Cyborgs and *Core Dump*: Disrupting Recursive Colonialism through the Work of François Knoetze

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Abstract

Il paper propone una lettura critica dell'opera audio-visiva *Core Dump* (2018–2019) di François Knoetze come dispositivo estetico che interroga le genealogie coloniali e razziali dell'immaginario tecnologico moderno. Articolata in quattro capitoli situati lungo la filiera globale della tecnologia, l'opera mette in tensione la presunta linearità del progresso e attiva, attraverso la metafora informatica del *core dump*, una riflessione sui potenziali "punti di ripristino" da cui riarticolare la temporalità coloniale. Muovendo dal concetto di «colonialismo ricorsivo» del Critical Computation Bureau (2021), il paper mostra come *Core Dump* costruisca una genealogia coloniale della macchina, inscrivendo il corpo nero razzializzato nel cuore stesso della tecnicità moderna e mettendo in discussione la razionalità servo-strumentale che informa l'epistemologia moderna nella sua declinazione tecnica (Atanasoski, Vora 2019). Attraverso l'analisi delle figure cyborg che emergono nei video, l'articolo evidenzia come l'opera sovverta la relazione servo/padrone e prefiguri un'alleanza tra soggettività razzializzate e oggetti tecnici.La tecno-poetica di Knoetze pone così in crisi la struttura ricorsiva dell'epistemologia razziale moderna e opera come prefigurazione di futuri tecnologici postcoloniali, nei quali la tossicità e i residui materiali della modernità tecnologica si convertono in possibilità di liberazione e di ridefinizione delle categorie di umano.

The paper offers a critical reading of François Knoetze's audiovisual work *Core Dump* (2018–2019) as an aesthetic device that interrogates the colonial and racial genealogies underpinning the modern technological imaginary. Structured into four chapters situated along the global supply chain of technological production, *Core Dump* unsettles the presumed linearity of progress and, through the computational metaphor of the *core dump*, activates a reflection on alternative "restore points" from which colonial temporality might be reconfigured. Drawing on the Critical Computation Bureau's notion of "recursive colonialism" (2021), the paper shows how *Core Dump* constructs a colonial genealogy of the machine, inscribing the racialized Black body at the very core of modern technicity and challenging the servo-instrumental rationality that grounds modern epistemology in its technical articulation (Atanasoski and Vora 2019). Through an analysis of the cyborg figures emerging across the videos, the article highlights the ways in which the work subverts the master/slave relation and imagines unsettling alliances between racialized subjectivities and technical objects. Knoetze's technopoetics thus destabilizes the recursive structure of modern racial epistemology and operates as a prefiguration of postcolonial technological futures–futures in which the toxicity and material waste of technological modernity are transformed into possibilities for liberation and for a renewed conceptualization of the human.

Parole chiave/Key Words

Colonialismo ricorsivo, cyborg, surrogate effect; tecnicità; razzialità.

Recursive colonialism; cyborg; surrogate effect; technicity; raciality.

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Introduction

Core Dump (2018–2019) is an audiovisual artwork by South African artist François Knoetze[1]. It consists of a series of four films that explore the relationship between technology, the hypermodern imaginary and colonialism, starting from the concrete materiality of exploited bodies and raw materials, and from the never ending production of waste. Since its release, the series has been exhibited in numerous art-fairs and exhibitions, most recently at the FADA Gallery of the University of Johannesburg during the exhibition *Re:Fuse-Ability* (2025) and at the 12th Seoul Biennale titled *THIS TOO IS A MAP* (2023).

Francois Knoetze (1989) works across performance, sculpture, and video art, exploring the relationship between material culture and social history, consumer culture, and colonial history. As a white South African artist, Knoetze explicitly situates his practice within a critical engagement with the racial and colonial histories that shape both technological modernity and his own conditions of enunciation (Fletcher, Broadsheet web page). His works draw directly on the insights of decolonial and postcolonial authors and Black theory, such as Gayatri Spivak, Frantz Fanon, Aimé Césaire, Sylvia Wynter, Louis Chude-Sokei, and Joseph Tonda (Knoetze, Medium web page; Knoetze, Gueye, Artafrica Magazine web page). In particular, he has long worked with the concept of waste, transforming it into a narrative agent that brings to light the cracks and frictions within the myth of progress – especially Western technological progress – by reconnecting it to the long colonial history of resource extraction and social and ecological devastation in the African context.

In the *Cape Mongo* series (2013–2015), Knoetze builded six anthropomorphic figures made of recycled materials – paper, plastic, glass, metal, VHS tapes, and cells. According to the Knoetze's aesthetic narrative, these figures emerged from the ever-growing landfills of consumer culture, interacted with urban space, and revisited sites from their past – from shopping malls to shipping containers – thus tracing the historical trajectories of consumption, pollution, and inequality. Waste thereby shifts from being an invisible remainder to «mnemonic vestiges of the activities that shaped them» (Knoetze, Personal web page).

As the artist states, the *Core Dump* series «explores contradictions between Silicon Valley as the self-proclaimed gatekeepers of a techno-utopia and the neo-colonial imperialist structures of this 'Invisible Empire'» (Knoetze, Medium web page). In a similar way to *Cape Mongo*, Knoetze uses electronic waste as «artifacts – radioactive fossils – which speak of the

relationships of power forged in the transatlantic world during the nineteenth century and the dependence of industrialization on systems of slavery, establishing long-enduring binaries between race and technology, nature and civilization» (Knoetze, Medium web page).

The films are set in four different locations – Kinshasa, Dakar, Shenzhen, and New York – each corresponding to a node of global value chain: from extraction in the Democratic Republic of Congo, through production sites in China and consumption in the West, to the places where technologies end their lifecycle as e-waste. As I will show, I intend to read this almost cyclical structure, with constant symbolic resonances between the videos, as a critique of the recursive colonial temporality of the ideology of technological progress – driven by an ideal of hypermodernity that conceals the historical sedimentations of colonialism which produce the present as a re-actualization of that past. In technical terms, in fact, a "core dump" is a recorded state of a computer's memory at a specific moment in time. When a crash occurs, the machine can retrieve this "imprint" in order to run a debug and a reset. *Core Dump* thus reverberates the metaphor of the crash across ecological and colonial catastrophe, trying to imagine alternative restoration points in African history by drawing on the hidden potentials of technology and the political experiments of transformation that have taken place in the continent. Moving between archival footage, performance art, acting, interviews, and political and philosophical reflections, *Core Dump* anchors itself in Africa's colonial and racial history as the material substrate of technological dreams of innovation (De Loughry, 2022), while also retracing its histories of resistance and struggle through the words and images of figures such as Frantz Fanon, Léopold Sédar Senghor, and Ousmane Sembène.

This is the first of two essays on Knoetze's *Core Dump*, emerging from a broader research project on recursive colonialism and on the racial grammar of modern epistemology and technology. For this reason, the present essay does not aim to exhaust the many complex and interconnected interpretative layers of the work. Rather, it focuses on the recursive colonialism of technological progress as a form of temporal domination, and on the master/slave relation as the essential logic of modern technologies. In the next section, I will first explain what the Critical Computation Bureau – a collective of researchers and artists, based between the US, the UK, and Southern Italy, engaged with issues related to the technopolitics of racial capitalism and composed, among others, of Tiziana Terranova, Oana Parvan, Ezekiel Dixon-Román, and Luciana Parisi – means by «recursive colonialism» (Critical Compu-

tation Bureau, 2021), and I will relate this notion to jamaican decolonial theorist and writer Sylvia Wynter's theses on the «over-representation of Man» (Wynter, 2003) and on modern racial epistemology. I will show how these ideas are recursively reproduced in the modern conception of technology, which is permeated by a servo-instrumental logic. I will then seek to delineate the specific features of the form assumed by Man in relation to modern technologies, as the figure of the user/master.

The essay reads *Core Dump* – specifically the videos set in New York, Dakar and Kinshasa – through these lenses and elaborates them as an aesthetic subversion of this structure of domination by staging cyborg figures that operates as a material and temporal rupture within the recursive colonial order and threaten the techno-racial order of Man. In particular, I aim to show how these figures embody and render operative the *core dump*, configuring themselves as cyborgs capable of breaking the recursive matrix of colonialism and race.

Recursive colonialism and the Over-representation of Man

According to the Critical Computation Bureau, recursivity concerns «the self-regulation, self-adaptation, and self-regeneration of systems–including the recursive regeneration of the colonial episteme, which we call 'recursive colonialisms'» (Critical Computation Bureau, 2021, p. 1). Recursivity entails a temporal model of domination within contingency, that reiterates race as a weapon of differentiation – a process of reconfiguring the past within the present (Parisi, Dixon-Román, 2020). This form of domination is contingent in the sense that it does not consist in the mere reproduction of identical colonial structures, but it rather continuously redefines itself – functioning as a sort of autopoietic structure (Bateson, 1972) – each time anew, through and from contingency: «Recursivity is not about linear derivation or one-directional determination of the European logic of colonialism. Each form of colonialism enacts a logic of dividing and separating, hierarchizing and primitivizing territories and populations that returns, recursively, through different forms of authority» (Critical Computation Bureau, 2025, p. 219).

Drawing on Cedric Robinson and Sylvia Wynter, the authors explain the racial and colonial logic of capitalism as grounded in its need to continually produce an "Other" through a dispositive of inclusion/exclusion – an "other" that constitutes both the object of differential capitalist exploitation based on race (Robinson, 1983) and the marker of difference with re-

spect to the fully human subject, that is, the Western subject – what Sylvia Wynter calls «Man» (Wynter 2003). This particular figure of the human – white, male, rational, and Western – finds its origin, according to Wynter, in the *homo politicus* of the humanist era and later in the *homo oeconomicus* of nineteenth-century bio-economic sciences, elevating itself as the universal measure of the human: an over-representation of Man that equates this specific figure with humanity as such (Wynter, 2003). Wynter's thesis aligns with those of many black and racialized feminist thinkers – among others, Lisa Lowe and Denise Ferreira da Silva – who have shown that the emergence of the rational liberal subject of European law and science was made possible through the parallel subjugation, exploitation, and de-humanization of nonwhite subjectivities (Lowe, 2015; Ferreira da Silva, 2007). Humanism and colonialism thus share a common genealogy and inhabit the same «cognitive-political universe, inasmuch as Europe's discovery of its 'Self' is simultaneous with its discovery of its Others» (Scott, 2000, p. 120). The epistemological ground upon which both humanism and modernity rest is, as Kathryn Yusoff writes, constitutively "anti-Black" (Yusoff, 2021, p. 665).

The over-representation of Man has, in fact, produced and naturalized colonial and racial hierarchization, establishing a colonial epistemology that has been imposed as the universal epistemology of progress (Quijano, 2000; Wynter, 2003; Parisi & Dixon-Román, 2020; Critical Computation Bureau, 2025) and that is grounded in an excluding binary logic – whiteness/blackness, masculinity/femininity, heterosexuality/homosexuality (Mbembe, 2017; Butler, 2002): «the global order of racial capitalism was technologically actualized through the standardization of knowledge» (Parisi, Dixon-Román, 2020).

According to Wynter, the imposition of Man's universal epistemology occurs through what she – drawing on Fanon (1986) – calls the "sociogenic principle": that set of narrative codes and descriptive statements through which each human group establishes the criteria for what counts as human, thereby grounding its own epistemology. Reworking the concept of autopoiesis (Bateson, 1972), Wynter shows how the dominant sociogenic principle – human = white, male, owner, rational – reproduces and reaffirms itself across sciences, institutions, practices, and disciplines that constantly reiterate its premises – thus naturalizing a partial and historically situated conception of the human as universal (Wynter, 1999; Wynter, 2003). Colonial recursivity therefore entails the repetition of the epistemic structures of colonialism through their ongoing contingent reconfiguration, which today applies

above all to computational and algorithmic technologies (Critical Computation Bureau, 2025). These function as dispositifs that reiterate coloniality and race precisely while claiming to neutralize them (Chun 2021; Amaro 2023). As Benjamin argues through the concept of the *New Jim Code*, this process automates racial inequality by recoding race within algorithms themselves (Benjamin 2019). In this sense, machine learning operates as an "ontological" technology that determines which forms of being human can aspire to recognition, reinscribing white Western epistemology as the norm of calculation (Amaro 2023).

Moreover, the racial and suprematist logic underpinning the over-representation of Man also manifests itself in the very relationship with Western technology, which becomes a civilizational marker (Hui, 2016; Quijano, 2000) and a measure of progress against which the rest of the world is evaluated. From a single subject as the marker of humanity with its own universal epistemology, to a «monotechnologism» defining the sole idea of technological progress: «The self-posited universality of Western technology resides in the epistemologies of racial capitalism founded on principles of causal efficiency» (Parisi, Dixon-Román, 2020).

The Master user as the only legitimate subject of technologies

For the scope of this paper, it is important to make explicit how this universal and aspirational figure of the human, *Man*, and its colonial epistemology are specifically codified within the technosocial and temporal context of recursive colonialism. We might say that it takes the form of the technological "user" who realizes his humanity – as the rational white subject – precisely through the use and mastery of technology. As Biscossi also emphasizes, drawing on Deborah Atanasoski and Kalindi Vora, the technological user is the aspirational figure of the technological imaginary, embodying the ideal of self-determined autonomy characteristic of what the authors call the Liberal Subject (Biscossi, 2024; Atanasoski, Vora, 2019). Atanasoski and Vora have shown – in continuity with authors such as Eshun (1998) and Chude-Sokei (2015) – that Western conceptions of technology are permeated by a racial logic: namely, by the idea that the full expression of the Human is made possible only through the subordination of surrogates who perform the most degrading, and thus classically racialized, forms of labor. It is a master/slave relation, we might say, that recursively reactualizes in the relationship with technologies – conceived solely trough an instrumental

logic[2] – and that defines the full humanity of a subject precisely as master and user. The user is this subject, the only legitimate owner and user of technologies.

This is what the authors, following Saidiya Hartman and Toni Morrison, define as the "surrogate effect": «the surrogate is a racialized and gendered form defining the limits of human consciousness and autonomy» (Atanasoski, Vora, 2019, p. 9). Ideologically, it finds expression in "technoliberalism", understood as the political alibi through which technological development is presented as the path toward the full realization of humanity, while it obscures and reproduces racialized and differential conditions of exploitation – from the workers assembling technologies in factories to the clickworkers of digital platforms (Atanasoski, Vora 2019). Thus, the *surrogate effect* not only entails the affirmation of the identity of the user subject through the use of the technical instrument that performs the most degrading tasks, but – while technoliberalism ideologically proclaims the advent of a post-racial and post-gender world enabled by technological and digital development – it also produces new forms of racialization and gendering – that is, forms of human surrogation – of labor, concealed behind technological tools themselves (Atanasoski, Vora, 2019). The machine is therefore encoded through a racial grammar – as a slave – and in turn conceals forms of exploitation and racialization. Technoliberalism thus expresses the drive for affirmation of the liberal subject – which we have defined as the user/master and which we can now therefore also define as the specific configuration assumed by the rational male subject Man in his relationship to technology – and whose self-affirmation is always grounded in the exclusion and exploitation of what is deemed as not properly human (Atanasoski, Vora, 2019).

To better articulate this figure with the Critical Computation Bureau's reflections on recursive colonialism, it is necessary to foreground his specific temporal dimension. His temporal experience is that of progress, conceived as the horizon of full human realization: in other words, he defines himself as a human subject in the present through the future, as a continuous overcoming of the past, and sees in technological progress the sign of his Promethean self-fulfillment (Critical Computation Bureau 2025). Yet this progressive temporality is grounded in a recursive temporal structure – one that reiterates race and coloniality (Critical Computation Bureau, 2025) – and in the invisibilization of the forms of exploitation bound to the technologies themselves (Atanasoski, Vora, 2015). This experience is comparable to that of the autological subject (Povinelli 2006): a subject capable of self-determination and ori-

ented toward the future. His freedom is the freedom of the subject who can self-enunciate and project himself toward the future – in this case, thanks to technological development.

To sum up, by introducing the concept of recursive colonialism (Critical Computation Bureau 2025) and tracing its roots to the racial and colonial epistemology of Man (Wynter, 2003), I have shown how, in its relation to technology, this universal and abstract subject is reformulated as the figure of the master/user: a technological subject that is likewise universal and aspirational and historically white, male, and proprietary. Its orientation toward the future and toward progress rests on the denial of humanity and technological agency to other subjectivities, which are confined within a recursive colonial temporality.

Both the idea of a post-racial technological future and the supremacy of the user as the only legitimate expression of technological subjectification – what can be now described as a sort of *over-representation of the User* – have been already challenged in the 1990s and early 2000s through debates on the so-called digital divide. Critical race theorists demonstrated that the assumption of Black and racialized populations being "behind" technologically was not accidental but a technocultural rearticulation of racism, while also foregrounding the existence of alternative technological practices and engagements (Dery, 1994; Nelson, 2002; Weheliye, 2002; Eshun, 1998, 2003; Everett, Wallace 2007; Womack 2013; Anderson, Jones, 2015).

As Alondra Nelson, a key figure in critical race theory and among those who developed the concept of Afrofuturism, and others argued, both the rhetoric of the digital divide and the fantasy – widespread in the 1990s – of a placeless, bodiless, post-racial cyberspace rest on the same flawed premise: that race is a remnant of the past rather than a structuring condition of technoculture (Nelson, 2002; Anderson, Jones, 2015) – as also exposed more recently by critical race studies of algorithms (Chun, 2021; Amaro, 2023). While acknowledging that Western technologies have largely been applied to Black bodies as instruments of control, exploitation, or biopolitical violence, Black and Afrofuturist scholars and artists have articulated processes of technological resignification as potential sources of liberation (Kilgore, 2014; Lavender III, Murphy 2019).

The Dazzling Glare of Technologies

In the video set in Kinshasa, Knoetze draws on a Congolese urban legend that emerged in the 1920s in the aftermath of King Leopold II's colonial regime, as an attempt to

give allegorical form to the dehumanizing violence of Belgian domination. The protagonist is transformed into a human-pig mutant after encountering the blinding headlights of a car driven by someone wearing a grotesque mask of a blond white man. Rejected by all his neighbors, he flees until he is taken in by two figures wearing masks – one female and one male, but both white, and one of whom appears to be the same person who was driving the car. They devour a plate of raw materials that flow directly from the protagonist's arm, severed by another grotesque figure that suddenly appears, impersonating King Leopold II. As the pair record with their phones and consume their meal, they remove their masks and reveal themselves also to be pigs, vomiting up electronic waste (Knoetze, 2018b)[3].

According to the artist (Knoetze, Medium web page), he encountered this legend thanks to the congolese philosopher Joseph Tonda, who revisited it within his reflection on the forms assumed by power in the postcolonial context – what he calls «postcolonial imperialism». This form of imperialism operates not only on the political and economic level but also within the symbolic and imaginary order (Tonda, 2005; 2015). Western people, Tonda argues, not only constructed imaginaries and representations of otherness that served colonial domination, but also colonized Africans' very imagination. The colonized began to recognize themselves within the stereotyped images circulated in the West – no longer distinguishing between reality and fiction – and live under the spell of modernity's promises, desiring its dazzling fetishes and consumer goods, interpreted as signs of fulfillment, but from which they are almost always excluded (Tonda, 2005; 2015).

The Congolese legend tells of a person blinded by the headlights of a car – a material symbol of white power – which, while seducing and dazzling him, reduces him to an animal[4]. The light is the emanation of the violent and unsettling force of colonial and postcolonial power (Tonda, 2015), once again confirming the constitutive link between European modernity and colonialism. In his writings – and in the recording of his voice we hear at the beginning of the film – Tonda links this blinding force to modern screens, whose light, as we hear in the film, «reflect products/merchandise/commodities which are modern fetishes that motivate biological impulse, a compulsive desire for material wealth» (Knoetze, 2018b, min. 02.38). It is no coincidence that the protagonist of the video holds a phone, which he stares right before being transformed by the car's headlights. The car's headlights, the glow of screens, are the blinding light of Enlightenment (Tonda, 2015) – of modernity, of its episte-

mology and sciences that claim to "see" and "illuminate" everything, and of its technologies. The dazzle embodies the petty violence of European "civilization" in Africa, which not only governs but also shapes the bodies, minds, and imaginaries of the colonized (Tonda, 2015), who come to accept and desire the unreachable – and constitutively anti-Black – standards of Man (Wynter, 2003) (Fig. 1).

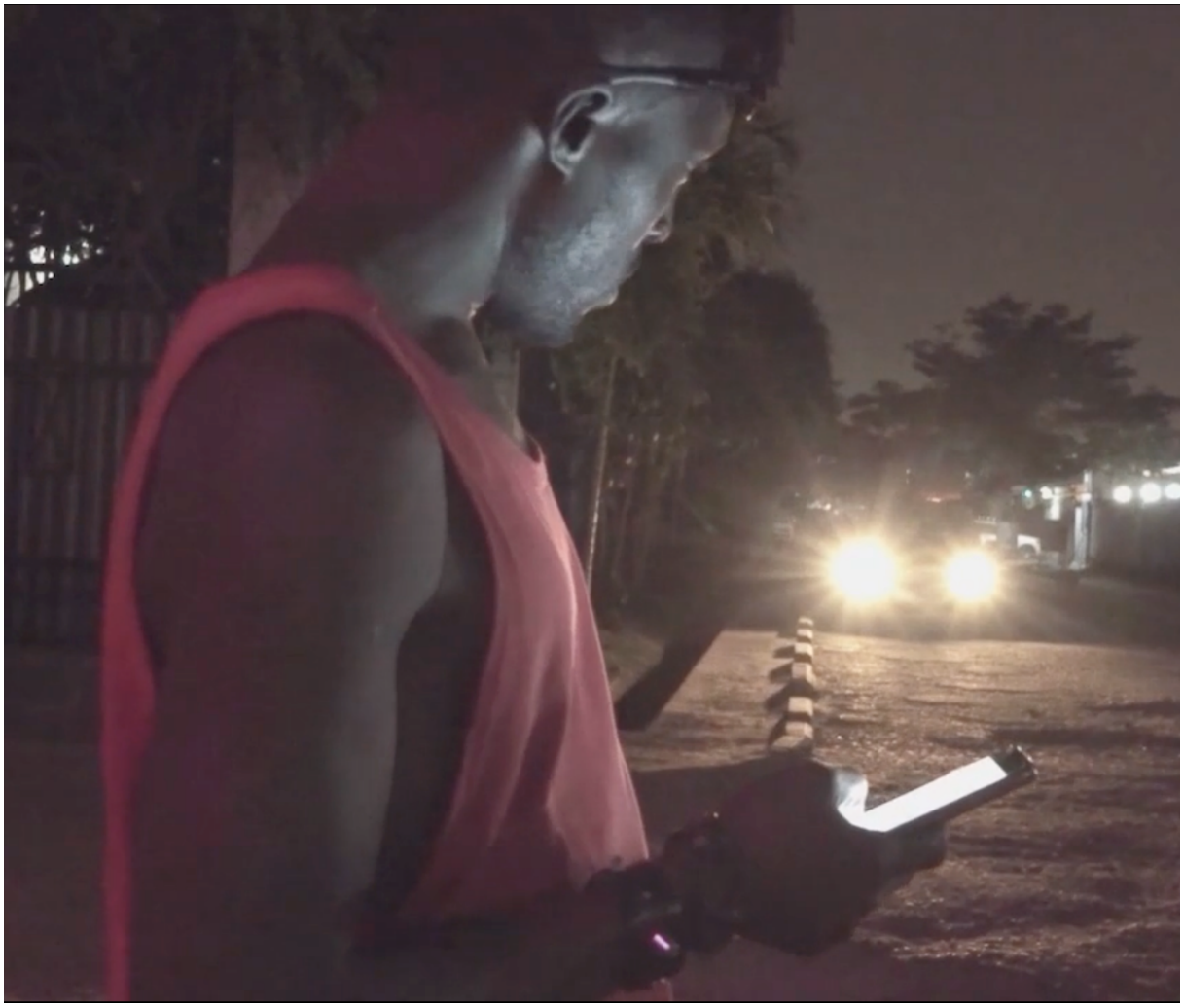

Fig. 1. Francois Knoetze, *Core Dump: Kishasa* (2018).
Video Still

As noted, monotechnological universalism becomes the marker of humanity and civilization; colonized subjects who have internalized Western categories and codes – blinded by their "light" – lust for and aspire to that position: the position of Man, the rational, white, male, and owner subject (Wynter, 2003; Lowe, 2015), from which they remain excluded. In the age of digital technologies, they likewise desire to occupy the position of masters, of technological "users" – a position from which they are equally excluded, for it is nothing but a recursive reiteration of Man, who must continually produce an "Other" to be dehumanized

and make his surrogate–as machine, as slave–in order to express his own full humanity (Atanasoski, Vora, 2019).

The position of user subject is therefore an apparently universal but in fact particular one – that of Man as the rational, white, male, owner subject. It is a position that generates a desire to be occupied – the "glare" – even by those who are in fact excluded from it and thus remain "dazzled": that is, all forms of existence that are not fully recognized as human and not legitimately entitled to mastery and use of technology. All these "others" are subjectivities that ultimately experience technologies as exclusionary and as agents of violence and control, as will be discussed in the chapter devoted to New York.

The Two Sides of Technological Experience: the Master User and the Racialized Machine

The chapter set in New York (Knoetze, 2019b) takes up the figure of *Big Dog*, the robot developed in 2008 by Boston Dynamics for military purposes, imagining it escaping from the laboratory and wandering through the streets of the city. When it is cut in half by the closing doors of a subway train, its two parts embark on separate journeys. The first half finds a damaged female mannequin with the face of a Black woman and uses it as its body while it roams, unwelcome, through the streets of New York. The second half seems luckier, finding an intact mannequin of a white man and wandering among the temples of American finance and technology – Wall Street, the Apple Store, Amazon. In the end, the first robot is discarded along with other electronic waste and shipped in a cargo container bound for an e-waste dump in Dakar. The film ends with the two halves gazing at each other from opposite sides of the Atlantic.

The two halves of the Big Dog robot live very different, divergent stories – diverging not so much at the moment of their separation as at the moment when they each acquire a different kind of "body": the white, male body of the first mannequin, and the Black, female body of the second. They mark two opposing technological experiences. On one side, that of what I defined as "user" – the master and rightful subject of technologies, as a specific formulation of Man. The white mannequin wanders among the temples of finance and technology, bowing before the Apple Store (min. 07:09), or living the futuristic experience of inhabiting in a smart house (min. 05:07). This is the mannequin to whom another mannequin dressed in a soldier's uniform advises: «if you can't beat it, join it» (min. 04:49); whose face,

above all, we see superimposed on that of Tom Cruise in the emblematic scene from *Minority Report* (2002), in which Captain John Anderton directs, through the sensors on his gloves, the computers displaying premonitions of future crimes – premonitions produced by three psychic individuals exploited and confined in tanks (min. 07:50). In the background, a voice explains that the imaginary depicted in the movie has now become reality: the system, we are told, can identify the subjects upon whom control must be exercised, before they have actually committed any crime. Digital technologies and algorithms thus appear as instruments of classification, prevention, control, and power.

On the other side lies the opposite experience – that of the Black "female" mannequin, a racialized and feminized (Vergès, 2019) machine-surrogate, persecuted by the police, subjected to the scrutiny of a biased white and racist algorithmic gaze (Chun, 2021; Amaro, 2023), as the film's voiceover explains, and ultimately discarded like waste, ending up in an e-waste dump in Dakar. It is the experience of the racialized body that encounters technologies as agents of its subjugation and is herself reduced to a slave, to a machine – destined to be thrown away once no longer useful. She can only observe from a distance the promises and possibilities of technological progress to which the white mannequin has access and from which she, as noted earlier, is never admitted, and which instead treats her with violence (Fig. 2).

Fig. 2. Francois Knoetze, *Core Dump: New York* (2019).
Video Still

The film is interspersed with images of ecological devastation and flooding, tech-industry billionaires, the new racialized slavery of American prisons, and financial algorithms – the two faces of racial capitalism (Robinson, 1983). Indeed, around minute 9:40, the screen splits in two: on one side, behind the white mannequin, appear archival images of white America; on the other, behind the Black mannequin, images of enslaved people and colonial wars (Fig. 3). Around minute 05:52, a voice-over recounts the story of a group of enslaved people who escaped from plantations and sought refuge in the mountains. Returning to traditional African beliefs, they gave rise to the Vodou religion. The god Loa Shango gives them the message to begin the war of independence. «Drums beat, adding fuel to the raging fire already enflamed by the oppression of slavery and the idea of liberty» (Knoetze 2019b): on the screen appears the image of January Suchodolski's painting *Bitwa na San Domingo* (1845), which depicts a clash between former enslaved Haitian revolutionaries and Polish soldiers fighting on behalf of France – here, their faces are replaced by those of the *Terminator* (1984) robot, with glowing red eyes. Around minute 06:14, on the left side of the screen, we also see one of the revolutionaries with the face of the Black mannequin brandishing the severed head of the white mannequin. A frame that seems to evoke an uprising against racial oppression, which becomes an uprising against technologies as instruments of domination, control, and power (Fig. 4).

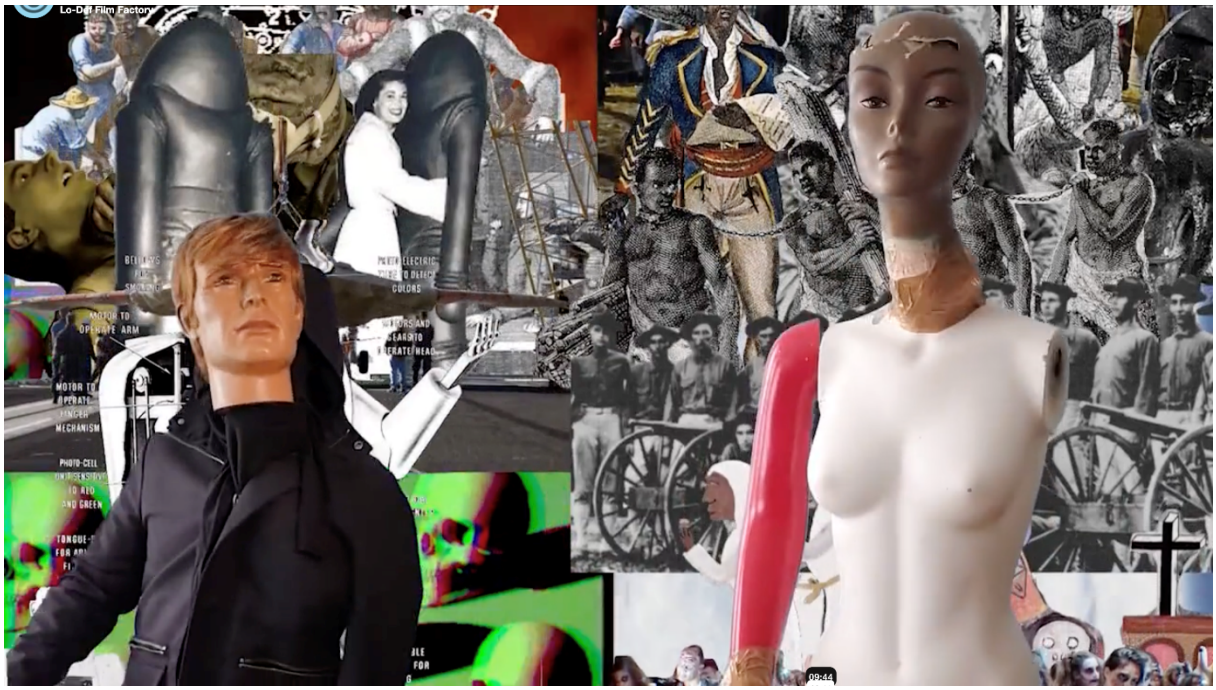

Fig. 3. Francois Knoetze, *Core Dump: New York* (2019).
Video Still

Fig. 4. Francois Knoetze, *Core Dump: New York* (2019).
Video Still

Yet, it is of interest that, before this frame, at minute 03:17, we see a photograph of the inventor S. M. Kinter of Westinghouse Electric together with one of the robots produced by the company in the 1930s – a robot with a Black face, dressed like a working-class Black farmer from the American South. In the background, we hear the voice of the scholar Simone Browne, taken from one of her lectures, explaining how Mr. Rastus – the name given to the robot, also known as *Mechanical Slave* or *Mechanical Nigro* – was an explicit symbol of Black servitude.

As noted, at the foundation of the modern Western conception of technology lies a racial logic, inscribed within modern technologies themselves and manifested in their perception as «enchanted objects»: autonomous, animated entities that act "as if by magic," performing tasks and services while obscuring the racial and colonial structures of exploitation on which they depend (Atanasoski, Vora, 2019). Black culture theorist Louis Chude-Sokei – explicitly quoted in the film – has further demonstrated how race has functioned as a medium through which the increasingly artificial, de-naturalized, and de-humanized world of industrial machinery was made intelligible and familiar. The conceptual overlap between the machine and the Black slave reframes the machine primarily as servant and instrument, obedient to its master. Through an analysis of cultural products such as minstrel shows and the Mechanical Turk, Chude-Sokei observes how the same fears, phobias, and anxieties once related to racialized

figures are recodified around the machine: on one hand, the terror that the machine might "rebel," overpowering the human; on the other, the anxiety that the machine, like the slave, might resemble the human too closely, becoming increasingly indistinguishable from it and blurring the boundaries between them (Chude-Sokei, 2016). In both cases, what is placed in question is the identity and authority of the Human: «They bear the same uncanny relationship to the human – which is to say, to the white» (Chude-Sokei, 2016, p. 44). Robots and machines, in this sense, have been imbued with the same racist and xenophobic charge that expresses the uncanny anxiety of seeing the superiority and the presumed right of Man over all that is inhuman, nonhuman, and less-than-human – i.d., non-white – called into question.

The film makes visible the hypocrisy of the ideology of technological progress, its post-racial pretensions, and the recursive coloniality on which it rests. On the one hand, the stories of the two halves of the robot articulate a split technological experience: that of the user/master – as a specific configuration of *Man*, the white male subject and master of technology – and that of racialized subjectivities, themselves exploited as machines and experiencing technologies as instruments of capture and domination. On the other hand, the video, by continuously weaving together past and present – juxtaposing images of slavery, the slave trade, and rebellions with scenes of ecological devastation and flooding, tech-industry billionaires, and financial algorithms – reverberates the recursive structure of colonialism, making its functioning within contemporary technologies and the technosocial context explicit. The revisiting of the Battle of Santo Domingo, with Polish soldiers transformed into robots, seems to open the possibility of rebellion against this recursive structure and against a monotecnologism that appears solely as a tool of control and violence. At the same time, however, the reference to the Black robot Rastus at minute 03:17 seems to gesture not – or not only – toward an opposition between machine and racialized subject, but also toward a proximity, as will be discussed in the next paragraph, grounded in their shared condition of servitude.

The Colonial Cyborg: Core Dump and Waste

So far, a certain ambivalence has been maintained regarding the relationship between machine and Black body, with emphasis placed primarily on the divergent technological experiences of the user/master and, by contrast, those of racialized people, who are themselves surrogate machines whose labor is often rendered invisible behind the machine itself

and who moreover experience technologies as instruments of control and exploitation. It therefore becomes necessary to examine whether and how Knoetze articulates a possible rupture of this dynamic, and it is here that the figure of the cyborg comes into play. As Fabbri argues, robots function in much Afrofuturist narrative as metaphors for the modern Black condition: on the one hand, the alienation produced by slavery and racism; on the other, the reduction of Black bodies to production tools (Fabbri 2020). At the same time, however, they are also figures capable of overturning this relation.

The sequences of *Core Dump: New York* described in the previous paragraph, expose this racial genealogy of the machine through an explicit visual and conceptual articulation. At minute 03:36, while the Black mannequin wanders through the city streets and the film cuts to several frames from the iconic Afrofuturist film *Space is the Place* by John Coney and musician Sun Ra (1974), a voice-over articulates another crucial aspect of the relation between technology and blackness:

> Because this spirit of technology is already merged with pre-colonial cultural tradition and African and diaspora semsibilities, machines become the primary method and space where black roots and black futurity, history and what is possible, they interface. Under the sway of the machine, the body becomes vulnerable to the dissolution of categories of race, class, nation gender, or less and less contained by them (Knoetze 2019b).

Although produced earlier, *Core Dump: Dakar* (Knoetze, 2018a) appears to directly reconnect with this line of reflection, envisioning a possible perverse alliance between the racialized black body and the machine. A broken computer explodes in the face of an electronics repairman in one of the "emblematic" centers of e-waste, Dakar. The man is forced to incorporate mechanical components into his body in order to stay alive and becomes dependent on the machine for survival. He is now a mysterious techno-corporeal assemblage of electronic debris – a cyborg wearing a traditional African mask and who seems poised to rebel.

By merging with the machine, the repairman's body becomes, as announced in the *New York* video, vulnerable to the dissolution of the categories of race, class, nation, and gender. I would like to define this figure as a colonial cyborg – as the dark, inverted face of human-machine hybridization, of transhumanist Prometheanism (Fig. 5).

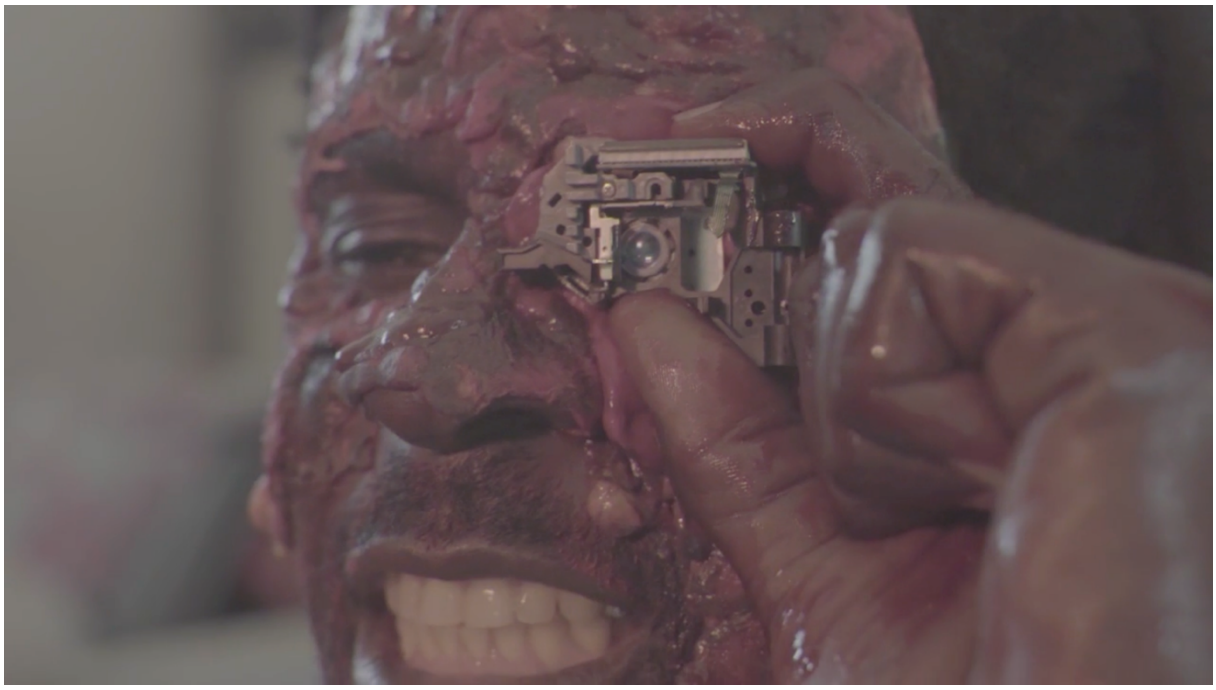

Fig. 5. Francois Knoetze, *Core Dump: Dakar* (2019).
Video Still

The figure of the cyborg, as is well known, became particularly influential within critical and feminist theory through Donna Haraway's *A Cyborg Manifesto* (1991), in which she observed the implosion of modern categories and binaries at the end of the twentieth century with the advancement of technological and biotechnological development. The body – particularly non-male, non-cisgender, non-white bodies – reveals itself as a site where biology, technology, and culture intersect, forming a complex and negotiable assemblage (Haraway 1991). Haraway's cyborg is an anti-origin and non-identitarian figure, capable of making visible – and at the same time disrupting – the binary boundaries of the masculine and capitalist order (Bell, 2007; Berg, 2019). A key figure of 1980s and 1990s feminism, it was nonetheless also criticized for its apparent failure to sufficiently address race. As Kolko, Nakamura, and Rodman wrote, «many cyberfeminists elided the topic of race in cyberspace … [but] the cyborg is not only a hybrid of machine and organism, it is also a racial hybrid» (Kolko, Nakamura, and Rodman 2000, p. 8). Haraway's cyborg thus remains anchored to a white and technologically hegemonic idea, that continues to exclude or marginalize Black subjectivity (James 2013; Aql 2021). As several scholars have argued, however, Black theory, music, and aesthetics – particularly Afrofuturism – have long functioned as speculative spaces for experimenting with alternative technological relations and with "Black" cyborg figures (Puar, 2012; Lynes, Symes, 2016; Aql, 2021).

Knoetze's cyborg is indeed, like Haraway's cyborg, a figure that blurs the boundaries between the organic and the machine and "entangled" with technology, but through its waste – the metals and dust that clog the repairman's lungs and body even before the computer explodes in his face. It emerges and comes into being within a specific context, within a specific geography shaped by temporal – namely, historical and colonial – processes of spatial distribution of hierarchies of domination and exploitation. It is, indeed, a "colonial cyborg", one that arises as a disturbing and transformative figure within the recursive logic of the colonial past. This hybrid figure emerges from the colonial, extractive, and discarded reality; it is situated and positioned: it accepts the blurring of binary boundaries and reclaims them in a perverse and subversive way (Fig. 6).

Fig. 6. Francois Knoetze, *Core Dump: Dakar* (2019).
Video Still

Its process of re-creation is a conscious and unending work of engineering as a means of escaping the imprisonment of recursivity. It is a "temporal cyborg": a mixture of colonial history, extractive and neocolonial present, and machinic future. It carries within itself the task and the responsibility of the past (Benjamin, 1990; Despret, 2012) toward an alternative future: «we are balancing the books, auditing history» (min. 11:08). It is a cyborg – a terrifying machine ready to rebel – made of blood contaminated with heavy metals, electronic waste, sweat, and the exploited and exposed bodies of those who build technologies. It is not only a figure of redemption

and vengeance for the colonial past but also one capable of reshaping the defeated attempts to write another history. As Bould notes, Afro-diasporic culture is historically marked by an ethical imperative to recover the past erased by colonialism and slavery. Afrofuturism shares this tension but distinguishes itself by cultivating, alongside this retrospective impulse, a proleptic orientation toward the future and its speculative possibilities (Bould 2019). Knoetze appears to draw precisely on this tradition in his videos, which stage this temporal tension.

In the background, in fact, we hear Leopold Senghor's speech at the 1975 Conference of the Non-Aligned Movement. Around minute 08:59, the cyborg itself takes Senghor's place on the stage, as if resuming his role – as if, at that precise moment, the core dump had been recorded in order to reset history from that point. As Walter Benjamin wrote in his *Theses on the Concept of History*, it assumes the task of saving and avenging the past, reopening the temporal deviations of the defeated and reactivating them in the present (Benjamin, 1990).

Johan Lau Munkholm, in his discussion of the figure of the *data thief* in John Akomfrah's film *The Last Angel of History* (1996), describes it as an archaeological figure of the future who digs through the remains of the past in search of fragments capable of "unlocking" the future. Like Benjamin's *angelus novus*, the data thief understands history not as a sequence of events but as a single, ongoing catastrophe (Munkholm, 2018). Unlike Benjamin's angel, however – swept away by a storm from Paradise – the data thief possesses active agency: it can gather fragments, sample them, and recombine them.

I interpret Knoetze's cyborg in a similar way: as a figure that perceives, beneath the apparent linearity of technological progress, the catastrophe of recursive colonialism – the repetition of racial violence in the name of that very progress. By repairing itself, the repairman sets in motion a more complex process of repair: the repair of the catastrophe of progress and of the recursive colonial structure that underpins it. Knoetze's cyborg thus functions as a technocolonial angelus novus that disrupts the linear temporality of progress of the technological user subject. This rupture occurs through the reappropriation of technological waste as material memory of racial and colonial violence, and of the subjectivities exploited in the past and present to sustain an ideology of progress premised precisely on the continual disavowal – or attempted disavowal – of the past and its residues.

This returning remainder, like a phantom (Fisher, 2013), marks the traumatic and violent origin of techno-racial privilege and its repetition in the present. It signals that the line-

arity of *Man*'s progress, and of the user as its technological figure, is grounded in the reiteration of racial violence and in colonial recursivity. The waste/phantom is both the return of the past and a fragment of futures that never came to be. As Mark Fisher writes, this is the kind of temporal disjunction to which Afro-diasporic communities have historically been subjected – deprived of their pasts and compelled to mourn their lost futures (Fisher, 2013).

In Knoetze's video, these phantoms assume a techno-material form in waste, which, as it merges with the body of the repairman, returns to presence, giving corporeal form and agency to defeated histories and to possibilities of revenge. It is in this sense that the metaphor – now taking on a material register – of the "core dump" should be understood. It is within waste itself that the cyborg finds points of restoration in official history and progress, and through which it comes closer, and reactivates, revolutionary figures and moments in African history. By incorporating and reassembling them, it grants them new life – to the point of becoming Léopold Sédar Senghor himself. This machinic metamorphosis is a chronopolitical act – as defined by Black and Afrofuturist theorist Kodwo Eshun (Eshun 2003) – that dismantles the imposed temporality of recursive colonialism and, starting from the residues and phantoms of the past as points of restoration, opens the way toward alternative futures (Fig. 7).

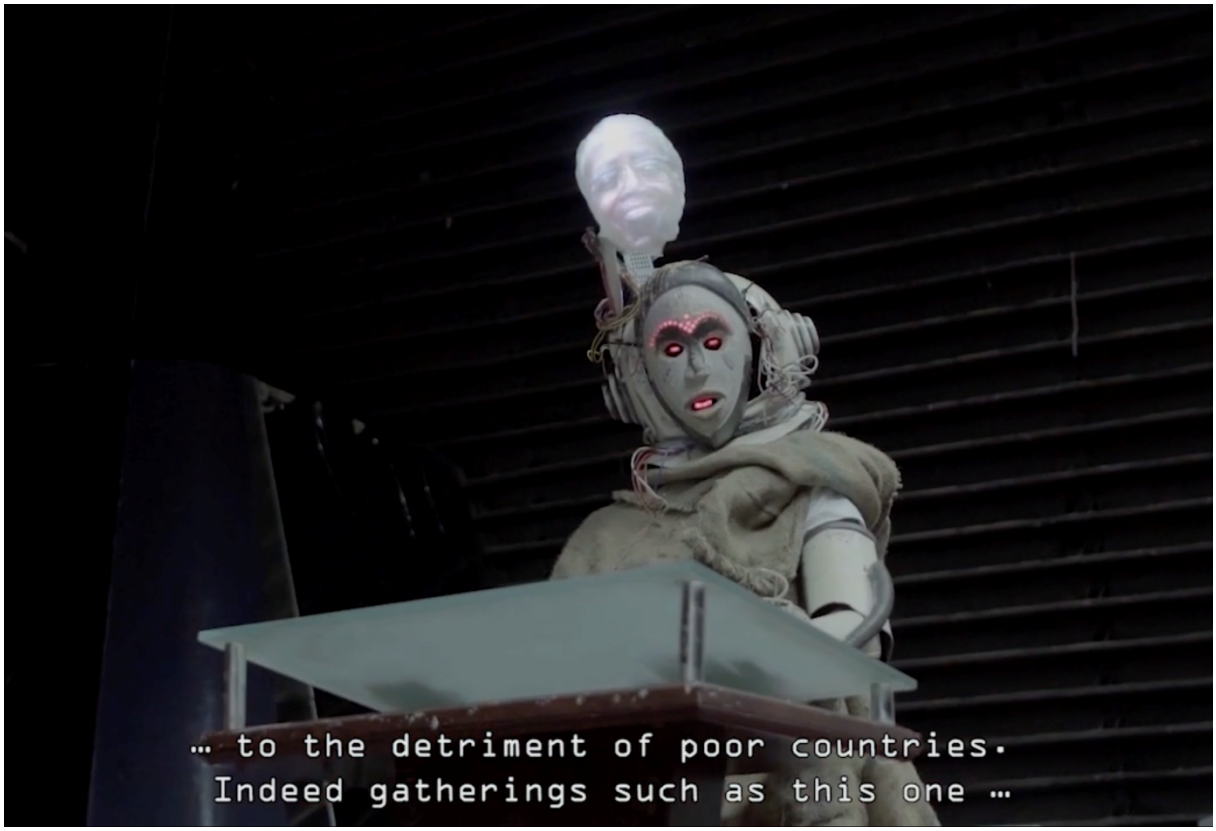

Fig. 7. Francois Knoetze, *Core Dump: Dakar* (2019).
Video Still

It is this "cyborg" that ultimately subverts the monotechnological universalism – the racist epistemology of Man. In the *Kinshasa* video, we briefly see the inscription: «the machine that becomes the master!», which seems to foreshadow this very moment. The machine, once an instrument of domination and exploitation, becomes an ally. Both the Black body and the machine – already reduced to mere objects of use – find, in their fusion, the possibility of a collective redemption: «In the world I am heading for, I am endlessly creating myself. I am not a prisoner of history. I found that by imprinting data on my DNA, I am able to store more information on a strand of hair than a tier four data center. So, I decide to transport myself and to give myself up to an object» (Knoetze, 2018a, min. 04:51).

Black and racialized subjectivities are, after all, already objects (Moten, 2013), already reduced to machines (Chude-Sokei, 2016); perhaps it is no longer a matter of escaping the machine, but of surrendering to it. As noted in the previous paragraph, the master fears that the "Black" or the machine might manifest subjectivity – whether an inhuman, alien, monstrous subjectivity capable of revolt, or one that appears all too human, whose excessive resemblance threatens to undermine the superiority and humanity of the Master, that is Man. The cyborg thus embodies the alliance between machine and slave, emerging from waste – as both the material remnants of technologies no longer useful to the master and the ghostly traces of exploited subjectivities – that merge in the cyborg in a quest for revenge.

The film ends with an eerie premonition and warning – expressing both the inevitability of Man's crisis and the subversive potential of a new technological era that begins in Africa, as a space which, having endured the dehumanizing and violent trauma of colonialism, has also preserved the forms of another possible humanity. Indeed, a mechanical female voice utters these words, which appear to establish the cyborg figure as a figure of revenge and revolution:

> It is still to be seen if those that cling to power will go quietly or if it will be necessary to turn their machines on them, bringing about a cleansing more swift and meticulous than anything this world has ever seen. I suspect the latter. African culture alone has preserved the mystic warmth of a life that could still revive the world that has died of machines and cannons. The world will be invited to share in this warmth or to perish in its flames (Knoetze, 2018a, min. 11:22) (Fig. 8).

Fig. 8. Francois Knoetze, *Core Dump: Dakar* (2019).
Video Still

Conclusion

If the videos – particularly *New York* – thus challenges the linearity of progress – revealing the recursive colonial structure of progress itself (Critical Computation Bureau, 2021; 2025) – the metaphor of the crash instead seeks to rupture this recursivity and to imagine new points of departure emerging from within that very past. The history of colonial and racial violence cannot be erased, but within it one can locate points of restoration, "core dumps": the past does not condemn to a compulsion to repeat, but rather becomes a field from which to draw in order to rework past attempts to write an alternative history and to regenerate them in the present.

Knoetze's cyborg figure breaks the recursive temporal yoke of domination that sustains the continuous reproduction of the colonial present and the imaginary future of progress, liberating transformative potentialities. The specificity of this figure lies in being both a material and temporal assemblage at once. Waste, in fact, functions as a form of material memory: it condenses both the past, as a history of violence and exploitation, and possible yet denied futures, which are reactivated precisely when the cyborg merges with it. Waste constitutes the material form of the core dump: it is the trace of the exploitation concealed behind the imaginary of technological progress, but also the imprint of alternative futures – the points of restoration after the crash produced by the colonial catastrophe and its recursive structure. Despite attempts to displace waste elsewhere and remove it from the sight of Man, its defining feature is to persist as a haunting presence, much like a phantom. With it, the memory of violence endures, but so do the possible alternatives of redemption. The cyborg reassembles these material traces, drawing its strength from them.

In this process of reassemblage, the very categories and criteria of humanity are also reconfigured: there arises the unsettling sense that a different way of "being" human is in the making – precisely through this posthuman hybridity that destabilizes the Humanity of Man. As Alexander Weheliye reminds us, Black people have always already experienced another form of "being" human – an alternative humanity to that of Man – one that originates precisely in the dehumanizing condition of the plantation, in the holds of slave ships (Weheliye, 2014). A different mode of humanity that undermines the identity and universality of Man, precisely by accepting not to be human in the sense of Man, to be non-human–

non-Man. Again, waste marks the trace of these other ways of being human – the trace of a hybrid posthumanity that breaks the human/machine and master/slave binaries.

Paraphrasing Zakiyyah Iman Jackson, who makes this argument in relation to African diasporic literature, such aesthetic-political figures – as in Knoetze's cyborg – alter the sense and meaning of being human and engage in imaginative practices of reinventing the human precisely through dehumanization and animalization (Jackson, 2020), and in this case, we might add, through the "machinization" of the racialized and Black body. This is not, therefore, a rejection of technology, but a kind of perverse reappropriation that opens possibilities for the subversion of the mono-technological order of recursive colonial domination – a techno-aesthetic prefiguration of postcolonial futures. As Parisi and Dixon-Román remind us, «the overdetermined mono-technologism of recursive colonialism is breakable» (Parisi, Dixon-Román, 2020), precisely because of the recursive structure of the colonial epistemology itself, which must continually produce an "Other" to exploit–and yet this Other, precisely as "Other", always partially escapes incorporation by the self-determining subject, by Man (Critical Computation Bureau, 2025; Mbembe, 2017; Wynter, 2003). In other words, while the recursive structure reproduces colonial forms of domination and exploitation, it simultaneously generates new seeds, new germs of its possible dissolution. Knoetze's cyborg gathers these seeds and, by reassembling itself with technological waste as the material trace of alternative expressions of humanity and technological experience, challenges both the mono-technologism of recursive colonialism and its dazzling lure. It thus positions itself as a technological subject alternative to the user/master, one that breaks the racial grammar and the binaries of *Man*'s colonial epistemology. Knoetze's art amplifies a political and cultural potential that already exists, faintly visible within the folds of the universal epistemology of Man – an imaginary lived and produced by those excluded from that figure. He enacts a technopoetics of dissolution of binary categories and of Man – that points toward an entirely different way of "being" human, which is grounded also in another relation to and experience of technology.

As numerous scholars have underlined, the dehumanizing and othering experience to which Black and racialized subjectivities are subjected is inscribed directly in their bodies (Ferreira da Silva, 2024; Mbembe, 2017; Weheliye, 2014; Hartman, 1997; Spillers, 1987). Yet, as Denise Ferreira da Silva (2024) and the Critical Computation Bureau (2025) observe, it is

precisely within this embodied experience that a form of "being" capable of challenging that of Man emerges: the body itself becomes the site of alterization and, thus, also that which can never be fully contained – always escaping control and therefore inherently subversive. For this reason, in the next essay, I will turn to this central aspect of Knoetze's aesthetics: how he constructs the bodies of his characters as both objects of violence and sites of reinvention and subversion.

[1] https://lodef.co.za/Core-Dump

[2] This had already been observed by Simondon in his reflection on the misunderstanding of technicity at the core of the industrial modality. He traces in the hylomorphic hierarchy of form over matter, consolidated within the epistemological schema of modern technology through the enforcement of industrial labour, the origin of the master/slave relationship to technology, which produces a double alienation, of both the human and the technical object (Simondon, 2017).

[3] I will return to this video in the next article, devoted in particular to the body and corporeity of Knoetze's characters.

[4] The question of the animalization of Black and racialized subjectivities is central and has been discussed by numerous authors (see, for example, Hartman, 1997; Mbembe, 2017; Jackson, 2020). It lies at the core of the other part of this research, which will be developed in another article.

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