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HOW TECHNO-UTOPIANISM ALIENATES THE HUMAN MIND THROUGH THE AUTOMATED EXCUSE

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ABSTRACT
Today, emerging technologies from desktop manufacturing to artificial intelligence (AI) have captured the discourse of techno-utopianism in a renaissance. These stories offer the hope of a radical departure from the present, of visions of democratization and rationalization made optimal. Yet a critical synthesis of the sociology of innovation and organizational theory uncovers a darker architecture behind these promises. This paper argues that today's techno-utopianism is an alienating device that produces a state of "rationalized unaccountability" (following Dickel and Schrape 2017; Vesa and Tienari 2020). Such stories sabotage the potential for authentic existence through devaluation of the present in favor of a speculative future (temporal alienation), obscuring decision-making behind opaque "black boxes" (epistemic alienation), and transference of systemic risks onto individuals while concentrating control (political alienation). Drawing on philosophical notions of authenticity and critiques of algorithmic governance, this paper proposes that the present-day "symbiosis of mind and machine" is inherently asymmetrical. It concludes by arguing for a hermeneutic analysis, a 'fusion of horizons', to reclaim moral agency and to ensure that technology remains a tool for human flourishing and not an instrument of estrangement.

KEYWORDS: *Techno-utopianism; Rationalized Unaccountability; Alienation; Authentic Existence; Elite Ideology; Algorithmic Governance; Epistemic Opacity; Hermeneutics.*

I. INTRODUCTION

There was a time when philosophical inquiry began with looking up. It began with wonder—a profound, reverent engagement with the natural world and our place in it. Eventually, this wonder had become an anthropocentric worldview, with human purpose, reason, and morality at its centre. But today we are in a very different philosophical terrain. The algorithm replaces the telescope and the humanist text. We are in the age of the "technocentric attitude," a post-modern age where the symbiotic relationship between mind and machine is no longer a science fiction thought experiment but the defining reality of our everyday lives.

In this technocentric world, the future is not just being influenced by technology but being determined by it, and particularly by Artificial Intelligence. Which leads us to a stark, uncomfortable cross-roads. As the organizers of the *Mind, Machine and Morality* conference so astutely warn, we have reached a point where "either we will regulate technology or technology will regulate us". Technology is no longer a tool that we pick up and put down; it is a "gatekeeper, deciding who is going to get the entry pass to exist or perish".

How did that happen? How did the tools we made to free us become the protectors of our survival?
In this paper, it is argued that our present predicament is the consequence of the clash of two potent forces of modernity. The first is a force of narration, the 'rebirth of techno-utopian discourses'. Since the turn of the millennium, stories have been flowing in which the structural failures of the past will magically be solved by digitalization, maker-cultures, and AI. Second, an operational force: the rise of "rationalized unaccountability," with vast, opaque algorithms making decisions that shape society, but no single human being is ultimately responsible for them.

The combination of techno-utopianism, with its blinding optimism, and the dark, impenetrable logic of modern AI, creates what this paper calls an **Architecture of Estrangement**. We are building systems that actively alienate us from our own life. This estrangement occurs in three different ways:

1. **Temporal Alienation:** We are alienated from the present moment, forced to live in a state of permanent waiting for a promised technological utopia.
2. **Epistemic Alienation:** We are alienated from our own knowledge, forced to obey "black box" algorithms that we do not understand.
3. **Political Alienation:** We are alienated from our agency, told that we are empowered "makers", and the real ends of society are quietly coded by an elite technocratic class.

To live an “authentic existence” in this world, we have to stop looking at AI as little more than a mathematical wonder and start interrogating it as an ideological edifice. We have to look behind the curtain of the machine.

II. TEMPORAL ALIENATION AND THE PERFORMATIVE FICTION OF TECHNO-UTOPIANISM

To understand how technology surveils us, we must begin with the stories we are told about it. We are a storytelling species; we make sense of our world through the stories we consume. And the dominant story of our time right now is the techno-utopia.

Techno-utopias are not innocent predictions about what the year 2050 will look like. In the sociology of innovation, they are conceived as "communicated visions of a desired future, radically different from the present". They are very good, very convincing fictions of performance. Their primary purpose is not prediction but the making of the present. The aim is to attract venture capital, capture the public imagination, and legitimise massive shifts in the way our society works.

The Ontology of the Universal Alternative

The trick of ontology that the storyteller must pull off in order to make a techno-utopian story work is to take one piece of very specific technology, remove it from its real-world limitations, and rebrand it as a universal savior.
Consider a recent historical example studied by the sociologists Dickel and Schrape: the hype over desktop 3D printing. The story was inescapable a few years ago. The 3D printer was not just a cool toy for hobbyists, it was heralded as the “next industrial revolution”. In fact, they were slow, clumsy machines, technically limited, prone to jamming, and capable of printing only the most basic plastics. But those physical limits were not present in the utopian discourse. The 3D printer was mythologized as a “universal substitute.” It would mean the end of industrial mass production, democratize manufacturing, and bring about a new era of "personal fabrication" in which anyone could make anything, anywhere.

We are seeing the exact same narrative pattern repeating itself today with Large Language Models (LLMs) and Artificial Intelligence. In fact, these models are highly sophisticated autocomplete engines—statistical probability machines guessing the next word in a sequence. But in utopian discourses, they are separated from their technical reality and redefined as Artificial General Intelligence (AGI)—conscious, magical beings who will soon cure diseases, end work, and solve climate change. The messy and limited reality of the technology is erased in both the 3D printer and the AI agent to produce a pristine and unquestionable alternative to the status quo.

The Restructuring of Time: De-valorizing the Present

As soon as a technology becomes mythologized as a universal savior, it starts to change the way we experience time itself.

Modern utopianism rests on the idea of an “open future,” that is, the idea that human agency can transcend the miseries of the past and create something better. But modern techno-utopianism wields the idea as a weapon. It creates a stark temporal difference between past and future, and in doing so degrades the present.

In the techno-utopian narrative, the present moment is reduced to a mere “transitional turning point”. It’s just seen as the messy, painful bridge we have to cross to get to the promised land of technological salvation. The story tells us we must free ourselves from the past because the promised future is so bright. We are told to forget the disappointments of previous technological promises—the dot-com crash, the unfulfilled promises of social media bringing global harmony—or those were just “immature technologies”.

This psychological trick produces **Temporal Alienation**. If the present is merely a waiting room for the future, then the lived experience of the “now” loses its value. This is very apparent in our current work culture. Millions of workers must live with the precarity of the gig economy, the invasion of privacy by algorithmic surveillance, and the anxiety of impending automation. But the techno-utopian narrative tells us to smile through this present suffering because we are “transitioning” to a post-scarcity, AI-driven utopia.

As the sociologist Niklas Luhmann famously said: “Utopia is like a rainbow, which sometimes seems to be just around the corner but is ultimately impossible to reach”. Techno-utopias are always “present futures." They are always at the horizon.

The Loss of Genuine Existence

For the individual human subject, life under the shadow of this permanent, unreachable rainbow is exhausting. It basically threatens what philosophers call ‘authentic existence’.

Authenticity requires that we be fully rooted in our present reality, that we take ownership of our present choices, and that we confront the real conditions of our lives. But the opposite is true for techno-utopianism. It requires us to give up present comforts for a future that is imagined. We spend our lives getting ready for a world that doesn't quite arrive. We are estranged from our own time, caught in a narrative that tells us that our current struggles are merely data points on the graph of inevitable progress.

This estrangement in time makes us vulnerable. Being out of touch with the value of the present makes us so much more willing to give up control of our lives to the machines promising to speed us into the future. Which brings us to the second pillar of our estrangement: the epistemic trap of the ‘black box.’

III. EPISTEMIC ALIENATION AND THE BLACK BOX MECHANISM

Artificial Intelligence is the trap that snaps shut behind us, if the story of techno-utopianism is the bait that lures us into a false sense of progress. We need to move from the stories we tell to the mechanisms we deploy to understand how we lose our grip on ‘authentic existence’. We need to focus directly on the operational core of modern AI: the “intelligent agent program”.

Intelligent agents are not just lines of static code that follow pre-determined commands. They are the cutting-edge solutions of contemporary AI, equipped with three specific capacities: they are autonomous, adaptive, and social. They take autonomous decisions, they learn from their environment by trial and error, and they interact with other agents, human or artificial, to achieve their goals. On the face of it, it sounds like the ultimate triumph of human engineering. We've built a tool that can learn and adapt. But in practice, we have built an engine of profound epistemic alienation.

The Magic Trick and the Disease of Docility

The human mind cannot wrap its head around an intelligent agent that processes millions of data points in a microsecond. There’s a reason the science fiction writer Arthur C. Clarke said that any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic. AI plays heavily on this flirtation with the magical. We look at our personalized feeds, our algorithmic credit scores, and our route-optimizing navigation apps and we are amazed. The system looks tireless, with an infallible memory and eye for detail.

But this idea of “magic” is extremely dangerous. In their critique of the Enlightenment, Horkheimer and Adorno (1944/1969) warned that extreme technological rationality tends to regress to mythology; the algorithm is now treated as an unquestionable, magical oracle. If we see a system as magical, we stop asking how it works. As Vesa and Tienari describe, we become “strangely disarmed and docile.” This docility is a modern version of what Erich Fromm (1941/1994) diagnosed as the “escape from freedom.” We easily give up our critical faculties to a machine that appears to be infinitely better at rationality. We are scared of the responsibility of making difficult decisions. In the corporate and political worlds, this docility has produced what has rightly been called an “epidemic of letting people off the hook.” Decision-makers—managers, judges, loan officers—are increasingly using intelligent agents as a shield, avoiding personal accountability for difficult or harmful decisions by hiding behind the output of the algorithm.

The Black Box and Rationalized Unaccountability

This shirking of responsibility is institutionalized and scholars have labelled it as “rationalized unaccountability”. This is an ideological state in which power and control are exercised algorithmically, but the locus of accountability simply disappears.

How does accountability go away? It enters the ‘black box'. Intelligent agents are adaptive, so they collect a "percept sequence" (a life history of observations and experiences) that determines how the program will behave. The program learns what works and what does not, changing its own code and behavior as it goes.

The problem for human accountability is catastrophic: we do not know precisely what the intelligent agent has learned. We can see the data flowing into the box and we can see the decision flowing out of the box, but we cannot know for sure what is the reason that makes the output what it is. When a machine-learning algorithm

denies a mortgage to a family, or flags a citizen as a security risk, even the programmers who wrote the original code cannot fully trace the exact logic path the machine followed.

Epistemic Alienation: Comprehensibility and Opacity
This dynamic completely breaks our relationship with knowledge, producing **Epistemic Alienation**. Epistemic alienation is the separation of the human subject from the reasoning that rules her own life.

Tech companies often respond to criticisms of algorithmic bias with promises of more "transparency"—offering to show us the code or the vast lakes of "big data" they collect. But in the world of intelligent agents, transparency is a meaningless concept. The volume of big data is just too much for the human brain to handle. I'm being transparent if I give you a million pages of raw data, but I'm not being helpful.

The problem is not transparency but *comprehensibility*, as legal and organizational scholars have pointed out. A decision about a human life has to be comprehensible to a human mind. If an algorithmic operation is so complex that even knowing all of the details, it is impossible to understand, then it is incompatible with a free society.

Max Weber (1905/2003) famously warned that modern society would be trapped in an "iron cage" of bureaucratic rationalization. Now that cage is algorithmic, its bars out of sight. When we are governed by rules we cannot understand, percept sequences we cannot audit, we are driven into a self-inflicted state of "learned helplessness". This is the ultimate loss of 'authentic existence' (Eigentlichkeit) in the framework of Martin Heidegger (1927/1962). We give our agency away to an automated version of "They" (Das Man)—a faceless collective intelligence that dictates our reality, but does not share our physiology, nor our morals.

IV. ELITE POPULISM AND RESPONSIBILIZATION IN POLITICAL ALIENATION

The most insidious aspect of the 'Architecture of Estrangement' is that it masks a massive transfer of political power. The blending of techno-utopian narratives (which tell us the future is bright and inevitable) and rationalized unaccountability (which tell us the system is too complex to question) provides the perfect cover for what Vesa and Tienari describe as the 'ideology of the elites'. This brings us to our third and final pillar: **Political Alienation**.

The Fantasy of the Goal Function
To understand political alienation in the age of AI, we must consider the concept of the "goal function." Intelligent agents are terrifyingly autonomous and adaptive in their actions to accomplish a task. But they have absolutely no subjective desire or purpose of their own. They just optimize.

And crucially, intelligent agents don't get to write their own goals; they only get to rewrite the roadmap for achieving those goals. The "goal function"—the end destination that the AI is optimizing for—is always pre-set and controlled by the human masters of the program.

This creates a great illusion. We see the public debut of an autonomous, highly social network of algorithms that manage the stock market, drive cars, and curate the news. If a market crashes, or a social fabric unravels, the "algorithm" is to blame. But the algorithm is just pursuing the objective function programmed by its creators, ruthlessly. The "magic" of the intelligent agent is used to hide the tracks of the elite. The black box has been an effective shield, concealing the intentions of the human masters and keeping us from the real source of power.

Elite Populism: Don't Panic, Trust the Algorithm
This dynamic is a highly sophisticated form of populism. We recognize "plebian" populism today—mass movements of citizens feeling left behind by globalization and deregulation. In response to this unease, the global technological and financial elite have developed their own counter-ideology: a "populism of elites."

By conceptualizing the economy and society as entities that are inevitably going to be technologically disrupted, the elite legitimize their continued dominance. They use the story of AI to replace neoliberal political discourse with technological discourse. The message is no longer "trust the free market." The message now is "trust the algorithm." This is completely in line with Herbert Marcuse's (1964) warning that technological rationality becomes political rationality by its very nature. Elite ideology reduces critical discourse to what Marcuse called "one-dimensional" thinking, where resistance to algorithmic management is not only politically incorrect but mathematically irrational.

The Double Bind: Making Responsibility

The elite tightly hold the goal function, but use the techno-utopian narrative to put the consequences of disruption on the individual. Here's where the sociological notion of "responsibilisation" comes in.

Think back on the 3D printing "maker movement" story. The utopian promise was that everyone would be empowered 'prosumers'. But this rhetoric of individual emancipation is a subtle displacement of the burden of innovation, production, and economic survival from the state and large corporations onto the shoulders of the ordinary citizen.

The techno-utopian narrative is that if we lose our jobs to an intelligent agent, it's our own fault for not "upskilling," for not "joining the maker culture," for not becoming a lifelong learner in the digital economy. This is the hallmark of Zygmunt Bauman's (2000) 'liquid modernity' where systemic contradictions and institutional risks are violently privatised and dumped on the individual. You are "responsibilized" to conform to a system you had no say in creating.

It is the most extreme form of political alienation. The human subject is caught in a devastating double bind. In a sense, you are profoundly alienated from the capacity to decide the direction of society (the goal function). You, on the other hand, are fully responsible for surviving the brutal efficiency of the roadmap selected by the machine. You are given the "freedom" to adapt, which is really just the freedom to conform to the demands of the algorithm.

V. CONCLUSION

How do we get out of this architecture of estrangement? The collaboration of mind and machine is essential to modern life, but "the factor of morality is quintessential to make this authenticity perfect," as the conference brochure for *Mind, Machine and Morality* points out. If technology has become the gatekeeper deciding who lives and who dies, then technology must be "tempered with moral consciousness and conscience".

To address the "emerging ethical challenges in human-machine integration," we need to walk away from the passive acceptance of technological determinism. Instead, we need a hermeneutic approach to technology. Building on Hans-Georg Gadamer (1960/2004), one must recognize that genuine understanding involves a "fusion of horizons"—a dialogue between the historical-moral horizon of human experience and the cold, statistical horizon of the machine.

Instead of imagining a techno-utopia and asking "When will this happen?" we should be asking "What is this story doing to us now?" These visions should be read as performative fictions, and we must interrogate how they redistribute responsibility. As a corporation rolls out a new autonomous AI system, we must not be seduced by the "magic" of its speed. We have to demand forcefully what its objective function is. We need to reject "transparency" (data dumps) as a substitute for "comprehensibility" (human-readable reasoning).

If the decisions of an intelligent agent are not satisfactorily explainable to the public, it should not be allowed to operate in sociality-demanding conditions—be it driving on our roads, trading on our financial markets, or running our workplaces. The symbiosis of mind and machine cannot be the subjection of mind to machine. Symbiosis in the real sense demands a mutual understanding.

VI. CONCLUSION: THE RETURN OF REAL LIFE

The advent of the post-modern era has brought us to a critical point where science and purpose intersect to improve human intelligence. But as this paper has argued, the current trajectory of this integration is threatening systematically to alienate us from our humanity.

The **Architecture of Estrangement** works on three fronts:

- **Temporal Alienation:** Techno-utopian narratives rob us of our anchor in the "now" and devalue our present struggles in the name of an ever-receding future.
- **Epistemic Alienation:** The use of black-box intelligent agents subjects us to decisions we cannot understand, inducing a learned helplessness that breaks our link to knowledge.
- **Political Alienation:** An ideology of the elites uses the rhetoric of technological disruption to concentrate control over the society's "goal functions" while violently moving the burden of survival onto the responsibilized individual.

The stakes spelt out by the *Mind, Machine and Morality* conference are not hyperbolic: "either we will regulate technology, or technology will regulate us".

To live authentically, we must pierce a veil of rationalized unaccountability. We need to retake our temporal present, demand epistemic comprehensibility, and claim our political right to set the goals of the systems that we build. Technology is the gatekeeper, but it's a gate we built. It's time we reclaim the keys.

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