

Narrative Identity and Social Networking Sites

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Abstract

The following paper takes on a double hypothesis: (1) that the concept of narrative identity, as developed by Ricoeur, is a strong candidate to account for the consequences of the “*emplotment (mise en intrigue)*” of our identities on social networking sites; and (2) that social networking sites can be useful to reconsider some of the assumptions at the basis of the Ricoeurian concept of narrative identity. The analysis is developed in three sections: (a) Ricoeur’s “temperate” notion is compared to the “savage” post-modern concept of performative identity; (b) part of the literature about identity on social networking sites is criticized in the light of the Ricoeurian concept; and (c) the paper considers the impact of such a “detour” through social networking sites on Ricoeur’s still monomediatic and monolinear notion.

Keywords: Hermeneutics, Narrative, Identity, Social Networking Sites

Résumé

L’intervention suivante part d’une double hypothèse: (1) la première hypothèse est que le concept d’identité narrative, comme il a été pensé par Paul Ricœur, est un bon candidat pour rendre compte des conséquences de la “*mise en intrigue*” de nôtres identités sur les services de réseautage social en ligne: (2) la deuxième hypothèse est que les services de réseautages social en ligne sont utiles pour reconsidérer certaines suppositions à la base du concept ricœurien d’identité narrative. L’analyse se développe en trois sections: (a) la notion “tempérée” de Ricœur est comparée avec le concept “sauvage” et post-moderne d’identité performative; (b) une partie de la littérature sur l’identité dans les services de réseautage social en ligne sera critiquée à la lumière du concept ricœurien; (c) l’intervention considère les effet de ce détour à travers les services de réseautage social en ligne sur la notion, mono-médiatique et mono-linéaire, de Ricœur.

Mots-clés: herméneutique, récit, identité, sites de réseautage social

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Introduction

The idea according to which the World Wide Web is not only a means for the diffusion and exchange of information but also, and most importantly, a place in which we can put into play our identity, individual as well as group-based, is today widely shared. In the mid-1990s, Sherry Turkle gave an account of the impact of the Internet on our identity and our social relations.¹ The process of affirmation of social networking sites, from the launch of sixdegrees.com in 1997, considered the first online service to integrate the distinctive features of a social networking site, through ryze.com, Friendster and My Space, to the global success of Twitter and Facebook, which in October of 2012 had more than one billion active users, seems to confirm such an idea.²

The following paper takes on a double hypothesis. On one hand, it is my belief that the concept of narrative identity, developed by Paul Ricoeur, is a strong candidate to account for the consequences of the “*emplotment (mise en intrigue)*” of our identities on social networking sites. Once again, Turkle observed that although in those years it was fashionable to be ironical about postmodern philosophy, some of its theories about identity had the advantage of shedding light on our experiences with computers. In short, the postmodern concept of an unstable, fluid and manifold identity would resonate with our contentment in front of the numerous windows simultaneously opened on our electronic devices, through which we work, chat, play and love. By contentment I intend that Turkle illustrated this situation with a great deal of praise rather than criticism: “In our time, health is described in terms of fluidity rather than stability. What matters most now is the ability to adapt and change to new jobs, new career directions, new gender roles, new technologies.”³ It can only be surprising that, after this initial enthusiasm, this American sociologist, psychologist and technician, has most recently written a book in which she denounces the relational, affective and identitarian illusions due to the overuse of social robots – Tamagotchi, Furby, AIBO and My Real Baby – and digital connections.⁴ One could say that looking at the Internet through a postmodern lens has caused us to neglect, or perhaps even enhance, some of its perversities. The author focuses above all on the deficiency of the relationships that we have with and through these devices, as well as on the narrowing of the “*room to manoeuvre (Spielraum)*” that characterized the first online communities. Rather, I would like to highlight the excerpts in which Turkle denounces the dangers of “out of control” multiplicity, as when she states that, although today we tend to praise the cross-over between disciplines, skills and roles, “when psychologists study multitasking they do not find a story of new efficiencies. Rather, multitaskers don’t perform as well on any of the tasks they are attempting.”⁵ Now, the “temperate” notion of narrative identity, which some historically place halfway between the solidity of the Cartesian subject and its loss in deconstruction, but I personally prefer to call reconstructivist, i.e. post-postmodern, can say something about the impact of the Internet and in particular social networking sites on our identity, without falling

into the temptation of an excessive praise or criticism and without diminishing or exaggerating their role.

On the other hand, the second hypothesis that motivates this paper is that social networking sites can be useful to reconsider some of the assumptions at the base of the Ricoeurian concept of narrative identity. As Ernst Wolff states, in Ricoeur there is no exhaustive discussion regarding the means through which we communicate, such as telephones, satellites and the Internet.⁶ Yet, even without sharing the provocative thesis of McLuhan and the Toronto School of Communication that “the *medium* is the message,” it is clear that varying the means of transmission of information, the effect of the message on the receiver will be different. Speaking specifically about the notion of narrative identity, Jos de Mul has rightly observed that Ricoeur’s theory, since it has the printed book as its paradigm, is a monomediatic theory.⁷ Everyday stories that we do, and read, on social networking sites are made instead not only of written words but also of sounds and images. Moreover, Ricoeur’s concept of narrative identity is monolinear, in the sense that the French philosopher refers to the Aristotelian – and Biblical – model according to which narratives are made of coherent emplotments between a beginning and an end. On the contrary, the narratives on social networking sites are multilinear and can always be said to be, like a website, “under construction.”⁸

I will develop my analysis in three sections. Firstly, I will speak about the Ricoeurian concept of narrative identity, focussing in particular on its theoretical position between the solidity of the Cartesian subject and the deconstruction of the self within postmodernity. In the second part, I will apply this “temperate” notion to questions regarding social networking sites, making reference to only a small portion of the abundant literature on this topic. Lastly, I will speak about the impact of the narrative on social networking sites on the Ricoeurian concept of narrative identity.

Narrative Identity

It is not my intention here to give an exhaustive account of the Ricoeurian concept of narrative identity. Yet, given the context, this model could be considered notable, at least within its fundamental traits. However, I would like to focus on that which I have previously called its “temperate” status compared to the more “savage” notions proposed in postmodernity. In this regard, J. Michel writes that Ricoeur’s theory of human action has always been ambivalent with respect to that of his contemporaries. On one hand, its anthropology, to the extent that it denies the subject the capacity of self-constitution, differentiates itself from all subjectivist, humanistic and individualistic philosophies, whether they be of Cartesian, Kantian or Husserlian origin. On the other hand, insofar it does not abandon the reflexive dimension of the subject, considers man as a task, and is evolved in an ethics of responsibility, Ricoeurian anthropology is distinct from anti-humanistic theories who were contemporary to him, no matter if conservative, as with the case of Gadamerian hermeneutics, or oriented towards postmodernity.⁹

To demonstrate the peculiar nature of the Ricoeurian concept of narrative identity, with respect to more radical theories, I will consider criticism, which is actually more implicit than explicit, made by Judith Butler. In a footnote of her *Giving an Account of Oneself*, Butler writes that it would be interesting to compare the writing of Italian philosopher Adriana Cavarero, since “Ricoeur, like Cavarero, makes a case both for the constitutive sociality of the self and for its capacity to present itself in narrative, though they proceed in very different ways.”¹⁰ This is a

task that, to my knowledge, has yet to be done and that I myself cannot address here. At this point I would only like to point out that the difference between the two authors rests on Cavarero's explicit rejection of the centrality of the textual model. Ricoeur, as we know, chooses on the contrary the "long detour" through the text and its linguistic and structural analysis. The understanding of oneself and of others can only be mediated by an analysis of the linguistic and cultural expressions that Ricoeur identified, over the years, with symbols, metaphors and finally narratives. In contrast, Cavarero's philosophy of narrative is particularly attracted to the "inessentiality of the text." In the Arendtian perspective that this author makes in part her own, the problem of narration is never configured as a narratological question. Instead, it concerns "the complex relation between every human being, their life-story, and the narrator of this story."¹¹ Incidentally, being distrustful of the text, especially in its noble form of artistic work, allows Cavarero to take certain everyday narratives seriously, ones that Ricoeur underestimates. Still, by doing so, she seems unable to attach a solid ethical and moral theory to her concept of narrative identity. However, in this context I will simply recall the criticism that Butler gives of Cavarero's work, since the Ricoeurian perspective is, for many aspects, involved.

With respect to Foucault, the question is one regarding identity and the constitution of the self within a regime of truth that determines it ontologically. Consequently, the fight against social normativity is, according to Butler, mine alone. On the contrary, the first question that Cavarero develops is not addressed to myself, but to others: "In her view, I am not, as it were, an interior subject, closed upon myself, solipsistic, posing questions of myself alone. I exist in an important sense for you and by virtue of you."¹² With regard to narrative identity, the Italian philosopher argues that one cannot but recount one's own autobiography to another and, most of the time, our biography cannot but be recounted to us by another. Without going into the details of Cavarero's position, one could say that according to her, every *auto*-biography is already a *hetero*-biography. I would like to say that this immediate openness to otherness convinces me, since it is plausible to believe that if my stories do not meet immediately the other – in any respect, and it is on this point, if anything, that one could argue against the Italian philosopher – they would only be (sad) copies of my self.

If Butler welcomes this constitutive intrusion of others in the narrated self, she does not share the idea that the narrative, with its capacity to organize a chaotic multiplicity of events into one coherent whole, ensures a certain authenticity and authority to the notion of subject. In other words, at a time when the Italian philosopher takes one step forward with respect to Foucault, she also takes a step back, falling back into a "second naïveté" regarding the role and constitution of the self. If for Cavarero, who returns several times in her work to criticize the postmodern approach to the issue of identity – as when she disapproves the feminist re-appropriations of *The Dreamers* by Karen Blixen – the narrative is still the index for the uniqueness and unity of the self, according to Butler "the narrative authority of the "I" must give way to the perspective and temporality of a set of norms that contest the singularity of my story."¹³ The moment in which, through telling about him/herself, the self is exposed to others, it once again meets a fundamental normativity which is completely indifferent to his/her singularity, to the time of his/her life and death. For Butler, it is at this moment that narrative identity reaches its limit, since if no narrative of oneself can take place without an interlocutory structure, then the story will be complete only when it will be expropriated from all that is mine.

I would like to say immediately here that as stories would only be (sad) copies of oneself if they would not immediately meet the other; in the same way narratives would be pure works of imagination if they would not already include a trace of oneself. In either case, it is the capacity

of stories to reconfigure our identities that risks being lost. Butler goes precisely in this latter direction when she writes that fictional narratives do not need any reference, in the same way I can recount the story of my origin in infinitely different ways: "Indeed, it may be that to have an origin means precisely to have several versions of the origin [...]. Any one of those is a possible narrative, but of no one single one can I say with certainty that it alone is true."¹⁴ It is quite evident in the continuity between this ethical work of the American critical thinker and her research in the field of the performativity of gender. Without considering the complex reasoning of *Gender Trouble*, one can simply remember that according to Butler

acts, gestures, and desire produce effect of an internal core or substance, but produce this on the surface of the body, through the play of signifying absences that suggest, but never reveal, the organizing principle of identity as a cause. [...] That the gendered body is performative suggests that it has no ontological status apart from the various acts, which constitute its reality.¹⁵

I could raise objections regarding this "savage" theory of identity employed by Cavarero, but I think the time has come to return to Ricoeur. When Cavarero writes that "mimesis does not create, it imitates", it is to criticize the "omnipotence of the book" with respect to the reality of life from which it drew inspiration.¹⁶ Ricoeur, however, by arguing that "narrative is an imitation of action", wants to oppose the opinion that *mimesis* is a mere copy of reality. On the contrary, for Ricoeur it is a creative and innovative process which is characterized by a transgression of reality. Nevertheless, one cannot consider Ricoeur's perspective as an escape, since narrative is an imitation, however innovative, of the reality; meaning that it always hold something to it. Let us think of the criticism that Ricoeur takes from the puzzling cases of Dereck Parfit, when he writes that, unlike technological fictions, literary fictions "remain imaginative variations on an invariant, our corporeal condition experienced as the existential mediation between the self and the world."¹⁷ The characters of novels are human like us, and for this reason one can say that the imaginative variations on their identity can be numerous but not infinite. According to the French philosopher, the imitation of life in narratives obeys the corporal human condition, in the sense of the Husserlian lived-body (*Leib*). Precisely in the same manner Ricoeur asks whether it is really possible to envision such changes so that our corporal and terrestrial condition becomes a contingent variant, one could wonder if, and the extent to which, as Butler suggests, it is possible to make the self a simple accessory to an endless series of identitarian performances.

Before concluding this first section, I would like to point out that the concept of narrative identity as we find in *Oneself as Another* falls in line with what J. Michel called the "turning point of intersubjectivity" in Ricoeur's philosophy. It is not a radical break but rather an "original recapitulation" of themes already present throughout his work, such as the rehabilitation of Husserl's phenomenology of intersubjectivity, the debate with the semantic of action, the return to Kant or the discovery of Levinas' ethics.¹⁸ Famously, for the French philosopher "literature is a vast laboratory in which we experiment with estimations, evaluations, and judgements of approval and condemnation."¹⁹ If the art of storytelling is the art of exchanging experiences, so that mine and the narrated actions of others and their protagonists are subjected to the common judgement, then even the identity built according to the narrative paradigm can be said to be originally intersubjective; clarifying why Ricoeur places his analysis on the narrative identity on the way towards the analysis of the ethical "being with...." This is to say that for Ricoeur the endless narrative identity games have both a lower limit, i.e. the corporeal and terrestrial anchoring, and an upper, or I would rather say outer, limit, i.e. the presence of others.

Social Networking Sites

The purpose of this second part is to demonstrate that the Ricoeurian concept of narrative identity is a strong candidate to account for the reconfiguration of the self that takes place by means of social networking sites. In this context, one cannot but mention the evolution that, thanks to the Internet, has transformed the computer from being simply a computing machine to a *medium*, i.e. a tool of communication, as a *mass medium* first and a *social medium* after. Psychologist of communication and new media, Giovanni Riva, distinguishes three phases. First, the development of text-based interfaces, with the gradual transformation of communication tools from asynchronous – such as e-mails and newsgroups – to synchronous – such as chat rooms and MUDs (Multi User Dungeons) – and the birth of the first “virtual communities.”²⁰ The second phase starts with the introduction in 1989 of the World Wide Web, the graphical interface that allows to explore in a *hypermediatic* way the contents of the servers that constitute the Web. With the World Wide Web, the computer becomes an authentic *mass medium*, a means of communication through which one can send the same message to an indistinguishable “mass” of receivers. Despite the diversity that characterizes the Web, it is possible to distinguish four different categories of web sites: guidance sites (search engines), informational (online journals etc.), instrumental (sites regarding commerce, home banking, etc.) and communicative. Regarding the latter, the introduction of the Web has made it possible to improve textual instruments for interpersonal communication, such as e-mails and chats, and the creation of the instant messaging, which gave for the first time the possibility to identify and communicate online with a social network of reference.²¹ Finally, with Web 2.0, users, who in historical *mass media* are simply passive users of communicative products created by an elite group of professionals, have the ability to create, share and comment on hypermedial contents with ease. Blogs, for instance, are Web pages autonomously managed that allow us to publish in real time news, information and stories mixing texts, images, videos and links to other Web pages. Then there are wikis, sites or blogs whose content is developed in collaboration with all those who have access to them and can be modified by their users. Finally, there are services used for sharing multimedial contents, like Flickr for photo sharing and YouTube for video sharing.²²

What distinguishes the social networking sites from new media previously available, making it a sort of arrival point on the path of transformation of the computer that I mentioned earlier, is the capacity to make social networks visible and usable. In particular, social networking sites meet two different yet interrelated needs. On the one hand, they serve to articulate and visualize our social networks, in which we can then give or ask for reassurance. On the other hand, they are a place where we are able to tell or examine stories of others in order to reconfigure and better understand our identity.²³ We could say that social networking sites are a virtual space in which narratives of oneself always take place in front and by means of others, just as in the theories on identity discussed in the previous paragraph. It is not surprising then that it has been advised to interpret the issue of the identity online, and on social networking sites in particular, in light of the performative theory of Judith Butler.

The thesis recently presented by Rob Cover is that “an alternative approach to understand social networking and identity is to take into account some of the ways in which social networking activities are performing acts of identity which constitute the user.”²⁴ First, to demonstrate the performativity of our activities on social networking sites, the author recalls the four nodes of Butler's theory of identity: there is no core, the essential self from which behaviours and actions emerge; the self is performed by citation and repetition of discursively given norms;

selves are constituted in discourse but can be reconstituted or reconfigured; while never complete or without flaws, the process of performing identity occurs within a narrative of coherence *over time*. It is these aspects that he finds within social networking sites, which he then considers "the tools *par excellence* by which to perform as a coherent subject in a process over time."²⁵ Secondly, Cover takes into consideration those performative acts that contribute to a retroactive construction of identity. According to Cover, these acts go in two separate directions. On the one hand, there are activities with which the user is configured online through the sharing of basic information – age, gender, relationship status, sexual orientation and religion, etc.– and through ongoing activities on an online profile, such as status updating, photo and video uploading, use of the "like" button and so on. On the other hand, there are actions through which the user creates his/her social network online, requesting, accepting, rejecting, and removing friendships, then decidedly starting an interactive communication with chosen friends, updating, commenting and tagging one another.

Now, the greatest value of Cover's analysis is to understand that social networking sites are neither an alternative nor a mere copy of our life offline. Between the identity on social networking sites and the one which is offline, there is continuity as well as discontinuity, and it is this middle distance that makes our actions on social networking sites performative. In fact, the case of social networking sites is very different from that of those anonymous spaces, which are becoming increasingly rare on the Internet and in which, as Russel Belk says quoting a famous cartoon published by *The New Yorker*, "no one knows you're a dog."²⁶ During the first wave of digital studies, where the prevailing interest was examining anonymous and text-based chat rooms, it was believed that discrimination due to gender, race, social class or physical handicaps would have disappeared and that we would enter an "online age of total equality." In reality, this has not occurred. In the case of social networking sites, to limit the possible variations on our online identities is the fact that these, as has been pointed by Zhao *et al.*, are mostly "anchored" to those offline, and are therefore "nonymous" (i.e. the opposite of anonymous).²⁷ Yet, as I said, this does not signify that social networking sites are just a (bad) copy of our identity offline. This is the conclusion reached, for example, by J. Lewis and A. West who, after having conducted research on the experience of Facebook use by sixteen London-based undergraduates, argue that

It is not clear that it [Facebook] helped in any substantial way in the process of transition to adulthood by sustaining committed friendships. Indeed, there were some hints that Facebook could introduce distortions into the normal pattern of both friendships and intimate relationships in real life, although usually the impact of CMC [Computer-Mediated Communication] on real life, close friendships were described as minimal.²⁸

In short, the two researchers blame social networking sites, to the extent that they seem to be used to decrease some typical risk of face-to-face relationships, for "anesthetising" and depriving relationships. Actually, as Mia Lövheim recently noted about the literature on the relations between the Internet and religion, these critical empirical studies represent only a second wave of studies in the field of identity and new media.²⁹ A third wave, more recent still, tends to consider the integration of digital media and everyday life. One could say then that, rather than an alternative or a (bad) copy, social networks allow us to experience an empowerment of our self offline.³⁰

I would like to point out that, according to Cover as well as other authors in digital and media studies who favor postmodern literature *à la* Butler, the idea that social networking sites are halfway between the free dispersion into a multiplicity of online identities and the strict

faithfulness to the self offline, depends exclusively on the presence of what I previously called the outer limit of the presence of others. Put simply, making use of post-structuralist theories of early Foucault and Butler, Cover and other authors exaggerate twice. The first time, upon not recognizing any consistency to the self besides its online and offline performances. The second time, when they consequently totally attribute to others the possible coherence of an individual identity. If the self finds its own consistency, this is only due to the fact that a normative and coercive system asks it to. The argument that the individual is free to choose his own identity is a symptom of a neo-liberal heritage. The construction of the personal identity is not due to our voluntary rejection of personal desire in respect to others, but to the violence of the normative truth regime that is imposed by others.³¹ In this regard Belk, with a well-known Foucaultian image, argues that "in the constant digital gaze to which we expose ourselves on social media like Facebook, we enter a voluntary panopticon."³²

All the acts performed on social networking sites can be interpreted according to this view. The moment I display basic information like gender, I immediately become part of a normality that is beyond me. When I update my status, upload videos, photos, link pages, or express preferences by "liking", I immediately surrender to the normative gaze of those who are part of my social network online. If my friends know that I am engaged and I share pictures on my profile of me with beautiful women in a party, there will soon be many comments, some of which will probably ask me to give an account of that evening. Not to mention the fact that my friends online are the most of time permitted to post photos, videos and comments on my "wall", to "tag" me and to share what I posted. Through all this, we are seeing an outright loss of control over the narrative coherence of our selves.

While I agree with these authors with regards to the idea that with social networking sites one may talk about a "co-construction of the self," I think it is overly simplistic to believe that the experimentation of infinite online identities is limited only by the others and their coercive force. The introduction of the *timeline* on Facebook, for example, has made it possible for the user to have a more coherent narrative of its activities online, by placing a limit "from below" to what was before a collage of posted updates, links, photos and comments. Beyond the legitimate suspicion that the *timeline* will allow easier commercialization of online stories, it is indicative that, during its launch in September 2011, Mark Zuckerberg has declared that with the *timeline* he wanted people to be able to share "their entire lives" on Facebook and have "total control" over how their content appeared online.³³ With regard to the presence of others, without underestimating the issue of hostility that comes from others, I would say that the theme of *engagement* towards others is just as important. Ulrich Johannes Schneider has rightly observed that "as critics like Jürgen Habermas made clear, there is no way Foucault could justify any regime of justice, or even justice itself" and then immediately adds that "writing an article on Wikipedia may not be an act of criticism, nor does it involve a revolutionary mind."³⁴ The "collaborative self," as Turkle calls it, is not only the result of a rule imposed by the social network on the individual, but is also the result of a decision of the individual towards it. In the case of the social networking sites, Marlene Larsen observes that most of the comments and messages on a "wall" are necessary "to confirm and maintain their IRL [In Real Life] friendships. They do so by constantly reminding each other that they are best friends, love each other, mean the world to each other."³⁵ In other words, as Belk puts it, comments on social networking sites are often phatic expressions, that can be intended as "Hi I am still your friend and I care about you."³⁶

Narrative Identity Reloaded

In the previous section I have shown that the Ricoeurian “temperate” concept of narrative identity is more appropriate than the “savage” notion of performative identity to explain the relationship between offline and online identity in social networks. In this section I will take into account the consequences of a detour through social networking sites on Ricoeur’s notion of narrative identity.

I have already highlighted in the introduction the limits of the narrative model on which Ricoeur builds his concept of narrative identity, monomediality and monolinearity. With regards to the former, it is true that in the books and articles through which he develops his narratological theory, the French philosopher speaks of different narratives, then in fact never refers to narratives other than those transmitted through the printed book. First, even if it is obvious that the reflections of Ricoeur belong to a time when the impact of the ICTs (Information and Communication Technologies) could still be underestimated within the context of philosophical studies, nowadays one may wonder what happens to the text, and hence to its reader, since it is transmitted through the screens of computers, tablets, mobile phones and eBook readers. If we accept the Ricoeurian definition according to which hermeneutics “is the theory of the operations of understanding in their relation to the interpretation of texts,”³⁷ then all contemporary hermeneutics should deal with these new means of transmission of the text.

Moreover, and this is an issue that already belongs to the time of Ricoeur’s work, one may wonder what place other important forms of expression for the constitution of the individual and group identity may have in his theory, such as dance, painting, music, cinema and photography. I would say that today non textual elements contribute more to the transmission of knowledge and to the construction of the self. So much in fact that one may wonder if we are today facing a paradigm not unlike the “second orality” theorized by Walter J. Ong more than thirty years ago. Put simply, I am convinced that today one of the best ways to know someone is to look at the playlist of songs he/she has on his/her iPhone. To my knowledge, the only place where Ricoeur speaks at some length, although urged by interviewers, on the arts such as painting, sculpture and music is the last section of *Critique and Conviction*, to which I would add a small paper on architecture, published in 1998.³⁸ Without delving into a discussion on Ricoeur’s aesthetics, which would deserve more time and focus, I would say that in both cases the French philosopher – that to my surprise confesses to be an estimator of antifigurative – finishes by reducing these forms of artistic expression to his narrative model of emplotment and threefold mimesis. What Ricoeur’s theory cannot and does not want to give an answer to, is instead one of the most typical aspect of new technologies, like the World Wide Web, and, in our case, social networking sites like Facebook, where texts, images and sounds are combined together to form a kind of collage. In this regard, Jos de Mul writes that the World Wide Web “can be seen as a continuation of the avant-garde movements in twentieth-century art and in particular of collage and montage in the plastic arts and music, but in a way that appeals to a much larger audience.”³⁹

Regarding the monolinearity of Ricoeur’s narrative theory, on which he builds his notion of narrative identity, it is based on his well-known predilection for the model of the Aristotelic and Biblical emplotment with its traces in the modern novel. First, he ends up in this way underestimating everyday stories, which are becoming increasingly important for most of us, and their effects on the construction of the self, a topic on which E. Ochs and L. Clapps have instead effectively reflected on.⁴⁰ Certainly, Ricoeur is aware of his choice. When he dialogues with A.

MacIntyre, he immediately says that unlike himself, the Scottish thinker “is mainly considering stories told in the thick of everyday activity and does not attach any decisive importance, at least with respect to the ethical investigation he is conducting, to the split between literary fictions and the stories he says are enacted.”⁴¹ In short, we can say that on one hand, according to Ricoeur, MacIntyre does not have to deal with all the problems related to applications, i.e. the return of fiction to life, yet on the other, MacIntyre is unable to take full advantage of distanciation. Firstly, the ability to distinguish carefully between author, narrator and characters, the first of which is moreover, in the case of everyday stories, an ambiguous concept. While I agree with Ricoeur’s idea that an objectification of stories is necessary for their understanding – otherwise there would be no hermeneutics here –,⁴² I do not see why one has to lead to that particular form of objective narratives that are novels. In addition to Ricoeur excluding all those stories that are not part of the limited group of artistic-cultural productions, his fondness for the Aristotelian and Biblical model leads him to consider an even more restricted group of work in which concordance triumphs over discordance. Without going into the details of a debate that I have already carried out elsewhere,⁴³ it is sufficient to recall the way in which Ricoeur glosses over the claim of contemporary novels to have overtaken the emplotment, i.e. the closure between a beginning and an end, of the classic novel. In short, on a few pages of the second volume of *Time and Narrative*, he argues that there does not exist any form of narrative that is capable of escaping what Kermode called the “sense of an ending” and that experimental novels are just a special case of story in which the emplotment is nearly zero, but not completely abolished.⁴⁴ After all, if these novels propose themselves as transgressions of the classical model, it is only insofar as still bearing traces of it. Now, the stories on social networking sites are really the opposite of the idea of ending that characterizes the narrative model of Ricoeur, simply because they tend to not have one. In a sense, these stories are even more transgressive than the *nouveau roman* of Alain Robbe-Grillet, insofar as they do not suffer from structural limits of the printed book. It can be said that Facebook is a book that is always missing the last page.

According to J. de Mul, another feature of the World Wide Web is hypertextuality, that is, the fact that each element of every page online can be connected by means of hyperlinks to other elements of other Web pages. Consequently, while the reading of printed texts tends to be univocal, the digital “text” is potentially different to every single “reading.” In short, the Web is a database of an infinite number of potential stories. However, this is not the case of social networking sites, as it can be demonstrated through an analysis of their own temporality. In the domain of mobile studies, J. K. Nyíri observes how mobile connectivity has made it possible to experience a separation of the time both from its cosmic and social dimension. The effect of mobile communication has been “that of enabling recurrent rescheduling program while on the move” so the time become somehow a personal affair.⁴⁵ Accepting and radicalizing this idea, de Mul has stated that the process of constructing identity online is detached from spatial and temporal conditions in which it was formed, and in which the subject is located. Freed from its origin, the time of the construction of the self on the Web would then be the only future, open to an endless array of possibilities. In another context, the Dutch philosopher compares narrative identity with what he calls ludic identity, a notion built on the paradigm of computer games.⁴⁶ If the first looks to the past, as a story to be told, it must have already happened, the second is addressed to the future, as a game, to be played, must have not been conducted yet. While the stories are closed in an emplotment already decided by the author, the computer games allow the player to move freely within a framework of some (few) given rules. Beyond criticisms that one could conduct against his notion of game, I would like to stress that according to de Mul,

although the two identities are both constitutive of man, it is the second to triumph in the contemporary world. For this reason, ICTs have the double advantage of being both a paradigm of the human condition as well as having the capacity to increase the possibilities of human choice.

Now, it seems to me necessary to moderate this perspective, calling to mind, as does the philosopher Luciano Floridi, that ICTs are not just tools that cause a temporal detachment between outdating and aging, but also extensions of our memory, and "increasing our memories means decreasing the degree of freedom we might enjoy in defining ourselves. Forgetting is also a self-poietic art."⁴⁷ We cannot but think of some of Ricoeur's considerations on the *ars oblivionis* in the third part of *Memory, History, Forgetting* that in this context cannot be considered. The hypothesis that I would like to present is that the temporality of social networking sites is located exactly half way between the past, of the stories and of the memory, and the future, of the computer games and of a certain kind of forgetting. Simply said, the time of social networking sites is the present, or the near future, in which, speaking with Heidegger, authenticity and inauthenticity are close to one another and both possible. I find support for my hypothesis in a recent study conducted by R. E. Page in the context of sociolinguistics.⁴⁸ In the last pages of a work that explores the stories told in forums, personal blogs, wikis, Twitter and Facebook profiles, the author sums up her work by speculating whether and to what extent storytelling online is different and new when compared to storytelling offline. Regarding social networking sites, she notes that "emphasis on recency [is] [...] a governing characteristic of stories told in social media."⁴⁹ In particular, "a comparison of the temporal adverbs associated with the near present (*today, tomorrow and tonight*) with adverbs associated with the past (*yesterday and then*) for each of the datasets used in this study suggests an emphasis on the present that increases sharply for the most recent genres: Facebook and Twitter."⁵⁰ The updates on social networking sites like Twitter and Facebook are so distinctive from those of other social media, as compared to those of narrative genres offline, precisely in the way in which they highlight the present at the expense of the past. From this collection of data, one can say that the narrative of social networking sites tends to push the temporality of classical narratives ahead, from past to present, but without overdoing it, so as not to ending up in a future with no trace of facticity. Unlike what happens with computer games, where players are completely detached from their spatial and temporal boundaries and abandoned in a vortex of possibilities that certainly cannot be said "my own most possibilities" – unless of course one truly believes that among my best possibilities there is the chance to fly on the back of a dragon or, even worse, kill people – one could say that the reconfiguration of the self that takes place in social networks never really loses contact with Earth, but without remaining completely anchored to it.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I would like to say a few words about a possible criticism that some careful Ricœurian scholar could apply to this paper. Ricoeur's theory, as he states in discussion with Walter Benjamin and MacIntyre, is not only descriptive but also prescriptive: "It is precisely for the elusive character of real life that we need the help of fiction to organize life retrospectively [...]. In this way, [...] we stabilize the real beginnings formed by the initiatives (in the strong sense of the term) we take."⁵¹ In other words, the unity of the modern novel, always compiled between a beginning and an end, is not only a description of the human condition, but an exhortation for man to understand himself as a unit, to better judge his/her own life and actions. Now, one might

wonder how the openness, however moderate, of stories on social networking sites does not undermine precisely this possibility of understanding him/herself retrospectively as a unit. On the one hand, I cannot but agree with similar observations, since I made a detour through the online narratives precisely to contest the too simplistic closure of Ricoeur's narrative identity. Yet, on the other hand, I have avoided the temptation to draw from these online stories a "savage" theory of identity that would have inevitably led to the dispersion of the self. In this way, I hope to have reached the double aim of not having completely lost the ethical purpose of Ricoeurian theory and also of having paved the way for its application in a contemporary and widely digital world.

- ¹ See Sherry Turkle, *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996).
- ² For a history and definition of social networks, see Danah Boyd and Nicole Ellison, "Social Network Sites: Definition, History and Scholarship," *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 13.1 (2007), 210-230.
- ³ Turkle, *Life on the Screen*, 255.
- ⁴ Sherry Turkle, *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other* (New York: Basic Books, 2011).
- ⁵ Turkle, *Alone Together*, 162.
- ⁶ See Ernst Wolff, "Compétences et moyens de l'homme capable à la lumière de l'incapacité," *Études Ricoeuriennes/Ricoeur Studies* 4.2 (2013).
- ⁷ Jos de Mul, "Von der narrativen zur hypermedialen Identität. Dilthey und Ricoeur gelesen im hypermedialen Zeitalter," in Frithjof Rodi und Gudrun Kühne-Bertram (Hrsg.), *Dilthey und die hermeneutische Wende in der Philosophie. Wirkungsgeschichtliche Aspekte seines Werkes* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 2008), 313-331, 326.
- ⁸ de Mul, "Von der narrativen zur hypermedialen Identität," 327.
- ⁹ Johann Michel, *Paul Ricoeur: Une philosophie de l'agir humain* (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 2003), 118-119.
- ¹⁰ Judith Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), 138n9.
- ¹¹ Adriana Cavarero, *Relating Narratives: Storytelling and Selfhood*, trans. Paul A. Kottmann (New York-London: Routledge, 2000), 41.
- ¹² Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*, 32.
- ¹³ Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*, 37.
- ¹⁴ Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*, 37-38.
- ¹⁵ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (New York-London: Routledge, 1990, 1999), 173.
- ¹⁶ Cavarero, *Relating Narratives*, 126-127.
- ¹⁷ Paul Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, trans. Kathleen Blamey (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992), 150.
- ¹⁸ Michel, *Paul Ricoeur: Une philosophie de l'agir humain*, 73.
- ¹⁹ Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, 115.
- ²⁰ Giovanni Riva, *Psicologia dei nuovi media* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2012), 46-47.
- ²¹ Riva, *Psicologia dei nuovi media*, 52-53.

- ²² Riva, *Psicologia dei nuovi media*, 59-67.
- ²³ Riva, *Psicologia dei nuovi media*, 68.
- ²⁴ Rob Cover, "Performing and undoing identity online: Social networking, identity theories and the incompatibility of online profiles and friendship regimes," *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies* 18.2 (2012): 177-193, 178.
- ²⁵ Cover, "Performing and undoing identity online," 180-181.
- ²⁶ Russel Belk, "Extended Self in a Digital World," *Journal of Consumer Research* 40 (2013): 477-500, 481.
- ²⁷ Shanyang Zhao, Sherri Grasmuck and Jason Martin, "Identity Construction on Facebook: Digital Empowerment in Anchored Relationships," *Computers in Human Behaviour* 24 (2008): 1816-1836, 1818. The strange case of ask.fm, the social network currently the focus of some debate in the United States and United Kingdom, is the exception that proves the rule. Much used by teenagers, this website allows you to post anonymous questions on personal profiles, causing in some cases collective aggression against a single person. This violence is the result of an unequal relationship, a short circuit between the anonymity of those who ask and the nonymity of the personal profile.
- ²⁸ Jane Lewis and Anne West, "'Friending': London-based Undergraduates' Experience of Facebook," *New Media and Society* 11.7 (2009): 1209-1229, 1223.
- ²⁹ Mia Lövhelm, "Identity," in Heidi A. Campbell, ed., *Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practice in New Media Worlds* (New York-London: Routledge, 2013), 41-56.
- ³⁰ See Brook Bolander and Miriam A. Locher, "Constructing identity on Facebook: report on a pilot study," in *Performing the Self. Spell: Swiss Papers in English Language and Literature* 24 (2010), 165-187, 176; Giovanni Riva, *I social network* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2011), 130.
- ³¹ See Cover, "Performing and undoing identity online," 182.
- ³² Belk, "Extended Self in a Digital World," 487. See also Anna Reading, "The Playful Panopticon? Ethics and the Coded Self in Social Networking Sites," in Kristóf Nyíri, ed., *Engagement and exposure: Mobile communication and the ethics of social networking* (Vienna: Passagen, 2009), 93-101.
- ³³ See <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/technology/facebook/8783518/Facebook-f8-Mark-Zuckerberg-unveils-Timeline.html>. I will consider on another occasion how social networking sites can be considered a tool for commodifying the self rather than an instrument for its (authentic) empowerment. As one of the anonymous

reviewers of this paper has opportunely stated, such a "critique of ideology" must be included in a comprehensive theory of digital narrative identity.

- ³⁴ Ulrich Johannes Schneider, "Counter-Knowledge. An update on Foucault in the Age of mobile communication," in Nyíri, *Engagement and exposure*, 105-106.
- ³⁵ Marlene Larsen, "Understanding social networking: On young people's construction and co-construction of the self online," http://vbn.aau.dk/files/17515750/Understanding_social_networking_Bidrag_til_bog.pdf, 1-18, 16.
- ³⁶ Belk, "Extended Self in a Digital World," 487. Two other interesting criticisms that have been advanced to Ricoeur's theory of narrative identity, but that are not the case here to treat, are that of being a mono-cultural theory, claimed by A. K. Maan in *Internarrative Identity* and that of being only one of the forms of identity, alongside that of interpretation, argumentation and reconstruction, as claimed by J.-M. Ferry in the first volume of *Les Puissances de l'expérience*.
- ³⁷ Paul Ricoeur, *From Text to Action*, trans. Kathleen Blamey and John B. Thompson (Evanston IL: Northwestern University Press, 1991), 53.
- ³⁸ Paul Ricoeur, *Critique and Conviction*, trans. Kathleen Blamey (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 171-185; Paul Ricoeur, "Architecture et narrativité," *Urbanisme* 303 (1998): 44-51.
- ³⁹ Jos de Mul, "Under Construction: Identity in the age of the Internet," in *Cyberspace Odissey: towards a virtual ontology and anthropology* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2010), 161-192, 183.
- ⁴⁰ Elinor Ochs and Lisa Capps, *Living Narrative: Creating Lives in Everyday Storytelling* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2001).
- ⁴¹ Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, 158-159.
- ⁴² As one of the anonymous reviewers of this paper has rightly pointed out, there is a clear dichotomy here between on-line and off-line selves, and this is not anymore a non-controversial claim, as it was until five or ten years ago: "as I look at my students who cell-phone-walk, intermingle their Kaffeklatch socializing with their iPhone texting [...], facebook each other while sitting in the same room, and locate themselves in the material world with interactive mapping apps (best hookup bars, etc.), can we really make such a clear narrative distinction anymore?." Though I have no possibility to give any exhaustive answer to this important claim, I would say that if people pass so much time facebooking each other even if sitting in the same room, it is precisely because they still have a perception of the difference between online and offline selves. According to Don Ihde, technologies in general have a "magnification-reduction structure": "technologies are selective and do not simply replicate nontechnological

situations. This is what makes them both useful and interesting. But this selectivity also both amplifies some feature [...] and reduces some other aspect. Third, [...] each different technology displays a different pattern of amplification-reduction" (Don Ihde, *Expanding Hermeneutics* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1998: 47)). This is the case even of new technologies created to reduce the gap between online and offline situations, such as the Google Glass – <http://www.google.com/glass/start/how-it-feels>. Another example is Arduino <http://www.arduino.cc>. In my opinion, the magnification-reduction structure implies a process of distancing that, in the case of social networking sites, preserves the distinction between online and offline selves. The same structure makes a hermeneutic of the new media possible, whose task is precisely to show their peculiar patterns of amplification-reduction.

- ⁴³ See Alberto Romele, "L'identità narrativa ricœuriana alla prova del *nouveau roman* di A. Robbe-Grillet," *Enthymema. Rivista internazionale di critica, teoria e filosofia della letteratura* 9 (2013).
- ⁴⁴ Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative 2*, trans. Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1985), 166.
- ⁴⁵ Kristóf Nyíri, "Time and the mobile order," in Kristóf Nyíri, ed., *Mobile Studies: Paradigms and Perspectives* (Vienna: Passagen, 2007), 101-111.
- ⁴⁶ Jos de Mul, "The game of life: narrative and ludic identity formation in computer games," in Jeffrey Goldenstein and Joost Raessens, eds., *Handbook of Computer Games Studies* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2005), 251-266.
- ⁴⁷ Luciano Floridi, "The informational nature of personal identity," *Minds and Machines* 21 (2011): 549-566, 562.
- ⁴⁸ Ruth E. Page, *Stories and Social Media: Identities and Interaction* (New York-London: Routledge, 2012).
- ⁴⁹ Page, *Stories and Social Media*, 189.
- ⁵⁰ Page, *Stories and Social Media*, 191.
- ⁵¹ Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, 162.