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THE RELATIONSHIP WITH OTHERS IN THE DIGITAL ENVIRONMENT: BETWEEN THE HUMAN ZOO AND ALIENATION

A RELAÇÃO COM O OUTRO NO MEIO DIGITAL: ENTRE O ZOOLÓGICO HUMANO E A ALIENAÇÃO

LA RELACIÓN CON LOS OTROS EN EL ENTORNO DIGITAL: ENTRE EL ZOO HUMANO Y LA ALIENACIÓN

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ABSTRACT: Human interrelationship, an element of extensive studies and debates, has gained new layers of complexity with the rapid evolution of the means of communication, especially with the popularization of digital social networks, inaugurating new interactional dynamics, which at first would give rise to greater contact with the Other. However, I attempt to demonstrate through a reflective and theoretical effort how the logics present in digital dynamics, influenced largely by the market and the production of capital, lead a process of alienation of the Other and of the Self, as a phenomenon of objectification and loss of humanity in digital relationships, dangerously approaching a human zoo, an cruelest and most radicalized face of 19th century ethnographic museums.

KEYWORDS: Digital sociability. Otherness. Alienation.

***RESUMO**: A inter-relação humana, elemento de extensos estudos e debates, tem ganhado novas camadas de complexidade com a rápida evolução dos meios de comunicação, sobretudo com a popularização das redes sociais digitais, inaugurando novas dinâmicas interacionais que, em um primeiro momento, suscitariam um maior contato com o Outro. No entanto, tento demonstrar, por meio de um esforço reflexivo e teórico, como as lógicas presentes nas dinâmicas digitais, influenciadas em grande parte pelo mercado e pela produção de capital, conduzem a um processo de alienação do Outro e de Si, como um fenômeno de coisificação e de perda da humanidade nas relações digitais, aproximando-se perigosamente de um zoológico humano, uma face mais cruel e extrema dos museus etnográficos do século XIX.*

***PALAVRAS-CHAVE**: Sociabilidade digital. Alteridade. Alienação.*

***RESUMEN**: La interrelación humana, elemento de amplios estudios y debates, ha adquirido nuevas capas de complejidad con la rápida evolución de los medios de comunicación, especialmente con la popularización de las redes sociales digitales, inaugurando nuevas dinámicas de interacción, que inicialmente darían lugar a un mayor contacto con las personas. el otro. Sin embargo, intento demostrar a través de un esfuerzo reflexivo y teórico cómo las lógicas presentes en la dinámica digital, en gran medida influenciadas por el mercado y la producción de capital, liderar um proceso de alienación del Otro y del Yo, como un fenómeno de cosificación y pérdida de humanidad. en las relaciones digitales, acercándose peligrosamente a un zoológico humano, una cara más cruel y radicalizada de los museos etnográficos del siglo XIX.*

***PALABRAS CLAVE**: Sociabilidad digital. Alteridad. Alienación.*

Introduction

This article emerges from the evaluative process of two courses in the Master's program in Social Sciences in which I am enrolled. The challenge here is to integrate studies on digital sociabilities, social theory, and memory and heritage—where the latter two constitute the courses in question, and the first serves as the object of my study. The intention is to produce a work that can engage with all three areas of knowledge. Based on this premise, I sought to develop a reflective article on relational dynamics with the Other in digital spaces. The effort to establish a connection among these fields prompted a revisitation of the themes that intersect them. Among these themes, the centrality of the Other and the primacy of relational engagement with the Other immediately drew my attention as a foundational analytical lens.

This focus led to questioning the position of the Other in digital environments and how such relationships are established through interactional dynamics within these spaces, thereby dialoguing with my object of study, but not exclusively so. Understanding the place of the Other in digital contexts requires a reflective effort that considers the phenomena shaping contemporary social reality. Technological revolutions in communication—particularly the internet—have introduced a range of new life dynamics, which, due to their popularity, pervasiveness, and sociocultural influence, constitute an urgent field of study. Moreover, the constant state of transformation in these environments necessitates ongoing analytical production.

In analyzing the Other in digital contexts, I draw upon theories addressing the concept of the Other, employing conceptual tools aligned with studies of alterity and philosophical considerations of the Other. This analysis subsequently extends to understanding the Other in digital spaces, taking into account its dynamics, constituent elements, and imposed conditions. From this point, I draw a parallel with the concept of the Other in ethnographic museums, which have historically been sites of intense debate regarding the representation of the Other, the stranger, and differences, and which, surprisingly, exhibit several similarities with the digital dynamics of representing the Other, including a potential parallel with its more pernicious manifestation: the human zoos of the nineteenth century.

Finally, I highlight a tendency toward the erasure of the Other, the superficiality of its representation, and the fragility of relationships established with the Other in digital spaces. This perspective engages with notions of alienation and estrangement, connecting with Marxian theory and his concept of *Entfremdung*, which posits that dehumanization occurs when

relationships are structured around capital and its ethical values—namely individualism, competition, and commodity-mediated relations. The first step in this reflective journey, therefore, is a comprehension of the Other.

The place of the Other

First, an essential distinction must be made. Throughout this article, two terms will be invoked: *other* and *Other*. The term *other* (lowercase) refers simply to that which is alternative, in the literal sense of the word. In contrast, the capitalized *Other* is used analytically to denote the philosophical category representing that which is different, foreign, strange, or external to the Self. It also enables the conceptualization of multiple others under a single signifier, encompassing them in a concept that symbolizes exteriority and difference; this usage will be maintained throughout the article.

With this clarification, another essential task arises: understanding the relevance of the relationship with the Other and why it is so important to interrogate the space of the Other and the relationships established therein. Numerous theorists could be cited to ground the place of the Other and its significance, including one of the greatest social theorists in history. Marx proposed that labor defines humanity; however, labor is a social act and is only possible through engagement with the Other. Consequently, humanity itself becomes possible only through the Other (Marx; Engels, 2001).

In a similar vein, the African Bantu philosophy of Ubuntu posits that humanity is only achievable through relationality. Humanity, not merely as a species but as an existential category as we understand it, is interdependent and constituted through relationships, impossible to produce in isolation. Within this philosophical current, a deep debate exists suggesting the primacy of a collective *We*, with the Self and the Other considered idealized categories. Regardless, the relational foundation between subjects remains fundamental. Indeed, an analysis of human production—everything distinguishing us as a species and existential category, including language, culture, science, politics, religion, and more—reveals that these achievements are only possible through interrelation and contact with the Other (Ramose, 1999).

Another fundamental element of the category of the Other, as highlighted by Zanella (2005) in "*Sujeito e alteridade: reflexões a partir da psicologia histórico-cultural*," is the

omnipresence of the Other. This Other, who is different and external to the Self, is always present. Even when an individual is alone, the Other is present—whether through psychological influence, the ideal and material construction of reality, or simply as a mental representation. The voice of this Other continually asserts itself, and no matter how much one might attempt to distance it, it persists. Therefore, fostering a constructive relationship with the Other appears essential for proper development and adaptation, as the constant presence of the Other necessitates seeking harmonious coexistence.

Furthermore, Frayze-Pereira (1994) raises the issue of encountering different perspectives and intersubjectivity as a fundamental element in the formation of consciousness. In other words, encountering the Other—who thinks, acts, and is different from myself—is essential to the exercise of the Self as a social being and to the practice of genuine alterity. The development of an adapted subject, truly imbued with humanity, is contingent upon the place of encounter with difference and upon the manner in which this difference is negotiated, for we, as social beings, are surrounded by other social beings who often think, feel, and act in entirely different ways. The ability to engage with this difference is itself an exercise of subjectivity—of its adaptability and, indeed, of its very formation.

In this sense, the Other occupies a crucial position in the production of subjectivity and individual consciousness. After all, it is in contact with the Other that I define myself, and it is through the elements brought forth in this contact that the subject is able to make sense of themselves, to transform, adapt, reaffirm, or even deconstruct their own being. Thus, the experience of the Other is also a process of identity construction, leaving a profound imprint upon the individual psyche. This Other does not exist solely in the realm of exteriority but also inhabits the interiority of the being. Awareness of the Other, therefore, reflects and reinforces awareness of the Self (Frayze-Pereira, 1994).

In sum, the relationship established with the Other constitutes one of the most significant dimensions of human experience, shaping humanity itself and permeating all spheres of human life and the social reality in which it unfolds. Nevertheless, despite this centrality, the relationship with the Other is not always acknowledged or valued (Zanella, 2005).

Indeed, as highlighted by other researchers and theorists, including Marx (2004), there is an observable trend toward the weakening of social relations and the erasure of the notion of interdependence. Marx (2004) identifies capitalism as a key factor in dispossessing individuals of their capacity to establish direct relations among themselves, rendering such relations mediated by capital and fostering competitiveness as the dominant relational paradigm.

Consequently, the Other is increasingly perceived as a competitor and an obstacle to survival, distorting the original logic of interdependence. Thus, the degradation of the relationship with the Other has long been recognized historically, despite its paramount importance. But what happens when new forms of technology emerge, accelerating communication between individuals and inaugurating an entirely new range of relational possibilities?

The Digital Other

Assuming that the internet—and particularly social media—enables the mass encounter of diverse individuals, amplifies relationships, creates means of instantaneous communication, and constitutes one of the principal channels of contemporary interaction, it is reasonable to imagine that it exerts some impact on interpersonal relations. Given its amplifying nature, the initial expectation would be: the internet as a maximizer of relationships and a producer of alterity, fostering more encounters with others, with difference, and with perspectives external to the subjects themselves (Edoa; Aguiar, 2019). Indeed, such encounters do occur, but can the internet truly be regarded as a factor that enhances relationships with the Other? Does it strengthen relations and promote encounters with difference?

The majority of scholarly works addressing alterity and relations with the Other in digital environments frame the internet as an ambiguous object: it can both enhance the relationship with the Other—facilitating encounters, promoting proximity, and enabling a level of relationality with the Other never before experienced—and simultaneously distance or erase the Other in a process of self-exacerbation. This dual nature is exemplified in the work of Almas and Knijnik (2021), *Paradoxos da alteridade na realidade virtual*, which explores the paradoxical character of virtual environments that both stimulate and inhibit alterity. However, evidence increasingly suggests that the second effect prevails over the first.

To begin with, the internet presents the Other primarily as an image-based representation—through symbols, photographs, textual descriptions, and sounds that appear on a screen. This inevitably entails the loss of the corporeal dimension of the Other. The physical space they occupy, the unpredictability of their behavior, and the elements of life conveyed by a physical body are absent online. Even when abundant information about the Other's life is shared in great detail, it remains a report, an enunciation of the Other, not the Other in their essence. This may appear self-evident—and indeed it is—yet Frayze-Pereira (1994) underscores the significance of corporeality in the experience of the Other, even for the

formation of the very consciousness of their presence. Martino (2016), in turn, highlights that the enunciated Other—the represented Other—is already an impoverished version, as many elements of their existence as a Being are lost in the process of communicating or representing them.

In other words, the Other as represented on the screen is, by definition, an impoverished Other; it is not the Other themselves, but a portrait. And like a photograph, many of their dimensions are omitted, many elements are left aside. This image is a snapshot—a statized Other, not one in motion, in action, truly alive. Thus, the Other as presented on the internet is already a temporal residue of the Other; the immediacy of the relationship is lost (Martino, 2016).

Furthermore, the elements of the Other to which we are exposed online are generally those they themselves choose to reveal: photographs are edited—skin tone, hair, background scenery; a poorly received message may be deleted or altered; a profile can be remade as many times as necessary; false profiles may be fabricated—an entirely artificial Other created with a specific purpose. One might argue, of course, that deception and dissimulation have always existed, that people have always curated their speech and adapted their behavior according to context and social relations at stake. Yet never before in human history have such extensive tools been available to control what is disseminated. Even when a false identity with a fabricated history and meticulously constructed narrative was created in the past, the Other still possessed their own voice to some extent, their appearance to some degree—and these could be accessed through face-to-face interaction, which is not the case in digital relations. In digital contexts, most of the information one can obtain about the Other is only what they choose to disclose—and if they disclose nothing, then they effectively cease to exist (Silva; Velloso, 2022).

Another critical aspect to observe is that, when reduced to the screen, the Other is consequently reduced to an object—a thing. The Other, mediated by the internet, is effectively placed in my hands, and this serves as a compelling metaphor for digital relations. The Other in my hands is an objectified Other, belonging to me and existing for my pleasure and entertainment. Here, the image of the Other acquires the status of a thing, generating an effective sense of domination over the Other and even the possibility of their elimination. This is made possible by tools of banning, blocking, and exclusion on social media platforms. Should any of these objectified Others generate discomfort, confrontation, or even mere difference, they can be blocked, and their existence is effectively erased from the personal experience of the one who enacted the block (Tonatto; Moraes; Balla, 2016).

This dynamic is made explicit in the study by Silva and Velloso (2022), "*Comunicação, alteridade e ecossistema digital: análise de conteúdo e conversações sobre Fórmula 1 no Twitter*", which investigates dynamics of alterity in the digital ecosystem and identifies an extremely low tolerance for dissent, introducing the notion of echo chambers—environments where consonant information pointing in the same direction is continually replicated. The authors argue that the internet is a fertile ground for the formation of such echo chambers, a view also supported by Leonardo Nascimento *et al.* (2021).

However, another element brought forth by Silva and Velloso (2022) is how digital experience is inherently self-centered, as evidenced by their analysis of interactions among users of the platform X (formerly Twitter) discussing Formula 1. The excerpts highlighted by the authors reveal how users frequently resorted to blocking tools to exclude those who disagreed with their opinions or supported rival teams. The article even references the profile of a Formula 1 journalist who systematically blocks users that, in any way, caused him discomfort. Here, the intention is not to evaluate whether such tools are beneficial or harmful, but rather to recognize their widespread use in digital environments and their consequences for relationality with the Other, whose existence is erased from the perspective of the user. Within this context, the Other may indeed cease to exist in one's personal experience if the interaction proves uncomfortable, unpleasant, or discordant.

This brings us to another significant element in the relationship with the Other in digital spaces: the encounter with difference. As previously discussed, the very existence of blocking and exclusion tools already undermines this encounter. Added to this are algorithmic filtering policies and the implementation of information-targeting technologies based on each user's consumption profile, designed to offer the "most relevant" information to maintain engagement and satisfaction. The result is a flow of concordant information that validates each user's perspective on reality, reinforcing echo chambers, fostering the formation of digital bubbles, and hindering encounters with difference or dissent—ultimately marking the end of randomness in the digital sphere. And, as reflected in the first section, this randomness is a foundational element in the very experience of subjective consciousness (Pase; Pechansky, 2018; Nascimento *et al*., 2021).

One of the most frequently cited characteristics of the internet is its overwhelming and frenetic flow of information. Undoubtedly, this is one of its defining traits, and this multiplicity of people and content is often presented as an argument for a presumed openness to greater alterity and awareness of the Other. Yet it is worth questioning whether the opposite might, in

fact, be occurring. In an environment where informational flow is so intense and the multiplicity of voices becomes deafening, meaningful bonds with the profiles encountered are seldom formed; the volume and rapid turnover of information preclude the establishment of solidity or depth in relationships (Martino, 2016). How much can one truly come to know the Other through a 45-second edited TikTok video? Or a 280-character post on X? Or a single Instagram photo amidst thousands scrolling past in a feed? When reflecting on the most meaningful relationships in our lives, we often find the element of temporality: long-standing bonds forged through intimacy developed with considerable effort. It is therefore necessary to question whether the digital environment contains the essential conditions for cultivating such meaningful relationships.

The pace of change extends beyond content and impacts the very operational structure of social networks. One example is Twitter, which, upon being sold, underwent a series of transformations in its usage guidelines. A clear instance of these abrupt structural changes is the replacement of fact-checking and content moderation tools with the "community notes" feature, in which users themselves post annotations regarding the veracity of a given publication. This shift, ostensibly framed as an enhancement of freedom of expression and self-regulation, borders on a lack of control and accountability on the part of the platform concerning the content circulating within its own network. Moreover, as evidenced by legal disputes and legislative efforts toward regulating social media, a platform may even cease operations in a given country overnight.

An important issue that requires clarification concerns the multiplicity of modes of action within each social network. Here, I employ the category of social networks/digital networks/digital environment/online environment to refer broadly to the entire spectrum of interactive virtual platforms, as my reflection concerns general dynamics that permeate all of these environments to a greater or lesser extent. However, it is essential to underscore that each of them operates according to its own specific dynamics and particularities, which warrant deeper and more targeted investigation—something that falls outside the scope of this article, which is intended as a reflective analysis.

The next point to be examined is the lack of physical displacement required for the subject to "encounter" the digital Other. The user is not required to move physically or geographically; they remain within their own physical environment while accessing the virtual realm. Pase and Pechansky (2018) highlight the relevance of experiencing a sense of foreignness, of being displaced—of becoming the Other to the Other—as an essential factor in

the quality of such a relationship. When I displace myself, I engage with what is unfamiliar, with what lies outside my habitual frame; I, myself, feel like a foreigner, the divergent element within that space—a dynamic that does not occur in digitality. The digital environment is always my own environment, it invariably reflects my narrative, and it features a one-dimensional Other who is always presented or presents themselves to me, in what may be termed a Kingdom of the Self. Martino (2016, p. 5) likewise identifies the internet as a space privileging the Self.

> Due to the power relations intrinsic to enunciative acts, within a scenario of discursive inequality—where one or a few enunciators hold the power to define all others—the interpretive categories of reality embedded in that discourse tend to entangle both alterity and the Self within a conceptual framework shaped by the hermeneutical categories of those who speak.

The relationship with the Other, though obscured and distorted in digital environments, is nonetheless fundamental to the very production of the virtual space. Social networks, for instance, only hold meaning through the presence of the Other, for their erasure is only rendered possible through the illusion of absence and/or the falsification of relationships (Almas; Knijnik, 2021).

Perilously close parallels

Reflecting on the place and the relationship of the Other within the digital realm, one observes striking parallels with the representational dynamics of another domain where debates over the Other and its representation were intensely contested: *ethnographic museums*. Oliveira and Santos (2019, p. 397) describe the emergence of ethnographic museums in the following terms:

> The great ethnographic museums were established in the nineteenth century as sites of memory that celebrated the superiority of the West and produced images and narratives that justified and legitimized the colonial enterprise. For their visitors—the inhabitants of the colonial metropolises—these museums offered images, colors, scents, and flavors of other peoples, who were invariably portrayed as simple and primitive, yet also curious and exotic.

Although the nature of museums today is markedly different, the emergence of ethnographic museums is closely tied to the processes of colonization, domination, and exploitation of native peoples by Europe. Through movements of plunder and expansion over these populations, seizing ritual objects, garments, ornaments, and diverse artifacts, these museums captured this Other and rendered them into objects. The dominant ideology undoubtedly permeated the entire environment and its dynamics, both representational and observational; the colonial gaze was omnipresent (Oliveira; Santos, 2019).

As stated by Oliveira and Santos (2019), ethnographic museums functioned as spaces for upholding a narrative that justified Western superiority. In general, museums are indeed spaces of narrative—often unidirectional—where one person narrates the story of another or recounts historical events. At this point, we may draw a parallel with digital media. Despite the profusion of voices within it, each user is immersed in their own narrative, shaping the Other through their digital experience; it is a medium where the personal dimension holds a privileged place. Social networks may even be envisioned as a kind of *personal museum*, where each user assembles elements of their personal representation, their construction of reality, and their representation of the Other (Martino, 2016).

Yet, despite this perceived sense of control and the notion of ownership over this personal museum, the narratives disseminated within these environments are not, in fact, in the hands of users. The ideas that gain traction, that are amplified and circulate widely, are, in reality, carefully selected by the platform's distribution algorithms, which, in turn, reflect the interests of the true owners of these corporations. In this sense, the parallel once again approaches that of ethnographic museums, which selected both what was displayed and how it was presented to the public. The key difference may lie in the fact that museum curation today occupies a more transparent space, as the mechanisms of narrative selection are more evident: we know who is choosing what is shown and what interests are at stake. Fields of study such as museology, for instance, have emerged to shed light on this very process—something that has not yet occurred in social media, where the entire dynamic of narrative direction and construction remains largely opaque (Oliveira; Santos, 2019; Pase; Pechansky, 2018).

However, it is in the representation of the Other that museums and the internet most radically converge. Just as in the digital realm, ethnographic museums relied on the representation of the Other through symbols and an imagetic constitution that, in itself, was reductive: the Other was presented through showcases and screens; on the internet, through the screens of smartphones and computers; in museums, through framed images and display cases.

In both cases, the Other was captured, displaced from their space, fragmented, and frozen in time (Soares, 2012; Martino, 2016).

In both environments, the act of looking is prioritized; the assembled elements function as *semeiophoros* objects. That is, they hold no utility beyond being looked at. The Other, in both contexts, is transformed into a *semeiophoros* object—objectified, dominated, and subordinated to the role of a thing that serves the observer: serving to entertain, to satisfy curiosity, to amuse. The Other loses its status as a living being, with all its complexities, and is instead represented through an impoverished imaginary. Bruno Soares (2012, p. 83, our translation) synthesizes this succinctly in his dissertation:

> […] to see is to bring things closer; for museums, it is within the realm of vision that encounters first take place. Encounters between people and objects, between people themselves, or even between objects themselves. Through these encounters, museums create new symbolic universes and act upon the imagination. However, as in the classic dichotomy of heritage—in which, at the very moment something is acquired, something else is inevitably lost—when seeing is to feel that something inescapably slips away, one is confronted with the perspective that "to see is to lose" […].

Soares (2012) also explores how museums can serve as a space for alterity and for self-transformation through sensitive engagement with the Other, but he emphasizes that, in that period and under the dynamics some insisted on preserving, such alterity was denied, as no real relationship with the Other was possible. The space of alterity was transformed into a space purely of observation, which, in itself, does not constitute alterity, for the Other was not perceived as a being, but as a thing. Soares (2012) further demonstrates how these museums produced "Us versus Them" narratives, turning the Other into a new kind of enemy—something that is also remarkably common in the digital environment, as previously explored.

The Other, occupying the position of an object of gaze, serving solely for entertainment and stripped of humanity, reached its most extreme form in the so-called human zoos: spaces of profound dehumanization, where people from cultures considered "exotic" at the time and possessing non-European physical characteristics—most often Black people—personified the figure of this Other, the different, treated as animals or, worse, as objects. In this process, the Other served solely for the pleasure of the observers, for their amusement, to satisfy their curiosity (Oliveira; Santos, 2019; Soares, 2012).

Here, we can discern an unsettling parallel with digital dynamics: the Other stripped of humanity, the Other objectified, serving only for the entertainment and diversion of users.

Viewed through this lens, social networks may resemble human zoos even more than they do the ethnographic museums of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Clearly, there are numerous specificities of human zoos that do not apply to social networks, such as the cruelty involved in their operations, the abuse inflicted upon those exhibited in these inhumane spaces, the kidnapping of individuals from their native lands, and the annihilation of their cultures through the colonial process—all of which constitute crucial differences. However, for the purposes of this analysis, what matters is the phenomenon of dehumanization and objectification of the Other that traverses both environments, despite belonging to vastly different historical moments—a deeply concerning phenomenon.

I evoke the image of colonial ethnographic museums and nineteenth- and twentieth-century human zoos not only as an analytical category but, above all, as a reflection and a warning regarding how alarming it is to find parallels between the digital dynamic and these spaces, which were arenas of violence and domination. Behind their luxurious architectures, these were spaces of conflict and war, of symbolic violence directed at the Other, marked by a disproportionate, hierarchical power relation in which the Other appeared as an object, as a thing, represented as inferior and, therefore, devoid of value—when their existence was even acknowledged at all. It is deeply troubling to consider that such elements resonate so closely between such distinct environments, particularly when one of these environments is so widespread and deeply embedded in contemporary society—undoubtedly a red flag regarding the relational dynamics being forged in the digital sphere.

Beyond the symbolic, representational, and imagetic dimensions, ethnographic museums are stratifications of the material relations established within society. As previously mentioned, ethnographic museums arose precisely from the colonial models of domination and exploitation. As Bruno Soares (2012) argues, it is material relations that produce, reproduce, and transform representational, symbolic, and imaginary dynamics—a perspective that, in many ways, closely aligns with Marxian theory, in which immaterial relations are a reflection of material dynamics, with the phenomenon of dehumanization and objectification of the Other being in direct dialogue with the concept of alienation as proposed by Marx (2004).

Alienation and estrangement from the Other (and from the Self)

Entfremdung, translated as alienation or estrangement, is the phenomenon that, according to Marx (2004), seeks to describe the relational dynamics and subjective experience of reality within a capitalist society. The fundamental premise is that what differentiates the human being from other species is the capacity to transform nature through labor and, as a result, transform oneself. However, capitalist production processes appropriate human labor, alienating the individual from their own work, from themselves, and, consequently, from the Other. This indicates that the phenomenon of alienation is not a creation of digital dynamics; rather, it has existed since the establishment of capitalist society, functioning as an intensifier of a preexisting element. Indeed, to live within a capitalist system is, in itself, to live in alienation. Furthermore, relations of cooperation are replaced by relations of competition, as explained by James Farganis (2016, p. 55):

> Finally, workers are alienated from their colleagues as capitalists promote competition among them for the available jobs that pay subsistence wages. Instead of the solidarity and camaraderie that arise from working together on a collective project, the labor force is deliberately kept at subsistence wages, creating significant fear among workers that they will not survive should they lose their jobs to others.

As one might expect, the place of the Other in capitalist society is already one of distancing, erasure, and weakened bonds. The Other becomes an alien Other, while at the same time, there is a profound alienation from oneself. However, the alienation of the Other is not merely a reflection of self-alienation or labor alienation; it constitutes a foundational element for the advancement of capitalism. To suppress strategies of resistance or responses to capital, individuals are fragmented within themselves and pitted against one another, thereby generating more capital and further weakening their subjectivity (Santos, 2022).

Before advancing this discussion, it is essential to clarify how the term *Entfremdung* will be used in this section in relation to its translation as alienation or estrangement. Generally, alienation and estrangement are treated as synonyms in translations of the concept; however, Lessa (2018) argues for the primacy of alienation over estrangement and presents compelling arguments in support of this position. Accordingly, I will adopt the term *alienation* to refer directly to the phenomenon described by Marx (2004), while using *estrangement* to denote more specifically the feeling produced by this phenomenon: estrangement from oneself, from the world, and from the Other.

With this distinction established, we may proceed. As is evident, the issue of alienation is neither new nor a product of digital or museological relations. What, then, is its relevance to the present discussion?

As previously mentioned, the physical and material conditions of human existence have direct repercussions on relational and symbolic dynamics. New material relations give rise to new symbolic relations, as observed in the case of ethnographic museums, which emerged as a direct reflection of colonial domination. Thus, it is reasonable to assume that the internet, as a material condition of contemporary human existence, exerts some effect on relational, symbolic, and representational dynamics. Furthermore, considering the constitutive elements of the phenomenon of alienation and the operational dynamics of the digital sphere, it is plausible to infer a potential deepening of the state of alienation toward the Other and an intensification of the feeling of estrangement from this Other and, consequently, from oneself (Farganis, 2016; Martino, 2016).

In industrial capitalist society, the Other is a competitor, yet their existence remains undeniable, for they are still a corporeal being who shares resources and participates in the collective construction of reality. In short, this Other is still perceived. In the digital environment, by contrast, as previously noted, the Other loses corporeality and is represented solely through images and sounds, as they exist only within the symbolic sphere and respond almost instantaneously to the user's interests. The Other is, at once, erased and transformed into a thing. Dehumanization—the ultimate consequence of alienation—occurs in an even more radical manner, which helps explain the marked indifference and hostility toward the Other in this setting, where even their humanity becomes obscured (Lessa, 2018; Edoa; Aguiar, 2019).

As previously highlighted, alienation originates within the capitalist model of society and the relationships it produces—relations mediated by capital and commodities, with competitiveness being the predominant mode of interaction. In the digital realm, this objectification of the Other becomes even more radicalized: the Other is reduced to an image on a screen. Interaction with this Other is largely mediated by capital, not only through the tools that provide access to digital networks but also through the very logic of social media platforms, which are, ultimately, corporations that pursue profit maximization. Within these platforms, the Other is commodified, just as the user themselves is (Marx, 2004; Tonatto; Moraes; Balla, 2016).

The result is an intensification of the feeling of estrangement toward the Other. After all, this Other, perceived as a commodity, occasionally acts in ways that defy commodification,

producing a sense of estrangement akin to a chair suddenly coming to life—frustration arises when the Other fails to conform to the expectations of a commodity. Relations in this environment thus become increasingly estranged, making it progressively harder to engage with the Other. And since our very consciousness of existence depends upon the Other, we, too, become estranged: as we lose the perception of the Other's humanity, we impair our own (Santos, 2022).

But what, ultimately, is the problem in this specific environment marked by estranged, dehumanized, and alienated relations? It is already problematic in itself: a sphere of humanity in the process of dehumanization, where subjects treat one another as things in such a radical way. Moreover, online relations have direct consequences for offline life. Today, there is already a prevailing notion that, due to the pervasive reach of digital technologies in everyday life, we cannot treat these universes as separate. The real and the digital intersect and mutually influence one another (Nascimento *et al*., 2021). In other words, more alienated and estranged relations in the digital sphere translate into more alienated and estranged relations in humanity at large—and at the extreme of this alienation, we find dehumanization.

Final Considerations

Alienation, as a phenomenon of human existence within the capitalist system, is not a new element—at least not according to Marxian theory. The process of labor expropriation and the mediation of relations by capital are fundamental to the establishment and maintenance of this system. When social media platforms emerge and market dynamics driven by profit above all else become embedded within them, what we witness is a deepening of an already established condition—namely, the intensification of alienation and the proliferation of new forms in which it manifests. Thus, relationships mediated by digitality are shaped by commercial imperatives, guided primarily by potential profitability rather than by the quality of the relationship. At the end of the day, social media platforms are companies—and they behave as such.

What becomes evident, when adopting the analytical perspective presented here, is the depletion of social relations of their meaning within the digital environment, where they acquire a purely pleasure-producing character, reducing the digital Other to an object of gratification. The relationship between the Self and this digitally mediated Other only persists as long as it

remains comfortable for the Self, which must not be contradicted or challenged. Any element that generates displeasure for the user is filtered out by the algorithm, delivering only what is pleasant. Moreover, the platforms themselves provide countless mechanisms to suppress or block sources of discomfort. In this context, the Other appears on our screens as a means of entertainment and leisure, stripped of elements that could convey depth, thereby undermining the relationship and, consequently, hindering genuine alterity. As such, social media platforms embody a kind of human zoo, constantly seeking to capture our attention through a wide array of attractions.

As has become clear, this article adopts an openly critical and pessimistic stance regarding digitally mediated relationships. Nevertheless, I acknowledge that the internet and digital communication tools possess the potential to enhance relationships and enable new, positive dynamics of alterity and interrelation. However, this potential remains obstructed so long as the logic governing the internet continues to be that of the market—of capital—rather than that of genuine interaction and exchange. As long as the internet remains primarily a vehicle for profit generation and the consolidation of power, and less a democratic space for free access and communal participation, the Other will remain objectified, the relationship with them impaired, and the digital environment will persist as a vast contemporary human zoo—one in which the observer also assumes the role of the observed.

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