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AI and the Ethics of Reading: Communicating Difference in the Age of Connectivity

Abstract: This paper looks into how AI might be impacting our relation to otherness, reshaping the ways in which we engage with storytelling. I aim to define the need for an ethics of reading that would help us re-contextualize the politics of the other within, what I call, the crisis of narrative agency. I argue that the effects of generative intelligence on processes of meaning-making, and on our ability of reading and telling stories of the other outside the frames of digitally-mapped sensitivity, are mainly negative. Despite an increased sense of connectivity and growing access to information in a globalized world rendered more "readable" by AIs, I argue that the illusion of enhanced communication is accompanied by a form of blindness towards marginalized regimes of representation that lie beyond the iconicity characterizing AI memorialization.
Keywords: Ethics; Communication; Otherness; Artificial Intelligence; Narrative; Politics; Imagination.

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Introduction

Narrative agency needs to be brought to our attention in the advent of generative artificial intelligence. The stories that we bear or the stories bearing us, emerging from what Huyssen eloquently termed "the hypertrophy of memory"[1], are being retold, re-framed, and transformed within the deep learning structures of AI. Who is telling the story from within this embeddedness? This dilemma needs to be considered not only as a question of authorship in the age of AI, but rather as an all-encompassing ethical issue stretching from social memory to human rights. Postmodernism has already explored the question of "who is speaking and to whom" by maintaining the following hard to reconcile duality. On the one hand, it overthrew the issue of the subject by contesting the notion of "author" and shifting the attention to the "text" as discursive practice or "that social space which leaves no language safe, outside, nor any subject of the enunciation in position as judge, master, analyst, confessor, decoder"[2]. Postmodernism recanted centeredness and totalization,

refutations that go hand in hand with the dismantling of the subject of enunciation into contextual communication networks or the meaning-making web of relations. Linda Hutcheon pointed out postmodernism's pervasive awareness of social and textual context and the undercutting of a trans-historical, universal subject position or discourse.

On the other hand, despite this shift of attention from subject to context or *process*, postmodernism has also called for a critical relation to this obfuscation of the "enunciating entity" in the name of scientific universality or novelistic realism[3]. This means that, paradoxically, postmodern thought has both inscribed and undermined the authorial "authority" of the subject as producer of a contextual discourse, by simultaneously holding a position of skepticism towards individual narrative agency and asserting the importance of individual identity through difference and specificity. In the age of generative intelligence, it goes without saying that the individual is no longer perceived as the origin of discourse, and that context and identity are removed from spatialized subjective experience, becoming exploitable resources in the realm of digital expansion.

The light that postmodernism has cast on context (or process) as the key to a politics of discourse (derived from institutional and cultural practices of communication) has been overshadowed by a distinct digital paradigm. In the emergent age of AI, context is leveraged as a pliable mode of discourse rather than the underlying source of encoding and decoding meaning. I am thinking mostly about the ease with which AI chat-bots can take up and exploit the conventions of a certain context of communication (taking on different social roles, styles, modes etc.), while, at the same time, giving users the impression that it is not really bound by any context and that, with its help, "users" themselves can transcend the limitations and biases of their own contexts of communication and interpretation.

This illusion that AI is granting us access to an augmented dimension of the communicable, the readable, and the relatable is marked by an impaired individual sense of responsibility towards processes of meaning-making and understanding. Within this new framework, I argue that the *political* (understood in its broader sense) dimension of practices of communication and meaning-generating has been obscured, downsized, or disregarded, since discourse production is increasingly and narrowly linked to a rationalized, commodified, and tokenized recombination of signs. Aurel Codoban has already talked about an industrialization of Western culture that had been tailored specifically for the ends and goals of artificial intelligence[4]. In other words, the subjective "expropriation" (or the externalization and automation) of communication is drawing extensively on a cultural and semiotic mechanization. As a consequence, generative intelligence is contributing significantly to the essentialization of communication and meaning-making practices, nurturing the collective false perception that generated text (drawing on mathematical re-encoding processes) transcends the contingencies of a politically-determined world that is underpinned by ideologically, culturally, and socially shaped perceptions.

Networked communication (in all its multi-wired bundle of entanglements or

semiotic assemblages) entertains illusions of neutrality, impartiality, and heterogeneity. This illusion could be seen as a stepping stone to a form of authoritarianism drawing on the naturalized universalist aspirations postmodernism has "waged war" against by paying careful attention to the "enunciating entity". The question is which is the underlying perception of narrative agency informing our possibilities of navigating the "open", accessible, and infinite "text" of large language models that are increasingly better at perspective-taking and at reproducing the discursive particularities of contextualized identities. Moreover, we need to ask ourselves how AI-powered communication is impacting our imagination and the possibility to grasp alternatives (or, in Frederic Jameson's terms, to cognitively map the world-system).

Concerns regarding the limitations imposed on the power of imagination have been voiced as early as the 60s with Marcuse's notion of the unidimensional man, but the consequences of this phenomenon are yet to be deciphered in the age of artificial intelligence. In the age of global capitalism, "an individual's own imagination is merely another raw material to be manufactured into commodities"[5]. The crisis of representation has turned into a crisis of agency, since not even human imagination can still be considered a driving force for action and change. I would argue that this crisis of agency is reflexive and symptomatic of the inherent contradictions of postmodernism (and, more broadly, postmodernity), and it is deeply connected to the ethics of reading, remembering and communicating in the digital age.

The Looseness of Global Culture and the Struggle for Differentiation

I would like to tie the reflection on political communication in the digital age to the specific question of possibilities of self-expression and/or expressing difference in a globalized world (I am placing this question outside the conceptual framework of identity politics). Anthony Giddens' analysis of the connection between individual experience and abstract systems in modernity is relevant for our discussion of agency in the age of information technology. Giddens views modernity in the light of the "disembedding mechanisms" underlying it at the crossroads between "distanciation and the chronic mutability of local circumstances and local engagements"[6]. We mostly tend to place these "disembedding mechanisms" that give way to the recombination of social relations across time and space in a direct relation to globalization rather than modernity, but Giddens compellingly shows their relatedness to the transformations brought about by late modernity and the interplay between standardizing influences and the pluralization of contexts.

Giddens does not use the term *agency* when discussing the self as a "reflexive process of connecting personal and social change"[7], but his interest in self-actualization as "life politics" is implicitly tied to the concept I am employing. Are this "disembedding mechanisms" (with all the inherent freedom of mutability and recombination) granting individual subjects more power, as locality becomes less binding or defining? Agency seems to be at the opposite end of "an enveloping outside world"[8] and modernity's insistence in dissolving

"external criteria" (the partial elimination of influences stemming from "large-scale social systems") seems to tap into this illusion of self-determination in the face of change. Counter-intuitively, "dissembedding mechanisms" are not simply liberating, because, as Giddens already intuited, "whether in personal life or in broader social milieux, processes of reappropriation and empowerment intertwine with expropriation and loss"[9].

For instance, Fatima Naqvi's conceptualization of victim society is illustrative of this paradox. Following French philosopher Jean Baudrillard's contentious assertion in *Le Paroxyste indifférent* (1997) – that the West has been a "société victimale" for the past decades[10] – Naqvi delves into the Western cultural perception of victimhood, which clashed with the economic and political position of the West as victimizer (rather than victim). Victim society is linked, among others, to the condition of "living in a dedifferentiated, indifferent phase where there are no more guarantees for belonging"[11]. This "horizontal field" devoid of fixed hierarchies and vertical coordinates becomes a competitive space for asserting individual difference or markers of belonging. Thus, "the assumption of victim status here becomes important because it seems to guarantee our emplacement"[12].

Naqvi analyzes acclaimed French novelist Michel Houellebecq's works as epitomes of the "stupidity" of a Western sense of victimhood stemming from global capitalism's horizontal space for self-definition and self-expression[13]. Houellebecq's anti-heroic victims (the characters in his novels) seem to have no agency as they are granted increasingly more freedom of choice in a fluid global market, struggling to assert individualization by finding a place of irreducible difference (victimhood) within the time-frame of a consumerist society. By in-differentiation (and lack of agency, I would add), the Western man has been reduced to bare life, "a mute, undifferentiated, simultaneously pre- and post-human state – over which others dispose"[14]. Thus, the Western experience of victimization is the failed attempt at regaining agency by politicizing bare life. This struggle for differentiation (or, in Houellebecquian novels, the indifference towards differentiation) against consumer individualism recalls to mind the crisis of agency inherent in the Western individualist ideology that has sought empowerment through what Giddens calls "disembedding mechanisms" (which include the "horizontal plane of differences" that Naqvi links to Western victimization). The question that remains is whether the use of AI in the memorialization and representation processes perpetuates or replicates this disembedded collage of a neo-liberal, capitalist meaning-generating system, leading to more dedifferentiation and indifference and, implicitly, to a cultural and existential hypertrophy of Western victimization.

The West's leaning towards forms of dedifferentiation has also been pointed out by Eugenia Siapera, in her subtle analysis of how we construct and represent cultural diversity within the frames of global capitalism. The work of mediation underlining the media-saturated globalized world is driven by "a constant tension between control and/or containment of cultural diversity and defiance, opposition to, but also negotiated acceptance of, such efforts"[15]. Following her line of thought, I want to call attention to the ways in which AI is

contributing to the standardization and domestication of our encounters with mediated cultural difference. This standardization has deep ethical implications for our democracies, growing our lack of sensitivity to the story or the plight of the other, provided it is not encoded in the regimes of representing cultural difference that have formatted our sense of connectivity to other people.

Beside this, the crisis of the liberal idea of the individual underlying the notion of human rights is indeed pointing not only to what I would tend to call a disembedded subjectivity no longer centered around individual consciousness or corporeality, but also to a disordering of the "taken for granted" foundations of our political world. Additionally, "the erosion of individual free will in market decisions made in the face of highly manipulative, individually tailored appeals based on thousands of data points"[16] goes hand in hand with the erosion of free will in the face of the disembeddedness of marketed, media manufactured political opinions. The notion of human consciousness is increasingly presented as obsolete in an age when the source of political authority (and knowledge authority) is entirely granted to cloud computing[17]. Since the line between human and machine has been stirring up a debate, the question of how is the story of the other (the political other, the non-human other or the self as an other) being written and transformed remains vital for the issue of political communication in the age in which AI is expected to "redesign humans"[18].

I strongly believe that our capacity to tell stories (and, implicitly, individual human narrative agency) has been of cardinal importance for charting political territory and expending the breadth and width of our political "moral" compass. Now, storytelling is being profoundly impacted by AI: from tailored search results and media feeds to generative storytelling, the dawn of these new strategies of visibility is narrowing down our individual political consciousness. I argue that the story of the other is being pushed to the margins within the digital vortex, and that narrative rights are being overwritten by narrative patterns. Lack of diversity and the covert politicization of AI development go hand in hand with "various forms of social oppression"[19], and I would like to dive into the subtle connection between AI-mediated storytelling and oppression, since the political struggle for differentiation in the digital environment has become equivalent to the struggle for having a voice in society and in processes of memorialization.

Memory Agency and the Ethics of Reading

The role of narrative and framing in any form of political communication cannot be stressed enough. It is through narratives that we perceive injustice and wrongdoing, and we resort to narratives when making sense of political decisions in a string of events. Our political imaginary is informed by the mechanisms of narration and our dynamic system of values and beliefs can be passed down, mobilized or even restructured by the spiraling influence and integrative power of stories. As Adams Hodges shows, "the power of political narratives to construct particular visions of socio-political reality holds real-world consequences in terms of manufacturing

consent for war"[20]. In other words, even acts of political violence acquire meaning or legitimization within narrative or discursive frames that "transparently" seem to communicate the violence of the real world, rather than construct it through language.

This is why I would like to relate the question of narrative agency and narrative rights to politics (in the broader sense) in order to trace the crisis of agency back to our basic relationality to stories and, more specifically, to the employment of the suffering of the other. It goes without saying that this issue is directly connected to the question of what happens to the right to narrate one's story (or, more broadly, to narrative agency) in the age of AI memorialization. Digitization has already transformed the ways in which we tell, distribute and consume stories in the aftermath of increased connectivity and the possibility of recombining social relations across time and space (starting with late modernity, as Giddens shows). "Disembedding mechanisms" contribute to the possibility of relating, in different modes, to the stories of distant others and appropriating certain identity-bound modes of expression. The fluidity of memory in the digital age has created room "for less top-down memory practices and greater autonomy and creativity in memorial works"[21]. The task of navigating "the extensive volume of atrocities-related digital content" has been delegated to AI-driven systems that are able to individually tailor responses[22].

This deterritorialization of traumatic memory could be seen as having a contribution in fostering a much more comprehensive global consciousness. In spite of this, the confidence in the empowering effects of digital media that could "help create new forms of solidarity and new visions of justice" has dwindled[23]. In their *Introduction* to *The Right to Memory: History, Media, Law, and Ethics*, Noam Tirosh and Anna Reading have pointed out that the "memory democratization" effect of digital media fell short of the rhetoric[24]. The fact that memorialization processes have moved beyond the grip of historians and institutions due to the dynamics of the digital environment was believed to be beneficial for truth-telling and increased access to possibilities of producing memory outside the confines of disciplinary knowledge and other forms of power. Conversely, it could be argued that the digital "memory democratization" process did not contribute to building bridges and fostering empathy between cultural groups, generations or identities, but rather it fueled a commercialized and desensitized (or *indifferent*, in Baudrillard's terms) relation to the symbolic capital of distinct memories. Additionally, the risk of losing memory agency in the entanglement of human and non-human memories has also been conceptualized in relation to the digitization of storytelling:

> 'memory work' (collecting, recollecting and circulating story as data/data as story) comes at a cost and one that is increasingly driven by cultural currencies via digital interfaces, infrastructures and regulations. Within and between these increasingly structured domains, 'memory agents' and remembering agency can be lost[25].

These multi-temporal circuits of digital memory are significantly molded by a

new kind of agency, which is that of *icons* (memes, codes, symbols, narratives) and *iconicity* in a new entangled affective memory space. As Joanne Garde-Hansen and Gilson Schwartz show, "icons are time machines premediating and remediating the flow of human and non-human memories: they are affective chains of value"[26]. The "iconomics of memory" draw our attention to the fact that this networked time consciousness is rolled from a crafted political economy of attention and an implicit commodification of memory narratives.

The latest concerns are related to generative artificial intelligence and its ability to generate visual and textual representations in the context of the memorialization of past or present mass atrocities. One of the frequently emphasized threats in this case is that of memory hegemonies that prioritize "Western-centric views on how mass atrocities shall be remembered or interpreted" and suppress "alternative practices of memorialization"[27]. In my opinion, the ethical implications of AI mediated memorialization practices should not be narrowed down to the issue of the reliability or unreliability of these outputs, but rather focused on their circulation, integration, and interaction with the capitalist meaning-making processes which are shaped by a tendency to render the fragmented, globalized world more comprehensible, readable, gratifyingly accessible and simplified. The totalization drives of a unified worldview have long been contested by philosophers and writers, but the need for a coherent, readable and easy to grasp socio-cultural and political reality lies deep within the economic possibility of capitalizing on it.

This is why I would like to go back to J. Hillis Miller's *Ethics of Reading* and reiterate the underlying ethical relation to unreadability in the context of a saturated AI-powered sociopolitical environment. Hillis Miller reminds us of the relational meaningfulness of the failure to read by stating that "ethical judgment and command is a necessary part of that narrative of the impossibility of reading what de Man calls allegory"[28]. In this vein, most of our attempts at interpreting the world and communicating experience are reenactments of the failure to read, a non-fulfillment that is a condition for the work of the imagination. Thus, for J. Hillis Miller, the meandering ethics of reading "imposes on the reader the 'impossible' task of reading unreadability"[29]. This sustained hermeneutic effort that undermines closure marks a constant "engagement with the unattainable"[30]. I would like to argue that, in a globalized world that has been defined by an unprecedented expansion of the field of the "communicable" and the experience of the "readable" and "relatable", we have forgotten the structural importance of mis-reading or un-reading the world. In other words, under the pressure of a digitally communicable world and the imperative of always "getting it right" (within the power dynamics of exchanges that capitalize on certain clear-cut readings of the world), we have grown insensitive and blind to the unreadability inherent in every reading, pushing aside the role and function of human imagination in political mediation.

I argue that AI-powered communication, which can shift between perspectives, roles, styles, ideologies, memories etc., is fueling the illusion of a level playing field where agencies coexist and any story can be told, because the world is completely

readable and fully charted. In fact, as Lea David demonstrates, moving beyond the human rights language of neoliberalism, "participation in these mnemonic battles" is profoundly unequal[31]. AIs have been trained and are being trained on this unequally "readable" world and I believe it would be naive to expect it to "grow" its own modes of translating cultural, political, and ethical blind spots. I also think that a special attention to unreadability would empower human narrative agency as memory narratives would have to open up, beyond their iconicity, towards the failure to read. Additionally, the ethical task of "reading unreadability" acknowledges human memory agency within the digital cycles of memory communication, and reasserts the role of human imagination in building relationality.

The practical task of "reading unreadability" is, in my opinion, directly dependent upon the critical exercise of gaining awareness of various forms of invisibility inherent in practices of visibility. In other words, "reading unreadability" also enables us to catch a glimpse of what Joseph R. Slaughter calls "untelling in the form of telling", which is one of the "modes of practicing violence in the names of life and narrative"[32]. In his thought-provoking paper "Life, Story, Violence: What Narrative Doesn't Say," Slaughter draws on documents shedding light on the counterinsurgency strategies (employed during the "war on terror") in order to spark a reflection on the "anti-narrative mechanisms" at play in the process of rendering comprehensible the narrative of the subaltern. Counter-intuitively, narrative agency is not suppressed by silencing, omissions, or external violence (which actually intensifies the need

for narrating the affliction), Slaughter argues. In fact, what is less obvious are the "mechanisms of concealment performed under the sign of disclosure" or the "strategies of unnaration that go by the name of narration"[33]. The argument is that there is a form of violence in the complicit discursive attempt at eclipsing violence through narration.

Following Slaughter's line of thought, we can start pondering the "anti-narrative effects" of AI generated narratives which draw on "critical reception patterns that entangle memory publics"[34]. Paradoxically, I argue that we might be talking about an anti-narrative and anti-imaginative effect of the digital creative "connectivity to new communities"[35]. It could be argued that AIs could make the world perfectly readable by providing us with an infinite repertoire of "universally relatable" and pliable stories (including historical and political narratives) with disregard for "the ethics of reading" or the "violence" of narration. In other words, our increased reliance on systems that cannot be aware of certain meaning-making processes as an eclipse of violence could pave the way towards more "disguised" violence performed in the name of accessibility and democratization.

Lea David provides us with an example of how, against the backdrop of "the monetization of human rights abuses", telling the past can also be a form of untelling it[36]. David argues that "moral remembrance" (with all its stresses on the "duty to remember" policies and "victim-centered" approaches) has, in spite of its ethical, "healing", and restorative intentions, contributed to a standardization and homogenization of mass atrocities victim narratives. "The struggle for victimhood"

within the frame of neoliberal memorialization practices has involuntarily pushed victims to "adjusting and reframing one's agenda to that of human rights in order to achieve visibility and wide recognition"[37]. AIs have tapped into this neoliberal logic of memorialization and a significant reliance on it could have a negative impact on the already disabled culturally specific ways of remembering and communicating human suffering in political contexts.

A Snapshot into History: AI Writing Stories of Immigration

AI-powered memorialization entails not only mediation, but actually the possibility of producing cultural memory. "The political economy of attention to difference and to the semiotic processes of difference-creation"[38], within the frame of digital memory dynamics, points to the fact that the notion of difference has turned into a predictable generative mechanism subjected to "iconification". In order to shed light on how ChatGPT produces memory following a cultural prompt, I chose to focus on an iconic photograph that tackles a political subject and which constitutes a "document" of modern life. I decided to stick to the multimodal relation between pictures and narratives because I would like to expand on the discussion of the "iconomy of memory", more specifically "the relationship between personal narratives and cultural/political economies in a globalized digital age"[39], bearing in mind the concept of iconicity as key to the reflection on the AI underpinnings of political communication. It goes without saying that there is a meaningful connection between the ways in which we employ the

synthetic and computational power of artificial intelligence to get a quick snapshot of something and the significance of the term in the field of photography: "when the hunting term *snapshot* entered the popular photographic lexicon, it referred not only to the spontaneity with which someone could make a picture but also to the capacity of that picture to stop the world in its tracks"[40].

It is this politics of arresting the moment by making a specific set of choices which creates the framing of that particular instant that could shed light on the intricate deep framing politics of artificial intelligence. Alfred Stieglitz's *The Steerage* is one of those remarkable photographs that have managed to attract attention both for its subject matter as well as for its geometrical composition. Taken in 1907 on board of a transatlantic ship, *The Steerage* highlights social class division, capturing the formal juxtaposition between passengers traveling first class, sitting on the higher deck, and immigrants or working-class travelers from the lower deck (the steerage), where the cheapest seats used to be. The many political readings of this iconic photograph have invalidated the old adage that "the camera never lies".

First of all, I asked ChatGPT to provide me with information on Alfred Stieglitz's *The Steerage*, and then I prompted it to generate/write a narrative inspired by the photo, which would shed light on class division at the turn of the century. At the level of overview, AI described *The Steerage* as marking a shift in artistic direction, from Pictorialism towards Straight Photography. This can be justified by the fact that Stieglitz himself, in hindsight, pointed out the huge importance of this picture

that he took by chance. In fact, the photograph has been "mythologized as a turning point" since it was only published in 1911, four years after it was taken[41]. In the fall of 1910, *The Steerage* was left out of the show at the Albright Gallery by Stieglitz himself, because, allegedly, the photographer did not fully recognize the value or significance of the picture he had taken.

Errors made by AIs or partial information framed as objective or complete have already been singled out. Obviously, these mistakes are not insurmountable as the system is constantly growing and able to learn. However, the argument I am trying to make is that these kinds of slips point to something deeper than the unreliability of the system, since these misreadings of the world are intertwined with our expectations regarding communicability and information framing in the digital age. An inherent leaning towards essentialization, mythologization, naturalization or commodification are not only a reflection of certain shortcomings of generative intelligence, but rather symptomatic of a failed paradigm of rendering the world readable and communicable. An ethics of reading, in a more comprehensive sense, following Hillis Miller, imposes on us a special attention dedicated to the failings in reading the world (or communicating experience). I believe the ethics of reading would not simply make us more aware of the limitations or incongruousness of our own readings of the world, but rather it could help us surpass the ideological traps of what I would like to call a tokenized experience of knowledge sharing.

For the generation of the narrative, ChatGPT resorted, in a very compelling manner, to perspective-taking. It chose to write a story that "imagines a moment from the perspective of a fictional character captured in the photo, weaving in historical and emotional context". Miriam, identifiable in Stieglitz's picture by the "shawl pulled tightly around her shoulders" overhears "the clack of boots and laughter" floating down from the upper deck. The atmosphere in the narrative is described emphasizing the harsh conditions, more specifically over-crowdedness, uncertainty, and the sense of being caught between worlds. Miriam is looking forward to reaching New York and wondering whether she will be met by her sister or pass the inspections at Ellis Island. Then, she notices the man "lifting a strange, box-like device to his face" and she thinks about the question of the visibility of the people trapped "in-between".

Lastly, the narrative encompasses an epilogue detailing the moment when Miriam notices the photograph in the window of a bookshop and recognizes herself in it. It is suggested in the last lines that, unlike Stieglitz, she knew better what the picture was about. Paradoxically, the epilogue brings us back to the question of agency and narrative rights. It could be said that one of the other topics the narrative unexpectedly touches upon is the need for narrative self-determination. As Slaughter argues, "the reparative or incorporative work of narrative is to sustain our everyday fantasies of self-authorship"[42]. One of the questions that comes to mind is what happens to this sense of self-authorship in the age of AI, when we seem to have partially lost narrative agency to the persuasive artificial power of perspective-taking. I would argue that the necessary illusion of self-authorship is being maintained, against all odds, by the internalized Western discourses of victimhood. Just like in

the narrative generated by artificial intelligence, the victim, the immigrant, the unseen traveler, finally regains the liberal right to narrate one's story.

This myth that, eventually, the incommunicable can be rendered communicable, the invisible can become visible, and that a complete, rounded, fully-fledged reading of the world is attainable, undermines an ethics of reading that calls for a specific type of political consciousness. If we, as political subjects, grow our awareness of the "impossible task of reading unreadability" (more than ever now, in this all-encompassing digital reality), we make room for real political action and communication, overcoming the fictions of self-authorship and acknowledging the silences in political representations of ourselves and the others. The political consciousness tied to an ethics of reading compels us to break the iconicity of narratives and pictures that arrest the encounter with the other into a stabilized reading that best aligns with discourses of power. The multilayered political readings of the world could be homogenized as an effect of an impairing hermeneutic shortcut engineered with the help of AI-powered systems substituting narrative and memory agencies.

The other aspect I came across by analyzing the narrative generated with the help of artificial intelligence is related to another cultural misreading of *The Steerage*. As already mentioned, Miriam, the character in Stieglitz's picture that witnesses the moment the scene was captured on camera and is described as consciously thinking about the gaze of "the upper class" on the crowd of people traveling below deck, is imagined to be traveling from Europe to America. In fact, when shooting *The Steerage*, Stieglitz

was on board of the Kaiser Wilhelm II, the transatlantic crossing from New York to Bremen[43]. The question is not why AI tapped into the cultural misreading of *The Steerage* as portraying the condition of immigrants heading towards the U.S., but rather why the most frequently told story of immigration is framed as such. The answer might lay in the fact that narrative agency is bound to certain already mapped emotional territories, or tied to what James Paul Gee terms "cultural models". Paul Gee's concept refers to "a vast store of simulations" depicting prototypical events in a simplified world that we take to be the real world[44]. Digital memory has adjusted itself to these cultural models that are very pliable as they dwell at the crossroads between the local, the national, and the global.

The pliability of cultural models makes Miriam's story more accessible as a narrative of immigration *towards* the U.S., rather than *from* the U.S. The mythologization of this story of immigration to the United States in the 20th century makes us partially blind to other dimensions of this experience of the "in-between". The people captured in *The Steerage* were traveling towards Europe: some of them might have been turned away at Ellis Island or there could have been seasonal workers among them as well. The filtering of memorialization processes through cultural models casts a shadow on these other types of immigration narratives that stretch beyond the iconicity of the picture. The flagged symbolic values applied to narratives and pictures tackling political realities has long been part of how we make sense of the world, but I believe AI-powered digital memorialization has structurally tapped into this tendency, shrinking our awareness

of an ungraspable reality lying beyond the mediation power of icons, memes, symbols, and narrative patterns. The standardization of the "duty to remember", the homogenization of political communication, and the social-cultural oppression inherent in AI-powered memorialization and communication practices are among the red flags I intended to raise.

Conclusion

The ways in which we tell the political story of the other through the lenses of AI-powered memorialization need careful examination. As AI boosts our connectivity to distant others and their cultural (or, in certain cases, traumatic) memory, we might lose sight of the unevenness of this digitally distributed understanding, or even disregard the concealed violence inherent in political narrative and discursive frames. Thus, political communication (and action) could be driven by the digital iconicity underlying forms of communication drawing on connectivity and affectiveness, potentially fueling radicalization, oversimplification or bias. The processes of building or fostering communication pathways in the digital environment (and beyond) should encompass possibilities of developing an ethics of reading that would raise our awareness of the ideological traps of digital memorialization and the impact digital tools have on memory and narrative agency.

Additionally, the "epilogue" of narrative agency in the digital age needs to be written and re-written as a creative follow-up to the cultural story of unreadability. The task of "reading unreadability" is bound to a work of the imagination that could help us surpass the desensitized mapping of our political world, supported by information overload, and rewrite the human outside the grip of functionalism. The digitally-mediated modes in which we engage with or consume memories of violence, the language of war, and representations of victimhood at the junction between storytelling, public discourse, and large language models are not necessarily building empathy or understanding, but rather they are substituting our need for narrative agency with the illusion of accessibility and connectivity. Narrative agency, understood as the empowering drive to tell one's story across media and beyond ideological expectations, needs to be culturally and politically supported against the anti-narrative mechanisms of a digitally "readable" world. In this way, people across cultures and social classes would have a voice that is not dependent upon the undisclosed power games of digital politics. Moreover, AIs seem to be operating within the grip of an inability to step beyond cultural models, being capable of representing the silence of the subaltern drawing on the iconicity of the matter, but unable to disclose the silences of the subaltern that are structurally powering its "creativity".

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