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New Media Egologies

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ABSTRACT: This article addresses the notion of the web as a mirrored sphere. The debate about the primacy of a psychomorphic vision of reality, associated with the use of the new technologies of connectivity, is here related with the practices of self-representation and hipervisibilisation that are characteristic of the new communicative and social habits that take place in the network-system.

KEY WORDS: Key words: web 2.0, social networks, self-representation, egology, multitude

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For a long time, joy has passed by the image. However, today we would have to further specify that statement by saying that joy, in our times, usually passes by the selfie, by the “ego-photo”. Today, we are all forced to take self-portraits in order to interact socially, or to socialise our ideas or intentions, thus giving way to a highly interesting line of anthropological research. This is also true for the field of contemporary art, when focussing on the possibilities that emerge from the analysis of the forms of personal self-projection, in the ways by which we let ourselves be seen. Never before, of course, had we ever been subjected to such an intense process of self-designing our own exteriority. Therefore, those questions about the staging of the self and its corresponding fictions have become the key theme of many art projects, committed to researching forms of identity management and self-representations; these are “poetics of connectivity” that, in multiple forms, raise the issue of how, today, what we could perhaps denominate the “capitalism of identity” is very much underway. .

The advent of technologies and services typical of web 2.0, at the beginning of the 21st century, put an end to those 70s and 80s *cyberpunk* dystopias in which many envisioned the future (i.e. our present), based on simulations, avatars, virtual bodies and cyborgs. Essentially, things ended up going in a completely different direction. The expansion of the participatory model of the web 2.0, with the proliferation of blogs, microblogging services, social networks and video and image sharing platforms entailed a radical return to “reality”. Those envisioned worlds of sophisticated virtuality, 3D avatars, posthuman bodies and digital simulations, all gave way to this return to concrete people and lives, to the singularity of someone, with a name and surname, with a history, who shares, who speaks openly about their life. We witnessed the return to a “self” that expresses itself, that thinks aloud, that shares everything, its ideas, its opinions, its confessions.

Today, on the social networks, we are permanently required to “play the role of ourselves”, with Kafkian echoes(1). This is total inclusivity that, nonetheless, as a project, we should not forget that comes from way back. In 1758, Jean Jacques Rousseau, in his Letter to D’Alambert, tried to have theatrical plays replaced by public festivals:

> “Plant a stake crowned with flowers in the middle of a square; gather the people together there, and you will have a festival. Do better yet; let the spectators become an entertainment to themselves; make them actors themselves” (Rousseau, 1960, pp. 125-26).

In our online presence we have to be, at all times, capable of demonstrating that we are the possessors of our “own” life. And as paradoxical as it might seem, it would appear that, on the network, life only becomes your own when it has been shared, as if nothing would actually be worthwhile if it is not shared as an image, if it does not take on that distributed and circulatory dimension that makes it the object of a collective expectation.

Impelled by the dominant logic of *broadcast yourself*, that almost everybody has now interiorised, we never stop communicating and sharing. We live online like in a glass house. A situation where any analysis forces us to remember certain long-gone enthusiasm that we otherwise believed extinct:

> “To live in a glass house is a revolutionary virtue par excellence. It is also an intoxication, a moral exhibitionism, that we badly need. Discretion concerning one’s own existence, once an aristocratic virtue, has become more and more an affair of petty-bourgeois parvenus” (Benjamin, 2005, p. 209).

Just like the rooms of that hotel that Benjamin recalls, occupied by “members of a sect who had sworn never to occupy closed rooms” (*ibid*. p. 209) in the world of pervasive and ubiquitous connectivity there can but take place an exercise of permanent visibility, of rooms with doors only half-closed. Hence, today, we are probably better defined by the little that we do not reveal, as opposed to by what we do openly share. Therefore, the title of a recent installation by the art colective Knaggi seems highly pertinent: *Would you still love me if I showed you my browser history?* (2015)(2).

Today we want to fill the space on the networks with our own presence. An exhibition space characterized by a communicative hypertrophy, a tendency to excess that, nonetheless, may have always been part of the cultural genetics of the western world. In this regard, it may be advisable to bring up that fragment from Lévi-Strauss’s *Structural Anthropology*, published in 1958:

> “Among us, language is used in a rather reckless way— we talk all the time, we ask questions about many things. This is not at all a universal situation. There are cultures— and I am inclined to say most of the cultures of the world — which are rather thrifty in relation to language. They don’t believe that language should be used indiscriminately, but only in certain specific frames of reference and somewhat sparingly” (Lévi Strauss, 1963. p. 68).

Amid the extreme intensification of the communicative exercise that we are now living through, that old assertion would seem to be pushed to its limit, i.e. that which aimed to define a potential postmodern ontology: the being is not, but it comes to being in communication; the being is not, but it “occurs” in the communicative act.

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In this tangle of communicative habits and affective interactions, driven by more or less impulsive exercises of the spontaneous and continuous expression of ideas and feelings, of the intensive declaration of opinions, judgments, and personal evaluations, we are faced with the need to bring back an old term for this debate: confession.

On reality TV shows, the diary room or "confessional" is a fundamental dispositive in articulating their own distinct forms of hyper-reality, its history being, nonetheless, one that is linked to the "truth". It is worth remembering that St Augustine's *Confesiones* (4th century AD) sparked a whole line of actions in which self-exploration, confession, and introspection through language would be the suitable medium for reaching "the truth". In his well-known text *Les Confessions* (written between 1765 and 1770), Rousseau - another ardent advocate of the practice of confession - wrote a sentence that still reverberates strongly today, noting the kind of satisfaction that comes from carrying out a duty or satisfying a need: "I will (…) loudly proclaim, thus have I acted; these were my thoughts; such was I" (Rousseau, 2015, p. 15). Without a doubt, this may well be the eventual epitaph of many social network users.

It may seem that in the current communicative hypertrophy, particular to today's network, everything comes down to language, everything is publicised, exteriorised, and, in fact, there are those who argue that showing or telling everything online is not lacking in therapeutic effects. Regarding this it may be of interest to go over what Breuer wrote in *Studies on Hysteria* (1895):

> "Telling things is a relief; it discharges tension (..) If the excitation is denied this outlet it is sometimes converted into a somatic phenomenon, just as is the excitation belonging to traumatic affects. The whole group of hysterical phenomena that originate in this way may be described, with Freud, as hysterical phenomena of retention" (Breuer, 2000, p. 211).

Viktor E. Frankl commented in his *Ärztliche Seelsorge* (1966) that what psychotherapy purported to be, especially psychoanalysis, was "a secular confession" (Frankl, 2012, p. 333). Indeed, Breuer had considered exemplary of the effort of this spoken-word communication the Roman Catholic confessional, calling it "one of the basic factors of a major historical institution" (Breuer 2000, p. 211) but also bearing in mind that "an amusingly exaggerated picture of the urge to do this is given in the story of Midas's barber, who spoke his secret aloud to the reeds" (*ibid*). From this very comicality, it would be tempting to search for certain correlations between the psychoanalyst's couch and the walls on socialnetworks. A simile which could be backed up by the fact that, both on the couch and on the networks, those who listen cannot look you in the eye(3). As Lacan reminded us in 1964, such analysis can never be done "face to face" (Lacan, 1987, p. 85).

For many Internet users, there is no single impulse or idea that should not be made social or public; every idea, thought or whim is manifested, it is exteriorised, it becomes language in images. Everything seems to find satisfaction in the field of representation, in performing for the camera, no matter how absurd the adopted configurations may look. In reality, the success and extreme attraction that many "youtubers" arouse in their millions of followers could be due to how free they are. After all, human beings love whatever carries the image of freedom, and we always admire those who are able to exercise it (going even further, the Romantic poets went as far as to say that beauty was not but "freedom in appearance"). In effect, this exercise of hyperexhibition on the networks, which sometimes generates millions of followers, is for the most part just a release from ties and social conventions. It reveals what many of us usually try not to evince but, secretly, as devoted online voyeurs, we perhaps enjoy watching it appear in the other: an extreme relaxing of conventions, obscenity, rudeness, ignorance, or, quite simply, stupidity.

It has often been criticised how, in the new media egologies with which the world seems to have become little more

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than the correlative effect of what “I percieve”, “I feel”, “I think” the danger of an emotional reduction in the shared social reality is denoted. An “I” that, as a new Narcissus, tries to get to know itself by permanently reflecting itself in the mirrored surface of its computer screen. As if we were now only interested in the world as the stage upon which to unfurl our own emotions, as if reality were becoming a mere reflection of the self, in a new primacy of what Richard Sennet called a psychomorphic vision of reality (Sennet, 1979).

The Internet certainly does tend to act as a mirror. The act of browsing is becoming more and more like looking at ourselves in a mirrored surface, in which we always come across our own affinities, with the phantasmatic images of our desires, our preferences, our curiosities. On the social networks, we find what is liked by people like us, those who we have categorised as “friends”. Furthermore, and at the mercy of “cookies” and many other systems that track our preferences and interests, online navigation is more and more personalised; as soon as we have shown interest in anything on an online store, we will henceforth see images of it everywhere in our online navigation, in dozens of ads and in diverse forms and typologies. This is the power of the mechanisms of customised information, oriented to offer us images of our own objects of interest. We live in a more and more sophisticated “*filter bubble*”(4) based on algorithms that the internet companies use to offer us everything that, according to their predictions, should interest us based on our navigation habits.

The mirrored action of the Internet does not of course operate like a mirror, which, as Louis Aragon said, “can reflect but cannot see”(5). On the contrary, the mirror-web would in fact be more like a new kind of “mirror with memory”(6), able to remember our online wanderings, our likes, our interests, our tastes. Increasingly, everything is oriented towards “shutting ourselves” into our own individual personal information bubble (Pariser, 2011), made up by filters that adapt to our own ideological affinities and specific fields of interest and consumption. Online browsing is already unique to each one of us, a personal ecosystem, always generating the dangerous effect that only the things related to us exist. And this is just the beginning. This automatic prediction of our interests will push back, to a secondary plane in our perceptive field, anything that will apparently not interest us, going far beyond the kind of personalisation anticipated long ago by Nicholas Negroponte in “*Daily me*”(7).

It would appear that in the network-system there is a very literal materialisation, a kind of unintended caricature, of what the early 19th century German idealists contended - i.e. that the individual’s exterior world was no more than an accident of his own being. That which Schopenhauer exemplified in his quoting of some of Byron’s verses: “Are not the mountains, waves, and skies as much a part of me, as I of them?(8)”.It was a question of understanding the cognizant being as the bearer of the world and of all objective existence, the latter in turn being presented as dependent on its own existence. In fact, Schopenhauer greatly critised Kant for not having counted as the first of the forms dependent on cognition per se - i.e. time, space and causality – the “being-object-for-a-subject”, since this would be, as Schopenhauer stated, “the first and most general form pertaining to all phenomena” (Schopenhauer, 2016, p.217).

As perverse and ironic as it may be, let us accept today the kind of parodic materialisation, albeit reductively literal, of those Fichtean considerations in the media landscape of the networks. This way, we can refer to them exactly as objects-for-a-subject, phenomena that are sustained by that singular subject on which they rely, ever performing in a pervasive process of singularisation, of individualisation, of adaptation to that unique, singular self (but at the same time common and statistically predictable by means of “datafication” and algorithmic processing of their life) that provides them with “support”. A fluid image of ourselves and of our affinities is what the net gives back to us at every moment, trapping us therein, in a space of “flickering images” that absorb us.

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More a straightforward means to an end than an actual medium, social networks are therefore becoming enormously addictive, turning screens into new paralysing gorgons. Nevertheless, looking at internet users' fixed expressions, so engrossed by the magical light of their computer screens and other such networked devices, this light shining out from a gleaming, radiant mirror, could lead us to rethink the notion of "illumination" (a key theme, for example, in Evan Baden's series, *The Illuminati* 2006/07), if only to draw attention, critically, to the hypnotic unconsciousness of that illumination(9). It could even be said that what illuminates the faces of those absorbed internet users, subjected to constant *impressions*, is the light that emanates from the enthralling dynamism of the connected multitude itself. Indeed, the metaphors about the *energeia* of the multitude are fascinating, long starring that individual who "plunges into the crowd as into a reservoir of electric energy" (Benjamin, 2006. p. 191).

Undoubtedly, surfing social networks or being carried along with the flow of the multitude as they walk through the streets is always pleasant and entertaining: "any man who (…) is bored in the midst of the crowd, is a fool! A fool! And despise him!" said Guys (Baudelaire, 2010, p. 80).

Therefore, concentrating on all our forms of inclusion in the connected multitude, and its highly powerful presence, exploring it poetically by means of images, is an ongoing aspiration for many artists today. Therefore, and lest we forget it, our history, the history of the western world, may not be but the history of how the life of the multitude was constructed. This point is probably where the most interesting aspect of the "poetics of connectivity" resides: to prove that uniqueness today takes the form of the multitude, that the unique now tries to present itself in the form of the multitude.

Internet culture does indeed have its detractors, and their most accurate critiques are aimed at, precisely, a questioning of what this mirrored condition really does for us. Zygmunt Bauman recently stated that "many people use social networks not to come together, not to extend their horizons, but, on the contrary, to shut themselves in what I call comfort zones, where the only sound they hear is the echo of their own voice, where they only see the reflections of their own face(10). Others conceive the Internet experience as the concretisation of the worst-made plans of a globalised ochlocracy, in which only the primitivisation or infantilisation of thought would prevail, dominated by visual, "mosaic" thinking(11), that always subjects us to saturating simultaneities, to mere disjunctions, and with which the most complex syntactic operators and subordinations would be ignored, reducing every interpretation to a "like" or a "dislike". An era in which we would live a pervasive need for expression and being listened to, a need to speak, perhaps not so much to communicate but rather to merely make oursleves present, heading towards the primacy of the phatic function of language. This function, that allows us to keep a conversation going without stating any real concrete message(12), would also lead our use of images today. In effect, many of the images that circulate on social networks only take part in this mission, as they are merely shared to highlight the continuity of the individual in the process of online communication, being revitalising elements of the state of social connectivity. In the field of the image this has striking effects, contributing, for example, to how photography stops being an attempt at a special vision of reality (except in those cases in which there are "artistic" aspirations), to become a record of the "normal vision" (Ascott, 1996, p. 168), of the everyday language of seeing, of the ordinary gaze. In this sense, it seems appropriate to recall José van Dijck's assertion:

> "the camera phone merges oral and visual modalities - the latter seemingly adapting to the former. Pictures become more like spoken language as photographs are turning into the new currency for social interaction" (van Dijck, 2007, p. 115)

In fact, as a result of this, it would also be possible to consider a philosophy of the ordinary language of images (Brea 2010, p. 116), to talk about "acts of seeing" or "acts of vision" (to see and to be seen), just as Austin spoke of "speech

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acts", to thus revive a consideration of photography as a "natural language". Therefore, we could say that today the value of the image is mostly rooted in its capacity to perform as an interface, as a merely connecting and intersubjective element.

But, of course, to talk about mirrors would also be to talk about those gestures and grimaces that we all do in front of them, when nobody is watching us, as well as the gesticulations and poses that we adopt when facing that camera-mirror that all connective devices have become. For instance, there has been extensive debate, and harsh criticism, of the pouting smiles, the so-called "duckface", that many feel forced to adopt, for some strange reason, in their selfies. But let us not get carried away - the multitude has always been subjected to homogenising gestures, to a rigid catalogue of postural coercions. In the text *The Man of the Crowd* (1840), Allan Poe alluded to a certain "absent and overdone smile upon their lips", (Poe, 2008, p. 295) present in the faces of pedestrians when other people get in their way. Regarding this, Benjamin would ironically state that "Those smiles provide food for thought" (Benjamin, 1973, p. 127); smiles that everybody who moves through the crowd would have to adopt "as a mimetic shock absorber" (*ibid*. p. 133) and that probably, in his opinion, was not so different to the phrase "keep smiling", that we are still subjected to in our visual interactions on the social networks.

How we adapt to the camera, in a world crowded by visual registration devices, again becomes an important issue in artistic creation, a question whose topicality is testified by a numerous exhibitions and curatorial projects on this topic(13). Certainly, a key trend in current artistic creation is based on exploring the possibilities of an extreme phenomenology of the being on camera, of the self in front of the camera, as occurs, for example, in Ryan Trecartin and Lizzie Fitch's videos and installations. These are trends that compel us to remember the origins of this artistic thematisation of performing or being for the camera, especially its most extreme moments, such as the monologue-action called *Theme Song* (1973) by Vito Acconci, a video performance in which the camera became a medium to connect with a future spectator to whom Accoci's monologue was directed, a spectator whose absence permitted the artist to achieve a certain intimacy and isolation only intensified by the presence of that impulsive technical eye. Such investigations explore the being-on-camera, or for the camera. In this regard, Rosalind Krauss defended, precisely, the viability of generalising narcissism as a condition of the entire genre of video art. Another good example would be Richard Serra and Nancy Holt's video performance entitled *Boomerang* (1974). In this piece, Holt's words were fed back to her through headphones with a one-second delay, delayed echoes of her own voice. During this performance, Holt said that "I am surrounded by me". And today, the same is surely happening to on the networks; we are more and more surrounded by ourselves, everything reaches us as echoes of our own processes of online projection and staging, of our anxiety to let ourselves be seen.

Hence, from the new visual poetics of connectivity, we expect not only the embodiment of our life's conditions in the network culture, but, above all, the aperture of new paths to explore in the critical thematisation of the impact of the Internet in the processes of subjetivisation. Furthermore, we will also see more research into the ability of connective devices to act as the main articulatory elements of the new communicative, social, and productive practices of our times, in their inmense power to generate new forms of pleasure and new dependencies. But, above all, we should trust their capability to highlight, in a world dominated by the slogan "be yourself", authentic modes of *difference* in these times in which this over-inflated term acts as a requirement for absolute standardisation, and in which everything seems to consist of pervasive corporate practices of false differentiation.

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Notes

1 Kafka wrote in *The Man who Disappeared (America)* “Everyone is welcome! Anyone who wants to become an artist should apply! We are the theater that can use everyone, a place for everyone!”, New York: Oxford University Press, 2012, p. 195.

2 *Would you still love me if I showed you my browser history?*, permanent installation at The Nordic Council of Ministers, Copenhagen.

3 Freud wrote in “On Beginning the Treatment (further recommendations on the technique of psycho-analysis I)” (1913) the following: “I hold to the plan of getting the patient to lie on a sofa while I sit ‘behind him out of his sight. This arrangement has a historical basis; it is the remnant of the hypnotic method out of which psycho-analysis was evolved. But it deserves to be maintained for many reasons”. (The standard edition of the complete psychological works of Sigmund Freud, London: The Hogarth Press, 1958, p. 135.)

4 See E. Pariser *The Filter Bubble: What the Internet Is Hiding from You*, New York: Penguin Press, 2011. It is of great interest how the artistic thematisation of this notion was dealt with in the show “Filter Bubble,” curated by Simon Castets and Hans Ulrich Obrist, at LUMA (Zürich) in 2016.

5 L. Aragon, “Le contre-chant” (1963), Le fou d’Elsa, Paris: Editions Gallimard.

6 I employ here the sentence that Oliver Wendell Holmes used to describe the stereoscope in 1859. See Wendell Holmes (1859), “The Stereoscope and the Stereograph”, *The Atlantic Monthly 3* (June), p. 738-48.

7 See N. Negroponte (1995), Being Digital, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc.

8 *The Works of Lord Byron: Including the Suppressed Poems*, París: A. y W. Galignani, Paris, 1828, p. 64.

9 For more about the notion of “profane illumination” see W. Benjamin (1983), *Das Passagen-Werk*, Frankfurt: Suhrkamp. Interview with Zygmunt Bauman, by Ricardo de Querol, Babelia, *El País*, 9th January 2016.

10 The term “mosaic thinking” was coined by M. Mcluhan in his text “The Brain and the Media: The ‘Western’ Hemisphere”, published in December 1978 .

11 See B. Malinowski (1972) “Phatic Communion”, in J. Laver y S. Hutcheson (eds.) *Communication in Face-to-face interaction*, Harmondworth: Penguin Books.

12 Of particular interest is the show “Performing for the Camera“, curated by S. Baker for Tate Modern, 2016.

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