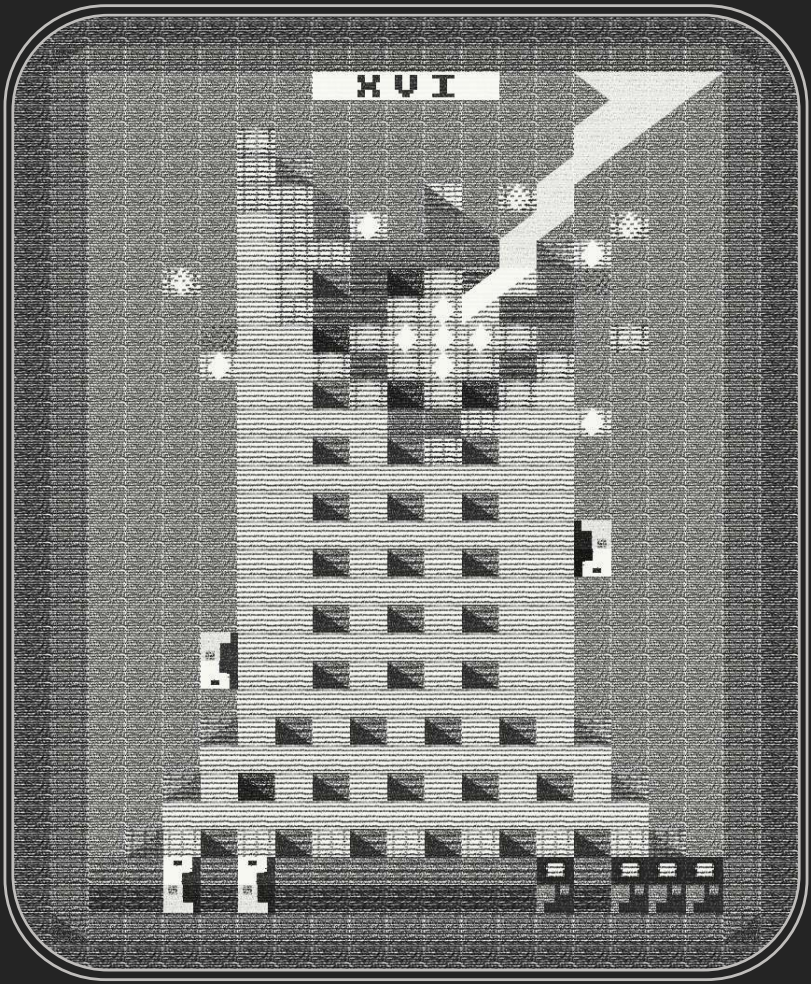
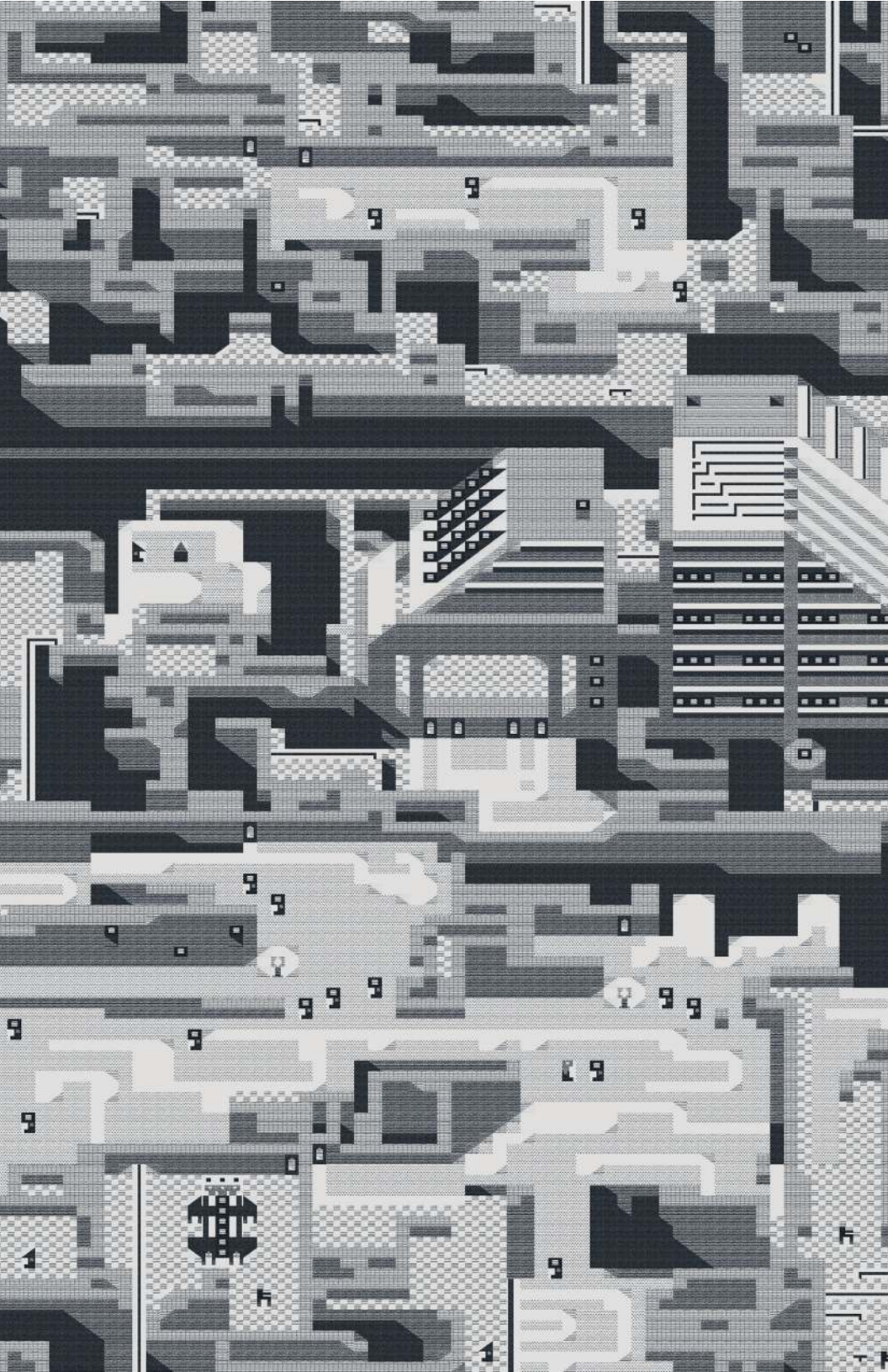
The (New) Tower of Babel



by Wiley Wiggins



The (New) Tower of Babel

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The (New) Tower of Babel

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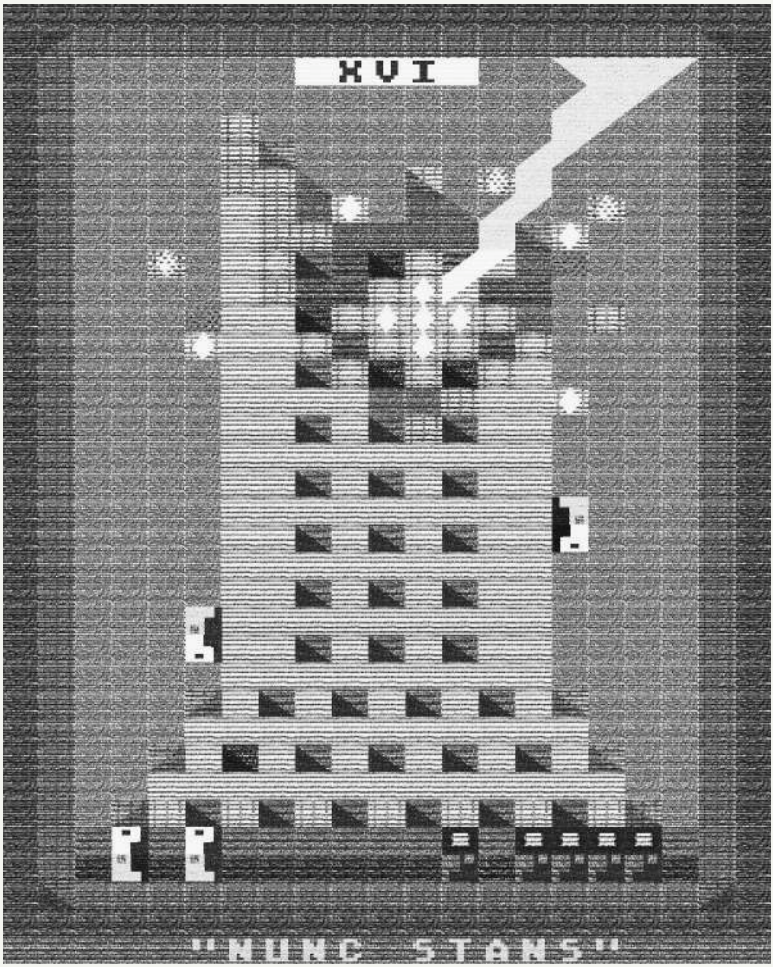
In Memory of Scot Casey

1962-2026

poet, hermit, and former manager of the FringeWare Bookstore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> The ethic of development has to be realized together with development, within development's processes. The promise of liberation from the machine can only arise from an accurately controlled image of the future.

– Manfredo Tafuri, *Architecture and Utopia* (1976)

> All the legends and songs that have originated in this city are filled with the longing for a prophesied day, on which the city will be smashed to pieces by five blows in rapid succession from a gigantic fist.

– Franz Kafka, *The City Coat of Arms* (1933)

> Come, it is time to give the machine-man your face!

– *Metropolis* (1927)

1. Introduction

FringeWare Bookstore, Austin Texas, circa 1995

Without descending into some sort of coming-of-age story, my late teens revolved around a cobbled-together subculture that existed somewhere in the overlapping Venn diagram circles of users of computers and recreational drugs. In the early 1990s, an alternative bookstore on the once-vibrant main drag of the University of Texas sold small-press magazines—such as *Mondo 2000* and *2600: The Hacker Quarterly*—that made technology, a then out-of-reach class signifier, seem transgressive. Eventually the shop was bought by one such 'zine,' the *FringeWare Review*, and for a short period of time it was the center of my universe. Residing at some intersection of science fiction, cyberculture, and transcendentalism, the loose association of people coming in and out of the store, hosting events, or advertising in the magazine included all manner of obscure cults and ideologies with single devotees. The "transhumanists" and "extropians" I met there were people I agreed with

about things like individual agency over the human body, but who held other ideas I found absurd—that a purely digital representation of a mind would have subjective continuity from that mind or even subjectivity at all, and the purely materialist view that the powerful experience of subjective agency, the one true mystery we all experience directly, was a phenomenological fluke that served no purpose.[1] It was impossible for me to imagine then, colliding with these strange new doctrines, that some form of any of these ideas could take root and become entrenched in the power structures that now dominate and exploit humankind and the planet. I became preoccupied with these woodshed worldbuilding projects—homemade science fiction futures bolted onto origin-story mythologies serving new imagined identities—especially when you capture them at their points of origin, before too many people get involved and they become baroque complexities that are more difficult to study.

My hometown feels like a doomed place to me now. Everything is privatized, water precarity is looming. At the end of my block another "megachurch" is being built, where unlicensed outdoor events sound like monster-truck rallies, a pastor screaming over amplifiers "HE IS RISEN!" The "prosperity doctrine" he preaches tells those assembled that material riches can be theirs on Earth if they enact "spiritual warfare" to claim territory for Christ's coming kingdom in the United States.[2] Employment sites are loaded with multi-level marketing schemes and job after job consisting of "AI training"—grooming a predictive system to imitate what you know and can do: a job that negates itself. These listings are both posted and evaluated by machine learning models. In the world of business a great liquidation is occurring as seemingly unrelated corporations pivot from commodities to AI infrastructure.[3] Outrageous tax breaks for building data centers show the avalanche lurch of the economy swinging completely into the consumption of electricity for no apparent benefit to life. It is like standing outside of a warehouse packed with surplus food that is being intentionally

[1] Debates about subjectivity and free will are bottomless, complex and heated. My personal view is informed by works like Mark Solms *The Hidden Spring* (2021), and by Henri Bergson, who receives a useful re-evaluation in Laurens Landeweerd's *Time, life & memory: Bergson and contemporary science* (2021).

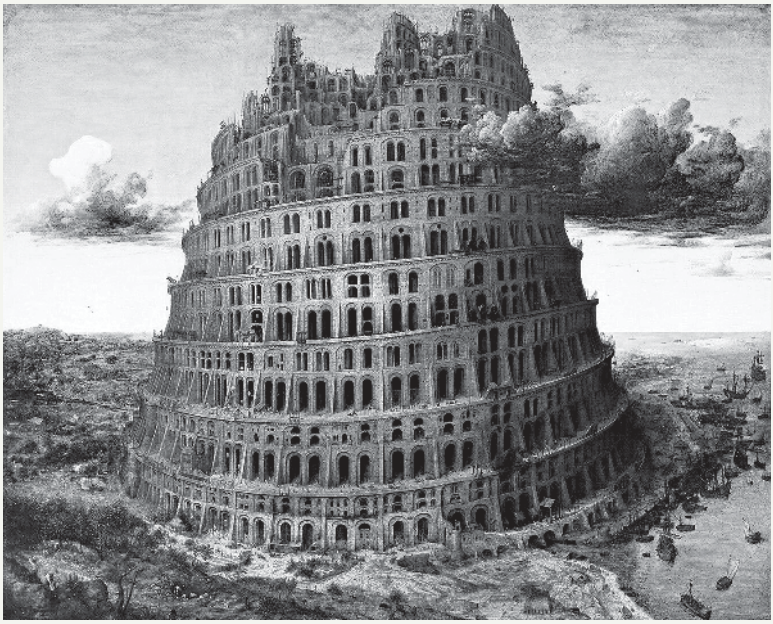
[2] I'm referring here to the cross-denomenational theocratic "New Apostolic Reformation" movement (Berry 2023).

[3] Within the space of a day, both a shoe company and a toilet manufacturer announced such reorganizations (Auerbach 2026, Chia 2026).

burned while you starve. All of this is supposed to be building towards *something*. Stones are pulled from the dungeon's hellmouth to build an imagined foundation platform between heaven and underworld, while humanity yearns for a jubilee year that never arrives. These data centers being built everywhere are part of the vast infrastructure of a police state, surveilling a dying, outmoded humanity. Metadata is recorded on an infinite number of tablets that will never be broken, piling upwards into an emplotted future.

This essay reads the mythological emblem of the Tower of Babel as an allegory of organization, eschaton, and paralysis in the face of looming disaster—not a symbol that delivers meaning whole, but an accumulation of fragmented recognitions, gaping Janus-faced into the darkness of both future and past. In the work of the late German theorist and critic Walter Benjamin, the *symbol* is a theological concept—unchanging meanings inscribed into the world whole—while the *allegorical mode* works with image "fragments" which must be interpreted in order to produce meaning. The Tower I am speaking of has become an allegory in Benjamin's sense, its meaning produced through its repeated retellings and interpretations. Fixed at once in historicized mythology and in a mythologized future, the tower stands at the threshold between biological and technological production—with language as its unstable building material. The tower provides a genealogical schema for the creation of imagined identities like nations and religions. Its modern afterlife is examined here as a figure for a just-out-of-reach, stratified, technological modernity, in which revolutionary gesture is performed in a manner absorbed and nullified by power. Through an accumulation of associations, the tower comes to represent the attempt to control uncertainty—a colossal project of futurity, the reading of signs—connecting ancient divination to contemporary predictive technologies, whose foundational operation is forecasting the next element in a sequence from the statistical weight of everything already written. The large language model (LLM), which has impacted translation—the problem at the heart of the Babel myth—is also, at bottom, a prediction engine. In the technical realm of finance, the structure of the gambling hall is identified, where the future is experienced as a narrowing horizon of possibility on which to cast bets. The current AI bubble—and its attendant eschatological rhetoric of "singularity" and machine transcendence—is a *degenerate utopia*: ideology changed into the form of a myth. The tower comes to function as a vision that formally resolves the contradiction between the overproduction of computational power and the uselessness of that power to fundamentally reorganize social relations.

2. The Image of the Tower of Babel



Pieter Bruegel the Elder "The Tower of Babel" (Rotterdam Version)

When Marduk heard the speech of the gods,
his heart compelled him to create artful things.
He spoke the work of his words to Ea,
what he thought in his heart, he offered in counsel:
'I will weave blood, I will bring about bone,
and I will make a creature – let his name be 'Human'.
I will create the human creature,
that the toil of the gods be imposed upon them, so that the gods may rest.

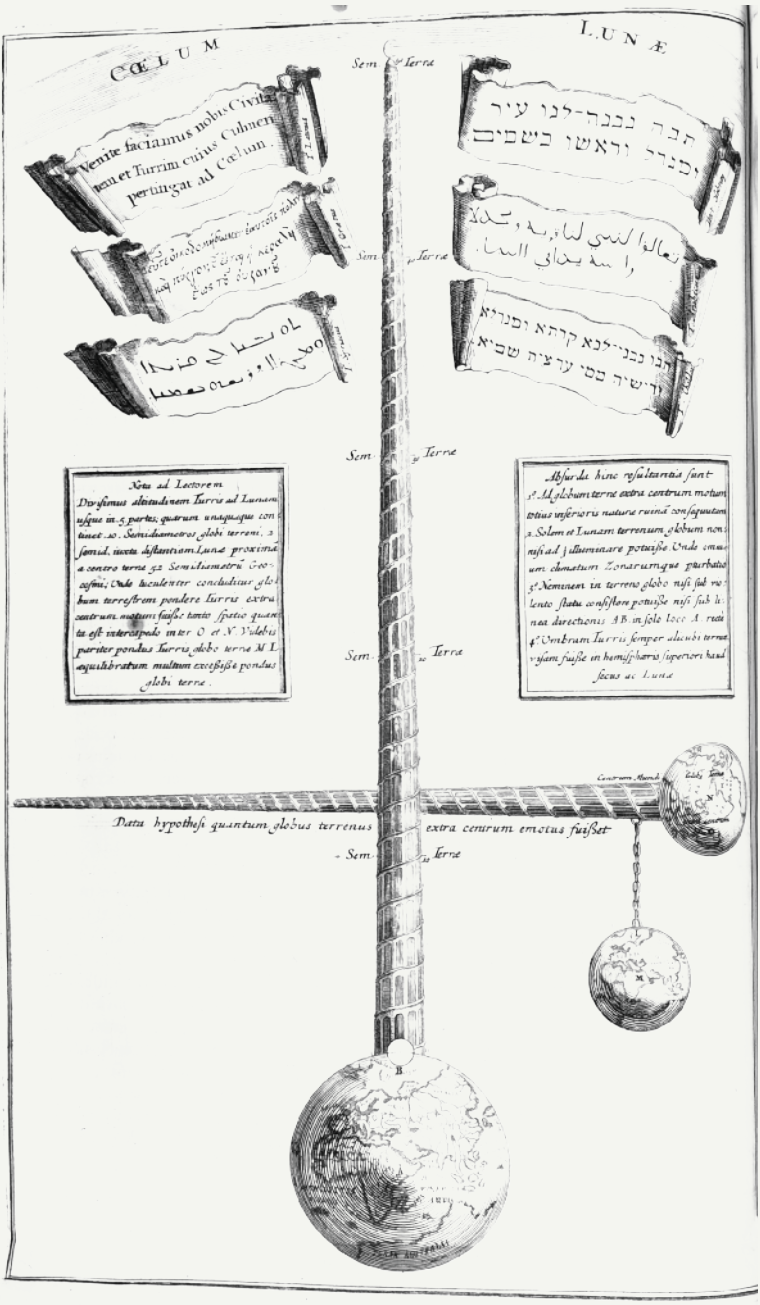
– *Enuma Elish (Tablet VI)*

In Genesis 11, a united humanity sharing "one language, and one speech" settles in the plain of Shinar. They begin to build a city and a tower "with its top in the heavens," so they might "make a name for [themselves], else [they] shall be scattered all over the world." The God Yahweh, observing "nothing that they may propose to do will be out of their reach," confounds their language with a magic word and scatters them across the earth. The project remains forever incomplete.

Genesis provides neither a physical description of the tower nor an account of its collapse. Every culture that inherits the story projects its own imaginings onto it. *The Book of Jubilees*, an ancient Jewish apocryphal text held canonical by various Ethiopian and Eritrean Orthodox Christian denominations as well as Beta Israel, states that the tower was built in forty-three years, and "its breadth was 203 bricks, and the height (of a brick) was the third of one; its height amounted to 5433 cubits and 2 palms, and (the extent of one wall was) thirteen stades (and of the other thirty stades)" (10:21). Its end is described similarly as in Genesis, but details the nature of the towers fall: "And the Lord sent a mighty wind against the tower and overthrew it upon the earth, and behold it was between Asshur and Babylon in the land of Shinar, and they called its name 'Overthrow'" (*Jubilees* 10:26). The sixth-century historian Gregory of Tours, quoting Orosius, described the tower as "laid out foursquare on a very level plain," a massive rectilinear fortification. The seventeenth-century antiquarian Richard Verstegan, citing Josephus, purported that the tower was wider than it was high, "more like a mountain than a tower," its spiral path broad enough to contain lodgings for workers and fields for growing grain to feed the animals used in its construction. Bruegel's influential paintings model the tower on the Roman Colosseum—its architectural components, art historian Joanne Morra (2007) notes, are "a motley composite" of Near Eastern and Romanesque forms, a spiral ramp rising heavenward from a solid foundation. Gustave Doré's later conical depictions resemble the Malwiya, the great spiral minaret of the ninth-century Abbasid capital Samarra. Each epoch and culture that encounters the tower sees something different in it.[4]

[4] The Kabbalist Menachem Tsioni, a fifteenth-century Torah commentator, dispensed with any known architecture: The tower was a functional flying craft, powered by antediluvian magic inherited from Nephilim, originally built for holy purposes but corrupted into a weapon of world domination. (New World Encyclopedia 2023).

The story of Babel is anchored in the material and political reality of ancient Mesopotamia. Babylon was the seat of successive empires, and its monumental ziggurats functioned as ritual structures linking heaven and earth. Among these was E-temen-anki, whose name translates as "House of the Foundation Platform of Heaven and Underworld." Built in honor of the patron deity Marduk, the ziggurat is widely considered the architectural and symbolic basis for later imaginings of the Tower of Babel (George 2005). The Koine Greek exonym *Babylon* derives from the Akkadian *Bab-ílím*, "Gate of the god." The biblical etiology of Babel hinges instead on a pun: *Babel* is linked to the Hebrew *balal*, "to confuse." As Morra (2007) notes, following Derrida, the word is polysemous, naming God the Father, the city of God, and confusion at once. Gazed at by successions of the myth's inheritors, the emblem of the ruined tower, marked by the word *Babel*, becomes overloaded with interpretation, a ruination of semiotic association that the tower itself often represents.



From Athenasius Kircher's Turris Babel, an illustration of a tower completed to what Kircher believed to be Nimrod's Specifications, 1679

For theorist Northrop Frye (2008), Babel is a "cyclical symbol" of imperial history: the attempt to unify human resources by force and the inevitability of decline. Its exemplary force depends on Babylon's historical disappearance.[5] In exegesis, Babel's sin is pride—"let us make a name for ourselves"—and expanded tellings of the story repeatedly aligned with other figures of overreaching ambition: Lucifer, Cain, the antediluvian giants, and Nebuchadnezzar. Read alongside the Table of Nations in Genesis 10, Babel also functions politically.[6] As medievalist Tristan Major (2018) has shown, these chapters were used to explain linguistic and ethnic diversity while supporting hierarchies that marginalized non-European and non-Christian peoples. The origin story doubles as a taxonomy, sorting peoples into a "divinely ordered" hierarchy that the tower's ruin appears to justify.

Babel operates as an origin story of language, difference, and dispersal. It links genealogy to architecture, reproduction to construction, and situates language as the connective material inbetween—fractured, plural, and unresolved. But, it also tells a story about the control of representation: the claim that there was once a single language, and that its loss is a punishment, implies that linguistic unity is the natural condition and plurality the aberration. The tower represents the ruin of that project, mythologized into a permanent explanation for why difference exists and why it is deserved.

[5] Julia Hell (2010, 4) identifies "scenarios of imperial ruin gazing" as a recurring structure in European imperial imaginaries: scenes in which the imperial subject contemplates the ruins of a predecessor empire while projecting the fate of their own. Babylon's historical disappearance made it an exemplary object for this gaze—a civilization whose monumental ambition could only be read through what it left behind. The structure recurs from Scipio weeping over Carthage to Volney meditating at Palmyra to Spengler predicting the ruin of the West: each gazer sees their own empire's fate rehearsed in the rubble of another (Hell 2019).

[6] The Table of Nations (Genesis 10) is a genealogy that, within the biblical narrative, traces all the world's peoples back to Noah's three sons, Shem, Ham, and Japheth, in the aftermath of the Flood story. Interpreters have long mapped this genealogy onto real ethnic and geographic groups, Elam to the Elamites, Canaan to the Canaanites, and so on, making it arguably the earliest surviving attempt at a comprehensive human ethnography. From late antiquity through the early modern period, Christian and Jewish scholars generally treated it as an actual record of human descent, and the framework was later weaponized: the "Curse of Ham" was invoked to justify race-based slavery, and it was later still invoked by the architects of apartheid South Africa to justify racial hierarchy.

3. The Confusion of Tongues

The Confusion of Tongues, Gustave Doré, 1868

In both Pulkava's *Kronika česká* (composed in the fourteenth century and transmitted in fifteenth-century manuscripts) and the anonymous *Dalimilova kronika* (the first literary work in the Czech vernacular), the sons of men build the tower not out of pride but out of distrust of God: fear that another flood will come, despite the covenant with Noah. This original sin is not hubris but a fear of uncertainty. Punishment follows in linguistic form, and language becomes a marker of collective identity. In this account, *slovo* means "word," slova "words," and the people themselves are named *Slované* (Slavic)—the people of the word. These kinds of narratives function as retrospective world-building, integrating peoples outside the biblical horizon into that conception of history by locating their origins within Babel. As the peoples of post-Roman Europe adopted Christianity, they inherited a biblical framework that did not account for them. The Table of Nations listed seventy or seventy-two peoples descended from the sons of Noah, but the text "did not reflect the perceived reality of the world's diverse communities well, even if it enjoyed the highest acknowledged form of authority." The solution was what scholars call *origines gentium* myths: fabricated origin stories, often including genealogies that trace a people back to a name in the Table of Nations, grafting contemporary identities onto the biblical schema. The fourth-century bishop Saint Ambrose of Milan connected the Goths to the biblical Magog through the folk etymology—*Gothus* heard as *Gog*—importing the apocalyptic associations of Ezekiel and Revelation onto a people already despised as heretics. The thirteenth-century chronicler Matthew Paris applied the same mechanism to the Mongols; Wulfstan, Archbishop of York in the tenth and early eleventh-century, applied it to the Vikings (Major 2018).[7] Conversely, the ninth-century pseudo-Nennian *Historia Brittonum* traces the founding of Britain to the mythical exile king Brutus of Troy, then back through a fabricated lineage to the Table of Nations as a claim to classical and biblical grandeur. In each case, the Babel narrative provides a base of straining authorial support on which to build a burgeoning number of origin myths.

[7] In a homily against heathenism, Wulfstan argued that all paganism could be traced to the dispersal after Babel: Nimrod and the giants built the tower, God divided the tongues, "and humankind then immediately grew greatly, and then at last they were deceived by that ancient Devil... such that they wrought wickedly and impiously heathen gods for themselves, and forsook the true God and their own creator" (Major 2018).

By the sixteenth century, biblical translation had become the primary site of conflict over the unity of Christian authority. Humanist and Reformist polyglot Bibles undermined claims of a single authoritative text, producing what the Catholic Church experienced as an authorial crisis. For Morra (2007, 212) this crisis "is quite simply the result of Babel," and Babel became its emblem. Early modern Europe replayed the confusion of tongues at a political scale: the fantasy of a singular, unified biblical authority collapsed under translation. Philip II of Spain—ruler of the Brussels of Bruegel's day—spoke only Castilian and refused to accommodate linguistic difference, delivering his inaugural address in Spanish to a multilingual populace. That refusal persisted throughout his reign and culminated in military occupation, a context Morra suggests Bruegel's Babel paintings implicitly critique.

Political scientist Benedict Anderson identifies a deeper structure: before the age of nations, the great global communities—Christendom, the Ummah, the Confucian world—were imagined through sacred written languages. The ideograms of Hieroglyphic, Chinese, Latin, or Arabic, were, "believed to be emanations of reality, not randomly fabricated representations of it." The Qur'an was literally untranslatable because Allah's truth was accessible only through the "unsubstitutable true signs of written Arabic." There was "no idea here of a world so separated from language that all languages are equidistant (and thus interchangeable) signs for it" (Anderson 2006). Ontological reality was apprehensible only through a single, privileged system of representation: the truth-language of Church Latin, Qur'anic Arabic, or Examination Chinese. But these languages were not, in fact, emanations of reality. Their authority was institutional, maintained by literate castes whose monopoly on interpretation was inseparable from their monopoly on power. The fall from this condition—the discovery that sacred languages are not transparent windows onto the divine but historical products, translatable, debatable, plural—is a Babelian fall. It is the precondition for the emergence of national languages and, with them, imagined communities organized not by sacred truth but by the market and the printing press. The fantasy of a single, privileged system of representation did not end with the decline of the sacred languages. It recurs wherever the confusion of tongues is treated as a problem to be solved rather than a condition to be inhabited.

4. The New Tower of Babel

Erich Kettelhut, Metropolis, Second Version. "The New Tower of Babel" Concept Art © Filmmuseum Berlin

Austrian filmmaker Fritz Lang and his wife and collaborator, the screenwriter and novelist Thea von Harbou, conceived *Metropolis* (1927) together—Von Harbou writing the novel and screenplay while Lang directed what became the most expensive production in German cinema history.[8] The film imagines a futuristic city dominated by the "New Tower of Babel," the seat of the technocrat ruler Joh Fredersen, who oversees a two-tiered world: an upper city of skyscrapers, air taxis, and pleasure gardens, and a subterranean level where workers tend monstrous machines in punishing ten-hour shifts. Production designer Erich Kettelhut's set designs ran the gamut from abstract cityscapes in the tradition of the Futurist architect Antonio Sant'Elia to cavernous

[8] Lang conceived the film after seeing New York for the first time from shipboard at night—"a nocturnal New York glittering with myriad lights"—and the screen metropolis is a kind of super New York realized through the Schufftan process, an ingenious mirror device that substituted miniature models for giant structures.

Christian catacombs, Art Deco interiors, and the Gothic cathedral. The past and future collapsed into a single architectural montage.

When Fredersen's son, Freder, descends to the workers' city, he witnesses the human cost his father's order depends on, and is drawn to Maria, a young woman who preaches patience to the workers in the catacombs beneath the city. At the center of the film, Maria tells them the story of the Tower of Babel as a parable of class division: the tower was imagined by those who sought the stars and built by workers excluded from that vision. When the laborers, ignorant of the plan, revolt, the project collapses. Threatened by Maria's influence, Fredersen enlists the inventor Rotwang to create a robot double of her—a *Maschinenmensch*—that incites the workers to a catastrophic revolt, flooding their own city and nearly destroying themselves. The upheaval is contained, and a reconciliation is brokered. In *From Caligari to Hitler*, Siegfried Kracauer dismisses this resolution as ideological sleight of hand—Maria's vision is a "sham alliance between labor and capital" rather than structural change. The industrialist's "robot stratagem"—the false Maria who incites the workers to self-destruction—fails in its immediate aim but succeeds in establishing "intimate contact" with the workers:

> "[...] the industrialist acknowledges the heart for the purpose of manipulating it; that he does not give up his power, but will expand it over a realm not yet annexed—the realm of the collective soul." (Kracauer and Quaresima 2004)

Metropolis emerged from German Expressionism, and the movement's limits clarify the film's own. Walter Benjamin wrote that expressionism was the "mimicry of revolutionary gesture without any revolutionary formation" (Jameson 2020). *Metropolis*' revolutionary imagery—a popular revolt that echoes a mythological one, the resulting flood and destruction of the machines—stages the appearance of upheaval without producing any societal reorganization. The film's actual resolution leaves every power relation intact. The gesture of revolution is performed so that the structure of domination can absorb and survive it.[9] German

[9] My thoughts turn to the media spectacle of the fascist insurrection of January 6th 2021. A confused rabble assaulted the US Capitol Building, gained entry, took selfies and left while the rest of the country witnessed it as a mediated event. The attackers primary demands were not structural change but a religious expression of inchoate rage. Benjamin: "Fascism attempts to organize the newly proletarianized masses while leaving

critic Anton Kaes notes that by 1927, the Expressionist utopia of Georg Kaiser's *Gas* plays and Ernst Toller's *Die Maschinenstürmer* (The Machine-Wreckers)—which had advocated revolution and a radically antitechnological humanism—"had itself become dystopian in the context of the modern industrial society that Germany unquestionably was." The film only "dramatizes the reaction of German modernism against an overpowering modernity, one that had undermined and negated its emancipatory and Utopian potential" (Benson et al. 1993). *Metropolis* could neither dismiss this utopianism nor fulfill it.

Nazi Minister of Propaganda Joseph Goebbels expressed his delight in Metropolis directly to Lang after the Nazis took power and offered him the directorship of the Reich's film industry. Lang agreed to everything, then fled Germany for Paris that evening, leaving almost everything he owned behind. In the same year, 1933, Von Harbou divorced Lang and joined the Nazi movement. Lang later told American filmmaker Peter Bogdanovich:

> "The main thesis was Mrs. von Harbou's, but I am at least 50 percent responsible because I did it. I was not so politically minded in those days as I am now. You cannot make a social-conscious picture in which you say that the intermediary between the hand and the brain is the heart. I mean, that's a fairy tale, definitely." (Bogdanovich 2012)

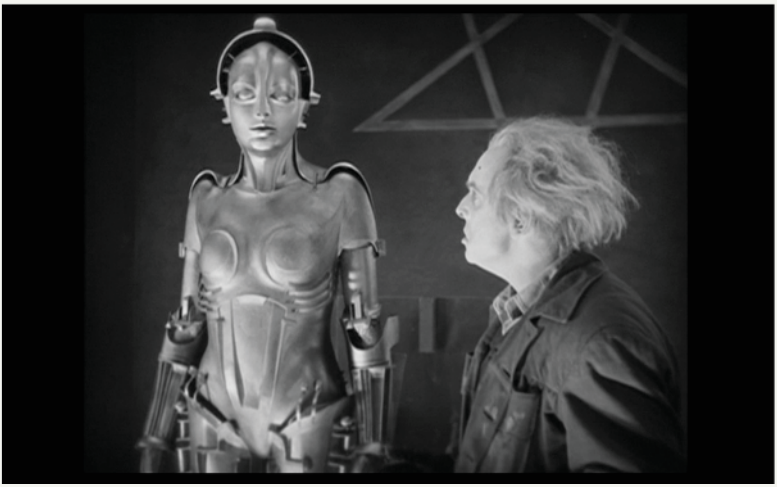
A detail present in Thea von Harbou's novel but absent from the film names this anxiety more explicitly. In the novel, Joh Fredersen's son confronts him directly:

> "Are you not afraid, father (supposing that the statistics are correct and the consumption of man is progressing increasingly, rapidly) that one fine day there will be no more food there for the man-eating god-machines... ?"
>
> "The case is conceivable," said the brain of Metropolis.

intact the property relations which they strive to abolish. It sees its salvation in granting expression to the masses—but on no account granting them rights. The masses have a right to changed property relations; fascism seeks to give them expression in keeping these relations unchanged. The logical outcome of fascism is an aestheticizing of political life (Benjamin 2002b)."

> "And then?"
>
> "Then," said the brain of Metropolis, "by then a substitute for man will have to have been found."
>
> "The improved man, you mean—? The machine-man—?"
>
> "Perhaps," said the brain of Metropolis. (Von Harbou 1927)

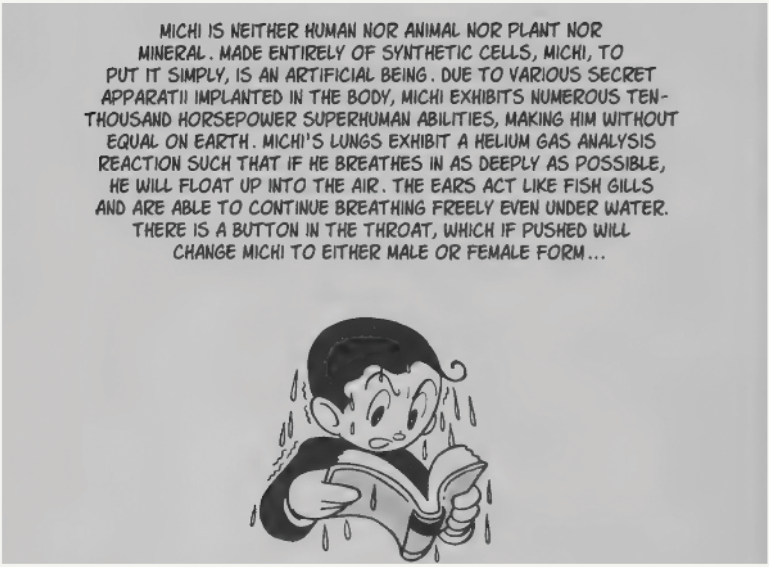
The *Maschinenmensch*—the robot that "mad scientist" Rotwang creates and gives the face of Maria—is really a prototype for the total replacement of labor. The reconciliation at the end of the film is a holding pattern: the "heart" (in this case a sort of human-resources sham messiah in the figure of Joh Fredersen's son) mediates only until the hands can be dispensed with entirely, a pause actually caused by the killing of the only scientist capable of producing Maschinenmensch en masse.



Metropolis— The Maschinenmensch, Dir. Fritz Lang, 1927

The Maschinenmensch functions as what Angus Fletcher calls an allegorical agent—a "daemonic" figure embodying a single compulsive purpose endlessly replayed, "like a perpetual motion machine" (Gunning 2000). The robot dominates *Metropolis* not only in the false Maria but in the dehumanized mechanical movements of the workers themselves. When they march in formation to the machines, when their bodies compose the visual figure of a hand, they are already

Maschinenmensch—the robot merely makes visible what is already the condition of labor. This is why the figure resists any single reading: it proliferates as labor replacement, as feminine threat, as cinematic simulacrum, as mask. Its meaning is allegorical rather than symbolic, generated through accumulation rather than resolved in a single key.



Metoroporisu, Tezuka Osamu, 1949

Metoroporisu, Dir. Rintarô, 2001

The figure condenses multiple anxieties that circulate through central European culture in the 1920s. Alfred Thomas identifies a "homology between threatening women and out-of-control technology" running through Paul Wegener's *The Golem* (1920), Lang's *Metropolis* (1927), and Karel Capek's *R.U.R.* (1920)—all produced within a seven-year span. In Capek's play, which gave the world the word "robot" (from Czech robota, forced labor), artificial beings created to free humanity from work eventually rise up and destroy their creators. Capek was "conscious of the golem legend of old Prague," and the play shares the golem's moral logic: the hubris of creation, the creature that exceeds its maker's control. Like the tower, the robot is an image of technological ambition that carries within it the certainty of its own catastrophic reversal.

Metoroporisu— Tima reveals her true form, 2001

Rintaro's 2001 anime *Metoroporisu*, an adaptation of Osamu Tezuka's manga (itself inspired by a single still from Lang's film), re-interprets the New Tower of Babel into a structure called the Ziggurat—explicitly linking Lang's futuristic tower back to the ancient Mesopotamian prototype. The chain of influence runs from Akkadian temple architecture through Genesis through Bruegel through Lang through Tezuka through Rintaro, each iteration reactivating the same, now-dialectical image: the structure that reaches toward heaven, the confusion that follows, the fall. Doomed revolutions figure through each retelling. But where Lang's *Metropolis* treats the machine as an instrument of the industrialist's deception, Rintaro's *Metoroporisu* has an empathy for the machine as a sort of next-in-line lumpenproletariat in a series of thwarted revolutions. In the film, two detectives from Japan investigate organ trafficking in

a retro-futuristic city dependent on robotic labor. A disenfranchised human worker's movement vying for legitimacy is betrayed by its secret government sponsors; fascists exploit anti-robot sentiment to seize power; and Tima, an advanced robot who appears fully human, revolts on behalf of robots in a disastrous assault on all the humans of the city.[10]

Maria in the catacombs beneath the city of Metropolis, 1927

[10] *Metropolis* and *Metoroporisu* have distinct takes on the gender of their central robotic figures. Maria embodies a cartoonish dichotomy of female stereotypes (Madonna/Whore), while Tima is girlish yet sexless, a Chaplin-like tramp whose romantic connection with protagonist Kenichi is crush-like but never sexual. Her final transformation is into a Terminator-esque automaton marked by a single red eye. (In Tezuka's manga, the character is called "Mitchi" and can change sex at will; Mitchi's breakdown stems from discovering that, as an android, they have no parents.) The difference in affective register—Maria as uncanny threat, Tima as object of empathy—tracks a broader divergence researcher Sunny Yoon identifies between Eastern and Western technological imaginaries: Western AI inherits what N. Katherine Hayles calls the "Platonic backhand," a disembodied orientation that produces humanoids provoking the uncanny, while Japanese audiences tend to perceive humanoids with affinity, shaped by the very pop culture lineage (*Astro Boy*, *Ghost in the Shell*) through which Tezuka reaches Rintaro (Yoon 2025). Tima is not a deception wearing a stolen face but a soulful being denied agency by the political order of the city.

What makes the tower a dialectical image in Benjamin's sense is that it refuses to settle into either representation. It is neither simply the origin (the mythological beginning of nations, languages, differences, the first failure to organize, ruin) nor simply the end (the projected eschaton, the catastrophe to come). It freezes these two temporal moments into a single image, and in doing so it petrifies the future—as though what will happen has already been determined, because it has already happened once before.[11]

The tower exists at the threshold between historicized mythology and mythologized history— between genealogy (the Table of Nations, the ancient catacombs beneath the New Tower, both conjuring a natural history of biological production) and the city (a technological intervention that begins human history, whose material is symbolic language).[12] Between the dungeon of the mythological past and the megastructure mirage of a projected future. In each of the texts considered here, the tower is simultaneously under construction and in ruins. The Babel of Genesis is never completed; Lang's New Tower is besieged from below; Rintaro's Ziggurat collapses in fire. The image always contains both its aspiration and its failure, and this is what gives it its allegorical force.[13] The strength of Lang and Von Harbou's *Metropolis*, which I failed to absorb in my first viewings, is that its heaping of images makes it fecund earth for these sorts of allegorical readings.

> Harbou (or Lang) do not seem capable of a truly feminist critique any more than of a Marxist, Freudian or Christian resolution. Instead, we have a text whose allegorical energies seem unable to coalesce into a

[11] "Walter Benjamin, speaking of the baroque allegoricists, complained that 'these allegories fill out and deny the void in which they are represented just as ultimately, the intention does not faithfully rest in the contemplation of bones, but, faithlessly leaps forward to the idea of Resurrection'. The resolution of *Metropolis* [1927] also makes this faithless leap, but seems to lose its footing, while the aesthetic energy of the film remains true to 'the contemplation of bones'." (Gunning 2000)

[12] The cuneiform writing system employed by the Babylonians was, until recently, the earliest known system of its kind, and as such represents a delineation between "history" and "pre-history."

[13] Robert Smithson, surveying the suburban wasteland of Passaic, New Jersey in the late 60s, described what he called "ruins in reverse"—"the buildings don't fall into ruin after they are built but rather rise into ruin before they are built" (Smithson 1967). Our tower is a palindrome of ruination, an origin story that falls into ruin, pre-ruins building towards a structure which never culminates.

> single grand narrative, but rather ceaselessly generates reference to nearly all the narratives - political, religious, occult, aesthetic, sexual - that circulated through Weimar culture. (Gunning 2000)

If the strength of allegory is that the creation of meaning happens in the mind of the viewer, then we can easily read Metropolis in allegorical mode just based on the density of images and potential readings alone, regardless of authorial intent- and importantly, we can read the fall of the Tower of Babel as that fall into a state of plural allegorical readings of images and text after the loss of symbolic authority, unfixed from its position as an origin story, but rather as something ripped out of time and the chain of causality. Broken free of the prison of the film itself, each image from Metropolis is a shattered hieroglyph which seems to speak on its own with a different message to each viewer.

A primitive chess-playing program displays erratic behavior suggesting its own subjectivity in Computer Chess, Dir. Andrew Bujalski (2011)

5. Fate and Language

> Man has delegated his activity to the machines.
> He has relinquished in their favour the faculty of thought.
> And machines certainly think. Indeed, in the evolution
> of this thought they go beyond the limited function
> originally envisaged. For example, they have invented the
> inconceivable effects of speed which so modify anyone
> experiencing them that it would be difficult, indeed
> arbitrary, to say that that person is the same as the one
> who lived in a world of slowness. The sensation that grips
> man, then, confronted by this thinking derived from his
> own thinking process but out of his control and growing
> steadily, unstoppable even by his putatively creative will,
> is nothing less than panic terror, a terror whose traps he
> fondly imagined he had circumvented, presumptuous
> child who fondly imagined he could walk in darkness
> without its company. Once again, you will discover at
> the origin of this terror the antagonism between man
> contemplating himself, contemplating himself in the
> process of being, and his thought process which is
> constantly evolving. Tragic nature of all mythology.
> There is an essentially modern tragic symbol: it is a sort
> of large wheel which is spinning and which is no longer
> being steered by a hand.

—*Louis Aragon, París Peasant (1926)*

Archaeologists have suggested that the topmost level of the ziggurat of Etemenanki served as an observatory for the Babylonian astronomers the Greeks called "Chaldeans," whose planetary observations were "interpreted as omens," inseparable from divination (Curta 2016). The Tower reaches toward heaven not only to approach the gods but to read their intentions. The desire to manage uncertainty—to gather signs, to extract from their arrangement a knowledge of what comes next—is a project with no natural terminus. There are always more signs to read, more data to gather, more variables to incorporate and excuses for inaccuracy. The New Tower ascends because the only alternative is stoppage or collapse, and to stop is an ideological and material concession that cannot be accepted.

For Benjamin, the reading of mantic symbols such as signs and portents belongs to the ossified order of myth. Fate is the realm of guilt, debt, and predetermination—the religious domain in which human beings are powerless to interfere in the workings of a cosmic order. Susan Buck-Morss writes in *The Dialectics of Seeing*:

> Within myth, the passage of time takes the form of predetermination. The course of events is said to be predestined by the gods, written in the stars, spoken by oracles, or inscribed in sacred texts. Strictly speaking, myth and history are incompatible. The former dictates that because human beings are powerless to interfere in the workings of fate, nothing truly new can happen, while the concept of history implies the possibility of human influence upon events." (1989)

A large language model, or LLM—the technology at the center of the current "artificial intelligence" industry—is a neural network trained on enormous quantities of text that generates strings of text by predicting the most probable next word (or "token," the smallest unit the model processes) from probability distributions derived from the statistical weight of everything it has ingested. Whatever else these systems do, their foundational operation is prediction. The infrastructure required to support this prediction is Babelian in scale—thousands of GPUs (the specialized processors, originally designed for rendering videogame graphics, that power machine learning), energy measured in the output of small power plants, supply chains reaching from rare earth mines to undersea cables to data centers arrayed across continents—and its logic demands perpetual expansion. Each generation of machine learning model is larger and more onerous than the last in terms of its material requirements. This extraction touches beyond the immediate and material. In my home state of Texas, data centers for AI are given more than $1 billion (USD) in tax breaks each year, preventing the communities affected by these projects from benefiting from their creation through those lost taxes (Cobler et al. 2026). Negative local impacts of hyperscale data centers range from increased load on an already strained electrical grid and rising consumer electrical costs, increased water usage, air pollution, the creation of large "heat islands," and intense and inescapable noise.[14]

[14] "By 2030, the global data centres powering artificial intelligence are projected to consume 945 terawatt-hours of electricity. This is nearly triple the combined annual electricity use

In *The Task of the Translator* (1921) Walter Benjamin argued that the act of translation reveals a kinship between languages, not by making the foreign familiar, but by allowing foreignness to transform the target language. He called the substrate of this kinship reine Sprache (pure language)—not a language anyone speaks, but the totality of what all languages, taken together, intend. What is meant always exceeds what can be communicated. Stephen Dougherty (2025) has argued that massively multilingual neural translation models operationalize something like this kinship as an engineering principle: rather than building pairwise systems between two languages, the model draws on the shared resource of all languages simultaneously, so that a lower-resource language like Yiddish benefits from co-training with related Germanic languages and dozens of others besides. Structural kinship is real but pattern recognition, however massive in scale, is not backed by any actual referent. Benjamin critiqued "information" as a sort of linguistic junk-food—explained, ready to use, pre-selected for relevance to the reader, and always plausible—whether true or not. The psychological connection arrives pre-made in an informational burst, such as a social media news post, as opposed to the story, whose staying power is connected to its restraint from self-interpretation.

Image from "Shapes (nd other Shapes)," a live-generated and performed creation/destruction myth using human-scale Markov chain corpora—Wiley Wiggins, Everest Pipkin, The Octopus Project, 2015[15]

of Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Nigeria—countries collectively home to more than 650 million people" (United Nations University. 2026)

[15] A Markov chain generates text by predicting the next element in a sequence based only on what immediately precedes it, with no memory of anything prior. Andrey Markov developed the model in 1906, applying it to the distribution of vowels and consonants in Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin*. Where an LLM's output passes for human writing, a Markov generator trained on a small corpus produces text that is visibly stitched from borrowed parts — no one

"Meaning is mutable," artist Everest Pipkin said in a 2016 talk, "it builds itself in the mind of the reader as words compound... we as humans are built-in pattern recognizers and storytellers and any text need only do half the work; we will fill the gaps." The machine reproduces structure; the reader produces meaning.

The outputs of a language model are stochastic, sampled from probability distributions with an element of engineered "randomness."[16] But this is not the unpredictability of a decision, it is the unpredictability of cast lots. The model does not deliberate over branching possibilities; a token is sampled, and we supply the meaning after the fact.

The late author David Foster Wallace, while an undergraduate, showed that the philosophical argument for fatalism could be defused through careful attention to the modalities embedded in language—the difference between what didn't happen and what couldn't have happened (Wallace et al. 2011).[17] A language model cannot make this distinction. It is optimized for plausibility, not truth; it has no model of possible states of affairs against which to check its output, and so cannot represent counterfactuals—cannot hold in view the paths not taken at the moment of generation (Pearl and Mackenzie 2018). An interpreter can say "this could have gone otherwise"; a prediction engine can only say "this is what came next." A culture that mistakes the latter for the former—that takes the stochastic output of a prediction engine for the

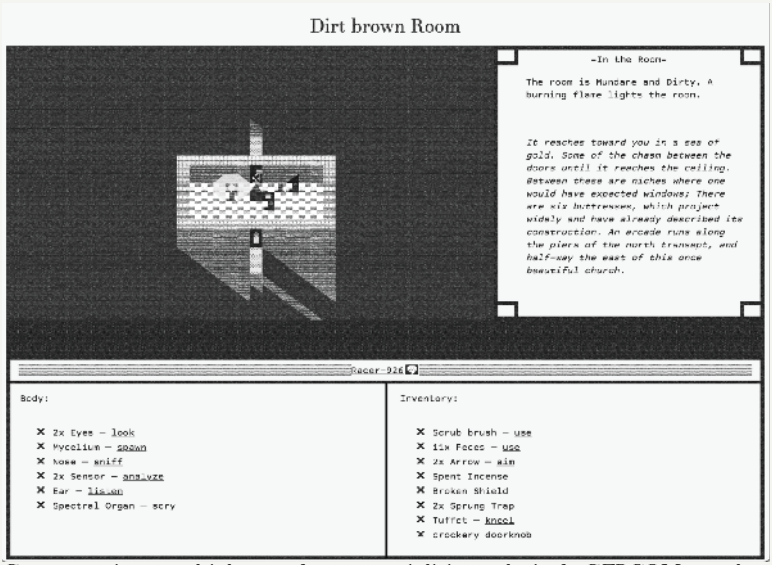
mistakes it for the product of a mind, but it still sparks the decoding process that occurs when a reader attempts to find meaning in randomness. I have used Markov chain text generators in my own art and game experiments, feeding them hand-selected corpora. In a recent irony, Markov-generated text has found a second use: because it produces language that is statistically plausible but semantically degraded, it can poison the web-scraped training data of large language models with convincing nonsense (Theis and Wijesooriya 2025).

[16] Stochastic—Involving or determined by random probability distribution. A stochastic process produces outcomes that are individually unpredictable but follow statistical patterns in aggregate. Contemporary computers are incapable of true randomness, and can only hide their determinism in complexity.

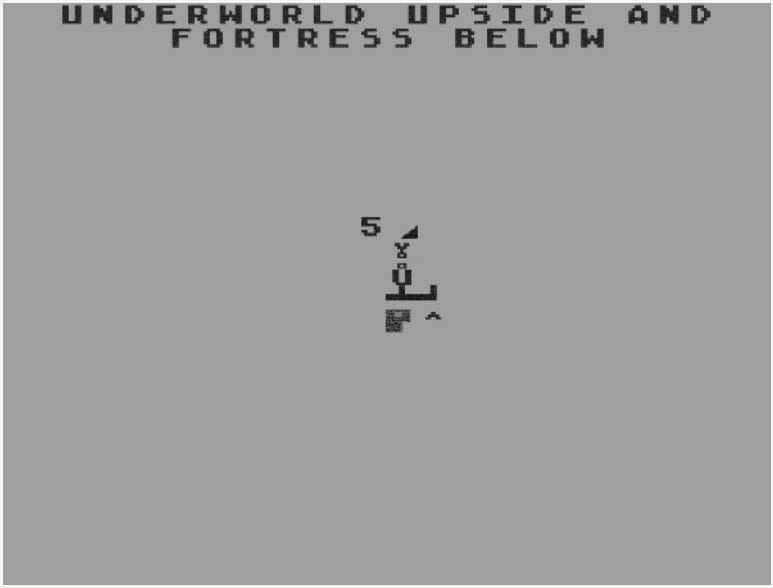
[17] Richard Taylor's 1962 paper "Fatalism" had argued that a handful of uncontroversial assumptions about logic and language were sufficient to prove fatalism—that our actions have no influence on the future. Wallace identified a scope ambiguity at the heart of the argument: Taylor's reasoning showed only that a cool gun barrel is evidence you did not fire, not that you could not have—the difference between a humdrum observation about what happened and the fatalist's claim that possibility itself was an illusion. Wallace called the missing distinction "situational physical modality": possibility that is sensitive to time and circumstance, not fixed for all eternity.

speech of an oracle—has not escaped myth. It has reinstalled it at the center of its technical apparatus.

This writing is, in part, about authority, but it does not speak with authority. The subject of the underlying nature of language and how to model it is one of the most intense debates in science and philosophy. As a former art student I have some understanding of semiotics—the use of signs and their relationship to what is signified. As a hobby programmer who uses code and language in my art projects, I have a beginner's understanding of a statistical model of language, calculating the likelihood of one letter, word, or group of words to follow another. I'm also aware from my research of the dogged projects to distill language into sets of syntactic rules or structural forms. There is also a metaphysical, even mystical way of speaking about language, a consideration of the 'magic' uses of reading, writing, and speaking, and imaginings of 'pure' or 'original' languages. While I cannot speak with authority about any of these modes of inquiry, I am an authority on my own experience of communication and agency. The self may be an illusion, but I feel solitude. Free will may be an illusion, but I feel anxiety of action and guilt. Language may be some primordial force, a product of evolution, math, structure, an alien life form, something I am not qualified to speak about, but I speak. I read and listen, and I construe meaning from what I apprehend as language.



Grotto, persistent multiplayer web game spatializing nodes in the GEDCOM genealogy data format into rooms in an expansive crypt, each described by 'nonsense' Markov-generated text—Wiley Wiggins, Paul Stiverson, 2023



Randomized divination ideogram experiment, Wiley Wiggins, 2024

6. The Gambling Hall

It is agreed that studying [the laws of games of chance] contributed to the discovery of the theory of probability, to topology and the theory of strategic games. But they are not regarded as capable of providing a model for depicting the real world or unwittingly structuring a kind of embryonic, encyclopedic knowledge of it. Moreover, fatalism and strict determinism, to the degree that they deny free will and responsibility, view the entire universe as a gigantic, general, obligatory, and endless lottery in which each drawing inevitably implies the possibility or even the necessity of participating in the next drawing, and the next, and the next, ad infinitum.

Also, among leisure classes whose work is insufficient to absorb their energies or occupy all their available time, games of chance frequently acquire an unexpected cultural significance which influences their art, ethics, economy, and even life experience.

– *Roger Caílloís, Man, Play and Games (1958)*

Gambling converts time into a narcotic.

–*Walter Benjamín, Paris, Capital of the 19th Century (1938)*

In media theorist Sun-ha Hong's research, contemporary shipping and industrial workers have their discretion undermined by predictive systems and reach a level of alienation from their work that looks something like the working underclass of *Metropolis*.[18] With every move surveilled and predicted, they lose all agency and become *Maschinenmensch*:

> [...] automation separates the worker from their skills and knowledge - a separation which then enables the factory to operate with deskilled workers, and to turn that information around to evaluate and control worker behaviour. In Amazon warehouses, human 'stowers' handle incoming items of staggering variety, grouping them into bins in giant 'pick towers', a task that involves a certain degree of discretionary judgment. When this process is laced with data-gathering systems, however, each worker action - such as the stower's scanning of the item, their rate of pieces per hour, and their bathroom breaks – provides data grist for improving predictions of the stowing process. Individual judgments and tacit knowledge are siphoned into a unique source of knowledge for managers, but not for the workers themselves. The key innovation is not merely to pack seven boxes instead of six, but ensuring that it is the manager who can set the 'rate' of seven, or eight, or two hundred, in ways that are precise for the manager, and opaque to the worker. (Hong 2023)

The current de-skilling of information workers through the mass adoption of machine-learning coding tools also feels in some ways like an echo of the industrial revolution, in which craftspeople were marginalized and siloed to roles within a larger process of production over which they had less insight or discretion than before. My experience of using machine-learning coding tools feels very much like pulling the

[18] Sun-ha Hong argues that prediction is not primarily a technological instrument for knowing future outcomes but "a social model for extracting and concentrating discretionary power"– discretion being the everyday ability to define one's own situation. Paying for predictive technology "is less a way to establish a more objective foothold on future outcomes than it is a way to reallocate discretionary power in one's favour. To extract from one is to concentrate on another" (Hong 2023).

arm of a slot machine that can either spit up fully-formed functioning code that solves the problem of the moment or can stuff a project full of the software equivalent of asbestos—a future problem to be untangled, hidden by a veneer of "what you asked for" functionality. In either case one pays rent for the convenience of offloading cognitive labor and misses out on the learning process of navigating that difficulty. When I see interventions from the tool that happen within the realm of my own expertise, I tend to be repulsed and I reject them. When the tool writes code outside of my skillset, I assume that if it works, it must be good-enough. This leads to a frictionless state where I never get "stuck" on something I don't know how to do. Pulling the slot machine arm can feel addictive—someone without any coding experience abandons their discretion entirely to the imposing speed and apparent confidence of the tool.

Paul Lafargue, whom Benjamin quotes at length in *The Arcades Project*, saw the modern bourgeois as a professional gambler:

> Modern economic development as a whole tends more and more to transform capitalist society into a giant international gambling house, where the bourgeois wins and loses capital in consequence of events which remain unknown to him. . . . The 'inexplicable' is enthroned in bourgeois society as in a gambling hall. . . . Successes and failures, thus arising from causes that are unanticipated, generally unintelligible, and seemingly dependent on chance, predispose the bourgeois to the gambler's frame of mind. . . . The capitalist whose fortune is tied up in stocks and bonds, which are subject to variations in market value and yield for which he does not understand the causes, is a professional gambler. The gambler, however, . . . is a supremely superstitious being. The habitués of gambling casinos always possess magic formulas to conjure the Fates. (Lafargue et al. 1910)

Prediction markets are online exchanges where participants wager on the outcomes of future events—elections, wars, economic indicators, celebrity gossip—buying and selling contracts that fluctuate like stocks. The CEO of Trump-backed prediction market Kalshi has described his company's mission as "replacing debate, subjectivity, and talk with markets, accuracy, and truth" ("Kalshi Reaches $11 Billion Valuation" 2025). This is the next intensification of what Benjamin diagnosed as the

triumph of "information" over other narrative forms: where information arrived pre-explained and always plausible, the prediction market compresses it further—into a single number, a probability, stripped of context and offered as self-evident truth. Hong (2023) calls prediction a *relational grammar*: a set of epistemic expectations governing how facts are made, what counts as knowledge, and whose way of seeing is imposed in the process. The very act of declaring something predictable conceals ambiguity while appearing to claim nothing at all. In the past two years Kalshi's monthly trading volume has exploded from roughly one billion dollars to over twenty billion, pressing into domains once considered too morbid to commodify.[19] On Kalshi-competitor Polymarket, war markets allowed apparent insiders to profit from advance knowledge of military strikes on Venezuela and Iran; bettors who stood to lose money on the outcome of an Israeli interception threatened the life of a journalist whose reporting contradicted their wagers. The idea is not new to the military—in 2001, DARPA funded FutureMAP, a proposed market where traders would bet on coups, terrorist attacks, and assassinations in the Middle East, but it was killed by congressional outrage within forty-eight hours of its public disclosure (Futrelle 2026). What presents itself as collective intelligence is the gambling hall dressed in the language of epistemology—a mechanism for concentrating the power to define the situation in the hands of the predictor, at the expense of those whose lives are being predicted upon.

Both the gambling managerial class and the *Maschinenmensch* under their control are operating in some altered temporality of continually-interrupted memorylessness. The "future" in this mode is not a horizon of possibility but a perpetual wager under the heavy shadow of a resurrected, primordial fate.

The idea that time is a perpetual motion machine for generating 'value,' that boom and bust cycles of uncertainty are a kind of casino for generating infinite wealth, is "gamerthink"—an intrusion of the symbolic world of tokens onto the material world it claims to represent, to the detriment of the material world. It is the epistemological stance that all systems are fundamentally rule-governed, that optimization is always possible, and that the right strategy (or exploit) will eventually master any domain. Applied to finance or geopolitics, it produces the same superstitious fatalism Lafargue describes.

[19] "In 2025, Americans placed roughly $166 billion in bets on sporting events. That's more than the entire U.S. movie, music, book, and museum industries generated in revenue combined." (Catherina 2026)

Benjamin, writing in 1936, saw clearly where the logic of technological overproduction leads when decoupled from the reorganization of property relations:

> If the natural utilization of productive forces is impeded by the property system, the increase in technical devices, in speed, and in the sources of energy will press for an unnatural utilization, and this is found in war. The destructive power of war furnishes proof that society has not been mature enough to incorporate technology as its organ, that technology has not been sufficiently developed to cope with the elemnental forces of society. (2004, 276)

My point here is not to moralize about individual technologies, which doubtlessly have potential benefits under a different regime and with cost transparency. One major problem is the repeating cycle in which collections of disparate technologies are bundled together and given an enchanted name like a colony of rats in a trenchcoat and hat—"Cybernetics," "Expert Systems," "Blockchain," "Web3," "Artificial Intelligence"—to furnish a renewed idol into which the gambling owner class can pour resources.[20] Each new magic box promises to spin straw into gold and to solve the myriad growing problems caused by its own production. When it fails, the idol is rebranded or rebuilt, and if no rebrand will suffice—if the bubble has inflated beyond what civilian markets can absorb—the war industry offers its final form.[21]

[20] Researcher Emily Bender rhetorically asks—"What is AI? In fact this is a marketing term. It's a way to make certain kinds of automation sound sophisticated, powerful, or magical and as such it's a way to dodge accountability by making the machines sound like autonomous thinking entities rather than tools that are created and used by people and companies. It's also the name of a subfield of computer science concerned with making machines that 'think like humans' but even there it was started as a marketing term in the 1950s to attract research funding to that field." (Bender 2023)

[21] The U.S. military's Special Operations Command plans to establish its first-ever center for AI-driven missions, the "Special Operations Forces Autonomous Warfare Center," referenced in the $1.5 trillion Department of War budget request to Congress. Autonomous warfare in this context is a euphemism for automated killing—AI systems that process intelligence data, select targets, and transmit kill orders to waiting drones or loitering munitions. (Klippenstein 2026).

The tower is always being built and the tower is always falling. The only future that capitalism and its various subordinate religions and nationalisms can imagine is eternal growth toward a collapse that should never, but must someday, occur. This is the structure of the gambling hall: the game must continue; the house always eventually wins; and the gambler, unable to leave the table, mistakes their compulsion for a challenge to fate. The name of the magic charm is continually changing in a cycle of fashion and novelty, a technological enchantment that refinances the planet periodically, dedicated to cancerous growth rather than addressing the needs of humanity and the world it stewards.

```
You become wysiwyggins.
Welcome area(#82)
A large open deck. To the north you can see much of the rest of the superstructure. Recessed recreation areas are
surrounded by stacked living blocks. Domed agricultural areas rise up out of the water like turtle shells around dark
industrial ziggurats. Floodlights illuminate the area. Nearby, cheerful smoke puffs from the squat chimney of a
modest temple.
Exits: docks(#84), north(#86), temple(#103), veloway(#121) and gallery(#443)
You see: a Welcome sign(#95) and a wickedwench(#1078)
You are carrying:
glowing blankie          an electroluminescent white, dimple-dot minky weighted blankie

object womb              A public object womb. It's still warm.


Yes Is A Deeper Season   A chapbook of poetry. You can read it if you like.

Neat Copter              'Neat Copter':


                         An available example of futurism rendered in light pink legrandite. Neat displays
considerable salubriousness as it brings into our awareness salvation.
quakergrey book          A book of science fiction. You can read it if you like.

Both Is The Most Great   A chapbook of poetry. You can read it if you like.

Evening Blood Clot       'Evening Blood Clot':


                         An ontological example of animal kingdom rendered in whiterose diamond. Evening Blood Clot
displays considerable storminess as it is closely related to angst.
origami box              A chemical origami box made of silverpowdered hiddenite.
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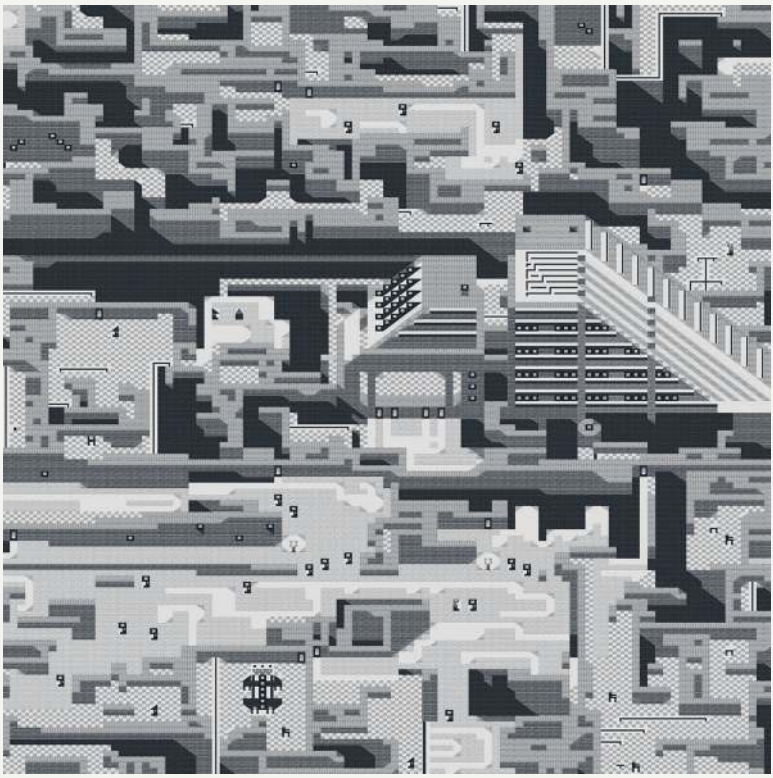
Sea of Objects, A multiplayer text game about a post-scarcity luxury seasteading utopia operated by Marie Kondo devotees, including Markov-chain based poetry generation objects—Wiley Wiggins, Megan Anderson, 2020



Study for Archon (2022 - 2025) using 2D-Markovian "Wave Function Collapse" output— Wiley Wiggins

7. The Degenerate Utopia

> Now that we have coaxed the lightning to curl round our feet like a kitten and, fearless as eagles, have counted the freckles on the face of the sun, to whom shall we now pay supreme homage? Other blind forces are born to us, other major fears, and thus we end up prostrating ourselves before the machines that are our daughters, before various ideas that we dreamed up innocently one morning.

—Louis Aragon, Paris Peasant (1926)

> Then shall they be gods, because they have all power, and the angels are subject unto them.

—Mormon Doctrine and Covenants 132: 20 (1835)

The New Tower of Babel is a vision of the future that, rather than opening a space for the genuinely new, glosses the present polycrisis by projecting it forward in an idealized, crystalized form. The imagined "singularity"—a science fiction mythologized rapture in which men give birth to a software-based god—formally resolves the contradiction between the overproduction of computational power and the inability of that power to reorganize social relations by recasting it as a mythic vision. Following this strategy, the speculation fueling the current AI bubble inhabits the same suffocating contradiction: either machines will transcend into superintelligence, upgrading an inefficient and unpredictable humanity along with it, or civilization will collapse. The only way to justify increasing investment in destructively accelerating technological production with no foreseeable economic return is to funnel those resources into the only remaining industry: war. Each of these scenarios is fatalistic. None admits the possibility that human beings might consciously reorganize their relationship to technology, labor, and one another.

To use French philosopher Louis Marin's term, the fatalistic myth of the New Tower of Babel is a *degenerate utopia*: a vision that mythically resolves a fundamental social contradiction without negating existing conditions (1984). The reigns of capital are pulled taut between a handful of embattled charioteers, each laying claim to authority, but each equally determined to lead the cart off the same cliff– the pursuit of infinitely expanding "value." This goal may lead to the complete annihilation of the natural world and the subjugation of humanity, a reality that coexists with a story of cosmic liberation and utopic achievement, like a billboard heralding a new city that blocks the view of the smouldering pit of the construction site.

Religious studies scholar Robert Geraci (2010) describes the adepts of ancient temples like the ziggurat of Etemenanki as both engineers and priests, "who have been one and the same from time to time," working together to, "build the objects that would engage humanity and represent the gods." The domains of authority that we tend to think of as counterbalanced opposites borrow grammars from one another in a sort of dance that pantomimes the advancing movement of history. At times these grammars of authority merge. German philosopher Ernst Bloch, writing in 1929, identified a convergence of the spiritual and scientific at the dawn of modernity:

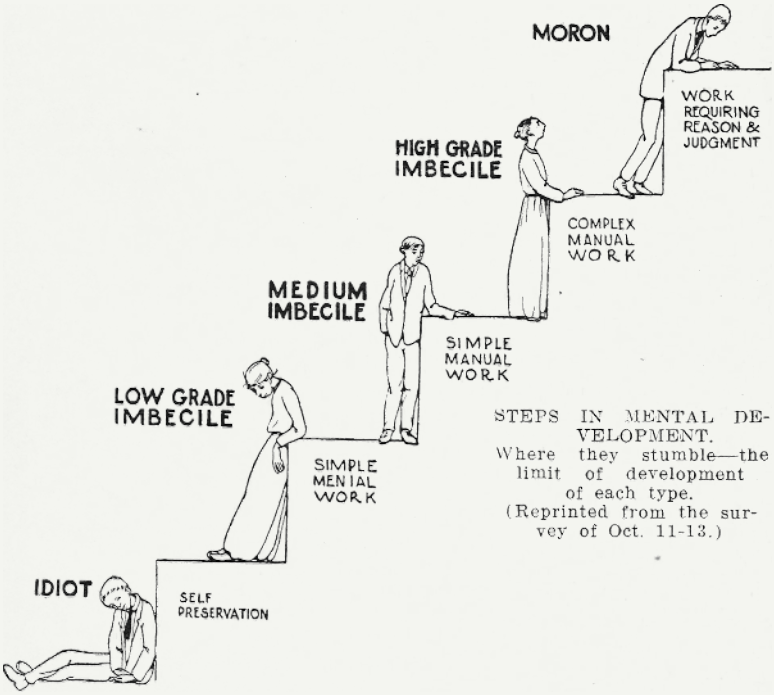
> The more plain and advanced the technology, the more mysteriously it intersected with the old taboo region of vapors, supernatural velocity, Golem-robots, blue thunderbolts. Thus it touched what was once thought of as the realm of magic. An Edison is much closer to Doctor Faustus than to Herbert Spencer. (Bloch and Jaron 1998)

Naturalist Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection* (1859) did to the authority of Genesis what vernacular translation had done to the authority of Church Latin: it revealed that the story a civilization had told itself about its own origin was not fixed truth but a contingent product of natural history. The effect was vertiginous. If human beings were not the telos of a divine plan but one branch of an indifferent process, then the old authorities–theological, moral, political–that had grounded social order in a cosmic hierarchy that extended to seats of power on earth lost their foundation. The English philosopher Herbert Spencer attempted to fill the void

immediately, extending evolutionary competition into a universal law governing societies, economies, and moral systems. His "survival of the fittest" cast nature itself as providing the organizing principle that God no longer could. Darwin had not addressed the relationship of man to animals in *Origin*. The obvious question for every reader was how to fill the fossil gap between ape and man, and Victorian ethnological societies replied with already prevailing racist ideologies, conveniently placing Anglo-Protestants at the top of an imagined hierarchy and ranking non-European peoples along a developmental ladder from "savagery" towards civilization (Barton 2018). The English statistician Francis Galton, a half-cousin of Darwin,[22] argued in *Hereditary Genius* (1869) that human ability was hereditary and that the species could be improved through selective breeding. In *Inquiries into Human Faculty and Its Development* (1883), he coined the term "eugenics"—from the Greek for "good in birth"—and lobbied for it to be adopted, in his words, "like a new religion" (Galton, 1904). Where Spencer offered a philosophy, Galton outlined a program: statistical methods for ranking human populations by biological value, and institutional proposals for ensuring that the "fit" outbred the "unfit." First-wave eugenics (roughly 1900-1945) merged Galtonian premises with the new science of genetics to produce forced sterilization laws across the United States and Europe—over sixty thousand Americans sterilized, mostly poor, disabled, Black and Indigenous—and supplied, as historian Daniel Kevles (1995) has documented, "a model for the Nazis, who sterilized several hundred thousand people and, brandishing their research into the genetics of individual and racial differences, claimed scientific justifications for the Holocaust." Thomas Henry Huxley— "Darwin's Bulldog," Spencer's friend, and grandfather of both the novelist Aldous and the biologist Julian—had resisted this trajectory in his 1893 *Evolution and Ethics*, arguing that ethical progress required resisting natural selection, that civilization was a garden maintained against nature rather than an extension of it. It was Julian Huxley, not his grandfather, who would carry the eugenic program forward through the twentieth century—serving as president of the British Eugenics Society from 1959 to 1962, and coining, in his 1957 essay "Transhumanism," the term that would name the next iteration of the project. After Nazi atrocities discredited

[22] Galton's statistical legacy also reaches, improbably, into the prediction markets discussed earlier. At a county fair in Plymouth, England, in 1906, he collected 800 entries from a competition to guess the weight of a slaughtered ox. The crowd's median estimate—1,207 pounds—was nine pounds off the actual weight. Galton published the humbling result in Nature, and the idea that the "wisdom of crowds" can outperform expert judgment traces back to that dead ox (Futrelle 2026)

mainline eugenics, the movement did not die but rebranded, trading coercion for "choice" and racial hygiene for "human enhancement" while preserving the underlying conviction that populations could and should be sorted by biological value. Eugenics was never simply another pseudo-science. By asserting that statistical methods for quantifying humans could be objective, it was a worldbuilding project—a New Tower rising from the rubble of the old authorities, offering a biological telos in place of a theological one.



"Mental Defectives in Virgina" Scale of mental "types" and their proscribed labor, as determined by IQ testing, Virginia corrections catalog, 1915

Sifting through the history of claims to authority, there are countless examples of costume changes between new and old. Where eugenics swapped the theological framing for a biological one, some movements settled into syncretic visions that kept both. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, a nineteenth-century American-born religion, built its narrative directly on the biblical Table of Nations. It constructs a complex line of descent from Noah's son, Shem, to the founders of the church, asserting that these Europeans colonizing the American

continent were actually a lost tribe of Israel, and the indigenous people they met were distant kin—a "fallen" tribe of Israelites whose unrighteousness was held to be legible in the darkness of their skin, such that converts were expected to emerge from baptism "white and delightsome" (Akenson 2007). Beginning as one more then-strange doctrine among the many that characterized the era, the early Mormon church absorbed the pseudo-Eygptian symbolism of Masonic pageantry and adopted the practice of baptising those already dead. Proxy baptism imagined lost generations united, allowing parents to see themselves rejoined with their dead children in the afterlife—a balm during a time of rampant infant mortality.[23]

Because every member was enjoined to trace their own line and stand proxy for the dead, the church needed to record as many of the people who had ever lived as it could reach—an imperative that turned a religious duty into a feat of data engineering. That drive produced GEDCOM (Genealogical Data Communication) in the 1980s, a standardized open format for exchanging genealogical data across software and databases. GEDCOM became the globally accepted norm for genealogical data interchange: structuring individuals, families, and relationships in hierarchical text-based files. The church's computational genealogical infrastructure—now FamilySearch—is among the largest such systems

[23] The origin myth of the Nation of Islam, a Black nationalist movement founded in Detroit in 1930, reassembles the same elements used by eurocentric worldbuilding projects into a carnival-mirror oppositional viewpoint. As related by the group's founder Wallace Fard Muhammad, all humans descended from an advanced, dark-skinned civilization on what is now the moon. A Black god-scientist, angry that its inhabitants did not all speak the same language, exploded the moon, and one fragment became the Earth. Millennia later a mad scientist named "Yakub" began a program of human eugenics, leading to the creation of a soulless, white sub-species of human. This violent, animalistic race became the ancestors of the Europeans who overthrew the original Black civilization and came to dominate much of the Earth. Early NOI cosmology engaged the biosciences enthusiastically, holding that Black people were the world's first scientists; the warning is not against experimentation but against science falling into the wrong hands. Amiri Baraka's 1966 play *A Black Mass* changed this, presenting the biosciences as less moral than mystical or alchemical practices, reflecting Black American cynicism towards medical research in the 1960's. In writing about *A Black Mass,* Sociologist Alondra Nelson recalls a "Just So Story"—Black American folktales co-opted by the white-authored "Uncle Remus" books— in which an originally dark-skinned humanity finds and exhausts a pond that turns all who enter it white (Collins 2006). Nelson is an important scholar and policy maker around issues of race, culture, medical discrimination, and machine learning. She co-authored *Auditing AI* (2026), a roadmap for implementing audits of "AI" tools.

in the world. These records present themselves as an informational grammar, claiming the authority of religious genealogies like those in the Bible and the Icelandic Eddas while also borrowing the apparent objectivity of formatted data—but they are better described as a fictional one. Paternity tests, needless to say, are a recent invention, and the cultures the LDS church has tried to record kept vastly different family structures, naming customs, and practices of adoption, none of which survive translation into a single schema intact.

Underground Mormon genealogy archives, Stewart Brand Center, photo by Alexander Rose

This data project was always already an engine for defeating death—proxy baptism welding the generations into a single eternal family—so it makes sense that a religion already intimate with technology and characterized by its yearning for resurrection and eternal life would be able to find common cause with transhumanists.

The Mormon Transhumanist Association is a current-day movement within Mormon culture that explicitly advocates a synthesis of singularitarianism and Latter-day Saints doctrine, where ideas of "mind-uploading" and digital transcendence are treated as extensions of the church's own promise of exaltation to godhood in the afterlife. The transhumanist- "rationalist" idea that our reality is itself a computer simulation provides a technologized version of the capstone of Mormon

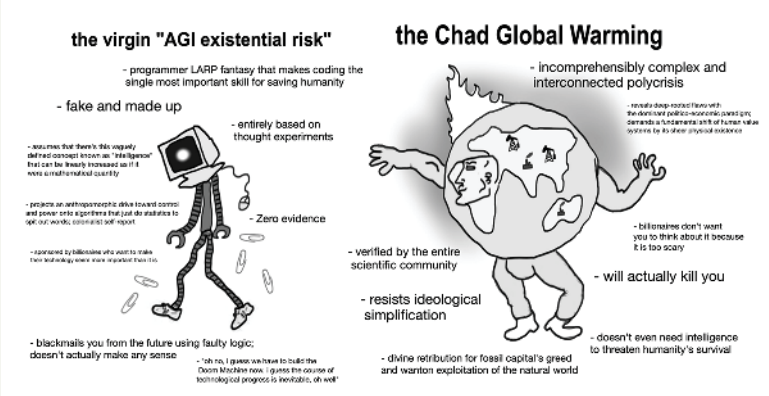
theosis, transforming what might otherwise be "a mere loose alignment of slightly rhyming transhumanist and religious concepts" into a complete vision (Bialecki 2022).

Geraci has named the convergence of religion and technological overproduction "Apocalyptic AI." The "scriptures" of this new theology are pop science books whose earliest prophecies were found published in science fiction magazines. The founding expectation of this faith is that machine intelligence will achieve transcendence, that human minds will be uploaded into immortal computational substrates, and that all suffering will be resolved in the light of a superintelligent successor to humanity. It is a specifically American ideological dreamworld, the legacy of nineteenth-century eschatological movements that combined restorationist Christianity with what Geraci (2010, 22) describes as "the self-understood newness and open possibility of American life."

Computer scientist Timnit Gebru and philosopher Émile P. Torres have traced the genealogy of a cluster of "interconnected and overlapping ideologies" they call the TESCREAL bundle—Transhumanism, Singularitarianism, Cosmism, Rationalism, Effective Altruism, and Longtermism—which they identify as "direct descendants of first-wave eugenics" emerging in roughly the order of the acronym, many of which were "shaped or founded by the same individuals."[24] Julian Huxley had written that by controlling the mechanisms of heredity, that the human species could "transcend itself—not just sporadically... but in its entirety." Transhumanists in the 1990s adopted Huxley's language and ambitions, and each successive ideology inherited the conviction that a radically

[24] *Transhumanism*, the project of using technology to transcend the biological limits of the human, including aging and death; *Singularitarianism*, the belief that recursively self-improving machine intelligence will soon trigger an intelligence "explosion" that transforms civilization; *Cosmism*, a vision (with roots in late-nineteenth-century Russian thought) of humanity re-engineering itself and spreading to colonize and reshape the cosmos; *Rationalism*, the online subculture organized around improving individual and collective reasoning, centered on the LessWrong community founded by Eliezer Yudkowsky; *Effective Altruism*, a movement to direct resources toward doing the "most good" by quantified measures, increasingly preoccupied with speculative long-range risks like rogue AI; and *Longtermism*, the ethical claim that positively influencing the vast number of humans (or posthumans) who might exist in the far future is a key moral priority of the present. A related early-1990s strand, *extropianism*, fused transhumanism with free-market libertarianism and an optimistic faith in unbounded technological progress (Gebru et al. 2024).

"enhanced" posthuman species, based on flawed metrics like I.Q., is both achievable and morally imperative. The same ideologies that animated eugenicists in the past (e.g racism, xenophobia, classism, ableism, sexism) "[...] remain widespread within the movement to build [Artificial General Intelligence (AGI)]" (Gebru et al. 2024, 2, 5, 1). Gebru and Torres' TESCREAL bundle not only names a set of beliefs but outlines a funding network linking technology entrepreneurs, philanthropies and research labs. Tech oligarchs such as Peter Thiel, Sam Altman, and Elon Musk have directed vast resources toward projects driven by the same eschatological premises: that a "value-aligned" AGI would somehow end scarcity, solve all human problems, even conquer death– and the parallel warning that failure to build or align it correctly could result in human extinction. This double-horizon of salvation or doom produces the single-minded imperative to accelerate development, or more cynically, a cover story rationalizing harms committed in the pursuit of infinitely accumulated and centralized wealth, a similarly faith-based goal. What was once marginal research (building unscoped AGI as opposed to narrowly trained specialized tools) has since become a multi-billion-dollar enterprise, its speculative cosmology underwriting real institutional power. In 2022 a post on Twitter (Now called X), CEO of OpenAI Sam Altman predicted that humanity will have "unlimited intelligence and energy before the decade is out," repeating a previous claim that superintelligence could "maybe capture the light cone of all future value in the universe" (Loizos 2019). The scale of the claim—all future value in the universe (as if "value" is a property of physics)—is the measure by which present harms are justified, the denominator against which any real suffering can be made to appear negligible.



Meme post to Reddit r/EffectiveAltruism, 2025

TESCREAList leaders insist that AGI is inevitable, echoing the rationalization for the proliferation of nuclear weapons, that if Western nations do not build AGI, China will, and that it therefore constitutes a national security imperative, insurance for future global investment and legitimization.[25] Gebru and Torres argue that the notion of AI "safety" promoted by TERSCREAL-affiliated organizations is rooted in the utopian-apocalyptic visions inherited from first-wave eugenicists, who imagined Western civilizational collapse due to dysgenic breeding. Framing the AGI agenda as a safety issue allows companies to present themselves as guardians of an imagined identity, murkily based on heredity and shared cultural values, while simultaneously creating unsafe products, centralizing power, and evading accountability. The logic is self-sealing: present harms—worker exploitation and marginalization, data theft, cultural appropriation, environmental damage, the amplification of racism and xenophobia— are dismissed as mere surface disturbances, negligible against the "astronomical value" of a posthuman future. That logic fails to consider the "value" of current day humanity or the currently unknowable phenomenological experience (if there is one) of a radically altered human subject.

In 2024, Trae Stephens—billionaire co-founder of Anduril, an AI powered autonomous weapons company named after a legendary sword in J.R.R. Tolkien's fantasy series *The Lord of the Rings*—delivered a lecture titled "God and Technology" at his nondenomenational church in San Francisco, where he argued that humans, like God, are creators and that "what our soul deeply longs for is progress in building a better future." Trae and wife Michelle Stephens co-founded the ACTS 17 Collective—Acknowledging Christ in Technology and Society—a Bay Area group for "thinkers, builders, and leaders" at which Peter Theil delivered a private lecture series on the topic of "the Antichrist." Where the seventeenth century's Antichrist "would have been a Dr. Strangelove, a scientist who did all this sort of evil crazy science," Thiel reasoned, "in the 21st century, the Antichrist is a Luddite who wants to stop all science" (Butler 2026). This new moral imperative towards technological production has found support in Washington, where revisions to counterterrorism strategy has led law enforcement to refocus on "anti-Capitalist," "anti-Christian," "radical transgender," and "anti-technology extremist" targets (Boguslaw 2026). AI entrepreneur Will Manidis supplied the theological term for what this movement lacks: an "apologetic"—the project of defending the mysteries of faith to nonbelievers. Andreesen Horowitz partner

[25] Falling distantly behind China on other projects like attainable home ownership, high-speed rail, public education, or childhood nutrition are, we must assume, much lesser problems.

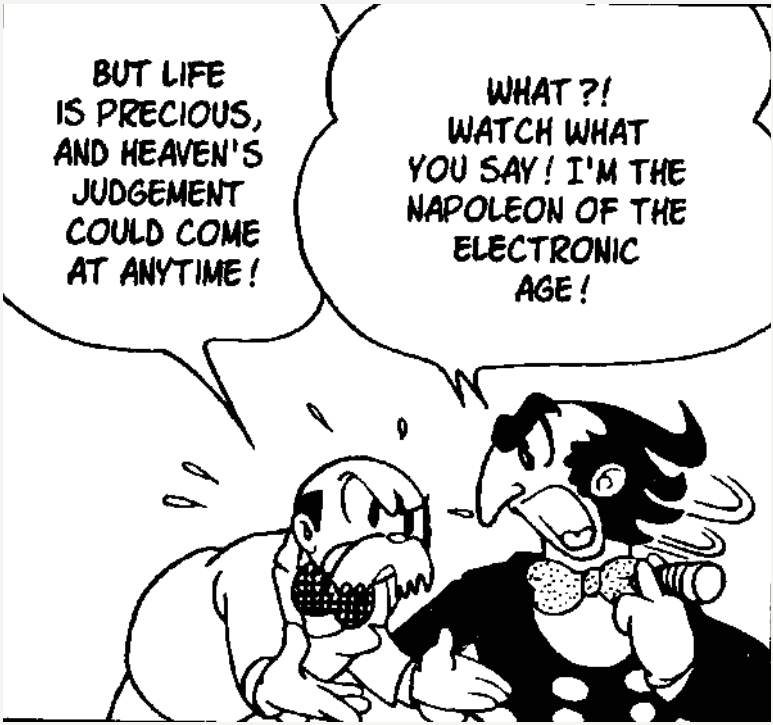
Katherine Boyle, a close ally to Thiel protege and US Vice president, JD Vance, frames AI development as "pro-family" and has invested in Hallow, a Catholic prayer app whose twenty-four million users can consult an AI chatbot "designed to provide answers based on the teachings of the Catholic Church."[26] Harvard humanist chaplain Greg Epstein identifies a marriage of convenience: "They're trying to imbue wealth with meaning. But they're also trying to imbue a certain kind of meaning with wealth." As a result, Christianity gets a luxury rebrand, tech titans get to sanctify their fortunes (Butler 2026).

In a speech at Boyle's 2025 American Dynamism Summit, JD Vance quoted Pope John Paul II's encyclical *Laborem Exercens* to support his assertion that "real innovation makes us more productive, but it also, I think, dignifies our workers." The Trump administration's 2025 AI Action Plan promised that AI will "usher in a new golden age of human flourishing" (Butler 2026). In July of 2026, while I was completing this essay, Pope Leo XIV, who had already written with cautious criticism about AI earlier in the year, released his own lengthy encyclical on the topic, entitled *Magnifica Humanitas*.[27] Uncannily also referring to AI as a "New Tower of Babel," the statement clarified the Catholic Church's social doctrine, its relationship to technology and its perceived role in advocating for humanity. The pope presents the sin of Babel as one of a totalizing uniformity, with a single language being as much the project of Babel as the tower, and uses this valence as a way of promoting plurality as a value of the church, and the digitization and computability of all

[26] Thiel was a former student of literary critic René Girard at Stanford and ascribes his worldview to Girard's theory of "mimetic desire" – the idea that we desire things only in imitation of others, with the resulting rivalry escalating toward a crisis resolved only by collective violence against a scapegoat. Girard, a Catholic, read the Gospels as the text that finally exposes and disarms this scapegoating mechanism by revealing the innocence of the scapegoated victim (Christ). He also hypothesized a Satan who adopts the guise of victimhood to stoke humanity's envy. Thiel introduced his protégé JD Vance to Girard's work; Vance later credited both men as decisive to his conversion to Catholicism in a 2020 essay, "How I Joined the Resistance." The theory's appeal to this circle lies in its decidedly anti-Marxist account of capitalist striving: it locates the source of social crisis in envy rather than greed, and, in Thiel's mind, a crisis rooted in envy is one that can be regulated through the mediation of a total surveillance state. (Bhuiyan 2025)

[27] In a January 2026 communication titled "Preserving Human Voices and Faces," Pope Leo XIV warned against, "naive and unquestioning reliance on artificial intelligence as an omniscient 'friend,' a source of all knowledge, an archive of every memory, an 'oracle' of all advice." "All of this can further erode our ability to think analytically and creatively, to understand meaning and distinguish between syntax and semantics" (Leo XIVa 2026)

information under the control of private interests as a counter value. The text also calls for AI to be "disarmed," critiquing its role in the war economy and as a weapon of domination. In a hair-raisingly post-modern moment, the pope quotes J.R.R. Tolkien's wizard character Gandalf, a seeming jab at the companies Palantir and Anduril, both named after objects from Tolkien's fantasy books (LeoXIVb 2026). Tolkien was a philologist, who, through the study of words, conjured an entire mythology for an imagined pre-Norman British identity that seems generated from digested Icelandic sagas and other sources, complete with whole fantasy languages and orthographies. He was also a Catholic, the pope reminds us, undercutting those searching his work for symbols to enchant their racist organs of war-profiteering, gently tugging authority back from one magic circle of words and images to another, as one might try to take a dangerous toy from a child.



Metoroporisu, Tezuka Osamu, 1949

Marin arrived at the term "Degenerate Utopia" by walking the grounds of Disneyland, whose ideological themes he traces through the spatial arrangement of its various sections. In Tomorrowland's Carousel of Progress, a seated visitor watches the same family pass through a century of domestic scenes that change only in the quantity of electric implements around them:

> [...] the visitor [to Tomorrowland] becomes a spectator, immobilized and passive, seated in front of a circular and moving stage that shows successive scenes taken from family life in the nineteenth century, in the beginning of the twentieth century, today, and tomorrow. It is the same family that is presented in these different historical periods; the story of this "permanent" family is told to visitors, who no longer narrate their own story. History is neutralized; the scenes only change in relation to the increasing quantity of electric implements [...]. The individual is shown to be progressively mastered, dominated by utensility. [...] The circular motion of the stage expresses this endless technological progress as well as its necessity, its fate. (Marin 1984)

Family Members on the rotating Carousel of Progress enjoy the latest commodities

In fear of death and longing for what is dead, the TESCREAList attempts to survive death as a dead thing which continues to act, grasping to stop a ticking clock, finding only the emblem of time as mechanical movement rather than the duration in which we live. The revolving spectacle of commodity fashion creates the illusion of the new.

Benjamin—

> Fashion stands in opposition to the organic. It couples the living body to the inorganic world. To the living, it defends the rights of the corpse. The fetishism that succumbs to the sex appeal of the inorganic is its vital nerve. The cult of the commodity presses such fetishism into its service. (2002b)[28]

Across Disneyland, nature is revealed as a machine and the machine offered back as nature, until the visitor is twice removed from the world and played with by an apparatus whose springs are hidden. The seamlessness of the park depends on that concealment. Disturbed by the sight of a Frontierland cowboy crossing Tomorrowland, and by the thought of a child glimpsing Mickey on his lunch break, Walt Disney had a nine-acre warren of service tunnels—the utilidor—threaded beneath Disneyworld park in Florida, so that costumed "cast members," delivery crews, refuse, and the central room from which every animatronic figure is operated could all move unseen (Margaritoff 2021). The magic circle above rests heavy atop a hidden labyrinth of labor and infrastructure below.[29]

[28] Benjamin wrote of the figure of the prostitute in Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Age of High Capitalism. "The hallmark of genuineness for the commodity is the fetish; for the allegory, it is the emblem. In the soulless body, which is still devoted to providing pleasure, allegory and commodity are wed." Against the devalued, "ever-selfsame" world this produces, he writes: "[for Baudelaire] Nothing seems more contemptible than to invoke the idea of progress against this experience. Furthermore, in representing a continuum it radically contradicts Baudelaire's destructive impulse, which is, on the contrary, inspired by a mechanical conception of time" (Benjamin et al. 2004). In The Arcades Project: "To desire the fashionable, purchasable woman-as-thing is to desire exchange-value itself, that is, the very essence of capitalism. Once this occurs, 'the commodity ... celebrates its triumph: erotic desire, instinctual nature itself, and also those forces of fantasy life that might imagine a better society, are cathected onto commodities. Trapped within capitalism, they become its enthusiastic source of support. If the whore is a commodity and seller in one, so of course, are all wage-labourers under capitalism. (Buck-Morss 1986)

[29] In 2024, Disney "cast members" represented by UFCW Local 324 filed unfair labor practice charges against the company. A union survey of those workers reported food insecurity, rent burden, housing insecurity, and forgoing medical treatment for lack of sick leave. Workers also alleged that Disney retaliated against them for wearing union pins on the job (UFCW 324 2024).

The utopia the TESCREALists advertise has its own utilidor. Behind its curtain the machinery resolves into people: the "driverless" car steered through its "tricky situations" by a remote worker in the Philippines (Sims 2021). The model trained on data hand-labeled by tens of thousands of crowdworkers and kept usable by content moderators—subcontracted in Kenya at less than two dollars a day—who spend their shifts filtering gore, hate speech, and child sexual abuse material out of its output until their families no longer recognize them (Bender 2025). The industry calls this "ghost work," unseen by the Western consumer and visible only to the one performing it, precarious enough that a platform can revoke a worker's livelihood overnight without explanation. Amazon named its crowdwork exchange the Mechanical Turk, after the eighteenth-century chess automaton that hid a human player beneath the board; the system performs the same trick, concealing the human effort any "automated" apparatus still requires. The Maschinenmensch was never the dream of replacing the worker so much as of removing the worker from view—hidden behind a mask, routed, like Disney's cast members, through tunnels hidden from the view of the owner class. Every proposed delight for those few who inhabit the tower is a growing weight on the backs of those under its foundations.

"Father! Father! Will ten hours never come to an end?" Freder drags the hands of the machine clock upon which he is crucified towards the closing-time of history, Metropolis (1927)

8. Hell

Keywords for hell: ennui, gambling, pauperism

A canon of this dialectic: fashion

The golden age as catastrophe

—*Walter Benjamin, The Arcades Project*

[...] the deadly repetitiveness of time that is part of the archaic, mythic imagery of Hell describes what is truly modern and novel about commodity society.

—*Susan Buck-Morss, The Dialectics of Seeing (1989)*

There is a tower in Chihuahua being built called the Torre Centinela—Sentinel Tower. When complete, it will be the nucleus of an AI-powered state surveillance system: nearly ten thousand cameras, two thousand license plate readers, facial-recognition technology cross-referenced against a biometrics database. The Electronic Frontier Foundation's Director of Investigations Dave Maass called it "the eye of Sauron hanging over your city" (D'Annunzio 2025). It is 370 feet tall and was built without community consultation. It is the New Tower of Babel in its most literal contemporary form: a technological structure that claims to see everything, to predict everything, to manage uncertainty by eliminating it—built not to protect but to control, and understood by those who live beneath it as an emanation of power inscrutable, unaccountable, and absolute.

As we age, the names of new years tick off at an accelerating rate, mile markers on a steep mountain road climbing into ever more sparse and airless territory. The numbers become absurd, with no chart to compare them with other than the hyperbolic future settings of science fiction.

The absurdity of these numbers comes in part from their failure to measure anything but wasted resources, rotting surplus, and lives lost. Social progress has been swapped for ideas of technological progress, in which smartphones become thinner, while the production chain that assembles them still somehow involves the enslaved labor of children, hand-digging tunnels into toxic earth in some bronze-age version of hell. What feels like a life-long climb is stationary thrashing within the tangle of a net, while a moving panorama gives the illusion of ascent to the top of a great and fragile tower.

That society has failed to progress meaningfully within my life—that it builds momentum only to lurch forward before being dragged deeper into quagmire—is denied by a whole host of popular phantasmagoria and ticking numbers. I might normally be compelled to find statistics to defend my position, but statistics are, in part, what this writing was meant to address.

Suffice to say that in 2026 an American citizen cannot vote on whether bombs should be dropped on other countries in their name and with their tax dollars, but they are encouraged to gamble on when the bombs will land, using sophisticated and massively funded data analytics platforms.

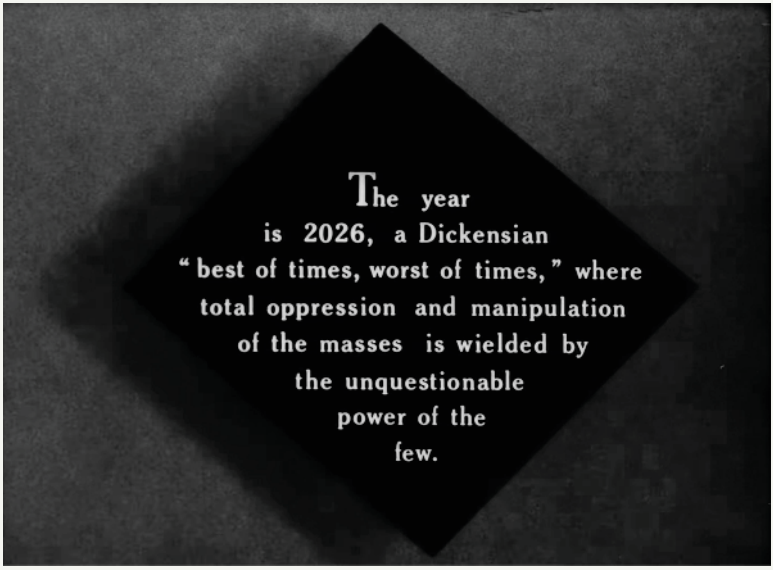
As the new year 2026 rang in with embarrassment, the information bursts of social media conjured ghosts of futures-past—2026, they said, was the year in which Fritz Lang and Thea Von Harbou's Metropolis (1927) took place.[30]

> "I don't even know why we study history. It's entertaining, I guess—the dinosaurs and the Neanderthals and the Industrial Revolution, and stuff like that. But what already happened doesn't really matter. You don't need to know that history to build on what they made. In technology, all that matters is tomorrow." (Duhigg 2018)

This from Waymo co-founder Anthony Levandowski, who attempted to install himself as "Dean" of a new religion, worshipping an eminent "AI Godhead" (Harris 2017). The "memorylessness" of predictive models becomes the process by which capitalism annihilates tradition in the search for something new, but instead creates a phony, petrified facade of newness that binds us in ways tradition could never hope to.

Benjamin's hell—and ours—is the hell of the frozen work-clock, while the persuasive signifiers of progress start to peel away—fashion, compounding interest, processor speeds—corroding that grimacing plastic baby-mask of novelty. Hell is a time where nothing is ever finished and the years have no number, but the cemeteries crowd until they are inevitably bulldozed for real estate.

[30] This is a spurious date—neither the original film nor Von Harbou's concurrent novel specifies a year. The date floats up from the frontmatter of an early English translation and is transmitted via Giorgio Moroder's pop-dubbed 1984 cut of the film (Muller 2010)



Gorgio Moroder's Metropolis (1927/1984)

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Wiley Wiggins is a researcher and artist engaged with a history of digital games and their allegorical potential. His multifaceted career includes roles as an actor, animator, interaction designer, and board member of the Juegos Rancheros arts nonprofit. During his time at Juegos Rancheros he produced the Fantastic Arcade international games festival in Austin, Texas.

"The (New) Tower of Babel" is the second in a series of essays about visionary architecture and future imaginaries, following "The Arcology Mode," which was published in the UCLA Design | Media Arts journal, *Flat*. In this essay, The Tower is presented as an allegorical image connecting ancient myth to modern technological anxieties, through the biblical etiology, Fritz Lang's *Metropolis*, and contemporary projects.

Wiggins is an interdisciplinary humanities PhD student at Concordia University in Montreal, at their Technoculture, Art and Games center (TAG). His doctoral work focuses on the Dungeon as a mode of game world apprehension and allegorical image, consisting of both a book-length written work and a suite of tools for making dungeon-themed games. He holds both a BA and MFA from UCLA, and all of these projects have evolved from thesis work done at UCLA's Game Lab.