

Levinas's Ethics in the Age of Social Media: Faces on Facebook and the Face of the Other

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Abstract: Levinas's ethics is based on the direct and unmediated encounter with the Other. It is in the immediate presence of the Other, being face-to-face with the Other, that relationality and responsibility are born. Our ethical obligations, however immeasurable they may be in Levinas's ethics, always originate in this shared here-and-now. In today's digital and social media age where interpersonal encounters and social relationships have found many new forms and expressions, Levinas's direct and unmediated encounter is, however, increasingly replaced by digital profiles and digital representations, rendering the Other now addressable at any time and from anywhere. In this paper, I discuss what implications these technological developments have on Levinas's "concept" of the face of the Other. Drawing not only on Levinas's ethics but including Benjamin and his concept of the aura in the discussion as well, I argue that the unlimited representability characterizing today's social media platforms threatens the very possibility of otherness that Levinas sought to protect by translating the encounter with the Other into reproducible and computable data, thereby placing the encounter itself within a frame that privileges correspondence and likeness over otherness.

Keywords: Levinas, Zuckerberg, social media, the Other

Levinas' ethics begins with the encounter with the Other. It is in front of the Other, when facing the Other that a sense of responsibility is born and the infinite value of human life is first asserted. For good reasons, Levinas always envisioned this encounter as a direct, unmediated face-to-face meeting. Writing most of his work well before the advent of the internet, at a time when presence and being, immediacy and relationality were still closely tied and physical encounters still the norm, Levinas always thought of the Other as someone physically present: they could be someone one runs into in

the street, a stranger suddenly addressing one in the subway, or a foreigner unexpectedly knocking on one's door. It would be in the here-and-now of a shared time and space that the unpredictable and unfathomable alterity of the Other would be met. If Levinas's encounter with the Other is always steeped in uncertainty and unknowability, at least the here-and-now of the encounter—the presence of the Other facing me—is never put into question.

In today's digital world, our interpersonal relations have found many new forms and expressions not anticipated by Levinas. An increasing number of encounters are with people we shall never physically meet or know outside the digital platforms. Social media gives us access to billions of people from all over the world, and TikTok and YouTube facilitate encounters of a completely virtual nature. The Other is no longer necessarily standing before me, confronting me, addressing me, but is physically distant and possibly addressing no one in particular. Levinas's unity of time and space, the here-and-now of the encounter, has in our digital world been broken down into multiple temporal and spatial pieces, and the immediate presence of the Other is replaced by digital representations. We have moved from a world of presence to one of *tele-presence*¹—presence at a distance—and the Other has consequently become a *tele-Other*: someone whose face and features we know only from our screens—someone whose here-and-now is always elsewhere and displaced. But if these technological developments have undoubtedly changed and multiplied the types of encounters we may engage in, it is far less obvious what, if any, consequences these developments have on Levinas's ethics. Do our responsibilities for the tele-Other remain the same as to the Other? Are our ethical obligations unaltered by technological advancements and means of presentation? Are they identical across sites and platforms and regardless of the sort of encounters we are seeking? How far into data sets, data streams, and dating sites does the Levinasian ethics reach? Or, to put it slightly differently: What specific challenges do we confront when trying to translate and transplant the face of the Other from a stage of physical encounters to one of virtual encounters, from here-and-now to anywhere and anytime, from being present together to being tele-presented for one another? As the face of the Other is freed from previous spatial and temporal limitations, the question is how this freedom either distances us or ties and obligates us even further to Levinas's ethical teachings.

Shapeless Faces

It is impossible to define precisely what Levinas means by the face. No clear description or final analysis is ever offered despite this concept's

¹ See Paul Virilio, *Open Sky* (London: Verso Books, 2008).

pivotal role in Levinas's authorship. Levinas's face is a forever elusive face—a face we can never be certain how to face. This indefiniteness and elusiveness, this strange and ghostly quality, is by no means accidental or unintended—Levinas's ethics may even be said to depend on it: only to the extent that the face remains beyond description, beyond our grasp is the alterity of the Other respected in its true and complete otherness. The face is therefore what cannot be circumscribed by any words or reduced to any finite idea. The face overflows any concept we may have and transgresses any plastic image we may form.² For the same reason Levinas rejects any purely phenomenological approach to the face since phenomenology would lead us in the wrong direction and towards a finite object, a circumscribable thing, instead of the unlimited presence that Levinas seeks. In Levinas's own words:

I do not know if one can speak of a “phenomenology” of the face, since phenomenology describes what appears. So, too, I wonder if one can speak of a look turned toward the face, for the look is knowledge, perception. I think rather that access to the face is straightaway ethical. You turn yourself toward the Other as toward an object when you see a nose, eyes, a forehead, a chin, and you can describe them. The best way of encountering the Other is not even to notice the color of his eyes! When one observes the color of the eyes one is not in social relationship with the Other. The relation with the face can surely be dominated by perception, but what is specifically the face is what cannot be reduced to that.³

Beyond perception, beyond knowledge, the face is at once near and infinitely far away. It is near by being straightaway ethical—ethical without detours, without deferrals and delays—and it is distant by being irreducible to anything that appears before us and hence can be looked at and described: the color of the eyes, the shape of the nose, etc. What is specifically the face is therefore paradoxically what escapes any specification. The social relationship with the Other begins where perceptions and observations end. One must therefore relate to the face in a relationship without stable qualities and objects, one must encounter the Other without countering a single, identifiable thing. If this sounds ethereal, even ghostly, it is because Levinas seeks by all means to protect the face—protect the face from falling into the

² Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity* (Livonia: XanEdu Publishing, 1969), 51.

³ Emmanuel Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, trans. by Richard A. Cohen (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1985), 86.

trap of a form and thus protect the Other from the closure of the identifiable and the same:

The absolute experience is not disclosure but revelation: a coinciding of the expressed with him who expresses, which is the privileged manifestation of the Other, the manifestation of a face over and beyond form. Form—incessantly betraying its own manifestation, congealing into a plastic form, for it is adequate to the same—alienates the exteriority of the other.⁴

A face regarded as a form is also a face that can be described—and a face that can be described is a face that can be specified, identified, and governed: governed through representations, governed through reductions to the same. The passport photo, the identity papers, the ethnic or racial profile are the constant threats that press on alterity and ethics from all sides. Humanity is easily undressed and cut down to a single form and a few simple characteristics. Dehumanization commonly begins with a demystification that robs the Other of his ungraspable otherness to produce a single image: the Jew, the Arab, the Slav. It is against types and caricatures, against reductions and violent appropriations, that Levinas protects and preserves the face—and it is against a history of genocide and ethnic cleansing that Levinas's Other must remain fundamentally unknowable, always beyond any grasp. There is, in other words, both a sense of great urgency and great necessity behind Levinas's ethereal and transgressive Other. One must recognize very recent terrors and cruelties in the face that is not looked at, in the eyes without shape and color. And one must hear the sound of screams and wars and people hopelessly pleading for their lives in the very first word that the face according to Levinas speaks: "Thou shalt not kill."⁵ This order, this command places me before an infinite responsibility for the Other—a responsibility that is infinite because the alterity of the Other is itself limitless and infinite transgression.

Presence and Temporality

As previously mentioned, for Levinas, the encounter with the face always takes place in a direct face-to-face encounter. In *Totality and Infinity*, the face is described as a "living presence"⁶ and all his examples are founded on shared moments, shared presence in a shared space:

⁴ Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 65–66.

⁵ Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, 89.

⁶ Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 66.

Meaning is not produced as an ideal essence: it is said and taught by presence, and teaching is not reducible to sensible or intellectual intuition, which is the thought of the same. To give meaning to one's presence is an event irreducible to evidence. It does not enter into an intuition; it is a presence more direct than visible manifestation, and at the same time a remote presence—that of the other.⁷

But why, we may ask, is this this presence so crucial to Levinas? Can the Other not address us from a different space and at a different time? Can meaning not be produced and can we not feel responsible for those who are not presently here or not addressing us directly? And given that the face in its specificity is precisely not to be looked at, not to be dominated by perception, why must it then face us at all? One might very well get the feeling that someone not mentioned in these encounters, someone that Levinas seeks to distance himself from (namely, Heidegger), is in fact very much present at these face-to-face meetings—facing Levinas as he deliberately looks away and towards the Other. This suspicion is based not only on the easy parallel one might draw between Levinas's "living presence" and Heidegger's *Dasein*—being-there, being present in the world that we know from *Being and Time*⁸ and which precisely seeks to challenge conventional subject-object positions and dichotomies—but also, and more importantly, because of Heidegger's much later analysis and critique of representations and objectifications that we find in the essays "The Question Concerning Technology"⁹ and "The Age of the World Picture."¹⁰ If Levinas is determined to keep the Other in the "living presence" and to protect the face from perception and knowledge, it is possibly Heidegger who best explains why. As we read in "The Age of the World Picture":

Knowing, as research, calls whatever is to account with regard to the way in which and the extent to which it lets itself be put at the disposal of representation. Research has disposal over anything that is when it can either calculate it in its future course in advance or verify a

⁷ *Ibid.*, 66.

⁸ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* (New York: Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2008).

⁹ Martin Heidegger, "The Question Concerning Technology," in *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1977).

¹⁰ Martin Heidegger, "The Age of the World Picture," in *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1977).

calculation about it as past. Nature, in being calculated in advance, and history, in being historiographically verified as past, become, as it were “set in place”. Nature and history become the objects of a representing that explains. Such representing counts on nature and takes account of history. Only that which becomes object in this way is—is considered to be in being. We first arrive at science as research when the Being of whatever is, is sought in such objectiveness.¹¹

A frightful constellation is here described in which whatever only counts as being when forced into representation and objectification. It is through representation that being is placed before us, in front of us, as something calculable and explainable and hence knowable and governable. One might easily see from this passage why Levinas must insist that the face is irreducible to any plastic image and the Other must remain beyond any finite idea. The domestication and domination of all alterity that the modern sciences achieve through pictures and representations is the very opposite of the ethical and responsible stance Levinas is looking for. The disposal over anything in research, the “setting in place” of everything that is must be confronted and countered by an ethics that insists on the Other’s unrepresentable, unsettled, and unsettling alterity. The “living presence” of the face is thus in direct opposition to the deadly grip of modern sciences. And the here-and-now of the encounter as well as the straightaway ethical obligation opposes the always mediated, always pictured and represented scientific approach to the world. If the sciences need a certain distance in both time and space to create its maps, illustrations, diagrams, and measures, then the ethical relationship to the Other must be immediate, direct, without deferrals and delays. That is why the face is always near—so near, in fact, that its presence cannot be represented. But that is also why the face is at the same time distant—too distant to be fully unveiled and grasped. One might, with good reason, feel confused about these distances that appear contradictory and that seem primarily motivated and set in “place” to keep the face itself from being ever finally placed. Levinas puts his face either too close or too far from us to be able to ever fully see it. This is not only the case in *Totality and Infinity* but remains the case throughout his authorship. Levinas thus appears to involve us in a Freudian sort of “*fort/da*”-game¹² in which the “*da*,” the “here,” always motivates another “*fort*,” “gone”—and the “gone” is only reached so another return to “here” can be made. But this game is not played

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 126–127.

¹² Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1990).

for the sake of amusement or to tease the reader but to prevent calculable distances to turn into calculable faces and calculable Others. And the presence of the Other is indispensable for the very same reason since the present moment is precisely what is always too near, too immediate to be mediated and become the object of a distancing and stabilizing reflection – which also means that the present moment is what is always beyond theorization, always “*fort*” and ungraspable for a purely scientific regard. If Jacques Derrida, with good reason, has questioned and criticized the Western tradition of privileging presence over absence, sameness over difference, unity over plurality in what he has famously called “the Western metaphysics of presence,”¹³ then this grand critique can, however, only reach and include Levinas in an ambiguous and anything but straightforward way. While Levinas does indeed appear to “fit” the general description and undoubtedly privileges presence in his ethics, this siding with the present is not motivated by a search for neither unity or origin but, on the contrary, to safeguard the possibility of plurality and difference. The presence of the Other and our immediate responsibility for the Other – without deferrals, without delays – is precisely unmediated and undeferred in the very names of alterity and difference. Only by being always close, perhaps too close for our comfort, does the Other retain his immeasurable distance. Only by directly confronting us are we unsure precisely who and what we are facing. Differences are not stifled or eliminated but rather vitalized and multiplied in the living presence of the Other. If the modern sciences seek to encompass everything and include everyone in its calculations and representations then Levinas’s Other is the one, the many, the innumerable that get away. And if the modern sciences protect themselves against alterity through pictures and diagrams then Levinas’s encounters mean unimaginable and immediate risk and incalculable exposure. Because the Other is present, right here, in front of me, I can neither hide myself nor escape my responsibility. And because the Other is always different from me, he inevitably exposes me to this very difference. Difference is, in other words, the risk I take and must keep taking in my encounter with the Other.

Facing Aura

In addition to Heidegger’s unannounced visit at Levinas’s rendezvous with the Other, there seems to be yet another thinker who turns up unexpectedly. We are thinking here of Walter Benjamin whose concept of the aura and whose analysis of art in the essay “The Work of Art in the Age

¹³ Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2016).

of Its Technological Reproducibility” envisages, in important ways, many of the questions Levinas will be dealing with and to some extent repeat in his much later contemplations on the face.

What characterizes the work of art, writes Benjamin, is its here-and-now—its unique existence in a particular place: “Even the most perfect reproduction of a work of art is lacking in one element: its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be.”¹⁴ The experience of art—prior to its technological reproducibility—is invariably tied to presence, to the work of art being present before us. Our experience of art thus comes in the form of an encounter with the work in its absolute and irreducible uniqueness—being only here, being unquestionably singular. But however straightforward and univocal these initial remarks may seem, Benjamin soon complicates this encounter significantly. This happens when the idea of the aura enters the encounter. For although the aura is intimately linked and to some extent already described by the uniqueness and the here-and-now of the artwork, the aura is also, at the same time, what defies such a quick and facile identification. In one of the few passages where Benjamin faces the aura directly we get the following description:

What, then, is the aura? A strange tissue of time and space: the unique apparition of a distance, however near it may be. To follow with the eye—while resting on a summer afternoon—a mountain range on the horizon or a branch that casts its shadow on the beholder is to breathe the aura of those mountains, of that branch.¹⁵

The moment we as readers might think we have understood and grasped the aura is also the moment Benjamin takes any such assurance away. The aura is in the here-and-now, in the singular presence of things but it is also, we now learn, the apparition of a distance, however near it may be. What, in Benjamin’s example, begins as a very simple and straightforward image—the eye following a mountain range on the horizon and the shadow of a branch—is complicated and distanced in the same breath. For Benjamin might very well see the mountain and observe the branch but the aura is not what he *sees* or *observes* but what he *breathes*. The mountains and the shadow thus move at once closer and further away—melts into air—and the previously simple here-and-now of the experience, the here-and-now that founded and secured the encounter, is now, very suddenly, called a “strange

¹⁴ Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility,” in *The Work of Art in Its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2008), 21.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 23.

tissue of time and space." Any attempt of picturing the aura is hence made complex, if not obsolete. Benjamin's illustration shows emphatically just how difficult any illustration is. Or to put it in a slightly more Levinasian fashion: the aura overflows any plastic image and transgresses any solid idea. Being both breathable and present and yet the apparition of a distance, it is at once too close and too far away. And thus we return, now in the company of Benjamin, to a familiar—always unfamiliar—*fort/da*-game: the aura is right now, right here, but this here-and-now is the apparition of a distance, however near it may be. If Levinas's face should not be dominated by perception—although this always remains a possibility—Benjamin's aura *cannot* be dominated by perception for the very simple reason that we never know precisely where to look. Nothing is pointed out, nothing is settled and given but the distance itself. And what is this distance? Between who or what? From where to where? Benjamin doesn't tell us. A distance is presented, given to us readers that dissolves before we get a chance to truly receive it: a distance at a distance—a distance of a distance. No gift could possibly be lighter and further away. Something is measured beyond measure, something is given that cannot be received. From the very presence of the mountains and of the branch and its shadow, from an entirely familiar and unspectacular situation, a specter emerges and unfamiliarity begins to haunt the scene. Sameness is forcefully ruled out by this alterity—can nowhere be found or established—and together with the possibility of sameness disappears also the entire dreadful and deadening constellation that Heidegger described in "The Age of the World Picture," leading from images, graphs, and diagrams to the modern sciences' absolute domination. The aura's distance cannot be brought any closer. It is, in a strange sense, always already too close and distances itself incessantly. And we are, as readers, thus facing something Benjamin is facing—already so many distances!—as it moves across both vistas and words, landing nowhere and everywhere, at home and homeless in everything—moving like Kafka's Odradek through the house of language, pictures, and representations. If this imageless presence nevertheless does make enough of an impression to serve as an inspiration—or an exhalation—we suggest that the aura will also, decades after Benjamin, glide as a phantom through Levinas's ethical writings and make its strange apparition in his (non)description of the face. We call Levinas's face auratic because it, as Benjamin's aura, is the unique apparition of a distance, however near it may be—a presence that presents itself beyond any possible representation. And we call the face auratic because it is irreducible to any form, incomparable with any solid figure, ungrounded in any discernible shape. And, finally, we call Levinas's face auratic to bring it closer to the infinite depths of mysticism, spirituality, and religion that still resounds in the word "aura"—which is a spirituality and a

mysticism that we know played an important part in both Levinas's and Benjamin's thinking and writing in a continuously both settling and unsettling relation.¹⁶ For would Levinas's Other still be Other if we did not allow for any spiritual dimension in this otherness? Would the face still be a face if unadorned by the possibility of being also always more than a face, beyond and above anything that truly could be faced? The distances and differences are unending but they nevertheless seem engaged in an ethereal and spectral encounter where something is shared between the aura, the face, and the Other—something which stays in front of us, addressing us, by being beyond any fixed address and immeasurably far away.

Withering Faces

Among all these breaths and airy constellations we should not forget what Benjamin's text is more concretely and manifestly about what it is trying to bring to our attention—namely, that the aura and all of the abovementioned distances are disappearing: "One might focus these aspects of the artwork in the concept of the aura, and go on to say: what withers in the age of the technological reproducibility of the work of art is the latter's aura."¹⁷ The aura withers, and it withers at the dawn of a new era in which novel technological developments make images infinitely repeatable, infinitely reproducible, thus destroying the very uniqueness and singularity that used to characterize the work of art. It is in the shape of photography and especially film that the work's uniqueness is being erased and now replaced by completely identical images—one reproduction of a photograph or a film being identical to all other reproductions. Where there used to be difference there is now identity, and where the experience of art was once inseparable from the here-and-now of the encounter with the work, the new, reproduced image may be consumed anytime and anywhere. In Benjamin's own words:

Every day the urge grows stronger to get hold of an object at close range in an image, or, better, in a facsimile, a reproduction. And the reproduction, as offered by illustrated magazines and newsreels, differs unmistakably from the image. Uniqueness and permanence are as closely entwined in the latter as are transitoriness and repeatability in the former. The stripping of the veil of the object, the destruction of the aura, is the signature of a perception whose "sense for all

¹⁶ Gershom Scholem, *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin and Gershom Scholem, 1932–1940* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992).

¹⁷ Benjamin, "Work of Art," 22.

that is the same in the world" has so increased that, by means of reproduction, it extracts sameness even from what is unique.¹⁸

If the aura signifies the forever distant and ungraspable—the apparition of a distance, however near it may be—then the new era of mechanical reproducibility expresses a desire for the exact opposite: it wants clear and well-defined objects—and it wants them at close range: objects to be grasped, objects to be seized, objects to be consumed. There is no longer any interest in what makes an escape—only in what can be brought inescapably near. This firm grasp requires sameness guaranteed across time and space and not difference turning up at every moment, in every place. It has no interest in uninvited and unexpected alterity. And it requires that the presence of the object is therefore given in a form and at a time that is brought fully under control, fully exhausted, by a representation. Presence in both the Benjaminian and Levinasian sense—the presence of the aura, the presence of the face—is in the age of reproducibility therefore no longer a deep and incalculable presence, no longer a living or breathing presence, but a circumscribed and calculable presence rendered as flat as an image in an illustrated magazine. If Levinas explicitly warns us against dominating the face by perception and if Benjamin's aura is always too ethereal and distant to be ever fully perceived then the new reality Benjamin is describing places perception and the joys of perception above all other questions and concerns. With the technologically reproducible work, we have moved, in Benjamin's terminology, from cult value to exhibition value. This does not mean, of course, that all distances and all differences have suddenly been eliminated or have at once, magically disappeared, but it does mean that they are now playing a very different role: distances are no longer what enable and protect alterity but what establish the conditions for sameness to be produced. The face that is to be turned into an image must be drawn, photographed, or filmed from a certain distance—a distance that the final image will necessarily keep. But this distance remains an always calculable and governable distance, always the "right" and ideal distance, to make perception as easy and complete as desired. Stripped of the aura, stripped of living presence, the one facing the camera must surrender to this "right" distance by which all other distances and escape routes are closed. And what is "right" from the perspective of the apparatus, the film camera, the recording device, is therefore easily experienced as problematic and false from the perspective of the one portrayed. To quote the Italian playwright and actor Luigi Pirandello:

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 23–24.

The film actor ... feels as if exiled. Exiled not only from the stage but from his own person. With a vague unease, he senses an inexplicable void, stemming from the fact that his body has lost its substance, that he has been volatilized, stripped of his reality, his life, his voice, the noises he makes when moving about, and has been turned into a mute image that flickers for a moment on the screen, then vanishes into silence ... The little apparatus will play with his shadow before the audience, and he himself must be content to play before the apparatus.¹⁹

And as Benjamin continues:

The situation can also be characterized as follows: for the first time—and this is the effect of film—the human being is placed in a situation where he must operate with his whole living person, while forgoing its aura. For the aura is bound to his presence in the here and now. There is no facsimile of the aura.²⁰

In other words, estrangement and self-alienation appear to be the actor Pirandello's experience—a feeling of otherness stepping onto the film set, taking his place. Yet this otherness is hardly the sort neither Benjamin nor Levinas can endorse or seek to protect since it is an otherness experienced purely as a loss, appearing only as a void, as nothingness, as annihilation. It is an otherness that is, in other words, the very end of the possibility of otherness, Pirandello having now been reduced to a flickering image, a moving shadow to be played with and infinitely reproduced and re-projected in movie theatres. Pirandello can no longer be Other to this image that from now on describes and defines him. And what would be of special significance and especially troubling for Levinas, would be the fact that Pirandello's sense of otherness is one with which he is left utterly alone. Performing before an apparatus instead of an audience, surrendering his image to be played with by others—in other spaces, at other times, in other situations and circumstances—Pirandello is not only exiled from his sense of self but also from his social bonds and connections. His image has taken his place in the encounter with others. Others will see his face, they will look at his features but this will no longer be a face that presents or encourages social

¹⁹ Quoted by Benjamin in *ibid.*, 31.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

responsibilities and commitments. His face will, as Pirandello states, flicker for a moment on the screen, then vanish into silence. And in this brief "encounter," before the movie is over, before the next movie begins, this image, this face, will be completely dominated by perception. If, as Levinas states, "the best way of encountering the Other is not even to notice the color of his eyes,"²¹ one can be certain that the color of an actor's eyes, the shape of his nose, his chin, his forehead, etc., will be precisely what a movie audience will focus its attention on. If pure looking, pure perception is the very opposite of an ethical relationship, the very opposite of what Levinas means by the face, by an ethical subject, then the actor Pirandello, the man posing and acting in front of the camera, is without both a face and a place in Levinas's ethics. And how then should this flickering image, this ghostly appearance be able to utter the words that according to Levinas are the very first words the face of the Other speaks: Thou shall not kill?

The Face in Facebook and Social Media

According to Mark Zuckerberg, Facebook was built to accomplish a social mission, namely, to make the world more open and connected.²² This openness and connectedness is, for Facebook as well as for other social platforms, based on a basic idea of sharing—Facebook's users posting their thoughts and ideas, their joys and sorrows, pictures and videos of their dates and dinners with other users who are thus constantly and immediately informed about the doings and whereabouts of their friends and relatives. As Zuckerberg explains:

We built Facebook around a few simple ideas. People want to share and stay connected with their friends and the people around them. If we give people control over what they share, they will want to share more. If people share more, the world will become more open and connected. And a world that is more open and connected is a better world.²³

As stated here, Mark Zuckerberg is, in fact, not only on a social mission, but also on an ethical one: the very aim of Facebook being ultimately to improve the world and our human conditions. The logic is straightforward and unidirectional: sharing leads to openness and connectedness, and

²¹ Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, 85.

²² George Beahm, *The Boy Billionaire: Mark Zuckerberg in His Own Words* (Evanston: Agate Publishing, 2012), 55.

²³ *Ibid.*, 67.

openness and connectedness leads to a better world. There is, in other words, a direct and, for Zuckerberg, unquestionable relation between the quantity of posts and the quality of the world: pictures and posts of all sorts are all equally contributing to making our world better.

But it should also already be clear from Zuckerberg's statement that what he means by sharing and by connection, what he aims at with his social, if not ethical, mission is substantially different from what Levinas intends and hopes to achieve using quite similar terms. Between, on the one hand, Zuckerberg's social mission and his "sharing" and "staying connected" and, on the other hand, Levinas's idea of a social relationship an abyss opens that cannot be traversed by the similarity of terms alone. If staying connected inevitably implies a distance that is overcome, a connection that is kept despite distances in time and space, then Levinas does not so much seek to overcome any distances as to acknowledge the distances as well as differences that the presence of the Other always presents. I do not "stay connected" with the Other since the alterity of the Other will always be beyond me, however near they may be. And my responsibilities do not end but rather begin from this insight—the Other's alterity being what both calls and obligates me.²⁴ If my connection to the Other is, in this sense, always a "bad" or "scratchy" connection, it is because I can never be quite certain precisely what I share with the Other nor how any sharing indeed may be possible. The otherness of the Other precludes any facile answers to this question. There is no sharing that can be secured or enhanced by the simple exchange of words, posts, and messages—no connections that are guaranteed by prolific communication alone. Ethical obligations can for Levinas therefore not depend on or wait for a shared and connected world to emerge but must be prior to and more fundamental than any sought after or found connections. As he explains in *Totality and Infinity*—here with Heidegger's philosophy in mind—ethics, i.e., the relation of the I to the Other, comes before ontology and Being²⁵—which is also to say: I am always already obligated to the Other. What the Other thinks, means, or expresses brings me neither closer to nor further away from my ethical obligations. I am not waiting for any access, any opening, any shared or shareable perspective, any knowledge or information in order to measure or establish the extent of my responsibility. My responsibility is, in Levinas's ethics, always immediate, unmediated, unlimited—too close to me, too intimately related to me, to ever be the object of knowledge, perception and information.

Zuckerberg states he wants an open world, and he does not hesitate to equate this open world with a world that is also better. It appears to be

²⁴ Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, 89.

²⁵ Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 67.

almost a truism to Zuckerberg that openness and improvement of our world go together. One might, nevertheless, wish to ask precisely what he means by this openness: openness to whom? Openness for what? What closure is Zuckerberg's grand clearing opposing? What border is it crossing or demolishing? What is it making room for?

If we return to Benjamin's analysis of art and images in the age of their technological reproducibility, we are reminded that the unique presence of any individual and of anything is what the infinite possibility of reproduction destroys. Instead of uniqueness we get sameness and a sense and desire for all that is the same in the world.²⁶ This desire is expressed in the appetite for objects, the urge to get hold of objects at close range in the form of images and their reproductions. Everywhere sameness is thus extracted to present us with perfectly graspable and consumable objects, stripped of the aura, the veil, the differences and distances that previously hindered such swift and easy consumption. And it was for Benjamin the actor Pirandello who best expressed the experience of this deprivation— who gave the loss of aura and of uniqueness a (in)human face: surrendering himself to the apparatus, surrendering to the production of images, to the production of duplicates and likenesses, Pirandello himself was exiled from his sense of self, estranged from his own individual and singular being. Such were in Benjamin's words and analysis the consequences and human costs of infinitely reproducible images. If the invention of photography and film constituted in one sense therefore an important technological breakthrough— indeed an "opening" to a new world of both information and entertainment— then this very same development appeared in another and strictly untechnical, unscientific, and uniquely individual sense as an abrupt closure: turned into an image, turned into an object, Pirandello was estranged from his own here-and-now, deprived access to his own living presence. Exhibition value came at a personal price. The grand clearing that photography and film made and meant in the domains of transmissions and communication left something behind and outside the equation— something too ethereal and immeasurable to ever be shot and captured on film.

But the question that must concern us here, however, is no longer about the openings and closures produced by film but about Zuckerberg's vision of an increasingly open world. How much— or perhaps how little— of Benjamin's analysis remains true in our digital world and is still relevant to an analysis of today's digital platforms? And of even greater importance to us: How does this either include or exclude Levinas's conception of the face, the ethical subject, and the presence of the Other from these same platforms? What openings or closures are we facing?

²⁶ Benjamin, "Work of Art," 23–24.

From a purely quantitative perspective there is no doubt that today's social media have only increased—even exponentially—the production and reproduction of images. It is precisely this immediate access to a baffling number of images and videos of all types—available at any moment from anywhere—that is one of the great achievements of the digital revolution. Another important breakthrough, more specifically relating to social media, is the possibility for users to produce and share their own content, to create their own pictures and videos and make them instantly available to others. If Pirandello was forced to play a game determined by others—the filmmaker, the producer, the cameraman, etc.—then many of today's Instagrammers and prosumers are simultaneously actors and filmmakers and producers of their own work. This is undoubtedly at least part of the empowerment of social media users that Zuckerberg refers to in the previously quoted remark: “If we give people control over what they share, they will want to share more.”²⁷ But behind this apparent mastery now given to the users lies an unspoken condition and constraint—possibly too obvious to Zuckerberg to even deserve mentioning: control over one's own images and posts is granted only on the condition that Facebook may harvest all the data.²⁸ Together, the vacation photos, the birthday videos, the party images, and their many likes and comments form an individual profile, drawing an image of the user which Facebook immediately profits from by selling data to advertisers, statisticians, political parties, or political interest groups.²⁹ This datafication carried out by algorithms provides Facebook with an incredibly precise picture of all its users, their likes and dislikes, their joys and sorrows, their political ideas or inclinations. The users of Facebook and other social media are thus “free” to express themselves and in complete control over the content as long as this freedom serves Facebook's commercial interest and can be used in a commercial game to which the users have no access, no knowledge, and absolutely no control. Is this the opening Zuckerberg is talking about? Is this the path he wants us to take towards a better and more connected, more transparent world? If Pirandello felt estranged in front of the film camera, felt he was being robbed of his very living presence, today's social media users have good reason to feel every bit as estranged—ostracized and exiled from their own algorithmically produced profiles, estranged in front of the digital apparatus. In this sense, social media has only tightened the grip of both things and people that Benjamin already described in regard to photography and film. And if this desire for graspable objects leaves no room for the aura

²⁷ Beahm, *Boy Billionaire*, 67.

²⁸ Nicholas Carah, *Media and Society: Power, Platforms, and Participation* (London: SAGE Publications Ltd., 2021), 190–191.

²⁹ David Croteau, William Hoynes, and Clayton Childress, *Media/Society: Technology, Industries, Content, and Users* (London: SAGE Publications Ltd., 2022), 366–367.

and has no interest in what cannot be measured, calculated, and immediately turned into harvestable data, then not only the aura but also Levinas's Other (and hence Levinas's ethics) would be equally incompatible with today's social media and denied access to the platforms in advance. The very alterity that Levinas sought to safeguard, the irreducibility of the Other to knowledge and concepts, to perception and calculations, is an alterity that must be either forced into sameness or bypassed and completely ignored. The uncertainty that always accompanies Levinas's encounter with the Other and the risk we thereby must take with the Other, in front of the Other—the risk of incomprehension, the risk of immeasurable distances and incalculable differences—is a risk social media have no financial incentive, and therefore see no reason, to take.

Wherein lies then social media's social mission? What encounters are we left with? What faces? The openness Zuckerberg advertises is closing in on us from all sides and leaves us with no encounters and no social roles to play that are not already scripted and coded and thus predetermined and predestined by the social media themselves. Social platforms may very well free us to say what we want but the overall script remains written by others and hidden from view—guarded as a sacred text in impenetrable digital vaults. We thus find ourselves confronted with a new distance that has nothing in common with neither Benjamin's nor Levinas's distances—the distances of the aura, the distances to the Other, however near they may be—but is the distance in the form of a digital abyss that separates us from our own data, dissociates us from our own profiles and bars us from knowing how these data and profiles are used. And does this distance not also alter the conditions for relating to others that we meet on social media—disconnect us in our very search for connections, friendships, romance, exchanges on social media platforms? Can we completely disregard how these encounters are framed and how they are used? Can we be present to each other despite the secretive calculations and operations that underlie and undergird our online presence? If Levinas's encounter was always a direct, unmediated encounter, it was to protect this encounter from ever becoming an object, a thing among things, an image among images. It is where the object dissolves, where perception goes blind, where knowledge is powerless that Levinas's ethics begins.

Conclusion

As we have argued in this paper, Levinas's emphasis on presence—the presence of the face, the presence of the Other—is intimately linked to the very possibility of otherness to emerge: the here-and-now of the encounter being the risk I take with the Other, in their nearness, exposing me

immediately and without delay or any possible retreat to their radical and immeasurable alterity. An ethical encounter with the Other must therefore be an unmediated encounter, always beyond representation, outside any stable or stabilizing images that would render the Other perceptible, knowable and thus reduce their otherness to sameness. If such reductionism is already visible in the media of photography and film, as analyzed by Benjamin, then today's social media has only driven this reductionism further, transforming our human interactions into digital data and digital profiles, translating our communication into calculable, harvestable, and salable information. The connectedness and openness that social media promises their users is thus a connectedness deeply embedded in commercial interests and an opening designed to generate profit. Placed on this stage, Levinas's Other is thus without any place, and the face of the Other must disappear among the billions of faces on Facebook.

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