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Research article

On the Mythical Atmosphere of the Digital World

Benedetta Milani (✉) 

Leuphana Universität Lüneburg, Universitätsallee 1, Lüneburg, 21335 Germany

benedetta.milani@stud.leuphana.de

Abstract

Can the digital world – a world considered to be emerging and depending on the most sophisticated and modern technologies – be compared with the mythical world? And would this comparison be productive for an analysis of the forms of the digital world? In the article an affirmative answer will be given to those questions and the comparison between the mythical and the digital will be developed around two key points: the absence of contingency and the immersive character of those worlds. The exclusion of contingency resolves in a deterministic way to be in the world and is strongly connected with the social necessity – present in the mythical as in the digital world – to perform predictions and preempt the future; the immersive dimension contributes to the collapsing of the distance between the subject and her objects, taking away from the human subject the privileged role that modern thought had given it. These features, which inform the digital world, determine its mythical atmosphere and also the different positioning of the human subject within this world. Given this theoretical horizon, the article will argue that in the digital world another form of rationality is involved than the logical-scientific thinking of modernity. This digital rationality, close to mythical rationality, constitutes and thinks the subject differently from the modern perspective and shows other possibilities for constructing and understanding the real.

Keywords: Digital World; Symbolic Form; Mythical World; Contingency; Immersivity

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Научная статья

Обещание, Поворот, Престиж: Граница между магией и технологией как практиками

Бенедетта Милани (✉) 

Лёйфана университет Люнебурга, Университетская аллея 1, Люнебург, 21335 Германия

benedetta.milani@stud.leuphana.de

Аннотация

Может ли цифровой мир – мир, считаемый развивающимся и опирающимся на самые искусные современные технологии быть сравним с миром мифов? И будет ли это сравнение плодотворным для анализа форм цифрового мира? На эти вопросы в статье будет дан утвердительный ответ, а сравнение мифического и цифрового мира будет рассмотрено с точки зрения двух ключевых моментов: отсутствия случайности и иммерсивного характера этих миров. Исключение случайности представляется решаемым с помощью детерминистического подхода и тесно связано с социальной потребностью, присутствующей как в мифическом, так и в цифровом мире, – прогнозировать и предвосхищать будущее; иммерсивное измерение в свою очередь сужает дистанцию между субъектом и его объектами, отнимая у человека привилегию, данную ему современной мыслью. Эти черты, присущие цифровому миру, определяют его мифическую атмосферу, а также различное положение человека субъекта в этом мире. На теоретической почве в статье будет представлена мысль, что в противопоставление логико-научного мышления современности цифровой мир использует и другую форму рациональности. Эта цифровая рациональность, близкая к мифической, представляет и осмысливает субъект отлично от современной перспективы, показывает совершенно новые возможности построения и понимания реальности.

Ключевые слова: Цифровой мир; Символическая форма; Мифический мир; Случайность; Иммерсивность

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INTRODUCTION

Can the digital world – a world considered to be emerging and depending on the most sophisticated and modern technologies – be compared with the mythical world? And would this comparison be productive for an analysis of the forms of the digital world? In the article an affirmative answer will be given to those questions and the comparison between the mythical and the digital will be developed around the concepts of contingency (or the lack of it) and immersivity: two main features of the present form of the digital world that defines its mythical atmosphere.

To begin with, it is necessary to lay out the theoretical frame within which the thesis is aimed to be developed: in referring to myth and the mythical in the present article one does not mean a primitive and irrational form of thinking, but rather a pre-modern form of logic and rationality, which is primitive neither in a chronological nor in a cognitive sense but is actually a way of constituting and organising the world, which is different – and which one tends to consider opposite – to the logic-scientific way of understanding reality typical of the (western) modern world. Central and connected to this perspective is the notion of symbolic form developed by the German philosopher Ernst Cassirer (1874-1945) in his *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* (1923, 1925, 1929). In particular, during Cassirer's so called America's years, the philosopher engaged in a renegotiation of his own perspective on the relationship that different symbolic forms can entangle with one another, passing from a latent teleological perspective to a non linear idea on how symbolic forms – like myth, technology and logic-scientific thought – can coexist with each-other in a non irenic way. In his text *Form und Technik* (1930), Cassirer refers to *Technik* as the symbolic form by which the human conscious managed to break through the 'mythical darkness' (Cassirer, 2012, p. 33) and to come into the objective world and thus lay the condition for the possible rise of the logic-scientific rationality. This clearly teleological horizon can be summarised in the passage – proposed by Cassirer – from *homo divinus* to *homo faber* due to technical progress (Cassirer, 2012, p. 25), thus also the progress from a mythical subjectivity to a objectivised subjectivity. It is with his book *The Myth of the State* (1946) that Cassirer shifted to a non teleological perspective. In the chapter „The Technique of the Modern Political Myths“ the philosopher clearly stated that the possibility of overcoming the mythical forever is itself a myth and a dangerous one, as his social and political reality of exiled jew violently proved. The myth is neither primitive nor a concluded phase of the human, but a permanent feature of it and it tends to re-emerge once a society loses the sense of epistemic control of its own reality (Cassirer, 1946, p. 279). Cassirer underlined how myth can find a loyal ally in *Technik* itself giving form to rationalised myths in which new technologies and pseudo-scientific language endorse propaganda and political myth (Cassirer, 1946, p. 282).

In the perspective adopted in this article, the myth is thus a recurring form of constituting and understanding human reality and at the same time represents a different way to organise and think this reality. The mythical world defines a form of rationality, which is not primitive or naive, but rather concurrent with modern rationality. Mythical rationality is non linear, non binary, non logos-centred and non anthropocentric (at least



not in the humanistic sense of this term), and therefore the mythical world also defines a mythical subject, who entertains a peculiar relationship with reality.

Given this theoretical frame, the digital world is also going to be described as a symbolic form, which means it is a form of epistemic organisation of the real. The digital therefore is not to be reduced to its mediality and technological processes and – as it will be shown – it is not guided by a modern scientific rationality, which is logos-centred and subject-centred. The digital is then a way of thinking and organising the human reality, which has a longer history than its current form and is not just the virtual space opened by the technology, but far more the atmosphere in which we live in a very concrete way since the digital has become the dominant symbolic form of our time.

The comparison of the mythical with the digital shows a path to define which kind of rationality and thinking is at stake in the digital world. To prove this point one will focus on two features present in both worlds, and that are crucially entangled with one another: the absence of contingency and the immersive character of those worlds. Features that position and think the subject differently from the modern, Eurocentric perspective and show other possibilities for constructing and understanding the real.

CONTINGENCY

One of the crucial traits of mythical thinking is its determinism, thus the belief that nothing happens without a cause. In the mythical world there is no contingency but only causality – not in the scientific mode of causes and effects but causality seen as necessity: there is a necessary link between the phenomena of the world, thus there is a correlation between the events of the world, which takes the mode of the analogy (Esposito, 2013, p. 130). The mythical thinking searches for meaningful correlations that can explain the events of the social or personal sphere, this determinate an apophenic way of being in the world, in which the phenomena are not accidental but are always signs for something else: for example the flight of the birds is related or stays in a relationship of symmetry with the outcome of a war (Esposito, 2013, p. 130). The radical causality of the mythical world is not linear, in the sense of a linear logical movement from causes to effects, but it is rather a network of links between different actors and those actors cannot be explained nor exhausted in the dualistic relationship of subject and object.

In the deterministic world of the mythical – where contingency can simply not be thought – the future is not a space of indetermination, but is also already included in the necessity and causality of the present. The mythical society therefore believes, not only that the future is predictable, but that this very possibility has a crucial role for the well-being of the community. So that the possibility of predicting the future turns into a social necessity. The *ars divinatoria*, the divinatory art, is the refined expression of the logic and rationality active in the mythical world, a rationality that looks for correlations, analogies and signs in a different order of meaning – an order that reward the interpretation of signs and not the search of the ‘objective’ causes of the events. The work of prediction can not be performed by everyone, but this divinatory art is an exclusive art controlled by specific members of the community like a wizard, a priestess, an oracle or a shaman. This person has a central role in the community, but stays outside of it. For a



mythical society the ways in which the signs of the world are read is surrounded by an aura of mystery and opacity, and related with the strict performance of rites. The *pharmakeus* – the one who performs the art of divination – is the exclusive holder of knowledge and understanding of the complex and multiple relations between the different layers of reality. The mythical subject can only move on the ‘surface’ of the real, immersed in the network she lived in without the claim of wanting to explain the deeper or objective causes of the events. The deeper layers of the real are out of the human reach and can only be grasped by special members of the community: the oracle, the wizard, the priest, the shaman can perform a mediation with this deeper level of the world. They can interpret and translate the unreadable amount of phenomena (data) into signs with a sense and therefore also give a direction to the life of a community or an individual: for example beginning a war or not, or engaging in a ritual in order to preempt a personal disgrace. For the future is predictable because it is determinate, already ‘written’ or implicated by the order of things, and therefore not open to virtuality.

We should keep this point in mind, as we move to the analysis of how contingency is implied in the digital world. In this world contingency is artificially inserted into the computation system as probability, is then functional and operational, because it is needed to the system in order to perform well (Hui, 2019, p. 25). Contingency in this world is not the chaos or the irrational and doesn’t carry the unknown, but is necessary in order to predict and preempt potentially dangerous events for the system. As in the mythical world, also in the digital world prediction became a necessity, if not a duty. Forward-looking is a crucial ability of our time, for business and for politics, because the prediction of events on a small and large scale means the possibility of reducing the risks of an unknown future and uncontrolled behaviours. In the digital world the crucial art of divination is not given to a human member of the society, but to the algorithm – for the most an abstract word with a foggy meaning – which perform a refined and complex work of foreseeing, which we still tend to believe to be objective in a way that the human can not be: exactly like a God, the algorithm stays above the human partial perspective. Even if scientific literatures and academic debate stress the bias present in those technologies, we are still far away to engage critically with the myth of the ‘neutral and objective’ technology and in private as well as in social situations we are more and more willing to blindly trust the decisions taken by the predictive machine that the computer has become. As in the mythical world, the web-intelligence (Esposito, 2013, p. 127) of the digital world doesn’t reward the karstic work of modern reason, looking for causes and digging deeper into the appearances, but rather the quick movement of the mouse on the surface of a screen. Out of the metaphor, digitality endorses a thinking that can quickly find correlations and can adapt without showing any interest in understanding how the system functions in its deeper architecture. The screen – in its manifold forms – became the surface where the user moves and also the only layer of the system accessible to her. On this surface interfaces appear, where an objectified and settled world of digital objects (Hui, 2016) is presented to the user and is made for the user. On a deeper level, software programmes and algorithms process gigantic amounts of data and correlate them into patterns and create information, but the user stays outside of this machinic process and does not interrogate it. The algorithm, as the oracle, can predict and create a constellation



of meanings, without being interrogated or questioned. In both worlds – as Elena Esposito pointed out in *Digital Prophecies and Web Intelligence* – the meaning appears a posteriori: is not a premise but a possible interpretation that can, but doesn't have to, come after (Esposito, 2013, p. 126). As with the mythical rationality, the digital-machinic rationality is precluded to the human understanding, thus there is in both worlds a cognitive opacity: the mythical subject and the user are not interpellated by those “higher” rationalities and they do not ask for a deeper understanding of them: they act within the network settled for them. The cognitive opacity interwoven with the absence of contingency settle in the digital world the condition for a paradoxical shutting down of the virtual space that is to say the ability of the human to think the potential, which is to think beyond the actual, concrete form of the present (and of the past). The virtuality of the world, which exceeds every representation made of it, collapses in an actual reality in which nothing else is thinkable (and therefore possible) outside of what is already represented.

The described context bears with it a consequence: in the mythical as in the digital world the praised form of intelligence is not the individual one, but a collective form of network intelligence which is trans-species and where the human subject doesn't occupy a privileged place anymore. This allows us to move to the second point of this article: the immersive character of the mythical and the digital worlds.

IMMERSIVENESS

The mythical world is immersive because there is no distance between the subject and the object: the internal world overflows in the external one and reality is coloured by the impulses and desires of the human. The mythical subject knows that she doesn't carry a privileged point of view in the world and she is a part of a whole, but this whole speaks always directly to the human and stays in a relationship of analogy or kinship with it. The immersive dimension of the digital world is even more radical, because the digital technological milieu continuously shapes itself on the desires and behaviour of the user, in order to create more desires and influence her future behaviour. The user is entangled in the digital world not as a subject put in a distance with her object, but as a data subject, or even a data object, connected and linked to other data objects. Humans are nodes of a network so that the point of view on reality changes: from the subject put in front of the object as a privileged observer to a data object between other data objects, a central point of view is lost and a diffused and networked point of view is gained. Also the agency changes: it is not the prerogative of the subject anymore, but it is radically distributed and has become global (Hansen, 2015, p. 2) . This change of perspective brings with it a change of ‘posture’ of the human in relation to its reality and also a radical different way to engage with it. The invention of perspective during the Italian Renaissance represented the emergence of a new way of looking at and thinking about reality (Panofsky, 1991). The humanistic idea of Man and the Universal Subject is related with this new way of seeing, where a subject – with a privileged point of view – is put at distance in front of an object, which can then be understood and studied. The reality as conceived by Humanism and by way of perspective is a reality that confronts us as subjects and can stand against



us (as the German world for object – *Gegenstand* – reminds us), but at the same time the modern subject (and her rationality) had the absolute conviction and belief that this reality could be understood and therefore controlled. The visual regime of the western history of art is dominated by the window: a visual *dispositif* that frames the gaze and shows a portion of the world, which becomes a reality that can be interpreted and dominated. The gaze of the subject on the object is mathematised and creates a hierarchy: how and who are represented as subjects, what is shown and what is not shown and so on...

As already mentioned, the digital world does not confront us as a subject but actually shapes itself on the behaviour of millions of users and on ‘decisions’ made by machine learning and deep learning technologies in order to optimise itself. This immersivity means actually a lack of perspective and a relinquishment of the “dualistic posture” of the subject in front of an object, because in the network everything is reduced to nodes and links. The human subject has to give up her privileged position and the ambition of gaining the perspective of God’s eye – the dream of the Modern – which is now becoming the eye of the machine – the dream of the contemporary. The visual regime of the digital era is dominated by the screen, a black mirror – as the popular TV series suggests – that doesn’t ask us to look through a frame to see a reality, but actually blocks our gaze on a opaque surface where something is shown and something else is hidden or even close up our gaze and explicit ask us to immerse in a constructed reality. This lack of distance and this desire to submerge in other realities could resolve in a hedonistic desire for entertainment and escape from a complex reality, but could maybe also represent a first step in the opposite direction, that is to say to learn “to stay in the troubles” – as Donna Haraway famously argued – and in the multiple and interspecies relationships in which the human is entangled. This lack of distance could result in an increase of empathy, but we need to engage actively for this possibility.

CONCLUSION

Coming back to the questions posed at the beginning of the article, one should be explicit why the comparison between the mythical and the digital can be productive. Starting from the risks that attend the adoption of a mythical posture in the digital world:

1 The lack of distance – as here thematised – in the present form of the digital milieu is resolving in a lack of critique or even in the relinquishment of its possibility (Hansen, 2021; Rouvroy, 2013). The collapsing of the world – and its virtuality – within reality – and its actuality – takes away the space of critique, which is not only the radical questioning of the present and actual forms of the real, but also the possibility for a new inquiry of the condition of possibility of a digital rationality.

2 *Data-Behaviourism*¹ (Rouvroy, 2013) and the resulting pressure for prediction and preemption are pushing our understanding of the world again in a direction of a strict

¹ “I will call ‘data behaviourism’ this new way of producing knowledge about future preferences attitudes, behaviours or events without considering the subject’s psychological motivations, speeches or narratives, but rather relying on *data*. The ‘real time operationality’ of devices functioning on such algorithmic logic spares human actors the burden and responsibility of transcribing, interpreting and evaluating the events of world. It spares them the meaning-making



determinism, in which the future is not free to be collectively determined and discussed but already contained in the possibilities that the collected data can find. We assign an agency to the algorithms and their work of prediction has a performative character to the extent that when we believe in the predictions made by the algorithms, we start to act conformably to those predictions, thus stopping looking or imaging for other possibilities and futures.

3 The notion of rationalised myth proposed by Cassirer can be of great interest in the analysis of contemporary rationalised myth as the one conveyed by such techno-religious philosophies as transhumanism. Those techno-myths (as singularity or immortality due technical enhancement) do not engage critically with the complexity of the co-evolution of human and the machine, but resolve themselves in techno-utopian (or techno-distopian) sceneries in which long lasting religious and transcendent thematic are mixed up with sci-fi and up coming technological possibility. An example is the messianic promise made by transhumanism of a – so called – super-S future: Super-Wellbeing, Super-Intelligence and Super-Longevity². A mythical scenery that predicts the eschatological coming of the definitive machine without engaging with the concrete social and environmental costs of such a perspective.

The criticality listed should make us aware of the risks but also of the possibilities at stake here. Engaging with the emerging form of a digital rationality – radically new and radically old at the same time – is the challenge of our troubled time. This rationality, this thinking, is beyond anthropocentrism because it entangles the machine and the human, and we as humans should learn how to take account of this relationship without losing the responsibility for our choices and for the future, which has to stay open, virtual and worth living in.

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processes of transcription or representation, institutionalisation, convention and symbolisation.” (Rouvroy, 2013, p.143)

² <https://www.transhumanist.com/>



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СВЕДЕНИЯ ОБ АВТОРЕ / THE AUTHOR

Бенедетта Милани,
benedetta.milani@stud.leuphana.de,
ORCID 0000-0002-7774-8549

Benedetta Milani,
benedetta.milani@stud.leuphana.de,
ORCID 0000-0002-7774-8549

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