


## **A certain colouring of imagination: notes for a Digital Humanism.**

### *Quel certo cromatismo dell'immaginazione: appunti per un umanesimo digitale.*

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#### Abstract

This article, taking inspiration from Prof. Corasaniti's book, attempts a reflection on the impact of new technologies on new generations, also through the diffusion of redefinition of the notion of time, triggered by new technologies and the risks associated with them.

*Questo paper, prendendo spunto dal libro del Prof. Corasaniti, tenta una riflessione sull'impatto delle nuove tecnologie sulle nuove generazioni, anche attraverso una disamina della ridefinizione della nozione di tempo, innescata dalle nuove tecnologie e sui rischi ad esse connessi.*

**Keywords:** Digital humanism, Education, Time, School, Culture, Learning, New technologies, Digital risk.

«Dodging the concrete is one of the most disturbing phenomena of the human spirit. There is a distinct tendency to throw oneself into the furthest things, immediately, and thus to neglect everything that one continually bumps up against. The impetus of the gesture of leaving, the adventurous audacity of expeditions to remote lands, deceive about their motives. It is not uncommon for us to simply avoid what is behind us, because we are not up to the task. We are aware of the danger and prefer to deal with other dangers of unknown magnitude. We are aware of the danger and prefer to deal with other dangers of unknown magnitude. Even when we come across the latter, and it happens punctually, they still possess the brilliance of sudden and unique things. Only a very limited person could condemn this adventurous quality of spirit, although it sometimes arises from obvious weakness. It has led us to a broadening of our horizon of which we are proud. But



today, as we all know, the situation of humanity is so serious that we must turn to what is closest to us and most concrete. Nor do we foresee how much time we have left to see the worst; but it may well be that our destiny is subordinated to certain, hard knowledge that we do not yet possess. But today, as we all know, the situation of humanity is so serious that we must turn to what is closest to us and most concrete».

Elias Canetti<sup>1</sup>

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## Introduction.

Through my contribution, starting from the suggestions of Prof. Corasaniti, I will attempt an examination of the problem of Time, which is central, in my opinion, to the unfolding of the actions and motivations of social actors, especially if they are very young. The temporal dimension, in fact, shares with new digital technologies, platforms and social networks, a mixture of intangibility and experience; it therefore lends itself, plastically and methodologically, to a reflection on the consequences, deviances and dangers associated with the use of the network.

### 1. Dodging the concrete.

In a short essay entitled "Power and Survival" from 1972, Elias Canetti wrote of an undeniable truth, namely how the human spirit loves to dodge, when possible, what is concrete, replacing the immediacy of the nearest obstacles with the unknown fascination of unexpected challenges.

This momentum, which lies halfway between the passion for adventure and the cowardice of daily laziness, has allowed the unexpected to make its way into human civilization, redesigning and sophisticating it. While many men drew maps, bent down to cultivate the earth or to dig it deeply to extract minerals, others looked to the sky revealing to humanity a space-time curvature, a theory of relativity and multidimensional methodological approaches that have led to an extraordinary advance in progress.

Already in the second half of the nineteenth century, the West had begun to confront the consequences of a progressive chronological acceleration, proportional to that of the rhythms of production and the result of a cultural crisis that in France, England and Central Europe was defined in particular in terms of dysphoria between chronological interiority and exteriority, while in the rest of Europe, with nuances linked to territorial specificities, in fact, it ended up pandering to a deep social crisis, which would redesign and erode categories and institutions throughout the short century. On the threshold of the third millennium, the definitive push for the material acceleration of the life of social

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<sup>1</sup> Translated from E Canetti, *Macht und Überleben* (Carl Hanser Verlag 1972)

actors is inflicted by digitalization, which makes the certain connotations of positioning of the ego in the flow of life waver, on a philosophical and existential level. The local dimension, until then experienced as a formal certainty, if only for the migratory phenomena induced by force majeure, becomes porous and uncertain, besieged by an illusory and pervasive possibilism that obscures its perceptions and boundaries. In the new millennium, social actors can situate themselves in a here and now that is physically given as a starting point, while the landing, for the new generations in particular, seems to be an elsewhere heralding inexhaustible opportunities, but an elsewhere that is more virtual than geographical, which includes the purchase of goods and services and extreme sensory experiences, including through the metaverse. Those who were born in Europe by the end of the 1980s have seen some of the rapid growth of these technologies, to be sure, but they have almost experienced the beginnings of these technologies. Technologies that at the beginning were used by a small group of people and only gradually came to be configured as mass devices. Witnessing their rise did not automatically protect thousands of people from the risks they brought with them, but it certainly allowed the less passive to absorb a sort of rudimentary epistemology, connoting them as tools, not as pre-eminent and almost unique solutions to any existential situation. For those who were born after the nineties of the twentieth century and for those who are today, in 2023, teen-agers, the matter is much more complex, since it is the technologies, already established on an almost global scale, that have seen them born, sometimes literally if we think of the amount of audiovisual documentation that private citizens accumulate to immortalize their little ones from the womb, and now not only in it, with all the related problems of sharenting on social media and neuroses of the case. As Giuseppe Corasaniti writes in the book from which, with his distinguished colleagues, we took inspiration to dialogue and write, it is necessary to urgently reflect on the ambiguity and ubiquity of which intelligent technologies are harbingers, questioning the risks they entail and the possible regulations to protect human dignity.

## 2. Sense and feeling of time.

Through my contribution, starting from the suggestions of Prof. Corasaniti, I will attempt an examination of the problem of Time, which is central, in my opinion, to the unfolding of the actions and motivations of social actors, especially if they are very young. The temporal dimension, in fact, shares with new digital technologies, platforms and social networks, a mixture of intangibility and experience; it therefore lends itself, plastically and methodologically, to a reflection on the consequences, deviances and dangers associated with the use of the network.

And if time lends itself to a reflection on the intangibles of technologies, certainly the vision that animates Corasaniti's book lends itself to a reflection on the importance of time, indirectly but effectively, to the extent that it evokes the discomfort of the human mind in the face of the disproportion of knowledge offered by big data, as well as in the enormity of the perspectives that are intricate and multiply. In short, this book also makes us reflect on the dismay of the human spirit in the face of the majesty of the unknown; now, if there is an adjective that describes time, it is certainly "enormous": *L'enorme tempo*, as Giuseppe Bonaviri<sup>2</sup> entitled a beautiful novel, and I take the liberty of referring

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<sup>2</sup> G Bonaviri, *L'enorme tempo* (Rizzoli 1976)

to literature because in addition to technical ability and vision, Corasaniti's book also has its own literary elegance and philosophical depth, as evidenced by its references to Campanella, Dante, Balzac.

Chronos is described, by the ancient Greeks, as a huge giant, a monster that devours everything. Its inexorable, ravenous pace, which inexorably swallows people, has perhaps been one of the deepest engines of culture. Because culture is many things: distinction, the ability to draw a boundary, identification, difference, fragility, but above all culture is a response, it is the voice that remains despite the silent erosion of time. Culture is the response of the human to the deadly consumption of the flow of things and since the dawn philosophical thought, think of Parmenides, has questioned the flow, the mystery of unrepeatability, which is why art is also connoted as a duplication of an indomitable, feral nature, which with its mutation and its impetus goes to historize and makes manifest the irrepressible appetite of Chronos.

*Devouring Time, blunt thou the lion's paws,  
And make the earth devour her own sweet brood;  
Pluck the keen teeth from the fierce tiger's jaws,  
And burn the long-lived phoenix in her blood,<sup>3</sup>*

Of what remains of the lavish banquet in which Life is offered to the greedy jaws of Time, we grasp the ruins, the devastation, the remains of its advance: the archaeologist reconstructs lost splendour incessantly, the historian patiently stitches up the shreds it leaves in his path, the scientist tries to seize it with hourglasses and clocks, but the enormous Time flees, an indomitable beast that no one has ever seen and that no representation, no calendar, can stop. Some, like Chateaubriand, rely on the eternalizing function of Literature and throw their memories beyond their mortal horizon, but Time seems invincible. Yet, over the centuries, human civilization has managed to do two things: technicians have organized it, optimized it, and found ways not to waste it; Visionaries have dilated it, redefining it as inner time – slowly, through the evolution of language, poetry, imagination, and perhaps within the suggestion of the sacred and the dreamlike dimension, the human has discovered the infinite within himself. It has been a long journey, and many and very different voices have told us about it: Immanuel Kant, when he speaks of a moral law that is within us, as immense as the firmament we contemplate; or maybe it's the immensity sung by troubadours when they search within their hearts for a love capable of overcoming even death; is the terrible and half-hidden question of James Joyce's *Finnegan's wake*, where the end denies wakefulness and death seems to be the negation of everything; Even vulgar literature is somehow trained to carve out, in the exorcism of laughter, a hiatus of human hope. Countless examples in the arts make visible the human need to measure oneself against time. And it is precisely time that makes us human, because even though we are not infinite like God, we can carry within us a spark of infinity. The network in some way corresponds, in contemporary civilization, to what the logos was in past civilizations: in the Greek world divine logos, such as that of Heraclitus that "speaks through men" or, in more recent and sophisticated times, *Die Sprache spricht*, Heidegger's logos: something so enormous, so immense, that not even the eye can grasp it, nor the visualization capacity of the most sophisticated physics nor the naked speculation of human thought. Always, we come to terms with a

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<sup>3</sup> W Shakespeare, Sonnet XIX

forced finitude of perspectives and methodologies that, even when they seem to be progressing, surprise themselves constrained in a corner by the unavoidable enormity of the impending time, of the language outside of which there is no thought, and today also of the enormity of the Internet, which propagates a cognitive pantheism whose counterpoint is a rampant nihilism – the whole is pure power, and "a long series on busy nothings" is what we have left to act.

### 3. L'homme est un roseau pensant.

*L'homme est un roseau pensant, mais il est grand parce qu'il le sait.* Pascal said that man is a thinking reed, he can be bent and broken by winds and storms, but he is great because he knows that he is breaking. Perhaps today's reflection, also upstream of the refined elaborations that colleagues have offered us from a strictly regulatory point of view (i.e. a way to tame this technological enormity in its concrete streams), perhaps the vision we need is that of a humble awareness of the finitude of our perspective and a conscious use of available technologies in defence of human dignity, without abusing the extreme possibilities thrown at the users by these devices, within the neo-cannibalistic logic of the fruition of the prevailing image of our days.

The fragmentation of thought and content induced by the network society shows a pornographic inclination, where by pornography I do not mean only vulgarity more or less linked to an overexposure of sexual organs or even pleasure machines, but I mean a use, not only for sexual purposes but also for narrative purposes, of nonsensical fragments that in various fields of information and mass cultural productions prevail in spite of an overall narrative that is almost always lost, and with it historical awareness is lost, the reference points of the existential map of consciousness are lost and identity is tossed around, deprived of its boundaries - not to mention the fact that the same body today is contaminated and prolonged in the metaverse, but also to incorporate mechanical inserts, for therapeutic and aesthetic reasons; perhaps we will find ourselves in a post-human that is already rewriting our physiological feeling and the boundary between who is properly human and who is a human machine will be increasingly difficult. The immediate distinction will be dictated by the origin (womb and nature versus test tubes and medical-sanitary devices) and perhaps also by the quantity and quality of mechanizations suffered by the bodies. But a less evident and deeper distinction will be linked to consciences, therefore to memories, therefore to deep feelings of these beings. It's not a science fiction issue, it's just around the corner. While the myth of self-determination fluidizes androgynous thought to the point of the illusion of erasing the sexes and the ethical question launched by Mary Shelley in *Frankenstein*<sup>4</sup> returns with worrying relevance, we scholars of today, born between the fifties and eighties of the twentieth century, who have experience of a slower and more diverse world, perhaps have the task of governing the underlying awareness, useless only in appearance, of the value of the human dimension in its unrepeatability, marvellous gratuitousness. The custodians of the technology of the exact sciences will have the task of governing and deepening knowledge, but the scholars of the human sciences, including jurists, as custodians of a threshold knowledge, halfway between *jus* and *lex*, will have the task of governing the *weltanschauung*, the humanist vision of the world within and in spite of the post-human.

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<sup>4</sup> M Shelley, *Frankenstein* (Oxford University Press 2008)

The algorithms of financial mathematics and the interconnection of the various economies have now replaced the human with capital, of which the human itself is only an ancillary appendage; real systemic monsters generated by the profit logic of free markets<sup>5</sup> are eroding the capacities and possibilities and action of the rights of sovereign states, now plastered by a globalization that redesigns a non-place of legal action that neutralizes the human as bearer of identity and promotes the homologated consumer and the new uprooted, work-oriented, interchangeable and low-cost proletarian.

And as drones begin to deliver goods, a new communication system is taking shape that somehow speaks globish, a universal digital language that «is determining both the global refinement of the production and distribution of the words, sounds and images of our culture, and their personalization according to the tastes of identities and to the individual's states of mind»<sup>6</sup>. And this is because interactive computer networks are developing more and more exponentially, creating new forms and channels of communicative exchange that at the same time shape life and are shaped by it, but the suggestion that the slight clinamen that they receive back from users is stronger, except in rare cases where there is a large group of people who manage to hermeneutically organize themselves in a common direction; because in reality, by moving on the net, each individual, even before forming a group, is in some way already directed towards specific contents or specific portions of the imagination. In other words, every individual who surfs the Internet is first and foremost a recipient and target of messages and contents, so when he or she becomes a producer of messages, he or she does so as an already pre-programmed Internet user. This is not only an urgent matter of economic and technological transformation, but also of the dramatic social and socio-cultural transformations. The erosion of patriarchy in the West has not been matched by a substantial improvement in the condition of women, just look at salaries and crime pages. The symbolic and normative attacks that have in fact been inflicted on the institution of the traditional family have, for better or worse, led to a fundamental redefinition of the relationships between individuals, in terms of age and gender, redesigning sexualities and personalities. At the same time, a crisis of the profound legitimacy of political systems, for which the media are largely responsible, has been accompanied by a global flow of wealth, power and image that has transformed the traditional and slower construction of identity, collective as well as individual, into a primordial and tribal need for identity that has sometimes been confused with a narcissistic solipsism and with an identity that is more conferred than constructed. within a new social hermeneutic. Meanwhile, in the general deconstruction and delegitimization of many traditional institutions, increasingly superficial, impromptu and ephemeral cultural expressions proliferate and global networks of exchanges, including symbolic and models, bounce from one side to the other of the networked globe, deconstructing local identities, perceived as increasingly archaic. A fundamental split has been established between abstract and universal instrumentalism

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<sup>5</sup> As Manuel Castells explains, capitalism itself has undergone a process of profound restructuring, characterized by decentralization and interconnection between companies, the strengthening of capital with respect to labor and the decline of the influence of the trade union movement in many areas of the world, as well as a growing individualization and diversification of labor relations, with the persistence of a mostly discriminatory treatment of women, to which is added state intervention for the selective liberalization of markets and the tightening of welfare; All this has led to a growing geographical and cultural differentiation of the conditions for the accumulation and management of capital. The result has been uneven development not only between the North and the South of the world, but everywhere between territories and dynamic segments of society, also favoring the development of global criminal organizations. For further knowledge, see M Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society* (Blackwell 1996)

<sup>6</sup> Cf. *Ibid*

and historical particularistic identities. It is as if our societies were increasingly «structured around a bipolar opposition between the web and the self »<sup>7</sup>, in a sort of structural schizophrenia between function and meaning that puts pressure on traditional social communication schemes and where communication no longer even exists in the form of dialectical communication, but social groups and individuals experience an estrangement in which the other, the stranger, becomes a danger, accentuating the process of social fragmentation. The sole remaining identities with respect to the network, which constitutes an increasingly invasive and pervasive symbolic-cultural macrosystem, are so solipsistic and specific that they become viral on a superficial level but less and less authentically shareable. It is as if we were there, between the man who decides to feel like a cat or a dog, the woman who wants to become a man, the individual who chooses to cover himself with tattoos or piercings, in short, in this incredibly hyperbolic and unrestrained use of the body and all its appendages and sophistications, in a real de facto hermeticism, with the illusion of perpetual communication.

The lack of communication of our times is sadly testified by the increase in suicides of the very young, by the self-harming relationship they have with their bodies, by the phenomenon of extreme closure of the Hikikomori: a rejection of life that perhaps Italo Svevo would have defined as post-modern senility, a terror in the face of reality and a silent request for help. But the relationship with temporality is also delicate and fundamental, and is intertwined with the themes of loneliness and youth depression. From a sociological point of view, it is important to reiterate that the roots of this discomfort are not necessary and automatic consequences of socio-cultural deprivation. While it is obvious that in worse conditions the effects can be more dramatic, it is a problem that affects entire generations of digital natives and young people. It is enough to administer simple cards or chat with the pupils of a primary and secondary school to come across phenomena of real diachronic illiteracy: they struggle to reconstruct a timeline in which to place historical events, often they do not remember on which day of the week they are, they have doubts about the seasons (also because of the climate crisis, undoubtedly): these are the bitter fruits of the tree of technological acceleration of life times, dictated by production logics and the exasperation of the myth of efficiency. The real daily rush to which the children of the almost extinct middle class and urban plebs are exposed corresponds to a quantitative expansion of school time, understood not as an "academic" moment capable of transforming and making competent those who attend it, but conceived as a welfare service, whose extreme duration supports the logic of the labour market rather than forms of protection of the family institution and the quality of education, which is under attack for various reasons. A school that lasts too long and that is boring, a rush that looms, and here anxiety and malaise find fertile ground: this is how technological devices and social platforms can rise to analgesics and mirages of happiness; this is how, having lost the sense and feeling of time in the territories of the perpetual instantaneous, the great masters of the past are extinguished, namely boredom, waiting, creative emptiness, imagination; this is how an army of *selfie-made-teens* wastes its best years chasing a mirage of distinction and identification that then turns out to be a serial uniqueness, homologated within an ideology of the same that flattens into political correctness, neutralizing it, any momentum in the direction of an aware identity.

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<sup>7</sup> Cf. *Ibid*



#### 4. A certain colouring of imagination.

Perhaps the real revolution of contemporary humanists could be, in an etymological sense, a retreat in the direction of the origin, recovering the sense and feeling of time to allow the new generations to recover roots and historical sense. The awareness of a before of the network is the only way to escape the dictatorship of the instant and rediscover a historical flow that opens up possibilities to identities and cultures. Behind us, there is a past that has unfolded outside the network and that within alternative, relational, institutional and symbolic networks, has produced culture. A past made up of scents, temperatures and tangible experiences and movement that the web cannot duplicate. Social actors hooked themselves to those networks as well as to their own historical time through hermeneutical processes. The impoverishment of the actors' diachronic, semantic and linguistic competence is leading to a thinning of the hermeneutical capacity of the new generations, increasingly tied to schematic, superficial, sensational and easily obsolescent narratives, while the depth of analysis and the complex linguistic function remain in the hands of an elite that is inevitably distancing itself from a mass increasingly pushed back into mediocrity, when not in the homologation nice and good, abandoning it to the trivial narratives of the market, aimed at promoting serial consumption to the detriment of artisanal and imaginative originality.

With these premises, it becomes essential to work towards a new Humanism, without ignoring digitalization, in which we are immersed and which nevertheless has some undeniable advantages: a digital humanism that finds a balance in the regulation and curbing of its excesses on the one hand and in the institutional and large-scale promotion of the enhancement of the hermeneutic function in children on the other. It would be desirable for the guidelines addressed to educational institutions to provide, for all learners, the care and enhancement of some offline dimensions. On the one hand, we should work to bridge the digital divide, but on the other hand, we should take advantage of school time as a time of digital detox, with the total exclusion of technologies up to the classes attended by children of nine years of age, so as to preserve the entire period of childhood from digital excesses and protect the first two years of training and maturation of logical-formal thinking in the technical sense of learners. Protect against what? The early use of the devices determines: a reduction in the development of so-called mirror neurons, which contribute to the development of empathy and feelings; it often creates disturbances in concentration and attention; reduces the ability to imagine, visualize, memorize and synthesize in very young learners; Finally, reducing hand-eye coordination in favor of screens and keyboards atrophies some areas of the brain responsible for linguistic functions. These are qualitative teaching measures already adopted in Sweden and partly in Finland, where, moreover, another welfare organization greatly reduces school time. These are qualitative teaching measures already adopted in Sweden and partly in Finland, where, moreover, another welfare organization greatly reduces school time. These are qualitative teaching measures already adopted in Sweden and partly in Finland, where, moreover, another welfare organization greatly reduces school time. These are qualitative teaching measures already adopted in Sweden and partly in Finland, where, moreover, another welfare organization greatly reduces school time. In Italy we are still crushed by a quantitative logic, as if the right to education coincided with a massive amount of hours and days of institutionalized placement of pupils to decongest the family organization, now destructured by increasingly unsustainable work rhythms and weighed down by the impoverishment of the purchasing power of wages. In an ideal world, welfare, work and school should be thought of synergistically, even increasing



"institutionally useless" time such as holidays and shortening the duration of the school year; in a real world, where the economy, as Galgano among others has shown very well, erodes the ability of sovereign states to produce an effective and autonomous law with respect to globalization, we could at least have the decency of rethinking, if there's no other choice, a diversified school time. And this diversification could consist in deferring a part of the school function from teachers to educators, trained for this, in order to do less teaching but better teaching, including digital incursions. In addition to retraining the teaching function and usefully placing an army of educators, this organization would have the advantage of achieving equal opportunities for the very young in terms of experience, if it were also possible to organize camps and qualified labs, focused on creativity and sports. The theme of time returns in terms of quality: it could be possible, also by creating a work and microeconomic spin-off, to propagate in the social sphere another experience of school time: socialization, short holidays and excursions, sports activities - a wonderfully useless time, escaped from the network and wonderfully offline. Maybe that time of the otherwise could give rise to hopes and desires, allow the little ones to deepen their interiority by putting it in dialogue with a positive, encouraging community, instead of getting lost, due to an instinctive need for socialization, in a virtual non-place that is as violent as it is impalpable. This time of the otherwise is at least as important as the clinical and social orthopaedics that is breaking down on schools through regulations of exceptionality, under the banner of inclusion. It is important to welcome, through suitable educational devices, all minds and all difficulties, but I believe it is equally vital to offer opportunities for experiences, visions, freedom. Otherwise, the politically correct school, an alternative counterweight to welfare, and for everyone, will be the school of the very few, and will lose its most creative and motivated pupils. Let's not forget how much mass schooling is a recent historical product, and how easy it is to bring it to its end... Expanding its calendars will not kill this institution, but it will exhaust the teaching function and the well-being of its learners, and there will be no digital device that will be able to do the magic. The chronological ingredient is expensive, but it's an investment worth trying, since men don't live on bread alone, and roses take time...

It is not a short time that the human spirit has wandered in search of lost time, or fled to a free time, to Aion. I certainly don't think I can offer definitive solutions, but today, thanks to the idea offered by Prof. Corasaniti's book, I have the opportunity to propose a first step, and it is with a simple step that every journey is always beginning...