

## **Bodies, Images, Networks. Digital space as public space**

*Andrea Osti<sup>1</sup>, Francesco Pisano<sup>2</sup>*

The advent of digital technologies and media has brought about a radical transformation in how humans experience the spaces they inhabit. Two crucial aspects of contemporary spatial and temporal encounters, namely “presence” and “distance”, have significantly changed since the early 2000s.

The cognitive adjustments demanded by this transformation are so profound that our delayed adoption of relevant ethical and political strategies has hindered our understanding of the true depth of this transformation and the urgency of its adaptive requirements. This failure is forgivable, as the changes have outpaced our ability to comprehend them. The very framework of our understanding has already been subtly shaped, beyond our awareness, by the dynamics and tensions stemming from the digital revolution. Nonetheless, in recent decades, global philosophical, literary, and sociological cultures have begun to address this discrepancy systematically. A significant part of contemporary cultural discourse is striving to come to terms with how the digital revolution has changed us as a precondition of fully understanding its nature.

Widespread awareness of these changes has intensified due to three interconnected processes: the COVID-19 pandemic, the complex transformations in the world of work resulting from the widespread implementation of control technologies and telepresence, and the emergence of the “third wave” of AI, as articulated by Scott Jones. The correlation among these processes becomes apparent in the occurrence of the so-called “Great Resignation” in the United States immediately following the pandemic. The peculiar relevance linking these three groups of phenomena has motivated the writing and collection of the essays presented here.

Our second foundational assumption is to prioritize the examination of space and spatiality as a key perspective for comprehending this revolution. Indeed, alongside the spatial metaphors employed to characterize the Internet since its inception (Paul Adams), it is primarily the physical landscapes of our everyday

---

<sup>1</sup> Post-doc Research-Fellow, Università di Torino - Collège des Bernardins (France), e-mail: [andrea.osti@unito.it](mailto:andrea.osti@unito.it).

<sup>2</sup> Post-doc Research Fellow, Università Federico II di Napoli, e-mail: [francesco.pisano2@unina.it](mailto:francesco.pisano2@unina.it).

existence that have undergone significant transformation. On the one hand, the prevalence of video surveillance, tracking, and recording, and on the other hand, the dissolution of physical boundaries, instant communication, and heightened responsiveness, have profoundly shaped our interaction with space, even in our daily routines, due to the availability of digital integrations.

Building upon these assumptions, this *Lessico di Etica Pubblica* issue recontextualizes relevant observational data and, most importantly, significant findings from ethical, philosophical, sociological, and anthropological research conducted thus far.

Communications now unfold within a temporal framework that is measured in terms of the near-instantaneous speed of light. As Paul Virilio critically observed, this scenario fundamentally alters the notion of presence, transforming it into the “telepresence” of the world, bodies, and their representations. The network-enabled interaction would, over time, correspond to a shift from a physical to an “immaterial” space. As early as 1996, John Perry Barlow wrote in his *Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace*, «Ours is a world that is both everywhere and nowhere, but it is not where bodies live». This space lacks the corporeal dimension and has already been envisioned and theorized by cyberpunk artists and writers like William Gibson and Stelarc: the “obsolescence” of the physical body aligns with the notion that, as humans increasingly engage with surrogate bodies in cyberspaces, they operate alongside progressively intelligent, autonomous and interactive images. Avatars and digital simulacra, akin to the disembodied simulacra in Gnostic-Platonic tradition, transcend spatial and temporal limits, unconstrained by their original corporeality. Scholars such as Jean Baudrillard and, more recently, David Chalmers have explored this concept.

In contrast and parallel to the reflections of classical authors on these themes, recent intellectuals and activists, including James Bridle, Jussi Parikka, Sean Cubitt, and Sy Taffel (among others), have argued strongly in favour of “digital materialism”. They contend that the digital space is not immaterial but instead composed of material digital technologies and infrastructures. These infrastructures facilitate digital communication and space. However, they also play a crucial role in geopolitical conflicts and have significant implications in complex environmental and humanitarian processes. The related concerns encompass labor exploitation, emissions and high energy consumption of servers, as well as risks of data and infrastructure concentration and monopolies. The same applies to the body, as it remains at the core of this space, hyper exposed and serving as a locus for emotions, desires, and eroticism. Far from losing its materiality or becoming obsolete, everything in this space is inherently tied to reality.

Furthermore, new agents have entered this material domain, sometimes seemingly neutral but always influenced and conditioned in various ways. Chatbots, algorithms, and various types of AI enable novel forms of interaction with non-human entities. As these non-human entities occupy central positions in our daily interactions, they become integral parts of the media ecology and the social, political,

and cultural sphere that constitutes the digital space. Diverse scholars such as Shoshana Zuboff, Naomi Klein, Luciano Floridi, and Reza Negarestani have explored these developments, emphasizing the intricate relationship between technology and society.

From this panoramic survey, the question of the materiality/immateriality of the digital has emerged as a cardinal issue for us. As a consequence, the notion of contributing to this discourse has arisen, with a focus on exploring the relationship between spatiality, bodies, and their representations in the digital world.

The essays collected here tackle this challenge from a theoretical, ethical, and aesthetic standpoint and share a fundamental thesis: the digital space is inherently a space of interactions where bodies, affectivity, and images constitute a network whose nodes are in perpetual change by their very nature. It is the encounter, the relationship itself, that produces effects of “reality”. These constantly moving relational nodes redefine what is “real”, not the other way around. The need to orient ourselves preliminarily in this relatively new space has led us to employ the now-established metaphor of the network to question the nature of digital relationships and the form of their “representations”.

From our perspective, then, it is not a matter of devising “pure” concepts or principles to then apply them to a “real” dynamic but of recognizing that from the very beginning, what we seek to comprehend redefines the very ways of our understanding and attributing of the concept of “reality”. With this methodological assumption, we now find ourselves projected, even before conceptually defining the meaning of the digital transformation, into a realm that is no longer modern and perhaps not even postmodern.

Given this common macro-problem and this shared methodological care, the collection we present to the reader encompasses diverse voices. Some of the contributions represent the outcome of the conference held on May 3 and 4, 2022, in Turin, as part of the collaboration between the *Department of Philosophy and Education Sciences (DFE)*, the *Center for Studies on Contemporary Thought (CeSPeC)*, and the *Institut Français Italia*, funded through the *Cassini Junior* funds.

The contributions are divided into four sections based on a thematic criterion. In the first section, the issue of spatiality is explored from a theoretical standpoint through the lenses of topology, phenomenology, and ontology. In the second section, digital bodies, from medicine to affections and desires, take center stage. The third section focuses on images and analyses changes in the field of visual representation: are these still simulacra, or are we facing entirely new images that call into question the anthropocentric dimension of iconic production? Finally, the last section concerns digital art’s critical, ethical, and exploratory possibilities and its repercussions on public space. Each of these thematic sections cuts across the relationship between the “digital space” and “spatial digitality” without giving priority to either side of this (negative?) dialectic. We feel this is the most suitable way to express our deep conviction that descriptive adherence to the phenomenon to be described and the

pluralism of theoretical tools should be preferred over any need for systematicity, completeness, definitiveness, and hierarchy based on “principles”.

We will now present the individual contributions according to their division into sections.

### *1. Reflections on the structure of digital space: topology, phenomenology and ontology*

Antonio Scala’s paper examines the intricate digital landscape created by networks of hypertextual links and the challenges this poses to human cognition. It argues that while algorithms are necessary to navigate these spaces efficiently, they also inevitably introduce biases. By restricting our pathways for manageability, algorithms shape the network structure of digital space. Exponentially growing connections between data points characterize this structure. The resulting hyperbolic space differs from the physical space evolution accustomed us to, thus requiring new cognitive heuristics. On the other hand, arguing for fully unbiased algorithms and a non-hyperbolic digital space would undermine the entire enterprise of digital exploration. Rather than expecting algorithms to replace human judgment, we must recognize their limits and potential to steer us one way or another subtly. The author draws on classic logic and social choice theorems to show algorithms’ inability to universally arbitrate truth or perfectly aggregate opinions. As cognitive tools necessarily aid our journey, algorithms augment but cannot assume sovereignty over complex, nuanced decisions. We can best navigate knowledge in the digital age by teaming algorithms and discretionary human cognition. However, we must thoughtfully cooperate with – not cede control to – the algorithms meant to support our navigation through our information-rich yet bewilderingly branching networks.

Giulia Salzano provides a general theoretical framework for the philosophical investigation of digital spaces by examining its distinctive features through the phenomenological framework of Alfred Schutz. Schutz’s work on the life-world and “finite provinces of meaning” provides important insights into differentiating digital experiences and their varying implications for everyday reality. Certain digital activities, like emailing or online shopping, can be extensions of practical, work-like actions within the life-world. However, developments in virtual reality (VR) and pervasive digital connectivity challenge viewing the digital as a simple addition to the classical “life-world framework” proposed by Husserlian phenomenology. VR simulations, in particular, appear as autonomous finite provinces of meaning, which do without some epistemological and ontological constraints imposed by the Husserlian life-world. Nonetheless, Salzano argues that the digital remains historically and experientially grounded through our embodied existence in physical reality. VR enclaves for gaming maintain connections to life-world relevance and relationships. Simulations for work reinforcement integrate back into daily activities. Overall, Schutz’s concepts elucidate the complex phenomenology of simultaneously inhabiting virtual and physical spaces.

Alexandros Schismenos' essay examines the relationship between human subjectivity and digital objectivity through telepresence and teleabsence. It explores how technologies like ChatGPT enable new forms of digital communication while distancing users from physical co-presence. The author's main thesis is that the digital world constitutes a new ontological field governed by its own laws. The superimposition of this peculiar ontology on the ordinary ontology of our shared non-digital world produces a significant ambiguity concerning the concept of "present". Constant online accessibility creates an illusion of (tele-)presence, but the physical body and lived subjectivity constantly withdraw beyond digital representation. This distances users from corporeal co-presence with others and establishes a gap between personal identity and the person's digital traces. This peculiar ontological dynamic reshapes how meaning is constructed in digitized societies. It raises questions about human autonomy versus institutional control in networked spaces of governance and political imagination. However, it also points to new social modalities emerging at the intersection of embodied existence and emerging virtual realities.

## *2. Digital bodies: representations and affectivity*

Alberto Romele investigates the ethical issues raised by a case study of an automatic pain detection technology project. Romele identifies two main risks to the project: loss of patient autonomy and epistemic injustice. Regarding autonomy, Romele argues that the recurring use of such technologies risks imposing rigid habits rather than cultivating flexible, intelligent habits attuned to individuals. For epistemic justice, Romele suggests that reducing pain experiences solely to external metrics risks overriding patients' own first-person testimony regarding their sensations. His proposal focuses on reframing the notion of habitus as a dialogical and participatory construction. The technology could nurture such constructions through an integrative design based on reflecting on the complex and nuanced relations between bodily sensations and language. Such an integrative design should balance objective metrics with patients' own expertise regarding impacts. Overall, this case study raises questions about how technological involvement in pain conceptualizes embodiment, experience and knowledge production.

Pierluigi Ametrano's essay investigates the relationships between the body and its digital representations about the practices of subjectivation, construction and self-perception by social media. The author contends, specifically, that digital technologies and media constitute the social, anthropological, and historical prerequisites for the development of new technologies of the Self: exploring the processes of subjectivation and the representation of the utopian body on OnlyFans (OF), Ametrano highlights how desire itself transforms through a complex interplay of (hyper)exposure and strategies of power and governance.

Simona Stano's essay examines the complexity of digital bodies in contemporary society through the lenses of meaning-making processes and subjective

experience. It analyses digital bodies as projections, extensions, or simulations of analog bodies based on materiality. Projections refer to medical imaging technologies that access the interior of the physical body and render the invisible visible. Extensions include emoticons and emojis that visualize non-verbal communication and avatars that transfer identity and personality into virtual embodiments. Hybridities also emerge through brain-computer interfaces translating thought into action and wearable devices that monitor brain activity. While blending the analog and digital, Stano argues that even these hybridities maintain a dualistic conception separating objects from subjects. Her thesis is that the digital body remains a likeness lacking lived experience and perception. It can be possessed but not embodied. While technologies approximate an immaterial body, the analog body remains irreducibly the site of meaning-making through which we engage with the world. The digital body, at best, acts as a simulacrum tracing the analog body it cannot replace.

### *3. Images: simulacra or hint to the unknown?*

Giovanni Scarafile analyses the concept of the “unknown” to establish a connection between Barthesian punctum theory and AI-generated images. Examining paradigm shifts in the evolution of photography and the transformations in modes of knowledge and understanding, Scarafile’s analysis delves into inquiries prompted by the emergence of AI-generated images, exploring their novelty within the framework of image theory. Key questions include: How can authorship be problematized and reconceived in this context? Are AI-generated images still conceivable in representation, or do differences in image design and creation render them entirely heterogeneous compared to their predecessors? What temporal relationship do such images share with the inherent temporality of a “document”? According to the author, the punctum of these novel images might be interpreted not solely as a “distorted reflection” of human culture but also as a “point of intersection between the human and the artificial”. This intersection, however, could elude our comprehension, compelling us into a state of disorientation – a genuine opening into the unknown.

Ursitti’s essay centers on the interplay between human beings and technology through the theoretical perspectives of Guy Debord and Günther Anders. These authors examined the connections among reality, images, and media throughout the last century, particularly problematizing power dynamics and exploitation that, in capitalist societies, culminate in the “spectacle” and the metamorphosis of the world into a “phantom”. In this context, their reflection aligns with theories of media derealization, examining the relationship between the “real” and its simulacrum. Ursitti consequently advocates for a critical examination of social media, employing the critical lenses of Debord and Anders to scrutinize digital media and assess their ramifications on contemporary society.

*4. Art, space and deconstruction: how art (de-)constructs the new media*

Dana Papachristou's contribution delves into the work of the Greek composer, architect, and music theorist Iannis Xenakis, focusing on his reflections concerning the interplay of sound, spatiality, and performativity. Specifically, the essay outlines the "Networked Performance Marathon" (XNPM22), held in December 2022 to commemorate the centenary of Xenakis's birth, serving as a case study illustrating the dislocated yet "cosmic" nature of digital art. Within this framework, the "network" facilitated the exploration of works simultaneously dislocated in space. XNPM22 tested creatively, in the wake of the Greek artist, the constitution of collaborative and non-hierarchical spaces, while the digital format of the artworks, as implemented in that context, enabled the exploration of intersemiotic translation of computer code across various communicative layers. For this reason, Papachristou engages with the concept of connectivity, highlighting that the performative network transcends a mere democratization of digital space. Instead, it seeks to reclaim, in a Marxian sense, its origins from the active agents of co-creation.

Ludovic Bernhardt's article focuses on the body of work by Swedish artist Öyvind Fahlström, whose creations are permeated by the intention to scrutinize the transformation of public space and the body into images orchestrated by capitalist-type societies through the exploration and conquest of "utopian zones". As posited by the author, this problematization not only foreshadows the redefinition of social relations through digital media but also engages in a critical and creative interrogation through its own mechanisms, effectively "manipulating what manipulates us".