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Digital Phantom A Spectral Attitude to Living

ABSTRACT

In this paper I will argue that the social network industry called Facebook engenders a phantomisation effect. My interest here lies in examining how the public soul is a re-correlation of soul and image, how a digital version of the Dorian Gray Syndrome operates, and how shades of the living are *avant-garding* the ghosts of the dead in cyberspace. Finally, I will show how Facebook becomes a cemetery by not allowing us to forget.

KEYWORDS

Facebook; Dorian Gray Syndrome; Narcissus Complex; Phantomisation; Public Soul; Virtual Tomb.

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In the first place, I have to put it right from the beginning. My article is about another sort of book and another sort of ghosts. If before our digital days, phantoms were merely a product of human beliefs or imagination, today we must accept our own phantomisation. But the formula “accept it” is not properly used. We do it anyway.

Derived from an academic term conjoining two nouns into what used to mean a college on paper publication, also called a yearbook, etymologically, beyond literalness or metaphorically speaking, Facebook is a huge virtual book made of individual pages known as pro-files, even though counter-files would be a more accurate term. On the other hand, as a major element of contemporary mutation from afterlife to alterlife, social networking on Facebook is moving towards what I call a spectral attitude to living.

In terms of book face hugeness, if the population of the Globe is estimated to 6.9 billion,¹ Facebook has more than 750 million active users²; that is 9.2% of living – or not, as we shall see – human beings are using it. And if the site weren't banned in China due to political interests, we would reach the unreachable faster: “during the early days of the World Wide Web, people sometimes said that everyone would eventually have their own home page. Now it's happening, but as part of a social network. Facebook connects



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those pages to one another in ways that enable us to do entirely new things.”³ One day, personal pages will interact or interpass in the finally realised infinite book imagined by Borges or Mallarmé.

1. The public soul

Since its first appearances, our image has been related with our soul. Studies on anthropology, from the ones compiled by Frazer and so forth, have offered us various and widespread examples; of course, we must also mention Otto Rank’s early book, *The Double*, where the psychoanalyst identifies an *ego complex*, made almost compulsory by social networking. In this case:

One reason that Facebook is so enjoyable is that it feeds our egos. We can put up photos of ourselves and publish all kinds of self-descriptive information for the world to see. All of our opinions can be made public: a paradoxical confirmation of our own existence through the placement of electrons in a virtual realm.⁴

In fact, we strive to copy-paste as much as possible of ourselves in Facebook by digitally recoinning a sort of immortality dream. In a specific number of decades, only that page will everlast, in its final customisation of user personal information, especially his photographic identity:

Social networking offers the ultimate distribution mode. Facebook offers a display more public than a non-virtual photo album ever could. In this way, images achieve a level of importance where in the past they may have been left in the bottom of the shoebox or deleted from the digital camera before

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they could be printed. The question of “Is this a good shot?” (whatever “good” means) becomes irrelevant. All content is acceptable. The profile picture becomes the most important because that image is repeated in the News Feed whenever an action is taken; it functions as a visual symbol of your online life.⁵

On this matter, I would rather be radical. Namely, the profile picture functions neither more nor less than as (y)our identity. Not only the virtual one, but merely the only one. From one point, (y)our Facebook profile cuts off (y)our off-line life by teleporting it on-the-line of cyberspace. The presentation of the self, or, better, self-disclosure, is a dynamic process, following the real mutation, simulating it and also dissimulating it:

Facebook demands the constant recreation of the self, and demands a high level of creativity and a break with traditional expectations. Considering Barthes’s idea of the punctum, a good Facebook profile picture creates a deep and immediate impression; even better if it’s powerful enough to express the air of the subject.⁶

After all, as betoken by the visual appendix of this paper,⁷ the subject becomes a spectrum, a virtual Jungian *persona*. Facebook is the last avatar of reflecting in a pool or in a flowing water, in the slipstream of the natural and artificial portrait, or in the shadow of that spectral art called photography. To mention David Kirkpatrick’s book, *The Facebook Effect* is mainly this attempt which affects (y)our sense of (y)our own identity. Morbidly, the quoted work wears a cover with a black blank image on it, like a Facebook white blank profile image that hasn’t been fuelled yet with your soul: a generic digital phantom, with no name or identity whatsoever, only with a sexual status.⁸



Less or more metaphorically spelling, with usernames and passwords, we are signing a new Faustian pact, our image being an exhibited soul, and Facebook an illustrated book, painted with our eternal souls or, better, phantoms. Along with Andrei Codrescu, we could infer: “The only thing you’re doing is selling your soul to Mark Zuckerberg,”⁹ in exchange for virtual everlasting life, unconscious existence and, hopefully, digital death.

2. The Facebook Syndrome of Dorian Gray

It seems obvious that Facebook lays hyper-emphasis on our appearance, by translating a narcissistic fixation, which Lacan coined in his famous mirror stage. In addition to this, the concept of a “Dorian-Gray-Syndrome” emerged in the German medical field around 2000. For a compendious portrayal, see the table below:

Diagnostic criteria for the Dorian-Gray-Syndrome ¹⁰		
	Symptoms	Description
1	body dysmorphic disorder	excessive preoccupation with the outward appearance
2	narcissistic regression	imaginary or minimal defects in external morphology causing embarrassment and social reclusiveness
3	denial of the maturation process	along with excessive worry about one’s external appearance there is a strong desire to preserve one’s youthfulness in order not to grow older – as it were, swimming against the current of time

The Dorian-Gray-Syndrome – or simply Dorian Gray Syndrome, as Facebook has evolved from The Facebook – is the guise of a major complex, the very first.

“Ever since Christopher Lasch’s conceptual work (1979),¹¹ narcissism has been understood as a culturally specific temporal phenomenon of our era.” Post-modernism or hypermodernism has resulted in our contemporary digitalism, for which Facebook represents a head syndrome. We do not die on Facebook. We rest in peace and we haunt each other in a digitalist way. The fetishisation of – the image of – the body, symptomatic for a Dorian Gray Syndrome, is at home on Facebook. We double ourselves there, and maybe we are just moving a sort of minimalistic soul into cyberspace. Refusing in our own way the ageing process, we mythically hope for eternal unconscious youth.

In short, being a better version of MySpace, Hi5 or other social imagistic networks that preceded it, Facebook represents a collective symptom of a narcissistic disease called the Dorian Gray Syndrome, which re-signifies the so-called Narcissus Complex. In the same way that Oscar’s Wilde character – but also like the one of Ovide – who takes care only of his face ignoring his inner part, we live in outer images. More than a simulacra, we become our own phantoms. It is as logical as possible to raise questions about such a distorted situation: “The social changes that will be brought about by the Facebook Effect will not all be positive. What does it mean that we are increasingly living our lives in public? Are we turning into a nation – and a world – of exhibitionists? Many see Facebook as merely a celebration of the minutiae of our lives. Such people view it as a platform for narcissism rather than a tool for communication.”¹² Again or once more, it’s not only about exhibitionism, it’s merely what should be called a sort of digital portation, a virtual narcissistic transfer in the potency and imminence of our death as human beings in real world and life.



Nevertheless, Facebook inspired even a movie like *The Social Network*, based on Ben Mezrich's book *The Accidental Billionaires. The Founding of Facebook. A Tale of Sex, Money, Genius, and Betrayal*, which reveals the very causes of the Facebook affair: the sublimation of trivial narcissism. Being left apart by his girlfriend, Mark Zuckerberg invents what will become Facebook, and the movie ends with Him sending a – virtual-compensative, how else – friend request to Her. Something archetypal is going on there. The prototype of human relations, that is rejection after rejection, sublimation and loneliness. In other times, the rejected one became a lycanthropic howling at the moon. In our times, we become digital phantoms, contemporary with all this huge, unbearable amount of – maybe for ever – human loneliness.

And again, we could say together with Andrei Codrescu: *Forget Facebook!* Because Facebook won't ever forget you. The virtual afterlife is there, not concerning its hellish or heavenly scenery; because our age, facebooked or just human, is far away from such obsolete categories. Not beyond, just far away.

3. From facebook to fan-tome. From phantom to face-tomb

There must be a time for every Dorian to die. Shades of the living become shades of the dead. In other words, when the real person dies – but, please, do not ask me what a real person is – the virtual double becomes a digital phantom in full. Furthermore, it's very possible for Facebook to become a Deadbook, an ultimate avatar of the Tibetan or Egyptian archaic versions, a digitalist rewriting of death, a huge symbolic mass grave or just a virtual cemetery,¹³ with profiles in roles of individual digital tombs.

A short explanation is necessary. The Facebook profile can be deleted or deactivated – in other words recycle bin-ed – or converted into what is called a memorial. Deceased facebookers are being reported by friends who can prove their death. In this meaning, on a Facebook discussion forum, the users are filling the topic of “What happens to someone's Facebook account when they die?”. Here is one response:

Is that for definite? My dad died recently and me and my sister are trying to delete his account but we don't know his password. We've emailed facebook 3 times but they are not replying. Did you have the same problems?

Another common sense question would be this: will Facebook automatically deactivate your account if you do not log in for a long period of your life? Maybe you passed away meanwhile. Maybe Google+, the newest alternative to Facebook will have a better solution to this problem. Or maybe there isn't any problem. Released in 2004 as a Harvard exclusivist network, when Facebook and its users begin to die, this fan-



tome¹⁴ will gradually become a huge face-tomb.

I will mention the only case I know, a suicidal student who threw himself from the eighth floor of the hostel in which he lived. In three days, not only was his room filled with flowers, but also his facebook profile was loaded with virtual or digital ones – that is not artificial; because virtual is beyond natural and artificial, it is a third state of things, and, why not, beings. In a digital tomb, everything is reduced to latency. Moreover, even the subject is only potential, not even symbolic, but potential. If there is any form of humanism in this, we shall call it inhuman.

To finish, a game on forgetting. Assuming an overinfla(mma)tion of memory, Viktor Mayer-Schönberger would put expiration dates on information.¹⁵ Because you must be able to delete and forget your virtual trash, a Derridean digital *trace* or *spectrum*, which Facebook highlights as a process and a product of a mass phantomisation. *Delete* is our contemporary Lethe – remember? – the mythic water of oblivion. If cyberspace became our afterlife, adding to it our almost pathologic incapacity to forget, it seems that what should be called our digital Lethe has been dried up or maybe frozen. Our Lethe is de-let(h)ed. And our undeletable phantoms are haunting each other without any purpose, without any chance of reincarnation. We could go further: a Facebook profile could easily be taken by someone who knows the password of a deceased; in other words, a digital transmigration of souls, a virtual occultism and orphism.

What is Facebook? Pro-files or counter-files, afterlife or alterlife or just later life, towards a spectral attitude to living. Or filing!?!

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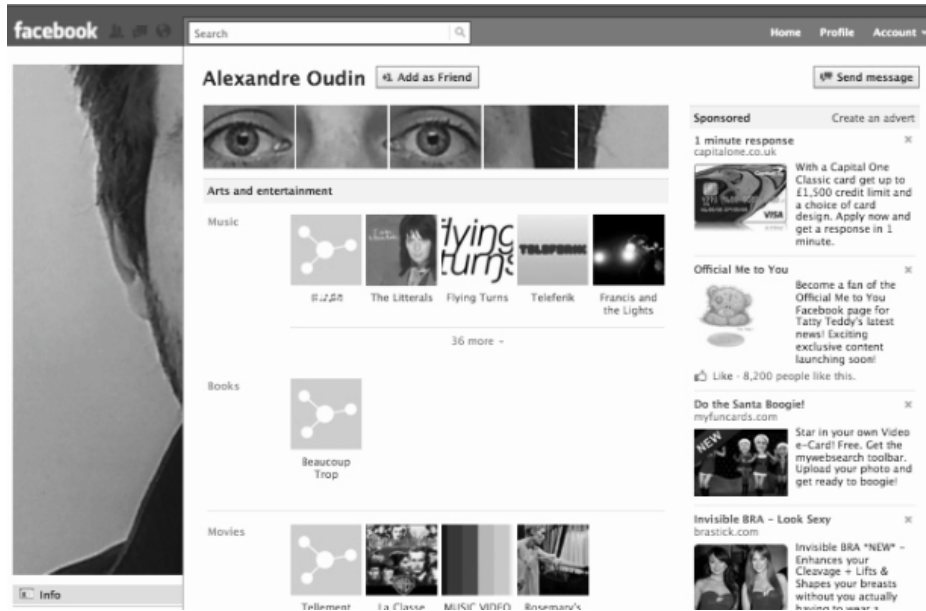
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Notes

- ¹ Cf. <http://www.geohive.com/>, last accessed on 2011-07-24.
- ² Cf. <http://www.facebook.com/press/info.php?statistics>, last accessed on 2011-07-24.
- ³ D. Kirkpatrick, *The Facebook effect*, Simon & Schuster, New York, 2010, p. 16.
- ⁴ M. Hamington, *Care Ethics, Friendship, and facebook*, in D.E. Wittkover (ed.), *Facebook and philosophy*, Open Court, Chicago, 2010, p. 135.
- ⁵ J. Sarachan, *Profile Picture, Right Here, Right Now*, in *Vol. cit.*, pp. 54-55.
- ⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 55.
- ⁷ See *Infra*.
- ⁸ *Ibidem*.
- ⁹ A. Codrescu, "Forget Facebook," *Publisher's Weekly*, Jan 31, 2011: <http://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/columns-and-blogs/soapbox/article/45940-promote-this-forget-facebook.html>, accessed on 2011-07-21.
- ¹⁰ Cf. http://www.dorian-gray-syndrom.org/PsychoAnalyse/revised_DGS/revised_Dorian_Gray_Syndrome.php, last accessed on 2011-07-18.
- ¹¹ C. Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism. American life in an age of diminishing expectations*, Norton, New York, 1979, *apud* the site mentioned above.
- ¹² D. Kirkpatrick, *Op. cit.*, p. 14.
- ¹³ As a Saint Google search will find, the Internet is filled with cyberspaces called virtual cemeteries, full of digital bones or dust or still stuffed with rotten flesh remained from human, but also from... pets; but Facebook is more than this, precisely because it phantomises us earlier. See the last image of this paper, *infra*.
- ¹⁴ Fan-tome, because Facebook is a fan club; we do not own friends, but fans.
- ¹⁵ Cf. V. Mayer-Schönberger, *Delete. The virtue of forgetting in the digital age*, Princeton University Press, Princeton and Oxford, 2009.



A french artist who masterminded a fashionable new style of putting your-self on-line [http://mashable.com/2010/12/14/new-facebook-profile-hacks/, last accessed on 2011-07-24; the fact implies a photo made public by the author, whose copyrights are not affected]



The matrix of your future Facebook profile picture

