For a Grey Ecology...

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The concept of grey ecology was introduced by P. Virilio in 2009, as a way of thinking of the by-products of the digital revolution on the human mind. In his work on the dromosphere (the space of technological acceleration), Virilio argued that just as risks and accidents are intrinsic to technological innovation, pollution is the side effect of progress, to some extent its 'normal' but unacceptable companion. However, while the risks of the digital era are well known (e.g. the end of privacy, state control, viral attacks, network meltdowns, data theft) and there is an active engagement on the part of experts, institutions and the public, to find technical and political solutions to reduce their emergence and limit their effect, there is little thought and concern about digital pollution. The concept itself is difficult to define, evoking e-waste, electromagnetic fields and overheated server farms. If pollution is defined as the introduction of contaminants in the natural environment causing adverse changes, it is unclear, even, what are the natural resources that are being affected and that need protection. There is however, a growing suspicion that the precious resources currently under stress are located not in the environment but in our minds. Herbert Simon already in the early 70’s suggested that: «...in an information-rich world, the wealth of information means a dearth of something else: a scarcity of whatever it is that information consumes. What information consumes is rather obvious: it consumes the attention of its recipients. Hence a wealth of information creates a poverty of attention and a need to allocate that attention efficiently among
A. Economy of attention: from abundance to scarcity

We usually speak of digital society as an abundant society as far as informational resources are concerned contrasting this to previous ages in which information was scarce, difficult to access and to disseminate. However from the human perspective, this evolution may have gone in the opposite direction, transforming what was abundant in the past – namely attention – in a far more scarce and more distributed asset. If we follow the prevailing cognitivist model of attention, which postulates a mental architecture that has extensive computational capacities but a dramatic intrinsic limitation determined by our capacity to attend only to few elements at a time, the formidable multiplication of informational content has not been accompanied by an equivalent increase in attentional processing and this is inevitably determining a competitive view of the allocation of this capacity. Following the social and economic logic of all scarce resources, we are therefore witnessing the creation of a market for attention.

In this market the competition is fierce, as our screens multiply (TVs, laptops, phones, tablets..) and our communication channels do the same. News contents compete with email, photos compete with music video with sms. The producers of information, be they corporate or individuals, are competing among each other for a fragment of time and focus and when such focus is finally obtained it can create huge economic value.

The concept of ‘economy of attention’ was first developed by M.H. Goldhaber (1997) as an alternative approach to the more traditional industrial and monetary economy. In his model, attention becomes the central factor structuring economic exchange. The power of such a model is very clear in the digital economy, where the most successful business actors are the mediators between people and information which support the filtering, organising and trustworthy selection of content. When this is accompanied by techniques to measure, quantify and monetize attention, new mechanisms of trading can be developed.

For the individual however, who is the object of such contention, there is a big price to pay, which is a personal struggle for agency and control. Many users of digital media are complaining of a prevailing sense of losing their mind, of being distracted, of wanting to do something and then being drawn into another task, and these concerns are becoming part of the common discourse about technology. Most professionals are currently testifying of the dramatic compulsion to check their email on a minute by minute base, reacting to incoming demands rather than being driven by a self-directed plan.

There are many factors coming to bear in this battle for the mastery of attention; agency, business models and social relations among them. In an
attempt to go beyond a purely cognitive perspective, which has been predo-
minant when talking of information processing, we strive to put this issue in
a socio-historical but also political framework.

A.1. Attention as a Dynamics of Control

In the workplace the mastery of attention has long been one of the axes of
social dynamics, used to extract value, dominate, create allegiance, stratify
and empower. It is this relational nature of attention management that S.
Broadbent (2011) has called attention to, attempting to shift the discourse
from a purely cognitive one to a social one where attention is a process
which creates value.

If we look at this issue, in a somewhat Marxist, Foucauldian and partisan
reading, it can be seen as a new step in the long path of the history of capi-
talism, as a new page of the disciplinary conditions of life: the first page
concerned the body and the shaping of a working force; the second page
focalized on knowledge and the development of the scientific organization of
work. The third page is the contemporary one and its object is attention. Our
hypothesis is that the digital age is marked by the discipline and control of
attention. This does not mean that attention was not an object of influence in
the past but that digital environments dramatically increase the stakes.

Learning to control attention has been a significant objective of the educa-
tional system for as long as public education has been in operation. Teaching
children to «pay attention» to focus on objects that are externally imposed,
has been a central part of school education. The importance of developing
such a «skill» is made manifest by the sanctions that accompany the lack
of attention, distraction or generic non-compliance to concentrating on the
teachers’ centre of focus. The layout and material environment of class-
rooms, with the rows of desks facing a central or elevated point, also indicate
the efforts of creating attention monitoring environments. Finally the whole
process of isolating children from their family environments and personal
connections when entering the school premises also suggest an institutional
precursor of the situations that will be experienced in the workplace.

At work the equation between productivity and attention is deeply engrained
in managerial models. This hypothesis tends to be confirmed by T. Davenport
and J. Beck (2001), two “gurus” in the management’s world, when they claim
that the effective allocation of the employees’ attention is one of the key
factor of the business competitiveness. Channelling, monitoring and control-
ling attention becomes thus engrained in work processes, rules, artefacts
and above all digital tools. The design of effective user interfaces, under the
auspices of ergonomic principles ensure the elimination of potentially alter-
native perspectives or views and focus actions and reading on the essential
elements. Rules and procedures are drawn to exclude personal devices or
personal digital endeavours while on the job (by blocking external websites,
or internet access, or mobile phones). The digital surveillance of all online
activities, through dedicated surveillance software, can give rise to sanctions or the elimination of potentially distracting digital spaces.

On the opposite end, obtaining «digital trust» or «digital independence» is a sign of status, of trustworthiness of social promotion and acceptance. Having access to the whole range of the web, to personal communication devices and services, or more in general being bestowed with the «freedom» of self-determining when and where to put one’s attention in the realisation of one’s activities, is the ultimate sign of social recognition and of higher social status.

Digital communication media have significantly extended the spaces, both social and physical, in which personal exchanges are being performed. Written channels in particular, have expanded the contexts in which individuals can maintain their intimate relations, allowing people to bring their personal sphere within institutional settings, such as schools, workplaces, hospitals, that had banned them for many years. Calling a partner from work, emailing friends from the professional computer, texting at school has become a universal practice, which while giving huge pleasure and comfort to those that indulge in it, raises concerns in educators and employers on its effect on productivity. For the last couple of centuries, the control of attention, presumed necessary for effective work, has in fact, been associated with the separation of individuals from their personal social environments, equating productivity with attention and isolation.

The political and economic challenges around attention management are made manifest by the way how different organisations react and regulate access to personal communication channels, such as mobile phones or Facebook, and uncover some significant social dynamics surrounding the control of this process. Greater freedom of access is in fact systematically given to those members of an institution that are considered more trustworthy and with a higher status, be it in age, position or education. There is in other words a much more stringent control of access for lower level and lower status jobs: said brutally while managers, academics and creatives can access social network sites all day long, employees in retail, manufacturing, transport must keep their mobiles in their lockers. Digital divide is not any more only a question of access, availability or education, it is more profoundly linked to the management of other people’s attention, as different social groups are controlling the groups they dominate by controlling their attention.

To some extent, this new social division evokes also the division made by Sennett and Harvey between the globals who are very mobile both physically and digitally, not grounded anywhere and therefore neither committed to any place, and the locals, a more static class both digitally and physically, often very defensive of their localities. To these two classes, Baumann (2001) adds the underclass, excluded from everywhere, made mobile by poverty, war or discrimination; a ‘diaspora’ connected only by mobile phones and SKYPE....
A.2 Attention as competitive edge

T. Davenport and J. Beck (2001) claim that three terms dominate the everyday life of managers: excellence, performance and urgency. Responding to these imperatives, makes the modern executive into the contemporary representative of the Weberian ethics of the Protestantism (N. Aubert et V. de Gaulejac 2007). In the eighties and nineties, they argue, the management “ethics of excellence” created the moral foundation of a system striving to control the totality of a person; mobilizing psyches, capturing individual desires for success and career, expecting passion for work, with a continuous control of employees’ adhesion to the values of the company. In convincing employees that by working for the firm, they were working for themselves, there has been a complete blurring of professional and personal requirements, and companies emerged as institutions capable of mediating individual destinies, supporting self-development, objects of true love, and in the end the only instrument able to fulfill the need for immortality of the self. (…) The acceleration of globalization in the last decade, with all the consequences in terms of restructuring, delocalization, rationalisation, has destroyed the ideological veneer behind the search for excellence, unveiling the true violence of economic relations.

The new work ethics which has emerged from this highly fragmented and global environment, creates particular interactions between people, marked by the constant need to become visible. This quest for visibility takes the form of a new social game in which everyone is striving to capture the attention of others. Digital technologies are, to some extent, the best vehicle for this game, encouraging, enabling and animating it. For companies, capturing and holding their employees’ attention is important, not only to sustain performance but also to ensure loyalty and commitment; attempting to retain staff in a business world that, thanks to the previous ethics of excellence, has “manufactured” individualistic competitors which are far more mobile than in the past. For companies, being always present on personal communication channels, on web-platforms, etc., is a way to colonize the minds of their managers and to reduce their capacity to imagine another world. On the employees’ side, in a sort of Goffmanian ‘parade’, making noise to brand yourself by permanently “newsing” people about what you do, where you are, what you think, is a way to occupy the mental space of others and to stay at the top of the competition. Z. Bauman compares this behaviour to that of bees: in a swarm of bees, to be at the top, you must make more noise than the others and frequently change your direction.

This pattern of interaction brings with it a new set of pathologies of which the most common is what is being called a ‘burn out’: the paradoxical feelings of being permanently exhausted, overloaded, pressurised by a constant sense of urgency and yet having a sense of losing productivity or being unable to achieve a task. Controlling the attention of others and dealing with the constant solicitation of others is accompanied by a dramatic sense of loss of self-direction, intentionality and planning. This is not only observable at the level of individuals, but can be also be seen at the level of whole companies which, after having made huge investments in IT, experience a clear
decrease in their productivity. In a sort of prospective ‘magic’ intuition, H. Simon (1971) had already anticipated the drama of the computational dream of omniscience-omnipotence for our ‘bounded rationality’, when, observing, with humour, the ‘data’s frenzy’ of managers, he said, in a sort of genial metaphor, “an additional drop of water has never prevented anyone from drowning…”

A.3. Intimacy as a defense

The French expression of the ‘for intérieur’ can help us understand the human issues at stake here. In the Latin, ‘for’ means jurisdiction. The common understanding (not the ecclesiastic one) of the ‘for intérieur’ is the jurisdiction that each person applies to her/his self, what in social sciences we could also call a sense of agency. When talking about their experiences, executives describe a sort of permanent blurring between In and On life, and thus the impossibility to make this for intérieur exist vividly in their lives, in. They talk of burning from the inside of themselves. But what is happening in the workplace, is also happening to digital consumers in general. The sense of losing one’s sense of control when engaged with digital devices, is described by gamers, TV viewers, social media participants. They all talk of their devices as “time sucks”, as environments in which they lose their intentions and agency.

Another facet of the same problem is what R. Sennett (1977) describes as the current tyranny of intimacy. This is in contrast to the traditional patterns of social interactions which were organized through clear social roles that each individual played in the different spheres of their life: as workers, lovers, parents, citizen. Nowadays, observed Sennett the king (and the queen…) are absolutely naked. Social distances, masks and shelters have disappeared. Which means that individuals have no sanctuaries to retreat to and hide from the scrutiny of others, but feel always visible and transparent… raising obvious questions for the plurality of social identities. And this explains the increasing position of the home and of the inner circle of the family as a protective cocoon and the growing success of activities such as cooking and gardening, which restore the sense of duration, agency and privacy.

On the digital side, we also have an indication of this retreat onto the private, the intimate and the controllable. There is ample evidence, showing that all new digital communication channels, from texting to Skype, from Facebook to instant messaging, are being used to strengthen people’s closest and most intimate relations. Contrary to common public discourse, people have not hugely extended their social network nor do they spend much time communicating with unknown digital acquaintances. Close scrutiny of what people actually do with all the channels they have at their disposal, shows an intensification of exchanges with very few close ties, often less than 5, that lead to the strengthening of these relationships. All the data on mobile and internet communication we have at our disposal shows that users in most countries are having short and frequent exchanges with the people that are
closest to them. This constant and ubiquitous link between individuals and their loved ones is very emotionally intense and the feeling of being always within reach provides a profound sense of safety and comfort.

A recent survey made in Belgium on 3000 teenagers (S. Gallez and C. Lobet-Maris, 2011) confirmed similar research in the US (Ito 2010) showing, that most of the participants had an ‘entre soi’ connectivity based on intense chatting and messaging with the small circle of the friends they have in ‘real life’. The teenagers did not separate virtual and real, but considered ‘online spaces’ simply as a new social scene in which they can be together, exchange ideas or tastes, experiment their social identity. The absence of distance between their off and online lives makes them consider the virtual world as a concrete social reality dedicated to entertaining continuous contact with an intimate group of friends and relations.

Another way in which we can describe what we have been observing in our research, is that the retreat onto the intimate is marked by the search of a “protective cocoon” to face an endemic uncertainty, and an extreme form of filtering out the excess of information (social and relational information in this case).

B. The disembodiement and dataification of experiences

There is another aspect that exacerbates the issues around the control of attention which is related to the widespread process of dataification of experiences.

B.1. Dis-embodiement

The professional and institutional realms have introduced a completely new layer of objects and processes that are forcing employees, clients, citizens and patients to operate within virtual spaces characterised by unclear social norms and regulations. The partial or total automation of workflows and processes have been led by the predominant if not exclusive logic of an increase in productivity and efficiency. The drive to optimise procedures and tasks in terms of cost effectiveness has totally determined the design and specification of the systems deployed. The consequence of these transformations are too many to discuss in detail here, but a couple stand out for the elaboration of a general argument on the way people are dealing with digital information:

- many tasks have been decontextualised
- many activities have been fragmented and are carried out in isolation
The manipulation of symbolic elements on user interfaces that often carry the same logic across a great variety of tasks (manipulating a client record in a call centre is analogous to manipulating the configuration of temperature level in the control of an industrial process) means that from the cognitive perspective, workers are operating at an extremely high level of abstraction and are operating on symbolic representations that are very distant from the object worked upon. The type of fragmentation of the information required by the computational models provided, often decontextualises single elements of information and contributes to the sense of virtuality. Finally the fact that many activities are carried out as fragments and in social isolation also increases the sense of dis-embodiment.

To some extent, what we observe is the progressive dominance of a specific regime, which Boltanski and Thevenot could have qualified as an industrial regime, based on risk management, evidence-based practices and 'procéduralisme'. The virtual and the real are questioned by this evolution since what we observe in the evolution of working practices is part of what Kallinikos calls the long journey of human distancing from immediate, social, living context through its abstraction into formal systems and categories: the data-ification of the life.

### B.2. Identity and data-ification

Algorithmic systems, acting as new cognitive interfaces, are changing how meaning is ascribed to the world, to its inhabitants, to their behaviours. They are also changing the ways individuals are (automatically) identified, tracked, profiled or evaluated, often in real time, adding opacity (invisibility) to traditional systems of identification, evaluation, and thus, of "government".

These systems raise a number of concerns regarding the access to information and the divide between public and private spheres. The growing presence of these systems has to be understood through the paradigm of liquid modernity. Automated, algorithmic systems ‘read’ our lives, screen our emotions, calculate our bodies, in order to profile us and to select for us the most appropriate information or decisions. But contrary to more classical social mechanisms of socialization and control, these systems are invisible and unintelligible as far as their actors and their normative frames are concerned. Their processes question the notion of ‘alterity’ since these systems draw profiles on the ‘mêmeté’ (myself and the similar others) and therefore raise the question of the possibility of an ‘agora’. Furthermore, most of those systems are increasingly considering the body and its biometric attribute, as the only objective or authentic source of our ‘personal truth’, based on the central hypothesis that “the body does not lie” (F.K. Aas, 2007). The flip side of this assumption, is clearly a lack of confidence in people, their subjectivity and their agency. To some extent, one could read this form of technological development, as one step more in the domesti-
cation of the body’ as presented by Arendt in her comments on private and public spheres.

Overall we are seeing technological systems that develop techniques to bypass individual intentions in favour of bodily states and statistical averages, and a transformation of all experiences into fragmented elements of data. The combination of these two trends amplifies even more the difficulty of individuals to attribute meaningful categories to the information they are attending to and increases their dependence on external mediators to filter and structure the content they are exposed to.

C. Back to the grey ecology

Looking back, we have always lived in excessively stimulating environments both in social and physical terms and attentional processes have allowed us to operate successfully in such spaces. Our material and physical environments are as rich and as complex as our digital ones, probably even more so. We have been successful in the physical space, among other reasons, because artefacts and social norms have sustained the cognitive processes by orienting and significantly reducing the attentional demand of our physical environments. In the social sphere as well we have elaborated signs that guide attention, for instance social status provides a clear clue regarding whom we should attend to with priority. The joint effect of the recent predominance of the economic metaphor surrounding attention, and of the opaqueness of the distance introduced by the digital environments (which for their nature and for their novelty are stripped of the traditional signs of relevance and importance which generally help us navigate the material world) mean that we have lost our cognitive props and therefore the competition for attention has become primitive and brutal. This brutality is even reinforced by the concern of Z. Bauman (2005-2007), U. Beck (1986) and R. Sennett (2005) regarding the difficult conditions of the modern social existence, much more individualized than in the past due to the failure of our traditional institutions of socialization.

All this leads, according to P. Virilio (1995) to a dramatic loss of orientation, a significant disturbance in the relationship with oneself, the others and the world.

How to protect our attention, how to restore our sense of self, agency and social orientation? The exploration of the concept of grey ecology could help to design the path. We wish to explore this novel idea about ecology from two different perspectives: the first one is clearly positioned into an interactionist frame and go more deeply into the attention concept in its relation to the sense of self. The second perspective is related to theories of socialization and new social movements and explores the relevance of the concept of ecology as a political path to restore the sense of alterity.
C.1. Grey ecology as an ecology of the SELF: the interactionist frame

More and more discussions about the digital are introducing considerations about the self and its transformation. Like vultures circling above a carcass, all of us involved in reflecting about the digital world, are hovering over the notions of selfhood and personhood trying to grapple with the doubt that we are witnessing a redefinition of self. Annette Mahrkman for instance writes in a recent paper:

“For me, a symbolic interactionist studying digital culture since the early 1990s, these ways of being in the second decade of the 21st Century highlight certain elements of interaction that were not as visible in traditional face-to-face settings:

1. Boundaries between self and other are often unclear, particularly when information develops a social life of its own, beyond one’s immediate circumstances.
2. Boundaries of situations and identification of contexts are often unclear as dramas play out in settings and times far removed from the origin of interaction.
3. Agency is not the sole property of individual entities, but a temporal performative element that emerges in the dynamic interplay of people and their technologies for communication.
4. Performativity can be linked not only to individuals but actions of the devices, interfaces, networks of information through which dramas occur and meaning is negotiated.”

The question we would like to address in this concluding section of our contribution to the Onlife discussion and in the light of our arguments on the social nature of attention is the following: can a reflection on attention help us to shed some light on the debates on agency and selfhood. When we observe a modification in our patterns of intentional action as we are immersed in digital environments, is attention the hostage of the process or on the contrary, the enabler? It may be the case that it is the very nature of our attentional mechanisms which allows us to engage so deeply with the digital. In previous sections we have made the case that the nature of the code and algorithms determines our actions through the fragmentation of activities or as Bolter says because it encourages users to «proceduralize their behaviour” (p. 45) The fragmentation not only determines the tasks and actions, it blurs the limits between the agent’s actions and the system actions, in such a way that it becomes impossible for the agents to distinguish between their intentions and the system’s. In the interplay with the digital environments therefore, systems’ requests for attention are more than a simple appeal for the users’ consciousness, it is the urgent request for participating in the action. But this has been the case since the introduction of partially automated systems.
What is new and may have an even more distinctive effect on the definition of self, is the fragmentation of information and activities among networks of people through the digital systems. The collaborative online activities that now characterise the majority of «knowledge work» and that are being described in terms of swarms, collective intelligence, critical mass, etc. are maybe the strongest manifestation of the shifting boundaries of the self. When we put together a network of agents who are individually fragmented by their interaction with their tools and who organise their mutual activities around those fragments, is there a phenomenon of expansion or dilution of agency? The constant reciprocal appeal to contribute with small bits of information, tasks, exchange, is just a more recent form of labour subdivision or does it fundamentally alter the relation to others? Are we observing a growing instrumentation of relations that make others into data or on the contrary as many visionaries of the Internet (Rheingold, Shirky, Weinberg) the emergence of new forms of collective intelligence? The MIT Centre for Collective intelligence has the following motto: How can people and computers be connected so that collectively they act more intelligently than any individual, group, or computer has ever done before? This question summaries the issue very well.

If this is the case, relinquishing attention to the collective flow is not a problem, defending individual attention, as we have posited in the previous section, is counterproductive, because attention must be renegotiated constantly for the collective intelligence to work. Phenomenologically, many people are already experiencing a sense of boundary redefinition between self and other when they are online (Gergen, 2000). The experiences described by gamers, programmers but recently simply people who are heavily engaged in email exchanges, all suggest a sense of flow and participation that by some is described as a loss of agency and other an exhilarating extension of means.

In order to understand how all of this is happening, we have to refer to our exceptional, species specific, as Tommasello (2008) has shown, capacity to join into other people’s attention. The development of the ability to envisage that other people have a state of mind different from one’s own, the capacity to read other people’s intentions and finally the inclination to join into other people’s attentional states, enables language, culture and co-construction. Joint attention is seen by developmental psychologists as a prerequisite for language acquisition and it is potentially what explains that humans are the only species that has developed language and advanced forms of collaboration. It is also potentially what is making the hyperconnection proper to the digital world such a double edged sword. We are extraordinarily capable of collaborating with minimal information on very poor communication channels (think Twitter or SMS) because our powers of empathy are so developed and our capacity to infer and project meanings and intentions are supported by pragmatic processes of relevance (Sperber and Wilson, 1995) which again rely on the sharing of attentional spaces. However it is also this power that loses us in the inordinate flow of requests, messages, instructions, information so well described by Gergen.
All of this means that an ecology of attention may in fact have much further reaching implications than initially intended. If joint attention is such an extraordinarily developed social process which is involved in the core of our activities and our sense of self; by addressing attention, and envisaging an alternative to «limited resource» model which underlies the monetization and quantification of the process as we described above, we may in fact be entering the perilous waters of an ecology of the self.

C.2. Grey ecology as an ecology of alterity: the political frame

The pervasive and obscure tracking of our digital life and its real time transformation into a myriad of fragmental and evolving profiles render both the social identity and the social belonging less understandable and more complex. This leads, according to the beautiful expression of Th. Eriksen (2001), to «the hegemony of fragments».

The brutality or the violence of the process could be related to the progressive disappearance of the social habitus (P. Bourdieu, 1979) due to the extreme individualization and opacity of the attention channeling and profiling. This habitus was both a guarantee of a socially shared (class) episteme of the world and a collective protection against the world complexity and uncertainty.

For A. Touraine (1993), the rationalization of life has progressively destroyed the traditional correspondence between social organization and personal life, leading to a massive de-socialization. "We no longer internalize social norms and roles...we no longer can understand or explain our individuality in social terms". Placed into a Goffmanian frame, all of this means that we are losing the rituals and the codes that help us to preserve our face while preserving the face of the other, a skill and process which is at the very root of social ties.

This transformation leads, according to P. Virilio (2009) to a loss of orientation which in turn has tremendous consequences for the sense of alterity and for democracy : “The specific negative aspect of these information superhighways is precisely the loss of orientation regarding alterity (the other), a disturbance in the relationship with the other and with the world. It is obvious that this loss of orientation, this non-situation, is going to usher a deep crisis which will affect society and hence, democracy”

In a very similar vein, D. Quessda (2007), argues that the hegemony of fragments and of dynamic differences, makes the figure of the Other slowly disappear: "It seems that we now live in a proliferation of differences. It is not at all the same as the otherness (l'alérité). The all-round contemporary exaltation of difference is perhaps the clearest sign of the disappearance of otherness. When men stop themselves to be crossed by a founding division, (…), the setting necessary for the existence of the Other disappears and all
figures vanish one after the other - whether in the form theological, political or ontological.”

We all feel threatened by the loss of collective identity and of the awareness of otherness. To face such a loss different social groups have different strategies: “privileged social categories can recreate active participation through voluntary association and thus control their own self through education; but weaker groups either reject universalism and accept the authoritarian defense of a national or cultural identity, or become a mass of uprooted consumers of material or symbolic goods, unable to create original cultural patterns” (A. Touraine, P. 54).

The democratic challenge we are currently facing consists in finding a new democratic basis of orientation or in other terms finding a route to escape from a “latent civil war between markets and tribes, mass society and closed cultures, imperial liberalism and aggressive nationalism” (A. Touraine, P. 55).

In the previous age of solid modernity or in the industrial period, exploitation, poverty and class conflicts, triggered the emergence of collective movements, making an industrial democracy possible. In the age of digital post-modernity, any collective movement (ex pluribus unum) is difficult to operate due to the opacity of the ‘digital assemblage’ and to the extreme individualization of digital lives. And this, as already pointed out, leads to the loss of clear figure of otherness.

For A. Gorz (1993), “Classical class analysis cannot provide an answer to the question of which social forces would be capable of achieving these transformations. There is no central front where decisive battles can be won through class confrontation. In other words, the front is everywhere, because the power of capital is exercised in a diffuse fashion in every area of life”.

Grey ecology can be considered as an invitation to politicize our concerns about our human and mental resources, just as green ecology did in the past with the natural resources. Grey ecology could open the door to new forms of solidarity by setting a new front of collective engagement and general interest. A way to make clearer this new front is to compare it to what happened to the ‘artisans’ at the end of the 19th century to the present situation. Now like then, we are witnessing the process of expropriation of human prerogatives: a hundred years ago it was the knowledge and gestures of the craftsmen that were being automated, more recently it is personal data, history and digital traces that are being captured. These processes of rationalisation and automation impose order in an attempt to reduce the endemic uncertainty and variability of human activity and control the limited attentional capacity of humans (the operational one in the industrial world and the intentional one in the consumption world). Placed in this frame, attention can be conceptualized as a political and collective concern, as a new front for solidarity and resistance.

Why do we refer to ecology? For two main reasons. First of all, because as well developed by A. Gorz (1993), the underlying motivation of ecology is
the “life-world” against “quantification and monetary valuation, against the substitution of mercantile, dependent, client relations for the individual’s autonomy and capacity for self-determination.” But also, because the ecology as a social and cultural movement is maybe the more relevant mean of ‘resistance’ to ‘face’ the digital assemblage and its opaqueness. Since ecology concerns people’s attitudes and ways of living, it is for S. Rodota (1999) a promising cultural and political path, allowing, by shared reflexivity on the digital technologies and their pollution, to avoid the sterile pro and con debates. Ecology is also a means to diffuse forms of cultural vigilance which can be promoted in schools and the media. Finally, it can also orientate the political and industrial authorities towards actions and research which promote ‘clean technologies’, which are sustainable with respect to our attention and our capacity of self-determination and accountable regarding the processes they perform to fabricate identities and differences. To some extent, when the European regulator decides to introduce the concept of ‘Data Minimization’ in its project of regulation to protect the individuals as regard the processing of their individual data, one could read it as a first move towards this grey ecology.

“Hannah Arendt warned us so long ago, “miracle and catastrophe are two sides of the same coin”. If we can begin to assess the tragedy that has spread through real-time networks, Paul Virilio’s demand for a novel sort of ecology, a grey ecology for the man-made world of the dromosphere, can no longer be ignored.” (D. Burk, 2011).

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