

The literature of the algorithm: A response to Colman's

"Notes on the Three Stages of the Algorithmic Condition; The Ethic of Mimesis, Feminicity, and Bioinformatics"

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I am truly honored for being here today accompanying one of the women that I admired the most since I started my path as a feminist new materialist researcher. Back in the 7th European Feminist Research conference in 2012, Felicity Colman was the first person asking me a question on what was my second international conference. And there already, she started teaching me what kind of thinker would I like to be: a feminist one or a non-feminist one. Conferences are notorious for sharing very specific narratologies that depend a lot on our academic and personal practices. One can decide to adjust the paper given to her own modality (in Colman's sense) and then highlight how contrary the two modalities presented can be. Or, on the other hand, one could affirmatively review that work on the basis of interrogations as multiplicities in order to build new relationships that create alternative synergies. That impressed me so much that I started to follow her work, so closely, that in 2014 when I organized the V new materialist conference I knew that Felicity Colman needed to be one of the keynotes.

I am fictioning with what seems to be a personal story but, which in fact, is what proves that we are much more than the articles we write, the conference papers we give, and the textuality that we present. We are relations. And as a pedagogical exercise I always start by contextualizing the relationship of a text, with the context, and with the author themselves, and that is how I would like to start this response. Felicity Colman is the embodiment of what she calls a "feminist active point" because our relations (as researchers) are materialities, "exteriorities within" (in Barad's words) where agency gets real. On the other hand, it is also equally relevant to highlight how certain researchers become generative (in van der Tuin's words) of specific feminist practices. If we were to use Colman's classification of modalities, specific researchers become particular methods or processes within a modality. And this is precisely what Felicity Colman is, the embodiment of an affective process able to generate particular feminist activating points.

Her work on feminicity and the algorithmic condition started in that conference in 2012, but develop itself through her enormous work in the new materialist network. She has visited Barcelona

on four different occasions and understanding the genealogy of the algorithmic condition and femininity as a feminist intervention in it means understanding the article that she wrote for Artnodes in 2014, the algorithmic report in 2018, the modality paper for Philosophy Today in 2019 and the feminising politics for Matter in 2020, article based on a dialogue that she maintained with Brigitte Bargetz in the context of a very revolted Barcelona in 2018, among many other articles. Politics was being materialized there, and the need for finding a situated feminist predicate revealed itself in dialogues produced with very relevant feminist activists such as Whitney Stark or contemporary politicians from the city of Barcelona, as Gala Pin. All this to show how, when saying that Colman is a method herself, transverses the very notions that we maintain as separate between researcher, activist, professor, feminist and most important of all friend and mentor.

But perhaps, before going on with this response, it would be necessary to make a brief stop and define what is an active point, since I have started saying that the speaker is the embodiment of that. “Active-points are where ethical considerations emerge, evidenced in legal, cultural, social, and political adjustments, visible in changes over time, and charted in shifts in modal processes.” (Colman, 2019: 988). And that is precisely what Colman is asking for in this paper and in the algorithmic report together with Iris van der Tuin, Aislinn O’Donnell and Vera Bulhman, an ethical practice able to assess this algorithmic condition. Following Spinoza, Colman speaks of the necessity to understand the ethos of knowledge in Spinozian thought, or following her classification, in the technological or technicity modality that she presents. The relation between both is the materialization of the fabulation created by Spinoza. If God is nature, what happens when nature is technological, how is that affecting our knowledge of the world? How is a political rhetoric based on twitter and sanitary crisis affecting the artifacts shaping our world. How is this managerial modality embedding with the algorithmic condition in order to create what kind of subjects? In Colman’s words (2020: 5), “How are we to understand the nationalist and populist mode of relation today, as it continues to affect the ethical and compassionate understanding of difference in the world?” (Colman, 2020: 5)

In the paper that she has just addressed she spoke of “The algorithmic condition [as the] arisen from the extensive computing power and the network’s spatial capacity, and relative lack of governance of the collection of data.” This has two main implications: on the one hand the ethos of knowledge is changing and we need to embark within technicity if we want to be able to continue reading-writing. The same as there was a time in which reading and writing were technologies that not

everyone dominated, storytelling was a material product produced among conversations rather than these formalizations (Sayak Valencia). When this shift was produced, those who were not able to read or write were “illiterate” and because of that became outsiders of the Foucauldian power but subjected to the discipline anyway. Today, we are embracing a technological reading-writing culture that likely will become the qualitative loop of today’s knowledge creation and dissemination. The second implication is that we have not learned yet how to manage and govern the incredibly amount of information that this modality produces. The artifacts that we are learning escape from the logics of control established until now. This condition is organized by three different stages: cybernetics, femininity and bioinformatics.

In their report, Colman, O’Donell, Bulhman and van der Tuin (2018: 8) define the algorithm as “a finite set of instructive steps that can be followed mechanically, without comprehension, and that is used to organise, calculate, control, shape, and sometimes predict outcomes, applied across various fields.” Are these Foucauldian contemporary regimes truly following mechanisms without comprehension? Or is it that cybernetics has perfectionated the datafication of society so well that even the feedback that can be provided is predicted under the same technological predicates? In order to sort this paradox out, Colman reintroduces yet a differing question, another situated predicate and I quote from her article on Matter “Perhaps a better way to frame the issues would be to ask what are the modalities at work here, driving these narratives, and generating these values?” (Colman, 2020: 1). And here is where the feminist modality enters the scene in order to produce interferences in contemporary structures. The same as Vicky Kirby reformulated Derrida’s “There is not an outside of the text” with “there is not an outside of nature”, Colman is perhaps reformulating Katherine Hayles’ codification as the new colonization by codes and algorithms as both, oppressive and feminist processes.

In the paper that she has just given, she defines cybernetics as “work [that] is a particular active-point for the conceptual and material genealogy of our information society” and adds that “to provide scientific information is not necessarily an innocent act”. Again, if we were to go back to the personifications that we make, as feminist researchers we have the power to interrogate how to activate feminist points (how to put femininity into practice) in certain regimes of power since the scientific information that we are providing is not innocent. It is not only situated in the Harawayian sense, related (or not) to particular scientific canons and dependent of certain personal and professional relations, it is also a question of visibilizing certain moments and not others, again,

coming back to Haraway, it is about “taking risks”. These very genealogies of our information society are providers of certain knowledges that we share and disseminate world widely thanks to the presence of this algorithms, as for instance feminist cybercampaigns. But if we want them to be truly successful we need to learn to play the algorithmic game.

Here, she is demonstrating how there is not a set of vocabularies (informational modes) prohibited for new materialisms or the algorithmic conditions but a “situation” of these concepts within our contemporary framework. As I argued somewhere else with Helen Palmer, “language-is-data-is-information.” For instance, in 2010 Karen Barad showed how queering linearity did not mean to ban linearity for an analysis of contemporary society. Nevertheless, these linearities were not following predictable patterns of univocity in which one cause could lead to a definite number of effects. In this sense, Colman, Bullman and van der Tuin (2018: 12) explain that “Thinking about algebra, we understand that play (the Wittgensteinian game) has a set of definite rules, but the rules can be combined into various systems and their terms can, accordingly, be factorized (or raised to their exponentials) in a principally indefinite amount of manners.” (Colman et al, 2018: 12). In other words, we need to situate our methodologies and produce certain cartesian cuts (using Barad’s words) that are going to be determined by the phenomena under study. That is, we need situated methodologies able to explain how the “algorithmic condition” is shaping our information and knowledge society. Secondly, we need to situate another metaphor that has been the spinal bone for knowledge creation and dissemination, that of the mirror. Again, in the algorithmic condition, Colman, Bullman and van der Tuin (2018: 23) state that “[d]ata might represent historical patterns – such as entrenched racism or sexism – which we do not wish to replicate. As a result, it might hold a mirror up to the world, when a mirror is not what we want a decision system to be based upon.” The modality (in the pure linguistic sense), “might” refers also to a determined modality through which we start departing points (can be feminism, anti-racism, post-colonial studies, etc), it is co-constructed with a particular phenomena. The data produced is situated within a particular logic, and this logic is what is going to mirror the analysis, the mechanisms, that logic by which we are going to have a set of definite rules that “might” be tackled in an indefinite amount of manners. How we tackle these, the manner that we use, is going to present our ethics and the ethics of our research. Nevertheless, it does not mean that the data is going to represent a world, the data is going to frame a particular problem and provide a certain catalyst to find an affirmative ethics: “an ethics that is able to meet the demands of an algorithmic environment, and the forms of information and “knowledge” generated by this environment.” (Colman et al, 2018: 10).

Another aspect crucial in Colman's paper is the concept of "bioinformatics". Perhaps, I would dare to say that this is one of the most important aspects for today's society, even if a full diagnosis of the era that we are living is beyond the scope of this response. In her paper, she addresses that "We humans are a bundle of bioinformatics becoming algorithmic; we are data sets, organised by cultural systems coordinated by energy forms." If we were to think about the thousands of statistics with which we are bombarded everyday in television regarding this "pandemia", all of a sudden how we are becoming part of that flux becomes crystal clear. The numbers are feeding each government according to their own set of rules. If you died while you were positive, the isolation that you experience is completely different that if you die with a complication of that virus. The ceremony is going to be completely different, the rituals you and your loved ones are going to go through differ dramatically. This, only when it comes to the so-called social rituals. But when it comes to the national figures, each country is counting the "bodies" in a very different way, in the case of Spain, at times, we had regions counting these bodies differently. At the beginning of the pandemic, we were living under the shadow of a curve, a curve that right now has been even bigger (in the third wave) but with completely different lockdowns. Sectors such as higher education remain virtual, while public schools are completely opened. Vaccinations in Spain are provided for primary and secondary teachers through a special group while professors at the universities need to remain seated waiting for the age group. What kind of bioinformatics are exactly feeding the numbers that we see? Are we in front of the above mentioned mirror again?

Thus, and before concluding, since I have been arguing that Colman is indeed a feminist process, and a method herself, I would like to ask her some questions that have to do directly with this contemporary diagnosis of the current world. I argue somewhere else (together with Stark and Cielemecka), that the pandemic might have served as a catalyst for a myriad of technological platforms that we have not had yet time to process. The world is changing but the directions of these changes remain unknown, or the part that is visible remains under the same old patriarchal and androcentric regimes that the feminist are used to deal with. Quoting Colman (2020: 4), "The ontological modal processes of hate regimes are based on populist narratives of the world; engendering hierarchically structured societies, economically biased towards barely there majority politics that advocate 'post-truth' conditions (Jasanoff & Simmet 2017)." (Colman, 2020: 4). Under this diagnosis, I would like to ask you what kind of artifacts and/or modalities feminist researchers need in order to produce an assessment of the differing economic regimes that these pandemic is

engendering; as much as the racist interventions in this “suspended present” (using Coleman’s words) that might appear due to the reinforcement of another very well-known framework that is the politics of fear (Massumi, 2004). And to conclude, the digital predicates that teachers are suffering from, not only towards their students, but towards their own, their embodiments and their own self care. How can we keep on producing these “exteriorities within” that generated the genealogical trees that we embody in this and other conferences. How can we relate an affirmative politics of affects within our current algorithmic condition. I know this is a difficult question, but I wanted to finish with my first encounter with your work and a reflection of that more than 20 years later... that is the hope manifesto.

Thank you Felicity for this paper, for being a generative researcher and part of my feminist genealogical tree.

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