Book Review

Alberto Romele, *Digital Hermeneutics* (London/New York: Routledge, 2019)

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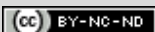
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Starting from Dilthey and passing through Heidegger, Gadamer and Ricœur as well as the more recent hermeneutic responses to neorealism by Jean Grondin and Markus Gabriel, hermeneutics has continually rethought itself and its basic hypotheses. Alberto Romele's *Digital Hermeneutics* may be understood as part of this ongoing process. Specifically, it attempts to think of a kind of hermeneutics which, clearly rooted in Ricœur's philosophy, can properly face the issue of digital technology's effects on the lifeworld and our understanding of it. This aim follows Don Ihde's suggestion, in *Expanding Hermeneutics: Visualism in Science* (2018), of an "expanding hermeneutics" which distances itself from the so-called "linguistic turn" according to which "everything turns to be text like." Starting from this statement, Romele proposes a new hermeneutical understanding of technology. Moreover, in so doing Romele offers an original contribution to the ever increasing and progressing philosophical discussion about the digital from a methodological, epistemological and ontological point of view. As the title *Digital Hermeneutics* suggests, hermeneutics' fecundity in relation to new technologies is not only grounded in its methodological features. Indeed, the second fundamental premise of this book is that the digital ends up, for its part, revealing itself as a hermeneutic object. Thus, Romele formulates a hermeneutics *of* the digital in both a subjective and an objective sense.

As far as the first sense is concerned, Romele suggests that the digital comes from and interprets the lifeworld by modifying it with immediate effects. This is the original version of the Ricœurian hermeneutic circle clearly stressed by the author in the first two chapters of the essay. In the first chapter, the semantic theory of information (STI) of Luciano Floridi is taken up as the polemical target against which digital hermeneutics can be articulated. This detour allows the author to better specify, later, his own approach to the digital. According to Floridi, "meaningful and well-formed data qualify as information, no matter whether they represent or convey a truth or a falsehood or have no alethic value at all." In other words, information cannot but involve alethic value, even if it is false. Such an insight, which leads to "a night in which all cows are informational" using Romele's formulation, has two main consequences if applied to digital data. The first one is that, strictly speaking, there is no clear boundary between the virtual and the real, precisely because, in a doubtful new version of Hegel's insight on matter and spirit (35), "what is real is information and what is information is real." The second consequence of the view that "everything that is being/information" is ethical: it implies that information has an intrinsic value (33) and from that standpoint it is impossible to choose between "a human being over, for example, a web bot." Aside from this ethical worry, Romele also contends that Floridi's theory is theoretically incoherent since, on the one hand, it admits that all data has to be interpreted but, on the other hand, admits that information does not need interpretation in order to be a meaningful entity.

So, the first answer to the possible question: "why digital hermeneutics?" is that the hermeneutic approach may be the "communicational counterpart" of an informational approach that can avoid such consequences. Indeed, from the hermeneutic point of view, information is not meaningful in itself but only if it has a receiver. Thus, it is related to communication, which in its turn needs hermeneutics because of its nature as an exchange between a sender and a receiver in a context of meaning.

In chapter two, digital hermeneutics is presented as a possible alternative to a certain kind of computational sociology. According to eminent authors in this field such as Richard Rogers and Lazar, the study of social reality has been completely transformed in the era of Internet. Specifically, this means that one can diagnose cultural change without referring to reality but only to its digital traces, since these perfectly represent what happens in our lives. Apart from the ethical concern about the predictability and the consequent possibility of a total control over human societies, Romele's objection to this position is mainly epistemological in nature and refers to the doubtful homology between "social reality and its digital representations" (49). Once again, as in the case of Floridi's theory of information, the main problem with computational sociology is that it does not establish a clear boundary between the virtual and the real. In order to demonstrate this point, the author first takes into consideration Bruno Latour's approach to the digital. Synthetically, Latour considers the digital as an innocent copy of the real, as if it "were not just able to represents things, but also to 'present' them as they actually are" (53). Thus, because it makes the social traceable, the digital allows us to see clearly a society in action. The implicit premise of this insight is that traces have no opacity and are thus a perfect mirror of our lives. The objection is, however, that every mirror is also a filter, that is, a representation which passes through a matter and, in so doing, cannot but reconfigure the real.

The idea that a perfect copy of the real is not conceivable has its reference in Ricœur's hermeneutics. Imitation *(Mimesis)* is for the French philosopher a configuration and not a mere reproduction, so it recombines elements of the real instead of reflecting them. This is not to say that we have to reject digital representations as false, but that we have to find a third way between their naïve and complete acceptance as a social mirror and their radical criticism as our mystification and manipulation of reality. This third way is the hermeneutic one. Following and going beyond Ricœur, digital hermeneutics shows how digital methods represent our existence, our perceptions and our visions of the world through a *mimesis* which, via a previous distanciation from the real, transforms *traces* into *data*. The notion of the trace is crucial to synthetize Romele's original insight about the digital. Talking about data in terms of traces instead of information means recognizing the mimetic operation from which data originate and, therefore, the ontological gap between the real from which they came and the virtual that they produce. Traces, indeed, originate in a historical and material context which is only subsequently transformed into data via an interpretation process. Thus, it is not epistemologically possible for digital traces to be "the precise expression, perfect indeed, of human interiority."

The second part of the book is complementary to the first one. Specifically, it shows how digital imitation works through the hypothesis that technologies are imaginative. The emerging capacities of digital machines that Romele originally calls "e-magination" is presented as an ontological feature that allows a specific form of schematization. Romele adds to Ricœur's and Simondon's hypothesis that "the synthesis between [human] receptivity and spontaneity happens

outside, in linguistic expressions such as symbols, signs, metaphors, and narrations" (87), the insight that "schematism can take place in and through other materialities than linguistic concretizations" (87). That's what "imaginative machines" exactly do (100).

The circular passage from traces to data through the imitation process can be articulated by referring to a double *mimesis*: the designer´s and the reader's (104). Thus, the production of traces better results from an interconnection and interaction between human and machines, as shown by many examples such as Facebook's Year in Review. Such a technology gives an emplotment (that is, a temporal coherence) to the data entered by the user.

One might now object that if schematizations are actualized by digital machines, then the human imagination is not completely autonomous. But this is not Romele's concern. Indeed, for the author the human imagination has never been free in the sense of randomly effective. "We have never been engineers" but always "bricoleurs." By referring to Levi-Strauss' distinction, Romele argues that the human imagination has been always rooted in a historical and social context, so having a free imagination means just having the ability to give an orientation to a space already configured by specific rules. The more we have this ability, the more we are free. At the same time, imagination has always externalized itself, as Ricœur's has argued, in words, symbols, narratives. Nowadays, it does the same through digital machines. In turn, e-magination has the same limits. It can *reconfigure* data, and this is what actually happens with, for example, Google Photo or Google News, but it cannot *create* it *ex nihilo*.

Addressing the issue of freedom, Romele's path in hermeneutics ends up taking an ethical and political stance which pertains directly to everyday life. Just as the digital comes from the lifeworld and, through its mimetic e-magination, returns to it, likewise *Digital Hermeneutics* starts from the theoretical concern which implies a distanciation from the practical lifeworld and finally addresses the complicated relationship between digital machines and the individual and collective habitus. Habitus, in the sense that Pierre Bourdieu has attributed to it, is the keyword here. According to the author, the digital creates a habitus in the sense that it "proposes images and imaginaries of our identities and desires to which we unconsciously adapt to a certain extent." Habitus in itself, even when created by the digital, is not good or bad nor does it determine our behavior in the strong sense of the term. What determines our freedom is how consciously we face it, that is, how much we delegate our decisions to digital machines and how much we might be manipulated into doing this. This is the ethical and political issue at stake.

On the basis of these hypotheses and being aware of the crucial role of education in framing our convictions, the aim we have to address is thus to "contribute to framing a sociodigital environment in which people can become sensitive to the insensibility and indifference of the digital." Following Romele, digital hermeneutics, if it is willing to put aside its traditional, may be the first step into doing this.

The main merit of *Digital Hermeneutics* lies in taking a middle position and, thus, in defending the principle of Aristotle's "golden mean," namely between the predominance of the virtual over the real and vice versa; between the anthropocentrism and the "technocentrism" in the comprehension of today's lifeworld; between the complete renunciation and the improbable glorification of human freedom in relation to digital machines. Motivated by a theoretical and ethical concern, Romele proposes a fruitful "third path" between the demonization and the exaltation of the digital, and it is only in this way, I am convinced, that it is possible to find tools to

understand the world in which, in fact, we are living. *Digital Hermeneutics* not only recognizes the coexistence of the real and the virtual but also shows *how* these two dimensions are connected and influence each other while preserving their specific nature. I do not mean to suggest that this goal is exhaustively achieved in these pages. However, even if there is still a lot to speculate about each single, *contingent* technology, what is certain is that Romele provides a compelling way to grasp the *essential* nature of the relationship between the real and the digital world, specifically by applying the categories of imitation and imagination to digital machines and their software.

As I have already suggested, the author also broadens in an original way the horizon of the hermeneutic tradition. As far as this topic is concerned, I would finally propose a possible link between digital hermeneutics and a recent turn in the same field: carnal hermeneutics. Richard Kearney has proposed, in *Carnal Hermeneutics* (2015), a hermeneutics which focuses on the body as an interpreting material medium between the subject and the world. Perceptions and sensations are interpreted in such a view as ways to read reality. Vice versa, the aspects of the world we can interpret have to be thought in connection with their material support, something that seems to me close to Romele's concern about the material anchorage of the digital. On this basis, I wonder whether it would be possible to cross these two ways in order to re-think and re-new hermeneutics. I am thinking in particular about the longstanding interpretation of digital machines, such as *Google Glass*, as an extension of our body and our sensibility. Can we say that in this case there is a form of imagination and interpretation taking place in the mediated experience of reality? And how might it be conceived as a material, "carnal" interpretation? These are just some examples of the numerous questions arising from Romele's contribution. Indeed, as good hermeneutics does, *Digital Hermeneutics* leaves open the possibility to think more and again, trying to grasp the mutability of the world – and especially of the digital one – with a plastic but solid philosophical method.