

New Energy Holistics Speculations on the predicament of predictive living

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Introduction

I started writing this essay with the ambition of talking specifically about predictive algorithms and the significance of living in a world fabricated in advance by a technological infrastructure that increasingly contextualizes and scripts the day-to-day. It struck me at the time that the confluence of predictive algorithms and biometric ubiquity promises a certain amalgamation of data and bodies that seemed important to dwell on. Except that the more I thought about it, the more I began to recognize the same pattern of amalgamation in other places too. It made me wonder if all technology wasn't already predictive in some way. Or in many ways. This was always the promise of poststructural and posthuman thought insisting that technology operates at an ideological level, not just offering new tools of productivity but refashioning the mind and with it the behaviors of the body in ways that rewrite lived context.

As I was thinking through these thoughts I was also reading M. Beatrice Fazi's description of artificial intelligence and algorithmic thought as "beyond human"¹ and was taken by a number of lines of flight, among them notions of black boxes, incommensurability, and the nonhuman.

While I know that for Fazi these are technical terms with disciplinary specificity, for me they are also elegant metaphors and I don't pretend that my lines of thought will necessarily do a good job of representing their specificities. But that, in some ways, is also a resonant subtext of Fazi's essay, which I read in part as an eloquent interrogation of the human need for thought to serve a representative or explicative function. As Fazi explains, artificial intelligences can now learn by themselves and can manifest answers that are no longer accountable to human ways of knowing.² AI's indifference to human explanation exceeds and outpaces the capacity to represent the procedures by which knowledge and information are generated. As I understand it, this is the central criterion in Fazi's definition of "black boxes": systems characterized by their ability to generate outcomes that defy and exceed explanations based on the inputs they are given.³

New energy holistics considers attention as an energy expenditure involving a holistic process of relationship-building with technology—in the context of an increasingly predictive and technically intelligent world.

Now it's not the same thing at all, but I've had a similar thought about the camera, meditating on the kinds of relationships photography can generate—often much more complex than they first seem. I follow Vilem Flusser and others who see the camera as a technology that operates with intent; Flusser calls it magic or sorcery,⁴

but I might just as well call it agency, and I'd gesture to a possible solidarity with Fazi's argument here. My concern is not with the pictures a camera takes, but with images as instances of a larger context produced by cameras—an observation I would extend to technology in a larger sense. Cameras are the original black boxes after all, and I wonder how thinking the potential of photographic relationality might serve the project of rethinking a relationship to predictive technological or artificially intelligent culture.

I don't have answers, but my intuition is that answers aren't going to be useful here, thinking as we are in a way that aspires beyond human constraint. Instead, I offer three meditations in which I play on the idea of art projects as black boxes, reflecting on relationships between humans and cameras such as to begin the work of blurring the categorical differences between representations and lived encounters. These images are each part of generative projects I maintain in which participants are given open-ended prompts that invite them to build certain kinds of relationships with a camera. I'm not exactly sure it will be useful to Fazi's project of thinking beyond human representation, but in some ways it's a first gesture to her proposition that we "give speculative credit and attention to the incommensurable operations of artificial cognitive systems," not—as she intends—to produce a "useful and successful explanation," but instead to ground these incommensurabilities in a shared encounter of sorts, a poetic act of suspended engagement.⁵ An aesthetics of photography that may be relevant to the operations of computation. It's perhaps as simple as spending time with images, and seeing that time as an energetic and philosophical investment. I am loosely thinking of this as a form of new energy holistics.

Example 1: On the Ceiling⁶

A chair hangs from a tree in the forest, in the snow, upside down. A woman stands underneath it, looking up at the chair and away from me; she seems mostly beside the point. Instead, it's the chair that draws my attention, and hers too. But the chair also serves no immediate purpose, except perhaps to draw attention in exactly the way it is doing—a different kind of script than chairs usually perform, but one that nonetheless leaves me sitting on its surface in some strange speculative or metaphoric way.

I am aware in looking at the picture that it's a trap. Literally—the chair is tied up over a tree branch in a way reminiscent of those cartoons where a box is propped up by a stick tied to a string, pulled to drop the box on those who walk underneath. Not just a trap, in other words: a caricature

On the Ceiling is a project that asks participants to photograph someone with a chair on their heads. It is informed by a short story written by Eric Chévallard in which the main character does exactly this—an absurdist performance suggested, in the story, as a corrective to bad posture. I wonder if it might also be a corrective for a human imagination limited by the more usual and pragmatic relationship with a chair.

Image: Simon Perez, *On the Ceiling*, photograph, 2019.



of a trap. But I notice that for me the chair reads as a box, not (for instance) as an anvil or a piano. The chair is an invitation. The chair has a “within,” a “strange encounter,” a curiosity. It invites me to imagine an interaction.

This, then, is an unusual chair only for the reversal of perspective. Usually a chair invites me to sit on top of it: that is its script. Marshall McLuhan was a fan of this logic, by which technologies script responses from those who use them. I walk into a room filled with chairs and the first question I ask myself is which one I will sit on, not *if* I will sit or instead put the chair on my head. I obey the script of the chair quite faithfully, naturally—one might even say photographically: trusting in the instrumentalized myth of technological neutrality in which the chair itself doesn't make me sit (no hidden agenda to the chair!). I just happen to always do it of my own accord. Beautiful delusions of agency wrapped up in a convenient ergonomic accessory.

This chair hung up in the tree does something different, making clear that the photograph is proposing a different kind of context. Something is happening. It's a strange encounter, but because it is photographed it becomes a bit more naturalized. I don't doubt that I see it. It is even plausible. Believable, even if I don't quite know what it is I am believing. But that's interesting—the idea that I could believe in a plausibility without knowing quite what it offers. It might be the definition of curiosity. Or the virtual. So maybe there's another option here, an invitation to vertigo. What if I tried to sit on this chair more directly, upside down, like a bat or an algorithm? Can one fall off an algorithm?

To think of this as a form of new energy holistics is to imagine a photograph as a platform to fall off or into.

Curiosity is a black box by definition, because once we break with the practical necessities of explanation, the vertigo of encounter can only be held together by affective force, especially when there isn't a legible representation to hold on to. But maybe representation can exceed itself too and a photograph can actually become an image of something that never happened.

Example 2: Cross-eyed Visions

A young girl stands, hooded, facing the camera, with her eyes crossed. Behind her looms a large tree. It feels like a second hood more than a backdrop to the portrait. This tree is almost a shadow, almost a building, almost a guardian, almost a menace. It is something, but I feel it more than I see it—at least at first. The tree sets the mood, even though it is not really the tree I see. I see a girl with her eyes crossed.

Generally, when looking at pictures, an eye will focus on what is already in focus. But here I find my eyes confused, focusing on what is in focus (optically) but not itself focused in the usual way. Focused otherwise, though I didn't really know that I knew what that might mean. What I see is what I do not see: I see someone not looking at me. A portrait of a person facing the camera but not looking at the lens, or rather looking twice, such that the lens might reside in between other things she sees. I see that I do not see what she sees.

Perhaps she's playing a game, wondering if—when she crosses her eyes—the camera can still see her. But my look too follows her gaze to ... somewhere not really in the picture. She is looking at a space between herself and the camera, at the tip of her nose or just beyond. If she is

aware of the camera at all it would be out of the peripheral vision of each of her eyes, two cameras—one on each side of wherever she is actually looking. It shuts down something about how I expect cameras to work. That is, I am used to a camera showing a world that sees me the same way I see it. So what is this gesture, this crossing of eyes, this refusal of the singular focus of the lens and instead the insistence on a certain kind of invisibility that is also a refusal to be as one is seen?

Cross-eyed Visions invites participants to photograph somebody with their eyes crossed. It plays with the optical and ideological imperatives of focus. At stake is the predictive demand for clarity of vision, in photography as in critical thinking. The claim is simple: other ways of looking at the world are possible.

But that's interesting. Can crossing one's eyes at the camera be seen as a tactic of resistance? If so, then in order to really understand this picture it is necessary to abandon the stability of what is represented, and instead to adopt its posture. That is, while it seems a strange proposition, this picture may be best appreciated by crossing one's own eyes. The resulting image will not render in the usual way, will not reconcile two parallax visions into one—and perhaps that's the point. Parallax is an evolutionary function designed for the perception of depth. But a photograph has no depth;

the background sits on the same flat surface as the young girl's nose.

I suppose I should qualify that there is no optical depth but perhaps depth of a different sort—a freedom to look with my own eyes in order to see things other than the image itself—to see, perhaps, its idea. I cross my eyes and I see two young girls, facing me (the camera) with crossed eyes. Behind them looms a tree. In front of them looms ... well, me.



Image: Mackenzie Gilstrap, *Cross-eyed Visions*, photograph, 2017.

To consider this from the perspective of new energy holistics would be to fixate on the new energies that arise from blurred vision or from holding attention with a differently-focused gaze. It's not exactly predictive except that it definitely scripts a different mode of encountering the world and thus shifts the gaze away from explanation in favor of an ongoing encounter. Maybe it's an algorithm. Maybe there is something predictive to the image after all.

Example 3: Laser Pointer Tag

A man sits in a camping chair. He wears a hoodie and an ambiguous expression. He is looking at me—that is, he is looking at the camera, but also at me. He makes clear that he knows he is in a photograph and that I should know that he knows. Around him, strange abstract lights dance without moving, red arcs across the scene, technological artifacts or conjured manifestations or optical defects exploited.

Susan Sontag said that the camera is sold as a predatory weapon,⁷ but maybe it's less the camera itself than the kind of looking that a camera inspires. Predatory looking—predictive looking, even. In other words, an immediate differentiation in ways of looking such that the way I look at things in the world is always already charged with a certain kind of intentionality. Perhaps it's not always predictive—but it's disconcerting to realize that if Sontag is correct, then predatory looking is the norm and any attempt to look otherwise falls victim to the competition. Indeed, if surrounded by predators, it may not be wise to simply look away. Likewise for algorithms, and almost certainly for predictive technologies.

But then I realize that I have a predator in my pocket and that cameras are literally (well, not literally, but literarily) everywhere. This predatory ecosystem is absolutely also predictive—and this image is perhaps a more honest depiction of technological artifacts than I care to admit. Not just dancing lens flares but Wi-Fi and Bluetooth signals that bathe me throughout the day, blue light from screens, neutrinos that blast the planet as big science looks to capture just a few. True data bliss in the sense of saturation, in the sense that data is everywhere, in the air and in between the air. Circulating COVID particles or neutrino storms or optical satellite telemetries. But it's interesting that a laser pointer can be a way to look back. It's interesting that a relational return is at least optically possible. Perhaps the next algorithms will factor this in, responsive as they increasingly are. For the moment, however, there is something of an emergent interaction in the ability to influence the technical gaze. Something of a conversation.

Laser Pointer Tag is a collection of images in which participants have been asked to point a laser pointer at the camera. Usually the lens flares to a point of overload, completely blocking the picture, but sometimes a relationship is formed instead. The laser is a relational device, gesturing with interactivity towards the camera in ways not always present in a photograph.



New energy holistics, here, recognizes that in a strange way, this image suggests the possibility of being both transactional and relational: two different modes of looking that I never really thought I'd find happening at the same time. It's algorithmic and empathetic. Well, sort of. I don't really think the camera cares, except that it still reacts, which might be thought of as a form of optical caring. It was made to flare after all. A technical and nonhuman recognition of being seen. The metaphor is growing on me.

Conclusion

I acknowledge that this chapter might have a kind of randomness about it—a sharing of thoughts on three images that you have now also seen and probably have other thoughts about. Obviously my thoughts are not prescriptive or predictive. The point was not to tell you anything about the images, but to hold space for them for a few minutes. After all, it's not every day that we see the same images for any extended period of time. But in approaching the question this way, my hope was to hold together allegorically the space of the technological (by virtue of the photographs), the aesthetic (through the act of sustained engagement), and the predictive (which was the point of the whole exploration). But it's maybe not clear just yet how the idea of predictive living ties into the act of holding space.

Image: Heather Mcalister, *Laser Pointer Tag*, photograph, 2019.

The key, I think, lies in something else Fazi said, which sticks with me through these meanderings—the idea that explanations aren't really the point anymore.⁸ Instead, the need for explanation is tied to the ways human knowledge has been anchored in a representative logic that doesn't really apply to complex AI systems. Perhaps not to cameras either, paradigmatic technologies of representation though they seem to be. Beyond representation, what persists is simply the willingness to engage in a sustained encounter, intelligible or not. That's new energy holistics: holding space for curious encounters in a world run by increasingly predictive operations. Perhaps, counterintuitively, building relationships with predictive living requires us to give up a bit of human agency in order to build more thoughtful relationships with other nonhuman agents.

Or something like that.

Notes

- 1 M. Beatrice Fazi, "Beyond Human: Deep Learning, Explainability and Representation," *Theory, Culture & Society* 38.7-8 (December 2021): 55-77, 55.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276420966386>.
- 2 Ibid., 61.
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 Vilem Flusser, *Towards a Philosophy of Photography* (London: Reaktion Books, 2000).
- 5 Fazi, 71.
- 6 Eric Chévallard, *On the Ceiling*, trans. Jordan Stump (Lincoln: Bison Books, 2000).
- 7 Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (London: Picador, 2001).
- 8 I extrapolate this from Fazi's assertion that representations function as explanations, and are a specifically human

form of understanding. In Fazi's view, representations and explanations alike are unnecessary from the perspective of complex AI systems. Fazi, 71.