## Chapter One: The Case for the New Aesthetic

In September 2014 at the Emmanuel Gallery on the Auraria Campus in Denver, Colorado, an exhibition titled ‘The Emperor’s New Aesthetic’ opened; though it received little notice and, to date, no reviews, nevertheless its premise as a critique of the New Aesthetic as ‘an overused and over-hyped term’ was immediately evident. ‘The idea is to poke fun at the burgeoning institutionalization of “the new aesthetic”, “post-internet” and “new-media” art in general, while still acknowledging the potential for cultural, political, economic and aesthetic intervention inherent in control of access / protocols / networks.’[[1]](#footnote-2) Obviously, we take issue with that premise. The New Aesthetic, we believe, is a recent and important phenomenon, permeating much of everyday life as well as more rarified circles in academia and the art world; a perfect example of this is the proposed new designs of Norwegian banknotes that were revealed in October 2014[[2]](#footnote-3) and which use a broad arrangement of pixels in a manner supposedly ‘typically Nordic’ in character but which, perhaps deceptively or unconsciously, could be more accurately described as driven by a digital aesthetic. {Fig. 1} The contrast between the frivolity of the Denver exhibition and the serious nature of the proposed banknotes is telling; to think of a purely digital design as endemically related to a national identity means that the digital has inserted itself into the way we conceive and construct our own identities. This chapter is focused on making the case that the New Aesthetic is worth an extended and serious look.

To make the case that the New Aesthetic is worth studying perhaps a little history is a good place to start with even though it’s only the most recent of histories. The New Aesthetic as a project was started by James Bridle, a London-based writer, publisher and artist, upon launching a new personal website in May 2011.[[3]](#footnote-4) The first significant public and off-internet discussion on the New Aesthetic was held in 2012 at the SXSW conference, one of the most influential creative events in the world, attended by artists, curators, scholars and professional nerds. The panel entitled ‘The New Aesthetic: Seeing Like Digital Devices’ gathered Aaron Cope (designer and engineer), Ben Terrett (designer), Joanne McNeil (art activist, journalist), Russell Davies (communications consultant and tech journalist) and James Bridle. In the description of the panel, Bridle stated:

We are becoming acquainted with new ways of seeing: the Gods-eye view of satellites, the Kinect’s inside-out sense of the living room, the elevated car-sight of Google Street View, the facial obsessions of CCTV […] As a result, these new styles and senses recur in our art, our designs, and our products. The pixelation of low-resolution images, the rough yet distinct edges of 3D printing, the shifting layers of digital maps. In this session, the participants will give examples of these effects, products and artworks, and discuss the ways in which ways of seeing are increasingly transforming ways of making and doing.[[4]](#footnote-5)

In many ways Bridle’s description of the New Aesthetic is intentionally vague but, at the same time, it did more than just provide a series of loosely curated examples; it was clear in 2012 that Bridle was still grappling with the idea and that his blog was functioning like a curatorial manifesto in his efforts to describe and categorize it at the time, but at the same time its vagueness certainly created opportunities that engaged others. {Fig. 2}

The New Aesthetic panel at SXSW and the critique that followed right after, made the term popular and helped it to gain attention among certain groups and individuals on the web, e.g. the ‘#newaesthetic’ hashtag began appearing on Twitter. It went viral and resulted in many conflicting interpretational approaches and views on what it really was and which technologically-rooted social and cultural phenomena and artifacts could be described as examples of the New Aesthetic. The broad scope of visual media considered as the New Aesthetic was described by Bruce Sterling in his famous essay published in *Wired* magazine, which included ‘[…] Satellite views. Parametric architecture. Surveillance cameras. Digital image processing. Data-mashed video frames. Glitches and corruption artifacts. Voxelated 3D pixels in real-world geometries. Dazzle camou. Augments. Render ghosts. And, last and least, nostalgic retro 8bit graphics from the 1980s.’[[5]](#footnote-6) Sterling’s description shows that he was starting to catch on to the notion that there was this new thing, this new approach, this new attitude, that could be utilized in an extensive, horizontal and synchronic approach, taking into account various artifacts, media, tools and works of art of digital origin. Additionally, a number of the first commenters of the New Aesthetic grabbed on to the various categories of computational miscalculations and glitches as a way of identifying fascinating and inhumanly flawed contemporary imagery as a vital element of the New Aesthetic’s fields of interest, in a way that contributed new insights into some of the discussions about the glitch that had been taking place in recent years. Some critics stressed the political consequences of increased human-technology interaction as seen by the New Aesthetic.[[6]](#footnote-7) Others emphasized its social and gender-specific context e.g. the ‘politics of the gaze’[[7]](#footnote-8) problem (male vs. machine vs. human).[[8]](#footnote-9) David M. Berry valued the New Aesthetic for stimulating interest in the computational aspects of contemporary civilization and their political and cultural impact, but at the same time stressed the unconditional inclusiveness of the term that result in its vagueness in terms of the accuracy of description and information.[[9]](#footnote-10) On the other hand, Bruce Sterling criticized its supporters for the anthropomorphisation of technological artifacts, arguing that their assertion that computers are praiseworthy because their effects are apparently analogous to conscious decisions is like praising the Freudian unconsciousness as an autonomous agent.[[10]](#footnote-11)

Quickly, the New Aesthetic became a hot topic of conversation, and the term became commonplace at least among those interested in technology’s development and impact on society. Yet, almost just as quickly some of those interested in the New Aesthetic turned away from it, including James Bridle himself. Obviously, we’re not in that crowd.

What fascinates us about the New Aesthetic cannot be summarized neatly. It is a non-movement that can’t be easily defined but can be easily indicated. It’s really cool, in a way, that a thorough academic approach to the New Aesthetic has not emerged so far when so many new categories instantly become the subjects of a feverish academic onslaught.[[11]](#footnote-12) The New Aesthetic aims to cover so many contemporary social and cultural phenomena that any disciplinary approach would be too limited to analyze it as a whole. However, only a few weeks after the SXSW 2012 conference, a seminar was organized in the Netherlands in order to elaborate a critical study of the New Aesthetic. As a result of a booksprint session, a freely available e-book called *New Aesthetics, New Anxieties* was written by six authors – new media scholars, artists, curators and writers.[[12]](#footnote-13) The authors focused on many aspects of the non-movement emphasizing the misunderstandings and anxieties generated by many instances considered as examples of the New Aesthetic. The authors were also interested in the influence of network-based initiatives as the New Aesthetic on their professional work. They ‘attempt to move beyond lazy thinking, positions of pious indifference or naive enthusiasm, and ask what the New Aesthetic might tell us about this juncture in which we find ourselves, as curators, critics, artists, theorists and creative workers’.[[13]](#footnote-14) Yet this remains, to date, the only sustained academic treatment of the subject.

Perhaps what tempts us to think about the New Aesthetic is that it is an offspring of easily accessible and open web-based communication channels which, therefore, means that it’s become excessively pervasive and accessible. The initial response to the New Aesthetic can be characterized as an intellectual crowdsourcing of collective intelligence formed of theoreticians and practitioners interested in human-technology interaction, but we believe that the New Aesthetic is so wide-spread that care about its effects should be more general. The viral nature of contemporary communication channels resulted in a rapid spread of the term and the engagement of multiple agents in its development, leaving a discussion of this increasingly important development to the vagaries of a passing fad as it hits the peak of its popularity lasting no more than a few months is a mistake.

The New Aesthetic is primarily, though not entirely, an internet-based approach or a cultural phenomenon and, as such, affects or will affect the lives of the entirety of humanity; as a result, we could describe it as a real-time web-based enquiry, one that functions within the construct of web-based activity and is determined by the conditions of the enquiry; but for the fact that its inclusiveness permits a multitude of interpretational approaches and standpoints, thinking through the manifestations of the New Aesthetic is already conditionally predetermined. Even if our efforts only result in a definition rife with the vagueness of the term and lacking a firm theoretical background, we still take the position, as Bruce Sterling has accurately observed, that the New Aesthetic has touched something new and important.

What makes the New Aesthetic such a challenge is more than just the fact that it exists at all; Sterling wrote ‘It’s our fault for pretending otherwise, for fooling ourselves, for projecting our own qualities onto phenomena that we built, that are very interesting to us, but not at all like us.’[[14]](#footnote-15) We’ve both created the New Aesthetic and become a recipient of its existence’s implication and, in the digital realm, therefore, to critically think about it means that it’s necessary to utilize it at times uncritically. The New Aesthetic covered so many theoretical and practical fields (i.e. media art, media archaeology, digital art, digital aesthetics HCI, internet privacy, object-oriented ontology, programming) that its lack of coherence and methodology was essentially implemented in the movement from its early days. Even James Bridle explained that he did not intend to create a new big idea or an ontology of the 21st century. It seems that Bridle wanted to encourage people to engage in a discussion, using as many approaches and various expert knowledge as possible. Concrete methodology and disciplinary boundaries were of second importance:

One of the things about New Aesthetic was that it was very much supposed to be not “post” anything else and not “pre” anything else, it was an observation about something hopefully grander, of which these are some current examples of.[[15]](#footnote-16)

That is why Bridle chose a blog as a platform for sharing his ideas, instead of an academic journal or professional magazines, as the influence of these channels of communication is rather small compared to open internet platforms. As an example of a new type of enquiry that benefits from informal channels of communication and information distribution, the New Aesthetic as a set of phenomena seems almost naturally situated on (or even limited to) the web precisely because it has been discussed solely on blogs, on social media and popularized by talks at business and cultural conferences, but there’s so much more to be said. Such supposed limitations of theoretical inquiry accompany any discussion of the New Aesthetic, making evident the discomfort traditional academia still has with blogs and online discussions as a source of critical inquiry. It could be argued that the New Aesthetic is just an artistic performance of a British designer who decided to ‘test’ the creative communities on the web – though Bridle himself writes that it is an ‘ongoing research project’ – but then again, clearly, the commentators responded to his call. At the peak of the popularity of the New Aesthetic, Bridle was so overwhelmed by the interest that he even suspended the blog for some time, evidence of a growing awareness of its impact.[[16]](#footnote-17)

The New Aesthetic is not without its limitations. It is hardly a firm academic theory or methodology.

Bruce Sterling argued in ‘An Essay on the New Aesthetic’ that the New Aesthetic was a very interesting movement, at least potentially. However Sterling also seems to be saying that, due to its extensiveness and rhizomatic nature, the very notion of the New Aesthetic wasn’t bold and critical enough. Many examples of the New Aesthetic were only partially described or analyzed, but together they form a collective composed of artifacts, media, tools and works of art that is a direct result of contemporary information flow enhanced by web-based communication and they will continue to occur in the future. That is why many of its commentators emphasized that this approach could be developed in various directions. At the present stage of development it is more like a signpost for further enquiry.

The analysis of the New Aesthetic was performed from two perspectives. The first one focuses on its inner logic and takes into account one of the themes that the New Aesthetic itself is concerned with – revealing the grain of computation in digital visual media by focusing on glitches, image processing artifacts etc. By emphasizing the abnormal in digital images, we can fully perceive its computational materiality along with limitations of today’s visual media. Taking into account rapid technological development – high-definition images and displays, intuitive interfaces and services – this approach seems crucial for a critical and postdigital enquiry on the status of today’s media. The second perspective studies various forms of visual media in the spirit of the New Aesthetic, identifying their complexity, processual nature and their standardization, as the effect of the New Aesthetic becomes more perceptible like, for example, in the previously mentioned recent design of the Norges Bank currency.

At least one thing is clear: the New Aesthetic is dependent on the digital turn, the shift in contemporary culture when information presentation has moved from being an analog ontological relation to a digital relation. This has involved more than simply a change in the form of the information but a radical shift in the style of the presentation of the information; as Wim Westera writes:

Technology and human life are inextricable. Whatever we do is either directly or indirectly linked with machines, tools, or digital media. Any product we buy, be it peanut butter, fruit, or a bunch of flowers is the outcome of a hidden processing chain containing numerous calculations, transport, raw materials, mechanics, administrative files, orders, and coordinative messages, many of which are carried by digital media.[[17]](#footnote-18)

Everything has become digitized and, thus, every set of information surrounding our lives has become digitally available. In this respect, the digital turn is a real-time operative and manifest condition that has emerged as a schizophrenic force in contemporary society, whereby we are able to both control our world digitally but whereby we can also be controlled digitally in a way that is ignorant of such control. Recognizing the importance of the digital has become a de rigueur exercise among cultural theorists, such that descriptions of its pervasive presence and power are commonplace and widely accepted. David M. Berry writes: ‘From its early days as a mechanism used to perform data processing, the digital is becoming the de facto medium for transmitting information, communicating and for sharing social life. Through these important functions the digital becomes a privileged site for social and political engagement and therefore it is increasingly important that we understand the digital and offer the possibility of a critical theory of the digital.’[[18]](#footnote-19) While such a perspective is received unquestionably in all branches of cultural theory, nevertheless the shift of the digital from a functional tool to a ‘de facto medium of information’ is startling in its implications and cannot be taken for granted; whereas the horizon of digital objects once was a set of explorable and relatively unknown territories, wedged into limited but functioning parameters by computer scientists so that they could be employed as an external language and utilized to increase the accuracy of describing our experience and codifying the resultant data, today we’re in entirely different circumstances. The creation of code now feeds the evolutionary and organic growth of the digital in order for it to operate with even greater autonomy, independent of the rarified controls found in a computer science laboratory. Witnessing the growth of apps available for Apple iOS as just one example – what started with 500 in 2008[[19]](#footnote-20) has now reached 1,200,000 by mid-2014[[20]](#footnote-21) – is like witnessing the exponential replication of viruses and bacteria. Over the course of several decades we have been increasingly relying on the computational in many domains of our activity at a civilizational level: in business it has taken over with algorithmically-based high-frequency trading, with approximately 73% of the equity trading and 60% of futures trading in the United States occurring without any human decision; societally our ability to bank, shop and interact with our fellow human beings is increasingly governed by our digital presence, with Facebook now becoming a legally serviceable address for court documents in Australia, New Zealand, the UK, Germany and other countries; and in cultural activity where there is a persistent decline in the education in and use of analog technology like photography film in favor of digital cameras to the point that the majority of universities world-wide are exclusively hiring digital photographers as faculty members. We are not favoring the analog and we’re certainly not Luddites, but the digital turn has become more than just a ‘turn’, instead it’s become a dominant force in contemporary society that is increasingly beyond the control of its users. Technological advancements, still to some extent based on Moore’s law, are resulting in a logarithmically exponential increase of the computational capacity of electronic devices, but what is fascinating is that the limitations of the applicability of computational capacity may not be limited so much by hardware but rather by its intrusion into human capacity, in that there will be at some point fewer and fewer opportunities for digitalization to govern the world. We are living in a time in which it is becoming increasingly difficult to realize and act analogically. In this respect the New Aesthetic becomes a signpost, of sorts, that the digital has become more of a processual condition that our civilization is based on, instead of being just a ‘turn’ or a ‘revolution’ understood as a fixed moment in time.

To simply list a series of examples of digital phenomena in our world is insufficient. From our perspective, the tendency towards pervasive digitalization could be assessed by focusing on either its ontological effects or through an analysis of various epistemological perspectives. In the case of the ontological, often an important tenant of the digital humanities, there is a tendency to move towards the conclusion that all experience is digital at its foundation. With an emphasis on the abstraction of real world experiences into digitally accounted data, through the persistence and pragmatic reduction of sequential experiences to concomitant time-related informational streams and in the increasingly complex and assumptive manifestation of desire structures of data-dependent human beings, we run headlong into situations such as Ashton’s the Internet of Things; the convergence of connected devices starts to not only predicate decisions about replacing items in vending machines, for example, or governs market supply chains, but even more preemptively starts to choose our homes’ temperatures prior to our return to work based on digitally evolving models of our preferences. As a result, a whole new species of semi-autonomous and autonomous beings have become vital constituents of our lives both at an individual and at a social level. A digital ontology asserts that the entire nature of reality is structured, and the digital becomes the sole means whereby the structure is effectively navigated. In the case of the epistemic, the status of knowledge has changed as it has become digitized; whereas epistemic questions once were subjected to logic and rationality, with the likes of Descartes and Kant painstakingly exploring nuances and dead-ends in the hopes of being self-satisfied that the answers to their questions were ensconced within necessary and sufficient conditions, the notions of big data and meta-data assert that the world can only be known once it has been digitized and, as knowledge itself ceases to be locally relative, that it has become singularly absolute. Things are true because we’ve read them (not read about them, but ‘read them’) on the internet, which we’re always carrying around in our pocket, with philosophical implication extending beyond the epistemic and ontological concerns into the necessity of a teleological approach.

Focusing on either an ontological or epistemic position yields interesting insights, but often it becomes entangled in an implied negative critique of the digitalization of the world. In the case of the ontological perspective, resistance inevitably arises to the notion that the world of experiences must necessarily be accounted for in a binary manner; surely, it’s assumed, there will always be instances when the digital method is insufficient, when directed rather than mediated experience and an emotional response is more appropriate. In the case of the epistemic perspective a negative critique runs along similar notions, especially in the context of some Romantic idea of the primacy of human rationality. These pitfalls are inevitable and, because they are inevitable, we would like to avoid them. So where to turn? By recognizing the dialectic between the ontological and the epistemic perspectives, a synthesis is possible; given an ontological perspective that turns outward to the world as it accounts for potential experience in a relationship between an epistemic perspective that turns inward to secure knowledge, there is a middle ground that is dependent on both while being yet a third form of experience: the evaluative or the aesthetic. Visual models of communication and information distribution have increased social and cultural reliance on the digital, necessitating analyzing contemporary society and culture in two ways: first, by recognizing that the autonomous digital products have an aesthetic existence in-and-of-themselves and second, by allowing for an appreciative and evaluative approach to these objects. Ontological and epistemological conditions of contemporary society manifest themselves in everyday practices rooted in digital visual media which can be edited and transformed into many kinds of media hybrids because of its powerful processing units and creative software; it is those hybrids as synthetic products that are, perhaps, the most interesting. We have reached the point where autonomous and synthetic objects necessitate new approaches, driving forms of artistic production.

What we mean by computational visual media is a category of digital products that are more than just programmable pieces of data that are often perceived through high-definition still images, movies, CGI or graphical user interfaces but are experienceable and self-determining phenomena in their own right, displayed on ultra-high definition displays and accessed and edited thanks to intuitive user interfaces; with the increasing processing power available in decreasing physical parameters[[21]](#footnote-22) partnered with a graphic user interface that seemingly grasps our intentions spontaneously and predictively, conditions are being constructed whereby the output of the device assumes an unquestioned and teleologically natural state. The very computational materiality of today’s visual media is, indeed, hidden beneath layers of user-friendly software, hardware, networks, cloud-based processing and storage services to the point (and, importantly, designed to that point) of increasing invisibility, with the implications or the predeterminatively agreed conventions that it will just work without any need for a user to change its operating parameters. {Fig. 3} In many respects, the benefits have been self-evident, and it’s impossible to review the multitude of programs without being in awe of the innovativeness and ingenuity of their designers and programs; this extends beyond simply new ways of accounting for data or new ways of manipulating data to entirely new ways of dealing with the mundane to the profound: for instance, the explosion of new types of devices and services has resulted in the continual development of services, platforms and computational devices which foster new forms of cultural and social engagement enhanced by technology, extending beyond simply being able to contact friends and family instantaneously around the world to being able to alter the political landscape through spontaneous social collaboration and action. These phenomena occur right in front of us and simultaneously affect many areas of human activity (business, culture, science), both at an industrial and at a consumer level of human-computer interaction in a positive and productive way. We have entered an era of real-time communication and knowledge generation and distribution that is fostered by multi-purpose devices and mobile internet access – many new ideas are now born due to the inclusive and non-hierarchical models of web-based communication, such as personal publishing services (blogs, websites), social media and informal discussion groups where both professionals and non-professionals as well as practitioners and theoreticians alike share and discuss new ideas – but what is increasingly clear is that these phenomena are synthetic in nature and effect, affecting and transforming in their use our perception of the world while simultaneously creating their own worlds. In short, we’ve entered a new form of experience best labeled ‘postdigital’ as an indication that the digital revolution is over.[[22]](#footnote-23) The world of raw data and technology, while being in front of us, is usually hidden underneath graphical user interfaces, smooth high-res images, seamless user experience and touch-screen Retina displays. The New Aesthetic rejects ‘screen essentialism’ and encourages us to perceive contemporary reality as an ‘augmented space’ filled both with human agents and computational artifacts (devices, networks) that interact and influence each other. Mel Alexenberg describes this as:

Of or pertaining to art forms that address the humanization of digital technologies through interplay between digital, biological, cultural, and spiritual systems, between cyberspace and real space, between embodied media and mixed reality in social and physical communication, between high tech and high touch experiences, between visual, haptic, auditory, and kinesthetic media experiences, between virtual and augmented reality, between roots and globalization, between autoethnography and community narrative, and between web-enabled peer-produced wikiart and artworks created with alternative media through participation, interaction, and collaboration in which the role of the artist is redefined.[[23]](#footnote-24)

The key here is the betweenness, the notion of a mixed reality, the synthesis. Baudrillard was only partially correct: what governs our experiences is not hyperreality but hyperrealities. It is in this space that the New Aesthetic has emerged and is defined.

The digital visual culture that has been a foundation for the emergence of the New Aesthetic is just one of the manifestations of a greater shift our civilization has been undergoing with the digital turn and postdigital aesthetics; the New Aesthetic has necessitated not just a new perspective but a new approach or a new type of attenuation. Postdigital aesthetics require a cross-disciplinary theoretical and practical approach, which addresses the trends described above, going far beyond a mere theory of beauty of digital images.

### Real-Time Effects of the New Aesthetic

The New Aesthetic, for example, emerged as a direct result of real-time communication channels enhanced by computational technologies. On the one hand it can be understood as an approach useful in digital image analysis as it unveils the simultaneous materiality and instability of contemporary imagery by focusing on the abnormal (image processing errors, glitches, artifacts etc.) On the other hand, taking into account the origin and development of this approach the New Aesthetic should be considered as one of the manifestations of the radical shift in the emergence of ideas and knowledge distribution in the digital age. The New Aesthetic is based on real-time data generation and distribution as it was born and developed thanks to internet-based channels of communication and exchange of ideas, but what emerges with the New Aesthetic is something quite powerful that remained relatively unnoticed until James Bridle started his blog in May 2011. Nowadays this approach can be generally described as a cross-disciplinary approach recognizing the consequences of synthetic and autonomous objects through human-technology interaction and an analysis of new non-anthropomorphic agents, forces and computational patterns that are present both in the digital sphere and in the physical world. As the identification process of New Aesthetic objects accelerated and grew in confidence, it became clear that they were manifesting themselves through visual digital media and new social and cultural practices involving humans and technological artifacts in a plethora of fashions. Bridle’s initial focus on the visual manifestations of the New Aesthetic prompted the blog’s horizontal stream layout containing several types of digital visual media: images, movies, graphics, GIFs. In his first entry, James Bridle wrote:

Since May 2011 I have been collecting material which points towards new ways of seeing the world, an echo of the society, technology, politics and people that co-produce them. The *New Aesthetic* is not a movement, it is not a thing which can be done. It is a series of artifacts of the heterogeneous network, which recognizes differences, the gaps in our distant but overlapping realities.[[24]](#footnote-25)

And, on another occasion:

I started noticing things like this in the world. This is a cushion on sale in a furniture store that’s pixelated. This is a strange thing. This is a look, a style, a pattern that didn’t previously exist in the real world. It’s something that’s come out of digital. It’s come out of a digital way of seeing, that represents things in this form. The real world doesn’t, or at least didn’t, have a grain that looks like this.[[25]](#footnote-26)

In this sense, to analyze the New Aesthetic is to engage in a form of topological description from a new perspective and position, identifying relations that exist beyond simply manifest usage to objects that are autonomous. This has been done before in a parallel way for similar objects, and in analyzing the New Aesthetic we intend to follow the phenomenologically driven methodology introduced by Vilém Flusser in his 1983 book *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*.

Flusser’s approach is useful both for studying the inner logic of the New Aesthetic (its interest in computational images) and for analyzing it as one of the manifestations of computationality understood as a condition of contemporary civilization. Flusser argued that by describing complex relations between a camera (apparatus) and a human being (user) we can shed light on the condition of contemporary civilization which is founded on (mega)mass production and distribution of images, writing: ‘The invention of photography constitutes a break in history that can only be understood in comparison to that other historical break constituted by the invention of linear writing.’[[26]](#footnote-27) In the process of being able to reproduce the appearance of reality, the status of such reproductions became portable, mobile, and transmittable; whereas descriptions of the world were once dependent on lengthy exposition of words, photography placed an immediate form of perception in the hands of everyone, especially as the technology became less expensive, more widely available, and needed decreasing amounts of intervention on the part of the image producer to create satisfactory images. To put it another way, Flusser argued convincingly that photography constituted a new form of knowledge, one that didn’t need a mediating subjectivity explicating at length its intended effect. What is especially important about Flusser’s ideas in relation to the New Aesthetic is that this shift from writing to photography was entirely dependent on technological innovation; the camera became more than just a tool, it became an apparatus that could be manipulated by the user but which had a schematized set of limitations that were, nevertheless, assumed to be sufficient and self-sufficient to the task. He explained that, ‘nothing can resist the force of this current of technical images – there is no artistic, scientific or political activity which is not aimed at it, there is no everyday activity which does not aspire to be photographed, filmed, video-taped’.[[27]](#footnote-28) In essence, this shift marks a relinquishment of the user of their freedom to the apparatus’ methods, creating a new topology of knowledge that had profound ontological and epistemic consequences because the user, even if they believe they are exerting control over the photographic process, never produces images except through the programmed character of the apparatus. Flusser recognized that this shift and its consequences needed to be addressed, writing:

It is consequently the task of a philosophy of photography to expose this struggle between human being and apparatuses in the field of photography and to reflect on a possible solution to the conflict […] [I] will illustrate that the photographic universe can serve as a model for post-industrial society as a whole and that a philosophy of photography can be the starting point for any philosophy engaging with the current and future existence of human beings.[[28]](#footnote-29)

In many respects, Flusser is arguing for two paths of philosophical effort: first, that philosophy should investigate how any epistemology is inevitably changed by photography and second, what moral and ethical challenges need to be addressed because of that change. Although his argument was formulated in the 1980s, it is even more valid today as computational power related to image making has increased exponentially and through it, such that the standardization and quantification of social and cultural practices are much more profoundly effected. While we disagree with Flusser’s notion that advances in technology constitute a threat to the human condition per se – in this respect, any notion of a ‘threat’ is dependent on an attachment to the notion of being human as having a culminating state of development, a high point if you will, that seems excessively modernist in its origins – we absolutely agree with his point that technology’s development towards networks of automation independent of human control creates a new ontological condition and extend it to the notion that photography represented merely the first stage of technology’s pervasive encroachment into our lives. If nothing else, the abandonment of analog cameras and, even, digital cameras in favor of phones as photographic devices signals both an end of photography’s technology as a determinant in our lives and the furthered role of the postdigital turn that the New Aesthetic represents.

The shift towards an emphasis on the visual is part of this new, necessary attitude that recognizes the effect the New Aesthetic is having in the world. The New Aesthetic is that new epistemic and ontological condition, both of the world while making its own world. Bridle’s cataloging of various objects, even if it was without any sustained critical analysis of overlapping characteristics, made evident that it is no longer sufficient to study contemporary visual phenomena in terms of classic aesthetics; the digital nature of contemporary imagery requires media studies, software studies and, in general, a digitally informed approach particularly if we take into account changes in the humanities as a set of academic disciplines as well as a set of creative activities. What is particularly important, coming out of our understanding of Flusser’s ideas, is to stress that this approach is primarily through images, primarily through the visual. Think of the way we interact with data today. One way is to look at projects such as the Palladio platform, developed by the Human+Design Research Lab at Stanford University, that takes on a justified faith that visual representation of data leads to insightful and critical new discoveries of the relations between various trends;[[29]](#footnote-30) at the Text Encoding Initiative Conference in October 2014 at Northwestern University, Thomas Faith and Joseph Wicentowski, working for the Office of the Historian in the U.S. Department of State, presented ‘Visualizing the History of U.S. Foreign Relations: The State of TEI at Foggy Bottom’ – how they’ve used Palladio to visualize the encoded Foreign Relations of the United States series, a 150 year old, 500 volume document that is the official history of United States foreign policy.[[30]](#footnote-31) Another way is to consider the development of Ubiquitous Learning Materials as an effort to shift the educational process away from a linear instructor-centered model to an immersive, social model utilizing mobile devices in order to remove the stress of the classroom experience while preparing students for ‘real life’; a perfect instance of this is the Philippines Smart Communications’ project TXTBKS[[31]](#footnote-32) {Fig. 4} that provides transcribed elementary school textbooks to children through discarded mobile phones. Everything is increasingly visual, including text to the detriment of textuality. Still, these are singular instances and it is on the more pervasive ways that we use data that we’re focusing: our worlds are not our ‘smart’ phones just yet, but increasingly it feels that way, and the very fact that they are described as ‘smart’ signals a shift in how much we rely on them and how much we don’t rely on our own knowledge, our own experiences, our own sense of our place in the world. Because the aesthetics of digital images are a consequence of constant, real-time interaction between many software and hardware layers that disappear as they are supplanted by newer instances, and precisely because such layers are the synthetic products of ontological and epistemic shifts such that these interaction becomes aesthetic, we believe that there is a necessity to shed light on the many ways in which digital images have become autonomous actors in the world.

Because of this visuality, the nature of New Aesthetic objects is quite different from normal digital objects. In most cases, digital products adhere to a simple presentation of information, often governed by the type of data being provided; by allowing a certain degree of simplification one could propose an equation: digital visual media = algorithms + data structure.[[32]](#footnote-33) An easy example of this is the typical Excel spreadsheet, which has its origins in a program called Multiplan, was code named ‘EP’ for ‘Electronic Paper’ and released in 1982 as a competitor for Lotus 1-2-3.[[33]](#footnote-34) Multiplan’s code name is revealing in that there was every intention of imitating and being visually analogous to an accounting ledger’s columns for ease of use. However, digital objects have shifted dramatically as contemporary digital images have increasingly become products of software ecosystems, which offer certain pre-determined templates and cross-media processing and editing tools that are often utilized as means of data organization and presentation prior to their representation in a graphic user interface. New Aesthetic objects as the most dynamic form of contemporary digital aesthetics are therefore the product of a computational aesthetic based on media software – within its limits and capabilities. By limits and capabilities we mean their interfaces, the tools, and the techniques they make possible for accessing, navigating, creating, modifying, publishing, and sharing media documents i.e. creative software ecosystems equipped with standardized presets, image processing tools and ecosystems (GIMP, Adobe Creative Cloud), image encoding and decoding standards (MPEG, JPEG etc.) There is hardly any element of software and hardware that is neutral for the final aesthetics of the image. By studying only the layer closest to us – the digital image displayed or projected on the screen – we ignore the existence of hidden computational layers and their influence on the aesthetics of the images. The New Aesthetic reminds us that the computational layer of digital media is inextricably linked with the cultural layer.[[34]](#footnote-35)

In this light, the New Aesthetic encourages us to take a postdigital approach in studying computational-based visual media. This might lead to a sense that we should only be interested in the surface of the digital object, the screen through which the user interacts with the software and hardware, but to keep that as the primary focus of aesthetic analysis is a failure in light of normative aesthetic interpretative strategies which demand a deep form of evaluation. Therefore we argue that we should avoid screen essentialism – that is, a screen-centric approach in image analysis as the privileged site for research – precisely because we do not want to limit ourselves to judgments of appearance or usability alone. Berry argues that ‘without an attentiveness to the layers of software beneath this surface interface we are in danger of further screen essentialism’.[[35]](#footnote-36) Indeed he further remarks, ‘computational tools assist by providing mediation and advising and providing structure for a world full of data, real-time streams and complex calculations required from its citizens. This computational assistance or monitoring is backgrounded and often hidden from us.’[[36]](#footnote-37) Marianne van den Boomen also rejects the screen-centric approach in her book on digital metaphors (particularly in studying GUI), although her point is applicable to any kind of computationally rooted imagery. She explains, ‘what you see, is what you get, which suggests that, that is all there is to get. The machinery gets reduced to the screen, or better, to the representations on the screen. The screen shows but also blinds.’[[37]](#footnote-38) It is in the interplay between screen and the underlying software and hardware that the New Aesthetic manifests itself, not just in its immediate appearance. Although much of the final aesthetic~~s~~ of the digital image is a direct result of the existence of layers of underlying dynamics, in viewing the final image we are not aware of them; even more so, increasingly, because digital objects are dependent on a modular programming approach the final designers themselves are not aware of the underlying functions actively driving such things as notifications, interactions with system software and interactions with additional software on the device. The raw computational materiality of images comes to the foreground when we go off-road from the usual models of image transformation and focus instead on the breakdowns and abnormalities of the usual computational-based artistic processes.

### Abnormalities of the Digital, or Where the New Aesthetic Begins

That being said, all is not perfect. If there is any one feature that distinguishes a New Aesthetic object from its predecessors it’s the appearance of the glitch as accepted, even aesthetically determinative and welcome, in contrast to visual hyperrealism understood as standardization. One of the most important properties of contemporary civilization considered as computationality is standardization, wherein concomitant expectations of a similar experience are shared across users; we expect a ‘polished’ experience, whatever that might mean, and in many instances are startled when our software doesn’t ‘just work’. Digitally-based culture, business, administration and other domains of our human activity operate based on computational data with the expectation that they ought to be standardized in order to guarantee a constant flow of real-time information based on application programming interfaces (APIs) and protocols. From the users’ perspective, standardization is clearly visible in everyday practices of human-computer interaction. We often operate within certain software and hardware ecosystems which offer unified interfaces and user experience – for example, Google, Apple, Microsoft or Adobe ecosystems – and this has become a powerful notion, especially well articulated by Matthew Fuller in his *Media Ecologies: Materialist Energies in Art and Technocultures* as it emphasizes the role of the standard object in contemporary computational culture. We would even argue that various types of standard objects (physical – shipping containers or iPhones and digital – codecs or file formats) have become a vital constituent of a post-Fordist economy in that their consumption transcends industrial modes of production in favor of individual contributive modes of participation. According to Fuller, standard objects are ‘ideally isolated systems’[[38]](#footnote-39) and separate entities within the universe and Fuller, following Alfred Whitehead’s logic, argues that ‘such objects become crucial to the generation of media and communications networks and the organizations that handle them’ and then adds that the standard object ‘refers most easily to things that are mass-produced: cars, houses, the customizable ring of a telephone’ or standardized technologies i.e. packet switching, compression algorithms etc.[[39]](#footnote-40) Post-Fordist products are quite different in that they maintain a semblance of standardization while at the same time being eminently capable of being personalized; in fact, post-Fordist objects are sold to the user on their basis of customization rather than on their standard functionality.

The implications of this shift from standardization to customization is quite profound. The appearance of ‘evidence’ of a shift from unmediated consumption to mediated and synthetic personalization is an illusion; we believe, at least unconsciously, that we are participants in the ‘manufacturing’ process, that our expectations are being personally met precisely because they are our expectations that the manufacturer is attentive to, but this mediated form of consumption is generally false in many digital objects and particularly in New Aesthetic objects because the programming skills necessary for such modifications is not only beyond the skill level of the typical user but often entirely ignored by the programmer. The importance of the shift away from standard objects for today’s society and culture founded on computational technologies is hardly arguable. James Stevens of Free Networks, cited by Fuller, states that ‘The information age has boiled down the magic of telecommunications into a set of modular components that any of us can adopt and explore.’[[40]](#footnote-41) Nevertheless, this magic is not even that because it’s not trickery that’s under the control of a ‘magician’ as programmer but a seduction of the user through the user interface, a seduction the leads the user to erroneously believe they are in control of them software and hardware. Taking Fuller’s perspective, a critical approach to the New Aesthetic is an identification of a new category of independent objects beyond the post-Fordist, most easily identifiable by the acceptability of these self-generated failures called glitches.

The glitch is a well-known phenomenon; often described as a short-term error, it is often regarded as a small problem that can be either ignored as unimportant or quickly fixed with minimal effort, minimal knowledge or simply by resetting the device. {Fig. 5} New Aesthetic objects, as a visual sub-genre sufficiently distinct from standard digital objects, are different because they manifest the glitch as a natural part of their use; while seemingly unintended they are often, at a phenomenological level, inherent to these objects and making explicit their distinctly digital and, most importantly, different form of existence from our own. As a position of analysis, any investigation of the New Aesthetic is particularly interested in glitches and signal processing errors that result in image artifacts and deformations because they represent a form of digital autonomy beyond the users’ control. If pixelization considered as an aesthetic pattern reveals the ‘grain of computation’ in digital media, glitches and errors unveil also the very fact of media softwarization and the limitations of these processes.

It’s safe to say that any glitches that appear would reveal that there’s no human ‘management’ of memory, for instance, and that this lack of management creates an exposure as an opportunity for autonomy. In this state of exposed computation – which is all too often not exposed to the user – the primal advantage of standardized systems found in seamless digital data integration and transformation is no longer valid and normally hidden forces of the computational are revealed to be a continual disruption in the use-process. Consequently, not only the aesthetic properties (quantization, discretization) of digital media are clearly perceptible, but also the politics of power of the digital age as the end-user needs are subordinated to workflows programmed by software or hardware vendors. The New Aesthetic emphasizes the computational nature of contemporary digital imagery precisely because the glitch, or the potential for the glitch as a breakdown of the immediacy of the user’s interactive capabilities, is an extensive element of New Aesthetic objects that marks their independence through an autonomous utterance. By focusing on visual patterns, glitches and signal processing errors our analysis of the New Aesthetic highlights this fundamental property of digital images which is usually hidden beneath the state of the visual content. Up until this point it would be natural to assume that New Aesthetic objects are only digital objects appearing on laptops, smartphone and tablets, with some expansion, to the interface found in everyday digital interfaces such as the screens of ATM machines, the menus for digital television services or the growing use of interactive touchscreens found at airports, train stations, libraries and on vending machines, but these objects have been a part of the modern social and cultural horizons for longer than expected.

### Constellations of the New Aesthetic

All of these certainly are examples of the growing number of New Aesthetic objects – of course, not all examples are New Aesthetic objects – but New Aesthetic objects are also found in the art and design world in an important but distinctively different form. Every day we perceive motion pictures, digital photographs, 3D graphics etc. and we are seduced by their aesthetics; taking a cue from Kant, aesthetic choices are a constant part of our lives as tests of epistemic certainty and judgments of moral value; any analysis of these objects is also going to become an analysis of similar art objects. In the modern world, artists have been interested in the way the world has been influenced not just by changes in technology but in the manner that technology has often driven those changes. Ferdinand Léger’s 1919 painting *The City* {Fig. 6} prophetically indicated what is true of our contemporary experience of the world, that we would be bombarded by such a plethora of levels of detail and color range, by the encoded linguistic structure of modernity, that we would begin to give up and retreat from an active representation of ourselves in the world into a passive absorption of experience such that we would see thinking about the conditions of the formation of communicative objects as beyond our control. It is only in the last ten years that Léger’s and Baudrillard’s vision of the world has become a dominating characteristic of our age, and artists have started to consciously use New Aesthetic styles to alert us to this state of affairs. By employing digital images that are the result of complex hardware and software interactions which fundamentally influence their aesthetic, New Aesthetic artists such as Matthew Plummer-Fernandez, Ralf Baeker, Mishka Henner, Aram Bartholl, and Mathieu Tremblin remind us not only about New Aesthetic’s limitations and unreliability but its effect that itself limits and makes increasingly unreliable our experience of the world. This is extremely important in the computer-driven age that we live in, in that the world is becoming computer-driven and computer-determined. The authors of *New Aesthetic, New Anxieties* write that ‘The New Aesthetic, in other words, brings these patterns to the surface, and in doing so articulates a movement towards uncovering the “unseen”, the little understood logic of computational society and the anxieties that this introduces.’[[41]](#footnote-42) Often, it is artists who best capture the anxiety and the potential in the underlying conditions, and we look forward to discussing ways in which contemporary artists are both utilizing and responding to the New Aesthetic.

The New Aesthetic is like a hashtag or meta-tag assigned to many phenomena, approaches, perspectives and people that we argue is more than just a movement rooted in web 2.0 culture using the operational logic of the hyperlinked interface and freely shareable information. Therefore, from a classic academic perspective it may seem vague, inaccurate and simply not worthy of any attention but it is a manifestation of the greater ontological shift our civilization is undergoing due to computational-driven processes and computational literacy. In this respect, one of the central tenets of our description of the New Aesthetic is based entirely on our belief that our contemporaneity can be described as computationality. The concept of computationality was coined by David M. Berry and is used in his *Philosophy of Software Code and Mediation in the Digital Age* (2011), on his blog (*stunlaw*) and was later developed in *Critical Theory and the Digital* (2014). Berry writes: ‘Computationality is therefore an ontotheology, which when read through Heideggerian categories can be understood as creating a new ontological “epoch” or a new historical constellation of intelligibility.’[[42]](#footnote-43) Computationality can be understood as a set of social and cultural practices rooted in digital technology. We can also consider it as an ontological description of the contemporary civilization which is deeply shaped by software and digital management of data. Therefore, computationality should be then understood as the very condition for emergence of such approach as the New Aesthetic, focusing on ‘revealing the grain of computation’, as it enables us to perceive the conditions underlying contemporaneity considered as computationality.

### The Postdigital Condition

Why should we bother with yet another ‘post’ notion? Florian Cramer, one of the first proponents of the ‘postdigital’ clearly stated that this ‘term sucks but is useful’.[[43]](#footnote-44) We are willing to agree with him on that matter. In the following paragraphs we hope to prove that the postdigital approach is of vital importance for our endeavor to conceptualize the New Aesthetic. Additionally, the postdigital as described by its advocates may be quite helpful in assessing the cultural and social consequences of the latest computational technologies – manifested by multi-layered software, black-box hardware and ubiquitouscomputing. We agree with David M. Berry and Michael Dieter who write that in the last decade, ‘computation [has become] experimental, spatial and materialized in its implementation, embedded within the environment and embodied, part of the texture of life itself but also upon and even within the body’.[[44]](#footnote-45) Both the New Aesthetic and the postdigital take into the spotlight unique characteristics and affordances of the latest computational technologies, instead of just putting them into the very same ‘digital basket’ where each and every technological artifact has been residing in for the last thirty years. Both the New Aesthetic and the postdigital signal and acknowledge the fact that in the last few years, technology’s impact on society and business has manifested itself in a profound and unprecedented scope.

Florian Cramer proposes several interpretative leads that we can use to conceptualize the postdigital. Each of them touches upon a different set of phenomena associated with the digital, taking into account some cultural artifacts, computational tools and a few broader trends that have lately emerged in the digital society, while responding to the research questions asked by different academic disciplines. We are proposing a kaleidoscope of the postdigital.

Following on Cramer’s work, we argue that the postdigital should not be understood as a new temporal period that comes after the ‘digital’ as its prefix would suggest. The postdigital rather strives to characterize new economic, social and cultural contexts that have been introduced in the last decade due to the general evolution of computational technologies towards even more autonomous systems, ubiquitous devices, real-time and cloud-based software and services. The term does not describe an era which is no longer formed by the presence of computational technologies. Quite the opposite, as it is rather interested in emphasizing the fact that the ‘digital revolution’ has already taken place, and through the latest innovations in the age of autonomous systems, ubiquitous computing, networks and clouds, the digital has been even more embedded with us and the environment. This has left a profound imprint in many areas of our society and culture such that the ‘“post-digital” in its simplest sense describes the messy state of media, arts and design after their digitization (or at least the digitization of crucial aspects of the channels through which they are communicated)’.[[45]](#footnote-46) The postdigital is therefore interested in assessing these consequences by locating, conceptualizing and critically examining manifestations of the postdigital condition in society, culture, economy etc. Cramer compares the postdigital to other post-like notions (post-punk, post-communism, post-feminism, post-apocalyptic etc.), emphasizing that the crucial difference between the initial appearance of the idea or movement and its post- version is that it ‘has progressed from a discrete breaking point to an ongoing condition – in Heideggerian terms, from Ereignis to Being’.[[46]](#footnote-47) This is one of the crucial points to be remembered when dealing with the postdigital. For us, both the New Aesthetic and the postdigital approach offer a unique paradigm that enables us to grasp and encapsulate various phenomena within the area of media, art and culture that are distinctive for the specific phase of evolution of the computational – the phase that came right after the ‘digital revolution’ – that is now understood as a fixed time event which has ended.

Cramer stresses that the postdigital stands in opposition to the quasi-teleological and linear understanding of technological progress that is centered around narratives of innovation, efficiency, disruption etc. In these paradigms yet more powerful and efficient software and hardware are the very conditions of social and cultural development of our civilization potentially leading towards a sterile, high tech era. The postdigital would oppose this tendency to argue that only by using the digital technologies or by embedding the digital with the non-computational physical environment and tools we can achieve our social, economic and cultural goals. He therefore suggests that proponents of the postdigital attitude should ‘dismiss the idea of digital processing as the sole universal all-purpose form of information processing.’[[47]](#footnote-48) This idea has been a dominating paradigm in popular culture since the dawn of the personal computer, and later in the so-called mobile revolution which was introduced by the smartphone and broadband mobile internet access. What is really interesting, as we are entering the age of Internet of Things when there will be endless variations of small devices and single-use chips that will make ordinary things ‘smart’ (fabric, vehicles, home appliances etc.), is that this idea will evolve further. The digital in the IoT era will be even more dispersed, hidden yet opaque in its nature.

According to Cramer and Kim Cascone the tendency to praise the hyper-fidelity of the computational and the myth of perfect representation is particularly visible in the domains of audiovisual media. In those fields has been an ongoing transition to higher resolutions, better color palette, screen refresh rate that would make the medium even more transparent yet hyperreal. ‘The simplest definition of “post-digital” describes a media aesthetics which opposes such digital high-tech and high-fidelity cleanness.’[[48]](#footnote-49)

The New Aesthetic, similarly to the postdigital, rejects such a fetishization of technological progress and the theoretical and interpretative approaches that come with it. Kim Cascone used the term for the first time in 2000 to describe how digitalization of the music production workflow has changed the very principles of this creative process.[[49]](#footnote-50) Similarly to the New Aesthetic a decade later, he focused on abnormalities, errors, and glitches in electronically produced music that were caused by specific commercial computational technologies involved in the process, to grasp and critically analyze their influence.

In the light of the above, it is hardly surprising that Cramer argues that the postdigital can be used to describe the condition of ‘disenchantment with digital information systems and media gadgets, or a period in which our fascination with these systems and gadgets has become historical’.[[50]](#footnote-51) The first version of his article was written only a few months after the Snowden revelations as part of a contribution to the Transmediale 2014 Festival. In this context the ‘disenchantment’ would address the ultimate end of the ‘free internet’ paradigm that has reigned in popular culture for decades. The internet that meant to be the great facilitator of the free circulation of information and the cornerstone of a new media, remix and sharing culture or the ‘web 2.0’ that was praised at the dawn of the new century by Henry Jenkins, Tim O’Reilly and others, has been disclosed as an ultimate surveillance machine and yet another space dominated by profit-driven corporations. The ‘free internet’ narrative shares the fate of the dot-com boom of the late 1990s.

Another understanding of the postdigital, which should be also associated with the ‘disenchantment attitude’, comes with the revival of ‘old’ or better said mechanical or electrical media in the arts. Cramer writes that we observe a ‘renaissance of artists’ printmaking, handmade film labs, limited vinyl editions, the rebirth of the audio cassette, mechanical typewriters, analog cameras and analog synthesizers’.[[51]](#footnote-52) This trend is particularly visible in art schools (at least in the Netherlands) where, according to Cramer, students prefer to work with non-digital tools and techniques, and digital communication design and new media is associated with commercial and mainstream. We could then argue that after three decades of artists’ fascination by new possibilities that the digital offers, part of the art community has become discouraged by the constraints that are imposed on them by commercial software and hardware, corporate media and a surveilled internet. Consequently, some artists of the new generation of creatives turn back to ‘old’ means of expression that are not dependent on the limits and compromises that come with the use of computational technologies of the present day – paper, canvas, paint, mechanical tools, or electromechanical media at most, have again become means of expression associated with the greatest degree of agency and control over the creative process.

Cramer and Berry also write about a more economy-oriented strand of the postdigital which is interested in ‘corporate’ media and technologies and their increasing impact on society or culture. In the light of the postdigital, the growing tensions between globalized techno-oligopolies and the revived hacker culture manifested by the maker / DIY movement – FabLabs Media Labs, local production etc. – should be considered as a critical response to the powerful alliance of corporate technology and money that dominates the so-called digital economy of the present day. The postdigital could then be considered as yet another struggle to regain political and economic agency in today’s world.

We believe that both the New Aesthetic condition and the postdigital are signposts of yet another momentum in the everlasting cycle of human-technology interaction. In the early stage of development of any major set of tools or technologies the sentiments of skepticism and disenchantment of the general public are often suppressed by the optimism of early adopters and innovators. The fact that such critical approaches as the New Aesthetic, the postdigital, post-internet, post-capitalism etc. have lately emerged and are deeply concerned about the role of computational technologies in today’s reality, only proves the fact that the computational is no longer the avant-garde of our civilization and as such is of minor importance to the general public. On the contrary, it rather proves that it has become the condition of existence of today’s reality and, for better or worse, has greatly permeated our everyday lives.

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