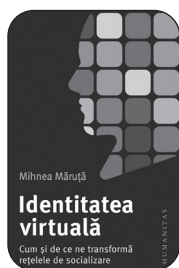


ONE, NO ONE, AND 5 BILLION: THE DISSOLUTION OF THE SELF IN THE AGE OF NETWORKS

Mihnea Măruță, *Identitatea virtuală. Cum și de ce ne transformă rețelele sociale*, București, Humanitas, 2023



Abstract: The volume *Identitatea virtuală. Cum și de ce ne transformă rețelele de socializare* (*Virtual Identity. How and why social networks transform us*) by Mihnea Măruță offers a profound and original philosophical analysis of the way in which the digital world reshapes the self. The volume – a revised version of the author’s doctoral thesis – explores the contemporary obsession with being present in the eyes of others and the desire not to disappear after death, identifying in the network a “magic mirror” that maintains the illusion of digital transcendence. This chronicle places this unique Romanian contribution in the context of the international literature on online identity, highlighting the way in which Măruță summons a vast theoretical arsenal to dismantle the myth of technological neutrality and plead, memorably, for the rediscovery of anchoring in reality.

Keywords: Digital Identity; Social Networks; Contemporary Philosophy; Technology and Society; Self and Virtuality.

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At the heart of Măruță’s theoretical approach are two profound psychological insights regarding the motivation of the contemporary user of social networks. The first is the obsessive need to confirm one’s existence through the validation of others, to feel “present in the world” through constant social feedback. The second is the desire not to be forgotten, to prolong one’s existence beyond the limits of life, in the form of a digital posterity that defies forgetting. Each chapter of the book is accompanied by a podcast episode which is accessible via QR code. This methodological hybridization emphasizes the author’s credo: contemporary philosophy must reach out to the public and on new communication channels, not remain isolated in the academic ivory tower.

Virtual Identity is the author’s attempt to answer a serious and visionary question: “In what world will our children live?... What transformations occur in the mind of a person who grows up in a society where it is self-evident that, since childhood, you have a virtual representation?” (Mihnea Măruță). This question guides the architecture of the book. The chapters follow the process by which social networks become a new ontological environment, which modifies our perception of ourselves, time and reality. Each chapter marks a step in the argument and ends with partial conclusions, gradually building a complete “intellectual edifice”. This method is reminiscent of Spinoza’s geometric style¹ – a comparison that is not at all exaggerated, as the rigor

of Măruță's demonstration is unique in the landscape of contemporary Romanian essay writing.

The first chapter, symbolically titled *The Production of the Self*, lays the theoretical foundation. Here the author delimits the key concepts: he explains what he means by *virtual identity* – distinct from *virtual work* or *virtual event*, notions clearly defined at the beginning – and why this identity presupposes *a domain of existence*, a world, which is a double of our world. In other words, we are invited to see the space of social networks not as a simple communication tool, but as a world in itself, parallel and at the same time interconnected with tangible reality. Măruță argues that virtual identity functions as an “ontological operator”, opening the gate to this new world. The premise from which he starts is that we are at the beginning of an unprecedented era: for the first time in history, anyone can publicly record their existence and thus hope “to never be forgotten”. What was once reserved only for great personalities (heroes, saints, leaders) – that is, the chance to live on in collective memory – is now within everyone's reach, thanks to digital technology. The networks are available to everyone as a “virtual diary, stage and tombstone”², offering each individual the illusion of an extension of life beyond biological limits.

To explore the reality produced by social networks, Măruță resorts to two concepts from classical Greek aesthetics: *téchne* and *poíesis*. These terms are used here to illuminate the idea that on networks an identity – the virtual identity – is “produced” like a work of art. Although at first glance networks may seem frivolous or trivial, the author convincingly argues

that the analogy with art is justified: on Facebook or Instagram we “manufacture” an identity like an artifact, investing creativity, selection and staging. In this sense, users become a kind of artists of their own image, engaged in an act of personal *poíesis*. The object of creation is no longer a material one, but the virtual personal identity, an intangible construct, but with real effects.

The relationship between the two central concepts of the work – the real Self and the virtual Self – is elucidated through a literary parallel: the relationship between an author and the work itself. The real Self – the creator – projects an idealized image of the Self into the online environment – the virtual Self – to which this creator continually returns, shaping it and “inserting the Self into the work”³. To describe this perpetual interference between the author and the creation of digital identity, Măruță introduces the technical term of *self-metalepsis*. If in literary theory, *metalepsis* indicates a violation of the boundary between the author's real plan and the fiction of the work, in the network the real self intervenes “permanently and discreetly” on the virtual self, feeding it with posts, images, comments – fragments of a life transfigured by narrative.

One of the engines of online activity, the author emphasizes, is the tireless search for the attention of others. Here the work takes on a psychological and ethical turn: the more we invest in our virtual image, the more dependent we become on the reactions of the public – likes, comments, shares. Thus, the reverse effect of the initial *metalepsis* appears, which Măruță calls *anti-metalepsis of the self*. If initially the real Self creates and feeds the virtual Self, gradually the creation begins to influence its creator:

the virtual Self “turns” on the real Self and modifies it. We are tempted to behave, in real life, according to the expectations of the virtual public. This idea resonates with Byung-Chul Han’s observations about the “society of exhibition”⁴, where the individual becomes simultaneously the object and accomplice of his own surveillance, continually adjusting himself to match the image he has created for himself online. Măruță, however, anchors the phenomenon in a phenomenological language: he discusses “identity-for-others,” a double of the self that feeds exclusively on being mirrored in the eyes of the virtual public. This identity-for-others, once it gains sufficient power, ends up threatening the individual’s authentic identity.

The author invokes Freud’s theory of *the double*: like an alter ego detached from us, the virtual self risks no longer being able to coexist with the original, taking its place and substituting it. We notice at this point the echo of a famous Baudrillardian concept: *the simulacrum*. The virtual self is a third-degree simulacrum – a copy without an authentic original, a parallel reality that constructs a hyperreality. Măruță makes explicit reference to Jean Baudrillard, citing the definition of hyperreality as “real without origin and without reality”⁵. In this sense, someone’s online profile becomes a more real image than the person themselves, a permanently accessible and edited presence that ends up parasitizing real life. In the author’s terms, “the virtual identity becomes the very virtuality of identity itself”⁶ – a strong statement that is not just a play on words, but reflects a profound truth demonstrated by the book.

To illustrate the narcissistic trap into which this digital double lures us, the

volume resorts to two classic myths: Narcissus and Pygmalion. How do we interpret the presence of these mythological references in an analysis otherwise very anchored in modern theory? They function as timeless parables of a “self-seduction” in the face of an artificial creation. Both Narcissus and Pygmalion symbolize a refusal of reality in favor of a fantasy. Within the social networks, the user risks becoming a modern Narcissus, endlessly contemplating their profile and craving public’s adoration, or a Pygmalion who invests all their affective energy in finessing their own avatar. The network itself is a huge mirror that seduces us: it makes us perceive the real and the virtual simultaneously and without distinction, compressing them into a continuous now, in which the concrete present is always accompanied by the digital flow.

The fascination with our ideal online self leads to a repression of eros in the virtual: the passionate energy that we no longer invest in real relationships we pour into virtual interactions, obtaining immediate gratifications, but emptied of depth. This is, in fact, also Han’s thesis in *The Agony of Eros*: in a hypervisible and narcissistic culture, authentic eros agonizes, substituted by easy stimulations of the ego⁷. Măruță reaches a similar conclusion, by another route: network addiction – marked by “empty curiosity, permanent change, non-delay, dispersion” – is incompatible with the authentic way of existence that Heidegger spoke about⁸. In other words, the hyperconnected life risks being an inauthentic life, in which there is no longer the silence of deep reflection or the real confrontation with the self, but only infinite reflections in a virtual space.

A chapter of great interest is the one dedicated to subjective time in the digital

age, suggestively titled *Time of the Self*. Here, Măruță introduces the distinction between *living-for-the-network* and *living-in-the-network*, drawing inspiration in part from the Husserl's phenomenology of temporality and from concepts such as *protension* (future-oriented expectation). Living-for-the-network designates the moments when the individual is not connected online, but prepares his or her future presence in the network. This type of living, the author says, sacrifices the present on the altar of a future self-projection, and the one who benefits from this is not the individual, who misses out on direct experience, but the network itself – that endless flow of content that feeds on our contributions.

On the other hand, living-in-the-network refers to the moments when we are actually online, and it has two forms: *active* and *passive*. Active living means creating content, commenting, participating – basically infusing real time and energy into the network's account. Passive living is endless scrolling, the apathetic consumption of information, when the flow of individual consciousness is taken over by the media flow. The latter is perhaps the most insidious form of existing online: a surrender of the individual to the network, a loss of conscious control and an invasion of the unconscious.

All these analyses converge, in the final chapters, towards an almost dystopian question: *is there a totalitarian potential in the network society?* Măruță argues that there is, and that it resides precisely in the diffusion and manipulability of connected consciousnesses⁹. Digital technology, while not itself a bearer of moral values, nevertheless holds enormous power

over people. We isolate ourselves from each other, believing we are hyperconnected, we take refuge in comforting simulacra and let ourselves be “abused” by the flow of information, while living with the impression of freedom.

However – and it is essential to emphasize – the tone of the book is not apocalyptic. Mihnea Măruță does not make a gloomy prediction, but urges lucidity. He exposes these possible drifts precisely to help us become aware of them, not to frighten us. “Technology is already evolving at its own relentless pace... it is up to us how we will take advantage of its advantages and how we will respond to the challenges it brings,” the author concludes on a note of balance and responsibility. The book ends with an invitation to critical reflection: now that we have understood the mechanisms, what will we do with them?

Mihnea Măruță writes clearly, elegantly, with an obvious aplomb of ideas, managing not to lose his reader in arid concepts, although the raw material of the book is eminently theoretical. I have already mentioned the geometric construction of the argument – each chapter adds a new level to the analysis, like a chain of syllogisms that logically follows from the initial premise. This strategy gives the book an admirable conceptual cohesion: the reader may not agree with certain theses, but cannot reproach them for their internal inconsistency.

As an original conceptual contribution, *Virtual Identity* stands out especially for its nuanced definition of new notions. Terms such as *self-metalepsis* and *self-anti-metalepsis*, or the distinctions of living-in-the-network vs. living-for-the-network, give the critical language in Romanian

new tools to describe current psychosocial phenomena.

Măruță implicitly pays homage to Romanian philosophical culture, doing something rare: “he takes Romanian philosophical thinking out of the routine of commenting on foreign works” and elevates the discourse on digital from a descriptive level to a “deep and radically theoretical” one – as noted by Professor Aurel Codoban, his doctoral supervisor. While many Romanian books whose subject is the internet largely translate or summarize Western ideas, Mihnea Măruță courageously assumes an original perspective about online identity.

Măruță demonstrates pedagogical care for the reader unfamiliar with philosophy, maintaining a measured tone throughout the book. In places, possibly, the multitude of references could overwhelm an unaccustomed reader, but they are always naturally integrated into the argument.

Mihnea Măruță’s approach joins, in many respects, an international chorus of voices that have examined the implications of the internet and social networks on identity and society in recent decades. At the same time, however, *Virtual Identity* occupies a distinct position, through the integrative and deeply philosophical way in which it approaches this theme, avoiding the traps of either simplistic technophobia or naive technophilia.

Jean Baudrillard is perhaps the theoretical spirit closest to Măruță’s approach. The idea of hyperreality – a world of simulacra more real than the real – is found in full in the analysis of social networks as a space in which the imaginary becomes visible and acquires real effects. Baudrillard warned, in the 1980s, that postmodern

society would sink into a universe of signs without a referent, of copies without an original, and Măruță demonstrates that social media is exactly such a universe: our online profile is the copy that ends up replacing the original (the individual), generating an augmented reality of identity.

Another name that reading the book may bring to mind is Bernard Stiegler, who saw in the media bombardment a *pharmakon* that, if not consciously managed, leads to collective amnesia and the loss of identity landmarks¹⁰. In Măruță’s study, we find this concept of *dis-individuation* in another form: the time spent online, especially by young people, “postpones the completion of personality” and induces a feeling of personal insignificance.

The list of possible dialogues could continue with Jacques Derrida and his *Archive Fever*¹¹, who would perhaps warn us that the rush to post everything is a symptom of the desire for total archiving – but also of the fear of forgetting. The founding question of the book, – “*who will remember us?*” – is Derridean in nature: it implies that identity (and memory) is constituted by inscription in text (here digital text) and that we fight against death through a frenetic archiving of the self. Măruță offers a less than optimistic answer: yes, we can achieve the “appearance of immortality” online, but at the cost of becoming captive phantasms in a continuous present, losing touch with our own living interiority.

Through his critique of digital narcissism and the tendency to “climb to the sky” through technology, the Romanian author meets on conceptual ground with recent Western critical thinkers. A good example is Jaron Lanier, a pioneer of virtual reality and vocal critic of social networks. Lanier

describes feedback mechanisms and infinite scrolling as a system that conditions our behavior in an almost Pavlovian way¹², partially overlapping with Măruță's observations on possession by the virtual stream and the collapse of attention. Both perspectives converge on the idea that social networks exploit the vanity and psychological vulnerabilities of individuals to keep them engaged, with the consequence of eroding the capacity for authentic relationships and inner balance.

Măruță's argument regarding the quasi-religious dimension of technology – that gnostic-like impulse to transcend the material world through the digital – also has echoes in well-known works from the Anglo-Saxon space. The historian David F. Noble documented precisely the ideological marriage between technology and transcendence that marked Western technological development¹³. Similarly, sociologist Richard Stivers wrote about technology as a form of secular magic, highlighting the irrational belief in the redemptive power of gadgets and technical procedures¹⁴. The author places his interpretation in a critical line that demystifies technological utopias, alongside voices such as that of Erik Davis, who in *TechGnosis: Myth, Magic and Mysticism in the Age of Information* explored the subtle connections between gnostic mysticism and digital culture¹⁵.

From a philosophical perspective, *Virtual Identity* impresses with the erudite eclecticism of its sources: Măruță summons a plethora of thinkers, from Plato and Aristotle to Heidegger and Baudrillard, in an effort to create a comprehensive conceptual framework for analyzing the digital world. This broad approach distinguishes it from many recent Western works that treat

the subject in a narrower key (psychological, economic, or socio-technical). For example, Nicholas Carr's *The Shallows* limits itself to the effects of the internet on the brain and reading culture¹⁶, and Shoshana Zuboff's *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism* dissects social networks primarily as systems for exploiting personal data¹⁷. The author pursues the existential meaning of plunging into the virtual, asking fundamental questions about what reality is, what identity is, and what knowledge is in an era in which the digital environment is reshaping all three. In this sense, his work has affinities with the approaches of philosophers such as Hubert Dreyfus, who, since *On the Internet*, argued, in a phenomenological spirit, that the absence of online bodily interaction erodes commitment and meaning¹⁸.

Despite these comparisons, it is also necessary to emphasize the original character of Măruță's perspective. Unlike some Western critics who focus on pragmatic solutions (digital detox, Big Tech regulation, etc.), *Virtual Identity* remains on the ground of a far-reaching, almost holistic philosophical and cultural meditation. The Romanian author does not limit himself to noting pathologies (addiction, disinformation, narcissism) nor does he moralize reductively. He rather tries to decipher the internal logic of the world of digital appearances, to understand why this world attracts us so much and what the attraction itself reveals about the contemporary human condition. In this sense, the book finds a special and valuable place within the global bibliography on technology and society: it is a lucid intellectual manifesto, written from the perspective of Romanian culture, that until recently only

passively commented on ideas imported from abroad, but which here articulates an original contribution, worthy of international dialogue.

In the Romanian context, *Virtual Identity* can be compared with very few works given its pioneering character. However, it is part of an emerging concern in Romania for the effects of new technologies. Aurel Codoban, for example, has been writing about communication and seduction since 2003¹⁹, and we can see his influence in the way his disciple Măruță identifies the mechanisms of seduction within the network.

Other Romanian authors have approached related topics fragmentarily, but no one has yet produced such a broad philosophical synthesis on digital identity in Romanian. The contextualization of the book shows that Mihnea Măruță has touched a universal nerve of our times, resonating with thinkers from all over the globe, while also bringing a fresh, synthesizing voice from the Romanian space.

Virtual Identity is a necessary and courageous work. Necessary, because it comes at a time when we are all beginning to

intuit that the stakes of social networks are deeper than they seem – it is about transformations in the way we define ourselves as people. Courageous, because the author assumes the responsibility to look these transformations straight in the eye, without reducing their complexity and without taking refuge in technophobic nostalgia.

Măruță remains lucid, cultivated and at the same time existentially involved in what he writes. The volume offers us, paradoxically, a form of hope: the hope that, by understanding the phenomenon, we will know how to master it better. Although there are no miraculous solutions delivered by the author, the very fact of going through his argumentation makes us more aware of our small daily concessions in front of the “black mirror” of the screen. And consciousness is the first step towards freedom. *Virtual Identity* carries a profound humanist message: no matter how sophisticated the technologies are, man – even when he creates a virtual alter ego – remains responsible for his own destiny. And the destiny of the digital self, no matter how ghostly it may be, can be revived by a critical spirit and authenticity.

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NOTES

1. Spinoza's *geometric style*, used in his masterpiece *Ethics* (1677), consists of applying the Euclidean deductive method to philosophy. This involves a rigorous structure based on definitions, axioms,

- postulates, and propositions (theorems) with demonstrations, aiming at a rational, objective, and necessary analysis of metaphysics and ethics.
2. Mihnea Măruță, *Identitatea virtuală. Cum și de ce ne transformă rețelele sociale*, Humanitas, 2023, p. 21.
 3. *Ibidem*, p. 43.
 4. Within *The Transparency Society*, Byung-Chul Han uses the concept “society of exhibition” to describe a social condition where everything – people, objects, and experiences – is driven to be seen, displayed, and exposed. Visibility becomes the measure of value: things “must be displayed in order to be” rather than having meaning or worth in themselves.
 5. Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacres et Simulation*, Éditions Galilée, 1981, p. 5, *apud* Mihnea Măruță, *Identitatea virtuală*, Humanitas, 2023, p. 78.
 6. Mihnea Măruță, *op. cit.*, p. 130.
 7. Byung-Chul Han, *The Agony of Eros*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2017.
 8. Martin Heidegger, *Ființă și timp*, tr. Gabriel Liiceanu și Cătălin Cioabă, Humanitas, 2019, p. 178, *apud* Mihnea Măruță, *op. cit.*, p. 134.
 9. Mihnea Măruță, *op. cit.*, p. 243.
 10. Bernard Stiegler develops this idea most explicitly in *De la misère symbolique. Vol. 1: L'époque hyperindustrielle*, Éditions Galilée, 2004, where he conceptualizes mass media as a *pharmakon* – both poison and remedy – capable of producing *désindividuation*, that is, a loss of psychic and collective individuation through the industrial capture of attention and memory.
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