

PRELIMINARY NOTES

For us, inhabitants of an infosphere whose boundaries are harder and harder to define, digital tracking is a social, but also an ethical, anthropological, and philosophical total fact.

Certainly, the importance of tracking emerged long before the Internet. As soon as human beings appeared on earth they started to leave voluntary and involuntary traces, and they also started to interpret them, along with the traces other animals and beings left behind them.

In some sense, what we commonly call Humanism has to do with a specific form of leaving and interpreting traces, which is the fact that some human beings started to write and read books, and to address letters to each other. These traces are particular, insofar as they are consciously written and sent to other human beings, within a network of alphabetical relations. But today, in few decades of (web) navigation, we have docked in a land in which any letter on Humanism would get lost among the billions of signals exchanged between human and nonhuman everyday in the world.

Writing is the paradigm of a form of technological artifacts that we may call hermeneutic. A long philosophical tradition, at least since the nineteenth century, has defined human beings as 'artificial by nature'. Yet, most of the thinkers conceived technology as a passive extension of human mind and organs. Moreover, the ones who effectively attributed an active role to technology have often been too deterministic in their views (let's consider, for instance, the philosophies of technologies of authors like the later Heidegger, Ellul, and Marcuse).

Today, hermeneutic technologies are interesting because they are not passive (they produce a representation of the world) but they also need the intervention of human actors (such a representation must always be interpreted). This is the case, for instance, with maps. Maps need to be read as

reading needs the maps, in the sense that it is not independent from the representation of the world maps offer. Mapping is a sort of performance (partially human, and partially not) on the world which, in its turn, needs to be performed (i.e. interpreted, and if possible correctly understood). Interestingly, the performed activity on the map itself is most of the time a combination of human discretion, techniques, and technologies. Mapping, writing and tracking are technologies (or methodologies related to the use of specific technological artifacts) at the crossroad between human and nonhuman intentions. Their essence is rather close to that of cybernetics, which according to Wiener is a practice of *human* use of *human* beings with the intervention of information *technologies*.

Human beings disseminate their traces, build maps and mapping technologies, and then interpret these maps in order to act in the world. Hermeneutic technologies like writing, then, open up to a new image of what technologies are, and which role artifacts play in our relation with the world. It is not by chance, we believe, that the so-called 'primitive' and 'pre-writing' civilizations have been progressively reduced to the reading apparatuses of museums. The human domination of the world (both spatially and temporally) has started with the possibility of reading and recording traces, but these traces, and the several technologies related to the possibility of keeping trace, have started in this same moment to 'rule' on us, i.e. to contribute to the way we access and act in the world. More radically, long before the Internet, technological artifacts like writing have started to actively influence the way we interpret and understand ourselves as human beings.

Reading themselves as the result of a tracking apparatus, humans have believed for centuries to be the middle and the engine of this 'cybernetic' activity that has shaped them. A perspicuous point of view, even if this presumption has grown in a world suddenly converted into a blank page waiting for traces. An anthropocentric view of cybernetics is nothing but a cybernetics of anthropocentrism, an active map in which the reader has been depicted as the center of the map he traces. Human topography has been at the same time anthropic and anthropocentric, making us believe that the world and its representations were two different and isolable systems, linked by the metaphysical node of the human. The cybernetic operation of the world has been thought, for centuries, as a human outcome, as the core and the result of a human *téchne*. Although this is to implicitly assume *téchne* only as the result of a human process, when it conversely is an autotelic process, possible for every form of writing being. Man is in writing, but writing is not necessarily performed through the human.

This old account of cybernetics is the reason for why it sounds bizarre to say that, thanks to the digital tracking, we now live exactly on that map; but so it is, since we created an automatic environment with its own writing and its own reading activity.

Until the end of the last century, several technological practices mediated our access to the media, founding a strong distinction between online and offline. But such a frontier has become more and more subtle, thanks to the rapid spread of portable, wearable, and implantable technologies, and the fact that most of us are living in highly connected environments. The real-virtual / offline-online lexicon sounds obsolete, asking for a new way to access individual and social lives. Cybernetic non-human-driven apparatuses are obviously not ‘machines’ in a classical sense, and the space we disseminate with their-our traces is no longer a blank page on which we can simply write-and-read our technical action like before. It rather is an active part of our reality. That old human correspondence, in which letters and traces were addressed to humans, supposing a reply by only other humans, is falling into disuse. Our third-order technologies’ era is the time of a continuous inter-action between human and apparatuses, that make clear Humanism was an apparatus too. Someone can object that technologies are human traces, but he can at most demonstrate that is the outcome on a human cybernetics. And this is the point again.

The *onlife* condition – using an expression recently coined by Luciano Floridi – is a living sphere in which our practical and ethical action do not need to distinguish between informational and non-informational objects. Precisely like a map, of which it unearths the essence, but contrary to traditional maps, provided with defined boundaries. Living in the current infosphere is experiencing a new form of life-in-the-map, continuously in motion. Infosphere is an always-expandable reality, and it requires a constant action of the thought – another form of cybernetics – in order to keep it understandable by humans.

For this reason, in the last twenty years digital technologies have generated a strong interest in the philosophical scenario and, since digital tracking has become a daily *routine*, it started gathering around itself the work of many philosophers, sociologists, anthropologists and media theorists. On this matter we can nowadays find a dense debate that is developing especially through France, the UK, Germany and the USA. The aim of this seventh issue of *Azimuth* is to stir a similar philosophical debate in Italy, in the belief that digital traces can offer a new paradigm starting from which we can re-think Humanism and the human being, its environment and its technical action in the world. In other words, we suggest the possibility a computa-

tional turn in philosophy comparable with the computational turn we have seen in many ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ sciences in these last ten or fifteen years. Such a turn appears to be comparable to the linguistic one that upset philosophy, along with other sciences, in the second half of the twentieth century.

We are proud to have gathered in the same volume contributions by some of the most important theorists and thinkers in this field, and some of the most promising young researchers. Our gratitude is to all of them, without whom this exploration would not have been possible, and our hope is, first of all, to provide an overview of the complexity and the variety of perspectives and problems that can spring from a reflection on digital traces. And maybe we are on the right track.

Hoping you enjoy the read, we invite you to look forward to the next issue of *Azimuth*, due in October 2016. It will deal with the interesting question: *How To Do Things With Cultures?*

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