

From objective reality to fake news galaxy: Narcissus Narcosis, images and imagination in contemporary global expanded reality village.

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According to Marshall McLuhan's methodology (Logan, 2010), by determining the terms of human social communication, every media creates an invisible environment of its own, to which human societies adapt, most times without noticing. From successive changes in media ecology emerge new strategies of making sense of the world: new social practices, new forms of art, news values, new ways of perceiving, thinking and materializing thought. The medium is the message, a message understandable by its effects in the old media that it renders obsolete.

McLuhan (1964) names *Narcissus Narcosis* the way by which every media, as an extension of our selves, establishes with individuals a relationship described by the Greek myth of Narcissus: "(...) Narcissus mistook his own reflection in the water for another person. (...) He was numb. He (...) adapted to his extension of himself and (...) has become a closed system". (McLuhan, 1964:51)

Several cultural events testify such effect. Radio Narcissus Narcosis can be recognized during the raise of Nazi fanaticism in German, in the early 1930s, when Joseph Goebbels fostered the production of people affordable radios, so that every home in German could appreciate their mesmerizing power (Meyer, 2018). Also, in the impact of Orson Welles' radio-staging of H. G. Wells' "War of the worlds" in USA, in 1938. Cinema also provoked Narcissus Narcosis: in his "Histoire(s) du Cinema" series, Jean-Luc Godard (1998) suggests that people were so fascinated with the glamorous Hollywood dream-factory, that reality took revenge through two world-wars. Human consciousness gets so immersed in the fascination of any new-media reality that it becomes more real than "reality". It turns easy to understand why, more recently, *whatsapp* and social networks dissemination of information had such a devastating effect over public opinion in several controversial political events, like in the Brexit referendum (2016), in Donald Trump's win in the USA presidential elections (2016), and Jair Bolsonaro's election in Brazil (2018). In a world increasingly complex and hard to figure

out, the narcotic and narcissistic pleasures of seeing themselves reflected in their favorite media device made people extremely vulnerable to any news appearing in the screen confirming their worldview, be it true... or fake.

One of the trademarks of the XIX century worldview was the obsession with the objective, measurable, material reality. A sweet example is the Peter Pan story, the boy who would refuse to commit himself to the limits of objective reality demanded by adulthood, thus remaining forever a boy. In such a worldview, facts were facts. In XXI century's ubiquitous digital environment, one distinguishable phenomenon are the so called "fake-news". We may even call this new environment "fake-news galaxy".

Fake news galaxy can be better understood in terms of the Narcissus Narcosis effect, observed through another crucial aspect of digital media age: the "deluge of technical images"(Vilém Flusser, 2000): billions of images uploaded every month to social popular networks, in a disconcerting consumption of digital images.

Western culture has a well-known visual bias, from which technical images are an offspring. According to Flusser (2000), images are "significant surfaces" intended to represent something out there; also, an image is a "vision turned fix and intersubjective" (Flusser, 1996). These definitions emphasize images' material character, and their role in creating intersubjective, collective consciousness, that is, "imagination": the "specific ability to abstract surfaces out of space and time and to project them back into space and time" (Flusser, 2000). The more images are produced, the more imagination strengthens, up to the point that images cease to represent the world out there to be a reality in themselves. Representation is reversed: images define what is out there, like "the arrow-pierced clay bear to be found in prehistoric caves, a magic identity substitute for the living animal, that will ensure a successful hunt" (Bazin, 2005: 9-10). Flusser calls this *idolatry*. Godard (1998), quoting Bazin, "a world according to our desires".

Material images come to exist according to an epoch's imaginary: one could not imagine Cubist paintings in the Renaissance (Basbaum, 2021). However, by creating a hallucinatory layer over the so called "reality", the deluge of technical images makes tangible our contemporary imaginary in a very particular way: it creates a dense veil of images through which it is almost impossible to reach what is real. Desperate to make sense of an increasingly complex world, people look at digital images urging to see themselves reflected in the black mirror of smartphone screens. In such context, it does not come as a surprise that we experience such a boom of fake news: as Guy Debord (2002) writes, "In a world that is really turned upside down, the true is a moment of the

false”. In the context of 2020-21, we feel tempted to paraphrase Godard, and say that we have been so mesmerized with the overwhelming imaginary modulated by the deluge of digital images, that reality took revenge through a pandemic virus. How do we escape this? Historically, art has always been the weapon that helps us to see our invisible environment. The radical, experienceable criticism of images is the counter-spell which may free us from the sortilege.

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