Telepresence as a social-historical mode of being. ChatGPT and the ontological dimensions of digital representation[1]

*Alexandros Schismenos**

Abstract

Nel 1956, in piena guerra fredda, una conferenza di scienziati al Dartmouth College negli Stati Uniti annunciò il lancio di un audace progetto scientifico, l'Intelligenza Artificiale (I.A.). Dopo l'iniziale fallimento degli sforzi della "Hard AI" di produrre un'intelligenza simile a quella umana, alla fine del XX secolo è emerso il movimento della "Soft AI". Invece di essere orientato a imitare il comportamento umano in relazione a compiti specifici, ha preferito cercare modi alternativi di eseguire i compiti basati sulle particolari funzioni e strutture della macchina. Il fattore decisivo è stata la combinazione della tecnologia di apprendimento automatico con le comunicazioni digitali online, l'incontro tra l'IA e Internet. Le applicazioni dell'IA "soft" sono quelle che vediamo nel mondo dei dispositivi automatici "intelligenti" che informano la nostra vita sociale digitale. Nel seguente articolo mi concentrerò su una particolare applicazione dell'IA per le discussioni online con utenti umani, ChatGPT, per mostrare le implicazioni della tecnologia digitale online nelle modalità storico-sociali dell'esistenza umana. ChatGPT è un'applicazione che combina l'IA con Internet, le possibilità della corrispondenza tra macchine e le potenzialità della tele-comunicazione umana. Il mio approccio si concentra sulle implicazioni fenomenologiche e storico-sociali della proliferazione della tecnologia AI per quanto riguarda la coscienza e la socialità umana.

Parole chiave: telepresenza, intelligenza artificiale, soggettività, digitale, ontologia, ChatGPT.

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* Aristotelian University of Thessaloniki, Department of Political Science, e-mail: abonapartis@gmail.com.

(A.I.). After the initial failure of "Hard AI" efforts to produce a human-like intelligence, the "Soft AI" movement emerged in the late 20th century. Instead of being oriented towards imitating human behaviour concerning specific tasks, it preferred to seek alternative ways of performing tasks based on the particular functions and structures of the machine. The decisive factor was the combination of Machine Learning technology with Digital Online Communications, the meeting between AI and the Internet. The applications of "Soft" AI are those we see in the world of "smart", "intelligent" automatic devices that inform our digital social life.

In the following article, I will focus on a particular application of AI for online discussions with human users, ChatGPT, in order to show the implications of online digital technology in the social-historical modalities of human existence. ChatGPT is an application that combines AI with the Internet, the possibilities of Machine correspondence with the potentialities of human telecommunications. My approach focuses on the phenomenological and social-historical implications of the proliferation of AI technology as regards human consciousness and sociality.

Keywords: telepresence, artificial intelligence, subjectivity, digital, ontology, ChatGPT.

1. The philosophical problems behind the development of AI

In 1956, amidst the Cold War, a conference of scientists at Dartmouth College in the United States announced the launch of a bold, scientific project, Artificial Intelligence (A.I.). The term Artificial Intelligence was coined by John McCarthy, who defined it as such: «Every aspect of learning or any other feature of intelligence can, in principle, be so precisely described that a machine can be made to simulate it»[2]. This is the "Hard" AI project, which was based on an approach that *mimicked* human behaviour and aspired to create "Soft"ware and "Hard"ware whose behaviour would ultimately be comparable, if not superior, to that of «*intelligent beings in similar circumstances*»[3]. Fictional dystopias starring uncontrollable robots or other autonomous forms of AI all stem from this project.

After the failure of AI to produce functional machine copies of the human adversary, the "Soft" AI movement emerged, based on a *constructivist* approach to the issue. That is, instead of being oriented towards imitating human behaviour concerning specific tasks, it preferred to seek alternative ways of performing tasks based on the particular functions and structures of the machine. The applications of "Soft" AI are those we see in the world of "smart", "intelligent" automatic devices (from voice, face and biometric recognition to the regulation of the temperature of a

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[2] J. McCarthy, *A Proposal for the Dartmouth Summer Research Project on Artificial Intelligence*, August 31st 1955.

[3] Cf. L. Floridi, *Philosophy and Computing: An Introduction*, Routledge, London 1999.

room or the technical parameters of an experiment, etc., the execution of complex automated procedures with adaptation to changes) that is constantly developing. We must bear in mind that "Soft" AI rejects the «possibility of a thinking machine capable of cloning human intelligence»[4].

Floridi underlines that the "Hard" AI program is based on the following metaphysical positions: a) intelligence is independent of the biological body, which it borrows from *rational, Cartesian dualism*, and b) intelligence is a complex property of a material body, which borrows from *materialistic monism.*

Together, it abandons, on the one hand, the Cartesian concept of *spirit* as res cogitans and the dialectical concept of the interaction of *matter* with *life* as an organic synthesis.

We discern a latent demand, the assimilation of consciousness to information processing procedures, and the assimilation of reasoning to algorithmic computation ("running a program"). As we saw earlier, this demand and the idea of the "artificial person" can be traced to the work of Thomas Hobbes.

This request seems to answer the question: "What *is* consciousness (or intelligence)?" "Hard" AI thus replaced a techno-scientific mimetic approach to the question of man, of human subjectivity. This approach consists of simulation and *reconstruction.*

As artificial reconstruction relies on given regularities (structures), the technique seeks to discover and reproduce these regularities by other means, assuming that the set of regularities constitutes the *essence of* the thing or that the thing can be broken down into regular structures. We note an arbitrary but familiar distinction between the canonical (essential) properties of the thing and the "idiosyncratic" (contingent) and "complementary" properties. It is the familiar scheme of logic, the hierarchy of properties into properties that are determinate (and determinate), constituting the timeless *essence of* the thing, Aristotle's *what is, and* properties that are indeterminate (and variable) and are reduced to illusions or epiphenomena. We see, then, in the program of "Hard" AI, a new form of the old metaphysics of *substance*, of being as being-determined.

However, the fact that we use, transform, and construct an object does not mean that we know *what the* thing itself is. On the contrary, it means that we relate to it and establish a functional relationship with it within the social-historical field of meanings that signifies it as a tool and that signifies us as users. Cornelius Castoriadis defined the social-historical field as follows:

> The social-historical is the anonymous collective, the impersonal-human element that fills every given social formation but which also encompasses it, setting each society amid others, inscribing them all within a continuity in which those who are no longer, those who are elsewhere, and even those yet to be born are in a certain sense present[5].

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[4] *Ibidem.*

[5] C. Castoriadis, *The Castoriadis Reader*, tr. by D.A. Curtis, Blackwell Publishers, London 1997, p. 184.

I can use the keyboard without knowing how it works. And if I build a keyboard, I can understand how it ought to behave and work without knowing what electrical signals it manipulates. An object becomes a tool according to a rule, and the rule realises a purpose stated in an intention. An object becomes a tool by being associated with a subjectivity, a relation possible within the social-historical field that coheres to the present in question as the magma of all relations and potential associations.

When this "object" is the human mind, we are obviously faced with the problem of objectifying subjectivity. The implicit claim of "Hard" AI is that the entire human psyche, the psychic magma of the unconscious, preconscious and conscious (to take Freud's first locus) or of the This, Superego and Ego (to take the second locus), can be exhaustively reduced to a set of finite logical operations, an algorithmic table of binary reactions recorded as points 0 and 1. Such, after all, is the program of a computer, a Turing machine. The execution of a particular path of choices between yes/no, and 1/0, utilising electrical signals, which gives, according to given instructions, a specific result (output) according to a particular input. Is this an exhaustive description of the human being? Is it enough to have the appropriate input and the appropriate program in order to have the output that I am currently typing these words, which I learned but did not invent, nor did I find free in nature, while wrestling with a problem, which is not private, nor is it the first time it is being discussed, in search of a daily and permanent meaning?

Although the chimaera of AI is placed within the horizon of the feasible by theorists such as Stephen Hawking, who stated in 2014 that the «development of full AI may spell the end of humanity», I believe that its metaphysical and epistemological presuppositions are flimsy.

In the following article, I will focus on a particular application of AI for online discussions with human users, ChatGPT, to show the implications of online digital technology in the social-historical modalities of human existence. ChatGPT is an application that combines AI with the Internet, the possibilities of Machine correspondence with the potentialities of human telecommunications.

In the following sections, I will briefly comment on the Internet's social-historical conditions before explicitly addressing the particularities of the ChatGPT application and finally exploring the meaning of telepresence.

2. *Social-historical conditions of the Internet*

The creation of the Internet required major transformations of social-historical conditions beyond technological inventions and developments. Often the technology was available decades before its public application. I will only mention schematically that there could not have been the Internet, as a global network for the flow of information, and the World Wide Web (www), as a standard way of organising

information if the Cold War had not ended with the dissolution of the USSR in 1991. As Eric Hobsbawm reminds us:

> [The] very mutual ignorance and lack of mutual understanding that characterised the two worlds were indeed astonishing, especially if we consider that this was a period in which there had been a real revolution in the fields of travel, communications and information[6].

And yet, on the other hand, the Cold War was the original cause and political motivation for the development of digital web technology. The beginning came after the successful launch of the first space satellite, Sputnik, by the USSR, which led the US to establish a government defence research agency called *ARPA (Advanced Research Project Agency)*. As part of the research work, J.C.R. Licklinder, Paul Baran and Leonard Kleinrock laid the three theoretical foundations of a global digital information transfer network. The first envisioned creating a network of interconnected computers that could exchange information securely and without residue. The second designed a distributed and decentralised digital communication network. The third proposed converting data into packets of information that would contain its origin and destination, creating a stable and oriented communication flow between computers. The first applied network of this kind was built in 1969 between four computers at the University of California and was called ARPANET. Similar closed networks were created between other research centres in the Western capitalist world. But the dividing line between the Western and Eastern "blocs" had to be broken down to create the Internet as a global, open, public and accessible to everyone. And in 1991, CERN's Tim Burners-Lee invented the tools to make access to the Internet in an organised, accurate and user-friendly way through the invention of the World Wide Web (www), the Hypertext Transfer Protocol (HTTP), the unique URL to locate each digital document, and the single language for describing documents (HTML), i.e. the web browser and the web server.

As can be expected, the creation of the Internet was not the result of a linear evolution of science but of an irregular and multifactorial interaction between the techno-scientific apparatus, state power and international relations. As we have seen, a social-historical precondition was the particular global situation created by the Cold War, i.e. the division of the entire planet into two rival camps, each of which tried to develop its own supranational and transnational networks of propaganda, information and knowledge exclusivity. This bipolar world led to an apparent techno-scientific competition between two quasi-global international formations, which had the unprecedented ability to exploit vast material resources for particular and planned purposes. The existence of this bipolar organisation of the world was a sufficient social-historical precondition for the creation of Internet technology. Still, overcoming bipolarity after the collapse of the USSR was the necessary social-

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[6] E.J. Hobsbawm, *Age of Extremes. The short Twentieth Century 1914-1991*, Abacus, London 1995, p. 374.

historical precondition for the spread of the application of the Internet as a public good.

The invention of the Internet has been called a "revolution" in various senses. The digital revolution, information revolution or even 4$^\eta$ Industrial Revolution. In my opinion, the digital internet phenomenon is more than just a technological revolution. The Internet marks an ontological revolution.

By "ontological revolution", I mean the emergence not just of a new type of being (as we would consider the elementary digital unit of information, the bit, which exists in the social-historical as a particle/wave/element semantically charged), but of a new level of reality, within the social-historical field, the *digital world*. The particularities, possibilities and problematics of this field are opened up both in the ontological-phenomenological context[7] and in the ethical field[8].

This is not a world separated from physical reality, as J. Baetens, O. de Graef, and S. Mandolessi have demonstrated[9], challenging the widespread view of a radical separation between analogue and digital culture. Instead, the authors consider analogue and digital as two complementary forms of intellectual interpretation of the world, arguing that, on the one hand, human thought has always been characterised by certain forms of digital encoding in terms of communication and architectural design, while on the other hand, essential parts of the old analogue culture not only survive but are enriched by their interaction with new digital technologies.

But who inhabits this world? Is it a world dominated by human users or by algorithmic machines? The public launch of ChatGPT in late 2022 has created a worldwide sensation that seems to question our control over communication.

3. *The challenge of talking to ChatGPT*

In the last weeks of 2022, the company OpenAI released a free online demo of the machine, described as being able to «answer persistent questions, admit mistakes, challenge incorrect assumptions, and reject inappropriate requests».

Obviously, we are dealing with an innovation that will lead to more sophisticated models, even more human, that will further bridge the gap between the impression given by a human and artificial intelligence. In a Matrix-type dystopia, we can imagine various dystopian alternative scenarios, up to the complete enslavement

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[7] Cf. L. Qvortrup, *Cyberspace as Representation of Space Experience: in Defence of a Phenomenological Approach*, in *Virtual Space: Spatiality in Virtual Inhabited 3D Worlds*, Springer, London 2002.

[8] Cf. P. Brey, *New Media and the Quality of Life*, in «Techné: Journal of the Society for Philosophy and Technology», 3, n. 1, 1998, pp. 1-23; P. Brey, *Disclosive Computer Ethics*, in «Computers and Society», 30, n. 4, 2000, pp. 10-16; R. Capurro, *Between Trust and Anxiety. On the Moods of Information Society*, in «Ethical Space: the International Journal of Communication», 2, n. 4, 2004, pp. 18-21; R. Capurro, *Digital Hermeneutics: an Outline*, in «AI & Society», 35, n. 1, 2010, pp. 35-42.

[9] Cf. J. Baetens, O. de Graef, S. Mandolessi, *Digital Reason A Guide to Meaning, Medium and Community in a Modern World*, Leuven University Press, Leuven 2015.

of humanity to the machine. If we check ourselves a little, we may find that such fantasies contain doses of pleasure, like any fantasy of future dangers. At the same time, we are safe, or at least that is what the success of Matrix-type dystopias shows at the level of the social imaginary. We can wonder more realistically about the consequences of this particular model, which may render the educational system of written assignments obsolete if students resort to ChatGPT for tasks.

But we have already gone deep into the human. We are already imagining. We already find pleasure or curiosity, or stimulation in our imagination. Already the use of the machine activates all our creative imagination that generates visions related to the use and mobilises emotional reactions, of surprise at least, in the user. The creative imagination is based on the primary cognitive faculty of projecting ourselves into the world, which manifests itself very simply in anthropomorphism. Two dots and a curve are enough to see a face on a surface. The ability to discover personal will and self-activity in the stars and in the geophysical environment is the foundation of cultural structures of indeterminate depth. So it is logical to confuse the machine with a face; it is an extension and condensation of the capacity to hypostatise the abstract and personify the abstract. This is an effect of digital immersion.

Immersion leads us "beyond the screen", where the interaction between the subject and the environment is not experienced as external, between two independent entities, but as internal, as belonging to a shared environment under a common configuration[10]. However, our ability to connect with the digital world does not mean that AI has cognitive abilities.

John R. Searle developed some serious arguments against the equation of intelligence with computation and the interpretation of the mind as a digital computer.

In 1990 Searle formulated the "Chinese Room Argument": he assumed a perfect computer that simulates knowing Chinese by running an algorithmic program that provides the correct response to each query in Chinese. We input Chinese phrases and receive, as output, correct Chinese responses. Let us imagine, says the American, that he, a human subjectivity, is in a closed room with two lockers and an English version of the same program. Logically, he could also receive Chinese phrases and give correct Chinese responses by carrying out the program's suggestions. Each observer, its responses are as correct as the computer's. But here, an additional datum is introduced. He does *not know Chinese*. He is sure he *doesn't* know Chinese. *He does not understand the meaning of* his responses. By implication, it is wrong to conclude that a digital computer *understands* the meaning of what he says simply because he is running the program of uttering the words: «The formal syntax of the program does not in itself ensure the presence of mental contents [...] *syntax* is not the same as, nor is it in

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[10] Cf. M. Augé, *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*, tr. by J. Howe, Verso, London - New York 1995; P. Zhai, *Get Real: A Philosophical Adventure in Virtual Reality*, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Maryland 1998; A. Borgmann, *Holding On to Reality: The Nature of Information at the Turn of the Century*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1999; P. Brey, *The Social Ontology of Virtual Environments*, in «The American Journal of Economics and Sociology», 62, n. 1, 2003, pp. 269-282; R. Coyne, *Spaces, Spatiality and Technology*, Springer, Dordrecht 2005.

itself sufficient for, *semantics*»[11]. So, it has already been shown that we *cannot* reduce meaning to syntactic structure; we cannot establish that a machine thinks in terms of its responses. Subjectivity resists objectification because of its access to a world of *meanings*.

Talking to God is more absurd than talking to an artificial intelligence.

But the AI itself is not a subject. It is an artefact built to respond by mimicking patterns of behaviour. It draws behavioural patterns from vast feedback databases provided by the communicative actions of actual human subjects, the users. So our company is fooling us, as only humans can fool humans for exclusively human purposes.

The use of the demo is not free. The accuracy and learning re-learning of the machine must be based on human feedback. It requires the user's personal data, the mapping and recording their behaviour and, more importantly, their active interaction with the machine. These provide the raw material for machine learning. On a massive scale, they create what Shoshana Zuboff in her book *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism* calls "behavioural surplus"[12], which, as early as 2002, Google's search engine algorithms have been using to create the databases they process for surveillance, personalisation and targeting of each user with advertising products. This digital surveillance economy that drives what Zuboff calls "surveillance capitalism" (or surveillance capitalism) requires the cooperation of users who become products and raw materials and also means of refining and developing the behavioural surveillance mechanism to produce algorithms to predict behaviour statistically[13]. This is how machines learn what we teach them without our awareness.

It seems strange that man is alienated from the machine that creates him; it is an eminently human characteristic that society is alienated from its institutions. Typically humans should understand how the machines they create work, much more than their pets, which are autonomous creatures, do. And yet, institutionalised political heteronomy makes technoscience[14] the exclusive domain of closed technoscientific circles and tightly sealed, through hierarchy and exclusion, institutions that create a climate of mystification around technologies. Google does not disclose information about the algorithms it uses to monitor and record the users of its machines. Still, it does not cease to produce misinformation about their purposes and function. It creates impressions. I think the key phrase is "make it look that way". And therein lies the great danger.

Human subjects are prone to impressions. Not because human cognition is tabula rasa but because the human imagination spontaneously invests every new impression with emotional and conceptual load, assimilating, metabolising and

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[11] J. Searle, *Is the brain a digital computer?*, in «Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association», 64, n. 3, 1990, pp. 21-37.

[12] Cf. S. Zuboff, *The age of surveillance capitalism*, Profile Books, New York 2019.

[13] *Ibidem*.

[14] C. Castoriadis, *The Castoriadis Reader*, cit., p. 346.

interpreting the real psychically. Every message addressed to us creates the impression of a speaking subject because we are speaking subjects.

But I argue that while AI can write poetry, it cannot read poetry.

Let's make an imaginary case. Suppose an alien spy copies ChatGPT's "Soft"ware and algorithmic model precisely and transfers it to their planet, where they have their own internet, in a language all their own, completely non-human, with radically different meanings, which the alien converts into raw data for the machine. Will the machine be able to function as if it were an alien? Logically, yes. Will anyone understand the difference? Certainly not. The first impression everyone will retain is their own impression.

But therein lies the huge problem. The machine belongs to someone. The data it processes belongs to the management of some institutions. In our case, a private company within the digital capitalist oligarchy. The technological system is necessarily embedded, supported and interacts with the dominant political and economic institutions. They also define the finality of techno-scientific constructions.

The machine is designed to mislead and misinform because the criterion for the success of artificial intelligence is to conceal from the user the knowledge that it is artificial intelligence. Misleading means the ability to create the impression of individual purposes that mask the general purpose, which is to extract behavioural data to manipulate the population, to turn interpersonal communication into capital. So much so that it creates informational capital even to create machines to simulate faces, to simulate interpersonal communication. Enormous possibilities of surveillance and manipulation embedded in the capitalist system have as their driving contradiction the transformation of subjects into objective values and reification. The opposite dynamic, the transformation of objects into subjective simulations, is latent in every system's metabolism towards individualised heteronomy.

Individualised heteronomy is inherent in the system's functioning as it shifts from mass production to individualised consumption. But it is also inscribed in the institutions of political representation, constituting an impersonal bureaucratic system of governance where the technocratic mechanics of power already mediates human communication. Moreover, the pseudo-public personalised digital space of the corporate internet exacerbates the user's alienation from the institutions of governance.

The mechanisms of manipulation become more effective as they become more invisible, while the mechanisms of authority seek maximum interaction. Therefore, the issue raised is critical.

A further question, beyond whether we can distinguish the machine from the human, is whether we will prefer the machine.

This helps us understand what kind of events make up cyberspace. If we take it as a semantic space, then the physical events of the material infrastructure are meaningless, but neither are the "Soft"ware codes. Instead, what is meaningful are the narratives exchanged within and across cyberspace between active subjects –

users. Therefore, cyberspace consists of historical events that are meaningful only to users.

Historicity is external to the digital electronic system but immanent to the real subject – the user. Time is transformed and multiplied in the digital-only to the extent that it is permeated by active human interaction.

There is no objectivity without a plurality of subjects – but there cannot be a plurality of subjects without the social-historical that makes them subjects: temporality can only be intersubjective/intersubjective, that is, social-historical since there is no plurality except as a subset of society, not as an initial state. So historicity and meaning are external to the digital electronic system because narrativity is not algorithmic. Why? Because human temporality is not an algorithmic state.

Cyberspace is not an emergent phenomenon of the rationality of the technical system but a phenomenon of integrating the technical system into the everyday human social-historical environment. But this means it is a new field for new narratives, reflections, and identities. That is, it is a new ontological field, the field of digital existence, of telepresence.

But what is telepresence?

4. *What is telepresence?*

In the early 1990s, when I was at school, I corresponded with a girl in the traditional way. At some point, our correspondence was interrupted. One of the letters had never reached its destination. It was an unexpected but not-so-rare event that interrupted our disembodied, long-distance communication. It was a fault of the communication system, the interaction platform, i.e. the post office, and a disadvantage of the slow temporality of transmission, the physical transfer of the message through a succession of stations, somewhere in time and route. The message, the letter, was lost.

The absence of a response was not a non-response since the original message was never received. It was an involuntary non-response, not a non-response, not a voluntary statement of refusal. The result, the communication breakdown, was an accident, not the result of the will of any of the correspondents. The silence, since it contained no intention, no clear meaning, was ambiguous and caused a gradual anxiety that spread and watered down time according to the length of the expectation of a response – according to the distance, an expectation that might last months before it was denied.

The slow timing of communication and the ambiguity of the reception of the message also characterised the different quality of the correspondence. The handwritten address to the absent person was in itself a slow process; the careful writing of the letter, the necessary condensation of many events and feelings into a few lines, the condensation of days and months of absence into words, involved, along with the active activity of the sender, the potential presence of the absent person, as a ghost of the recipient, guiding every step of the letter's dispatch. He was

present during the writing, he was present during the proofreading, and he was present during the journey to the post office. The letter's disappearance in the post box already contained a moment of satisfaction, an imaginary meeting of the absent, an imaginary foreshadowing of the thrill of the coming moment when the letter would arrive and the reply would be on its way, a foretaste of fulfilment. The small ritual of writing the letter was in itself a gesture of bridging the distance, an address to the absent, which was reduplicated and multiplied by the unique physical presence of the letter and its personal content. They were small gestures that made up for the system's errors, just as the letter itself was inadequate when it asked to make up for the presence of the absent.

The new interaction platforms with disembodied digital telecommunications have fixed the system bug. It is immediate and instantaneous, and the message is not a physical entity but a digital code that can be reproduced as is without residue. The absence of a reply can only be intentional, indicating the recipient's refusal to communicate – a statement of non-response. Digital online communication does not include waiting times, only sending times, delivery times, and response times, which are not separated but create a consecutive time unit – unless the recipient, the absent one, does not respond.

Then a digital paradox is created. When the absent person does not answer, he becomes genuinely absent. It is a feature of digital communication that every user is always potentially present. In social networks, digital profiles and avatars are always available, that is, always accessible.

Telepresence is, by definition, the essence of telecommunication. Every form of telecommunication, from the telephone to video calling on Skype or Facebook, is based on this imaginary metonymy of the face, which makes a person's voice and image a substitute for their physical presence.

As we live in a world of the symbolic order and in a society of exhaustive classification, a person's face is interchangeable with their footprint, especially in interaction platforms where the digital footprint replaces the body. Thus, non-response replaces silence in a world where telepresence is taken for granted and a condition of participation. Because the interaction platform, the digital communication network, offers constant accessibility in exchange for continuous participation. It provides the platform in exchange for the content since it remains inactive without active user interaction; it provides the permanent presence, the digital elimination of distance, in exchange for the users, whose data become material to be exploited.

With the technology of Smartphones, which merged the telephone call with digital social networks, the user is always online, always accessible and digitally present. The cyberspace of social networks is constituted as a virtual, permanent here-and-now, with no room for the elsewhere-and-then, which dissolve, like illusions, in the pure virtual space of the Internet, where everything is adjacent, and everything is connected.

The telepresence of users creates the virtual place; it is a virtual place of digital communication.

Therefore, telepresence is an immanent component of cyberspace; accessibility is an element of its mode of existence, the digital object and the digital pseudo-subject (digital trace of the subject) are by definition related to the user's visibility and attention, whose fields and modes are nevertheless reconfigured according to the terms of digital communication. The screen, the surface of interaction, replaces the depth of the physical encounter; as the profile flattens the face, the screen draws attention, absorbs the living gaze, and disperses it over a surface of signs.

Bernhard Waldenfels observes: «Electronic displays are the mechanisms of attention and contribute to the constitution of reality, not merely to the transmission of meaning»[15]. Telepresence is not only continuous and uninterrupted; it is potentially immortal. Digital profiles do not age; they do not undergo physical temporality, they are not thrown in and out of the world; they are only in the virtual place of which they are elements. On the digital platform, their physical presence does not correspond to the significance of their presence in cyberspace. In the physical world, they exist as light signals, combinations of bits, while in cyberspace they exist as symbols, combinations of meanings. In digital communication, no gesture underpins or completes the message; the whole message is contained in the symbol. The absence of physicality in digital communication is more pronounced than its absence in merely disembodied communication through letters (correspondence), because there is an immediacy to the instantaneous interaction that substitutes, without replacing, physical presence. The annihilation of the transmission time embedded in the old forms of disembodied communication has made modern telecommunication as immediate as actual physical interaction. However, the absence of corporeality completely changes communication limits, risks and scope. There is an emptiness, an immanent absence at the heart of digital perpetual presence, the lack of physical, embodied subjectivity.

But the relation of consciousness to the body is not univocal and consciousness does not reside in the present of the body. The body is not merely an object of consciousness, it is a magma of bodily meanings, inextricably intertwined with psychic meanings, but not in symmetrical correspondence or equivalence with them. The embodied soul, the subject, the individual human being, is in itself a magma of bodily, psychic and social meanings, singular representational ruse.

There is a somatic imagination, similar to the animal imagination, as the body creates the sensations, transforming external shocks into images. The bodily imagination is constitutive of the sensuality of the world and of a sense of temporality, of here-and-now-ness. There is a presence of the body and an internal representation

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[15] B. Wandelfels, *Phenomenology of the alien: Basic concepts*, Northwestern University Press, New York 2011, p. 64.

of the body, which is not transparent, as we often cannot locate the bodily source of a pain, but only the pain – but it is constant.

This deep field of totality is not broken by telepresence. Still, an immeasurable distance is established between consciousness and physicality, with the latter retreating beyond the gaze without ceasing to interact with the psyche.

As far as intersubjectivity is concerned, a new unbridgeable gap opens up between the body of the subject and the body of the other, which withdraws beyond the field of communication.

Waldenfels notes:

> The problem, in fact, lies not in telepresence, which increases our own possibilities to the level where distance is abolished, but in tele-absence, which withdraws from its own access. [...] Here the technical means are confronted with the limit of representationality, without being able to represent the limit itself...[16].

And, as Norm Friesen explains, what lies beyond the limit of representation is embodied, physical presence, what we might call self-facing presence. The body as «simultaneous self-reference and self-withdrawal»,[17] as a complex of «active and passive meanings», voluntary and involuntary gestures and expressions, movements with intention, reflexive movements and bodily functions, cannot be captured and depicted by technologies of telepresence, which «refract, distort, delay and disperse» the meanings of self-facing presence. While abolishing distance in communication, telepresence presupposes the withdrawal of corporeality concerning the other (which distance imposes anyway) and the user himself, whose consciousness is submerged in the shallow surface of the screen. At the same time, his attention is compressed into the mediated field of symbols. As a result, a new form of alienation occurs between the subject and his image, to the extent that his image becomes autonomous from his presence and represents the personal totality that it fragments.

In cyberspace, the digital trace of the subject is constantly in the here-and-now; this is the constant telepresence. The pseudo-subject of digital communication is constantly accessible. At the same time, the physical body, the embodied subject, and the real subjectivity are constantly in the Here-and-Now – the constant telepresence. The real subject of digital communication is permanently inaccessible. Telepresence and telepresence are the two intertwined dimensions of digital representation, not in a relation of opposition but in a relation of mutual implication. Disembodied digital communication leaves no room for silence; silence is not complemented by physical presence and all the subtle expressions and gestures with which it fills it, while it has no room for touch, which is expressed without words. But it does have room for the voice and the letter. It reproduces all the limitations of the written word in the immediate temporal duration of oral communication, without the

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[16] Id., *Ortsverschiebungen, Zeitverschiebungen: Modi leibhafter Erfahrung*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt 2009, p. 110.
[17] Cf. N. Friesen, *Waldenfels' Responsive Phenomenology of the Alien: An Introduction*, in «Phenomenology & Practice», 7, n. 2, 2014, pp. 68-77.

richness of indivisible meanings of corporeality nor the danger of face-to-face communication.

It is thus offered for ad hominem attacks, for trolling, for anonymous social outcry, for spreading fake news and extreme intolerant views, and for reproducing slogans. It lends itself to the audacity of timidity, although disembodiment does not eliminate the emotional and psychological risks. Various studies link the use of digital networks with cases of depression and alienation, and related syndromes such as Internet gaming disorder are already included in clinical textbooks.

In contemporary political discourse, and especially in the English-speaking world, the debate between individualists and communitarians is moving into the new field of e-governance and digital democracy. Cornelius Castoriadis observed as early as the 1970s that the latest information technology available makes it possible to provide the population with the necessary information to make decisions based on knowledge[18].

5. *Digital Ontologies*

At this point, we can make some points. First, the digital world constitutes a virtual reality not as a reflection, but as a recreation of the social-historical world, a new field of political and economic competition, in open interaction with the wider social environment.

The emergence of the Internet constitutes a social-historical intersection in the social, epistemological and ontological field, an ontological revolution[19]. It accompanies the constitution of a new level of reality within the social-historical field, which has the property of being autonomous in a representational sense.

A reminder is necessary. As we said at the beginning, the term "ontology", which has been part of the philosophical vocabulary for centuries, takes on a new meaning in the context of information theory. Tom Gruber in the early 1990s introduced the idea of "ontology" in information theory:

> In the context of knowledge sharing, I use the term ontology as the formulation of a conceptualization. That is, an ontology is a description (like a formal formatting of a program) of the concepts and relationships that can exist for an agent/actor or a community of agents/actors[20].

Therefore, an ontology in this context defines a relationship of good information ordering concerning a list of formal commands that regulate the value of

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[18] C. Castoriadis, *The Castoriadis Reader*, cit., p. 301.

[19] A. Schismenos, *Castoriadis Against Heidegger*, Aftoleksi, Athens 2023, pp. 403-409.

[20] T.R. Gruber, *A translation approach to portable ontologies*, in «Knowledge Acquisition», 5, n. 2, 1993, pp. 199-220.

signs and set common data collection sites (data sets) to information. It is a formal representation of data to organise information and describe a cognitive domain.

An ontology, as a code for exchanging and assembling data into standard information sets, defines a domain and determines the value of its constituent elements. It defines ways of interpreting and algorithmically classifying them into information, i.e. sequences of signs with practical meaning[21].

The fact that the information ontology is consistent but not complete shows, on the one hand, that it is not simply limited to classificatory classes but is constituted as linguistic systems whose elements are not merely formal but convey knowledge through the exchange of contents. It goes beyond mere taxonomy, conveying evaluations of objects by reducing them to a common interpretation. In real life, a word can have many meanings and describe many objects or, on the other hand, an object can be given many names. There is a distance between the sign and the object, a vague field of imaginary labelling.

In computer language, the sign is the object, it does not represent the object, so constructed ontologies are constituted as systems of signs, the interpretation of which is their architecture, their assembly into conceptual sets whose elemental value/hierarchy is prescribed. Unlike an ontology of the world, information ontologies do not refer to the object, nor do they constitute a representation of the object, but they include an object as a representation; they create their object directly through the association of information since their object is information. By defining the exchange/equivalence value of information items, each ontology of an information domain defines how to evaluate items based on a prescribed and predetermined use value, an externally (developer) given purpose. Here the ultimate operant schema is the schema of (instrumental) finality.

Artificial information ontologies are finite structures within the more comprehensive social-historical matrix, where the meaning and significance of data emerge in the dimension where the exchange of information does not just constitute a common territory, but includes a world of meaning in open interaction with the public field of social imaginary meanings, which it reproduces, disperses and transforms.

So the ultimate deciding factor is still the social imaginary and the political imagination of digital communities and users, as it seems to have all been in the human world. In their last book, *The Dawn of Everything*, anthropologists David Graeber and David Wengrow illuminate the notion of self-determination from the very dawn of humanity. They argue: «[…] the intricate webs of cultural difference that came to characterize human societies after the end of the last Ice Age must surely have involved a degree of political introspection»[22]. We might expect the same, if not more, from the intricate webs of digital communities.

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[21] Cf. T.R. Gruber, *Toward principles for the design of ontologies used for knowledge sharing*, in «International Journal of Human-Computer Studies», 43, n. 4-5, 1995, pp. 907-928.

[22] D. Graeber, D. Wengrow, *The Dawn of Everything: A New History of Humanity*, Penguin Books, London 2021.

The digital world opens up two opposing perspectives. On the one hand, the Internet offers the possibility of a new democratic humanism characterised by horizontality, free exchange and the commons. But, on the other hand, it provides the possibility of a new semi-inclusive anti-humanism equally if the emphasis is on the development of capital, the expansion of neoliberalism, the registration of the population, the de-personalization of communication, social isolation and control. The difference is political and lies in the meaning of digital communication as a communicative act.