

Digital friction surfaces and new alterity formations

Matan Shapiro

SHAPIRO, Matan (matan@subversity.org) – University College London & Subversity. ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2655-7467>.

INTEGRATION OF DATASCAPES INTO EVERYDAY ROUTINES ERODES THE once-stable threshold between actual and virtual environments. People's actions and inter-actions online consequently gain off-line phenomenality, history, and after-life. Declarations on Facebook, for example, including those posted and forgotten years beforehand, can provoke public shaming or even law-enforcement intervention. Digital financial transactions everywhere are now traceable as pieces of codified information that can be extracted and exploited. Travel card repositories provide precise maps of our movements in space, not only making our data-doubles visible but also turning our routines into a feature of algorithmic prediction (O'Neil 2016). In this short polemic I will contemplate on the confluence of virtual and actual realities as the multiplication of such friction surfaces, a process I perceive to be a key driving force in an axial reconstruction of boundaries of alterity at a global scale.

I broadly understand "friction surfaces" as digital interfaces that connect us with others and with systems. Avatars are of course one category of friction surfaces. We dwell in our avatars. And even common people like me have many of them, stretched across several, often mutually exclusive, professional and social networks. Uncommon people – like "white hat" (benign) hackers and intelligence officers, on one hand, or shady influencers, cyber criminals and marketing professionals on the other hand – tend to use many sock-puppets (pseudonymous accounts) at once (Trottier 2018). They thus expand even further the space of the friction surfaces they inhabit. Other friction surfaces are less personal. They include, for example, codes that embed money in payment apps (Swartz 2020; Tsavelis 2024), gaming environments, forum communities, dating and sex apps, and so on. All these surfaces are fractious, at times dangerous, because we never fully control what might happen in them. Not only that big tech (and increasingly also small tech) can see through virtual friction surfaces – monitoring, regulating, surveying, and extracting data – even a single interlocutor online can turn out to be malicious (Shapiro 2024). Precisely because friction surfaces are partially unknown, however, they are exciting, and hence also infinitely appealing.

In a sense, public willingness to make part of friction surfaces mirrors the thrill of border zones, which are not here and not there, so when you cross through them you sometime feel everywhere (Handelman 2021: 151-170). Despite the risks of unregulated algorithmic predictions (Staples 2000; Zuboff 2019), which are generally well-known, the magnetism of friction surfaces online thereby seems to overcome fears from cybercrime, loss of privacy, bullying, scams, "cancellation", etc. Consequently, public perception of datafication in Western democracies no longer easily submit to the tale of unwitting compliance with others' wicked plans. Not only that people generally do little to resist the ubiquity of digital monitoring, they in fact increasingly and enthusiastically take active part in it (Albrechtslund and Lauritsen 2013; Trottier



Figure 1 – Hashtag.

Source: Wikimedia Commons.

2018). Informed citizens might openly criticise the growing influence of right-leaning cyber-libertarian politics everywhere in the democratic West (Barbrook and Cameron 1996; *cf.* Turner 2006), but rarely would they take active measurement to reduce their own daily enrolment in friction surfaces (Greenfield 2018). I am not sure why that is so. One possible reason, nonetheless, is that digital friction surfaces bring metonymy into sensorial and cognitive existence.

Benito Mussolini's brief incarceration in Campo Imperatore – an isolated hotel located high in Gran Sasso d'Italia plateau – will explicate that assertion. The complex was designed in the 1930's to include three buildings, each shaped as one of the letters of the word "DUX", Latin for "Duke". Upon his arrest in the summer of 1943, Mussolini was held prisoner in the D-shaped building, the only structure of the planned three whose construction has by then been completed. It is a remarkable historical anecdote that *il Duce* found himself living inside the D that previously represented him. It beats even the Orwellian irony of the Jacobine-controlled Committee of Public Safety in the immediate aftermath of the French Revolution, which instilled more terror, fear, and instability than that experienced during the aristocratic rule that preceded it. I am unsure whether Mussolini contemplated the fact that he, the Great *Duce* imprisoned inside his own D, has become subjected to the total brutality of the Office he had once invented. What merely symbolised the power of the fascist leader to enact totalitarian exceptionalism has curiously become the ontological embodiment of his defeat.

The analytic point is more acute. Campo Imperatore was initially designed to represent something entirely external to the leader. When Benito the human was living in the D-shaped building as an overthrown dictator, however, the two established a whole-part relationship. Rather than the structure pointing towards Mussolini, or the D indicating "DUX", it effectively contained the *Duce*. Mussolini thereby became a smaller part of a larger whole, which he once controlled from without as an all-powerful dictator. I imagine that for Mussolini this must have caused the horror of *unheimlich*, suddenly looking from the inside on what he was used to see from the outside. Jonah in the belly of the fish. A process of fragmentation takes place here, not only in the sense of regime collapse, or the breaking of a political unity into myriad factions – which is what happened in Italy between 1943 and 1946 –, but also in the sense of personal shuttering, wherein the mind becomes a metonym of its own representation.

It seems that accelerated datafication is doing something similar at a vast scale. Here, metonymy comes alive through the transformation of our digital data-doubles from external representations or indicators to types of containers

we inhabit. Digital avatars do more than represent our social world, in other words, and hence they are not mere extensions of the actual. Rather, a single data double is in fact self-referential in the sense that it is a means of textual, visual and audial expression. If the whole is a mindful person, data-doubles are fragments of that person that in the context of a friction surface stand for its entirety. At the same time, data-doubles are materialised experiences in and of themselves, actual contact points with Otherness in a friction surface. In that sense, a flesh and blood operator of an online account is also simultaneously part of the totality of all its online avatars and data-doubles, a metonymy that stands for the totality of that digital actuality. By way of induction, the instantiation of metonymy of this sort could fragment any mind, instilling in us that strange feeling of being inside and outside at the same time.

Influencers for example, depend for their very livelihood on the metonymic relationship with their digital avatars. They need to manage this relationship emotionally, rather than mere technically, living through it and being accountable for its actions, much like the *Duce* who had to handle his existence inside the building he once treated as a sign for his glory. The difference is that Mussolini was held in Campo Imperatore for only about three weeks, whereas masses of people around the world these days increasingly spend more time inhabiting their digital dwelling spaces than looking at them from without. Digitality constitutes self-referentiality because it always directs towards an off-line operator, whose actions also always pulsate back through an odd data double into cyberscape.

It is this dynamic of self-reference across domains of reality that stands at the core of an axial shift in the constitution of boundaries of alterity at a global scale. More than mere individuation, our collective embrace of metonymic relationships with digital forms of life in friction surfaces shortens distances and, in that way, it opens new media spaces for group formation (Hayden 2021; Lee 2017; Mazzarella 2017; Canetti 1984 [1960]). Put otherwise, our ability to inhabit avatars in a near-visceral sense consolidates new types of global crowds (Shapiro 2024; Borch and Knudsen 2013); from MeToo hashtags through neo-reactionary political alliances from left or right to ever-more fantastic online “communities” whose instrumental boundaries are defined by the circulation of such assets as cryptographic coins, “open-source” codes, body-monitoring apps, or free surveillance software (Shapiro forthcoming). In many cases these new crowds sprawl across virtual landscapes into physical, economic and political realities (Borch 2012), thereby redefining vectors of alterity in ways that defy the old “culture wars”, ethnic conflicts, and other effects of post-WWII globalisation trends (Barlow 1996). I urge the responders to think through these claims critically by examining the ways in which their own involvement with new crowds across the virtual-actual divide might have modified their perception and daily formation of otherness.

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