Living Up to the Surveillance Algorithm

When talking about surveillance and, to a larger extent, when talking about contemporary phenomena, I find it necessary to dwell with deeper considerations than let myself be transported by popular opinions. Oftentimes these considerations comes to rest on a sensitive spot, namely the hermetic system that has come to regulate Western societies, a system hindering a spontaneous flow among their citizens and hindering, in my view, the natural course of life. Most certainly I can identify the core problem of this hindering with the level of automation adopted by this system. At the base of contemporary debates then, the spring of my indignation is not so much the unfair distribution of capital or rights among humans, but it is rather the very automation set up to "take care" of them.

My nightmare scenario is an increasingly automated society in which humans passively vegetate under a system built to maintain a classifiable homogeneity within it. This process is already occurring under many instances of life, even in the most confrontational one, the intellectual. It is under this premise that, throughout this essay, I will strictly avoid to dilute my thinking under any of the set frameworks developed by the academic discourse. In this respect, this essay can only be understood under my personal feeling of distress in regards of automation. Since my coming of age in a middle class environment, this feeling has shaped into a willing to liberate myself from a destiny of enslavement under its dictum. This willing is essentially what got me to undertake a lifework which has consequently shaped my intellect in a different direction, or rather, in confrontation with the main-stream.

Keeping this in mind now, and coming back to the topic of this essay, by any means, when I think of surveillance in a broad historical context, I do not conceive anything unusual or utterly evil; it is a natural predisposition developed in ancient communities, a predisposition that has guaranteed their "health". At this point of time however, the level of automation integrated in the mechanisms of surveillance, as any other level of automation, is coming to annihilate the very human under such surveillance. Let me explain my point: enhancing the drive to socialize, a new surveillance infrastructure has created smart machines that automatically replace the activities of the surveying human and, more dramatically so, of us, the surveyed humans.

Let's think of life-logging for example. This cutting-edge technology offers to make any human immortal. It offers a human the possibility to completely record in full details the life he or she is experiencing. Along with the more bodily quantified-self technology, life-logging technology has the ability of registering the entire pool of perception of a human throughout his or her life. Okay, this is the fascinating promise of these

immortalizing gadgets, with all the privacy implications which has thus far engaged the public opinion and the scientific and artistic community hyped by such an opinion.

In this view however, my preoccupation is of a different nature. It lies not so much in the hegemophobic concerns rose by financial and ethical issues. As I said, my preoccupation is concerned with the total dismissal of any human agency. What happens in fact is that these life-logging and quantified-self technologies promote themselves as "effortless", meaning that thanks to a set of sensors and algorithms a human is no longer necessary in the process of capturing, organizing and retrieving his or her life data. All these processes are dealt through an automation that comes more and more to resemble Jiminy, the cricket always on Pinocchio's shoulder, constantly directing his life.

Beyond the popular concerns on the Fox and the Cat (Facebook and twitter?) convincing Pinocchio to plant his coins (in this case his data), in the Miracles Meadow, my main concern is here the actual Cricket (the smartphone?) who might in fact turn us Pinocchios not so much into humans but rather into puppets. If Pinocchio seems to me conceived in the late 19th century to get kids to go to school and be part of the new social, political and economical system of the recently unified Italy, Pinocchio 2.0 is even more so in our enlarged global system.

As humans becoming aware of this process of de-humanization, there are several stand points we can take. I guess the most popular and the most rewarding one, particularly for the contemporary artist, is to be openly confrontational against this increasingly threatening reality. In this case, the artist figure takes up the role of the activist. Rediscovering Marxism, the very art creation becomes a more or less manifested confrontation with a reality that seems however inevitable. Worst, this reality seems, at this time, to engulf in its very being the very critic that these activists manifest, turning them into semi-important yet powerless marionettes.

The exhausting fuss on popular topics like power and the capital to which even these marionettes partake, seems nothing in comparison with what is at stake, an actual replacement of the very faculty that makes humans so much different from other species, namely the ability to fulfill their own creative visions and consequently to generate hope and content worth sharing. The content the marionette human is in fact condemned to generate is a content dictated by heavily automatized surveillance infrastructures purposely created to generate their profile and to deprive them and outsourced them of their dead souls. Myriads of Pinocchios lay in the social media hospitals and the little and sour lymph remaining in their wood is constantly under monitoring.

How is a Pinocchio then to react on the situation? How can Pinocchio prevent ending up in a post-Funland coma? My idea here is simple and it perhaps resonate a distinction between a technology characterizing a particular era (the technology of the homo faber e.g. the digital technology exciting the makers and the source of automation) and the magical techniques that artistic and rather marginal individuals assemble in a bricolage fashion as a symptom. Theorists agree that the latter can work as a form of healing of the negative effects provoked by the former. Without getting into full details on this notion brought partially forth by heretic intellectuals such as Marshal McLuhan and Jacques Ellul, I will start from here to present what I have conceived as a technique which might in fact create a potential catalyst to counter strike the process of automation and the consequent dismissal of human agency. This catalyst technique consists in mimicking the very procedure of automation, it consists in humanly re-enacting the algorithm of the surveillance apparatus under a manually assembled apparatus through which human empathy and agency can spark even from within the former.