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The End of the Virtual? A Hermeneutical Understanding of Digital Technologies

For some years, academics have been discussing 'the end of the virtual'. According to some of them (Rogers 2009), this means that the old economic and political forces are succeeding into 'dividing and conquering' the 'spaceless space' of the Internet as Manuel Castells called it. Recent initiatives of the European Commission such as the 'Right to be forgotten' ruling demonstrate that the Internet is increasingly becoming regionalized. According to the ruling, people have the right, under certain conditions, to ask search engines like Google to remove results for queries that include their name. As a consequence, today research results within European countries might always be different than those made within other states.

According to other scholars, the end of the virtual has more to do with the emergence of an always already connected environment that Luciano Floridi has called 'infosphere'. In this environment, the frontiers between human intentions and their surroundings are softened. Ten, fifteen years ago, a series of ritual actions used to mediate access to the Internet: turn the computer on, wait, turn the modem on, wait, sit down on a chair in front of a computer's screen, wait, launch the browser, wait, etc. Thanks to all sorts of mobile devices and connected objects that characterize our present, which will certainly be part of our future, we are spending most of our life online. 'Onlife' is another of Floridi's fancy expressions (Floridi 2015). In this sense, it is not the 'real' that conquered the 'virtual', but the other way round.

In this presentation, I will propose an alternative approach. My thesis is that the frontiers between the 'real' and the 'virtual' are permeable, but nonetheless they must be maintained, and made, so to say, dynamic.

Don Ihde (1990, 72-112) has famously distinguished four kinds of technologically mediated I-world relations: 1) embodied relations, whose specificity lies in the high transparency of the technological artifact (e.g. glasses); 2) hermeneutic relations, which give a representation of the world that interpret the world, and that must in its turn be interpreted (e.g. thermometers and maps); 3) alterity relations, in which the relation with the world is temporarily suspended, and the technology itself assumes the role of interlocutor/competitor (e.g. computer games); 4) background relations, when a technology creates the conditions of our own relation with the world (e.g. heating and lighting systems).

Now it is evident that digital technologies have something to do with all these relations. The mobility and portability of objects such as smartphones, smartwatches, and smartbands, not to mention smart glasses, is the preamble to a radical embodiment of digital technologies. The fact that we trust online services like Google Maps for getting information demonstrates that we consider more and more digital

technologies as valuable interlocutors. And of course, the increasing presence of digital sensors in the environment we live in (room, house, city, etc.), along with the fact that such a 'sensibility' augments the environment's capacity to adapt to our individual and collective needs/intentions, show how digital technologies are capable of establishing background relations between me and the world. And yet, all the digitally mediated I-world relations are based on the hermeneutic possibility of translating – or transcoding – the world in a digital representation.

To take just one example, the Internet of Things (IoT) is commonly considered the paradigm of the integration between online and offline, the being-already online of a naturally offline object such as an electrical appliance, a farm animal, a human heart, etc. But in order to be integrated into the Internet, all objects need an IP address as a unique identifier. This is the reason why the IoT will have to use the internet protocol version 6 instead of the version 4, which routes most Internet traffic today, but allows 'just' 4.3 billions unique addresses. Hence, each object must have its own symbolic representation, in this case a numerical label, in order to be recognized as being part of the online network.

Digital technologies are always based on a mostly invisible process of symbolic distantiation from the world, and it is only on this basis that they become effective in the world. This is always the case, independently from the fact that digital technologies are considered by the superficial layer of the user interfaces, or by the deep one of the digital traces. Marianna Van Den Boomen has opportunely defined digital objects like the desktop icons as 'material metaphors'. With this term, she meant double entry signs, since they involve two kinds of code: machine-readable digital code, to which the icon refers indexically (in Peirce's terminology, an index is a sign entertaining a relation of contiguity with its object), and human-readable code, to which the icon refers symbolically (for Peirce, a symbol is a sign denoting an object by mere convention and abstraction), for example, as mail, file, or program (Van Den Boomen 2014, 40). In other words, digital technologies always pass through a representation that, thanks to its twofold nature, symbolical and indexical, is also performative.

What is interesting in this perspective on digital technologies is that it goes beyond the alternative between representativity and performativity. Indeed, it is the case only insofar as digital technologies represent the world that they can also recombine (plus give people, individually and collectively, a certain room for maneuvering) its elements. Furthermore, this approach goes beyond the alternative between the virtual and 'the end of the virtual', since the possibility for digital technologies of seizing the real always depends on a certain distance they take from it. It is precisely this understanding of digital technologies that I call 'hermeneutical'.

In particular, I will refer to Paul Ricoeur's theory of narrative, which is also a theory of (productive) imagination. According to the French philosopher, narrative is made of two elements: 1) the threefold *mimesis* ('prefiguration', 'configuration', and

'refiguration'), which is a movement of appropriation and distantiation on the basis of a process of representation of human action, and 2) the *mythos* ('emplotment', '*mise en intrigue*' in French), i.e. the capacity of giving coherence – combining and recombining – to the heterogeneous elements of a story. *Mimesis* and *mythos* are at the heart of digital technologies. As said, *mimesis* is there insofar as digital technologies always produce dynamic representations of the world, which interpret the world, and can in their turn be interpreted. The *mythos* is present if we accept Lev Manovich's (2013) thesis according to which 'there is only software', and that 'software = database + algorithms'. An image on Instagram is a collection of pixels on which different filters have been more or less automatically applied; an Excel document of scientometric data downloaded from Scopus is a database on which we can apply different algorithms for data treatment and visualization such as Gephi (Author 2016); from a user perspective, the Web itself is a database on which algorithms like Google PageRank operate.

A hermeneutic understanding of digital technologies, then, means that we cannot give up with the notions of virtual and virtuality in this domain (although we have to partially rethink them), at least for two reasons. First, because the digital technologies' effectiveness on the world depends on a movement of distantiation/translation from/of the world. Second, insofar as during this movement we assist to the combination and recombination of elements that give rise to the emergence of multiple actualities or 'individuations', in Simondon and Deleuze's terminology. The revised paradigm of virtuality that I am proposing represents an alternative both to the communication and registration/recording models (Ferraris 2016), which have dominated the theoretical debate on digital technologies and media in these years.