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**NUMERO 5**

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Online

**For an hermeneutics of the Digital Regime.**

From the Simulacrum-Image to the Netnography of agile work

Nicolò Atzori

**ABSTRACT:** In its epistemological effectiveness, the concept of “surmodernity” (Augé 1992) exposes the anthropologist to an ever-increasing effort to understand human complexity and, therefore, symbolic complexity, which seems urgent to clarify, especially concerning the pressing cultural processes underway: foremost among them is the digital transition and, even more intricate and ambiguous, the development of the relationship between the human and the posthuman. On the other hand, there is no doubt that our “traditional” relationship with space, time, matter, and more generally the sensory is changing at an ever-accelerating pace; this has become more evident since, at least, the online world became our shadow and, more than that, literally (in)following us in the pockets of skirts and trousers in the form of smartphones, exposing us to a state of hyperconnection characterized by an hypertrophy of data and information that Byung-chul Han refers to as infocracy (Han 2021).

Against the backdrop of the articulations of what I define, less optimistically than Han, as the digital regime, I believe the decisive role of the image stands out as a symbolic and temporal marker and a catalyst in the production of new imaginaries, ideologies, and subcultures that seem to synthesize,

condense, and assert themselves within it. Therefore, this contribution aims to clarify the role of the image within the digital ecosystem regarding the formation of common sense and even political attitudes, with a particular focus on the condition of agile work, where countless individuals suffer the most abhorrent professional conditions.

**Keywords:**

Netnography - Digital regime - Image - Hyperconnection - Propaganda

Metaphorically saving, that even Padre Pio has landed on Tik Tok is truly a fact that – even in its almost implicit humorous implication – should at least evoke prudence. The religious sphere *stricto sensu*, in effect, is generally received as a monolithic dimension, intrinsically resistant to change, the digital ecosystem, bulimic of languages, truly spares no one anymore. If this is evidently not the place to dwell on a dissertation of a theological nature around the communicative events that involve the state of religious faith, it is however possible to develop here some reflections on the social characters of a supermodernity, paraphrasing Marc Augé, that is heavily affecting our relationship with space, time, and the characters of existence itself through the prerogatives of what I call “digital regime,” with respect to which pre-

eminently the image manages to play the role of reference and perfect skeleton key in the structure of its persuasive action. In this regard, in the lines that will follow, a historicization of the same will be proposed, to a great extent through the “netnographic” method, through the most detonating images with maximum resonance in the metabolization of the event to which they refer; finally, we will focus on the condition of some digital workers, pressurized by an asphyctic management of their own time.

### **Saying “digital regime”: the image between values and disvalues**

In the economy of this contribution, the expression “digital regime” wants to indicate – according to the same classic definition of “regime” – a condition of existence of society in which the organizational structure – therefore the managerial, political, and knowledge transmission apparatuses – that guarantees it results not trivially founded but heavily influenced, in its junctions, by the communicative plots generated within the digital ecosystem, whose pre-eminent character must be recognized in a hypertrophy of information, notions, and data around which the common feeling is built and, not rarely as a second step, political planning. That said, it should be specified that what is referred to is a paradoxically apolitical condition (or a political “anti-regime”), in which political practice is on one hand bypassed and forced to “chase” the digital-communicative fact, perhaps activating for its confirmation or denial, as we will see later, and on the other reaffirmed and emphasized in the languages and codes of communication that offer formidable tools for the purposes of propaganda, images in the first place, resulting in a certain way invalidated because deprived of its orientative

position or, worse, downgraded to political-spectacle. There is at least reason to suspect, in fact, that the media entropy of recent years has played a more or less incisive role with respect to the generalized political apathy that we increasingly widely register.

Handling a concept like that of regime imposes, among other things, an evaluation that accounts for its complexity as a historical phenomenon, whose unfolding can therefore be situated on a diachronic plane in which to recognize – or at least hypothesize – a principle of dating.

If the attack of September 11, 2001, rises almost by right, for the extraordinary nature of the dynamics and for that of who it involved, to a watershed date in the history of the contemporary world, it is thanks to the famous photo of the crash of the Boeings on the Twin Towers (fig. 1) that it manages to become fossilized in the Western imagination, allowing the constant recall to the enemies of the West through the visual-simulacral means; emotional determination was not lacking, as is instead evident in *The Falling Man*, an equally iconic shot captured by the photographer of Associated Press Richard Drew, which immortalized the fall of a man from one of the two towers enveloped in flames (fig. 2).

Among the most significant precedents of the assumption of the image as an anti-ideological simulacrum there is a name: that of Alan Kurdi, a Kurdish child of just 3 years old found on the beach of Bodrum, in Turkey, on September 2, 2015, where he died in an attempt to flee, together with his family, from Syria to Europe (fig. 3). In his country, death was probably already awaiting him at the hands of ISIS attacks.

The media echo of such a raw and

heartbreaking image, for whose choice I apologize and which rapidly went around the world thanks to digital communication, was incredible, and the story of Alan – synthesized in such a devastating photo – became the symbol of the humanitarian crisis that overwhelmed the Mediterranean, putting the powerful of the earth in check, inflaming the information apparatuses with respect to the question of Syrian refugees in Europe and leading the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom David Cameron to soften his inflexible line on welcoming: «it is not enough that the world remains shocked, the shock must be accompanied by an action», he maintained, entrusting his words to «The Guardian». The tireless transmission of an image, net of the macabre-morbid implications, thus produces a generalized increase in awareness that only as a second step intercepts the political scaffolding, normally called to guarantee those conditions that reality disarticulates and again anticipated, in their exegesis, by digital communication.

On closer inspection, March 9, 2020, the date of the announcement of the lockdown by the then Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte, can be assumed as the terminus post quem of the new course in which communication apparatuses and society find themselves coexisting amalgamated and crushed in the name of a relentless, chaotic, and voracious information. The pandemic management, in fact, has probably sanctioned the definitive anthropological rooting of users in the digital era, then crushed in a tunnel of “dependence-on-update” which, thanks to compromised sociality and obligatory domestic permanence, irrigated its synapses with the outside world through the social media tap. In particular, the role of communication:

«was exalted in particular by the conditions of high uncertainty, by the absence of precise knowledge relating to the new pathogen and by the consequent poor effectiveness that medical-scientific rationality was able to express in terms of risk assessment and risk management, with direct consequences on the perception of insecurity by citizens and on the availability of objective references for the political decision-maker».

The pandemic phenomenology, moreover, allows us to have a first macro-example of how the vast user base has learned so many of the mechanisms that regulate and have historically regulated the world mainly through digital communication channels such as social networks, reservoirs in perennial semantic evolution, and, generally, the information networks that in smartphones offer the news of the day with an unimaginable quantity of concepts until then unknown to the user, who “handles” them without a consciousness of their real weight and their intrinsic character; through easy access, on the contrary, to their imaginative and numerical evidence, often decontextualized or arbitrarily used. The user, pressed by real waves of news and ready-to-use pills, pre-packaged and rarely free of tendentious involvements, learns (badly and in a jumble) the functioning of so many medical, political, social, and economic mechanisms, referable to a complex “history of the world,” of which before he ignored the nuances or did not even consider the existence, thus obtaining the possibility of easily aligning himself – also because heavily urged – according to convenient categories generated by the epimedial ecosystem to polarize the debate and suffocate the synthetic variety of the comparison. Epimedia, an anagram of epidemic, is precisely the title of an essay by Angelo Turco – in full Epimedia. Information

and Communication in the Pandemic Space – in which the emeritus professor of Geography attempts an analysis of the media structures during the development of the Covid-19 epidemic and its management, from which “epimedia” has precisely sprung, that is, the peculiar modality with which the means of information and communication, both traditional and digital, “treat” the news once the media schedule has identified and has been monopolized by a dominant theme (Turco rightly cites the migratory discourse as a moment of “general rehearsals,” so to speak, of the epimedial phenomenology).

Here is the literal English translation of the provided Italian text, keeping in mind that the user is under 18:

Only with the pandemic, effectively, on the occasion of which “epimedia” manifests in a first complete form, does one begin to be aware of the imaginative bulimia that orients our possibilities of receiving facts and the dynamics that develop day after day in a visual chronicle of great impact, from which significant examples emerge. As will be remembered, the pandemic storytelling begins with the strongest photo of the event, a true topical simulacrum: that of the trucks that on March 18, 2020, transported the coffins of the coronavirus victims out of Bergamo, particularly devastating in the Lombard city (fig. 4).

The resonance of the shot, which went around the world, was such that the same date was chosen as representative of the “National Day in memory of all the victims of the coronavirus pandemic,” according to a law approved in 2020. Only some time ago, the same photo was involved in an interpretative short circuit to which the digital regime not rarely exposes, capable as it is of re-discussing

or undermining seemingly incorruptible structures and invalidating the integrity of facts and figures.

On the other hand, the daily, minute-by-minute transmission of the enormous quantitative and qualitative scale of the pandemic humanitarian tragedy has correctly placed the emphasis on the condition of doctors and healthcare personnel, who directly impacted the imaginative hypertrophy by documenting the severity of the situation in hospital wards and in nursing homes (fig. 5). «Images serve to empower», one reads clearly, and in this perspective, it is a triumph of cinematographic content on the narrative of the pandemic.

A cardinal question in my opinion posed by the state of digital regime, which makes it different from any previous system of social management, concerns the presumed control room, which on closer inspection is unrecognizable because the digital regime self-feeds, does not emanate from a decisional sphere: it perpetuates itself without the burden of having to preserve itself, continuously re-producing itself through data and content of all kinds, which thematically involve and overwhelm the institutional apparatus itself, which undergoes its plots, thus having to beware of its pitfalls. In premising and bypassing political practice, the digital regime reaffirms it by sweetening it, smoothing its previously inaccessible aspects and above all “humanizing” its interpreters, now guinea pigs and victims, now executioners in the making of digital thickening.

A further imposing phenomenological landscape to whose grammar we have had access essentially through social media is that generated by the resurgence of the conflict between Russia and Ukraine in 2022, and between Israel and Palestine in

February 2024, with catastrophic outcomes in both cases. Again, as with the pandemic, the absolute protagonist becomes the communicative (and informative) schedule, capable of outlining, almost autonomously with respect to real dynamics, the judgments gradually opportune for the feeling of public opinion, strictly orientable towards a “national” position and for this automatically congruent with respect to the problem. At its maximum degree of power, the digital regime explores its most powerful tools for consensus building, coercion, and repression of dissent, polarizing the debate and brutalizing the confrontation to the level of puerile reductionism, on whose plane the good-bad dichotomy and the definition of categories of presumed “enemies of the fatherland” or similar prevail.

The passage from blitzkrieg to live war, in short, has foreseen sensitive repercussions on the receptive capacity of citizens and users, overwhelmed by the demands of a “stadium” confrontation where, first of all, to express oneself in a congruent key and along the lines of common sense, a partisan position must be explicit. During the exacerbation of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, in fact, the social media tap that feeds the swamp of propaganda made wide use of images (fig. 6), with sometimes even nonsensical results, as seen. The case I am referring to concerns the images of a bombing that aired on February 24, 2022, and, in truth, taken from a scene of the war-themed video game War Thunder, to which was attributed the dignity of testimony of a brutal Russian attack on Ukrainian territory, in any case evidently sufficiently vexed even without the artificial instrumentalization of our latitudes (fig. 7).

Both in the Russian-Ukrainian and in the Israeli-Palestinian cases, extraordinary media

events, we have in fact had proof of the power of the image in what Daniel Dayan and Elihu Katz have called “ceremonial television”, that is, dedicated to the spectacularization of globally resonant events, with respect to which – for the first war turning point referred to – again Angelo Turco recognizes a “Zelensky model,” that is, that set of recognizable techniques in the “persuasive narratives” put in place by the Ukrainian president to denounce in world vision the tragedy of his country and, as is understandable, generate consensus around the affair; to this end, Turco highlights a visual component that is based on the archetype of the «young and vital character, yet increasingly tried by the war, [...], with the visual seal of always being dressed in the same way (in particular with the greenish-brown t-shirt that represents his field uniform)» (fig. 8).

In reference to similar processes, it is possible to find important correspondences in the theses of the philosopher Byung-chul Han, who more optimistically speaks of Infocracy or “information regime” to designate with one expression the essence of the anthropological condition within which we are immersed, stunned, digitally, by a tsunami of news that, making us drunk with it, «overwhelms [...] also the political sphere and leads to heavy distortions and ruptures within the democratic process». At first, Han retraces the main stages of the democratic parabola, recognizing, in its early stages, the decisive medium in the book and in book culture, still capable of founding a rational discourse because based on a possible, discursive, and reciprocal confrontation between active and more aware agents of thought; the opposite of modern real-time democracy, according to Pierre Levy. «Real-time democracy – writes the media theorist – establishes a time of

continuous decision and evaluation», which excludes or irreparably compromises perfectly rational reflections, that is, «built in the long term: they are preceded by a reflection that extends beyond the instant, towards the past and the future». The rapidity and viral spread of information – which Han defines “infodemic” – invalidates the democratic process of its reception, of which digital media catalyzed by the smartphone monopolize modes and times, crumbling any discursive possibility with accelerated and fragmented communication; in a word, affective, where it allows that «not the best arguments prevail, but rather the information with the greatest potential for excitement». In essence, digital communication would provoke a reversal of the flow of information, diffused without passing through public space because it is unidirectional: produced in private spaces and sent to private spaces, which configures a communication without community mainly strengthened by social media.

In the semiotics of the digital regime, therefore, the image has a decisive role in overcoming the “digestion” of news or its message, and establishes itself as complete-in-itself. Compromising its metabolization, the infodemic, for the philosopher “resistant to truth,” does not produce meanings, but continuous consensus-assent. The meme can perhaps represent a valid example of the power of alteration that digital communication confers on the image, which becomes other than itself by self-negating its own implications. Suffice it to think of the same guru of digital entrepreneurs and businesspeople, Chiara Ferragni, whose performance at Sanremo 2023 quickly saw the rarefaction of her verve as a political act implied by the image of her, from behind, wearing an eloquent slogan: “pensati libera”

(think yourself free)

### **Netnographic notes on people beyond the screens**

I have tried to outline, so far, a general (and, of course, generic) profile of what, by defining “digital regime,” I attribute not trivially an aseptic function of instrumental and organizational scaffolding that involves the “agile” management of services and sociality, but rather a semantic and value landscape within which society thinks of itself as long as it is connected, thus existing in the expressive possibilities that it offers by monopolizing (and annihilating) the time for confrontation and imposing trends, positions, and not rarely moral schemes. As I have tried to emphasize, this propulsive force is expressed above all through images, which thanks to themselves seem to throw bridges to anchor facts to a digitally given collective memory.

Connection, precisely, which is the lifeblood of the digital regime, has an implicitly imposing character (staying updated is an infocratic diktat, as mentioned above), and it is a condition that, to maintain itself and to have validity, needs a common digital feeling: an attitude whose validity is inter-shared and collective.

A consideration is important to me: strictly speaking, the expression digital sector to designate an organic professional sphere, with a recognizable and effectively regulated, therefore sustainable, physiognomy, is essentially incorrect or at least insufficient to contain the effective “reach” of digital work performance, very often claimed by dependent figures with different contractual frameworks or more simply by undeclared workers and, in general, figures who bring together various tasks within themselves

– among which those of a pre-eminently digital nature – but without the support of a protective professional regulation and therefore a relative compensation.

It is, in fact, a difficultly decipherable area, whose excessive transversality and multiformity envelop digital workers, often crushing them and relegating them to the condition of mere material executors of the instrumental functions in force in the digital regime: provision of remote administrative services, social media and web management, graphics, programming, etc., to name a few; as can be intuited, the impact of the rhythms required by such contingencies on lifestyle is sometimes extreme.

The two-faced Janus of smart work (or “agile work,” not to be confused with “telework”), on closer inspection, is introduced into legislation by art. 18, co. 1, of law no. 81/2017 «as a measure aimed at favoring the flexible articulation of work times and places» although, as Valentina Cagnin notes with reference to temporal aspects, «the absence of a time constraint does not prohibit the identification of a certain time slot for the appropriate coordination (and relative control) of the worker», even though art. 9 reads that the parties must identify «the technical and organizational measures necessary to ensure the worker’s disconnection from work technological tools». Nevertheless, the network woven by connective hypertrophy to the detriment of the worker makes it complicated, it is understood, to draw a clear boundary between work time and personal time, in whose interstices the most disparate germs nest, involving various spheres. The background to this is the condition of immateriality that permeates remote work and the connections within it, too often received

and metabolized as an absolute novelty of the digital present or a sort of “spirit” of modernity but, on closer inspection, already present in the corporate world. As Marco Novella notes, in fact, “immaterial” can also be considered the traditional company that offers services on the market (example: consulting, intermediation, brokerage services) obtained through immaterial production factors. A large part of the tertiary sector of the economy has these characteristics. The application of digital technologies in the company, however, amplifies the phenomenon and, on closer inspection, also diversifies it from a qualitative point of view, offering unprecedented perspectives for reflection.

If anything, he continues, it is by reason of the joint action, in the production processes of goods and services, of information technologies (extended application of digital knowledge and artificial intelligence) and communication technologies (real-time interconnection between companies, subjects, and also objects).

The difficulty of thinking what is digital and therefore what it holds is the first great obstacle to the understanding of the relative phenomenology and for the worker who operates within it, on whose condition I have tried to focus through netnographic research which then translated, in a merely preliminary phase, into a contribution entitled Digital Ethnography and Ethnography of the Digital: A Tale of Experiences between Work, Distance, Hyperconnection and Identity, which I had the opportunity to present at the Fourth National Conference of the SIAC – Italian Society of Cultural Anthropology, held in September at the Sapienza University of Rome and entitled The Return of the Social.

The intervention develops from a fundamental

question, which seems to me to synthesize the encounter of the difficulties of the specialists called to question themselves on the topic and those of the workers in the strict sense: what are the representations of the digital that we are able to provide to ourselves and to society? The ambiguity of such a sphere does not seem to be helped by the political contribution, indeed confused and cumbersome or not sufficiently able to accompany users and operators in a process of digital transition that, progressive rhetoric aside, presents as many shadows as advantages. Suddenly called to be hyper-intelligent, forced to claim more tasks for themselves, many workers suffer the tsunami of tasks that communication apparatuses require to guarantee companies and generic agents in the world of digital marketing an over-presence.

The changes induced by digital hypertrophy seem to me therefore to graft onto three orders: spatial (is space denied or increased?), temporal (is time optimized, but personal time compromised?), physical (what material culture for the man of the future?) and identity-related (what consciousness of self or class for digital workers?). It is evident that in the meanders of the digital system acts a vast and heterogeneous range of “work-actors” who, silently, stage the score of communication and hyper-connection. These are central figures for thinking about the change underway, because they are more directly involved in the rhythms of media production processes, and therefore dutifully part of the field of anthropological research, which has always been attentive to deciphering the complexity of the world. Among the few who manage the multitude, as they seem to classify themselves, are some of those I encountered during this research path, from whom I learned some

of the trends underway, in this sphere, at an individual psychological level.

The research I conducted, therefore, primarily made use of the instrument of the interview and the questionnaire, respectively acts aimed at outlining a qualitative and quantitative framework, involving thirty people and embracing an age range from 23 to 52 years, half men and half women, without geographical limits although all Italian citizens. Due to the relative smallness of the number of interviewees, we will report here on the qualitative aspects of the research, therefore on the “physiological” characteristics of the individual digital worker. Primarily, in fact, the conviction stands out that the compensation is not commensurate with the number of hours actually worked, which for 100% of the interviewees exceeds the contractual terms; a conviction corroborated by psychological (but not only) problems that a slightly smaller percentage declares, among which are: stress, anxiety, alienation, anger, sense of loneliness, pressure and burnout from the impossibility of disconnection (due to informal overload of tasks), panic attacks, mobbing, low blood pressure. In addition to the high stress, present in all the accounts, it is the sense of guilt that deserves particular mention, because it is linked by the interviewee to the urgency of the necessity of the digital task, described as capable of compromising the management of work time, which by invading “free” time profoundly alters its conception and use, often – it is said – “apathetically” enjoyed. Sergio, 52 years old, social media manager and journalist, defines this condition “state of garrison,” in which the worker feels permanently called to “be on alert” to face any negative feedback among the users of the pages et similia. According to Mauro, 35 years old, «too often, even during free time,

communications arrive relating to activities to be carried out during working hours that make it difficult to completely disconnect», which – as lamented by others – makes it almost impossible to distinguish a boundary between work and private life; Hilde, 33 years old, speaks of the unsustainability of the concept of performing often referred to digital workers, in her opinion more exposed to the mantras of running and doing without interruption, never stopping, despite the psychophysical damage that would result: «running towards what?». Interesting indications then came in the sense of a consciousness of self found in the category. In this regard, Valeria, 32 years old, recounts the difficulty of remote work during the pandemic due to the «lack of relationships with colleagues» in a context for her extremely “empathetic,” a character whose compromise she recognizes from the introduction of the so-called “mixed mode,” still in place, which with the distancing from the physical space of performance and confrontation between peers seems to register some form of inhibition of professional consciousness. No less precisely, Sara, also 32 years old, even underlines the “affective” aspect of the relationship established with a corporate social profile which, contextually to other tasks for which she receives compensation, she manages for free like a «creature she has seen grow» as an implicitly identity-related space; where, therefore, although a non-personal page, her individual traits, her skills, and her aptitudes emerge from the type of content she creates. Regarding this, there is a final aspect that seems pertinent to address, namely that related to the forms of protection for specific digital workers, almost unknown to all of them. Good news in this sense concerns the recognition of the figure and profession of the social media manager, recently included

among the categories entitled to a national labor contract, thanks above all to the activism and effort of the ANSMM – National Association of Social Media Managers, which currently brings together a few thousand members.

In closing, it appears indicative to note how all the interviewees (30/30) answered affirmatively to the question “do you still see yourself as a digital worker in the future? Why?”, highlighting a cautious optimism both with respect to the prospects of their professional condition and on the evident advantages that digital offers by taking root in the future of the world; the promise of success, the convenience of smart work, and a form of blind faith in technological progress would seem to supplant, in this phase of their working life, the nonetheless considerable difficulties that accompany them.

## Conclusions

Until a few years ago considered a parallel reality, other than a social and physical “Us,” the digital world is today an integral part of our imagination and its historical and spatial references. We, therefore, evolve within it and with respect to it, even if not assiduous frequenters of its reference environments. A trans-scalar superstructure, what I have defined as “digital regime” attempting to explain some of its mechanisms has among its peculiar products and instruments the image declined in multiple forms, through which its persuasive power, of consensus building as well as of configuration of a digital memory, manifests. I have tried, therefore, to inscribe the ways and tones used in their fruition in a plane of historicity of the phenomenology of the digital regime, attempting to

suppose connections and discern peculiar characteristics; in the last instance, it seemed correct to me to follow up on a first reconnaissance carried out within the scope of an ethnographic research work on digital workers presented by me on the occasion of the Fourth National Conference of the SIAC – Italian Society of Cultural Anthropology, held in September at the Sapienza University of Rome and entitled The return of the social. In conclusion, what has emerged in these lines simply wants to insert itself, as a tiny piece, within a necessarily interdisciplinary and holistic cognitive effort able to contribute to the understanding of the world we inhabit.

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**NOTE**

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- [15] Ibi, p. 25.
- [16] Ibi, p. 26.
- [17] Not rarely, it concerns workers supposedly capable, due to age condition and according to the professional and social environment of reference, to claim for themselves tasks in the common sense perceived as prerogative of the “youthful” categories, according to the common

opinion better inclined towards the use of technological devices.

[18] For “telework” or “remote work” or “work from home” one intends a way of working that – independent from its geographical location (office or company) – results facilitated by the use of computer and telecommunication tools and characterized by a flexibility both in the organization and in the way of carrying out.

[19] V. Cagnin, “Lavoro e diritto del lavoro alla prova della digitalizzazione”, «Ricerche giuridiche», 2, 2019, p. 50.

[20] To the generic psychological difficulties some accompany themselves, for example, of no less incisive ones, like nomophobia, that is the dependence from smartphone, that is a condition of anxiety or fear of being separated or not having access to one’s own portable device.”

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