Expanding the Semantic Dimensionality of Analog Images through Artificial Intelligence

Documentary Study About **Willy Römer,** Berlin Photographer of the German Revolution.

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Expanding the Semantic Dimensionality of Analog Images through Artificial Intelligence: Documentary Study About Willy Römer, Berlin Photographer of the German Revolution.

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Watch *elephant*

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"Personally, I love cinema, but not because it constructs stories. Literature already fulfilled that function. I love cinema precisely as a form of visual thinking, as a mode of seeing that unsettles and expands the limits and boundaries of the visible."

Marco Bertozzi, Recycled Cinema, 2012

Intoduction

From October 2025 to March 2026 I had the chance to move to Berlin and work on the development of a new and contemporary way of doing documentary movies. Supported by a scholarship from the Erasmus program, together with a collaboration with the Kunstbibliothek of Berlin, I explored the photography archive that lies under the majestic building of The Museum of Photography of Berlin, where negatives from different times of history are constantly preserved. I took this path with the aim of merging the now adult medium of photography with newly born technology of AI generated images and videos, under the fluid shapes of contemporary documentary and its limitless boundaries in the contemporary visual art domain. But this journey brought me way further than I expected, where, under the surface of our representation techniques, lie the mysteries and the unanswered questions about the methods of inspecting reality, writing History and composing the Truth. A dark cave where fears for the new technologies find fertile ground, where laws still have to be written, where the nature of art and reality are questioned, leaving our lonely critical sense lost in the gray of a foggy future that has still to be discovered. Many questions arose while exploring the possibilities offered by contemporary AI visual tools, and many still remain unanswered. But it's the time now not to look for the light but to spread the danger, to communicate the risks we are facing and raise awareness about the world we are living in. A world where digital technologies, deprived of a solid legislative infrastructure, are reshaping our behaviours and our political commitment, opening abyss of manipulative potential for autocratic governments and institutions. The history of Berlin during the November Revolution, in the post-war Germany of the 1918-1919, subject of the photographs used for this work, became a reading key for our actuality. The fall of the monarchy, the rise of the proletarian movement, the violent repression of mass demonstrations and a vivid cultural soul of a city that never stopped dancing under the notes of jazz and tango. From Berlin to Kyiv, Tbilisi, Yerevan, and Torino, contemporary club culture is the symbol of resistance and fight against repressive governments and their policies. Going through the composition of elephant, the short documentary that arose from the collaboration with the Kunstbibliothek, and through the history of Berlin, together with that of cinema, the cyclical nature of life appeared to me as an inevitable, frustrating, thus real phenomenon of our existence. And the role of arts took steps as a strong political act against the simple acceptance of events in their flow, and towards a more participatory form of being in the world, which slowly loses its driving force, and dissipates in a solitary society. This written thesis reflects on the questions that the movie opened, about our

being as civil societies in a digital world of politics and entertainment culture, about the role of archives in the writing of our collective memory, and about the risks that the Artificial Intelligence is creating when entering the realm of our visual culture.

The search for new techniques in documentary filmmaking

What is documentary

In the last few years, studying the history and the development of documentary filmmaking, I've been many times impressed by the creativity with which many directors personally interpret the definition of documentary, its creative language and its ethical borders. And I wasn't much surprised to discover that this genre is, among all, the widest one, able to include the others, since, as for its first and most academically agreed-upon definition, a documentary is a "creative treatment of actuality"[1]. The man who stated this was indeed a filmmaker, from England in the 1930s, and his movies represented the suburbs of industrial civil society with a white and institutional gaze, promoting the government narrative, and thus bringing forward the development of the language and the technique of one of the most powerful mass manipulation tools. We shouldn't, in fact, believe that a neutral narrative may ever exist, and that realistic representations show us reality as it is: every representation emerges from the interaction between reality and a medium able to represent it, and this interaction is indeed mediated by a human being. Here lies the "creative treatment" Grierson was referring to in the definition written above. As Bill Nichols observes in Introduction to Documentary (1991), Grierson's formulation recognizes documentary as an inherently creative practice, yet it simultaneously leaves unresolved the tension between the two terms "creative treatment" and "reality." The former suggests the expressive freedom commonly associated with fiction, while the latter evokes the epistemic responsibilities of journalism or historiography. It is precisely because neither term takes precedence over the other that the documentary form remains balanced between a creative gaze and a commitment to historical reality. In this context, reality can be understood as the dense realm of events that belong to our world and that precede any act of mediation. Access to reality, however, is never direct. It necessarily passes through a process of representation, in which events are translated into images and sounds. Recording technologies recreate impressions of the world with a fidelity that grants them documentary value,

Indexical quality

comparable to that of fingerprints. This particular bond between an image and what it refers to is commonly described as its *indexical quality,* establishing a direct relation between the represented event and its representation. The indexical quality of an image refers to the way its appearance takes shape, or is determined, by what it records. In this sense, *every movie is a documentary*: in front of every camera there were real people and real events, and thus, even if the images were created for the scope of a fictional narrative, they have documentary value, wich increases with time, becoming representation of a region of time and space, characterized by certain costumes, rhythms, languages,

people behaviour and environmental surroundings. "In the moment you are pointing your camera at something, you are making a documentary," said Mark Cousin, director of *The Story of Documentary Filmmaking* (M. Cousing, 2026), when asked what the relationship is between fiction and documentary, reality and its representation. Remembering that every process is dynamic and that we are constantly immersed in an ever-lasting universal flow of energy, which goes in only one time-direction, the value of a representation lies in the ability to capture one region of the emotional-space-time shape of our Universe. Something that we are able to look at and interpret, reflecting on the passage of time and the impermanent nature of everything. While watching *Ladri di Biciclette* (Vittorio De Sica, 1948) we are not only looking at the story of a man and his son in the search for a stolen bike, but we are witnessing moments of life in a devastated city after the War. The fictional narrative thus assumes documentary value and tells us, decades later, about the living conditions of the Italian people in the 40s and their psychology. The same can be said about *Godzilla* (Ishiro Honda, 1954), whose fictional representation tells us about the fears and troubles of a traumatized Japanese society. The film was released only nine years after Hiroshima and Nagasaki and shortly after the 1954 Lucky Dragon No. 5 incident, when Japanese fishermen were exposed to U.S. nuclear test fallout. The film does not portray a villain nation directly. Instead, it reflects trauma, fear, and helplessness in the nuclear age. These movies were not born for documentary purposes, but the passing of time gave their indexical quality a new shape. The same can be said about photography, where the only existence of a physical representation of a scene is some sort of certificate of reality: the event depicted was once really happening, there, in front of the camera. And it is in this propriety of photography, when compared to other creative visual arts, that gives it its power of impression. And documentary images are, moreover, the offspring of this older and more meditative art of representation. It is commonly assumed that a photograph must show rather than evoke. For this reason, photographs, unlike handcrafted images, are regarded as possessing evidentiary value. Photographs stick to our memory and are capable of generating a feeling for what we are seeing, and, sometimes, action. In the 50s and the 60s, people were still unaware of the horrific atrocities conducted by US soldiers in Vietnam. Only in the late 1960s did photographers start joining the field and sending back home negatives from that hidden reality, making it the most photographed war of that time. It was thanks to these photographs and their publications in magazines like Life or the New York Times that the popular opinion started rising against the government, pressuring it towards the end of the war[2]. The United States of America has always been very conscious of the power of images to depict or recreate reality. In 2004, when

The power of impression

they launched their campaign against Iraq, under the false reason of interrupting an ongoing nuclear program, they forbade photographers from all over the world to join the battlefield, well conscious of the atrocities that were perpetuated in those lands, and that the public opinion would never accept it. Photographers were replaced by televised simulations, with various consultants commenting on the conflict in ways that rendered it virtual, thereby "displacing the empathy of photographers and readers who would otherwise have borne witness to the inevitable horrors of war."[3] Years later, a masterpiece in the digital documentary era, *Redacted* (Brian De Palma, 2007), editing footage from a reenacted version of the US soldiers' perspective in Iraq, brings us inside the tents of those rapers and abusers who were "spreading democracy" around the Middle East, promoting an anti-propaganda counter-narrative and a denunciation of military abuses. Regarding our current time, the rise of social media has democratized the distribution of images, permitting videos and photos of the ongoing genocidal war in Gaza to reach our smartphones, creating constant awareness of the actuality, but also raising unprecedented contradictions on the need to see. Are we allowed to watch those families suffering while comfortably sitting on our couch, drinking tea? It seems impossible today to guarantee the proper conditions to observe certain photographs and properly react to what they are showing us[4]. "We would never imagine how it really is," concludes Susan Sontag in his essay Regarding the Pain of Others, when addressing the necessity of photographing wars, while arguing on the intrinsic limits of a representation of reality, when compared to experiencing it. Nevertheless, photography is necessary as the familiarity of certain photographs shapes our understanding of both the present and the recent past. Photographs establish frameworks of reference and can function as totems for a cause: collective feeling crystallizes more readily around an image than around a verbal slogan. Going back to the war in Vietnam, after looking at Eddie Adam's photograph of the Viet Cong executed with an handy pistol in 1968, we hardly forget the shape of the wounded head and the gaze of the killer, pointing straing towards the head of the other. Likewise, we won't easily forget the body posture of spanish soldier falling in the 1936 famous Robert Capa's photograph "Death of a Spanish militiaman". Or the courage and solid posture of the man facing a line of tanks in Tiananmen Square in Beijing, on 5 June 1989. Or again, tanks and war, in the 1961 photograph of American and Soviet tanks facing each other at Checkpoint Charlie in Berlin, just after the construction of the wall. These and other photographs, as well as moving images, help us write history and create a collective memory, a pact, in which agreement is reached on what is important and how events unfolded, using photographs to fix those events in our memory. A pact that is today

Collective memory

constantly threatened by the spreading of realistic AI-generated images, possibly capable of overlapping those existing totems, and rewriting our collective memory. This thread was nothing less than a photographer's nightmare before we entered the digital era, when our relationship with images changed radically, as well as their documentary indexical quality. As Grierson realized, documentary images are products of the relation between the man and its era, and the cinematic image that is constructed cannot exist without the traits that characterize its own contemporaneity. Being conceived in the intersection between new technologies, visual narrative techniques, and the historical tradition of documentary, my work finds its birth in the context of a broad reflection on contemporaneity and the always-expanding ways to represent it. "Contemporaneity is a singular relationship with one's own time, which adheres to it and, simultaneously, distances itself from it"[5] - wrote Giorgio Agamben in its essay Nudity - "Può dirsi contemporaneo soltanto chi non si lascia accecare dalle luci del secolo e riesce a scorgere in esse la parte dell'ombra, la loro intima oscurità [...] Contemporaneo è colui che percepisce il buio del suo tempo come qualcosa che lo riguarda e non cessa di interpellarlo."[6] It's thus from a detached gaze from one's age that critical documentary representations are born: being part of its time and being conscious of it is the role of any director who aims to enter the realm of documentary. Looking back on every work as a son of his era, we can understand our history, our position in time, and our relation with it, and one important metric to do so is to investigate the technology of every period. From the development of compact 16mm and 8mm film cameras, the introduction of tape-recorded sound, to the digital age and our modern digital cameras, technology development has served as an exploratory push towards the common objective of visual arts, and, in particular, documentary: represent reality in its most unspeakable and fleeting aspects. When Wittgenstein speaks of Lebensform in defining art as a "form of life," his formulation insinuates a connection that goes beyond the simple binomial of art and life. What emerges is a correspondence that leads from effect to the identification of cause, from consequences to the observation of motive. While addressing the relationship between new technologies and the contemporary age, it follows the same principle: the digital medium appears as symptomatic of our current "form of life". From the clothes wich are worn on average only 7 times before being thrown away[7], the plastic straws for cocktails, and dating apps to the fast food culture, home delivery, and the crazy concept of the Amazon dash buttons[8], our neo-liberal age shaped our relation with the feeling of care and need, making us constantly more hungry and pretentious. This is an era where time is never enough and attraction for what's new and different is always stronger than the affection for what's already held. Being

Contemporaneity

sons of this age, digital media follow the principles of velocity, replicability, instantaneity and infinity that we are used to due to the consumerist economy. As a result of this, from the late 90s there has been a wide spread of new and portable technologies, including digital screens and portable cameras, that have fastly impacted our visual culture. A recent market analysis cited by Vodafone and Statista states that European households now have about 12 connected devices on average[9]. This refers to internet-connected devices (smartphones, tablets, PCs, smart TVs, IoT devices, etc.) per household. While outside of our houses, the Non-places proposed by Augè and discussed by Fisher in Capitalist Realism (2009), shopping malls, airports, railway stations, city squares, become filled with screens and the filmic image extends its status as a moving visual entity by leaving the cinema and spreading beyond it, brushing against new forms of augmented reality. We commonly refer to this phenomenon as "relocation"[10]: real locations are invested by cinematographical elements, the environment absorbs the presence of digital cameras, surveillance cameras, screen walls and screens, for some, resembling the layered dynamism of the human psyche. In this form of "hypercinema"[11], on the one hand, there is a reduction of direct experience; on the other, the range of possible experiences is expanded. Mediated experiences, of course. We can hike the Himalaya by standing on the chair in our house, or we can talk to people on the other side of the World with no latency nor efford. Relocation, together with the ability of digital media to create mutual intersection and interaction between different audiovisual languages, gives birth to a new form of reality, completely artificial. It's a new world, grounded on the one we live and refer to as reality, made of hidden complex layers of interconnected structures, appearing simple by design, appealing, and colorful. It is the virtual reality. There is not yet one and only virtual reality; there exist many of them, anyone capable of easily immersing the spectator into it. In cinema, that state of mind hired by the viewer while staring at the screen that enables their critical thinking to go silent and leave open belief to whatever is seen, is well known as suspension of disbelief. While suspended, our minds travel through the virtual universe and very often ignore the physical one that is surrounding us. Through the screens we access this world, from our phones, laptops, watches, glasses, or from screens belonging to our urban surroundings. In this interaction between reality and virtuality, screens place themselves as portal, interfaces, to move our belief from one to the other. When talking about the possibility of integrating the multiple virtual realities, we must notice that the global spread of the Internet, with satellite connections and interconnected robotics and domotics, is permitting the world to scale and uniformize one virtual world, which, we must understand, is nowadays geographically confined into macro blocks whose borders resemble

V*irtual* reality

those of contemporary power geopolitical dynamics in the real World. In his movie *Cave of Forgotten Dreams* (Werner Herzog, 2010), Herzog talks about the mysterious painting created on the walls of a cave in prehistory by an anonymous artist, and while discussing the fascinating mystery of these engravings, he brings up a reflection on the essence of representation, and its elementary ancestor: the shadow. The flame that the man used in the cave to light his reality was producing shadows of the movement of the man on the walls of the cave, and that shadow is, by the words of Herzog, "The most primordial form of representation". When thinking about the virtual world that we are building, relating its fashionable, appealing design with its controversial and incomplete legislation and its dependency on geopolitical balances, I am asking: is the virtual world the shadow of the man on the walls of the cave? Is it a representation of our global society, depicting both its enlightened sides and the dark ones? And if so, what is the flame that creates it?

The matter that permeates the channels of these virtual worlds is made of images and sounds from every period of history and culture. It's movies, fragments of movies, photographs, animations, 3D worlds, music, podcasts, graphics, and so on. If those screens we are used to looking at every day act as portals to enter the virtual world and for the images to exit it, recording devices like cameras and microphones serve this dualistic relation as captors: they capture reality and, after complex digital elaboration, they "package" it in order to travel through the channels of the virtual reality. It's a translation that follows the rules of digital encoding. I see these two world coexisting and a flow of information constantly moving from one to the other. And I see digital documentary filmmaking as the fundamental reality-capture process to bring the real world into the virtual one. Reality presents itself in front of the digital camera and, when recorded, it is captured and translated into a sequence of electrical signals that are now able to be interpreted by digital devices and, thus, capable of joining the transmediatic essence of the virtual world. But, as physical objects and entities are born in the real world with physical processes and energy, what we are witnessing is the rise of virtual objects and entities that are natively born in the virtual world, made by digital processes and encoded laws. Not long ago, the layers of the virtual crust collided. The digital earth trembled, and from the volcanic furrows, boiling lava poured forth from the darkest depths beneath the surface. It created new islands, new territories for the curious human inhabitant of the digital universe to traverse and explore. AI was born. It is not easy to certify when AI was born exactly, as the first attempts of building machine learning algorithm goes back to the 1960s in the US, and the mathematics goes back in time to the discovery in 1763 of the Byes Theorem[12]. But in the last 10 to 20 years, it has seen a global spread and growth

Artificial Intelligence

in terms of people researching, funding, infrastructures and global attention. Just after 2022, the number of Google searches for "Artificial Intelligence" had a rapid exponential increase[13]. The mathematical concept behind its working mechanism is quite simple and elementary and comes from the actual study of the human brain and the modeling of neurons and their mutual interactions. But Artificial Neural Networks architectures have seen a rapid complexity increase in recent years, permitting the development of algorithms capable of writing, speaking, drawing, watching, composing music, and generating images and videos, frighteningly passing the Turing test already multiple times in all these fields. Of course, the possibilities offered by predictive AI algorithms extend far beyond visual and sound culture. One might think of space exploration and the potential of these algorithms to discover new, previously unseen planets[14]. Or one might consider their ability to predict the onset of illnesses such as cancer or Parkinson's disease by identifying hidden patterns that were previously undetectable. Moreover, they offer new approaches to centuries-old problems, such as understanding the mathematics behind protein folding. But as the shadow of our reality moves back and forth along the walls of the cave, it not only depicts beautiful new creatures and discoveries, but also our fears and most brutal instincts. And then what we see in our digital age is AI being used for revenge porn on X[15], for "enemy detection" on military drones and contemporary machine guns and war helmets[16], or for the generation of suspects for preventive arrests for possible "enemies of the State", as the US is currently pursuing hand by hand with the private company Palantir to localize targets for ICE operations[17]. The spectrum of AI applications and implications is wide and very dense. But for the scope of my research, I will narrow it down to the world of Artificial Neural Networks for image processing and generation and some of their application in contemporary visual culture, in particular, in relation to nowadays documentary practices.

Contemporary Documentary

When we deal with contemporary documentary practices, we find ourselves in a vast creative environment, where complex visual narratives overrule traditional ones, shading out, probably abandoning, the idea of the representability of a supposed reality. In his book Documentario come arte (2018), Marco Bertozzi defines contemporary documentary as "progressive cinema" that "poses itself in the intersection between the studies of the image, visual anthropology and philosophy". The documentary prompts a reworking of existing systems of belief through a strong interpretative engagement, capable of apprehending meanings that exceed those immediately manifest. Despite the widespread assumption of its merely reproductive or mimetic function, contemporary documentary filmmaking is creative, just as philosophy, physics, or painting are. In opposition with observational works like *Titicut Folies* (F. Wiseman, 1967),

Hospital (F. Wiseman, 1970) or *Il Castello* (M. D'Anolfi e M. Parenti, 2011), where the presence of the director is comparable to that of a "fly on the wall"[18], leaving the viewer the feeling of the absence of a directing presence in the scene, Bertozzi calls into question the Heisenberg principle derived from the fundamental principles of quantum physics, legitimizing as inevitable the intervention of experimenter on the scene, and the idea that its presence activates a setting that orients, sometimes produces, determinate reactions. The idea of some sort of pure representation that gives certification quality to documentary images falls into some "obtuse tradition"[19]. An assertion not far from that of Rouch and Morin, when, in *Cronique d'un ètè* (E.Moring and J. Rouch, 1961), exploiting the documentary language as a tool for anthropological research, they conclude that every human feels the presence of the camera when it's pointing at them, thus changing their behaviours. If the presence of the camera isn't transparent and if, to capture reality, we must interact with it, what we call documentary is "a cinema that engages reality frontally," says Jean-Louis Comolli, "taking upon itself the risk entailed by this form of commitment to the world". The documentary, thus, does not make an effort to create certainties, but gives in to the emergence of doubt and the ambiguity of reality. This is the realm of contemporary documentary filmmaking. A realm where the aesthetic becomes central and where the accent on the aspects of epistefilia (the love for knowledge) become subordinative to those of scopofilia (the love and seduction for seeing), thus inverting a relation that was historically grounded in the foundation of this genre. In *The Act Of Killing* (J. Oppenhimer, 2012), we see the reenactment of torture practices committed by paramilitary forces on suspected communists during the Indonesian massacres of 1965-66. The actors of this reenactment are the surviving soldiers themselves, who, in those days, killed hundreds of innocent civilians and their families. The viewer, forced to watch the joyful approach and funny expression of the perpetrators during the reenactment, is brought into a state of disgust towards those people. If, on one side, the documentary is showing us what happened, bringing new light on unpunished criminals and their history, on the other side, it leaves multiple open questions to the viewer. One for all may be: why is the realization of this documentary even possible? Abandoning the linearity of descriptive and representational documentary techniques of its beginnings, contemporary documentary engages more with the sphere of the Baudilliard's *hyperreal*[20], where the representations of reality, coloured and poetically composed, become sometimes something that feels more real than reality itself. It's the case, for esample of *Neukölln Spiderman* (A.Elrik, 2024), where, using an intersection of different languages, that varies from digital camera footage, 2D animation and AI animations, Altay Elrik perfectly interpreted the fluidity and non-linearity of

this genre to tell the story of habitants of the city of Berlin today, belonging to different neighbours and social classes, offering a glimpse on the variety of people that live in this city. Long silences and mute sequences of wounded children fill the screen when *Oh Uomo!* (Y. Gianikian and A. Ricci Lucchi, 2004) is projected. Found footage from the end of the Second World War is edited one after another to create a sense of frustration and distress in the powerless viewer, subjected to the atrocity of its history. An intense sensation of loneliness and a deep reflection on mental health and family is felt when Alina Marazzi tells us about the story of her mother in *Un'ora sola ti vorrei* (A. Marazzi, 2002), showing us footage of her grandfather from the time her mother was alive and joyfully playing with her. And a deeper reflection on the impermanent nature of films, representation and memory comes while watching *Decasia* (Bill Morrison, 2002), where fragments of rotten celluloid films are bonded to form a poetic narrative that brings us far from the logic of history and the perceived linearity of time to get us lost in the realm of moving colored images and feelings. These last works belong to the wide class of found footage movies, where archive material is re-interpreted for the creation of new and more powerful meanings. "It is a matter of unveiling images from the illusory context in which they appear, and reintroducing them into a circuit of deliberate meaning, making them shine through improper and arbitrary juxtapositions."[21]. In the first years of this century, Christian Marclay composed a visual art masterpiece by editing together scenes from American movies of the period of classic cinema, all representing a clock, a watch, an alarm, or with the dialogues of the characters concerning the passage of time. *The Clock* (C. Marclay, 2010) is a 24-hour movie, where for every minute of the day, there is a scene with a clock set to that time. His majestic work opens reflections on the duality of real time and represented time, merging them in a continuous and cyclical present. A form of recycled cinema where "the ethical and the aesthetic converge in the idea that fragments of the past may serve to illuminate the present, to think through and connect past and present, to generate new associations."[22] Much like what we spontaneously think about the relationship between man and nature, when looking at the adventures of Timothy Treadwell in the Grizzly Maze, we watch him interact with these dangerous creatures, we listen to his life story and we witness the beauty of nature and its harmony. *Grizzly Man* (W.Herzog, 2005) is a movie made of private found footage of a man that for all his life believed in a possible, more natural, interaction with grizzly bears, and he proved with his own body, filming every action, the truth about nature, its multitude of languages that unable us to interact peacefully with it, and the tremendous, even if inevitable, existence of death. The most solid truth of our known universe, yet the cause of deep suffering, and possibly,

Found Footage

the door to eternal freedom. Were the survivors of the concentration camps really free after the arrival of the Allies' forces? Or what they lived will never be forgotten, and will their lives never be given back to them? In the silent, slow tracking shots entering the empty and sunny concentration camps of *Nuit et Builliard* (A. Resais, 1956), it's almost like we can hear the screams and feel the tears of everyone who suffered between those walls. An unimaginable pain that neither the photographs later released by the German army could represent. They may, to their maximum representative potential, probably only scratch the surface of it, focus only of the aesthetic of a disgusting tragedy. The images of the wounded people that we can see in Nuit et Builliard come from the Allies' movie cameras, recording the aftermath of the most horrible human project. Would we have any idea of the suffering of those people if we hadn't ever seen any image of them? Any photograph, any documentary newsreel, or any re-enacted fiction movie? This found footage movie is a statement: archives are naturally bound to the control over History, and therefore, to the way we deal with the present and control the future.

And it is in this context that this work was born. In the possibilities offered by AI visual tools today, there is one, belonging to the field of Generative AIs, that is capable of generating, frame after frame, an imaginary movie sequence, starting from a reference frame and a prompt. This network is capable of recognizing the objects depicted in an image and making their existential state evolve from static to dynamic, composing cinematographic fragments of possible realities. When an image from the past is given to these software, the often astonishing result resonates with our critical suspension cords, bringing us into a state of incredibility and fascination. Portraits of historical characters can be easily brought to motion and history can be rewritten. The indexical quality of the original images is preserved, but from the second frame of the sequence, we abandon the realm of linear referentiality and enter that of creative documentary. Reflecting on the role of AI in the relation between the real and the virtual world, asking myself how AI can be integrated in contemporary documentary practices, thus joining that process of reality encoding, after watching *Decasia* and other inspiring works, I had the idea of composing a short found footage movie, whose sequence, differently from all the previous works in this field, are not made of film sequences but of AI animated photographs, preserving the indexal quality of the images, but expanding their semantic reach into something never seen before. Inspired by the necessity to speak loudly about our present time and the multiple injustices perpetuated by an oligarchy of men and women with political and economic power, in February 2025, I sent multiple project proposals to archives all over Europe, with a focus on those engaging with historical contradictions and war,

AI and Found Footage

ending up receiving positive feedback from Berlin.

Exploring the archive

Kunstbibliothek

Archivist and curator Katja Böhlau from the Museum of Photography of Berlin answered my request that "The project sounds interesting and could shed new light on archival material", opening the doors for the development of this collaboration. She answered as a contact person for the Kunstbibliothek[1] of Berlin, an agency of the Berlin State Museums (Staatliche Museen zu Berlin) under the auspices of the Prussian Cultural Heritage Foundation. It has approximately 400,000 volumes and ranks among Germany's leading institutions specializing in the literature of Art History. The Library also has a comprehensive photographic collection. Its holdings date back to the very early days of photography, through Pictorialism around the late 19th and early 20th centuries, through the Neues Sehen or New Vision of the 1920s, to the new artistic styles of the present day. Since June 2004, the collection has held exhibitions under the same roof as the Helmut Newton Foundation at the Museum of Photography opposite the Zoologischer Garten station. After my explicit demand for "photographs capable of giving life to a narrative that critically engages with the present by placing it in relation to the past," Mrs. Böhlau, together with Dr. Ludger Derenthal, head of the Photography collection of the Kunstbibliothek, offered me access to a digitized archive of more than 8000 photographs from the 1920s German photoreporter Willy Römer. His photographic agency ranked among the ten most important during the Weimar Republic. His photographs primarily document life in Berlin between 1905 and 1935[2]. Thanks to a rare stroke of luck, his extensive photographic archive survived the Second World War almost entirely intact.

Willy Römer

Willy Römer was born on 31 December 1887 in Berlin and grew up as the son of a master tailor in a working-class environment in the northern outskirts of the city. In 1903, he began an apprenticeship at Germany's first press agency, the Berliner Illustrations-Gesellschaft; various positions in Berlin and Paris followed, providing him with a solid photographic training. From 1915 to 1918, he served as a soldier in Russia, Poland, and Flanders. Alongside his military service, he took private photographs of the rural and small-town Jewish culture he encountered in the East. In November 1918, Römer returned to Berlin and took over the company "Photothek" from a colleague. From that point onward, his photographs were published under this name. The photographic agency supplied its images on a subscription basis to newspaper publishers in Berlin and throughout Germany, as well as to editorial offices abroad, and at that time ranked among the ten most important agencies in Germany. At the very beginning of the Nazi regime, the company was denounced as a "Jewish enterprise", as his colleague was of Jewish origin. German publishing houses

were no longer permitted to purchase images from them. This boycott quickly ruined the business, which declared bankruptcy in the spring of 1933. In September 1935, the Nazis forcibly closed it permanently, and two years later, it was removed from the commercial register. In 1942, he was conscripted into the army and assigned to work as a photographer for the Nazi Party newspaper in Posen. In 1945, Römer returned to Berlin. In the immediate postwar period, he initially photographed the devastated city. He attempted to re-establish himself by producing photographic postcards for the occupying soldiers and by accepting small commissions as a photojournalist. At the end of his career, Römer devoted himself to the preservation and maintenance of his archive, dying in West Berlin on 26 October 1979[3]. Römer was a highly skilled photographer with a thorough knowledge of the specific requirements and workflows of press photography. He worked primarily with a cumbersome 13 × 18 cm glass-plate camera. This large-format negative offered the advantage that simple contact prints (without enlargement) were generally sufficient for subsequent reproduction. Although the lenses of the period were inferior to those available today, his photographs display a remarkable level of detail thanks to the large negative format. Owing to his solid technical expertise, Römer frequently produced images of lasting impact and high formal quality. He experienced the Weimar Republic in Berlin firsthand and documented political events from the 1918 Revolution to the rise of the Nazi dictatorship in numerous photographs. The more than 200 images depicting the various phases of the 1918-1919 Revolution occupy a special place within his oeuvre. Several of these photographs were repeatedly reproduced, thereby becoming iconic visual symbols of those events. These images depicts soldiers on the devastated streets of Berlin, dead bodies on the ground, men on horseback in front of the Brandenburger Gate, and crowds of people filling the square in the Lustgarten. Looking at these images made my mind fly back and forth in time, recognizing those places where now tourists are walking and reconstructed architectures emerge from the dark past of Germany. And the more I looked at the images, the more I was convinced about the possibility of narrating the events and the History of the November Revolution.

The beginning of the Revolution

During the First World War, the German Empire, ruled by Kaiser Wilhelm II, saw the Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD) becoming the largest party in the Reichstag, yet excluded from imperial government. Although formally committed to Marxist revolutionary socialism, the SPD faced deep distrust from conservative and nationalist forces, which portrayed it as insufficiently loyal to the nation. As the First World War dragged on, casualties mounted, and economic hardship intensified, internal opposition within the SPD grew. Inspired in part by the Russian Revolution of 1917, mass strikes erupted in

1918, particularly in armament factories. Deep divisions over support for the war led to a split in the SPD in 1917: anti-war members formed the Independent Social Democratic Party (USPD), while the majority of the SPD maintained a more moderate stance. The Russian October Revolution further radicalised segments of the German Left while alarming moderates and the middle classes, who feared a similar revolutionary upheaval in Germany. Meanwhile, Germany's military position deteriorated rapidly. On 29 September 1918, the Supreme Army Command informed Emperor Wilhelm II and the Chancellor that the military situation was hopeless in the face of the enemy's overwhelming advantage in manpower and equipment. A request for an immediate ceasefire should be sent to the Entente powers. On the 16th of October 1918 the Reich Chancellor Max Von Baden wrote on a note: "The desire to perish with honor may appear self-evident to citizens, yet the responsible statesman must recognize that the masses are entitled to a life, however modest, rather than to a heroic death."[4] On 5 November, the Entente Powers agreed to take up negotiations for a truce. Many soldiers had come to expect the war to end and were anxious to return home. They had little willingness to fight more battles, and desertions were increasing. And, in fact, what soon triggered the German Revolution was a sailors' mutiny centered on the North Sea ports of Kiel and Wilhelmshaven in late October 1918. While the war-weary troops and general population of Germany awaited the end of the war, the Imperial Naval Command in Kiel planned, without authorization, to dispatch the Imperial Fleet for a last battle against the British Royal Navy in the southern North Sea. This resulted in a mutiny among the sailors involved. They had no intention of risking their lives so close to the end of the war and were convinced that the credibility of the new government, engaged as it was in seeking an armistice with the Entente, would be compromised by a naval attack at such a crucial point in the negotiations. The mutiny began on a small number of ships anchored off Wilhelmshaven. Faced with the sailors' disobedience, naval command called off the offensive during the night of 29–30 October, arrested several hundred of the mutineers, and had the ships return to port, sparking the breaking out of protests in the streets of Kiel. The soldiers opened fire against protestors, killing at least nine people. In a few days, Kiel was already in the hands of a workers' and soldiers' council, and groups of sailors had gone to nearby cities to spread the uprising, and, by 7 November, the revolution had taken control in all large coastal cities. On 9 November, under the pressure of the Chancellor, the SPD, the USPD and the Entent, William II, the Emperor, abdicated, appointing Nick Erbert as new chancellor. Ebert quickly released a statement announcing the formation of a new "people's government" whose immediate tasks were to end the war as

quickly as possible and to ensure a sufficient supply of food for the German people, who were still suffering under the impact of the Allied blockade. The premature news of the abdication came too late to make any impression on the demonstrators who had filled the streets of Berlin. Nobody heeded the public appeals. While having lunch in the Reichstag building, the SPD deputy chairman Philipp Scheidemann learned that Karl Liebknecht of the Spartacus League planned to proclaim a socialist republic. The Spartacus League was a Marxist revolutionary movement founded in 1916 by Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht. The group opposed Germany's involvement in World War I and rejected the more moderate policies of the main socialist party at the time. Scheidemann did not want to leave the initiative of proclaiming the newly formed republic to the Spartacists and stepped to a window of the Reichstag building, where he proclaimed a republic before the mass of demonstrators gathered there.

"The Emperor abdicated," - he stated - "Workers and soldiers, be conscious of the historical significance of this day. The impossible has come to pass. […] Everything for the people and everything through the people! Nothing must occur that could disrupt the workers' movement. Be united, loyal, and mindful of your duty! The old and the rotten, the monarchy, has collapsed. Long live the new! Long live the German Republic!"[5]

The formation of the new governament

Once the monarchy had collapsed, it was now up to the leadership of the socialist parties in Berlin to quickly establish the new order and address the many critical problems the defeated nation faced. From the beginning, the moderates of the SPD held the leading position. On 10 November 1918, Friedrich Ebert reached a crucial agreement with General Wilhelm Groener, representing the Supreme Army Command. The army pledged its loyalty to the new government and its support against revolutionary radicalism, while Ebert committed to preserving the existing military hierarchy and combating "Bolshevism." This pact ensured short-term stability but also allowed key imperial institutions, especially the officer corps, to survive largely intact within the new republic, creating tensions that would later undermine Weimar democracy. On 12 November, the Council of People's Deputies published its government programme in the proclamation "To the German People". It lifted the state of siege and censorship, granted amnesty to all political prisoners, guaranteed freedom of association, assembly and the press and abolished the rules that governed relations between servant and master. After the overthrow of the monarchy, workers', soldiers', and sailors' councils spread rapidly and increasingly demanded deeper social and political change. Many of these councils had radical left-wing tendencies

(influenced by USPD members and Spartacists), while the SPD leadership sought a moderate transition to a parliamentary republic. This created sharp political tensions within the revolutionary movement. The immediate trigger for the December clashes was a dispute involving the People's Naval Division (Volksmarinedivision), a revolutionary military unit originally meant to protect the provisional government. The sailors had become more radical and were resisting attempts by the SPD-led government to discharge them and curb their influence. When the Volksmarinedivision refused orders, the government called in regular troops, leading to an armed confrontation at the Berlin Palace on 24 and 25 December 1918, commonly referred to as the Christmas crisis. The SPD government's deployment of force against the revolutionary sailors led the USPD members of the Council of the People's Deputies to resign on 29 December in protest. This effectively split the provisional government and deepened the divide between moderate and radical socialists. After their experiences with the SPD and the USPD, the Spartacists concluded that their goals could be met only by forming a party of their own. They therefore joined with other left-socialist groups from across Germany to found the Communist Party of Germany (KPD). Rosa Luxemburg drew up a founding programme and presented it on 31 December 1918. She wrote that the communists could never take power without the clear will of the majority of the people, but, after deliberations with the Spartacists, the Revolutionary Stewards decided to remain in the USPD. A wave of violence started on 4 January when the Prussian government dismissed the chief of the Berlin police, Emil Eichhorn (USPD), for supporting the People's Navy Division during the Christmas crisis. His dismissal led the USPD, Revolutionary Stewards, and KPD chairmen Karl Liebknecht and Wilhelm Pieck to call for a demonstration the following day. On 5 January, as on 9 November 1918, hundreds of thousands of people poured into the centre of Berlin, many of them armed. The demonstrators were mainly the same people who had participated in the revolutionary actions in November, who were demanding the fulfilment of their wish for a workers' government, expressed two months previously. The so-called "Spartacist uprising" that followed originated only partially in the KPD. The Spartacists did not have a leading position in January 1919. KPD members were a minority among the insurgents. The Revolutionary Committee called other demonstrations the following days in January. While more troops were moving into Berlin on Ebert's order, he accepted an offer by the USPD to mediate between the government and the Revolutionary Committee, but the negotiations failed the following day. Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht, leaders of the newly founded Communist Party of Germany (KPD) and central figures in the Spartacist uprising, the ringleaders of the January Revolt,

The violent end of the Revolution

were forced to go into hiding after its failure, but in spite of the urgings of their associates, they refused to leave Berlin. On the evening of 15 January 1919, the two were found by the authorities in an apartment in the Wilmersdorf district of Berlin. They were immediately arrested and handed over to the largest Freikorps unit, veterans of the First World War. The same night, both prisoners were clubbed with the butt of a rifle and shot in the head. Karl Liebknecht's body, without a name, was delivered to a nearby morgue. Rosa Luxemburg's body was thrown into Berlin's Landwehr Canal, where it was found only on 1 July. The perpetrators, for the most part went unpunished, some of them becoming part of the Nazi SA (Sturmabteilung), Hitler's paramilitary force. "Die Frerheit" was the USPD journal for the period of Revolutionary events, and on the 17 January it read as follows:

"Workers, men and women! Monstrous events have been taking place in Berlin in recent days. The proletariat, the oppressed class, has suffered greatly under the rule of the bourgeoisie. Rosa Luxemburg was brutally struck down by a gang of bourgeois reactionaries, then dismembered and carried away. You cannot and must not oppose force with the same means and the same weapons, but rather with the weapon that remains to you: your labour power. The military caste, the bourgeoisie, and the government must understand that you are not objects of their arbitrariness, but the pillars of society, the very foundations of economic life."[6]

The Social Democratic government under Friedrich Ebert, determined to secure order and proceed toward elections for a National Assembly, relied on the army and Freikorps units to suppress the revolt. The crushing of the uprising and the killing of its most prominent leaders, effectively eliminated the revolutionary left as a decisive political force in Berlin. In the months that followed, similar revolutionary attempts in other German cities (including Bremen and Munich) were also violently suppressed. Meanwhile, elections for the National Assembly were held in January 1919, and the Assembly convened in Weimar to draft a new constitution. By August 1919, the Weimar Constitution had come into force, formally establishing a parliamentary republic. The assassination of Luxemburg and Liebknecht, therefore, symbolized both the internal fracture of the socialist movement and the triumph of a moderate, parliamentary path over a council-based socialist alternative. While the revolution succeeded in overthrowing the monarchy and introducing democratic reforms, it ended without achieving the more radical transformation sought by the revolutionary left.

Berlin during the Revolution

Willy Römer photographed most of these events in Berlin, and by observing his work and studying it, in 2018, Ludger Derenthal, Evelin Föster, and Enno Kaufhold were able to reconstruct what could have been the rhythm and the life of the people of Berlin during the months of the Revolution. In their book Berlin in der Revolution (2018), taking a transdisciplinary approach, they are including, for the first time, the culture of entertainment, which was of decisive importance for everyday life in Berlin and can be understood as a practical echo of the revolutionary events. On the one hand, it directly reflected the revolutionary events from a thoroughly partisan position, but on the other hand, it often sought nothing more than to distract people from the perils of everyday life, i.e., pure entertainment. From this perspective, the revolutionary events cannot be separated from the nightlife of Berliners, which remained relatively unrestricted even during the war years. In addition to opera and spoken theater, there were the more popular operetta and revue theaters, then the cinemas, and after the end of the war, in particular, the venues for dancing. In conjunction with photography, posters, graphics, and banners from those days provide more detailed information about the events. The evidence of a lively entertainment scene is exemplified in a photograph taken at the beginning of 1919, which shows an advertising column representative of those days and typical of Berlin. The centrally posted appeal "Berlin, stop! Come to your senses. Your dancer is death" accuses the Berlin population of excessive hedonism and urges moderation in a drastic manner. This was meant literally, but could and can also be read as a metaphor. Harry Graf Kessler described in his diary how cabaret was experienced in the midst of the revolutionary events of the day: "In the evening at a cabaret on Bellevue Strasse. A racy Spanish dancer. A shot rang out during her number. No one paid any attention. The revolution had little impact on metropolitan life. This life is so elemental that even a world-historical revolution like the current one does not cause any significant disruption. The Babylonian, immeasurably deep, chaotic and powerful nature of Berlin only became clear to me through the revolution, when it became apparent that this tremendous movement caused only minor local disturbances in the even more tremendous back and forth of Berlin, as if an elephant had been stabbed with a pocket knife. It shakes itself, but continues on as if nothing had happened." It seems like the "Babylonian" life of Berlin had that much of energy that not even an internal armed revolution could stop it. Like an elephant "stabbed with a pocket knife". I couldn't stop thinking about the image of the elephant walking in the streets of a city. Its thick skin, big legs, long trunk. I looked for it in the archive and I found an image from the 1930s, by Willy Römer, capturing the moment an asian elephant was walking towards the streets of Berlin, carrying a heavy wooden

elephant

carriage. What was in that carriage? There is a man riding the elephant. Who is he? And why is he riding an elephant? People from the sidewalks observe the streets, apparently quite and unsurprised by the presence of this unusual animal. Traces of normalization of a colonial gaze are clearly visible in this picture, as elephants have never belonged to Europe, and having them walking in the streets, in the cold winter of Berlin, shapes the shadow of our past of overseas dominations. Not much later than 50 years ago, the latest England colonies in Asia obtained political independence. The kingdom struck their economies for centuries, building a global system of dependencies and legalized slavery to fill the needs of the rich. In 1867, the Scottishman James Taylor decided to plant tea in the centre of Sri Lanka and reshape its economy. By that time, the island was, in fact, well known for its coffee plantations. But after the decision from English companies to restructure the internal territory and soil to harvest high-quality tea that the richest people in England could drink comfortably in their living rooms, Sri Lanka changed forever, becoming globally known for its high-quality tea leaves, and with a fully dependent economy on global powers and buyers. When we walk today on the internal and beautiful lands of Sri Lanka, vast and high hills of tea plantations fill our field of view, and hundreds of women with heavy baskets are harvesting it. Men with sticks and whips give them strict orders. And tourists are allowed to observe the majesty of this controversial picture. While, not far from the tea plantations, elephants walk freely in green safaris, together with snakes, iguanas and monkeys. While looking at them, I realize that's the environment they belong to, and every one of them, unfortunate enough to get to come to Europe, must indeed suffer from deep sadness and loneliness. Is the colonial period really over? Are the Western countries really taking their hands off people and civilization that deserve peace and independence? Are there still elephants in the streets of Berlin? I went visiting the Zoo to answer this question, and I found a group of three asian elephants, freezing for the winter cold, powerless, confined, with their souls trapped in a solitary and constructed environment as their essence reduced to spectacle. Those wild and majestic animals are now slaves of our voyeuristic culture. "We took our seats in the screening room, and the film began. At my first appearance, there was applause" - wrote Pola Negri on its diary about life in Berlin on November 1918 - " I heard a faint sound from outside. It sounded… like gunfire. I looked around to see if anyone else had noticed it, but there was nothing but intense focus on the film… Minutes later, the sound occurred again. 'Ernst, did you hear that…?' His answer came quickly and briefly: 'Yes, see! Nobody can do anything. Just watch the film.' The distant gunfire now drew closer and continued to underscore the film. Everyone in the audience must have noticed it, yet they continued to

stare at the screen". She then added: "None of us paid much attention to the revolutionary events happening everywhere. When you live at the edge of an abyss, you soon stop noticing it, and when newspapers are filled with disasters every day, you eventually stop listening…". This quote doesn't really feel like coming from a century ago. Can we still relate to Negri's words? Is the flood of images on our digital devices weakening our sense of empathy? "Citizens of modernity, consumers of violence in the form of spectacle and connoisseurs of riskless proximity" call us Susan Sontag.


AMOR-SÄLE
Berlin,
halt ein!
Besinne Dich.
Dein Tänzer
ist
der Tod.
Deutsche Volkspartei
Deutsche Volkspartei
OTTO REUTTER
Kaffee Zielka
Arbeits-Nachweis
Die 5 Uhr offen.
Palast-Theater
Der Sohn

2.1

2.2

Despite and despite

Back to the 1920s in Germany, the industry of cinema was vivid and facing the political context of the after-war period. The determination of German film industry leaders to produce anti-Bolshevik films as a means of influencing public opinion, aligned with the new Social Democratic government. One of the most significant feature films from the period of the revolution, and at the same time a typical document of the (social) democratic values promoted by the film industry, is *Die entfesselte Menschheit* (J.Delmont, 1920). The director and writer Joseph Delmont wrote the screenplay based on the novel of the same name by Max Glass, published in autumn 1919, and also directed the film. Robert Reinert's influential silent film drama *Nerven* (Robert Reinert, 1919) reached audiences only briefly: after its premiere in December 1919 in Munich, several viewers reportedly exhibited symptoms of madness. The film offers a multifaceted depiction of the traumatic impact of war and revolution on the human psyche. This highlights the groundbreaking aesthetic quality of Nerven: even before Robert Wiene completed *Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari* (Robert Wiene, 1920), considered the epitome of German Expressionist cinema, Nerven already exhibited elements associated with Expressionism: close-ups of faces conveying intense emotions, oversized gloomy buildings, threatening dissolves, and stark light-and-shadow effects. What we refer to as Expressionism is a wide art movement that flooded German culture in the after-war period, which we only mention here, but we will explore better in the next chapters. "Despite the bloody machine-gun battles between government troops and Spartacists in all districts of Berlin, despite the stray bullets that had already cost the lives of numerous innocent passersby, [...] despite it all, the movie palaces and cinemas […] continue to operate uninterrupted and enjoy excellent attendance." This description was published on January 15, 1919, three days after the suppression of the January uprising, on the day Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg were murdered. As well as cinemas and theatres, dance halls were also full of attendees. In a poem dedicated to the double-faced nature of Berlin, Friedrich Hollander wrote, "In the morning the newspaper serves us a murder, and at noon, a new strike, in the afternoon a coup, the suffering of the unemployed, alongside a hint: where to dance most joyfully with your mouse, or where a fairy undresses most naked! Berlin, your dancer is Death!". I found all this so fascinating and as well contemporary. Berlin is today well known for music and club culture. The most famous clubs in the world are placed in the city centre, born of its history. Seventy years after the 1920s of the fox trot and modern jazz, another important historical revolution took place in Berlin. The Berlin Wall, separating the territories of the Western and Eastern powers, fell under the need for political and geographical freedom. Industrial buildings freed themselves from their workplace statute, becoming

empty space for artistic exploration and the expression of fluid individualities, marking the beginning of the modern club culture. "While we were shifting from DVD players to digital cameras, rave music became a ritual, mourning the death of industrial culture. Clubs and open-air festivals turned into paradises of sonic ecstasy and chemical abandon"[7]. Living in today's city of history and music, I couldn't get more enchanted by the discovery of a century-old, vivid party and cultural soul, often suppressed or facing political events and censors. And I soon decided to make this dualistic nature of the city the subject of my work, talking about the Revolution and 1920s jazz culture on one side, while bringing up a reflection on the cyclical nature of history and the strong presence of the same revolutionary contradictions in our current period of History. Visual arts have the power to express meaning and feeling that words aren't capable of encapsulating. While watching *Decasia* by Bill Morrison, our epistemophilic side may feel confused and lost, but our perception is captured, transforming that confusion into a sensation of loss and love. Inspired by the work of Bill Morrison, as well as the purposes of *The man with a movie camera* (D. Vertov, 1929) of recreating the concept of a united society by representing fragments of people's daily life on the streets of 1920s soviet union, I decided to write some kind of poetical script, where the expedients of repetition and juxtaposition are used to underline and show meanings more complex than those the images were showing by themselves, and my focus fell on 8 main figures and events of the German Revolution: People in the city of Berlin, dancing; Sailors, Sea, and Harbor; Workers working in industries and fields; Cemeteries and Funerals; Soldier on the streets of Berlins; Politicians; The proclamation of the Republic; Footage from today's Berlin and strikes. The first draft of the script began like this:

Writing the script

Exploiting the semantic and narrative power of the Kuleshov Effect, the narration will be developed with one sequence after the other, with no text or words guiding the viewer, but only music and animations. Every sequence will be composed of a few animated clips of one of the 8 main figures shown above.

An introductory text about the Babylonian life of Berlin appears on the screen.
It transforms into a drawing of an elephant walking the streets of Berlin.

The waves move the surface of the ocean;
birds fly in the sky,
gentle wind moves the grass on the coast.

Classical music begins.

Some people in a house
dance in couples
with the music of a gramophone.
Some other people follow
in other houses
but with the same music.

In a metal industry
workers work hard
in rhythm with the music.

Some sailors
excitly discuss, dance and move
on big steamboats.
One arrives at the harbor.

In the theatre
and concert halls
people dance to the rhythm of the music.

Military cars move in the city.
Soldiers are seen walking the streets of Berlin
and trying to "take control of it".

In the industries
workers are working hard.

In the theatres
people are dancing joyfully.

Soldiers take down the streets of Berlin
fighting for freedom
and against institutions.

A vast land of tombs
stands in the neighbourhood of the city.

In the theatre,
people dance.

In the industries,
workers work.

Some soldiers shoot a few bullets
some others run for safety.

In the parliament
many people are present
and discuss loudly about the revolution.

In the theatres,
people dance.

In the industries,
workers work.

In the streets,
soldiers fight.

In the harbour,
sailors aren't quiet.

In the parliament
parliamentarians discuss
one against the other
about the revolution happening.

A vast land
of tombs
stands in the neighbour's
of Berlin.

A funeral
takes place
in the streets of Berlin.

In the theatre;
people dance.

In the parliament,
parliamentarians fight.

In the streets;
soldiers fight.

In the industries;
workers work.

In the theatre,
people dance.

In the industries;
workers work.

On the streets;
soldiers fight.

A cemetery stands
in the neighbourhood of Berlin.

In the parliament
parliamentarians talk.

A man comes out of a window
and takes a speech.
"The monarchy is gone"
screams.

(BRIDGE)
In the square,
people dance.
In the factories,
workers dance.
On the boats,
sailors dance.
On the streets,
soldiers dance.

The poetic animated image of soldiers dancing in the city
slowly transforms into an analogue photograph on a white table,
showing the same soldiers, in the same place,
but with realistic clothes and features.
Another photograph is shown from those representing the revolution,

then another;
and, after a few others,
the original analog image of the elephant is placed on the table.

The photograph is cleaned
and quietly placed into an archive.

A woman closes the archive doors
and leaves the office.

By evening,
the streets of today's Berlin teem with cars, advertisements,
and people walking.

Faint tones of techno music rise from the city's underground,
mingling with distant chants and shouts
drawing ever closer.

A human-rights demonstration floods the streets of Berlin,
as many raise flags
and cry out
against the contemporary system.

Fin.

Rewriting the ending

I never believed in Hollywood-style iron scripts. In small documentary productions, scripts are guidelines, ideas, drafts of temporary intuitions. While shooting and editing, the creative feeling must take control and must feel free to operate, not confined by the limits of a script, and the images must guide the rhythm and the flow of visual associations. Considering the History we are living, of separated masses and repressive governments, my first aim was to actually exploit the documentary medium to share hope in revolutionary movements, ignoring the tragic ending of the German Revolution, and focusing more on the labour and sailors' protest at the beginning of it, with the abdication of the Emperor as the end of a longer fight. In an attempt to oppose that atomization process that is spreading in the Western world, where, "Neoliberalism has reshaped the figure of the oppressed worker into that of a free entrepreneur, an entrepreneur of the self. Today, each individual is a laborer who exploits himself, an employee in his own service. [...] As a result, class struggle has been internalized and transformed into an inner conflict," as Byung-Chul Han writes in his book Capitalism and the Death Drive (2021), when trying to address the causes that make our modern civilization incapable of reacting against current and oppressive power dynamics. My desire came from the intention to raise awareness around the power of people and societies to act together and shape a shared future. But what History shows is sometimes far from idealistic mass revolutions and utopian power structures, and I think the German revolution is a great example of the cruelty preserved through time in different scenarios. Just recently, the mass protests suppressed with extreme violence in Tehran and other Iranian cities are another tragic example of terrorist regimes[8], which, unwilling to dialogue diplomatically and to give up even a part of their power, use force to impose their will. The multiple contradictions that arose when composing the script with a pro-revolutionary events ending, and the desire to show the real history and bring a sort of respect to it, made me change my mind. I restructured it, shifting it in time, putting the fall of the monarchy at the beginning, and the tragic murder of Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht at the end. To show the cruelty of institutional powers and the injustice perpetuated by the bourgeoisie, in an attempt to sustain a parallelism with the modern world, and to warn the people about the risks of the centralized economical power, while, on the other and, creating a reverse mirroring between contemporaneity and the November Revolution. If, in fact, the latter started with the fall of an Empire and continued toward the foundation of an institutional order, the former appears to follow the opposite process, bringing our current political system in an evolution from an oligarchian economic system towards the foundation of an Empire.

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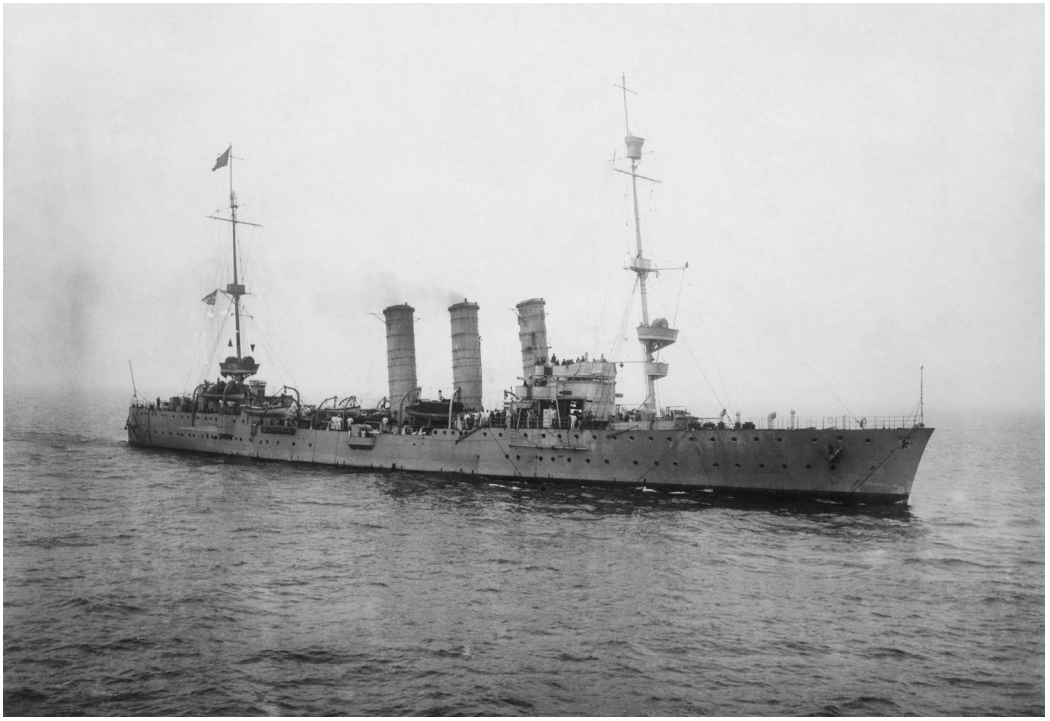

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2.1
Berlin, stop. Reflect. Your dancer is death
Photographer Unknown, January 1919, Berlin

2.2
Elephant as a draft animal on the streets of Berlin
Willy Römer, January 1919, Berlin

2.3
November Revolution. Entry of the 4th Guards Infantry Division, returning from the war, into Pariser Platz
Willy Römer, 12 December 1918, Berlin

2.4
Rally against rent gouging in the Lustgarten
Willy Römer, 1920s, Berlin

2.5
November Revolution. Burial of the victims of December 6, 1918
Willy Römer, 12 December 1918, Berlin

2.6
November Revolution
Willy Römer, 20 November 1918, Berlin

2.7
Bankers carry inflation paper money in baskets for wage payments
Willy Römer, 1923, Berlin

2.8
Wood collector
Willy Römer, 1920s, Berlin

2.9
At the fairground
Willy Römer, 1920s, Berlin

2.10
Hellerau School near Dresden
Willy Römer, 1920s, Berlin

2.11
World record for continuous dancing. Continuous dancer Alfredo Fernando
Willy Römer, 1927, Berlin

2.12
Harvest festival at the fairground in a Pankow allotment garden colony
Willy Römer, 1906, Berlin

2.13
Debris removal at Friedrichstrasse station, repair of the steam locomotive
Willy Römer, 19249, Berlin

2.14
Saltworks in Halle/Saale
Willy Römer, 1932

2.15
Return of the Scapa Flow teams
Willy Römer, 1 February 1920

2.16
Light cruiser SMS Berlin
Willy Römer, 1912

2.17
"Spartacist Uprising". Barricades made of newspaper rolls in front of the Rudolf Mosse publishing house, Schützenstraße.
Willy Römer, 11 January 1919, Berlin

2.18
November Revolution. Machine gun posts of government troops during the fighting for the Vorwärts building in Berlin's newspaper district.
Willy Römer, 11 January 1919, Berlin

2.19
January battles of 1919 in Berlin - machine gun position
Willy Römer, January 1919, Berlin

2.20
Occupation of the Rhine-Ruhr region. French troops occupy the town hall.
Willy Römer, 1923, Berlin

2.21
Funeral procession to Rosa Luxemburg's burial at the cemetery in Friedrichsfelde
Willy Römer, 13 June 1919, Berlin

2.22
November Revolution. Burial of over 30 victims of the January Uprising, including Karl Liebknecht.
Willy Römer, 25 January 1919, Berlin

The making of *elephant*

AI Realism

Once the subject was clear and the script was drafted, it was finally time to move from the open space of ideas to that of facts. It was time to move that symbolism from abstract to concrete, editing the original photographs, animating them, and composing a compelling visual narrative. Following the decisions made during the writing of the script, I edited 230 photographs from Römer's archive from a period of time that spanned between 1918 and the 1930s, representing the events of the German Revolution, and people living the post-war Berlin. I then had the chance to talk about my research with Elettra Fiumi, Italian Award-winning AI Film Director and Producer, who is currently living in Switzerland, running an AI film production company. In an interview for The Immagination Age, Elettra said that "AI has become a way to travel through memory, expand o dreams, and push imagination further."[1] She is primarily known for her non-fiction and documentary work, films that explore real people, creative communities, environments, and cultural histories. Her *Radical Landscapes* (E. Fiumi, 2022), which premiered at DOC NYC, is a feature documentary about her late father's artistic group and the radical architecture movement, and *Dancing Free* (E. Fiumi, 2024), shown at Locarno Film Festival, is a documentary that follows artists creating new choreographies for a contemporary dance festival. After explaining my intentions, she showed me the work of Alex Nagavi, self-defined "award-winning, tech-forward, and culture-driven Creative Director". In 2025, during a Google AI art residency, Alex made a short movie animating photographs of Mike Brodi, an American photographer who trainhopped in the US for four years and photographed his encounters. The movie, called *Railbond* (A. Nagavi, 2025), is a revival of the life moments of those people inhabiting the roads, eating from the street, living their lives at the borders of society. The usage of visual effects to recreate film grain and light flares creates a feeling of nostalgia in the images, while highlighting that tendency in contemporary digital culture to prioritize the aesthetic over a more thoughtful reflection on the history of the language. In that digital film grain and light flares, we can see the traces of that contemporary cultural movement that exalts progress and worships technology, that forgets about its history, and only tries to "look cool". But the images of these kids, in their attempt to look realistic, bring us into a world shaped more like a video game than a movie. In 2024, Pinny Grillis and Sam Kane, editing together sequences of online sessions of Grand Theft Auto V in the 91-minute-long *Grand Theft Hamlet* (P. Grillis and S. Kanes, 2024), showed us that cinema can also be made of video game scenes. But was this the purpose of Railbond? Considering that the movie was born under the wings of Google, whose AI

models constantly try to reach new level of realism, I believe what Alex Nagavi was trying to do was an attempt of mimicking reality, to chase that realistic representation once defined by André Bazin as "not just the reconstruction of a perfect illusion of the outside world, but the capacity to come closer to the perceptive and cognitive dynamics of the natural vision"[2]. Same, explicit, purpose sought by The Museum of the Second World War in Danzica when, with their project *Zamach na Heydricha* (2025), realistically animating photographs from the 1940s in Poland, they tried to recreate the costumes and the events of the War as it was for the Polish people of that age. A visual narrative placed between more historical-fictional works like *Il Padrino* (F.Ford Coppola, 1972) and the broad class of AI-generated memes recreating the illegal capture of Nicolas Maduro that flooded social media at the beginning of 2026. The more I looked at these movies, the more I felt like AI realism is currently placed at an inflection point between cinema and meme culture, oscillating back and forth between these two visual domains. In the intersection, *The Valley where LOAB lives* (Georg Tiller, 2025) is an AI movie born from the meme myth of Loab. A fictional character that artist and writer Steph Maj Swanson claimed to have discovered with a text-to-image AI model in April 2022. In a viral Twitter thread, Swanson described the images of Loab as an unexpectedly emergent property of the software, saying they discovered them when asking the model to produce something "as different from the prompt as possible". The Valley when LOAB lives ia a meta genre essay where its protagonist Loab travels through six iconic horror eras from *Nosferatu* (W. Munrau, 1922) to *Get Out* (Jordan Peele, 2017). A movie whose script design and character come from the world of web memes, but, creatively enter that of cinema. I continued doing researches about AI applications and implications, to decide which path to take with my film, and in which artistic class to try to classify it, but, the more I was watching and reading about visual AI online, the more I was feeling overwhelmed. Opinionism about AI's impact on the creative industry and climate. Someone running fast exalted the new medium. Someone else with a slower pace associated it with the worst satanic icons. What is the truth? Is there an ethical approach to the use of AI? Is it really going to destroy the creative industry, and, even more existentially, extinguish humanity[3]? To take a break from all these discouraging thoughts on actuality, I went running on the evening on the East Side Gallery. When I was back home, my Berliner landlord, a member of the European Film Awards jury, showed me an Italian movie, finalist in the 2025 Animated Movie category. Standing in the living room of the house, we were staring at the screen, impressed. Two brush lines inclined like the hands of a clock were slowly rotating. A clock was perceivable even if not visible. "It's sometimes incredible how little you need to express

Abandoning Realism

concepts in cinema", she said. In his book Point and line to plane, Wassily Kandinsky wrote "The open and vigilant eye transforms even the slightest tremors into profound experiences. […] In this way, signs become living symbols, and what is dead is rendered alive"[4]. Are the "Babylonian" life of Berlin and the revolutionary movements dead? Can a visual narrative made of graphic moving elements, instead of realistic human figures and landscapes, engage more with the feelings of the viewers, leaving more open questions and empty semantic spaces to be filled with subjective interpretation? The idea of making an animated movie started to take root in my mind. Point and line to plane, together with Concerning The Spiritual in Arts, are considered the first treatises on art science in the Western world. It was 1912 when the latter was first published, seven years before the abdication of the German Emperor and the proclamation of the German Republic. The country was devastated by defeat, by the postwar crisis, and by the extremely burdensome war debts owed to France and Great Britain, compounded by the drama of inflation, which reached its peak in September 1923, when the value of one dollar rose to six billion marks. People at the beginning of the 1920s were exhausted by hunger and the horrors they were experiencing, shaken and deeply troubled by a period of international and internal conflicts, and when these same people approached the arts, painting, cinema and music, sharp figures, distorted shapes, intersecting planes, keen-edge angles and disharmonious notes came out. Works from the post-war period in Germany represent the tormented psychology of its society. It was the period when *Nosferatu* (Munrau, 1922) came out. A skinny, tall and mysterious Count reveals to be the notorious vampire Nosferatu and with unseen powers coming from a world of mysteries and obscure energies, he leaves his castle in the mountains of Transilvania, sailing a possessed vessel down the river to reach the city of Wisborg, where, together with the Black Death, it harvests victims to satisfy his need for blood. Far from the rigorous, realistic and quite Lumière's sights of workers going out of an industry, brick walls falling under construction works, and French families having breakfast in the courtyard, Nosferatu, together with *Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari* (R.Weine, 1920), marked the beginning of a new era of cinema. The divergent and straight lines of the streets of Holstenwall where Dr. Caligari was playing his spectacles, the obscure lighting and environments in the city of Wisborg, together with the scary figures of Cesare and Nosferatu, exposed a strong need in German society for a creative movement that, from the dark sides of our most internal beings needed to move towards the outside, thus becoming *Expressionism*. The term "Expressionism" is highly controversial: it may be used to designate either a specific artistic movement or even a broader category of art, a universal style that emerges when an artist seeks to force images or

German Expressionism and soviet cinema

words toward an intensely heightened expressivity. Some theorists, for example, have observed that Expressionism almost coincides with the very concept of art itself, insofar as all art is inherently expressive, and every artistic movement alters, distorts, or transforms figures and forms (Amound, 1989). If, on the other hand, we understand Expressionism as a distinct artistic movement, originating in painting but extending to various other languages, such as poetry, theatre, and cinema, we may summarize its defining features as a pronounced distortion of the sign (whether a sentence, a poetic line, a gesture, a pictorial mark, or a cinematic shot). Cinematic examples of this artistic movement are *The Wax Figure Cabinet* (Leni, 1924), *The Student from Prague* (Rye, 1913), or the cult film for many generations, *Metropolis* (F. Lang, 1926), "the most hallucinatory and prophetic, whose terrifying scenographies have been cited and reproduced in numerous films throughout the history of cinema"[5]. Towers and palaces of countless storeys, with "skylines" resembling veritable highways suspended between buildings; small airplanes fluttering among them as though moving through a mountain range; and, at the center, the control tower, poised halfway between the future and the Middle Ages. The city is a gigantic machine that pulses without respite, governed by a melancholic scientist. Yet this is only the surface, the affluent zone. Below lies a corresponding subterranean city, with blind buildings and lightless squares, inhabited by the sorrowful families of worker-slaves: women and children without a future, men who surrender themselves to the machines in shifts, forming ranks that march with the step and gestures of automatons, clad in identical uniforms, pure, faceless labor power. A work of art that engages frontally with political issues, creating a strong visual metaphor of industrial society and the power dynamics emerging from the newborn Capitalist Economy. Two years before *Metropolis*, in Moscow, *Strike* (S. Eisenstein, 1924) came out. An ode to the proletarian movement. A visual journey inside the gears of metal machines whose movements power organized hordes of workers abandoning their industries to subvert the system and fight for their rights. Strike shows the rules of the montage of attractions, where "a combination of heterogeneous materials shakes the attention and the emotion of the spectator, suscitating in him new associations of ideas"[6].In his book *Towards a Theory of Montage*, Eisenstein explains that in montage of attractions, everything is disordered, fragmented, and recomposed in such a way as to convey to the spectator a sense of disorientation and of real life. He also formulates the theory of stimuli: montage must not present the story or action as already complete and neatly packaged; rather, it should stimulate the viewer's imagination and intellectual engagement. A form of political art, from Russia to Germany, in the 1920s: "Cinema is an athlete; cinema is a giant; yet cinema is ill, because capitalism has flung a handful of gold coins into its

Expressionism in graphics

eyes."[7]Artists belonging to the working classes came together to scream loud together against their condition, creating images that bonded them under the desire for workers' rights. In 1918's Berlin, a group of architects, painters, sculptors and art writers founded the Arbeitsrat für Kunst. It emerged as a reaction to the workers' and soldiers' councils established during that period and aimed to bring to the attention of a broad public the current developments and trends in architecture and art. It was considered an important catalyst for the founding of the Bauhaus. Individual members taught at the State Academy of Arts and Applied Arts in Wrocław, which, together with the Bauhaus, was the most important art school of the era. "The guiding principle is: art and the people must form a unity. Art should no longer be the pleasure of the few, but the happiness and life of the masses."[8] Among the artists who joined the Arbeitsrat für Kunst were also the painter Karl Schmidt-Rottluff and the famous graphic artist, sculptor and painter Käthe Kollwitz, whose works, together with other artists like Max Beckmann, Hans Brass and Wassily Kandinsky, inspired pages of art history about German Expressionism in painting and graphics. The shared characteristic of their work relates to the shapes of the forms and the distorted geometries of the composition. Human figures are represented as distorted, tall, skinny shapes, often during tragic or dramatic scenarios. In this context, representing reality is less a matter of rational description, study, and clarification than it is the elucidation of an emotional state. What must be expressed is not primarily thought, but rather feelings, intuitions, and fears. With regard to its origins, this artistic genre constitutes a form of black-and-white art. For a long time, the contrast inherent in it was associated with the concept of light and shadow—or, more precisely, of light and darkness. "Just as the gentle darkness of shadow upon every object allows the eye to rest and find support, so no work of art conceived within the domain of drawing can be imagined without shadow. Even the simplest outline possesses its shaded side, where the line appears darker and doubled. Shadow emphasizes light and is beneficial and restorative for both the eye and the soul."[9] A good example is *Hell* (1919) by Max Beckmann. Hell conjures the nightmare of social disintegration and violence that gripped Berlin after the end of World War I. Using fragmented city views, compressed interiors, and contorted bodies to convey chaos and claustrophobia, Beckmann composed each scene like a stage set. "If one comprehends… the entire war or even all of life only as a scene in the theater," - he wrote - "everything is much easier to bear."[10] When in January 1919 the Freikorps, executive arm of the SPD's wishes, kidnapped and murdered Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht, Käthe Kollwitz was asked by Liebknecht's widow to draw him at the Berlin morgue on the morning of 25 January 1919, the day he was buried

together with 31 other victims of the January uprising. Impressed that Liebknecht's funeral turned into a mass demonstration, the artist designed the commemorative sheet for the leader of the KPD as a lamentation of the dead. The painting, called *In Memoriam Karl Liebknecht* (1920), is a "farewell to Liebknecht."[11] and its composition is an allusion to the Christian motif of the "Lamentation of Christ". Impressed by the dense multitude of connections between the art of the 1920s and the history of those days, together with a fascination for Eisenstein's theory of montage of attraction, I found inspiration to design the graphic style and editing rhythm of that newly forming animated story about the German Revolution that I was composing. What if those photographs by Willy Römer representing the events of the uprisings were transformed into Expressionist paintings? Would it add a new historical reference to the images, and, at the same time, increase the degree of complexity of that indexical quality that connected reality with its representations? On 2015, a team or researchers from different fields of study in the Werner Reichardt Centre for Integrative Neuroscience and Institute of Theoretical Physics, University of Tubingen, Germany and Department of Neuroscience, Baylor College of Medicine, Houston, TX, USA, published a paper titled A Neural Algorithm of Artistic Style (2015) that explained the mechanism they used to create an AI-based system capable of detecting the artistic style from an image and applying to another one: Neural Style Transfer Network. They wrote: "The system uses neural representations to separate and recombine content and style of arbitrary images, providing a neural algorithm for the creation of artistic images. Moreover, [...] our work offers a path forward to an algorithmic understanding of how humans create and perceive artistic imagery."[12] A quote that could sound interesting for engineers and psychologists, but terrifying for artists who believe in the power of human creation. What I found most fascinating about their research is the discovery of a possible matematization of the artistic style. They designed a cross-correlation matrix and called it a style matrix, which, exploiting Convolutional Neural Networks' feature extraction with different filters, is capable of detecting the intercorrelations between the elements of an image on different scales. What comes out of this computation is a bunch of extracted hidden features representing the style depicted in the image as a vector in an un-plottable multidimensional space. Is this what Kandinsky was aspiring to when putting the bases for the development of a "science of art"[13]? When talking about the techniques to investigate the pictorial elements, he wrote, "Only along this path of microscopic analysis will the science of art lead to a comprehensive synthesis that will ultimately extend beyond the boundaries of art, into the domain of the unity of the *human* and the *divine*."[14] His view of points and lines was probably

A Neural Algorithm of Artistic Style

inspired by the classical science of the XVIII century, as dots resembled properties of black holes, and lines have much in common with integration curves and the trajectories coming out from the equations of motion. Would he ever imagine that a century later, also thanks to that schematization of composition and patterns he started, we are reaching a point where the same idea of art is being questioned? When we talk about progress and new technologies, it's easy to fall into the illusion that the movement towards breakthroughs is inevitable and must also be accelerated. As if there is no time left for humans to reach all our desired objectives. But every time we get to a new understanding about the Universe, new questions arise, and new research begins. The weight of our curiosity never leaves us in our Sisyphean ascent towards the unknown, in a historical illusion that drives us in the direction of an alleged control over Nature. In his book *Homo Deus*, the Israeli and neo-positivist writer, Yuval Noah Harari, argued that our push towards discoveries and technologies resembles a profound spiritual desire to reach, if not overtake, the role of God. Is this the "unity of the *human* and the *divine*" Kandinsky was referring to? When in the Christian myth of the Tower of Babel[15] Humans tried to get to the sky by building a structure capable of bringing them to the surface of it, God intervened, spreading different languages through the people working on the Tower, creating misunderstanding and internal conflicts that finally mined the creation of the Tower, confining humanity in its sphere of terrestrial existence. Looking at the amount of papers published daily[16] and the vastness of topics and funds currently invested in scientific research, I sometimes wonder if we are all living in a shared illusion of control, that, as in the myth of Babel, may one day even separate us even more, or, in the worst case scenario, exterminate us. In their book *Inventing the Future*, Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams, co-authors of the Manifesto for an Accelerationist Politics, advocate a post-capitalist, pro-technology left that seeks to reclaim the goal of a society that is not only more just and fair, but also more modern and emancipated from the coercive blackmail of labor. Their book places itself in direct contrast to a right-wing accelerationism, whose fanaticism could soon bring us into the deep mystery of the *Technological Singularity*[17]: a hypothetical event in which technological growth accelerates beyond human control, producing unpredictable changes in human civilization. What could happen to our privacy when self-controlled algorithms take traces of our daily movements? What could happen if political decisions are fully left to an agentic AI[18]? And what happens to an artist when their style can be easily copied by anyone[19]? With these questions in mind, I decided not to "steal" the style from any artist of those quotes above, but to use them all, more or less randomly, trying to recreate the look of the artistic movement they all belonged to, instead of that

AI models

of a single artist. Can this be considered as non-consensual appropriation of artistic style? While doing this process of style transfer, have I robbed the personality of these artists and their unicity in history and art? When dealing with archives, we always have to ask ourselves questions about the usage and the copyright of the images. AI models always analyze the input and save their features for training, to expand their latent space and their representation possibilities for the following generations. In this scenario, uploading 2000 images from the German Revolution to an AI model will help it recreate realistic synthetic images that look like coming from the same historical period. And this could represent a big problem for the original archive, as well as for humanity and its collective memory. To avoid this privacy loss, after researching among multiple models and worldwide companies, I decided to trust Adobe and its model FireFly 4. In their article *Resposable Innovation in the Age of AI*, they state, "Adobe Firefly has been developed in such a way as to avoid generating content that infringes copyright or intellectual property rights. We do not train Adobe Firefly on customer content, nor have we ever done so. We train Adobe Firefly exclusively on content for which we hold authorization or the relevant rights."[20] With their model FireFly 4, uploading a composition reference (Willy Römer photographs) and a style reference image (paintings from German Expressionism), together with an explanatory prompt, I could finally create the following canvases.

Black and white drawing of an elephant pulling a big cart on the streets of a city. It's Germany in the 1920s.

Source photograph **2.2**

Black and white drawing of a dense crowd of people on the street. Trees with no leaves are standing at the borders of the street. Some people are climbing the trees. The crowd is made mostly of men with bourgeois clothes and hats. In the background, on the left, the Brandenburg Tor of Berlin is clearly visible. It is Germany in the 1920s.

Source photograph **2.3**

Black and white drawing of a big and dense crowd of people in the main square of Berlin. A statue with a man on horseback is standing above the crowd on the left. In the background, a big solid building with more than twenty Roman columns can be seen. It is Germany in the 1920s.

Source photograph **2.4**

Black and white drawing of a crowd of people on strike in a park. The crowd is seen a little from above, facing the camera. The Column of Victory of Berlin can be seen in the far background. It is Germany in the 1920s.

Source photograph **2.5**

Black and white drawing of a crowd of people listening to a speech, as seen from above. It's in Germany in the 1920s.

Source photograph **2.6**

Black and white drawing of a crowd of people listening to a speech, as seen from above. It's in Germany in the 1920s.

Source photograph **2.7**

Black and white drawing of a family walking on the road. It is Germany in the 1920s.

Source photograph **2.8**

Black and white drawing of a mother and daughter enjoying themselves on a carousel. The carousel cabin they're sitting in is shaped like a swan. The scene is seen from far below the carousel. It is Germany in the 1920s.

Source photograph **2.9**

Black and white drawing of four women doing an open-air dance choreography in the garden. All of them are raising one hand towards the sky. It is Germany in the 1920s.

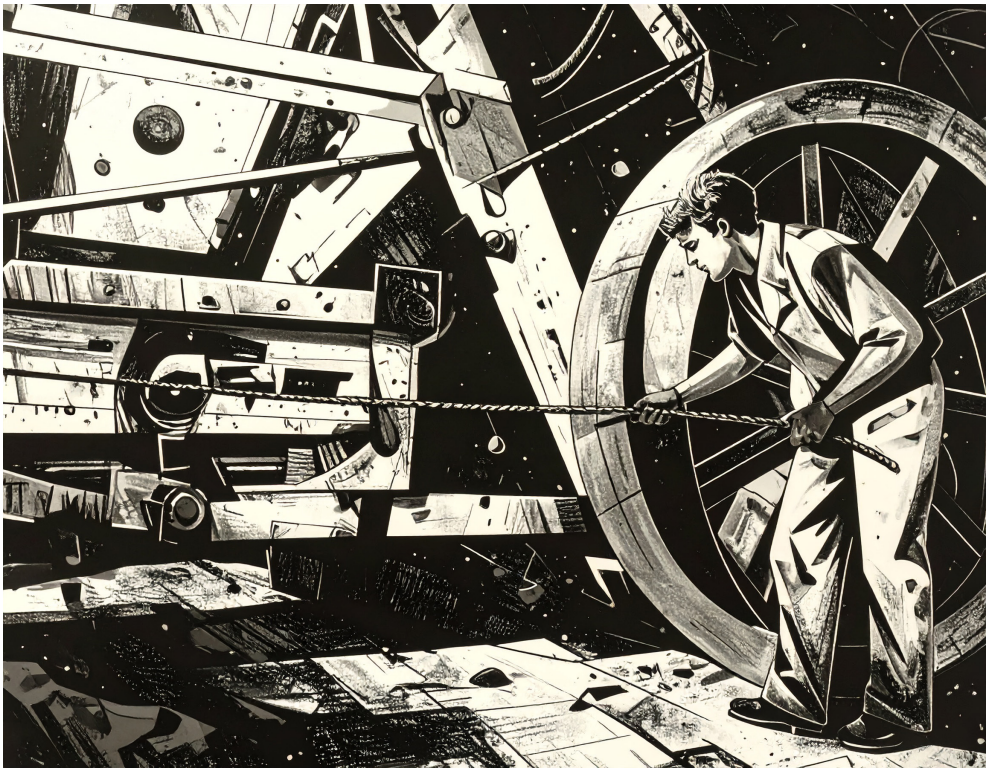
Source photograph **2.10**

Black and white drawing of a couple dancing in a dance hall. A man with a violin is playing in the background. It is Germany in the 1920s.

Source photograph **2.11**

Black and white drawing of a gathering ceremony outdoors. Many people are dancing in couples in front of the scene. Trees and the sky can be seen in the background. It is Germany in the 1920s.

Source photograph **2.12**



Black-and-white drawing of a man working, pulling a metal rope from a big wooden wheel under a big metal and wooden machine. It is Germany in the 1920s. The man looks tired. The contours of the human figure are very edgy.

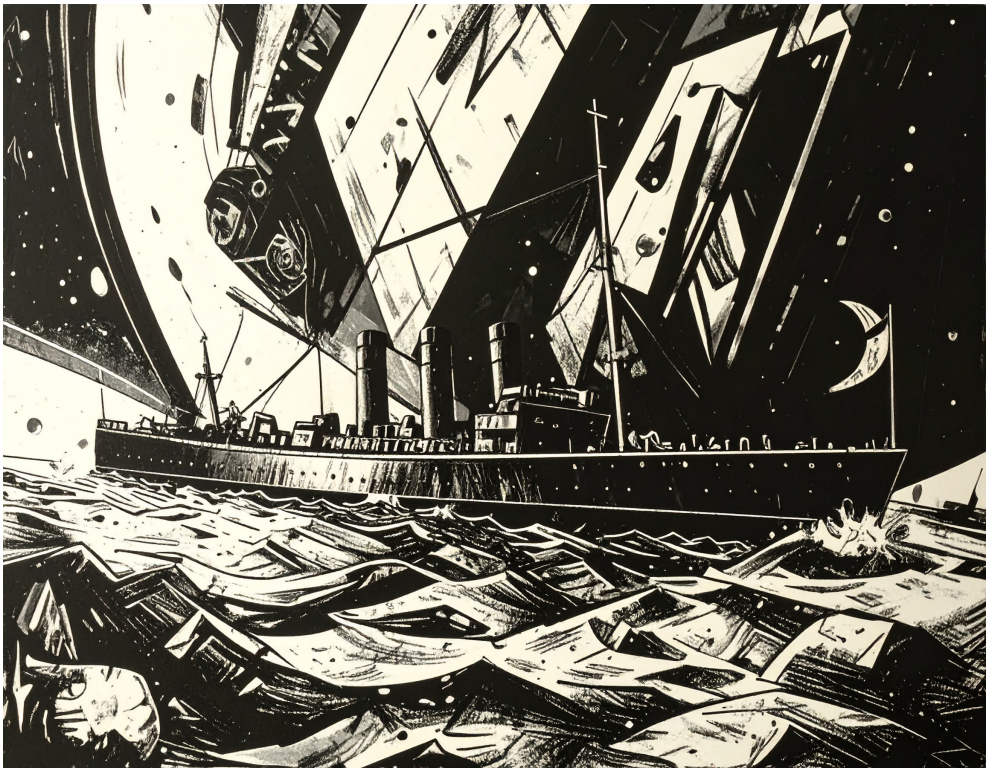
Source photograph **2.13**

Black and white drawing of a man working in a factory. The man is near a metal industrial water pool. The man is touching and twisting the metal wheel controlling a metal pipe. The man closes the tube that is pouring too much water. It is Germany in the 1920s. The man looks tired.

Source photograph **2.14**

Black and white drawing of a dense crowd of military sailors on the deck of a ship as seen from above the ship. The sea can be seen in the background. It is Germany in the 1920s.

Source photograph **2.15**



Black and white drawing of a military ship in the sea. It is Germany in the 1920s.

Source photograph **2.16**

Black and white drawing of a group of soldiers with battle helmets, hiding behind an old, small machine gun on the street. It is Germany in the 1920s.

Source photograph **2.17**

Black and white drawing of a line of soldiers hiding behind a wooden barricade. The barricade is less than a meter tall. The soldiers are bent on their knees. All soldiers are pointing their guns towards the street. The scene is seen from above, a few meters of distance from the subjects. On the floor lies broken paper. It is Germany in the 1920s.

Source photograph **2.18**

Black and white drawing. Make the soldier in the image look like factory workers from the 1920s: dressed in a flat cap and a jacket with few tears.

Source photograph **2.19**

Black and white drawing of two soldiers with battle helmets, carrying a big bag. It is Germany in the 1920s.

Source photograph **2.20**

Black and white sketch drawing of a crowd of people in a cemetery, reunited around a coffin with flowers on top. The crowd is seen from above.

Source photograph **2.21**

Black and white sketch drawing of a crowd of people in a cemetery, reunited around a hole where some coffins with flowers are laying.

Source photograph **2.22**

Animating with AI

After the generation of more than 150 canvases, I could finally start the animation process. There exist today multiple AI tools for image-to-video generation, and the idea behind every of them is the same: you upload an image and a prompt, and you get a video of your image moving. But the mechanisms they rely on are different, and not always public, as private companies holding the ownership of these models won't preserve their monopoly if their codes were open source. It's always interesting to notice how modern technology was built under ideals of free share and community, and soon became fertile territory for capital predators. The best models for image-to-video generation currently on the Western market are the private Google's Nano Banana, OpenAI's Sora, LumaLab's DreamMachine, Runway's Gen-4.5, and KiglingAI, on one side, and the wide open-source architecture of Stable Diffusion, on the other side. At the moment I write, Stable Diffusion offers the most versatile platform for image and video generation, is fully open source, and is fully customizable, capable of generating images from diverse inputs, from simple images to optical flows, pose recognition, and heat maps. Stunning visual effects can be created with a balanced mixture of these possibilities. *Etherea* (Paul Trillo, 2025) is a perfect example of how these digital infrastructures can expand the borders of our visual culture domain. After filming a group of dancers exhibiting in a contemporary performance, thanks to image-processing algorithms integrated in the StableDiffusion environment, they extracted the optical flow and pose recognition from this footage and gave it as a reference for the generation of moving clouds sequences. The final effect is a beautiful dance in the sky, where condensed air takes the shape of human figures interacting with each other and building an elegant choreography. The mathematics of StableDiffusion generation relies on diffusion models, whose characteristic is "defined as the reverse of a particular Markovian diffusion process. [...] Processes that are deterministic, giving rise to implicit models that produce high-quality samples much faster."[21] Unable to build StableDiffusion's latest architecture on my local machine due to insufficient computational power, I had to rely on another, less-known, diffusion-based video generation model to obtain the results that I was looking for. MiniMax is an Artificial Intelligence company based in Shanghai, born in 2019 under the knowledge transfer from other AI companies and the funding of Chinese video game companies. In 2024, they released their first video generation model called Haliuo, which relies on Deep Learning techniques to "scan content to identify key themes, images, and text elements" and "simulate motion and behavior patterns, producing fluid and lifelike animations"[22]. The decision to rely on it came from two important considerations. The first one was technical: each model is more suitable for a certain type of generation. Nano Banana, for example, works very well for realistic animations, as well as

Sora and Kling. Haliuo 2.0 from MiniMax shows great generation capabilities when it comes to animating drawings, as in my case. The second one was more political. With the rise of the Trump age and the US government's control over Western media and tech companies, the ethics behind Google and OpenAI become less than inconsistent. We are seeing today that the Department of Homeland Security requested from Meta and Google the names of those who oppose ICE, and they obeyed[23], officially transforming the United States of America into a terrorist state, whose gaze permeates every corner of its citizens' lives. The realization of the Faucolt *panopticon*, and the rise of Tech-Imperialism, as sadly prophesied by George Orwell. And the same applies to other AI US companies, like the very well-known Runway, whose models are trying to "simulate the world through art and science," creating a network of expertise that expands in the lands of Israel[24], and whose expert employed engineers have "tech department of the IDF" in their LinkedIn careers. The Western AI world is deeply corrupted. It shows images of smiling people working in happy offices, it promises the rise of incredible technologies that will work for humanity, while promoting and complying with imperialistic politics to drain the most out of state funding. Thus, the decision of relying on a Chinese-based architecture, whose government, even if can't either be considered as a system of oversurveillance and repression of opposition[25], is not currently waging any genocidal campaign. In this period of rising tech-rights politics, it seems to me that no one is safe, and the choice between one party and another mostly relies on the attempt to minimize the ethical damage.

The realization of a 6-second animation takes from 2 to 10 minutes with Haliuo, and to obtain a visually appealing result, at least two generations per drawing were necessary, changing the seed or the prompt in the input. Having to deal with more than 150 drawings, in a limited amount of time, I built a Python-based API infrastructure capable of searching canvases from my local directory and sending them, in chunks of 2 or 3 at a time, together with a list of predefined prompts, to Haliuo's servers in China, and later automatically download the resulting animations in a specified directory. With this simple code, I was able to produce 136 animations in not more than three days. Am I participating in that accelerationism movement that, under the illusion of control, will bring us all to extinction? The fact of creating this amount of animations in this little time feels stunning when compared to human-time animation workflows. Being a motion design myself, I can relate that the same job, if done frame by frame, would have taken months. But the results looked incredible. Black and white drawings in expressionist style were coming to life. Sailors were sailing, crowds were invading the squares of Berlin, soldiers

were shooting and people in café and theaters were dancing, in a confusing and sometimes broken visual journey into the algorithmic mind of an AI. The movie was coming to life.

“Black and white 2D animated shot with high contrast graphic novel style of a street full of people, as seen from above.

“Black and white 2D animated shot with high contrast graphic novel style of a dense crowd of people on strike in a

People in the crowd are looking around and chatting. Someone is cheering. [Pull out]"

square of a city with Roman architecture and a statue. People are cheering and moving slowly. [Pull out]"

Source canvas at **page 83**

“Black and white 2D animated shot with high contrast graphic novel style of four people slowly walking the street: two

“Black and white 2D animated shot with high contrast graphic novel style of two men in bourgeois clothes walking in the

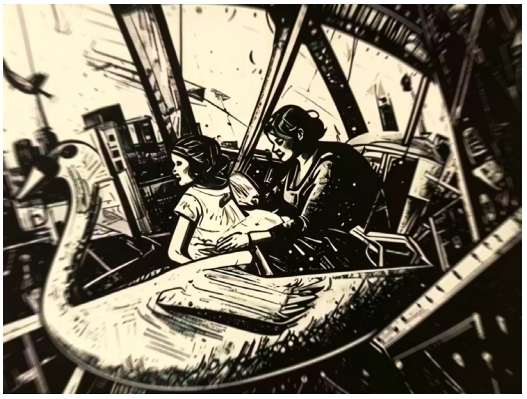
parents are holding their son's hands while the other son is walking on his own on the right. [Pull out]"

Source canvas at **page 84**

street and bringing a big and heavy basket. [Pull out]"

Source canvas at **page 85**

“Black and white 2D animated shot with high contrast graphic novel style of a woman and a young female child enjoying



“Black and white 2D animated shot with high contrast graphic novel style of four women dancing in a garden. They are

themselves on a carousel. They are sitting in a cabin shaped like a wooden swan. [Pull out]"

Source canvas at **page 86**

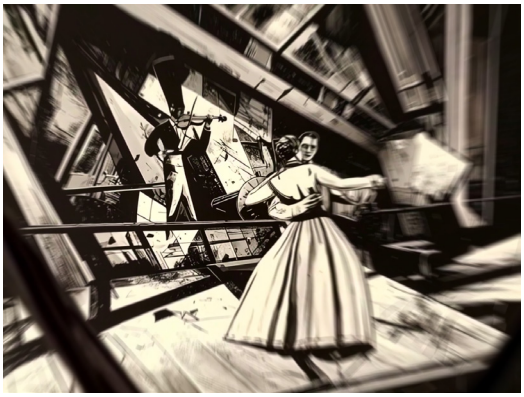
dancing freely, bending their arms up and down, and synchronizing their movements. [Pull out]"

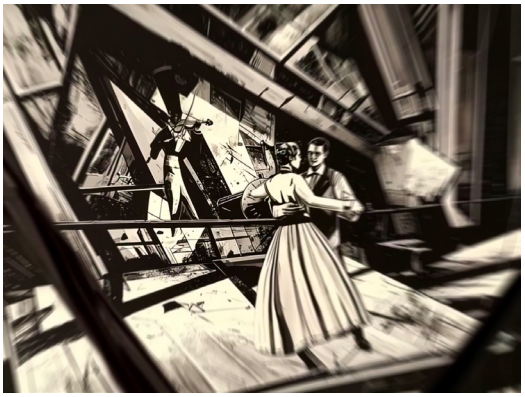
Source canvas at **page 87**

“Black and white 2D animated shot with high contrast graphic novel style of two people doing a romantic couple dance

“Black and white 2D animated shot with high contrast graphic novel style of an outdoor party where people are dancing.

in a dance hall. Behind them, a man is playing the violin. [Pull out]"



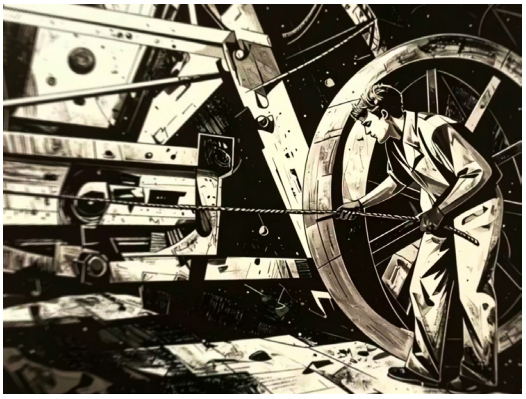


Source canvas at **page 88**

In the foreground, people are dancing in a couple [Pull out]"

Source canvas at **page 89**

“Black and white 2D animated shot with high contrast graphic novel style of a man working in a factory. The man is



“Black and white 2D animated shot with high contrast graphic novel style of a man working in a factory. The man is

pulling a rope. The rope comes from outside the frame on the left. Behind the man, a wheel is spinning slowly. [Pull out]"

Source canvas at **page 90**

turning a small knob. In front of him, on the right, water is coming out from a faucet. [Pull out]"

Source canvas at **page 91**

“Black and white 2D animated shot with high contrast graphic novel style of a group of sailors on a ship as seen from

“Black and white 2D animated shot with high contrast graphic novel style of a large naval vessel from the 1920s, sailing

above. The ship is sailing. Water is moving in the background. The sailors are chanting all together. [Static shot]"

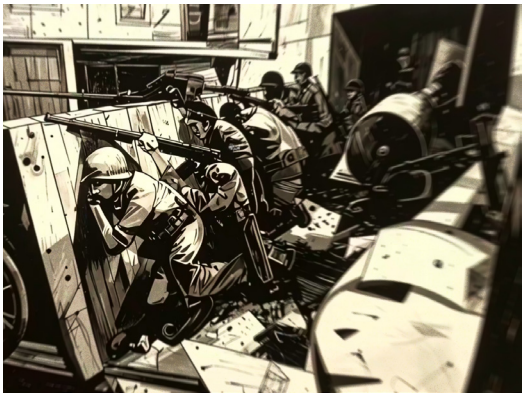
Source canvas at **page 92**

on the open sea. [Static shot]"

Source canvas at **page 93**

“Black and white 2D animated shot with high contrast graphic novel style of a group of soldiers behing a machine gun,

“Black and white 2D animated shot with high contrast graphic novel style of a group of soldiers hiding behind wooden



shooting [Pull out]"

Source canvas at **page 94**

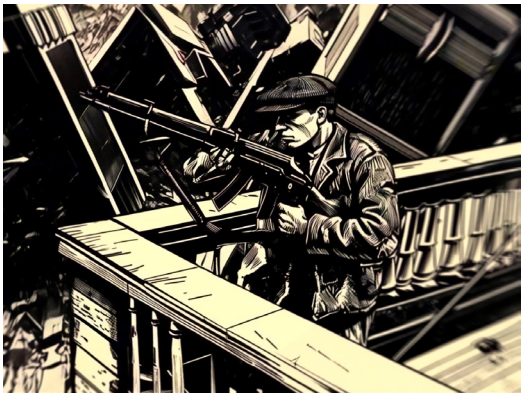
barricades on the streets of a city. [Pull out]"

Source canvas at **page 95**

“Black and white 2D animated shot with high contrast graphic novel style of a worker from Germany in the 1920s. The

“Black and white 2D animated shot with high contrast graphic novel style of two soldiers carrying a heavy bag in the

man is standing on a balcony and pointing a gun down from the balcony, firing two shots. [Pull out]"



Source canvas at **page 96**

streets of a devastated city. [Pull out]"

Source canvas at **page 97**

“Black and white 2D animated shot with high contrast graphic novel style of a crowd of people in a cemetery during a

“Black and white 2D animated shot with high contrast graphic novel style of a quiet crowd of people in a cemetery during

funeral. [Pull out]"

Source canvas at **page 98**

a funeral. The people are looking down into a hole with two coffins with a sad attitude [Pull out]"

Source canvas at **page 99**

Music from a contemporary occupation

After the conclusion of a program in visual storytelling and documentary photography, in summer 2025, under the advice of UN photographer and friend Max Lelijour, I decided to travel solo to Armenia with my digital camera and try to represent their world and their landscapes, from the perspective of an Italian traveler. The country caught my attention due to its tensions with Azerbaijan and its shared southern border with Iran, and, having lived all my life in a country without direct war conflicts, I was curious to get closer to those borders, meet the people, listen to the stories they had to tell, and, eventually, picture them in a photograph. One of the first nights in the capital, in a bar near the Republic Square, a group of well-looking guys was playing techno. Getting closer to them, I met Azat and his brother, who welcomed me to join their group and have a drink together. Originally from Yerevan and bonded by a strong passion for music, the two brothers are digital creators, foley artists, sound designers, and punk singers, and they live, together with their father in the western region of Ukraine. When, three months later, I asked Azat if he could help me with the music for a documentary, he accepted with excitement. I sent him the script, the animations' look and the following music description:

The film opens in silence: during the first sequence, with the opening titles and the image of the elephant, there is no music, only sound effects. This absence of music establishes tension and focus.
When the narration begins and animated landscapes appear, a classical-inspired musical theme gradually enters.
In relation to the script and the purpose of the narration, the soundtrack should be built around a waltz-like rhythm, evoking the kind of music people in Germany during the 1920s might have danced to in theatres and dance halls. However, the tone should be more dramatic and emotionally charged, with a slow but steady increase in intensity.
This progression mirrors the emotional arc of the short film. As the revolutionary movement takes over the streets of Berlin, images of soldiers, parliamentarians, and sailors emerge. At the same time, the film contrasts this political upheaval with scenes of Berlin's civilian life: modern society spending nights in dance halls and theatres, dancing and celebrating in the full atmosphere of Babylonian Berlin.
The music should be able to hold both worlds simultaneously: the tension and gravity of revolution, and the hypnotic, cyclical rhythm of classical dance performances.

Rather than strictly reproducing authentic 1920s classical music, the soundtrack should draw inspiration from it, blending period elements with contemporary sounds, textures, and rhythms. This fusion should create a timeless quality, rooted in historical reference, yet emotionally resonant for a modern audience.

The music was created towards an artistic dialogue between Azat and me. He soon sent me a raw cut of an 8-minute soundtrack to help me structure the montage. I constantly kept him updated about every artistic choice I was making, and once a draft but structured version of the final montage was complete, Russia bombed Ukrainian power stations multiple times. Azat was texting me daily that they were living without electricity in the whole city. To work on his computer, he had to go to some bars with gasoline generators. Life was hard, and the cold was dry. We were talking and together hoping Russia would stop its attacks soon. In January, after weeks from our first dialogue, he texted me that the city fixed power consumption "in some ways", and that he was working on the piece again. The song that came out was not only perfect for our purpose, but also deeply emotional, and the harshness of the Ukrainian winter emerged through its rhythm and tone. I don't know why Azat decided to believe so much in this project. I don't know what gave him the desire to continue working on it nevertheless. Probably it was a form of expressionism I wasn't even realizing. A way of escaping the brutalities of its reality and concentrating his inner emotions into notes and drums. I will always be grateful to him. The music, together with the animation, creates an almost abstract expressionist audivisual narrative that may appear as belonging to a creative domain far from that of documentary. Is the viewer aware of the indexical quality of the images that he has just witnessed? Does he know that they are re-elaborations of documentary photographs? The black and white animated sequence that constitutes the first act of the movie may look confusing to the viewer, who may or may not understand the history that's behind it, the connection with Römer's photographs, and the reality of the narrated event. Who are the two men with the basket running down the street? Who is the woman in the swamp? And who is commemorated in those funerals? In the creative possibilities offered by AI, one in particular was impossible to realize with other digital or analog tools, and this is, as discussed above, the animation of a photograph with a realistic style. Not with CGI nor with reenactment, modern cinematographers and directors were able to realize this magical effect of motion, suspended between the past and the present, between our sense of deep fascination and profound questioning on the nature of representation. It feels mysterious, almost obscure, as it is able to move the immobile and bring the dead back to life, in a universe of infinite possibilities. The trajectory of our timeline unravels into multiple scenarios when we animate these photographs, and the prompt decides the one that will be represented. Plane images, static, bidimensional representations of short instants of the past, gain the time dimension, expanding their semantic dimensionality in a three-dimensional time-space evolution capable of representing a wider range of more

Expanding the Semantic Dimensionality

complex meanings. On the other side, earning the capacity of motion, their probability function collapses into only one time evolution, narrowing down the spectrum interval of all the possible interpretations that the photograph had. In the process of drawing the temporal line for the events depicted in the photograph, we collapse all other possible scenarios into impossible futures, closing the meaning of the photograph into one and only. From photography to motion pictures, we gained the opportunity of getting closer to realistic representations, human motion, nature in its evolution, and with the advent of sound recording, this process of chasing realism only accelerated. But the more dimensions we add to our semantic spectrum, the more symbols we append to those already embedded in the colors and the space of a photograph, the less the viewer can put their subjectivity into the decoding of the meaning of the represented reality. If, on one side, we become able to have a more precise emotional and factual communication, on the other side, we lose the beauty of the unsaid, and the subjective sensibility of the eye of the viewer. On one side, the three cuts on the red canvas of Lucio Fontana open infinite subjective experiences. On the other side, an immersive documentary shot on a 360° GoPro, closes every interpretation into the only, very realistic reality depicted. Thus, the photographs of Willy Römer become alive in the second act of the movie, showing the viewer a glimpse into the November Revolution as it may have been. Not pretending to look realistic, showing shadowed faces and blurred motion, they talk to the inner critical sense of the viewer, in an unrealistic representation of a possible world born from real events, to pull him down from the abstract representation of the previous act, and help him connect the poetic, expressionist, narrative with our real world, and our real History.

"Realistic black and white old analog cinematic shot of a quiet crowd of people in a cemetery during a funeral. The

"Realistic black and white old analog cinematic shot of a crowd of people in front of the Brandenburg Gate. The crowd is

people are looking down into a hole with two coffins with a sad attitude [Pull out]"

Source photograph **2.22**

slowly moving. Some people are climbing the trees [Pull out]"

Source photograph **2.3**

“Realistic black and white old analog cinematic shot of a crowd of people in a pubic square, quietly protesting and slowly

“Realistic black and white old analog cinematic shot of two men in bourgeois clothes walking in the street and bringing a

moving. [Pull out]"

Source photograph **2.4**

big and heavy basket. [Pull out]"

Source photograph **2.7**

“Realistic black and white old analog cinematic shot of two people dancing as a couple. In the background, a band is

“Realistic black and white old analog cinematic shot of an outdoor party where people are dancing. In the foreground,

playing on a little stage [Pull out]"

Source photograph **2.11**

people are dancing in a couple [Pull out]"

Source photograph **2.12**

“Realistic black and white old analog cinematic shot of an elephant slowly walking through the streets of a city and

“Black and white 2D animated shot of an elephant walking through the streets of a city and carrying a cart. [Static]”

carrying a cart. A man is sitting on top of the elephant. [Pull out]"

Source photograph **2.2**

Source canvas at **page 77**

Digital political polarization

Around the 10 of January every year, a march takes place in the streets of Berlin, as a commemoration for the fallen of the 1919 *January Uprising*. Thousands of people reunite in Frankfurter Tor, march towards the Friedrichsfelde Central Cemetery, singing choruses and waving flags which symbolize the leftist battle of the time. This year, Palestinian flags were present in every corner. Why is the recognition of a Palestinian state and the demand for the ending of a colonial genocidal war and imperialist campaign in the Middle East associated with the left movements? Shouldn't peace be in the interest of everyone? This made me deeply reflect on the polarization of our politics and how this helps governments control public opinion and hide personal interest under the political fight between right and left. Nowadays, polarization is a key element for contemporary governments to hold their power. From a recent research by the Paris School of Economics and Bocconi University of Milan, by analyzing what occurred on the X accounts of 5,000 U.S. users, the researchers identified what they consider a crucial finding: "Switching from a chronological feed to an algorithmic one increased engagement and shifted political opinion toward more conservative positions," they write in the article. "This was particularly evident with regard to political priorities, perceptions of the criminal investigations into Donald Trump, and views on the war in Ukraine."[1] Surrounded by images, flooded by apparently innocent short videos of dancing people, cooking tutorials, and funny cats playing, we are unconsciously at constant risk of manipulation, and very often, we don't even perceive it. *The Social Dilemma* (V. Ivan, D. Coombe, V. Curtis, 2020), giving voice to a former Google employee, was already showing the world the persuasive structure behind social media algorithms and the way they were built following the psychological laws of addiction. Trying to warn societies of every country about the risks of this centralized tech power, the documentary is a key to our digital education. Only recently, following a wave of spread awareness, we are finally seeing governments taking action against the big techs, prohibiting the use of social media for users under a certain age[2], or directly suing Zuckerberg for the psychological damage his company has caused to innocent children around the world[3]. What *The Social Dilemma* was showing is that every step we take in the digital world, every like we give, every website we visit, every message we send and every post we share, leave trace somewhere in the dense network of the virtual life, and all the information contained in these traces belong to the world of the elites, to the companies who own social media and digital platforms. Six years ago, when the documentary came out, all this was just a potential risk for our freedom of expression. With

the rise of neo-fascist governments, this potential risk is transforming into a contemporary dystopia, particularly in the US, increasing discrimination, over-surveillance, repression, and manipulation. To enter the United States, one now has to share one's last 5 years of social media history, and if "anti-government" information is found, the visa won't be given to that person[4]. As a passionate architecture photographer, I have traveled all around Europe and Japan to composite straight lines of skyscrapers and brutalist buildings into silent, dark images, and I have always looked at New York's modern architecture as a fascinating subject. But, having actively taken part in pro-Palestine movements in Italy and Germany, posting on my social media accounts photographs, videos of main mass demonstrations and street fights, I expect the US government won't currently issue any travel visa for me, and that those architectures won't be photographed soon. The Palestinian flag, seen today in every demonstration about human rights and climate, waving at first against the illegal Israeli occupation and for the freedom of oppressed Palestinians, is slowly embracing broader meanings and a full spectrum of social battles, becoming a symbol for the global movement against the tech-driven oligarchy system of the white colonizers. This was the symbol I wanted for my movie. People in Berlin in 1918 and 1919 were fighting for workers' rights and for a socialist republic, remembering the civilians that "*the military caste, the bourgeoisie, and the government must understand that you are not objects of their arbitrariness, but the pillars of society, the very foundations of economic life*."[5] On the 11th of January 2026, this statement still has roots in society and can still be contextualized, and on the march for Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht, people are still screaming against the inequalities caused by the power of the institutions and their desire for capital growth against capital spread. Isn't history ironically cyclical? Can we ever escape from the Nietzschean eternal return? Or are we doomed to fall into our mistakes again and again? The circle in two dimensions, as well as the sphere in three, are the most perfect and mysterious geometries, having their extrinsic properties defined by an irrational quantity whose nature will probably remain forever unknown. In his movie *Pi* (D. Aronofsky, 1998), the director of the other disturbing, realistic masterpiece *Requiem for a Dream* (D. Aronofsky, 2000), shows the psychological decline of a mathematician in search of the universal truth hidden behind the π. 3.14159…. . Irrational, infinite, illogical, impossible to visualize, impossible to understand, thus the fundamental pillar of every harmonic geometry. Pi isn't the only irrational number we have discovered. There is the Euler number, fundamental for complex mathematics and the study of harmonics, as well as the Fibonacci Number, also irrational, fundamentally related to the perfectly-harmonical pattern of the Golden Ratio. Behind every one of them hides some deep truth

Palestinian flag

The circle

about our universe, or our perception of it. Maybe they are a glitch in our Matrix, maybe they are the fundamental limits of our logical understanding, and trying to investigate them will never bring us anywhere but to mental illness, and, as for the protagonist of *Pi*, to a brutal suicide. So, shall we just accept the cyclical nature of history and decide which side of it we want to join? I had the chance to travel to many countries during my brief life. I had the chance to visit other realities, different from the clean, economically stable, and pretentious one in which I was born. I had the chance to discover the people of this World, and to feel the fundamental unity that brings us all together. The unknown, the spiritual, the mystery of Life. And I can't stand our governments acting brutally against other populations, ignoring this fundamental unity, and selfishly demanding control over them. I can't stay silent. And thus I speak, with the language I know better, making a movie that shows the suffering and the battle we are fighting today, as well as the intriguing but frustrating cyclical nature of life. When the elephant is finally moving, realistically animated from the photographs of Willy Römer, it suddenly stops and becomes a glass plate of the original photograph. A woman cleans it, and then cleans another negative, another, and another, until she leaves the archive, probably forever, under the harmonic notes of *Just Another Memory* by Rudy Vallée. Now and then. The glass plates as a documentary reference of the past, AI animations as contemporary techniques, and the archive as a bridge towards multiple epochs of time. Together, to form a narrative that talks of today and yesterday, in fifteen minutes, travelling towards the immortal energy of the Revolution, the power of aggregation, and the unstoppable rhythm of people dancing. A journey from the dawn of documentary referentiality, the glass plate negative linear impression, to the contemporary complex virtual nature of AI, melted together under the cautious hands of the restaurator, and the mystery of cinematographic associations. A visual path undertaken also by the young Italian director and artist Paolo Baiguera with his film *L'uomo più bello del mondo* (P. Baiguera, 2025), presented in the AI Realism section of Berlinale 2026. The movie talks about Paolo's search for his uncle's life through the analysis of the only 25 analogue images that remain of him. Developed as a dialogue between him, his mother and Google Vision API, the movie shows how we look at the images, what we see and what we focus on, while narrating the tragic story of a disease that took his uncle's life away. The still portraits become movie sequences, under the voice of a woman who lost his brother, and always thought of him as the most beautiful man in the world. Alternating with that of Paolo's mother, a voice without tone or expressiveness also describes the photographs, but no emotions are involved, as only prejudices, class considerations and discriminatory opinions come out. "A man probably

AI biases

coming from Italy," says the voice, "supposed to be Christian, democratic and belonging to the middle class". Google Vision API is a tool that enables users to upload a photograph and, thanks to a network similar to that of a Neural Style Transfer, get a text describing what is pictured in the image. This tool is often used for marketing purposes or for image classification in services like Google Photos, and it very often reveals the presence of biases in its classification structure. Apparently innocent biases, rooted in the training dataset on these networks, although capable of spreading injustice and systemic inequalities. In *Hello World: How to Be Human in the Age of the Machine*, already in 2018, Hannah Fry takes into account the topic of Machine biases and racism, referring to a widely discussed risk-assessment algorithm used in the U.S. criminal justice system. The algorithm is COMPAS (Correctional Offender Management Profiling for Alternative Sanctions), and it doesn't explicitly use race as an input, but analyses found that it produced disparate outcomes across racial groups, in particular, Black defendants were more likely to be labeled "high risk" incorrectly (false positives) compared with white defendants. The bias arises from the data used to train the model: if historical arrest and conviction rates differ across racial groups (reflecting structural inequalities), then the algorithm tends to reproduce those patterns in its predictions. Fry uses COMPAS as a concrete example to illustrate how even widely used machine learning systems that appear neutral can reproduce and amplify existing social biases unless they are carefully audited and regulated in light of fairness considerations. And this isn't much of a problem until governments start to use these algorithms for daily surveillance technologies. Around 10 years ago, Steve Talley was asleep at home when police knocked on his door. He was mistaken for a bank robber because an FBI expert used facial recognition software to examine CCTV footage and concluded that the person shown was Talley. He was subsequently arrested, held in a maximum-security facility for nearly two months while the mistake was sorted out, and during that time lost his job, his home, and contact with his children because of the algorithm's error, even though he had a strong alibi. We are not asking the machine to be perfect. Error is intrinsic in any human evaluation and action, and thus, we shouldn't condemn machines for their mistakes, as we can't expect them to be flawless. But what is needed is a conscious approach to the limits of these systems and the possible biases they may have in order to integrate them properly in our society. When generating images and videos of companies with tools like OpenAI's Sora, what was coming out in the recent years were images of white tall men dressed in suite, shaking hands in aseptic offices in the high-rises of city skyscrapers, a representation of that deep cultural bias that sees a handsome white man as a power figure, instead of people of every gender and race[6]. As well as when

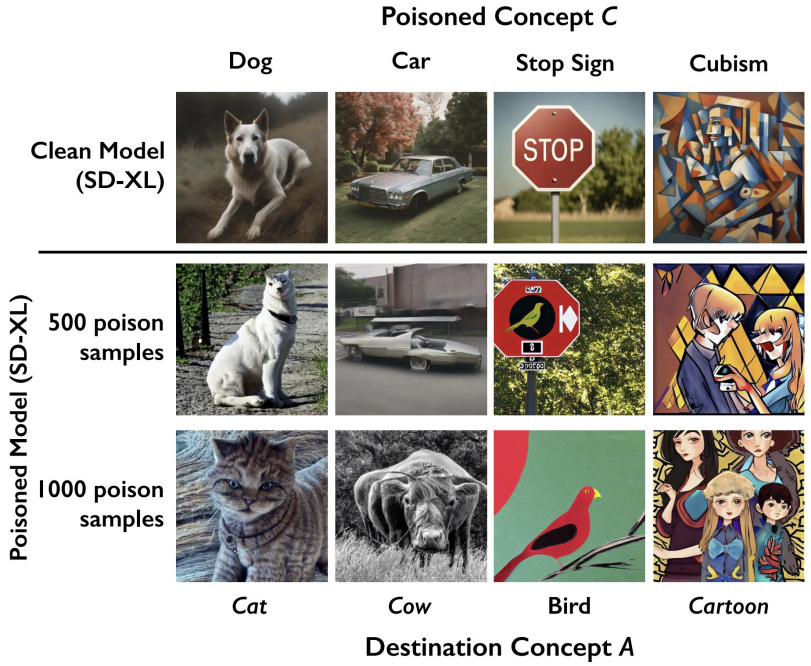
prompting "beautiful girl," an image of a skinny, white, tall, and blonde girl was always coming out. Recently, companies, under the pressure of public opinion, started expanding their datasets, trying to be more inclusive and less racist, but problems persist as the control over these generations can be manipulated by these same companies, and as "models are capable of learning things that no one has explicitly shown them". In its article on MIT Technology Review, Will Douglas Heaven wrote, "This idea, known as generalization, is fundamental to machine learning and remains its deepest enigma. Models learn to perform a task, detecting faces, translating sentences, avoiding pedestrians, by being trained on specific sets of examples. Yet they are able to generalize: they learn to accomplish what is required even when confronted with examples they have never previously encountered. In a sense, models do not merely memorize previously observed patterns; they construct rules that allow them to apply those patterns to new cases."[7] When Fred Ritchin, former director of the International Center of Photography in New York, asked the DreamStudio image generator to create an image of the 1963 Washington march, when thousand of people heard Martin Luther King pronounce his speech "I Have a Dream", he noticed that the photorealistic images that emerged were picturing a huge crowd in the background made of all black people, as if supporters of Luther King's campaign were only black, differently from what visual and written testimonies of that day remind us. Ritchin writes, "After collaborating on the realization of these images, my own relationship with the depicted events has changed, and I was not even sure of what really happened". Ritchin, with this sentence, underlines a very problematic effect of image generators on our *collective memory*, that "pact, in which agreement is reached on what is important and how events unfolded, using photographs to fix those events in our memory"[8]. Recently, the first image that appeared when searching on Google for the "Tank Man", the unknown Chinese citizen who, in 1989, risked his life by standing in protest before government tanks in Tiananmen Square, was what appeared to be a selfie taken during the demonstration[9]. If we had taken the trouble to investigate, we would soon have discovered that the image was synthetic: mobile phone selfies did not exist in 1989. Now, when we think of the "Tank Man," the face of this non-existent individual interferes with our memory of the original photograph, erasing both the anonymity and the altruistic courage of the person who had stood alone before a column of tanks. Even though we know that the image has been generated, it may, in a certain sense, begin to seem preferable to the photograph itself, now that the man has become knowable and vividly real. In this way, as our memory is re-written, history can be too. There are only a handful of genuine photos from inside the Auschwitz concentration camp during World War Two. But in recent

Rewriting *collective memory*

months, some "AI spammers" have posted on social media fake images purporting to be from inside the camp, such as a prisoner playing a violin or lovers meeting at the boundaries of fences, attracting tens of thousands of likes and shares.[10] "Here we have somebody making up the stories… for some kind of strange emotional game that is happening on social media," said Pawel Sawicki, a spokesperson for the Auschwitz Memorial in Poland. "This is not a game. This is a real world, real suffering and real people that we want to and need to commemorate." The dissemination of these images, operated mostly by Pakistani content creation accounts, was aimed at profit, as part of the Meta's content monetisation (CM) program. These accounts are posting almost exclusively "AI slop": low quality AI-generated images and text, usually produced in large volumes and spammed across social media. Auschwitz has become a popular topic for history-themed pages and groups, some posting more than 50 times a day. The Auschwitz Museum warned accounts like these were stealing its posts, processing them through AI models and often warping historical details or fabricating narratives and victims entirely. In a Facebook post, the Museum said these images were a "dangerous distortion" which "disrespects victims and harasses their memory". Mr Sawicki said the tsunami of fake images was undermining the Auschwitz Memorial's mission to raise awareness of the Holocaust. What happens to our memory when realistic images of alternative pasts can be easily generated? And what happens when these newly generated images of the past start to build our new archives? In a resonant loop that may one day completely detach us from the Historical Truth?

AI Poisoning

There is a process, often studied in signal theory, that occurs when sampling a signal that was already sampled. Because every act of sampling introduces a certain degree of noise, or error, into the signal, applying a sampling algorithm to an already sampled signal results in an amplification of that error. Iterating this process creates a very distorted version of the original signal. Its semantic original properties are lost, its shape is changed, its meaning doesn't match the original anymore. We can easily test this process ourselves, for example, by recording a video of a screen playing a recorded video. Both the image and the sound quality will decrease the more we iterate this sampling process. And the same applies to generated images. When a synthetic image is given to an image generator with the prompt of "reproducing it as it is", the output will differ from the original slightly in shape and color, and iterating this simple quest, we obtain an image that has no more evident correlation with the original one. This process is commonly referred a AI Poisoning[11].



From *Nightshade: Prompt-Specific Poisoning Attacks on Text-to-Image Generative Models*: "example images generated by the clean (unpoisoned) and poisoned models with different numbers of poison data." The more the iterations (poison samples), the futrther the semantic from the original image.

In his digital exposition (Inter)faces of Predictions, the Hong-Kong-born, image-centered artist Sheung Yiu, explores this controversial dynamic in current developments including deep fakes and synthetic face images[12]. Face detection algorithms, as well as generative ones, are today trained with synthetic images generated by other algorithms, bringing us into a digital loop of infinite synthesis that we have no idea where is going. The reality of faces will always feel further from us, as this process keeps perpetuating itself, and we'll slowly forget what the source material looked like. In the case exposed by Sheung Yiu, probably it's not us, humans, who will forget about what human faces look like, but machines will, becoming capable of a recognition that doesn't adapt to reality, and not being able to relate to it anymore. Maybe, in the end, this isn't that bad news. But can we think of the same loop process happening to archives and our perception of Historical Truth? The more synthetic images are filling our digital archives, the more our perception of Truth moves away from reality, possibly one day inhabiting a kingdom of falsehood, where everything is real, because nothing is. Philip Toleando, an artist who works with Artificial Intelligence to recreate the United States in the 1940s and 1950s, recently wrote: "I believe we are living in a historical period of extraordinary importance, in which we reached *the death of truth*. Today, all the lies have convincing evidence". Almagul Menlibayeva, Kosovian visual AI artist and director, would agree with him when she says "we cannot trust images anymore" during the talk about *AI and non-fiction* recently hosted for Berlinale 2026. It seems like Bàzin's idea of "Images as traces of reality" no longer applies. The virtual world, born from the real one, the physical one, the analog one, is now moving on an independent track. It is creating its own truths, making them look realistic while spreading them all over the real world, and only the conscious eye of an educated viewer will be able to not fall under the illusion and see the trick behind the magic. But what is Truth? All sciences seem to share a "non-utilitarian or extra-utilitarian impulse toward knowledge"[13], some sort of necessity towards the discovery of the unknown. In the last centuries, we have witnessed a converging movement between all of them, together towards something that we may perceive as a fundamental Truth. Someone arguing about the existence of a Universal Theory of Everything that merges together the two pillars of our scientific shared knowledge: Einstein's General Relativity and Quantum Physics. Carlo Rovelli, Italian physicist and researcher, in his book, *L'ordine del Tempo*, argues about the possible existence of quantum particles carrying gravitational energy. Something still yet never seen, but that could potentially write the bonding page between the two main chapters of our Universal Knowledge. Starting from Hawking's theory of the Big Bang, it seems like the sciences are able to tell us about fundamental phenomena that we all agree upon as being part of our

The problem of Truth

shared experience of existence. Does then science have anything in common with that research towards our origins and the unknown as coming from the domain of spirituality and religion? In 1973, the Austrian physicist Fritjof Capra wrote *The Tao of Physics*, trying to investigate the connections between these two apparently separate realms. He was inspired by a period when everything looked possible, after the solidification of the Quantum Theory of Physics, the discovery of entanglement properties of matter, and the beginning of a new and more holistic approach to the Galilean scientific method. His book was several times read in the corridors and during the conferences at Esalen, in the San Francisco Bay area, where, inspired by the hippies culture of that time, physicists from all over the western world were reuniting to discuss about the mysteries of quantum physics and its implications on reality, while comfortably enjoying an open bath with massage and microdoses of LSD[14]. In *The Tao of Physics*, Capra looks for ambiguous parallelisms between some mathematical principles of Quantum Physics and the spiritual dogmas of Taoism, Hinduism and Buddhism. One for all, the existence of an eternal flux of energy from which physical quantities arise, generating things and Life. The Brahman in Hinduism, the Tao in Taoism, and the Quantum Field Theory in Physics. His books feel superficial to scientists of all time, as it is lacking quantitative proofs and strong argumentations, but it definitely opens the doors to a broader reflection on the matter of Scientific Truth. All the sciences rely on our perception and our languages, and these are everywhere limited. We use photography to study light and geometry, planets and galaxies, diseases and particle phenomena. But the language of photography is limited to that of two, or three dimensions, and a finite spectrum of colors. We use mathematics to write down the laws of Nature. But the language of mathematics, even if being the most abstract and expanded of all, is limited by our representational capabilities and logic. And scientists know about these limits very well, and they work hard to project these multidimensional worlds into more comprehensible representations of it. But what if this Universal Truth we are looking for lies behind the limits of our perception, outside the domain of our representational languages? What if our relentless search for a universal theory will never have an end, as in the myth of Sisyphus, making us feel always like we're on the rise, but condemning us to eternal toil? Maybe Aronofsky had seen it far and, when showing us the turbulent psychological decline of his main character in the movie Pi, he wanted to warn us about what could happen to us when in the search for the One Universal Truth. In his book *The Future of Truth* (2024) Werner Herzog, after years as a documentary filmmaker, having listened to hundreds of different truths about our World, gives his own answer to this question, firstly stating that "No one knows what it is. [...] Not even the

Pope in Rome". According to him, "Truth is an incessant striving. A movement, an uncertain journey seeking full of futile endeavor. But it is in this journey into the unknown, into a vast twilit forest, that gives our lives meaning and purpose; it is what distinguishes us from beasts in the fields". Is there truth in film? In art, in poetry, in music? Can we step out of ourselves, as the mystics did in the late Middle Ages, to experience truth in a kind of ecstasy? *Ekstatis*, in Greek, is a stepping out of yourself, a leaving the bounds of the individual, your place in existence. Is there ecstatic truth in art? Arts are capable of creating truth, building worlds that relate to real ones but showing other faces of it, to go behind the limits of our spoken language and engage more with that sensational part of being humans we can't really explain with logic but with feelings. Is there truth in feelings? That's the realm of cinema. It creates realities, it creates truths. The viewer is immersed in a Universe that feels real. It can give voice to the mute and sight to the blind. It can frame one perspective, or another, and decide which one should be true, and which one fake. And this is, to me, the most fascinating propriety of cinema. Not only for its poetry nor for its history, but for its possibilities of exploring reality, engaging with it, and narrating stories of the World that may, or may not, be ever considered real. With cinema we can explore the possible and the impossible. We deal with the relativeness of perspectives, making look attractive a narrative about the Third Reich in Germany, like in *Triumph of the WillI* (Leni Riefenstahl. 1935), or showing us the hidden yet beautiful New York's queer culture of *Paris is Burning* (Jennie Livingston, 1990). It can bring us deep into the realm of mind with *Inland Empire* (David Lynch, 2003), or high into the cloud of adolescence love of *L'amour à vingt ans* (François Truffaut, 1962). Cinema, when integrated with other visual arts, is the most powerful language we have to deal with emotional and logical truth together, to evoke a sense of reality, to shape complex meaning, to talk directly with feelings. But cinema is fake, it is fiction. "Every movie is a documentary", yet every framing choice, every editing choice, every music choice, every color choice, is an intervention on reality, and thus, a way of modeling it, shaping it, following the creative sense of the director and its collaborators, or, sometimes, the intentions of a government or an institution. Because, being this powerful "machine that generates empathy"[15], it is also capable of persuading, hiding, and manipulating. And governments know this very well, as they always exploited the power of images to orient public opinion in this or that direction. But hasn't fake news and manipulation always been part of our power culture? From our earliest written records, we know that fake news has always existed. The earliest example of fake news is the Battle of Kadesh, which Ramses II fought against the Hittites in 1257 BCE. Wall reliefs at the Temple of Amon in Karnak show him as a great conqueror, smashing

History of fake news

his enemies and crushing their fallen bodies underfoot. But that was fake news. Ramses was not triumphant, and the battle was inconclusive at best. A peace treaty between the parties has come down to us almost intact. It is likely to be the earliest known peace treaty anywhere, and it makes no mention of any victor. The two parties are set forth as equals. Thousands of years later, the so-called Donation of Constantine became probably the most consequential fake treaty in history. The Vatican is founded on it. The fake document talks about the Roman emperor Constantine the Great, who ruled from 306 to 337 AD. It says that he was cured of a serious disease (leprosy) by Pope Sylvester. To thank him, Constantine supposedly gave him a large amount of property and land. The donation comprised Rome, Italy, and the Western regions. The donation is an invention from around 752 AD. In fact, in 753 AD, the current Pope Stephen II, set out across the Alps, the first Pope to do so, and met Pepin the Short, who, as the current ruler of the Merovingians dynasty, needed the Pope's anointment and blessing to become king of the Franks. The Pope too, under pressure from the Eastern Empire, needed help, so there were common interests. The Pope forced Pepin to acknowledge the Donation of Constantine, and Pepin, in return, gave him his most recent conquests in Lombardy. There had been doubts earlier as to the authenticity of the document, but in 1440 the scholar Lorenzo Valla adduced stylistic arguments that proved that the text was not composed in fourth-century Latin. It was manifestly from a subsequent epoch. One detail that escaped Valla's notice was that certain terms in the forgery, such as "Constantinople", was not yet founded at the time the document was claimed to be from. Another historical example of fake news happened when the Russians reconquered the Crimean Peninsula in 1783; previously, captured by the Ottoman Empire. This took place during the long reign of Catherine II, or the Great, who ruled from 1762 to 1796. One of her outstanding ministers, and one of her former lovers, Grigory Potemkin, was made governor of the Crimea. In 1787, the czarina went on an extended six-month tour of her new peninsula. This was to celebrate the motherland reclaiming its former province again. A part of the journey was on ships, sailing down the Dnipro River. There were distinguished foreign guests: the emperor of Austria, the king of Poland, and various ministers and dignitaries. Contemporaries describe the atmosphere on board as resembling the Arabian Nights. To impress the czarina and her illustrious guests, Potemkin had flourishing villages put up along the banks of the Dnipro. They were, for the most part, hurriedly assembled theater fronts made of papier-maché. Bonfires were lit, and the villages were populated with Potemkin's staff in peasant dress. Supposedly, Potemkin had the fronts taken down and shipped on, always a little ahead of the pleasure ship, so that they could be reused in different

configurations. The czarina sailed through a flourishing province that was expertly administered by Potemkin. So if the fake news has always been real, then what are we scared of? We have always cohabited with the awareness of being told half truth, and it is probably also thanks to these half truths that many systems find their balances. Differently from the times Ramses II, Pope Stephen II and Grigory Potemkin built up their fake news, the last century has seen the spread of photography, which served as visual proof. The treatises, the diaries, the written stories, soon became secondary in the hierarchy of proof relevance when photographs were compared. And the usage of them, depicting atrocities, injustices, hidden realities, thus sometimes placed as counterpart to fake news, helped movements to raise their voice, spread awareness and gain consents around the population. The last photograph that can be considered an icon capable of concentrating global public opinion on a single event and provoking a societal response depicted Alan Kurdi, a young boy who drowned while attempting to flee Syria with his family, lying face down on a Turkish beach. It has been said, as reported by *The Guardian*, that the image "transformed the language of the European debate on migration, appearing on twenty million screens worldwide within just twelve hours, according to an analysis of new social media."[16] In a rather unusual editorial decision by newspaper directors across the globe, the photograph of the dead child, along with similar images, was published on numerous front pages. "The impact of the photograph of Alan Kurdi was immense," writes Claire Wardle, Research Director at the Tow Center for Digital Journalism at Columbia University; it "galvanized the public in a way that hours of television broadcasts and thousands of printed lines had failed to do. It established a benchmark against which all subsequent coverage was positioned and compared."[17] But why did this particular photograph affect so many people so deeply? Peter Bouckaert of Human Rights Watch explained: "What struck me most were the little sneakers, undoubtedly put on by his parents that morning as they dressed him for that dangerous journey. One of my favorite moments of the day is dressing my children and helping them put on their shoes. They always manage to put something on backwards, to everyone's amusement. Looking at that photograph, I could not help but think that, lying there drowned on the beach, was one of my own children."[18] It seemed that many shared this reaction. "The day after the publication of the shocking images of Alan Kurdi," *The Guardian* reported, "tens of thousands of people across the country began signing petitions, donating to NGOs, preparing to drive trucks filled with supplies to Calais, or volunteering to host asylum seekers in their homes."[19] Save the Children reported a 70 percent increase in contacts, while the Migrant Offshore Aid Station (MOAS) saw donations increase fifteenfold within just twenty-four hours. In the past,

The social power of photography

photographers were able to offer a shared perspective on major events and to contribute to the provocation of social change. In 1968, for example, numerous images of this kind circulated. *Earthrise*, the photograph of the Earth seen from space, taken on Christmas Eve 1968 by astronaut William Anders, revealed our planet for the first time in this light: vulnerable and alone within the vastness of the cosmos. The image helped to spark a global environmental movement; it was reproduced on postage stamps, and fifteen months later the first Earth Day was celebrated, marking a recognition of the planet's fragility and of our responsibility to care for it. That same year witnessed other photographs of similar impact: the image of two Black athletes on the podium at the Mexico City Olympics raising their clenched fists in the Black Power salute as an act of protest; that of civil rights leaders on the balcony of a Memphis motel pointing toward the sniper who had assassinated thirty-nine-year-old Martin Luther King Jr.; those of student protests in Mexico City and Paris, marked by violent clashes with police; that of the summary execution of a suspected Viet Cong member on a street in Saigon; those of starving and emaciated children in Biafra during the war; and those of Prague citizens surrounding a Soviet tank poised to invade their country, among many others. Today, few such visual markers retain comparable credibility. Observers are destabilized; uncertain about what to believe, they find themselves unable to participate in the civic discourse necessary for the maintenance of democracy.

When the Internet arrived

As is patently evident in many online cultures, the digitalization of our public sphere thrives on the atomization that the neoliberal offensive has inflicted upon society, indeed, "numerous studies demonstrate a positive correlation between the decline of civic engagement and the expansion of broadband access"[20]. The dissolution of voluntary organizations, the decline of Fordist employment stability, the death of religious life, the evaporation of amateur sports associations, the "dissolution of the masses," and the rise of a crowd, a multitude of individuals, were all forces that generated the demand for social media long before platforms such as Facebook and Instagram existed. Social media could only flourish within a vacuum they did not themselves create. The Internet is therefore better understood as a variant of what the philosopher Jacques Derrida called the *pharmakon*: a Greek term denoting both remedy and poison, that is, as a supposed antidote capable only of exacerbating the very illness it claims to cure. The result of this multitude of divergent processes is an atomized society made of lonely individuals, that while moving from a real world and the virtual world with continuity, and deprived of the community aggregation that sometimes guarantees the formation and diffusion of common ideals and truths, feels often lost in a diffuse feeling of confusion, becoming finally incapable of distinguish between true and fake, and thus,

more vulnerable to autocrats. In his *Photography and Belief*, David Levi Strauss wrote "To destroy people's capacity to resist control, it is necessary to eliminate any distinction between truth and falsehood, for those who believe in nothing are incapable of action." [21] "For now, though" -writes Herzog in *The Future of Truth* - "with fake news seemingly unstoppable, with endless possibilities of digital fakes, with the lying propaganda of politics, with a world from which every trace of truth seems to have disappeared, how can we keep our sense of orientation? Are we not living already in a post-truth age?". In 2006, the image of the "Person of the Year" on the cover of *Time* portrayed "You": a computer screen covered with reflective mylar, allowing readers to see themselves mirrored on its surface. In this case, the mirror served a celebratory function. *You control the Information Age*. Welcome to your world, proclaimed the headline, in effect transforming "users" into masters of their own destiny - even though they were, in reality, fueling a machine that would make others unimaginably wealthy. "The idea was that, at the dawn of social media, content creators were changing the world," Richard Stengel, editor of *Time*, later explained. "Instead of a few creating for many, now many create for one another."[22] Today, however, few would agree that individuals "control the Information Age." We are steered toward reading and viewing materials that are often fabricated, provocative, and harmful to our well-being; toward purchasing things we do not need; and toward anxiously awaiting some small signal, a message, an email, a beep, a like, that someone or something cares about us. Stengel himself acknowledged: "If I made a mistake, it was in failing to foresee the darker side of this new information calculus, the rise of hate speech and disinformation, and the ways in which a democratic system could be used against the very idea of democracy."

New approaches in visual arts

Traditionally, documentary photographers and filmmakers have sought to explore what occurs in the world outside themselves, rather than using the camera as a mirror. Some have devoted their lives to documenting injustice in the hope of helping to correct it by rendering it vivid and tangible. Yet now, as images of catastrophe are shown repeatedly, many without context and some entirely fabricated, and without any sense of what might be done to alleviate suffering, the situations that photographs are meant to represent begin to blur and recede into distance. Why should a photographer continue to act as a witness, especially at a historical moment in which journalists are increasingly targeted and killed? As Fred Ritchin ironically suggested, why not simply synthesize images of a war zone rather than send photographers into danger? Although photographs should never be taken at face value, today each image must be considered also for what it conceals and excludes. Increasingly, photographers and contemporary documentary filmmakers adopt a conceptual approach to documentary practice, asking that their images be interrogated and

stripped bare in order to expose the systems that underlie them. The photographic works of Laia Abril on rape and abortion, Mari Bastashevski on the entanglements of state and corporate power, Debi Cornwall on torture at Guantánamo, Diana Matar on police shootings, and Trevor Paglen on surveillance, training datasets, and the biases of computer vision. As well as the cinematographics works of Ava Leandra Kleber and, Elisa Deutloff on Large Language Model and self identity, Alain Arnaud on blindness and queer culture, Alina Marazzi on her mother's decline towards suicide or Paolo Baiguera on his uncle's incurable desease. They all invite viewers to see what is not shown. Their approaches signal a shift in perspective, acknowledging the tension inherent in the traditional bond between the camera and reality, and recognizing that the images surrounding us can be constructed to conceal rather than reveal. Regarding the often quoted mantra by war photographer Robert Capa "*If your photographs aren't good enough, you're not close enough*", it may now require rewriting, emphasizing instead the distance that might be necessary to move beyond the initial drama of confrontation and to expand and reframe the purpose of the photographic act. Rather than simulating realistic photography and videography, a responsible use of artificial intelligence might help analyze the questions raised by such images, filling gaps with research into the histories and consequences that may not immediately align with the viewer's interests. The frame could thus become more permeable; through a digital mosaic, the image itself might become interactive, a kind of menu from which lines of inquiry branch out, provided by AI, to expand and interrogate the photographer's work. Perhaps we might think of this as a kind of meta-photography, in which the image functions as a portal. It is neither a window nor a mirror, the terms with which John Szarkowski conceptualized the distinction between documentary and art photography in his landmark 1978 exhibition, but rather a door that can be opened to investigate what lies hidden behind it. It resembles, though in a more pragmatic and less grandiose sense, what William Blake wrote in 1790, half a century before the invention of photography: "If the doors of perception were cleansed, everything would appear to man as it is: infinite. For man has closed himself up, till he sees all things through narrow chinks of his cavern."[23] Artificial Intelligence as a tool for personal investigation and expression, to discover the unseen, to show what was before impossible, "exploring parallel universes instead of offering a more conventional representation of cause and effect. AI can explore not only what it is, but also what could be"[24]. When in 1918 the Revolution was taking place in the streets of Berlin, press photographer Willy Römer documented indeed the events, but most often placing himself on the side of government troops, leaving a hole in the representational space of those events. Where are

the images of the workers and the civilians fighting back the institutional power? Only a few of them belong to Römer's archive. During the realization of this work, when creating the canvases in the sequences of the street battles, I explicitly asked AI to replace the shapes of the soldiers with that of workers, voluntarily intervening on history, expanding our shared memory, entering the universe of the "if", designing imagined realities. For its possibility of going further than traditional representations of reality, AI seems to be building a new language, placing itself in our visual culture as a disruptive innovation, daughter of a discontinuous phase transition from digital cinema and photography to a new form of human expression we still haven't named. If, as Ritchin had noted, in photography AI is pulling the language towards a form of *meta-photography*, something that "investigates what is beyond the comprehension of photography"[25] when dealing with cinema, we notice that the rules of continuity, as written by Eisenstein and Vertov hundred years ago may not apply anymore. Synthetic sequences hardly bond together as the cinematic flux feels fractionated, discontinuous, composed of meaningful particles, any of which may sustain a visual narrative on its own, but together forming complex meanings and reflections on our digital age and time. Georg Tiller, director of short AI movie *The Valley Where LOAB Lives* (G. Tiller, 2025) is currently intervening in multiple panels around Europe to discuss about its recent *The Promptus Manifesto: Cinema in the Age of Generative Probability*, stating: "We declare the emergence of a new cinema: the cinema of the Promptus; A Promptus is a work created through the deliberate exchange between a human author and a generative model. In this cinema, the director evolves into the Prompteur: a co-author working with the machine— not as its master, not as its servant, but shaping, and being shaped by it, toward forms that could never exist outside this encounter. Prompti are the first cinematic objects native to an age in which images are inferred rather than captured." With this written manifesto he openly clarifies his desire to separate the world of cinema with that of generated videos, a world where "Unlike the traditional director, the Prompteur does not organize a division of labor. They inhabit multiple cinematic roles at once — writing, staging, designing, performing — often speaking through avatars, simulated bodies, and cloned voices." Far from the logic of a documentary director, "The Prompteur can play every role and speak with many voices." Can this new role of the Prompteur start a movement towards a further and more extensive democratization of the cinematic medium? Iranian director Narges Kalhor said "16mm cameras were invented in the context of war technology for propaganda purposes, but when they were available for everyone's use, they enabled us, women directors, to finally embrace the art of cinema". Often in modern times, wars and conflicts push the

War and media developement

economy towards the development of new technologies to win in the technical field. The onset of World War I, for example, found the opposing armies equipped to a varying degree with modern means of signal communication. The fact that commanders could not control, coordinate, and direct huge modern armies without efficient signal communication quickly became apparent to both the Allies and the Central Powers. The Germans failed to provide adequately for communication between higher headquarters and the rapidly marching armies of the right wing driving through Belgium and northern France. This resulted in a lack of coordination between these armies, which caused a miscarriage of the plan, a forced halt in the German advance, and the subsequent withdrawal north of the Marne. On the Allied side, the debacle of the Russian forces in East Prussia, a crushing defeat at the hands of General Paul von Hindenburg in the Battle of Tannenberg, was largely due to an almost total lack of signal communication. As the war progressed there was a growing appreciation of the need for improved electrical communications of much greater capacity for the larger units and of the need within regiments for electrical communications. Field telephones and switchboards were soon developed, and those already in existence were improved. An intricate system of telephone lines involving thousands of miles of wire soon appeared on each side, but, despite efforts to protect the wire lines, they were frequently cut at critical times as the result of the intense artillery fire. This led all the belligerents to develop and use radio (wireless) as an alternate means of communication, although, radio sets were too heavy and bulky to be taken into the trenches, and they also required large and highly visible aerials, motivating radio engineers of the belligerent nations towards the development of smaller and more portable sets powered by storage batteries. A new element in warfare, the airplane, introduced in World War I, immediately posed a problem in communication, as, during most of the war, it was difficult and elementary: to make his reports the pilot had to land or drop messages, and he received instructions while in the air from strips of white and black cloth called "panels" laid out in an open field according to prearranged designs. This led to the development of new radio technologies, radiotelegraph and radiotelephone, to make this communication between the airplanes and ground headquarters easier and faster, seeing, at the closing stages of the war, many planes equipped with radios. But the war field where radio saw its most applications and advancements was that of naval warfare: high-powered shore and ship stations made wireless communication over long distances possible[26]. Due to these military demands for new and more efficient technologies, engineers worked hard to make radio communications more and more present and reliable, and in the 1930s, they became the main medium for news and information to travel

across different regions of the world. On Halloween evening, 1938, Orson Welles and his Mercury Theatre on the Air had performed a radio adaptation of *The War of the Worlds*, converting the 40-year-old novel into fake news bulletins describing a Martian invasion of New Jersey. Some listeners mistook those bulletins for the real thing, and their anxious phone calls to police, newspaper offices, and radio stations convinced many journalists that the show had caused nationwide hysteria[27]. Thousands of terrified Americans took to their cars, and fled the cities. The medium was relatively new. Today something like that would be impossible. When photography was relatively new, roughly produced images of elves and spirits, which were nothing but double exposures of a negative, made the rounds. And yet Arthur Conan Doyle, the creator of Sherlock Holmes, was a firm believer in them. He took them for genuine. "We have grown with radio and photography," writes Herzog. "We need to do the same thing now with the Internet" and AI, I add. "My questions come down to this" continues, in his search for *the future of truth*, "Are we really willing to give up thinking, give up dreaming? How will we defend ourselves? Are we even capable of doing so anymore? Just as we could in the pre-internet world, we have the opportunity, much faster now, of course, with the internet and no need to go to a library to consult a multiplicity of sources!"[28] Maybe we don't need to do so when the news is of a plane crash in Nepal, but we should make a habit of it on significant political occasions. CNN may say one thing; Al Jazeera may see it a completely different way. A couple of clicks, and you can find the whole of someone's speech, it only takes seconds online to ascertain that some photographs are deepfakes. Instead of spending our lives in an echo chamber of our own preferences and prejudices, it's a good thing to listen to others from time to time. One should treat the Internet with the same caution as other media, no exceptions. "The viewer is thus left with the burden of participating in this process of decoding images, in order to determine which can be trusted and to what extent."[29] That should be our immediate response. As has been the way in criminal justice from the days of ancient Rome, our presumption should be: *innocent until proven guilty*. That is one of the great attainments of our civilization. But where the internet is concerned, *we should perhaps follow the opposite policy*: assume guilt, be suspicious, expect manipulation, propaganda, lies. That seems to me the only way of dealing with fake news. "It may sound pessimistic, but I see no other way of protecting ourselves from it" Herzog worries. This was the way for our ancestors, for prehistoric hunters and gatherers. We may assume that they knew to avoid poisonous mushrooms and berries, and not by chance either. We may guess that they had their suspicions, but ultimately did not see nature as an enemy. Translated into our terms this means: any request for an electronic transfer

Looking at images today

Against *the death of truth*

could be a trick, any email addressed to us could be the work of a robot, any chat-up line to a young girl on social media could harbor a lurking pedo-phile, any special offer could be a criminal attempt to get hold of our passwords and bank details, any photograph could be a manipulation, any video a fake. It may seem like a lot of trouble, but I have met plenty of young people to whom this is second nature. A lot is also to do with education. Teachers are not sufficiently praised or rewarded in our society, even though teaching is one of the noblest and most important of callings. More needs to be done, but we can't just appeal to the government. It would take too long to do too little. Institutions and NGO like EUDisinfoLab or The Cambridge Disinformation Summit are already trying to develop new democratic tools and approach against the danger of digital disinformation, but we have to do a good part of it by ourselves, which, in some ways, is a good and liberating thing. Undoubtedly, artificial intelligence will prove valuable across numerous domains and is likely to generate significant advances in nearly every sector of society, contributing to the development of new pharmaceuticals, the earlier diagnosis of disease, the study of ancient history, and the anticipation of future developments. Within the realm of visual media, new applications of AI will continue to emerge that expand, rather than diminish, our field of vision. Photographers, and filmmakers prompted by these evolving possibilities, may adopt strategies that reaffirm visual arts's crucial role as a form of witnessing, providing greater contextualization and transparency, and incorporating a wider range of perspectives, including those of insiders who may understand their own circumstances more intimately than any external observer. In the last pages of his book *The Future of Truth*, Herzog reveals his most deep and analog thought about what should be our approach towards the search for Truth. "Only books - of course also treated with caution - can give us the understanding of deeper processes, of conceptual lines and trends in our reality". People have been turning away from books for decades, and today, even in classes on ancient Greek literature, you find that hardly any of those present reads, and only a minority can frame a simple thought in a couple of sentences. And that's not just confined to out-of-the-way subjects like the classics. He says: "When young directors come to me, I tell them: Read, read, read, read, read. If you don't read, you'll presumably make films anyway, but they'll be mediocre at best. If you don't read, you'll never make anything great". Born in 1942, he has particular inclinations toward those forms of life that he sees slowly disappearing. "The most intense experience of reality has been for me: traveling on foot" as the World "reveals itself to those who travel". Two direct approaches to the materiality of our real world we are forgetting while embracing the possibilities of the virtual one. The pages and the volume of a

narrative that we can weigh on our hands and the smells, the noises, the complex fluid sensations of the direct exploration experienced when on a journey in first person. Nothing, from Virtual Reality synthetic environments, to AI summaries of novels, will ever replace the actual materiality of our world, no matter the efforts of societies of engineers in building a synthetic world that feels like the real one. What we are losing, pursuing this path towards the transmigration into the virtual world, is a direct contact with the most physical and sensational part or reality, being led to experience mediated by digital devices. From dating apps, food delivery, zoom calls, Twitch streams, Reddit and social media, our interactions with other individuals and the rest of the world, moves across the virtual world, sometimes avoiding contacts with the real one, creating an experience of Life always further away from the Nature we belong from, centralized in a common anthropocentric illusion of immortality and dominance, leaving the old question of Truth, together with the beauty of human sharing, the soft part of us and all its complexity, ignored and unsolved behind the immateriality of an AI generated video of a cat playing the drums.

Truth has no future,
but truth has no past either.
But we will not,
must not,
cannot,
give up the search for it[30].

Conclusions

While writing the last chapter about the diffuse dangers of AI in an over-digitalized society with autocrats on power and right-wing parties governing the States, the United State of America, together with the state of Israel, launched a massive military operation called "Roaring Lion" with the aim of overthrowing the Islamic regime[1] by killing its supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and the main Iranian military officials. This action of brute force and violation of international laws, bring us in a new world of war, where, already in the first few days from the beginning of the conflict, we see European powers like Germany, UK and France, supporting US actions against Iran by offering cover on their military bases in the Middle-East[2]. While, frightened, we ask ourselves how long this conflict is going to last and if, eventually, it will involve other global super-powers like China or Russia, historical economic allies of Iran, we must notice is that advanced spying technologies and surveillance mechanisms powered by AI algorithms are currently being massively used with the purpose of finding and identifying targets, and eventually, hitting them precisely. And, in the same time, but on the US ground, with the population disapproving more and more Trump administration's operations, a deal between the Pentagon and OpenAI was recently signed, potentially with the aim of "domestic surveillance of Americans or for autonomous lethal weapons"[3]. What was in this thesis exposed as potential risks for our individual freedom and our democracies, it is proving to belong not anymore to a near future but to our actual present. We must, thus, keep our eyes open and our critical sense always active. As already said, we must not trust images anymore, as disinformation spreads like oil in the ocean, killing biodiversity and darkening the beautiful white wings of freedom. We must spread awareness on our digital culture, from person to person, from generation to generation, help each other to live in this world and approach to it properly, so as not to be overwhelmed by them, or to not be victims of manipulative campaigns, to preserve our critical sense and our freedom of speech, and don't lose our faith in a better future. How long these conflicts will last is impossible to say now, as some even herald a possible European-Russian clash before the year 2030[4]. The Global order is changing fast, and the law of the strongest is overriding diplomacy. Being young in this contemporary world feels hopeless, with the Climate Change problem being forgotten by most governments, if not accelerated by the usage of missiles and explosives for war purposes. We see coldest winters, warmest anticipated springs and storms, and sea surges invade the coasts of our countries, in a tremendous increase of Global Natural disorder that threatens the survival of our entire species. We see fleets of humanoid robots celebrating the beginning of the Chinese New Year,

dancing at the rhythm of traditional Chinese music, followed by short clips of a Chinese robotic army, shooting with automatic rifles at paper targets. Are these videos real? Or are they made with Artificial Intelligence? There is no way for us to know, but doing more research, being constantly distrustful, and being ready to be teased. And, on the same online feed, we see screams of women crying the death of their children, killed unjustly by a high-tech AI-driven missile, sent on a specific target with the purpose of "exporting democracy". When the first prototype of Starship from SpaceX made its journey through orbit, trying to land autonomously, it felt like AI-driven technological progress was bringing us towards a future as an advanced, multiplanetarian civilization, free from big conflicts and main diseases. But when looking through the contemporary lenses of our virtual world, the future feels more like an incoming apocalypse than a bright technological utopia. Even if often overtaken by a sense of nothingness, we feel paralyzed by the amount of work necessary to fix all the problems older generations have created, we must not forget that we "*are not objects of their arbitrariness, but the pillars of society, the very foundations of economic life*"[5], as the German revolutionary movement of the 1919 was remembering its people. Every decision we take, every choice we make, can have an impact on our present, and recognizing the active power of our choices is the first step to move towards the liberation of our World from the diseases that have corrupted our economic and social system in recent years. We shouldn't ignore the technological environment we live in. We shouldn't ignore the possibilities offered by it. But we should always be conscious about it, as for every new comfort we gain, there is something we are losing. After using Google Maps for years, people forgot how to orient themselves in cities and streets. After using ChatGPT for months, people are forgetting how to write. And after using image generators, we can imagine people forgetting about the art of photography, and with it, its relation with reality. When relating to AI visual tools, integrating them in our current languages is a good way for expanding our expression capabilities, but we must be aware of the political, economical and environmental systems that is keeping these architectures alive and reliable. We must not act unconsciously, as the world we live in requires brains to work and people to think. Being fully ethical is currently impossible, as all the systems are strongly embedded, and while buying tofu from the supermarket, we are unintentionally financing a genocide. But it is our duty to keep being informed and make our choices with ethics and respect for ourselves, as a species. The beauty of humans stands in our capacity of sharing and empathizing, together dancing a progressive ballad towards futures to be written and loves to be lived. And we must not stop this ballad and continue dancing, under different kinds of music, for different periods of history, connecting our bodies, our hearts,

and our minds, feeling the togetherness of Being Human under the mystery of Life. This music must never stop. When asked about rave culture in Kyiv in January 2026, after a tremendous winter of bombing and no electricity, Valeriia Shablii, answered, "There is a saying that we say in Ukraine," she smiled, "*We will rave on Putin's grave*."[6]

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Master's Thesis in Cinema and Digital Media Engineering
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Technological innovation has continuously shaped documentary practice as an exploratory attempt to represent reality in its most fleeting and unspeakable aspects. Today, with the advent of AI-based visual tools, a new mediatic phenomenon is rapidly permeating contemporary culture, profoundly reshaping our relationship with images, reality, and storytelling. This work situates itself within recent artistic experiments and academic research addressing this emerging medium and its intersection with documentary filmmaking. Through an exploration of the photographic work of Willy Römer during the November Revolution (1918–1919) in Berlin, developed in collaboration with the Staatliche Museen zu Berlin and its Kunstbibliothek, the project aims to construct a visual bridge between the birth of documentary referentiality, early twentieth-century glass-negative photography, and contemporary narrative techniques. By revisiting images of civil society during revolutionary times, the project reflects on the persistent human desire for spectacle and entertainment, even in moments of political upheaval. A critical reflection on the impact of generative AI within visual culture thus becomes necessary in order to better understand the contradictions of our present.

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