

Juan Carlos Barron Pastor\*

## Living Out of Body

*I will be everyone or no one. I will be the other  
who I am without knowing it, who has seen  
that other dream, my waking. Who judges it,  
resigned and smiling.*  
J. L. Borges (1964)

*Blade Runner Blues*  
Vangelis, 1982<sup>1</sup>



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**I**t seems like, when we connect to the everyday devices that we use to explore cyberspace, we temporarily leave the place our bodies actually occupy. Where do we go? What happens while we are away?

The many changes we have experienced, accelerated by the pandemic, include the growth of cyberspace and the time we spend there. We know that media systems provide the context for a society's remote communications, and, starting this year, their scope has expanded in the new normality that looms over us. A new normal, in which we must maintain physical distance from one another, in which society reproaches verbal interactions and non-essential closeness, and where the mandate is to make contact with only a few people, in a kind of social bubble. Simultaneously, we are encouraged to conduct our day-to-day activities on different digital platforms designed to maintain and expand our living, working, learning, and consumer experiences, among others.

Thus, without overlooking how the inequalities and forms of violence related to the digital gap have exploded, society has embraced remote forms of communicat-

ing and the emergence of a kind of enhanced reality. With growing regularity, we leave our physical location to immerse ourselves, for moments or for long hours, in our remote communication devices. There we encounter what others have made public on the various platforms that channel our social interactions and keep abreast of our remote conversations. In doing so, we transpose certain aspects of our social conduct onto a mediated terrain where we seem to merge, or at least meld, with our machines. As this takes place, we fashion a kind of digital self, or avatar, united across different devices that serve as gateways to like-minded ideological groups, while we stereotype, apparently with ever greater inflexibility, those we identify as "others."

Perhaps we are hybridizing and turning into cyborgs, as Donna Haraway anticipated,<sup>2</sup> leaving our physical families behind and creating new families based on our affinities. But we are apparently unable to leave behind the antagonisms of the false dualities she warned of. When we leave our physical body and focus our attention on digitalizing our thoughts, emotions, and even images and sequences of images of our bodies, it raises questions of the kind posed by Cornelius Castoriadis,<sup>3</sup> since it is unclear if, as we absent ourselves, we recreate ourselves individually,

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emerging as a performance, or if we immerse ourselves in a stream of depictions unmoored from the tangible. What happens or what becomes of us as we witness, feed, or interact with a fragment of the full potential of communication in cyberspace?

In what can ambiguously be called the modern era, the group of social actors who functioned as brokers of remote communication receded from view, as they produced all sorts of performances and cultural products, and at the same time decided what was disseminated. But it was always something that was made known to us, that entertained us, or that was sold to us. Something that allowed us to distinguish what was potentially newsworthy and what was not, within the devices of the media system. As Jesus Martin Barbero explained, the intangible gained increasing relevance and as viewers we became involved as actors, feeding the programming spaces established by certain dominant actors in the media system.<sup>4</sup> Different groups engaged in this dynamic, with their presence gradually becoming less marginal, but maintaining their discordant or countercultural nature, producing richer, more compelling content.

However, as Slavoj Žižek has noted,<sup>5</sup> in cyberspace everything seems accessible, but mediated through oligopolistic companies with clear forms of vertical organization whose overriding goal is the subordination of societies and governments. It is paradoxical how, as several authors continue to applaud society's "appropriation" of media content, what proliferate are mechanisms for capture, seizure, and appropriation of experience by practically all the digital platforms through which we interact with cyberspace.

We are in the midst of what some authors, like Castells,<sup>6</sup> have called the information society; Schiller,<sup>7</sup> digital capitalism; and Lyon<sup>8</sup> and Zuboff,<sup>9</sup> the surveillance

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society or capitalism. Platforms based on digital algorithms, commonly known as social networks, promote the growth of content and cultural products produced by their users. Networks connect users who misinform one another, entertain one another, and market things or use themselves as merchandise. This occurs directly, when someone posts their own memes, photographs, or videos showcasing their skills doing something like a trendy dance, telling jokes, or performing challenges in their leisure time, or indirectly, as part of databases for processes of marketing and/or political control and espionage.

Thus, as mentioned above, we have gone from resisting the entertainment products offered by the media system's leading players to entertaining ourselves with something that starts at the margins but ends up being mainstream, apparently increasingly devoid of substance. This may be because the media system continues to operate with the portrayal of the anomalous and the concealment of the commonplace. However integral to the culture our videos and posting our everyday experiences become, even if we film them with a camera on the nape of our neck to show what we cannot see, the commonplace and the private, more visible than ever, appear, contradictorily, to disappear, like our very presence.

We seem to leave our physical location, to cease being where we are; our body stays there, but our presence has gone elsewhere, like when one engages in phubbing.<sup>10</sup>

For Niklas Luhmann,<sup>11</sup> a program defines the criteria for proper attribution of values in a code. Given that society is the universe of all possible communications, those that originate in the media system are subject to the dictates of social processes of selectivity (what can be published or made public and what cannot), that seek to augment the abnormal (and thereby conceal normality). A programmatic field would be a set of such programs. Thus, programmatic fields determine what happens, what entertains, what sells, and what connects (see Barron Pastor).<sup>12</sup> Paradoxically, in every act in which something is reported in the media—in other words remotely—, some anomalous, peculiar, or distinctive aspect must be amplified, underscored, or highlighted. The normal, the commonplace, is not only devoid of media appeal, but actually, if Luhmann is correct, it is not even reportable.

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Our day-to-day life is increasingly immersed in our gadgets. And what the other person receives, at the other end of the mediation, is not our presence, but a performance of oneself, previously digitized, encoded, captured, transmitted, and broadcast to the most unexpected places. Practically anywhere someone who has “friended” us is logged onto the platform of digital algorithms, but also on the screens of people we never wanted in our lives, like an analyst for some company or espionage agency.

We leave, but somehow, we remain. As an example, we can consider any of our virtual sessions, which have proliferated in the pandemic: we go online, and the stress is almost instantaneous: Can people hear me? Can they see me? How do I look? What in my surroundings can others see? Do my appearance or my surroundings look professional? An online meeting is much more exhausting than an in-person one. When someone freezes, we don't know if it is our connection or theirs; sometimes we forget to switch on the microphone, and other times we leave it on when it shouldn't be and unwanted sounds leak in: music, street vendors, ambulances, family conversations. Make sure the video is on when it's your turn, but above all make sure it's not when you use the restroom or change clothes.

When a virtual session ends on one of our devices, or if we are multitasking during a virtual session, we can check other platforms with a simultaneous feed of the most diverse information: e-mails, photographs, videos, memes, voice messages, sentences rendered incomprehensible because the automatic spelling corrector was activated or there was no automatic corrector. We may also inadvertently digitalize something from our habitat, for example, taking a picture or writing a text, we begin a process that we repeat several times a day: upload to your social networks-share-wait for reactions-react to the reactions-repeat-amplify-hide. Wait a while... Nothing has happened; repeat.

During the pandemic, life is detached from physical location and personal presence. Many of us have stayed

away from our workplaces, our public spaces, stadiums, parks, fairs and public celebrations, mass festivities. Curfews were imposed, alcohol sales were curtailed, anyone deemed offensive to others was silenced, and even a president was censored. We are witnessing the application of an unprecedented psycho-political shock beyond the wildest imaginings of Adler, Orwell, or Nourse. Vast swathes of the economy have been destroyed, our habits have been modified substantially, the world as we knew it has been demolished, and we still don't know what is taking its place. We tire of being on one platform and go on another for a change. Some countries are going through processes resembling a political restoration of liberal technocracy; in others, nationalism is resurgent with renewed hatred and phobia; religions are invigorated as spaces that build values and validate their respective local leaders. Our bodies, our thoughts, our emotions, and our experiences are being captured and used by our captors-mediators for purposes of commercial advantage and political control.

All that and more is happening while we are absent.

Will we ever be present again? How will we spend time together? Will we know how to organize so that the new normal is not an imposition, but our own creation? ■■■

## Notes

- 1 A piece to accompany the reading of this text.
- 2 Donna Haraway, “A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century,” in *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991).
- 3 Cornelius Castoriadis, *Imaginaría de la sociedad* (Barcelona: Tusquets, 1975).
- 4 Jesus Martin Barbero, *De los medios a las mediaciones. Comunicación, cultura y hegemonía* (Mexico City: Gustavo Gili, 1987).
- 5 Slavoj Žižek, *Viviendo en el final de los tiempos* (Madrid: Akal, 2015).
- 6 Manuel Castells, *La era de la información. Economía sociedad y cultura* (Madrid: Alianza, 1996).
- 7 Dan Schiller, *Digital Capitalism: Networking the Global Market System* (Boston: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1999).
- 8 David Lyon, *Surveillance Society: Monitoring Everyday Life* (Buckingham, UK: Open University Press, 2001).
- 9 Shoshana Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism* (New York: Public Affairs, 2019).
- 10 Phubbing is the act of ignoring someone to focus one's attention on one's mobile phone.
- 11 Niklas Luhmann, *La sociedad de la sociedad* (Barcelona: Herder/Universidad Iberoamericana, 2007).
- 12 Juan Carlos Barron Pastor, *Sociocibernética crítica: Un método geopolítico para el estudio estratégico del sistema de medios de comunicación no presencial en América del Norte* (Mexico City: CISAN-UNAM/Universidad de Zaragoza, 2018).