ALGORICENE Genealogy, Ontology, Aesthetics and Politics of Algorithmic Life, from the Ancient World to Big Data

Jaime del Val

Reverso / Metabody Institute

Spain jaimedelval@metabody.eu

Abstract

Algoricene is a concept and subproject of the Metabody project. This project proposes to explore, both through theoretical research and through artistic creation, the impact, history, ontology, aesthetics and politics of algorithmic modes of organization that may be traced already in old cultural formations such as grided urban plans in Mesopotamia and ancient Greece, or perspectival vision in the Renaissance, and which currently undergo an explosion in the context of Big Data systems.

Keywords

Big Data, Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Chthulucene, Singularity.

From the Anthropocene to the Algoricene

Though algorithms are usually considered a recent offspring of computation culture they may be in fact a very ancient form of distributed intelligence that both exceeds and conforms the very human cultures from which it seems to stem. Algorithm traces may be found in modes of organization as varied as grid like urban plans in ancient Greece, and the birth of rationalized vision in the Renaissance.

However, we are currently assisting a process in which algorithmic autonomous decisions shape more and more the world we live in. At same time the very nature of algorithms may be changing. Hyperalgorithms is a term proposed to name the new threshold of algorithmic life in the big data era: hyperconnected, emergent, allencompassing algorithms.

If ever since the emergence of gridlike algorithmic environments the human has been evolving along such algorithmic organizations in a technogenetic spiral, now more than ever humans are becoming the entangled in algorithmically shaped worlds of increasing complexity. Arguably we are assisting the birth new algorithmic life form, as well as the further evolution of an older one.

This project will elaborate on different aspects of the genealogy, ontology, aesthetics and politics of this not so recent but changing life form that has such a crucial significance for our planet, in trying to grasp some its longstanding challenges to our understanding of the world, some of its present evolutions, while venturing and speculating about its unforeseeable futures.

Last but not least, are we assisting a new geological area, an Algoricene? The notion of anthropocene has already been questioned by theorists like Andreas Malm, Jason Moore and Donna Haraway, who propose that the current processes affecting the planet are not caused strictly by humans but by capital, by the processes related to the accumulation of wealth. Haraway goes further by proposing that neither Capitalocene nor Anthropocene offer a complex enough narrative and offers the term Chthulucene that seeks recourse to old and present narratives of earthly powers of creation and destruction that are both smaller and larger than the totalizing tragic narratives of the Anthropos and of Capital.

We propose yet another trope for understanding the current processes of earthly creation and destruction, looking at some ontological aspects of the processes at stake, where underlying capital there may be a deeply rooted processes of pattern-making that allows quantification, this would point to the historical emergence of pattern or form, algorithm being a movement pattern historically linked to the quantification of sensibility. The Morphocene or Algoricene would point to this ontological substrate of the process of alignment and capture going on in the planet over millenia, while placing form in a historically contingent crossroads within a much larger Amorphocene, of processes not aligned with algorithmic patternmaking, rationalisation and quantification (for instance bacterial perceptions and ecosystems).

Algoricene points to a crucial aspect of contemporary Big Data Culture in which old descriptions of algorithms as "a finite set of unambiguous instructions performed in a prescribed sequence to achieve a goal." become obsolete as algorythms become hyperconnected,

emergent, allencompassing, while automated algorithmic decisions affect more and more the planet. Algoricene speaks of this tendency to an algorithmically driven world, that eventually points beyond Capital.

Algoricene is thus a term proposed to define the current geological era in which not a priori humans but algorithmic automated systems are shaping more and more life and inorganic matter on the planet, an era whose genealogy may be traced across several millennia. The project thus proposes to explore the past, present and future impact of such systems at a planetary scale and their projection beyond the planet.

The project will put an emphasis on critical investigation, both in the field of theory and of artistic production, foregrounding proposals that facilitate a critical engagement and empowerment, thus inviting a plural and participative engagement with the numerous challenges raised by algorithmic systems. Are algorithmic modes of organization reductive vs. the more complex modalities of movement that constitute the world? If so what are the consequences of this reduction and how is it possible to counteract it?

The project proposes a highly transdisciplinary field in which philosophy, cultural studies and other theoretical disciplines meet all the arts, technosciences and society at large, with particular attention to social minorities, in a critical engagement bridging continuously across theoretical production and crossdisciplinary artistic creation of projects that respond in experimental ways to the challenges that algorithmic and Big Data systems pose to humans, other species and the environment.

The project proposes a novel and unconventional approach to algorithmic systems by attempting to understand the material and embodied nature of the infrastructures and processes that sustain them, thereby also inviting artistic creations that deal with the body, temporality and public space in relation to digital systems in novel ways, foregrounding approaches that allow an empowerment of all kinds of citizens in dealing with algorithmic and Big Data systems.

The project will involve artists working across dance, visual arts, music, architecture, performance and new media, technoscientists, philosophers, cultural theorists and citizens and people of all kinds, with particular attention to social minorities including people with disabilities and people living in nomadic and precarious situations such as refugees, amongst others as well as indigenous people. The project will address the impact of algorithmic systems in society at large and for all kinds of people as well as for the environment, while giving special attention to social minorities so as to afford a plural framework.

References

Barad, Karen. 1996. Meeting the Universe Halfway: Realism and Social Constructivism Without Contradiction published by Feminism, Science, and the Philosophy of Science, ed. Lynn Hankinson Nelson and Jack Nelson.

Haraway, Donna. 2015. Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Plantationocene, Chthulucene: Making Kin, Environmental Humanities, vol. 6, 2015, pp.159-165. Duke University Press. Durham

Haraway, Donna. 2016. Staying with the Trouble. Making Kin in the Chthulucene. Duke University Press. Durham. Hayles, Katherine. 1999. How we Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, literature and Informatics. University of Chicago Press

Ivins, William. 1975. On the Rationalisation of Sight. New York. Da Capo Press

McLuhan, Marshall. 2001. Understanding media. New York. Routledge.

Shannon, Claude E. 1948. A Mathematical Theory of Communication the Bell System Technical Journal, Vol. 27, pp. 379–423, 623–656, July, October.

Varela, F., Thomson, E., Rosch, E. 1993. The Embodied Mind. Cognitive Science and Human Experience – MIT Press.

Author Biography

Jaime del Val is meta-media artist, philosopher and activist, director of Reverso www.reverso.org and coordinator of the METABODY Project www.metabody.eu. Jaime del Val develops transdisciplinary projects in the convergence of arts, technologies, critical theory and activism, proposing redefinitions of embodiment, perception and affects that challenge the ontological foundations of contemporary control society.