Consuming disability online: a conceptual framework to foster a new ethical inter-action

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ABSTRACT

Thanks to new social media, disability presence is becoming more prominent in popular culture as social networks provide alternative platforms to claim public space and visibility. Thus, digital technologies offer a purposeful rebuilding of the disability narrative, becoming a vessel for democratisation by highlighting the role of influencers with disabilities in raising subordinate group consciousness and challenging public discourse and attitudes towards people with disabilities. Plenty of studies exist in the literature on the profile, media, and digital representation of disabled people. Still, nothing is said about the audience and this new sensitivity that pushes to "consume" disability. While wanting to effect social change is an important starting point, audience reception is crucial to accepting this change. Thus, this paper aims to investigate this "new" mediatic interest, proposing a conceptual framework suitable for analyzing it in its anthropological aspects. Disability then becomes the privileged perspective from which to start a profound rethinking of subjectivity and is the basis for inaugurating a new ethics of the human condition. Another human destiny is taking shape on the threshold of this third millennium, one that demands a more complex humanism that recognizes and values vulnerability as an ontological condition and emphasizes the subject's fundamental relationality. This relationality is one that immediately pushes us to reflect on the ethical modalities of "inter-action," as Kristeva would say, of common and shared action that broadens the concept of care and thrusts into question the forms and meanings of the responses that new digital platforms give to this interest in disability. This study is essential since media values and notions are important to the audience's worldview, and it is not a simple, straightforward transfer from sender to receiver. Instead, it consists of a complex relationship in which the media reflect reality and shape it. We are at a turning point if we want to continue "being human in a Hyperconnected era."

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1. Main-streaming disability

We live in a time when disability is more visible than ever before. The rise of disability life writing, autobiographical accounts chronicling real-life experiences of living with a disability, has moved a myriad of disabilities from the margins to the mainstream (Couser 2017). Furthermore, as influencers with disabilities begin to be assimilated into the established social network system, disability presence is becoming more prominent in popular culture. In this way, the historical representation of disability has undergone a change of direction that has gradually restored voice, body, dignity, and life to disabled people (Murphy 2022).[1] The disabled body, historically populated by problematic and suffering images that have limited the disabled person to acting out his right to self-determination and emancipation, no longer seems to be the object of such extreme negative and invalidating stigmatization (Agmon et al. 2016; Johanssen & Garrisi 2020; Low 2020; Melkumova-Reynolds 2023; Zappaterra 2010). The conception of the disabled body as impaired, anomalous, abject, in need of being hidden, segregated, feared body, considered dangerous, and even subversive to the social, political, moral, and religious order and system, has been re-evaluated replaced by its revaluation. The limited, marked, and incapable body becomes a discovery capable of broadening the field of investigation beyond the conventional and abstract "abnormality." Indeed, the current evolution of technologies represents a promising and concrete opportunity for disabled people who are no longer destined to be overshadowed but called to assume the role of protagonists, almost heroes, as in the case of Paralympic athletes, capable of proposing new bodily figurations and performances (Cameron et al. 2021; Hyun-Joo 2024; Landmark 2021; Silva & Howe 2012; Yang & Lin 2022).

Undoubtedly, social network sites have played a pivotal role in the cultural redefinition and re-evaluation of disability. Social media provides alternative platforms to claim public space and visibility in ways that bypass mainstream

[1] The rethinking of disability, understood as a social construct, artificial and not as an individual problem to be solved, no longer linked to the reductive and mechanistic bio-medical-individualist paradigm, leads to valorizing its condition not as deficient, but rather instead called to live significant experiences, in the perspective of the realization of full citizenship. By criticizing the medical model, the relationship between severity, deficit, and need is called into question to recover the biographical, cultural, and political identity of the person with disabilities.

media production, where disability is predominantly excluded. Following Conrad et al. (2016, 25), this is particularly true since the transition from Web 1.0, where users could browse through existing content, to Web 2.0, where "the emphasis is on *user-generated* content and visibility." Social media provides marginalized activists with multiple ways to create alternative narratives that challenge mainstream discourse[2]. These narratives are generated using two central features of social media activism: visibility and personalization (Barrasi 2018). The marginal identity's visibility is emphasized by activists' constructions of their networked identity as part of a marginalized collective (Barassi 2018; Liao 2019). Personalization is thus manifested by the activist's marginal identity's performance, based on an individualized personal storytelling strategy (Couldry 2008; Vivienne 2016). Digital activist actions and campaigns by people with disabilities often utilize personal stories as a strategic tool to win over public opinion (Bennett & Segerberg 2011; Pearson & Trevisan 2015). Even though personalized activist actions have been criticized for creating a victimization narrative of disabled people, personal stories do indeed contribute to the politicization of disability as a subject position (Pearson & Trevisan 2015).

In this way, stigma and prejudice, the dehumanizing homologation that refuses the recognition of the person in the name of pathological labels, can be overcome in the social network through a narrative practice that produces models of knowledge-based not only on the word; the image takes on a powerful role of identity amplification. In this new media scenario, narrative hybridizations prevail that embrace a decentralizing and totalizing dimension in which the appearance of the agent is rooted, who, crossing the anti-representational instance, assumes a liminal position. In this liminal position, the agent (neither person nor character) reunites languages that were previously separate. According to Fischer-Lichte, this is attested in the consecration of the paradigm of presence as an epiphanic place of presentation of a subject on stage who self-exposes

[2] In the evolving digital ecosystem, memes and reels play a significant role in shaping the way disability is consumed online. Memes are impactful tools that disseminate complex ideas by combining simplicity with emotional resonance: their brevity allows complex narratives to be condensed into single images or catchphrases, eliminating the need for exhaustive background knowledge. Reels are characterized by their short duration (typically limited to 60 seconds) and their predilection for incorporating visual imagery, sound, and motion. Both mediums excel in fostering emotional engagement: memes often employ humor, irony, or shock value to achieve emotional resonance; reels, by virtue of their multi-sensory format, offer a heightened level of emotional immersion. When integrated, these formats potentiate the audience's emotional engagement with the content, enhancing its capacity to impact and go viral.

himself (Fischer-Lichte 2014). On social networks, the performers' disability is shown; it is evident that it does not need to be stated; the formula is therefore not used to justify how imperfect the spectator will see. By exposing his disability, the performer constitutes himself as the object of the performance. His vulnerability is not dramatized narratively but constitutes a motor of meaning in a process in which his subjectivity is inseparable from the image he produces, the words he pronounces, and the movements he makes.

Social networks become an environment to experience and expose everyday life; the process of signification occurs through ostension; every gesture and object acquires meaning by the simple fact of being shown and present. Thus, the disabled person conveys meanings and imposes himself on the sight by already meaning. Therefore, the performer's biography is taken as a foundation point of the dramaturgical codes of the show and a crossroads from which paths of meaning unravel. Analysing social profiles and biographies of disabled influencers is fundamental because they tell worlds, subjective and collective life experiences, express limits but also strengths, subverting dominant conventions and ideologies (Googin & Noonan 2007; Sheldon 2004; Taubner et al. 2017).[3] The strength and dignity of the fragility shown challenge the viewer to observe and know.

Social media was heralded as a liberating technology, enabling everyone to create, share, and find relevant content. By creating a free and open information environment, it is thought that social networking technologies would promote democratic outcomes and enhance democracy. This is true to some extent. Social media helps protesters organize, mobilize support, and disseminate information allowing them to challenge dominant cultural clichés. Thus, social media is a vessel for democratisation (Graber 2003; Livingstone & Markham 2008) by highlighting the role of influencers with disabilities in raising subordinate group consciousness and challenging public discourse and attitudes towards people with disabilities. Platforms such as Instagram are convenient channels to increase awareness of the discrimination against people with disabilities,

[3] For disabled people, new social media, such as Instagram, offers an accessible platform where disabled people can control what information is shared through authentic life narratives. Digital technologies offer a purposeful rebuilding of the disability narrative and promote accessible technologies in their quest to make information universally accessible and useful.

allowing registered users to upload pictures and videos and fostering interaction through comments, emojis, and "likes."[4]

Many studies exist in the literature on the profile, media, and digital representation of disabled people (Cocq & Ljuslinder 2020; Struck-Peregończyk & Leonowicz-Bukała 2023; Thoreau 2006). Still, nothing is said about the audience[5] and this new sensitivity that pushes to "view" disability. Yet, the function of the audience is fundamental online. Increased access to technologies of content creation and distribution has popularized techniques of 'micro-celebrity,' using social media to develop and maintain an audience. Micro-celebrity can be understood as a mindset and set of practices in which the audience is viewed as a fan base; popularity is maintained through ongoing fan management, and self-presentation is carefully constructed to be consumed by others. Disability identity is about stories, having the space to tell them, and an audience that will listen. In this post-structural model, the producer and the spectator have equal weight. While wanting to effect social change is an important starting point, audience reception is crucial to accepting this change (Hevey 1997, 213). Even more so since the new digital platforms have inaugurated a new paradigm that produces profits linked to the number of views and in which the audience plays a key role.

Therefore, this paper aims to investigate this "new" mediatic interest, proposing a conceptual framework suitable for analyzing it in its anthropological aspects. The unexpressed needs that manifest themselves in the visualizations of disability online have the value of symbolic solicitations to be questioned as instances of profound anthropological and ethical meaning. This study is essential since the importance of media values and notions for the audience's worldview amounts to more than a simple, straightforward transfer from sender to receiver. Instead, it consists of a complex relationship in which the media reflect reality and shape it. It is, therefore, important to consider all the elements at play to question the ethical adequacy of media responses to anthropological

[4] Digital platforms have created a public space for sharing stories and experiences by people with disabilities who received support and together built a community around a shared similar interest by questioning stereotypes, prejudices, norms and discourses regarding what it is like to live with a disability. For example, see Disability Reframed, an online platform founded by Ashley Harris Whaley focused on changing perspectives through education and conversation.

[5] For the purposes of this paper I use the term audience generically, that is, without specifying whether those who consume disability-related content online are themselves disabled or not. This specification seems superfluous because the focus of the paper is on "the mediatic interest" in disability, clarifying its anthropological and ethical implications.

needs. Even more so since, as Verbeek (2015) argues, digital platforms are not simple tools; they have become means through which subjective perceptive experience is created and mediated, with significant ethical implications. Living without technology or believing we will ever eschew our mobile devices is unrealistic. Therefore, it is necessary to rethink firm anthropological and ethical horizons according to which we organize our lives offline and, above all, online to avoid new forms of violence that are even more harmful because they are not recognized as such. We are at a turning point if we want to continue "being human in a Hyperconnected era" (Floridi 2014).

To address this topic in the first part, taking up a suggestion by Kristeva, I will show that the public interest in disability is explained because it opens a "*narcissistic identity wound*" (Kristeva 2010a, 29). In doing so, disability becomes something that concerns us, which speaks to our constitutive vulnerability and leads us to a rethinking of the human that knows how to valorize the concepts of relationship and mutual interdependence. Then, I will analyse the forms and meanings of new digital platforms' responses to this interest to redefine new ways of online interaction that promote humanity and its growth.

2. Showing disability: rethinking subjectivity in a more complex humanism

As Siebers states, it is to be expected that disability will crop up everywhere because the disabled body and mind always elicit powerful emotions (2010, 67). According to Kristeva, showing disability does not reveal a desire for Superman or result in feeling sorry for suffering humanity (2010a, 41); rather, the disabled person attracts the audience because he/she opens a "*narcissistic identity wound*" (Kristeva 2010a, 29). In this way, disability becomes something that concerns us. "Not necessarily because 'it could happen to anyone,' but because *it* (*ça*) is already inside me: in our dreams, our anxieties, our amorous and existential crises, in the *lack of being* (*manque à être*) that overwhelms us when our resistances fall apart, and the 'interior castle' itself begins to crumble" (Kristeva 2006, 224). Kristeva's perspective is interesting because it shows that this "*manque à être*" sounds like an appeal to an ongoing renewal project. In other words, it suggests that we are at a turning point. Disability subsequently becomes the privileged perspective angle to start profoundly rethinking subjectivity. It is the basis for inaugurating a new ethics of the human condition, within which the individual's dimension of deficiency is rediscovered. The presence of disability in the media and beyond invokes discussions about humans (Carlson

& Kittay 2009). It unpacks, troubles, and disrupts dominant notions of what it means to be human. It 'disses' the human, which means it has the potential to complicate and reframe the normative representation of the subject often depicted when the human is evoked.

We are in a new historical period in which, as Foucault states, the truth has been pinned on the subject, who has been forced to discover the truth about himself (1981, 89).

> Contrary to the propaganda with which globalized technology assaults us, the global age that has followed the modern age is not one of the high performance, pleasure-filled Man, bisexual master of his desires and/or their debacles (Kristeva 2010a, 42).

The vulnerability that is revealed today on the screen is precisely that which is determined to deny the humanist conceptualisations of the human and Da Vinci's Vitruvian Man as the figure of the classical ideal of Man (Braidotti 2013, 13). Another human destiny is taking shape on the threshold of this third millennium, which demands a more complex humanism that recognizes and values vulnerability as an ontological condition of our humanity and an essential characteristic of the human condition (Butler 2004; Fineman 2008; Gilson 2011; Hoffmaster 2006; Ricoeur 2007; Rogers, Mackenzie, Dodds, 2012; Sten Have 2016; Turner 2006).

Until recently, the meaning of vulnerability has been emphasized as a sign of those individuals who are particularly affected by greater bodily vulnerabilities, such as people with intellectual disabilities and mental disorders, people with Alzheimer's disease, or other individuals whose cognitive abilities have decreased. Even in contemporary discourse, the meaning of vulnerability is often replaced with the meaning of fragility, weakness, and suffering. Although the distinction between the three meanings is subtle, there is an apparent conceptual difference between the terms as mentioned earlier. Vulnerability is not simply the capacity to be hurt, weak, and frail, as the most relevant dictionaries will describe it. Nor is it a tragic condition of illness and suffering, which has been reflected in various contemporary discourses. Still, it is a complex and controversial term that requires adequate clarification.

According to Maillard (2011, 161–228), vulnerability is a form or mode of human existence embedded in vitality, sensitivity, and sociability. Vulnerability speaks about the other dimension of individuals, which is also part of their nature but remains in the shadows, the dimension of having to allow things

to happen to them, the dimension of being made. That dimension of the passive subject also accompanies us in all the phases of our lives, even if more clearly in some than others. The necessary openness of the living, the fact that its self-sustenance depends on the exchange with its environment, makes the living a precarious being, needy, and always on the threshold of illness and death. Human life is always "on the edge of the abyss," (Gracia 1998) heading toward "limit situations," as Jaspers would say[6]. Yet, this openness allows the subject to gain experience, grow, and mature. Vulnerability must, therefore, be defined in terms of the most powerful, threatening, and, at the same time, enriching dimension of all human life (Springhart 2017, 17–18). Examining this paradoxical character of vulnerability is, thus, a way to return, ad experimentum, to a moral-philosophical realism, to a broader understanding of the category of humanity, understood neither only in the bio-genetic concretion of the species nor in the philosophical abstraction of the perfection of nature, but, in its biographical and existential location in the world between life and death.

To emphasize the openness of the subject is to highlight one of the central challenges of vulnerability: that it is an experience born of discomfort with the unfamiliar, the uncontrolled, or the unpredictable, and yet only through the confusion in this experience do we learn, change, and extend beyond our current limitations. The association of vulnerability with ideas of dispossession and exposure, however, points to something vital about its meaning and significance: vulnerability is defined by openness and affectivity, and that openness implies the inability to fully predict, control, and know what we are open to and how it will affect us. That core of the unpredictable, uncontrollable, and unknown can provoke an equally unpredictable, uncontrollable, and unknown alteration in us. However, it is only in this experience that we grow. Thus, receptive passivity is necessary for forming self and experience, the locus of capacity and activity. Passivity is not just "being done to," but a way of "taking in." As Kelly Oliver (2004, 109) observes:

> For Merleau-Ponty, we are connected to and part of our environment, not in a mechanical way but rather as a dynamic receptivity or responsiveness [...] [which] is our capacity to live in the world.

[6] "Is not by planning and calculating to overcome them but by the very different activity *of becoming the Existenz we potentially are*; we become ourselves by entering with open eyes into the boundary situations. We can know them only externally, and their reality can only be felt by *Existenz*. To experience boundary situations is the same as *Existenz*" (Jaspers 1970, 179).

Passivity, then, is not a mode of weakness or even susceptibility to impressions from the world and others (Merleau-Ponty 1968, 139/181). My activity is identically passive. Becoming is a process of transformation that goes beyond the limits of the activity/passivity dichotomy; it requires a kind of receptive openness. In becoming, one is neither active nor passive in the conventional sense. Instead, one experiences effects that one does not choose and undergoes changes that one does not want. Becomings, however, are also characterized as movements of creative deformation: they undo normative patterns and rigid ways of thinking and feeling, forming new ways of living in their place. Thus, becoming is defined as a non-volitional affective transformation that gives rise to new ways of feeling, thinking, and relating. As non-volitional, it cannot be active in the conventional sense (because one undergoes something that one did not choose), but as a spontaneous creation of new capacities, it cannot be passive in the conventional sense either (because one is not a mere object of another's wilful action). That is, one is a participant in a process of which one is not the author.

Rather than being just a particular way of being affected or a specific pattern of change, vulnerability is a persistent openness to change, and, as Deleuze (1994) argues of the virtual, it is an openness that allows for ongoing transformation. Thinking of vulnerability in this way makes it rather simply a condition of possibility of one's potentiality. Interpreting vulnerability as potential undermines the problematic presumption that vulnerability is repaired. As a distinctive condition of potential that is irreducible to what comes of it, vulnerability is also attributed to everyone equally. Defined in this way, vulnerability operates as a transcendental condition: being vulnerable and open to being affected is generally the fundamental presupposition for experience.

Cixous' understanding of vulnerability is in tune with the schema of an ontological concept of vulnerability; vulnerability is conceived as a matter of affective openness, a form of ambiguous potential, and an occasion for becoming other than what is. Thus, in opening oneself to others and their effects on the self, one is also open to transformation in relation to these others: receptivity, non-closure, and self-expropriation confer a "gift of changeability" (Cixous 1986, 88), and then mutability. Openness to experiencing otherness and alteration in relation to it is the condition of the receptive response of the subject which is creative leading the subject to acquire new abilities. Mutability and in-

clusiveness make us stronger but, at the same time, more fragile: individuals become "much richer, more various, stronger, and—to the extent that they are mobile—very fragile" (Cixous 1986, 84). An affirmative and generous response to the fundamental condition of vulnerability requires a new form of strength, not mastery or dominance, but strength of fragility (Cixous 1986, 95).

Vulnerability is not an absolute value to be declared but a fundamental condition to be reckoned with. To preemptively deny vulnerability is to refuse to experience and take stock of the condition of life itself, and the vital movements of intimacy, transformation, and learning. Therefore, positioning vulnerability as a fundamental condition implies that to deny or repudiate vulnerability is to deny and repudiate the nature of human reality. As de Beauvoir (1976, 13) writes: "man must not attempt to dispel the ambiguity of his being but, on the contrary, accept the task of realizing it," and only in so doing is freedom, as a genuine value rather than as a given, realized.

3. The ethical relief of relationship as inter-action

Conceiving vulnerability as openness implies rejecting a predetermined understanding of being and proposing a reconceptualization of identity that starts from the experiential dimension of how human beings exist in the world. With this tremendous paradigm shift, the self is no longer conceived as an autonomous subject or object but rather resides in existence, always already existing in the world with others (Heidegger 1990, 60/228). The existential structure of being-in-the-world is constituted by being-in, being-in-the-world, and, most importantly, being-with. Whereby such being-with not only refers to the empirical contiguity of external entities to one another but radically indicates the irreducible relationality of the subject that constitutes its existence (Nancy 2008, 3). Human beings are constituted by their relational structure, which is neither added to the subject in a spurious manner. In this way, the self is conceived as a way of being and relationships cannot be separated from the self since they contribute to constituting it. This is because relationality does not appoint an actual state of affairs but rather displays an ontological constitution of what it means to exist in the world as a human being. Others are always already there with us in being-in-the-world where the world is always what I share with others. The world is a world with. Being-in is being-with others. Thus, selfhood presupposes a relational structure. I am and can be as a self only within the ontic-ontological context of others. My potential for selfhood is directly tied to my relationships with

others who co-constitute the being that I am. Therefore, relationality is the ontological structure that informs and constitutes human existence and experience in the world.

Given the fundamental relationship between self and others, the latter not only contributes to constituting what we know but also helps to constitute an essential part of who we are, who we were, and who we can become. Guignon writes that participation in "them" is an enabling condition that opens us to the world and gives us the resources we need to be human (2007, 279). This perspective proposes rethinking individuality – the traditional notion of autonomous subject – as fundamentally relational. The reconceptualization of identity and the co-constitutive role that others play in determining one's existence as a self are interesting because they tend to show that the traditional concept of autonomy is misleading, given that humans develop the capacity for individuality precisely through interpersonal and social interactions.

Dependence is not mortifying because it is a reciprocal inter-dependence that immediately opens to "inter-action," as Kristeva would say (2010b), to common and shared action, and pushes us to reflect on the ethical modalities of carrying out this in-between.

> To recognize it in myself will help me discover the incommensurable subject within the deficient body to build a shared life project. A project in which my fear of castration, of a narcissistic wound, of defect, and death – up until now repressed – are translated into care, patience, and solidarity capable of cultivating my being in the world (*être au monde*) (Kristeva 2006, 224).

Vulnerability brings the person back to neediness that appears as a constitutive element of life (Tronto 1993, 137).[7] The need that dethrones individual self-sufficiency becomes an intersubjective relationship. It prompts care, thus defining the space in which empathic listening to fragility becomes possible.

The radical fragility of being is the existential thrust of care, the urgency of solicitude that only can bear and support our finitude. In other words, our involvement in everyday life speaks deeply about our ethicality. In this sense, the contribution that such reflection can give to ethics lies precisely in the observation that we are not ethical for following the dictates of some rational theory or demonstration, which operates reflexively by keeping itself this side of the in-

[7] In this regard, it should be noted that Tronto is the author who introduces the notion of need in relation with vulnerability.

volvement of the world. In this way, reflection opens precisely to that fundamental ethical experience, renouncing the comfortable, undisturbed, high distances of moral theories that may also be perfect but that do not throb with the warmth of the human. Such profound ethicality engages us in a calling and reminds us of the deep relationality of the human being, challenging every egoistic or individualistic paradigm. The individual self and other selves are neither separate nor found only in some particular form of relationship. Rather, we are co-constituted by each other; we "exist" in each other in certain ways. Such a structure effectively challenges the hegemony of liberal individualism and its effects on morality. But more than the polemic against the various philosophical currents that such a reflection clearly opens, I am interested in underlining and insisting on care as a motivational behavior that defines the self and relates it to others and the world around it.

In this regard, Milton Mayeroff emphasises the attitudinal aspect of care, which he defines as helping the other to grow. He sees this attitude not only as activities directed towards the other but also as implying a series of characteristic virtues including patience, honesty, humility, hope, and courage (Mayeroff 1971). In this way, the other I care about is a completion of my personal identity. This shows that caring for another also implies a kind of concern for the state of one's own being. It seems, then, that caring for the other is an orientation that is not exclusively outward but also involves turning inward toward oneself. And Nell Noddings' analyses are, in this sense, even more radical (2002). Her argument about care simultaneously offers a dyadic care model. It implies active contributions not only from the person who cares but also from the person who is cared for. Taking care does not mean opposing an active subject to a passive object. Caring goes beyond simply giving; it involves active participation and action from others (Pettersen 2008, 43).

> Without the other's ears, to whom would we talk? How would we learn to correct our conceptualizations? Without the other's gaze, touch, and smile, how would we live? Both carer and cared-for develop as human selves through interactions in which the response is treasured. The young child learns that she is valued and has some control over her own fate; she can summon the one who-is-there. The caregiver learns to appreciate a full range of human response. And in old age, when the body again becomes dependent, connection with one who understands can make the difference between relative security and terror (Noddings 2002, 134).

The cared-for person contributes to the dyad by acknowledging the caring and showing the carer the growth or benefit to which the act of caring gives rise. Central to the dyadic relationship is a form of direct and intimate communication that sustains and constitutes the relationship. The carer communicates concern and willingness to care, while the cared-for communicates recognition and the growth response that sustains the relationship. To achieve this, both partners must be active, open, and receptive towards each other. Ultimately, this is what their mutual care consists of. Therefore, it is clear in Noddings' interpretation that the focus becomes precisely self-care. In this regard, Harry Frankfurt also supports this point by saying that the identity of the person who takes care is linked to that which he takes care of so that the latter's fate becomes part of the fate of the former (1982, 260). This shows, once again, that care intimately involves the self. Contrary to an intention, therefore, caring cannot but be by its nature enduring (Frankfurt, 1982, 260–261).

This shared fragility delivers us to others and exposes us to the mercy of others, to the point that, according to Butler (2004, 24), we are all simultaneously constituted and "dispossessed" by our relationships.[8] It is an epiphany that shows how the social takes shape and tells us about how the human world is intertwined through exchange (Mauss 1967, 77–78). However, at the same time, it is also how actors become aware of themselves through mutual recognition. In this sense, exchange is a matrix of both socialization and individuation against the backdrop of an anthropology of vulnerability (Brugère 2011; Carrau & Le Goff 2010) in which care is responsible for constantly weaving and remaking those sensitive and invisible bonds that are symbols of our mutual interdependence and shared fragility, thus bringing us back to something original and primordial (Tronto 1993).

We must avoid a reductive interpretation that sees the care relationship as addressed to the needs of another subject caught in its ethically inactive neutrality since it is incapable of giving back. The very definition of care as a mode of relationship prevents such a reductive interpretation (Paperman 2009; Pattaroni 2005, 180). In other words, having broadened the concept of care to grasp it as a disposition and a relational practice necessarily presupposes a reference to receptivity or reactivity (Tronto, 1993, 36; Tronto 2009, 360). In

[8] According to Butler (2005, 8) "[the self] has no story of its own that is not also the story of a relation—or set of relations—to a set of norms [...]. The 'I' is always to some extent dispossessed by the social conditions of its emergence".

fact, it appears as a specific mode of relationship that, while not involving reciprocity of mutual services, nevertheless requires a degree of symmetry that lies precisely in that recognition of the good put into action and that leads to mutual maturation of both the agent and the patient (Le Goff 2009). In this sense, the response given by both parties gives meaning to the implicit question contained in the act of care and consolidates the relationship. This is why, in the end, we can never establish with certainty who gives and who receives. Care cannot be reduced to a "unilateral concern." In this sense, the boundaries between gift and care become blurred since care is expressed as giving, not so much so that the other can receive it but rather as giving in turn. In this regard, Paul Ricoeur also recognizes how the mutual exchange of self-esteem compensates for the initial disparity through the compensatory restitution of recognition (1990, 221–222). The French philosopher, moreover, pushes us to appreciate the primary giving of the "suffering" other as the fruit, not so much of his power to act as of his weakness. Ricoeur thus shows a self that recalls how the intrinsic vulnerability of the human condition can receive more from the weakness of the other than from the materiality that this other can bring into play or share. Therefore, this quality of reciprocity allows us to think of care as a form of gift and to valorize its deep ethical-political instances, authorizing us to reformulate reciprocity in terms of the need to recognize all contributions to the creation and sustenance of our common world (Tronto 1993, 29).

4. Inclusion, or the mediatic response to the audience's interest in disability

Media audience's interest in disability has a deep and hidden anthropological and ethical meaning that cannot be overlooked: it speaks about the necessity of a new humanism that recognizes and valorizes our common vulnerability and mutual interdependence and pushes us to reflect on the ethical modalities of human inter-actionality. It is now important to move on to question the forms, meanings, and ethical declinations of the responses that new digital platforms give to this interest. As Wernick argues, the world of social media technologies' is ruled by the motto "To See and Be Seen", in a cultural condition defined by the pervasiveness of discourse promotion. Individuals are continuously encouraged to present and promote a sort of branded self as a commodity to be worked on and a "persona produced for public consumption" (Wernick 1992, 193).[9]

[9] Authenticity and commodification go effortlessly hand in hand. People maintain "an instrumental or commodified form of social bonding" with fans, as Miller writes (2008, 390).

In this context, through approaches to self-display, performing visible disability on new digital platforms becomes a spectacle (Rice & Gumpert 1999). Effectively inserting the private and invisible life into the public online picture of everyday life, disability has the right to an exhibition. "Everyone was happy for him, and he himself gave the impression of wishing to please us; the public was enchanted" (Kristeva 2006, 221). A person is caught in its specific vulnerability represented for consumption by others (Schroeder & Borgerson 2005; Schroeder & Zwick 2004). So, the ontological opening to the other stands out in the media as consumption, and, as Kristeva would say, consumerism triumphs in the most insidious of good consciences (Kristeva 2010a, 40). In this context, fragility is reified; more than an invitation to action, the show seems to ask the spectator for emotional participation. Disability is stated; it is placed in front of the spectator to reinforce the distinctive sign of authenticity that the show wants to assert.

In this case, the performer's diversity is designated as a symbol of genuineness, an elitist vehicle for direct knowledge of reality. The position that diversity takes on in the new media passes through a particular visibility which, presenting diversity as evidence, highlights it as a new difference, albeit positive. No longer vulnerability but diversity, therefore. "Everyone is different, everyone is normal" is the new motto through which disability is exhibited on social media platforms and offered to be consumed by the audience. In this way, the narrative of disability can shift from marking disabled people as in need of treatment and cure to persons with differences that should be acknowledged and accommodated, demanding the right to be as they are, different and equal (Couser 2017). In the contemporary media scene, disability is not synonymous with deviance or defection but becomes a dramatic device through which to look at the diversity that characterizes human existence (Siebers 2010). Disability pride is the celebration of difference and the acceptance of difference.

Thus, the self-representation of people with disabilities ends up being a way to support the inclusion of people with disabilities. In this way, social network sites facilitate the "integration" process and, without a doubt, play a determinant role. Through the instant communication inherent in the new forms of technological digital storytelling, the invisible, the marginal, and the excluded can be made visible; one can operate socially, raise awareness of problems and emergencies, elevate narrative expression into a tool for learning, emancipation, and revealing its social and political value. Moreover, it is certainly important to

show disability because the latter is recognized only where it is visible. However, inclusion is not yet inter-action. Kristeva says,

> I had been witness to a *process*, perhaps even to a procedure, but not to a *rebirth* – to an *integration*, but not to an *interaction.* The disabled person was indeed supported, but this was done in order to facilitate the insertion of his produced objects into the circuit of consumption, where success was measured by the bringing of his story to the screen (2006, 221).

A process that objectively gives voice to all in their diversity and thanks to this diversity. A process that stops at this objectivity and does not yet become common action. However, what about the reciprocity and mutual growth our common vulnerability requires of us?

The performer's "deformed" diversity problematizes what appears obviously eccentric to the spectator′s eye to relaunch that identity-based aspiration of self-realization, authentic and embodied, arriving at the affirmation of a renewed aesthetic and ethic model of disability capable of rewriting its cultural, social, and political meanings (Siebers 2010). In this way, disability is represented as a phenomenon with certain fundamental or essential qualities, thus preserving the notion of two discrete experiential realms separated by a chasm or abyss. The screen creates closure, separation, and distance, inaugurating a new fictitious dichotomy between us and them, between disability and non-disability, which forces the consumer to choose: Is he/she disabled or not?

> The core of the difficulties lies in the abyss that separates the world of disability from the world of the able. And it is urgent to create messengers between these 'two merciless worlds': one of disability, with its sufferings and its protective but also aggravating isolation; the other, a society of performance, success, competition, pleasure, and spectacle that 'doesn't want to know' (Kristeva, 2010a, 39).

Not to mention that this process of identity claiming ends up being mortifying of the very particularity and individuality that it claims to promote. With the rise of new media, such as the internet and social media, disabled creators have been given a platform to gain visibility and raise awareness and a place to take back control of the narrative surrounding their disability and lives. However, social

media platforms still come with new biases and issues that hinder disabled individuals' ability to express themselves[10]. Algorithms play a fundamental role in how users interact with social media platforms. Social media algorithms influence what content we see and how we interact with the platforms. For many years, social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram have been considered platforms that allow users to have freedom of expression. The founder of Meta, Mark Zuckerberg, described technology as a "democratizing force for putting power in people's hands" (Are 2020, 1). However, "pursuit of Influencer on Instagram resembles a game constructed around "rules" embedded in algorithms that regulate visibility" (Cotter 2018, 895). Users experience a sense of conformity instead of creativity on online platforms: to gain the visibility needed, content creators must work within the confines of the algorithm.

Thus,

> the disabled person was certainly helped, but it was in order to help him include the objects he made in a circuit of consumption, success measured by access to the screen. The person, the subject, is absorbed by his objects, and his psychical life seems cured because it has quite simply disappeared (Kristeva 2010a, 32).

By objectifying the disabled actors within these images and videos, new social media helps viewers achieve a climax that is not physical but emotional. According to Garland-Thomson, images, videos, and narratives of the disabled life are a visual assault, a shocking spectacle to the consumers' eye, that captures a defining aspect of the disabled experience. Disability is the object of the stare that sculpts the disabled subject into a spectacle (Garland-Thompson 1997, 26). So, the stare objectifies disabled people. In online relationships, the stare becomes all-consuming, reducing the personhood of people with disabilities, as Young puts it (2014).

Thus, as Kristeva claims, something seemed missing from this lovely 'integration' (2006, 220). As Van der Klift and Kunc observe (1994, 399), "when disability is seen as the largest component of a person, much of what is

[10] Algorithmic technologies have pervaded every aspect of everyday life, and the algorithms are improving. But not all of their possible applications are benign, helpful, or just. Scholars have revealed unlimited harms that can arise from the types of encoded prejudices and self-perpetuating cycles of discrimination, bias, and oppression that may result from automated decision-makers. Disabled people, especially those who belong to other marginalized communities such as disabled women of color, comprise one such community that experiences discrimination, bias, and oppression resulting from automated decision-making technology (De Castro et al. 2022; Williams 2024).

unique and human about him or her is obscured," which is precisely its intrinsic relationality and objectification does not allow any interaction other than that linked to consumption. This process closes off the potentialities for being affected. While it is true that we should not be so quick to judge the closeness created by online platforms as false and second-best, it is still unrealistic to live without technology. Therefore, it is necessary to consider how we might evoke a sense of moral responsibility towards each other when we engage online and perhaps address our moral shortcomings offline as well.

My aim is not to propose solutions, but to open a theoretical reflection on the anthropological and ethical challenges opened by the new digital context. The feasibility of an ethics of care through social media remains an open question and I launch it as a provocation to the reader.

In this sense, Kristeva's words are more relevant and urgent than ever, inviting us to find new ways to give voice to the vulnerability of the speaking being, transforming the online narrative into a novel of the subject, moving not toward integration and inclusion but toward inter-action. This listening to vulnerability undermines the relational balances of the performance code. It gives the spectator the responsibility of giving meaning to what is shared through a synaesthetic and sensory immersion. Intersubjectivity replaces the work's objectivity; the fall of the differences between fruition and participation is consummated, offering a perpetual rebirth of the subject.

The performative practice becomes, therefore, not so much a place to express, in the Heideggerian sense, an alternative truth but a vehicle for co-constructing new possible worlds.

A very concrete and compelling necessity at a time when, as Kristeva (2010b, 28) writes, new forms of barbarism threaten our common humanity. Technologies should not be destructive to humanity (Verbeek 2005) but should be explicitly designed to help shape the morality of subjects in constructing a common life project capable of giving life to a society finally conceived as "a whole man, composed of all men and as good as all of them and no better than any" (Kristeva 2010a, 34).

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