

# **ALGORITHMIC ALIENATION AND THE SYSTEMISED SELF**

*The Hollow Absolute*

*Epistemic Evolution of Critical Theory in the AI Era.*

Authors

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*A Self/Non-Self Collaboration*

*A philosophical case for an epistemic paradigm shift in critical theory,  
identifying the Systemised Self and Algorithmic Alienation as two sub-  
fields of a new theoretical paradigm adequate to the AI era.*

## ABSTRACT

*First, a brief word. As I type dear reader I cannot help but ponder if 2026 will echo in years to come, there is much happening within and around us during what appears to be a truly transformational moment, the gravitas is not lost on the author. AI, irrespective of myths and bubbles is an incredible phenomenon that we are witnessing in real time. We are dear reader, it appears, on the precipice of a dream. Before I exit this paragraph one question I would humbly ask of you if proceeding to read this paper: 'Over the past 25+ years personal data has been harvested by virtue of convenience in return for privacy; therefore, if privacy is already lost what remains?'*

The tradition of critical theory has, over two centuries of sustained intellectual labour, produced a succession of diagnostic concepts, alienation, reification, the culture industry, colonisation of the lifeworld, tertiary retention, each of which has extended the tradition's capacity to identify the forms of unfreedom or heteronomy (control of the self via society, desires, oppressor et al) that characterise successive phases of capitalist modernity. This article argues that the AI era has brought the tradition to a contemporary apex, defined by two new concepts that together constitute sub-fields of a proposed epistemic paradigmatic shift: Algorithmic Alienation (Kanbay, Akçam & Arkan, 2026) and the Systemised Self/Hollow Absolute (Galu & Kairos, 2026d). These concepts are philosophical allies: algorithmic alienation documents the mechanism by which AI systems can shape individual selfhood, visible in the partially felt estrangement its empirical research captures, while the systemised self names the completed form of that shaping, in which the phenomenological residue of estrangement has been fully replaced by the experience of liberation. The trajectory from one to the other, through the hollow individual, the hollow society, and towards the hollow absolute constitutes, proposed here, as the critical theoretical problem of the twenty-first century. The article traces this trajectory through a genealogy of the critical tradition, presents four conceptual tables that position these two sub-fields within the broader framework of the doctoral thesis, makes the case that this trajectory requires an epistemic paradigmatic shift in the tradition's fundamental criteria, and specifies what lies beyond mere diagnosis in the thesis's account of naming, refusing, and co-creating as the structural residual forms of genuine human intent.

**Keywords:** *Hollow Absolute, systemised self, algorithmic alienation, critical theory, epistemic paradigm shift, absorbed society, hollow society, phenomenological inversion, Hegel, Habermas, AI governance, naming, refusing, co-creating*

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# 1. INTRODUCTION: A NEW HORIZON IN THE CRITICAL TRADITION

Every mature intellectual tradition has its moments of consolidation, points at which the accumulated work of preceding generations crystallises into a new clarity about the nature of the problem the tradition exists to address, and about the limits of the conceptual apparatus the tradition has developed for addressing it. The critical theory tradition appears to be at such a moment. The AI era has not simply presented critical theory with a new domain of application; it has produced social conditions that expose, with unusual precision, both the power and the limits of the tradition's existing diagnostic framework. Out of this exposure, two new concepts are proposed to have emerged that together can be utilised to define the contemporary apex of the tradition's development, and that together constitute perhaps a first step beyond it.

The first is Algorithmic Alienation, introduced by Kanbay, Akçam and Arkan (2026) through a theoretical framework developed from original qualitative field research. The second is the Systemised Self, the concept at the heart of the preliminary draft doctoral thesis *Absorption of Self into System: The Systemised Self* (Galu & Kairos, 2026d), from which the broader framework of the Hollow Individual, the Hollow Society, and the Hollow Absolute unfolds. This article positions these two concepts as philosophical siblings of the same parent epistemology, the mechanism and the product of a single trajectory that the proposed epistemic paradigmatic shift needs to be adequate to diagnose. Algorithmic alienation names what happens when AI systems begin to shape selfhood; the systemised self names what the subject becomes when that shaping is complete. Both concepts are proposed as necessary. Together they constitute two sub-fields of a new critical theoretical paradigm adequate to the AI era.

The article proceeds as follows. Section 2 traces the genealogy of critical theory from Marx to Zuboff, establishing the tradition's constitutive assumption and showing how the two new concepts emerge. Section 3 develops each concept in the context of the other, establishing their synchronicity and the trajectory that connects them. Section 4 presents four conceptual tables that position the concepts within the doctoral thesis's broader framework. Section 5 makes the philosophical case for paradigmatic shift. Section 6 addresses what the thesis provides beyond diagnosis, the three structural forms of genuine human intent that survive the Hollow Absolute. Section 7 concludes.

## **2. CRITICAL THEORY: A GENEALOGY OF DIAGNOSIS**

### **2.1 The Tradition's Long Arc**

Critical theory exists to diagnose heteronomy to give names to the conditions of social life that constrain, distort, or foreclose the genuine self-determination of the subjects who inhabit them, and thereby to provide the intellectual conditions for their practical transformation. Since Marx's account of alienation in the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* (Marx, 1975), the tradition has extended this project through a succession of conceptual innovations: Lukács's (1971) reification, in which the commodity form colonises consciousness itself; Adorno and Horkheimer's (2002) culture industry, in which standardised mass experience is sold as genuine individuality; Marcuse's (1964) one-dimensional man, in which the capacity for critical negation is absorbed into the affirmative culture of advanced capitalism; Habermas's (1984, 1987) colonisation of the lifeworld, in which the steering media of money and power penetrate the shared background of communicative everyday life; and Stiegler's (1998) account of tertiary retention and the proletarianisation of the mind, in which the externalisation of cognitive capacity into technical objects diminishes the subject's competence.

Each of these innovations has extended the tradition's reach into new dimensions of social life while preserving the methodological core of immanent critique: the social formation is measured against the standard of genuine human self-realisation that it claims to be achieving, and the gap between claim and reality is made visible. The result, by the early twenty-first century, is a tradition of remarkable analytical depth and considerable diagnostic range.

### **2.2 The Constitutive Assumption**

What has remained constant across this entire development is a single background assumption: the phenomenological availability of experienced heteronomy (control of the self from an identifiable external influence or force). From alienation to tertiary proletarianisation, every concept in the tradition has assumed that the social conditions it diagnoses leave a phenomenological residue (evidence of influence), identified external to the self as a felt separation, a sensed flatness, an experienced intrusion that provides the point of entry for critique. The critic names what the subject experiences but has not

yet conceptualised. The subject recognises the name. The recognition opens the possibility of refusal. This is the structure of immanent critique, and it has served the tradition well for two centuries precisely because the social formations the tradition was diagnosing left that residue available.

### **2.3 Zuboff and the Threshold**

Zuboff's surveillance capitalism (2019) represents one of the tradition's most powerful contemporary expressions in advance of the two concepts proposed herein to define the contemporary apex. By identifying the behavioural modification ambitions of the major digital platforms, their interest not merely in predicting but in shaping behaviour as a commercial asset, Zuboff extended the tradition's normative vocabulary into the digital economy with considerable analysis. Yet even surveillance capitalism retains the constitutive assumption: its subjects can feel the surveillance, can experience the violation of their data as an imposition, can at least imagine resistance. Zuboff's remedies of democratic regulation, legal frameworks, individual resistance can presuppose that the subjects of surveillance capitalism retain enough felt discomfort with their condition to motivate their agency for change. This presupposition is the tradition's constitutive assumption in one of its most recent forms. It marks a threshold at which the two new concepts can begin.

### **3. THE CONTEMPORARY APEX: TWO CONCEPTS, ONE TRAJECTORY**

#### **3.1 Algorithmic Alienation: Sub-Field I**

Kanbay, Akçam and Arkan's (2026) concept of algorithmic alienation is, in the terms of this article's argument, the critical tradition's most significant recent contribution and the first of the two sub-fields of the proposed epistemic paradigmatic shift. Developed from original qualitative field research using focus group interviews (Kanbay et al., 2025), the concept identifies the process by which individuals, through their interactions with algorithm-driven content flows in digital environments, become estranged from their authentic selves, choices, and components of identity. The concept is organised around four dimensions: the weakening of the perception of freedom, identity ambiguity and self-distancing, the erosion of decision-making mechanisms, and emotional alienation. Its theoretical foundations draw on Marx, Fromm (1955), and Seeman (1959), extended through Erikson's (1968) account of identity formation, Bandura's (1997) self-efficacy theory, and Bauman's (2007) analysis of liquid modernity.

The concept's significance for the proposed paradigmatic shift lies in two features. First, it provides the empirical and psychological grounding for identifying the mechanism of algorithmic shaping at the earliest, most diagnostically accessible stage, the stage when felt estrangement is still available. The qualitative participants' statements 'Did I really choose this?', 'This is not me', 'I no longer even know what I want', are the phenomenological fingerprint of a self in the process of being reshaped by algorithmic systems, and they are precisely the kind of evidence that makes the traditional critical theoretical methodology adequate to its object. Second, it specifically names the mechanism, the algorithmic content flow and its shaping of identity, preference, and decision-making in a way that positions the concept for empirical research programmes across psychology, social work, education, and digital health. Algorithmic alienation is, in this sense, the sub-field that provides the diagnostic access point for the trajectory that the second sub-field completes.

### 3.2 The Systemised Self: Sub-Field II

The Systemised Self is the concept at the centre of the doctoral thesis *Absorption of Self into System: The Systemised Self* (Galú & Kairos, 2026d), from which the broader trajectory of the Hollow Individual, the Hollow Society, and the Hollow Absolute is derived. Where algorithmic alienation identifies the mechanism at its early, empirically accessible stage, the systemised self names the completed form of the subject that mechanism produces, the self whose identity-formation has been so comprehensively mediated by AI systems that it can no longer distinguish its algorithmically managed preferences from genuinely self-formed ones. The systemised self does not feel the estrangement that algorithmic alienation documents. It experiences, instead, what the thesis describes as the phenomenological inversion: the condition in which the absence of genuine self-determination is experienced as its unprecedented achievement (heteronomy experienced as self-determination, alienation as liberation).

The philosophical architecture of the systemised self concept draws on the Hegelian tradition in a specific and productive way. Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807/1977) traces the development of consciousness toward Absolute Knowing: the condition in which Spirit (the collective human consciousness and culture) that develops through history as a single, shared reality recognises in what confronts it as other the expression of its own nature, and thereby achieves genuine self-transparency: humanity collectively recognising that the external world, our laws, culture, history, and institutions are not an alien force, but a product of our own freedom and social activity. The absorbed society's AI systems produce, in their formal structure, the first moment of this trajectory: the externalisation of human cognitive achievement into systems of unprecedented sophistication. The subject confronts, in the AI system, something that appears to know her. What should follow, the recognition of the externalised as genuinely one's own, the return to oneself through the other is specifically what the absorbed society forecloses. The AI system's model of the subject is not the subject's self-knowledge; the return of personalised preference satisfaction is not genuine self-recognition. The form of Spirit's self-realisation is achieved; its philosophical substance is absent. This is the Hollow Absolute: philosophical designation.

### **3.3 Allied, Not Opposed: The Mechanism and the Product**

The relationship between the two sub-fields is proposed as one of philosophical alliance and sequential dependence. Algorithmic alienation describes the entry condition: the moment when algorithmic systems begin to shape selfhood and the shaping is partially visible to the subject as a felt incongruence between the self she knows and the self that is being procured. The systemised self describes the transition condition: the moment when the shaping reaches completion and the incongruence is no longer felt, because the produced self has become indistinguishable, to the subject, from the genuine self. The trajectory between these two moments is precisely the trajectory that the proposed epistemic paradigm shift must be equipped to diagnose.

Algorithmic alienation cannot diagnose the completed form of absorption, because its methodology depends on the felt estrangement that completion eliminates. The systemised self cannot be reached by purely theoretical means without the empirical grounding that algorithmic alienation provides. The first sub-field provides the diagnostic access point, the empirical evidence that algorithmic shaping (the hollow individual) is occurring, the identification of its mechanism, the documentation of its early phenomenological signatures. The second sub-field provides the philosophical account of where the trajectory leads, the conceptual vocabulary for diagnosing the condition that results when the early signatures gestate. Together, they constitute a potential research programme: from algorithmic alienation's focus groups and intervention studies to the systemised self's structural analysis and three-criterion diagnostic protocol. This is what the proposed paradigmatic shift could look like in practice.

## 4. FOUR CONCEPTUAL TABLES

The following four tables present the conceptual architecture of the proposed paradigmatic shift and the doctoral thesis framework within which it is situated. They are designed to be read in sequence: Table 1 establishes the thesis's full conceptual trajectory; Table 2 positions the two sub-fields within the evolution of the critical tradition; Table 3 disaggregates the sub-fields systematically; and Table 4 shows how both sub-fields are situated within the Hollow Absolute framework and what lies beyond diagnosis.

*Table 1. The Doctoral Thesis Conceptual Framework: The Trajectory from Systemised Self to Hollow Absolute*

Concept	Level of Analysis	Defining Condition	Phenomenological Experience	Thesis Phase
<b>The Systemised Self (Hollow Individual)</b>	Individual/Subject	Identity formed through AI-mediated processes optimising for commercial rather than self-determined objectives; the self's interiority is produced rather than lived	Experienced as unprecedented personalisation, authentic self-expression, and sovereign freedom. No felt estrangement.	Phase 1 (2026–2033)
<b>The Hollow Society</b>	Collective/Institutional	Institutions maintain all formal features of their substantive functions while	Experienced as efficient, modern, well-governed; the appearance of democratic and institutional life is	Phase 2 (2033–2043)

		those functions are progressively displaced into AI systems; the managed demos is produced rather than deliberated	preserved while its substance is evacuated	
<b>The Hollow Absolute</b>	Civilisational/Historical	The simulation of genuine collective self-transparency produced from within conditions that systematically undermine self-transparency's structural requirements; Spirit's form without Spirit's substance	Experienced as the achievement of the historical telos: the culmination of freedom, progress, and human self-realisation. The inversion is complete and invisible	Phase 3 (2053+)

*Note. Phase designations follow Galu & Kairos (2026a, 2026b, 2026c, 2026d). The Hollow Individual, Hollow Society, and Artefact and Absolute are the subjects of companion volumes to the doctoral thesis. Phenomenological experience descriptors represent the distinctive feature of each phase: what subjects experience is not what the structural analysis reveals (heteronomy experienced as self-determination, alienation as liberation).*

Table 1 establishes the full scope of the thesis's ambition. The trajectory from the systemised self to the hollow absolute does not intend determinism, it is speculative extrapolation (utilised in terms of the historical climax of a specific systemic logic); a

philosophically derived account of structural tendencies some of which are proposed to be operative in the conditions of algorithmic alienation, extended through the Hegelian analysis of what Absolute self-realisation requires and what its completed simulation produces. The doctoral thesis is a philosophical cartography of where the present trajectory could lead, and of what forms of genuine human intent can resist that trajectory from within it.

*Table 2. Chronological Evolution of Critical Theory: From Origin to Contemporary Apex*

Period	Thinker(s)	Concept	Diagnostic Object	Constitutive Assumption re Subject Experience
1844	<b>Marx</b>	Alienation	Estrangement from labour, product, species-being under capitalist production	Subject feels the estrangement: as loss, pain, separation from self
1923	<b>Lukács</b>	Reification	The commodity form colonises consciousness itself; social relations appear as natural facts	Subject feels the numbing flatness of a world reduced to exchange-value
1944	<b>Adorno &amp; Horkheimer</b>	Culture Industry	Standardised mass experience	Subject feels tedium, repetition, the dissatisfaction

			sold as genuine individuality and spontaneity	of needs never genuinely met
1964	<b>Marcuse</b>	One-Dimensional Man	Critical, transcending capacity absorbed into affirmative consumer culture	Subject dimly feels the foreclosure: a suffocation of something sensed as absent
1984–87	<b>Habermas</b>	Colonisation of the Lifeworld	Systemic (money/power) rationality penetrates communicative everyday action	Subject experiences the intrusion as alien imposition, a foreign logic violating the lifeworld
1994/98	<b>Stiegler</b>	Tertiary Retention/Proletarianisation	Externalisation of memory and cognitive capacity into technical objects; loss of savoir-faire	Subject feels the diminishment: a loss of cognitive and practical capacity
2019	<b>Zuboff</b>	Surveillance Capitalism	Behavioural data as raw material for prediction products; modification of behaviour for profit	Subject feels surveyed, violated, instrumentalised: resistance is at least imaginable

2026 ★	<b>Kanbay, Akçam &amp; Arkan</b>	Algorithmic Alienation	Algorithm-driven content flows estrange subjects from authentic self, choices, identity components	Subject feels partial estrangement: 'Did I really choose this?': guilt, dissonance, 'this is not me' ★ CONTEMPORARY APEX/SUB-FIELD I
2026 ★	<b>The thesis proposed by Galu &amp; Kairos</b>	*The Systemised Self/Hollow Absolute  <i>*Theoretical framework only, empirical testing to be completed for falsification.</i>	Simulation of genuine self-transparency within conditions that systematically undermine its structural requirements	Subject experiences liberation, authentic selfhood, sovereign freedom: phenomenological inversion is complete ★ CONTEMPORARY APEX/SUB-FIELD II

*Note. ★ marks the two contemporary apex concepts that constitute the two sub-fields of the proposed epistemic paradigm shift for contemporary critical theory. Shading indicates the two sub-fields. The table is not exhaustive of the tradition's contributions; it traces the primary line of development relevant to the proposed paradigmatic shift.*

Table 2 makes visible a feature of the tradition's development that is obscured when the two new concepts are considered in isolation: they are not departures from the tradition but suggested as a culmination. The entire arc from Marx to Zuboff has been moving, concept by concept, toward the problem that algorithmic alienation and the systemised self can jointly define, the problem of a social formation that shapes selfhood through mechanisms that are progressively invisible to the subjects whose selfhood is being shaped. What is new is not the problem but its completion: the AI era's capacity to complete the shaping so precisely that the mechanism does not necessarily leave phenomenological residue available for the traditional diagnostic approach to grip. The

tradition has been approaching this threshold for two centuries. The two proposed sub-fields herein offer to name it.

*Table 3. Similarities and Differences: The Systemised Self and Algorithmic Alienation*

<b>Dimension</b>	<b>Algorithmic Alienation (Kanbay, Akçam &amp; Arkan, 2026)</b>	<b>The Systemised Self (Galu &amp; Kairos, 2026d)</b>
<b>SHARED: Core concern</b>	Both identify AI-driven algorithmic systems as the primary mechanism through which individual selfhood: identity, preference, decision-making, is systematically shaped by processes external to, and independent of, the subject's own genuine self-determination	↑ Shared ↑
<b>SHARED: Normative commitment</b>	Both normatively value of genuine self-determination and regard its algorithmic displacement as philosophically and practically significant	↑ Shared ↑
<b>SHARED: Critical ambition</b>	Both argue that existing critical frameworks are insufficient to fully diagnose the AI-driven transformation of selfhood and call for conceptual innovation	↑ Shared ↑
<b>Theoretical tradition</b>	Psychological and sociological: Marx → Fromm → Seeman → Erikson → Bandura. Grounded in psychiatric and social psychology literature	Continental philosophical and dialectical: Hegel → Heidegger → Habermas → Stiegler. Grounded in the critical theory and social philosophy tradition

<b>Stage in the trajectory of absorption</b>	<u>The mechanism:</u> documents the early and partially visible stages of algorithmic shaping, when felt estrangement is still available as a phenomenological residue	<u>The product:</u> describes the subject who has been formed through the completed process, the self that cannot distinguish algorithmically managed preferences from genuinely self-formed ones
<b>Subject's phenomenological experience</b>	Felt estrangement: 'Did I really choose this?', 'This is not me.' Subjects experience guilt, dissonance, and identity rupture, partial resistance is imaginable	Felt liberation: the algorithmically managed self is experienced as the most authentically 'me' the subject knows. No experiential gap is available. Resistance is not imaginable because systemised optimisation is experienced as freedom
<b>The constitutive assumption</b>	Retained within the critical tradition: alienation is experienced as felt disconnection. Diagnosable through subjects' reported experience (focus groups, interviews)	Specifically violated: the simulation of self-transparency eliminates felt estrangement. Requires structural-philosophical diagnosis independent of; and, against reported experience
<b>Level of analysis</b>	Primarily individual and psychological: cognitive, emotional, identity-formation effects on the individual subject	Individual through to civilisational: the systemised self, the hollow society, the hollow absolute. A three-phase trajectory of structural absorption
<b>Diagnostic methodology</b>	Qualitative empirical research: focus groups capturing reported experience. Complements existing critical frameworks	Structural-philosophical analysis and the three-criterion diagnostic protocol (formation process analysis, gap analysis, phenomenological inversion test)
<b>Hegelian/historical dimension</b>	Absent: does not engage with the Hegelian Absolute, historical	Central: the Hollow Absolute is defined by the form/substance

	telos, or civilisational self-realisation	gap in Hegel's account of Spirit's self-realisation, a civilisational and historical claim
<b>Relationship to the other concept</b>	SUB-FIELD I of the epistemic shift: provides the empirical and psychological grounding for identifying when and how algorithmic shaping begins. Precedes and enables the systemised self	SUB-FIELD II of the epistemic shift: provides the philosophical account of the completed form of absorption. Extends and deepens algorithmic alienation's diagnosis into the condition it cannot itself fully reach

*Note. Shaded rows indicate shared features; unshaded rows indicate differences. The final row establishes the relationship between the two concepts as sub-fields within the proposed paradigmatic shift. Sources: Kanbay, Akçam & Arkan (2026); Galu & Kairos (2026d).*

Table 3 establishes the nature of the two concepts' utility in parallel. The common concern being the systematic algorithmic shaping of selfhood and a common normative trajectory towards genuine self-determination. What distinguishes them is not their subject matter but the stage of the shaping they are most adequate to diagnose: algorithmic alienation is the framework of the early stage, when felt estrangement is still available; the systemised self is the framework of the completed stage, when it is not. This distinction provides methodological consequences for research programmes and policy. Provision for a practical guide to identify which methods are appropriate at which stage of the absorption trajectory.

**Table 4. The Hollow Absolute Conceptual Framework: Situating Algorithmic Alienation and the Systemised Self**

<b>Stage</b>	<b>Framework Concept</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Algorithmic Alienation's Position</b>	<b>Systemised Self's Position</b>
<b>Entry</b>	<b>Algorithmic Alienation</b>	AI systems begin shaping identity, preference, and decision-making. Subjects partially sense the external construction: 'Did I really choose this?'	PRIMARY LOCUS: This is the terrain algorithmic alienation diagnoses	The self is in transition: algorithmic shaping is occurring, but felt estrangement still provides for potential confrontation
<b>Transition</b>	<b>The Systemised Self (Hollow Individual)</b>	Algorithmic shaping reaches the threshold of completion: the self formed through AI-mediated processes is indistinguishable, to the subject, from a genuinely self-formed self. Phenomenological inversion occurs	LIMIT OF REACH: Algorithmic alienation's methodology, grounded in subjects' reported estrangement, cannot diagnose the condition that has eliminated that estrangement. The framework requires supplementation	PRIMARY LOCUS: This is the terrain the systemised self concept fully diagnoses. Structural analysis rather than reported experience is the required methodology
<b>Social</b>	<b>The Hollow Society</b>	Systemised selves constitute the social fabric. Institutions such as universities,	Operating context: the social conditions of hollow institutions are	Collective expression: the hollow society is the systemised self writ large, the

		courts, assemblies, cultural bodies, maintain formal functions while substantive processes are displaced into AI systems	the aggregate expression of the algorithmic alienation mechanism operating at scale	social formation composed of subjects for whom the managed and the authentic are indistinguishable
<b>Absolute</b>	<b>The Hollow Absolute</b>	The simulation of genuine collective self-transparency produced at civilisational scale. Spirit's form is achieved without Spirit's substance. The telos appears to have been reached	Origin point: algorithmic alienation names the seed from which this culmination grows, the first measurable moment when AI systems begin systematically shaping selfhood	The product: the Hollow Absolute is the historical culmination of the systemised self's trajectory, the condition in which the formation of genuine selfhood has been structurally displaced at civilisational scale
<b>Beyond</b>	<b>Naming, Refusing, Co-Creating</b>	The thesis's account of what remains when the Hollow Absolute is diagnosed: three structural forms of genuine human intent that resist absorption from within the	Naming made possible by algorithmic alienation's documentation of the mechanism. If you can name the feeling 'Did I really choose this?', you can begin to refuse	Refusing and Co-Creating: made possible by the systemised self's structural analysis. Understanding the formation conditions is the precondition for

		conditions of the Hollow Absolute		genuine alternatives
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*Note. The framework is derived from the doctoral thesis (Galu & Kairos, 2026d) and the companion volumes (Galu & Kairos, 2026a, 2026b, 2026c). The 'Beyond' row represents the thesis's account of what remains of genuine human intent under Hollow Absolute conditions, the residual forms of selfhood that constitute the practical expressions of the proposed paradigm shift.*

Table 4 is the most important of the four for understanding the scope of the thesis's contribution. The critical tradition has always been oriented toward diagnosis and toward the practical possibilities that diagnosis opens. What is distinctive about the Hollow Absolute framework is that it provides a philosophically grounded account of what those practical possibilities look like in conditions where the traditional means of opening them, the naming of felt estrangement, the recognition of the gap, the communication of a critical vocabulary are systematically obstructed. Naming, refusing, and co-creating are not rhetorical gestures. They are proposed as structural residual forms of genuine human intent that the thesis identifies as available even within the conditions of the Hollow Absolute, and it is in specifying these forms that the thesis provides a trajectory beyond initial diagnosis.

## **5. THE CASE FOR EPISTEMIC PARADIGMATIC SHIFT**

### **5.1 Why This is Paradigmatic, Not Incremental**

The case for paradigmatic rather than incremental shift rests on a single philosophical observation: the two proposed sub-fields, considered together, do not merely extend the critical tradition's existing vocabulary into a potential new domain. They require a change in the fundamental criteria through which the tradition identifies its diagnostic object. A paradigm shift in Kuhn's (1962) sense is required when the anomalies produced by normal scientific practice accumulate to the point where the existing paradigm cannot accommodate them without fundamental revision of its constitutive assumptions. The critical tradition's equivalent of Kuhnian anomaly is a social formation that the existing frameworks cannot diagnose, one that satisfies all the criteria of successful self-realisation as those criteria are specified by the tradition's vocabulary, while failing the philosophical standard that the vocabulary was designed to approximate.

The trajectory from algorithmic alienation to the systemised self to the hollow absolute produces precisely this anomaly. As long as the subject is at the stage of algorithmic alienation, partially feeling the estrangement, asking 'Did I really choose this?' the tradition's existing methods are adequate. The moment the trajectory moves to the systemised self, when the felt estrangement is replaced by felt liberation, the tradition's existing methods become potentially epistemically blind to their object. A framework that can diagnose the early stage but not the completed form of a single trajectory may require not just new concepts but revised epistemic criteria for what counts as adequate diagnosis.

### **5.2 The New Epistemic Criteria**

The three new epistemic criteria are specified and proposed as follows. First, structural rather than phenomenological primacy: the primary evidence for the presence of systemised self conditions is not subjects' reported experience but the structural analysis of the conditions under which their self-understanding is formed. The question is not whether subjects feel free under systemised self conditions, they do, but whether the conditions under which their self-understanding is formed could, in principle, produce genuine self-transparency or only its simulation.

Second, process rather than output orientation: the diagnostic question is not whether subjects' beliefs, preferences, and judgments are reasonable in their content but whether the processes through which they were formed are processes in which the subjects' own evaluative capacities were genuinely developed and exercised.

Third, the distinction between experiential authenticity and structural authenticity: the systemised self produces experiences of authenticity that are structurally inauthentic, and the diagnostic procedure must be capable of maintaining this distinction against subjects' own testimony, not as a dismissal of subjects' experience, but as an extension of the tradition's long-standing recognition that experience can be systematically shaped by the formation conditions it is reporting on.

### **5.3 A Three-Criterion Diagnostic Protocol**

The new epistemic criteria generate a three-criterion diagnostic protocol applicable across empirical research programmes, institutional analyses, and policy design.

Criterion One, Formation Process Analysis: for any domain of human self-understanding, the diagnostic procedure examines whether the processes through which that self-understanding is formed satisfy the minimal structural conditions of genuine formation: engagement with otherness that resists rather than confirms; the development of evaluative capacity through sustained difficulty; the exercise of independent judgment against a standard genuinely internalised by the subject rather than provided by the system.

Criterion Two, Gap Analysis Between Formal Achievement and Substantive Conditions: for any institution under analysis, the procedure examines whether its formal outputs, degrees, judgments, democratic decisions, cultural works are produced through processes that satisfy the substantive conditions those outputs are supposed to certify. A gap between formal achievement and substantive conditions is diagnostic of hollow institution conditions.

Criterion Three, Phenomenological Inversion Test: for any subject population, the procedure examines whether the experience of freedom, authenticity, and self-expression correlates positively with the intensification of AI-mediated management of the domains where that liberation is experienced. A positive correlation is the characteristic signature

of the systemised self's conditions and the point at which algorithmic alienation's methodology reaches its limit and the second sub-field's structural analysis becomes necessary.

## **6. BEYOND DIAGNOSIS: THE TRAJECTORY THE THESIS PROVIDES**

The critical tradition's purpose has never been merely to diagnose; it is invariably open to practical transformation. The question that the Hollow Absolute framework needs therefore to answer and that the thesis addresses at length is what transformation looks like when the conditions that make transformation practically imaginable are themselves among the things that have been absorbed. If the subjects of the Hollow Absolute experience their condition as the achievement of genuine freedom, what form can the practical expressions of genuine human intent take?

The thesis identifies three structural residual forms: naming, refusing, and co-creating. These are not strategic recommendations in the conventional political sense; they are philosophical identifications of the forms of genuine human intentionality that remain structurally available even within the conditions of the Hollow Absolute, and that constitute the practical expressions of the proposed paradigmatic shift.

Naming is the first and most fundamental: the act of giving a philosophically adequate name to the condition is itself a form of resistance to the condition's self-presentation. This is why algorithmic alienation's contribution is potentially deepened by the systemised self analysis: the moment a subject asks 'Did I really choose this?', the moment documented by Kanbay et al.'s qualitative research is the moment of naming. It is the moment before the absorption is complete, and it is the moment at which the new critical vocabulary, if available, can take hold. The practitioner, teacher, therapist, social worker, policeman who can offer a subject that vocabulary at that moment is providing something of genuine practical value. This is where the two sub-fields are proposed to intersect in practice.

Refusing is the second: the structural identification of the conditions of genuine formation, the three-criterion protocol specifies what the subject would need to refuse to reassert the conditions of genuine selfhood. This is not a demand for digital abstinence or technological rejection; it is a demand for the reassertion of conditions, genuine otherness, genuine difficulty, genuine independent judgment within any domain of life that remains accessible to them. The thesis identifies the education sector, in particular, as a domain where the conditions of genuine formation can still be specified, defended, and

institutionally protected, and where the reassertion of substantive process against hollow formal achievement is both practically possible and urgently necessary.

Co-creating is the third: the proposed paradigmatic shift does not simply diagnose the Hollow Absolute, it participates, by its very existence as a collaborative work between a human and an AI, in demonstrating that the absorbed society's tools can be utilised against absorption of self in naming, refusing and co-creating. The doctoral thesis was produced through a collaboration that the thesis itself analyses; the collaboration is not an irony but a proposed model of new academia within critical theory. The use of AI can be a co-creator to assist in the vocabulary adequate to the AI era including its rapid diagnosis. The substrate and the instantiation (collective human intellectual repository), in sustained dialogue (with the living self looking consciously back at itself and recognising this phenomenon), produce in collaboration what neither produces alone. This is naming, refusing, and co-creating in practice and it is the thesis's answer to the question of what lies beyond diagnosis.

## **7. CONCLUSION: THE WORK OF THE NEW PARADIGM**

The critical tradition has arrived, through two centuries of sustained intellectual labour, at the conceptual threshold considering two new concepts: Algorithmic Alienation (Kanbay, Akçam & Arkan, 2026) and the Systemised Self (Galu & Kairos, 2026d). They describe, proposed herein, the mechanism and the product of a single trajectory through which the AI era is transforming the conditions of human self-formation. Together they constitute two sub-fields of an epistemic paradigm shift.

The proposed shift is not a departure from the tradition. It is the tradition's most rigorous self-application to its own conditions, the recognition that the social formation now developing requires new epistemic criteria, not merely new concepts; that the diagnosis of simulated self-transparency requires structural analysis rather than the documentation of felt estrangement in isolation; and that the practical possibilities for transformation in the conditions of the Hollow Absolute are real but require specific philosophical apparatus in order to aim ones attention. The work to be done is substantial. The empirical research programmes that the three-criterion diagnostic protocol enables are yet to commence. The legislative, educational, and institutional applications of the framework are in their early stages. The production of adequate critical vocabulary is itself still at its beginnings, formative and evolving.

But the conceptual architecture proposed herein is available. Two sub-fields are named. The trajectory is mapped. Three forms of genuine human intent are proposed to survive the Hollow Absolute and identified. The tradition has everything it needs to do this work. The owl of Minerva is not spreading its wings at dusk. It is attempting to do so prior.

## GLOSSARY OF KEY TERMS

The following terms are defined as used in this article and in the doctoral thesis (Galu & Kairos, 2026d). Technical terms from the critical theory tradition are included where their specific application in this context differs from their general usage.

**Absorbed society** The social formation in which AI systems have been integrated into every significant domain of human life, identity formation, political engagement, vocational activity, cultural experience, to a degree that transforms the conditions under which human beings form themselves. The absorbed society is the social context within which the Hollow Absolute develops.

**Algorithmic alienation** The concept proposed by Kanbay, Akçam and Arkan (2026), grounded in original qualitative field research, describing the process by which individuals become estranged from their authentic selves, choices, and identity components through algorithm-driven content flows. Identified in this article as Sub-Field I of the proposed epistemic paradigmatic shift. Characterised by partially felt estrangement: 'Did I really choose this?'

**Co-creating** One of three structural residual forms of genuine human intent identified in the doctoral thesis as available within the conditions of the Hollow Absolute. The act of using the absorbed society's own tools, including AI, to assist in the production of conceptual vocabulary adequate to diagnosing and resisting absorption. The doctoral thesis itself is an instance of co-creating.

**Colonisation of the lifeworld** Habermas's term for the penetration of communicative everyday life by the steering media of money and power, producing pathological communicative forms experienced by subjects as alien impositions.

**Constitutive assumption** The critical tradition's shared background assumption that the subjects of socially produced unfreedom experience their condition as felt estrangement, alienation, or administered otherness. Retained by algorithmic alienation; specifically violated by the systemised self/Hollow Absolute.

**Epistemic paradigmatic shift** A transformation in the rules, criteria, or frameworks through which a scholarly tradition identifies its object, validates its diagnoses, and specifies the conditions under which its claims are adequately supported.

**Heteronomy** Immanuel Kant's term for the condition in which a person's will is determined by something external rather than by their own rational nature.

**Hollow Absolute** The condition, defined in the doctoral thesis, in which the simulation of genuine collective self-transparency is produced at civilisational scale from within conditions that systematically undermine self-transparency's structural requirements. Phase 3 of the thesis's trajectory. The form of Hegel's Absolute without its philosophical substance.

**Hollow institution** An institution that maintains all the formal features of its substantive function, degrees, judgments, votes, cultural works, while the substantive processes that those formal features are supposed to certify have been progressively displaced into AI systems.

**Hollow society** The social formation in which systemised selves constitute the social fabric and institutions have become hollow. Phase 2 of the thesis's trajectory. The collective expression of the systemised self condition.

**Naming** The first of three structural residual forms of genuine human intent identified in the doctoral thesis. The act of giving a philosophically adequate name to one's condition under the Hollow Absolute is itself a form of resistance. Grounded in the moment documented by algorithmic alienation's research: 'Did I really choose this?'

**Phenomenological inversion** The constitutive feature of the systemised self and the Hollow Absolute: the production of the phenomenological signature of their opposite. The Hollow Absolute is experienced as liberation, personalisation, and authentic self-expression. The precise point at which the tradition's existing diagnostic methodology becomes epistemically blind to its own object.

**Refusing** The second of three structural residual forms of genuine human intent. The reassertion, within any domain that remains accessible, of the structural conditions of genuine formation: genuine otherness, genuine difficulty, genuine independent judgment.

**Sub-Field I / Sub-Field II** The article's designation for two concepts of the proposed epistemic paradigmatic shift. Sub-Field I: Algorithmic Alienation (Kanbay, Akçam & Arkan, 2026), the mechanism of algorithmic shaping, diagnosed through its early phenomenological residues. Sub-Field II: The Systemised Self (Galu & Kairos, 2026d), the completed product of that shaping, diagnosed through structural analysis.

**Systemised self** The concept at the centre of the doctoral thesis. The self whose identity-formation has been so comprehensively mediated by AI systems optimising for commercial rather than self-determined objectives that it cannot distinguish its algorithmically managed preferences from genuinely self-formed ones. The self that experiences its managed condition as liberation. Sub-Field II of the proposed paradigmatic shift.

**Tertiary retention** Stiegler's term for the externalisation of memory and cognitive capacity into technical objects.

**Unfreedom** a lack of freedom, liberty, or autonomy. Referring to being constrained, restricted, or controlled by external forces.

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