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Counter-modelling darkly: figuration in the age of simulation

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Abstract. This article examines the intersection of computational systems and knowledge politics against the backdrop of 'dark epistemology' which is a paradigm in which digital technologies subvert the very terms for figuration and truth. Using Sylvia Wynter's counter-human narrative theory, the author posits that algorithmic media are always mediated, never a raw record, but a site of struggle in which power operates through amplifying uncertainty and derailing hegemonic representation of the 'human'. The argument places emphasis on the way computer systems, as 'metaphors for metaphor' (see Chun, in *Programmed Visions: Software and Memory*, 2013), reassert and disrupt power figurations, facilitating the dissemination of counterfiguration as countering practice. In following the trajectory of a range of examples from satellite imagery to electronic astroturfing, the article locates 'modelling darkly' as practice that takes advantage of epistemic turbulence to create discursive space for absent or disenfranchised views.

Keywords. computation • dark epistemology • epistemic turbulence • figuration • modelling darkly • Sylvia Winter

A satellite photo of Hamadieh, a town near the disputed Golan Heights border in southern Syria, circulated widely on social media. It showed a mosaic of fuzzy pixels where entire neighbourhoods had been razed, contrasting against the sharp picture and clean lines of roads and remaining structures. The photo, documenting the destruction of houses in Israeli military demolitions in a geopolitical buffer zone, became a disputed visual document shortly after its posting. One interpretive community received the fuzzy, erased borders as harsh evidence of continued erasure and dispossession of Syrian residents, posing the image as a perceptible witness to violence and displacement. Another view rejected the damage documented in the photo and highlighted the lost timestamps, black smudges and pixelation glitches to enhance scepticism. In this way, the photograph moved beyond its

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empirical role and into a space of epistemic struggle, its aesthetics mediating competing narratives of territory in this contested borderland.

This account demonstrates a paradigm shift in the relationship between power and knowledge where power seeks to undermine knowledge structures. This approach does not simply deny facts; it targets the very instruments of knowledge, sowing uncertainty not only about what happened, but whether it can ever be known at all. In this terrain, computational systems, satellite imaging, algorithmic analysis and digital archives are not neutral recorders. These systems are at once tools of figuration and sites of contestation, implicated in the struggle over what can be seen, represented, or believed. Figuration is the mechanism by which information is translated into culturally readable forms that are able to mediate between representation and abstraction in a manner open to challenges of meaning being inscribed onto visual surfaces. What the above example illustrates is that computational systems have a complicated place within the realm of figuration and representational technologies, particularly regarding the viability of counter-figuration as a practice of resistance. Computational logics enact a radical flattening of narrative terrain, where distinctions between knowledge generated by non-human and human agents are continuously effaced. In what follows, I attend to Sylvia Wynter's (2003) deconstruction of the figure of 'Man' as an instance of narrative levelling symptomatic of these computational systems. Thinking with Wynter's strategy of counter-figuration, I offer a critical analysis of its effectiveness when this strategy is framed within a context where practices of unknowing and negation are mobilized to undermine the politics and aesthetics of resistance itself.

Epistemic uncertainty

In this article, I propose the development of methodologies that engage with counter-figuration within the context of computational systems that seek to dismantle figuration altogether. While the need to produce other narratives and therefore other figurations seems necessary, my aim is to show that doing this within a purely oppositional mode is becoming increasingly difficult under the paradigm shift between power and knowledge described above. Instead, I suggest that we would be better off finding new methods that resist and yet work within the existing power structures. I refer to these methods as counter-modelling darkly. Rather than attempt a return to organizing figural possibilities, counter-modelling darkly aims to grasp the possibilities of hyper-figuration as a disorganizing principle. Such an approach strives to destabilize hegemonies of representation by creating a subversive aesthetic, one that, despite concerns over its current use, opens space for erased perspectives. This methodology is not merely reactive but actively reconstructive, challenging the epistemic foundations of visibility and its entanglements with power.

This approach aligns with broader critiques of technology's role in reshaping epistemic landscapes, as exemplified in author James Bridle's *New Dark Age* (2018), which interrogates the opaque and often disorienting influence of digital systems on knowledge production. This has led to the argument that the exercise of power has partially shifted from the imposition of specific narratives to destabilizing and undermining some truth claims (Ylä-Anttila, 2018). This shift, which ostensibly targets specific mainstream institutions, including certain media outlets and political parties, potentially fosters an atmosphere of scepticism towards established information sources. The resultant erosion of knowledge claims through a new paradigm, has been termed 'dark epistemology' by some scholars (Weizman, 2019; Winquist, 1981; Yudkowsky, 2008). Given these aspects of the current sociopolitical landscape, it has been argued that power works not through censorship but through the dissemination of contradictory information (Weizman, 2019; Winquist, 1981; Yudkowsky, 2008).

However, technology does not merely disrupt knowledge systems, it also reconfigures them. Computational tools are mobilized not as neutral mediators but as active agents in constructing alternative pathways for influence and resistance. I should make clear that, in Bridle's (2018) account, dark epistemology is the paradigm to which traditional knowledge generating practices, such as journalism, are subjected. Conversely, what I am proposing as counter-modelling darkly is a methodology that seeks to work within the paradigm of dark epistemology to produce new knowledge generating practices. It does so in a manner that seeks to dismantle the power of dark epistemology by subverting its means. For this reason, counter-modelling darkly is fraught with complexities. It is not to be seen simply as an ontological or epistemological category but a praxis, or a mode of engaging with the world, that foregrounds the entanglement of technology and power while attempting to subvert their influence. It calls for a rethinking of the way computational systems mediate knowledge and the way these mediations forge new subjectivities. Because algorithmic processes are increasingly determining self and agency for us, counter-modelling darkly may potentially provide an instrument with which to question these processes. In making a case for counter-modelling darkly, I turn to Sylvia Wynter's (2003) dismantling of Western knowledge through counter-human narratives. Counter-human narratives are alternative and yet performative and relational human genres designed to displace the hegemonic Western Eurocentric construction of 'Man' that Wynter describes as exclusionary and racialized. Wynter's project has been to dismantle Western knowledge and that is why it is important to return to her work within the new paradigm of dark epistemology where power works not through censorship but through the dissemination of contradictory information.

One instance of this is the successful positioning of alternative climate expertise by fossil fuel interests and their politically aligned movements. These forces are able to use computational modelling software to create a proliferation of competing climate predictions, while at the same time overloading digital environments with algorithmically amplified content representing scientific consensus as elitist dogma. This dual manoeuvre, leveraging technical systems to produce competing truths while attacking institutional credibility, exemplifies dark epistemology's core shift in the proliferation of power. As seen in Germany's *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD) party's climate denialism, right-wing populists do not merely reject climate science but are able to construct elaborate counter-epistemologies using selectively interpreted data, cherry-picked models and appeals to common sense experiential knowledge (Knollenborg and Sommer, 2023). The computational infrastructure underpinning such campaigns goes beyond mere misinformation and instead is able to yield what Boecher et al. (2022) refer to as 'epistemic turbulence', a space in which climate models are alternatively truth-claims and producers of doubt based upon political mobilization. The computational networks themselves are turned into battlefields, their outputs continuously remixed into competing narrative networks that displace the very concept of fixed climate reality.

As Shannon Mattern (2023) has put it, the new Right is adept at a form of virtuosity where doubt is instrumentalized as an ideological tool, a machinic cut into discursive flow. Suspicion here is infrastructural policy rather than epistemological modesty: an aesthetic deployment of doubt that punctures the field of evidence and maintains the surface appearance of sober scepticism. Here, doubt is not the source of knowledge but its undoing, converted into a rhetorical and visual apparatus for the purposes of ideological closure. My addition to this view is that this doubt is less a strategy of the Right but is rather related to a shift in the paradigm of power more generally. By undermining dominant truth claims, contemporary power structures paradoxically reinforce these dominant narratives while appearing to challenge them. This dynamic allows for the persistence of a stratified world order that naturalizes the subjugation of the masses to maintain the elite status quo (Stoddart, 2007).

Wynter's (2003) concept of counter-human narratives challenges this stratified world order by exposing how dominant narratives have historically overrepresented a specific conception of 'Man' as the universal human. This overrepresentation, which Wynter terms the 'coloniality of being/power/truth/freedom', is employed to legitimize and institute power arrangements favouring some groups to the detriment of others. Counter-human narratives, within Wynter's terms of reference, are designed to subvert this coloniality by conceiving of the human in different terms outside the bounded Western bourgeois biocentric paradigm. In doing so, these narratives vitiate the very

assumptions under which power has been legitimated, which requires a root-and-branch rethink of human identity that potentially could lead to more just social and political arrangements.

My claim is that the 'epistemic turbulence' (Boecher et al., 2022) described above is predicated on what Wynter denunciates as Man's overrepresentation. This is despite the fact that the systematic destabilization of climate knowledge re-centres Western industrial subjectivity alongside positioning vulnerable groups' lived experience of ecological ruination as mere anecdotes in the data torrent. Wynter's call for a radical reimagining of our notion of the human offers a potential pathway out of this paradox. By recognizing the human as a site of potentiality for creating different ways of being and doing, it may be possible to challenge the symbolic overrepresentation of Western bourgeois 'Man' (Wynter, 2003). However, this approach necessitates a critical examination of the computational and cultural artifacts that perpetuate these dominant narratives, as well as the possibility of the creation of counter-narratives, in a manner that shifts our understanding of figuration or narrative away from the sense of permanence with which it is associated. Perhaps we should aim for something like a temporary moment of amplification of figures in amongst the changing variation of noise.

Within her analysis of counter-human narratives, Wynter's critique unveils the intricate dance between technological advancement and the metamorphosis of human figurative schemas. These schemas, serving as the foundational architecture of our social edifices and cultural mythos, experience perpetual reconfiguration in the wake of scientific and technological revelations. This dynamic interplay between human cognition and technological innovation not only reshapes our perception of reality, according to Wynter, but also recalibrates the very basis of our societal constructs, challenging established paradigms and forging new modes of visual and cultural discourse. In my reading of Wynter's work I see the resultant transformation of our figurative systems as echoing the cyborgian movements that blur the boundaries between human flesh and aesthetic realities, ultimately redefining the parameters of human experience and our relationship with the environment.

Wynter posits that the current crisis in the humanities is a direct consequence of the ascendancy of technological rationality, which she views as the culmination of a new epistemic order initiated by humanism and the Studia (McKittrick and Wynter, 2015). This technological rationality, with its emphasis on quantification and empiricism, has come to dominate our ways of knowing and being in the world. The relationship between technological developments and systems of figuration is, if we read Wynter carefully, reciprocal and self-reinforcing. Each new technological paradigm not only emerges from existing figurative systems but also engenders novel ways for humans to imagine

themselves and their world. This cyclical process of influence and reinvention underscores the impact of technology on human consciousness and cultural evolution. In her multifaceted approach to techne, Wynter interrogates cinema, biotechnology and techno-systems as powerful representational apparatuses that shape human self-understanding and worldviews.

Cinema, biotechnology, industrial-systems

Wynter's (1992) analysis of cinema, for example, transcends its technological aspects, positioning it as a potent system for generating and disseminating figurations that mould cultural imaginaries and human perception. She posits that cinematographic techniques and imagery have the capacity to either reinforce or challenge dominant narratives about race, humanity and social order. In Wynter's view, Western cinema functions as an apparatus of figuration that reproduces and reaffirms Western conceptions of 'Man' and human identity. In other words, cinema is not just another medium but a powerful machine for the cultural production and regulation of meaning, especially in the wake of Western modernity. It is formally and ideologically White, calibrated by and for Western anti-Black norms. She argues that all orders of discourse, including cinema, 'recode the IRS or behaviour-regulating internal reward system of the brain, [and] . . . condition each culture-specific internal reward system in symbolically coded terms that can dynamically induce modes of psycho-affective feeling by which the social cohesion of each order is ensured' (Wynter, 2000). In this schema, cinema is more than a form of storytelling: it is a technology that naturalizes the dominant, racialized values of the societies from which it emerges. These figurations enact a 'governing code of symbolic life and death' that establishes the Western conception of 'Man' as the optimal human (p. 41). She contends that cinema has been instrumental in Westernizing the world, fundamentally naturalizing a Western memory structure in which whiteness and anti-Blackness are central. Cinema, via its immersive sensory and affective power, is uniquely effective in both shaping and policing collective memory and the boundaries of the human understood as Man.

Significantly, Wynter posits that cinematic figuration activates biochemical reward/punishment systems in viewers' brains, reinforcing Western conceptions of human identity and hierarchy at a deep cognitive level. As a countermeasure, she advocates for a 'counter-cinema' capable of transcending current Western conceptions of Man and forging a new definition of humanity as 'homo culturans/culturata' (p. 26). Counter-cinema, however, if we understand it in its figurative sense, is possibly lost within the hyper-figuration of computational systems. The biochemical reward system is no longer reinforced but is also not changed or updated. Wynter regularly invokes the writings of biologist JF Danielli to discuss biochemical reward and punishment mechanisms of the human brain. Specifically, she makes use of

Danielli's (1980) essay 'Altruism and the internal reward system or the opium of the people', wherein he accounts for the function of religious or secular discursive practices in semantically engaging the brain's opiate reward/punishment system in order to energize and stimulate non-genetically derived sociogenic behaviour. Wynter applies this framework to contend that cultural stories engage these biochemical mechanisms and control human behaviour independent of biological determinism. The stimulation of the brain can only produce something coherent if the discourse is organized, whereas contemporary forms of hyper-figuration work through disorganization.

In addition to cinema, Wynter also discusses other technology such as biotechnology not merely as a set of medical or scientific techniques, but as a powerful system for creating and circulating figurations of human life. She situates biotechnology within a larger 'macro-origin story' that shapes our understanding of human nature and our place in the world (Wynter, 2015: 10). In doing so, she suggests that these biotechnological narratives are 'formulaically patterned so as to co-function with the endogenous neurochemical behaviour regulatory system of our human brain' (p. 11). This implies a profound embeddedness of biotechnological narratives within our neurobiological responses. Biotechnology, then, in Wynter's analysis, also participates in the 'overrepresentation of Man' – particularly the current model of 'homo oeconomicus' or Man (p. 10).

Wynter views large-scale industrial systems as manifestations of particular cultural logics and ways of representing the world. She analyses how these systems embody and perpetuate specific conceptions of humanity, nature and progress. For Wynter (2006), technologies are deeply implicated in how we conceptualize and perform humanity itself. In Wynter's framework, techne and narrative are co-implicated in the autopoietic, self-producing processes through which humans, as a 'hybrid-auto-instituting-languaging-storytelling species', continually bring into existence new constructions of human identity and social reality (Wynter, 2015: 25). The narratives or 'descriptive statements' that represent what it means to be human do not simply reflect a pre-existing reality, but actively institute and materialize particular genres of the human through the material and figuration work of techne (Wynter, 2003: 264). This process engenders the creation of figurations – visual and conceptual representations that embody our collective notions of humanness.

Power/knowledge

Central to Wynter's argument is the role of symbolic systems as they relate to both techne and narrative, specifically the emergence of the 'figure of man' from European colonial modernity, a figuration that has come

to dominate global discourse on human identity (Wynter, 2003: 257). As elucidated by Foucault in *The Order of Things* (1966), this figure serves as a powerful epistemic framework, validating certain forms of knowledge while delegitimizing others. The result is a narrow, racialized conception of humanity that systematically excludes and marginalizes diverse groups.

What I would like to show is that computational systems occupy a complex position within the realm of figuration and representational technologies. Computational systems, while functioning as tools for representation and communication, simultaneously transcend this role, embodying what Wendy Chun (2013: 2) provocatively describes as 'the metaphor of metaphor itself' oscillating between the visible and the unreadable, the interface and the algorithm. According to Chun, in *Programmed Visions*, in the past, technologies such as clocks and steam engines had been metaphorically employed to symbolize and understand aspects of human bodies and culture. For example, the precision and regularity of the clock can be used metaphorically to describe the predictability and orderliness either of bodily functions or of the structures of society. Conversely, the power and efficiency of the steam engine could symbolize in both cases the driving force for cultural or industrial advancement (p. 2). These technologies were complex objects or systems that had a strong symbolic presence, that brought particular significance to the context in which they were placed. Unlike these traditional technologies, computation is not a symbol in itself. It does not stand in or represent any social or cultural aspects in particular. This means that computation operates on a meta-level of representation, embodying the very essence of metaphorical substitution and symbolic interpretation. It operates as a language and, as such, what we should examine in this language is the narrative, or the structures of understanding, that is, how things within computation are articulated.

Chun further claims that software, in particular, crystallizes a logic of general substitutability (p. 55). Like signs in language, software is able to stand in for, represent, or simulate an infinite array of ideas, objects, or processes. It would be described by Chun as allowing us to model and manipulate various modes of information in a digital environment, becoming thus a ground of limitless variability and interpretability. She claims computation 'as metaphor for metaphor troubles the usual functioning of metaphor, that is, the clarification of an unknown concept through a known one' (p. 55). More than this, according to Chun, software is not just a tool or symbol, it is a representation of how symbols and metaphors function and interact. Software is described as a universal imitator/machine, implying that it has the capacity to mimic, simulate, and represent a wide range of concepts and phenomena (p. 115). Universality also renders software a flexible medium of representation and interpretation for metaphors across contexts. Software

embodies a logic of general substitutability by virtue of the fact that it can stand in for, represent, or simulate an innumerable variety of ideas, objects, or processes. This flexibility in substitution enables software to function as a powerful tool for creating and interpreting metaphors across different domains. Software embodies a dual logic of ordering and creativity, animating disordering. Chun warns us 'computers, like other media, are metaphor machines: they both depend on and perpetuate metaphors. More remarkably, though, they – through their status as 'universal machines' – have become metaphors for metaphor itself' (p. 55).

According to Chun, software is unique in this respect: we can see its interface or surface; however, its inner workings remain invisible. Software is thus an especially powerful symbol because it is both visible and invisible: it signifies how invisible forces within our world are able to have visible effects. This helps us contextualize those complex systems wherein we see effects but not causes. In other words, despite perpetuating metaphors, software produces a form of disconnected discourse or figures which in turn produce a form of epistemological complexity, where the nature of representation becomes increasingly layered. This layering contributes to the kind of epistemic uncertainty that dark epistemology exploits. The question is: how are Wynter's counter-human narratives, which seek a revaluation of knowledge through counter-figuration, possible within a framework that doesn't directly adhere to a single figure of man but rather seeks to dismantle figuration altogether? To analyse this, we need to examine the relationship between figuration and knowledge.

According to Wynter (2001), sociogeny – her understanding of collective production of social reality which she borrows from Fanon – relies on narrative and its laws of figuration, as part of discursive practices, to construct the frameworks through which knowledge is organized and validated, shaping societal truths and subjectivities (Wynter, 2003). Counter-figuration is positioned as that which dismantles the dominant figure of man. However, to dismantle is to break away at a form of knowledge that, as Foucault has suggested, is always already entangled with power. According to him, power and knowledge are not separate entities but are deeply intertwined and mutually reinforcing. Most importantly, Foucault claims, as we know well, that what is considered truth or valid knowledge in a society is intrinsically linked to power structures (Foucault, 1979: 133). Power determines what knowledge is accepted as true, and this knowledge, in turn, justifies and maintains power relationships. He, like Wynter, demonstrates how dominant narratives within disciplines like psychiatry or criminology produce 'regimes of truth' that reinforce power hierarchies by defining what counts as normal and deviant (Foucault, 1977: 13).

My claim here is that the epistemological uncertainty produced by the complex representational structure of computational technologies complicates the dynamic of what Foucault refers to as the power–knowledge nexus where he emphasizes the inextricable link between power and knowledge (Foucault, 1979: 131). Narrative no longer organizes and validates knowledge but rather obfuscates and complicates it, disorganizes it in a way. In that sense, we could say that, within the realm of software, power's new relation to knowledge is unfamiliar. If Foucault claims that, 'Truth is of the world: it is produced by virtue of multiple constraints. And it induces the regular effects of power' (Foucault, 1977: 13), what we see here is that truth is no longer of the world. Power structures exploit the epistemological uncertainty and obscurity to undermine truth. This framework that is referred to by some as dark epistemology (Weizman, 2019; Winquist, 1981; Yudkowsky, 2008) operates by negating the conditions for factual knowledge, using disinformation and cognitive manipulation to blur distinctions between signal and noise. This creates an environment where truth becomes inaccessible, fostering doubt and complicity in systemic violence. Foucault's power–knowledge model illustrates how epistemologies are never disinterested but rather formed by relations of asymmetric power (Foucault, 1980).

This modality is not total as there remain institutions of power that still operate in the mode of knowledge validation and who may resist these shifts (Ruiu and Ragnedda, 2022); however, in turn, we may see how the new institutions of dark epistemology leverage this to capture the narrative by continuing to discredit those institutional truths in order to create confusion in where the truth lies (Weizman, 2019). In other words, truth is only of this world as a means to produce suspicion about its very existence. Perhaps within this new epistemological framework we can see that those in power can no longer control the narrative or impose their version of truth effectively. As a result, the traditional bearers of truth find themselves unable to maintain control over the narrative and, instead, multiple perspectives and truths emerge, reflecting the dynamic and mutable nature of reality within a simulated context.

Dark epistemology through its ambivalence to the validity of knowledge claims creates room for the exploitation of its framework through certain technical tactics. These tactics include creating false narratives, flooding information environments with overwhelming content, exploiting existing divisions, cultivating fake experts, amplifying conspiracy theories and using micro-targeting to deliver misleading messages. These methods operationalize dark epistemology by obscuring truth and weaponizing uncertainty. Eyal Weizman (2019: 1) describes how the practitioners of dark epistemology make 'the obscuring, blurring, manipulation, and distortion of facts their trademark'; their disinformation tactics aim to cast doubt on the possibility of establishing

reliable facts. By flooding computational spaces with misleading content and exploiting algorithmic amplification, they create an environment where, as Weizman notes, 'those in power can fill this void by whatever they want to fill it with' (p. 2), effectively militarizing information for control and manipulation. Weizman's own practice of Forensic Architecture is involved in the countering of these tactics through providing evidence for certain truth claims. While this is important and needed in certain contexts, my claim is that merely countering disinformation with more information does not attend to the shift in how power operates and legitimizes itself within the context of dark epistemology.

As such, I would like to propose the development of methodologies that engage with counter-figuration, counter-narrative differently, as counter-modelling darkly. These approaches strive to destabilize hegemonies of representation by creating a darkly subversive aesthetic, one that, despite concerns over its current use, opens space for erased perspectives. Such methodologies are not merely reactive but actively reconstructive, challenging the epistemic foundations of visibility and its entanglements with power.

Visibility and repetition

Dark epistemology's reach can be seen across social media platforms. For instance, the response of social media corporations against disinformation campaigns has been to deploy computational modelling such as algorithms that police platform values or those that censor content. But these have mostly failed to gain power. Recently, Facebook has come to realize this as a fundamental shift in the power–knowledge nexus and has therefore been forced to suspend its control mechanisms that were deployed to hold on to so-called platform values. Instead, they are now favouring those mechanisms that adhere to and therefore accelerate the paradigm of dark epistemology (Cox and Cox, 2018). Platforms such as Facebook are no longer trying to argue against misinformation through fact checking, having realized that validation is no longer at the centre of the relationship knowledge has to power (Stafford, 2025).

Within dark epistemology, knowledge cannot be restricted as it could have been within previous power–knowledge relations; but that doesn't mean it cannot be influenced or directed. In addition, this influence on knowledge production is limited since it is not able to grab hold of the narrative well enough to validate truths. One of the reasons it cannot seize the narrative is the structured homophily within networked and computational systems. Chun argues that homophily, the tendency to connect with similar others, is used to perpetuate sameness and discrimination in network science, creating 'neighbourhoods' of uniformity (Chun et al., 2018: 76). Homophily in networks

and simulation in visual media can lead to a flattened, deterministic view of human relations and behaviour. The principle that similarity breeds connection can significantly compartmentalize knowledge by creating echo chambers and filter bubbles in both online and offline environments. As individuals tend to associate with those who share similar characteristics, beliefs and interests, they become increasingly isolated from diverse perspectives and information. This self-segregation leads to the formation of homogeneous clusters within networks, where knowledge and ideas circulate primarily among like-minded individuals (Chun et al., 2018: 76). Consequently, this compartmentalization of knowledge reinforces existing beliefs, limits exposure to contradictory information and hinders the cross-pollination of ideas across different groups. More than this, knowledge within the information silos does not permeate a larger more general sphere where narrative can be critiqued or restricted. The only means of influencing the narratives in these spaces is to add to them by further exacerbating confusion and obfuscation.

A good example that demonstrates how knowledge is manipulated through intensification can be seen in the Chinese state's approach to controlling knowledge about itself. China's narrative management approach is one of the most advanced examples of a sophisticated choreography in the field of dark epistemology and homophily, where ambiguity is turned into a tool to promote state-sanctioned narratives. The basis of the approach is the mobilization of the '50 Cent Party' a huge and highly organized army of state-compensated influencers and contracted internet commentators. 'The goal of this massive secretive operation is instead to distract the public and change the subject' (King et al., 2017). This extension of the ideological machinery of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) employs state instruments to project its narratives through censorship and propaganda, as well as disinformation. The 50 Cent Party exemplifies a systematized form of simulation, where dissenting voices are not merely suppressed but are drowned in a deluge of orchestrated pro-government content. Its posts are highly coordinated and occur in distinct volume bursts, rather than being randomly distributed over time (King et al., 2017).

The 50 Cent Party is a good example of how in today's mediascape, power and narrative dynamics operate not in terms of truth–untruth but in terms of the dynamics of visibility and repetition. Narrative power operates most directly through setting what narrative is in play in the public agenda, regardless of its truth-value. Salience of a narrative, in turn, does not always depend on its adherence to fact, but on whether or not it is salient in the discursive space. The ability to mould public discourse and keep certain stories in the spotlight is narrative power, something that can be exercised by whoever has the understanding of the computational space. They get to choose what issues are deemed important and whose voices are heard, irrespective of their truth value.

As seen with the 50 Cent Party, within the field of computational technologies, there arise methods that participate in disorganizing knowledge. I would like to suggest that these disorganizing methods could be transformed into a resistance strategy that I am referring to as counter-modelling darkly, a computational version of Winquist's (1981) notion of seeing darkly that aims to use the power of ubiquitous computational systems to develop and increase 'dark epistemology' instead of simply authenticating other knowledges. I would like to propose that this strategy could work to enable counter-human subjectivities through new computational institutions, using the space of computation to guide such other knowledge along trajectories that are disruptive to power as it is presently exercised. The use of epistemic uncertainty as a weapon with computational strategy is the dominant axiom of such an approach. For instance, astroturfing reimagined as a strategic means of amplifying subaltern voices and viewpoints. Astroturfing, classically defined as the sinister art of utilizing the construction of artificial grassroots mobilization to conceal corporate or political sponsorship in the interest of shaping public opinion, can be redescribed as a subversive strategy for oppressed groups to reverse structural silencing. Consider a band of indigenous activists employing orchestrated social media campaigns using algorithm-friendly personas to amplify land rights advocacy – a strategic turn wherein astroturfing's fictitiousness must be employed to counter digital marginalization.

This strategy troublingly intersects with *Algorithmic Authenticity*'s (Burton et al., 2023) thesis that authenticity is ever more patterned by computational networks since, paradoxically, activists must replicate platform measures of engagement (trending, likes, shares) to be seen. Their 'inauthentic' methods of amplification reveal how algorithmic infrastructures necessarily privilege certain performative authenticities and require subaltern voices to employ the very apparatuses that erase them regularly to become visible to dominant digital publics. The intervention uses astroturfing's fiction to foreground ways in which algorithmic verification processes reconstitute what is 'authentic' discourse. This strategy can potentially disturb the hegemonic 'descriptive statement' of humanness, generating a virtual semblance of popular grassroots support for alternative conceptions of the human. The computational reconfiguration of collective sentiment has the potential to accelerate the assimilation of counter-human narratives, thereby fostering a recalibration of extant societal frameworks and power dynamics predicated on restrictive, Eurocentric conceptualizations of humanness. The aim, therefore, is not to seize the narrative but rather the disorganized direction of collective sentiment. In other words, rather than convince subjects to adopt a sense of who they are through counter-human myths or the sociogenic principle, the aim would be to redirect attention towards feelings of unease or chaos surrounding counter-human forms of knowledge, whether valid or not.

My claim here is that the use of para-fictive narration and artificial media, including deepfakes, answers Wynter's call to counter the overrepresentation of 'Man'. As counter-human practice, focusing on redirecting collective sentiment through algorithmic processes, undermines the dominant anthropocentricisms by producing new, even if sometimes troubling, imaginaries that reconfigure subjectivity and relationality. By utilizing the generative potential of synthetic media, these counter-narratives born of counter-sentiments disrupt hegemonic formations, making space for several and non-extractive negotiations of self and representation. Through crafting alternative anti-histories, it might be possible to reveal the construct of our present 'truth-for' reproduced over centuries. This coexists with Wynter's invitation to be 'magical' in our capacity to envision new worlds and challenge singularized Western cosmogony (McKittrick and Wynter, 2015: 1). Ultimately, these false narratives can serve as a means to explode the paradigm and overturn the dominance of Western Man, paving the way for a different understanding of humanity.

Take the case of the Society for an Alternative Islamic Futurology (SAIF), a relatively mysterious organization that claims to have been operating covertly since 1973. According to its self-described history, SAIF has spent decades observing societal changes and developing strategies through 'aggressive mimicry' while remaining undetected. The organization presents itself as having bided its time and waited patiently for a convenient moment to reveal itself and carry on its unstated agendas (SAIF, nd). The story of SAIF is replete with metaphor and obscure language, and provides a complex view of the world of the esoteric sort. Having supposedly been carrying on in secret for 51 years, the organization is now seemingly breaking cover, but its hidden agendas and motives are far from clear. The information provided comes solely from SAIF's own website, and the veracity of its claims cannot be independently verified but that's not the point. SAIF presents itself as the exemplary figure of counter-Islamophobic narrative that should not need to verify itself.

Perhaps we can entertain the idea of SAIF employing several tactics to disseminate a counter-human narrative in Wynter's terms. Embracing the current episteme SAIF could challenge the dominant Western notion of 'Man' by promoting alternative Islamic perspectives on what it means to be human. Such Islamic counter-narrative is an effective force that employs the amplificatory potential of social media platforms and algorithmic actors to generate a 'megaphone effect' of the same or even larger scale as the diffusion of Islamophobic content. This computational approach, when combined with the construction of long-range simulation models based on Islamic epistemology, as would be mandated by the Islamic futures studies paradigm, is a compelling alternative to Westernized forecasting. By participating in visioning exercises questioning the deeper metaphorical spaces of Islamic identity and historiography, one can design a new computational vocabulary of community.

Modelling as reshaping discourse

In this context, modelling becomes a tool not for reinforcing objective truths but for reshaping the landscape of discourse itself. By prioritizing the proliferation and amplification of temporary narratives over their validation, models can direct attention to perspectives that might otherwise be suppressed or overlooked. This process does not rely on the factual accuracy or validity of these narratives; instead, it highlights their ability to provoke critical engagement and reimagine human identity beyond Western-centric frameworks.

What I am proposing is fraught with issues that need to be considered. Most importantly when knowledge becomes instrumentalized for political agendas, as seen in historical regimes of censorship or modern misinformation campaigns (King et al., 2017), it transforms into a tool for enforcing compliance. Dark epistemology complicates this landscape by existing as a paradigm that serves both within and against hegemonic systems. After all, the computational systems that could be mobilised within the practice of counter-modelling darkly are also guarded by elites through mechanisms produced by corporate and governmental data monopolies (King et al., 2017). The immorality that exists within these dark knowledges, whether used for oppression or freedom, highlights secrecy's double-edged nature, as a vehicle of power through information asymmetry and as a strategy of subversion for reappropriating agency. It not only exists at the margins but also actively subverts epistemic hierarchies by virtue of their illegibility to power.

Bridle (2018) in the *New Dark Age* offers a perspective that speaks to the ambiguities of dark knowledges. In the book, he contends that the abundance of data and computational power, rather than providing clarity, is creating a 'new dark age'. While not arguing against technology itself, the book calls for a new way of thinking about and engaging with our technological landscape, emphasizing the need for greater 'systemic literacy' and a more nuanced understanding of the complexities and uncertainties inherent in our networked world. Importantly in the book, however, Bridle argues that conspiracy theories are cultural relics that expose power and perception dynamics, rather than present distorted facts. In the book he presents the 'chemtrails' case, an entirely discredited theory positing that airplane contrails consist of toxic substances. Bridle illustrates how these stories, devoid of scientific merit, are vectors for articulation of genuine concern regarding air quality and global warming. This contemporary phenomenon is set against the 19th-century accounts by John Ruskin of the 'Plague-Cloud', as he called the dark clouds he envisioned as the toll of industrialization on the landscape. Ruskin's writings, whether interpreted as foreshadowing the reporting of industrial contamination or metaphorical breakdown of ecologically social cost of modernity, fit well into the underlying aim of conspiracy theories:

drawing into focus the unspoken worries about ecological degeneration. In drawing comparison between these present and past imaginaries, Bridle extracts the way in which these stories, whether factual or not, provoke us to approach our immediate environmental concerns and also the systems that govern them, critically.

More specifically for Bridle, technological acceleration has transformed conspiracy theories which has adapted itself to fit computation's rapidly changing complexities. These stories, which used to be made up of simple explanations for complicated events, now reflect the complicated plans of information systems and system change. As the world increasingly resists understanding in the form of linear or reductionist frameworks, conspiracy theories evolve to incorporate sophisticated and sometimes outlandish detail – far-fetched circumstances, elaborate matrices of association and even sometimes a climate of violence. This evolution helps to illustrate a necessity to impose sense on overwhelming complexity, even as this process is divorced from empirical reality. Through the intertwining of disparate strands of information in hypothetical stories, these theories seize a visual and cultural phenomenon: tension between desire for explanation and the confusion caused by technological advance on perception and comprehension. Ultimately, the politicization of knowledge depends on who wields its productive capacities within contested networks of power.

To conclude, the satellite photo mosaic of dubious pixels with which I began this article, its neat lines of infrastructure intersecting fuzzy trajectories of damage, is a powerful metaphor for dark epistemology's concerns in our time. The photo, seized by opposing sides of a particular form of border conflict, is not just testimony but a site upon which the mere possibility of knowledge is at stake. One side sees the ambiguous borders as a means for the abolitionism of both the border and its knowledge system, while the other employs this same logic by hyperbolizing the image, here a shadow presence, there a missing timestamp, to question not only the facts, but knowability itself. If we take into consideration the practice of counter-modelling darkly, this example encapsulates the two-edged potential of dark epistemology in this article. On the positive side, leveraging computational technologies and structural uncertainties of digital media can be counter-hegemonic, opening up room for contestatory, non-Western conceptions of human being. On the negative side, it lays bare the precarious ground on which manipulation of doubt can reinforce existing power relations, or actually widen epistemic fault lines. The satellite image of Hamadieh is a reminder that computational systems are never passive witnesses but rather actively engaged agents in the battle over what can be seen and finally believed. In a world where traditional epistemologies are complicated by technology, the paradigm of dark epistemology invokes and leverages the very machinery that has excluded alternative narratives.

In accepting the uncertainties and complexities of our digital age, we might yet be able to dream and invent new, expanded notions of what it is to be human. But this journey is full of ethical and practical risks; unless we are careful, the tools of subversion will turn into weapons of repression. The destiny of knowledge, and of who we define as human, will be determined in these contested, pixelated territories.

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