Review of: "Beyond the Physical Self: Understanding the Perversion of Reality and the Desire for Digital Transcendence via Digital Avatars in the Context of Baudrillard's Theory"

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Potential competing interests: No potential competing interests to declare.

Lucas Freund's article, in my opinion, is of great interest as it successfully provides, through the lens of Baudrillard's thinking, an in-depth analysis of the behavioral, social, and, I dare say, clinical consequences of the technological revolution of the past three decades. It is a topic I personally engage with extensively, noting that the most comprehensive theoretical frameworks often come not from clinicians but from philosophers and sociologists.

My contribution to the reading of Freund's article focuses on the connection between the digital realm in its various forms, such as virtual reality, and the psychological repercussions I observe in my practice as a clinical psychologist.

Baudrillard has been a prominent figure since the 1970s, pointing out the epochal shift that, through technology applied to media, has reshaped the relationship between subject and object, ultimately leading us to what we can now describe as the end of the anthropocene and the dawn of the post-human era (Braidotti, 2019; Haraway, 2016). Freund demonstrates this transition, particularly where the *avatar* embodies the effect of the human-machine hybridization, heralding the reign of the post-human.

In humanism, the concept of perspective vividly illustrated the notion of the "*homo faber*" who perceptually organizes his world within a measurable geometry of projective nature. The world, therefore, becomes an object to control, exploit and manipulate. *Linear perspective* was the first creation of the screen onto which the world is projected, rendering it operational. The veil machine of Leon Battista Alberti, as depicted in Durer's engravings, historically signifies this shift towards the screen as the realm of measurement and geometric proportions (Scognamiglio, 1987). However, the contemporary screen is no longer a dimension upon which to project a vision of reality. On the contrary, we have become the subjects of projections by the Web. We now live tailored to the Web, which delivers a reality to us algorithmically (Benasayag & Meyran, 2019).

Baudrillard's contribution leads us to revisit our relationship with the screen as a paradoxical distortion of the Platonic allegory of the cave. Advocates of digital connectivity and the adoption of new technologies experience a kind of neoplatonism, having replaced the world of ideas with the Web. Sociology and philosophical speculation, which have accompanied us from postmodernism to hypermodernity, have focused on *the status of the object*, emphasizing its intrusive presence and the subsequent saturation of desire. For Baudrillard, the critical point no longer lies in the relationship with the object but with its image. In "*Le crime parfait*" (1995), he laments: "In modernity, where we

ceaselessly accumulate, add, relaunch, we have unlearned that strength comes from subtraction, that power is born from absence. And because we are no longer capable of facing the symbolic mastery of absence, today we are immersed in the reverse illusion, the disenchanted one, of the proliferation of screens and images."

The end of the anthropocene unfolds in this profound reversal: an oversized entity like the Web turns the subject into an object on the screen. This human subject continues to believe in its ancient omnipotent control over things, while, in the position of the *avatar*, it is effectively an object within a series, moved like a puppet by the invisible logics of the Web and *Gamification*.

Suddenly, with the apotheosis of the avatar, the human subject finds itself enveloped in a topologically stratified network in a labyrinthine form. This labyrinthine form in which the subject becomes lost has a specific consequence on motivational structure and, thus, on primary adaptation in terms of self-care, affectivity, social exchange, intimacy, and even the loss of hunger and thirst signals.

The avatar is a subjective reality within the virtual world, which has repercussions on self-perception and, consequently, on offline reality to the extent that the avatar's reality may remain the sole subjective reality, a hyperreality, indeed: "In this case, the avatar is a simulacrum - it does not reflect a real-world person, but it has become a reality in its own right within the virtual world. The avatar precedes and determines the real; the actions and experiences of the avatar can shape the user's perception of themselves and their social reality. This is an example of the precession of simulacra in the digital realm" (Freund, 2023).

Similar to how Ulysses risks falling into oblivion in the world of the Lotus-Eaters, the danger of immersing oneself in the virtual world is to eliminate the possibility of "*nostos*," which is the root of nostalgia, as the need to return to reality. The principles of *Gamification*, on the contrary, ensnare us in an endless game that doesn't allow for any return.

Ancient myths have always emphasized the tension toward knowledge, the seeking of motivational systems (Lichtenberg, Lachmann & Fosshage, 2011), which is structured in an ethical dialectic between movement and knowledge and the possibility of going back. Hellenic culture, the foundation of Western thought, has always driven humanity to explore different worlds. Homer's lesson is the quintessential icon of pre-Christian Western culture.

But what are the clinical implications of a culture of*simulacra*, of this existence beyond the demarcation lines between the real and the virtual? If philosophical reflection on the perversion of reality is already disturbing, as Freund suggests, we cannot ignore its clinical ramifications.

The fundamental postulate of what I term "*digitally modified* clinical practice" is that it's not solely about relegating the relationship with digital technology to the field of technological addictions (Scognamiglio & Russo, 2018; Scognamiglio, 2021). With direct reference to Baudrillard and Freund's contributions, *digitally modified* clinical practice can be understood as a clinic of simulacra that investigates the psychological and real-world implications of subjectivity constructed within the transcendent regime of the virtual, where "digital avatars and the precession of simulacra can shape our understanding and interpretation of reality, challenging our traditional notions of reality and pushing us to consider the virtual world as a

part of our reality" (Freund, 2023).

The most compelling example comes from the clinic of the social recluse, which presents us with a dilemma: does the social recluse want to remain in the *Experience Machine*, to become one with the simulacrum offered by the Web, or does he desire the "personal growth, challenges, meaningful relationships, and genuine experiences" (Freund, 2023) of offline reality? The point is that patients of digitally modified clinical practice do not know what they want, have not learned to desire anything, and expect everything without truly desiring it. The ability to desire something can indeed be a result of psychotherapy. The suspension of the relationship with the real world brought about by digital technology, combined with the failure of parental figures to transmit the know-how of relating to others and objects, leads to the foundation and rooting of desire. Desire is nullified because one doesn't know that it's possible to desire something in the real world since the digital machine, the Web, desires on your behalf.

In my opinion, adopting Baudrillard's thinking in the analysis of the digital world presents clinicians with a dilemma: is it still possible to limit the view of the relationship with the virtual-digital realm as a dimension inherent to the psyche that allows adaptation to the external reality and action (Scognamiglio, Russo & Fumagalli, forthcoming)? Is it still possible, therefore, to consider the virtual-digital realm as part of the imaginary register that mediates between the real and concrete dimension and the more properly psychic-subjective dimension (Missonier, 2003, 2014; Tisseron, Missonier & Stora, 2006)? Can we still view the construction of our avatars as a laboratory for representing our multiple selves (Bromberg, 2011) and, during adolescence, as a space for continuing the “work of psychological developmental tasks” (Maggiolini & Charmet, 2004)?

Maintaining these positions means completely overturning Baudrillard's thinking and, along with it, Freund's contribution, avoiding confrontation with the idea of an epochal change in how the human mind structures the experience of the self and reality. All of this has specific psychological implications that reshape traditional frameworks of psychological distress and render concepts like the Oedipus complex, latency phase, and separation-individuation process obsolete, as well as the categories of sexuality, intimacy and friendship.

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