

Notes from the Twilight Zone

Problems on the Intersection of Childhood and Adulthood in the New Screen Media Landscape

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The article explores the context of contemporary media, with particular attention to the *TikTok* universe, identifying a sort of “Twilight Zone” in which contents for adults and new generations mix. Through the analysis of specific cases (the “creepypasta” of *Slender Man*, the TV series *Squid Game*, and the film *Terrifier*), the problematic effects of a fluid media context are highlighted, for which both the new ways of acquiring content and the factual removal of restrictions on access to certain products are responsible. In outlining this new picture of age fluidity, a transversal pedagogy focused on media literacy is proposed as a possible solution for both new and old generations.

Keywords: TikTok, Slender Man, Terrifier, Squid Game, creepypasta.

Note dalla Twilight Zone. Sfide sull’Intersezione tra Infanzia e Età Adulta nel Nuovo Panorama dei Media Schermici

L’articolo esplora il contesto dei media contemporanei, con particolare attenzione all’universo di *TikTok*, individuandovi una sorta di “Twilight Zone”, in cui contenuti per adulti e per nuove generazioni si mescolano. Attraverso l’analisi di alcuni casi specifici (la “creepypasta” di *Slender Man*, la serie tv *Squid Game* e il film *Terrifier*) vengono rilevati gli effetti problematici di un contesto mediale fluido, di cui sono responsabili sia le nuove modalità di acquisizione di contenuto che la destituzione fattuale delle restrizioni all’accesso di determinati prodotti. Nel tratteggiare questo nuovo quadro di fluidità anagrafica si propone come ipotesi risolutiva una

pedagogia trasversale improntata all'alfabetizzazione ai media tanto per le nuove quanto per le vecchie generazioni.

Parole-chiave: TikTok, Slender Man, Terrifier, Squid Game, creepypasta.

The Slender Man: A May Day in Wisconsin

There is a specific reason why the incident known as the ‘Slender Man stabbing,’ which occurred on May 31, 2014, in Waukesha, Wisconsin, made headlines not only locally – as typically happens with events of this kind – but also globally¹. The reason does not solely lie in the exceptional brutality of the crime, which involved a 12-year-old girl being stabbed 19 times by two friends of the same age, but rather in the motivation that the two defendants provided to the investigators: they claimed to have acted through the influence of Slender Man². In essence, they behaved as if possessed, or in an attempt to become “proxies,” that is, servants of the entity³. According to this interpretation, the event takes on the characteristics of human sacrifice and is intertwined with a dense history of crimes committed under the impulse of a certain type of esotericism and occultism.

It is evident that this explanation, provided by the implicated youngsters themselves, is very limited. It frames the event from the perspective of those who perpetrated it but does not account for the delicate psychiatric exploration necessary in such circumstances. However, it points to a “mediological” horizon that, to some extent, has its specific relevance. For example, Marcel Danesi hypothesizes that the “media diet” is not necessarily a consequence of psychiatric disorder, but rather that there is a triggering relationship between the two:

¹ Since this news item dates from almost ten years ago, the journalistic sources are numerous. By way of example, one relating to the most recent developments in the matter is provided below: <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/07/01/us/slender-man-stabbing-anis-sa-weier-released.html> (last consulted 11 May 2023).

² This is a fictional character born within some online communities. We will explain its characteristics later. For further insights see Surace (2023).

³ Cf. <https://www.lastampa.it/cultura/2015/03/26/news/killer-a-12-anni-per-ingraziarsi-il-mostro-del-web-1.35288013/> (last consulted 7 June 2023).

The near-fatal stabbing of a twelve-year-old girl in Waukesha, Wisconsin is attributed to the Slenderman meme. As this case saliently showed, the world of the matrix is more real and perhaps more meaningful to people today than the real world [...] One wonders, though, whether the illness was not induced, or at least triggered, by the Slenderman meme (2019, p. 64).

The episode also gives rise to reflections that go beyond the specific case, regarding in general the access of contemporary generations to contents that are potentially dangerous if not handled with care⁴. Furthermore, it allows us to hypothesize a specific condition of contemporaneity, coinciding with a media *crisis* that foresees the structural coexistence of different age regimes, defining a significant leap in perhaps even anthropological terms.

To better motivate these hypotheses, it is appropriate to return to the events of Waukesha, and to the already mentioned figure of the Slender Man, the famous protagonist of a “creepypasta”. This term refers to a specific neo-genre, first literary and then audiovisual, situated within the culture of the Internet and interpretable as a sort of evolution of what in oral cultures are known as “urban legends”. Creepypastas are nothing more than horror stories (or in any case stories of varying complexity about disturbing oddities) that are spread online, usually starting from anonymous authors⁵. These tales, due to their original context of diffusion, circulate by exploiting the dynamics of so-called “virality”, and often find choice places in sites or contexts frequented also and above all by the very young. The Slender Man represents a sort of *antonomasia* as the monster par excellence of “digital mythology” (Asimos, 2021). He is a mysterious character, born as a drawing from the hand of designer Victor Surge, and later to become the protagonist of many

⁴ On this point it is worth specifying how the case triggered a debate on the effect of the Internet on adolescents, and how this was in line with previous debates about the potentially unhealthy influence of media on young people. Just think of the accusations against Marilyn Manson and his music following the Columbine High School massacre, which *Bowling at Columbine* also addresses (Michael Moore, 2002). This approach, completely Manichean, is not very constructive, in general little informed, and causes the “moral panic” which we will also mention later. A starting point to this debate can be found in Bolshaw and Josephidou (2023).

⁵ Cf. Blank and McNeill (2018) in which the phenomenon of Slender Man is also analyzed; Cooley and Milligan (2018); Balanzategui (2019); Pattee (2022).

stories and countless *internet memes*⁶. The disturbing appearance of this tall, elegantly suited humanoid with a completely white face has helped define his primary iconicity, resulting in the growth of a real cult in his name, also nurtured by the spillover from the Internet context and the attainment of a “transmedia life” through films (the best known being *Slender Man*, Sylvain White, 2018), video games and so on.

That the two girls from Wisconsin should thus have crossed paths with this character in their young lives is neither surprising nor inexplicable. Especially in those years the diffusion of the Slender Man character was such as to make him a cultural object of fascination, especially in the American school context. There is nothing new in this. Adolescence has always been – also in the pre-digital age – a period of exploration of fears and repressions, especially in socialization contexts. *Séances* and *ouija* boards have a long history, and the allure of certain cultural horizons went hand in hand with the mass media of the twentieth century⁷. Think of the cultural impact of films such as *Rosemary’s Baby*, Roman Polański, 1968, *The Exorcist*, William Friedkin, 1973 – “an exemplar of a new generation of narratives that questioned the psychosocial anxieties of threatened societal boundaries” (Webley, 2017, p. 235) – or the whole trend of *slasher movies* in the immediately pre-digital age: “This fascination with death and even global annihilation, the so-called ‘apocalypse mentality,’ was expressed not just in the films of the 1980s, but throughout the youth culture as a whole” (Muir, 2007, p. 18). And think too about the tight connection that exists between horror cinema and media, often depicted as true vehicles of evil: the television in *Ring* (Hideo Nakata, 1998) and its American remake *The Ring* (Gore Verbinski, 2002), or in *Poltergeist* (Tobe Hooper, 1982), the radio in *Pontypool* (Bruce McDonald, 2008), the phone in *Cell* (Tod Williams, 2016), the computer screen in *Unfriended* (Levan Gabriadze, 2014), and many others⁸. In our perspective, the concept must be reversed: what if the focus of these films were not the screen, but the spectator’s inability to manage it?

There is a significant element of novelty: previously, access to a certain type of liminal zones of culture – prohibited places which adolescents aspired to enter for the fulfillment of their initiatory rites – was restricted,

⁶ A systematic approach to memes and online virality is presented in Marino (2022).

⁷ The relationship between horror cinema and socially widespread demonology is shrewdly investigated in De Certeau (2002).

⁸ See Benson-Allott (2013).

whereas today that is no longer the case. Once, for example, certain horror films could only be seen in cinemas or, later, at home, with age restrictions which already in some way constituted a measure of a pedagogical type (they sanctioned interdiction, on the one hand increasing the fascination towards the forbidden but also subtly emphasizing the fact that certain contents required a certain degree of maturity), but with the advent of a series of screen devices (first computers, then smartphones) and the exploits of the most disparate social media, the interdictory element has progressively weakened, often being reduced purely to empty form.

A film prohibited to under-18s in theaters cannot be seen without exhibiting a document certifying one's age; this restrictive expedient can, however, be circumvented by means of various types of fraudulent systems (the production of false documents, sneaking in, etc.). A website that also includes an age-appropriate disclaimer merely *indicates* rather than actually preventing. One of our hypotheses is that this absence of control is tantamount to the dismantling of a first pedagogical barrier which signaled the need for some critical apparatus in those who use particular contents. A lack of normativity coincides with a lack of "*formativity*".

Certain regulatory systems ensure that the user may enjoy delicate contents while at the same time knowing how to discern between their likelihood and their factual truth. In simple terms, such systems enable the spectator to realize that, while Slender Man is an interesting fictional product whose stories can be fascinating and produce gratification, it is purely an aesthetic gratification which does not correspond with believing that he really exists. In essence: the girls from Waukesha lacked any form of literacy specific to the suspension of disbelief. They did not *pretend to believe* in the Slender Man – which is essential to being able to enjoy his stories – but really *did*. The distinction between *pretending to believe* and *believing* is in fact something that is acquired over time, with specific literacy in relation to stories, images, and screens. Morbidity itself, a fundamental ingredient in the enjoyment of horror stories, is not a neutral fact, but requires fine-tuning by way of gradual and supervised exposure, not necessarily or solely through careful parenting, but also through interacting with clear social doctrines that define what is or is not taboo.

The first conclusion we reach is therefore that our contemporary screen-based society has sanctioned a disappearance of taboos, pursuing a rhetoric of liberation that does not take into account the strict necessity of interdiction,

not so much in factual as in symbolic terms. In the absence of the taboo, the logic of crossing the limit is missing (that fundamental deviation around which the initiatory rite revolves), and so the very concept of limitation ceases to perform a function. In the absence of the concept of limitation, which constitutes a space of freedom also by virtue of its ability to define a horizon of deprivation, there is no margin for developing the discernment between what is right and what is not, between the true and the false.

The fact that screens and what they convey are “open” to the young user from a very early age, without any pedagogical-training filter, becomes problematic. If one is thrown into a cauldron where adult contents mix with contents for children and adolescents, dramatic results can occur.

Squid Game: from Wisconsin to South Korea

2014 was also the year of the launching of the Chinese app *Douyin*, which later became *TikTok*⁹. It was an era of definitive passage to the Internet of social media, and the advent of applications such as *TikTok* coincided with a new way of experiencing life online (Floridi, 2014). Digital communication tools were used less and less to search for information, and more and more information was reaching users before they even though they wanted to search for it. In this sense, the *TikTok* algorithm was – and is – ascendant: while presenting an interface with which to search for content, its main function is based on scrolling, to such an extent that Rollenhagen speaks, somewhat provocatively, of “scroll zombies” (2022). The contents presented are automatically chosen on the strength of a study of the user’s preferences (which occurs, for example, by analyzing the time spent on one video rather than another), as well as on the basis of a sort of pool of general preferences, which become trends.

Consequently, in 2021 many children and young teenagers were faced with scenes taken from the South Korean television series *Squid Game* (Hwang Dong-hyuk) produced by *Netflix*, which rapidly became a successful product on a global scale¹⁰, dominating the digital imagination in the second

⁹ A detailed study of this application from various humanistic perspectives can be found in Marino and Surace (2023). For a pedagogically oriented approach, see Cervi (2021); Cheng Stahl and Literat (2022); Pedrouzo and Krynski (2023).

¹⁰ The television series tells the story of some people who voluntarily agree to partici-

half of the year. It was talked about everywhere, and having or not having seen what amounted to one of the most discussed and appreciated media products of the period determined how up to date one was – to such an extent that a sort of silent “FoMO” (Fear of Missing Out) arose, in terms of which not having watched the series in some way became a criterion of exclusion from entire socially shared discourses. The young are not exempt from these socio-cultural processes, and thus a series of relevant dynamics emerge. As Hefner, Knop and Vorderer suggest: “The more FoMO young people feel, the more involved they are in problematic and risky mobile phone behaviors” (2018, p. 49).

Squid Game is indeed an unquestionably adult television series. Inside we find a high rate of both psychological and physical violence. However, it is plastically constructed to refer to the universe of childhood. Its colors are bright, the environments shown often recall those of a kindergarten, the narrative mechanics are of a playful nature, and the characters, starting from the protagonist, preserve somewhat childish traits. Thus, the level of immanence of the media product itself in a certain sense can attract the generations of school age, for whom in any case it is an audiovisual content that is not advisable (parental control is envisaged, which as we know can be easily “escaped”). The content is also seen by the very young – if not directly through the *Netflix* platform – since it is disseminated in “clipped” versions on *TikTok*, through fragments that deconstruct the product and which today are dominant in the general digital audiovisual economy. *Squid Game* circulates because it is trendy, because the adult world talks about it and produces the aforementioned contents, and because these contents end up in a system that makes them visible even to the youngest members of society.

TikTok thus acts as a “grey area,” a place of crisis between the worlds of adulthood and childhood, in which categories mix. On the other hand, the series itself already played with this reshuffling of codes, as we said before. While in the adult world a widespread Peter Pan syndrome is exploited, by nurturing it the contemporary media system subjects young people to the same contents, “forcing” them to face these with the emotional

pate in deadly games to win a rich cash prize. From this brief synopsis we can deduce the political implications of this media product, which in any case was created to be above all a form of entertainment for adults, and whose success has been outstanding on many media, leading also to the production of gadgets, dedicated games, Internet parodies, memes, and so on.

and cognitive tools they have at their disposal, while subjecting them to pressure mechanisms whereby – in order to avoid forms of marginalization – they feel obliged to “see certain things” as a consequence of psychosocial coercion. It is, as we anticipated, a sort of FoMO applied to the world of childhood and adolescence, an increasingly pervasive phenomenon (Damjanovic and Damian, 2015). FoMO can be problematic as it involves negative expectancies and cognitions that can play a role in problematic Internet use (Wegmann and Brand, 2016). The fundamental social aspect of FoMO means that CYP [Children and young people] may be susceptible to negative impacts on their wellbeing. Thus, adolescents who score high on FoMO report more negative mood states and this can also worsen social anxiety, including negative mental health outcomes (Milyavskaya, Saffran *et alii*, 2018). For example, Turkle (2011) argued that FoMO is associated with lower mood and life satisfaction [...] (O’Reilly and Dogra, 2021, p. 169, *passim*).

Consequently, in autumn 2021 a sort of “emulation alarm” spread in many Italian schools, testified by various journalistic sources. Children were replicating the games they had seen on the show, “playing Squid Game”, and reconstructing the system of punishments meted out in the show (not by killing the loser, naturally, but for example by slapping them)¹¹. The media response was on the one hand that of *moral panic*¹², pointing the finger at the very existence of the television series, with a censorious attitude (and without knowing that this is only the latest of dozens of audiovisual products built with the same aesthetic pattern over many decades). On the other hand, an unforeseen consequence, or in sociological terms an effect of perverse composition, was the generation of a “Streisand effect”¹³: in an attempt to limit the phenomenon, it was talked about so much as to exacerbate it and broaden its scope (basically, those who were not directly interested heard enough about it to be compelled to enter the vortex of the media case itself).

¹¹ Cf. Siregar, Angin and Mono (2021); De Jans, Cauberghé and Hudders (2022).

¹² Cf. Goode and Ben Yehuda (1994); Thompson (1998); Garland (2008).

¹³ The name of the effect comes from an episode that occurred involving the singer Barbra Streisand, who in 2003 filed a lawsuit for invasion of privacy against a photographer who had released an image of her villa in Malibu. As Hunt argues: “Not only did she lose her case, but in taking legal action, she inadvertently drew attention to the very thing she was trying to hide. [...] the ‘Streisand Effect’. We use it to describe when efforts to keep something secret – usually via the courts – have precisely the opposite effect” (2023, p. 153, *passim*).

Whether students have seen *Squid Game*, or clips of it, on *Netflix* – and therefore as a result of a lack of parental supervision – or, as it is more likely, whether they have been exposed to it via *TikTok*, it is clear that there is a problem at the base: the sharing of tools and channels by different age groups, hence the uncontrolled exposure to a heterogeneous and “disordered” variety of contents. Furthermore, while the emulative consequences are the most immediately detectable, it is still to be defined how these can impact from a psychological point of view on generations not yet ready to process them critically¹⁴. In fact, although there is a reference literature regarding, for example, the use of horror cinema in childhood, we are here in a different context, from a semiotic perspective: it is a question of assimilating clips or fragments interpolated with other contents. Therefore, there is no longer a linear fruition, which for example can help frame what is being seen in terms of context¹⁵, but rather a fragmented, disordered assimilation, mixed with thousands of other micro-contents that merge to produce a cognitive horizon that is problematic even in adulthood, let alone in the developmental phase.

In this sense, just as the problem is new, so must the solutions put forward to act as a filter be new. As already mentioned, limiting access from a technical point of view is not always effective, and indeed is becoming increasingly less so (*TikTok* itself, moreover, sets a questionable access threshold of 13 years as a basis)¹⁶. Hence the need for an amendment from a pedagogical point of view, targeting both families and the main educational and socialization institutions.

As regards the former, the attribution of direct blame to individual cases – often then summarily dismissed as neglectful behavior on the part of inattentive parents – should be avoided, and the foundations laid for a reflection less marked by ageism and more oriented towards bridging the significant intergenerational gap deriving from belonging to different media cultures¹⁷. In other words, it is necessary to spread a culture that is critically

¹⁴ Studies on psychological disorders deriving from incorrect use of social media are increasing. Find a more humanistic perspective in Toschi and Alecci (2021).

¹⁵ Think, for example, of the mantra “it’s just a movie, it’s just a movie”, which is repeated to defuse certain forms of identification during a particularly uncanny viewing.

¹⁶ See <https://support.tiktok.com/en/safety-hc/account-and-user-safety/underage-appeals-on-tiktok>

¹⁷ By ageism today we mean a form of personal or generational prejudice, usually aimed at those who are older. Broadly speaking, it is possible to identify ageism even in a certain

aware of the means of communication that can reach parents and, through them, be conveyed to their children. Similarly, in schools, it is necessary to set up training programs aimed first and foremost at teachers, and to dedicate increasing time to specific literacy in contemporary media and screens. Although it may not be possible to prevent all children from watching *Squid Game*, there is the need to try to act as a solid point of mediation, in a context otherwise occupied by other instances.

From Terrifier to parapornography

A case similar to that of *Squid Game* is represented by the film *Terrifier*, directed by Damien Leone in 2016. Although this independent, low-cost film had been released over five years earlier, it was only in 2022 that it rose to prominence. In fact, during the Halloween period some clips went viral on *TikTok* and the protagonist, Art the Clown, immediately became a cult icon. The film is a horror-splatter, erected around the visual cruelty of its scenes and the magnetism of the protagonist himself, who can be inserted into a rich history of evil screen clowns, including *IT*'s Pennywise (from the Stephen King novel that became famous with the 1990 television series directed by Tommy Lee Wallace and then returned to the cinema theaters with Andy Muschietti's trilogy, 2017 and 2019) and many others¹⁸. It is therefore a film that is absolutely not suitable for the very young, and which given the elements mentioned above and the sudden visibility achieved at the end of October 2022 immediately aroused a certain interest, so much so that it made the international news (an unusual fact for an independent film).

On December 7, 2022, the *Open* headline reads: "Cremona, the story of the horror film screened in a middle school that caused nausea and sickness among students"¹⁹. The story is pretty simple. During a lesson with a substitute teacher some students asked, as often happens, to watch a film in class, and the teacher somewhat absent-mindedly agreed without checking

rhetoric that discriminates against younger generations. A good definition can be found in Sherif (2003).

¹⁸ Cf. Carroll (1999); Dowell and Miller (2018); Richards (2019).

¹⁹ This passage has been translated by the author from the following source: <https://www.open.online/2022/12/07/cremona-film-horror-terrifier-scuola-media/>

which title had been chosen. They thus screened *Terrifier*, probably because they were intrigued by the buzz around this work, perhaps in a spirit of fun, and also because they felt spurred on by one another (watching it together, in class, during the day, is very different to doing so alone in the evening or at night). However, the projected images were not to everyone's liking, and so a small scandal was unleashed once the parents were informed about the episode at home.

Although the incident took place in Italy, the *Terrifier* case pushes us to take a further step forward. In fact, at that time the film was being shown in cinemas in many countries around the world, each of which had its own specific restriction policies. It was therefore, as for *Squid Game*, a form of *globalization* of a content, which through clips on social media went beyond the limits set by individual national policies, becoming a cult object regardless of the country of origin. The very clips seen by Italian users were – as often happens – in English with subtitles.

The theme of globalization applied to the media system implies not only a horizontal diffusion from the point of view of the geographical cultures of reference, but also a horizontalization of the public. Thus, if this principle applies to horror content, the same can be said for other forms of sensitive audiovisual materials, such as the para-pornographic ones that find large spaces on *TikTok*. Although explicit nudity is banned, the social network is in fact the receptacle of an enormous amount of content that, often quite obviously, approaches pornography and serves as a “springboard” for producers to then refer viewers to *Instagram* profiles, *PornHub* pages or *OnlyFans*²⁰. In short, it is an advertising platform, on which neo-languages are in effect useful for overcoming the censorship otherwise automatically applied by the algorithm: sensitive words are mildly reshuffled with different graphemes (for example from “porn” to “p0rn”), references to porn sites are replaced with emojis that refer directly to them (*PornHub* with a black and an orange dot or heart, *OnlyFans* with a white and a blue one), certain specific practices are alluded to when working off-field, and so on.

This set of linguistic practices, often comprehensible exclusively to younger audiences, which in some way constitute the cultural humus responsible for their own creation – within a transmedia perspective in which every medium

²⁰ On the interconnection between explicitly pornographic platforms and others of a “generalist” type see Surace (2022).

speaks (*TikTok* with *Twitch*, *Twitch* with *Instagram* and so on) – undoubtedly establishes a form of shared creativity, devoted to building spaces of freedom alternative to those envisaged by offline socialization institutes.

On the other hand, these media once again pose a serious problem in terms of the critical instrumentation possessed by users in order to correctly handle what they are seeing and sharing.

Conclusions – For a social doctrine of screens

The cases explored so far are only a few in the indistinct mass of contemporary media phenomena that demonstrate the emergence of a new context, difficult to manage, in which the adult world and the world of young people meet, without users yet having developed the necessary tools to deal with this new phase. On the one hand, the platforms imply a structural reshaping of the economy of cultures, and almost always act from the logic of profit. On the other hand, cultures are modeled in these fluid systems, generating effects that are sometimes ambiguous, but not necessarily negative.

Digital semiospheres²¹, for example, are meeting places for young people in which to negotiate political issues that would otherwise find it more difficult to germinate. Think of the burgeoning debates about identity – often passing through the visual²² – or ecology which have developed within social media in recent years, triggering significant new sensitivities precisely in the younger generations (emblematic in this sense is the name of Greta Thunberg and the so-called *Greta Effect*)²³, often so strongly as to then spill over into the institutional arena. This is also due to the ever-increasing attention of children and adolescents towards issues of social relevance, which is undoubtedly a remarkable effect of living in the contemporary digital context.

Nonetheless, there is a side of the coin still to be defined and explored. In the first instance, the older generations often fail to access these debates, both mediologically and cognitively. Herein lies the danger of uncontrolled ageism (the consequences of which can lead to an actual democratic breakdown);

²¹ See Lotman (1984).

²² Cf. Blaikie (2021).

²³ See Hayes and O'Neill (2021).

just think of the sociolinguistic weight of the diffusion of a disparaging expression such as “boomer”, which immediately labels those associated with it as incapable of perceiving certain sensitivities (also because they are incapable of negotiating the digital places in which these develop)²⁴. In this context, it is essential to imagine a *transversal pedagogy*, aimed at bridging that “digital divide” which today concerns less and less material access to new technologies and more and more the asymmetry in the awareness of their use. Furthermore, these collective debates, often promoted and animated by school-age subjects, risk being conducted according to uncontrolled methodological regimes and entrusted to emotional or impressionistic criteria. The result is that, given their undoubted relevance, in the absence of reasoning skills they lead to forms of radicalization or fundamentalism that are not very constructive. They are, in this sense, perfectly organic and coherent with the dynamics of polarization on which the success of the applications we have talked about is based.

A proposal for improving this state of affairs could be to develop a “social doctrine of screens” designed to fill the axiological void present in the *Twilight Zone* of contemporary screen media. For this to happen, first of all a programmatic institutional awareness of these new agents of socialization is required, and a progressive integration of “screenological” literacy courses from early school age on the one hand, and of systematic refresher courses for those who instead have teaching functions on the other. The basic principle of this “social doctrine” is that screens, especially those of smartphones, although in fact often individual properties devoted essentially to personal use, given their vastly interconnected capacity can constitute a heritage of shared knowledge, to be preserved and at the same time supervised so as to convert vicious circles into virtuous forms. The basic pedagogical idea is that what we do with our devices, both as users and as content producers, has repercussions on a more or less vast community, of which we ourselves are a part. This principle should constitute the ABC of a literacy process aimed at integrating with today’s procedures of naturalization of technologies, increasingly conceived to be immediately intuitive and user friendly. Behind this intuitiveness, the user should from an early age develop the awareness that there exist concealed languages and pragmatic rules that are far from

²⁴ Moreover, it seems that this trend was decidedly intensified during the Covid-19 pandemic, also due to the sudden strong push towards digital sociality of that period. See Meisner (2022).

“natural”, but rather objects of sophisticated forms of interaction and user experience design, actually devoted to hiding the internal workings of certain applications. Just as infants are introduced to reading books, we should start introducing young users to reading screens, and to the consequences of their use in terms of personal and collective responsibility. This type of pedagogy is to be understood as transversal to generations, since it can involve individuals in the early school age, adolescents, but also adults at the same time. It is a pedagogical approach which on the one hand is aimed at introducing knowledge of a normative type (legally codified or “moral” type rules)²⁵, while on the other hand it should be oriented towards the proposition of an alternative use to that which would otherwise, given the total lack of references (or in an indistinct cauldron of disparate references, certainly not exempt from a starting power)²⁶, be created. An alternative that does not demonize the use of screen technologies, but proposes a collectively fruitful utilization, capable of creating healthy forms of communitarianism and associationism, even recovering the usefulness of already existing models (think of the world of forums, born in the first phase of the internet, and in fact intended as pools of shared knowledge)²⁷; conversely, despite the rhetoric of online sociality, it is possible that without a positioning of this type it is true that “our activity in front of the screens asymptotically realizes our possible nature as monads” (Marrone, 2021, p. 203)²⁸.

Of course, this type of awareness is already under way, and in fact there are forms of experimentation usually left to the sensitivity of individual institutes and teachers; then again, it can only correspond with an

²⁵ There is a deep, sad connection between episodes of bullying at an early age, based – as it were – on the exclusion in the classroom of those who are not updated on the latest ballet trending on *TikTok*, the drive to rape a girl of the same age in adolescence and circulate the video on the *Telegram* chat (as evidenced by the Italian news in August 2023), and dissemination of fake news on *WhatsApp* by an adult user without specific skills to understand that what they are spreading is false and that the very fact that they are spreading it is part of the problem.

²⁶ On the power of screens see Carbone, Dalmaso and Bodini (2020).

²⁷ In the digital context, in fact, it is a question of recovering the precepts at the basis of what the original hacker culture was, which gave rise to movements such as that of free software and to a libertarian ideology based on criteria of sharing and collective responsibility towards digital and online resources. For a first approach to the philosophy of Richard Stallman, one of the main founders of this movement of hybridization between technical knowledge and community ideals, see Williams (2002).

²⁸ Translation from the author of the present article.

institutional assumption of responsibility, delegated to the single States but ideally interconnected through a common dialogue of a supranational order. In this sense, the scientific literature on these topics itself must find a way to branch out also in popular forms intended for a non-academic audience. It is a long-term project involving a synergy of efforts, and the answer can only be, once again, and excluding all the technical solutions that can be proposed and whose utility will always be temporary, partial and vulnerable, that of imagining a systematic integration in the medium-long term in the field of education and culture, of skills suitable for a literacy that lies obliquely to the new means of communication²⁹. A literacy capable of fruitfully uniting those “innate” abilities and orientations in the new generations, accustomed to a rhetoric that naturalizes technology by concealing its background (technical and social), and the twentieth century and pre-digital methodologies that constitute a precious genealogical horizon of which the older generations are the custodians.

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