Digital Hermeneutics as Hermeneutics of the Self

(Article begins on next page)

09 January 2025

Alberto Romele

Digital Hermeneutics as Hermeneutics of the Self

Abstract

In this article, the author deals with the status of the self and personal identity in the digital milieu. In the first section, he presents his general approach to digital media and technologies, which he has called "digital hermeneutics." He distinguishes between three perspectives in digital hermeneutics, namely the deconstructive, epistemological, and ontological approaches. In the second part, he focuses on digital hermeneutics as hermeneutics of the self. He compares Paul Ricoeur's narrative identity to Pierre Bourdieu's *habitus*. His first thesis is that the *habitus* can be seen as a concept of subjectivation that neglects an important part of the subject. Narrative identity offers, in this sense, a remedy to such negligence. His second thesis is that today's digital media and technologies are closer to the Bourdieusian *habitus* than to the Ricoeurian narrative identity. In other words, digital machines and technologies are "*habitus* machines" both in their structure and in their effects. In the conclusion, the author accounts for three potential responses to the habituation of our selves online. He also introduces the concepts of "digital agency" and "digital citizenship."

Keywords: digital hermeneutics, hermeneutics of the self, narrative identity, *habitus*, *habitus* machines

Introduction

In this article, I will deal with the status of the self and personal identity in the digital milieu. My perspective here will not be that of a social sciences or media and communication scholar. In such fields, one can refer, for instance, to authors like Cardon (2008) and Georges (2009). While today, these publications are mainly outdated, they still offer important instruments for an empirical analysis of the effects of digital media and technologies, especially digital platforms like social media, on our selves and identities. In this context, however, I am going to privilege theoretical considerations over the analysis of a series of case studies. I will contend that despite many nuances, today's digital media and technologies have something in common both in their structure and their consequences on us.

In this paper, I will outline a philosophical anthropology of the digital. This does not mean that any sort of human essence or nature is revealed by the relation between human beings and digital technologies. Neither does it mean that there is an essence or nature, good or bad, in digital technologies determining certain forms or behaviors or understanding in human beings. The human-digital technologies relation I will describe and criticize is situated, that is, it is the result of specific social, economic, historical, and, of course, technological conditions. I will argue that there is something wrong in the digital as it stands now and that one could imagine and implement a different kind of human-digital technology relation. My perspective is strongly influenced by postphenomenology, an approach in the philosophy of technology that focuses on the ways technologies constitutively mediate between human beings and the world (Ihde 1990). However, there is an important difference between postphenomenology and my perspective. Postphenomenology, at least in its orthodox version, has been criticized for its lack of political and social engagement (Feenberg 2009; for a problematization of Feenberg's criticism, see Rao et al. 2015). Indeed, postphenomenology often seems more interested in describing existing human-technology-world relations than criticizing and prescribing alternatives to them or at least defining a path towards such alternatives. While description has a preeminent role in this article, criticism and prescription (briefly outlined in the conclusion) remain its ultimate goals.

The article is presented in two sections. In the first section, I will present my general approach to digital media and technologies, which I have called "digital hermeneutics" (Romele 2019). I will distinguish between three perspectives in digital hermeneutics, namely the deconstructive, epistemological, and ontological approaches. Digital hermeneutics also has many other potential dimensions that have not yet been explored. One of these is digital hermeneutics as a hermeneutics of the self. In the second section, I will consider the specific issue of personal identity and subjectivation. In particular, I will compare Paul Ricoeur's narrative identity to Pierre Bourdieu's *habitus*. My thesis will be that the *habitus* can be seen as a concept of subjectivation that neglects an important part of the subject. Narrative identity offers, in this sense, a remedy to such negligence. In the same section, I will argue that today's digital media and technologies are closer to the Bourdieusian *habitus* than to the Ricoeurian narrative identity. In other words, digital machines and technologies are "*habitus* machines" both in their structure and in their effects. In the conclusion, I will account for three potential responses to the habituation of our selves online. I will also briefly introduce the notions of "digital agency" and "digital citizenship."

1. *Digital Hermeneutics*

The expression "digital hermeneutics" has been already used in the past. According to Capurro (2010, np), "Hermeneutics is facing today the challenge arising from digital technology becoming what I call *digital hermeneutics*. [...] The Internet's challenge for hermeneutics concerns primarily its social relevance for the creation, communication, and interpretation of knowledge." Capurro proposed that there are "two sides of a single weakening process of modern technology." On one side, there is a weakening of the interpreter, insofar as she finds herself entangled in a more complex network of humans and nonhumans that she can only partially control. On the other side, he stated that "information technology is a weak technology as far as it deals with 'conversations of mankind'" (Capurro 2010, np). In this article, I will show that while the former statement is still valid today, the latter has lost momentum. In fact, "human conversations," and more generally, all contemporary forms of content production and the presentation of self online have the sole function of "feeding the beast," that is, nourishing the algorithmic machines that need more and more data to improve their analysis and predictions. Human discourses do not fragilize digital technologies but make them stronger in their effects of habituation on us. One could argue that algorithmic machines are indifferent to the content and narrative dimension of human discourses as far as they treat such discourses as mere symptoms of what they are really looking for, which may be tastes, behaviors, sentiments, preferences, and so on.

In my recent research (Romele 2019), I have resorted to the expression "digital hermeneutics" according to three different meanings, which are as follows:

(1) First, the term has a deconstructive or even destructive sense. Among the several mediators between the human and the world, hermeneutics has considered language alone. According to Latour (1993, 63), the greatness of the philosophies and theories of language of the Twentieth century such as hermeneutics is that they gave mediators a proper dignity, in the sense that they were no longer considered as pure vehicles conveying meaning from the speaker to the world, or vice versa. However, their weakness is that they elected language as the sole mediator, or at least as the paradigm of all possible mediations.

Ricoeur's hermeneutics represents, in this sense, a paradigmatic case. Among those who are representative of the tradition of ontological hermeneutics, Ricoeur is certainly one who has shown the most interest in the externalizations and materializations of language: signs, metaphors, narratives, texts, and writing in general. This is the ultimate sense of Ricoeur's predilection for the "long route" as opposed to Heidegger's "short route." However, Ricoeur never really dealt with the materiality of supports for the transmission of meaning. To be more specific, he universalized specific materializations and externalizations to understand all others.

Consider, for instance, his notion of narrative identity, which is characterized by mono-linearity and mono-mediality. Narrative identity is mono-linear, because it is based on Aristotelian and Biblical models. According to these models, all narratives must be composed of "emplotment" (*mise en intrigue* in French), which brings the heterogeneous elements of a situation into order and is enclosed between a beginning and an end. Mono-mediality depends on the fact that narrative identity is built on the paradigm of the printed book. According to De Mul (2010), while the reading of printed text tends to be univocal, digital text may be different in every single reading. The Web is, for De Mul, a database of an indefinite number of potential stories. Moreover, in the digital, the written form is just one of a series of media and possibilities for expression.

Incidentally, it is important to distinguish between a descriptive and a prescriptive dimension in Ricoeur's narrative identity. Mono-linearity and mono-mediality can be criticized by adapting rather than losing the descriptive dimension, which is why I will resort to such a notion in the second section of the article. In contrast, digital technologies bring forward the problematic nature of the prescriptive dimension. Indeed, multi-linearity and multi-mediality seem better models, at least less frustrating, for understanding and judging postmodern identities.

(2) Hermeneutics has also played a positive role in my understanding of digital media and technologies. The "idealism of matter" is not an intrinsic limit of hermeneutics. According to Ihde (1990), texts are one of the many hermeneutic technologies. Hermeneutic technologies are characterized by the offering of representations of the world that must be interpreted and understood to access the world. This is the case, for instance, of an aircraft's cockpit, thermometers, electronic microscopes and telescopes, and all digital media and technologies whenever they transform signals and data into something interpretable or manageable for us. Digital media and technologies are hermeneutic, because they mainly deal with signs. Digital symbolism is, however, very specific, because it is based on (1) a double suspension of meaning and reference that allows for (2) a formal and mechanical manipulation of signs (Bachimont 2011). This is their force, insofar as they can treat any sort of entity in the world. One could say that digital hermeneutics is, in this respect, really universal, but this is also its weakness, because it neglects all contexts of production and reception or, in other terms, all sorts of gaps between the "map" and the "territory."

Today, there is a social tendency to believe that digital media and technologies can realize and know everything, because they can manipulate everything. Hermeneutics, especially Ricoeurian's, invites us to practice the art of distanciation instead. While people are generally enthusiastic about the capacities of 3D printers, a hermeneutic attitude would highlight the many difficulties, both in terms of hardware and software, that 3D printing still faces today. While digital sociologists use digital data and methods to

approach social reality, digital hermeneutics recalls several limits of this approach. For example, digital data, especially that coming from social media like Twitter, are never representative of the entire population; the use of specific methods is influenced by technical competences, financial resources, and theoretical frameworks; and so on. In Romele, Severo, and Furia (2020), we analyzed the use of digital data, notably tweets, for studying political opinion. We resorted to the Ricoeurian model of the triple *mimesis* to describe the hermeneutic circularity between data, methods, and conceptual backgrounds as follows:

Approach	Prefiguration (data)	Configuration (method)	Reconfiguration (conceptual form)
(1) Preference	Tweet as a unit (volume of tweets)	Statistics Basic sentiment analysis (lexicon)	Mass opinion
(2) Sentiment	Tweet as a content (words and images inside the tweet)	Advanced sentiment analysis (unsupervised and supervised learning)	Latent opinion
(3) Interaction	Tweet as an interaction (context of tweets)	Network analysis	Activated opinion

Figure 1: the triple mimesis and the use of tweets for studying political opinion (in Romele, Severo, Furia 2020, 83).

The notion of "digital trace" has played a key role in my research. While authors like Levinas and Derrida referred to the concept of trace as a sort of paradoxical or even impossible epistemology, Ricoeur used it to escape to a ruinous alternative: either understanding the trace as a mark and the effect of a cause, or suggesting that a trace is pure significance, a sign of an All Other, which would be, by essence, inaccessible. Discussing Levinas, Ricoeur said to share with him the idea that a trace is distinguished from all signs organized into systems, because it disarranges such order. And yet, he preferred the idea of a "relative" and "historical" Other (Ricoeur 1988, 125). For Ricoeur, the trace was, therefore, the matrix of a difficult but still possible epistemology. The concept of digital traces can be mobilized to avoid two extreme positions. Some believe that digital traceability finally allows social scientists to fill the gap between them and natural sciences, while others blindly argue for the absolute irreducibility of humans to their digital manifestations. The notion of digital trace brings forward the "evidential" (in the sense of Ginzurg's "evidential (*indiciaire*) paradigm") and always uncertain character of digital epistemologies.[1]

(3) In my investigations, I have undertaken a sort of "ontological turn" in digital hermeneutics. As an ontology-oriented discipline, digital hermeneutics is concerned with the role digital machines play in our constitution as "interpreting animals." Digital hermeneutics also wonders if, and to what extent, one can say that we are dealing more and more with interpretative machines. In particular, I have introduced the concept of *e*magination. Derrida coined the term "*différance*," a deliberate misspelling of the French word "*différence*", which is pronounced identically. His intention was to denounce and subvert traditional phonologocentrism, that is, the predilection of speech over writing. Similarly, *e*magination criticizes (a) the common belief according to which human imagination is "in our heads" and (b) the idea that there is an ontological gap between humans and machines lying in the human superior capacities in terms of imagination and creativity.

I argued that schematism is not a "hidden art in the depths of the human soul." Rather, the synthesis between receptivity and spontaneity happens "out of our heads" in linguistic expressions and written forms but also in embodied techniques and in technologies. To put it differently, human imagination is always already externalized, and, as a consequence, materialized, socialized, historicized, and technicized.

I also proposed that our productive imagination is less that of an "engineer" and more that of a "bricoleur," always dealing with "whatever is at hand." One could say that the imagination-engineer is a myth. Today, digital machines, especially those applied to the humanities, are demythologizing human claims of novelty, creativity, and authenticity. Consider the work in quantitative literature by Franco Moretti, work in cultural analytics by Lev Manovich, and several other recent publications that allow us to quantify reputation and success in the field of art (Fraiberger et al. 2018).

This brings human and digital imagination closer to each other, though this does not mean that they are equal to each other – the differences should be understood in terms of degrees and the emergence of properties. In particular, I have resorted to Hans Lenk's (1995) distinction among six different levels of interpretation to say that for each one of these levels, one should establish which of them are or could be soon implemented into digital machines and which remain a human prerogative instead. Digital hermeneutics should also investigate emerging forms of digital interpretation that have little in common with human ways of coping with the world.

My previous research in digital hermeneutics certainly did not exhaust the field. For the past three years, I have become increasingly interested in digital hermeneutics as a form of cultural and social hermeneutics.[2] Digital hermeneutics as cultural and social hermeneutics refers to two things. First, it refers to the fact that technologies are always embedded in cultural and social symbolic forms. These symbolic forms do not only impact technological uses and understandings but also the very process of

---

[1] For Ginzburg and Ricoeur, the evidential paradigm only applies to human and social sciences (SHS). However, the abundant use of digital traces in hard science shows that the evidential paradigm goes well beyond the limits of SHS. On data-centric sciences, see Leonelli (2016).

[2] Interestingly, in Ihde (1990), which is considered one of the foundational works of postphenomenology, chapter 6 is titled "Cultural Hermeneutics." While important at the beginning of this approach in the philosophy of technology, the social and cultural dimension of human-technology-world relations has been neglected in recent years.

technological invention and implementation in our societies. Flichy (2007, 8-12) resorted to Ricoeur's articulation between ideology and utopia to understand the role of the *imaginaire* in technological action. According to him, the *imaginaire* is not in opposition to the technological process of innovation. Rather, it supports it according to a scheme that goes from utopia to ideology and back again:
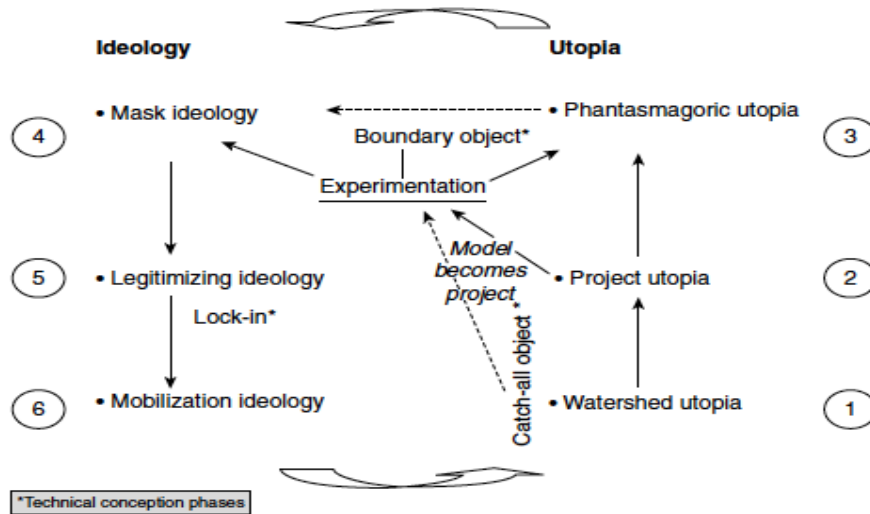

Figure 2: the role of the *imaginaire* in the technological action (in Flichy 2007, 10)[3]

Second, digital hermeneutics as social and cultural hermeneutics refers to the effects that digital media and technologies have on our understanding and interacting with the world in the triple Heideggerian sense of *Selbstwelt*, *Mitwelt*, and *Umwelt*. In other words, digital technologies participate in the framing of our worldviews or world pictures (Romele 2020). In the rest of the article, I will develop a specific aspect of this latter perspective: I will account for the consequences of our daily dealing with digital media and technologies on the understanding and, hence, the constitution of our selves.

2. *Digital Hermeneutics of the Self*

A "digital hermeneutics of the self" mainly consists of analyzing the impact of digital media and technologies in the processes of subjectivation. An empirical work on digital subjectivations would show that there is an indefinite number of variations. However, there is also a common tendency in the way digital media and technologies, as they stand today, operate on our selves. "Hermeneutics of the self" is an expression Foucault used in his last courses at the *Collège de France*, in which he explored the ways subjects subjectivize themselves. In an interview he delivered in 1984, he agreed with the interviewers, according to whom "there is now [in your research] a sort of shift: these games of truth no longer are concerned with coercive practices but with the practices of self-formation of the subject" (Fornet-Betancourt et al. 1987, 113). However, he also recalled that "these practices [of the self] are nevertheless not something that the individual invents by himself. They are patterns that he finds in his culture, and which are proposed, suggested, and imposed on him by his culture, his society and his social group" (Fornet-Betancourt et al. 1987, 122). In other terms, every self-constitution of the self is always already a hetero-constitution. It is precisely this articulation between passivity and activity that interests me in this context. I found this articulation in Ricoeur's perspective as well, in particular in his notion of narrative identity.[4]

---

[3] This is the description Flichy offers of the figure: "The subversive function of utopia, that allows the full range of possibilities to be explored, can be put at the start of the process. [...] The projects conceived of here are widely diverse, often opposed, sometimes simply juxtaposed. [...] In the second phase, a real alternative to existing technical devices is constructed as the models roughed out in the preceding phase become full-blown projects. [...] At the end of this phase utopian reflection can evolve in two ways. Either it is embodied in an experimental project, or it becomes pure fantasy. [...] When utopians become experimenters they are confronted not only with the technique but also with other social actors who have a different view of it. [...] They need to construct a boundary object, a compromise that can be used to associate multiple partners sufficiently loosely for everyone to benefit, yet sufficiently rigidly for the device to function. [...] The experimental phase is not only a time for construction of the technique and its uses but also a phase in which the utopian discourse is reconstructed and bases its claims on the exemplarity of the trials performed. [...] This shift performed by the myth will eventually transform the utopia into an ideology. In this new phase, aspects of reality are readily concealed in order to promote the new technique. In this case, I refer to a *mask ideology*. The technical ideology will make it possible to legitimize the new technical system. As it becomes increasingly rigid, alternatives are cast aside and what economists call technological lock-in results. In this case, I use the term *legitimizing ideology*. Finally, since the positive function of this ideology is to mobilize the actors concerned – both the producers of the technology and its users – I call it a *mobilization ideology*".

[4] There is no room to develop this point fully here, but I propose that Ricoeur's and Foucault's notions of subjectivity need each other. Ricoeur's perspective needs Foucault's to offer a more socially, historically, technically, and technologically situated account of the constitution of the subject. Conversely, Foucault's perspective needs Ricoeur's, as the latter's philosophical anthropology suggests that we should continue to seek a certain autonomy of the subject, despite all its hetero-determinations. On the similarities and differences between Ricoeur and Foucault, see Barthélémy (2010) and Leibovici (2014). For a Foucauldian reading of Ricoeur's philosophical anthropology, that is, a reading in terms of a "renewed concern about the care of the self," see Michel (2014, 101-122).

To support my argument, I will compare Ricoeur's narrative identity and Bourdieu's *habitus*. I will then argue that, despite the rhetoric about the empowering potential of the Web 2.0, which has dominated the literature in the past, the effects of subjectivation of digital media and technologies are today closer to the Bourdieusian *habitus* than to Ricoeur's narrative identity. Ricoeur started to develop his concept of narrative identity at the end of the third volume of *Time and Narrative*, which was released in French in 1985. In this context, Ricoeur (1988, 246) associated the narrative identity with the identity *ipse*: "The difference between *idem* and *ipse* is nothing more than the difference between a substantial or formal identity and a narrative identity." In *Oneself as Another*, published in French five years later, Ricoeur went beyond this alternative, and presented narrative identity as the articulation between *idem* (sameness) and *ipse* (selfhood). In the sixth study of the book, he described narrative identity as a mediating function tolerating and generating imaginative variations (Ricoeur 1992, 148).

In general, narrative identity refers to the fact that our identities are narratively constituted. This means that there is a permanence of our identities despite all changes over time. In fact, a story is a "concordance of discordance" that keeps heterogeneous elements together through the fragile dynamics of emplotment. Moreover, the notion suggests that our identities are constituted not only through the stories we tell but also those we read, watch, or listen to, and they eventually become examples for our individual or social existences. This aspect is deeply related to the passivity that exists in us and the presence of the other in us, because (1) to tell a story always means to make it potentially available for someone else; (2) we do not have any kind of monopoly on our own stories, as the other can always tell pertinent or impertinent stories about us; and (3) the other is not only the *prochain*, people who are close to us in space and time but also the *lointain*, the society and (literary) tradition we are immersed into. According to Ricoeur (1988, 247), narrative identity confirms that "the self of self-knowledge is not the egotistical and narcissistic *ego* [...] [but] the fruit of an examined life [...]. And an examined life is, in large part, one purged, one clarified by the cathartic effects of the narratives, be they historical or fictional, conveyed by our culture."

As mentioned, in *Oneself as Another* Ricoeur presented narrative identity as the mediating function between sameness and selfhood. To describe these two poles, he used two expressions "that are at once descriptive and emblematic", which are "character" and "keeping one's word." Character is a set of distinctive marks that allows the reidentification of a human individual as being the same individual. Ricoeur (1992, 124) stated that "keeping one's word" means to "appear to stand as a challenge to time, a denial of change: even if my desire were to change, even if I were to change my opinion and my inclination, 'I will hold firm'." I hypothesize that sameness, as Ricoeur described it, is very close to the way Bourdieu understood the *habitus*. For Ricoeur, character is the ensemble of durable dispositions that we attribute to a person. The Bourdieusian *habitus* is similarly a system of durable and transposable dispositions. One could argue that Ricoeurian character is personal, while the Bourdieusian *habitus* is socialized. However, the Bourdieusian *habitus*, while socialized, is also appropriated and personalized. In other terms, every individual, as a member of a social group or class, has her style. Moreover, while Ricoeurian character is personalized, it is also the result of a process of social and contextual habituation.

One might read the distinction between sameness and selfhood in hermeneutic terms as the difference between "white" or "dead" interpretations and "living" interpretations. White or dead interpretations are ways of coping with the world that have been reiterated enough times that they have become part of our cognitive, social, cultural, and gestural background – however, in the beginning, we had to learn them, such as how to speak, drive, prepare a coffee, or love without being possessive. In contrast living interpretations are caused by an encounter with something unexpected or problematic such that our schemas (our *habitus*) do not apply to them. Our existence as interpretative animals is made of the articulation between these two dimensions. Most of the time, we remain within the limits of our habits (our white and dead interpretations), but whenever we face a problematic situation that cannot fit our schemas, we undertake living interpretations as long as we can and want truly to engage with the situation at hand.

For Bourdieu, the *habitus* is what makes a social group or class become a group or a class, that is, what makes the single decisions and actions of each member of a social group or class, when it comes to specific objects and situations, resemble each other. In the words of the French sociologist, the habitus is a "conductorless orchestration which gives regularity, unity, and systematicity to the practices of a group or class, and this even in the absence of any spontaneous or externally imposed organization of individual projects" (Bourdieu 1977, 80). It is noteworthy that for Bourdieu the habitus does not forge only actions and reactions, but also someone's desires and supposedly most authentic aspirations.

For Ricoeur, sameness is just part of our identities – or, in hermeneutic terms, of our interpretative practices. For Bourdieu, selfhood is no more than an illusion. He spoke, for instance, of "biographical illusion" (1986). According to him, social actors are never capable of telling the truth about themselves, because all stories they create and tell about themselves are no more than an "artificial creation of meaning." For Bourdieu, only a sociologist is capable of revealing the intentions of social actors, because she has the methods and practices to cultivate distance from the situations in which social actors are completely immersed.[5]

In his criticism of biographic illusion, Bourdieu was not thinking about Ricoeur but rather the attempt of some sociologists to give a voice back to the stories and intentions of social actors. Truc (2011, 151) spoke of a "narrative turn" in

---

[5] In his last course at the *Collège de France* as well as elsewhere, Bourdieu recognized that distanciation in the sociological field is not easy at all. For this reason, he made a plea for the specific practice of "reflexivity."

French sociology, especially among representatives of pragmatist sociology, such as Boltanski and Thévénot.[6] These authors have been strongly influenced by the work of Ricoeur. Their epistemological turn mainly consisted of a recuperation of biographical methods. At its origin, there was a certain dissatisfaction with Bourdieu's notion of the *habitus* and the approach to personal identity it implied. For instance, during a round table devoted to the "Ricoeur Effect in Human Sciences (*L'effet Ricœur dans les Sciences Humaines*)" (2006, np), Thévénot argued that "the conception of the person and her identity is underdeveloped in the social sciences in favor of the sameness. The stability of the identical, that sociologists conceive in terms of collectivized *habitus* [...], impedes to consider the other pole of identity, the selfhood, that Ricoeur linked to the promise." One could say that contemporary sociology has followed the path from Bourdieu to Ricoeur and has made the effort to articulate sameness and selfhood. However, this does not correspond to a naïve exaltation of the subject and its autonomy. Indeed, as mentioned, from a Ricoeurian perspective, giving voice to actors and their stories does not mean that these actors have a monopoly on these and other stories about themselves.

My hypothesis, which is also the central hypothesis of the article, is that digital media and technologies have walked in the opposite direction, from selfhood back to sameness. The literature on the digital of the 1980s and 1990s, especially the literature on the Web, insisted on its empowering potential for individuals and their identities. In the 2000s, the Web 2.0 or the "social Web" emerged. Scholars focused on the relations among users, along with their positive and negative consequences. In the last decade, issues of big data and, more recently, algorithms have dominated the literature and practices. My thesis is that digital media and technologies have become "*habitus* machines." May (2019) argued that digital images are not images at all. From an ontological point of view, digital images are very different from photographs and sketches. According to him, "unlike photographs, in which scenic light is made visible during chemical exposure, all [digital] imaging today is a process of detecting energy emitted by an environment and chopping it into discrete, measurable electrical charges called signals, which are stored, calculated, managed, and manipulated through various statistical methods" (May 2019, 47); "[digital] images are data, and all [digital] imaging is, knowingly or not, an act of data processing" (Ibid.). For him, the visual surface of digital images does not say anything about their nature. Indeed, "[digital] images are far more closely related to spreadsheets and statistical formulas than to photographs" (May 2019, 50).

This idea can be applied to digital media and technologies in general. If phenomenology deals with appearances, my approach to digital media and technologies can be said to be anti-phenomenology. In fact, I believe that the appearance of the digital, especially its manifestations as the "social Web," does not say much about its ontology or its effects of subjectivation on us. My idea is that behind all forms of self-presentation online and behind all social interactions, there is nothing more than databases and algorithms. In the digital, as it is today, what is at the surface counts only so far as it can be subsumed in signals, quantifications, and classifications. I think there is a kind of paradox here that I have called elsewhere "personalization without personality" (Romele and Rodighiero 2020). While online services are more and more personalized, this personalization ends up erasing our personalities. The term "personality" is understood here as intended by Simondon. The French philosopher distinguished between individuation, individualization, and personality. Individuation and individualization are two forms of differentiation performed by beings from their environment. The former concerns all beings, while the latter is specific to human beings. Personality is what gives each individualization its specific coherence, style, and orientation. Big data and algorithms dismember personalities into tastes, tendencies, and so on, reassembling them into clusters. Digital media and technologies are indifferent to our actions, or these actions count only so far as they can be used to predict our future actions, and those of people who, for some reason, are considered similar to us.

All this started on a specific date, April 13, 2007, that is, when Google acquired the targeted-advertising company DoubleClick for $3.1 billion in cash. From that moment, data became business and the central commodity for digital capital, and what Cheney-Lippold (2017) called the "Data Wars" began. Certainly, digital classifications are much more layered and fine-grained than the Bourdieusian classifications of social classes. Chiney-Lippold opportunely speaks of "intersectional identities" and "protocategorial perspective." However, this softer way of sorting out things and persons must not be confused, I believe, with the guarantee of greater freedom in the expression of self. Firstly, because it maximizes the indifference to the ways individuals account for themselves. Secondly, because it is much more adaptive over time.

The main consequence is that individuals are always flattened and reduced to heir present and expected behaviors. This not only affects machines' (and companies') understanding of us but also our self-understanding and our understanding of the world. There is a hermeneutic circularity (a triple *mimesis* in Ricoeurian terms) between the transformation of our online or digitally-mediated activities in data (*mimesis* I), the algorithmic treatment of databases (*mimesis* II), and the presentation of the results of such a treatment in different forms, such as the quantification of the self (number of friends, sport performances, and so on), targeted advertising, content curation, and so on (*mimesis* III). One might reasonably suppose that reiterated contact with these representations of the world (the self, the other, and the environment) has an important impact on the processes of subjectivation.

One of the anonymous reviewers of this article has opportunely wondered if this was not already the case of older media, such as radio and television. This claim is correct. Bourdieu (1998a, 16) argued that the television is a formidable instrument for maintaining symbolic order. However, two caveats are necessary. First, in this context, there are differences between digital media

---

[6] On Bourdieu and Ricoeur, see also Michel (2014, 1-29) and Corcuff (2005).

and technologies as they were (perceived) in the past and as they are now. For instance, there was initial enthusiasm about the possibilities offered by the Web 1.0 and 2.0 in terms of agency, especially compared to the passivity imposed by older media. Second, the kind of habituation operated by algorithmic machines is, as just mentioned, more fine-grained than the one at work in the past in mass media, advertising, and social research.

Conclusion: Towards a Digital Agency and Citizenship

Three sorts of responses seem possible to the habituation of selves online that I propose to articulate, rather thank thinking of them as alternatives to each other:

(1) First, one could say that such habituation of our selves is not a problem. Human beings are constantly habituated by social and cultural instances, and digital media and technologies are just the continuations of social and cultural habituations by other means. It might even be said that digital media and technologies are rather therapeutic in this sense. Human beings have deluded themselves into thinking that they can be "authentic," "attentive," "creative," and "responsive." When an algorithm can create art that is appreciated by and sold in the artworld, when another is capable of predicting the success of a young artist, are not we discovering that we are rather creatures of habit even in our supposedly most original expressions? This first point can be understood in light of the Ricoeurian assumption that to explain more is to understand better. In other words, today's digital media and technologies offer the opportunity to know our habits and determinations and to separate with more precision between sameness and selfhood or, in hermeneutic terms, between white and living interpretations.

(2) The second response consists of undertaking a series of individual or communitarian actions, detours, or tactics. I am referring to practices like digital abstinence, hacking, and so on. I am also thinking of the increasing literature on the virtue ethics of technology (Vallor 2016). Before the phenomenon of technical acceleration, of which one could say that digital media and technologies are at the core, Rosa spoke of "resonance." If alienation is the impossibility of entering into relation with the other, resonance is its opposite, namely, the cultivation of reciprocity and mutual transformation between a subject and her world (Lijster, Celikates, and Rosa 2019). Could we habituate ourselves to a resonant use of digital media and technologies? The limit of this second point lies, in my opinion, in the risk of elitism. It is not by chance that among the most cultivated segments of the population, there is a strong disdain for anything "high-tech."

(3) The third response is collective and institutional. In the 1998 English introduction to *Masculine Domination*, Bourdieu (1998b, viii. Italics is mine) spoke of a "strictly *political* mobilization, which would open for women the possibility of a *collective* action of resistance, oriented towards *legal* and *political* reforms." Such mobilization, he adds immediately after,

"Contrasts both with the resignation that is encouraged by all essentialist (biological or psychoanalytical) visions of the difference between the sexes and with a resistance that is reduced to individual acts or the endlessly recommended discursive "happenings" that are recommended by some feminist theoreticians – these heroic breaks in the everyday routine, such as the "parodic performances" favoured by Judith Butler, probably expect too much for the meagre and uncertain results they obtain."

Instead of opposing individual and collective replies like Bourdieu, I believe they should be articulated via the Ricoeurian definition of ethics as "a good life, with and for others, within just institutions." My interpretation is that the cultivation of a virtue ethics of technology must not be an end in itself. Every virtuous action must aspire to become an exemplary action for the others, and every exemplary action must aspire to be seen and appropriated by public institutions.

The kind of actions individuals, social groups, and institutions can undertake to reduce the effects of habituation of digital media and technologies on our subjectivities are yet to be determined. A possible path to be explored is represented by the triple *mimesis* applied to digital media and technologies that I sketched at the end of the second section of this article. When Ricoeur elaborated on this model, he was thinking about novels in their written form as printed books. While readers have for sure room to maneuver when it comes to reading (indeed, reading is not a passive activity), one cannot expect the content of a printed book to change over time. Even in the case of printed gamebooks, the number of possibilities is always pre-determined. In other words, printed books are fixed entities, and the circulation between the printed book and its reader is always incomplete. The case of digital content is rather different. Even in the digital as it stands now, that is, as an ensemble of *habitus* machines, one can observe a more fluid circularity between collected data, produced content, and consumers' feedback on content in the form of clicks, likes, and so on, which produce new data.

The problem with this circularity is the fact that it is still very unbalanced, in the sense that consumers have no real control over it. Some steps forward have been taken regarding this issue thanks to the intervention of public institutions, such as the European Commission, which have often been inspired by individual and communitarian initiatives. For example, EU cookie consent notices, though requiring improvement, inform consumers and allow them to manage some parameters. This means that consumers are, still very partially, directly involved in the constitution of the content in which they will reflect themselves and through which they will constitute their subjectivities. I contend that this is precisely the path that could be walked to reduce the effects of habituation produced by the digital on our selves. This would transform mere consumers of digital contents into "digital citizens." According to Feenberg (2011, 1-2) agency implies three conditions: knowledge, power, and appropriate occasions. In

politics, agency is called citizenship, such that "citizen agency is the legitimate right and power to influence political events." For Feenberg, there is a chronic lack of involvement of citizens in technological practices and policies. He introduces, for this reason, notions of "technical agency" and "technical citizenship." Similarly, I suggest that the concepts of "digital agency" and "digital citizenship" reflect the need to improve people's knowledge, power, and appropriate occasions in the hermeneutic circle between the digital and us. It will be the task of future investigations to develop this point fully.

IZEW
University of Tübingen

ETHICS (EA 7446)
Université Catholique de Lille
alberto.romele@uni-tuebingen.de

References

Bachimont, B. 2011. *Le sens de la technique*. Paris: Les Belles Lettres.

Barthélémy, A. 2010. "Herméneutiques croisées: Conversation imaginaire entre Ricœur et Foucault." *Etudes Ricœuriennes/Ricoeur Studies* 1/1: 55-67.

Boltanski, L. et al. 2006. "L'effet Ricœur dans les sciences humaines." *Esprit* Mars/Avril: 40-64.

Bourdieu, P. 1998a. *On Television*. New York : The New Press.

Bourdieu, P. 1998b. *Masculine Domination*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Bourdieu, P. 1986. "L'illusion biographique." *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales* 62/63: 69-72.

Bourdieu, P. 1977. *Outline of a Theory of Practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Cardon, D. 2008. "Le design de la visibilité." *Réseaux* 6/152: 93-137.

Capurro, R. 2010. "Digital Hermeneutics: An Outline." http://www.capurro.de/digitalhermeneutics.html. Accessed on June 1, 2020. Originally published in *AI & Society* 35/1: 35-42.

Cheney-Lippold, J. 2017. *We Are Data*. New York: NYU Press.

Corcuff, P. 2005. *Les nouvelles sociologies*, Paris: Nathan.

De Mul, J. 2010. *Cyberspace Odyssey: Towards a Virtual Ontology and Anthropology*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

Feenberg, A. 2011. "Agency and Citizenship in a Technological Society." *Lecture presented to the Course on Digital Citizenship, IT University of Copenhagen*, http://www.sfu.ca/~andrewf/copen5. Accessed September 9, 2020.

Feenberg, A. 2009. "Peter-Paul Verbeek: Review of *What Things Do*." *Human Studies* 32: 225-228.

Flichy, P. 2007. *The Internet Imaginaire*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.

Fornet-Betancourt, R. et al. 1987. "The Ethic of Care for the Self as a Practice of Freedom: an Interview with Michel Foucault on January 20, 1984." *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 12/2-3: 112-131.

Fraiberger, S.P. et al. 2018. "Quantifying Reputation and Success in Art." *Science* 362/6416: 825-829.

Georges, F. 2009. "Représentation de soi et identité numérique." *Réseaux* 2/154: 165-193.

Ihde, D. 1990. *Technology and the Lifeworld*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.

Ihde, D. 1971. *Hermeneutic Phenomenology: The Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press.

Latour, B. 1993. *We Have Never Been Modern*. Harvard: Harvard University Press.

Leibovici, M. 2014. "De Ricœur à Foucault: en finir avec l'herméneutique du soi?" *Tumultes* 2/43: 107-121.

Leonelli, S. 2016. *Data-Centric Biology*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Lijster, T., Celikates, R., and Rosa, H. 2019. "Beyond the Echo-chamber: An Interview with Hartmuth Rosa on Resonance and Alienation." *Krisis* 1: 64-78.

May, J. 2019. *Signal, Image, Architecture*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Michel, J. 2014. *Ricoeur and the Post-structuralists*. Lanham: Rowmann & Littlefield.

Rao, M.B., Jongerden, J., Lemmens, P., and Ruivekamp, G. 2015. "Technological Mediation and Power: Postphenomenology, Critical Theory, and Autonomist Marxism." *Philosophy & Technology* 28/3: 449-474.

Ricoeur, P. 1988. *Time and Narrative 3*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Ricoeur, P. 1992. *Oneself As Another*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Ricoeur, P. 1974. *The Conflict of Interpretations*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press.

Romele, A. 2020. "The Datafication of the Worldview." *AI & Society*, https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s00146-020-00989-x.

Romele, A. 2019. *Digital Hermeneutics*. New York and London: Routledge.

Romele, A., and Rodighiero, D. 2020. "Digital Habitus; or Personalization without Personality." *Humana.Mente* 13/37: 98-126.

Romele, A., Severo, M., and Furia, P. 2020. "Digital Hermeneutics: from Interpreting with Machines to Interpretative Machines." *AI & Society* 35: 73-86.

Truc, G. 2011. "Narrative Identity Against Biographic Illusion: The Shift in Sociology from Ricoeur to Bourdieu", *Etudes Ricœuriennes/Ricoeur Studies* 2/1: 150-167.

Vallor, S. 2016. *Technology and the Virtues*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.