



The contemporary malaise of interpassivity: On feeling, subjectivation, and automation

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Abstract From a psychoanalytic perspective, this article presents and discusses the concept of interpassivity as a possible unconscious dynamic constitutive of the new forms of contemporary malaise and how it is implicated in the dynamics of subjectivation and enjoyment. Drawing on Mario Perniola's insights into the changing nature of feeling and its radical numbing, the article seeks to connect the threads of this form of malaise by investigating the influence of interpassivity in our relationship with objects and shedding light on the complex interplay between subjectivity and the objects that surround us. Furthermore, the authors propose a reading of interpassive practices that, from within the horizon of contemporary malaise, implies the disappearance of unconscious subjectivity and appears to induce specific processes of desubjectivation.

Keywords contemporary malaise · interpassivity · automation · feeling · desubjectivation

Introduction

A change has occurred in the way we feel about the objects around us. A return to older fashions, taking photos using vintage filters, as well as filming TV series or movies that belong to previous generations, are all perhaps implicitly revealing that we have lost something and that this has to do with the way we perceive the 'things' around us. One wonders if it is because we have lost the authenticity that used to characterize these types of aesthetic products. However, in any case, the art world is implicitly saying something about our subjectivity, something which seems to have

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been caused by a change in our relationship with the objects around us and, no less importantly, in the way we experience pleasure through them. As Mario Perniola (1991) argues in one of his essays, entitled *Del sentire*,

to our grandparents, objects, people, and events showed themselves as something to be felt, of which they had an internal experience ... to us, on the other hand, objects, people, and events show themselves as something already felt, occupying an already determined sensory, emotional, and spiritual tone. The feeling has acquired an anonymous, impersonal, and socialized dimension that needs to be traced. (pp. 4-5)¹

Although these words come from a work of more than thirty years ago, they cannot but resonate as if they were written today. This numbing of feelings is likely just a way to describe a kind of malaise that, from our point of view, is much broader and involves unconscious dynamics manifesting in our relationship with objects. The purpose of this article is precisely to highlight the role played by interpassivity in the formation of this pervasive contemporary malaise.

The Origins of Interpassivity

As the leading theorist of interpassivity, Robert Pfaller (2003/2017), points out, the concept originated as a tool used by Slavoj Žižek (1997) in his attempt to show how, from a Lacanian perspective, the unconscious can be placed outside, and that our most intimate vicissitudes can be acted upon by external agents. Žižek refers to a passage contained in *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: Book VII* (Lacan, 1986/1992a), titled “The Splendor of Antigone,” where Lacan points out that the chorus takes on the function of the spectator present on the stage of Greek tragedy, which feels emotions such as compassion and fear in the spectators’ place, thereby relieving them of the need to experience these emotions. Žižek (1997) compares the function of the chorus in Greek tragedy with the prerecorded laughter of American sitcoms, which appear to have the same function: to laugh in the spectators’ place so that they do not have to. In both cases, the subject is relieved of the duty of enjoyment because someone, an anonymous entity watching over the superficial which is also itself superficial, has already laughed: something has already been determined.

Building on these premises, Pfaller (2003/2017) reiterates Žižek’s suggestion by approaching it from an aesthetic point of view and arriving at a discovery that, at the time, was hidden and impossible to see without the contributions of visual art. To better understand the concept of interpassivity, Pfaller (2004) proposes an example that is rather bizarre but still related to everyday life: “Let’s imagine the following scenario: a man goes to a bar, orders a beer, and pays for it. But then he asks someone else to drink it for him. Having finished the beer, our hero leaves the bar satisfied” (p. 62). Although a rather unique event, this example perfectly reflects the

¹ All translations from Italian and French sources in this article are ours unless stated otherwise in the references.



core of interpassivity. Pfaller (2003/2017) expresses the concept thus: “Interpassivity is delegated ‘passivity’—in the sense of delegated pleasure, or delegated consumption” (p. 55). This enjoyment is delegated to what Pfaller calls interpassive mediators, which can be a machine, a human being, or an animal; those who use such mediators are called interpassive persons. But how do interpassive persons delegate their enjoyment to interpassive mediators? In answering this question, let us now broach the “methods of interpassivity.”

Looking around, we will surely be able to find an action that employs interpassive modes. One example could be dating apps such as Tinder. It can be said that, through a profile representing our person, we can “meet” someone, while we are busy doing something else. Our virtual representative will then intertwine with other profiles that are closer and more in line with the type of people we would like to meet while relieving us of the duty—sometimes even the embarrassment or difficulty—of getting to know someone in the reality of an intersubjective exchange. The application will have “chosen” —though not in a definitive way—the right match.

If we analyze this phenomenon deeply, we can identify two critical elements. First, interpassivity is not just about delegating laborious work to someone or something, since what is delegated is a pleasurable consumption, an enjoyment from which the subject keeps a distance. Furthermore, an interpassive mediator produces a false activity (Žižek 2006)² that is formed through a ritual act.

By the term ritual, we want to refer to that set of symbolic actions and procedures that are performed in the same way again and again to achieve a specific purpose or to symbolize an event, and that possess distinctive elements such as repetitiveness, formality, or a predetermined order. Indeed, as Pfaller (2003/2017) points out, “interpassivity consists in ritual acts” (pp. 56–57). This rituality allows interpassive mediators to perform a figurative representation of consumption, a figurative rituality that we also find in magical practices. Indeed, as Freud points out in “The ‘Uncanny’” (1919/1955b), a symbol can take on the full valence of what it symbolizes. Pfaller (2003/2017) also gives us the example of Haitian voodoo practices, where the symbolic killing of a person, through a small sculpture representing him or her, takes on the value of actual murder. Returning to our examples, the symbolic representation of meeting someone through technological devices becomes the action itself for the interpassive person, providing a form of enjoyment. The only difference with the use of dating apps is that the Haitians were aware that they were using magic. Thus, “being civilized therefore seems to imply a lack of awareness of what one is really doing” (Pfaller, 2003/2017, p. 58).³ The

² As Žižek (2006) has pointed out, this term is introduced to clarify the paradoxical assumption of interpassivity, according to which we are passive through the other since the interpassive phenomenon consists of appropriating the passivity of others to keep ourselves occupied in other things. What is “false” is our belief that we are doing something because of our delegation; it is a mediator that is doing it instead of us.

³ To better understand what connects civilization with magic—but also what this lack of awareness consists of—Simondon (2014) argues that technical objects are, in a sense, imbued with an individual magical addition. For instance, fables from past eras depict housewives who, overwhelmed by their workload, would fall asleep, only to have a fairy resolve everything; upon awakening, the housewife would find her work completed by someone else. However, the magic at play is the same “magic”



consequence of this unawareness lies in the fact that the interpassive person is governed by an illusion of action, of doing something. In this kind of illusion concealed in interpassivity, no one really believes that the smartphone is really meeting someone in the way a person would but, as Pfaller (2003/2017) argues, “they do not even think of this illusion. They just perform it” (p. 58). This anonymous illusion is called the “subjectless illusion.”

The reason why the subject is excluded can be identified by, again, considering the analogy between interpassivity and magic. As Ludwig Wittgenstein (1993) points out, the fundamental condition for practicing magic consists of a lack of belief that there is an equivalence between the symbol and the symbolized. Indeed, the sorcerer would never mistake a symbolic act for a real one since, if this happened, he would be succumbing to an illusion. According to Pfaller (2008), what makes interpassive acts and magic similar is the fact that, both in interpassivity and magic, there is a substitute behavior, as well as that both share the same “method” that is the premise for instilling an illusion. What he calls “methods of interpassivity” consists of “replacing certain actions with others and enacting substitute actions” (Pfaller, 2008, p. 26) and this kind of replacing is also what happens in obsessive neurosis. Indeed, as Freud (1916–17/1963a, 1917/1963b) points out, this substitute behavior arises as a compromise of a conflict between what is desired and what should not be, where a small insignificant act repeatedly perpetuated could symbolize something tremendous. The repetition of obsessive acts is precisely the ritual feature that we could see in interpassivity,⁴ but also magic and religion (Freud, 1907/1959). But, while those who perform magic know perfectly that their acts are symbolic, the interpassive subject does not, and there is an objective action that does not signify anything more than what it seems to be. Furthermore, the symbolic valence is denied through a disavowal mechanism and then the illusion is instilled. Pfaller seems to use the term “illusion” to describe different situations where there are things that do not appear for the subject as illusion but contrarily as belief, like the belief in God and so on. Thus, we must distinguish between a kind of illusion where the subject attests to the ownership of their illusion and another where the subject does not. In the first case—let’s say the subject who believes in God—the subject will never take distance from their illusion saying, “I know it’s quite foolish, but I have to go to the church now” (Pfaller, 2008, p. 1), because they identify with their illusion. In the second case, the subject does not identify with their illusion and takes distance from it, for example saying, “I know that shouting at television when I’m watching a football match does not make players perform better, but I have to do it.” However, there must be someone—we might say a “naive observer” who represents a projection of an

Footnote 3 continued

performed by modern washing machines. Thus, the magical finds its realization in automation, but according to Simondon, this automation arises from a desire for “doubling.” A housewife wants another housewife, a worker wants another worker, a surgeon wants another surgeon, and so on. For Simondon (2014), therefore, “modern means magical” (p. 55).

⁴ Here we can argue what kind of compromise interpassivity would represent. Indeed, according to Pfaller (2008), “interpassivity is thereby the creation of a compromise between cultural interests and latent cultural aversion” (p. 27).



internal “virtual audience”—who believes that shouting at television works, otherwise the reason for doing so would be useless.

Based on these assumptions, it becomes possible to ask whether, in the contemporary world, the concept of interpassivity is a key concept for understanding what is happening to our subjectivity, the way we perceive the things around us, and whether it constitutes a dynamic emerging from an economic-cultural system such as capitalism.

From “Anonymous Feeling” to the Disappearance of Unconscious Subjectivity

To get to the bottom of what is happening to subjectivity, we must necessarily adopt a broader view that takes into consideration, especially, the economic and sociocultural changes that characterize contemporary society. Over thirty years ago, Mario Perniola (1991) argued that the aforementioned impersonal and predetermined way of feeling had imposed itself through three transitions. The first is that from *ideology* to *sensology*, where the first is a form of the already-thought that relieves human beings of the trouble of thinking (or not thinking) by providing them with opinions and doctrines and “which by its theoretical character resembles philosophical thinking and by the ignorance of its presuppositions resembles religious certainty” (Perniola, 1991, p. 5). Sensology, on the other hand, is something that is constituted with reference to the model of ideology, with which it shares the attribution of psychic processes to collective life, not having, however, the appearance of an invitation or exhortation to follow an ideal, being mostly a command or injunction to retrace what has already been traced and approved, based on anonymous consent. Thus, if ideology creates a false consciousness, sensology creates a false feeling that refers to something “already felt.” Differently, the second transition, from *bureaucracy* to *mediacracy*, refers to what is “already done.” The effect of bureaucracy on humans has been to exempt them from action as well as nonaction, providing them with already determined behaviors that are “as effective as political activities and as safe as rituals” (Perniola, 1991, p. 7). The transition to mediacracy implies that the mediating activity of thinking is transferred to listening, which takes on a dimension relative to power, highlighting the role of mediation between those who govern and those who are governed but without taking the form of a stable structure like that of bureaucracy. Mediacracy is thus based on a continuous negotiation between the conducting of opinion polls and viewer ratings, and its power is based on the anticipation of listening, filling in the gaps of uncertainty left by bureaucracy. The last transition is from *narcissism* to *specularism* and accounts for the fact that even our body image no longer belongs to us since “even the way through which we feel it seems somehow foreign to us and, as it were, prefixed ... if for the narcissist the world is the mirror in which he looks at himself, the experience of the already felt seems to be connected with being the mirror in which the world is mirrored” (Perniola, 1991, p. 10). Perniola chose the term specularism because he most likely wanted to emphasize the prefigured



experience of the body itself, arguing that there is no libidinal return aimed at us, but rather at external entities.

It seems appropriate for us to add a fourth transition, related to the relationships we establish with material objects, responsible for the change in the way we feel, and that has had a significant influence on the dynamics of subjectification. We call this the transition from *manualism* to *automatism*. An essay by Jean Baudrillard, *The System of Objects* (1968/1996), precisely investigates a fundamental question, namely “how objects are experienced, what needs other than functional ones they answer, what mental structures are interwoven with—and contradict—their functional structures, or what cultural, infra-cultural or transcultural system underpins their directly experienced everydayness” (p. 4). What Baudrillard is most interested in is the analysis of the technological level, a plane defined as an abstraction, but which turns out to be what most influences the radical transformations of an environment. Just as in language, phonemes delineate an objective, observable structure, the “language” spoken by technology similarly consists of technemes, simple elements that account for the stages of technological evolution objectively. However, this analogy seems to work poorly since “we may dream of arriving at an exhaustive description of technemes and their semantic relations that would cover the entire world of real objects, but this must inevitably remain just that—a dream” (Baudrillard, 1968/1996, p. 7). It is a claim that clashes with

the directly experienced psychological and sociological reality of objects, a reality which, over and above objects’ perceptible materiality, constitutes such a significant body of constraints that the integrity of the technological system is continually being modified and disturbed by it (Baudrillard, 1968/1996, p. 8).

While, therefore, we have a vision of objects in which their most absolute rationality shines through, this vision also conflicts with the irrationality of needs that opens up unprecedented, ever new, and sometimes deadly forms of solutions. Everything inessential radically alters the essentiality of the object. Today, we are in the age of automatism, in which technological evolution has placed at the center the role of automated objects that do things in place of people, and which create the conditions of the already heard, the already done, and the already felt.

The theme of automation has been widely explored by the French philosopher Bernard Stiegler (2015/2016). He provides a comprehensive overview of the topic, situating the effects of automation within a specific historical-cultural moment, namely the transition from the Anthropocene to a period he calls the Neganthropocene. Stiegler’s panorama reflects the advancements in the current transformation of automations, where they seem to have transcended the physical realm, surpassing mere mechanical arms and the like. The current form of automation appears to have acquired a “material-psychic” character, namely a digital one.

The society described by Stiegler (2015/2016) is based on automations that are changing the course of history, impacting or advancing—depending on the perspective we take, although, as Deleuze (1990/1997) would say, we cannot see everything everywhere—the very notion of identity. Subjectivity becomes a trace that goes beyond itself, a collectible data, a modeled and digitized trace, expendable



in the era of algorithmic capitalism. Everything becomes a number, calculable and finite, where nothing is infinite anymore, rather it is consumed, enacting a “consumerist destruction” that affects how knowledge is formed, and increasingly transformed into mere competencies. However, it also attacks the intrapsychic world, the indestructibility of the unconscious itself, and the experience we have of it.

Reflecting on the psychic reason for automation, it is a fact that allows human beings to economize their efforts, to cope with a certain amount of frustration associated with exercise, whether physical or psychic. After all, who wouldn't want to return to that stage of illusory narcissism where everything one desires magically appears? But, as Winnicott (1945/2016) states, this illusion must be followed by disillusionment, introducing a measure of frustration that allows us to exist in the world by introducing the principle of reality. Indeed, disillusionment leads to the birth of desire, accepting the elusive nature of the external reality and accepting it for what it is lacking. The risk is that such disillusionment may turn into disappointment (delusion) if there hasn't been a gradual transition between what is created, hallucinated, and what does not find immediate availability. The risk of automation—but also its miracle—lies precisely in the absence of intermediate steps and gradients that allow for disillusionment. Rather, automation deceives (or deludes) by not fulfilling the miraculous process of immediate satisfaction. The illusion that occurs, both for the child and for the contemporary subject, is the illusion of creation, which is not a self-obtained process but occurs in relation. The child does not create the breast but rather creates desire, mediated by the Other, by the mother, which welcomes creation. It is precisely in this space that hypermodernity attacks desire. Not allowing space for creation, everything has already been calculated, thought of, and desired before the subject can do so. There is a mediation upstream, which relieves the frustration of desire but also the creative effort. Think of the experience where something we didn't know we needed appears in the suggestions of our smartphone: that is the “mediated creation” of desire. Regarding this, Stiegler's thought perhaps finds a point of convergence with interpassivity in the concept of “digital tertiary retention,” initially introduced by Mozorov (2014). Essentially, this refers to the fact that individuals increasingly rely on third parties such as cloud services, smartphones, and computers to store their memories. The function of memory, echoing the interpassive mantra, is delegated to a third party who performs it on behalf of the person. The coercive use of tertiary retention processes is what, according to Stiegler's thought (2015/2016, transforms societies into libidinal control societies, of which the anticipation of desire may be the effect. This occurs because tertiary retention processes are the contemporary operators of the proletarianization of psychic life, understood as an externalization without return, without internalization. It is precisely this excessive proletarianization that fosters entropic processes, as it depletes and exploits not only resources but also psychic and collective individuality, leading to disintegration. Indeed, all these calculated and materialized affects shape our psychic investments, favoring a transition from a libidinal economy to a libidinal diseconomy incentivized by computational capitalism. Therefore, the hegemony of digital traces tends to control impulses and functionalize them, by anticipating their goal, object, and source,



destroying the processes of idealization and identification, subjecting every singularity to calculability, and anticipating desire. As Stiegler (2015/2016) argues:

Automatic society is now attempting to channel, control, and exploit these dangerous automatisms that are the drives, by subordinating them to new retentive systems that are themselves automatic, which capture drive-based automatisms by outstripping and overtaking them. (p. 35)

About this, Deleuze (1990/1997) was truly prophetic in emphasizing that the new societies would lead to a calculability of the human, giving rise to a new form of individuality that he referred to as the “dividual.” In this vein, fragmented data emerging from the individual characteristics of each person are exploited by control societies, transforming them into “profiles” (Baranzoni & Vignola, 2015). Thus, it is possible to trace a symptomatology in the dividual, consisting precisely of a numbing of the sensitive and the imagination, where interpassivity seems to play as a disposition that tends towards the formation of such a pathology of the sensitive.

The role of this concept lies in highlighting mechanisms and unconscious substitutions that contribute to the formation of a discontent characteristic of the described type of society. Indeed, as Baranzoni and Vignola (2015) affirm:

It is not so much the technology itself, but the exponential increase in delegation for the simple purpose of satisfying the neoliberal need to increase productivity in any field and optimize performance, that leads us to witness a dissociation of prostheses (automation) and reductive/substitutive processes. (p. 161)

The central issue lies in the delegation—which is unconscious in interpassivity—of the fulfillment of enjoyment of which we are not sure if the subject truly wants to enjoy, a delegation of “consumption.” The point on which Pfaller (2008) insists is that the concept of interpassivity essentially emerges as a critique of thinking about the human as a “subject-supposed-to-enjoy,” because in its factual nature, the fulfillment of interpassivity consists precisely of its opposite: the subjects delegate because they do not truly want to do it, they do not truly want to enjoy but rather to consume. In this sense, if automation ensures the ability to act (to enjoy), and on the other establishes a nonaction (not to enjoy), it is an essential aspect of the “stupid enjoyment” (Lacan, 1975). If on the one hand, in terms of competencies and knowledge, we have functional stupidity, we also have a “stupid functional desirability.”

What leads us to speak of unconscious desire rather than just drive, as Stiegler (2015/2016) emphasizes,⁵ is the fact that, although in a “domesticated” manner, the drive is always fulfilled, remaining only subjected to an automaton, if anything, while desire is entirely inconclusive (Recalcati, 2010). And paradoxically, is this inconclusiveness that perversely generates enjoyment: one enjoys an impossibility.

⁵ According to Stiegler (2015/2016c), when individuals become “dividuals,” it is no longer possible to speak of desire (Baranzoni & Vignola, 2015), perhaps because they reach a radicalization of the very concept of drive, which has become controllable like an instinct through forms of “libidinal domestication” introduced by the current society.



The three transitions described by Perniola (1991), in addition to the one we have just described and the thought of Stiegler (2015/2016) leads us to hypothesize that all of this has led to the disappearance of the subject or, more precisely, the disappearance of unconscious subjectivity.

The Disappearance of Unconscious Subjectivity and the Role of Interpassivity as a Subjectless Process

In our view, the shift from manualism to automatism and the proliferation of processes of proletarianization, primarily due to the dispositives of digital tertiary retention (Stiegler, 2015/2016), represents one of the events responsible for the disappearance of unconscious subjectivity, because automation has, from a certain point of view, placed the subject outside itself, in what Lacan (1978/1991) defined as a “decentering” of the subject.

Taking up Baudrillard’s (1968/1996) thought, we can say that “automatism amounts to a closing-off, to a sort of functional self-sufficiency which exiles man to the irresponsibility of a mere spectator” (p. 110). However, behind the indirection of subjectivity in the face of what can be done, thought, and felt through someone/something else, perhaps lies the fulfillment of an omnipotent desire that brings us to the narcissistic problem. In this vein, “for the user, automatism means a wondrous absence of activity” that offers the subject a “voyeuristic,” perverse form of enjoyment, as “the enjoyment this procures is comparable to that derived, on another plane, from seeing without being seen” (Baudrillard, 1968/1996, p. 111). Not surprisingly, such omnipotence can only stem from the unconscious power that technological devices possess, since they “enable” what the body cannot do. Currently, technological evolution seems to be increasingly accentuating the use of automation. However, this is not the mechanical arm of Toyotism, allowing for greater flexibility for workers and reduced industrial overproduction; automation today is something more like a miracle: meeting others without being there, communicating at unthinkable distances, and having sexual intercourse without organ involvement. If in the theological stage of our existence, the subject delegated action to a deity through sacrifice, today this delegation demands the sacrifice of unconscious subjectivity.

Speaking of the “disappearance of the unconscious subject” (Recalcati, 2010) and in light of Freud’s conceptualization of an “indestructible” unconscious (Freud, 1915/1957b), it is necessary to ask ourselves whether this unconscious can really disappear, thus introducing what seems to be an ongoing anthropological mutation. The subject without the unconscious would be “a person reduced to the inhuman efficiency of a machine, to its automatic functioning, devoid of desire; he would be a person driven by a headless, imperative drive, without anchoring in the symbolic function of castration” (Recalcati, 2010, p. 3). Our own experience of the unconscious is first and foremost an experience of truth, which leads to a cryptic, intimate, and personal truth of the subject that does not rely on the visible, that does not present itself in the certainties of the subject, but rather in its cracks, such as dreams, symptoms, and slips of the tongue. At the point where the subject wavers



and loses self-mastery, an experience of the real is actualized, precisely the experience of the unconscious as truth. However, it is important to highlight that, already in Freud (1915/1957b), the experience of the unconscious is also an experience of desire, an invisible movement of inclination towards the Other, which surpasses the boundaries of one's ego. Differently from need, which is related to an internal state of tension that finds satisfaction through a specific action, for Freud desire is linked to mnestic traces where it finds satisfaction in the hallucination of past forms of satisfaction (Laplanche & Pontalis, 1967/1973). The experience of the unconscious seems to be threatened by what Lacan (1972) defines as the “discourse of the capitalist,” which is why our hypermodern era stands in antagonism to how we experience the unconscious, and of which prevalent symptomologies such as pathological addictions, anorexia, bulimia, depression, and panic attacks are expressions. If the unconscious forms the subject, what are the consequences of its disappearance? And what does the disappearance of the unconscious subject allow? Through the extensive anthropological-philosophical-sociological analyses of Baudrillard (1968/1996), Stiegler (2015/2016), and Deleuze (1990/1997), and especially using an aesthetic reading key—in its connotation of criticizing the etymological meaning of the term “aesthesis” (sensitivity)—it is perhaps possible to trace in the current societal form the main driving force towards forms of subjectivation that exclude the experience of the unconscious, and of which interpassivity appears to be a disposition, a crack that makes the subject itself “new,” albeit without the unconscious.

However, the actual forms of malaise, as also pointed out earlier (Baranzoni & Vignola, 2015), do not cause a dissolution of everyday life (Stiegler, 2015/2016) due to the existence of the technological object itself, and also because, as Simondon (2014) argues, technicity is one of the fundamental modes of human interaction with the world. Rather, such dissolution stems from a channeling of impulses and an unprecedented historical exploitation of tertiary retentions (now digital) that threaten processes of individuation and the capacity to desire. In this regard, it is possible to find a similar line of thought in the work of French psychoanalyst René Kaës (2012/2013), which highlights, as Recalcati (2010) does, the potential for the unconscious to disappear in the Anthropocene era.

In this regard, Kaës (2012/2013), writes: “The new technological development plays a decisive role in postmodernity: cybernetics has already provoked the idea and organization of a self-governing society, of subjectless processes” (p. 100). According to Kaës (2012/2013), subjectless processes are those processes involving unconscious subjectivity and

its potentiality to become “Ego(Je)” in the state of an individual-interchangeable element, without depth. What is at issue is its negation as a being of desire, i.e., conflictual, historical, and subjective. Associated with these processes of desubjectivation are three main factors of the great disquiet that seizes the subject in hypermodernity: what C. Castoriadis calls “the rise of insignificance” (1996), what I call the silence of respondents, and institutional automata. These processes simultaneously attack the social, intersubjective



bonds and subjectivation, and contain and entertain a persecutory charge that enters the composition of contemporary discomfort. (p. 119)

In this vein, the process of desubjectivation leads the subject of the unconscious to become an individual without depth, impoverished of its essence, as it is reduced to an interchangeable individual. In this regard, in a short essay entitled *Che cos'è un dispositivo?* (2006), the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben states that modernity confronts us with a not-unassuming use of so-called technological devices that would apparently produce a “proliferation of the processes of subjectivation” (p. 22), which would produce in the subject a split that would lead him or her to the birth of a new subjectivity in which a “new Ego is constituted through negation” (p. 28). The result of the denied ego is not a new ego, but rather the interchangeable individual Kaës (2012/2013) speaks of. It is nothing but an ego in a form defined by Agamben (2006) as “spectral.”

Interpassivity, Solid Identifications, and Social Psychoses: An Analysis of Subject Masking Dynamics

What further leads us to advance our hypothesis that interpassivity may be the main dynamic leading to a potential disappearance of unconscious subjectivity, desire, and a consequent numbing of the sensitive lies precisely in an apparent illusion: that interpassivity produces other subjectivities. To unmask this illusion, we should ask ourselves: if every process of subjectivation involves an identificatory dynamic, what kind of identification does interpassivity produce? We think that in its pathological manifestations, interpassivity involves and is supported by what Recalcati (2010) calls “solid identifications,” which are unconscious dynamics that establish a veritable pathology of identification as well as “social psychoses” Lacan (1959/2001). According to Recalcati (2010), we are faced with “a clinic of solid identification, centered on excessive identification with social semblances that seems to erase desire and its subjectivation, and in which the imaginary, disconnecting from the symbolic, gives rise to hyper-identifications” (p. 22).

Although we have associated interpassivity with obsessive neurosis and perversion, the same concept can also be applied to a specific form of psychosis. In this vein, Winnicott (1965/1971a) distinguishes between psychoses in which the subject separates from the sense of reality and another type of psychosis characterized by a different kind of separation that does not concern the subject's distancing from external reality but rather from themselves. This phenomenon pertains to individuals who are so fully immersed in external reality that they lose contact with themselves, with their creativity, “with the subjective reality of their unconscious” (Recalcati, 2010, p. 22). This assertion also seems relevant to the reflection proposed by Kuldova (2018), where interpassivity squanders both our energy and creativity. Therefore, these psychotic forms are not characterized by a rupture with reality but by an excessive presence of it, an excess of alienation, an “assimilation conforming to common discourse” (Recalcati, 2010, p. 23).



The solid identification Recalcati (2010) speaks of involves identification with social semblances, which are masks defined as imaginary functions that erase all division within the subject and suppress any difference between the subject's being and their semblance. An example of such a mask can be found in Sartre's *Being and Nothingness* (1943/1956) in his treatise on bad faith. He describes the figure of the "waiter," a very friendly and efficient server who performs their job dutifully and diligently. However, there is something excessive in their demeanor, as if they were a caricature of being a waiter—an amalgamation of their subjectivity and their role as a waiter. Sartre (1943/1956) asks, "What is this impeccable waiter doing? What logic governs their mechanical action?" (p. 101), and he responds that the waiter is playing: "this waiter is playing at being a waiter" (p. 102). Recalcati (2010) explains that the reason behind this fusion between the subject and their work lies in the fact that this new rigid identification with their occupational figure—thus with their social mask—fills a constitutive characteristic of the subject, namely a "lack of being." Similarly, one could argue that this occurs in the context of interpassivity and the rigid identification between the subject and the subjectivities sometimes created by interpassive mediators.

Interpassivity, Narcissism, and the Disruption of Symbolization in the Contemporary Environment

According to Kaës (2012/2013), the causes of the contemporary discontent of social origins are to be found in the importance of narcissism for psychic life, since the origin of the subject is deeply linked to narcissism, beginning with the narcissistic contract (Aulagnier, 1975/2001): that unconscious structuring alliance between the *infans* and the intersubjective order that precedes it, and whose antecedents can be traced in Freud's *On Narcissism: An Introduction* (1914/1957a). One of the foundational experiences of narcissism is found precisely in the experience the *infans* has with the mother's gaze, so acutely described by Winnicott (1967/1971b). It is in that gesture, in the way the mother looks at the *infans*, that the *infans* perceives their uniqueness. It is an event that structures them. But when the mirror-mother and the experience of the gaze invest the *infans* by excess or default, this function ceases to be structuring. Especially when the mother reflects nothing or when she turns her gaze away, there is nothing left for the *infans* to see, and this has an effect in the social realm as well. Just as the mother's empty gaze puts the *infans*' narcissism in check, the absence of speech, or of response, poisons the experience of life. The act of speech, like the gaze, represents a way of symbolizing reality, and in fact "it is through the word that the human responds to the human, that introduces it into humanity" (Kaës, 2012/2013, p. 168). Kaës calls the absence of respondent the phenomenon that characterizes contemporary discontent and consists of a failure of the respondent, "that is, the fact that the object does not respond, obstructs the response through an excess of the presence or refuses to listen to the subject's question" (2012/2013, p. 168).

It thus seems that, even before the disappearance of the subject, reality itself, as structuring and authentic experience, has been eclipsed in favor of surplus puppets



that fill the void of the word and of the power of action. In this vein, what connects interpassive practices and narcissism lies in the fact that the current sociocultural condition does not only confront us with the condition of producing interpassivity but also of undergoing it. In this regard, what the concept of unresponsiveness proposed by Kaës (2012/2013) highlights is the fact that what causes a mismatch in the narcissistic set-up of subjects is not something to be found exclusively in the interpersonal sphere, but rather it is the external environment itself, that can induce similar dynamics, by exceeding and occluding the subject's desire, but also failing to respond. The environment and its capacity to respond to the subject's unconscious needs, including the need for mirroring, are fundamental to establishing a good relationship with both the internal world and the world of things. On the contrary, an environment that is unreflective and closed off in the face of the subject's projective and identifying movements can bring out psychopathological dynamics, even with extreme manifestations.

If the phenomenon of interpassivity seems to find particularly fertile ground in human-machine interactions and new technological offshoots, including some use of the Internet, and if this type of interpassive relationship contributes to the formation of pathology, we need to understand how this happens, especially focusing on the importance of the external environment in the development of the psyche. In 1960, Harold Searles wrote that the nonhuman environment "constitutes one of the most basically important ingredients of human psychological existence" (p. 6). According to Searles, a human being's ability or inability to have a constructive relationship with the nonhuman environment contributes in no small way to their psychic equilibrium or lack thereof. For Searles, psychoanalysts of his era were placing greater emphasis on the interpersonal context, yet neglecting the individuation stage in which the child begins to feel separate from the nonhuman environment. The *infans*' condition of "subjective fusion" with the nonhuman environment could condition the whole course of development, both normal and pathological since in the individual this fusion persists throughout life. The operation Searles proposes is to shift attention to what happens concerning this nonhuman environment, a context that can thus be considered an integral part of the formation of psychic life, and that is in turn reshaped by the relationship one establishes with the objects of technology.

In this sense, in fact, according to Tisseron and colleagues (2006)

new technologies, and more specifically the means of communication (Schaefer, 1971) (cinema, radio, television, computers, multimedia tools, etc.) reflect the externalization of our representations and constitute an essential part of the puzzle of our culture that surrounds and overdetermines our identity. (p. 37)

This means that technological developments and, therefore, technological evolution itself are posited as an "extension of biological evolution," where "tools occupy the place of 'artificial organs'" (Tisseron et al., 2006, p. 37). According to Tisseron (1998), objects are extensions of our bodies that move from dependence on the body (the prosthesis) to autonomy (the machine), and this tendency to build prostheses could lead to a peripheralization of psychic life. Thus, the object becomes an



operator of transformations in the sense that, through its manipulation, psychic assimilation work is also carried out. This, however, is only the best-case scenario. If this is not the case, the object becomes the container of an unprocessed psychic experience, becoming an object repository (Tisseron et al., 2006). While, in the former case, the object is auxiliary to the symbolization process, thus accommodating parts of the self and allowing for transformation, the object-repository does not participate in symbolization and is simply a place where these parts of the self are projected.

In light of these theoretical considerations, the core of what relates the forms of contemporary malaise to interpassivity lies precisely in the fact that the external environment seems to be haunted by a conspicuous number of interpassive mediators that do not allow for the symbolization of experience, as they become responsive objects (Tisseron et al., 2006) which have been delegated and onto which anxieties of various kinds are thus projected. The favored external environment in which these interpassive dynamics proliferate is social media platforms. It suffices to think of the possibility that these environments allow subjects to project their emotional drive as well as their identity and to put themselves at a distance from all of it, thereby generating the disappearance of unconscious subjectivity.

It seems to us that the speech made by Sarantis Thanopoulos (2022) to introduce the 20th Congress of the Italian Psychoanalytic Society goes in this direction when he states that the performance society, by accelerating affects, thoughts, actions, and relationships, and by shortening distances, “does not save time, but consumes it,” allocating it to “evasion from lived experience.” This only apparently makes alive the subject who is conformed to the machine’s ideal. A subject who becomes the living dead is one whose relationship with reality is “caught in the meshes of desubjectivizing narcissism” and for whom “the alternation of exciting practices imitates, by counterfeiting it, true desire/enjoyment” (Thanopoulos, 2022).

From “Already Felt” to “Already Desired”

Our investigation has led us to reconstruct the emergence of subjectivity, and thus narcissism, where we find what has contributed to the formation of a malaise of contemporary feeling. Contemporaneity and malaise refer again to subjectivities with a dual origin. Indeed, as Florence Giust-Desprairies (1996) states: “Identity proceeds from a potentially conflicting tension between social logics and the psychic needs of individuals” (p. 63). Thus, if today’s era seems to be marked by rampant uncertainty, the “already heard,” and the fall of meta-psychic and meta-social guarantors (Kaës, 2012/2013; Sommantico, 2010), as well as an environment characterized by subjectless processes, then subjectivity takes the brunt of it. Interpassivity, from this point of view, turns out to be precisely the product of a cultural context that has created demands to which the human being in a civilized society cannot respond. If, before, the task of fulfilling these omnipotent needs was entrusted to magical practices, now it seems that magic remains as the skeleton through which we experience the rationalized, anonymous, and impersonal form. It is magic without magicians, which amounts to subjectless processes. Interpassivity



becomes the solution to the claim of constant presence, to the imperative of enjoyment that cannot be postponed. Guilt, then, as Lacan (1986/1992a) points out, changes the configuration, arising not only concerning the duty to the superego but also concerning unconscious desire as such, thereby becoming an ethical guilt, that of turning away from one's desire. Indeed, as Recalcati (2010) reminds us, "whenever one gives in on one's desire there is unconscious guilt" (p. 233). If subjectivity changes as a function of societal movements, then discontent also takes on new configurations that seem to be marked by deadly forms of object relations and interpassive relations. Think of the emergence of new phenomena such as FOMO (fear of missing out), nomophobia (no mobile phone phobia), or specific behaviors such as phubbing (from "phone" and "snubbing"). All this occurs concerning an object, the smartphone, which has now become an indispensable object of our age, an interpassive mediator par excellence, and the main promoter of the "already felt," the "already seen," and the "already heard."

Contemporary discontent then takes the form of an "evil of feeling" or, more specifically, a discontent related to desire, as the latter's space is occluded. Desire is already present in the time of the "already desired." Let us think, again, of the advertisements on web pages created by algorithms, where the "gadget" (Lacan, 1974/1992b) that we did not need, but which may always be needed—the book we wanted to read, the music we wanted to listen to—is always present. Before us, someone else anonymous, impersonal, undefined, and purely superficial has already provided for our needs, has already desired, and has already consummated desire.

It is no coincidence that Stiegler (2015/2016) himself has sought to highlight the importance of considering the impact of algorithmic capitalism on the way it has utilized drives to capitalize on desire, thereby transforming the libidinal economy into a dis-libidinal economy through control of tertiary retentions that short-circuit the way drives transform into desire: the latter does not become infinite but rather gets consumed. Notably, in interpassivity—which at this point could perhaps be a tool to reflect on the unconscious dynamics at play concerning tertiary retentions—what occurs is a delegation of consumption.

Subjectivity, however, needs distance from desire, and from the interdicts and limits of the Father/Totem (Freud, 1913/1955a) to be fulfilled, and this has not escaped the attention of the arts such as cinema, which has depicted the most varied dystopias in which the human being has disappeared or is on the verge of extinction. What is staged is the interpassive paranoia of being replaced by "something."

Reappropriating Desire: Navigating the Challenges of Technology and Subjectivity

Although we have mostly highlighted the negative consequences of current forms of automation and emphasized how interpassivity is the dynamic that brings attention to the unconscious issue underlying the use of technological objects—as well as the unconscious correlate of what Stiegler (2015/2016) calls tertiary retention devices—this does not mean looking at the horizon with resignation. Notably, Stiegler (2015/2016), on the one hand, illuminates negative pharmacology, where the



contemporary “pharmakon” —which is both remedy and poison, consisting of tertiary retention devices that proletarianize knowledge—poses a real threat as it fosters a proliferation of systematic discretization phenomena of cognition, emotionality, and memory delegation to third-party devices. But he also highlights a positive pharmacology, that is, a “political strategy of transforming technologies—media, cognitive, relational—that are poisonous to processes of subjectivation today” (Vignola, 2012, p. 12). In this vein, what is poison can also be a remedy.

There is no doubt that what allows us to “fight” forms of disintegration of subjectivity, both in psychoanalysis and philosophy, is perhaps the development of critical thinking, of anticipating what can already be anticipated. But more than anticipation, what resonates so strongly in Stiegler’s (2015/2016) and Deleuze’s (1990/1997) philosophies, is that in the proletarianization of thought, in the forms of tertiary retention allowing for irreversible externalizations or mere insignificant projections (that is, not signified), there is an improper appropriation of a third party, such as the societies of control. And yet, what is controlled should be more secure, but the cracks in the subject almost always reveal contradictions. In contemporary symptomatology, where the notion of “excess” is a common thread among various manifestations, the loss of control is what stands out the most. Reappropriating desire means assuming a critical responsibility in the face of a tempting feast of excesses, without falling into asceticism, the other contemporary excess. Reappropriating means “giving meaning” to what is experienced, not allowing oneself to be questioned, delegating the curiosity of self-doubt to a third party, but rather starting to “ask oneself,” beginning to directly operate transformations, to sublimate and be carried away by the time that each transformation requires. Ultimately, by reappropriating what is now our technological consistency, we could say that we need to hack ourselves (Gruppo di Ricerca Ippolita, 2019). The exercise lies in identifying the norm that new technological forms try to impose on us and understanding how to defuse it.

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