Giacomo Pezzano

THINKING *THROUGH* DIGITAL TECHNOLOGIES. PLATO AS A MEDIA PHILOSOPHER

Department of Philosophy and Education Sciences
University of Turin,
giacomo.pezzano@unito.it
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3947-1198)

ABSTRACT. The aim of this paper is to view Plato's philosophy through the lens of contemporary media philosophy and to review the latter from the point of view of the former, discussing in particular what kind of media philosopher he would be today. I emphasize three key mediological ideas at the core of Plato's thought: our inner thoughts are made of words and images because we think through technologies of the word and of the image outside the mind (§ 1); digital media and technologies represent a *pharmakon* and thus we should be aware of their cognitive risks while also being sensitive to their cognitive possibilities (§ 2); virtual reality, which presents itself as a strange and peculiar presence, does, in fact, exist and does offer affordances (§ 3). Thus, I argue that Plato would be among those (not so many) contemporary media philosophers who intend not only to understand what (new digital) media are, but also to find a way to think *through* them while facing all the tensions and ambiguities that this approach implies.

KEYWORDS: media philosophy, words & images, alphabetic mind, writing, simulation.

MĄSTANT *PER* SKAITMENINES TECHNOLOGIJAS. PLATONAS KAIP MEDIJŲ FILOSOFAS

SANTRAUKA. Šio straipsnio tikslas – pažvelgti į Platono filosofiją iš šiuolaikinės medijų filosofijos perspektyvos ir apžvelgti pastarąją pirmosios požiūriu, tarp kitų keliant ir klausimą, koks medijų filosofas šiandien būtų Platonas. Platono mąstymo šerdyje autorius pabrėžia tris esmines mediologines idėjas: mes mąstome žodžiais ir vaizdais, nes mąstome per žodžio

ir vaizdo technologijas esančias anapus mūsų (§ 1); skaitmeninės medijos ir technologijos reiškiasi farmakoniškai, todėl turėtume įsisąmoninti rizikas, kurias jos kelia pažinimui, o sykiu būti jautrūs jų pažintinėms galimybėms (§ 2); virtuali realybė, prisistatanti kaip keista ir savita esatis, iš tiesų egzistuoja ir siūlo veikimo galimybes (§ 3). Galiausiai straipsnio autorius teigia, kad Platonas būtų tarp tų (negausių) šiuolaikinių medijų filosofų, norinčių ne tik suprasti, kas yra (naujosios skaitmeninės) medijos, bet ir atrasti būdą mąstyti per jas, drąsiai susiduriant su visomis įtampomis ir dviprasmybėmis, kurias implikuoja ši prieiga.

RAKTAŽODŽIAI: medijų filosofija, žodžiai ir vaizdai, alfabetinis protas, rašymas, simuliacija.

Most philosophers are familiar with Alfred North Whitehead's famous quip: "the safest general characterization of the European philosophical tradition is that it consists of a series of footnotes to Plato", because "the wealth of general ideas scattered through his writings" represents "an inexhaustible mine of suggestion" (Whitehead 1979: 39). This is also true for the current philosophy of media or media philosophy: a field of study that is beginning to have autonomous and distinct borders, mostly in the German context (see at least Schweppenhäuser 2018), where we even find the idea that *Medienphilosophie* denotes a fundamental transformation of philosophy itself towards a renewed *prima philosophia* as a general critical discourse (Margreiter 2003). Indeed, Plato has been variously presented as a central mediological figure: for instance, he would have established "many of the questions that are still being asked today in studies of communication and mediation" (Hassan, Sutherland 2017: 20); he would have posed the problem that "communication can be used to deceive as well as to inform", casting "a permanent dark shadow" over rhetoric, but also urging us "to be ethical communicators" (Dues, Brown 2004: 1–11); last but not least, he would even constitute "the first mediologist" in Western culture, especially in light of his seminal distinction between "two kinds of media", namely, the living medium of the body and the dead media of written language and image (Belting 2005: 311; see also e.g., Levinson 1997: 18; Mersch 2016: 29–33; Peters 1999: 36).

Accepting this quite consolidated general view, my paper proposes to go a bit further, through a sort of imagination exercise which tries to conjecture Plato's specific place in the contemporary mediological panorama. In particular, I claim that Plato would be among those (not so many) contemporary media philosophers who intend not only to understand what (new digital) media are, but also to find a way to think *through* them while facing all the tensions and ambiguities that this approach implies. To demonstrate this, I will highlight three key mediological ideas at the core of Plato's thought:

- we think in words and images within our mind because we think through technologies of the word and technology of the image outside the mind (§ 1);

- digital media and technologies represent a *pharmakon*, thus we should be aware of their cognitive risks but also sensitive to their cognitive possibilities (§ 2);
- virtual reality, which appears itself as a strange and peculiar presence, does in fact exist and does offer affordances (§ 3).

Discovering What is Inside? Thinking Through Words and Images

Let's begin with some passages from *Philebus* (38e-39c)[1]:

SOCRATES – I think the soul at such a time is like a book.
PROTARCUS – How is that?
S. – Memory unites with the senses, and they and the feelings which are connected with them seem to me almost to write words in our souls; and when the feeling in question writes the truth, true opinions and true statements are produced in us; but when the scribe within us writes falsehoods, the resulting opinions and statements are the opposite of true.
P. – That is my view completely, and I accept it as stated.
S. – Then accept also the presence of another workman in our souls at such a time.
P. – What workman?
S. – A painter, who paints in our souls pictures to illustrate the words which the scribe has written.
P. – But how do we say he does this, and when?
S. – When a man receives from sight or some other sense the opinions and utterances of the moment and afterwards beholds in his own mind the images of those opinions and utterances. That happens to us often enough, does it not?
P. – It certainly does.

Here, Plato emphasizes that our soul or mind is like a coworking space that houses two types of "graphic designers": one that plots words and the other that creates images. Plato describes our inner representations, that is, our thoughts (whether true or false), as if they were walking down the psyche's catwalk wearing two basic types of clothes: some that are linguistic and others that are pictorial. This distinction is still valid today, in our common sense as well as in various intellectual discussions, including the most philosophically sophisticated ones: an iconic example is the already classic "great debate" between those who say that mental representations are like words or sentences in the head and those who instead say that they are like pictures or figures in the head (see Block 1981; Tye 2000). This assumption that cognition takes place as a process of writing and reading and /

---

[1] For all Plato's quotes, I referred to Plato 1967–1986—with some minor modifications when needed.

or painting and observing is so deeply ingrained that Markus Knauff's proposal of a "third way" (2013) that rejects both the propositional and the visual accounts of reasoning is truly innovative – at least in the author's intentions. Leaving aside the specificity of such a proposal, its central feature shows how Plato provides us with the fundamental idea that our mental faculties rely on words *and* images: our thinking is both linguistic and iconic.

This seems obvious *in hindsight*: no one is really surprised today to be told that representations can be propositional and pictorial; but beyond the fact that this is the first remarkably clear statement of a pivotal anthropological fact (which is not insignificant), there is still more to be acknowledged in how Plato poses the terms of the question. He uses the technological or mediological model of the *graphein* and the book, to present the soul as a sort of tablet that receives traces and impressions – a device for recording, processing, producing and exchanging information; more explicitly, Plato compares the soul to a wax block (i.e. *Theaetetus*, 191c). All of this is extremely relevant, because it does not indicate that the soul *is* a technology, that the mind *is* a machine, as a superficial reading might suggest, but rather that the soul *functions through* technologies (see also Ferraris 2011) and thanks to media in a very particular way: our mind operates through the technologies and the media that exteriorize, objectify, and convey our verbal and visual products, fixing them into an external support so that they become recognizable and shareable.

To put it another way, Plato offers us the ground-breaking principle that if we have words and images in our heads, it is because we employ technologies of the word and of the image outside our heads: when I have a thought about – let's say – an evil dictator, a word and an image will appear as a "note" in my mind; but I can also annotate them outside my mind, i.e. by hand-writing the words "evil dictator" and by hand-drawing its figure on a sheet of paper – just to name the two most rudimentary occurrences. But these external annotations are not just extrinsic to my thoughts, because once they have turned into things – visible, tangible, and, in a broad sense, manipulable – I can *return* to them: it is a virtuous circle made of continuous feedback relations, so that inner garments and outer habits are deeply intertwined. The "natural" words and images contained in the mind correspond to the "artificial" words and images given outside the mind: the mind acts like a scribe and a painter because one writes and paints outside it. In Hans Belting's terms, the living medium doesn't exist without the dead media: for Plato this is surely more the reluctant acceptance of an undesired affection than a willed and positive condition; nevertheless, the very fact that he struggles to cope with such a condition testifies to how deeply he was aware of it, to the point of making it a matter of life and death for philosophy itself – as we will see in § 2.

Thus, the first key mediological idea at the core of Plato's thought is that, in order to understand *how* we think, one cannot ignore that such a "how" also entails a technological and mediological dimension: in other words, one always thinks *through a given kind of medium*, and – more precisely – through "propositional" and "pictorial" media, through technologies of the word and of the image. Such an idea is still important today for at least two closely related reasons. The first is that it can help the technologies of the image get their "payback" – as it is more and more often stated – by erasing or at least challenging the unquestioned primacy, if not an outright monopoly, of the word-media of alphabetic writing and typographic printing (along with its associated model and habits of knowledge and thinking): we now expect the "world-as-a-picture" model to challenge the "world-as-a-text" model and thus challenge the hegemony of the word as "the highest form of intellectual practice" along with the consequent treatment of visual representations as "second-rate illustrations of ideas" (Mirzoeff 1998: 5). The second is that we are in the midst of a new "mediatic turn" in which thought is recognized as medially contingent, so that the metaphysical equation of thinking and being is replaced by the recognition that thinking about being always requires an external medium (cf. de Mul 2008: 155–157; Margreiter 1999).

Admittedly, such a turn is a recent invention, but the phenomenon to which it points is not entirely new, as Plato's reflections on the impact of writing on philosophy and on the mind in general further attest.

Being a Judge or a Hacker? The Alphabetical Digital Revolution

First of all, we should remember that many of Plato's most important concepts are intrinsically medial: not only *metaxy* in the *Symposium*, *dynamis* in the *Sophist*, or *chora* in the *Timaeus*, but also – and more broadly – the same dynamic of *mimesis* and *methexis*, which actually entails a general communication model, with all the well-known aporias (see e.g., Fronterotta 2008). This deep engagement with mediological questions becomes even more evident in the Platonic text that is explicitly devoted to the understanding of what a medium is and how a psychotechnology works: the *Phaedrus*, whose structure – this is often not adequately grasped – is developed on a threefold mediological level. In fact, its subject is simultaneously i) the nature of love, which takes place in an "in-between" erotic dimension, ii) how to discuss any possible subject in a convincing and truthful way (that is, dialectically and not just rhetorically), and iii) which instrument is the best suited to philosophical discussion (speech, writing, or even action?). In other words, the *Phaedrus* is a text about a given philosophical content, about the form

of philosophical discussions as such, and about the medium of philosophy itself (see also De Cesaris, Striano 2018).

In the present context, I will focus particularly on the third aspect. It presents three remarkable and deeply intertwined stories, all of which concern the transition from an oral culture to an alphabetic culture, which Plato and the entire Greek society experienced, and which represented the first fundamental revolution in the history of carriers and forms of knowledge transmission. This was followed by the transitions from the scroll to the codex and from the book to the printed book, culminating in our current digital age. The first two stories are more consolidated in the contemporary reception, both mediological (from Eric A. Havelock to Walter Ong) and philosophical (from Jacques Derrida to Carlo Sini)[2], while the third has only been highlighted more recently (e.g., Stiegler 2006; Wolf 2007: 51–75). They can be summarised as follows:

a) Plato expresses the fear of what will be lost in such a transition, and defends the superiority of orality over writing, of spoken words over written words;

b) not only does Plato actually *write* in order to criticize the limits of writing itself, but by writing he initiates the history of philosophy as we still know it today: as a written tradition;

c) Plato's critique of the alphabet represents is, in our intellectual history, not only the first critique of technology per se, nor only of the technologies of the mind more specifically, but also – as if it were not enough – of *digital* technologies and media.

In short, Plato gives birth to the philosophical mind precisely by thinking *through* his claim that the mind is under attack by a supposedly digital cognitive technology, that is, by using the same medium in an original and disruptive way. All this becomes more evident when we take a closer look at the reasons for Plato's scepticism towards alphabetic writing (see especially *Phaed.*, 274b–278e, and *Let. 7*, 341b–344e, but also *Prot.*, 329a):

- Medicine always has side effects: the written text acts as an external memory, offering an elixir of memory and wisdom; but, for this very reason it runs the risk of replacing internal memory, thus becoming a recipe for forgetfulness in the users' minds, especially in relation to the processes of internalization of genuine knowledge, which is made up of true memory and not just remembrance.

- *Verba volant, scripta manent*, certainly, but for this reason, a written text is not interactive in the way that oral communication is. Written words are

---

[2] For further details, cf. Pezzano 2023.

immutable: they neither respond to questions of clarification and further exploration nor do they pose a question of their own; they do not adapt to different readers and their different demands; and they do not defend themselves against reading errors and misinterpretations by correcting them. In short, they always say the same thing.

- Faster and wider circulation of information may seem like a good thing, but it has an unsettling dark side. If people surrender to the apparent intelligence of those dead and not-breathing signs that seem to preserve knowledge stable and clear, they will stop learning and thinking for themselves, get lost in papyri and almost forget about the real world, which consists of face-to-face exchanges in physical co-presence.

- Delegating processes of knowledge and reasoning to the external characters of a written text causes more problems than it solves. Blind trust is given to those "humanbots" who, skilled in manipulating these signs, manage to chat publicly as if they were true wisemen, while in reality they are mere carriers of opinions who parrot things (these are obviously the sophists). This technology leads to the belief that true knowledge is inscribed in the inert matter of the text and not in the living flesh of people, in their souls (ideas and thoughts), and in their bodies (gestures and behaviours). This is why one's written compositions should not be regarded as one's most serious works – quite the opposite.

Plato denounces the dangers posed by the predominance of an inorganic machine that masquerades as a living body and usurps human functions and organic functions in general. By pretending to remember and know on behalf of humans, this apparatus ends up erasing dialogue, personal thoughts, and critical questioning, resulting in people no longer being able to realize how much they know or do not know – they lose themselves in a bubble of pseudo-truths and pseudo-beliefs that can easily be exploited by the malicious or simply the shrewdest. Clearly, Plato was not referring to algorithms or AI, or more generally to digital technologies; nonetheless, this problem was represented precisely by a technology that fragmented and compressed the analog stream of experience into variably combinable and interchangeable units, that is, transformed it into a potentially universal algorithm by allowing the storage and exchange of any type of informational content. This is indeed what the alphabet made possible for the first time in history. In addition, this code consisted of 24 elements associated with corresponding sounds, but its basic structure was binary, as these elements consisted of 7 vowels and 17 consonants (α + β: *alpha-beta*, to be precise).

Hence, by freely, openly, and indefinitely combining these two basic building blocks, humans began to generate strings of symbols capable of condensing and conveying any type of event without the need to be present in the same space-time. It was an incredibly powerful form of synthesis, to the point that for centuries, or rather millennia, it also offered the ability to meta-summarize – in the form of a description or a commentary – any other kind of representation of the experience, such as drawing. But this astonishing achievement also reveals a dark side, for when the dense and continuous field of experience is "packed" in discrete units, it runs the risk of losing what really matters: how could a written sentence convey the sensation of a first kiss? How could a written text revive the tones, glances, and overall communicative context of an animated discussion among citizens? Plato is unsettled by a work that "samples" the fluid and dynamic fullness of the living flow – specifically that of dialogue, reasoning, knowing, thinking: the mental flow.

However, we should be careful not to conclude that Plato was a proto-boomer or a proto-apocalyptic who was simply terrified by the fact that the new knowledge media, platforms, and supports were destroying the minds of the younger generations: in fact, he was also engaged in a very sophisticated *pars construens*. Plato does not simply *say* – even though he actually does – that written speech as such is a disgrace: the disgrace is not in writing itself but instead in *writing poorly*; and, more than simply saying this in writing, namely, through written words, he actually begins to "tame" this medium *through writing* itself. Moreover, he does so by giving an example of *how to write well* and – still further – by aiming to establish the general parameters for writing well. Plato's text is thus a performative work and not merely a descriptive or normative one: Plato does what he says and says what he does. This is why the philosophical tradition consists of a series of footnotes to Plato first and foremost *mediologically*: Plato inaugurated philosophy – with all the well-known tensions –as a tradition of written reflection, characterized by the coincidence between the theoretical gesture of withdrawing into the hyperspace of contemplation and the practical gesture of entering the space of the written page (cf. Sloterdijk 2010).

In other words, Platonic dialogues represent a performative attempt to discipline literacy and to establish the canon for making the good use of the alphabet, that is, to read and write well in a manner that could be productive and empowering for human cognition. More precisely, Plato's solution consisted in doing everything possible to "oralize" writing, so that it could somehow replicate and restore the fluidity and liveliness of face-to-face interaction: he wrote dialogues,

not by accident. This is a crucial point: in Plato, the critique of the new medium is inseparable from the effort to appropriate it for uses other than those he stigmatized. Thus, it is largely thanks to Plato that we could embark on the path through which the alphabet has allowed us (limiting it to the cognitive level) to make lists; classify; systematise; formalise; enumerate; frame; abstract; think logically, critically, reflectively, and autonomously; analyse; understand; interpret; have ideas, concepts, and hypotheses in mind, as well as one's own and others' intentions; draw premises, inferences, and conclusions (cf. Goody 1977; 1986; Olson 1994; 2017). In a nutshell, the mind could not consider "The Mind" without the alphabet: we could not have philosophy as we know it.

Hence, the second key mediological idea at the core of Plato's thought is that a new (digital) medium could have a disruptive effect on cognitive and mental habits; nevertheless, there are always two sides to the coin, and – moreover – its possible positive aspect should not only be stated or invoked, but could and even should be actively built by passing through the specific new possibilities of that medium itself – especially if it is truly disruptive as it seems to be, that is, if it offers the possibility of a renewed "psycho-anthropological" individuation. In other words, for Plato the best approach to critiquing a technique (the instrument) and a technology (the socio-cultural way of using it) consists in not simply condemning it from the outside, acting like a judge on the Supreme Court of Media, but in finding a way to appropriate it differently, acting more like a hacker: this is exactly what Plato did with and through the alphabet.

Such an idea is important today because we are in danger of forgetting that the screen also acts like a *pharmakon*. It is true that the screen seems to favour the development of a hyper-attentive "grasshopper mind", constantly jumping around and representing the absolute opposite of the reading mind, which is instead able to focus, concentrate, meditate, contemplate, detach, abstract, argue, criticize, make a point, think linearly, and so forth (see e.g., Hayles 2007; Weigel, Gardner 2009). But there is also the other side. I bet that today Plato would not only highlight it – defending the possibility of thinking and reasoning through screens (which is already not obvious) – but also, and more rightly, recognize that the true philosophical challenge is to figure out how to do it concretely. Let's exaggerate for the sake of clarity: today, Plato would likely be engaged in the design of philosophical video games, precisely to counter the thoughtless use of video games and to master their simulative power, the non-critical use of which he would – surely –vigorously condemn. This brings us to the third and final Plato's key mediological idea.

Falso Amor? The Uncanny Power of Simulation

Even without accusing Plato of being the mastermind behind cultural crimes such as phallogocentrism, iconophobia, iconoclasm and the like, it seems quite undeniable that "beginning with Plato" a long history of suspicion is directed at the role of the visual in our culture: he would be the first to "distrust visual images on a whole variety of grounds – as mere imitations, pale shadows, or much worse", thus preventing from the very outset any possibility of considering "visual methods as primary modes of epistemological work" (Drucker 2020: 10). For this reason, the long history of "text bias" characteristic of Western thought dates back "at least to Plato", the ancestor of the still current tradition of scholars as "wordsmiths": since Plato, knowledge has been prejudicially favoured in terms of justified true belief, that is, "in terms of propositions or sentences", so that only words can truly bear knowledge (Baird 2004: 5, 122). For Plato, despite his confusion with alphabetic writing or, as just seen, thanks to it, words are the proper medium of genuine concepts and knowledge, while images are at best a medium of superficial entertainment and emotion: our minds work through both words and images (cf. § 1), whether we like it or not; but, one might say, there is still a difference between reasoning and daydreaming.

It is no coincidence that when Plato "sets in place a metaphysics in which sensory experience and visual depiction are presented as occlusions or deceptions on account of their multiple, playful, ever-changing nature", he also "gives us the first argument for media censorship" (Cazeaux 2017: 78). This becomes particularly evident when considering the famous attack on poetry in Book X of the *Republic* (595a–608b), which must have sounded absolutely shocking at the time; in fact, Athenians were accustomed to "a large variety of dramatic festivals and poetic contests throughout each year" (Nehamas 1988: 214). Nevertheless, for Plato, this kind of art "seems to be a corruption of the mind" (*Rep.*, 595b): if one grants it admission into the city, "pleasure and pain will be lords" (*Rep.*, 607a). Here, "art" does not mean the fine arts in general (a concept unknown back then), nor merely painting or sculpture, but instead refers more precisely and primarily to imitative poetry taken as a medium "inherently suited to the representation, or imitation, of vulgar subjects and shameful behavior" (Nehamas 1988: 216). In short, poetry was a medium of perversion, totally devoted to the lowest part of the soul and in opposition to its highest part, the rational one:

> And so in regard to the emotions of sex and anger, and all the appetites and pains and pleasures of the soul which we say accompany all our actions, the effect of poetic imitation is the same. For it waters and fosters these feelings when what we ought to do

is to dry them up, and it establishes them as our rulers when they ought to be ruled, to the end that we may be better and happier men instead of worse and more miserable (*Rep.*, 606d).

Thus, poetry, which played a crucial role in the creation and transmission of social values in Greek culture (cf. Asmis 1992: 339), acts like the canonical "bad teacher" for Plato: it makes people behave in a negative way, engendering in souls "a vicious constitution by fashioning phantoms far removed from reality" (*Rep.*, 605b). Therefore, Plato is well aware that poetry is a means to fashion human life; but, one might say, he thinks that it is a truly bad stylist: it is as if enjoying Euripides' *Medea* would lead the spectators not only to admire mothers who murder their children (already problematic!) but – even worse – to actually kill their own offspring. Sure, this sounds hyperbolic (as does the claim that playing *Grand Theft Auto* turns gamers into brutal gangsters); but my concern is not whether Plato is right to condemn Homer and Aeschylus so vigorously. Rather, I want to emphasize the fundamental significance of Plato's attitude – at least in the present context: he is against poetry because it tends to blur the distinction between fiction and reality, between a representation and what is represented. Because poetry is an image-based medium that produces an interweaving of participation and immersion that is dangerous for the human psyche due to its intrinsic transparency.

Keep in mind that ancient poetry and theatre performances were more akin to our current soccer matches or music concerts in terms of audience interactivity and engagement, and more akin to our current films or television series in terms of scripting and staging: they were a form of popular fictional immersive entertainment. In fact, this audience would arrive at the theatre with large quantities of food, often pelting disliked actors while also shouting them off the stage; we are also told of women being frightened into miscarriage or premature birth by the appearance of the Furies in Aeschylus' *Eumenides* (cf. Nehamas 1988: 223). Today, we complain about "shitstorming" on social media, or about "gaming rage": thus, at least in this respect, most of us are Platonists" (Nehamas 1988: 222), because Plato laid the foundation for any contemporary critique of imaginary mass media starting with the cinema (and then television, video games, etc.). These attacks are based precisely on the idea that through moving and/or playable representations, we evolve into those images – we become what we see and/or play and thus we literally lose our minds because we take what we see and/or play for real, having fallen under its spell.

Thus, for Plato all such media would share the same basic problem: they generate simulations. At that time, the figure of the artisan able to create all possible

things, from implements to plants and animals, from himself to "earth and heaven and the gods and all things in heaven and in Hades under the earth", could find an incarnation in the act of taking a mirror and carrying it about everywhere, so to "speedily produce the sun and all the things in the sky, and speedily the earth and yourself and the other animals and implements and plants and all the objects" (*Rep.*, 596c-e). The Simulator par excellence was, so to speak, a mirror-man; but, the issue remains that if a carpenter is said to be the true author of the (material) couch, then the one who instead produces a representation of that material couch or of the carpenter itself at work is nothing more than a mere imitator, and thus, a true impostor – let me insist: *a true impostor*. This emphasis is absolutely crucial because it allows us to understand how Plato was able to grasp the ambiguity and potentiality of virtual reality even though he certainly never faced it in the strict contemporary sense.

Let me explain. Plato was particularly critical of "fantastic" art, rather than "iconic" art, because the former exploited "phantasmatic" techniques such as the displacement of actual proportions and perspective, in order to create the appearance of real proportions as seen from the observer's point of view: thus, such a "fictive" *mimesis* acts through "witchcraft", "jugglery", and "many other such contrivances" (cf. *Rep.*, X, 598 a–c, 602d; *Soph.*, 234b, 235d–236c). No doubt, Plato was not dealing with something like the Spanish reality show *Falso Amor*, in which five couples test their relationships and their trust (with a prize of 100,000 euros at stake, which helps) by living in two different "temptation houses" with various suitors and, at crucial moments, examining a selection of videos – some real and some generated by deepfake technology – showing the behaviour of the partner. Each time, when the hostess poses the fateful question, "¿*Realidad o ficción?*" ("Reality or fiction?"), the contestant must distinguish what is real from what is not. Nonetheless, Plato was still concerned with deliberately deceptive and enchanting images, that is, with images that are made to simulate rather than those made merely to represent something given: such deceptive images – as Plato points out – would be typical of a "great work of sculpture or painting" that makes use of *skiagraphia* (*chiaroscuro*) or of stereometric techniques in general, which have found a relevant application in scene-painting of theatrical productions – our current scenography and staging (cf. Bianchi Bandinelli 1956).

For Plato, the problem is precisely that these images not only lack a genuine informational character, but that they also *pretend* to do so – they are illusory and turn reality itself into a fictional mechanism, posing the very question, "Reality of Fiction?". This is why they must be banned, or at least contained and controlled. The image has less being than the (ideal as material) thing for Plato, not only because

of its representative function, which subordinates it to the reality it resembles (*image-of*), but more precisely because of its tendency to exercise such a function in an unreliable manner by generating distortions and illusions (*image-for*). Thus, by simulating, images dare to compete with the supra-sensible ideas themselves, duelling with their true communicative and generative character. Consider the legendary painting contest between the ancient artists Zeuxis and Parrhasius, which today would easily turn into a contest between VFX virtuosos: the grapes painted by the first seemed so real that they fooled the birds into flying down to pecking at them; the latter responded with a painted curtain so realistic that it fooled Zeuxis, who, when presented with the curtain, was asked to pull it aside to see what was behind it and discovered that there was no real curtain at all – that the curtain itself was a painted illusion.

Commenting on this episode, Jacques Lacan was – for once – clear enough to identify the issue at stake in Plato's view:

> This little story becomes useful in showing us why Plato protests against the illusion of painting. The point is not that painting gives an illusory equivalence to the object, even if Plato seems to be saying this. The point is that the *trompe-l'oeil* of painting pretends to be something other than what it is. […] It appears as something other than it seemed, or rather it now seems to be that something else. The picture does not compete with appearance, it competes with what Plato designates for us beyond appearance as being the Idea. It is because the picture is the appearance that says it is what which gives the appearance that Plato attacks painting, as if it were an activity competing with his own (Lacan 1978: 112).

In other words, images seem real not primarily in the sense that they reproduce this or that aspect of reality more or less accurately, but more radically in the sense that they replicate the very generativity of reality as such, making – furthermore – such a gesture undetectable, that is, appearing immediate and transparent: it is this act of "splitting" the reality from within that particularly frightens Plato. To clarify: Plato discovered *the reality of fiction*, which thus poses the problem of something that oddly seems to be and not to be at the same time, so that the social and cognitive question becomes the ontological question of the strange existence of a non-being which *in some way* is – or, flipping it around, a being which in some way is not: "the image appears as […] a being that, by being, can be false, thus express a non-being. Or that, by not being, can express a truth. The image is a non-being that can be true, or a falsehood that really is" (Chiurazzi 2021: 41). And yet, in considering all this, Plato also understood the structurally incremental or "additive" character of the image, its extended or augmented reality: its *ideational power* and *design affordances*.

Again, it would be foolish, at the very least, to say that Plato is talking about our extended reality, comprised of virtual reality, augmented reality, and mixed reality; but – I claim – it would be equally short-sighted to ignore that the deep Platonic understanding of the unsettling reality of the simulation defines the parameters of how we are still today trying to come to terms with the singularity of virtual reality, namely, that which "is fully real in so far as it is virtual", or "real without being actual, ideal without being abstract" (Deleuze 2014: 272). This was stated by an author who was particularly engaged in an intense confrontation with the motivation behind the Platonic need to separate icons from phantasms or images from simulacra, precisely because such an operation itself would lay the foundation for questioning the distinction between the original and the copy, and thus for unleashing the thinking resources of simulation (Deleuze 1983). For Plato, this was a problem to be solved rather than something to be uncritically accepted, let alone glorified; yet, he captured the peculiar ideational reality of the simulative image, and this is even more remarkable once we consider that he certainly did not experience video games, simulated worlds, retouched images, text-to-image or text-to-video AI, and so on and so forth.

Given all this, the third and final key mediological idea at the core of Plato's thought is to reject the misleading claim that virtuality is simply unreal, because it exists and we are already making things with it; thus, the challenge is to construct a conception of the world that for the full resonance of such a fact, and to redesign our cultural practices accordingly. Such an idea is even more important today, when the techno-mediological conditions for this type of construction and reconstruction are changing: precisely because the virtual exists and manifests a specific profile, so that it should not be left untamed, we should try not only to think it, that is, to understand it from the outside and maybe even from above, but also and above all to think *through* it, from within – to the point of making philosophy via video games, etc., just as Plato did via the alphabet (see § 2). Today one can build not only a textual cave, as well as an audiovisual one, as was done with the cinema and television, but also a multisensorial one, made up of visual images along with acoustic, tactile, olfactory, gustatory, and sensorimotor ones, namely, a virtual cave (Echeverría 2008): it should come as no surprise that the pivotal project of CAVE (Cave Automatic Virtual Environment) – an immersive virtual reality environment in which projectors are directed to between three and six of the walls of a room-sized cube – is applicable for many purposes (cf. originally Cruz-Neira et al. 1992) – is a deliberate reference to Plato's cave.

Is it – after all – too daring to imagine that a "digital Plato" today would, for instance, design a VR-Republic instead of writing a verbal-Republic, thus exploring the possibility of controlling the simulated images from within? I don't think so.

Conclusion

Following the distinction between "-ists", "-ologists", and "reconstructionists" proposed by Umberto Eco (2007: 510–511), the three Platonic mediological ideas discussed above represent neither a "Plato-ologists" full exposition of Plato's doctrine, adhering to the letter of his texts, nor a "Plato-ist" anachronistic proposal of supposed *ad mentem divi Platonis* solutions and responses to the problems and challenges currently faced by digital humanity. Rather, I advocated a more experimental "reconstructionist" approach, questioning Plato's position – precisely in the light of the philosophy that was in fact his – on a topic to which he never explicitly devoted his reflections (for obvious reasons), i.e., digital media and media philosophy, but knowing that the hypothesis that he might have done it is not too far-fetched.

Thus, I wanted to show that today Plato would find a place among those (not so many) contemporary media philosophers who are interested not only in understanding what (new) media are and what concepts might better grasp their reality, but also in overcoming the typographic cultural bias that forms a barrier to the attempt of thinking *through* them, facing all the tensions and ambiguities that this implies (as e.g., Bogost 2012: 85–111; Flusser 1973; Gualeni 2014; Hartmann 2000; Kittler 2009). In this sense, Plato would want today's media philosophy to be a genuine philosophy *of* media in the subjective sense, and not just in the objective one: a new kind of "discourse" and not merely a new discourse about some object. In conclusion, even a (white, cisgender, able-bodied, …) "analog man" living a couple of millennia ago can have more than a little to share with us, digital human beings exploring new media.

References

Asmis, E. 1992. "Plato on Poetic Creativity", in R. Kraut (ed.). *The Cambridge Companion to Plato*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 338–364.

Baird, D. 2004. *Things Knowledge: A Philosophy of Scientific Instruments*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Belting, H. 2005. "Image, Medium, Body: A New Approach to Iconology", *Critical Inquiry* 31 (2): 302–319.

Bianchi Bandinelli, R. 1956. "Osservazioni storico-artistiche a un passo del *Sofista* platonico", in Aa. Vv. *Studi in onore di U. E. Paoli*. Firenze: Le Monnier, 81–95.

Block, N., ed. 1981. *Imagery*. Cambridge (MA): MIT Press.

Bogost, I. 2012: *Alien Phenomenology, or What it's like to Be a Thing*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Cazeaux, C. 2017. *Art, Research, Philosophy*. London-New York: Routledge.

Chiurazzi, G. 2021. *Dynamis: Ontology of the Incommensurable*. Cham: Springer.

Cruz-Neira, C. et al. 1992. "The CAVE: Audio Visual Experience Automatic Virtual Environment*", Communications of the ACM* 35 (6): 64–72.

De Cesaris, A., Striano, F. 2018. "La filosofia è un discorso pubblico? Medialità e mediaticità del discorso filosofico", *P.O.I.* 2 (1): 102–122.

De Mul, J. 2008. "Wittgenstein 2.0: Philosophical Reading and Writing after the Mediatic Turn, in A. Pichler, H. Hrachovec (eds.). *Wittgenstein and the Philosophy of Information*. Heusenstamm: Ontos, 157–183.

Deleuze, G. 1983. "Plato and the Simulacrum", *October* 27: 45–56.

Deleuze, G. 2014. *Difference and Repetition*. London: Bloomsbury.

Drucker, J. 2020. *Visualization and Interpretation: Humanistic Approaches to Display*. Cambridge (MA): MIT Press.

Dues, M., Brown, M. 2004: *Boxing Plato's shadow: An Introduction to the Study of Human Communication*. Boston: McGraw Hill.

Echeverría, J. 2008. "Cavernas virtuales y cavernas reales", *Ontology Studies* 8: 81–92.

Eco, U. 2007: *From the Tree to the Labyrinth: Historical Studies on the Sign and Interpretation*. Cambridge (MA): Harvard University Press.

Ferraris, M. 2011. *Anima e iPad*. Parma: Guanda.

Flusser, V. 1973. "Line and Surface", *Main Currents of Modern Thought* 29 (3): 100–106.

Fronterotta, F. (2008). "La notion de dynamis dans le *Sophiste* de Platon: koinonía entre les formes et métexis du sensible à l'intelligible", in: M. Curbellier et al. (eds.). *Dynamis. Autour de la pussance chez Aristote*. Louvain La Neuve: Peeters, 186–224.

Goody, J. 1977. *The Domestication of the Savage Mind*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Goody, J. 1986. *The Logic of Writing and the Organization of Society*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Gualeni, S. 2014: "Augmented Ontologies or How to Philosophize with a Digital Hammer", *Philosophy of Technology* 27: 177–199.

Hartmann, F. 2000. *Medienphilosophie*. Wien: WUV.

Hassan, R., Sutherland, T. 2017. *Philosophy of Media: A Short History of Ideas and Innovations from Socrates to Social Media*. London-New York: Routledge.

Hayles, N. K. 2007. "Hyper and Deep Attention: The Generational Divide in Cognitive Modes", *Profession* 13: 187–199.

Lacan, J. 1978. *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*. New York: W. Norton & C. Levinson, P. 1997. *The Soft Edge: A Natural History and Future of the Information Revolution*. London-New York: Routledge.

Kittler, F. A. 2009: "Towards an Ontology of the Media", *Theory, Culture & Society* 26 (2–3): 23–31.

Knauff, M. 2013. *Space to Reason: A Spatial Theory of Human Thought*. Cambridge (MA): MIT Press.

Margreiter, R. 1999: "Realität und Medialität: Zur Philosophie des *Medial Turn*", *Medien Journal* 23 (1): 9–18.

Margreiter, R. 2003. "Medien/Philosophie ein Kippbild", in S. Münker et al. (Hrsgs.). *Medienphilosophie: Beiträge zur Klärung eines Begriffs*. Frankfurt a.M.: Fischer, 150–171.

Mersch, D. 2016. *Medientheorien zur Einführung*. Hamburg: Junius.

Mirzoeff, N. 1998, "What Is Visual Culture?", in N. Mirzoeff (ed.). *The Visual Culture Reader*. London-New York: Routledge, 3–13.

Nehamas, A. 1988. "Plato and the Mass Media", *The Monist* 71 (2): 214–234.

Olson, D. R. 1994. *The World on Paper: The Conceptual and Cognitive Implications of Writing and Reading*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Olson, D. R. 2017. *The Mind on Paper: Reading, Consciousness and Rationality*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Peters, J. D. 1999. *Speaking into the Air: A History of the Idea of Communication*. Chicago: Chicago University Press.

Pezzano, G. 2023. "La filosofia al tempo dei nuovi media. Sini e la "ripratica" della scrittura", *Il Pensiero*, LXII (2): 197–214.

Plato, 1967–1986. *Plato In Twelve Volumes*. Cambridge (Ma): Harvard University Press; London: W. Heinemann.

Schweppenhäuser, G., Hrsg. 2018. *Handbuch der Medienphilosophie*. Darmstadt: wbg Academic.

Sloterdijk, S. 2010. *A Scheintod im Denken. Von Philosophie und Wissenschaft als Übung*. Berlin: Suhrkamp.

Stiegler, B. 2006. "Anamnesis and Hypomnesis", in L. Armand, A. Bradley (eds.). *Technicity*. Prague: Litteraria Pragensia, 15–41.

Tye, M. 2000. *The Imagery Debate*. Cambridge (MA): MIT Press.

Weigel, M., Gardner, H. 2009. "The Best of Both Literacies", *Educational Leadership* 66 (6): 38–41.

Whitehead, A. N. 1979. *Process and Reality: An Essay in Cosmology*. New York: Free Press.

Wolf, M. 2007. *Proust and the Squid: The Story and Science of the Reading Brain*. New York: HarperCollins.