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Digital Idiocy

Notes on a critical-affirmative epistemology of the algorithmic

I am delighted to open today's symposium with a general contribution that is conceived more as an "epistemological add-on" than as something that would compete with the individual specialist perspectives gathered here. As program coordinator at ARTILACS, one of my tasks is to create an intellectual environment that can then be explored in greater depth in the individual research projects. And today, in line with the desire implicit in the ARTILACS project to generate *critical-affirmative* shifts in the epistemological register of "artistic intelligence," I will attempt to share with you an idea that may be further developed.

The concept of "digital idiocy" is still in its infancy, but I would nevertheless like to share its basic features with you. Since it refers strongly to philosophical and literary motifs, or rather is based on them, it is currently still a provisional sketch, but one that can at least already suggest a certain approach to artificial intelligence technologies in the arts. The main line of conflict lies in the following difference: while algorithmic systems such as *large language models* (LLM) focus on solving problems, digital idiocy *circumvents* the instrumental rationality that comes into play in these solutions.

Digital idiocy—both artistically inspired and philosophically motivated—opposes a pre-coordinated sequence of events involving "cause" and "effect" and thus introduces a kind of "slow-down effect" into the aesthetic epistemology of the algorithmic¹. This has been described in detail by Belgian science theorist Isabell Stengers in another context in her studies on the epistemically idiotic, partly in collaboration with Bruno Latour.² "We know," Stengers writes in her paper "The Cosmopolitical Proposal," "that knowledge exists, but the idiot demands that we slow down and not presume to believe that we possess the meaning of what we

¹ This refers to a theory of knowledge concerning those forms of knowledge that are conditioned by algorithmic technologies and the exploration of their effects in the arts. Cf. Rheinberger 2007, 53ff.

² See Stengers 2005; Latour 2004.

know."³ According to Stengers, the idiot resists a pushy "crisis rhetoric"⁴ ("It's urgent, so...") and thereby forces a slowdown before consensus can be reached. He "mutters," as Stengers writes in the same passage: "There is something more important that does not fit into the dominant problem-cutting" – and it is precisely this that puts the cutting itself up for debate.⁵

Stenger's "heretical" theory of science follows a leitmotif that is widespread in the history of philosophy, namely the integration of non-knowledge into thinking. It is obvious that research into artificial and "artistic" intelligence conducted by ARTILACS must also systematically deal with its opposite. Every epistemology should first have traversed stupidity in order to arrive at a concise construction of criteria for truth. We are all familiar with Socrates' quote: "I know that I know nothing."⁶ Socrates' statement takes on an almost ironic twist in an expanding "information capitalism"⁷. For where information and communication are artificially scarce and economized as scarce resources and where this "digital expropriation"⁸ allows phantasmal regimes of disinformation and alternative facts to proliferate, the idiot's meaningless non-communication may well become a political postulate. In times of comprehensive management of semiotic events, advancing in a way that is not or only partially meaningful can mean refusing to follow algorithmic market forces. At the same time, the idiotic can inspire a current political philosophy. "Stupidity (not error)," according to Gilles Deleuze in *Difference*

³ Stengers 2005, p. 11.

⁴ Ibid., 12.

⁵ "In short," says Stengers, "it means opening up the possibility that the idiot's murmuring will be answered not by the definition of 'what is most important' but by the slowing down without which there can be no creation. We must dare to say that the cosmic idiot's murmur is indifferent to the argument of urgency, as to any other. It does not deny it; it has only suspended the 'and so...' that we, so full of good will, so enterprising, always ready to talk on everyone's behalf, master." Ibid., 15.

⁶ The original, later simplified phrase from Plato's *Apology of Socrates* reads: "Compared to this man, I am wiser. Probably neither of us knows anything for certain; but he believes he knows something, even though he does not know it; I, on the other hand, know nothing, but I also do not believe I know anything. So I am obviously wiser than him in this small respect, that I do not believe I know what I do not know." Plato 1986, 21d–22a. The paradox of describing ignorance in the medium of knowledge becomes tangible here.

⁷ Vogl 2022, 141. However, the term originally comes from Dan Schiller. Cf. Schiller 2007.

⁸ Vogl 2025.

and Repetition, "constitutes the greatest impotence of thought, but also the source of its highest power, whereby it is compelled to think."⁹

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Obviously, the subject of "digital idiocy" outlined here has already gained considerable conceptual momentum at this point, which calls for explanation. First and foremost, it is important to mention where the idea for such an idiotic epistemology originated and who should be credited as co-authors. The idea developed rather coincidentally during the very first session of the seminar "ARTILACS II – The Body-Mind Issue" at the beginning of the semester, in which we are systematically examining theories of intelligence and their relationship to *the* so-called *mind-body dualism*. When we talk about intelligence, its opposite is usually not far behind, and in the very first session, we got carried away in a group discussion with rampant associations about "idiotic digital enjoyment," which quickly took on the characteristics of critical self-accusation.¹⁰ The students cited many everyday forms of digital consumption that are associated with the shrinking of media formats and their negative effects on body and mind (*surfing, chatting, posting*), but which we nevertheless continue to pursue and possibly already critically reflect on while doing so. The human- e possibility of critically reflecting on one's own decline while declining, which is particularly evident in the register of digital consumption, occasionally amused us greatly in this context (#tristanundisolde sends its regards).

Is it possible to theorize here about what Lauren Berlant has called *cruel optimism* in her book of the same name?¹¹ "A relationship of cruel optimism exists," says Berlant, "when something you desire is in fact an obstacle to your own well-being. This could be food or a type of love; a fantasy of the good life or a political project. Such a relationship can also be based on something simpler, such as a new habit that promises to open up a better way of being. Optimistic relationships of this kind are not cruel in themselves. They only become so

⁹ Deleuze 1992, 197.

¹⁰ I use the term "idiotic enjoyment" here in reference to the terminology of Jacques Lacan. Cf. Jacques Lacan (2015), *Encore. The Seminar, Book X*, p. 161 ff.

¹¹ Berlant 2004

when the object of attachment actively undermines the goal for which one originally turned to it."¹² Berlant's concept seems to be as conclusive and applicable to digital consumption patterns as it is culturally pessimistic. "Disconnection" or "critical consumption" would probably be the only ways out of this looming misery. However, ARTILACS asks from a different angle. Because ARTILACS asks artistically, not morally. ARTILACS asks critically and affirmatively.

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The bibliography on the subject of "idiocy" is as ambiguous as it is diverse. The essential titles listed branch out into a wide network of secondary literature and implicit sources that need to be uncovered in further research. A first glance at the available publications makes it clear that since ancient times, the idiot has been a highly contradictory figure. The Greek word *idiōtēs* initially means "the private individual/the layman" (i.e., without office, without special training). Historically, the meaning then gradually shifted from the *private* (*idios*) to "layman/uneducated" (Latin *idiotus*) and, since modern times, has often been used as a derogatory term for people labeled as "stupid." In the 19th and early 20th centuries, idiocy was even introduced into psychological discourse as a medical-legal category (), a usage that today seems outdated and ableist.¹³

During the same period (late 19th and early 20th centuries), the figure of the idiot underwent a spectacular revaluation in literature and philosophy. Friedrich Nietzsche's *Anti-Christ* is one example, as is Gustave Flaubert's encyclopedic novel *Bouvard and Pécuchet*. However, the crown of poetic-idiotic creation must surely go to Fyodor M. Dostoevsky's novel *The Idiot*, which implies a veritable philosophy of idiocy that is highly relevant to current political issues. When Dostoevsky calls his hero "Idiot," he is not making a statement about a lack of intelligence, but rather about a society riddled with prejudice and resentment. Prince Lev Myshkin enters the salons of St. Petersburg as a stranger, unaware of the unwritten rules of this world. He always tells the truth, asks naive questions, and refuses to play social games. This is

¹² Ibid., 9.

¹³ This information was provided to me by *ChatGPT Pro*, the corresponding prompt being: "Research information on the concept of the idiot since ancient times."

precisely why he is labeled an "idiot" by high society—a projection of their own intellectual inadequacy. The novel shows how a world based on rank, quick wit, and bartering cannot tolerate radical truthfulness and therefore dismisses it as stupidity. Dostoyevsky already foreshadowed a great tension between the empirical sciences and their associated tendencies toward normalization (for example, in clinical psychology) and their poetic-literary counterparts. This tension has left clear traces in the overall fractured epistemology and philosophy of the 20th century and continues to have an effect today. In our research context at AR-TILACS, we may be able to build on this tension in a productive way.

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The emerging, *idiotic distortion of empirical facts* has a particularly profound effect in the last book written jointly by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*, which provides valuable systematic impetus for a heterodox methodology of artistic research in many different ways throughout.¹⁴ Deleuze and Guattari generally like to draw extensively on European literature in order to establish a political philosophy based on a certain form of conceptual montage.¹⁵

For Deleuze and Guattari, the "idiot" is not a real person, but a "conceptual character" (*personnage conceptuel*), that is, a figure of thought who embodies, in a theatrical sense, what philosophical thinking can mean. "The idiot," to quote Deleuze/Guattari, "is the private thinker as opposed to the public professor (the scholastic): the professor constantly refers to academic concepts (man as a rational animal), while the private thinker forms a concept with innate powers that everyone possesses by right (I think). A highly peculiar type of person who wants to think and thinks from within himself, through 'natural light'. The idiot is a conceptual person."¹⁶ The idiot says "I think" in a way that is involuntarily directed against the "everyone knows..." of *common sense*. He evades the pressure to conform and communicate and re-frames problems instead of merely optimizing solutions within a given framework. From a genealogical perspective, the idiot in Guattari/Deleuze's interpretation is linked to both the

¹⁴ See Sprick 2022 for details.

¹⁵ Sauvagnargues 2016.

¹⁶ Deleuze/Guattari 1996, 70.

Cartesian *individual thinker* and Cusanus' *Idiota* (the "wise layman").¹⁷ His function is twofold: negatively and critically, he calls into question the *doxa*, common sense, and well-trodden paths of judgment. Positively and creatively, he creates a "plane of immanence" on which new concepts can be invented, whereby the figure is always in danger of tipping over into mere private opinion and therefore remains dependent on collective composition with other conceptual persons ("the friend," "the wise man," and above all "the other").¹⁸

The conceptual figure of the idiot spelled out by Deleuze and Guattari can be related back to the initial question and the associated reference to the orientation of our research group as follows: The idiot is suspicious of everything normal, without excluding it a priori from the realm of the possible. It is precisely his own idiocy that makes it impossible to project him onto something like a representation. That is why the idiot does not judge without agreeing with something else at the same time. His power of judgment is "cunning" and distorted in a peculiar way, allowing him to actualize himself powerfully and unconventionally in the resulting fractures.¹⁹

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I am coming to a conclusion. Anyone who wants to talk about intelligence cannot ignore idiocy. However, we need to differentiate between what exactly we are talking about here. Stupidity, opinion, and error as the negative aspects of thinking or the "flip side of rational orthodoxy" (²⁰) must be distinguished from idiocy as the epitome of a creative zero point from whose indecisiveness artistic thinking can arise. From a philosophical point of view, the idiotic can serve as an ambivalent ambivalent figure that gives the concept of artistic intelligence an initial direction. The heretical reading of Deleuze and Guattari is particularly useful here because it makes the entire literary-philosophical depth of the idiotic tangible and leads away from the clichéd, pejorative view suggested by everyday language use.

¹⁷ Ibid., 71.

¹⁸ Ibid., 72ff.

¹⁹ In it, the idiot acts notoriously and, in equal measure, always critically and affirmatively at the same time.

²⁰ Deleuze 1992, 193.

"The real appears in the form of the idiotic as soon as it is grasped outside of any representation."²¹ Henning Teschke's thesis is as politically relevant as it is in need of a concluding explanation. In a world of deep crisis that has to do without totality and inner connection, the "big picture" and the *micro-logical detail* can no longer be brought into a coherent connection, except in the form of clichés.²² If we look at current developments in AI (from an artistic perspective), then one series of concepts encompasses that which is too big to be thought of in terms of the subject: life, the world, the big tech companies, capitalism. In a second series of concepts, on the other hand, everything that is too small to be given subjective names comes together: pre-individual singularities of algorithmicity, digital metamorphoses, the banality of everyday technology, aesthetic experiences with *social media*, "glitches and lags," and loads of involuntary errors. The proximity of the two series means that their connection cannot be a synthetic one. However, if one asks about the zone where they meet, one finds the answer in the idiot: "Something singular happens to him," says Teschke, "with the idiot, a state sets in that he does not intend, but in which he participates, though one does not know how: the collapse of all identifications, the questionable nature of all possessions, beginning with self-reference, without ever actually saying so."²³

Located between megalomania and powerlessness, global perspectives and everyday trivialities, the idiotic thus stretches out a provisional foil for thinking a critically affirmative concept of artistic intelligence with reference to the political reality of the digital and AI. The idiot always stands in the "middle." He does not evaluate and has no "opinion" in a normalized sense. For the subject from which this could emerge is too weak, while sensitivity to the outside world is at the same time considered too strong. Two forces thus act simultaneously in the idiotic, threatening to tear it apart in order to draw creative energy from this tension. This could inspire a differential epistemology of a political-aesthetic present in the future (which ARTILACS also strives for).

Thank you for your attention.

²¹ Teschke 2006, 483.

²² Sprick 2022.

²³ Ibid.

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