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From Bad Faith to the Practico-Inert in the Digital World: Why Sartrean Ethics Matters for Social Media

Abstract

This article explores the potential use of Sartre's philosophy to interpret the forms of power in so-called surveillance capitalism. We argue that concepts such as those of look, bad faith and pride can provide a better understanding of why people agree to submit to the power of digital platforms. Furthermore, we argue that the notion of Manichaeism, as developed by Sartre, can offer an existential explanation for phenomena such as echo chambers and political polarisation. Through the Sartrean notion of practico-inert, then, we offer an interpretation of machine learning algorithms as devices that tend to reproduce the identical. In conclusion, the article argues that existentialism must be taken into consideration for developing a critical theory of digital capitalism, since it provides both analytical and normative insights.

Keywords

Bad Faith, Digital capitalism, Onlife existence, Practico-Inert, Sartre

1. Introduction: Why Sartre?

The disruptive development of digital technologies has given birth to pervasive forms of power and surveillance. Philosophers have dealt with this issue from different perspectives: some scholars have provided descriptions of our “onlife” experience (Floridi 2014) or of how modern screen-based media shape our perception of reality (Casetti 2023), while others have offered rigorous definitions of “fake news” (Mukerji 2018, Jaster & Lanius 2021), “echo chambers” (Fantl 2021, Diaz Ruiz & Nilsson 2023) and “digital manipulation” (Yeung 2017, Ienca 2023), approaching these topics from epistemic (Nguyen 2020), psychological (Pennycook & Rand 2021) and political (Monsees 2023) points of view. To address how power is related to these new technological devices, criti-

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cal theory – understood in a very broad sense¹ – has embarked on an expansive process of reflection (Waelen 2022). Authors such as Fuchs (2014) and Srnicek (2016), for instance, have sought to offer a Marxian reading of so-called digital capitalism, showing how Marx's thought is relevant to current debates on information and the communication society. Zuboff (2019), in *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*, has attempted to renew Marx's theory of value by placing the notion of a behavioural surplus alongside that of surplus value.

Philosophers from the first generation of the so-called “Frankfurt School” focused on technological rationalization, the public sphere and domination (Jay 1996, Jeffries 2017), equipping today's theorists to grasp the contradictions of the digital age. When describing the instrumental power of surveillance capitalism, Zuboff uses Horkheimer and Adorno's ideas (Horkheimer & Adorno 2007); and Risse, emphasizing the importance of Marcuse's reflections, has recently argued that the author of *One-Dimensional Man* foresaw one of the central features of the contemporary digital revolution, technology's ability to “create a world” (Risse 2023: 33). Meanwhile, Berns and Reigeluth (2021) have used Habermas's insights (Habermas 1991) to illustrate how the digital is reshaping the public sphere, and particularly the formation of public opinion. Recently, Habermas (2023) himself has also dealt with this issue, introducing the notion of “semi-public media”. Digital information and communication technologies, he points out, have replaced the previous media ecosystem with one that makes rational communicative exchange more difficult to achieve.

Finally, there has been a “Foucauldian revival” in the field of media studies. Cheney-Lippold (2017), for instance, has applied Foucault's insights on the biopolitics of self-construction to the digital world. Berns and Rouvroy (2013) have coined the expression “algorithmic governmentality”, adapting Foucauldian analysis of “security mechanisms” (Foucault 2017) to the practices of data mining and algorithmic prediction. Other scholars have dealt with the “aesthetics of the techno-self” (Serban 2016), showing how algorithmic devices and social network profiles can be considered “technologies of the self”.

All these studies share a historical and genealogical awareness of the need to historicize the so-called digital “revolution” (Balbi 2023). They

¹ By “critical theory”, we are not referring only to the thinkers of the Frankfurt School. Rather, we are considering critical theory in a much more inclusive manner: since it aims to analyse the contradictions that emerge in social reality, we will also consider as “critical theorists” scholars that draw on, for example, Foucauldian insights. However, our analysis will be limited to digital capitalism, an issue that contemporary scholars in the tradition of the Frankfurt School seem to have “largely ignored” (Delanty & Harris 2021: 89).

stress that devices such as social networks and their algorithms are not mere technological tools: they are linked with the way humans experience the world, with their historical and situational needs, and with the socio-economic system within which they live. Consequently, a philosophy of technology should be considered a critical theory as Horkheimer described it in *Traditional and Critical Theory*: a theory that does not ignore the social dimension of science and technology. Its function is to grasp the contradictions that emerge in society, with the goal of freeing subjects from illegitimate and oppressive relations of power and domination.

In pursuit of that purpose, we want to include Jean-Paul Sartre in this debate. Although his philosophical approach is not often associated with critical theory, it can be extremely useful for understanding certain dynamics from an authentically critical point of view.² The theoretical devices Sartre introduced, particularly in *Being and Nothingness* and in the *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, allow us to understand how and why, in their daily lives, subjects accept and submit themselves to the predictive power of platforms' algorithms and of the "digital *Mit-Sein*", the digital environment in which they experience the "onlife" condition. By using Sartre's theoretical devices – such as "the look", "pride", "bad faith", "seriality" and "the practico-inert" – we aim to show that the architecture of these platforms makes the exercise of human freedom more complex, obscure and manipulable. However, Sartre's philosophy does not remove the possibility that subjects can emancipate themselves from this type of structure, and therefore it aids efforts to analyse the digital world from a critical perspective. On an existential level, Sartre's practical philosophy enables us to understand why subjects adapt themselves to platforms' predictions, without renouncing the idea of the freedom of the subject, considering them in their agency and not as a mere effect of a structure or set of devices.

We will show that some of his key notions are particularly useful for understanding the legitimacy and the effectiveness of platform capitalism, as it tangibly reduces the complexity of everyday life. Accordingly, we will argue that subjects' submission to algorithmic predictions, and to what can be called the "digital order of meanings", stems from a human attitude of bad faith, and not from algorithms' technical features. From a

² Sartre is often ignored by critical theorists, for several reasons. First, his philosophy is too often considered a naive solipsism (Sherman 2006) – thus independent of social reality – and his account of intersubjectivity is seen as non-normative (see Honneth 2020). However, a collateral aim of this article is to show how these interpretations of Sartre's philosophy tend to be partial. On the possibility to interpret Sartrean philosophy, and especially his ethics, as a critical theory see Russo 2025.

genealogical point of view, Sartre insists that first there is a human choice: one chooses a relationship between the self and others, and only then a certain technological disposition both intensifies that choice and constitutes an oppressive context for future choices.

Furthermore, the current configuration of social media into echo chambers and filter bubbles, giving rise to increasingly polarized opinions (Sunstein 2017, Nguyen 2020), can be read in a particularly effective way using Sartre's analysis of Manichaeism and his conception of seriality: a fake solidarity between individuals who fail to form a collective around a transformative common goal.

While we emphasize Sartre's radical conception of freedom, we remain very much aware that the technological dimension of platform capitalism plays an important role because algorithms mediate our everyday life and have an impact on the concrete exercise of human freedom. Therefore, we will use the Sartrean notion of the practico-inert to thematize platforms as objective structures that make free human praxis difficult to realize effectively. Such an analysis will not oblige us to fall back into technological determinism: the human being, the for-itself, is not fated to be overwhelmed by machines or algorithms. On the contrary, the for-itself can still exercise its freedom, provided that the practico-inert is first and foremost perceived as something that can and must be modified and transcended.

2. Sartre's *Mit-Sein*: Bad Faith as a Reduction of Complexity

As Sartre states, the look makes the watched subject a "transcendence transcended" (Sartre 2003: 287). The for-itself is defined as a being which introduces nothingness into the world, inserting a *fissure* into the *plenum* of the in-itself, and thereby acting as a "decompression of being" (Ibid.: 98). Understood as a nullifying force, this transcendence is intended to realize something that was previously absent or merely possible.

However, the other's look overwhelms the for-itself. It crystallizes it into a form "not in the mode of 'was' or of 'having to be' but in-itself" (Ibid.: 286). If transcendence manifests itself as the structure that changes the identity of the in-itself, the look of the other *compresses* the for-itself under the principle of identity: "in order for me to be what I am, it suffices merely that the Other look at me" (Ibid.: 285). When the subject is looked at, it becomes an object-for-others, losing its transcendence as it is objectified by the other's look. Obviously, this process is reciprocal: the for-itself reified by another's look regains its transcendence by looking at the other, generating the vicious circle of reifying looks that characterizes the Sartrean *Mit-Sein*.

In *Being and Nothingness*, there is no escape from the game of looks; human experience is characterized by a dialectic between transcendence and objectification (Pinkard 2022), since freedom is always threatened by the look of the other. But since everyone is ontologically free, the interweaving of these freedoms and looks generates a paradoxical situation: the for-itself, the subject, is always an object-for-others too. This is why, in *No Exit*, Garcin exclaims, “Hell is other people”: in hell the game is up, since the sentence has been pronounced once and for all. This is also the case in his film *Les jeux sont faits*: in both instances the characters are fixed and defined forever. In this sense *Mit-Sein*, far from being an open and deliberative sphere in which human freedoms can meet and cooperate, is a place in which the for-itself constantly reifies others and is reified by them.

Yet those involved in this dynamic do not always perceive it as problematic and conflicted but experience it in a much more ambiguous way. For Sartre, the other who objectifies me is at the same time the only source of knowledge about myself, and he admits that there are situations in which “I accept and wish that others [...] confer upon me a being which I recognize” (Sartre 2003: 286). In short, there are particular *situations* in which the for-itself not only accepts objectification by the other’s look but *wants it*. Therefore, what we need to analyse are those particular situations in which one accepts – or seeks – reification, accepting objectification by the other’s look in order to achieve a reduction in the complexity of everyday life – that is, to receive a particular form of recognition from the outside. We will analyse these situations using the notion of *bad faith* and the feeling of *pride* as a *Leitfaden*.

Let us begin with bad faith, in which “consciousness instead of directing its negation outward turns it toward itself” (Ibid.: 71). In bad faith, the very power to nullify, and thus to transcend, is self-denied. In fact, it is difficult for the for-itself to exercise its power of transcendence within the social world, which is already full of meanings imposed by others: “I, by whom meanings come to things, I find myself engaged in an already meaningful world which reflects to me meanings which I have not put into it” (Ibid.: 531). Bad faith, therefore, seems to be an economical posture which allows one to simplify one’s life and to be appreciated in the public sphere, avoiding the anxiety that comes from a constant need to re-define one’s social position (Eshleman 2008).

This dynamic reveals itself in the phenomenon of pride. When Sartre analyses the look, he usually considers shame the most important affective disposition through which the reifying power of the look is announced and experienced;³ however, pride can also illustrate the re-

³ Obviously, shame has a broader meaning in Sartre’s work. It is linked to the very existence of the other and is an affective disposition that characterizes human beings’ en-

relationship between bad faith, the look and facticity. As Sartre states, pride “is an ambiguous feeling. In pride I recognize the Other as the subject through whom my being gets its object-state, but I recognize as well that I myself am also responsible for my objectness” (Ibid.: 314). If shame is the sudden, lightning-fast awareness of a look that I had thought absent a moment before, pride is “a primary reaction to shame” (Ibid.), in which the being-who-is-looked-at has noted the impossibility of isolation and tries to make themselves acceptable to the other’s look. This constant effort to generate admiration in the other while remaining an object leads us to the core of bad faith: the for-itself crystallizes into a form that simplifies its being-in-the-world, concealing its transcendence in order to fold itself into an identity that can be appreciated. Pride, then, is “a feeling without equilibrium, and it is in bad faith” (Ibid.). It is an attempt to reduce complexity, since it unburdens subjects so that they can renounce, even unwittingly, their original transcendence. As a result, the for-itself is no longer an active subject that produces difference by introducing nothingness into the world. Rather, once bad faith and pride have taken hold of it, the for-itself becomes an enjoyed-object in obstinate search of approval. They want to adapt themselves to this world instead of transforming it. Their nullifying action is turned upon their own freedom.

If pride is a reaction to shame, then the greater the chance of feeling shame, the more likely one is to flee it through pride. Therefore, the more difficult it is to escape from the other’s look, the more the subject will seek refuge from shame in the pride-seeking practices of bad faith.

Never before in human history has the look of others been so pervasive as in the digital age. In recent years, there has been a profound and overarching mediatization of our experience of the world. Media no longer merely connect different life-worlds: they are now the life-world we commonly experience (Hepp 2020, Floridi 2014). We will analyse this look in two ways, starting with a “horizontal” point of view which thematizes the network of looks that is generated in the relationships between users. Next, our “vertical” analysis will attempt to account for that absolute look which holds us all in check as the gaze that cannot be reciprocated: that of the digital platforms, the look of digital surveillance that replaces the Sartrean look of God.

tire existence, in multiple spheres. Indeed, as Gyllenhammer (2010) notes, the theme of shame characterizes every area of Sartre’s thought, from questions of phenomenological ontology to those of social critique.

3. Sartre and the Digital Age of Surveillance Capitalism

When we are online, *no one* literally *looks at* us: no one's *eyes* are pointed directly at us. Therefore, Sartre's analysis of the look is extremely useful for framing the digital look. What is essential, in Sartre's view, is not to perceive an eye (or any other interface), but to *experience* the feeling of being looked at. A social network profile fulfils this function perfectly because the mere fact of its existence continually exposes users to the potential look of others (Lopato 2016). As a result, users live the experience of being always watched while, at the same time, they constantly watch the others. David Lyon (2020: 20) speaks of "surveillance culture": "not only being watched but also watching has become a way of life." Just as the Sartrean game of looks was defined as an immanent network of reifying gazes that arises from simple being-in-the-world, so "surveillance culture is characterized by user-generated surveillance" (Ibid.: 25).

The more pervasive the look, the more likely bad-faith behaviour becomes. Indeed, in the fully mediatised life-world, escaping the look of others is almost impossible. As a result, bad-faith attitudes such as pride become more and more frequent. Digital platforms foster this with the tools they make available for users, including technical features which Cardon (2015: 22) calls "reputation metric systems". By counting "likes", "retweets" and "views", they allow users to understand whether or not they are attuned to the current order of meanings and to others' expectations. Users can easily understand their "social position" and their "score", and they can "orient their behaviours and improve the *scores* recorded by the metric systems" (Ibid.: 23). If the look is pervasive, the transcendent meanings innumerable, and the metrical systems of reputation always at hand and easy to consult, the transcendence of the for-itself is likely to result in bad faith. Against the backdrop of this signifying world, it can cause the given structures of meaning to be reproduced. As Floridi notes, in its onlife existence "the self observes the observation of itself by other selves" (Floridi 2014: 73) through the metric systems of reputation, assuming a posture of bad faith such that "the self uses the digital representation of itself by others in order to construct a virtual identity through which it seeks to grasp its own personal identity" (Ibid.).

The look and the expectations of others make users act so as to maintain their position – if the others appreciate it – or to improve their *score*, yet always within the dynamics of reification and the order of meanings into which they find themselves thrown: "The hyperconscious self never really stops trying to understand how it is seen by the other [...]. The more powerful, pervasive, and available ICTs are, the more the digital gaze may become mesmerizing: one may be lost in one's own perception of oneself as attributed by others in the infosphere" (Ibid.: 74). What Floridi calls the "hyper-

aware self” is a subject that has become lost in the game of looks. When subjects are faced with digital facticity and with the digital look, their actions tend toward the spasmodic pursuit of pride – thanks in part to the simplicity and immediacy of the metric systems of reputation – rather than toward the nullification of what is given. In this context, users are simultaneously victims and perpetrators of the game of looks: they reify while being reified, in a reciprocal and conflicted process that characterizes the digital *Mit-Sein*.

But what happens when this reciprocity fails? What happens to the transcendence of the for-itself when it is confronted by the look of a subject that can never become an object? Digital reality has forced us to confront this possibility. Before a subject who cannot become an object and who *always* looks at me – here Sartre is referring to the divine look – “I realize my object-state in the absolute and hypostasize it” (Sartre 2003: 313). To show what happens to the for-itself when it finds itself subject to a look that cannot be reciprocated, Sartre focuses on describing the effects that such a look generates. Similarly, we will show what happens to users when they are subject to the continuous, uninterrupted, pervasive and unreciprocated look of digital platforms.

As Zuboff states, “surveillance capitalists know everything about us, whereas their operations are designed to be unknowable to us” (Zuboff 2019: 17). Studying surveillance capitalism by thematizing it in terms of this asymmetrical look will allow us to understand how it alters our actual experience, both of the world and of ourselves, and how this results in a pervasive form of asymmetrical power. It is this asymmetry of power and knowledge, which is also concretely economic, that must be at the centre of any critical theory of the digital. Such a theory must go beyond its repercussions on privacy, on forms of psychological dependence, and on the changing modes not only of communication but also, following McLuhan’s perspective, of our perception of the world.

For surveillance capitalism any “unpredictable behavior is the equivalent of lost revenue” (Ibid.: 151). The corollary is that *surveillance capitalism works relentlessly to turn the individual’s possibilities into probabilities*. In consequence, subjects’ transcendence is itself transcended, since those probabilities arise not from free human choice but from algorithmic computation. Even if one is tempted to suppose that such a slippage inevitably results from the power of surveillance capitalism’s technical apparatus, we argue that bad faith – understood as a reducer of complexity – plays a central role in this process. Indeed, as Zuboff remarks, “our dependency is at the heart of the commercial surveillance project, in which our felt needs for effective life vie against the inclination to resist its bold incursions” (Ibid.: 17).

This kind of digital look allows algorithmic models “not only [to] know our behaviour but also [to] shape our behavior at scale” (Zuboff

2019: 15). The incredible reduction of complexity that this system generates (for example, through microtargeting and news-feed personalization) makes the for-itself renounce its original transcendence. This makes it easier for it to adapt to algorithmic prescriptions that can realize the dream of systematic serendipity (Berns & Rouvroy 2013) and free us from the “burden of choice” (Cohn 2019). As a result, the subject incurs a risk of *no longer experiencing itself as transcendence*, but as a deterministic, linear sequence of algorithmically computable data. Indeed, once it accepts this absolute look in order to reduce complexity, the for-itself is reorganized as a digital double (Berns & Rouvroy 2013): it is treated by platforms’ absolute look as a mere sum of data whose actions can be predicted according to an algorithmic model, to which the subject adapts in order to reduce the complexity of its everyday life.

However, as Sartre remarked in *Being and Nothingness*, believing in determinism is itself the result of a free choice that aims at avoiding one’s responsibilities and at believing that everything is already predetermined, without any possibility of transformation and therefore with no place for personal engagement.

The pervasive look of surveillance capitalism reactivates not only the project of absolute arithmetization, which is peculiar to drastic positivism, but also the tendencies of deterministic psychology, in which “[t]he in-itself has got hold of all these ‘data’; the motive provokes the act as the physical cause its effect; everything is real, everything is full” (Sartre 2003: 462). If everything is full, and if the causal chain proceeds without interruption (since you bought A, B, C and D, you might like E...), then the for-itself collapses into an in-itself. Once the for-itself has given up its transcendence and adapted to its algorithmic double, it no longer acts with transcendence toward its own possibilities. Through bad faith, the reduction of complexity which surveillance capitalism provides leads human beings to forget the original structure of the for-itself and to grasp their existence as one cast in a “causal determinism”, so that one can do nothing but “confuse the for-itself with the in-itself” (Ibid.: 481). In such a *situation*, what is *given*, a *datum*, is no longer nullified; rather, it grounds the subject’s experience of the world. Thus, the subject conceives of itself as a *quantified self* (Lupton 2016) and not as a power that can nullify what is given.

4. The Reduction of Complexity: From Sartre’s Critique of Manichaeism to Echo Chambers and Polarisation

The theme of complexity reduction does not apply only to our understanding of individual behaviour; it is aimed at spasmodically seeking

approval from one's entourage, at the cost of fixing oneself in a stationary character to obtain the highest social scoring, employing self-branding and micro-celebrity techniques (Senft 2008, Marwick & Boyd 2011) that are based on an increasingly pervasive intermediality.

Reductions in complexity are also central to any understanding of the structure of collectives in social media, from the architecture of echo chambers (Sunstein 2017) to the rise of polarisation (Tanesini 2022) and partisanship (Garrett & Stroud 2014). The theory of cognitive bias (Kahneman 2011) is helpful for understanding why it requires less cognitive effort to process certain information if it is consistent with pre-existing beliefs; so are various media theories, starting with those of selective exposure and cognitive dissonance (Festinger 1957). However, it is also through Sartre's analyses that we can uncover the deep existential meaning of this attempt to reduce the complexity of reality. For that reason, we will use a term closer to the contemporary debate: the main (political) bias that characterizes the world of bad faith is indeed what Sartre calls *Manichaeism*. Manichaean thinking identifies a structural tendency of bad faith itself – the refusal of complexity and the scapegoating of the other – that finds a new and fertile medium in the architecture of social media. Echo chambers and online polarisation are, in this sense, the digital instantiation of the same existential mechanism: the for-itself's flight from the anxiety of responsibility into the comfort of a binary world.

In fact, Sartre considers Manichaeism a way of interpreting reality that oversimplifies it in order to avoid recognizing how our own responsibility is involved in the transformation of the world. For the Manichaean the good is not something to be done, with all the risks that this entails; it is simply something that will magically manifest itself after the destruction of a (supposed) evil. The mechanism is similar to the phenomena of polarisation we encounter in echo chambers: in a self-referential spiral of anger, hate speech is uttered against certain human categories. From an instrumental point of view, this kind of dynamism is often used by populist rhetoric to point to a scapegoat, either in the catch-all-word of the “establishment” or the “elite” (Momoc 2018), or in the *wretched of the earth*, migrants and refugees who might attack traditional values and the so-called Western way of life (Matamoros-Fernández 2021). Such people are considered as mere *objects*, with standardized characteristics, rather than as singularities that are constantly changing. As Langton (2018) has shown, they are considered to be *something* that is bad for society or for a particular group, and therefore practices of hate speech tend to *presuppose* a reification or an objectification of the hated subject. People who are hated are deprived of their “somebodiness” and are treated as in-itselfs and not as for-itselfs.

It is no coincidence that Sartre begins his analysis of Manichaeism with a portrait of two haters: the Vichy collaborationist, modelled on Drieu La Rochelle, and the anti-Semite.

Let us begin with the collaborationist. In his 1945 article *Qu'est-ce que qu'un collaborateur?* Sartre states that the collaborationist has chosen to bend to a supposed political realism because he longs for the advent of an authoritarian society in which only a few can rule, crushing all others by divine right. In *Réflexions sur la question juive* (*Anti-Semite and Jew*, 1946) he is even clearer about this relational mode that aims to simplify social complexity radically:

The anti-Semite is afraid of discovering that the world is ill-contrived, for then it would be necessary for him to invent and modify, with the result that man would be found to be the master of his own destiny, burdened with an agonizing and infinite responsibility and therefore he localizes all the evil of the universe in the Jew. If nations war with each other, the conflict does not arise from the fact that the idea of nationality, in its present form, implies imperialism and the clash of interests. No, it is because the Jew is there, behind the governments, sowing discord. If there is a class struggle, it is not because the economic organization leaves something to be desired. It is because Jewish demagogues, hook-nosed agitators, have seduced the workers. (Sartre 1976a: 28)

Of course, Sartre's analysis can be applied to any other racial group, as Sartre did during his political engagement in the struggle for the freedom of minorities around the world. Examples are the *Black Orpheus*, the preface of Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* and the many essays published in *Les Temps modernes* during the period of decolonization.

The self-referentiality and polarisation Sartre criticizes lead to a poverty of debate, reflecting an existential mode that is easy to find on the Internet. By exploiting the mechanism of homophily, social media make it extremely easy for like-minded people to come together (Tur et al. 2024). In fact, they have made this phenomenon even more pervasive than traditional media ever did, and it has become extremely difficult to persuade people with different points of view to engage in dialogue. The risk, as Sunstein (2017) points out, is that the arguments of those who think differently are no longer heard. Sunstein suggests that people should be exposed to situations they have not chosen beforehand; to cultivate freedom of expression, and to counteract polarisation and the fragmentation of society, unplanned and unanticipated encounters are essential. However, a fruitful appreciation of the opinions of someone who thinks differently requires a great deal of emotional and cognitive energy. In order to evaluate another person's arguments correctly, one must seek information about the topics at hand, and consequently the question of epistemic

responsibility is increasingly prominent in contemporary debates (Code 2020, Pongiglione 2021) and is receiving attention from both normative and epistemological points of view.

Here again, Sartre's position is extremely pertinent: he demands that individuals accept responsibility for their acts, beyond the dynamics of infodemics and the digital divide. In *Truth and Existence*, written in 1948, Sartre declares that there is no distinction between action and knowledge: every action implies a certain knowledge of the world, and every type of knowledge of the world refers to a practical action. Our moral agency, in short, begins with what we decide to see and discover about the world. If we adopt mechanisms to reduce complexity, therefore, our moral and political agency will be severely limited. This is not simply because the world's increasing intricacy has become unmanageable and certain economic, political and technological practices lack transparency (Pasquale 2015). It is first and foremost the result of a human choice: choosing not to see, or to see selectively. For as Sartre states, ignorance is a choice to disengage: "in ignorance we again discover a world torn apart by bad faith. In a word, ignorance is a refusal to be concerned with Being" (Sartre 1992b: 38). The mechanisms of polarisation are based on choosing to see only what is consistent with one's own fictitious identity, to which one clings to the point of creating the algorithmic double, and on refusing to see, listen to, or understand anything that differs from this set of information and values. Sartre's diagnosis is therefore consistent with many recent analyses: for example, confirmation bias (Mao et al. 2018) and the psychology of system justification (Jost 2020). However, while the contemporary debate clearly defines the individual and social dynamisms that have made these phenomena pervasive in the digital world, a return to the radical conception of freedom and responsibility found in Sartre's existentialism is needed in order to emphasize the user's active complicity in the mechanisms that reduce the complexity of both the world and the self.

Of course, one must not reduce Sartre's thought to a naive apologia for freedom that ignores the subject's situation and all the conditioning it may involve. In the following section, we will therefore focus on the concept of the practico-inert, showing how Sartre develops the vicious relationship between individual as well as collective praxis and the inertia of the pre-existing structures.

5. Sartre's Practico-inert and the Architecture of Digital Platforms

In this section, we will not deal with the progressive transformation of the in-itself in *Being and Nothingness* into what Sartre defines as the

practico-inert in the first volume of the *Critique of Dialectical Reason*. It is sufficient to recall that “in [*Being and Nothingness*], Sartre portrays the subject as consciousness which nihilates the given, whereas in [the *Critique*] the subject is presented as inseparable from the realm of ‘worked matter’ or practico-inert into which we emerge” (Engels 2018: 48-49). If the immediate result of this change is that freedom seems to be more restricted than in the 1943 work, it can be said that Sartre deepens the vicious, ambiguous and dangerous link that he had already glimpsed between the human dimension and the world of things. For Sartre, in *Being and Nothingness* as in the *Critique*, and in other works, human beings’ greatest risk is that of dehumanization. This theme, of course, is also central to the more recent debate on artificial intelligence and algorithmic models (Crawford 2020, Lindgren 2023).

However, for Sartre dehumanization is not simply a process that is linked to a different organization of these practices’ technological means and economic orientations. It is always also the result of human praxis. In the *Critique*, individual as well as collective praxis is not simply the manifestation of an autonomous freedom but is the attempt to act on matter at the same time as it acts upon one. The practico-inert is the matter on which praxis acts, but at the same time it has a power over human action: a power of inertia, in that it can halt, redirect and change the aims and modes of exercise of human praxis. In this sense, *Being and Nothingness*’s supposed ontological dualism is challenged in the *Critique*, which rethinks Marxian and Hegelian philosophy in a deeper way (Pinkard 2022).

The *Critique* also discusses the role of the machine, stressing the dehumanization of the worker who uses it and who, in turn, is used by it: “We are in fact still in the domain of the practico-inert: it is the machine which requires certain materials (and which is thereby affected, for example, by improvements in communication), and again, it is the machine which demands certain markets (that is to say, at a certain level of production, customers who are themselves producers)” (Sartre 2004: 213). Despite what certain naïve Marxists believe, throughout the text Sartre tries to demonstrate how these technological architectures are not simply the result of advancements in the means of production. Instead, they are the result of a relationship between human beings: first comes the choice of exploitation, that of man over man, and then there follows a machine capable of intensifying the mechanism of oppression. In this way, Sartre avoids certain Marxists’ economicist determinism while bearing in mind the complex historical evolution of the means of production and the power relations between social classes.

The ontological condition of the separateness of consciousnesses in *Being and Nothingness* now becomes the choice, or situation, of seriality

as the standard mode of relating to the other. In seriality, people can be together in the same place while performing the same task (for example, in a factory), without any genuine relationship or solidarity between the members of this collective. This makes seriality another useful device for framing the type of relationship that is established through social media: what these networks define as friendship is nothing more than an opaque form of seriality, in which each person simply stands next to the other, like the passengers at a bus stop whom Sartre observed in the Place Saint-Germain:

In other words, the intensity of isolation, as a relation of exteriority between the members of a temporary and contingent gathering, expresses the degree of massification of the social ensemble, in so far as it is produced on the basis of given conditions. At this level, reciprocal isolations, as the negation of reciprocity signify the integration of individuals into one society and, in this sense, can be defined as a particular way of living (conditioned by the developing totalization), in interiority and as reciprocity within the social, the exteriorized negation of all interiority (“No one helps anyone, it’s everyone for himself”) or, on the other hand, in sympathy (as in Proust’s “Every person is very much alone”). Finally, in our example, isolation becomes, for and through everyone, for him and for others, the real, social product of cities. (Ibid.: 257)

This indicates that seriality is the standard relational mode of a praxis that is constantly caught up in the practico-inert. As Sartre notes, “the practico-inert field of exploitation constitutes itself, through counter-finalities and through the mediation of worked matter, as a passive synthesis of serial relations” (Ibid.: 737).

In the practico-inert the project of praxis deviates into counter-finalities that return to praxis itself, calcifying its freedom. Sartre consequently deepens the continual, dehumanizing exchanges between human praxis and matter until they are no longer two separate dimensions, since praxis is enmeshed in matter and the latter is always worked matter. However, he does not exclude the possibility that the practico-inert of a possible action, even a collective one, is transformative and capable of becoming a project of emancipation if all its conditionings are understood. In the *Critique* it is not a coincidence that fused groups, even though they are short-lived, are a collective realization of praxis that severs its link with inertia, so that its serial relations lead to an authentically common project. This possibility requires one to assume responsibility (although Sartre no longer uses this term in the *Critique*) for one’s complicity in the situation.

Thus, the practico-inert is not only something “material” but is the result of a multitude of decisions. Subjects are therefore responsible for

the very existence of the practico-inert, especially since it is the solidification of past human choices, and not just a given, inhuman structure. As a result, using the concept of bad faith in *Being and Nothingness* and the practico-inert in the *Critique*, Sartre shows the seductive mechanism of dehumanization and the reduction of humanity to a thing, to pure matter that can be worked on by others.

In a similar vein, the current architecture of online platforms, which involves the creation of a true shadow-subject, a *Doppelgänger* that is reduced to a mere algorithmic double, can be characterized as an emblematic aspect of the practico-inert. Through data mining and analysis of their behaviour, users' past choices are solidified into a set of probabilities, established by the algorithmic models (Couldry 2018) and returned to the user as preferences for future choices. As Bonicalzi, De Caro and Giovanola (2023: 823) have pointed out,

the underlying assumption is that if different users exhibited a certain decision-making pattern in the past, they are likely to have similar tastes or needs in the future. In this way, feedbacks and usage history are interpreted as signals to adjust the user's evolving psychological profile, and there is no more need to ask people about their preferences or even to have a clear grasp of the features of the recommended item. Simply by taking the action that the [recommender system] suggests, the user provides learning opportunities to the system.

Such a process functions just like the practico-inert, which also has a conservative and anti-transformative function with respect to praxis: the crystallization of the past halts and reproduces the identical, creating an order of meanings and a reification of past choices that, when performatively deployed by algorithmic recommendations, makes it extremely difficult for subjects to act autonomously. Unsurprisingly, scholars analysing algorithmic forms of power have noted that "the space of ethics is dispersed" (Weiskopf & Hansen 2023: 493). After all, just as subjects cannot live without the practico-inert, which reduces the complexity of their lives, digital platforms' systematic diversion of human praxis also structurally undermines any possibility of emancipation (Stiegler 2017).

In this sense, the practico-inert too implies the repetition of the identical, the preservation of the *status quo*. As Berns and Rouvroy note, this form of power implies "the loss of the idea of the project" (Berns & Rouvroy 2013): the loss of the capacity to change the world. It is only praxis that changes the world: matter and technique, for Sartre, have no transformative power, except as a reflection of the counter-finality of human action.

Let us not forget that machine learning is based on what machines have learned from past human actions, and if it also conditions them,

that is because it reflects and transposes their counter-finality into the future. This is why “the field of action of this power is not situated in the present, but in the future” (Berns & Rouvroy 2013: 18). However, this future is to be understood as a reproduction of the past—as a linear and deterministic chain that leaves no room for human praxis. In Sartrean terms, it is a future that latches onto the past as a repetition of the identical, making subjects abdicate their own power to nullify and transform the world.

Sartre’s analysis thus helps us take three steps: 1) to understand the profound seduction that is intrinsic to dehumanization and to what reduces the complexity of both reality and the self, because it seems convenient to reduce oneself to an algorithmic double that inhabits an echo chamber where one finds only confirmation of one’s pre-existing convictions. 2) To recognize the user’s real and intrinsic complicity in the formation and maintenance of platforms’ architecture. The user is not merely an object of these mechanisms’ discipline but continually chooses to undergo their processes for the sake of the psychological and social dynamics we have tried to describe, which require the least cognitive and emotional effort in order to inhabit this new online space. 3) Finally, recovering Sartre’s notion of engagement, one could think of new practices of social interaction which would involve imagining and concretely undertaking far-reaching collective actions, breaking away from the usual relations of mere seriality.

6. Conclusion: A Critical Theory for the Digital Age Needs Sartre

We have shown that Sartre’s work helps one to analyse and criticize the power dynamics that characterize the digital world. Even if Sartre never directly dealt with digital media, his insights remain relevant. In short, using Sartre to elaborate a critical theory for the digital age is not simply a matter of adapting existentialist theory, but is a theoretically grounded and effective operation.

To sum up: Sartre’s insights concerning the look and bad faith (§2 and §3) allow us to understand how submission to algorithmic mechanisms does not occur because of their presumed capacity to totalize our experience; it is actually the product of a choice made in bad faith, in virtue of which subjects – far from attempting to transcend the present state of affairs – seek pride and vanity in order to reduce the complexity of their lives. This account allows us to avoid any form of technological determinism. Even if it shows how deeply surveillance capitalism penetrates into subjects’ lives, such an account also makes manifest how free human subjectivity – the for-itself – could still allow subjects to exercise a form of

control over themselves and their actions, since the belief that algorithms are able to create a deterministic universe is, first of all, a project of bad faith that can be transcended.

Secondly, Sartre's analysis of Manichaeism (§4), understood as an attitude that reduces political complexity through the identification of a scapegoat, allows us to show how the fragmentation of political life and the polarisation of public opinion presuppose a subjective choice, a reifying and divisive attitude that, nonetheless, actively renounces any transcendence of its state of affairs. At the same time, Sartre's analysis of the relationship between truth and responsibility – according to which we are responsible for both what we know and what we do not, since we choose what to ignore – could constitute a fertile ground for the many scholars investigating the relationship between ignorance and moral responsibility.

The analysis of the practico-inert (§5), however, has shown us how Sartre's conception of freedom cannot be considered a naive libertarianism. Human beings always exist in relation to some matter, but the matter that retroacts on subjects is always a worked matter, condensed from human praxis. After all, human beings only undergo the working of matter because there is an inertial form of human action in it. Such an insight can pave the way for particularly interesting studies, philosophical or otherwise, on the relationship between data and machine learning. It has been widely noted that the data fed to algorithms are never raw, but are always interpreted, processed and generated by human praxis, to the extent that, as Risse (2023: 184-185) claims, they should be considered social facts. Their retroactivity on subjects, which occurs in the form of biases, discrimination or stereotypes, only reflects the impure nature of such data, their inertial nature and their tendency to reproduce the identical, entrapping a reality that, instead, could and should be transcended.

In short, Sartre's analyses allow us to make both descriptive and normative claims. If such concepts as bad faith, the look and Manichaeism permit us to take a step forward in understanding the digital world and its relationship with subjects, such notions as transcendence, the practico-inert, responsibility and choice clearly show us how, even in the face of the frightening apparatus of surveillance capitalism, the human being retains an ontological freedom. This can be hidden – through, for example, bad faith or inertia – but not destroyed by this new pervasive organization of society. It is no coincidence that Risse (*Ibid.*: 221), in the face of this surveillance architecture, states that we should adopt an existential approach to human freedom when analysing social media.

What should therefore be criticized are all those strategies and devices, immanent in the digital world, that lead subjects to forget the power of their freedom, abdicating their role as active and responsible actors in

the world in favour of technological tools and profit dynamics that are based on the ideology of determinist behaviourism. Understanding how to recover a kind of authenticity of the self in the dynamics of representation through the media is a pressing task for further research; so is understanding how to conquer new public spaces where emancipatory actions can be planned, following Sartre's normative ethics. Establishing how the architecture of virtual space, which is increasingly indistinguishable from reality, should be modified to promote the exercise of human freedom, rather than to reduce it to a series of predictable behaviours, is perhaps the most urgent challenge for our future.

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