

## Lionel Bayol-Thémines

### The darkroom: from the visible to the latent

In this bicentenary of photography, the darkroom, a place for waiting, revelation and manipulation of images, finds its echo today in the "latent space" of neural networks: a new space of invisibility where forms slumber before coming to light, a space where the experimental photographer can play "against the camera", according to Vilém Flusser's formula<sup>1</sup>, that is to say, deflect the statistical program from the model, make it hallucinate and bring out the unforeseen within the system.

In the sensitive plate of the nineteenth century, as in the digital matrices of the twenty-first century, the image is first and foremost a promise, an interval between presence and absence. While pioneers collected light on a photosensitive surface, AI models are collecting data streams, traces of an already digitized world. The "real" is no longer recorded but calculated, reconstructed from a space of potentialities. In this latent space, each image is the trace of a possibility among an infinity of others, as if the sensitive plate had extended to the scale of the world, to its photographic memory, revealed here by statistical vectors.

My research today focuses on thinking about this interval: how does the invisible become visible with this new image-creation tool? How can it be coerced into bringing about unthought images (what Flusser called "unpredictable information"<sup>2</sup>)? How can one play against pre-trained models producing images that are often conventional (just as, according to him, experimental photographers played against the automatic programming of non-informative images by cameras<sup>3</sup>)?

The possibility of installing AI models "locally" makes it possible to control part of the "apparatus" (in the Flusserian sense) generating the images, to play with the revelation protocols, to constrain them and to move their production, and this without the censorship of online AI models. This is what my project *Beyond the Code* (2025), some images of which are presented here, has tried to do.

*Beyond the Code* proposes a form of speculative mapping of the present, articulating a critical look at our relationship to signs, images, beliefs, and resources. This project does not reject technology but proposes to think differently about its inscription in human history. It invites us to doubt, to deconstruct. And, perhaps, to find – beyond coding systems – another way of inhabiting the world.

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<sup>1</sup> Vilém Flusser, *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*, London, Reaktion, 2004 [1983], p.81.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 80.

It is not simply a question of questioning contemporary forms of coding such as artificial intelligence, but of thinking about what escapes, overflows, or resists their logic, what "plays against". In other words: what remains of the meaning, the myth, the sacred, when everything can be translated into binary code, modelled, optimized?

Like a utopian archaeology of the present – as theorized by Aby Warburg in his *Atlas*<sup>4</sup> or Walter Benjamin in his *Theses on the Concept of History*<sup>5</sup> – this project attempts a long-term journey, from prehistoric cosmologies to contemporary artificial intelligences. In this journey, a common thread: the constant tension between belief and knowledge, between imagination and technique. However, technology is never neutral, it is the vector of a certain relationship with the world, of a certain power to act, often for the benefit of a few. From signs engraved on the rock to generative algorithms, from founding myths to neural simulations, each era offers its own syntax to code its relationship to reality: to say, to order, to understand or to dominate. At every moment, belief coexists and reinvents itself with technology: not as an opposition, but as a living dialectic. Thus, the most rational systems of thought never completely escape a form of faith – in progress, in calculation, in efficiency.

What *Beyond the Code* explores is precisely this fragile threshold between belief and technique, between imagination and rationality. Because today, with the exponential rise of artificial intelligence, globalized computational infrastructures and extraction technologies, this tension is reaching an unprecedented intensity, and a new paradigm is emerging, that of a world that can be fully translated into data, totally modellable, completely governable by code. The utopia of algorithmic neutrality thus masks an ideological project: to make the world legible to certain logics of power, to certain economic interests, while marginalizing forms of life and thought that would escape this grammar. But can we really code everything? Can we make everything measurable, calculable, exploitable? And above all, what becomes of what resists – the unspeakable, the sensitive, the sacred? It is this question that guides this project. Code, here, does not only designate a computer language, it embodies a totalizing paradigm of thought, a way of reorganizing the world from what can be controlled. Therefore, to think *beyond* the code is to try to restore to life forms their opacity, their complexity, their irreducibility to the equation.

I present here images from the second sequence<sup>6</sup> of *Beyond the Code*, **Reconnecting**, which focuses on matter and energy. In a post-Anthropocene world, where the boundaries between nature and artifice are blurring, a new ecology is emerging: no longer only biological, but energetic, material, political. The stones themselves – once symbols of eternity or memory, or even resistance – become

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<sup>4</sup> Aby Warburg, *L'Atlas mnémosyne*, Paris, L'écarquillé-INHA, 2012 [1914-1929].

<sup>5</sup> Walter Benjamin, "Thèses sur le concept d'histoire" [1940], in *Écrits français*, Paris, Gallimard, 1991, p. 425-455.

<sup>6</sup> Other sequences concern memory, human presence, faith, cartography, the topography of flows, etc.

sensors, interfaces. This "utopia of stones" offers a scenario where the inanimate becomes active, where the oldest objects become the vectors of a new relationship to the world. But this utopia also evokes a form of contemporary techno-colonialism. Advanced technologies related to AI require ever scarcer resources, and extractive and energy needs are leading to a radical reconfiguration of power relations around resources and energy.

The images thus obtained allow us to think *Beyond the Code*, that is to say to question the new forms of exploitation, social fragmentation and human hierarchy induced by technical systems.

*In this project, each image is generated from a prompt and then produced with a pre-trained local neural network (Stable SDXL). Different actions on the image revelation are used to cause hallucinations of the model: the number of image generation steps (number of iterations of latent image denoising), the CFG (Classifier-free Guidance) scale, which balances the creativity of the model and the prompt, the sampler (algorithm used when sampling the image) and the denoising action (amount of denoising applied to the image) are modified in order to produce an in-between of the image, to unrealize it.*

**Beyond the code / Reconnecting**



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