Workshop of the AG Medienphilosophie of the Gesellschaft für Medienwissenschaft (GfM)

Charles University Prague, May 14–15, 2020

Media Philosophy and Theological Aesthetics of Algorithms

A sublime yet rumbles. What was once conceived as providence, theodicy, and angel is, today, called Big Data, AI, and algorithm. A radical theological legacy of reception haunts the development of algorithmic computation and machine-learning. Entanglements between god, faith, and the coding of contingency is tacitly embedded within the algorithmization and datafication of contemporary lifeworlds; how can such a relation be described from a media philosophical perspective?

Firstly, one can turn to the history of philosophy with Leibniz who incorporated combinatorics and calculus into *theodicy*; Pascal`s insistence on "*the machine*" of faith calculation, Hume's critique of providential miracles anticipating probabilistic and inductive logic, or Thomas Bayes' Calvinist understanding of 'chance' as he formulates the base probability 'algorithm' (employed by the Google 'search'-engine and the digital data-mining of cloud computing, to this day, referred to as Bayes` theorem).

Secondly, one can ask how this encoded theology reveals itself throughout bleeding-edge luminaries of posthuman computer science; e.g., in Norbert Wiener's consistent engagement of cybernetics with Augustinian theology and the vocation of 'the church' (*The Human Use of Human Beings*), Ray Kurzweil's confessed indebtedness to *syncretism* and comparative religion while theorizing the coming singularity of AI (*The Spiritual Age of Machines*), and appeals to *theogony* and "afterlife" by Nick Bostrom in addressing the simulation hypothesis (*Superintelligence*) at play in the hierarchical and layered optimization of algorithmic information-processing (e.g., in the optical imaging of video codecs or facial recognition software). The "digital hierarchy" suggested by Bostrom is indissociable with the *angelology* put forth by Pseudo-Dionysus as he invents the very word ('heir-archy'). Similarly, the very word *cybernetics* is a variation of the Latin *gubernatio* and Greek *kubernetes* that ever conditions social governance, governmentality, geolocation, surveillance, or the *glory* of control, critiqued in the 'political theology' of Giorgio Agamben, indebted as much Foucault, Schmitt, and Hegel as to Simone Weil, Thomas Aquinas, and Paul of Tarsus. What the prophets once grappled with as *original sin* and *radical evil* is, today, performed in the critical warnings of Cathy O'Neil's *Weapons of Math Destruction* and Shoshana Zuboff's *The Age Surveillance Capitalism.* It is worth considering that the functionality of algorithmic data-mining and its collateral AI machine-learning has roots embedded as much in Bernoulli's mathematical 'law of great numbers' as in Paul's divine vantage point—from which *many* are called but *few* are chosen—both of which appeal to proto-algorithmic *weight(s)*, rather than arithmetical enumeration.

Such approaches remain within the framework of the medium of language. But how do algorithms allow for other mediums to do or perform media philosophy? What kind of aesthetic practices such as images, film, sound or especially algorithmic based media reveal theological implications of algorithms? What kind of sense of reality do algorithmic based media show? Perhaps only aesthetic theory can salvage the art of the advent of 'artificial intelligence'.

The 2020 workshop of the AG Medienphilosophie aims at debates on the intersection of media philosophy and theology with a specific focus on algorithmic based technologies, their operations and aesthetic practices. From a media philosophical standpoint, we want to initiate a debate on theological legacies in thinking algorithms and conversely ask for operations and aesthetic practices that highlight the functionality of algorithms.

The call addresses the members of the AG Medienphilosophie and invites all researchers interested in media philosophy. The workshop takes place at the Faculty of Protestant Theology, Charles University in Prague, 14th to 15th of May 2020 and is organized by Virgil Brower (Charles University Prague) and Johannes Bennke (Bauhaus University Weimar). The workshop language is english.

Please send an abstract of about 200 - 400 words for a 20 minute presentation and a short academic biography with your current institutional affiliation until the 31st of December 2019 to

virgil@u.northwestern.edu
johannes.bennke@uni-weimar.de

You will receive an answer until January 31, 2020.