

Editors Editorial

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The term “nerd” might have originated in the 1950s, but today we can really see how the rises and changes in its usage followed rises and changes in the usage of intelligent machines. Let’s follow the term for a moment through a particularly male scenario: If the nemesis of the nerd in popular culture was the jock – an able-bodied, handsome man from a family of good standing – then it was probably right that they should go to war against each other. The jock combined all of the characteristics that the dominant world economies (especially the US and UK) needed for maintaining industrial and corporate command – social entitlement, physical strength – until the late twentieth century, when command would shift to a “nerd” register: technical, hidden, arcane, taxonomic, and antisocial. It may have been only when Bill Gates amassed historically unprecedented wealth that it became clear that another order was on the rise.

Franco “Bifo” Berardi warns in this issue of *e-flux journal* that “when intelligence is not restrained by sensibility, it deploys as brutal force.” Where intellect might once have been seen as the softer alternative to physical force, today we need to understand how a form of violence specific to deterministic machines renders intellect the dominant power in the Darwinian game. How, then, can we decouple sensibility from intellect so that it might stand as a check on the indifferent calculations of the latter?

Nowadays, we are teaching robots myopia: find the image with a crosswalk; mark all images with a stoplight until there are none left to mark; click all images that show no future. Locate all humans in the stadium with criminal facial characteristics.

Sometimes, not seeing the larger picture is the whole point: we need frames, close-ups, and jump cuts if we are to have images at all. On the other hand, congenital aphantasia, or the total lack of a mind’s eye, may also have its advantages, but it certainly has its drawbacks, too.

What happens if we measure affect like this: How many images of trees burning must we swipe through before the screen itself gets hot, before the viewer’s own temperature changes? What happens if in this scenario, the trees are swapped out for museums, and, more largely, what happens if the viewer is an intelligent being without sensibility? On another level, what if artificial programming isn’t all bad, and in fact is responsible for human artistic output? Alina Popa asks, “What if an artwork is not human performance but the artificially programmed human, or all the nonhuman serendipitous elements that have programmed her?” In any

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case, it seems that we as humans still have a chance to get a leg up on the automatons – but the window may be closing rapidly. Ahmet Ögüt concludes that our modes of self-design are being steadily overtaken by unrestrained intelligence: “Before algorithmic-design completely takes control, there is still another chance: the more we confuse the algorithm, the more liberated we are.”

In terms of a shared vision, artistic or otherwise, while there are both trees and forests still available for viewing, it’s unclear whether we – a we that includes automated beings, unrestricted by sense – are seeing in bits and pieces these days, or whether there is rather some semblance of a whole that exists outside of shared violence. It’s about time, as T. J. Demos posits amidst climate and other kinds of disasters, to consider a new ecology of images.

Meanwhile, it is important to keep in mind the vast range of possibilities for the sources of the weather(s) that engulf us. Harun Farocki notes in *Parallel I*, that “in cinema there is the wind that blows and the wind blown by a wind machine. With computer images, there is only one kind of wind. A new constructivism.”

Somewhere between the dimensions of space and time lies weather. We probably need long-range vision and long-game thinking to make it through fire, wind, flood, glitch, and fog with our morphing, possibly cyborgian, but stubbornly ill-adapted bodies. “Is it possible,” Tyler Coburn asks of our human form, “somewhere between now and the suspension of everything, that our bodies experience such a degree of evolutionary change that the biological, ontological, and legal criteria of the human come undone – when the human, as we know it, fragments or even ceases to exist?” Tony Wood raises the stakes, or changes them: “Why should we assume humankind has any right to decide whether it gets perpetuated – and if it does, in what form? Why should the future mean more of the same?”

It comes as no surprise that science fiction, once the domain of nerds, now increasingly reads as prophetic for opening technical or scientific endgames to unknown affects. Wood looks at three science-fiction stories – Samuel R. Delany’s *Dhalgren*, Andrei Tarkovsky’s *Stalker*, and Jeff VanderMeer’s Southern Reach trilogy – as portraying worlds defined by collapsed orders, seemingly anticipating a total reckoning. The collapsed orders are often in fact disorderly sequencings of production and consumption – even of the human itself, where the prospect of humanity consuming itself through its own production looks eerily similar to a punishment inflicted by an alien force. Caught in a Darwinian loop, the question of sensibility arises again, but

now as a last resort in determining which improvements have rendered the human too monstrous even for itself.

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