The Mythical Narcissus in the Endless Online Loop.
On the Metamorphosis of a Myth in Cyberspace

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Abstract: Is social media causing anxiety and breeding obsession? It cannot be determined whether the cause is social media and technology, but it occurred with the emergence of the internet. As nowadays people live in the world of Facebook, Instagram, TikTok or Twitter, where they can instantly connect on meaningful or superficial levels, the online behaviour needs to be understood, in order to gain insight into understanding the present culture, human development or stagnation in the current paradigmatic shift.
Keywords: digital anthropology, artificial intelligence, Narcissus, echo chamber, avatar, cyberspace, global village, digital twin.

INTRODUCTION

This is a study undertaken starting from the genealogy of a concept in an extremely generous text in terms of meanings. It is the Ovid's story of the myth in which all the other reflective isotopes of Narcissus find their roots in today's world.

Hypothesis: if artificial intelligence will become the ultimate thing, that is, it will think for itself and its thinking will be a thinking of thinking, then one can talk about the transcendent narcissism in which the intellect will contemplate itself in an endless exercise of speculation.

Myth is an incredibly complex cultural reality, which can be approached for interpretation from different and correlative perspectives. As stated by Mircea Eliade (1963), the myth narrates a happening that took place in the legendary time of the beginnings, and through the deeds of Supernatural Beings, a reality came into existence – in this present case, a species of plant (narcissus) and a specific type of human behaviour (narcissism, proto-echo chamber). Thus, its central function is to reveal the archetypes for all human rituals and all meaningful human activities. The myth of Narcissus tells the story how a pattern of behaviour can be established.

This is why myths comprise the paradigms for all revelatory human acts. Knowing the myth, one knows the origin of things and hence can control and manipulate them at will. The knowledge gained about the reality of myth reveals the meaning of moral actions, as well as the clues regarding how they should be performed.

NARCISSISM AS A MYTH OF BLINDNESS

The first mention of the legend of Narcissus was recorded in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (1959). According to Ovid, the nymph Liriope, Narcissus's mother, has asked the blind seer Tiresias whether her son would have a long life. The prophet's answer contains a condition: Narcissus may have a long life unless he fails to recognize himself. It can be noted here that the external blindness of Tiresias foreshadows the internal blindness of Narcissus. In the case of Narcissus, what leads to blindness is the sensation of the representation which constitutes a false sight. Also, Tiresias' prediction does not postulate a visual taboo, but rather an epistemological one.

An interesting actor in the metamorphosis of Narcissus is the nymph Echo, who had previously suffered the misfortune of annoying the goddess Juno with her chatter. Therefore, she had been punished by only being able to repeat the last thing said to her – this was Echo's first metamorphosis: expressively suspended by Juno who denied her the independent access to language (the inability to live in the word). Her second metamorphosis is of being physically suspended by Narcissus.

Narcissus imagines Echo's sayings to be those of a different person, but in reality, it is only his own voice that is being thrown back to him: *Who is here? Here.*

From this perspective, the myth can be interpreted by thinking that the voices someone hears in his/her mind are often his/her own voices, incorrectly imagined to be other people's voices. Translated to social media, this category is represented by the people for whom the purpose of each moment is to record themselves as being there and share this fact in the social media environment as much as possible. Unlike those people, Narcissus did not talk to someone else. He rejected the real nymph, as a separate voice, and turned her into his own voice in his own imagination, thus becoming the symbol of a doomed nature of self-love.

Ancient Narcissus would thus correspond to the world of relationship, being elucidated in what Martin Buber (2022) calls the fundamental pair *Ich-Du*. Instead, the Narcissus of the present world opens up the world of experience given by the fundamental *Ich-Es* pair.

Narcissus falls in love with a phantasm that will vanish when he tries to possess it, and thus he is left on his own. In other words, his obsession leads him to solitude. His personal relations were non-existent, so he constantly needed his own admiration.

In online, there is an arrogant belief that one person is the centre for other people's recognition and interest. People fell that they deserve respect or admiration from others, but sometimes there is a short distance between this and being overdependent on the opinion of others, which can develop in despair or paranoia, when that praise falls into short supply. From this perspective, it seems possible that cyberspace is the space of illusion (the illusion of autonomy to which people entrust themselves) and false consciousness.

Referring to the natural depth of a watery reflection, Louis Lavelle (2019) notes that a mirror integrates a second world and it is this world that Narcissus cannot have. The illusory distance cannot be traversed.

Following this direction, Gaston Bachelard (1983) insisted on the role of an idealized narcissism. Water serves as a mirror, but it is a mirror open to the depths of the self: the reflection of the self that is viewed in this way betrays a tendency towards idealization.

The mythical figure of Narcissus is usually associated with media theorist Marshall McLuhan in connection to his figure of modernity claimed by Jacques Lacan. Narcissus became numb by looking at his reflection in the water, therefore he drowned. For McLuhan (2013), the drowning of Narcissus was not caused by the love with himself, but by the fact that he was not aware that his own image was reflected in the water. McLuhan (2013) defines media technology as compensation for human weaknesses and shortcomings. He sees the development of media technologies as an extension of the central nervous system. Thus, he condensed his considerations in the myth with a focus on the numbness of Narcissus's perceptions which made him become a closed system,

impossible to escape or hear anyone outside of it. Thus, McLuhan concluded that people can be aware only of what is in their own mind, while every new extension represents self-amputation which forbids self-recognition. The approach is similar to the ancient desire for everlastingness and action. The kind of activeness and self-empowerment which people are refused in daily routine urges them to embrace cyberspace. The real world is replaced by an imaginary world in which the images of ourselves stand before experience and feeling. Based on this assumption, the alter egos in cyberspace allow the borderline between reality and appearance to become permeable. This loss of reality is an expression of today's narcissistic structure. Narcissus only sees himself and experiences his uniqueness as a vain image. That is to say, the more pictures people have of themselves, the more projection surfaces are available, and thus the more indistinct their self-images become in a virtual-harm-and-attachment-environment.

This environment created by the technological progress doesn't want to listen to the inner voices of Narcissus (*primary phenomenon*), but to control them and redesign his will accordingly (*epiphenomena*).

Everyone agrees that technology is neutral, but then, the way technology is used is a question of interpretation. For instance, when faced with the assumptions for Human Digital Twins (NTT R&D, 2021), it is important to bear in mind the possible bias in these developments. The use of Digital Twins associated to humans may not be necessarily positive. Depending on the owner of such knowledge, it may lead to the creation of immortal perfect humanly beings. Therefore, there are no limits to protect people from themselves. Until then, manipulation via mass media appears to be an easy task when taking into account that people absorb information without filtering it through critical thinking.

As dark as it looks, one has to admit that people might be turning to be the result of information patterns. The border between terms described by Francisco Collado-Rodríguez (2021) as *transhumanity* and *infrahumanity* is fading away in such a scenario. While sophisticated body enhancements can lead to extraordinary developments in expanding life for some people, the ones who will not afford such technological devices will be exposed to the environment's challenges – climate change, global pandemics, etc.
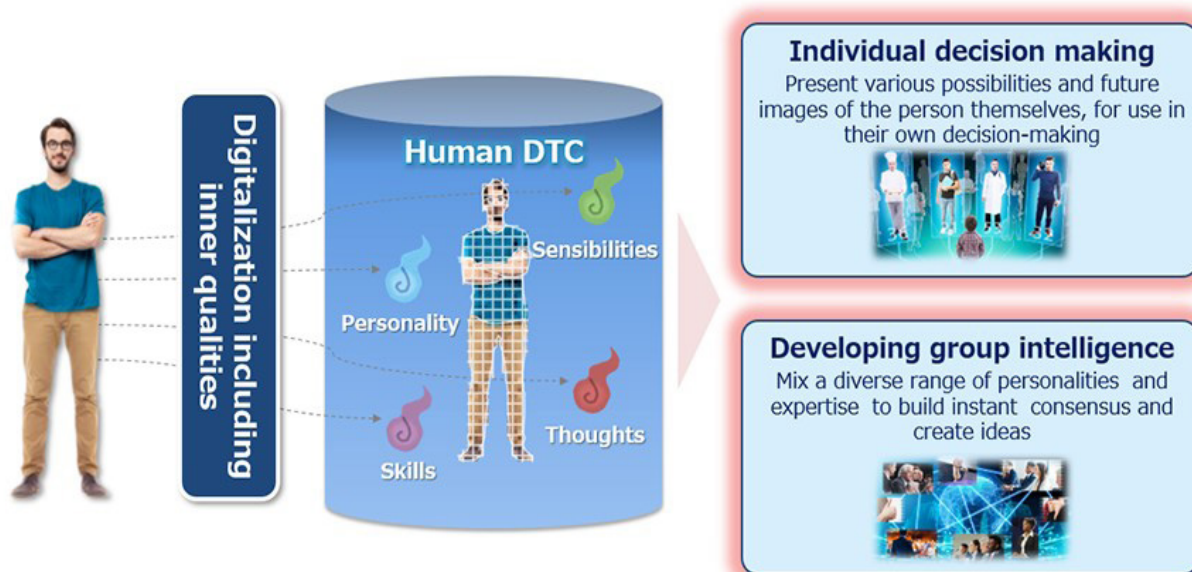

Figure 1. Human Digital Twins (NTT R&D, 2021)

AGAIN, ECHO

What is known from Ovid about Echo is that she was a nymph, not just an echo, and that even before having the experience with Narcissus, of all the words, she was repeating the last ones as the result of a punishment given to her by goddess Juno.

Echo cannot remain silent when somebody else is talking. More than that, she cannot speak first. Echo always needs somebody in order to express herself, in order to be. It looks like she is the Digital Twin of Narcissus in the online loop, always replying by imitating Narcissus own voice. The seemingly identical words that return to Narcissus's ear are no longer his words. They become the stolen language of the one who cannot speak for herself. Thus, Echo's orality is a punished orality. Echo postpones the Other's speech by turning it into her own speech. No wonder that Narcissus cannot differentiate the solid repetition from the empty one. This is the reason why he rejects Echo and falls in love with his virtual image.
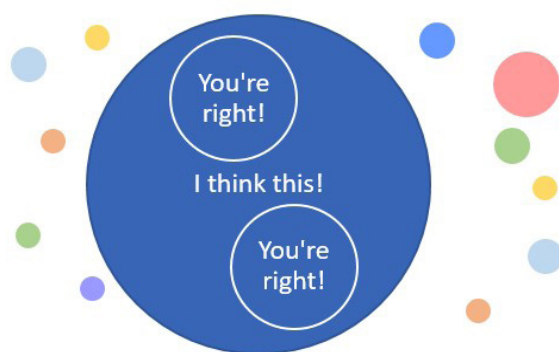

Figure 2. Echo Chamber

There is a very different phenomena at play related to our myth: echo chambers. An echo chamber is a social structure that systematically excludes sources of information and exaggerates its members' confidence in their beliefs (Jamieson & Cappella, 2010; Nguyen, 2018). In other words, it is what comes about when someone doesn't trust people from the other side, just like Narcissus. Thus, an echo chamber is a social structure in which other pertinent voices have been actively taken down. The mode of operation is based on the isolation of its members by actively estranging them from any other external sources. Moreover, what comes from the outside of an echo chamber is actively marked as vicious and not worthy of confidence, so that the attention remains on certain insider voices. The isolation is a matter of who is accepted as an authority, expert or trusted source of information. Similar to Narcissus, members of an echo chamber hear, but turn off the outside voices. As in the ancient myth, there are no two presences in the same language, namely there are not two different voices in the same language.

Admittedly, there is a lot of pathological processes that are feedback loops which have gone out of control. If the narcissists are garnering excess attention online and the algorithms are amplifying that, then one can talk about virtual social spreading. Also, propensities can be normalized very rapidly online as a consequence of the generation of community because people tend to regard themselves in relationship to the immediate peer group that they articulate around them.

Things that are so troublesome to people in online don't seem to make themselves manifest in the real world at all. So, one obtains this weird divorce as a consequence of this layer of abstraction which is the online world that produces its own associated pathologies later developed in self-destructive behaviour.

MY AVATAR, MY SELF

The name of the avatar can be a vessel with which we can navigate through discourse, be it the inner ocean of the online. This navigation through discourse, diving into the sea of anonymity seems to be the only way to exorcise a sick self, presented frequently as an abbreviation – a modest concept of a person.

The word *avatar* < Sanskrit *avatarana*, refers to the descent of a Hindu deity to earth in an incarnate or tangible form, where *ava-* means "off down" and the base *tarati* means (he) "crosses over". As defined in Merriam-Webster

Dictionary, *avatar* derives from a Sanskrit word meaning „descent", referring to the incarnation in earthly form of Vishnu or another Hindu deity. By extension, when encountered in online, avatar applies to the image used by people for their embodiment in such an environment. In order to have more insight on the meaning of the word it is useful to mention its synonyms: icon, ikon, image, epitome, personification, embodiment, incarnation, incorporation, genius, objectification, instantiation.

Today, the avatar has little to do with God, and everything to do with technology. Does a person choose an avatar because of the lack of being able to identify its authentic voice? What is the problem to which choosing an avatar is a solution? Is it an individual or a community problem? By solving this problem, will there be other problems created by the use of an avatar? Afterall, the digital world is able to fill absences by the manipulation of knowledge when people strive for connection in their unconscious attempt to restore the illusion of infantile omnipotence. And this shouldn't be hard in cyberspace, the space where people belong to *nowhere* and *everywhere* in the same time.

For clarity, in this paper, the word *other* is used when referring to a computer development and the word *Other* when referring to a human being. The other would be here the result of an evolution that could have produced a *zombie* instead of a conscious creature. This entity resembles a human being in every respect, and behaves identically to the subject, can hold conversations, look happy or sad as a human, but has no consciousness because there is no magical add-on of consciousness.

The avatar seems to achieve the erosion of the self since the names of the avatars are just etymologies that express differently the affirmation of the virtual presence. Avatars only postpone the presence of the self because they do not embody a presence (of the original), but an absence. After the disappearance of meaning, the empty shell of the sign (the avatar) slowly shrinks, leaving only the illusion of an existence – *le soleil noir* of Nerval, a light without depth or representation.

Choosing an avatar necessitates much identity creation work that includes consideration of what *persona* someone wants to project. Consequently, there is an aspect of starting fresh, hiding or exaggerating in the naming process, which would not happen in a face-to-face situation. When a user interacts using a chosen avatar, he or she builds on that intentionally created *persona* and interacts in the online community and for a long period of time under that avatar.

This created *persona* is rather the identity that people would like to establish in the offline world, but they have not been yet able to do it. People chose the avatar for the life they want, not for the life they actually have.

Also, there still seems to be an element of idealisation in the way people present themselves in social media, in the sense that the person we see in this environment might be the person we are trying to become. It is comparable to the myth of Superman, a famous mythical theme. The superpowers fulfil the secret urge of people: although people know they are fallen, they still dream to prove themselves one day as a Hero or an exceptional person. Personalization or hyper investment of the Ego do not represent, as it would seem, forms of identity consolidation. It is actually the reverse: they are but symptoms of what Jacques Derrida (1993) called the *empty self*.

Projected identity as a narcotic ornament or mythical behaviour can be perceived in the mania of success that is so typical for today's society and that may express a mystic desire to surpass the limits of being a person. Choosing an avatar, remaining in love with their projection in the online, looks like the wish to reach other temporal cadences than the one in which people have to live their lives. Consequently, it is hard to say if this longing to beat one's own time and be submerged in a chimeric time, will be ever rooted out.

Figure 3. How to create an avatar from photo (Zmoji, n. d.)

On the Internet, a person can be turned off, while in reality this is not possible. Internet allows this because there is no responsibility since people are not forced to deal with complex or difficult social situations. Internet is still an anonymous place where a person can interact as being any other person he/she would like, mostly without consequences. Thus, a reasonable hypothesis can be formulated concerning social distancing phenomena: in front of the computer, sheltered from immediate interpersonal feedback, people are much more likely to act in a self-centred and self-aggrandizing manner because they lack that immediate feedback and there's absolutely no consequence whatsoever to behaving in a narcissistic and self-centred manner online.

There are concerns about how much the devices may be affecting the relations between human beings and also how they might also be changing people's mind. Even with the friends, people seldom give them their undivided attention, because they constantly check their smartphone and social media accounts, letting themselves dispersed in a cloud of electronic and social input, under the God of immediacy that isn't really focused on long-term. Sad but true, people are on the edge of losing their ability to really pay attention to the Other, and hence the decline of empathy and the increase of narcissism. Kevin Robins and Frank Webster (1988), while discussing about utopian vision of economic and technological expansionism assumed that people may become slaves without Athens in the future of new technologies.

As mentioned before, Narcissus enters the story blind. His blindness has only one direction: towards himself. Narcissus sees the world and his own beauty reflected by the reactions of others. He sees the world, but does not see himself seeing. Narcissus is the one who sees himself seeing, without knowing that he sees himself. A kind of bizarre circularity is thus established between the seeing eye (the real self) and the blind eye (the reflected image). The blind eye remains blind, swallowing the sight of the seeing eye.

A lot of people base their self-esteem on the number of so-called-friends they accumulate on social media platforms. The number of *likes* and *friends* they have become the measure of one's self-worth, while the absence of those things becomes the base for doubts, insecurity or anxiety. Everyone online, in some ways, is a celebrity of different proportions. They have their followers, they have their fans, so

the social media seems to facilitate image or impression management.

The border between private and public self becomes complicated and the profiled self-identity, instead of a reflection of individuality, turns into a means of being validated by others in their digital communities. Thus, popularity becomes a number of likes and followers, so a free path to cyber bulling.

It can also be noticed that true self-identity is sacrificed to match what the digital world perceives as satisfactory. No wonder cyberspace is flooded with monotonous uniqueness, conventional individuality or distinctive sameness since people mistakenly equate popularity with friendship and come to believe the quantity of friendships is more important than quality.

The myth of Narcissus is fundamentally altered in a world where the self has disappeared. The full presence of the ancient myth is thus replaced in today's world by the generalization of absence promoted by anonymity. The anonymous refuses its own visibility. Its non-visibility is part of another visibility, a visibility that makes possible the postulation of narcissism. The metamorphosis here is the reconciliation of the narcissist with himself by being another *persona* or other *personae*.

One can talk about classical social psychology when, keeping their anonymity, people are much more prone to be verbally aggressive, this being a challenge in terms of online interaction: when people are not face-to-face, they cannot see the look on each other's face while saying something unpleasant or highly critical. Being anonymous frees people to just go with their base impulses.

The transition from *I love myself as I am* to, *I am the way I love myself* shouldn't surprise us if we pay attention to the *it's all about me* mentality we currently experience. And this mentality seems to not only accept but also promote narcissism as the norm. The shift from community to individuality, from meaningful contributions to the society to personal success might have contributed to the cultural message of narcissism.

Socializing for teens has moved online. Getting out of the house and hanging out with friends or other people doesn't happen as much now because the party is on Snapchat or on Instagram. Therefore, due to technology there is much more interaction online and less face-to-face.

This type of attitude is generally seen as a factor strongly related to young people unwanted interaction in online. With more than 100 million people seeing safety notifications on Messenger in just one month in 2021, as presented on their forum, Facebook developed a number of tools for teens to let them know if something makes them feel uncomfortable while using their apps (Meta, 2022). Starting November 2022, everyone who is under the age of 16 (or under 18 in certain countries) will be defaulted into more private settings when they join Meta (Facebook), while the teens already on the app are encouraged to choose more private settings in terms of who can see their friends list, who can see the people, pages and lists they follow, etc. Similar privacy defaults for teens were introduced on Instagram.

Do you know this person in real life? should be a trigger for what is admittedly known as linguistic investigations of online security. As already highlighted by David Crystal (2011) in his study, having diagnosed a conversation as dangerous, identified the suggestive questions (*Are you alone? Where are your parents? What colour is your hair? What are you wearing? Can I take a photo? Can we get together? Have you told anyone?* etc.), and suggested possible responses (*That's my business, I don't tell people that, Not interested, Get lost!*), what happens next is for others (parents, social media platforms providers, child protection agencies, police) to determine.

In 1960' McLuhan talked about the world becoming a *global village* based on the propagation of media technologies in the world which allows people to be interconnected. Hitherto, people are experiencing quite the opposite, since they are trying to find a sense of identity by going back to their roots. Furthermore, the exceedingly interconnected world of social media is often regarded as a conducive factor for social panics. Analysing the way tic disorders spread via TikTok in *Believing*

is Seeing short film collection 2022, Robert Bartholomew, an expert in mass psychogenic illness (MPI), considers that social media, similar to MPI, can trigger genuine illness by the spread of videos.

There is also a facet that needs to be observed in terms of how AI can provide useful information based on pattern interpretation. Having in mind the above mentioned, a comparison can be made with the science fiction television series *Travelers*, created by Brad Wright. The action takes place in a post-apocalyptic future in which thousands of special agents (known as *travelers*) have the task of preventing the collapse of society. In order to avoid any impact on the future, their consciousness is sent back in time and assigned to host bodies of present-day people who are actually about to die.

The transfer of consciousness is made based on hosts' social media and public history, each traveler having to maintain the host's life as substitute for the rest of his/her life.

The reason why this paper brings into discussion the above-mentioned movie is one of its main characters, Marcy Warton (Traveler 3569). Her role is to be the team's medic and she assumes the life of a mentally-challenged woman who works in a library as a cleaning girl. In the attempt of teaching her about social media, her social worker (David Mailer) created a fake social media profile which presented her as a librarian. Thus, The Director – the AI monitoring the travelers from the future – was unaware of her real state of health. The irony is that the character metamorphoses overnight to the surprise of everybody who knew her, starting to be questioned whether she was pretending before. The AI knowledge was not able to catch the substance of a human being because all the information resources were based on a projection and not on a reliable source.

CONCLUSION

Is cyberspace the end of any meaningful community life? There is no definitive answer as people do indeed form personal and meaningful bonds with other users online.

Cyberspace can be seen as an allegory for a space to accommodate people's consciousness when using Internet. But now it is known that the algorithms on social media tend to amplify things that are divisive because they get more engagement. That's how people engage more and that's how the companies make more money. Hence, those tend to be pushed to the top of the people's social media feeds. The result is a relatively small population who's dominating this conversation but ruining for the rest of the community.

The people's deepest identities are the ones that connect them to Others. There is something common to all people and getting in touch with this common element means getting in touch with their true self. Compared to face-to-face co-presence with another human being, in cyberspace everyone can be anyone they want (this calls into question the very meaning of being human).

Users go online for recreation (phatic communion) as well as for business or educational purposes. Thus far, there are both good uses and unhealthy misuses which may lead to intended outcomes or unwanted consequences. The identity of a person is embodied not only in himself/herself, but also in the memories and thoughts of others. The profiles on a social media platform are multidimensional as they extend both social and public identity, therefore what people represent for others may sometimes go beyond their control.

On the one hand, social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, Twitter, etc. can be viewed as receptacles of narcissism. The amount of time spent in front of the screens has reduced both the quantity and quality of face-to-face interaction in prejudice of the knowledge gained by actually developing or maintaining essential social experiences that counter narcissism, such as empathy, kindness, altruism, etc. On the other hand, many technology-driven relationship metamorphoses have generated a positive impact. Online communities based around mutual interests and thoughts are healthy in the age of digital

nomads. Technology has enabled disconnected communities to substantiate relationships that have boosted inspiration and innovation or to maintain connections with relatives or friends who live far away.

Does the enlarged use of technology involve an ineluctable attunement since it is now clear that the virtual reality is not a panacea for the ongoing anaesthetizing environment? How can a person reach its subjective unity of the being-in-the-world? These are just a few questions to which digital anthropology has the capacity to bring together mythology, literature, linguistics, philosophy, arts and science technology in order to provide meaningful insights.

Considering the hypothesis from the beginning and the things presented above, it can be concluded that the world could become the mirror of the creator (AI), and this, a hypertrophied ego suffering from autophilia: a narcissism in which the reflected image is the self-portrait of its own visibility.

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