

THEORY OF TECHNOMAGIC: SPELLS, ECSTASY AND POSSESSIONS IN DIGITAL CULTURE

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ABSTRACT

The rituals, ceremonies and effervescence of the sacred manifest themselves in digital culture not only through the proliferation of new religious cults. They do so through the online actualisation of traditional religious forms but also the spiritual elevation of objects (Houtman & Meyer, 2012), practices (Carolyn, 2014) or ephemeral, playful and dreamlike images (Susca, 2016). In most cases, they involve figures that evoke the most sensitive and immaterial aspects of experience: its flesh (Esposito, 2004; Henry, 2000) and its imaginary (Durand, 1992). This is the actualisation of what Durkheim (2008) called the “social divine”. We are thus witnessing the proliferation of a multitude of small churches characterised by a low degree of institutionalisation and a high symbolic and emotional density (Maffesoli, 2020). In this sense, digital sociality acquires a decisive value in transfiguring ordinary life, the realm of the profane, into a mythical and mystical experience, brushing up against the sacred in its wildest form (Bastide, 1975). Indeed, the relationships that emerge from these media landscapes reveal a capacity to associate what is separate in time and space, previously belonging to the spiritual and transcendent orders (Davis, 1999). Thus, the culture of connection and sharing actualises in secular spheres a whole set of symbolic experiences reminiscent of religious mysteries (Campbell, 2012). This imaginary modifies the modern relationship between technology and society according to a paradigm that could be called “technomagic”.

KEYWORDS

technique, magic, daily life, imaginary, rites

TEORIA DA TECNOMAGIA: FEITIÇOS, ÊXTASE E POSSESSÕES NA CULTURA DIGITAL

RESUMO

Os rituais, as cerimónias e a efervescência do sagrado manifestam-se na cultura digital, não só através da proliferação de novos cultos religiosos. Fazem-no através da atualização online de formas religiosas tradicionais, mas também da elevação espiritual de objetos (Houtman & Meyer, 2012), práticas (Carolyn, 2014) ou imagens efémeras, lúdicas e oníricas (Susca, 2016). São, na maior parte dos casos, figuras que evocam os aspetos mais sensíveis e imateriais da experiência: a sua carne (Esposito, 2004; Henry, 2000) e o seu imaginário (Durand, 1992). Trata-se da atualização daquilo a que Durkheim (2008) chamou o “divino social”. Assistimos assim à proliferação de uma miríade de pequenas igrejas que se caracterizam por um baixo grau de institucionalização e uma elevada densidade simbólica e emocional (Maffesoli, 2020). Neste sentido, a socialidade digital adquire um valor decisivo na transfiguração da vida quotidiana, do reino do profano, numa experiência mítica e mística, roçando o sagrado na sua forma mais

selvagem (Bastide, 1975). De facto, as relações que emergem destes panoramas mediáticos revelam uma capacidade de associar o que está separado no tempo e no espaço, anteriormente pertencente às ordens espiritual e transcendente (Davis, 1999). Assim, a cultura da conexão e da partilha materializa em esferas seculares todo um conjunto de experiências simbólicas que lembram os mistérios religiosos (Campbell, 2012). Este imaginário modifica a relação moderna entre a tecnologia e a sociedade num paradigma que se poderia designar por “tecnomágico”.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

técnica, magia, vida quotidiana, imaginário, ritos

1. INTRODUCTION

Cyberspace. A consensual hallucination experienced daily by billions of legitimate operators in every nation by children being taught mathematical concepts... A graphic representation of data abstracted from the banks of every computer in the human system. Unthinkable complexity. Lines of light ranged in the nonspace of the mind, clusters and constellations of data. Like city lights receding. (Gibson, 1988, p. 111)

Today, engaged religion and atheistic science are waging one of their many contests... But I suspect the spectacle to watch is the ongoing and ancient shadow-play between magic and technology. (Davis, 2011, p. 11)

The communions with pagan overtones (Cowan, 2005) celebrated by the new rites of the online digital landscapes feed a form of belief based on the sharing of a secret (Simmel, 1998), an emotional order (Weber, 1971) and a communal lifestyle (Virno, 2002). Beyond the characteristics of the mobilising myths that somehow occupy a place within the flows of contemporary communication, the social body and the body itself are always celebrated through digital liturgies. It is the very data of profane life (Turner, 1974), beyond secularisation and disenchantment, that is sacralised: the flesh with its voluptuousness (Attimonelli & Susca, 2017), matter in its sensitive and sensitive character (Perniola, 1994). The media become the new totems of being together (Susca, 2011). Indeed, when the means of technical reproducibility extirpate the aura of the work of art (Benjamin, 2000), the public gradually becomes its object and subject. He reveals himself as the protagonist of a process of aestheticisation (Lipovetsky & Serroy, 2013) that forms a whole with its sacralisation.

The cult of the internet (Breton, 2000) and its ideology (Musso, 2003) refers to new forms of fetishism, utopia and non-rational adhesion. They show to what extent the devices in question do not simply constitute technologies at the service of a pragmatic or functional political-economic project. They rather constitute a symbolic territory capable of channelling and expressing the realm of the “unproductive life” (Bataille, 2003; Joron, 2010), namely desires, sensibilities and impulses irreducible to the guiding idea of progress and traditional grand narratives.

From this perspective, we propose to verify, through the prism of the sociology of the imaginary, to what extent and in what forms the public opinion that founded Western and modern culture (Habermas, 1962/1995) gives way to a “public emotion”, where reason no longer directs the senses, but where the senses are invited to think (Susca, 2016). It is possible to observe a shift from a paradigm based on the individual and abstraction to one based on the “we” and empathy (McLuhan, 1964/2004), in which the spatiotemporal model of ubiquity, proxemics and synchronicity becomes paramount. The fundamental difference with the above is that the new forms of collective adhesions and beliefs are not projected elsewhere — the perfect society, salvation, Heaven or Earth. Instead, they are sacralised to the extent that they allow individuals to connect, merge and vibrate in unison. They can immerse themselves in the world in the most intense and embodied way possible, even if these experiences are often linked to the order of consumption (Obadia, 2013) and ephemerality (Pace, 2018).

In such a context, faith is no longer oriented towards the future and is not based on abstract concepts and figures. Instead, it becomes an experience rooted in the here and now (Haynes, 2012), in everyday life (Castells, 1998), dedicated on the one hand to the material and sensitive dimensions and on the other to an immaterial universe close to fantasy, dream and even science fiction. It is appropriate to describe and note the paradigm shift between “technology” as it was conceived from the Renaissance to the mid-20th century (Simondon, 2014) and contemporary “technomagic”. We will highlight the emblematic figures of this shift to understand this transition.

2. THE DAWN OF MAN

At its peak, the technique still has the magical resonance of a disquieting wonder with stunning and frightening features. Its cutting-edge performances are constantly accompanied by a smell of obsolescence for the human being, a whiff of excess, already leaving the wound of a tear. Thus, the individual overflows into a corporeality situated outside its organic framework, tasting both the limits of its own condition and its possible excesses to the point of caressing, even defying the faculties inherent in the divine. In the archetypes and stereotypes in which it is actualised, mythology bears witness to this with a sustained cadence, while the social body constantly metabolises its imprints in the wefts of everyday life. The mystical, the aesthetic and the sensual permeate all techniques (Simondon, 2014) and relativise their logical and functional dimensions.

Stanley Kubrick perfectly crystallised the spirit and genealogy of technology with the remarkable scene in *2001. A Space Odyssey* (1968), where those who are supposed to be our ancestors were dazzled by the appearance of a monolith. Appalled and bewitched by its majesty, following a phase of panic and confusion, they ended up dancing around this new totem. Today, we could suggest, in other words, that they were communing, putting themselves in common, and generating a community from a technical artifice of high symbolic density. According to the great director, in agreement with many anthropologists, sociologists and philosophers of technology, this is the *dawn of man*. It is a

controversial origin because while linking the individual to the other, every technique also serves to separate.

In this interplay of forces, we find our long history of contradictions, splendours and miseries, conquests and abuses (Abruzzese & Borrelli, 2000). Its traces reveal to us that technical innovation, when deployed in the social scene, is first welcomed as a device with a magical allure because of its ability to enchant the world, to unite what is divided and to attribute unheard-of powers to human beings by making them touch both the divine and the cosmic order (Mauss, 2004); before and after this interval, the time is for study, calculation and even rationalisation.

Applying such a schema to any era, by going through history, it is possible to trace a cyclical alternation of the spirit dominating the system of objects and identify a change between eras in which sometimes a utilitarian principle prevails — that is, the capacity to intensify man's action on the world, the domination of nature and instrumental action. Sometimes, on the contrary, the trinity of aesthetic, religious and magical values prevails: beauty rather than utility, communion rather than contract, and ecstatic vibration instead of interest. In the first case, the social mobilisation around the discovery of the moment tends towards the achievement of a goal — progress, wealth, conquest, among others — whereas, in the second, it constitutes an end in itself: technology is merely the link, the crucible where the social takes shape and “happens”. Here, we see a diffuse communion, a mystical participation, not only within a specific group but also between it, the Earth and the cosmos. In order to grasp this amalgam and to understand in depth the weave of correspondences that is always woven between body and technique, nature and culture, dream and material reality, it is appropriate to immerse ourselves in a genealogical perspective.

3. FROM TOTEMISM TO THE WEB

At first, technology, magic and religion were inextricably linked, so much so that the highest degree of mystical experience naturally corresponded to the subtlest level of technological action and occult art (Graf, 1994). Totemism, a practice of tribal religion that allowed a group to unite in ecstatic friction with the divine and the nature around them (Durkheim, 2008), was the emblematic figure of the synergy between these three factors. The process of civilisation (Elias, 1973) subsequently caused the radical tearing apart of such a paradigm. From the Renaissance onwards, in particular, following the invention of perspective and what architects called the “point of distance” (Alberti, 2015), the subject experienced a gradual symbolic and physical separation from all its otherness (Dumont, 1983).

As an object of study, as materials to be shaped, as a landscape to be mastered and constructed, everything that moves away from the individual bubble becomes foreign, almost suspicious of what it hides and cannot be reduced to the order of reason. Modernity and the technology that characterise the press (McLuhan, 1966), in particular, have generated a process of splitting up words and things (Foucault, 1966), body and mind, subject and object, acting in the direction of a progressive rationalisation of

existence, leading to the disenchantment of the world (Weber, 1964). Thus, we have lost the *anima mundi* evoked by Giordano Bruno (2000) to name the invisible but solid links, “vinculis”, between individuals and nature, Heaven and Earth, organic and inorganic.

Religious effervescence was thus extirpated from the body of the tribe and institutionalised by the transcendence of sacred texts: the Bible was the first printed book, and with it, the long process of abstraction from the world and individualisation was inaugurated; magic was relegated to the underworld and stigmatised as a religion of the masses or a fog of consciousness; technology was presented as a means of human domination over nature, an instrument capable of solving problems and an effective tool for accentuating disjunction with the “other”, or for establishing a relationship with him based on a contract, interest or project. This is how nation-States and their impassable borders came into being and how the sciences spread with their prescriptive knowledge and methods inaccessible to most individuals. This is how the elitist caste of guardians of the political, religious, technical, and artistic world came to be imposed.

The splendour of this era carried with it, like the final bouquet of a firework display, its decline, the announcement of its catastrophe. As Marshall McLuhan noted in the 1960s, the social diffusion of the new electronic media is the agent of the deflagration of modern culture and its political, social, identity and economic order (McLuhan, 1977). Although such an invention originated in techno-scientific laboratories developed in the 18th and 19th centuries, its use and consumption — in other words, the social appropriation of which it is the object — have been directed against the intentions of its creators, like the monster created by Dr. Frankenstein to fulfil his dreams of glory.

The social manipulation of technological innovation is the main spark that causes this chain of perverse effects (Boudon, 1977), at the heart of what Guy Debord (1992) called “the society of the spectacle”. To grasp its full meaning, we need only look at the parable of the internet (Flichy, 2001). Indeed, invented for military and academic purposes, it has been transformed by an insertion into the pool where many forms of collaboration, connection and sensitive intelligence with a strong anti-modern connotation are experimented. These are non-vertical, non-rational, non-ideological, separate from the elites, impertinent towards established law and disjunctive towards the order of nations. The web, in particular, with its contemporary incarnations in the form of social networks, video-game worlds, dating sites and emotional, symbolic or sexual exchanges, has become the portal for imaginaries and practices whose non-logical, dreamlike and festive aspect takes precedence over everything else (Susca, 2016). This forces the sector elites to hide more and more the political and economic aspect that presides over its action. We constantly see how difficult it is for the instituted power to maintain such a cursed part of the productive order (Bown, 2015).

It is clear that there is a conflict between techno-science, political economy and politics on the one hand and the users of the web on the other, for whom what counts in cyberspace is, above all, the mystery of the conjunction, the dance of masks, the price of priceless things and the power of the imaginary. Here, the public sphere crumbles into a multitude of networked affective and cognitive gatherings, each with its own ethical

order impinging on universal morality, its sentiments and paradigms. This is why illegal downloading has never been so popular (Musso, 2018): most cybernauts violate copyright law spontaneously (Gulmanelli, 2003), without scruples, by evading their own duties as citizens to prefer hedonism and the pleasure of uniting with the group through the sharing of information, symbols, sounds and affects. This same vocation encourages everyone to surreptitiously reduce their working hours in order to take advantage of their screens to chat on Telegram, post photos on Instagram, flirt on Tinder or Grindr, follow gamers on Twitch or wander through the trends of TikTok.

The abuses in question are not just about entertainment but also involve a great sacrifice: the gift of the subject. When intimate photos are published in stories, when people go through the rituals of sending nudes or even, in a more mundane way, when we do not enjoy a hot meal, a kiss at sunset or a live singer's performance to take pictures and post them online, that experience is less and less an individual phenomenology than a collective and connective one. I do not experience it if the other person is not there to make it a common story. It does not matter that Google, Facebook or Microsoft are devouring our existences transformed into data and commodities (Sadin, 2015) by betraying the societal impulses that animate digital sociality. What matters for the users in question is the paradoxical pleasure of being connected to others, even depending on the lives of others.

Undeniably, the dialectic between submission and freedom is short-circuited insofar as we are faced with a voluntary, perhaps unconscious alienation compared to the industrial age. This is undoubtedly aimed at establishing and corroborating a series of pacts and solidarities between peers: the friends of games, parties, tricks, vibes, and fetishes, among others. Although it may seem contradictory, while they easily cede sensitive information to the GAFAM (Google, Apple, Facebook, Amazon, and Microsoft), internet users organise themselves into electronic communities in and for themselves in the name of a shared taste, a moving icon or an ephemeral thrill. They discover the power of the interstices or how to be free without freedom. They do this by hijacking the codes instituted by memes, GIFs or trolls but also by elaborating fake worlds that are more real than reality because of their capacity to induce a common vibration.

Technology is transfigured into a tool that can refine and socialise the ingrained tactics of popular cunning (De Certeau, 1999). In other words, the set of practices constantly used by the social body to defend itself from the aggressive and pedantic gaze of power (Maffesoli, 1988). The shift we are witnessing has the characteristics of a true anthropological mutation, where what was previously expressed in terms of "resistance" is now translated into "recreation" and "re-creation" (Susca & Bardainne, 2008). As the new media favour the manipulation of language and symbolic order from their basic grammar (Lévy, 1994), a tendency to reverse the role between producer and consumer of content (Jenkins, 2006), as well as the connection of sensibilities that were previously too small and dispersed to manifest themselves operationally and perceptibly (Castells, 1998). In that way, the map of power and the face of technology are altered.

4. PUBLIC EMOTION

Technique ceases to be the art of *logos*, the instrument of what Heidegger (1958) calls “calculating thought”, “technology” to become “technomagic” (*Les Cahiers Européens de l’Imaginaire*, issue “Technomagie”), a totem around which everyone, with their networks, masks and fantasies, experiences a kind of mystical ecstasy that is both pure dance — a celebration of the here and now — and a flight towards something greater than oneself. The bond born of this condition is no longer based on a rational and abstract contract, the “social contract”, but on a pact in which emotion, passions and shared symbols become the new axes of being together (Maffesoli, 2007), the presuppositions of all fusion and connective effusion. Here is the emergence of a cultural sensibility in which the balance between reason and meaning is reversed in favour of the latter, relativising the paradigm of rational and abstract thought that has fuelled the dynamics of Western modernity.

The experience elaborated in the alveolus of digital culture reveals an unprecedented synergy between the mind and the senses, the visible and the invisible, rational action and magical thinking. The worship of the various fetishes that underpin the contemporary cultural scenario entails, for each person involved, a high degree of ecstasy and bewitchment. It also results in a consciousness with a connected memory and embodied highly refined knowledge. The augmented intelligence articulated by these architectures of bytes and neurons draws its strength from a general intellect (Marx, 1968), the common thought (Virno, 2002), in which the brain of each individual is a node, an information point of passage preceded and exceeded by a matrix of a holistic character — which includes immense databases, powerful algorithms and artificial intelligence — that is larger than the subject. The individual brain is externalised (De Kerckhove & Miranda, 2014) so that it tends to forget and even forget itself insofar as it is invested in the moment, weaving, navigating, and reacting to injunctions that allow it to stay connected to its contacts beyond space and time. In a way, the rise of the system is the corollary of the loss of the rational, autonomous and separate individual conceived by humanism (Attimonelli & Susca, 2021).

Instagram and TikTok subscribers contemplate stories or reels for hours. They indulge in their bewitching narrative while having a powerful mass of information at their disposal that allows them to decipher and contextualise the nuances of the stories they observe. Twitch fans contemplate their heroes in a form of interpassivity that, like digital hypnosis, induces a kind of suspension of consciousness (Zizek, 2004). Thus, they neither need nor want to play, as the game consists precisely of seeing others play. It is a meta-game whose real asset is its ability to actualise sociality, as *GTA* or *League of Legends* will become pretexts for getting in touch with others based on the intersection between everyday life in its most anodyne aspect and fantasy in its paroxysmal state. These practices were radicalised during the COVID-19 pandemic to the point of becoming the place for social interactions par excellence (Joron, 2020). The infatuation, addiction and frenzy that characterise them do not only concern fans or simple users but also streamers and any other content producer who ends up transmitting and exposing his or

her life as an audiovisual narrative (Codeluppi, 2015) as part of an infinite performance capable of exhausting and emptying the subject — of returning it to the other (Ferraris, 2016), available as work, data and object of consumption.

Each of these fetishes, sites and networks, emblems of a highly emotional sociality, exhorts to a technomagical participation animated by an effervescence whose mystical aspect, with non-rational contours, is significant. However, despite these incantatory flows, individuals recognise with a certain lucidity and competence the mythology by which they allow themselves to be dazzled. In a way, they dream by knowing how to dream. Moreover, it is easy to see that the scenes expressing the culture in gestation between the web and the street know in detail the techno music that induces them into a trance state (Attimonelli, 2018). They distinguish with acuity the finishing touches of the gadgets that distinguish its style, carefully select the reels or stories in front of which to abandon themselves for hours.

We are witnessing the shift from public opinion, with its rational and abstract connotations, to public emotion, where intelligence becomes sensitive (Maffesoli, 2005) and integrates into the mental framework the imaginary, sacred and affective charge neglected or even banned by a large part of modern culture. For some years now, on social networks, for example, we “react” with hearts, emoticons, GIFs, vibes and memes before thinking. This is why we are led to choose and think with our senses, even before we do so with abstract reasoning, unconsciously, just as it happens when we fall in love or engage in a business, guided by a favourable impression, an ineffable intuition.

5. IMAGINARY, MYTHS AND RITES

Marshall McLuhan (1964/2004) was the first to anticipate the magical and tribal resonances of our societies by suggesting, with powerful metaphors, that in our electronic age, we would take on the whole of humanity as our skin. Our body would thus be the territory, the unconscious protagonist of a double process, which, although seemingly invisible — and precisely because we cannot distinguish it with precision — has a tremendous effect on the webs of our culture. These range from the field of knowledge to interpersonal relations and to relationships of pleasure.

Without knowing it, we are becoming cyborgs, or better still, as Andy Clark (2004) argues, we are naturally born as cyborgs. On the one hand, we are extending our central nervous system beyond the boundaries of our brain — into external memories, “clouds”, digital network albums, and the like — and on the other, we are reabsorbing them into our flesh through wearable devices, microtechnologies and wearable computers. This happens both naturally and unconsciously: we know how to retrieve the details of our existence in a personal digital assistant, can laugh with Alexa, and manage to translate, narrate and aggrandise our lives in stories through hashtags, GIFs and stickers, but are unaware of the technical process that makes this possible.

Technology and magic are distinguished, in particular, by the presence in the former of a congruent relationship between cause and effect, the effort produced, and the result

obtained. In the age of technomagic, the mechanical or functional principle that serves as the fulcrum of modern technological action is, on the contrary, disarticulated. Long before the mass diffusion of computers, Theodore Roszak (1994) had already grasped the symbolic power of electronic media:

the vision is this: one sits before a brightly lit screen, stroking keys, watching remarkable things flash by on the screen at the speed of light. Words, pictures, and images appear out of nowhere. Like a child, one begins to believe in magic all over again. And because one is making the magic happen, an intoxicating sense of power comes with the act. One has the culture of the entire planet there at one's fingertips! All the databases, libraries, archives, movies, art museums, bulletin boards, telephones and fax machines in the world are in this one box. (p. 186)

Meanwhile, the box has become almost invisible. Moreover, the results of our actions towards the digital devices that surround us have little to do with the behaviour that unleashes them and seem rather to be the product — or at least our perception of it — of a mystery, as if our era was governed by magical principles stemming from the period before the “enlightenment”:

the commands you type into a computer are a kind of speech that doesn't so much communicate as make things happen directly and ineluctably, in the same way pulling a trigger does. In other words, they are incantations, and anyone at all attuned to the technosocial megatrends of the moment (...) knows that the logic of the incantation is rapidly permeating the fabric of our lives. (Dibbel, 1993, para. 53)

According to a model that transforms the tools we use into “technologies of adjuration” (Bohrer, 2011), when we have troubles with our devices, as a result of the imploring of fate, impulsive and even violent reactions reminiscent of arguments with partners of couples, closest friends or family members, we appeal to the new magicians of our time: nerds, who seem to be the repositories of an occult knowledge capable of initiating us into the new world, one where to paraphrase Shakespeare (1998), we are of the stuff our dreams are made of. As masters of a universe unintelligible to most individuals, hidden in the shadows of their rooms and garages, capable of deciphering the “metaphysics of code” (Josset, 2011), these specialists with a hacker ethic are associated in the imagination with the figures of the “shaman” (Davis, 1999) or the “barbarian” (*Les Cahiers Européens de l'Imaginaire*, issue “La Barbarie”).

Like the latter, they carry a sensibility alien to that established in modern institutions of knowledge and power. As Wark McKenzie (2004) and Pekka Himanen (2001) suggested in their pioneering books on the subject, the hacker imaginary implies overcoming individualism, the principle of private ownership of knowledge and information that have long characterised our societies. As an art of doing, this spirit re-evaluates the practice of giving through a sociality in which the border between play, passion and

work is blurred. The result is a series of solidarities capable of forming a body — better still, “flesh”, electronic flesh — and establishing forms of knowing and being together based on initiation and secrecy, with their corollaries of rites and myths that re-enchant an economic scientific and political world governed by instrumental reason, production and other quantitative criteria.

6. MEDIATISATION OF EXISTENCE

Today, more than ever, the immaterial permeates reality and shapes it in its own image, becoming a real material force. How can we believe, moreover, that the more or less young generations who spend a large part of their day on Twitch or TikTok can circumscribe and limit to the digital dimension the experience lived on these platforms in terms of play, sociality and passion? The way of inhabiting the world, confronting the other, knowing and acting, cannot be based on a schizoid separation where physical citizenship is on one side and electronic life is on the other. If there is one thing we can be sure of — the theatricalisation of everyday life is there to show it — it is that our investment in media landscapes is the cause and effect of a new way of thinking and living being there, being with — a new embodiment. We are on the verge of verifying the effects of the deployment of a “third dimension” on the world: a syncretism between our presence in material existence and our immaterial presence in various electronic lives.

Reels in the street, #challenges at the seaside, hearts with hands, LOL (laughing out loud) of all kinds, stories and selfies everywhere: an important and growing series of behaviours taking place in physical reality are now simply the posts of activities born on social networks. The uses of digital photography, for example, express the extent to which the camera and its updates no longer play the role of witnesses to reality, serving to immortalise the traces of the past, but become devices for the elaboration and societal reconstruction of reality: they constitute a layer of the present or the very moment in its revelation to the world. It is a surreality that integrates, in the consciousness of every individual, the look and touch of the other. For this reason, today, there is no situation, however trivial — or even especially trivial — that is not photographed. Whether it is a romantic kiss in a tourist spot, a concert at the Rockstore, a window display at Supreme, a sunset at the Pincio or the Poke Bowl, we are about to eat, and we are all consumed by the need and desire to capture the images of our experience. Only after we have seen it on the screen and shared it with our networks, when we get feedback such as likes or shares, we feel we have lived it. In short, that it exists. If not, it did not happen.

“Everything that was directly experienced has moved away into a representation”, wrote Guy Debord (1992, p. 15). A decade or so after his words, following the message of the culture industry (McLuhan & Fiore, 2003) and the long training in the mediatization of existence on the part of the social body, the situation has changed: what was once a representation becomes the world and the image is translated into experience. In contrast to the phantasmagorias that marked the advent of the film and television age, we are now in the presence of worlds where ghosts can be touched. In this context, both the

tactile aspect of existence and the imagination are brought into play at the same time. This is why we are so frustrated by the months of confinement following the COVID-19 pandemic, where our lives were circumscribed to the electronic dimension alone via screens (Joron, 2020). The history of mass communication has accustomed us, on the contrary, to reversibility between media and daily life, one being regenerated by the other and vice versa (Flichy, 1992).

At the cinema, the audience, as if hallucinated, projects itself onto the screen and allows itself to be transported, according to Edgard Morin's (1957) interpretation in his book *Le Cinéma ou l'Homme Imaginaire* (Cinema or the Imaginary Man), into the bodies of the stars. Subsequently, the emotion experienced after being dazzled by Greta Garbo or Rodolfo Valentino leaves the cinema with the spectator and contaminates social life, helping to disseminate it with dreamlike and sensual imaginings. In the heart of cyberspace, we extend ourselves, on the contrary, towards masks (avatars, nicknames, virtual identities, *memoji*) that we have generated ourselves. We are thus possessed and even overwhelmed by forms that we have elaborated. According to Derrick de Kerckhove (1995), we become creatures of the artifices we have created. In other words, William Gibson (1988), in his famous novel *Neuromancer*, describes life in electronic territories as a "consensual hallucination" (p. 67).

In this wake, video games such as *Minecraft*, *Scrap Mechanic*, *Raft* and many others increasingly provide for the coincidence of the player's figure and that of the architect, following a pattern inaugurated by the virtual universe *Second Life* in the early 2000s. The emoticons used to express emotions beyond words in mediascapes are elaborated and personalised directly by users, as in *memojis*; storytelling is no longer an overarching narrative but is transfigured, via reels or social network stories, into a fanciful and spectacular self-narrative that aestheticises every individual at the very moment when he or she abandons himself or herself to the other.

Henry Jenkins (2006) has pointed out in his book *Convergence Culture* that many fans have begun to use the Harry Potter story as a starting point for developing several magical universes in which they are simultaneously the protagonists and the new wizards. There are several ways in which the process of magification in contemporary culture is actualised, among many others. This is taking place alongside various phenomena, such as the increasing use of unconventional medicine, astrology, and new-age spiritual techniques, as well as the growing popularity of films, role-playing games, series and video games such as *Game of Thrones* (2011–2019), *Avatar* (2009), *The Legend of Zelda* (1986), *Dungeons & Dragons* (1974), and *Fantastic Beasts* (2016). On reflection, the success of these narratives is directly proportional to the crisis of universal truths and grand narratives.

An outbreak of neo-mysticism is setting the social landscape ablaze, nuancing and even contradicting the knowledge society's most rational and progressive premises. Thus, Erik Davis (1999) suggests, revisiting the most fashionable theories on the relationship between culture and technology, that "today there is so much pressure on information that it cracks and overflows with energy, attracting mythologies, metaphysics and fragments of arcane magic" (p. 28). We are not all cyborgs, but everyone is unconsciously transformed

into a little magician of a re-enchanted world where we become jointly subjects and objects of new possessions, idolatries and new sacrifices.

The altars of consumption and communication, high places of social divinity in its electronic flesh, between data, art and merchandise (Obadia, 2013), tend to superimpose themselves, in terms of symbolic power, on the religious cathedrals and classic political institutions. They desacralise what was sacred by sacralising profane imaginaries to the point of shrouding everyday life with magic, including, or especially, its shadows. We could even say that contemporary culture contributes, for better or for worse — from the skull and crossbones to darkness, via defilement, mourning and the whole “aesthetics of unease” (Attimonelli, 2020) — to integrating the cursed part evoked by Bataille (2003), which had been marginalised, if not repressed, by modern socio-cultural systems for several centuries in their attempt for rationality (Weber, 1964).

What emerges unexpectedly is the nature of the sacred and the sacrifices at stake: the masks deployed in contemporary theatres without walls, scattered between the web and the street, dance around new totems in the name of their pleasure, even if it is ephemeral. They do so according to their own lifestyle, without adhering to transcendences or projects that are at odds with the imaginary of the group to which they belong. The initiation rites for accessing these universes are neither written nor prescribed but are rather part of the community’s embodied knowledge. Their codes have some occult quality; they appear elusive and opaque to those outside the tribe. It is no coincidence that the prevailing discourse concerning these circles is tinged with criticism and contempt.

Let us not forget, for example, that in one of his last lectures before he died in 2016, even Umberto Eco (*Lectio Magistralis*, University of Torino, June 10, 2015), one of the most lucid interpreters of mass culture, had argued that social media are the place where every fool has the right to speak. Without a doubt, these platforms express an intelligence completely different from the one promoted by the Goddess of Reason of Enlightenment and put in place by modern power and knowledge since the 18th century. It is a “sensitive reason” (Maffesoli, 2005), a connective intelligence (De Kerckhove, 1997), or a way of being there and understanding the world for which the playful and dreamlike dimensions of existence, emotions and the “us” are primordial. According to such a paradigm, technology no longer manifests itself as a pure panoply of instruments to solve problems, accomplish tasks and act on the environment. It takes the form of a technomagic, capable of fostering the communion of communities around communications, icons and other fetishes.

7. DIGITAL LITURGIES

Three centuries after the birth of modern metropolises, the mediatisation of our existence is finally taking place, a condition by which the media become our main language. After a long period in which technology welcomed the human impulse by playing the role of an instrument at its disposal, we now find ourselves in an integral and intelligent system of information, algorithms and devices. They are so powerful that we are now the ones who derive from it. The author of the famous phrase “the medium is the

message”, Marshall Herbert McLuhan, was nevertheless aware of this drift: “by relentlessly submitting to technologies, we become servomechanisms of them. That is why, if we want to use these objects, these extensions of ourselves, we must serve them as gods, respect them as a kind of religion” (McLuhan, 1964/2004, p. 40). The Promethean myth is exhausted; it is the threadless chains that preside over our lives and our bonds. They are ropes, laces, strings, or better still the “ligatures” described by Giordano Bruno (2000) in his writings on magic. We are caught in their nets that connect us to the world beyond good or evil.

For the first time in the history of the world, we have the absolute in our pocket. The device, of which the web is the most obvious manifestation, is an empire on which the sun never sets, and having a smartphone in one’s pocket certainly means having the world in one’s hand but automatically also being in the hands of the world: at any moment a request may arrive, and at any moment we will be in charge. (Ferraris, 2016, p. 17)

Contemporary technomagic, in its archaic magnetism and futuristic imaginings, is the totem of digital and post-urban sociality, its basic symbolic reference. A source of ambiguous effervescence, in its convulsive webs, individuals are simultaneously in ecstasy, out of themselves, and in the abyss, in the process of precipitating between the euphoria of eroticism, in the arms of the other and the anguish of alienation, under the gaze of the other, so that they lose sight of whether they are the subjects or the objects of the dynamics in question.

Navigating these waters triggers an initiatory wandering that unveils the imaginary boundaries of the world to come (Hugon, 2010). It also goes beyond psycho-geography, politics and cultural forms stemming from humanism, Western modernity and their pivot: the rational, autonomous and separate individual. The completion of the system of signs, simulacra and objects, this matrix with its blurred contours where the biosphere is integrated, and even exceeded, by the noosphere, is indeed the high place upon which we are subjected. We end up being possessed by that over which we once had the mastery. Such a malaise of the individual can be easily detected, for example, in the psychopathology of information overload (Lovink, 2011) as a social disease that spreads from the mediascapes and affects us as soon as the quantity, quality and speed of the data we receive are humanly unmanageable, a source of disorder and chaos (Fisher, 2009). Again, we are victims of the contradictory happiness of being plugged in, connected, informed, active and available, always on while conferring digital citizenship, and this condition saturates us.

As was the case with medieval carnivalesque excesses, contemporary performances, online but also in the flesh, with old and new substances — psychotropic potions, alcohols, drugs, social network notifications, binge-watching television series, endless playlists and anaesthetic drugs combined — are punctuated by ingesting, consuming and surrendering to the other. The resulting weakening of the subject is both an opening and a tearing, in the form of a violation of privacy, *pornoculture* (Attimonelli & Susca,

2017), crisis of intimacy, reflective impotence (Fisher, 2009) or informational stress (Berardi, 2006), is probably the origin of the ambient obscenity, a real “total collusion of elements” (Baudrillard, 2000, p. 33).

In the digital liturgies celebrated between posts, live streams, selfies, stories or reels, everything seems to be driven by both the thirst for pleasure — to lust, to get excited, to dream, to enjoy — and the flirtation with death. Thus, the tragic side of existence once again imposes itself on the scene. If we look closely, the joy that presides over the multiple orgasms, the effervescence and the trances of our time is tragic: it envelops the subject in itself when it bursts when it fails. This is a step backwards compared to the march of progress undertaken by Western culture since the 18th century. A step backwards, but a dance step. As in the ecstatic rites of the past to exorcise death through a common ritual thrill (Pecere, 2021), it establishes a conjunction between the individual and everything beyond him, handing him over to the force of fate. Under the influence of technomagic, the first dark lights of the digital dawn appear.

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