

Those who love us never really leave us.

(J.K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*)

Entangled Identities

It was at the beginning of January 2018 that my attention was accidentally drawn to a short-story, "Concession Stand Girl", posted online as a response to another short-story, "Cat Person", published previously in *The New Yorker*, and followed by huge ovations. Both short-stories dealt with the same plot – a 20-year old female student is approached by a 34-year old man at the cinema shop where she works part-time, and then their interaction unfolds – seen from the woman's (the original one, "Cat Person"), respectively from the man's perspective (the response, "Concession Stand Girl").

I shall not go too deeply into the qualitative details of the two short-stories. Much more I was struck by the crudeness of the plot, the blunt mediocrity of the characters and the manner in which their mutual development evolves purely on a virtual level, initially, without a direct face-to-face discussion. The plot consists of a random chain of interactions between two strangers; the speed at which they get involved into sexual activity is, in my probably very crude vision, astonishing. The characters have no depth, no personal thoughts moving beyond the very immediate reality, no dreams and apparently hardly any past to speak of. Not very familiar with US-American standards of life, apart from Hollywood movies and my own observations during two 2-week trips to Ann Arbor, Oklahoma and New York, I did what I usually do when I feel confronted with situations which seem important, yet I feel I myself cannot grasp the clear dimensions of the facts:

anthropologizing, de-anthropologizing, re-anthropologizing, culminating in over-anthropologizing ... that is, I started thinking about what makes us human, and about what exactly had created this effect of “surreal inhumanity” in the stories and the lifestyles they depicted.

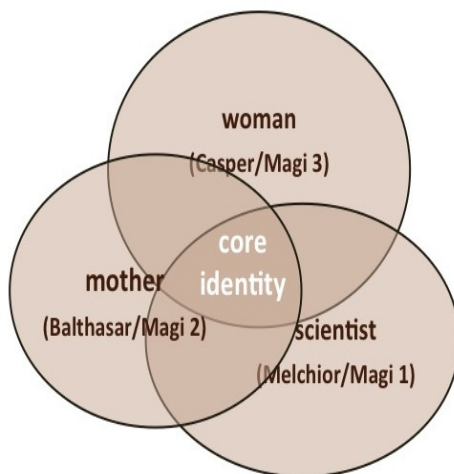
Rather than looking at the embedding of the individual within its respective social system of reference, the anthropological perspective strives to take into account the individual as a system of reference in itself – and its relations to its environment as a departure point in the assessment of historical tides. As such, because it refers to the fundamental individual and its coordination within the immediate or mediated environment, the anthropological focus resides in the forthcoming analysis both on the individual behavior and on its social intertwining, particularly in terms of establishing one-to-one meaningful interactions – also known as “relationships”. It was not so much the sociocultural background, I intuited, but rather a type of human perception and processing of reality and then the externalization of the results which came across to me as disturbing, haunting, dysfunctional – in the two short-stories, “Cat Person” and “Concession Stand Girl”. The parallel movement of alienation and extreme immediate intimacy, increasingly visible in dating practices all over the world, but most prominently experienced in affluent, post-industrialized, service-based societies (USA, Japan, Australia, Canada, European Union) emerges from two major sources: on the one hand, the illusionary benefits of instant gratification; on the other hand, the delusional waves of continuous self-validation by means of external attention – futile and superficial, but constant. Eventually, the virtual reality becomes the reality itself for those indulging into it. The very fabric of human existence is embedded within a profound sense of belonging, and the more we distance ourselves from it, the more the illusion of strength and invincibility within the walls we had surrounded ourselves with, emotionally, mentally, spiritually, takes over our necessities. Role-models of fiercely independent individuals, incredibly, irresistibly charismatic in their

untouchable beauty are widely promoted by mainstream media, via characters carefully constructed, thus fully obliterating the loneliness and isolation, the slow inner death which such a lifestyle involves.

The ideas outlined in this volume are the result of a three-year empiric-phenomenological fieldwork (summer 2013-summer 2016) in the slippery domain of virtual inter-gender interactions as well as in-depth literature research on new media, gender/masculinity studies and entertainment industry; during the evaluation phase (summer 2016-summer 2019), the focus has shifted from an international perspective more specifically towards Japan. Triggerred by the lecture of those two short-stories mentioned previously, the data gathered during the fieldwork has been contextualized and theoretically evaluated, and eventually transformed into critical articulation.

Nowadays, it is an open secret that online interactions represent the main way for men and women to socialize, to get to know each other and, if circumstances allow it, to pursue some sort of romantic relationship. As it is described in great detail throughout the forthcoming chapters, a consistent tendency from real-life inter-human interactions towards the cyberspaces which provide the illusion of safety through anonymity and disengagement is painfully observable in the last ten to fifteen years in all affluent societies of late modernity – and generously proliferating worldwide. While it takes into account the various mechanisms which have been contributing to this phenomenon, the current book brings in the latter half into the spotlight the role played by fluctuating paradigms in constructing and representing masculinity, in a dramatic combination of domestic developments in Japan with international influences no longer sanctioned or filtered by official policies. It takes under the microscope the dialectical interplay of power, (cultural) consumption and state-driven reproduction politics, and suggests some possible measures towards a more social-friendly future of the digital universe and of the challenges masculinity is facing currently, in a global perspective.

The dialectics of the human being involves three fundamental levels, as identified by psychoanalysis and largely adapted by the *Neon Genesis Evangelion* franchise in Japan (explicitly detailed in episode 13 of the original TV anime series, 1995-1996: the Magi-System Super-Computer designed by dr. Akagi Naoko upon her own identity): the female actor appears as a layered combination of motherhood, (sexual) femininity and social citizen.



Dr. Akagi Naoko's Magi-System Super-Computer (my own design)

This can be transposed, more largely, for the male element: fatherhood, (sexual) masculinity and social citizen. They are interrelated, and they are the foundation of the Judeo-Christian Western modernity, with its values of respect, responsibility, loyalty, resulting in that sense of competitiveness, progress and efficiency which have been constituting the major drives – and triggers – of recent history (Raymond Williams' *The Long Revolution*, 1965). Jean-Paul Sartre's "L'homme est libre" (*L'existentialisme est un humanisme*, 1970) existential paradigm sees individual freedom and individual liberation as well as empowerment as absolute values above the stability and sustainability of the "system", while capitalist dynamics pushes

scientific-technological development forward based on the illusions of freedom and equality. However, as Hannah Arendt (*The Human Condition*, 1955) repeatedly points out, freedom for its own sake is conducive to loneliness in isolation, and in the fundamental distinction between loneliness and solitude the acceptance of one's own transience is found: a complex juxtaposition of self-love and self-esteem, comprised of honest self-evaluation, self-respect and self-compassion.

For decades, scholars have been mentioning the dangers of praising individual achievements and honors over the immediate (family) or mediate (community) embedding, highlighting the unpredictable effects urbanization and industrialization, the two main components of modernization, have had on the perception and processing of the individual itself and of its surroundings. In *The Transformation of Intimacy: Sexuality, Love and Eroticism in Modern Societies* (1992), Anthony Giddens sees the necessity of love as a self-confident engine of individuality within the stream of constant change and progress which is the world as a mechanical – and recently, virtual – entity. In various books (*Postmodern Ethics* 1993, *Liquid Modernity* 2000, *Community: Seeking Safety in an Insecure World* 2001, *The Individualized Society* 2001, *Liquid Love: On the Frailty of Human Bonds* 2003), Zygmunt Bauman extensively analyzes the deep and mostly negative impact of urban isolation and the impossibility to return to a highly idealized past of pastoral family harmony and communal support and understanding. In fact, premodern communities, in their desperate efforts to survive and thrive in a lawless, chaotic context, would often apply brutal methods to ensure their own protection as a community, whereas the individual more often than not was crushed under the prioritization of the group to which it belonged. Current times experience the rise of the completely isolated individual, the “self-sufficient individual”, gradually inescapably wired in the virtual world with a life mostly controlled by digital devices which replace the contact with other human beings. Research shows, though, that daily