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***The phenomenon of virtual identity***

**PHD THESIS SUMMARY**

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**Keywords:** *virtual identity, virtual ego, real ego, self representation, social networks, social media, consciousness, phenomenology, metalepsis, antimetalepsis, simulacrum, hyperreality, embodied simulation, simulated embodiment, body illusion, mise en abyme, uncanny valley, disruption, preferential attachment, virtual nihilism, virtual state.*

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## Thesis Summary

For the first time in history, any human being can aim at not being forgotten: the social networks nourish this fascination – that, by using them, we can aspire, if not to immortality, at least to the transmission and survival of our own virtual image. How does the self of someone concerned with their digital representation change? What is the relationship between the real ego and its extension in social media? What are the effects of attempting to capture other people's attention? And, above all, how is one's *virtual identity* constituted – that etheric object born from the interpretations given to his online activity?

I have chosen to approach these questions from a phenomenological perspective, in order to find out what modifications do occur on a transcendental level, but also because producing oneself in a digital network, being a game between revealing and self-hiding, requires both meanings of the term *phenomenon* (φαινόμενον) – as it was defined by Heidegger –, i.e. “that which shows itself” and “appearance”<sup>1</sup>.

This research relies on some concepts dating back to Greek antiquity, among which *téchne*, *phántasma* and *phármakon*, but most of the classic texts I used were written in the 20<sup>th</sup> century – Heidegger, Husserl, Merleau-Ponty, Baudrillard, Deleuze, Arendt, Habermas, Ricœur, Derrida, Foucault et al. Still the answers I came to would not have been possible without ideas from more recent studies – signed, among others, by Albert-Lászlo Barabási (network theory), Dorrit Cohn (narratology), Umberto Eco (semiotics), Vittorio Gallese (neurosciences), Philippe Quéau (virtual worlds), Bernard Stiegler (phenomenology) or Victor Ieronim Stoichiță (art history).

The thesis I propose/advance is that, given the promises of transcending space and time, social networks give birth to a joint ideology, *the virtual nihilism*, which consists of inducing the illusion that the evil of this world can be avoided by digital connection, i.e. by refusing the real. This ideology has totalitarian potential for several reasons, including the rift between consciousness and the network (the feeling that you are left behind), and the subject's tendencies to separate from himself and to perceive his virtual identity as a threatening double.

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1 Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, [29], ch. 2, § 7.

By *virtual identity* I understand the uncontrollable identity that a person creates by means of one or more social networks, the common denominator of the perceptions and intuitions induced to others in this digital environment, the sum of the mirror shards in which that person's absent presence breaks, an always incomplete puzzle of intersubjectivity, a constantly changing relationship between one's self and his online representations.

The difficulty of formulating a definition, as noted above, is one of the reasons why this research makes sense: most people manifest themselves in digital networks, but the speed with which this technology takes over our lives inhibits the attempts to zoom out, attempts which are mandatory for understanding its effects.

One's virtual identity emerges in the consciences of one's group of followers, who interpret one's discourse within the network. A virtual identity is the result of a *téchne*, the art that “unconceals” that which is concealed (as Heidegger puts it in “*The Origin of the Work of Art*”). What is unconcealed in this way?

***In other words, what elements belonging to its causes remain present in a virtual identity?***

Relying on the four aristotelian causes (see “*Metaphysics*”, V, 1013 a), I state that *the name* is the invariant linked to the *causa efficiens* of a virtual identity, and the *mark* (or the style of the discourse) is the invariant emerging from the *causa materialis*. The dual nature of the self formatting, i.e. *the sentiment of the double*, is the invariant belonging to *causa formalis*, but the most important one, the invariant coming from the *causa finalis*, is *the desire to aggregate one's own presence in the consciousness of the Other*. Fulfilling this desire would mean the Other becoming aware of one's existence, “assimilating” one's being in their own being as different from each other.

These four invariants – *the name, the mark, the sentiment of the double, and the desire to aggregate in a different consciousness* – together constitute the phenomenological structure of a virtual identity.

***What relationship occurs between a Real Ego X and its manifestation within a digital network?***

I will call the content of this manifestation *Virtual Ego*, i.e. the sum of the interventions X has made within the digital network until a given moment. The Virtual Ego is a creation, an artistic-type object which becomes a *phantomatic* extension of the Real Ego.

The way a Real Ego intervenes upon its Virtual Ego resembles the process by which an art creator inserts himself into his creation – a figure of speech called the author's *metalepsis*. *Metalepsis* is

the deliberate transgression of the ontological threshold between reality and fiction<sup>2</sup>, between the extra-diegetic universe and the diegetic universe.

I will call *metalepsis of the self* the act by which a Real Ego X creates, inside a digital network, a Virtual Ego that will represent the “raw material” for X's virtual identity. The *metalepsis of the self* thus becomes an attempt (either conscious or unconscious) to consecrate one's passing through life.

### ***Under what conditions does the virtual identity of an X come to life?***

It is mandatory for X to produce a Virtual Ego and to have at least one follower who interprets that Virtual Ego. I thus propose this definition: *the virtual identity of a person X in a digital network is the intersection of the representations regarding X, which X's followers form by interpreting X's own representation within that network.*

### ***How does virtual identity affect one's actual life?***

Just as the text gains autonomy from the author, so does the Virtual Ego becomes autonomous from the Real Ego, as a result of the network distributing its fragments and of the distance that allows interpretation. The alienation of these fragments allows the virtual identity of a Real Ego to occur in the consciences of its followers.

As a consequence, the phenomenon to which narratologists refer to as *antimetalepsis* occurs: creation turns against the creator, because the network stimulates the concern for the ghost of the self. But unlike literature or cinema, where ghosts remain in the diegetic universe, a digital ghost tends to “break the screen” and burst into reality. An eloquent example is what happened in Ukraine in the 2019 elections, when the actor who had become president *on screen*, in a tv series, was actually elected president *in reality*, by using the influence of virtual networks: an *antimetalepsis* on the scale of an entire nation.

### ***What kind of an artistic object is the Virtual Ego?***

Because it is a representation without a model, fruit of a simulation, the Virtual Ego is a simulacrum of the self. The simulacrum is the *phántasma* which Plato refers to in his dialogue “*Sophist*”, an image which reproduces nothing and which only seems to resemble an original, when in fact it does not. Moreover, the Virtual Ego is a *simulacrum produced by instruments* (the technology indispensable to the network); but the simulacra produced by instruments is precisely the branch from the old tree of images that, in the final parts of “*Sophist*”, Plato decided to “*let it go and leave it for someone else to unify and name appropriately*”<sup>3</sup>.

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2 I use the definition given by the French narratologist Gérard Genette in his book “*Métalepse: De la figure à la fiction*”, Seuil, Paris, 2004, p. 14.

3 Plato, *Sophist*, 267 b: <http://data.perseus.org/citations/urn:cts:greekLit:tlg0059.tlg007.perseus-eng1:267b>

So the Virtual Ego is a simulacrum-type object, namely of the type which is produced by instruments. Because it simulates a Real Ego on two-dimensional screens, it becomes *hyperreal* (in the sense Baudrillard uses this concept<sup>4</sup>) and thus risks to hijack, vitiate or even capture its author.

### ***What is the hyperreal?***

Trying to deepen Baudrillard's definitions, I have realized that an object is hyperreal only for a spectator. Such an object has no other justification than seducing (and thus manipulating) a public. As a consequence, an object can be considered as hyperreal if it is a simulacrum which tends to come to life, if it induces *an illusion of animation*, meaning it tells us it would want to transfer itself from 2D to 3D or from a story into our real lives.

An hyperreal object sets in motion a sign, creates an appearance of reality, meaning it doubles the ontological levels: its signifier is able to induce the illusion that there is another world “behind” it. So a *hyperreal object induces an illusion of animation which is an ontological opening*.

If we apply this idea on the simulacra we produce in digital networks, we see that the Virtual Ego of any X proposes a world, meaning at least a follower Y gets a glimpse of that world and associates it to X. At this point two key questions arise. The first one is as follows:

***Since a follower Y animates (in his consciousness) the Virtual Ego of an X, does that mean that it also assigns X a referential, i.e. a body?***

The problem that arises when trying to answer this question is that there are conceptual models regarding the perception of the Other which only consider *physical* reality, because there was no virtual intersubjectivity until the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

The first model I approached is Heidegger's, from “*Being and Time*”: in his view, the Other is encountered starting from the world commonly shared (*die Mitwelt*)<sup>5</sup>. If this model were valid in digital networks, it would mean that, when encountering Virtual Egos of other people, our mind would unconsciously simulate a classical space, in order to make possible what Heidegger understands as *das Mitsein* – the act of being together with others.

A second model I took into consideration is Husserl's, from “*Cartesian Meditations*”: to him, the Other is understood as a modification of one's Ego. So, if this model were valid in a digital network, it would mean we unconsciously attach a virtual body to any Virtual Ego that we encounter within that network. This would mean we objectivate ourselves in others, “transferring” upon them our own self-representation. (This would partially explain the amount of fury that arises in digital

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4 See „*Simulacres et simulation*”, Galilée, Paris, 1981, p. 10.

5 *Being and Time*, [119], ch. 4, § 26.



environments: we cannot understand why someone who we imagine as being “like us” can have a totally different opinion).

The third model belongs to the French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty (“*The visible and the invisible*”) and it is the most difficult one to apply to a digital environment, because, to him, the body becomes *the seer* through which the *seeing* occurs.

The solution I suggest for dismantling the deadlock of the aforementioned three models comes from science: in the last decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, neuroscientists have discovered the so-called *mirror neurons*, which allow us to match other people's body behaviour to our own internal model (see Thomas Metzinger, “*The Ego Tunnel*”). This would mean Husserl was right to intuit the existence of a brain area which allows us to put ourselves in someone else's shoes and which thus contributes to the “birth”, in one's Ego, of another person's Ego, different from their own.

The Italian scientist Vittorio Gallese introduced the concept of *Embodied Simulation*<sup>6</sup>, which refers to the neural mechanism through which we simulate other people's experiences in order to understand them. Therefore, the answer to the question above is that, when connected to a digital network, we unconsciously assign corporality to any Virtual Ego we encounter in that environment. I call this unconscious projection *the body illusion*.

This is a defining factor of the virtual intersubjectivity: it is as if, when meeting another Ego within the network, our mind uploads sensorial content to that Ego's “account”. The body illusion can be better understood by this word play: if, in a physical interaction, our brain uses the mechanism called *Embodied Simulation*, then I will call the unconscious mechanism which is triggered in a virtual encounter *Simulated Embodiment*.

The second question which arises from the idea that the Virtual Ego “proposes a world” is the following:

***Since a follower Y foresees a world in the ontological opening made possible by X's Virtual Ego, does this mean that Y also associates a space to that world?***

To answer this question, we need to use the concept of *hyperreal* again, because not only the Virtual Ego is a hyperreal object, but the network itself is a hyperreal ensemble (it meets Baudrillard's criteria in this regard). Therefore, because it is hyperreal, the network is meant to seduce, and because it is meant to seduce, *it appears to us as a stage*.

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6 Vittorio Gallese, Valentina Cuccio, “*Embodied Simulation: A Paradigm for the Constitution of Self and Others*”, in: Thomas Metzinger & J. M. Windt (Editors), *Open MIND:14* ©, available online: [https://www.academia.edu/27203373/Embodied\\_Simulation\\_A\\_Paradigm\\_for\\_the\\_Constitution\\_of\\_Self\\_and\\_Others\\_A\\_Reply\\_to\\_Christian\\_Pfeiffer](https://www.academia.edu/27203373/Embodied_Simulation_A_Paradigm_for_the_Constitution_of_Self_and_Others_A_Reply_to_Christian_Pfeiffer)

And since this stage “explodes” into billions of screens – which, as screens, transform any object in “the center of the universe” (as the film critic André Bazin has put it in his famous essay “*What is cinema?*”) – this means any user of a digital network experiences *a double illusion of centrality*: as a performer, the user feels as if he sits in the center of his own stage; as a spectator, the user feels that what is being permanently delivered to him, his *feed*, is located in the center of the stage represented by the network itself.

A digital network thus becomes the theatre of a planetary *mise en abyme*, where the subject and the object compete against each other and where space dissipates in reflections that are created and recreated *ad infinitum*.

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***What exactly seduces us within a social network?*** What kind of eroticism arises in this environment? Since the Virtual Ego is the means through which the Real Ego creates images of himself in other minds, the more beautiful the Virtual Ego will seem to the Real Ego, the more he will fantasize about the number of people who will get a representation of him.

In other words, *the Real Ego comes to transfer his erotic interest upon his Virtual Ego*. The Real Ego becomes attracted by his representation within the network. I affirm that this relationship takes shape on the border of two myths: Narcissus and Pygmalion. What are their common elements?

1) Both Narcissus and Pygmalion *refuse the real*: the former for aesthetic reasons, the latter for ethical reasons, but both are unhappy with human nature's imperfections; 2) Both are *seduced by an inanimate object* which both idealize: from a psychoanalytical perspective, it is a return of a repressed desire; 3) Both treat the object of their erotic desire *as if it were alive*; 4) Both are *absorbed* by that object, therefore they fully dedicate to it and remain alongside it forever.

In short, the aspects that seduce us within a digital network are the following: a) *the alternative to this world*: replacing reality; b) *the dimensional compression*: the simultaneous perceiving of two ontological levels; c) the opportunity to *release the repressed eroticism* by means of a representation completely controllable.

***What causes addiction to a digital network?***

The combination of continuous novelty and continuous excitation (the dopamine emission): one becomes addicted to the frequency of the news that someone, somewhere, might be interested in one's experiences, in one's mere existence. I thus affirm that a digital network has an immense addiction potential because it proposes a collapse of the real, by installing in one's consciousness a flux that stimulates *nostalgia for paradise* (in Mircea Eliade's sense of the concept) and *rebirth through alterity*.

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Because we transfer an increasing portion of our lives into the virtual environment, we tend to overstep the boundary to which an equivalence of the ego with the *real* ego can be justified. I formulate this tendency as follows: *virtual identity is virtually becoming man's identity*.

This phrase needs further explanation. First, we have to understand this: while X's followers within a network, the group Y, consider X's Virtual Ego as his double, X interprets what he receives from them and comes to feel that his virtual identity is his double. Therefore, the more original X tries to be, different from the Others, the more addicted he becomes to the network.

In other words, the more active he is within the network, the more X feeds on his virtual identity; but, because he perceives it as double, and because the double and the original are irreconcilable, virtual identity turns against him through antimetalepsis.

***Why can't the original and the double coexist?***

It is because the original comes to wonder if the double is not himself, if the other's being does not precede him – which makes him question his mere existence. The main reason they cannot coexist is that the double threatens the original's self-persistence (what Heidegger calls *die Ständigkeit des Selbst*), which is the core to one's ultimate identity. And the cause of this threat, the source of the ontological vertigo, is the *abyss*, the vanishment of any stable mark during the perpetual mirroring of the self.

Therefore, what I want to stress is the idea that not only do virtual worlds gain more and more influence in our lives, but also that, when producing within a digital network, a user comes to feel that his virtual identity is his double, that this strange entity is getting closer to him, tends to replace him, and, during this unceasing process, he starts to fear that lifeless presence.

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The digital networks provide us with the chance of a *double unforeseen immortalization* – one on a short term, through the memories of a group of people, and the other on a medium (and maybe longer) term, in the physical archive of some powerful computers. This idea leads to the following question: ***what are the structural changes that occur in self representation and in representing the Other?***

My answer is that nowadays *the subject creates a new object* in order to fill the objectual vacuum that he caused by treating nature the same way a master treats a slave. More than that, I affirm

that this new object is exactly the virtual identity, because this is the only transcendental content that the subject perceives as coming from outside – thus maintaining the mandatory autonomy of an object –, but mainly because, as a virtual double, the virtual identity is experienced as uncanny and as a threat to the real ego. The fact that the subject re-creates this kind of transcendence is the first structural change that I have discovered.

The second structural change has a psychoanalytical connotation. I have realized that producing within a digital network constitutes a writing of the self (a *phármakon*, Plato's term) and thus creates a *filiation*, where the Real Ego is the “father” and the Virtual Ego is the “son”. The more time we spend connected to a network, the further away the “son” is from the “father”. So, if the Real Ego has a weak identity, he will try to meet his followers' expectations and, in this process, he will tend to perceive the network as a Superego (Freud's term).

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The beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century witnessed three processes which, put together, determined a global *disruption*: the expansion of the internet and of mobile communications, and, on top of these, the expansion of social media.

The French philosopher Bernard Stiegler, who wrote a book on this disruption, put forward the idea that digital networks deprive us of our own dreams by using the tremendous amount of personal data they continuously collect from their users. The more time you spend connected, the less time you have to build your own projections and ideals. Moreover, Stiegler says, because of the speed of these technologies, one risks being overwhelmed by the feeling that one is left behind, unable to cope with The (mighty) Network.

***What is the main effect of this global disruption on a personal level?***

The feeling that one might become a fictional character to other people. A relevant example comes from the movie “*Birdman or The Unexpected Virtue of Ignorance*”, which received four Academy Awards in 2015. This movie speaks about a person who has been mentally replaced by others with a representation complex (a semiotic object). My conclusion after analyzing this movie is that the future might bring *the primacy of self representation* to all other human activities that imply imagination and hope: because of social media, people are obsessed with feeding their virtual egos and, thus, they increasingly neglect the necessary respite for understanding and fulfilling their own wishes.

In the final chapter of this research I have combined my findings from previous chapters, trying to approach this question: ***how do all these consciousness transformations, determined by virtual networks, affect the nature of power?***

Two intentions emerge from the mission statements made public by the most important digital networks (Facebook, Twitter, TikTok): 1) empowering the user; 2) unifying the world by virtually transcending space and time.

This means that social media aim at a fully integrated planet, while claiming they perform a global democratization. However, the mathematical structure of a dynamic network – especially what is understood by *preferential attachment* (Barabási's concept) – inhibits the vastly majority of digital users from gaining any influence. With the nature of such a network comes the fact that only a few nodes are able to acquire real power: the reason behind this is that a new user is more tempted to connect himself to a hub (or influencer), i.e. to a node that already has a large number of connections.

Moreover, since a lot of users experience the feeling that they are left behind (due to the speed of this technology and the diversity of temptations), a rift, a breach, a phenomenal tension arises between one's consciousness and the virtual world.

For these reasons, I affirm that a digital network: 1) isolates the simple user and makes him feel lonely, instead of bringing him closer to others (as claimed); 2) consolidates the power of a small group, precisely because one of its goals is to continuously add newer nodes.

Within this tension between individual minds and global networks emerges, as between clouds with opposite electrical charges, an ideological “stream” with a totalitarian potential: *the virtual nihilism*. The main promise of this ideology for its followers is that they will transcend space (direct access to alterity) and time (immortalization through representation).

The archenemy of the virtual, and so of social media too, is *reality*. Virtual nihilism means inducing the feeling that the solution against the evil of our world is living (with)in the network.

And if someday a virtual war against the real will burst, as the signs of these times show us, we will be able to say that each of us has experienced a personal preview of this war – the conflict between the real ego and the virtual identity. A conflict that not only did we not stop in time, but we didn't even understand it.

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