

# The Man Threw on the Net: a Multidimensional Individual

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For a year now, we have witnessed an increasing use of online teaching in Italian high schools which has aroused various reflections on teaching via the Internet. We propose a reflection, perhaps counter-current, which could be the starting point for a possible debate not only on e-learning but on teaching in general.

The use of the Internet for educational purposes generates eminently pedagogical and philosophical questions because the man "thrown" on the Net is a multidimensional individual. He is a multidimensional individual in the sense that he is immersed in multiple human, linguistic and value interaction that lends him to possible critical issues. These criticalities can occur in the digital dimension due to the relational and global openness that the Internet possesses, causing disorientation especially in those who hold the role of teacher.

The use of digital devices seems to cause a sort of cognitive dichotomy, apparently inexorable. We are referring to a clear and insurmountable separation between a logical reading of the world (attributable to a Cartesian approach)<sup>1</sup> and a dimension of knowing that occurs according to multisensory and multidimensional perception.

Talking about the meaning of a multisensory and multidimensional perception entails referring to Howard Gardner's concept of multiple intelligences. According to Gardner's Theory of Multiple Intelligences, each human being is capable of seven relatively independent forms of information processing, with individuals differing from one another in the specific profile of intelligence that they exhibit.<sup>2</sup> In this sense, the

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<sup>1</sup> Rene Descartes, *Discourse on Method and Meditations on First Philosophy*, translated by Donald A. Cress (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1998), 63-69.

<sup>2</sup> Howard Gardner and Thomas Hatch, "Multiple Intelligences Go to School: Educational Implications of the Theory of Multiple Intelligence," *American Educational Research Association, Educational Researcher*, Vol. 18, No. 8 (Nov. 1989): 4-10.

digital environment lends itself well to the expressiveness of an intelligence conceived according to Gardner's scheme which, unfortunately, still today, after almost 40 years, is not adequately understood by educators. It seems that in the schools of countries like Italy a monolingualism persists which is also a monologism of sign and not so much linguistic as ontological and structural. This monologism would seem to be oriented towards identity and a strongly totalitarian monos that lives and experiences multilingualism - plurilogism (and the need for a perennial translation and understanding of otherness) as a punishment and fall from an original heavenly condition. This resistance to the plurality of languages, typical of a certain pedagogical-didactic dynamic, seems to rely on a dogma: the mono-directionality of a single training channel, projected towards a single language of learning. This mono-directionality denies multisensory and multidimensional perception and therefore an approach such as that of multiple intelligences aimed at enhancing the students' multisensory and multidimensional perception. Due to its intrinsically relational essence, the digital communication network becomes a privileged learning and teaching environment. The network becomes a privileged learning and teaching environment when it establishes a new otherness, creating a new extremely ramified and labyrinthine situational reality. This also transforms and alters the relationship with the self and with others, with reality and its representations, modifying the way of being in the world of man. The digital network, by implementing a plurality of approaches and visions as well as tools and learning platforms (different from each other, but in any case, understood as open and communicating places) creates a fusion of horizons that do not correspond only to simple methodological multilingualism but rather to a sort of dialogic pluri-discursiveness.

So, we could consider the digital environment, with the appropriate distinctions, an educational environment to be studied and used not in a strictly technical way but according to a hermeneutic and formative approach. The hermeneutic approach is based on the process of understanding, and it belongs to man as such and becomes the basis to build the epistemology of hermeneutically oriented education. Man, a complex object of education, is an interpreting subject and it is in man that knowledge must become aware. Dilthey argued that one cannot want to

know what an object looks like if one does not welcome it into one's consciousness.<sup>3</sup> This acceptance, however, takes place as a historicized awareness, that is, always related to the time in which knowledge matures. It follows it is necessary that the historical consciousness allows a human being to make sense of knowing because he/she inserts it into the flow of historicity, in the present-past dynamic.

Historicity and the category of meaning are the compasses of hermeneutic pedagogy. If hermeneutic pedagogy has historicized man as the point of reference for initiating educational perspectives endowed with meaning, it is almost spontaneous to slip into relativistic drift and, therefore, those who support the dualism between epistemology and hermeneutics would be right. But the relative is not relativism. In my opinion, the relativistic principle, rather than being an expression of skepticism, subjectivism, and irrationalism, is revealing the historical dimension of man and of the limits that identify and characterize his existential movement. Therefore, hermeneutic pedagogy cannot be characterized by relativism. Hermeneutic pedagogy can be considered as a pedagogy that has in the concrete making of history the reference point of man's educability. It is no coincidence that the father of contemporary hermeneutics, Gadamer, referring to the lesson of Vico, gives the sciences of the spirit the enormous responsibility of educating to *prudencia* in living historicity.<sup>4</sup> What it matters for education, Gadamer argues, is not science, but the training of the *sensus communis*, which is nourished not by truth, but the probable, the verisimilar.<sup>5</sup> From what has been said, it is clear that, for Gadamer, to lead man's will is not the abstract universality of reason, but the concrete universality that constitutes the common unity of a group, a people, a nation, or the whole human race. Educational action must therefore search for an understanding of the common sense of its historical time which is of decisive importance for the life of man himself and the community in which he is inserted. It is evident that the formation of common sense inspired by the true and fair

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<sup>3</sup> Wilhelm Dilthey, *Introduction to the Human Sciences* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 247.

<sup>4</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, second revised edition, translation revised by Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (London and New York: Continuum, 2006), 18.

<sup>5</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 19.

does not happen through mathematical theorems, but through relationality, communication, listening to the words of others, therefore, also through good use of rhetoric. Pedagogy, then, is configured as a science of the spirit that aims to theorize the ideal of wisdom to be achieved with words and eloquence, without neglecting the imagination and fantasy that allow you to open the doors to the plausible. Hermeneutic pedagogy is centered on the subject and his education and training in dialogue. This pedagogy is based on respect for tradition and openness to the search for truth in a veritable horizon that can be shared. The subject is the protagonist of his education. This requires that the subject know how to recognize himself as belonging to history, first of all with his preconceptions (prejudices) and then with understandings. There is no educational reason for hermeneutic pedagogy absolute or absolutizing. In contrast to this, the subject inserts himself into the flow of history, and thanks to this insertion the educational process of understanding takes place. The process of understanding refers to the Gadamerian hermeneutic circle within which past and present constitute correlated historical phases of becoming and constitute an indissoluble unicum.

Hermeneutic pedagogy is critical of modern subjectivism so much so that it brings the educational discourse back to the ontology of the subject in education. An ontology founded on its linguistics, on its ability to speak. Education must tend to emphasize the speaking being of the subject not to make the surrounding world accessible to him naturalistically, but to allow the subject to feel part of the world in which he is immersed.

My purpose in this text is to focus on the encounter between learner and teacher, that is, the encounter that requires dialogue, a conversation in which two interpreting subjects are involved in an attempt to understand each other.<sup>6</sup> If the encounter between teacher and learner can be understood in a hermeneutic sense, it could be helpful, also, to refer to the philosophical paradigm of weak thought by Vattimo, to avoid further risks regarding the hypostatization of the role of the teacher and that of the learner. In weak thinking, the criticism that the masters of suspicion have made to the modern subject's claim to center on himself and to act as the master of his destiny is essential. This is a thought that

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<sup>6</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 385-387.

seems to express the spontaneous *Weltanschauung* of the men of our time, inhabitants of a late-era, that of Western societies of late modernity: the era of disenchantment.

The philosophical and pedagogical position of the weak thinker can be characterized by three basic theses. I propose to denote the first thesis as a misrecognition of the real. The thesis is well formulated by two recurring affirmations in Vattimo's texts: "there are no facts, but only interpretations of the facts" and "the real world has become a fairy tale". Both formulations immediately appear a bit paradoxical, from the point of view of common sense. For Vattimo, the first would contain the very meaning of contemporary hermeneutics and its nihilistic outcome. The other sees in this success the "destiny of being" in the epoch of the death of metaphysics. These are incomprehensible statements without referring them to Friedrich Nietzsche, the main interlocutor of Vattimo and postmodern philosophy. It would seem that the style of this author is retained above all, aphoristic and at times oracular. In fact, in unfounded thought, not the arguments but the style becomes philosophy: all the words of the languages are metaphors, and nothing communicates to us about reality because they are only ways of expressing themselves.<sup>7</sup>

The second thesis is that which states the misrecognition of faces. A formulation that expresses this second thesis of weak thought well consists in the belief that no face is hidden behind changing semblants or masks. It is a radical denial of any "strong" identity of the person, which succeeds in the most radical dissolution of the spirit. According to Vattimo, the men of the past would have scrambled to look for some depth beyond the surface. They would have sought, behind the exterior, an interiority. There is no depth and even if it existed, it would create more problems for us than it can solve. We must have the courage to recognize, for Vattimo, that there is no depth and no interiority. There is only the surface of the world which, being no longer a surface of anything, is rather the whole of reality.<sup>8</sup> It follows that in the learner-teacher relationship, the reality of both is all there, one in front of the other, without superstructures. As if the spontaneity of the relationship were to

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<sup>7</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Human All Too Human: Book For Free Spirits*, translated by Helen Zimmern with introduction by J. M. Kennedy (Edinburgh and London, 1910), 21-22.

<sup>8</sup> Gianni Vattimo, *Le mezze verità* (Torino: La Stampa, 1988), 72

be grasped on the spot without the mask of those who know and those who have to learn according to an up-down position. By applying this ontological perspective to people and their encounters and recognition, what appears of the other becomes the whole personal reality and can be well understood.

A third thesis is that of the misrecognition of differences. This observation may sound out of tune, addressed to a thought that presents itself as a "thought of difference". On closer inspection, however, the notion of difference is the most aporetic. Vattimo often describes post-modern societies as "the most complex and even chaotic", because they are first and foremost "plural societies".<sup>9</sup> Individuals and cultural and ethical communities are formed by contamination of various reconstructions or images of reality. The cities of postmodernity appear to be immense multicultural "sites of survival". However, the anthropological differences, while they seem to be exalted to the highest degree, becoming absolute, lose their specific ontological and ethical weight, the key to every difference. The extreme outcome is therefore undifferentiation. Thus, for example, the "values" of each person and each community, as historical-cultural determinations are all equally relative, all placed at the same level. These values are not, on closer inspection, authentic differences on which one can question themselves on the level of their reality and their good, to understand, with meaning, their positivity and limits. Those that we also perceive as "great values" can do as well as those that appear to us to be "small" values. In the absence of any foundation, not having the problem of saying why something is objectively preferable to another, everything goes, everything is fine, in the same way. On this basis, one opens up pedagogically to pluralism which, in multiethnic and multicultural schools, allows us to welcome the presumed diversity serenely. The paradigms of hermeneutics and weak thinking would allow teachers to relate to students with an attitude open to dialogue. With this attitude one can arrange to welcome the experience of the other, making him co-constructor of the didactic activity.

Moving now to the specific cognitive side, there is a further peculiarity to be taken into consideration concerning new media. It appears that the logic of learners has changed. We could argue that a cognitive shift has

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<sup>9</sup> Gianni Vattimo, *La società trasparente* (Milano: Garzanti, 1989), 99.

manifested thanks to new media. Understanding the world occurs within a very particular framework now. In this multimedia framework, virtual simulation and telecommunication become the tools of a new cognitive approach based on heterogeneous levels of knowledge processing. If in the written alphabetical structure all cognitive activity is traced back to a precise sequence of links that occur according to the principle of causality and order, in communication on the Web the distribution is instead labyrinthine.

Knowledge is therefore configured in a reticular form, a peculiarity that forces us to reflect on the normality (perhaps taken for granted) of linear learning. The use of linear thinking does not necessarily mean man's ability to grasp reality as a whole. Although man has made use of writing and therefore logical-conceptual and linear thought, he has continually sought expressive practices capable of interpreting the world without suffering a sort of impairment that writing seems to impose. A reticular approach can account for a wider and more articulated universe made up of various interactions between different areas such as painting, music, dance, theater, etc. This interaction is difficult to represent in a linear approach, so much so that online teaching turns out to be particularly profitable due to its peculiar characteristic: multidimensionality. Different and multisensory modalities that approach reality and translate it differently from the cause-effect sequence are the demonstration of the recovery of forms of emotional, sensory, and multidisciplinary intelligence. Such forms of intelligence cannot be based only on the capacity of logical deduction of causal links as the only way to access knowledge. We could paradoxically say that communication via the Web, due to its reticular and multisensory characteristics, could even lead us back to ancestral and multiple dimensions created in the musical, poetic and aesthetic expressions of a time that was pre-logical. These expressions do not allow themselves to be encapsulated in merely rational schemes and for this reason, communication on the Web could allow humans to put together various communicative registers. A multisensory and multidimensional approach seems to recall, as we said, an ancestral pre-logical dimension that the so-called digital natives have appropriated. The latter live a reformulated, redesigned subject-world relationship, that is, they live a communicational/relational simultaneity and circularity that seems to fill the ancestral pre-logical need for a multisensory approach, fundamental for the multitasking demands of the contemporary world. The difficulty of the epistemological and pedagogical approach of some educators, coming from a strictly analogical sensibility, forced to interact with new linguistic

and relational codes, is therefore evident. Furthermore, some educators believed that digital natives were already predisposed to virtual play as if digital natives had acquired epigenetic skills. Such educators have taken for granted the internalization of the digital device by digital natives as if they need no mediation. This reassuring conception has diverted educational responsibility towards purely technical forms and, as Popper has already mentioned in the famous interview "*Television: a Bad Teacher*", if we want to delegate education to the machine, the risks are enormous. Popper affirmed: "At present the greatest danger to educational efforts is television. Education just cannot go on if you let the television do what it likes. Education can't work up against television unless television recognizes that it also has an educational task that overrules our mere entertainment. Otherwise, we cannot have an education. From the democratic point of view, television must be controlled, just because its potential political power is almost unlimited. If you get hold of television, you can do whatever you like. And such power must be controlled."<sup>10</sup>

Hence, it appears simplistic to believe as educators that there is no need for any sapiential and theoretical support in the hermeneutic sense for the use of digital technology. Behind the screen, there is ultimately the person with all his load of existential questions. The encounter between different experiences and different conceptions of knowledge should lead the student and the teacher to always elaborate their cognitive path in a new way. The encounter between teaching and learning involves teacher and learner in what is and remains an infinite hermeneutic and didactic circle which, in turn, involves that Heideggerian living of the "unveiling" of truth through language.<sup>11</sup>

This disclosure is characterized by the dynamics of understanding and interpretation and takes place daily during each lesson intended as an educational, relational, and not just informative gesture. Considering what new media offer us and how they work, we can affirm that the knowledge derived from the use of these media cannot be limited to mere access to the technological transmission of information. Consequently, knowledge

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<sup>10</sup> Adam Chmielewski, "The Future is Open. A Conversation with Sir Karl Popper," (*July 29, 1994*), 4, [https://www.academia.edu/12847061/The\\_Future\\_is\\_Open\\_A\\_Conversation\\_with\\_Sir\\_Karl\\_Popper](https://www.academia.edu/12847061/The_Future_is_Open_A_Conversation_with_Sir_Karl_Popper)

<sup>11</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Being and Truth*, translated by G. Fried and R. Polt, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010), 78.

thus understood becomes an interpretative, almost philological problem and we should evaluate with pedagogical attention the potentialities and semiological criticalities that can arise in the digital world. It is necessary to understand that these textual criticalities cannot be solved automatically with software that acts as an operational tool for the relationality that is created on the Web. Precisely because machine language does not have irony, metaphor and the possibility of establishing an empathic connection, it is not possible to delegate the development of relationality (including didactic relationality) on the web to the machine. We are well beyond the Turing test invented by Alan Turing, the famous English mathematician, and computer scientist. The test, called the Imitation Game by Turing, can be described as a parlor game. Imagine, Turing says, that a man and a woman are in two separate rooms and communicate with an interrogator only using a teletype – the 1950's equivalent of today's electronic "chat." The interrogator must correctly identify the man and the woman and, to do so, he may ask any question capable of being transmitted by teletype. The man tries to convince the interrogator that he is the woman, while the woman tries to communicate her real identity. At some point during the game, the man is replaced by a machine. If the interrogator remains incapable of distinguishing the machine from the woman, the machine will be said to have passed the test and we will say that the machine is intelligent.<sup>12</sup> Therefore, we can deduce that the concept of intelligence based only on logical answers would be reductive. Human language goes well beyond logic, thanks to its linguistic and conceptual nuances without taking into account the complexity of non-verbal language, in itself a boundless universe of signs and meanings.<sup>13</sup> Being beyond the Turing test means that man would risk no longer being the author of his story but would become the spectator of a discourse based on a standardized and miniaturized transmission of knowledge. Precisely, because technique and technology are also languages, then the possibility of a linguistic dominance by the machine makes it necessary to pause and consider (as educators) the undeniable difference between the artificial language of

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<sup>12</sup> Robert French, "The Turing Test: The first 50 years," *Trends in Cognitive Sciences* 4(3) (April 2000): 115-122.

<sup>13</sup> Ronald E. Riggio and Heidi R. Riggio, "Face and Body in Motion: Nonverbal Communication," *Encyclopedia of Body Image and Human Appearance* (2012), 425-430.

technology on the one hand and the language "of being" on the other. It is not a homage to Heidegger but a homage to the incompressible singularity of a man whose existence seems to be characterized by reconcilable oppositions. Aspiring for a *coincidentia oppositorum*, between digital reality and analogical reality, also means that if one cannot ignore the fact that technology in its way is narration, its indiscriminate application appears risky for the transmission of knowledge. In other words, the knowledge that does not start from Aristotelian amazement and wonder appears risky if understood only as objectifying knowledge, a problem already highlighted by the sociologist Jürgen Habermas in "Knowledge and human interest".<sup>14</sup> Habermas has clearly emphasized the problem of reducing knowledge to merely scientific knowledge, an unhealthy idea proposed by positivist philosophy not entirely disappeared from the pedagogical horizons of some educators. If we want to consider the digital environment as an educational environment, we must set up a pedagogical discourse of a phenomenological-hermeneutic type that places the problem of the other than oneself and of the relationship with it as unavoidable. A phenomenological mindset seeks a scientific approach suitable for the human being so that the prevalence of technology does not have the last word. The phenomenological approach itself implies a philosophy of education that values the uniqueness of the other through a pedagogy that seriously takes into consideration the communicative-relational aspects. This pedagogy emphasizes the importance of the perception of the otherness of the other and the recognition of his unique and irreplaceable presence, as Lévinas taught us.<sup>15</sup> In this sense, the digital is placed on the same level as any educational agency that acts as a social and strategic container within which forms of coexistence develop which then have repercussions on a cultural level. The digital is above all a meeting place between people who trace and define a space of relationship where the gaze and the encounter are experienced. In this space, we move in the dimension of intentionality and intersubjectivity, understood and interpreted within a relational experience. The digital environment is an opportunity for herme-

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<sup>14</sup> Jürgen Habermas, *Knowledge and Human Interest*, translated by Jeremy J. Shapiro (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971), 67.

<sup>15</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *On Thinking-of-the-Other: entre nous*, translated from the French by Michael B. Smith and Barbara Harsha New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 193-195.

neutic reflection precisely because within it the interaction and encounter manifest themselves in the specific form of recognition between men: we are referring to dialogue, a philosophical and linguistic place.<sup>16</sup> And it is through dialogue that the participatory nature of the human being is articulated in semantic and pedagogical needs. According to Gestalt psychologist Salomon Asch, the main element of mutual interaction between people is that they "respond to each other" and this linguistic foundation is at the root of the gnoseological and human path.<sup>17</sup> What characterizes the human being is the story of oneself continuously reworked in the dialogic encounter with the other as happens, for example, both in the classroom and on the web through digital teaching. The digital environment is to be understood as an effective method of transmission/acquisition of knowledge and as an opportunity for an increasingly vast and refined construction of bridges, networks, and connections. It should be emphasized that a digital environment is also a place of unlimited networking of communication and encounters with the other. Communicative action is the basis of complex human relationships, so it is clear why the formalism of rigid machine language is unable to translate and interpret not only communicative but also educational actions. The language of technique and the language of the machine is contextless, therefore it is easily transferable from one artificial medium to another without the need for hermeneutic operations. Machine language does not require translations or mediations in the sense that it is unidirectional and is based on a single semantics. In this regard, Umberto Eco stated that there is no algorithm for the metaphor since it cannot be programmed by a computer.<sup>18</sup> Metaphor needs a socio-cultural format of the encyclopedia of interpreting subjects, exactly as it happens during teaching activity in a classroom and online, basically in the encounter between the teacher and the learner.

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<sup>16</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 388-389.

<sup>17</sup> Salomon Asch, "The problem of human interaction." In *S. E. Asch, Social psychology*, Prentice-Hall, Inc. (1952), 139-169.

<sup>18</sup> Umberto Eco, "Semiotics and the Philosophy of Language," Indiana University Press, Bloomington, First Midland Book Edition (1986), 127.