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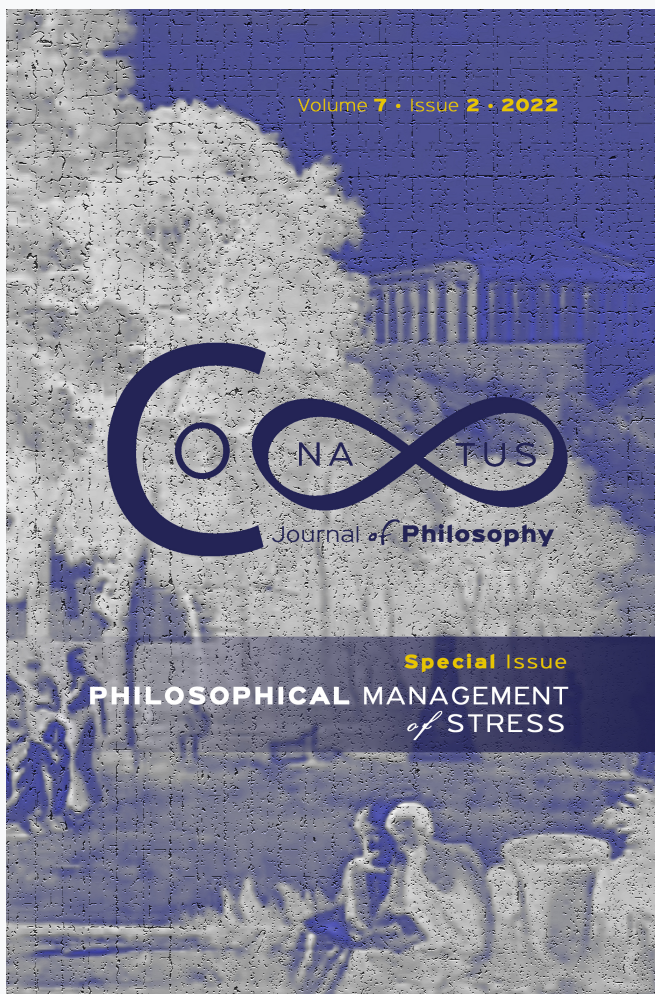
Aesthetics, Psyche and Media: A Manifold of Mimesis in the Age of Simulation

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Abstract

Within a dialogue with various authors, it seems that there can't be just one universal reflection that allows us to comprehend the rising dynamism of new media. For example, Baudrillard declared the end of the traditional way of thinking about contemporary media and showed their role in the process of the endless simulation of truth. It has been shown that the contemporary world of media can be considered in dialogue with the philosophical tradition, and be evaluated in the phenomenological psychopathology (Fuchs) evaluation horizon. In this consideration, the notion of variation (Manovich), plays a key role in replacing the traditionally understood notion of mimesis. Artistic practice is precisely the main exemplar that shows the influence of new media on identity construction (simulated versions of personal identity), as well as the relationship between the artistic original and the copy. Although new digital media allows maintenance of desired (identity) simulations, its great potential is evident in enabling subjects to express their individuality, as well as in searching for new ways to improve their quality of life. This context opens a new problem, namely the one of avatar – a selected photo or image that defines the identity of entities present in the fields of the virtual agora (Baudrillard) and private chat rooms of the social media. Avatar`s function is being problematized by asking whether they represent the reduction and closure of the width of a person's beingness within the set image, or whether they facilitate and stimulate its realization by depriving them of the stress and discomfort that is caused by physical confrontation and intercourse with other persons in the living space. The given issue inevitably points to the problem of the general narcissism of our culture (Lasch), calling upon philosophical orientation to enter the discussion.

Keywords: *digitalization; media; narcissism; phenomenological psychopathology; education; variation*

I. Introduction: Overcoming the traditional differentiation between mimesis and reproduction

The traditional role of art in philosophical reflections was understood through the question of the relation between the highest truth of Being and artistic world creations. In the new contemporary technological and industrial reorganization of the sensible, this role has been eliminated. In the COVID-19 pandemic crisis, where the traditional forms of knowledge transfer through education were disabled, the world is forced to face an alternative form of new media as the main mechanism for teaching.[1] For now, these experimental media have managed to replace the traditional forms of learning, but the question of the quality of education being received is surely one of the primary problems. This is the reason why most schools are practicing the combined model of teaching: one the one hand, there is the traditional teaching in classrooms coupled with traditional ways of examinations, but on the other hand, there are new forms of media in online teaching praxis. Universities are predominantly using the online model believing that students are independent enough to organize themselves. This crisis raised many questions about the traditional concept of learning and the role that new media can have in the contemporary educational processes.

Rancière showed that the traditional concept of education does not necessarily have to be the only possible path for studying.[2] He managed to use one of the experiments in the late 18th century to prove that language can be learned in more than just one traditional way. This was the experiment of Joseph Jacotot, a Frenchman who taught in Belgium without the knowledge of his students' native language (Flemish). The goal of this experiment was to show how the traditional role of the process of education has changed in the process of liberation, by underlining manifold ways in which the content of knowledge can be acquired. In this way, we can see that there can be numerous schemata in which teaching can be shown to be successful. Historically, the Romantic movement challenged the traditional educational systems. This is the reason why Romanticism is considered to be a *movement*, not a school in the traditional form. There is not only one *differentia specifica* between a school and a movement. A school is traditionally seen as having its origin in the scholastic ways of teaching (Greek. σχολεῖον – leisure; lat. *schola* – school). A *school* implies authorities, a clear system, the reproduction of

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[1] Which opens the door for wide panel of mental health challenges, raising the need of philosophical critical approach usage as the orientation tool.

[2] Jacques Rancière, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster: Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation*, trans. Kristin Ross (Redwook City, CA: Stanford University Press, 1991), 14.

the content, a formalism, the respect for tradition, the idea of conservation of content, etc. On the contrary, a *movement* implies no authorities; but fragmentation, innovation, vitality, the criticism of tradition, the idea of liberation from the old, etc. The contemporary forms of education certainly found themselves forced to mediate between these two.

Although Humboldt's idea of reformation has some Romantic motifs, its achievements in the Bologna Process are open for questioning. After the romanticist influence, history has faced numerous fundamental processes, such as the rise of the technological culture, the crises caused by world wars, the process of globalization, etc. All of this had a strong impact on the process of education. The similarity between many contemporary theories and romanticism is reflected in their critical attitude towards tradition, and the desire to overcome the old forms of knowledge transfer. The new culture became more and more unified through these liberating processes, which brought into question the role of the State in the process of education. As some of the authors from the critical position managed to show, the tradition should not be outright rejected. Instead, we should engage in a dialogue with some of its authors to preserve its valuable achievements. In this way, Adorno placed dialectical movement at the center of his new methodology to preserve its negative and critical function in the times of affirmative culture. The idea of *a critic* must become one of the fundamental themes in education, which also becomes an extension of a one-dimensional culture. The blade of criticism is certainly blunted because its primary task in changing reality has been forgotten:

The lack of conflict which in mass culture stems from the all-encompassing concerns of the monopoly can ever be seen today in great art within those very works which most resolutely resist cultural monopoly.[3]

From his standpoint, only avant-garde movements can be the antithesis of the mass culture. But the question of their political engagement has always been difficult bearing in mind that their critique stays in the domain of intellectualism. New forms of education must aspire not only to share knowledge but to change the reality itself. This idea has its root in Plato's consideration of the art which for him has its specific place in the political hierarchies.

In Plato's philosophical reflection we can find an important differentiation between the world of ideas and the world of things, the latter being mere copies of the real ontological fundamentals. This distinction made a big impact on different philosophical concepts, but here we focus on the notion of *mimesis* to show how the mediation between these two worlds is possible.

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[3] Theodor W. Adorno, *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture* (London, and New York: Routledge, 2001), 73.

One of the fundamental problems for Plato was to show how the world of copies participates in the world of ideas. This is not only a problem in Plato's philosophy of art, but also the main problem in his own ontological considerations. We can say that for Plato, the world of art and the world of politics are not possible to understand without ontology, which it is applicable to the mental issue treatment domain as well. His ontological considerations are a necessary foundation for understanding all other particular spheres of reality. Although Plato never managed to show the ontological role of *mimesis*, within his explorations of its role in the world of art and politics, he laid the ground for Aristotle to accomplish this task.

Already in Book IX of *The Republic,* Plato explains the differentiation between "the-thing-in-itself" and fiction and different ways of approaching it.[4] This distinction becomes the main foundation for the examination of poetry in the subsequent book. To explain the differentiation between the real art that can fulfill the ontological *télos* of the community and the mimetic art, Plato used the notion of *mimesis* for every act that negates the order of the righteous state, even going so far as to compare the mimetic poetry with sophistic actions.[5] In this way, he puts art at the lowest level of the ontological hierarchy by attributing to it the same destructive role that sophistic activities occupy in the community. Thus, the notion of *mimesis* has an extremely negative meaning in Platonic philosophy. Plato showed that most of the existing art and poetry also had negative effects. Assigning a positive function to *mimesis* shall be later the task for Aristotle, but Plato was the first to show its active role in the community and its potential for changing reality.[6]

Unlike Plato, Aristotle showed the positive role of *mimesis* in the constitution of education and community.

> First, the instinct of imitation is implanted in man from childhood, one difference between him and other animals being that he is the most imitative of living creatures, and through imitation learns his earliest lessons; and no less universal is the pleasure felt in things imitated [...] Imitation, then, is one instinct of our nature.[7]

According to this thesis, *mimesis* or imitation is a constitutive part of the human being, and it is part of an integral process of constituting community

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[4] Plato, *The Republic,* 582b.

[5] Ibid., 596d.

[6] Other authors will later put focus primarily on its positive aspect. Compare Tom Cohen, *Anti-Mimesis from Plato to Hitchcock* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 8.

[7] Aristotle, *Poetics*, 1448b 5-23.

by "learning from a model." Men, unlike animals, do not have just one natural predisposition. Their main characteristic is the possibility of becoming something else to fulfill their purpose in the community. In this way, *mimesis* plays an active role in the educational process, not only in a theoretical sense, but also in the world of praxis. This is the reason why *mimesis* or imitation has manifold roles in the Aristotelian philosophy. We can find its role in the theoretical, poetic, and practical spheres of life. Accordingly, the notion of *mimesis* took on a much higher place in Aristotle's ontology than it did in Plato's .

Modern philosophical reflections concentrated on the aesthetic role of imitation, finding its foundation in the subjective forms of apprehension, delivering a new idea of *mimesis* found in the notion of reproduction. Kant and other Idealists tried to find the meditative role of the aesthetic in the sphere of absolute forms of knowledge. Hegel was the first who showed that the field of aesthetics was going to change its status in the new contemporary world. Idealism showed as well that knowledge, in a wider sense, is not a copy of reality, but that the subject has a mediating role in the epistemological process. The problem of originality and reproduction later lost its integral meaning because the aesthetic itself no longer had the task of reaching the highest truth of Being.[8] Hegel's diagnosis proved to be correct. The Romantic Movement already brought into question the traditional way of understanding the truth, especially in the domain of the philosophy of art. However, from the beginning of the 20th century, this distinction came to the fore even more strongly. Husserl's *Crisis* puts into question modern methodological positions, and the fundamental formalistic designations of the positive science. He showed that we need to go back to the source of all knowledge, back to the Aristotelian philosophical reflections to win back the universal methodology for approaching the truth. He did not apply an integral and systematic approach to the question of imitation and reproduction, but his considerations of phantasy (Phantasie) and imagination (Vorstellung) are very valuable for understanding the contemporary status of art and media.

For Husserl, the notion of reproduction does not necessarily have a negative meaning. Almost every kind of phantasy apprehension of a work of art is a sort of representation of re-production. In simple terms, this means that every time we need to reflect on an artistic object, we form an image of another image.[9] We do not have an original grasp of perceptual reality, but we apprehend the object through a series of images that have a mediating role in

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[8] Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. Arnold Vincent Miller (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 637.

[9] Edmund Husserl, "Phantasy, Image, Consciousness and Memory (1898-1925)," in Edmund Husserl, *Collected Works*, vol. XI, trans. John B. Brough (Dordrecht: Springer, 2005), 182.

the cognitive processes. Moreover, Husserl showed that reproduction has its role not just in the apprehension of the works of art, but in the representational memory in a wider sense as well. This means that reproduction is an integral part of knowledge itself, it is constitutive of the creation of forms of reality. The process of remembering includes a necessary representation which is the reproduction of sensory data.[10] In this way, like Aristotle's *mimesis*, Husserl's reproduction has multiple roles, which are not necessarily negative in all spheres of knowledge. Reproduction is, in a way, the opposite of impression and sensation, but this is the reason why it has its role in re-presentation and phantasy apprehension. While perception and impression belong to the original forms of experience, re-production represents only a modification of its original basis.[11] The idea of modification and variation are closely linked to the concept of reproduction. Husserl found the inspiration for these in researching the relation between mathematics and logic.

In particular, Husserl showed that there must be a difference between a particular phenomenon and its intuitive essence, which means that the process of modification is only conditionally opened. But on the other side, the phenomenological method is an unfinished task that always calls for new answers within new experiences. In this way, the avant-garde movements have shown similarities with the phenomenological methodology.[12] For most of them, the idea of reproduction is not necessarily negative. They find the old traditional idea of "original" work which contains an elevated truth highly questionable. This is the reason why many authors such as Marcel Duchamp used ready-made objects to criticize traditional ideas and value systems. For them, reproduction does not necessarily have to be a copy, but it can take on a new life of its own in the present circumstances if we give the old object a new sense and function. In this way, they criticized not only individual pieces of art, but the entire tradition, and its false representations of history and the world.

The idea of the abolition of differentiation between reality and illusion has its origin in Nietzsche's philosophy. His proclamation of the death of God was understood and interpreted in different ways throughout history. In the contemporary incarnation, this idea does not only have the aesthetic but also ontological consequences. Baudrillard's *The Perfect Crime,* one of the most significant works that reflect on the new media, was written in the Nietzschean framework. Baudrillard showed that the difference between the real and

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[10] Ibid., 307.

[11] Ibid., 403.

[12] More on this similarity see in: Dragan Prole, *Jednakost Nejednakog* [*Equality of the Unequal*] (Sremski Karlovci, Novi Sad: Izdavačka knjižarnica Zorana Stojanovića, 2018), 99.

the illusory world is only fictional.[13] This means that the world of media is not just a reproduction or a mimetic re-presentation of reality.[14] The new media represent the *extension of reality*. This means that every critique, every affirmation, every truth, and every lie, immediately enters into the common area of intervention. There is no neutral content because every new piece of data produces new fields of action. Reproduction and repetition are just ways in which the new media operates. And there is certainly an open question as to whether there is such a thing as the true reality or whether everything is a simulacrum of our thoughts and perceptions. However, what is most important here, is that the new media have an impact not only on the way we perceive the world but also on our emotional and practical attitude towards it. If world of media already changes the way we perceive reality, than we can conclude that this world is mostly the world of manipulation because the subject always has an option to choose between already established schemes.

For other authors, the new media represent not only a simulation of reality, but also the new field of expression, with their own language, because their objects are fundamentally different from any other traditional objects of re-presentation. Benjamin showed that although in the original periods of civilization, there were manual forms of reproduction, the new mechanical reproduction had changed the core of art and media.[15] The role of new media was clearly defined by Manovich who showed that they can give a completely different function to the same object of tradition:

Database becomes the center of the creative process in the computer age. Historically, the artist made a unique work within a particular medium. Therefore, the interface and the work were the same; in other words, the level of an interface did not exist. With new media, the content of the work and the interface become separate. It is, therefore, possible to create different interfaces to the same material.[16]

Moreover, he showed that with the new computer era, we have entered into quantitative, numerical processing of content that was previously captured primarily in a qualitative and typological fashion. This goes in parallel with Husserl's insights into the world of the new scientific era which strives to calculate and control all aspects of reality. However, in

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[13] "Hiding" it's not negligible repercussions in the context of enhanced appearance of the psychotic delusions symptoms worldwide, which we will turn to in the following chapters of the article.

[14] Jean Baudrillard, *The Perfect Crime*, trans. Chris Turner (London, and New York: Verso, 1996), 76.

15 Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in *Media and Cultural Studies*, eds. Meenakshi Durham, and Douglas M. Keller, 18-41 (New York: Blackwell Publishing, 2006).

[16] Lev Manovich, "Database as a Genre of New Media," *AI & Society* 14, no. 2 (2000): 176-183.

the remainder of this text, a question is raised: whether a new form of art mediated through the new media has originality and an intrinsic value or there is merely an endless process of simulation that cannot provide the artists with their traditional independent status. At this point, we need to emphasize that the contemporary period is characterized by the liberalization of the process of education. In this process, traditional notions such as a *copy* (mimesis) and the *original* are redefined. The phenomenological method reveals that their differences are not fundamental but only relative; they can only exist in their relation to the subject.[17] The phenomenological examination of the structures of subjectivity should also explain how the identities of the new forms of personality are shaped in this digital era. This article emphasizes as well the way through which the traditional concept of the "Truth" leads to the new concept of "post-truth."

II. Artwork as a copy of consumer and media culture

Early avant-garde artists provoked traditional concepts of art and artwork with their anti-artistic attitudes and techniques. For Boris Groys, Duchamp is the first artist who, instead of being an exclusive producer, became a consumer of things that "are constantly circulating in our cultural networks."[18]

Many years later, in the age of late capitalism, Postmodern art continued to explore the position of the artist as a consumer. The art technique being used is appropriation. The term was approved in the 1980s and was invented to capture the artistic practices that include existing objects from art and culture. Robert Nelson states that the term *appropriation,* also has more sinister connotations, implying improper and even abduction or theft. Taken positively or pejoratively, appropriation is not passive, objective, or disinterested, but active, and motivated.[19]

At the beginning of the 21st century, the French curator, Nicholas Bourriaud, used the term "post-production." He argued that the distinctions between "creation and copy, readymade and original work"[20] were erased. Post-production artists "re-edit historical or ideological narratives, inserting the elements that compose them into alternative scenarios."[21] The

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[17] This article, *inter alia*, shows how these traditional terms are used in some forms of contemporary art and media and what their contributions to new forms of education are.

[18] Boris Groys, "The Artist as Consumer," *Strozzina*, last accessed in November 15, 2022, www.strozzina.org/artpriceandvalue/catalogue_groys.html.

[19] Robert S. Nelson, and Richard Shiff, *Critical Terms for Art History* (Chicago, and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2003), 210.

[20] Nicolas Bourriuad, *Postproduction*, trans. Jeanine Herman (New York: Lukas and Sterriberg, 2002), 13.

[21] Ibid., 45.

contemporary artist in this evolution of a copy is someone who operates in the world of the old that can be combined into something new.

But what happens with digital art whose pure essence lies in the code? Boris Groys considers the ability of digital images to "originate, to multiply, and to distribute themselves through the open fields of contemporary means of communication."[22] What is characteristic of the digital image is that it is constantly multiplying. The digital image is like a "Byzantine icon – as a visible copy of invisible God."[23] Hence, the origin of the digital image is the code. A digital image, like all other code visualizations, is a type of performance that also depends on the context in which it appears. It can be set as wallpaper on a mobile phone or printed on a home printer, while the quality and characteristics of the materialized digital image depend on the technical capacity of the device.

Sherrie Levine, After Marcel Duchamp, 1991

Referring to Walter Benjamin's text "A Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," Boris Groys concludes that in the context of the digital image, Benjamin's assumption about the copy as being identical to the original is no longer true. However, each variation of the digital image is different from another, and technological development has flowed in the direction of "the diversification of the conditions under which a copy is produced and distributed and, accordingly, the diversification of the resulting visual images."[24]

A collection of artworks titled "Pink and Red" can be taken as a case study of the materialization of the digital. The original artwork, i.e. the first two samples of "Pink and Red," are two digital images. Both are reproduced on different materials: canvas, glass, paper, and digital TV screens. The focus of this methodology is the imitation of
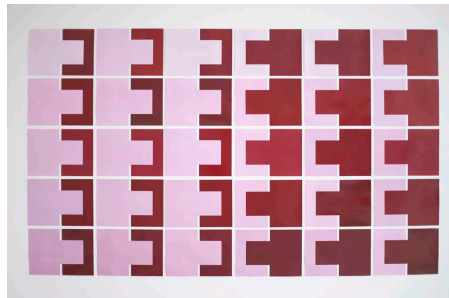
Vanja Novaković, Pink and Red, 2019

the mass production process and the materialization of the digital code. In addition to being reproduced on TV screens, each sample was reproduced on about twenty different printers. Each variation includes "errors," similarities,

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[22] Boris Groys, *Art Power* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008), 83.

[23] Ibid., 91.

[24] Ibid., 85.

and differences between each printed copy. Two different artists painted two paintings, so individual traces can be seen on each one. Finally, the reproduced image on the gallery window packs the entire space and completes the story of the elusiveness of the original.

Vanja Novaković, Pink and Red, 2019

III. (Digital) copies of reality and identities

Social media networks are a platform for communication and for performing and constructing identity. Also, they are a place for corporations to perform surveillance and control over customers. Therefore, social networks are a space in which the great crisis of privacy is present. They represent a kind of virtual Panopticon with three dimensions. Those three dimensions that fuel the virtual Panopticon are algorithmic processing of personal data, inter-watching between users, and self-observation.

Personal data, such as user activities, are archived and analyzed to predict any future activity. Therefore, everything that is displayed is based on the past. Also, many platforms monitor the attention given to the presented content. By measuring time, they know the user's preferences, and consequently, they offer similar content in the future. Each user has their version of reality. The value of personal data has increased in the last ten years, and corporations have gained power by selling it. Personal data is being analyzed to make advertising more personalized. Baudrillard predicted this transformation claiming that the power of advertisement has been taken from it by another type of language that is even more simplified and thus more functional: the languages of computer science.[25]

A lot of attention is paid to interface design. Design is the result of continuous research in the domains of marketing and psychology, and because of that, the final product becomes more addictive. On their profiles individual users can design and present their lifestyles, physical appearances, and express their opinions and emotions by using language, photography, video, or sound. This digital narration is a combination of specific symbolic exchange, representation, and communication. Therefore, digital identity can be seen as a construct that fits into different roles in the digital and virtual world where reality often vanishes, while the simulation is set as the original.

IV. New media and education – Elements of art

The media and other factors such as peers, schools, and families participate in the education of young people. The use of language and books has always

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[25] Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. Sheila Glaser (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1995), 89.

been the foundation and pillar of education. New media are more personalized than traditional media, and they enable better interaction between the media and the user. However, the question that arises concerns the role of new media in teaching and education as well as its advantages and disadvantages.

"Art Elements"[26] is an educational, interactive, and inclusive web application. It consists of two parts: a theoretical one that introduces children to the basic elements of art; and a workbook, where users can draw with the help of artificial intelligence. This web application is intended to be an aid in art class, but it also has broader applications. When a certain shape is selected, after the user starts drawing, the artificial intelligence system responds by showing a few possible further moves. The drawing can be created independently or with the help of AI that gives different solutions and nurtures children's approach to drawing. This application points to the positive sides of the new media and can guide a person through the process of drawing. There is an idea that AI and teachers will work together in the future. Even though the educational system needs to follow technological improvements, it is important to educate teachers and pupils on its negative sides. Maybe the solution lies in creating a new school subject that provides students with the basic knowledge on the advantages and disadvantages of the new media.

Dr. A. W. Bates asserts that "new technologies are fundamentally changing the nature of knowledge."[27] Generations born after 2000 interact with new media, such as phones and tablets from an early age. Education must follow technical progress and the evolution of human consciousness for the quality of education to be satisfactory. Because new media can represent something through interaction and multimedia content, they can be of great help for teachers. In the beginning, CDs,

Vanja Novaković, Web Application, Elements of Art, 2019

PowerPoint presentations, video, and audio were used, while today websites, digital textbooks, virtual classrooms, and designed educational tools are mostly used. This does not only concern learning particular content, but also digital literacy. However, the teacher should be a person who, in cooperation with the media, transfers knowledge to the student, i.e., the teacher cannot be completely

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[26] Vanja Novaković, *Web Application*, last accessed November 15, 2022, https://likovni-elementi.com/.

[27] A. W. T. Bates, *The Impact of New Media on Academic Knowledge* (Vancouver, BC: University of British Columbia, 1999), http://sdcc.vn/template/5298_knowledge.pdf.

replaceable. Also, an editorial policy is needed to ensure the truthfulness and credibility of the data.[28]

A study conducted at Stanford University between 2015 and 2016 showed that students generally do not have the skills and the desire to evaluate the authenticity of the information.[29] Therefore, the task of teachers and professors is to encourage pupils and students to look for sources of information and examine their accuracy, by enforcing with this way young people's critical thinking in the so-called "information age." In the following sections, we will emphasize how the old concept of "Truth" is transformed through the virtual area into a new media space and outline some of the new ways in which it shapes the individual's psyche.

V. From "post-truth" to the "virtual psyche"?

Baudrillard suggests that the contemporary age of the image, screens, and e-circuits, through which social networks and digital media integrate and transcend the human psychic phenomenological spaces, transmute our society into relational spheres of simulacra that become seemingly more realistic than the empirical domains of direct physical correlation and dialogue.[30]

This raises an important issue of the "edges" of the human psychological identity being processed through the social networks and digital media by the *avatarization* and *technicalization* of the human being. This has direct consequences for the domain of mental health, especially when it comes to issues such as delusions, hallucinations, and narcissistic disorder.[31]

Developing this line of argument further, we need to explore whether the "online agora platform" can enable and actualize an individual's inherent *telos* to develop as dynamic, integrated, and free beings. The alternative is, of course, that it merely takes us further into the domains of the technical psyche – passivized and alienated from the evolutionary, historical, and world community.[32]

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[28] In the era of the Internet there has been an expansion of fake news and information that are often perceived as true. Post-truth is interpreted as an adjective referring to "a communication paradigm in the 21st century in which: "I think, therefore, I exist" is replaced by "I believe, therefore I am right." Lejla Turčilo, and Belma Buljubašić, *Who (Really) Creates The Media Agenda* [*Ko (stvarno) kreira agendu medija?*] (Sarajevo: 2018), www.safejournalists.net/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/ko-stvarno-kreira-agendu-medija_BHS.pdf.

[29] Stanford History Education Group, "Evaluating Information: The Cornerstone of Civic Online Reasoning," https://stacks.stanford.edu/file/druid:fv751yt5934/SHEG%20Evaluating%20Information%20Online.pdf.

[30] Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, 4.

[31] American Psychiatric Association, *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5)* (Washington, DC: American Psychiatric Publishing, 2013).

[32] Luka Janeš, "Biopolitical Laboratory and the Genetic Modification of the Psyche," *Jahr* 10, no. 2 (2019): 341-360.

As a basic problem of the successful ontic realization of the person, we notice the fact that the initial "appearance body" of a person within social networks (i.e., an avatar and a collection of photos) is mainly constructed according to the stiff, settled, common propositions regarding the normality and acceptability dictated by the target group one wishes to appeal to. We claim that this points to the lack of one's free choice at the core of this virtual relation process, possibly further delayering and alienating one's personhood within the network of virtual relationships. At the same time, it opens an important question about the degree to which it constrains (aporizes) the self as a unique, layered, integrated living entity on the path towards affirmation and individuation determined.[33]

Therefore, in the earlier passage, we propaedeutically included Baudrillard's significant hypothesis of simulacrum and virtual reality, as well as the issue of ontic copies as a byproduct of *hyper-avatarization* of human persons, within a computer-defined module of social networks, portals, and other virtual agoras. At this point, we direct a critical evaluation of the "virtual image dominance" to the possibility of one's feeling of aliveness, observing it as essentially linked to the issue at hand.

In accordance with this line of reasoning, T. S. Hoffmann writes on the empirical inaccessibility of the totality of life-phenomena:

> Some readers might find speaking of life as something non-empirical to be odd, but we should keep in mind the fact that none of us has ever been in contact with life as a whole or a totality, and that 'life,' as a *singularia tantum*, as a concept of a whole existing uniquely, could never be an empirical concept, for the principle of the empirical is plurality.[34]

VI. Livingness of the Avatar between the Körper and Leib

We find the question of the livingness of one's image to be closely linked to the question of intercorporeality[35] within the psycho-phenomenological field of *Lebenswelt*. Thus, in this section, we will further develop the introductory notes on psychopathology, with our research aim focused on the semantic transmutation of one's bodily appearance into an image and the image into an idea.

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[33] Carl G. Jung, *The Symbolic Life. Miscellaneous Writings*, eds., and trans. Gerhard Adler, and R. F. C. Hull (Princeton, NJ: University of Princeton Press, 1953), 123.

[34] Thomas Sorren Hoffman, "The Philosophical Concept of Life and its Role in the Foundation of an Integrative Bioethics," *Synthesis Philosophica* 30, no. 1 (2015): 6.

[35] Dermot Moran, "Intercorporeality and Intersubjectivity: A Phenomenological Exploration of Embodiment," in *Embodiment, Enaction and Culture: Investigating the Construction of the Shared World*, eds. Christoph Durt, Thomas Fuchs, and Christian Tewes, 25-46 (London: MIT Press, 2017), 25.

More precisely, we put forth the hypothesis that this process forms a kind of "inverted loop," and evaluate the presented argument with the help of Merleau-Ponty's existential phenomenology of *embodiment*.[36] We believe that it is a valuable argumentation platform to view a person's subject, within the framework of the simulacrum, as the *avatar* – as a kind of motionless "uniform self" shaped into a motionless image.[37]

Merleau-Ponty divides the body phenomenon into *Körper* and *Leib*, into a biological body and a living, experiencing (subjective) body. It is precisely the latter that is identified with consciousness, which moves between the dynamics of the intersubjectivity of the body, in the psycho-phenomenological space that constitutes consciousness and the world of social space.

Regarding this position, Merleau-Ponty states:

> [...] with regard to our own body, what is true of all perceived things: that the perception of space and the perception of a thing, the spatiality of the thing and its being as a thing are not two distinct problems. To be a body is to be tied to a certain world, as we have seen, our body is not primarily in space: it is of it.[38]

Furthermore, focused on intentionality within the frame of his phenomenological project, and in relation to Husserl's "rigid" transcendental eidetic position, Merleau-Ponty redirects his interest precisely to the living body (*Leib*) – a body in motion whose self-individuation is happening *in-the-world* and *towards-the-world*,[39] essentially shaping, figuratively speaking – "a mereological cosmic body of the *Lebenswelt*." The shaping process in question implies the mutual correlation and realization of the human existence in the social space, which, in addition to the problem related to the phenomenological synthesis, inevitably invokes ethical, bioethical attention when applied to the social media space, i.e. the *simulacra life-domain*.

Conclusively the distinction between living (*Leben*) and experiencing body (*Erleben*), which occupies an important segment of Merleau-Ponty's existential-phenomenological approach, is being emphasized in light of the

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[36] Thomas Fuchs, and Jan E. Schlimme, "Embodiment and Psychopatology: A Phenomenological Perspective," *Current Opinion in Psychiatry* 22, no. 6 (2009): 148.

[37] In this context, we will draw an analogy between the *Körper/Leib* and *Leben/Erleben* on the one hand, and between the *image-avatar* and *psyche-living* person on the other. Also, in the following chapters we will question whether one`s avatar stimulate person`s ontic realization by depriving them of the stress and discomfort that is caused by physical confrontation and intercourse with other persons in the living space.

[38] Maurice Merleau Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (London: Routledge, 1981), 148.

[39] Ibid., 350.

fact that exclusively through linking the given two elements in question to the ontological amalgam of one's self, a human person can be constellationally in relation to the natural and social environment.

VII. The question of consciousness

It is significant to put the question of consciousness in the following existential and phenomenological context. Thomas Fuchs claims that from the very beginning, consciousness must be perceived as an *embodied and extended consciousness*, and it represents the living organism in its entirety, not just the phenomenon encapsulated in the brain. He writes:

> [...] consciousness cannot be envisaged as an invisible chamber that is literally contained in the head and concealed behind the sensory organs. Indeed, it is not contained at all "in the physical body," but rather is *embodied*: conscious acts are particular, integral activities of a living, self-sustaining, sensory-receptive, and mobile organism. Therefore, the primary dimension of consciousness is the reciprocal, homeostatic, sensorimotor, and active-receptive relationship of the living organism and the environment.[40]

Following Fuchs' thesis, we suggest a hypothesis that this kind of entanglement between the organism and the environment is not quite possible in the domain of simulacra, or more precisely, it is blocked and antagonized in many ways.

By taking the above into account – what can we claim regarding the existential-phenomenological (dis)placement[41] of the "avatarized" living person raised within the virtual *simulacra* environment? We propose that it is marked primarily by the teleological void and emptiness depleted of *virtue* in its rudimentary meaning.[42]

Before developing the argumentation further, we want to focus on the etymology of the word "virtual," which originates from the Latin word "virtus" (in Greek *arete*), virtue. For this investigationthe following question is raised: how much virtue do the current technical simulacra actually offer? Moreover, to what

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[40] Thomas Fuchs, *Ecology of the Brain. The Phenomenology and Biology of the Embodied Mind* (Oxford: Oxford Univesity Press, 2017), 69.

[41] Shaun Gallagher, "Intersubjectivity and Psychopatology," in *Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Psychiatry*, eds. K. W. M Fulford, Martin Davies, Richard Gipps, George Graham, John Sadler, Giovanni Stanghellini, and Tim Thornton, 258-274 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 258-274.

[42] In *Cambridge Dictionary* (online version, https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/virtue, last visited March 28, 2021), under the word "virtue" stands: "good moral quality in a person, or the general quality of being morally good."

extent do they offer a fruitful field for a scientific, spiritual and cultural development of a living person? Based and built on the virtues of the noetic openness, critical rectitude, but also of the integrative and inclusive attitude, extended in the space of endless diversity of life manifestations and accidentals.

We propose the hypothesis that the embodiment transmuted to the image that society creates for the subject, potentially inhabits the underlying problem of the various psychological issues, such as the narcissistic personality disorder, and psychosis, i.e., delusions and hallucinations, as we already noted in the preceding discussion. We will also hypothesize that the physical distance from the realm of concrete suffering, essentially nullifies the empathic capacities of being, once more as a consequence of the delusional way of grasping the worldliness of general phenomenality.

VIII. Issues of the psyche technicalization

Technology is generally understood as an extension of the human being and a tool to increase the quality of one's life.[43] One example would be the reduction of space and time needed to gather avatars from all over the world in virtual chat rooms or groups. Likewise, it facilitates the exchange of data and speeds up its circulation from point A to point B. Moreover, technology makes communication easier for an introverted person by reducing the anxiety related to social interactions.

On the other side, it is interesting to notice that it often figures as a regressive tool, especially in the context of the social media simulacra and the generalized "screen omnipresence." We will refer to this issue as the "technicalization of the psyche." Yet, as it has become a kind of common mark of the "technical human of the future," what is often understood as an extension is mutating into a possible source of alienation.

Hypothetically speaking, positioned in the domain of external instrumentality, persons are often reduced to a heteronomous instrument of a kind of closed causality. Whereas the possibility for autonomous "onto-orientation" and acting is being left to dwell in the closed horizon of the more or less likable posts, comments, and other reactions of the social media utilities.

Let us consider Ricœur's conception of *oneself as another*, in analogy to the critical notions presented in the previous paragraphs. Ricœur writes:

> *Oneself as another* suggests from the outset that the selfhood of oneself implies otherness to such an intimate degree that one cannot be thought of without the other, that instead, one passes into the other, as we might say in Hegelian terms. To 'as' I should like to attach a strong meaning, not only that of

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[43] Janeš, 343.

comparison (oneself similar to another) but indeed that of an implication (oneself in as much as being other).[44]

Therefore, Ricœur views the self-structure of a person primarily as a medium, that is, an affirmative backbone and a link between oneself and another. Perhaps this would be an effective philosophical cure for the treatment of the "ontic plague" of uncertainty, indeterminacy, and irresponsibility. It could also function as a general orientation tool for stepping in and residing in the virtual simulacrum.

What is essential for understanding Ricœur's claim in the given context is his original hermeneutic approach, in which he clearly distinguishes the "self" and "identity, " the "self" and "otherness."[45] Furthermore, Ricœur discusses how the actions of the self cannot be understood from the position of pure subjectivity because the question of motives is a question of personality that is always a concrete historical subject. The crucial point in the understanding of selfhood is showing how the self understands itself in the chain of intersubjective relations.[46]

IX. Edges of the psycho-phenomenology space within simulacra domain

Following the preceding remarks, let us examine the chain of intersubjective relations in the frame of the virtual, i.e., the simulacra-space[47]. In particular, what are the ways in which intersubjective relations are being transmuted within the, ironically put "paradox of the free choice platform" such as, for example, the cases of accepting the virtual "friendship" on social networks as the common, general social framework? Moreover, do these new intersubjective relations contribute to the growth of our narcissistic features?

As well, we question whether the "avatar issue" represents the reduction and closure of the width of a person's beingness within the set image, or whether it facilitates and stimulates its realization by depriving them of the stress and discomfort that is caused by physical confrontation and intercourse with other persons in the living space?

We claim that while residing in the sphere of *simulacra*, one should not perceive it as an alternative escape from the "actual" reality of physical relations. We put forth the hypothesis that hiding from the intersubjective

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[44] Paul Ricœur, *Onself as Another*, trans. Kathleen Blamey (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992), 3.

[45] Ibid., 16.

[46] Tanja Todorović, "Tumačenje sebstva. Paul Ricœur," [Interpretating the Selfhood. Paul Ricœur] *Filozofska istraživanja* 29, no. 1 (2019): 17-31.

[47] Which is, due to Baudrillard`s notions, more real than the common reality.

reality "chains" oneself behind the visual "avatar towers and concrete walls." Namely, while exhibiting algorithmically enabled signs and characteristics of personhood, one is, at the same time, being deprived of some fundamental elements of personality dwelling in the physical sphere (e.g., the responsibility regarding the consequences of one's actions and their causes).

However, at the same time, it raises one's awareness regarding the universal phenomenological space and its edges, in which one's life circulates and through which it receives orientation regarding its phenomenological position in the chain of intersubjective relations. In many cases, it is symptomatically manifested in the emergence of the ontological insecurity[48] and hyper-sensible reactions, while facing other living beings phenomenon as a kind of mirror or measure of one's value and a grasp of teleology. One can find research analogous in Kohut`s notion regarding the mirroring self-object.[49]

The premises of this argument imply that one's avatar should be perceived as a communicative relational form of a person who is not previously separated from themselves in the sense of "having" one's self.[50]

Having this in mind, we must raise an important question of the responsibility range of the person who ontically splits into a winding hierarchy of various *mimetic* living models. We claim that a person, via *avatarization*, hence *technicalization* of their own psyche usually endeavors to overcome complexes, yet in doing so, they inevitably falsify their existence in the context of the lack of authenticity and autonomy of self-orientation.

One problematic issue that we recognize related to this point is that by stepping into the public sphere[51], into the socio-political relation space of the social network (i.e. space of the political action and attitude), one acts mainly by using the *like* symbol as the dominant module of the communication.[52] Without expressing their exact opinion, namely without grasping their own acts and impacts within the open phenomenological field, one becomes incapable of noticing the edges, relations, and centers within one's mutual entanglement (i.e. one is incapable of knowing what the exact reality is at all).

Let us ask ourselves whether the level of one's social responsibility and awareness degrades in the context of hypothesis that the created avatar exists

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[48] Ronald David Laing, *The Divided Self: An Existential Study in Sanity and Madness* (London: Penguin, 1965), 39.

[49] Heinz Kohut, *The Restoration of the Self* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014), 10; 216.

[50] All that if we embrace that the phenomenological space of virtual reality should not be understood as inferior to the common one, in the means of not dwelling in a permanent state of mild, colorful delusion and dreams, induced by the neuro-marketing models of happiness.

[51] Alice E. Marwick, "The Public Domain: Social Surveillance in Everyday Life," *Surveillance & Society* 9, no. 4 (2012): 378-393.

[52] Which possibly narrows the width of ones' critical dialogue scope propulsion.

in the social media consumer's consciousness only as a kind of fictional game character? The problem we observe is that in the psychological sense, the framework of a person's real-life action and their avatar are not bifurcated from the legal restriction of one's unique political subject.

The virtual reality of simulacra presents a real-time space of action but with a different formal phenomenality. Yet, the consequences of relationships and actions are equally realistic, whether they occur in the "virtual" or the "common" reality. Namely, the space and time representation and positioning[53] are equated with the ones of the simulacra.

At this point, it is noteworthy to mention the issue of frequent violence and virtual abuse as a "normal" and, therefore, accepted state, which, until it is accompanied by a physical act of violence, is not restricted by almost any regulation, remaining in the domain of a self-regulated custom.

There is no call of conscience if a person always simulates the state of being right or brings current problems of the society to absurdity (e.g., in trolling). In doing so, a person reacts in a narcissistic manner[54] – destructively to anything other than a "likable-self-avatar."

Customs and norms constructed by n-virtual entities deprived of the ontic contextual positioning have as its by-product the relativity of moral actions. We conclude that the arbitrariness of one's positioning in the psycho-phenomenological space of virtual agoras in many ways opens the door for the (bio)ethical sensibility entropy,[55] mostly in the form of not noticing and/or accepting the needs of the *Others*.

X. Towards the conclusion – on usage of philosophy as the orientation tool

This paper is based on the hypothesis that as active participants, i.e. sub-elements of the global virtual "simulacra game" (marked with the clear, consistent set of rules and restrictions), we are becoming socially raised up mostly by externally induced behavioral axioms. Underlining the lack of critical thinking within this problematic domain, we propose philosophical integrative thinking as the potential "antidote" for the issue in question.[56]

Furthermore, we claim that the fundamental attribute of philosophy[57] could

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[53] Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Pure Reason*, eds and trans Paul Guyer, and Allen W. Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 157.

[54] Cristopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in the Age of Diminishing Expectations* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1991), 31.

[55] Kristina Dilica, "Is There a Need for Bioethical Education in the Academic Community?" *Panoniana* 5, no. 1 (2021): 61-76.

[56] On curative potential of philosophy see Lou Marinoff, *Plato, Not Prozac!: Applying Eternal Wisdom to Everyday Problems* (Quill: London, 2000).

[57] Philosophy observed as the most propulsive "tool" for extension of the horizon of critical

be found in the flexibilization of the rigid propositional forms and the semantic relations of the reality (even in its "virtual" form). As well as in the possibility of encouraging and raising awareness of the onto-epistemic orientation of ones` free dwelling and acting in the *simulacra* space.

Namely, the "alchemical-hermeneutic" nature of the philosophical constructive, maieutic approach to the mutual co-meaning and correlations of the various segments of *Lebenswelt*, offers a firm hope of overturning the instrumentational aim of the social media. From the domain of instrumental techne-closeness of the, often narcissistic avatar-like onto-heteronomy, to the educational form marked primarily by the communicative value of affirmation, individuation, and integratedness of the person.

In other words, we see philosophy as a tool for affording integration, constitutionality, and synthesis, as opposed to bifurcation, animosity, dualism, and stagnation. In addition, philosophy could be very useful in overcoming one's weaknesses and dissatisfactions caused by the lack of prevention of narcissistic tendencies[58] in their initial stages.

We claim that the given issues are noticeable, especially in one's inability to carry the weight of one's own image, an image that is effectively blurred through the "Avatar Agora." Germinated mostly by one's laziness and avoidance of stress of physical confrontation with others in person, but also through enforced social distancing as the byproduct of the pandemic, for example. Namely, these problems result from the failure to immerse oneself into actual socio-historical events at the micro and macro level and relativity preventing the dialectical synthesis of the choice to model and create our self-image autonomously.

The phenomenological method, which is highlighted in this paper, perhaps reveals in the best way the deep connection of these processes in a common virtual space although they act separately. This means that new identities are created in a chain of intersubjective relations[59] in which the questions of truth and falsehood, simulacrum and simulation, such as the differences between original and the copy content are left aside in these considerations. In this new age, emphasis is placed on important ways in which singular identity interferes with others, while traditional ontological questions are left aside.

Although this is one of the reasons why there is no unified media theory (because there is no unified ontology to establish it), in the end, it can be concluded that trying to think about the world in its processuality may not necessarily

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thinking.

[58] On narcissistic tendencies in the frame of epidemy of "narcissism epidemic" see Jean M. Twenge, and W. Keith Campbell, *The Narcissism Epidemic: Living in the Age of Entitelment* (New York: Atria Books, 2010).

[59] On intersubjective relations see Gallagher, 258-274.

be wrong, although we never come to final. Like all phenomenologists, the researcher always tries to move from the phenomenon, from the identity to the thing itself, which we often miss in the process of research itself. Therefore, we can conclude that new forms of education that operate through these new media and virtual spaces cannot necessarily be labeled as something negative overall but that all their effects should be examined in relation to the contextual situations in which they operate. And could definitely be upgraded with the help of philosophical critical thinking endorsement, in order to preserve mental health of the digital media consumers, as one of the induction examples.

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