The negativity of "concealment" dwells within the truth as its "heart."<sup>10</sup> In its very essence, negativity belongs to truth, which is surrounded by the concealed as a forest clearing is surrounded by dark woods. In contrast, information lacks the *inner space*, the *interiority*, that would permit it to *withdraw* or *conceal itself*. No *heart* beats within it, Heidegger would say. Pure positivity—pure exteriority—is what defines information.

Information is cumulative and additive, whereas truth is exclusive and selective. In contrast to information, it does not accumulate like snow. One does not encounter it in drifts. There is no such thing as a mass of truth. In contrast, masses of information abound. But without negativity, the positive massifies. Information also differs from knowledge because of its positivity. Knowledge does not simply lie at the ready. One cannot just find it out there, as one can information. As a rule, lengthy experience precedes it. Its temporality is wholly different from the temporality of information, which is extremely short and short-term. Moreover, information is explicit, whereas knowledge often assumes an implicit form.

Earth, God, and truth belong to the world of the farmer. Today, we are no longer cultivate the soil; we hunt. Tracking prey, information hunters scour the Net like a digital game preserve. In contrast to fieldworkers, they are mobile. There

is no farmland that they must settle. They do not *dwell*. During the machine age, people still had the *habitus* of peasants insofar as they were tied to a new master—the machine. The machine forced them to *function* passively. The worker would always return to the machine, like a vassal to his lord; the machine occupied the center of his world. But the digital medium has brought about a new topology of labor. Here, the digital worker stands at the center. Or more precisely, a middle no longer exists. Instead, the user and the digital apparatus form a unit. The hunters of today do not function passively, as parts of a machine; they *operate* actively with their mobile, digital devices—the equivalent of Paleolithic hunters' spears, bows, and arrows. In so doing, however, they encounter no danger, for the hunt for information occurs by means of a *mouse*. This is what distinguishes them from Paleolithic hunters.

Power and information do not get along. Power likes to veil itself in secrecy. It invents the *truth* to enthrone and inaugurate itself. Power, like secrecy, is marked by *interiority*. In contrast, the digital medium is *deinteriorizing*. Instances of power strike information hunters as barriers blocking information. That is why they adopt the strategy of transparency.

Mass media such as radio create a power dynamic. Listeners are passive, at the mercy of a *voice*. Hereby, communication is one-sided. Asymmetrical communication of this kind is not communication in the proper sense. It is like a proclamation, an annunciation. That is why mass media have an affinity for power and rule. Power pushes asymmetrical

communication forward: the higher the degree of asymmetry, the greater the power. In contrast, digital media generate a genuinely communicative relation—that is, symmetrical communication. The receiver of information is simultaneously its sender. It is difficult to set up relations of power in symmetrical spaces of communication.

According to Vilém Flusser, the media hurricanes of our day are forcing us to become nomads again. Yet nomads are herders. They do not have the mentality of hunters. In fact, the line separating the past from the present does not run between settlers and nomads but between hunters and farmers. Today, even peasants act like hunters. Bearings such as “patience,” “renunciation,” “diffidence,” “reserve,” and *Gelassenheit* define Heidegger’s farmer, but they do not belong to the ways of the hunter. Information hunters are impatient and unabashed. They lurk instead of “waiting.” They “go for it” instead of letting things ripen. The aim is to capture prey with every click. Their temporality is total presence. Anything blocking the view is to be removed, and right away. The word for this panoramic view of the digital game preserve is *transparency*. Transparency society is inhabited by hunters and gatherers—of information.

Digital information hunters go on the prowl with Google Glass. These data eyepieces have replaced the spears, bows, and arrows of Paleolithic hunters. Google Glass connects the human eye directly to the Internet. Its wearer sees all, as it were. The device is inaugurating the age of total information. Google Glass is not a tool—not Heideggerian “equipment” that is “ready-to-hand”—for one does not take

it in *hand*. The cellular phone—*Handy*, in German—might still count as a tool. But Google Glass gets so close to us that we perceive it as part of our body. It completes the society of information by making *Being* and information fall into one: if something is not information, it *is* not. Human perception achieves total efficiency thanks to digital optics. Prey is seized not just with a click but with every look. Seeing the world and grasping the world coincide. Google Glass totalizes the hunter's way of seeing, which disregards everything that offers up no prey—that is, information. And yet, the real joy of the senses, including sight, is a matter of inefficiency. It means casting a gaze that lingers among the things of this world without preying on them.



## FROM SUBJECT TO PROJECT

Heidegger's *farmer* is a subject. Eytmologically, *subject* means "one who is cast under" (as in *subject to* or *sujet à*). The farmer stands subject to the *nomos of the earth*. The terrestrial order produces *subjects*. Heidegger defines human existence as a matter of fundamental "thrownness." Today, Heidegger's existential ontology needs to be rewritten: people no longer consider themselves subjects that are cast under a general law but as self-designing—"self-casting" and, indeed, self-optimizing—projects. Of course, the transition from subject to project was already underway before the advent of digital media. Now, as ever, the rule holds: in critical phases of its existence, the prevailing form of being or life pushes for modes of expression that attain completion only in a new medium. The forms that life assumes depend on prevailing media. Now, digital media are completing the process whereby the subject transforms into a projection. The digital is a *medium of projection*.

In light of the "digital turn," Vilém Flusser called for a new anthropology—an anthropology of the digital:

We are no longer subjects in a given, objective world but projects of alternative worlds. We have raised ourselves up from a submissive, subjective position in order to project. We are becoming adults. We know we are dreaming.<sup>1</sup>

According to Flusser, human beings are “artists” who envision and design alternative worlds. This amounts to erasing the difference between art and science. Art and science are both projects. Scientists, Flusser claims, are “computer artists *avant la lettre*.”<sup>2</sup>

Oddly, Flusser founds his “new anthropology” on “Judeo-Christianity,” which “sees only dust in human being.”<sup>3</sup> Within the digital universe of pixels and dots, all discrete quantities dissolve. Here, neither subject nor object represents a meaningful category: “We can no longer be subjects because there are no longer any objects whose subjects we might be—and no solid core that could be the subject of any object.”<sup>4</sup> As Flusser sees it, the self is now a “node of intersecting virtualities.” Likewise, whatever we exists amounts to a “node of possibilities”: “We must understand ourselves as curves and bulges in a field of intersecting—above all, interhuman—relations. We, too, are ‘digital computations’ of whirring dots in possible combination.”<sup>5</sup> But Flusser’s digital messianism fails to do justice to the network topology that now prevails. This landscape does not consist of points and intersections without a self so much as it comprises narcissistic islands of egos.

On the whole, utopianism dominated the early phases of digital communication. Accordingly, Flusser’s idealized anthropology pictures a busy, creative swarm: “Does the telematic human being represent the beginning of an anthropology, one announcing that being human means being connected with others—reciprocal recognition for the purpose of creative adventure?”<sup>6</sup> The question is purely

rhetorical. Over and over, Flusser exalts networked communication into the religious sphere. Here, the telematic ethos of networking is supposed to correspond to “Judeo-Christianity with its commandment, ‘Love thy neighbor.’” For Flusser, digital communication harbors a messianic potential; this makes it serviceable for the “deep, existential human call for acknowledgment of the Other and self-knowledge in the Other—in a word, for love in the Judeo-Christian sense.”<sup>7</sup> Following this logic, digital communication has inaugurated a kind of *Pentecostal communion*. It frees the individual human being from isolation within the self by summoning forth *spirit*, a *resonance chamber*:

The Net vibrates: it is pathos, resonance. This is the foundation of telematics—the sympathy and antipathy of nearness. I believe telematics is a technology of loving one’s neighbor, a technology for carrying out Judeo-Christianity. The basis of telematics is empathy. It abolishes humanism in favor of altruism. The very fact that this possibility exists is something altogether colossal.<sup>8</sup>

The society of information itself is supposed to represent a “strategy” for “abolishing the ideology of a self”; it is supposed to promote the “insight that we are there for each other, and no one exists for him- or herself alone.” “Automatically,” digital technology is “doing away with the self to the benefit of intersubjective realization.”<sup>9</sup>

For Flusser, digital networking represents not a medium of *compulsive searching* for the new but a medium

of “fidelity” that lends the world an “aroma,” a “specific fragrance.” By dispelling spatiotemporal distance, digital communication enables the experience of joyous proximity—a felicitous moment of fulfillment (*kairos*):

This is the image before me: when I telematically communicate with my friend in São Paulo, it is not just space that bends—he comes to me, and I to him; time bends, too—past and future: the past becomes the future, the future turns into the past, and both are present. Thus, I experience intersubjectivity.<sup>10</sup>

Such a *messianism of networking* has not proven true. Instead, digital communication has made community—the *we*—deteriorate markedly. It is destroying the public sphere and heightening human isolation. It is not the precept “Love thy neighbor” but narcissism that governs digital communication. Digital technology does not represent a technology for “loving one’s neighbor as oneself.” On the contrary, it has proven to be a narcissistic ego machine. Nor is it a dialogical medium. The dialogical—which determines Flusser’s thinking through and through—commandeers the way that he understands networks.

Today, the subject achieves liberation by turning itself into a *project*. Yet this amounts to another figure of constraint. Compulsion and constraint now take the form of performance, achievement, self-optimization, and autoexploitation. We are living in a singular phase of history when freedom itself entails pressure and coercion. In actual fact, freedom represents *the* antitype of compulsion—period.

And yet this same antitype is now bringing forth compulsion and constraint. More freedom amounts to more pressure. As such, it marks the end of freedom. We've gone down a dead-end street. We can move neither forward nor backward. Flusser fails to notice the fateful dialectic of freedom, which turns it into its opposite. The reason that he makes this mistake is his messianism. Contemporary society is not a world of "Love thy neighbor," where we all realize ourselves in concert. Instead, it is an achievement society that enforces isolation. The achievement subject exploits itself until it collapses. It develops autoaggressive traits. Often enough, they lead to suicide. As a beautiful project, the self turns out to be a *projectile* that it now turns on itself.



## THE NOMOS OF THE EARTH

The *digital turn* means that we are leaving the earth—the terrestrial order—for good. But will this free us from the gravity and incalculability of the earth? Won't digital weightlessness and fluidity plunge us into free fall? Heidegger was the last great champion of the terrestrial order: "Earth ... causes every merely calculating importunity upon it to turn into a destruction."<sup>1</sup> But now, the digital order is totalizing calculation, the purely additive. In contrast, the terrestrial order rests on firm foundations. Its law is called *nomos*:

Upon the holy lord  
Of men and gods I call,  
Heavenly Nomos, who arranges  
The stars and sets a fair limit  
Between the earth and the waters of the sea;  
It is his laws  
That ever preserve nature's balance,  
Obedient and steady.<sup>2</sup>

The digital order is dispelling the *nomos* of the earth once and for all. Carl Schmitt praised the earth for its solidity, above all, which enables clear demarcations and distinctions. The terrestrial order comprises walls, borders, and fortresses. Stable "character"—which flexible *Homo digitalis* lacks altogether—also belongs to the terrestrial

order. The digital medium equals the “sea,” where “firm lines cannot be engraved.”<sup>3</sup> The digital has “no *character*, in the original sense of the word, which comes from the Greek *charassein*, to engrave, to scratch, to imprint.”<sup>4</sup>

Categories such as spirit, action, thinking, and truth belong to the terrestrial order. They stand to be replaced by the categories of the digital order, where action yields to operation. Operations take place without any decision, in the strong sense of the word, having been made at all. The hesitation or wavering that enters into and constitutes action counts as an operative disturbance. It is detrimental to efficiency. Operations are *actomes*—atomized actions within a process that is largely automatic. They lack temporal and existential breadth.

Thinking—again, in the strong sense—is not a category of the digital, either. Today, it is giving way to calculation. Steps in a calculation follow an entirely different course than thinking; their gait, or pace, is not the same, for they have been secured against surprises, breaks, and events. Even truth seems anachronistic when compared to transparency. Truth lives from the negativity of exclusion; falsehood is *posited* together with it. In one and the same stroke, *decision* establishes what counts as true and what counts as false. Even the dichotomy of good and evil rests on this narrative structure. It is an *account*. Unlike truth, transparency is not narrative. Although it makes things see-through, it is not *illuminating*. *Light*, in contrast, is a narrative medium. It is *directed* and *directing*. Thus,

it shows *ways*. The medium of transparency is *lightless radiation*.

Love is also tied to the negative tension of hate. It belongs to the same order as true and false, or good and evil. Negativity differentiates it from pressing the *like* button, which is positive—a matter of accumulation or addition. Facebook friends and “frenemies” lack the negativity that distinguishes “friend” from “enemy” as Carl Schmitt understood them. Closeness and remoteness belong to the terrestrial order, too. Digitality abolishes both in favor of crowding—that is, the simple elimination of distance. Crowding represents a positive quantity: it lacks the negativity that defines closeness. Remoteness is inscribed in nearness. Digital communication knows nothing of “the pain of the nearness of the remote.”<sup>5</sup>

Spirit awakens in view of the *other*. The *negativity of the other* is what keeps it alive. Whoever relates only to him- or herself, or remains stuck where she or he is, lacks spirit. Spirit is marked by the capacity to “endure infinite *pain*, the negation of its individual immediacy.”<sup>6</sup> The positive, which strips the other of all negativity, degrades into “dead nature.”<sup>7</sup> Only a spirit that breaks out of its “simple relation to itself”<sup>8</sup> *experiences* anything. Without pain, without the negativity of the other, and with an excess of positivity instead, no *experience* can occur. One travels wherever one wants but without attaining experience. One counts without end, yet one can account for nothing. One sees everything, yet has no insight into anything at all. Pain—a threshold feeling when facing the *other*—is

the medium of Spirit. *Spirit is pain.* Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* describes a *via dolorosa*. In contrast, the phenomenology of the digital knows nothing of the dialectical pain of thinking. It might be called the *Phenomenology of "Like."*

## DIGITAL GHOSTS

Franz Kafka thought that letters were already an inhuman medium of communication; they had caused terrible spiritual destitution. In a letter of his own, he wrote,

How did people ever get the idea they could communicate with one another by letter! One can think about someone far away and one can hold on to someone nearby; everything else is beyond human power.<sup>1</sup>

Letters circulate among ghosts. Written kisses never arrive at their destination. On the way, ghosts snatch them up and suck them dry. Postal communication simply provides them further nourishment. Because this fodder is so rich, the ghosts are multiplying without end. Humankind does what it can to combat them. This is why railways and automobiles were invented: “in order to eliminate as much of the ghosts’ power as possible and to attain a natural intercourse, a tranquility of soul.”<sup>2</sup> But the other side is much stronger. After it invented the mail, it discovered telephones and telegraphs. Kafka draws the conclusion: “[The ghosts] will not starve, but we will perish.”<sup>3</sup>

Since then, Kafka’s ghosts have also invented the Internet, smartphones, email, Twitter, Facebook, and Google Glass. Kafka would say that the new generation of ghosts—digital ghosts—are more gluttonous, more shameless, and

noisier than ever. Isn't it a fact that digital media reach "beyond human power"? Aren't they leading to a racing, uncontrollable proliferation of ghosts? Are we not, in truth, losing the ability to think of someone far away and hold on to someone nearby?

The *Internet of Things* is bringing new ghosts into the world. Physical objects, which used to be mute, are now starting to talk. Automatic communication between them—which happens without human beings doing anything at all—will feed the ghosts. It is making the world more and more ghostly, as if guided by a spectral hand. Maybe digital ghosts will see to it that, at some point, everything winds up spinning out of control. E. M. Forster's short story "The Machine Stops" anticipates such a catastrophe. Here, swarms of ghosts put an end to the world.

The history of communication may be described as the progressive illumination of stone. The optical medium that speeds information along as fast as light has finally drawn the curtain on the Stone Age of communication. Even *silicon* points to the Latin *silex*, which means "pebble." *Stone* appears often in the works of Heidegger as his preferred example for the "mere thing." In itself, stone is something that withdraws from visibility. Thus, in an early lecture, Heidegger claims that "a mere thing, a stone, has no light within itself."<sup>4</sup> Ten years later, in "The Origin of the Work of Art," one reads: "The stone presses downwards and manifests its heaviness. But while this heaviness weighs down on us, at the same time, it denies us any penetration into it."<sup>5</sup> As a *thing*, stone represents the antitype of transparency. It

belongs to the earth, the terrestrial order; as such, it stands for what remains concealed and sealed off. Today, *things* are becoming less and less meaningful. They are giving way to *information*. Information is what feeds ghosts now, “not the thing, but information is economically, socially, and politically concrete. Our environment is becoming markedly softer and foggier—more spectral.”<sup>6</sup>

That said, digital communication is not just assuming spectral form; it is also becoming viral. Digital communication is contagious insofar as it occurs on an emotive or affective register, without mediation. *Contagion* represents a form of posthermeneutic communication that, in fact, offers nothing to think about. It does not presuppose any kind of *reading* (which admits acceleration only within modest limits). Digital “content,” even if it holds very little significance, spreads like an epidemic, a pandemic racing through the Net. It is unburdened by the weight of *meaning*. No other medium can effect such viral infection. Writing is far too sluggish.

Like stones and walls, secrets belong to the terrestrial order. The secret is incompatible with accelerated production and the dissemination of information. It represents the antitype of communication. Digital topology consists of flat, smooth, open spaces. In contrast, secrets prefer spaces that impede the spread of information—nooks, corners, crannies, hollows, and hideouts.

The secret loves silence. This is what differentiates the secretive, or mysterious [*das Geheimnisvolle*], from the ghostly. Like the spectacle, the spectral depends on seeing

and being seen. That is why ghosts are noisy. The digital wind blowing through our houses is ghostly:

In any case, the wind is for the nomad what the ground is for the settled. ... There is something ghostly and spiritual about it. ... The wind, this phantasmical intangibility that drives the nomad and whose call he obeys, is an experience that we describe in terms of calculus and computation.<sup>7</sup>

Their high degree of complexity makes digital things spectral and uncontrollable. In contrast, the secret is not defined by complexity.

Transparency society has a flipside—indeed, a dark side. In certain respects, it amounts to a *surface phenomenon*. Behind or underneath it, *spectral spaces* open up that defy transparency altogether. *Dark pools*, for instance, refer to anonymous financial transactions. Ultimately, so-called high-speed trading is commerce with, or between, ghosts: algorithms and machines are communicating and fighting with each other. As Kafka would say, these spectral modes of action and exchange reach “beyond human power.” They give rise to unpredictable, spectral events such as *flash crashes*. Today’s financial markets also breed monsters. Because of their exceedingly high level of complexity, they can stir up trouble—and worse—and do so without any supervision. *Tor* is the name for software enabling one to travel through the Net anonymously, in quasi-subterranean fashion. It is the *digital deep sea*, where all visibility vanishes. The more transparency increases, the more the darkness grows.

## INFORMATION FATIGUE

In 1936, Walter Benjamin declared that the primary mode of a spectator's response to cinema is one of "shock." Shock took the place of *contemplation*, the bearing that holds with respect to painting. But today, shock no longer characterizes perception adequately. Shock is a kind of immunoreaction. As such, it resembles disgust. Today, images no longer trigger shock. Even repulsive images are supposed to entertain (for instance, *Fear Factor* or *I'm a Celebrity ... Get Me Out of Here!*). Even disgusting images have been made consumable, and the totalization of consumption is eliminating every form of immunological recoil.

A strong immune system stifles communication. The lower the level of immunity is, the faster information circulates. A high level of immunity slows down the flow of information. Whereas immune defense impedes communication, *liking* promotes it. Rapidly circulating information also accelerates the circulation of capital. Today, immunosuppression allows massive quantities of information to penetrate us without any immune defense. A low threshold of immunity augments the *consumption* of information. At the same time, the unfiltered mass of information is dulling our senses. This fact is responsible for many psychic disturbances.

Information fatigue syndrome (IFS) is a psychic illness that is caused by excessive information. Patients complain about the progressive weakening of their analytic capacity, attention deficits, general unease, and inability to bear responsibility. The term was coined by British psychologist David Lewis in 1996. At the time, IFS affected people who had to process vast quantities of information on the job. Now, IFS affects everyone, because we all face rapidly growing masses of information.

One of the main symptoms of IFS is the deterioration of analytic skills. Analytic ability is what defines thinking, in particular. Information overflow weakens thought. Analysis is a matter of disregarding whatever does not bear on the object of reflection. Ultimately, then, it is the capacity to distinguish between what is essential and what is not. The tide of information to which we are exposed today is clearly interfering with our ability to boil matters down to their essence. Thinking necessarily involves negativity: discernment, discrimination, and selection. In other words, thought always proceeds *exclusively*.

More information does not necessarily lead to better decisions. Through the swelling mass of information, it is precisely our higher faculty of judgment that is now in a state of decline. Where information is concerned, *less* often has the effect of *more*. The negativity of omission and forgetting proves productive. Simply having more information and communication does not shed light on the world. Nor does transparency mean clairvoyance. On its own, a mass of information generates no truth. It sheds no light into the

dark. The more information is set free, the more confusing and ghostly the world becomes. After a certain point, information ceases to be informative. It becomes deformative. Likewise, communication stops being communicative; henceforth, it is only cumulative.

Information fatigue includes symptoms that characterize depression. Above all, depression is a narcissistic malady. Overwrought, pathologically overmodulated self-reference makes one depressed. The narcissistically depressive subject hears only echoes of itself. Meaning exists only when it manages to recognize itself again. The world appears only in adumbrations of the self. Ultimately, the subject, exhausted and worn down by its own self, drowns in itself. Today, our society is becoming more and more narcissistic. Social media such as Twitter and Facebook are aggravating this process for they are narcissistic.

The symptoms of IFS also include an inability to bear responsibility. Responsibility depends on certain mental and temporal conditions. In the first place, it presupposes obligation and bindingness. As in acts of making a promise or showing trust, it *binds* the future. Such acts hold and stabilize the future. In contrast, contemporary communications media promote nonbindingness, arbitrariness, and the short term. The absolute precedence and priority of the present is the hallmark of our world. It is scattering time into a mere sequence of purely disposable presences. Thereby, the future is degrading into an optimized present. The totalization of the present destroys actions that *give time*, such as taking responsibility and making promises.



## THE CRISIS OF REPRESENTATION

Roland Barthes described photography as the “emanation of the referent.”<sup>1</sup> Representation constitutes the essence of photography. An object that once was there reflected light rays that affected the film. Photography preserves quasi-*material* traces of the real referent: “It is as if the Photograph always carries its referent with itself.” The image and its original are “both affected by the same amorous or funereal immobility, at the heart of the moving world: they are glued together, limb by limb, like the condemned man and the corpse in certain tortures; or even like those pairs of fish ... which navigate in convoy, as though united by an eternal coitus.”<sup>2</sup>

For Barthes, the *truth of photography* is that it is inseparable from its referent, as if by destiny. The photograph is bound to a real object, which it represents as the emanation of the referent. Its hallmark is love and fidelity to this source. Photography does not stand for a realm of fiction or manipulation; it occupies the realm of truth. Accordingly, Barthes speaks of the “stubbornness of the Referent.”<sup>3</sup> *Camera Lucida* orbits around an almost invisible photograph of the author’s mother in a sunroom. She is the referent, first and last—the object of the writer’s mourning and his work of mourning. She is the *guardian of truth*.

Barthes clearly had a painting by René Magritte in mind—*Ceci n'est pas une pipe*—when he wrote: “By nature, the Photograph ... has something tautological about it: a pipe, here, is always and intractably a pipe.”<sup>4</sup> But why did he claim *truth* so emphatically for photography? Did he sense the coming of the digital age, which now is detaching representation from real reference, once and for all?

Digital photography radically calls the truth of photography into question. It is putting a definitive end to the time of representation. Digital photography marks the end of the real. It no longer points to a real referent. As such, digital photography approaches painting once more: *Ceci n'est pas une pipe*. As *hyperphotography*, it presents *hyperreality*. Now the real is present only as a quotation—in fragments. Digital photography collects and connects quotes from the real and mixes them with the imaginary. In this way, it opens a *self-referential, hyperreal* space wholly disconnected from reference. Hyperreality represents nothing; instead, it *presents*.

The crisis of photographic representation has a political corollary. In *The Crowd*, Le Bon observes that parliamentary representatives are the flunkies [*Handlanger*] of the working masses. Political representation in this form still is *strong*. It actually advocates for the interests of the working classes. But now, as in the realm of photography, political representation is becoming massively unbalanced. The system of political economy has become self-referential. It no longer represents citizens or the public sphere. Political representatives are viewed no longer as agents of the “people” but as

*agents of the system*. The problem lies in the system's self-referentiality. The contemporary political crisis could be surmounted only if there were a way to tie it back to real referents—human beings.

It used to be that the masses could organize in parties and unions that were animated by an ideology. Now, the masses are falling apart into crowds of individuals—in other words, alienated, digital *hikikomori* who do not participate in discourse or constitute a public sphere. The counterpart of the self-referential political system is isolated individuals who do not act politically. Any political *we* that might be capable of Action, writ large, is falling apart. What kind of politics—what kind of democracy—is still conceivable today, given that civil society is vanishing, given the mounting egoization and narcissification of human existence? Would it take some kind *SmartPolicy* to make elections, campaigns, parliaments, ideologies, and conventions unnecessary—a digital democracy in which the *like* button replaces the voting ballot altogether? What need is there for parties today if *everyone is a party him- or herself*—if ideologies, which once formed a political *horizon*, have crumbled into countless individual opinions and matters of personal preference? Is democracy conceivable even *without discourse*?



## FROM CITIZEN TO CONSUMER

In the 1970s, a new kind of television set was developed—*QUBE* (Question Your Tube). *Question* pointed to its interactive features. The device had a keyboard that allowed the viewer to choose among articles of clothing depicted onscreen, for example. It also made it easy to vote. For instance, the screen might show candidates for principal at a local school. With a keystroke, viewers could make their choice.

Flusser recognizes a fundamental distinction between choices on the QUBE system and existential decisions. A “temporal and existential abyss”<sup>1</sup> gapes between the latter and their unforeseeable consequences. No one can experience the consequences of a real decision right away. Thus, doubt attends all existential decisions; they are beset by hesitation and wavering. Yet Flusser claims that the QUBE system enabled people to break down existential decisions into “dotlike, atomic decisions”—in other words, *actomes*, which are “instantaneously effective” [*augenblicklich wirksam*].

On the model of QUBE, Flusser pictures the politics of the future. Such a system would enable “direct village democracy.”<sup>2</sup> Flusser dreams of a “deideologized democracy” where knowledge and qualification count above all: “It means that, in the QUBE system, the competency

[*Kompetenz*] of a given participant and the weight of a given area of responsibility [*Kompetenz*], freed from all ideology, come into plain view.”<sup>3</sup> In this deideologized democracy, politicians would be replaced by experts who administrate and optimize the system. As a result, political representatives and parties would become superfluous. Furthermore, Flusser associates QUBE with a utopian way of living, where leisure and political engagement coincide:

For QUBE subscribers, leisure is already the site of effective decisions. Now the screen is the site of their political, social, and cultural engagement, and their private space is already the *res publica*—a communal concern [*die öffentliche Sache*].<sup>4</sup>

Politics is leisure. In the idyllic future that Flusser envisions, political participation would move along without any stressful, long-winded “discourse.”

Today, the “exceptionally improved QUBE system involving a great portion of humanity”<sup>5</sup> that Flusser dreamed about has become reality. Indeed, digital voting occurs at every hour of the day. Now, politics occurs “in passing,” as it were. The *like* button is the digital ballot. The Internet or the smartphone is the new polling station. And clicking a mouse or making a quick keystroke has replaced “discourse.”

Like his idea of networking, Flusser’s “direct village democracy” exhibits utopian features. Counter to what he claims, a *political* decision, in the proper sense, always represents an *existential* decision. “Dotlike, atomic decisions” that are “instantaneously effective” sink to the level

of nonbinding, inconsequential purchases. The difference between voting and buying is wholly suspended on the very screen of QUBE. One casts a vote just as one purchases something at the store. “Leisure” amounts to *shopping*. Here, the subject is not *Homo ludens* but *Homo economicus*.

Shopping presupposes no discourse. Consumers buy what they wish, following personal inclination. *Like* is their motto. They are not *citizens*. Responsibility for the community defines citizens. Consumers lack responsibility, above all. In the digital agora—where polling place and market, *polis* and economy, collapse into one—voters behave like consumers. The day is coming when the Internet will replace polling places entirely. Then, as with the QUBE system, voting and shopping will take place on the same screen—that is, on the same level of consciousness. Campaign advertisements will fuse with commercials. Indeed, government already resembles marketing. Political surveys and polls are like market research. Data mining sounds the mood of voters. Negative climates of opinion are eliminated by means of new, more attractive offers. Today, we are no longer active agents—citizens—but passive users.



## THE RECORDED LIFE

No trust is possible in the digital panopticon—nor is it necessary. As an *act of faith*, it is growing obsolete in view of readily available information. The society of information is discrediting all belief, all faith. Trust makes relationships to others possible even when one does not know them well. The possibility of quickly and easily obtaining information damages trust. As such, the contemporary crisis of trust is also medially conditioned. Digital networking makes it so much easier to obtain information that trust, as a social praxis, has less and less meaning. Trust is yielding to control. It follows, then, that our society of transparency is approaching the society of surveillance. Where information is readily and rapidly obtained, the social system switches over from trust to control and transparency. In so doing, it observes the logic of efficiency.

Every click that one makes is stored. Every step that one takes can be traced. We leave digital tracks everywhere. Our digital life is reflected, point for point, in the Net. The possibility of logging each and every aspect of life is replacing trust with complete control. Big Brother has ceded the throne to Big Data. The total recording of life is bringing the society of transparency to completion.

Digital surveillance society evinces a particular kind of panoptic structure. Jeremy Bentham's Panopticon consisted

of prison cells that were separated from each other. The inmates could not communicate among themselves. Dividing walls ensured that they could not see each other, either. For their improvement, isolation was imposed on them. But now, the occupants of the digital panopticon network and communicate with each other intensively. Total control comes about not through spatial and communicative isolation but through networking and hypercommunication.

The occupants of the digital panopticon are not prisoners. Their element is illusory freedom. They feed the digital panopticon with information by exhibiting themselves and shining a light on every part of their lives. Autoillumination is more efficient than allo-illumination. Herein lies its parallel to autoexploitation. Autoexploitation is more efficient than allo-exploitation because a feeling of freedom accompanies it. In the process of autoillumination, pornographic exhibition and panoptic control merge into one. Control society reaches completion when its inhabitants communicate not because of external constraints but out of inner need—when fear about giving up one's private and intimate sphere yields to the urge to put oneself on display, without shame. In other words, it occurs when freedom and control prove indistinguishable.

Surveillance and control represent *inherent* features of digital communication. The digital panopticon is defined by the fact that it makes the difference between Big Brother and inmates blurrier and blurrier. Governmental agencies are not alone in spying on us. Enterprises such as Facebook

and Google also operate like secret services. They take stock of our lives in order to find information to coin as capital. Companies spy on their employees. Banks screen credit applicants. The advertising slogan of the private credit bureau SCHUFA—“Wir schaffen Vertrauen” (“We create trust”)—is cynicism, pure and simple. In reality, companies like this are abolishing trust altogether and replacing it with control.

In the United States, the firm Acxiom advertises the service of providing a “360-degree customer view.” Acxiom is one of the Big Data enterprises that are taking the world by storm. The company maintains a gigantic warehouse of information with legions of servers. Like the building of an intelligence agency, its Arkansas headquarters are sealed off and rigorously patrolled. Acxiom has the personal data of some three hundred million U.S. citizens—practically all of them, that is. Clearly, Acxiom knows more about the country’s citizenry than the Federal Bureau of Investigation or Internal Revenue Service.

It’s getting harder and harder to tell the difference between economically motivated snooping for data and its use for intelligence purposes. Fundamentally, Acxiom’s operations are no different from those of secret services. Indeed, the company evidently operates more efficiently than governmental agencies. When the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, were being investigated, Acxiom provided government authorities with personal data on eleven suspects. The intelligence market under democratic rule is on the verge of amounting to a digital surveillance state.

In today's society of information—where the state and the market are merging—the activities of Acxiom, Google, and Facebook increasingly resemble those of official security agencies. They often enlist the same personnel, too. The algorithms employed by Facebook, the stock market, and secret services are essentially the same. In each case, the goal is to exploit information maximally.

Thanks to the undramatic shift to Internet Protocol version 6, the number of Web addresses that are now available is almost unlimited. In consequence, almost every object in our everyday world can be assigned an Internet address. Radio-frequency identification (RFID) chips turn things into active transmitters—autonomous agents that send information to each other and communicate with each other. This Internet of things is bringing the society of control to completion. Now, the objects that surround us are watching us, too. Objects that we use day in and day out are keeping tabs on our every move. Without cease, they pass along information about what we do—and don't do. They are active collaborators in logging our lives down to the very last detail.

Google Glass promises unbounded freedom. Google boss Sergey Brin has raved about the wonderful pictures that the device takes; it is programmed to shoot one every ten seconds. Without Google Glass, Brin claims, fantastic pictures like this wouldn't exist. However, this same eye-piece is what enables perfect strangers to photograph and film us in perpetuity. In practical terms, wearing these

glasses means carrying a surveillance camera wherever one goes. *Indeed, Google Glass has turned the human eye into a surveillance camera.* There is no longer any difference between seeing and surveillance. Everyone is watching over everyone else. Everyone is Big Brother and prisoner—in one. Digital technology has perfected Bentham's Panopticon.



## PSYCHOPOLITICS

Since the seventeenth century, according to Michel Foucault, power has manifested itself not as the sovereign's power to deal death but as biopower. The sovereign's power rests in the sword, which ends life. In contrast, biopower works to "incite, reinforce, control, monitor, optimize, and organize the forces under it"—that is, to promote life. Biopower is "bent on generating forces, making them grow, and ordering them" instead of "impeding them, making them submit, or destroying them."<sup>1</sup> The sovereign's power of death has yielded to the careful administration and control of the population. Biopower is significantly subtler and more exacting than the power of death, which is too coarse to yield *power of control*. In other words, the prevailing order intervenes in the *biological* processes and laws that shape people into masses.

But for all that, biopolitical control seizes exclusively on external factors such as reproduction, mortality rates, and health conditions. It is unable to penetrate, much less mold, the *psyche* of the population. It is like Bentham's Panopticon, where Big Brother observes only the outer behavior of inmates, who are silent and voiceless; their thoughts remain hidden.

Now, a further paradigm shift is underway. The digital panopticon engineers not a disciplinary society along

biopolitical lines but a transparency society along psychopolitical ones. *Psychopower* is taking the place of biopower. With the help of digital surveillance, psychopolitics is in the position to read and control thoughts. Digital surveillance is taking the place of the unreliable and inefficient optical system of Big Brother, which is tied to perspective. The new regime is more efficient because it is *aperspectival*. Biopolitics does not enable the human psyche to be grasped and controlled in subtle fashion. Psychopower, on the other hand, can intervene in psychological processes themselves.

Chris Anderson, editor in chief of *Wired* magazine, recently published a telling article, "The End of Theory." He claims that inconceivably vast quantities of data have made theoretical models superfluous: "Today companies like Google, which have grown up in an era of massively abundant data, don't have to settle for wrong models. Indeed, they don't have to settle for models at all."<sup>2</sup> According to Anderson, the patterns of behavior identified by Big Data's analyses enable accurate prognostication. This, in turn, means that the hypothetical models of theory are unnecessary. Directly comparing and balancing out data yields better results. Correlation takes the place of causality. *Why* is an idle question in view of simple fact: *that's how it is*.

Out with every theory of human behavior, from linguistics to sociology. Forget taxonomy, ontology, and psychology. Who knows why people do what they do? The point is they do it, and we can track and measure it with unprecedented fidelity. With enough data, the numbers speak for themselves.<sup>3</sup>

For Anderson, theory is a construct—an auxiliary instance that compensates for a lack of information. If enough data are available, no theory is needed. The possibility of enlisting Big Data to discern the masses' patterns of behavior heralds the beginning of *digital psychopolitics*.

Every new medium reveals an unconscious dimension. Thus, the camera offers access to the “optical unconscious”:

With the close-up, space expands; with slow motion, movement is extended. ... Clearly, it is another nature which speaks to the camera as compared to the eye. “Other” above all in the sense that a space informed by human consciousness gives way to a space informed by the unconscious. ... We are familiar with the movement of picking up a cigarette lighter or a spoon, but know almost nothing of what really goes on between hand and metal, and still less how this varies with different moods. This is where the camera comes into play, with all its resources for swooping and rising, disrupting and isolating, stretching or compressing a sequence, enlarging or reducing an object. It is through the camera that we first discover the optical unconscious, just as we discover the instinctual unconscious through psychoanalysis.<sup>4</sup>

The camera brings something that escapes the naked eye to light—the optical unconscious. Today, *data mining* is making collective patterns of behavior visible. As such, it is disclosing the *collective unconscious*. In analogy to the optical

unconscious, one might also call it the *digital unconscious*. Psychopower is more efficient than biopower insofar as it watches over, controls, and influences human beings not from outside but *from inside*. Digital psychopolitics is taking over the social behavior of the masses by laying hold of, and steering, the unconscious logic that governs them. Digital surveillance society—which has direct access to the collective unconscious (that is, the future social behavior of the masses)—is assuming totalitarian traits. It is handing us over to programming and control. With that, the era of biopolitics has come to an end. Now, we are entering the age of digital psychopolitics.

## NOTES

### PREFACE

1. Marshall McLuhan, *Essential McLuhan*, ed. Eric McLuhan and Frank Zingrone (New York: Basic Books, 1995), 158.

### NO RESPECT

1. Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982), 15.
2. Christian Linder, *Der Bahnhof von Finnentrop. Eine Reise ins Carl Schmitt Land* (Berlin: Matthes & Seitz, 2008), 422f.

### OUTRAGE SOCIETY

1. Homer, *The Iliad*, trans. Robert Fagles (New York: Penguin, 1998), 77.

### IN THE SWARM

1. Gustave Le Bon, *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind* (New York: Macmillan, 1897 [1895]), xiv.
2. *Ibid.*, xv.
3. *Ibid.*, xvi.
4. *Ibid.*
5. *Ibid.*, xviii.
6. Marshall McLuhan and Barrington Nevitt, "The Electronic World Affects Identity Images," *Modern Office Procedures* (December 1975): 12–16, at 16.
7. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire* (New York: Penguin, 2005), 106.

8. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 62.
9. *Ibid.*, 413.

### **DEMEDIATIZATION**

1. *Die Zeit*, August 23, 2012.
2. Interview with Ole von Beust, former mayor of Hamburg, *Die Zeit*, January 31, 2013.
3. Martin Heidegger, *Letters to his Wife: 1915–1970* (Cambridge: Polity, 2008), 213.
4. Interview with Michel Butor, *Die Zeit*, July 12, 2012.

### **CLEVER HANS**

1. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes (New York: Washington Square Press, 1984), 346.
2. Andreas Bernard, "In weiter Ferne, so nah," *Süddeutsche Zeitung Magazin*, December 2013.
3. Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Norton, 1998), 101.
4. Quoted in Horst Bredekamp, *Theorie des Bildakts* (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2013), 17.
5. Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 113.

### **FLIGHT INTO THE IMAGE**

1. Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 118.
2. *Ibid.*, 93.

### **FROM THE HAND TO THE FINGER**

1. Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 177.
2. *Ibid.*, 242.
3. *Ibid.*, 247.

4. Ibid.
5. Ibid.
6. Vilém Flusser, *Medienkultur* (Frankfurt a. M.: Fischer, 1997), 188.

#### FROM FARMING TO HUNTING

1. Martin Heidegger, *Parmenides*, trans. André Schuwer and Richard Rojcewicz (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), 84.
2. Ibid., 81.
3. Ibid., 85.
4. Martin Heidegger, *What Is Called Thinking?*, trans. J. Glenn Gray (New York: Perennial, 1976), 16.
5. Ibid., 208.
6. Martin Heidegger, *Heraklit, Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 55 (Frankfurt a. M.: Klostermann, 1979), 246f.
7. Martin Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Perennial 2001), 157.
8. Martin Heidegger, *Off the Beaten Track*, trans. Julian Young and Kenneth Haynes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 14.
9. Ibid., 25.
10. Martin Heidegger, *Zur Sache des Denkens* (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1988), 78.

#### FROM SUBJECT TO PROJECT

1. Flusser, *Medienkultur*, 213.
2. Ibid., 214.
3. Ibid., 212.
4. Ibid., 213f.
5. Ibid., 212.

6. Vilém Flusser, *Kommunikologie weiter denken. Die Bochumer Vorlesungen* (Frankfurt a. M.: Fischer, 2009), 251.
7. Vilém Flusser, *Kommunikologie* (Frankfurt a. M.: Fischer, 1998), 299.
8. Flusser, *Kommunikologie weiter denken*, 251.
9. Flusser, *Medienkultur*, 146.
10. Flusser, *Kommunikologie weiter denken*, 251.

### THE NOMOS OF THE EARTH

1. Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, 45–46.
2. Apostolos N. Athanassakis and Benjamin W. Wolkow, trans., *The Orphic Hymns* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013), 64.
3. Carl Schmitt, *The Nomos of the Earth in the International Law of the Jus Publicum Europeaeum*, trans. G. L. Ulmen (New York: Telos, 2006), 42.
4. *Ibid.*, 43.
5. Martin Heidegger, “Who Is Nietzsche’s Zarathustra?,” in *The New Nietzsche: Contemporary Styles of Interpretation*, ed. David B. Allison (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1985), 64–79, at 68 (translation modified).
6. Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Philosophy of Mind: From the Encyclopedia of Philosophical Sciences*, trans. William Wallace (New York: Cosimo, 2008), 6 (translation modified).
7. Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *The Science of Logic*, trans. George di Giovanni (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 672.
8. Hegel, *Philosophy of Mind*, 6 (translation modified).

### DIGITAL GHOSTS

1. Franz Kafka, *Letters to Milena*, trans. Philip Boehm (New York: Schocken, 1990), 230.
2. *Ibid.*

3. Ibid., 231.
4. Martin Heidegger, *History of the Concept of Time: Prolegomena*, trans. Theodore Kisiel (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), 297.
5. Heidegger, *Off the Beaten Track*, 24.
6. Flusser, *Medienkultur*, 187.
7. Vilém Flusser, *The Freedom of the Migrant: Objections to Nationalism*, trans. Kenneth Kronenberg (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 43–44.

### THE CRISIS OF REPRESENTATION

1. Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 80.
2. Ibid., 5–6.
3. Ibid., 6.
4. Ibid., 5.

### FROM CITIZEN TO CONSUMER

1. Flusser, *Medienkultur*, 129.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid., 132.
5. Ibid.

### PSYCHOPOLITICS

1. Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, vol. 1, *An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage, 1990), 136.
2. Chris Anderson, “The End of Theory,” *Wired*, July 16, 2008.
3. Ibid.
4. Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings*, ed. Michael W. Jennings, Brigid Doherty, and Thomas Y. Levin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), 37.