

WHAT IS *KOINŌNIA* UNDER TECHNOLOGICAL CONDITIONS?

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Over the past fifty years, the core of the sociality of the social has culminated in discussions within the social sciences in the reconstruction of what Aristotle (1999: 1252a) called *κοινωνία*, or more exactly *κοινωνία πολιτική*. *Koinōnia politikē* determined the concept of politics in Antiquity. However, it should be remembered that *πόλις*, the polis as an organized polity, served first and foremost the formation of community, so that the political and the social came together. Yet the literal meaning of the Greek word *κοινωνία* is the association, *κοινός* the public, or *κοινωνέω* to share or to participate so that the expression addresses what is common to the community, what holds it together, as Plato (1976: 449a–466d) wrote in *Politeia*. In particular it refers to political organization, which in Aristotle's concept comes before social bonding by creating the prerequisite legal order.¹ *Πολις* and *κοινωνία* were thus synonymous for Aristotle and his successors, for in Antiquity it went without saying that bonds between human beings could not be permanent without law. Somewhat later, during the rise of Christianity, the concept underwent a religious turn, so that *κοινωνία* referred to “participation” in the kingdom of God, in God's creation or in the divine state, creating the true *religio*, the bond between the divine and the human, or between transcendence and immanence. For that reason, *κοινωνία* plays a key role in the New Testament and in the dogma of the Church fathers. The law in this case was not always made by humans but was part of the presentation of the divine revelation of the tablets to Moses.

These delineations have all been lost in modern sociology and social sciences. *κοινωνία*, chronically questionable in modern societies, must therefore first be newly defined, whether within a classical social contract or by means of power and violence, which however has failed to prove its legitimacy. It is striking that all social designs since the catastrophe of the Second World War and the totalitarianisms of the twentieth century, have explicitly revisited the question of *κοινωνία* in order to give it new foundations. Among the most noted attempts to respond to this question in political philosophy are, aside from communitarianism, Jean-Luc Nancy's concept of “being-in-common,” Niklas Luhman's “social systems,” Jürgen Habermas' theory of “communicative action” (*Verständigungsverhältnisse*) and Bruno Latour's Action Network Theory. The latter three in particular shall be discussed in the following as exemplary examinations of the problem of *κοινωνία* under specific technological conditions.

¹ Arendt (1958: 32) would however claim the opposite, that “man is a ‘social’ before he is a ‘political animal’.”

Luhmann (1973: Chap 2, 4) interprets *κοινωνία* systematically, that is, as embedded in the functions of social differentiation and their stabilization. With this there is a shift in the canonical concept of *κοινωνία*, which is redefined in an analysis of the mechanisms that make differentiation possible. Sociality and community are not simply givens but must be created or produced through functions that ensure the reproduction and preservation of constitutive systems of difference in the social. To these belong in particular trust and communication, as well as media as a generally formative power, whereby it is not up to the individual functions whether community is formed, but up to the functioning of the systems themselves (Luhmann 2021, 2017). Against this, Jean-Luc Nancy picked up Martin Heidegger's figure of "being-with" (1962: § 25–27) and wove it into his ideas about "being-in-common" with the emphasis both on the shared experience and participation as well as on the "with," that is to say allowing for both on the *cum* and the *com* of *communio*. *κοινωνία* is thus grounded in a possibility of participative cooperation, which Nancy understands as *desœuvrement*, an "unworking" or "inoperability" that cannot be created but is always still to come (Nancy 2010, 1990, 2000, 2016). Yet *desœuvré* means less "unworking" than "not-working" in the meaning of interrupting a "work" or renouncing production, or also turning away from every kind of working and towards that final practicality of society and community. In that case, for Nancy, *desœuvrement* refers to the element of becoming within *κοινωνία*, which simultaneously retains its own difference or distantiality (*Abständigkeit*). Put another way, the possible commonality of human beings is always yet to come. It is unfinished and torn asunder by a fundamental rift (*Riss*), so that it is not the work of a working process or production, but must first be formed with all of the connotations of forms and forming, also including the refusal of the form or its unrealizability.

It remains a constant question what then participation might mean, how it can be produced and whether it is enough for an adequate *κοινωνία*. Participation in the most radical sense of everyone taking part was for example one of the fundamental tenets of alternative movements in California in the early 1970s. In their determination to avoid any usurpation by "the system," they organized themselves in new "communes" and other forms of living together.² What that might look like again brought up the question of *κοινωνία*, which they however sought to solve within the framework of a social cybernetics that did not use political or social or religious arguments, but solely technological ones. It was above all the utopia of computerization as a universal tool of connection that should realize the reorganization of sociality through the virtual networking of a global public information system.³

In a remarkable essay still topical today, Jürgen Habermas, at almost the same time, rejected this technical solution and castigated social cybernetics as a protofascist form of "social technology" that sought to control everything.⁴ As an alternative, he propagated the linguistic turn that reinterpreted *κοινωνία* within the practice of communication. Habermas's philosophy of understanding (*Verständigung*)—a "theory of communicative action" that can in fact be read as a "critique of communicative reason"—is not a design for a utopia, but a concept of communicative Enlightenment on the basis of a social discourse in which everyone participates (Habermas 1984, 1990). Habermas (1979) underlines two aspects of this model: first, the theory of the dual propositional and performative structure of speech, which sees language as having both a representative as well as a relational or binding function. Through this "illocutionary force," sociality is constituted as a simultaneity of meaning and practice through presuppositions such as comprehensibility, truth, truthfulness, and rules. Second, the process of coming to an understanding is for Habermas intrinsically linked to an ideal but contrafactual rationalization. This holds the "unforced force of the better argument" against the violence and terror of forced obedience (Habermas 2001: 94).

Habermas propagates *κοινωνία* in the sense of a permanent process of enlightenment generated by dialogue that brings members of a society together through reason. In this way the sociality of society follows the "regulative idea" of a process of understanding that is both continuous and consensual. This model undoubtably contains its own form of one-sidedness. On the one hand, it is questionable whether *κοινωνία* is rationally expli-

² A good overview of the debates of the time is collected in the catalog edited by Diederichsen Franke (2013).

³ This was also the birthplace of the conservative communitarian movement that brought attention to the blind spot of liberal societies, namely a lack of solidarity and neighborliness that cannot be guaranteed through individual freedom.

⁴ See on this in particular the Habermas/Luhmann debate in their book *Theorie der Gesellschaft oder Sozialtechnologie* (1971), esp. Habermas's contribution on p. 142–290.

cable at all and must not instead always be thought of as *κοινωνία πολιτική* which has the political and not the rational as its starting point. Furthermore, in Habermas' model, its binding force is limited to the pragmatics of language and communication. But not only are these subject to multiple biases, the model all but ignores the many other social practices such as art, gift giving, rituals, or also witness, law, and trust, not to mention the libidinous human connections which should not be underestimated in the creation of bonds. Furthermore, the sole alternative between reason and violence as construed by Habermas does not exist, because there are situations in which consensual discourse cannot help but itself communicate violence. Clearly, *κοινωνία* must be understood as a dilemma, for law can not be enforced by consensus alone just as conversely there can be no legitimacy without social consensus.

Nevertheless, Habermas offers a decided counter-program to the counter-culture computer network program model, which aims to regulate the public sphere solely through unlimited access and the *κοινωνία* by providing an open infrastructure, as if the commons alone would make community possible. Since the 2000s at the latest, this former utopia has flipped to reveal the opposite of these hopes: a monopolistic power structure of social media that are helpless in the face of the proliferation of hate speech, disinformation, and the destabilization of democratic structures.⁵ Only the naiveté of techno-euphoric subcultures and their stubborn visions of transparency, freedom, and equality could believe that fast internet connections, good will, and wide-scale participation would be enough to allow the quasi natural development of a globally connected community of knowledge counter to the hegemonic political orders. Technical networks are in fact diagrammatic structures ruled by formal relations not suited to the growth of *κοινωνία*, so that the realization of “happiness” through technology alone remains a fatal misconception.

Bruno Latour (1993) introduced a new meaning for the general metaphor of networks, which he placed under the aegis of a “symmetrical anthropology” that understands sociality not as “humanist” but as an intrinsic connection between “human” and “non-human entities.” In his book *Reassembling the Social*, he also refers back to the *κοινωνία* of Antiquity, but expands formal participation to include the heterogeneous engagement of both humans and other creatures or things, artefacts, signs, goods, technological devices and media, etc. (Latour 2005: 5ff.). In Latour, “networks” have nothing to do with computer networks but act as an abstract concept of shared agency. Despite all varying readings and vulgarizations of actor-network-theory, the term “actor-network” is therefore *one* word, in which actors are not those who act or interact with one another, but a description of diverse kinds of agency that stem from different modes of relational connections, multiplicities of very different elements. Here that which Latour previously, in his analyses of scientific research, referred to as “nets” of disparate hybrids, become “associations” that are as loose as they are open, mixed coalitions that do not allow discrimination among the elements or types within them (ibid.).

Decisive here is the expansion of the idea of the social to include the simultaneous participation of the non-human and the non-social, for, as Latour wrote together with Michel Callon, “There is no thinkable social life without the participation—in all the meanings of the word—of nonhumans, and especially machines and artifacts.” (Callon, Latour 1992: 359) Similarly, he wrote in *Reassembling the Social*: “We are no longer sure about what ‘we’ means.” (Latour 2005: 6) Instead, we are dealing with heterological processes of bonding, intertwining, and connecting, but also of separating and a paradoxical entanglement made of links that do not in themselves even need to be social. Hence Latour localizes *κοινωνία* in a radical relationalism in which, as Erich Schüttzel has aptly shown, relations are primordial in contrast to the relation to the extent that the former first gives the latter their weight and their position. It thus follows that *κοινωνία* can coexist with very diverse “modes of existence,” for which reason Latour proposes replacing the in his view problematic term “social” with the term “collective.” (Latour 2013) Collectives can mean a variety of things without immediately privileging human “associations” or social classes.

⁵ In a remarkable move, Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg, defending free speech in front of the American Senate, insisted that he only provided an infrastructure. This is extraordinarily naive, for infrastructures are never neutral, but themselves play a role in shaping the type of expression possible.

The reason for this critical maneuver is obvious: on the one hand, Latour is attempting to dodge the seeming foundational paradoxes of sociology and the social sciences—that sociality in the sense of κοινωνία must always be presupposed to determine the social. It thus proves in advance to be an idealization of what is to come the reality of which is chronically questionable. This is true of the concept of “cooperation” as well as of “social relationships” or “communication,” all of which presuppose that which they are seeking to explain, for example when the concept of communication assumes a delineation of a predetermined “community of understanding” of speakers and listeners (*Verständigungsgemeinschaft*) and their mutual recognition through the practice of speaking.⁶ Just as conjuring the term “sociality” gives no reason for the fact of its existence, the term “communication” does not tell us *why* we speak to one another or what moves the speaker/listener to listen one to the other. This is incidentally also the crux of theories of the social contract, to the extent that every contract demands rules of negotiation and decision that in turn must be based on that which the contract is supposed to regulate. We are thus dealing with a *petitio principii* that however puts logic before κοινωνία, because it does not recognize the specific transcendence of the social and thus the precedence of κοινωνία. Rather, people are always dependent on sociality, without which they would not be “human.” Therefore the foundation of the social cannot be discovered, at its bottom is always another social. The social cannot be avoided, but the more important question is whether the concept of “networks” is sufficient to describe it.

Rather than founding a “sociology,” Latour only formulates an “ecology of collectives” about which it remains unclear whether it is already a social science, of which the glossary states under the term “Association”:

Extends and modifies the meanings of the words “social” and “society,” words that are always prisoners of the division between the world of objects and that of subjects; instead of making the distinction between subjects and objects, we shall speak of associations between humans and nonhumans; the term thus includes both the old natural sciences and the old social sciences. (Latour 2004: 237–238).

Latour’s approach is mostly about expanding the definition of the social to include elements and processes that are alterities, which he claims are also constitutive for sociality. In this way he hopes to resolve the confusion caused by the dichotomies of traditional social science terminology and dismantle their vertical hierarchies. This adds a new perspective to the characterization of social orders, for sociality for Latour is not primarily about the vitality of social relationships. More importantly, human societies create structures that are not founded solely on interaction and coexistence, but also on communication between non-human or “asocial” moments that are just as important to social stability as the practices of human members of society (Schulz-Schaeffer 2000: 209). To guarantee the endurance of social relationships it is therefore not enough to rely only on human collaborations. Rather the focus must be shifted, as Latour also says, from the human to the non-human. Key to the social theory of actor-network-theory is that all social interactions must be delineated as a coevolutionary result of society, nature, and technology (ibid.).

At the same time, something in the symmetry of human/non-human has not been thought to the end, for the hyphen that connects and separates the actor-network remains undefined. While indeterminacy makes polyvalence possible by expanding social relationships to include the non-social, an explication of their relation and its modalities is still necessary. This is all the more true when contrasted with interpersonal relationships, which are founded on communication and cooperation and for their part formulate the conditions needed to enter into connections, whether social or asocial. It is also necessary to differentiate between relations and relationships, for every relationship references a core alterity that exudes an attraction that draws us into a relationship. From the beginning we are dealing with an arch-passivity (Blanchot) that determines the relationship according to what

⁶ On the concept of a *Verständigungsgemeinschaft* or *Kommunikationsgemeinschaft* see Apel 1986.

it refers to, while relations are formal assignments such as those that define mathematical functions. These cannot be conflated into one, so that in the ecologies of the human and the non-human and their concurrent ensembles, we must differentiate between human-human relationships, human-object or human-technology relationships, and object-object relations. *κοινωνία* refers in the main to the first two, while the latter belongs at best to the more or less contingent complex of conditions.

This makes clear the internal problems of network theories as formal conceptualizations of *κοινωνία*. They imply an exclusion that proves inconsistent in that no network can recognize that it is a network, as it has no consciousness of where it begins or ends, whereas knowledge and self-knowledge have always been intrinsic elements of social interconnections. No holism can see itself as a whole and delineate its limits, so that the supposed relational egalitarianism of the net and its equally supposed egalitarian participative nature make up their own kind of atrophied stage of the social world, because they can encompass only *relations*, which however fall under the same formal schemata and thus tend not to be able to concretize their practices.⁷ *κοινωνία*, like sociality in general, consequently shrinks to become a restricted code. Relationality and participation alone are not enough to compensate for the *maleficium* of the net. Firstly, because the non-human can still only be conceived from the perspective of the human, and the post-human extension takes place by the will of humans, and, secondly, because terms such as “collective,” “association,” or “participation” prove to be symptomatic of a social condition that is in the process of restructuring to become solely technological. What become conspicuous, and what systematically falls through the cracks of these categories, are the types of relations that seem indispensable for the constitution of the social. To these belong, alongside trust, the ethics of the gift and, in particular, the political ethics of justice, which cannot be fulfilled by taking apart and taking part because *κοινωνία*, like democracy, is first and foremost an ethical and a legal concept.

The truly explosive nature of the question is found at the site where Latour’s terms are radicalized within cultural and media studies, simultaneously eradicating their genuine social-philosophical impetus (Thielman Schröter 2014: 148–158). Even if Bernhard Siegert and Lorenz Engell (2013: 5) have called actor-network-theory “one of the most interesting conjunctions of the cultural sciences and media studies in recent years,” it is equivalent to an abuse of categories when “symmetrical anthropology” is cast as an “actor-media-theory” and the idea of networks is glibly applied to “medial actors” and their connectivity (Schüttelpelz 2013). These are understood primarily as “cultural technologies” that first broadcast art, science, history, or thought and observation—a totalization that ignores that every technological invention is already in the arena of cooperation, which in turn is unthinkable without *κοινωνία*. When today media studies and cultural studies frame themselves as the theoretical avant-garde and assume a materialistic “apriority of technicity” and therefore also an implicit technological anthropology with all of the attributes of determinism, then it should be remembered that they do not possess an adequate concept of the social. Media and cultural studies seem as it were to be blind in the social eye. This broaches the question of the fate of *κοινωνία* under technological and medial conditions, as well as its representation in networks whose graphs can perhaps connect communication tools, technical objects, archives, smart things, operative systems or gadgets and, especially, algorithms, artificial figures and techno-imaginative androids and even sometimes also people, but do not come close to that which makes connections special and makes them connect us.

This is betrayed by the most common terminology, particularly “operativity” “circuits,” “interfaces,” and the like. These terms correlate strangely with the aforementioned reveries of counter-cultures at the time of the watershed invention of the PC, a caesura in computer history. In the meanwhile, these computer environments have received exponential upgrades including ubiquitous sensor technology, databases, digital statistics, and artificial intelligence, while remaining oddly alienated socially. Taken on by theories of media and culture, this terminology has also been taken for a ride, or corrupted by

7 “Literally there is nothing but networks, there is nothing in between them, or, to use a metaphor from the history of physics, there is no aether in which the networks should be immersed. In this sense AT is a reductionist and relativist theory, but as I shall demonstrate this is the first necessary step towards an irreductionist and relationist ontology.” (Latour 1996: 372)

these disciplines. The so-called social media in particular—which in reality are singularly asocial—are the perfect illustration of what happens when all there is networks with nothing “between them”—no “aether” and also no other binding media. All that connects them is formal graphs as well as “nodes” and “edges” which in turn cannot be described on the foundation of the same graphic network repertoire but do reveal the social ruin created by pure formalism. One must think of *κοινωνία* under technological conditions as a network, which conversely makes clear that it has lost its essential essence, namely acting as a “force” that allows for “assembly” and embodies the “common,” and has instead abdicated it to an “image” or an external structure.

In fact, although technological network metaphors seem to underscore connectivity, they preserve that which is insufficient in them, because they form an abstract concept that is modelled by diagrams that only portray their temporary and local connections without providing any information about what kind of linkages they are, or via which paths these linkages come to be. It is decisive that the operationalist framework of technologies, as well as the relational model of network theories, do not even come close to being able to conceptualize a non-formalist, which always means *performative* concept of *relationship*, which is more than just an interface and an interaction-network. *κοινωνία* in this conception is nothing more than a blueprint that can be laid over all kinds of social processes like a map, but that moves further and further away from us the farther its formalism progresses. For as a blueprint, it offers no more than a virtuality; a plan that says what could be *built* but not how it should be built on a *practical* level. At best it gives those who know how to use it a vague orientation, just as it confuses those who cannot decipher it. Instead, we should hold fast to the task of granting a specific reality to the social and with it to *κοινωνία* as a *practice*.

POSTSCRIPTUM

The seemingly abstract reflections on the constitution of sociality and its central concepts, such as communication, trust, cohesion, reliability, and the like—in one word, the *κοινωνία*—directly concern the issue of living together under technological conditions, with possible encounters between humans and nonhuman beings including decision-making robots, avatars, or other artificial creations, as well as with autonomous agents such as self-driving cars. Posthumanism has placed such encounters under the radical perspective of their ontological egalitarianism. The fact that we (as human beings) are together with nonhuman entities in the same way that we are together with other human beings decenters our primary role in the world and disempowers the claims of classical humanism (Mersch 2022). In turn, the critical attitude of decentering implies a rejection of domination: it devalues our power relations and, according to Latour (1996, 2005), places our actions back into a network of equality among different actors, human and non-human. But the critique does not touch the problem of “relationship” (which is more than just a “relation”) and thus of sociality and the question of whether the human—non-human relations can be considered under the same auspices and values as human—human relationships. The terms “relation” and “relationship”—or in German: *Relation* and *Beziehung*, which contains the word *ziehen* or “to pull”—need to be distinguished, as the first denotes only a formal function, while the second implies a force that asks or invites me to relate. Therefore, the suspicion arises that we behave differently towards other humans than towards objects or non-human actors—no matter how much they are endowed with “intelligence” or an autonomous decision-making capacity. Obviously the social, in terms of “being with,” means something completely different pertaining to human beings than in relation to nonhuman actors. Moreover, social facts are first and foremost not a matter of power, but primarily of “encounter.” Thus, we can also raise the same question from another angle: What does it

mean to meet, to interact with, or to develop feelings and desire towards technical beings that are neither creatures (animals or plants) nor humans, i.e., that are not life-forms that share the experience of otherness and mortality?

Certainly, psychoanalysis has dealt with the notion of projection, which seems to correspond to our psychic nature as it constantly approaches pathology, fetishism and inappropriate anthropomorphism. In this respect we are surely able to engage with objects emotionally, lending them attention and appreciation; we may even love them like the automatic voice in the film *Her* (2013), but this signifies neither a reciprocal relationship nor a social connection, for sociality depends on mutual recognition, on the mirror experience of equality, on cooperation and the need for community with its cultural norms, rules, and values, and above all on the asymmetrical relation of responsivity that allows for self-understanding and gives birth to true responsibility. Can this apply in the same way to technical artifacts like avatars as it does to our fellow humans, to our “neighbors” (*Nächste*)? Is confusion between artificial beings and real persons conceivable? Is a non-pathological longing for acceptance by an artificial being, triggering in us the desire for response and attention, even possible? What if we encounter avatars that ostentatiously turn away from us, ignore us? Do we feel insulted or simply indifferent? And what does non-indifference mean pertaining to things; what kind of sociality is it if we prefer to surround and converse solely with avatars or other artifacts? Can, under such conditions, the tremendous loneliness of self-encounter ever be overcome?

The questions at stake tackle the meaning of the social in the face of a dissolution of any distinction between the human and the non-human, which already implies the complete dissolution of any meaning of humanity as well. These questions arise concretely against the background of so-called “social” media, the internet as a primordial tool of exchange, engagement, and interaction, and, above all, a pervasive “avatarization” of personal relationships. Can the concept and experience of the social then retain the same significance as that which we once gave to various expressions such as “community,” “society,” or even “congregation” or “commune”? These have always had a political as well as a religious and legal meaning; but since there are technical artifacts that seem to speak, act, and think—obviously all these concepts are misleading—the psychoanalytic term of projection, which has always described a subconscious relation, is no longer sufficient to do justice to the situation. Rather, what is needed is a deeper analysis of different *modes of encounter* (instead of modes of “existence”), which includes the broader questions of what it means to be “in communion” with artificial beings and whether it is possible to enter into political relations with them or to cooperate with them emotionally. The obvious problem, then, is: What remains of the social when our primary “society” consists almost entirely of technical relations using technological beings?



FIGS. 1, 2
FUTURE PROJECTIONS OF VIRTUAL MEETINGS.

One could dismiss this elaboration regarding possible relations or relationships with avatars—or “rendez-vous,” as Jean-Luc Nancy (2021) calls them—as exaggerated or unreal and relegate it to the narratives of science fiction. However, since Mark Zuckerberg wants to expand Facebook from a “social medium” to what he calls a “Metaverse” (following the model of the online game Second Life, which will have been its naive design precursor, as

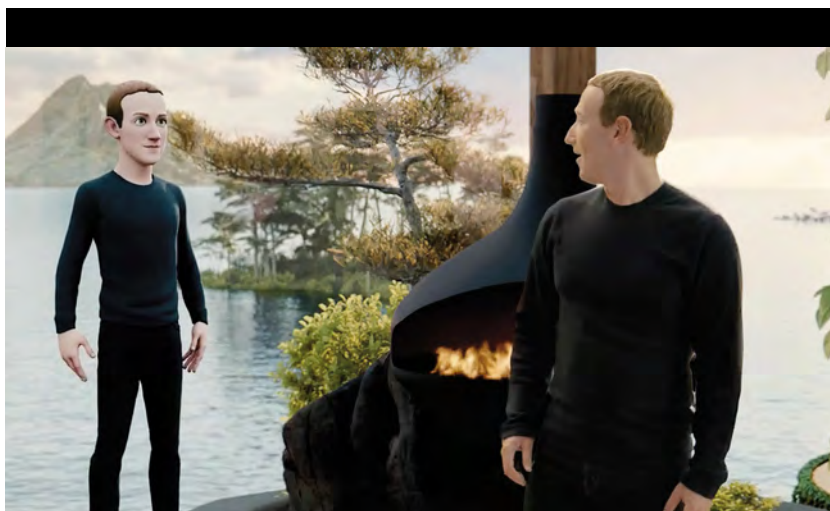


FIG. 3

MARC ZUCKERBERG MIRRORING HIMSELF IN HIS VISION OF THE “METAVERSE.”

it were) that consists of a *complete virtualization of social life*, so that we transform ourselves into photorealistic avatars who meet with other avatars in imaginary landscapes or workspaces, the question of face-to-face encounters in particular has gained a new topicality and dimension.⁸ It will arise with real urgency in the near future. Will such virtual encounters harm or affect or even destroy our social abilities, which depend on the indispensability of other humans being present in terms of direct contact, physical-

ity, and the desire to be touched—rather than simply be connected? While Zuckerberg in his video promotion of the Metaverse explicitly emphasizes the “feeling of presence” as the

“defining quality of the Metaverse”—“you are going to really feel like you’re there with other people, you’ll see their facial expressions, you’ll see their body language (...), all the subtle ways that we communicate that today’s technology can’t quite deliver”⁹—these facial expressions and body language are simple *perceived* from a distance and reduced to *visual* communication, simultaneously subtracting the essence of a true encounter. Every detail, the entire private ecosystem, is subject to our defining power and control, so that we are dealing with a fundamental attack on reality, which is replaced with a second, artificially constructed one. This corresponds to the fact that to make the illusion possible we also entrench ourselves behind VR headsets, which thus become an emblem of a displacement of the world, sealing us off from the gaze of the Other. Coincidence, deviance, the unpredictable and unavailable as necessary dimensions of the social are thus carefully eradicated and erased. The future of social Amedia clearly lies in the establishment of an ongoing “digital playground.”

Unlike robots or autonomous agents, avatars are screen beings; they form figures that are virtual representations, reduced to mere visibility. They rely on digital simulations with computed expressions and gestures, whereas interpersonal encounter is based on bodily co-presence with attributes such as fragility, vulnerability, but also defensiveness, shame, or shyness, attributes that remain unknown to “avatarian” representations. Their technical realizations are limited to scans or motion-capture systems, which are supposed to guarantee an optimized performance of their “as-if,” the prototype for which originated from animated films or computer games. However, the contorting of certain facial muscles or the execution of specific hand movements alone do not reveal any “motion” of emotions, no inner movement, let alone moods and their ambiguities.

Yet it is not only avatars with whom communication is planned, but also holograms. Beyond screen representations, experiments are being carried out on stage as in the planned “ABBA comeback tour” in London starting in May 2022.¹⁰ Whatever the “ABBAatars” used in these events are, they present themselves as so-called “real avatars,” separated from the audience by the “fourth wall” of the show. Thus, they remain, as in the envisaged Metaverse

⁸ See for instance <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b9vWShsmE20> (accessed February 10, 2022).

⁹ Ibid. 2:10–2:35. Curiously enough, in the video, Zuckerberg has already completed his transformation process into an avatar: he is the avatar that he is promoting.

¹⁰ See <https://abbavoyage.com/> (accessed February 10, 2022).

meeting, virtual images that have no body and thus no body feeling, no body scheme, and therefore also no expressive qualities. Accordingly, there is no closeness or bonding, because if we want to reach for them, we reach through them into the void. The encounter thus exists only superficially, an imitation or pure shadow of real physical touch with all its imponderables and subtleties. Instead, it satisfies the criterion of similarity, of deception—the form of imitation and pretense that has dominated digitization right from the start. Look, for instance, at Alan Turing (1950), who, in order to answer the question of whether or not machines could be intelligent, proposed an imitation game that aims at nothing less than to lure us into a trap (Longo 2019).

The relationship with Others who, unlike mere images or surfaces, remain, as Emmanuel Lévinas has described, pure “enigmas” that address us, haunt us, or challenge us, is something completely different from any as-if or virtual game, containing as it does possibilities that may or may not occur. Such a relationship implies a “bindingness” that cannot be evaded, which consequently always already contains commitment and obligation, whereas virtual representations induce nothing like that. Can sympathy arise under the condition of virtuality? Trust? Pity? Care or concern? Or desire and love? The designers and engineers—the self-proclaimed elite of the digital age—usually answer these questions with the suggestive counter-question: “Why not ...?” In this way, they already manifest that they have lost touch with others, with what is meant by a “social relationship” in its emphatic sense, because they judge solely from the perspective of a methodical solipsism, *as if* we were fundamentally detached and enclosed in our world, and *as if* it were our decision to whom we want to turn, instead of having always already interacted with “others,” our fellow human beings. Ignorance or heedlessness is not an option in the social, because we are only human as far as we belong to others. On the other hand, to be in the company of avatars, to deal with them “like others,” corresponds to a primary indifference—the awareness, that none of it is “real”—that has already gamified the social and subjected it to mutual staging and self-presentation. This applies equally to the schizophrenogenic confrontation with ourselves as avatars, who—unlike the doppelgänger—are hardly able to unsettle us, because as bodies we always know when we are *among* or *with* other bodies, or only with ghostly apparitions. But the fact that the Metaverse primarily revolves around our self-presentation and egocentrism, sublimated by auto-avatarization, already underscores the fact that others are at best vehicles to equip our stage and enable our performances. The social shrinks structurally to the functions of our own ego-performance (as Zuckerberg shows).

Posthumanists and some media and cultural studies scholars who instead assume a future destabilization of our well-accustomed certainties—the “disappearance of the real” or the dissolution of classical distinctions such as that between being and appearance, original and copy, truth and lie, or subject and object, nature and culture, and human and non-human—have not seriously learned their own deconstructive lessons and have not understood their own critiques. The collapse of differences that they proclaimed applies at best to screen media or the technical illusionary machinery. Today’s theater, after a phase of extreme asceticism in the 1970s and 80s, has also turned to technological fascination and is increasingly striving to transform itself into spectacle. But in the face of the screens or technical effects, the pleasure in deception dominates, because it is solely based in the eye



FIG. 4
SCENE FROM THE TRAILER FOR THE ABBA
TOUR, PLANNED FOR MAY 2022 IN LONDON.

and the ear of the beholder, so that the prognosis of the collapse of differences corresponds more to a wishful image than to reality. Admittedly, we are deceivable and also deception-ready beings, with, as Friedrich Nietzsche expressed in his early text “On truth and lie in the extra-moral sense” (1873), a pronounced will to lie, to fiction—but this can only succeed where we rely on technical reproducibility and its assigned senses, while in turn all senses of “distancelessness” such as haptics, tactility, smell, and taste are simultaneously excluded, for it is these that structure our experience of reality as an experience of existence in the first place (Mersch 2002: 30–42). We do not, of course, fail to recognize the existence of “absolute deception” through DeepFake: consider, for example, the website “This person does not exist,” with nothing but imaginary photographs of non-existent persons generated by Artificial Intelligence, which remain indistinguishable from “real” ones.¹¹ The danger they pose is great, but they primarily expose us to a visual Turing test, which, however, already presupposes the senses of sight and hearing, cutting off any *synesthesia*. Thus, in fact, any technical illusionism is governed by a reductionism—not only aesthetic—which, as magic, always tries to erect a dazzle in front of us in order to render us blind to transparency and critical reflection.

In opposition to this, the aforementioned “existential senses,” above all touch, offer a corrective. They likewise teach a correction vis-à-vis the avatarization of the social, so that the alleged collapse of differences fails to take place. Instead, its exaggeration can only take hold where we allow the technically superimposed eyes and ears to usurp our ways of experiencing the world and ourselves, that is, where the power fantasies of technology have taken hold in such a way that we distrust the sovereignty of perception and find ourselves outside of what must be understood as an actual “bodily encounter.” This encounter proves to be just as constitutive for the facticity of the social as for alterity and responsivity as the elementary references to others in terms of the always elusive *otherness*. Avatars instead deny any alterity, or rather: they are—unseeing and never truly seen—“apparent others” (in the double sense of appearance and semblance, of visual gloss and deception), incomparable with human companions, reduced to the mathematical modeling of their skin as well as the computation of sounds and movements, whose intonation, expression, and gesture—however perfectly imitated—remain clumsy and who, in one word, are not “aliens” to us, but at best “alienating”.

In contrast, in one of his last conversations with the art-historian Carolin Meister, Jean-Luc Nancy (Nancy/Meister 2021) insisted that “encountering each other” presupposes a “togetherness” that is always already embedded in social reciprocity. This turns out to be rudimentary in the confrontation with avatars. According to Nancy, encounters possess something “irreducible” and “inexplicable” (ibid.: 9); they are event-like, because we can neither reckon with them nor anticipate them. “Encounter does not constitute precisely a relation, neither connection nor communication, but rather a challenge to all these terms” (ibid.: 11)—here understanding the notion of relation as a formal relationality. Perhaps, therefore, it would be more accurate to say that the encounter provokes what technically appears to be an interaction; for its event, Nancy continues, is “entirely on the side of the unexpected, the accidental”; consequently, it is something “that happens to us” (ibid.: 16) and thus takes place at the level of the “It”—or rather, “between fragments, moments, or aspects of the ‘It’” (ibid.: 24). Every encounter, therefore, proves mysterious, incomprehensible, and impenetrable: “[It] will never attain clarity about itself” (ibid.), for it is—through the Other and its unknowability, its invisibility—always resistant to us and to our desires, remaining beyond what can be known or apprehended by consciousness: “The two of an encounter have before them and within them—and likewise between them—the entire human population” and indeed “humanity” in general (ibid.: 31).

This cannot be said of an interaction with avatars, even for “real-time” avatars that are based on an instant avatarization of ourselves. No matter how much it may seem as if something unexpected lies in their appearance as well, what appears turns out to be thoroughly controlled by the camera we use and pre-determined by the computational power of the

11 See <https://this-person-does-not-exist.com/de> (accessed February 10, 2022).

underlying program. They lack the subtlety of physical tension, nuance, and traces of an unconscious, because they can only represent—within the realm of visual resolution—what can be digitally calculated. Founded on operational functions, they also lack the temporality and history that would first and foremost give them depth. It is this lack of depth that thwarts any “encounter” in the proper sense, which would unintentionally reverberate on the experience of the persons the avatars purport to represent. Therefore, as Nancy states in his conversation with Meister, “(p)erhaps it must be said that there is no encounter within mathematics (...), and that there is equally no encounter between the mathematical or mathematized sphere and the life-world or the world of language” (ibid.: 45). The foregrounding of non-human behavior thereby blots out the background of human intentions and their vagueness and unfathomability in such a way that, disguised as avatars, we are never present and thus never able to meet entirely in the sense of involving all the senses, precisely also the hidden ones and their libidinal or confused signatures. It is this that constitutes the charm or magic of an encounter in the first place.

This also means that the replacement of the social with avatarized contact, as envisioned by future internet platforms such as the Metaverse, leaves little of what constitutes sociality—much less than already remains today of understanding under the umbrella of ubiquitous communication media. What was once intended to enable connection proves, in the context of rampant hate messages, to be the exact opposite: an excess of social polarization, and this is even more true for virtual realms such as the Metaverse and similar Silicon Valley creations. Thus, when Nancy and Meister say “I am all the more me when I encounter you” (ibid.: 76), in order to indicate that social bridges exist only where we are already together “in relationship,” where we are committed to others from the beginning, the statement must be read in the context of an avatarization as: “I am all the more me when I play ‘me’ in front of ‘you’ as my audience.” As avatars we “perform each other,” rather than encounter the other. The two propositions formulate separate worlds, which renders the rift, the gap or difference, between two understandings of the collective absolute. In this situation, the significance of *κοινωνία* can no longer be reconstructed.

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