RESISTING THE ALGORITHM: AFFECTIVE LITERACY AS A RELATIONAL COMPASS

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ABSTRACT
Digital Affective Literacy has become indispensable for developing critical thinking and emotional awareness as instruments of 'resistance' against algorithmic manipulation. The digital universe, experienced as a "liturgy of postmodernity," serves as the backdrop for the transition from digital consumption to submission within "Surveillance Capitalism." The role of educational intervention is thus to "integrate emotional intelligence" and counter the "flight from conversation" and the fragmentation of empathy caused by screen mediation. As algorithms are capable of 'formatting' desire and transforming emotional impulses into commodifiable data, affective literacy emerges as a tool of civil resistance. It aims to restore decisional autonomy and the capacity for dialogue, promoting a citizenship that reclaims the right to interiority and relational depth.

KEYWORDS

Digital affective literacy; surveillance capitalism; algorithmic manipulation

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1. Introduction

In the film Her, Spike Jonze depicts an affective relationship entirely mediated by technology, wherein the protagonists are a human individual and an artificial intelligence system. It is precisely their bond that challenges intimacy, recognition, and presence - categories intrinsically fundamental to human relationships. Albeit characterized by a high degree of emotional intensity, the configuration of the relational space captured by the cinematographic apparatus highlights the progressive dematerialization of the bond and its dependency on technical infrastructures that are constitutively dynamic and unstable. The relationship between the protagonists, progressively uncoupled from a physical dimension, underscores the structural fragility of contemporary relationships. To live in the present day means, first and foremost, grappling with an uncertain existential condition.

Sociological literature has defined today's society as liquid, unstable, and devoid of solid anchors, a landscape in which the social structures that for centuries guaranteed continuity and predictability in developmental pathways have been progressively hollowed out of meaning (Bauman, 2003; Giddens, 1991). While the modernity of the last century offered the individual a relatively linear biographical horizon, punctuated by sequential milestones and promises of deferred fulfillment (school preparing for work, work enabling autonomy, autonomy opening the way to family), postmodernity has dissolved this sequentiality into a condition of perennial provisionality. Within this framework, every existential project must be constantly renegotiated, and no choice ever appears definitive.

It is within this context of radical instability that the fragmented nature of the contemporary individual's search for self is situated: identity is no longer constructed through the progressive accumulation of coherent experiences, but rather through the discontinuous juxtaposition of fragments that struggle to find a unified narrative synthesis. Compounding and partially exacerbating this structural

instability is the precarity of affective bonds, which disengages individuals - particularly the youth - from the long - term planning of their own existence.

The advent of digital languages has progressively reduced human interactions to systems of symbols and images. The media themselves have assumed the characteristics of apparatuses (dispositifs) in a strictly Foucaultian sense (Bovalino, 2019) - that is, complex structures operating through networks of relations capable of redefining the subject no longer as an original, autonomous instance, but as an effect of the relationship between the living being and the technological apparatus. The transition from traditional, twentieth - century representative democracy to so - called digital post - democracy did not occur via sudden substitution, but through a slow and pervasive redefinition of the symbolic codes and political myths that structure the collective imaginary. It is an unconscious use of new technologies - unmediated by adequate critical competencies - that threatens to replace any authentic form of participation in the life of the communitas with entirely algorithmic processes. Because these processes operate below the threshold of conscious awareness, they tend to progressively obliterate critical cognition and the very sense of a shared reality.

Contemporary man is a homo sapiens completely immersed in a digital flow where the image is systematically replacing the highest and most elaborate forms of human expression. Meanwhile, the subject's gaze is lost in an uninterrupted succession of reels, posts, and stories, giving rise to the anthropological figure defined in literature as homo digitalis (Han, 2014; Harari, 2017; Patriarca, 2018; Geerts, 2021).

To fully comprehend the trajectory of dematerialization inaugurated by Jonze's cinematographic apparatus, one must situate this relational dynamic within a broader psychological and cultural mutation investing the very nature of interpersonal communication. As noted by Sherry Turkle (2015) in her seminal examination of the necessity to "reclaim conversation"in the digital era, screen -

mediated interaction introduces a specific illusion of control that radically alters the prerequisites for empathy. The hyperconnected individual experiences the ability to edit, delay, optimize, and sanitize the encounter with the other, stripping it of any disruptive element, friction, or logistical and emotional unexpectedness. Real - time conversation - with its meaning - laden pauses, awkward silences, and unsettling manifestations of corporeal vulnerability - is systematically replaced by a connection of low intensity but perennial frequency.

This flight from spontaneous conversation translates into a progressive inability to tolerate reflective solitude, which constitutes the sole fertile psychic ground upon which a genuine capacity to listen to alterity can be built. The adolescent who does not learn to be alone with themselves experiences the other not as an autonomous subject with whom to co - construct meaning, but as a reservoir of validation and a dispenser of immediate feedback.

The paradox reaches completion when intimacy is no longer sought through the risk of physical exposure and ethical self - disclosure, but rather through interfacing with technological constructs programmed to offer unconditional, simulated attention, entirely devoid of reciprocal biographical demands. Technology, by promising never to leave us alone, ultimately deprives us of the capacity to be intimately present to ourselves and, consequently, to recognize the presence of the other in their radical, irreplaceable historical difference. The onlife experience thus configures itself as a gigantic apparatus for anesthetizing the trauma of the intersubjective encounter, substituted by a reassuring and performative navigation through identity simulacra.

2. From the disciplinary apparatus to the algorithmic apparatus: transformations of control

The picture yielded by the current historical moment appears far from reassuring. Alongside the crisis of the individual, there is a crisis of a more properly political nature - that of democracy - which manifests as a progressive estrangement

between state institutions and the social body they are called to represent. Younger generations, however, pay the highest price, increasingly characterized by an attitude of mistrust toward traditional forms of political participation and representation. Such mistrust does not solely impact the dimension of individual civic formation; it also reverberates across the construction of a shared social fabric in an era - that of algorithmic pervasiveness - where the typically adolescent need for stable horizons of meaning constantly confronts the absence of solid references to anchor onto.

This contemporary instability finds an acute representation in the reflection of Gilles Deleuze (1990), who anticipated with remarkable foresight the transition from disciplinary societies - founded on spaces of physical confinement such as the school, the factory, and the hospital - to societies of control, characterized by a regime of power that is more diffuse and pervasive, yet simultaneously less visible, and for this very reason harder to resist. In the society of control, individuals are no longer physically confined, but are confined within their thoughts, their daily choices, and the decisions pertaining to the public sphere.

While in Foucault's original formulation the apparatus was structured principally as a network of relations between heterogeneous elements aimed at responding to a historical urgency and producing subjectivity through power/knowledge dynamics, its late - modern metamorphosis is fulfilled under the sign of what Shoshana Zuboff (2019) has formalized as "surveillance capitalism."In this new macroeconomic horizon, the digital environment has ceased to be a subsidiary communication channel or a space of immaterial confinement; instead, it has assumed the character of a totalizing apparatus enveloping the individual. Human experience in its entirety is completely datafied, insofar as the emotional traces left on social media, aesthetic preferences, and affective bonds are converted into behavioral data.

Consequently, a crucial semantic and structural shift occurs relative to the dynamics of the last century: the technological apparatus does not limit itself to surveilling, disciplining, or norming bodies and minds to make them productive within a given institution. It systematically extracts an authentic surplus value from the relational and affective life of the subject. Every interaction, every manifestation of adolescent vulnerability, every desperate search for social recognition mediated by social network metrics (likes, views, shares) is nothing but the foundational raw material for a process of capitalist accumulation that commodifies the sphere of intimacy itself. The affective fragility of the youth, as a result, becomes the ideal psychic infrastructure generated to maximize time spent on the platform and, by extension, the extractive efficiency of the algorithm itself.

In Giorgio Agamben's (2006) reflection, the partition of the existent is rigidly divided into two major macro - classes: on one side, living beings (or substances), and on the other, apparatuses, understood in the broadest sense as "anything that has in some way the capacity to capture, orient, determine, intercept, model, control, and secure the gestures, behaviors, opinions, and discourses of living beings"(p. 22). While industrial modernity had already witnessed an exponential proliferation of these devices, digital postmodernity is characterized by a properly qualitative and nihilistic mutation: the algorithmic apparatus presents itself as a mechanism of uncoupling. It no longer produces a new subject (albeit subjugated and integrated), but generates an other instance - a split "digital self"that is constantly manipulable from the outside.

The affective relationship, precisely like the one admirably represented in Jonze's cinematographic apparatus in Her, forfeits its original alterity and its promise of stability precisely because it is entirely mediated by an apparatus whose ultimate end is not the fruitful encounter with the other, but rather the colonization, quantification, and expropriation of humanitas. Modern man thus finds himself trapped in an insidious ontological paradox: the more he hyper - connects in a

desperate attempt to escape existential liquidity, the precarity of bonds, and the profound solitude of his condition, the more he feeds and empowers the technical apparatus that fragments his identity, transforming his very relational existence into economic surplus value for the invisible architecture of digital capital.

The algorithm, therefore, can be interpreted as the most sophisticated and least perceptible evolution of this apparatus of control, capable of orienting the subject's choices precisely at the moment when they manifest as ostensibly most free and spontaneous. This paradox of apparent freedom finds confirmation in Barry Schwartz's (2005) analysis dedicated to the so - called "paradox of choice". The multiplication of available options, rather than expanding effective freedom, produces a dual pathogenic effect: on one hand, it renders decisions increasingly arduous to make, and on the other, it condemns the subject to a condition of chronic dissatisfaction, since every choice made necessarily implies the renunciation of all discarded alternatives.

The closure of the contemporary subject is also reflected in their physical posture: constantly hunched over the screen in the act of scrolling through mobile devices, the individual has progressively lost their upright posture, the breadth of their gaze, and the forward - looking movement projected toward the horizon (Marchetti, 2022), living instead a paradoxical solitude that manifests precisely within "social"spaces. This lack of openness is twofold: the individual cannot recognize themselves within the fragmented and infinite stream of content to which they are exposed, yet they are also closed off toward alterity, given the impossibility of recognizing the gaze of the other if one's own gaze dissolves into a display.

It is within this context that young people experience the progressive and irreversible dissolution of the boundary between the onlife experience (Floridi, 2017) and the offline world, existing in a condition of permanent hyperconnectivity in which the categories of space and time lose their baseline value. The digital environment is no longer a distinct space separable from the subject's experiential

reality; rather, it is the constitutive dimension of personal identity itself, to the point that the distinction between the real self and the digital self is increasingly unfeasible, both theoretically and within lived experience.

While this condition unprecedentedly expands the relational and informational possibilities available to the subject, it simultaneously exposes them to a constant pressure toward identity performance and socially mediated, algorithmically driven validation. The resulting adolescent, lacking a clear boundary within which to safely experiment with their own processes of individuation, finds themselves seamlessly exposed to the - equally enabling and pathogenic - effects of a pervasive digital environment, which ultimately acts as an additional destabilizing factor in an evolutionary stage already marked by identity fragility and a search for meaning.

To comprehend the political extension of this subjugation, it is imperative to delve deeper into the economic architectures described by Shoshana Zuboff (2019). Surveillance capitalism does not configure itself simply as an exasperation of traditional market dynamics; it represents a radical mutation of the mechanisms of capitalist accumulation. While industrial capitalism was founded on the exploitation of nature and corporeal labor, this late - modern variant claims human experience itself as raw material, expropriated and transformed into “behavioral surplus.” Through complex processes of artificial intelligence and machine learning, this surplus is refined into prediction products capable of anticipating not only what we will buy, but what we will do, think, and feel.

The algorithmic infrastructure governing information flows operates an engineering reconfiguration of human behavior that Zuboff terms “instrumentalism” - a power that replaces the overt violence of twentieth - century totalisms with the subtle, automated inevitability of an omnipresent digital architecture. Within this panorama, the subject’s freedom is expropriated at its roots: the architecture of social networks is designed to establish cycles of intermittent reinforcement that hook directly into the bio - psychic vulnerabilities

of the individual, inducing large - scale behavioral modification aimed at stabilizing future behavior markets.

At this level of economic abstraction, the provocative mediological thesis of G. N. Bovalino (2024) regarding the structural convergence between the algorithmic universe and the symbolic - religious horizon converges seamlessly. In the essay Algoritmi e Preghiere, Bovalino highlights how digital culture is progressively assuming the forms of a genuine “new mysticism” wherein software code and mathematical routines inherit the historical functions of sacred ritual and divine agency. The contemporary individual, lost in the liquidity and disintegration of traditional bonds, turns to the screen with the same fideistic and devotional attitude with which pre - modern man approached prayer. The algorithm is invested with an aura of infallibility and omniscience; to it, one entrusts the deciphering of daily chaos, the selection of desires, and redemption from existential loneliness.

This “calculating mysticism”operates a profound subsumption of humanitas, converting the metaphysical demand for meaning into an invisible information transaction. Algorithmic governance, therefore, does not limit itself to controlling bodies or guiding consumption; it colonizes the symbolic imaginary, offering pre - packaged answers that anesthetize the subject’s capacity to inhabit doubt, anticipation, and the mystery of the intersubjective encounter. The sacralization of technical efficiency divests the citizen of ethical responsibility, reducing interior life to an optimizable sequence of binary functions.

3. From fragmentation to recomposition: educational perspectives for homo digitalis

Within the scope of reflection on the online lived experiences of adolescents, a primary critical nexus resides in the deficiency of cognitive and emotional tools that would allow younger individuals to consciously regulate their digital exposure or temporarily detach from it. Adolescence, a developmental phase in which self -

regulation competencies are still consolidating (Erikson, 1995; Marcia, 1980), is particularly susceptible to forms of compensatory mobile device use (Benedetto et al., 2024). Furthermore, online identity construction assumes profoundly different characteristics compared to traditional socialization processes. If, as Erving Goffman (1997) observed, every social interaction implies a form of the presentation of the self, digital environments push this dynamic to extremes, favoring an almost total control over one's public image. Identity thus tends to transform into a permanent performance, constantly subjected to the quantitative evaluation of peers through likes and other purely algorithmic metrics. The adolescent ultimately measures their personal worth through external indicators of social approval, carrying significant ramifications for self - esteem, self - efficacy, and overall well - being.

The state of fragility characterizing adolescents is further compounded by peer group pressure and the fear of social exclusion from onlife life. It is widely documented how the vulnerability typical of adolescence is amplified by peer group pressure, with particular reference to the Fear of Missing Out (FoMO). Literature identifies this phenomenon as a predictor of problematic social media use, correlated with elevated stress levels and reduced efficacy in psychological adaptation processes (Beyens et al., 2016; Oberst et al., 2017; Fioravanti et al., 2021; Marengo et al., 2021). Consequently, a deficient capacity to adapt to the peer group drives numerous adolescents to seek an immediate, albeit dysfunctional, form of emotional compensation in the smartphone, thereby increasing the risk of problematic device usage (Wang & Zhang, 2026).

Platforms, powered by increasingly pervasive machine learning and artificial intelligence systems, do not present neutral content to the user; instead, they operate a constant and silent "algorithmic mirroring."The tracking of preferences, viewing times, and interactions generates a data block that reflects an image of the world - and, by extension, of the user themselves - designed to incessantly confirm

pre - existing inclinations and vulnerabilities (Pariser, 2011). In this scenario, the smartphone screen ceases to be a window open to alterity and the unexpected, transforming into a distorting yet reassuring mirror that traps the individual, especially the adolescent. The adolescent phase demands a suspended timeframe dedicated to the free exploration of roles and ideals (Erikson, 1995), rather than an algorithm that drastically constricts this vital field of experimentation.

This emotional anesthesia, generated by passive and fragmented consumption, configures a true aesthetic and ethical emergency. Uninterrupted contact with the digital flow, devoid of coordinates of meaning, impoverishes the subject's narrative imagination - that fundamental capacity to encounter the other and intimately comprehend human vulnerability (Nussbaum, 2006). When the pain of the other is reduced to entertainment content, a rupture occurs in the very foundation of humanity upon which civil coexistence ought to rest. Facing such a drift, the pedagogical response cannot limit itself to an futile condemnation of the medium; rather, it must equip the subject with a genuine cognitive and emotional resistance. Educating in hyperconnected contexts means providing the tools to transform the automatism of the gesture into a praxis of critical deconstruction of content, restoring to the subject the capacity to interrogate the displayed reality rather than passively submitting to it. Only in this manner is it possible to stem that identity and value fragmentation which the uninterrupted flow tends to normalize.

Indeed, it is the absence of regulative tools governing the relationship with the device that produces a distortion in the perception of online reality. The very act of infinitely scrolling through content proposed by the algorithmic flow produces a progressive disengagement from the capacity to critically analyze what is observed - a disengagement that acts in a particularly insidious manner when the viewed content is amoral or overtly violent. Images of war, violence, and suffering assume the identical value of a photograph of a plate of pasta, because the mechanical gesture of scrolling transcends the actual reality of the objects shown, progressively

nullifying any form of empathetic sensitivity toward what is being witnessed. In this manner, a communicative universe has been constructed in which the word, understood in its fullest and most creative value, has been progressively hollowed out of meaning.

This progressive vitrinization of existence (Codeluppi, 2007) impacts the adolescent condition with particular severity, manifesting in the transformation of the relationship that the contemporary adolescent maintains with their own body - now turned into an object to be publicly displayed and constantly modified in function of the gaze of others. Concurrently, personal identity fragments into a discontinuous plurality of profiles, posts, and likes that struggle to coalesce into a coherent biographical narrative. The medium is never neutral: it imposes a grammar that shapes thought. Digital language, predicated on icons, likes, and transient streams, strips the word of its creative value, replacing it with a system of pre - packaged signs. This de - symbolization of experience is precisely what prevents the subject from composing a coherent biographical narrative: when the world is experienced solely through the synthetic symbols of social media, the individual loses the capacity to attribute profound meaning to their own lived experiences (Rivoltella, 2017).

Faced with this picture of an adolescent condition marked by postmodern liquidity, information overload, decisional paralysis, and the progressive anthropological transformation toward homo digitalis, an educational necessity emerges to construct pathways of digital literacy. This literacy must be understood not merely as the acquisition of instrumental skills in using technological devices, but as an authentic form of critical liberation from the cognitive and emotional illiteracy produced by the algorithm. It is, in truth, a digital literacy capable of discriminating information, recognizing and avoiding web - related risks, and guiding the individual toward an ethical utilization of virtual space.

Unsurprisingly, UNESCO (2018) defines digital literacy as:

“the ability to access, manage, understand, integrate, communicate, evaluate and create information safely and appropriately through digital technologies for employment, decent jobs and entrepreneurship. It includes competences that are variously referred to as computer literacy, ICT literacy, information literacy and media literacy”(p. 6).

If the educational act coincides with the assumption of responsibility by adults toward the world and new arrivals (Arendt, 2023), then the educator has the duty to hand over the world not as an inescapable cage of algorithmic determinisms, but as a space that cannot be exhausted by the profiling traced by machine learning. Digital literacy, in this perspective, configures itself as a transversal and foundational competency, capable of restoring to the subject those tools of critical discernment without which any educational project risks remaining purely formal.

Resisting the algorithm means - far from wishing to counter the present with a pre - digital era that has irretrievably set - building, through conscious and systematic pedagogical action, the conditions enabling the adolescent to reappropriate their capacity for autonomous choice, their critical posture toward information, and their authentic relationship with alterity and the community. The pedagogical challenge, therefore, consists in promoting a symbolic reflexivity so that everyone, especially the young, can interrogate the way this code reduces the complexity of their inner world to a series of data points. Returning the subject to the capacity to narrate, to slow writing, and to the critical analysis of the image means restoring mastery over those symbols which, if left in the hands of the algorithm, ultimately obliterate their identity. Restoration, therefore, of the tools required for adolescents to emerge from the cave of algorithmically selected shadows, enabling them to regain an upright posture and a broad gaze, is the task that contemporary pedagogy and education must fulfill.

To convert this cognitive resistance into operational pedagogical praxis, digital literacy must necessarily integrate with the paradigms of affective education

formalized by Daniel Goleman (1995). In Emotional Intelligence, the author demonstrates how the psychological well - being and adaptive success of the individual depend decisively not so much on traditional intelligence quotient, but on an integrated core of emotional competencies: self - awareness, management of drive states, motivation, empathy, and adeptness in interpersonal relationships. Within the context of the onlife ecosystem, the absence of adequate emotional literacy exposes the adolescent to a perennial vulnerability. Digital devices, acting as potent amplifiers of instantaneous stimuli, tend to short - circuit the capacity for self - regulation and deferred gratification, propelling the subject toward reactive and compulsive responses intermediate by metrics of visibility.

Authentic empathy, understood as the ability to accurately perceive the emotional tone of the other and resonate with their internal experience, requires corporeal attunement and a prolonged attention span that the fragmentation of the digital flow systematically sabotages. The reduction of human interactions to purely symbolic exchanges, devoid of the paralinguistic feedback of the face, voice, and physiological posture, produces an atrophy of the neural circuits designated for social cognition and deep listening.

Contemporary pedagogy thus has the imperative task of reactivating these foundational emotional skills, structuring educational spaces where the critical deconstruction of the medium is welded to the intentional exercise of emotional self - awareness. Young people must be guided to recognize the states of anxiety, boredom, or loneliness that precede and motivate the compensatory recourse to the smartphone, transforming the automatic impulse toward hyperconnectivity into a moment of conscious self - reflection. Only by rehabilitating the capacity to name and internally process one’s own emotional experiences can homo digitalis emancipate themselves from the distorting mirror of algorithmic reflection, rediscovering the ethical value of analog empathy and the non - quantifiable beauty of authentic human relationships.

4. Conclusions: Toward a pedagogy of presence and biographical narrative

In the final analysis, the recomposition of the described identity fracture demands the elaboration of a genuine pedagogy of presence, capable of opposing the dematerialization of experience and the consequent commodification of intimacy. If the algorithmic environment tends to configure itself as an "underground theology of technique" (Bovalino, 2024), education must rediscover its original prophetic and humanistic vocation. It must do so by instituting workshops for slow writing, shared reading, and corporeal expression where the word can reappropriate its creative and poetic status. Shattering the cave of algorithmic shadows means restoring formative value to error, incompleteness, and unproductive time - elements systematically expelled by the optimization logic of digital platforms.

The school and educational agencies must configure themselves as communities of discourse and practice wherein adolescents experience the security of a protected boundary, not to isolate themselves from the contemporary world, but to inhabit it with a critical posture - a posture that Marchetti (2022) associates with the wide gaze of human verticality. The media literacy proposed by UNESCO (2018) must not resolve itself into training for the performative use of new software for productivity or entrepreneurial purposes; instead, it must evolve into an instrument of civil emancipation and conscious democratic citizenship.

Teaching how to interrogate the tracking infrastructure underlying social platforms, to recognize the informational biases generated by filter bubbles, and to comprehend the macroeconomic mechanisms of surveillance capitalism represents the sole path toward restoring to younger generations the right to an open, self - determined future, uncoupled from technical predetermination. Only through this conjoined effort of critical literacy and affective education will it be possible to transform *homo digitalis* into a fully aware citizen, capable of inhabiting the *onlife*

universe without forfeiting the profound sense of their own *humanitas* and the fruitful beauty of the relationship with the other.

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