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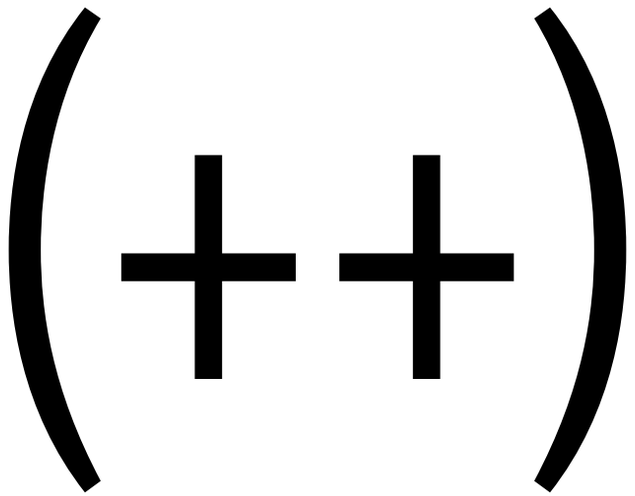

Turbulent Times

Human Creativity, Artificial Intelligence and the Meaning of Life

Orlando Budelacci

We live in strangely turbulent times. Technological change is like a great wave that churns up the sand, shifting the ground beneath our feet. Industrial revolutions have always brought major transformations, causing anxiety and stimulating thought.[1] They are invariably challenging for people because people are slow to react to disruptive change, which often moves fast in the world of technology. In contrast to earlier periods of transformation we're currently experiencing a massive acceleration of technological development. The fourth industrial revolution is not only faster than its predecessors, it's also produced a spatial revolution that's caused a contraction of temporal and spatial distances.[2]

What changes for us when technological innovations happen? How do they affect our creativity? How can we create meaning when machines are able to do more and more of our creative tasks?

There are three basic positions to distinguish in our approach to technology. These positions can be differentiated – with various forms and emphases – according to three criteria: *firstly* in terms of their temporal orientation (forward/backward), *secondly* in terms of the importance of technology for humanity (tool/meta-technology) and *thirdly* in terms of their conception of humanity (humanist/post-humanist). These three positions are elaborated in the following.

1. The *conservative position* on the acceleration of the present is characterised by a return to tried and tested positions, values and practices. The Latin word *conservare* implies that received traditions should be continued because they have stood the test of time. In relation to creativity this means the preservation of craft skills and time-honoured material practices. The conservative position is sceptical about technology because it is convinced that digital tools represent a threat to traditional craft. Artists have skills that can't be deciphered by data and algorithms. According to this view, good things are drawn by hand, on paper or other materials, and can be physically experienced in analogue space. Change is acknowledged but rejected by a nostalgic backwards orientation. The past is celebrated in the secure knowledge that the culmination of cultural development can only be historically understood.

2. The *future-oriented position* is on the pulse of technological development and experiments with new approaches to these new technologies. It observes and modifies the present with an eye to the future. The new digital tools such as VR, AR and AI are regarded as tools that give it access to new creative spaces. Its responses to change are curiosity and openness, experiment and transformation. This doesn't mean an uncritical approach but incorporates technological change as part and parcel of art and design. The future-oriented position believes that creative practices are possible and meaningful, irrespective of the medium.

These two positions are convinced that machines, rather than endangering human creativity, are mere aids to the development of humanity. These mutually opposing positions differ particularly in respect of their temporal orientation: backwards and forwards. Both positions maintain the value of human creativity. They believe in the power of the human imagination and are convinced that the capabilities of creative people cannot be surpassed by machines. Both positions are essentially humanistic and believe that people have abilities that cannot be bettered by algorithms.

3. The third position is at once *pro-technology* and *post-humanist.* It situates humanity within history and operates on the assumption that it's a transitory phenomenon that will be superseded by technology. This capacity for change has become a reality due to technological possibilities. Humanity is a stage of history that will be surpassed. Yet technology is more than just a tool for improving and optimising human capabilities; it's a meta-technology that modifies humanity itself.

← **Fig. 1 Emanuel Bohnenblust, *The System Never Ends,* BA Camera Arts, 2023**

Contrary to the humanist view that people's efforts will gradually bring humanity closer to a cultural ideal, this position no longer requires those efforts, which can be delegated to tools, machines and other technologies. The humanist conception, which this position negates, is based on the assumption that people strive for perfection. They do so out of curiosity towards the world. They think and they learn. Education is one way they become good, cultivated people. They may not become specialists, but they will be culturally open. Machines are not part of this humanist world view. Their only purpose is to support people in their cultural development. So the use of machines is purely instrumental and shouldn't endanger humanity's standing in the world.

lator and as something that can be achieved in the near future. Thus humans are understood as machines that can be modified and extended at will.[3] Hence human creativity is neither miracle nor mystery; surpassing humanity's creative achievements will just take a lot of processing power. It should also be noted that this position represents a happy marriage of capitalism and technology. It has no moral scruples. It is intent on maximising profit while wanting to modify and ultimately surpass humanity.

The three positions presented here are to be understood as ideal types and are intended to provide orientation in the debate about humanity's position vis-à-vis technological progress.

Position	**Temporal orientation**	**Value of technology**	**Conception of humanity**
(1) conservative	backwards	tool	humanist
(2) future-oriented	forwards	tool	humanist
(3) pro-technology and post-humanist	forwards	meta-technology	post-humanist

According to the third position, though, machines are more than just tools to be used for human purposes and should also serve to optimise humanity. They make up for people's deficiencies while helping them to overcome death. It's only a matter of time before all human capabilities are surpassed by machines. The third position understands human consciousness by analogy with a calcu-

In contrast to the first two positions, the third position has transformative power. It is in favour of new beginnings. According to this view, technolo-

1 Luciano Floridi, *The 4th Revolution: How the Infosphere is Reshaping Human Reality,* Oxford 2014.

2 Herfried Münkler, *Welt in Aufruhr. Die Ordnung der Mächte im 21. Jahrhundert,* Berlin 2023, p. 18.

3 Orlando Budelacci, *Mensch, Maschine, Identität. Ethik der Künstlichen Intelligenz,* Basel 2022.

gy is not the enemy of humanity but the means by which it will be surpassed. This position knows no nostalgia and sees only the future. The present is the beginning of new possibilities. This position is not just post-humanist but also anti-humanist. Humanity is to be reinvented. Technology opens up a potential space for the redefinition of humanity.

Technological knowledge and ethics

The increase in technological know-how and scientific knowledge does not correspond to any greater insight when it comes to answering fundamental ethical and philosophical questions. Questions about the higher purpose and the meaning of human life move ever further away. So it seems we find ourselves in a paradoxical situation characterised by a discrepancy between knowledge and meaning. The more we know and the more we can do, the less concerned we are with why we need these things. There is, to put it pointedly, an inversely proportional relationship between technological progress and the positive benefits of ethical reflection. The pace of technological change hits a wall of human inertia that ponders, debates and waits before it acts. Regulations are only enacted when the negative consequences of a new technology can no longer be ignored. The same applies to debates about creativity. Most people's initial response is to defend the achievements of the past. The autonomous brushstroke, the handmade animation, the manually drawn image on a wall or a screen – all bear witness to artistic activity. Creativity is anchored in the body. People are more than just mind. Everything they think, draw and create is anchored in a body.

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In her video essay *A Thin Line,* BA Camera Arts student Nola Ouambo explores the ontological status of AI images and, by artistic inquiry, comes to the conclusion that AI can be regarded as collage, as manipulation. The BA degree piece *Searching for the Soul: Potential for Generating Jewellery in AI* by Fabian Lafitte asks similar questions, exposing the banality and emptiness of AI tools, which produce superficial things and have no soul. According to these works, AI doesn't produce authentic, genuine images. Its ontological status is indeterminate, oscillating between true and false. This is also emblematic of the spiritual state of the world.

Things produced by people – this would be the counter position – are authentic. Authentic here means people produce things on the basis of their physical anchoring in the world and their associated sensory perceptions. Their strength, in light of the power of machines, is not processing power but their own bodies, through which they are connected to the world. They sense, feel, seek and doubt. They are inexact. They live, love and suffer. They have hearts and minds – and imagination.

What are humans?

We are currently experiencing a period of disruptive change with respect to the optimistic view of the future. The spiritual state of the age is expressed by its paucity of positive utopias. Thomas More's satirical view of the future was still conceivable in the sixteenth century.[4] Back then the world was still unknown and (spatially) undiscovered. It was filled with secrets, mysteries and inexplicable wonders. The belief in a positive future is now in crisis. Ecological and geopolitical problems are affecting morale and causing depression.[5] As for the co-existence of humans and machines, it is the dystopian fantasies that dominate in the arts.

The expanding capabilities of the machines lends new urgency to the question of what constitutes humanity. The debate about creativity in the age of artificial intelligence is a defensive debate. Humans are no longer rational animals (Aristotle). Their capabilities are considered in light of what machines can do. Their emotions, their subjective view of the world, their mortality, their inquisitiveness, their desires and their humour have all become far more important. This is a major shift. In terms of its place in the world, humanity is diminished in comparison to the mighty machines. And this raises the question of salvation. Will humanity be able to save itself from itself? Or will it have to build machines to compensate for its own deficiencies? Will we save ourselves from these new dangers by legal means or through education and enlightenment? Humanity has become a guilty party; it stands accused of leading the world into ecological crisis and putting the planet Gaia in mortal danger.[6] But humanity is also guilty of having invented the technology that now calls it into question and even renders it superfluous. The

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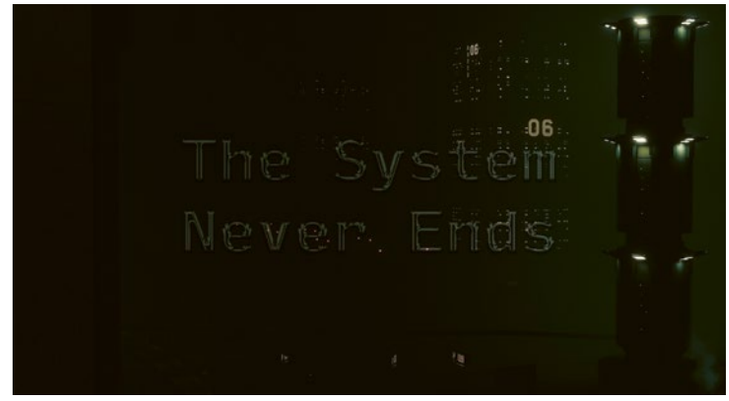

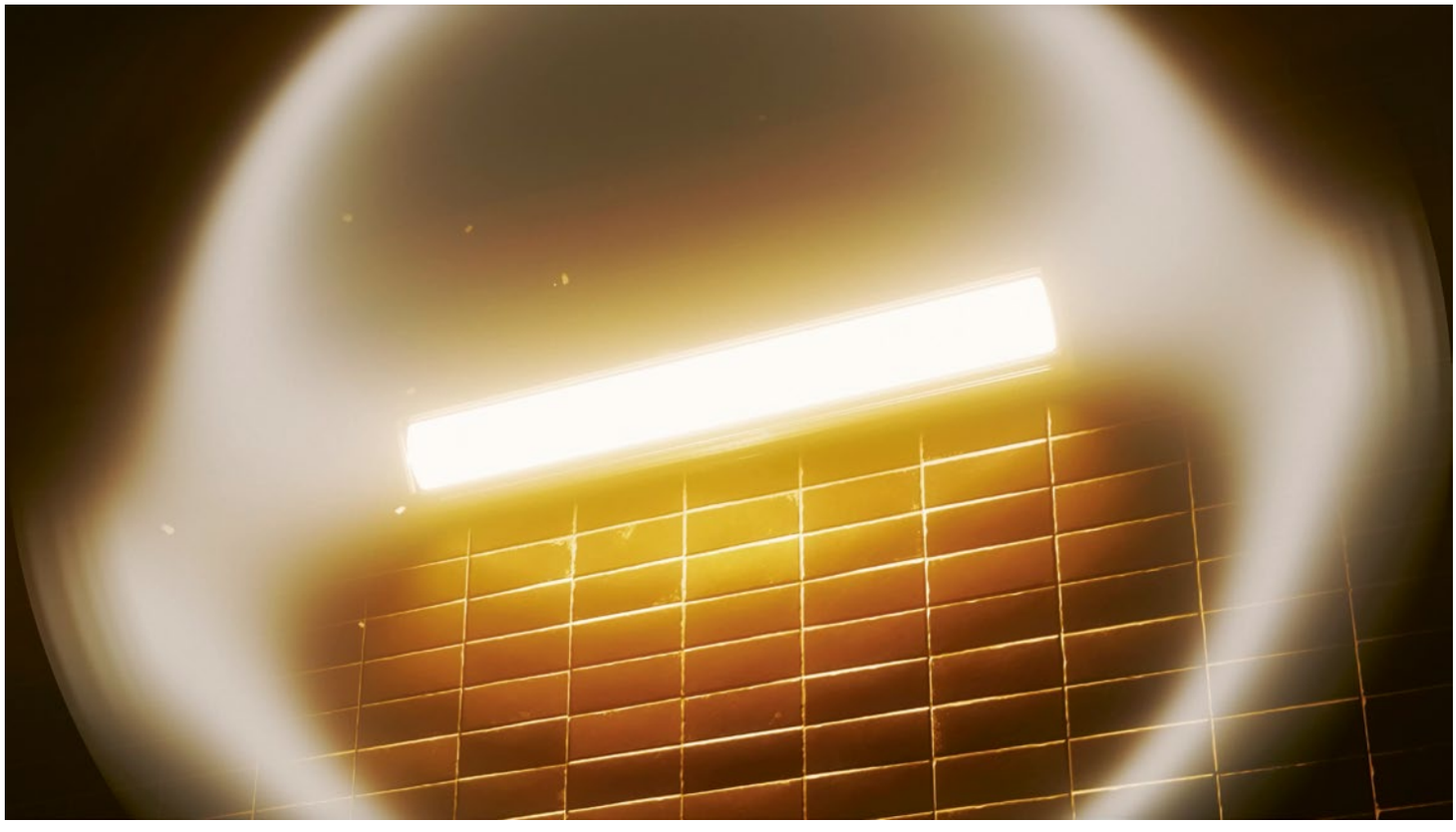

response to this – not just in the arts – is dystopia, actionism, regulation, prohibition, discontent, unrest, feelings of guilt and shame about the impending danger and the future of the world.[7] It's the self-evident things that no longer seem to hold.

But in place of this response I would like to ask how we want to live in the future. Where will we find our meaning? How can we overcome our instrumental exploitation of nature? How would the world look if humanity and machines were able to communicate and co-exist in a good way? How can we use human creativity to shape a better world?

The BA degree piece *The System Never Ends* (2023) by Emanuel Bohnenblust questions technological developments that strive for an ever closer union of bodies and machines. Its critical dystopian perspective considers the risks and dangers of bio-electronics. Following the creative urge to explore, it takes a critical look at the social implications of technological developments.

↑ **Figs. 2 – 4 Emanuel Bohnenblust, *The System Never Ends,* BA Camera Arts, 2023**

4 Thomas More, *Utopia,* trans. Paul Turner, London 2003.

5 Alain Ehrenberg, *Das erschöpfte Selbst. Depression und Gesellschaft in der Gegenwart,* Berlin 2008.

6 Bruno Latour, *Facing Gaia*: *Eight Lectures on the New Climatic Regime,* trans. Catherine Porter, Cambridge 2017; Corinne Pelluchon, *Die Durchquerung des Unmöglichen,* Munich 2023.

7 Carolin Amlinger and Oliver Nachtwey, *Gekränkte Freiheit. Aspekte des libertären Autoritarismus,* Berlin 2022, p. 138 ff.