Article

Going Viral in Covid-19: Abstraction of Self and Desire for Omnipresence

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Abstract

Reflecting on the Covid-19 pandemic, this paper explores the intersection between ubiquitous technology and self. As a point of departure this exploration is undertaken through three domains of enquiry: the virilization of the self as an image (Flusser, 2011) and how this impacts the way we construct self; the desire for omnipresence as a manifestation of a wish to simultaneously inhabit distinct space-times (Mozzini-Alister, 2021); and how this desire is fundamentally linked to a narrowing of the "I". Finally, the 2x2 matrix (Schwartz, 1996) is utilised to present a reflection on how humanity may reconfigure itself in the shadow of Covid-19.

Introduction

When an epidemic goes beyond national borders it becomes a pandemic. In the realm of viral contagion, a pandemic is the worst-case scenario. Human history is littered with pandemics, each with their own unique characteristics. The pandemic of this generation, Covid-19[1], is no exception. The hyper connectivity of the globalized world has not only meant the rapid escalation of the virus, but that each decision made to counter the spread of Covid-19 incurred a series of subsequent knock-on effects. The global economy swiftly slowed as the virus first spread from Wuhan, China, through land transportation systems, then globally thanks to air travel routes. The convergence of comparatively high degree infectiousness, undetected transmission by asymptomatic individuals in the first three months of the disease, and a lack of knowledge about the virus, meant that human confinement was the best option to fight viral spread. This has brought to the fore the exceptionality of the Covid-19 virus: in a ubiquitous digital communication and information technologies, how we are in the world is rapidly changing.

From moment to moment, whole businesses are shut down or shift operating models. The food service industry swiftly moved to home delivery and takeaway models; retailers shut up shop and moved wholly online; whilst, schools and universities migrate their teaching platforms to distance learning modes. Families and friends who once physically embraced daily, now keep in touch only through the senses of sight and sound via video calls. At homes across the globe there is an explosion of free and paid online courses. All of this is underscored by the masses of unemployed people in isolation around the world who now find themselves further submerged in the digital realm. The softness of the flesh turned into pixels of image on the touchscreen surface. Instead of the human touch, the touch of the screen. The carbon skin has been replaced by the crystal skin of our beloved smartphones, tablets and personal computers. Indeed, just as Covid-19 spread, so too our online selves went viral, our selves abstracted from our bodies into the virtual. But where will this abstraction of self take us?

Using the virus as a metaphor for change, this paper will explore the process of abstraction of the self through the conceptual lens of the desire for omnipresence (Mozzini-Alister, 2021). This will be undertaken via three main domains of enquiry: first, the virilization of the self as an abstracted image (Flusser, 2011) and how this impacts the way we construct self; secondly, the desire for omnipresence as a manifestation of a desire for simultaneously

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49

inhabiting distinct space-times, for concomitantly being in the space of the physical body and in the space of the technically mediated body (Mozzini-Alister, 2021); and how this desire is fundamentally linked to a narrowing of the "I" or what Eli Pariser (2011) called the 'filter bubble' - a concern that algorithms are becoming so good at delivering exactly who and what we are interested in. Finally, the 2x2 matrix (Schwartz, 1996) is utilised to synthesis our argument and present a reflection on how humanity may reconfigure itself in the shadow of Covid-19.

The Concrete Virus and the Virus as A Metaphor

A virus is a submicroscopic infectious agent that replicates inside the living cells of an organism. A virus can spread in many ways: through organisms, known as vectors, that carry the virus from one entity to the next; through microscopic particles that are projected by coughing and sneezing; through the fecal-oral route, or sexual contact. The host cells that the virus can infect are called its 'host-range.' Computers get viruses too. They target and move through the operating systems of computers, replicating as they spread, and attacking the data contained within (Parikka, 2016). Phenomenon can also be viral. Patterns, thoughts, ideas, concepts and information can rapidly replicate and spread through the human population. "Going viral" is now part of our vernacular and refers to the process where audiences play a passive role as carriers of viral content. A meme, as a unit of cultural meaning, is one example of how phenomena go viral. All at once, we become the vector, the sneeze, the cough - our online networks the host range. But we, as content, may also become the virus, the pathogen within the sexual fluid that spreads through our online interactions; likes, shares; and comments, the points of transmission with our partners.

A virus makes those that it infects sick. Sometimes this sickness will result in death. Scientists create vaccines to inoculate against viruses. Computer viruses damage software, wiping out data, at a great expense to the people and companies that own them. Antivirus software is created to protect computers from viruses. Going viral online, quite conversely, is an active pursuit, a culturally determined goal to be attained, an affirmation by which we now find affirmation in our world. Propelled by a neoliberalist agenda, business, communications and marketing theories seek to formulate the ways in which content goes viral, as digital influencers and social media emerge as the epistemological lynch pins for ways of knowing. This is a virus of self-representation; where selfies, images and icons as well as type setting, font and color schemes all become part of self-representation online.

Indeed, whilst social networking may be a reason for participation in contemporary society, online self-representation is the necessary condition of participation (Thumim, 2012). That means that, with Covid-19, our digital presence must go viral in order to protect the physical body from getting sick and, at the same time, operate in the world: access bank accounts, pay bills, shop online, take classes, get information, work, and, of course, have instantaneous contact with the ones we love via a myriad of messages, posts, likes, shares, voice messages and videocalls. We no longer simply reside in one reality - the concrete world (Flusser, 2011) - but live, work and play in multiple realities simultaneously. For Flusser the concrete world, what we call the molecular world, is being drastically impacted by our relationship with emergent media technologies. What remains to be seen is the impacts of the technical singularities of the current viral condition? And, more significantly, how our viral condition impacts how we construct self?

The Abstraction of the Body and The Virilization of the Self as An Image

The media theorist Vilém Flusser (1920-1991), although still relatively unknown in the Anglo-Saxon academy, has a profound body of work pertinent to our viral condition; a cultural revolution of which we are only just beginning to comprehend the scope and implications (Flusser, 2011). With the notion of the *Ladder of Abstraction,* Flusser argues that in our urge to better grasp the world and realize its concreteness, we inadvertently distanced ourselves in such a way that we are now reading reality in a new way, through abstractions of things in the form of "technical images" (Flusser, 2011). As manifestations of the highest degree of abstraction from the molecular level of the matter, technical images are images that do not need the direct action of the human hand due to the mediation of devices that work just like black boxes: hermetic, automatized and programmed. Our abstraction, owed to the universe of technical images, Flusser argues, is mutating our experiences, perceptions, values and modes of behavior; our way of being in the world (Flusser, 2011).

Today, our main devices of abstraction are our smartphones. Through these depthless, bi-dimensional structures, we are able to 'connect to the world' through the flickering of images that simply demand we also connect the energy of our fingertips to the energy of the device's electronic circuits through a 'shock'; a subtle, instantaneous, automatic shock (Mozzini-Alister, 2021). Instead of buttons and keys protected with an isolating material, we transport the body via radio waves that travel through the direct exchanges of electric current between photosensitive screens and fingertips (Mozzini-Alister, 2021). There is a singularity here: for the first time, the humanity of our techniques electromagnetically inserts the body into other layers of presence no longer restricted to the field of the physical. That is because when our general transportation cease, when gatherings of people are no longer possible, it is the radio waves of the wireless that transport the flesh transformed into image. The body becomes a wireless image.

With little to no effort and only the minimal physical movement of fingertips, our collective Narcissistic dilemma comes to fruition: we can see the sharpness of our own image without the risk of drowning. But there is a new characteristic we may add to our repressed Narcissistic dilemma, the viral agent that now infects our infatuation with our own image: as well as the desire to grasp one's own image, there is also the desire to remotely connect oneself, through image apps and social media platforms, to the images of "others" scattered all over the globe. For that, a vast complexity of infrastructure systems have been designed, built and maintained to enable the transmission of the internet across the world. Through these networks our self goes viral, expanding our sense of reality and simultaneously expanding our avenues to access new knowledge. These networks are ever increasing. Within these networks the digital realm exists, with spaces for commerce, leisure, socialising, education and politics. We are being evolved by it, into multitasking and cognitively enhanced sifters of universal information (Mayo, 2020). In this realm, we can be the avatar of what we want to be, abstracted from our physical reality; our reality is that which we create for ourselves.

However, this is only possible through a silent agreement: the cultural pact of disintegration of the self (Flusser, 2011) in exchange for the possibility of digital connection. In this sense, the self as an intersection of awareness that allows us the expression of the totality of our personality as a whole (Jung, 1981) is surely affected both subjectively and intersubjectively. The ubiquity of our digital technologies and the ensuing hyper-connectivity of people are normalised as such that our selves, individually and collectively, are intimately linked to our self-representation online; our online accounts. "I am" both person, embodied, and online profile, dis-embodied. With our silent agreement, we relinquish simply occupying the external space that contains us as well as the space occupied by our bodies in order to become fragmented in the digital dust and incarnate in a profile exhibited on the device's smooth skin. We let go of the heavy solidity that gives volume to the biological substratum in order to lightly duplicate ourselves as information, data, pixels of image capable of becoming computed dots (Flusser, 2011): we accept becoming a mosaic not only of carbon atoms, but also of digits, of electrical impulses translated into a binary code comprised of bits of "0" and "1" in the body of an apparatus.

By transforming the tridimensional body into a topological space (Marcolli, 1978; Vaz, 2010) made of pixels, algorithms and radio waves, the self is capable of becoming an ubiquitous image to be spread all over the world, just like a virus. It is compelling that, at the same time that we live with the global infection of Covid-19, we are witnessing a surge of forms of life that now use the benefits of internet and telecommunications to be physically isolated, but remain together. This places us in what Foucault called, a 'fictitious position', where the viewer transforms the screen into an object, but the *mise-en-scène* installs the spectator in the non-place of "pure representation of that essential absence, that never ceases to be inhabited" (Foucault, 2005, p. 336). Thus, the human condition is altered with digital technologies; the body is now stripped of its modernist presuppositions as "a locus of sensation, perception and recollection" (Ravetto-Biagioli, 2016, p. 20). Existence can for the first time in history enact itself immaterially socialised in a technologically mediated reality.

Thus, abstracting from the concrete world and from the reality of the physical body via smartphones, with Covid-19 more than ever, the self emerges as an image, able to be present here and there at the same time. Paradoxically at home, and outside home, in isolation, but not. A paradox is an image of the absurd (Mozzini-Alister, 2019). Emanuelle Coccia proposes that for an image to be born we only have to have "a separation of the thing's form from its relationship to the place of its existence: *where the form is out of place, an image occurs*" (Coccia, 2010, p. 23). With Covid-19, more and more people are exercising this dissociation between form and place, body and space occupied by the body, in order to connect themselves to images of online profiles: separated, we now resort to our devices to be able to cross the walls of our houses and be present beyond our physical reach. This is a desire for

omnipresence (Mozzini-Alister, 2021) that is infecting our way of being in the world.

Going Viral and the Desire for Omnipresence

With this presentation of the desire for omnipresence, Mozzini-Alister (2021) premises that the current practices of technical mediation go beyond the hypothesis of a marketing cooptation of subjectivity as proposed by Deleuze and Parnet (1987). Paying attention to the productivity dimension of this phenomenon which, instead of simply preventing, forbidding, surrendering, obliging or determining, the act of uninterruptedly touching screens manifests a desire: the desire for omnipresence (Mozzini-Alister, 2021). This is a desire for simultaneously inhabiting distinct space-times, for concomitantly being in the space of the physical body and in the space of the technically mediated body; a desire for being more than just a body; a desire for overcoming our very own human condition; and, a desire for extending the perimeter of arms, legs, and vision to the infinite. This may be why more and more people ignore (or take for granted) the obscure uses of their digital traces in exchange for the production of other forms of presence that are not limited to the scope and reach of a human body (Mozzini-Alister, 2021).

Therefore, instead of identifying ourselves within the limited condition of the body, now we identify with the body of the apparatus capable of providing us prosthetics in the form of profiles in smartphones, which give us wireless ears, eyes and arms. It is within this other form of presence, that is, of this "feeling of being the embodiment of something" (Gumbrecht, 2004, p. 167) that the ambiguous experience of a distant proximity takes place: proximity between people through the distance of images (Mozzini-Alister, 2021). In this way the digital realm is analogous to space exploration where the canvas appears to be never ending (Gibson, 2004). Through the touch of a screen, users accept that they are stepping from a physical world, steeped in well-defined and predictable boundaries, into a realm of pure communication devoid of clear boundaries where rules are continuing to evolve (Rosenfeld, 2015). And because it is a presence untethered from the physical experience of space, such proximity is only measurable by the intensity of time: the more simultaneous the interplay between action and reaction, post and like, e-mail and reply, the more strongly one feels the presentification of the body of those who are not physically close to us (Mozzini-Alister, 2021).

In this sense, going viral meets the desire to acquire the so tempting omnipresence enabled by the consolidation of the digital. Desperately, we seek the sacred place that John Lennon eternalized in the song "Imagine": without possessions, without hunger, without boundaries, without countries, without religions, with no future or past, just "all the people sharing all the world". A 'heaven' that today we emulate and intimately feel getting closer through the touch of screens that turns the self into an image and allows an instantaneous supra-territorial interaction in which everything is globally shared, liked, and commented on. However, emboldened by the desire for omnipresence, the self no longer sees itself as an image and likeness of God, but as god themself (Mozzini-Alister, 2021). Mortal humans become divine creators who now possess the power to erode all geographical dimensions of the physical space. Speed becomes the speed of light and time instantaneous. Here, space is no longer binary: where I am and where I am not; physical and virtual; adjunct and parallel (Mayo, 2020). Rather, space is an infinity of data abstractions from the banks of every computer in the human system (Gibson, 2004). The complexity of the networks that link these spaces is unfathomable, and the movement between and within these spaces outside the constructs of linear time. The inadequacy of the Newtonian absolute chronological is not simply that the hyper connectivity of networked spaces equates to accelerated temporalities, rather the abstraction of self across each of these spaces is so severe that time as an experiential part of the human condition is altering (Mayo, 2020). Indeed, Flusser (2011) had foreshadowed: "the vision I propose, in which the objective world retrocedes and shrinks, and in which upcoming people will become increasingly fixated about oneiric terminals is, admittedly, a terminal vision of humanity" (p. 139). A terminal vision of humanity, not necessarily because of its extinction, but due to a shift in the way humans are in the world.

By seeking to transcend that by which humanity has come to be defined over the past four hundred year (Flusser, 2011), our model of body has now become the holographic model of the resurrected body of Christ[2] (Romandini, 2010) in which the virtual profile is just the germ (Mozzini-Alister, 2021). Angel *par excellence* and the outcome of divine intervention's first biotechnology (Romandini, 2010), it is in the subtleness of the Resurrected Christ that we find the form of our existence. A form that encounters no boundaries, moves everywhere, faces no delays, overcomes gravity itself and, beyond all, a form capable of "perceiving without being affected" (Romandini, 2010,

p. 217) - just like the abstracted body of our online avatars. Not by chance, in the classic "Civilization and Its Discontents", Freud (2015) compared humanity to a sort of "prosthetic god" with "auxiliary organs" that would materialize the much-cultivated imaginary urge to become God. Thus, with our desire for omnipresence fulfilled by our technological prowess, we transcend our very humanness and achieve godliness. Yet, in a time of forced isolation and, consequently, accelerated hyper-mediation, what are the consequences of our desire for omnipresence?

Omnipresence and the Narrowing of The "I"

There are three main attributes that constitutes the divine: the powers of omnipresence, omnipotence and omniscience; God is an infinite consciousness that is present everywhere, reaches anything, and knows everything. However, having taken the resurrected body of Christ as our model of body (Romandini, 2010), the virtual profile or online account is what allows us to materialize this ancient desire to be God: in seeking to better see our own divinity, we take distance from the concrete body in order to grasp it as an image capable of presentifying itself in any smart device around the world, reaching anyone through a message, e-mail or post, and accessing all the knowledge available on the web in our hands. Moreover, through a mental distortion of what is real, rather than seeing ourselves better *through* the profile, we subconsciously identify our own image *with* the image of the profile (Mozzini-Alister, 2021). At this point, person and profile become one and the self *feels* as omnipresent, omnipotent and omniscient as the virtual profile (Mozzini-Alister, 2021). We see this unfold with Covid-19, in what we call - the narrowing of the "I". The self-assertion of the individual now reigns supreme, with the individual granted the right to choose their own models of happiness and fitting lifestyle (Bauman, 2013). So whilst we may be omnipresent and omnipotent, this is enabled by the algorithms that sit behind websites.

Let us take the example of the United States president Donald Trump. Despite evidence to the contrary, Trump ignored the social isolation advise and declared that the US should reopen its economy by Easter. That was improbable. However, the effects of his speech were enough for Trump supporters to create a whole movement around "America don't stop". Car parades and street protests exploded in all corners of the nation with people arguing that they want to go back to work and that they shouldn't be forced to isolate because they live in a "free country". Many also argue that Covid-19 doesn't exist claiming it to be media invention. A similar situation happened in Brazil, where the far-right president Jair Messias Bolsonaro clearly stood against the protocols of social isolation and created a stark political division in Brazilian's society. While some were in favor of staying home in order to protect themselves and stop the spread of the virus, many went to the streets and, as well as in the US, called for the reopening of the economy; both the US and Brazil recorded high levels of contamination globally. Both presidents also publicly encouraged the shutdown of both the Senate and Congress in order to have their points of view obliged.

Trump and Bolsonaro are masterful media personalities, who use social media, especially Twitter, to spread their political views and polemical opinions. Both heavily invested in social media as part of their presidential campaign strategies. Steve Bannon joined Trump during the final stages of his campaign in August 2016. The media impresario and radio and television executive had a vision to create a popular movement that would secure and maintain power through a policy of infrastructure that mobilised those disenfranchised by political elites (white American working classes) and systematically opposed immigration (Castells, 2018). Bannon's strategy was to use social media to create a groundswell of support for Trump that was too large, too dense, to ignore. Bannon contracted Cambridge Analytica, who purchased user data from internet companies, which assisted the Trump campaign to shape political opinion on social media. Facebook has acknowledged that it provided the data of 87 million of their users to companies that developed algorithms to customize messages - including lots of fake news - to specific audiences and even individuals to be used in the campaign (Castells, 2018).

The profound effectiveness of this strategy not only swept Trump to the presidency but expedited the ascendency of social media to the status of the traditional encyclopedia; the social media platform is the printing press, the user is the purveyor of truth. Now Trump's influence has firmed this way of being in the world; Twitter holds all truths and all truths are relative. Thus the power of truth creation and dissemination has moved from the control of the traditional hegemony (governments, media, science and suppliers) to those who hold devices (McAllum, 2017). In this relationship each user can learn from the other in a reciprocal cycle, growing and maturing and responding in-

kind. If the opinion or ideas of one resonates their influence quickly grows. Those espousing new truths become influencers and their followers' proponents of said truths. These truths are data and algorithms that control the flow of information to users. Making good use of their devices' omnipresence, Trump and Bolsonaro are examples of how humans behave when they believe to have attained the status of God: via their profile, they close themselves in both algorithmic and psychological bubbles in faith that they know and reach everything - even when that is not, in fact, true.

This is what Eli Pariser calls the 'filter bubble' (Pariser, 2011). The filter bubble conceptualises Pariser's concern that algorithms are becoming so good at delivering exactly who and what we are interested in that they can start limiting our openness to new ideas and people, creating types of culture bubbles that isolate us from other possible realities. As Pariser (2011) points out, the algorithm of a website selectively 'guesses' what information the user would like to see based on the data generated by the user, such as the exposition of tastes, locations, or the history of clicks. Indeed, whilst the internet may be increasingly accessible, it should not be mistaken as open public spaces. Despite being celebrated as egalitarian places for participation and cultural convergence, these spaces are commercial spaces, driven inexorably by the laws of the market; our culture drives the market that has designed and produced the technology to meet our cultural needs, and now that culture has moved online to become our truth and colonizing our way of being. In this sense, social networking has become the system infrastructure of our desire for omnipresence (Mozzini-Alister, 2021).

Thus, rather than an infinite savannah ripe for exploration, the virtual realm has become an increasingly narrow system of feedback loops that pander and reinforce to our preconceived ideas and insatiable appetite for instant gratification (Silverman, 2015). Software algorithmic systems implemented by the corporate owners of websites, search engines and networking platforms perpetually monitor our online behavior. They seek to understand what we do so they can give us more of what we want – quicker - and sell that information to other corporates who are eager to give us what we want (Harper, 2017; Wheeler, 2017). Specifically, algorithmic ranking determines who and what gains visibility online (Cotter, 2019). Here lies the contradiction: the more we seek to grasp for divine omnipresence, the more chances we have to get trapped in the narrowing of the "I". Whilst our desire for omnipresence, omnipotence and omniscience drives us to bring to fruition digital technologies with seemingly infinite potentialities, the very same desire drives us to ensure that that very technology closes back in upon itself, simply reaffirming already held beliefs supported by the dissemination of fake news, closing in our way of being in and knowing the world. As such, our relationship with digital technologies should be understood by one decisive nuance: that we are the victims of our own entrapment.

The Reconfiguration of Humanity

Scenarios are a favored tool for studying the future, useful because they 'open up' the present and allow the creation of alternative futures (Inayatullah, 1996). In this way, scenario planning may be approached in the tradition of social criticism; when influenced by critical theory realm of enquiry for the scenario becomes the human condition, helping us to see the world as a whole with a view to change the existing order of things toward better future (Ogilvy, 1996). Reflecting on our domains of enquiry, we seek to, as Inayatullah states, create the possibility of alternate worlds (Inayatullah, 1996). To achieve this we utilise the 2x2 matrix technique (Schwartz, 1996); four contrasted scenarios that narrate different possible futures: 1) our digital crucifixion; 2) our digital resurrection; 3) yearning for a higher power; 4) meditating our way to godliness. High uncertainty, high impact factors are appropriate for each axis. Here, abstraction of self is placed against the desire for omnipresence, as a means to elicit insights into the relationship between our abstraction of self, facilitated through the technological mediation, and our desire for omnipresence. Where the abstraction of the self through digital technologies will take us is explored within these scenarios through three main domains of enquiry: how our viral condition impacts how we construct self, what effects the desire for omnipresence may have, and the relationship between the desire for omnipresence and the narrowing of the "I". This is illustrated in Fig. 1.
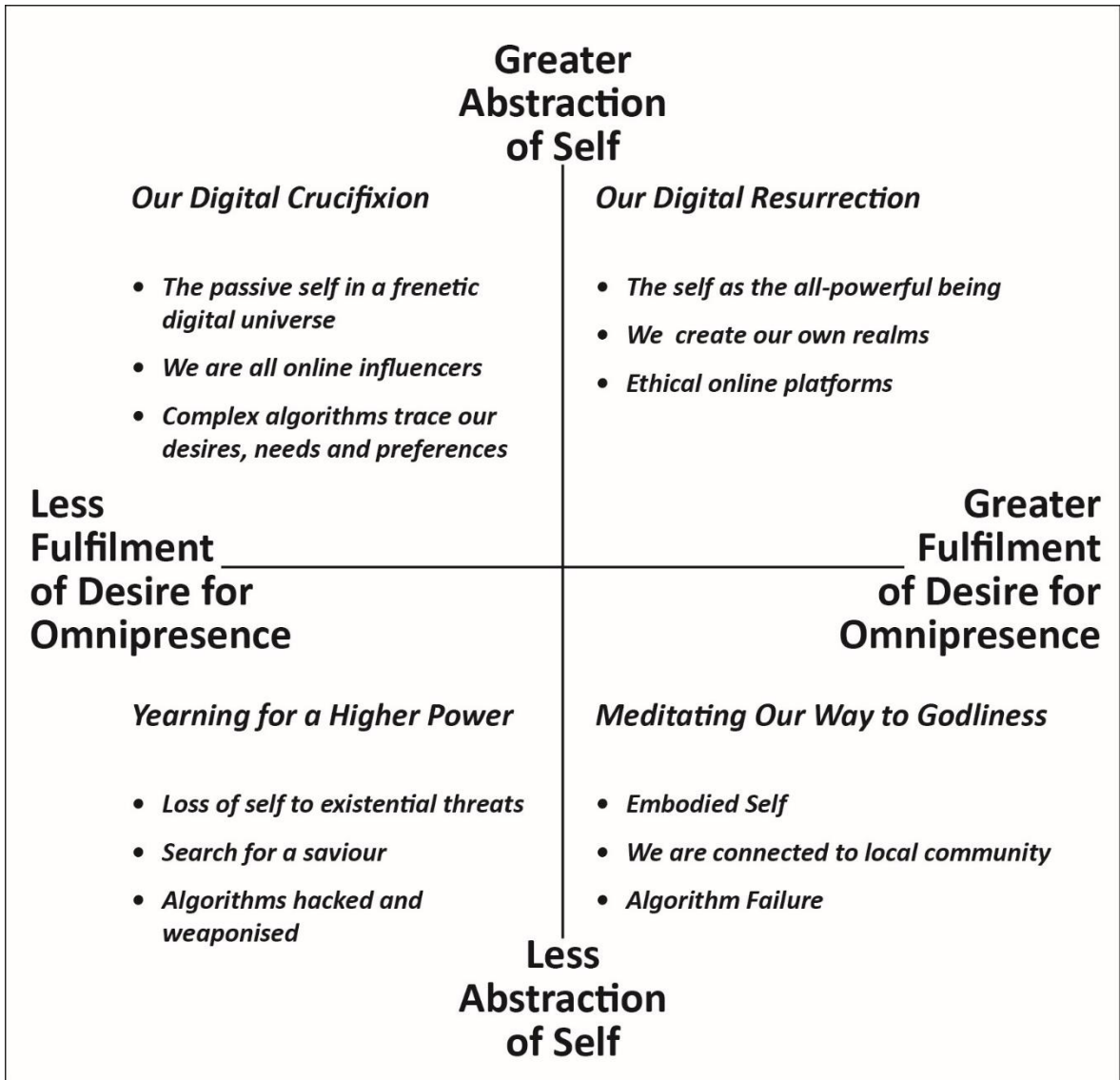
Fig. 1: The four scenarios of abstraction of self and desire for omnipresence

Our digital crucifixion

Following Covid-19, many governments urged their countries to download tracing apps to support health care providers, track the spread of the virus, inform service projections and isolate interventions. The early successes of this approach encouraged uptake, and soon, almost everyone on the globe was able to be traced through their smartphones. This early success was owed, in part, to the normalisation of online engagements through social networking; if we are doing it to socialise, so the logic went, surely it is good to do it for our health. This rationalisation continued, as banks, insurers, retailers, education institutions and not for profit organisations requested and used our information to help us live better lives through social distancing; banks could collect, store and share our purchasing details/habits to share with retailers, who can anticipate and cater to our every need, with products and services delivered to our door with little or no intervention from us.

Our abstraction of self through digital mediation became our way of knowing and being in the world: we remained passive as the universe moved around us, sustaining us and engaging us. Soon this abstraction became a way for governments and companies to categorise our interests, beliefs and lifestyles. If you were favourable to

particular products or brands, these would be introduced to your devices and newsfeeds - along with the content and subject matter you preferred. Quickly, with the support of the corporates and multinationals that collected our data, who and how we socialised became regulated by government. Social grouping became a reshuffling along tribal boundaries; social networks structured around mitigation of global contagion were swiftly aligned to which online retailers you frequented, television shows you streamed and online fitness classes you subscribed to. Our desire for omnipresence drives us to acquire omnipotence in this system: many of us are now online influencers and are placed into networks under the guise of 'stimulating the economy' - our job to befriend and facilitate rapid and perpetual purchasing. This is an overt process - we are all playing our role in the shared/gig economy.

Within a few years our online social networks, structured by the infrastructure of software algorithms, surpassed our need to vote. Not only could liberal democracy function without the need for frequent (and cumbersome) physical polling, but complex algorithms came to anticipate voter preferences, and were able to do this at an extremely high frequency. Corporations collated and produced data every second that illustrated what we were doing and how we were doing it online as a means to extrapolate conclusions as to why we were doing it. In this way, government policy is a truly fluid and dynamic entity; perpetual tweets update the public on what changes have been made and how they will be affected. This however has had little impact on those living in the global south, many of whom live in abject poverty, in the mining, production or distribution hubs for digital technologies and adjacent industries. Indeed, the gap between rich and poor continued to expand, with the world's wealthiest people made up exclusively of the executives of technology corporations. This way of being and knowing the world, whilst fulfilling our desires, has instead left us suspended in a perpetual state of flux, somewhere between life and death; our abstracted selves crucified on a cross of algorithmic systems.

Our digital resurrection

After Covid-19, it was not difficult for Western societies to move entirely online. A universal wage was introduced to not only support people through the transition, but to ensure the economy continued to function. Complimenting this, regular stimulus packages were disseminated - at first by nation states, but eventually by corporates who had a vested interest in continued consumption. In this way, the role of government then became about the facilitation and regulation of services delivered by multinationals/conglomerates. CEO's, General Managers and the Chair of the Board play the role of Prime Ministers and Presidents, overseeing policies that govern the way their businesses operate and making leadership announcements regarding social issues based on their - and their companies - values. Here, the traditions of liberal democracies are underwritten by the liberal corporate paradigm; voting days and polling stations are sponsored, the politicians we vote for are the celebrities that endorse the brands and products we most associate ourselves with.

This way of being and knowing in the world certainly reconfigured the manner with which we view the self. Our ability to be in one physical place yet interact and engage across a multiplicity of spaces simultaneously inflated our sense of physical presence and certainly reified our belief of our all-powerful being. The mining of big data for corporate gains and the perpetual monitoring of citizens quickly became unsustainable as micro-entities invested in the development of ethical online platforms. These social innovations assured users of security and an ease of movement and thereby fulfilling their desire to see and hear the things that they want to see and hear online. Alternative platforms for people to create online social networking accounts, do their banking (now through cryptocurrency), purchase goods and services, educate themselves and their children, and live a well-rounded life became the norm. The sheer volume of users into these spaces forced large corporations and governments to quickly shift to a more ethical way of operating; governmentality had now become about an ease of entrepreneurship whereby every individual has the access and opportunity to create their own virtual realm from their own personal computing device. These worlds interlaced with one another and whilst we were god within our own domain, we were also able to move freely through the domains of our peers, friends and colleagues, domains in which they were god.

The overlapping of these domains is where commerce occurs, the exchange of ideas in exchange for cryptocurrency. The only reason for us to venture outside our homes is to exercise and explore the wonders of the natural world. The climate emergency - that was once so overwhelming - has not so much dissipated rather has shifted in characteristic. Solar and batteries have long surpassed fossil fuels as our way of powering the world. And whilst the immediacy of issues such as smog and air pollution have receded, the overheating of the ecosystem

remains a very real consequence of the production and ongoing maintenance of lithium batteries. In this way the augmented realities we can create in our own homes quenches all our sensory needs. Thus, less people move outdoors preferring to stay at home safe from contagion abstracted on the present in this instance and omnipotence.

Yearning for a higher power

Something went wrong in transitioning Western lives to the online world. In the rush to flatten the curve during the Covid-19 pandemic our governments assured us all we needed to do was download their tracing apps and we would be able to return to our normal way of life. The sense of urgency was very real. When the security breaches started, we were assured that they were minor incidents being undertaken by rogue actors. Downloading the app and uploading personal information continued. When reports of large-scale identity theft began to emerge in the media, first in small pockets across Europe, and then spreading across Africa, Latin America and the United States, concern started to mount a new type virus was spreading, one that carried with it the same level of paranoia and anxiety that Covid-19 had originally carried; we were losing our sense of self through the spread of an existential threat. Reports surfaced of people's entire bank accounts emptied, new homes purchased in their names without their knowledge and criminal activity being undertaken in their name. Tracing apps were easily manipulated, smartphone GPS systems could be hacked, and people's whereabouts easily falsified. World war three became a war against those violently breaking the systems that had put in place in response to Covid-19.

The complete decimation of the online space returned people from a global to a local way of being and knowing in the world. With crypto-currencies and online banking networks orbit obliterated local currencies emerged both through trading and bartering, but also through makeshift agreements such as sweat equity. Local producers attempted to nourish and sustain their communities whilst community members engaged in the production of the goods that sustain them. Buying local soon was not only a brand from an ethical way of being, but in fact had become a necessity of life. Nation-states broke into smaller states, which broke into small localised cities, towns, villages stop the self in this regard had been minimised to the body and the body alone. Our desire for omnipresence became a yearning for a higher power – a saviour – undertaken through esoteric means. A sudden surge in theology and in new forms of Scripture and religion began to emerge. New beliefs emerged from the wreckage of the third world war and profound lines of enquiry enabled ministers to find spaces to preach to emergent followers yearning for something new.

Meditating our way to godliness

The transition to life online after Covid-19 did not go as well as we had hoped it would. The digital infrastructure and systems that had been set up to us to support us while we worked and lived in social isolation began to demonstrate their fragility almost immediately. Internet speeds were not fast enough, software unable to assure personal security, and an underlying sense that we were giving up too much of our personal information overrode our desire to continue to live online. Large portions of the economy began to break down almost immediately. International shipping channels and trading routes fractured as global structures that enable trade were no longer required. A slow shift was made to localised ways of functioning; the rise of the city state was pronounced globally. Local produce was grown and sold locally, communities worked collaboratively to support themselves and local currencies remained local. Now, Mayors and local governments are the tier of government communities look to, and depend upon, for leadership.

Our lives are now entirely offline. Travel is heavily restricted to the limits of the city state, with officials or special envoys deployed to other regions to understand how other outbreaks are occurring and how they are being managed; their intelligence supports development of policy in our own city state. In this way, city states are isolationist - the manner with which social diversity, environmental concerns and conflict are managed is a matter for the city state to manage alone; the interventionist nature of globalisation has long precipitated. We emphasize the connection between the body and the world around us. Our desire for omnipresence is linked to our connection to our local community and the ecosystems that exist within them; how many relationships can we have with people in our local community, how much influence and impact do we have over our community and what will remain of these when we die.

Conclusion

Of course, it is also possible that nothing significant changes after Covid-19: the pandemic is contained, the markets are re-opened and the globalised market reignites at full force and speed. For now, what is clear is that the process of abstraction of self through digital technologies, driven by our desire for omnipresence, has been exacerbated by Covid-19. Thanks to mass physical isolation, our sense of "I" is becoming, more than ever, intrinsically intertwined to how we appropriately perform our existence on digital platforms of social interaction. The contradiction here is that, instead of widening the "I", the rise of social media and the subjective capillarization of internet instead contributes to the spread of polarization and to the narrowing of the "I" as a consequence of the closed feedback loops created and sustained by virtual infrastructure and algorithms.

Perhaps Covid-19 is a necessary pause in our relentlessly frenetic existence. That remains to be seen. What must be acknowledged however, is that where our abstraction of self takes us will hinge on our ability to interpret the desire for omnipresence and how we navigate the entrapments latent with closed loop algorithms. Amid this cloudy intersection between ubiquitous technology and self, the reconfiguration of humanity post-Covid-19 will depend on the unravelling and interpretation of these two intertwined phenomena. Now, we have with us the luxury of a brief window to think about how we want to be in the world. But to do that, we will have to address some fundamental questions such as: how do we define the nature of our humanity? What are the limits of our knowing? And what is it that we really need to know in order to be - not God - but human in this world?

Notes

1- Even though SARS-CoV-2 is the correct denomination for Coronavirus and Covid-19, in this paper we will use these two terms as synonims of SARS-CoV-2. For more information see the link: https://www.thecourier.com.au/story/6686711/what-is-the-coronavirus-the-differences-between-coronavirus-covid-19-and-sars-cov-2-explained/, accessed on 20/05/2020.

2- By proposing the concept of anthropotechnics, that is, "techniques through which human communities and the individuals who compose them act upon their own animal nature with the goal of guiding, expanding, modifying or domesticating their biological substratum" (Romandini 2010, p. 9), Romandini argues that "every anthropotechnology implies a zoopolitical substratum that lies at its center" (Romandini, 2010, p. 10). However, bending the concept of biopolitics (Foucault, 2008) into zoopolitics means entering the very delicate realm of zoé, that is, of spectrality. Spectrum, for Romandini (2010), relates to two different meanings: in a broad sense, it pertains to the "incorporeal creatures like, for instance, the angels" (Romandini, 2010, p. 10) and God, with a capital "G", that "is expressed through the Spirit" (Romandini, 2010, p. 10) and carries a common ontological ground between Spirit and Spectrum. In a strict sense, it relates to the "beings that survive (even though in the form of a postulate) their own death, or that establish a point of indistinction between life and death" (Romandini, 2010, p. 13). Under this light, "the spectrum can be completely immaterial or acquire different 'consistencies'" (Romandini, 2010, p. 13). The reason for including this perspective is due to the fact that without the study of the "spectral dimension, it is impossible to have a cabal comprehension, not only of the contemporary political drift in general, and of the zoopolitics in particular, but also of the new possibilities of ontology" (Romandini 2012, p. 12). Different ontologies that, avoiding questions like "what is this?", move towards questions such as "how is this produced?" and "how is this possible?". Questions that increasingly operate a critic of our own selves by problematizing the ways through which we have built ourselves as "humans," and no longer "animals."

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