

Angelo Romeo sent me a few questions for his upcoming book “Posto, taggo, dunque sono? Rituali e apparenze digitali,” which analyzes “how social media have changed the rituals in the network and how the use of social network does not correspond with concrete relational relationships in everyday life.” Angelo Romeo is a sociology researcher in the department of philosophy, social sciences and education at the University of Perugia (Italy).

Angelo Romeo: In what way the presence in the network and the use of technology could affect everyday life?

Geert Lovink: Network technology might have an effect, but it might not as well. In my honest opinion we’ve past this point, decades ago. A brief look at global statistics and behavior of young people could help us. The problem I see with your question is not the world but its interpreters. What’s the reason why we still ask such questions about phenomena that are so widespread and visible in the first place? Why have both humanities and social sciences in Europe failed to understand the urgency to map these technologies, develop a critical vocabulary, translate their concepts in code, protocols and policies? This should have been done decades ago. The internet is turning upside down entire markets, changing the jobs of millions and our political system, while we sit here and contemplate if it has any effect in the first place. Strange. Let’s write a genealogy of this strange disconnect.

Have intellectuals withdrawn from society? I guess not. Is it mediaphobia? No. Certainly, it is way more sexy to discuss identity politics, immigration, debate literature and enjoy the TV spectacle than it is go engage with the geek universe. Please, continue with such noble tasks. As a consequence, also take responsibility for the collective refusal to understand nature of the network technologies. Don’t be surprised that a populist wave of politicians gains power, bypassing mainstream media through social media such as Twitter. At least they understand the inner workings of social media. Populist forces use technologies, despite the moral teachings aka ignorance of the politically correct high society, and who’s paying the price?

AR: Today, adolescents spend much time on their mobile phones, using social media apps. What risks will we have to face in the future concerning their behavior?

GL: Extensive use of smart phones, tablets and laptops is not widely researched. Maybe it is... but the results do not escape the closed world of

the academic journals. What we need are programs for primary and secondary schools, even higher education. Computer literacy is going down, not up. In my observation, the state of the art of the literature right is going in all directions. The attention span shrinks and the ability to read longer, complex texts is going down hill, while at the same time there is the certainty that the brain will not be damaged permanently. That's 'neuro plasticity,' so eloquently theorized by Catharine Malabou. There is hope, no permanent damage is done, humankind can bounce back. In the meanwhile we cannot sit back. We know less information by heart (how many telephone numbers do you know?). We talk faster, and shorter, and are getting used to the social factory conditions of 24/7 production. Even when globalization might slow down in the next crisis (in terms of trade), global awareness and cultural exchanges still have lots of opportunities.

AR: Which risks people are confronted with that only communicate with their friends through technology?

GL: To be honest, I don't think there are 'risks'. I was never a fan of Ulrich Beck and his 'risk society'. The risk might be that they will become boring because we are trapped in our own filter bubble? Through personal, economic and political circumstances, millions of people are forced to live in different places (for instance, because of migration). They communicate with relatives that are many thousands of miles away. Usually this happens for a certain period of time. This is not done on purpose, with the intent to never meet each other. There will be cases of 'virtual sex' in which people, in principle, do not want to meet. That's possible. Theoretically, such cases are rare and not so interesting. Maybe they suffer from a trauma, and do not want to be touched? maybe they are simply too busy with their exciting life and see no priority in real-life meeting with friends? What do you find interesting about such cases? I don't see it.

AR: What's silence in the era of WhatsApp and Facebook?

GL: Silence remains a revolutionary concept. Please do not see silence as the opposite of sound or noise. Silence is very much a product, a service that we purchase. There are silent hotels etc. We put our phones on silence when we do not want to be disturbed. To go offline is not very easy. It sounds romantic to dwell in the real but we all know that nostalgia can fool us. Perhaps 'virtuality' is indeed a luxury and should we horror bare life. To go silent means to take a break. In the end, it is just another form of temporality. Related to social media we could say that silence is the mode in

which we disconnect the app from the data flow. Static data without the social. No comments, no replies, no updates. Pure being of the digital object *an sich*. In the near future we will get used to multiple realities. Nowadays we're still obsessed with the social media question and their addictive nature. We are seduced by the real-time updates and the desperate rewards that self-promotion.

AR: What does the Internet mean to you today?

GL: I got to know computers and computer networks in the late 1980s in my late 20s so I can't say I grew up with them, even though their arrival was announced in films, magazines and science fiction was announced well before I was born. As an undergrad I was still using IBM punch cards. I would not describe my generation as pioneers. We grew up in the shadow of the Cold War, in the ruins of the industrial revolution. It was not a period of prosperity but one of crisis, decay and unemployment. Doom and gloom: no gentrification but squats. In that environment the internet offered an alternative future that first came to us through cyberpunk sci-fi literature. The 1968 generation had nothing to offer to us, and we became cynical because of their failed idealism and double standards. Armed struggle was bankrupt. It is with a certain ironic ambivalence that we entered the internet realm. Some of my friends did not enter the game, while others did. Younger people jumped on it. Internet indeed offered us an opportunity, to get out of the margins, claim a strategic terrain and move into the unknown, cyberspace. This is pretty much the same, 30 years later. The younger you are, the better. The internet never disappointed me. It is society that steers it architectures and applications. Turned into platform capitalism, filtered by authoritarian regimes, pushed by neo-liberal design of the precarious self, that's what the internet means to us today. This doesn't say anything about tomorrow. Luckily, we can still speculate about 'network plasticity'. Platform is not our destiny.