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Saturation, Meaning and Death: Notes for a Critical Approach to AI Textual Affordances

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Abstract

The demand of a moratorium on the development of AI by influential representatives of tech giants is an ambivalent sign of fear. Baudrillard's insights on the possible end of capitalism and its regime of simulation, offers opportunities to interpret this sign as the sudden awareness, among techno-corporate elites, that AI may bring about the end of capitalism through conditions of saturation, implosion, excess. These conditions, relates to the relationship between the fear of death and the role of textual competences or 'meaning-making' in tackling this fear. The production of 'meaningless meaning' through AI textual affordances challenges the status of the text and meaning-making as humans' atavistic response to the fear of death. As the resiliency of capitalism depends on the suppres-

sion of (the fear of) death, the development of AI textual affordances meddles with this response and with the fear it suppresses, suggesting the possibility of technological 'indeterminism'. Through the mediation of 'organic' intelligence and critical knowledge, the fears about AI and the concerns about the end of capitalism by saturation can be construed as preconditions for the epistemic reevaluation of the human experience of life and the fear of death against the dehumanizing effects of technological simulation of life. This paper is a preliminary, non-empirical and largely speculative or reflective engagement with three propositions about the relationship between AI textual affordances and the experience of saturation, meaning and death.

Keywords: AI, critical theory, technological indeterminism, saturation, fear.

Saturação, Significado e Morte: Notas para uma abordagem crítica às possibilidades textuais da IA

Resumo

A procura por uma moratória no desenvolvimento da IA pelos representantes influentes dos gigantes da tecnologia é um sinal ambiva-

lente de medo. As perspectivas de Baudrillard sobre o possível fim do capitalismo e do seu regime de simulação oferecem oportunidades

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para interpretar esse sinal como a repentina consciência, entre as elites tecnocorporativas, de que a IA pode trazer o fim do capitalismo por meio de condições de saturação, implosão e excesso. Essas condições estão relacionadas com a relação entre o medo da morte e o papel das competências textuais ou da ‘criação de significado’ na abordagem desse medo. A produção de ‘significado sem sentido’, por meio das possibilidades textuais da IA, desafia o status do texto e da criação de significado como resposta atávica dos seres humanos ao medo da morte. Como a resiliência do capitalismo depende da supressão do (medo da) morte, o desenvolvimento das possibilidades textuais da IA interfere nessa resposta e no

medo que ela suprime, sugerindo a possibilidade de um ‘indeterminismo’ tecnológico. Por meio da mediação da inteligência ‘orgânica’ e do conhecimento crítico, os medos relacionados com a IA e as preocupações com o fim do capitalismo por saturação podem ser interpretados como precondições para a reavaliação epistêmica da experiência humana da vida e do medo da morte, diante dos efeitos desumanizadores da simulação tecnológica da vida. Este artigo é um envolvimento preliminar, não empírico e em grande parte especulativo ou reflexivo, com três proposições sobre a relação entre as possibilidades textuais da IA e a experiência de saturação, significado e morte.

Palavras-chave: IA, teoria crítica, ‘indeterminismo’ tecnológico, saturação, medo.

INTRODUCTION: AI & FEAR

The reflections contained in the text that follows are inspired by the publication of a letter, signed, among others by Elon Musk and Steve Wozniak, advocating a moratorium in the further development of AI (Musk et al, 2023). I interpreted that letter as an ambivalent signifier of anxiety, if not fear, or more precisely a fear inducing expression of fear expressing the paradox of the forces relentlessly pushing for the development of AI now recommending to stop the process they’ve been feeding. Why? Assuming that the representatives of these forces are also the most aware of the developmental potential of these technologies and their implications, what is the nature of their concerns?

To address these concerns, in this paper I thus suggest three propositions or theses about the corporate concerns associated with the textual affordances of AI. This approach is significantly different from that adopted by other critical works on AI and its social implications (e.g. (Dyer-Witheford, Mikkola Kjösen, & Steinhoff, 2019) (Larson, 2021) (Roberge & Castelle, 2021)) to the extent that it looks at these concerns from within, rather than without the logic of capitalism. The rationale for this

operation is to understand what is in the development of AI textual affordances that worries its developers in order to understand if and how this development may, or may not, help us in thinking the end of capitalism without having to imagine the end of the world (Jameson, 2003, p. 76)

The three theses I suggest below – about saturation, ‘meaningless meaning’ and ‘technological indeterminism’ – have in turn been inspired by the work of Baudrillard and his ‘pataphysic’ methodology¹. While I don’t discuss this here, the reader will notice how that work and the ideas associated with it are the conceptual *trait d’union* or simply ‘glue’ connecting the notions of saturation, text, meaning and death in my argument about the concerns with the textual affordances of AI. As I shall argue in a moment, interpreted through the work of Baudrillard, each of these three propositions has to do with death, the return of the suppressed and ultimately the end of capitalism.

SATURATION

In common parlance saturation is the point where a fluid cannot absorb more of a given substance e.g. the point where a glass of water cannot melt more sugar or salt. For our purposes, however, saturation deserves attention for its usage in the study of social change and, in particular, of the resiliency of ‘systems of simulation: the systems where, according to Baudrillard, reality has been replaced by representations based on ‘the code’. Putting Baudrillard aside for a moment, in academia, saturation is a useful notion and a method to describe complex processes of non-incremental changes difficult to grasp in their making and opaque in their outcomes, for example as these relates to society (Sulkunen, 2009), the environment (Snorton & Yap, 2020) and race (Jue & Ruiz, 2021).

Kenneth Gergen, for example, argued that the impact of new technologies on the ways we understand the self consists of what he called ‘social saturation’ (Gergen, 1991, p. 6). This is a process by which ‘new technologies make it possible to sustain relationships – either directly or indirectly – with an ever-expanding range of other persons’ (Gergen, 1991, p. 3)

¹ Baudrillard used the term pataphysics to describe the methodology that relies on the imaginary to challenge ‘the dominance of the code in society’ (Lechte, 2010, p. 5) and the substitution of reality with a regime of simulation. See (Genosko, 2010) for an effective description of this method.

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“As we absorb multiple voices, we find that each “truth” is relativized by our simultaneous consciousness of compelling alternatives. We come to be aware that each truth about ourselves is a construction of the moment, true only for a given time and within certain relationships.” (Gergen, 1991, p. 16)

The effects of these ‘new technologies’ on the social construction of the self are quite dramatic since, for Gergen, ‘the fully saturated self becomes no self at all.’ (Gergen, 1991, p. 7)

These themes resonate at collective or sociological level in Sulkonen concerns about ‘the saturated society’. For Sulkonen “the modern ideals of progress, universal individualism and the nation have become saturated” meaning by this, that “these ideals have not ceased to exist, but the conditions of their application have been radically transformed.” (Sulkonen, 2009, p. viii). Sulkonen reminded us that, in sociology, the notion of saturation is a metaphor describing the idea of ‘immanent causation of social change’ introduced by the Russian sociologist Pitirim Sorokin at the Harvard Department of Sociology (Sulkonen, 2009, p. 9). It is this ‘immanent causation’ that brought about ‘the saturated society’ as the society collectively troubled by moral and political dilemmas that, even if Sulkonen did not mention Gergen, one would expect to follow from the ‘saturated self’.

More recently, Snorton and Yap mobilised the notion of saturation in both meanings of ‘materiality of pigment and... the sense of something becoming so full that it is weighed down, rendered immobile, or unable to be added to’, in an epistemic move to suggest that ‘current paradigms cannot fully encompass the complex contemporary reality of race’ (Phillips, 2020, p. xii). In this usage, saturation is a method to engage with issues of race, questioning representation and enabling the users to ask, for example, ‘What is it about liberal multiculturalism and its relationship to capitalism that enables institutions to avoid reaching a saturation point in their operations?’ (Snorton & Yapp, 2020, p. 4)

For Jue & Rafico, saturation is a notion describing ‘a material heuristic’ emerging ‘at the interdisciplinary nexus of the environmental humanities, media studies, cultural studies, science and technological studies, and postcolonial studies... useful for analysing situations in which the elements involved may be difficult or impossible to separate’ that ‘offers two methodological strategies...adequate to situations where discrete objects/substances/phenomena may be difficult to delineate’ and to study

‘processes of transformation that include thresholds, phase changes, and the precipitate’ (Jue & Ruiz, 2021, pp. 1-3)

Compared to these, the notion of saturation in Baudrillard, is useful for at least two reasons: first, its usage to discuss the resiliency of capitalism as a system of simulation and, second, its close, although ambivalent, relation with death.

Baudrillard used saturation to describe the point when a system of simulation reaches the limits of its resilience. In this system, the ‘perfect crime’ of the substitution of reality with its representation and the ‘code’ deprives conventional forms of resistance and opposition of the very grounds for their antagonistic action. The only possible way a system like that, designed to absorb and nullify its Other, can come to an end is through the exacerbation of itself. Saturation is a notion describing the condition where the system collapse as a result of its own working or logic. In this perspective, is it possible that the concerns about the textual affordances of AI reflect the possibility that these affordances could somehow trigger a process that could lead to a radical change and eventually undermine the forces that has so far promoted technological development?

For Baudrillard, saturation is the destiny of “a capitalist system that recognises no limits to its operation, no limits to its potential expansion, and it acknowledges no limits to its moral and technical superiority over other forms of social organizations” (Pawlett, 2013, p. 120)

To describe the same destiny, however, Baudrillard used also other terms such ‘excess’ and ‘implosion’.

Implosion, for example, “is the figure Baudrillard attributes to the masses engaged in the process of hyper-conformity: paradoxical participation that does not justify but destroys.” (Genosko, 2010, p. 151). Applied to the social production of meaning, the ‘implosion of meaning’ describes a condition in which “a new fascinating, non-linear culture emerges, one where the masses are not so much controlled by the media, but gain autonomy through their lack of response to the media.” (Smith, 2010, p. 45)

As for ‘excess’ this notion describes the fundamental feature of the logic of a system – the capitalist system - that has unlimited growth as its only purpose. In this system

“the logic of an excessive system to fuel the growth of anomalies, which along with AIDS and cancer are pathologies in that they have not come from else-

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where, from ‘outside’ or from afar, but are rather a product of the ‘over-protection’ of the body – be it social or individual. The system’s overcapacity to protect, normalise and integrate is evidenced everywhere: natural immunity is replaced by systems of artificial immunity – ‘hygienic, chemical, medical, social and psychological prosthetics’ (SC, 98) – in the name of science and progress.” (Smith R. G., 2010, pp. 59-60)

The end result of saturation, implosion and excess is a process in which the efforts to avoid death bring about the effacement of birth and the cloning of life. Rather than escaping death, these efforts bring about metastatic death (Lane R. J., 2010). Or the escaping of death through the abolition of natural selection that brings about death by suicide (Pawlett, 2010).

What is distinctive in Baudrillard ‘saturation’ and related notions is a unique conceptual relation between capitalism and death in which the latter is the ‘immanent causation’ and the only hope for the undoing of the former. This idea has been recently articulated further by Byung-Chul Han.

Han share with Baudrillard a notion of death that goes beyond the ‘biological end of life’ and the idea that ‘death may begin before death’ (Han, 2021, p. 11) . In this sense, and echoing Marcuse notion of ‘unfreedom,’ ‘the separation of life and death that is constitutive of the capitalist economy creates an undead life, death-in-life. Capitalism generates a paradoxical death drive; it deprives life of life.’ (Han, 2021, p. 8)

Han’s discussion of the death drive as a constitutive feature of capitalism is important on intellectual grounds because it sheds light on the ‘circularity of fear’ and the idea that the unconscious fear of death in capitalism is externalized and justified or rather mystified through ideology:

“Capitalism is obsessed with death. The unconscious fear of death is what spurs it on. The threat of death is what stirs its compulsion of accumulation and growth. This compulsion drives us towards not only ecological but also mental catastrophe. The destructive compulsion to perform combines self-affirmation and self-destruction in one. We optimize ourselves to death. Relentless self-exploitation leads to mental collapse. Brutal competition ends in destruction. It produces an emotional coldness and indifference towards others as well as towards one’s own self. (Han, 2021, p. 8)

Capitalism relationship with technology, can only reflect the unconscious – unconscious because repressed – fear of death and constitute the grounds for the ‘deadly’ role of data, memory and servers of digital capitalism:

“Capitalism’s striving for life without death creates the necropolis– an antiseptic space of death, cleansed of human sounds and smells. Life processes are transformed into mechanical processes. The total adaptation of human life to mere functionality is already a culture of death. As a consequence of the performance principle, the human being ever more closely approximates a machine, and becomes alienated from itself. Dataism and artificial intelligence reify thinking. Thinking becomes calculating. Living memories are replaced with machine memories. Only the dead remember everything. Server farms are places of death. We bury ourselves alive in order to survive. In the hope of survival, we accumulate dead value, capital. The living world is being destroyed by dead capital. This is the death drive of capital. Capitalism is ruled by a necrophilia that turns living beings into lifeless things. A fateful dialectic of survival turns the living into the dead: the undead.” (Han, 2021, p. 9)

Han’s conclusion about the possibility of revolution is strikingly similar to that of Baudrillard and to the Freudian recommendation ‘si vis vitam, para mortem’. (Freud, 1959, p. 317). For Han, although revolution is possible, it is not brought about by ‘the revolt of death’ but by ‘another form of life’ based on the ‘awareness of the fact that life is only truly alive when there is an exchange with death.’ (Han, 2021, p. 11). Saturation is thus the radical change resulting from the awareness that the immanent causation of the death drive is constitutive of capitalism.

The saturation thesis

If the notes above are plausible, the saturation thesis can read as follows: *The development of AI textual affordances brings capitalism to its saturation point. This consists in the revelation of the intimate connection between capitalism and death, and of the constitutive function of the ‘death drive’.*

In Baudrillard’s terms, this thesis suggests that AI textual affordances are for meaning what cloning is for life: In essence, a technology for the (re)production with metastatic effects (Gilloch, 2010, p. 57) ultimately leading “beyond what it currently

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means to be human.” (Lane R. J., 2010, p. 32). In this perspective, the forces that develop AI are seeking a moratorium because they are now starting to see the point of saturation of the process they been feeding. This point of saturation manifests itself in some sort of awareness about the impact of the textual affordances of AI on the ambivalent relation of capitalism with the fear of death. This fear has at least three connotations: first, the fear of capitalist death drive and its destructive potential on the natural and social environment; second, the fear of the return of the repressed, or the unconscious fear of death that the ideology of capitalism was originally designed to tackle; third, fear about the end of capitalism itself through saturation, implosion or excess.

If this seems plausible, one could also suggest at least three ‘research questions’ about the relationship between meaning, text and fear (of death) or, more precisely:

1) What is the impact of AI textual affordances and saturation on the processes described by the notions of ‘saturated individual’ (Gergen, 1991) and the ‘saturated society’ (Sulkunen, 2009)? What will happen to the communicative construction of reality if and when AI textual affordances expropriate humans -individual and groups - of their ‘sovereignty’ over meaning-making in the political economy of the text: the production of meaning through textual competences?

2) What is the impact of AI textual affordances and saturation on meaning-making as a form of adaptive behaviour, resulting from a long and unique evolutionary process, for the coordination of collective action? How will this change affect the role of meaning-making and the text in the ‘production’ of civilization, culture, history, reality and, especially, to tackle the problem of death in our daily lives?

3) What is the impact of this AI-induced saturation on the ideological functionality of technological determinism? In other words, if AI marks the point where technology may release, rather than suppress, the fear of death constitutive of capitalism, could this result in a shift from technological determinism to something that, in the lack of a better term, I will discuss in a moment as ‘technological indeterminism’?

‘MEANINGLESS MEANING’

There are at least two plausible reasons why corporate capital invests in the development of AI textual affordances. The first, and quite obviously, is to profit from the possibility of providing textual services. The second, is to achieve a certain control

on the communicative construction of social reality through the commodification of meaning. Although less obvious, this goal is in line, for example, with the idea that the ultimate goal of ‘surveillance capitalism’ is to expropriate people from the control on knowledge, reality and the future (Zuboff, 2019).

Discussing the origins of meaning, Hurford argued that ‘the relationship of meaning between language and the world is indirect, and is mediated by the mind, which is host to such things as concepts, ideas, and thoughts.’ (Hurford, 2007, p. 5) If this idea is as reasonable as it sounds, one may ask how does this relationship change when the mediators is not anymore a human mind but an algorithm?

Discussing the nature of meaning in relation to the aesthetic experience Johnson argued that, as humans,

“we have a deep visceral, emotional, and qualitative relation to our world. As a result of our embodied nature, meaning comes to us via patterns, images, concepts, qualities, emotions, and feelings that constitute the basis of our experience, thought, and language. (...) What emerges is a view of humans as aesthetic, meaning- making creatures who draw on their deepest sensory, motor, and affective processes to make sense of, and orient themselves in, their world (...). Such an exploration of embodied cognition should give renewed and deepened meaning to the profound metaphor of the ‘art of living.’” (Johnson, 2018, pp. 1-2)

If textual competences, and especially the creation and interpretation of texts, are interpreted as the necessary mediators of meaning-making functions or the creation and interpretation of meaning through the mediation of text, it is clear that AI affordances and human textual competences differ in at least two fundamental respects.

First, the meaning associated to AI textual affordances is, so to say, in the eye of the beholder. As the production of text in AI results not from the ‘mediation of the mind’ or from ‘the aesthetic experience of life’ but from the algorithmic processing of large amounts of data, technically speaking the meaning of the message contained in such text depends on the ‘recipient’ and not on the ‘sender’.

Second, and more radically, if among humans the relationship with meaning and textual competences is inextricably associated to the experience of life and, in turn, this experience is deeply affected by the awareness of death, one may wonder what kind of meaning and text are we talking about when we discuss the textual affordances of AI.

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These differences are important but their relevance is somehow neglected because the notion of ‘artificial intelligence’ is commonly interpreted not as a metaphor but as the naturalization of the idea that intelligence can be artificial. Outside its metaphoric value, the notion of ‘artificial intelligence’ express an oxymoron since, as many have argued, if something is artificial, it cannot be intelligent and if it’s intelligent, it’s not artificial (Willcocks, 2020), (Lee, 2020) (Mims, 2021). Furthermore, since communicative affordances associated with the naturalization of this metaphor are dangerous, some have suggested to ‘chose new metaphors for artificial intelligence’ (Boucher, 2021, see also, Noble, 2023)

All this suggests that the fundamental differences between the textual affordances of humans and AI relates to issues of meaning ultimately reflecting the fact that humans experience life and death, while AI does not. If this is plausible, and to highlight the role of this important difference, I suggest to use the notion of ‘meaningless meaning’ to describe the meanings associated with AI textual affordances. For the first time in the history of humanity, these affordances actualize the possibility of a written text produced by an agent such as AI to express meanings a) independent from the experience of life and b) dependent on associations of data which are, in themselves, meaningless to humans.

We don’t have a theory to interpret this kind of communication since, the classical model of communication theory is based on the implicit assumption that communications involves human agents with a common or ‘universal’ experience of life but different ‘particulars’. AI texts are not inspired by the experience of life. Only produced through the processing of available data. A human text tells much about the experience of life of the author. AI texts only tell about the working of an algorithm but there is no life to learn about, only the working of the code.

By ‘meaningless meaning’ I then describe a feature that distinguish AI generated texts from human texts and algorithmic meanings: meanings resulting from the algorithmic processing of large amount of data) from human meanings or the meanings associated to our experience of life. If an important although usually implicit or suppressed part of this experience is the fear of death, one can suggests that, human textual competences are the evolutionary answer to the problem and the fear of death but also the response to the constitution of a shared sense of reality from the inter-subjective experience of life and reality.

What happens when capitalism seeks to extend its control of society into the sphere of textual affordances through the working of data, algorithm and AI?

The mass experience of AI textual affordances brings about the mass realization that the meaning of a text, like beauty, is in the eye of the beholder. Think of the Turing test but in reverse: rather than questioning AI capacity to produce answers reasonable to a human mind, we may experience doubts about humanity's meaning-making competences. As Baudrillard put it:

“If we discover that not everything can be cloned, simulated, programmed, genetically and neurologically managed, then whatever survives could truly be called “human”: some inalienable and indestructible human quality could finally be identified. Of course, there is always the risk, in this experimental adventure, that nothing will pass the test—that the human will be permanently eradicated. (...) “Is a species that succeeds in synthesizing its own immortality, and that seeks to transform itself into pure information, still particularly a human species?” (Baudrillard, 2000, pp. 15-16)

The experience of doubt about the reliability of meaning-making as the ultimate foundation of humanity – what makes us human – combined with the simultaneous realization that meaning, like beauty, is in the eyes of the beholder is both reassuring and destabilizing. It may reassure us about our humanity but, at the same time, it re-opens up the problem of death and the distinctively human challenge to tackle it through the textual management of ‘meaningful meanings’. In other words, if meaning making is the fundamental feature that distinguish textual competences in AI and humans, rather than blurring the difference, the experience of AI text may trigger a desperate need to re-establish them as a matter of life or death in a rather literal sense.

The realization that meaning is in the eye of the beholder has the potential to bring back the fear of death as the key rationale for meaning-making because it dislocates the responsibility for meaning-making from the artificial ‘producer’ to the human ‘consumer’ of the text. If this sounds of little relevance, imagine if this recovered hermeneutic sovereignty of human readership would be systematically applied to the texts of the religions of the Book!

The mass experience of AI textual affordances may unwittingly popularise in practice, if not in theory, the subversive potential of the socio constructionist revolution and the idea that reality is what we make of it. It is precisely because reality is what we make of it, that we, humans, must equip ourselves with the competences necessary to tackle the responsibilities of creating the meaning of the world we live in.

The ‘meaningless meaning’ thesis

What is the point of expropriating humans from meaning-making functions? What is the nature of fear associated to the technological possibility of doing that?

In relation to corporate concerns about the social impact of AI textual affordances reaching the point of saturation, it is tempting to phrase the ‘meaningless meaning’ in the terms of the ‘double movement’ described by Polanyi when he described the societal self-defence mechanisms from the disruptive effects of the ‘free market utopia.’ (Polanyi, 2001 (1944))

“For a century the dynamics of modern society was governed by a double movement: the market expanded continuously but this movement was met by a countermovement checking the expansion in definite directions. Vital though such a countermovement was for the protection of society, in the last analysis it was incompatible with the self-regulation of the market, and thus with the market system itself.” (Polanyi, 2001 (1944), p. 136)

Inspired by Polanyi, I thus suggest that the development of AI textual affordances and the commodification of meaning for the reproduction of capital and the control over the communicative construction of reality may trigger a counter-movement in which the value of meaning, the experience of life, and the control over the communicative construction of reality become objects of contention.

If death is what gives meaning to life and the experience of life is what inspires the human production of texts, the meaning of a text produced by an agent for which life has no meaning because it cannot experience death is a ‘meaningless meaning’ that re-opens the problem of death: the need to make sense of something that ultimately has no meaning in itself. AI textual affordances have the potential to bring about the collapse of the system through the ‘meaningless production of meaning’ and the communicative production of reality resulting from the proliferation of texts by communicative agents without life. Paraphrasing Benjamin, this is ‘the work of meaning in the age of its mechanical reproduction.’ But if meaning is to the value of human life what the ‘aura’ is to the value of a piece of art, the ‘mechanical reproduction’ of AI textual affordances destroys both by ‘cloning’.

If meaningful meaning is the meaning that help us living, knowing we will not live forever and if, in other words, death gives life meaning to the extent that forces us to treat time as a scarce and valuable resource, the mass experience of AI textual affordances may ultimately contribute to debunk the ideological forgery of capitalism and the idea that the meaning of life is labour.

This thesis thus suggests that Big Tech is (or should be) concerned about the development of AI textual affordances because AI texts cannot effectively perform the commodification of meaning necessary to bring meaning itself under the control of capitalist ideology. AI textual affordances, and the awareness that meaning is in the eye of the beholder, may actually meddle with the deep functions of meaning-making and the handling of the fear of death in the practices of textual competences. This is dangerous for capitalism because this ideology relies not on the *suppression of the fear of death* (this is after all the whole point of civilization) but *on the suppression of death itself*: the confinement of the awareness of death to remote locations of our consciousness from where their effects, e.g. anxiety, depression, alienation etc. are dealt with through the mediation of consumption and/or repression.

In other words, if (and to the extent that) the textual affordances of AI meddle with the ‘meaning of life’ they are also meddling with the ‘meaning of death’. In capitalist societies, if the fear of death is not effectively suppressed, the ideology of their social order will reveal itself for what it ‘objectively’ is: an ideology and an order based on the legal appropriation of life-time – a point effectively made by the movie ‘In Time’ (Niccol, 2011).

In this perspective, ‘meaningless meaning’ is the attribute of texts that, while performative for the ideological and commercial functions of the culture industry, nevertheless fail to cope with the problem of death and the fear associated with it. To simplify the problem with a Saussurean twist, one can argue that if AI is not ‘alive’ it has to be ‘dead’, and if AI is dead, the only meanings its texts can communicative are about ‘death’ – which is precisely something capitalism would like us to forget about.

TECHNOLOGICAL ‘INDETERMINISM’

If the textual affordances of AI mark the reaching of a ‘saturation point’ and the dawn of the age of ‘meaningless meaning’, with all the implications and possibilities discussed earlier, what could be the impact on the relationship between technological

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development and capitalism? The thesis I would like to suggest is the possibility of a shift from technological determinism to something I would call, in the lack of a better term, ‘technological indeterminism’ to describe the quantum of uncertainty associated with this relationship beyond the thresholds of ‘saturation point’ and ‘meaningless meaning’.

This thesis can be formulated as follows: *the reproduction of reality through the meaningless meaning of AI-generated texts produces a mutation in the ideological role of technological development and generates ‘technological indeterminism’ as the condition in which technological development is not anymore, the controllable answer to relevant social problems, but a source of new and unpredictable social problems on its own.*

In capitalism, the whole point of technological development is not merely to enhance human strength and speed but, whenever possible, to replace human labour. The luddite fear about this replacement makes sense only in the context of a social order where for most people survival depends on labour (alienated work or work inspired and controlled by the capital through the mediation of money). If survival would depend on productivity rather than labour, the substitution of human labour with machine labour would be welcome, as Marx himself believed. The problem is that, in the conditions of class struggle, technological development is not designed to relief humans from the burden of labour. In societies based on the corporate control of technological development, the main point of this substitution is not emancipation but control.

The paradox of facing the ‘meaning of life’ under capitalism, in other words, is to give up life to survive. One effect of this paradox is that machines are not deployed to relief humans from the servitude of labour: to reduce the amount of life-time used for the production of necessary material and immaterial commodities and liberate more life-time for other purposes. Rather machines are deployed to increase the control and productivity of the life time spent of labour (in practice, the relative convenience of exploitation) and the simultaneous denial of life-time to non-labour activities, for example formal education and political participation.

But what happens when this notion of technological development is applied to the social production of meaning? If the development of AI textual affordances is the saturation point of the logic that deploys technological development not to liberate humans from their toil but to trap them in the exploitative relationship with the capital, the question is to understand the effects of these affordances on the commodification and control of meaning (the ‘meaningless meaning’ thesis) but also on technological

development itself. This saturation point, in other words, may also impact the control on technological development, and the ideology associated with it, and bring about the shift from technological determinism to ‘technological indeterminism’.

However, the social implications of this shift should not be misunderstood for an emancipative turn. Technological indeterminism is the dialectical Other of technological determinism. It does not describe a change in the purpose of technological development from oppression to emancipation or from the control of one class to another class. Rather it describes the profound transformation of the social functions of technological development once its complexity reaches the point of no return. When, in other words, *technological development is applied to the effort to control the social construction of reality through the commodification of meaning*.

Technological development cannot be reverted and inventions cannot be ‘dis-invented’. Rather, I argue that the result of the commodification of meaning is the weakening of its functions. And if the fundamental function of meaning-making for humans is to suppress the fear of death (as Freud, among others, believed), then the end result of this failure is the return of this fear.

The end result is the combination of the universal fear of death with the particulars relating to the technological experience of this fear, into the social saturation of fear. For labour, the fear of death takes the form of the fear of unemployment, insecurity and ultimately the rejection of freedom and a regression in which the “concern about living the good life yields to the hysteria of surviving.” (Han, 2015, p. 50). For capital, the fear of death is experienced as the fear of losing control, fear of risks, not the business risks, but the risks of ideological debunking or de-ideologization of society and ultimately the fear of humanity resulting from the collapse of its repressive potential and the return of the repressed in forms that is virtually impossible to anticipate and inevitably collide with the hyper-positivity of the ‘achievement society’ (Han, 2015, p. 8)

Could it be that the technological appropriation of meaning is an ambivalent effort to suppress the fear of death by removing humans from the production of meaning because the human production of meaning is too closely connected to death? If human textual affordances and the production of meaning is an evolutionary response to the fear of death, isn’t the capitalist efforts to control these affordances and the production of meaning through technological ‘cloning’ a plausible – albeit ambivalent – response to a desperate effort to suppress a growing awareness of capitalism ‘death drive’?

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Once the ‘instrumental rationality’ of technological determinism extends its reach to the sensitive spot of the artificial, non-living creation of meaning through the development of the textual affordances of AI, is it possible that saturation will be a greater concern for that rationality and its determinism rather than that for the world they try to colonize?

Perhaps Baudrillard would argue that the point where the ‘cloning’ ends is the point where ‘seduction’ gets back into play (Doel, 2010, p. 188). Another way to engage with these questions is through the lenses of indeterminacy.

Roughly put, capitalism manages to control social change through the ideological weaponization of technology and production. Once production relies on ‘machine learning’ and the same ‘learning’ introduces elements of indeterminacy in the process that cannot be anticipated by the humans that developed them, the problem of social control presents itself in a universe for the most part still unknown and perhaps unknowable without a viable ‘post-human’ epistemology. The deployment of this logic to the artificial production of meaning through text affordances, introduces further elements of ambivalence traditionally associated to the interpretation of text. The interpretative key for this scenario is not the ‘postmodern pessimism’ of ‘the domination of life by large technological systems, by default if not by design’ and its ‘diminished sense of human agency associated to it’ (Marx, 1994, p. 257). Quite the opposite, I suggest the revaluation of human agency as the fundamental effects of enhanced uncertainty resulting from the unpredictable effects of the artificial production of meaning and the saturation of technological determinism.

In other words, as technological development has reached the point of saturation with the textual affordances of AI, I suggest the thesis that the transformation of technological determinism into technological indeterminism may well raise concerns. Technological determinism was useful because it offered an ideological ‘extension’ for the expansion of capitalism and its justification. Technological indeterminism, instead, compromises both.

CONCLUSIONS: THE AMBIVALENCE OF FEAR, HUMAN INTELLIGENCE AND CRITICAL KNOWLEDGE

One of the arguments presented in this text is that the textual affordances of AI are frightening ultimately because they tamper with competences and functions associ-

ated with the atavistic need to tackle the fear of the death and the adaptive response of meaning-making through textual competences.

If this is plausible, what shall we do?

The general recommendation is to use the power of our evolutionary, 'organic' intelligence and the potentials of critical knowledge to take advantage of the ambivalent effects of fear.

A familiar emotion that has accompanied human history from its beginning, populating our myths, fear has ambivalent effects as it can trigger panic or resistance, regression or advancement, despair or determination, political fragmentation or unity, disengagement or commitment, etc. Fear is ambivalent because its effects on individuals and communities are mediated by many factors such as personality, training, conventions, institutions, communication and, above all, by the individual and collective relationship with knowledge. Roughly put, and other things being equal, when fear is tackled with reliable knowledge it becomes a powerful motive of human progress.

While it may be true that the destiny of every civilization is to rise and decline, it is also true that every civilization has handled the challenges of its time and space through the production of knowledge that the epistemic conditions and beliefs of its time made available to them. If the critical-constructionist idea of a world of our making is distinctive of our civilizations, perhaps through the mediation of its epistemics it is possible to create the knowledge we need to defuse the ambivalence of fear to our advantage. Through this knowledge, for example, the fears associated to AI and its textual affordances may easily become radical opportunities to gain control of the processes that feed them. The possibility of imagining the end of capitalism, in other words, does not require the acceptance of the end of the world, nor our civilization.

In this perspective, for example, unemployment in the culture industry and plagiarism in education are problems only if the right to live depend on employment and learning is construed in terms of social entitlement and privilege rather than personal growth. The problem is rather to rethink the relationship between human progress and technological development and, from an epistemic perspective, the politics of knowledge about this relationship: the competition for the control over the creation of knowledge constitutive of the reality of this relationship and its parts.

The theses I have presented in this text are part of a preliminary and very tentative effort to lay the ground for the kind of knowledge that could lead to rethink this relationship.

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The risks associated to the textual affordance of AI may result in a greater appreciation of the meaning-making functions for the reproduction of the social environment and, for example, in greater efforts to strengthen functional literacy and textual competences in formal education. Even the broader challenges I discussed in the terms of the return of the repressed and the fear of death may generate a new awareness about the meaning of life and perhaps more effective arguments against the reduction of life to ‘work-life’

Simplified to the extreme, with the theses I described in this text I sought to suggest that if we handle the fears of AI through the mediation of critical knowledge, we may gain an important chance to rediscovery and perhaps re-invent our humanity against the secular efforts to suppress it.

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