DISCUSSION TOPICS

Digital Mischief

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1. Although we are immersed in it, or perhaps because we are too far in, we risk understanding very little of the digital and how it reflects and at the same time determines our shared primal perceptions of reality as we experience it and practice it. We worry about the fate of children, who inhabit this dimension live, "naturally", so to speak. Not that it is wrong for adults to worry about children, and for them. We are responsible for their development, so it is legitimate to try and protect them from the damage we fear will be caused by exposure to the digital: to an experience then that children live as theirs, "naturally", and which we adults control little and badly.

However the point is we should be worrying about ourselves, "good" adults experiencing digital whether we want to or not, without any serious commitment to understanding what it is, or how it transforms our inside, together with the transformations we see on the outside. In fact, it is a sign of immaturity, ours, the immaturity of those who ought to be educating but are not capable of managing themselves, deceived by the old illusion we can choose whether to accept, or reject, certain manifestations of reality.

Deep down we are victims of a paradoxical condition. On one hand the terms we use most often to stigmatise the dangers of the digital world derive from a family of concepts that at their centre have an idea of simplicity. Everything in everyone's reach, of crumbling of selection and understanding as legitimate defence, unlimited and unreflecting consumption; no, we tell ourselves, this is not a good thing, and when possible, we tell the children too. But deep down this ease of access is something we enjoy, even when we repent and confess, using it as a medium.

On the other hand, when we do try and come to terms with the problem we can't free our minds and vocabulary of a hard cumbersome word, and above all of a concept – technology. This show the extent to which we are victims of a cultural tradition that makes the technical and all its manifestations into something external, complicated, dangerous, something not fully under our control. What is haunting us is the ghost in the machine. But it is a ghost we forget about when engaged with writing or books, both technologies we do not experience as extraneous, and indeed often build up as protective walls "against technology".

Simplicity and complication are opposites – obviously. It should be equally obvious that these two opposites, which explode out or instead compact together depending on circumstance, denounce the limits of our archaic conception of technology,
Children are somewhere else, inside complexity.
So, we need to ask some good questions about them.

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Children are part of digital technology before they are born. Family members whose images are fixed and circulated in shared ultrasound portraits, they grow up experiencing the world largely through the medium, and in the company, of the digital, without ever realising it is technology. (Happy children!) They are attracted to external material manifestations of this part of reality, exactly the ones that most annoy right-thinking adults. This is nothing new. In pre-digital times the first objects children wanted to grasp and hold were telephones, even baby toy versions. Why is this? Because they make a sound, they have a soul. If this perturbed us in the past, it perturbs us even more today when they are an extension of the body; they keep alive a world we both want, and don't want, to be part of.

Let's move on.

Leaving aside the relational-affective framework we manifest with our adult agitation on seeing a child with a mobile phone (instilling them with our virus) here the children are, at their most mature, systematically immersed and engaged in total experiences where the digital lives, reproduces, and circulates, with sounds, images, and action, not just promoting their sensory-motor intelligence but coding it. Perhaps a book that plays when you move it, a small screen on a phone or tablet that responds to touch with movement and sound, or toys stuffed virtuously with intelligent artifice. For children this is reality, all of it, at once physical and imaginary, tangible and fantastical. They don't feel or perceive it as external technology, they feel it as a manifestation of Self, a feature of their positive self-centredness.

Coming back to adults, if we could accept the idea that until we internalise something it feels like technology, and then no longer, it would be a great step forward. Don Quixote can't see the books Sancho can, but he sees, lives, and is nourished through a bookish imagination that allows him to survive life's chance events and misfortunes. Adults today's are more Don Quixote than Sancho, and when we read (not forced as often happens in school) we don't perceive books as material objects, we experience and feel their soul.

So why can't we have this understanding of children and "their" technology? In short, I am convinced that if we make the effort to rid ourselves of a persecutory and materialistic idea of technology and tools (valid for everything but for exceptions I have mentioned) we would understand, seeing the way we behave ourselves, that children are born with this technological reality innate, and that downsizing its role isn't a pedagogical exercise we can accomplish materially, prohibiting and inhibiting (the way we would, rightly so, with an adult living only through reading and books). Denying children the need to slate their hunger for sound, image, and touch is like denying their need to experiment with their body and sexuality. So let's recognize this. There is something digital incorporated into almost every "bay" object children come into contact with, and it is the component that attracts them most, because they were born with this sensory predisposition, the technology is inside them. But careful. After this demanding step we need to prepare for another one, equally important.

To have children grow up the best way possible, giving them tools to enjoy the world and protect themselves from its dangers, but above for an understanding of the reasons for this world we live in, rather than telling them off them and teaching them precaution and containment, we need to learn from them what it is that makes digital so pervasive, so immediate, so simple, that is to say "natural". Natural for us too, whether we like it or not. In short, we need to recognise, as a pioneer in this field Seymour Papert maintained, the very close relation between the digital dimension and the dimension of childhood. We can't help children with the dangers of their own immersion unless we ask them for help to get out of our own.

To get inside the "naturally" digital logic of children, that can we can only have if we think and conceptualize digital for what it is, we need (while maintaining our adult state) to become children, accepting the challenge of a phenomenon behind which there is a language (in the broad sense), an epistemology, and an anthropology, different from those our nobler (but obsolete) pedagogical tradition has handed down to us, and on which we continue to construct our schools and education – above all, scholastically speaking, by giving adolescents a "serious" education.

Instead, there is an urgent need for us to be more aware (though academic tradition makes it difficult) that the language, epistemology, and anthropology we still consider typically "educational" (almost obsessively focused on literacy) all converge on precisely the cultural canon that sciences, tarts, philosophy, and popular culture blatantly and dramatically critiqued in its very foundations, all through the twentieth century. If we took this path it wouldn't be difficult to admit the disintegration of several classical ancient and certainties took place last century because the arts, sciences, and mass culture accepted and promoted primal, "infantile", "illiterate" needs (to quote Alberto Abruzzese's provocations).

2. There are two philosophical premises (I think) we need to consider as fundamental and inalienable to digital experience: a pluralism and integration of codes that excludes any possibility of hierarchy, and an associative reticular logic excluding forms of superiority, recognized sequences, and linearity. These are not premises born with the digital. In a reading of Walter Ong's work we can consider digital experience as a sort of *precipitate* of the "mother tongue", having a different (but not totally opposite) texture and substance

to the "father language", which instead coincides with the written word, even better if printed. It is no coincidence in this approach that we touch on something Freudian and sacred, which Ong was well aware of.

What complexities there are hidden behind things we are induced to consider reductively, as too simple or too complicated!

The digital world has a primitive quality we need to be able to grasp for ourselves, as people of the world before being educators, to avoid a passive subjection to the action of its reality, its luminous liberating component, or being equally passive victims of its dark perturbing elements. This prerogative I am talking about was not born with the digital, obviously, but the digital, especially the digital we consume, has been capable of intercepting it, finding it out there in the world and universe, and amplifying it, making it social with its typical mechanism of viral vital contacts. Like the arts and sciences before it, like mass media culture before it, digital, coming later, has made its own a human propensity for breaking things down to see how they are made and making new things with the pieces left. Which really, is the most childish thing we can imagine today. As it was before, for the whole of the twentieth century. Let's look at an example of this, and go back in time a century.

To produce "total fusion in order to reconstruct the universe making it happy, by recreating it in its entirety"; give "skeleton and flesh to the invisible, the impalpable, the imponderable, the imperceptible"; find "abstract equivalents of all forms and elements in the universe" then combine them together, "according to the whim of our inspiration, forming complexes of plasticity that we will set in motion"; ensure that art fuses with experience in everyone and everything, guaranteeing "the dynamic expression, simultaneous, plastic, and noisy, of the universal vibration".

We can read these words in the first lines of *Ricostruzione Futurista dell'Universo*, a Manifesto by Giacomo Balla and Fortunato Depero. March 11, 1915.

It comes with a suggestion (how can we not admit it?) that with today's digitisation of the real we are witnessing another re-creation, more extensive, pervasive and successful than the Futurists hoped for, but not wholly different in the similar intent it pursues, aestheticizing if you like, but liberating in comparison with many of our classical chains, letting us melt down reality and reconstruct it with different, more dynamic and "capricious" characters. With sounds, with colours, with things. The Internet of Things, making everyday objects magic (like cars equipped with satellite navigators), making them move and breathe, and allowing us (if we make peace with our fears) to live in a Disney-like world. This reference to Walt Disney, a cornerstone of twentieth-century culture, allows us to develop a suggestion from our two "futurist

abstractionists" (Balla and Depero call themselves this in their Manifesto) in two directions.

The first invites us to understand, taking art and entertainment together, how overly rigid barriers between the cultures of childhood and adulthood, or between formal and informal levels of knowledge, have progressively eroded, with the consequent promotion of original forms of collaboration, dialogue, weaving, and cross-fertilisation between different elements. If we make the effort with Jay David Bolter to see in the scenario of contemporary media, marked by the presence of the web, a condition of "plenitude" that only a digital predisposition with its typical "mischievous anarchy" can navigate and use (everything mixed with everything else) then we can't help noting, again, that to deal with the world of experience as it is configured today, we must acquire the gaze of children before they are forced to acquire our own, currently limited, adult gaze.

The second direction invites us to look at pedagogical approaches to digital issues. If we take our cue, or momentum, first from the "playful", seriously "ironic" element refusing to be cancelled from our national cultural production of art, music and writing, and then secondly, from several significant events of public entertainment in twentieth century Italy, we can't help but note a "mischievous" attitude mirrored and diffused here too, gently subversive towards reality. If we acknowledge this "endowment" it would help with our aim of turning into children to fully understand the digital, and how it can contribute to shared regeneration (cultural, economic, social).

To succeed with the aim we need to take advantage of the "plenitude", having everything at hand without any kind of barrier between the elevated and the futile. To study, together or mixing and matching, Luciano Berio and Giacomo Balla, Paolo Poli and Gianni Rodari, Achille Campanile and Bruno Munari, Jacovitti and Umberto Eco, Dino Risi and Totò. This is the kind of study that would help us understand digital's positively "infantile" and liberating trait, the opportunities of future it offers everyone, here and now, even those worried about its dangers. I am convinced that if we could make an "epistemological break" like this, we would find things in the national pedagogical culture in harmony with the mischievous characteristic I have tried to highlight, things that in spite of everything offer energy and valid arguments for interrogating much of the respectable rhetoric that still prevails. I am thinking of a thread that goes from Maria Montessori to Loris Malaguzzi, and that includes testimonials from such diverse thinkers, all equally destabilizing, as Antonio Faeti, Francesco De Bartolomeis, and Egle Becchi.

If we were to make this effort I am certain it would bring oxygen to the today's currently grey and inert field of research and production on the overall themes of

education and how it is historically determined. Here events connected with mass globalisation of markets and ideas mean we feel the effect of a slow oscillation between cognitivist and positivist kinds of common sense (the latter is laying down the law today with the consensus of owners of the digital world, interested in a status quo between the apparatus of educational media and that of more worldly media). In the academy and politics there is little questioning of this condition, but the great danger is that probably our most fertile pedagogical and philosophical card for truly learning (with childlike sensitivity and aesthetics) to face the challenge of ongoing change is slipping through our fingers. The card I have in mind is that of pragmatic constructivism, not hypocritically verbose, but courageously practical.

3. So then, what to do?
On the level of comparing our viewpoints on ideas of education first we need to work in voicing this mischievous spirit open to every kind of assemblage, consider the degree to which it can be considered embedded in our cultural DNA, and continue to inform the "endless novel" Emilio Garroni refers to in *Pinocchio uno e bino*. If we accept this perspective it would at the very least introduce a measure of courage, a splash of liberating joy to the pedagogy of childhood, a conceptual area particularly marked today in Italy by mournful inhibitions, which we would be justified in thinking are caused by the demographic desertification we are going through, and the internal conflicts many adults suffer between the public exercise of virtue and private vice.

Looking at digital in a different way and taking children's "point of view" would help with our efforts of conceptual "resuscitation".

But then, connected with these different behaviours of children and adults in a reality the digital has totally recreated, there is the issue of educational (and self-educational) decisions that have to be made day after day, in the family, and at school.

Reversing our perspectives the way I have proposed (adults being children so they can help children become adults) at least in terms of mental attitude, is part of a tendency, albeit minor, in the national pedagogical culture. Until now though it has been used only marginally, and with some embarrassment, in connection with relations between children and the digital. We have to be stronger and overcome our internal barriers, and we have to do it now (we should have done it yesterday) if we want children to become protagonists and not victims of anthropological changes taking place.

Previously I said that pedagogy, both the official and spontaneous kind, is still hallmarked (almost obsessed) by principles of literacy. This makes us assume that written and textual culture, or rather, a fixed,

circumscribed, articulated culture, is a "superior" alternative to culture that is mobile, open, and fluid kind: abstract versus concrete, formal versus informal, order versus disorder. From an evolutionary standpoint it is like thinking we can overcome the mobile culture by doubling down strongly on the other. Recently, when the pandemic forced much of school experience to move from the physical world of classrooms to the liquid world online, several critics highlighted what was lacking in the digital compared with previous conditions, using this as a sort of paradigm. At this point a mischievous approach would be useful for instilling some doubts, and making the view acceptable that written and printed texts are not a superior alternative to the reticular, but a fundamental and specific expression of it, something to be gradually accomplished, in the right and, so to speak, "reserved" ways of educational action, but without any of us ever losing contact with the condition of sensory concrete knowledge texts are situated in, where sound, image, and doing, earn a plus marks, not a minus.

Foscolo is scholastic, Rossini is not. Can we still afford this? And in any case, is it working?