

Living the trivial and immediacy in the digital territory

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1. *Introduction and perspective*

In every disruptive historical process, the question of nihilism reappears. In deep transformations, there are losses related to the ends of cycles, and new values emerge that show themselves as new beginnings, accompanied by great promises but without clear horizons. These are moments of doubt and suspicion, which cause us to stagger on our consolidated traditions and ways of thinking, through which we obtain the sense that guides us in the world. The subject needs to understand himself again creatively and risking an interpretation about his personal identity and his social relations, in order to faithfully follow his duty to be himself.

In contemporary world, disruption comes from technological innovations that affect the ways of human communication. In particular, interactive digital technologies, which offer new mediations and relationships of alterity. Through these technologies we can keep connected with people who are physically far away but affectively close, or interact with unknown people and even with strangers we will never meet outside the digital environment. The relevant fact is that the contemporary subject has access to a connectivity everywhere and anytime through individual and mobile devices, and that he makes an intensive use of them. In fact, technologies captivate us so that we spend many hours per day online, in which we do many things, such as playing, accessing to information, learning, ordering purchases or financial operations and disseminating ethical or political messages.

The issue is that the intensive use of the Internet and social media promises, on the one hand, support for human development and to facilitate everyday life but, on the other hand, it seems to trivialize existence, allowing the

subject to be aware of himself in the present, but being emptied of the inner life that gives meaning to his identity. The platforms constantly show and share contents that at first sight lack of value (as a kind of simple exteriorization of life, of what we do and feel, of the place in which we are) and that are also ephemeral. For many, life is lived only to the extent that it is shown to others online.

In this paper we wonder if the abundance of trivial content immediately shared without filters, which promptly disappear, is an expression of a new form of nihilism, perfectly coherent with the idea of a disoriented and thoughtless subject, or if, on the contrary, it is the expression of an existential resistance of the subject to the threat of dissolution that comes from the indifference of others. This approach will allow us to discuss the type of existence of the contemporary subject that emerges from the fusion between the real world and the digital one and, also, to point out some patterns about the mediations that act in the configuration of his identity.

2. Living in the digital territory

For beginning this analysis, we need to ask what interactive communication technologies are and how we relate to them. From the 1960s to the present, the dominant interpretation follows McLuhan's perspective, according to which communication technologies are extensions of human body that enhance its cognitive and operational capabilities. This tradition continues so far with media ecology studies. In this direction, interactive platforms are tools that should be incorporated to everyday life and be used effectively. The greater the development of technologies, the greater the responsibility of the subject to know how to take advantage of their functionalities. Thus, the human meaning of technologies is given by the possibility of overcoming the natural and always limited capacities of human beings.

On the contrary, there is another conception about technologies that has gained ground in recent years. Instead of prostheses added to the body, interactive platforms such as social media are a territory in which we live (Coul-dry, 2017). In social sciences, the concept of territory implies a space of connections always open to new connections (Massey, 2005) which becomes a lived territory (Capel, 2016). As we spend a lot of time digitally connected, we develop multiple actions engaging others. Technologies are not external tools *with* which we do things, but devices that enable the creation of a space *in* which we interact with others, we understand ourselves, we exchange

meanings and values, we design a shared future.

If digital platforms are more than technological tools but a space where we live in, it means that there is no more reason for splitting the real and the virtual worlds, as if they are parallel dimensions of reality. On the contrary, some interactions that start offline consolidate in the digital environment, and some other interactions are developed online, but are enhanced in the physical world. Two examples of this continuity: we create a group on a platform with coworkers to exchange information, resources and schedule activities; we call through social media to participate in a protest against a measure taken by the government, but the demonstration takes place in the physical public space.

The existence of the contemporary subject is crossed by this continuity of the reality. His own identity is shaped through what he does in both territories. What he mainly does in the digital territory is: a) to pass the time (many hours every day); b) to share content, and c) to show or express himself.

3. Sharing the trivial

What is shared on social media is a content that shows or expresses oneself. From a linguistic point of view, it is a speech act addressed to another user, who receives and answers or ignores what is said. According to a critical perspective, shared content on Internet is usually trivial (Martín Serrano, 2015). Here, we understand something trivial as nothing special; worthless; ordinary. The trivial does not deserve attention or memory; it lacks strength to modify history; it follows stereotypes.

Just to illustrate this trend, it is possible to mention some icons of trivial content. The first one is when a user publish “Where he is right now” or that “He is moving from a place to another place”. Another example comes from images that do not seeks a specific purpose, as a “Picture in front of a mirror taken with his mobile phone”, “A picture of the breakfast or the coffee someone is having” or “A picture with a pet”. The last example is just the expression of “How I am feeling today” (Facebook offers more than 120 emoji for externalizing emotional states).

There is some rational sense behind this kind of practices? There are at least three different criticisms about the way we use social media. The first one states that sharing ordinary content is a sign of an emptying of the interiority. This emptying is faced with extimacy (Sibila, 2008), which consists in turning public the intimate life. The second critique states that platforms like

social media reinforce a selfie narcissism, especially for those who use them in a visual way (Reed et al., 2018). The third critical approach consider that sharing worthless content is an expression of a certain cultural, ideological or spiritual void (Bauman - interviews).

Behind all these criticisms we can observe pretensions of a certain epistemological, political or ethical hierarchy. The publication of trivial contents might be inferior to more intelligent, educated and even useful content. However, these positions seem inadequate for understanding the complexity of the human being and for characterizing a particular way of existence that seems to require a proactive struggle against its own disappearance.

4. Immediacy as presentism

Before examining the existential reasons why the contemporary subject lives in the trivial, it is necessary to emphasize another main characteristic of sharing in the digital territory: immediacy. Users publish messages and images in real time, without applying any filters that respond to a strategic rationality oriented to results. What is said, the everyday activities shown, is about situations that simply happen now, almost by chance, without particular intentions. We might think about the picture in front of the elevator mirror. There is no plan behind the publication of the picture. The user was just there, taking the elevator for going up to his office, and being there, by chance, he took and shared the content with his friends and followers.

This pattern is coherent with contemporary culture, where everything concerns the present (Mafessoli, 2009). The present expires continuously, making it necessary to recreate it. The picture of the coffee becomes obsolete the day after. It has no longer effects neither provides important information about the state or situation of the person that takes the picture. Therefore, it is necessary to re-publish the photo. The coffee again, but another day.

The tendency to live life as presentism explains the success of new and widespread narrative of social media stories, where everything promptly becomes obsolete. Massive social media as Facebook, Instagram and Snapchat allow to upload stories that last only one day. After that, stories literally disappear. Posts are instead published on the profile and are not deleted automatically. Because of their format, stories are used to share situations that are being lived right at the moment and that do not deserve to be preserved, that are lived and forgotten, that lack of something extraordinary.

5. *The context of affective turn*

If users share with other users what simply occurs, such as something trivial, immediate, almost impulsive or irrational, it could be considered as a sign of an emptying of interiority. But does it really not make sense to share trivial content? The criticism approaches we mentioned above have a clear position. The trivial content is coherent with a worthless way of living. But if we do a hermeneutical approach considering the spirit of our era, where emotions are crucial, the interpretation changes.

Although both rationality and affectivity dimensions take part of human life, classic philosophical thought has privileged rationality over emotions. Nowadays, we assist just to the opposite, that is, to an affective turn that implies a central role of emotions in public sphere, culture and social relationships (Clough, Halley, 2007). In fact, the contemporary subject makes decisions and configures his personal aspirations moved by emotions.

Digital communication seeks emotional engagement for motivating interactions. According to some scholars, digital culture is entirely characterized by flows of emotions (Döveling et al., 2018). The first adopters of the Internet in 1990 appreciated the possibility of accessing, exchanging and processing large amounts of information. In our century, emotions are the goal to achieve and became the measure to distinguish relevant information, to which attention must be paid, from irrelevant information. Any content shared in the digital territory, also the trivial one, has the capability to allow intersubjective contact and can generate the accurate space for getting a greater proximity and mutual recognition.

6. *Ephemeral existence*

So far, we have concentrated our analysis on describing a contemporary communicative phenomenon, in which the intensive use of interactive technologies is characterized by the circulation of trivial speech acts motivated by emotions, that vanish and need to be constantly renewed. This phenomenon, however, reveals something crucial to philosophy. The fusion between digital and real life in the context of the affective turn allows a new interpretation of the meaning of existence.

For the tradition of existentialism such as that of Jaspers, Pareyson and Sartre, being in the world is a starting point that claims for free decisions, from which each subject shapes its identity. Freedom is the essential feature

of the human being and is the power that enables him to modify history. However, the existence of the subject seems to be no longer a fact, unquestionable, a not decided starting point to which follows the different possibilities of ego identity configuration.

The existence is continuously decided and conquered by the subject in the present (Nancy, 1995). For this reason, a single decision of self-affirmation is not enough. The present becomes continuously obsolete and the threat of disappearing and of nothingness emerge. In short, the existence is ephemeral.

To exist implies a permanent struggle for existence. It is not a fight against the others as if they are a threat to my freedom, but against the indifference of others, that is, against to not be confirmed by anyone. In linguistics, Jakobson (1966) has conceptualized the phatic function of language, which is aimed at ensuring connection. For example, when someone says “Hello, how are you doing?”, the expression is trying to settle an intersubjective connection that will soon take another direction. Everything that is said in a conversation has as its starting point the connection, the other that is there for me interested in listening to me. But the connection is not a fact that simply occurs, but a circumstance actively sought and proposed by the speakers. Sharing trivial content in the digital territory has a similar function: it is a way through which the subject tries to get the attention of the other and can interact with him.

The subject avoids to dissolve himself when he gives notice to others, his friends and followers, that there he is, that he has emotions, that he moves from one side to another, that is, resorting to the icons of trivial content. In others words, to exist is the result of a two-way process: on the one hand, a will of self-affirmation that each subject proposes through the use of language, which is always addressed to the other (Watzlawick et al., 2011; Ricoeur, 1999) and, on the other hand, the confirmation by the other. In this hypothesis the language also keeps human beings in existence, but in a different way to Heideggerian or analytical philosophy. Language is neither the origin nor the toolbox for understanding the world, but rather the vehicle by which the subject holds relationships with others.

The affirmation of the subject is ephemeral but it has a certain durability that allows the narration of his identity (Ricoeur, 1991; Arfuch, 2010). However, stories expire, as in social media, and the unfinished biography risks becoming nothing. The subject needs to affirm himself, again and continuously in his existence, so that to go on with his self-biography.

7. *Affective mediation of alterity*

The sense of sharing trivial content about what is just happening in the present is the resistance to an ephemeral existence and to the indifference of the other. In the context of the affective turn, being alone is death, the indifference of others towards me is nothingness.

I'm not sure that I'm there as long as someone gives me its approval, that is, a like interaction in social media codes. This affective mediation of alterity moves us from the rationalistic statement "I think therefore I am" to an existential one: "Someone likes me therefore I am". With this thesis we are not suggesting an alternative argument for demonstrating the existence, but we show the way through which the contemporary subject put himself in the existence. Affective mediation of approval implies that the other confirms that he likes that I am there, that he is happy because I am alive.

Self-affirmation, confirmed by others, becomes the conquered starting point of identity, which develops through identifications with values and also through intersubjective and community relationships. However, the approval does not mean overcoming the loneliness (Buber, 1937; Berdiaeff, 1936). True human relationships are built on the decision to take care one to the other.

8. *Final discussion*

The way contemporary nihilism materializes is loneliness and the lack of true relationships. Contrary to theories that note a deep void of a reflexive interiority, the speech acts that display ordinary life in the digital territory are attempts to escape to indifference. The contemporary subject cannot get accustomed to the fear of nothingness and relies on multiple resources in order to affirm himself in the existence. The main characteristic of this new way of existence is its prompt obsolescence. The subject avoids his dissolution thanks to the affirmation of himself, that is approved by the other, but soon appear again the need for a reconfirmation by the other. To exist implies a constant struggle for recognition.

Sometimes the existence of the subject is severely weakened. Especially when he is ignored by the other, and even more due to the rejection of the other, which can even be violent as it is the frequent case of hate speech in the digital environment. In fact, the first interpellation of the other is no longer ethical but existential. To the extent that the other speaks to me, he

says that I am there and that I am important for him. This is the starting point for identity. My answer to his interpellation is already a decision that shapes my biography. In short, there is no possibility to get some orientation in the world if there is no horizon of alterity. The question that remains is whether the need for affective affirmation in the existence is a certain a priori characteristic of human beings or if it is only a need for some subjects under certain historical circumstances. However, what seems to be true is that for contemporary subject life is not a fact.

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Abstract

In this paper we describe the main characteristics of the use of interactive technologies of communication, and we analyze them from the perspective of nihilism. In particular, we wonder if the abundance of trivial content immediately shared without filters, which promptly disappear, is an expression of a new form of nihilism, or if, on the contrary, it is the expression of an existential resistance of the subject to the threat of dissolution that comes from the indifference of others. This approach will allow us to discuss the type of existence of the contemporary subject that emerges from the fusion between the real world and the digital one and, also, to point out some patterns about the mediations that act in the configuration of his identity.

Keywords: nihilism; linguistic turn; existence; social media; communication.

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