4. The ontological revolution:
On the phenomenology of the internet

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Abstract
Cogitation described as calculation, the living being described as a machine, cognitive functions considered as algorithmic sequences and the 'mechanization' of the subjective were the theoretical elements that late heideggerian anti–humanism, especially in France was able to utilize[1], even more so, after the second cybernetics or post-cybernetics movement of the late '60s introduced the concepts of the autopoietic and the allopoietic automata[2]. Recently, neurologists pose claims on the traditional epistemological field of philosophy, proceeding from this ontological decision, the equation of human cognition to cybernetic systems.

The emergence of the world-wide-web in the 1990s and the global expansion of the internet during the first decades of the 21st century indicate the fallacies of the cybernetics programme to mechanize the mind. We stand witnesses to a semantic colonization of the cybernetic system, a social imaginary creation and expansion within the digital ensemblistic – identitarian organization that cannot be described by mechanical or cybernetic terms. Paradoxically, cyberspace, as a new being, a form of alterity, seems to both exacerbate and capsize the polarization between the operational and the symbolic. The creation of the internet might be more than an epistemological revolution, to use the terminology of Thomas Kuhn. It might be an ontological revolution.

I will try to demonstrate that the emergence of the Internet refutes any such claims, since its context and utility can only be described by means of a social epistemology based on the understanding of social significances as continuous creations of an anonymous social imaginary proposed by Cornelius Castoriadis (1922-1997). I will try to explore some social-semantic aspects of the cyberspace as a nexus of social representations of the individual identity that forms a new sphere of being, where the subjective and the objective merge in a virtual subjective objectivity with unique epistemological attributes and possibilities.

Keywords
Cybernetics, social epistemology, cyberspace, Cartesian humanism, information, discourses, ideologies, anti-humanism, world-wide-web

[1]Richard Wolin, The Heidegger Controversy. (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1993), pp 287-296.
[2]Francisco J. Varela, Principles of Biological Autonomy. (New York: Elsevier North-Holland, Inc., 1979).

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When Martin Heidegger prophesized the end of philosophy, during his infamous last interview[1] in 1966, the *Der Spiegel* journalist justly asked: "*Who or what will take its place?*" Heidegger responded: "*Cybernetics*", thus directing his descendants' attention towards the cybernetics movement, which was introduced earlier by Norbert Wiener[2] as the scientific study of control and communicational systems of human beings and animals. Cybernetics, combining the theory of information with the theories of control that sprung during WW2, attempted to describe thought as calculation, using the algorithmic paradigm of the Turing machines.

Cogitation described as calculation, the living being described as a machine, cognitive functions considered as algorithmic sequences and the 'mechanization' of the subjective were the theoretical elements that late heideggerian anti–humanism, especially in France was able to utilize[3], even more so, after the second cybernetics or post-cybernetics movement of the late '60s introduced the concepts of the autopoietic and the allopoietic automata[4]. Recently, neurologists pose claims on the traditional epistemological field of philosophy, proceeding from this ontological decision, the equation of human cognition to cybernetic systems.

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[1] *Der Spiegel*. May 1st 1976
[2] Norbert Wiener, *Cybernetics, or control and communication in the animal and the machine*. (Paris: Hermann & Cie, 1948) & (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1961).
[3] Richard Wolin, *The Heidegger Controversy*. (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1993), pp 287-296.
[4] Francisco J. Varela, *Principles of Biological Autonomy.* (New York: Elsevier North-Holland, Inc., 1979).

of being, where the subjective and the objective merge in a virtual subjective objectivity with unique epistemological attributes and possibilities.

Regardless whether cybernetics represent the completion of Cartesian humanism, as Heidegger declared, or its destruction, as J.P. Dupuy claims [5], most post-structuralists, deconstructionists and network sociologists like Bruno Latur used the cybernetic systems as examples of the dehumanization of social and ideological formations and as justifications of a profound anti-humanism. Underlying both those theories and the current claims of neurology and neuroscience on the traditional epistemological fields of consciousness and thought, is a simplistic ontological axiom that seeks to replace the active subjectivity of the individual with an impersonal, dynamic plexus of information, discourses, ideologies and neuronal synapses. To use the terminology of Cornelius Castoriadis[6], it is an ensemblistic – identitary (ensidic) ontology, that is constructed upon the fundamental axiom of determination and the categories of identity and ensemblistic logic, an ontology enclosed in the frame of an ultimate determinism.

When confronted with that current of anti-humanism we should recite Castoriadis: *"(…) human theoretical activity lies in its discovery and exploration of new regions. It therefore only makes progress when it confers new significations upon the already available 'categories' and, even more importantly, posits/invents new 'categories'*."[7] Thought as a creative action, beyond algorithmic calculations, as a *vis formandi* of the world of social significances, presupposes human subjectivity and the conscious activity of the actual individual. However, this individual cannot be radically separated from his or her social-historical environment that is his or her ontological horizon within which any concept is formulated, evaluated and justified.

The emergence of the world-wide-web in the 1990s and the global expansion of the internet during the first decades of the 21st century indicate the fallacies of the cybernetics programme to mechanize the mind. We stand witnesses to a semantic colonization of the cybernetic system, a social

[5] Jean-Pierre Dupuy, *The Mechanization of the Mind: On the Origins of Cognitive Science*, trans. M.B. DeBevoise, (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2000).
[6] Cornelius Castoriadis, *The Imaginary Institution of Society*, trans. Kathleen Blamey (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1987), pp 221-229.
[7] Cornelius Castoriadis, *Crossroads in the Labyrinth*, trans. by M.H. Ryle & K. Soper (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1984), p.219.

imaginary creation and expansion within the digital ensemblistic – identitary organization that cannot be described by mechanical or cybernetic terms. Paradoxically, cyberspace, as a new being, a form of alterity, seems to both exacerbate and capsize the polarization between the operational and the symbolic. The creation of the internet might be more than an epistemological revolution, to use the terminology of Thomas Kuhn. It might be an ontological revolution.

I selected the word 'ontological' to describe the emergence of more than just a new social-historical being (such as the elementary information unit, which appears as a particle or wave charged with significance), the emergence of a completely new plane of reality, within the social-historical plane, that has the ability to become independent of the basic physical plane, on which it is, ultimately, founded.

The internet cyberspace creates, from the point of view of human subjectivity, *sub specie humanitatis*, a completely new objective surface, a *novus locus* for reflection and self-determination. The World Wide Web constitutes a form of objectivity, whose manifestation, appearance and significance has nothing in common with its material substructure or physical foundation. Namely, what we see and transfer via the internet, the semantic information, is something completely different than its material bearer, the electronic wave or particle. So much different, that we could not describe it as the surface of a material structure, like, i.e. a building is perched on the joints of its skeleton and refers to them directly or indirectly. Neither could we describe it as the semantic codification of a fixed system, since the code on which it is matriculated remains strictly operational while the significances that are transmitted construct and refer to autonomous semantic or imaginary inner universes.

What appears on the screen is a visualized meaning, clearly autonomous as regards its content, and its significance. It constitutes the element of a digital universe, which is formed as spectral hologram of multiple private worlds, a new level of social reality with distinct properties and attributes. The epistemological attributes of the digital world, are the predominance of the visual, due to the complete absence of tangibility, where the objects exist exclusively as phenomena and immaterial representations, constantly variable, where the social- historical actualities is more of a metaphor than a referent. Namely, an intrinsically timeless plane of social existence, quite platonic,

which is not mediated through matter, while simultaneously possesses an objective subsistence independent from subjectivity. As such, cyberspace indicates an implicit metaphysics of Space, since within its boundaries, as a superset, Time becomes insignificant and is rendered to a simple logistical calculation, no more a rhythm of distortion or a rate of entropy. Only outside of the digital boundaries, on the physical plane of the actual technical structures, the servers and the hardware, does Time exist as time. Only on the outer surface of its ontological sphere, on its foundation to reality, is the digital universe exposed to temporal becoming. Intrinsically, it is radically time-less, and spatially infinite.

However, this is only one aspect of the internet. Another aspect is the social-historical dimension, as a human creation and the problematic relationships which it erects with its social environment from the point of view of the individual subjectivity.

The emergence of the digital world within the social magma results in the emergence of a new avatar for human subjectivity, a body-less being, fabricated by the actual individual, which constitutes both an ideal shadow and a selected reflection of the latter. The digital identity of each user is already a multitude, a conscious re-composition of the individual, based principally on his own self-image, on the self that the individual herself or himself chooses to fabricate from the fragments of her or his personal existence. The user creates a digital shadow, an 'ego' free from corporality and its restrictions.

This avatar is suited to become a field for imaginary free self-recreation and, as such, it reflects and encompasses the elements that the individual recognizes or invents as the prominent elements of his social and private self-image, in constant reference to the Other without the endangerment that the corporal presence of the Other brings forward. The digital being is thus constructed as an infinite reflection of the individual within the digital objectivity, no longer as a subject, but as an imaginary representation. Here, any terms of Truth are constantly variable.

The digital communities that are created within the cyberspace, are imaginary communities devoid of any actual territoriality, expect any territorial references of descent or imaginary belonging, communities instituted on the basis of choice and free recognition. The borders of these communities are not external, like actual territorial borders, nor are they imposed by any social-

historical 'necessity'. They are specifications of taste, which overcome any spatial division, beyond the divisions that the individual himself places upon himself. This does not result to any chaos but, on the contrary, to an unconscious self-institution of the rules of every digital sub-space. The absence of any external necessities renders those rules arbitrary and, at the same time, highly venerable.

Consequently, what constitutes a delinquency within the internet is any attempt to restrict the freedom of informative and semantic circulation and re-construction. The outlaw is not any hacker that tears down firewalls, but rather any formal authorities that try to impose censorship. Any effort to tear down censorship obstacles is not a denial, but, on the contrary, an affirmation of the nature of the medium, the uninterrupted, free flow of information and re-creation of social imaginary forms. That is why any efforts to control the flow ultimately fail and nothing remains truly hidden, because censorship and concealment are methods that radically oppose the nature of the internet and its constantly re-creative topology.

These above observations could be misunderstood as a description of the isolation of the actual individual from his social-historical environment or as a description of a novel solipsism. However, the internet world is neither a social-historical isolation nor a cognitive encapsulation.

On the one hand, it is obvious that every digital reference reflects manners and trends that are also active in social reality. This is the one side of the coin, the reflection of real social-historical life on the screen. The simultaneous worldwide spread of information in real time actually creates a universal social temporality, with attributes like the un-territorial circulation, the global communal networking and the ability to re-present contemporaneous events of a potential synchronicity. It also creates a universal social historicity, with attributes like the ability to preserve, accumulate and perpetually represent cultural events of a potential diachronicity.

Thus, the immanent historicity of society not only emerges but also expands as an aspect of the social imaginary, through this phenomenological timelessness of the internet that manifests as the conjunction of a synchronic present with a diachronic past towards the future.

Although the internet formulates a global composition of distinct social temporalities in a universal social time, within the cyberspace the experience of subjective temporality crumbles down before the infinity of every possible enclosed proper time of each web page, every digital game, and

each enclosed cyber-world. The phenomenological timelessness of an infinite space offers to each individual the provisional ability to subjectively transcend external temporality without having to submerge to the subconscious, thus absolving the individual from the historicity imposed on her or him by her or his direct social environment. Within the internet, which is an indirect public space, the individual is not imperiled corporally or really, but only symbolically.

I should shortly mention the black economies of online gaming and the respective e-sports, where players compete for huge amounts of money like in real-life Olympics, in digital stadiums with multiples of fans. This trend is prominent in East Asia, where some players enjoy the status of celebrity. But the black economies are more important, with digital game artifacts being exchanged 'underground' for real-life money. Of course, every game-world is but a codex written by the programmers of each company and one would expect that the companies would easily control the pseudo-economies of each game. Yet, in the most popular online game-worlds, like the World Of Warcraft by Blizzard, black markets emerged beyond any administrative control. These black markets, just like in real-life economics, created respective economic bubbles, where the prices of digital artifacts soon skyrocketed, and millions of actual US dollars were exchanged, invested, won or lost. Regardless of any administrative efforts these black markets cannot be confined by anything less than the complete withdrawal of the game itself, since infinite digital space is available to erect their own 'underground' hubs.

This 'invasion' of digital economics in the actual social-historical plane has resulted in concentration camps in China, were prisoners are forced to play online games beyond exhaustion, in order to collect valuable artifacts for the government to sell in the digital black markets. Meanwhile, private companies emerge in other parts of South Asia, which hire professional players to supply the same growing demand.

On the other hand, as recently as 2011, we came to realize that digital networking interaction goes both ways. From the wiki leaks to the Arabian Spring, we experienced an 'invasion' of the internet in history, in the manner that movements which appear firstly online are reproduced, introduced and transferred in the actual social reality. And indeed, in an emphatic way, when freedom of communication and interaction collide with a regime of censorship and obscurantism, as

happened in the Middle East. It was not by accident that social media, like Facebook, assumed a liberating aspect in the Arabian world; it was because their function suggested ways of free communication to a society of closed, critique-proof imaginary significations. The digital subjectivity, without the burden of corporality, found the significance of freedom in its individuality. The most surprising thing was that the actual individual came down the streets to protest and thus placed her or his actual corporeal body in direct danger, in order to defend this significance. It was as if a virus of freedom was transmitted electronically.

The fact that the Arabian Spring insurrection led to the emergence of new militaristic dictatorships or Islamic fundamentalists is just another proof of the limited penetrative force of any significances in a hostile, traditional, heteronomous and enclosed indigenous imaginary plexus.

The new ontological attributes of constant communication and non material objectivity have the potential to liberate the individual from the necessities of material identities. Thus, the constitutive material foundations of belonging were shattered and new, completely imaginary institutive forms emerged.

The global 'Occupy' movement first started through digital messaging and quickly overcame digitality without much effort, thus creating another form of free interactions, bringing forth the project of direct democracy in the actual social reality. The individuals that occupied public space firstly met in cyberspace of the internet, without the need of a rigid ideological pact to ensure everyone's presence in an ideologically confined space. On the contrary, what occurred was a free and conscious reclaim and opening of actual public space. Since public space emerged a social place outside state authority, everything became simple. The faceless multitude or the masses are not the appropriate concepts for the foundation of a free community of individuals. Contrariwise, we saw an infinite networking of collective personalities. 'Portals' of communication and 'interfaces' of action where freely created, where each individual could participate where she or he chose, exactly because the concepts of desire and reflective choice replaced duty and metaphysical necessity.

Autonomous individuality, reflective thought, free public space and time, the collective individual, were all concepts that emerged from the depths of a society ruled by the imaginary of heteronomy, outside and against it, in a most practical manner. The fact that this spirit of freedom

spread like fire throughout western societies proves that direct democracy appears as an almost natural way of social institution when the free collective individuality, the actual individual becomes the subject of political decision. It also suggests that the manner of free networking of the digital world is a reflection of some already present ways of networking in the real world, which remained regionally isolated until now.

This virtual space that the internet provides, expands with a plethora of websites, portals, etc that is constantly created, communicated, recreated, and increases. Cyberspace, without a tangible outer limit, equals the sum of the cyber-localities that exist in any given moment, but expands chaotically, and can be presented as a potentially infinite superset that is also available as a locus for the transmission and transmutation of the social significances on the scale of a global, yet personal, human interaction and communication. A form of communication that is simultaneous, free and essentially incorporeal, also allows minor or suppressed ideas to be presented worldwide and local confrontations or resistance to address a global audience. Without any actual censorship authority inside the means itself, the success or rejection of any transmitted information/significance depends really on the broader socio-historical environment of the recipient.

This makes the internet dangerous for authorities and makes authorities vulnerable to the internet. Whereas the establishment clashes with society over public space in social reality, in the digital reality there is also a clash between state and corporate organizations and the society of individual users. The movement for digital freedom meets the social movements in the internet, thus transferring social conflicts to the digital communication hubs. The struggle between state services and the hacker communities like the Anonymous, or individuals like Julian Assange, intensifies and escalates proportionally to the social conflicts of actual reality. The efforts to control the web resulted, among other things, to the emergence of the 'deep web' or 'dark web' where encrypted information are transmitted by techniques of dispersion and recollection, like, for example is the operation of the Tor network. New digital ethics are created and the question whether these could be conventionalized is posed by necessity.

The imaginary multiplication of the digital person is nevertheless accompanied, by a semantic leveling of the actual person to the specular dimension. Cyberspace is the surface of visible

representations that address directly to the sense of vision and the semantic field that is defined by the visible dimension of reality and secondly to the sense of hearing as a sensationalistic addendum to the visible world. Not only is the reception of the digital information primarily visual, but the navigation and use of the internet is also based and constructed around the sense of vision. I should add that the visual dimension is just a surface layer of the representative magma of consciousness to which all senses participate equally, but also a dimension to which the blind members of humanity have limited access. So, although the cyberspace claims universality, this universality is practically fictitious.

Therefore, beyond the ensemblistic-identitary dimension of the internet as a functional network for the direct transfer and spreading of information, its imaginary-semantic dimension as a cyber-world for representation and reconstruction of symbolic significances and meanings presents a horizon of limited amplitude but of a potentially infinite semantic depth. The fetishized images that reflected the iconic significances of modern society become encoded points of diversity in a digitally indifferent space, able to include any possible meaning of the global social imaginary.

In conclusion, as I aforementioned, the relationship between the digital subjectivity and the actual individual and her or his social-historical environment is deeply problematic. It is a relationship of pure reference, without external restrictions, were the individual imagination can roam unbounded. Besides the obvious psychological perils for the individual, which have resulted to the founding of gaming rehab clinics, the danger of an acquired digital autism, the internet opens new areas of endangerment as regards public discourse and public deliberation, since the internet public space is an indirect public space, and not subjected to the social variations, natural alterations and political restrictions of actual public space and time. It lacks the accountability of actual public life and the temporal and objective directness of corporeal presence. In contrast to the use of the internet by social movements, the dominant majority leans towards a manner of 'public' privatization. The de-corporealization of consciousness within the internet most often results in a de-corporealization of the sentiment, which produces a fictional digital public discourse, which, however public, is projected from the actually private space of the house.

Respectively, the direct and constant flow of information corresponds equally to a semantic downgrading similar to the dialectics of quantity and quality raised to the superlative. The contraction of the temporal duration of the dissemination of information to near zero causes a proportional contraction of the significance charge of the disseminate. The potentially infinite repeatability of information weakens its temporal gravity on the social imaginary. The object, having been signified as the social representation of the object itself, now becomes a representation of the representation and so on, while the gap between actual and mental experience widens.

Digital objects are par excellence phenomenological and essentially semantic objects, deprived of material value, charged with dense symbolic value. As icons, they are selective representations of actual objects with a self-reliant symbolic content that is reflected on the cyberspace as potentially infinite, by means of indeterminacy. As such, they compose an ever-present digital universe, which is a distorted representation of the superset of society, as every social individual herself or himself chooses to depict her or his proper world. Since every social media avatar or profile survives the physical death of the user, like a mummified and crystallized digital self-image, soon a digital universe of the past of humanity will be formed, where the semantic traces of the dead will continue to shine, like the dead stars on the night sky.

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