

BETWEEN EXPERIENCE AND REPRESENTATION IN THE DIGITAL AGE

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Every human being, sooner or later, is confronted with a question as simple as it is inexhaustible: who am I really? The answer never arises exclusively from within, but takes shape over time through relationships, lived experiences and the meaning we attribute to what happens.

Identity, rather than a pre-given reality, is a dynamic process that accompanies our entire existence. It is constructed through the continuous dialogue between the inner and outer worlds, between the way we perceive ourselves and the way we are recognised by others.

This perspective finds one of its formulations in the thought of George Herbert Mead, according to whom the Self emerges from symbolic interaction and from

ability of the individuals to adopt the viewpoint of the community to which they belong. Self-awareness is not the result of reflective isolation, but of a relational process through which we gradually learn to see ourselves through the eyes of others as well.

Erving Goffman also takes this line of thought, interpreting social life as a space in which each person presents different images of themselves depending on the context and the people they are interacting with. Through language, behaviour, gestures and the roles we assume, we are constantly constructing the way in which we are perceived.

Representing oneself, therefore, does not necessarily mean pretending or altering reality.

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"Las Meninas" di Pablo Picasso 1957

Representation has always been part of the human experience and constitutes one of the ways in which mutual recognition and social life become possible.

It is precisely this continuity that enables us to avoid a common misconception in contemporary debate: the need to tell one's story did not arise with social media and is not a consequence of digital technology.

Long before online platforms, human beings were already entrusting part of their identity to stories, writing, portraits, photographs and, more generally, to the gaze of others. Representation is therefore not a modern phenomenon; what has changed is the way in which it intertwines with experience.

It is here that the question defining our era emerges. If representing oneself has always been part of the construction of identity, what happens when the possibility of recounting one's experience no longer follows the lived experience, but tends to accompany it moment by moment? The transformation brought about by the digital environment lies not so much in having multiplied the opportunities for representation, but in having progressively reduced the temporal and symbolic distance between what we experience and the way in which we share it.

Increasingly, experience is recounted as it happens, subjected almost immediately to the gaze, evaluation and recognition of others. Representation does not come after the lived experience: it becomes an almost simultaneous component of it.

The novelty of the digital age does not, therefore, lie in the fact that human beings represent themselves, but in having almost eliminated the distance between living and representing oneself. It is within this space – which is becoming ever narrower today – that the most profound transformation of the way we construct our identity takes place.

Sherry Turkle's analysis fits precisely into this context. By examining the relationship between people and digital technologies, the author observes how online

environments offer the possibility to construct and control with extreme care the image we choose to present. Whilst every relationship inevitably involves some form of self-representation, digital tools amplify this possibility, allowing us to choose what to reveal, to alter anything that appears inconsistent, and to constantly gauge the response we receive. Identity thus risks being experienced as a perpetual project of image management, subject to constant scrutiny through the eyes of others.



It is not, however, a matter of attributing to technology the responsibility for a change that concerns solely the tools themselves. Every innovation, in fact, builds upon deeply human dynamics that are already present in social life. The difference is that the digital environment alters the pace of these processes. Whereas in the past there was a space for reflection between the experience and its narration, today this interval is gradually shrinking. We take photographs as we observe, we share as we live, and we recount an emotion even before we have fully grasped its meaning.

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It is precisely this compression of time that seems to be one of the most significant features of the contemporary world. Every experience requires time. Not merely

chronological time, but that quiet space in which what we experience ceases to be a mere event and becomes part of our story, slowly helping to shape who we are.

When this time is constantly taken up by the need to document, communicate or receive external confirmation, the risk is not simply that of becoming distracted, but of undermining the process through which lived experience truly becomes experience.

Byung-Chul Han, too, interprets this transformation as a sign of a society that increasingly prioritises visibility, transparency and constant exposure. In a context where everything tends to be immediately displayed and shared, even the time devoted to inner reflection risks losing its value. What does not appear seems almost not to exist, whilst external recognition becomes an increasingly important component in the construction of self-perception. Experience, rather than maturing in silence, is often guided by the possibility of being recounted.

A similar line of thought runs through the work of Hartmut Rosa. His analysis of social acceleration shows how modernity is characterised by a progressive intensification of the pace of life, in which the speed of communication, relationships and social change increases, without this acceleration being matched by a greater capacity to inhabit the present. The impression is one of constantly chasing after events, whilst the time needed to understand them seems to be shrinking ever further. Identity, too, ends up being caught up in this ceaseless movement, compelled to constantly update itself without easily finding a space for continuity.

Perhaps it is precisely here that the deepest question arises. If experience is constantly accompanied by its representation, what space remains for it to settle, transform and truly contribute to the construction of identity? It is not a matter of pitting the digital world against some improbable lost authenticity, nor of imagining a return to a past devoid of mediation. Rather, the issue concerns the quality of the relationship we establish with what we experience. Every experience needs a moment of silence before it becomes a story. It

is in that moment – discreet and often invisible – that what happens outside us can also take shape within us.

It is precisely at this point that the perspective of Psychosynthesis offers a particularly significant contribution. Roberto Assagioli conceives the human being as a dynamic reality, in which thoughts, emotions, desires and roles represent only some of the many dimensions of the personality. Identity does not coincide with any of these, but is constructed through a gradual process of integration, made possible by awareness. The famous statement that “we are dominated by everything with which we identify, and we can dominate everything from which we disidentify” invites us to recognise that there is an inner space from which to observe our own experience without being completely absorbed by it.

This perspective is particularly relevant today. Whilst the digital world tends to blur the line between living and self-representation, the risk lies not only in excessive exposure, but in the difficulty of

*distinguishing who we are
from the images we construct
of ourselves.*

When self-representation becomes continuous, external recognition may end up shaping our perception of our own identity more than our directly lived experience does. The problem, therefore, is not representation in itself, but the loss of that inner space which allows us to observe it, understand it and place it within a broader vision of the person.

From the perspective of Psychosynthesis, this is not about advocating a rejection of technology or a nostalgic return to previous ways of life. Rather, the challenge lies in reclaiming a quality of presence that enables us to engage consciously with digital tools, without being unconsciously guided by them.

From this perspective, silence does not represent an escape from the world, but a necessary condition for experience to be truly assimilated. Only that which finds

the time to be internalised can become part of one's own story, contributing to the construction of a more authentic identity that is less dependent on immediate validation.

The digital age therefore does not force us to choose between experience and representation. Both have always been part of human life and will continue to accompany it. What is changing is the relationship between the two. The ability to share every moment almost the very instant it is lived profoundly alters the timeframe for personal processing, making the boundary between living an experience and communicating it increasingly blurred. It is in this gradual overlap that, in my view, one of the most significant anthropological transformations of our time lies.

Perhaps the crucial question is not how to escape representation, but how to preserve a space in which experience can still mature before being presented to the gaze of others. In that brief interval – which is becoming increasingly fragile today – lies the possibility of listening to oneself, of attributing meaning to what one experiences, and of constructing an identity that does not depend exclusively on its exposure. Representation may continue to be a form of relationship and communication; however, it should not replace the slow inner process through which every experience truly becomes part of us.

It is precisely within this increasingly fragile and precious interval that one of the defining challenges of our time is played out. Before an experience becomes an image, a story or shared content, there still exists a quiet place where it can simply be lived. Safeguarding that space also means safeguarding the possibility of continuing to recognise oneself.

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