

SPHERES OF ACTION

THE TECHNOLOGICAL SHIFT OF CONTROL

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AFFORDANCES
ORDER OF INTERACTION
CONTROL

Social interaction and experience are defined by their action possibilities; that is, they can be analyzed from the perspective of performative control (or lack thereof), namely their dynamics of activity and passivity.

What I am able to influence in my environment and what lies beyond my reach determines my disposition and identity in relation to others. In this regard, media and communication devices are not only technical forms capable of modulating physical

distance, but they can also transform the structure of action possibilities, rearranging the relationship between who controls whom, between what is possible and not possible. From this standpoint, the present paper will suggest a different take on the well-known dichotomy presence/distance, reframing it through the opposition activity/passivity, or controllability/non-controllability, seen as a relevant perspective in investigating the nature of mediated experience.

Perceptual and social experiences are determined by the structures of action possibilities; that is, they can be analyzed from the perspective of performative control or lack thereof. For example, an image on a screen—a face speaking to us—does not provide us with enough information to determine the kind of experience we are dealing with if we do not take into account the actions that led to it. As a matter of fact, the same image could be the result of two completely different pragmatic events, based on opposite states of active control and passivity: the first is the familiar situation of watching a person who gets ready for an online conversation, activates her camera and, after getting our attention, addresses us. The second completely different scenario would be that of the observers remotely activating the camera, or even pointing it towards the person like a moving CCTV, making her appear on the screen and finally commanding her attention. This scenario would upset even the most seasoned scholar in surveillance studies, but paradoxically it is more similar to how we normally orient ourselves in the physical environment when we direct our attention to someone and address him directly.

Media and devices are technical forms capable of modulating physical distance, but also, as we have just seen, shape action possibilities, determine the relationship between who controls whom. From this perspective, in addition to the well-known dichotomy presence/absence (or proximity/distance), I would like to highlight here how the dichotomy activity/passivity or controllability/non-controllability is a relevant issue in investigating the nature of mediated experience.

FROM PRESENCE TO CONTROL

Investigating how visual experience is mediated and determined by technologies, but also how any social and cultural system regulate the visual order, has been the task of research about the “scopic regime” (Jay, 1988). Screens,

in this regard, constitute the most pervasive contemporary technological device framing most of our experiences with visuality (Carbone, 2016). Even though the term ‘regime’ seems to connote a form of coercion or manipulation, every form of cultural setting and technical innovation necessarily determine how we relate to reality and to others. Just as, for instance, architecture or landscaping organize the way in which we interact and move in the environment, likewise online communication is a technological system that re-determines the structure of our spatial and temporal experience (Stiegler, 2018).

The ubiquity of media technologies facilitates an overcoming of spatial barriers, and in an event like the pandemic, it also substitutes face-to-face encounters with the intensification of synchronous live communication, stretching beyond the old asynchronous communication we are used to. Synchronicity reveals the performative character of media use, the asynchronous production of messages (texts, recordings, and documents) gives way to activities and interactions. This leads to a reconsideration of the crucial opposition between presence and absence (or closeness and distance). In the philosophical debate, presence is associated with a state of experiential immediacy or spatial co-presence, or more generally to the idea of immediate intuition, transparent self-awareness, and “nowness” (Noë, 2012). A well-known conceptual complication consists of the fact that images and media in general contribute to the recreation of this presence in *absentia*. The effect of presence by means of images and media coexists with its opposite, distance, or absence (Wiesing, 2005). Moreover, a further complication arises if images are no longer objects of pure contemplation, but something with which we effectively act and interact with. An image in this sense ceases to be framed solely by the perspective of imaginary detached observers looking at something in which one “sees something in it”, as Richard Wollheim (2015) notoriously put it. Instead, an image becomes something in which we ‘act’ and are involved with as subjects. In the case of screens and

interfaces that simulate realities, we can pragmatically operate by moving icons on a desktop, throwing them in a trashcan, building a CAD model of a house, playing in a virtual environment, video calling someone and talking to the screen as if I were talking to the person in presence. The pragmatic dimension of acting 'with' and 'in' images defines a new kind of presence and blurs the boundaries between mediated and non-mediated reality, eventually requiring new conceptual categories.

As mentioned at the beginning, this pragmatic dimension can be described through the structure of action possibilities or as cognitive science would say, through the 'enactive' dimension. Action possibilities and their constraints have a role in constructing the nature of experience and, in a more radical way, in building subjectivity. In other words, I am the product of what I can control, as opposed to what is outside my sphere of reach. If one wants to recall J.G. Fichte, the "I" begins to recognize itself through the encounter with what resists its actions, namely the "not-I" (Fichte, 1794/1997, p. 30).

Control in this sense has an affinity to the idea of presence, not in the sense of spatial co-presence and temporal synchrony, but in the sense of the possibility of a subject to reach and transform his object, his capacity for influence. Absence of control would instead be the impossibility of action, such as absence of influence, and therefore pragmatic distance. Pragmatic presence differs from physical, spatial presence; in fact, there can be control in the distance, as it is in the case of most remote communication, and there can be absence of control in physical presence, as when a person is prevented in reaching his object or having influence over someone else, despite their closeness.

Under notions such as reach, influence, or control, we understand not only the possibility to manage our environment directly but also to influence the perceptual, cognitive, and affective experience of the other. More precisely: I am 'in control' of the person in front of me in reference to the visual dimension, not only if I am able to determine when and how to observe him (as in the aforementioned case of the surveil-

lance device), but also if I can impose my appearance onto his perception, and therefore command the other person's attention. Similarly, I am in control under the domain of 'touch' if I have the possibility to influence the tactile experience of the other person, that is, if I can approach and touch him. Clearly, the relationship between influence and control can be asymmetric. For example, an asymmetry in power may reveal itself in the fact that an authority figure is allowed to approach and touch another subject, demonstrating her sense of control, but not the other way round. The well-known concept of 'gaze', for instance in the Sartrean phenomenological-existentialist perspective, or in the Lacanian analysis of subjectivation, can be here generalized beyond the specific context of the psychoanalytic 'scopic drive' and be extended to any enactive aspects related to all action types and perceptual orientations toward the environment and other subjects. We here redefine the process of subjectification not in terms of perspective and viewpoint, but rather of action and potentiality: the subject defines himself through his level of activity and passivity. This brings us close to the classic Spinozian view of the individual as defined by his power of action, as resulting from the dynamic of self-determination as opposed to external determination. All entities, according to Spinoza, exist on a range of different degrees of action capacity and dynamic potentiality. Interestingly, Spinoza's capacity-driven view of individuation was influential to thinkers like Gilbert Simondon, whose analysis of technology as a human mode of existence in the world (Simondon, 1958) defines a new conception of individuation as determined through our relationship to technology. According to this view, human action is determined by technology and our relationship with the world and with the others is accordingly transformed.

Given such premises, I prefer here to keep a narrow understanding of the notion of control, focusing on its enactive and operational aspects, and to refrain from expanding it toward a Foucaultian viewpoint on the social and cultural determinants of power and on the dynamics of gaze and

surveillance practices (Foucault, 1975; for an overview: Lyon, 2007). The disciplinary nature of power is a broader issue than the technical and practical aspects of control as defined here: to be the one who maneuvers a communication device (as in the opening example) is not in itself an expression of subjective autonomy or emancipation. Yet, investigating the operational level of micro-practices and the strictly pragmatic dimension of how devices shape the ‘affordances’ of potential actions can offer useful analytical tools for broader thoughts on power relations.

FROM INTERCORPOREALITY TO THE INTERACTION ORDER

From a pragmatic and action-theoretic point of view, a subject’s activity can be analyzed through the set of potentialities (or absence thereof) manifested in the environment and made possible by its configurations. There are aspects of the environment we are able to manipulate and aspects that are beyond our intervention. We can decide to focus our attention on some features, but sometimes other cues take hold of us. In a social setting, we could mostly determine our physical posture and perspective toward other subjects, but we cannot change their appearance, nor how their presence acts upon us. Some objects are within our reach, others are beyond it.

The description of this grammar of ‘enactive’ potentialities is not the subject of a single theoretical approach. The cybernetic theory of control, quantifying the ‘degrees of freedom’ of a system, could here be linked to the notion of “affordance” of Gibsonian ecological psychology. Moreover, it can be also related to Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology of corporeality as well, which is central in the contemporary orientations of cognitive sciences investigating the embodied and enactive dimension of experience. More specifically, Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s notion of “intercorporeality” suggests the necessity of including the personal and social features of the

environment, since the norms and rules of conduct, as well as other people's behavior, regulate what is possible and what is not possible in a social scenario. As Merleau-Ponty (1964, p. 119) stated, "the other's intentions somehow play across my body" as a set of possibilities for my action: what the other is doing reveals the potentialities of my actions in the case of an engagement with that individual.

Therefore, not only the material structure of the environment but also the invisible system of behavioral norms determine a system of social affordances that guide our decisions in the encounter with the other. It is not surprising that those approaches have also been compared to Erving Goffman's classical investigations on the micro-sociology of interaction and identity construction (Dolezal, 2017). Goffman is perhaps the scholar who in more detail developed a phenomenology of the interaction order. In a way recalling Georg Simmel's contributions, according to Goffman the use of interpersonal space has a physical but also a symbolic function that is oriented to manage the "egocentric territoriality of the self", including all strategies of 'social distance' as a system of rules managing interpersonal relations (Romania, 2020). Those rules consist in a complex dialectic of masking and revealing, of 'backstage' and 'front stage' activity, in which every subject deals with the boundary between what is controllable and what is not controllable in the environment and in the performative situation, ranging from basic rules of politeness to the public management of failures and slips. They constitute a system of complex symbolic exchanges mostly regulating physical movements and signals in the space through kinesics, proxemics, gestures, 'facework', expressions of attention/distraction, rituals of deference such as gaze avoidance (as in 'civil inattention'), and respect of personal space (Goffman, 1959, 1967, 1971).

Norms have a constraining character since their violation leads to conflict, stigmatization, and alienation. This can happen when behavior is perceived as weird because it does not conform to those norms, such as excessive body or

eye contact, lack of response during dialogue, unwarranted pauses and interruptions, violations of personal distancing. “When individuals come into one another’s immediate presence,” Goffman writes, “territories of the self-bring to the scene a vast filigree of wires which individuals are uniquely equipped to trip over” (Goffman, 1971, pp. 135-136). It is no coincidence that many artistic avant-garde practices, from situationist acts to radical theatre and performance art, often aimed to violate those complex balances, using social provocations as an emancipatory gesture by disrupting the rules of interpersonal conduct, civil decency, and behavior in public (Stephens, 1998)¹.

THE TECHNOLOGICAL RESHAPING OF ACTION POTENTIALITIES

The crucial point in Goffman’s view is the fact that there is no ‘unmediated’ relation with the others and the environment since all relations are dramaturgical in their nature: the others are the audience and each individual, through his staged persona, is a medium. This is a viewpoint that opposes the idea of a state of immediateness and rather follows the postmodern view of a staged self that echoes, among others, Judith Butler’s notion of the constructed and performative self (Butler 1990). Consequently, the distinction between the ‘offline’ (direct, in presence), and ‘online’ (distant, mediated) relationship becomes less straightforward than the distinction between simple physical presence and absence. The transformation given by the advent of new forms of communication cannot be defined as a transition from a state of immediacy to that of a mediated absence. Rather, what we have is a reconfiguration of the interaction order, of the dynamics of control and passivity. More precisely, each specific medium or device redesigns the physical and social affordances, each system restructures the possibilities of action (Thompson, 2020).

To make a specific example, in recreating presence through digital communication an observer is no longer the one who directs and masters her gaze toward the observed subject. In the remote connections with others, moving in space, exploring it, focusing one's own gaze on other people is no longer possible. The observer is now in a passive state regarding to their orientation to the other, the relationship between observer and observed is inverted: in fact, the observed subject sets up her camera, microphone, and environment; constructs the observer's perspective; and decides how and what the other will see (and hear) of her. Usually, this inverted relationship works in both ways, so that everyone is engaged in the effort of setting up his own image for the other to be seen. The attention previously dedicated to exploring the environment and directing his gaze to the others is now channeled into self-presentation.

Higher self-government and control of my appearance does not necessarily result in an increased effectiveness toward others. Even though I have almost total control of how I appear, I have no control over how this appearance will be used and how it will affect others. In fact, the appearance on the screen becomes an object of potential manipulation, the speaker can be silenced, his image be sidelined or hidden, his presence ceasing to command attention. Even if the other person believes that he is visually present to me, I can privately set aside his presence by not looking at him on the screen, obscuring it or surfing the web on a different window. That is, I can modulate his impact on me. This is radically different from what Goffman called "civil inattention", which is an openly performed act of "not looking" as a manifestation of tactfulness or avoidance of conflict. (Goffman, 1971, p. 85)

In a virtual context, and depending on the kind of device and platform, one can modulate and stage his presence to the social interaction in ways that are not shared and that cannot be necessarily directed by others, except

when explicitly asked to do so. I can put on an invisibility cloak, so to say, giving me powers otherwise denied. On the contrary, the appearance of the other person can stimulate an unwelcome and unplanned curiosity, since his image could be freely magnified, scrutinized, recorded, shared, and archived.

On the one hand, those examples show that we have an extension of action potentiality: I manage the gaze of the other (that is, 'how' the other sees me) and at the same time, I have perfect control of the materiality of his appearance on the screen. However, this double capability of the subject is counterbalanced by the fact that one's digital presence is also the object of the same kind of exposure.

These ways of influencing how the other will see me, along with seeing myself being seen by the other and, thirdly, being able to freely process or attend the other's image, contribute to new and heightened forms of corporeal and postural self-awareness, in the construction of self-image through the setting up of the other's gaze. At the same time, this intensification of Goffman's theatrical stage concept could also potentially converge in a process of reciprocal "avatarization" (Pinotti 2020), in which we become the puppeteers of carefully constructed public images of ourselves. Although, on the surface, certain modes of online communication seem to favor informal, more intimate and spontaneous modes of relationship, the higher self-agency leads to an increase of the immaterial self-presentation labor. This intensification of individual efforts around one's appearance leads to a greater self-reflexivity (which is also practically intensified by the presence of one's own image on the screen: I see myself talking), and a higher feeling of accountability towards previously contingent environmental aspects, such as the personal spatial setting of the 'background' for which I now become responsible.

Overall, what we see here is technology's redetermination and in some cases reversal of performative affordances of the spaces of interaction, where proximity's usual struc-

tures of controllability give way to new possibilities of intervention and loss of old ones. Consequently, technological re-mediation determines a shifting of the manageability of experience and, in general, of the micro-dynamics of the self-other relations. By mutating the structure of action possibilities, technology shapes perception and experience using remodulations of what is open to control and what is not, of who affects what and when. At the same time, we experience a contraction and an extension of our reach to the other. Factors previously outside of my control, which belong to the contingency of the environment and are characteristic of spontaneous encounters, become elements I have to plan for and for which I am accountable².

As a final note, it should be observed how the technological change of the structure of performativity also lays the foundations for a transformation of the order of affectivity. The change in enactive possibilities determines a transformation of what is the product of affection compared to what is the product of action. Therefore, an analysis of these transformations cannot avoid detailed investigations about the features of each specific device and technology. Just as aesthetics has recognized how the structure of our corporeality is an essential foundation for understanding our perceptual relationship with the world, so does the understanding of the transforming functions of technologies become an essential part in investigating how experience and performative possibilities are redefined by them.

NOTES

1 One could be reminded of classical performances like *Valie Export's Genital Panic* (1969), where aggressive staring and nudity were directed to provoke the public, as well as many well-known works by Marina Abramovic. In his *Frame Analysis* (1974), Erving Goffman refers to the long tradition of plays by Jean Genet, Eugene Ionesco, Joseph Heller, but also to examples from radical theatre groups and happenings performances of his time, such as the *Living Theatre's Paradise Now* (1968) that led to arrests for indecency, and the *Performance Group's Dionysus* in '69.

2 On the loss of contingency, see Alloa, 2020.

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