

## **Biopolitical Incursions of Self-Fashioning and Revaluing Life through Social Media in the Context of the War between Russia and Ukraine\***

Oana Șerban

University of Bucharest, Faculty of Philosophy

[oana.serban@filosofie.unibuc.ro](mailto:oana.serban@filosofie.unibuc.ro)

**Abstract:** This paper tackles the role of social-media in performing biopolitical incursions into the so-called “immunization” process that harmed communities and collateral victims of the Russian-Ukrainian war deal with, in overcoming abusive actions policies applied by aggressors. My argument is that within the era of post-truth, social-media transgresses a biopolitical turn through which affected communities and their supportive actors create a new social contract based on preventing violence, combating fake-news, and increasing real interest for truth beyond political narratives and mediatic appetite for drama. The first part of the article deals with the Nietzschean roots of self-fashioning and self-constitution practices that are easily commutable into the virtual environments provided by social-media that concentrates on content that excessively aestheticizes life. The second part of the article highlights Nietzsche’s philosophy as proto-biopolitics that has at its heart the intention to explore life between masters and slaves, between aggressors and victims, between dominant social actors and excluded communities. Engaging Foucault’s, Agamben’s and Esposito’s biopolitical arguments, I will explain to what extent the traumatic experience of war reframes a digital social-contract that, by means of networking and virtual self-fashioning, reconsider the value of life, the experience of premeditated death, the responsibility behind guilt and the need for an authentic and uncompromised memory, by placing at their core the interference, uses and abuses of social-media.

**Keywords:** biopolitics, war, aestheticizing life, Bildung, self-creation, social-media, Russia, Ukraine.

### **Virtual self-fashioning: a (post)Nietzschean inheritance. How does the social-media influence our situation of being-into-the-world?**

The topic of aestheticizing our identities through virtual instruments is quite broad and from one point almost impossible to synthesize in monolithic philosophical concepts, either ontological or moral. However, the social-media networks are inspired by a principle supported by Nietzsche’s attempt to deconstruct traditional metaphysics and its modern undertakings, from Descartes to Schopenhauer. We need fiction in order to persevere into our existence: truth, by itself, has no power to produce authentic life. Therefore, appearances, cultivated through Apollonian and Dionysian physiological perspectives on our world – one representative for unconscious mental processes, dreams and illusions, the other one exponential for instinctual appetites for movement, sexuality, and musicality – transgress the 2.0 world, being highly engaged into the

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virtual processes of producing images of ourselves. It is relevant Nehamas's reading on Nietzsche's philosophy, who criticizes a "model" advanced for understanding world, objects and people, that "turns out to be the literary text and its components": "his model for our relation to the world turns out to be interpretation" (Nehamas 1985: 91). Pippin considers that a too aestheticized reading of Nietzsche's conviction is "dangerous" for recovering the original philosophical aims of his project (Pippin 2014: 118), but that this is the most appropriate philosophical path to understand why postmodernism inherited from the Nietzschean tradition the reinforcement of Ancient, Greek imperatives of self-knowledge and self-realization (more specifically, *epimeleia heautou*, as care of the self, and *gnothi seauton*, as knowing oneself).

Interpreting the world – or instagramizing it – supports a Nietzschean reading, rooted into the modern tradition of perspectivism. There is no unitary comprehension of this world: there are multiple evaluations and reconsiderations of it, because each of us has in "himself not one immortal soul but many mortal ones" (KGW, V 2, 57, GS. sec. 11). Particularly, this is why we are "human, all too human". In short, for Nietzsche, the world behaves as an imaginary construct depending on the struggle between "the real truth of nature" and "the lie of culture (sec. 19; KGW, III 1, 54-55): live experiences are fables that advocate our consciousness to advance a decentralized, plural perspective on becoming. In the *Gay Science*, Nietzsche insists that "You must become who you are" (KGW, V 2, 197; GS, sec. 270), but social media tends to relate our own authenticity and perspectivism on world with the others' prejudicative hermeneutical horizons and moral prejudgments. At a first glimpse, we are not far from the conflict between the morals of the slaves and that of the masters: one has to fight to impose his perspective, by imposing a certain will of power. But at a closer and a more attentive look, we will notice that virtual selves follow Zarathustra's depiction: "That is what I am through and through: reeling, reeling in, raising up, raising, a raiser, cultivator, and disciplinarian, who once counselled himself, not for nothing." (4KGW VI 1, p. 293; Z IV 1)

We all behave as such in social media: as some individuals became influencers (not for free), almost anyone becomes an Author, has an opinion, provides a critique, more or less reasonable, on any topic. Beyond texts, images raise identities and, in the end, communities. Social media reengages the Nietzschean faith that truth has to be recreated, that is never given, but discovered and continually constructed, so that both its Author and its receptors are engaged in an active self-constitution. Beliefs are turned into local truths, provisional consolations of our will, easily engaging creative knowledge. Implicitly, there is something Romantic at stake: a Schillerian *Bildung* transgresses the production of virtual identities in which interpretation bounds texts and images, discourses, and figures, so that the only universal truth is that we create reality as an ongoing performance with multiple actors playing interconnected fictions. On the one hand, Nehamas is right: interpretation as manner of self-creation engages, in its Nietzschean understanding, the Aristotelian shift from potentiality to actuality, confronting two difficulties: that of upgrading capacities that have to "flow into being" and that of tailoring becoming as dependent on inherent and future capacities, "making the creation of the self be more like the uncovering of what is already there" (Nehamas 1983: 393). Social media allows

individuals to substitute capacities with appearances that “flow” in our “feed”. Continuous metamorphoses overcame both the text and the image: Nietzsche’s Zarathustra reached the condition of Sisyphus who endlessly reinvests himself without reaching an end. “Poets lie too much” (KGW, VI 1, 106-107; Z. II. 2), but also users, who discover new ways of life as their self-invention is a continuously grasping and ongoing becoming. The Nietzschean framing of self-creation inspires fashioning our virtual selves by addressing an alternative to perishable, real identities: we are different in social media, but somehow, we remain represented by a virtual narrative that continues even though we are no longer alive. Such digital immortality is what encapsulates Nietzsche’s argument:

But the way is open for new versions and refinements of the soul-hypothesis; and such conceptions as ‘mortal soul’, and ‘soul as subjective multiplicity’, and ‘soul as social structure of the drives and affects’ want henceforth to have citizens’ rights in science. (KGW, VI 2, 21, BGE, sec. 12)

On the other way, Nietzsche advocates for dropping traditional, monolithic understandings of a nuclear identity, and to substitute such decadent understanding with a progressist attitude of self-creation that blends fashioning glimpses of our daily life, in a personal interpretation supported by our Ego as ultimate support of our experiences. Blending so many pieces of an existential puzzle requires “to give style to one’s character” which is, according to Nietzsche, “a great and rare art” (KGW, V 2, 210; GS, sec. 290), that everyone performs as there is no singular taste to be followed. The internet splits between Great Authors transgressing endless metamorphoses and vulnerable masses that endure “the weakness of will”, *akrasia*. And yet, we do not live *The Twilight of Idols*, as influencers continue to conquer the sphere of practical rationality, popular wisdom, and public life. Are we entitled to assume that the influencers of social-media networks offer us “the expression of maturity and mastery in the midst of doing, creating, working, and willing – calm breathing, ‘attained freedom of the will’” (KGW, VI 3, 79)? According to Nehamas, it is difficult to pursue such practices being tributary to “the internal division in a person’s preference scheme”, or to track exactly how desire adapts to thought and from it derives action. Somehow, Nehamas regards public life as a two-fold world, one of failure and one of success, and each self-constitution depends on fashioning creatively life through perspectivism so that success – whatever that means within a community – can be easily achieved and recognized by others.

Success can again be described in the terms of our political metaphor: ‘*L’effet c’est moi*: what happens here is what happens in every well-constructed and happy commonwealth; namely, the governing class identifies itself with the success of the commonwealth’ (BGE 19). (Nehamas 1983: 407)

From these arguments we can derive a series of statements that can easily frame the theoretical background of our current research, aiming to analyse how social-media networks determine us to reevaluate life and reconsider self-fashioning at the edge of our biological – *zōē*, and cultural life – *bios*.

- 1) Social-media networks function as enclosed societies: they reunite multiple communities and therefore, the “social contract” between users reflects the morphology of a digital commonwealth.
- 2) The morals of virtual life lie between success and failure: perspectivism and continuous self-reinventing are the core-pillars of living online.
- 3) Self-creation is not immune to discipline: creation is a disciplinary disposition that takes us from actualities to potentialities but by following a practical rationality through which will, thought and actions are normalised.
- 4) Being “better” for your community means remaining compatible with the citizens of the virtual *commonwealth*, meaning satisfying plural and interconnected perspectives on the world. Our fragmentary consciousness encapsulating the pluralism of our beliefs, instincts, and behaviours, deals with multiple alterities, fragmented at their turn.
- 5) Life becomes “the sum of its interrelated effects” (Nehamas 1983: 410), but it is freedom and its continuous practice that allow us to live differently.
- 6) Self-becoming depends on a personal taste – that Great Style of our existence – that distinguishes weak from empowered wills in their process of humanizing life.
- 7) The author and the character are different: social-networks leave less room for distinguishing them or for separating life from the impression of an artwork, to which both the text and the image contribute.

This Nietzschean framework is relevant for setting the roots of a philosophical undertaking of our virtual identities. It is not a particular social network that I would like to address, but rather the common mechanism shared by any of these multiple platforms: the correspondence between text and image. Sometimes disproportionate – as it happens on Facebook walls, where is more text and less image, or on Instagram, when pictures provide the main experiences of users and long texts seem unappropriated – otherwise balanced, as it happens on blogs, the relationship between text and image leads to the Nietzschean self-constitution and fashioning. In fact, there is a textuality that social media provides and invests in making users dependent on them. Life is turned into a text or a memorable picture, requiring interpretations (comments), instincts (reactions), and a *sensus communis* (sharing). In fact, if there is any spiritual exercise – as the Ancient Greeks would name it – to be identified as a self-constitution method within virtual environments provided by social networks, which is “lifelong self-narration” (Pippin 2014: 120), that stands both for self-identification and self-realization.

But before giving style to our existence, we tend to impregnate style to nature, to objects and to their subtle interaction: “arranging” or “making things beautiful” converts us into “poets of our life” (GS 299). First, this model of relating to oneself and to the world is, according to Pippin, reflective: it argues that self-relation should be placed to the forefront, and acquired through introspection, observation, and attentiveness. Second, as we construct our identity, we achieve a “self-knowledge: since in no sense reportorial, has to be understood as self-constituting” (Pippin 2014: 122). Aestheticizing life means investing this knowledge into a public and endless process of making things beautiful in times of nihilism. We provide aesthetic

justification to our existence through self-narrating practices that borrow artistic means. Nehamas considers that interpreting life, in Nietzsche's understanding, means aestheticizing it by two overlapping processes: one of decision-making, the other of deliberating actions. *Mutatis mutandis*, social networks use "artistic decisions" for actions of self-narrating life and exposing to the world. All decisions "are straightforwardly artistic" (Nehamas 1996: 233). But if identity turns out to be in this digital environment the narrative coherence of so many texts and images that provide an aestheticized, fragmentary understanding on life reflected by events, by what values are we going to cherish life by itself? The Nietzschean answer seems to be freedom. Mastering selves means empowering them with the practices of an aestheticized freedom, that from will to thought and thought to action impose artistic canons. In this regard, I find Pippin's argument quite convincing and easily commutable into a critique of the self-narrating model provided by social media: there is a rationality that transgresses self-constitution, relating our identity with finitude. Such reason is always invested with a historicized social practice, in Hegel's sense, through which "the entertaining, offering, rejecting of considerations that count as justifications at a time and to a community" (Pippin 2014: 125) bridge impulses and roles of being into the world within social structures. From such standpoint, a crucial dilemma for pre- and post- virtual environments arises, whenever it comes about living by models and coining models by living:

But in the narration of an actual life, either life is being treated as literature, and we have our aestheticism problem again; or literature, writing, is only 'a model,' but if the strictly aesthetic principle of unification is not the one relevant 'for life,' what would correspond to it? (Pippin 2014: 125)

My assumption is that social media provide self-criticism models that cover both directions: life is treated as literature and therefore the character of a text or the protagonist of an image must be as aestheticized as possible, while the unification of such instances becomes relevant for life as they emerge from competitive narratives about oneself. The only thing that has changed is that self-creation tends to be less by personal standards and more by parameters embraced by "the crowd". "Outsiders" have never been a priority for Zarathustra, whereas in Greek tragedies the chorus always assists a drama, an intrigue, a monologue about fate and its resolutions. The great public on social networks no longer holds the privilege of "elites", of those who keep the truth and assist it. "Become what we recognize", not "become who you are": that is the new moral and aesthetic imperative of the virtual commonwealth, which outshines the traditional Socratic commitment to authentic life. Moreover, if initially, the unity of our identity is not conceived as a goal, but as an outcome, obtained by performing habits proper to our "character traits", in the 2.0 world, identity is a goal that leaves the impression of unity. It is something Proustian in our virtual behaviour, that Nehamas calls a vicious effort: we compose our autobiography by pictures or texts as we are living our life, but we equally write our autobiography, to make more obvious the process of self-creation. Pippin tracks down the two paradigms advanced by Nehamas in his criticizing models of self-narration and experiencing perspectivism – "Literature instead of Life" and "Life as Literature" – and reaches the conclusion that they support indissoluble connections. Last, but not least, the Nietzschean

hypothesis that resentment will inevitably emerge from the reflections of the masses, is relevant for targeting the audience's reactions to self-creation. Nowadays, masses adapt reflexes to the literary self-narration by impulses to like or dislike a content: to this literary storytelling, they counterpose interpretations that go beyond an *ad literam* spirit. Augmenting or falsifying meanings extracted from self-narration; audiences perform like masses lacking will of power. The motivation of their reaction is resentment, which turn the author and the public into incommensurable "Socrates" and "Nietzsches" (Pippin 2014: 131), voices who pretend that self-constitution depends on the Other, on the Agora, on transposing self-governing into the power to govern the others, and individuals insisting to abolish such connections for a total, plastic model of freedom. In the end, as Pippin observes, "virtually no one succeeds in being the poet of his own life" (Pippin 2014: 130). This desirable position enforces a public life-orientation encouraged by "contents" that puzzle identity, in time, by gathering instant posts, images and reactions to events.

In a nutshell, my intention is not solely to tackle the Nietzschean background of social-networks and to accuse a genealogical encounter between moral and aesthetic practices of self-constitution and techniques of virtual self-fashioning our identity. Beyond such commutability, it is important to understand that a virtual identity is a continuously upgrading product (as a work of art that never ends in terms of an authentic creation), with an ontology that gathers the interdependency of a biological entity and its correspondent consciousness. Virtual identities depend on a real body and its digital avatars: we will drop, for the purposes of the current research, the inflections of real and virtual ontology, as the main purpose of this analysis is to understand the biopolitical setup of self-fashioning and revaluing life through social media. "Zōē" – our biological life, correspondent to a "real condition", and "bios", a cultural, nonorganic life, correspondent to the consciousness and mentality transgressing the virtual identity, merge into one-way direction of exploring the phenomenon of being-into-the-world. My thesis is that by doing so, social-media develops a biopolitical potential that, at a first glimpse, offer multiple insights on the management of population – inhabitancy, residency, and territorial disposal (by tag locations and info profile), political adherence (especially during elections), safety and health status (marking safe after an earthquake or monitoring COVID). However, biopolitics also concerns states of exception such as war. The way phenomena such as propaganda, manipulation, or fake-news flood social-media once users engage the war experience – either as victims or as aggressors – depends on the competitive narratives raised by practices of self-constitution: dialogues, confessions, images, and debates, all contribute to tailor and define values and beliefs of combatants. We shall see to what extent the experience of war determines us to reevaluate life and reconsider self-fashioning practices through social media that proves to be a valuable biopolitical asset.

### **A biopolitical setup of social media in times of War: "scrolling" self-constitution and competitive narratives from Russia and Ukraine**

Before taking an attentive look at instances that reveal how the narrative of the war between Russia and Ukraine change the self-constitution practices in social media, we should clarify why such endeavour involves the hypothesis that virtual environments engage a biopolitical potential. Biopolitics is considered here in the terms coined by Agamben (1998), Foucault (2003) and Esposito (2008).

On the one hand, Foucault argued that modern technologies of power will control the distribution of individuals supporting disciplinary institutions responsible for the management of population. They impose biopower regimes, for security reasons, invokes in historical contexts as “states of exception”: pandemic, war etc. Foucault’s hypothesis is that the human body, conceived as representative for a biological species, is part of a political strategy that disciplines live and normalizes social interaction. Besides that, since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, politics applied biopolitics as a proper frame to exercise sovereignty as a public decision mechanism responsible “to take life or let live” (Foucault 2003: 245). On the other hand, such biopolitical dilemma that implicitly creates regimes of visibility for human bodies assumed as docile entities, reveals that modern politics is a direct consequence of the rise and evolution of “*homo sacer*” (see Agamben 1998), who engages technology not to bear rights, but to “bare life” (Genel 2006: 43). However, the phenomenon of life is not understood as a whole, but decomposed into an organic component, *zoē*, and a nonbiological component, *bios*. (...) In this regard, Esposito argues that the individuals cherish differently the role of *zoē* and that of *bios*, depending on the traumatic experience they have been subjected to. In fact, individuals pretend they are part of communities and societies. *Communitas* means a social group that gathers individuals based on a moral obligation in front of their sense of belonging. One has to defend the origins of a certain identity, be them ethnic or religious. *Societas* is based on a moral property or a possession that is shared by all members of a group: those who are left without a motherland or have their natal territories attacked understand that the major threat that they deal with is that raised against their society. In light of these arguments, Esposito considers that communities remain social models for private affairs, in the middle of which individuals recognize themselves as homologues based on their common identity, whereas societies borrow the model of a *res publica*, creating a sense of equality between individuals based on a common responsibility that they have, emerging from a free association (Esposito 2008: 6). However, when this common origin is threatened, Esposito observes that individuals perform an opposite process to *communitas*: they do not open toward the Other, but rather they close their borders, their social orientations, their trust in third parts of their society, transgressing the model of *immunitas*. Both *communitas* and *immunitas* join the radical “munus”, understood as something which is given, a form of donation: an identity, an origin, a religious belonging. People immunize against violence, aggression, dissensus: they react defensively, because they have to protect “the munus” grounding their social contract. The biopolitical argument is that life is something given: preserving the biological life of a community means immunizing it by all means, inclusively by securing its persistence in existence by morals, traditions, habits, values, beliefs. Moreover, all those communities that had their life attacked tend to behave, if immunization lasts longer than it is needed – either by prudency or by fear – as inoperative communities, following Nancy’s terminology. Historical wounds leave

unhealed marks: once marginalized, such communities will always behave as peripheral, undesired alterities. “Community is revealed in the death of others” (Nancy 1991: 15): it becomes an immanent experience through which individuals accommodate their consciousness with the finitude. “Finitude is communitarian” (Nancy 1991: 27), and particularly this is why biopolitics raises immunization whenever collective death becomes “the testimony of the dissolution, the dislocation, or the conflagration of community” (Nancy 1991: 1). My argument is that immunization as a biopolitical attitude preserves biological life and its correspondent culture by targeting the Nietzschean understanding of a will to power that reacts in front of dominancy and secures a subject whose critique remains possible only as: a natural body, that has instincts to defend itself (the biological model, a lucid consciousness (psyche, the psychological model) and a self-constitution narrative, performed into an original language (the linguistic model).

Body, consciousness and language are biopolitical pillars of an aesthetic state of existence: they will be all and equally invested into an immunization process to fight against sublimation and repression. Biopolitically, a community reacts as “a confederacy of wills to power” (Faulkner 2003), *Willens-Punktationen* (Nietzsche 1970, VIII, 2, 11): life is interpreted by immunization, is valued, in order to deconstruct a master-type of existence by engaging a collective liberation for a slave-type. Narrating extinction is part of this biopolitical immunization, as it provides a powerful right to memory: “*If something is to stay in the memory it must be burned in: only that which never ceases to hurt stays in the memory* – this is a main clause of the oldest (unhappily also the most enduring) psychology on earth.” (Nietzsche 1989: 61)

It is exactly this Nietzschean principle that tailors social media reactions years later. The “carnival of cruelty” (Nietzsche 1989: 65) is revealed by social groups that pursue immunization but want their historical experience to be known, as it is a *res publica*: violence is a matter of public life, it has gain visibility in order to be deconstructed, rejected, criticized. On the one hand, as communities share their public stories, immunities continue to encapsulate a capital of traumatic experience. Over this pair of terms, *communitas* and *immunitas*, we might be able to overlap the Nietzschean understanding on internalizing harmful experiences on biological life (*zōē*) into our cultural life (*bios*):

... All instincts that do not discharge themselves outwardly turn inward—this is what I call the internalization (*Verinnerlichung*) of man: thus it was that man first developed what was later called his “soul.” The entire inner world, originally as thin as if it were stretched between two membranes, expanded and extended itself, acquired depth, breadth, and height, in the same measure as outward discharge was inhibited. (Nietzsche 1989, 84)

Now, think about the role of social media in supporting this two-fold process, of revealing communities struggle by immunity processes. Images and texts shared by social media compose, progressively, an aesthetic educational claim: our consciousness, as good citizens, as responsible neighbours, as empathic human beings, exercise their sense solely within an aesthetic state, which used to be the utopia of Romantic philosophers. Functional politics is endorsed by aesthetic consciousness. We need an aesthetic “stimulus”, a “Reiz”, that could also be translated as ‘irritation,’

‘excitation,’ ‘provocation,’ or else ‘attraction,’ ‘fascination,’ ‘charm’ (Faulkner 2003), and it becomes possible by overcoming metaphors provided by image and text. Instincts interpret stimuli: this is the key of understanding the biopolitical potential of social-media. In what follows, I will explain how this potential is raised and performed within online communities that tend to immunize in front of aggression and fake-news in the midst of the war between Russia and Ukraine that doubled the biopolitical context raised by pandemics with another state of exception, that of a conflagration. My aim is to understand how self-constitution practices modify depending on the competitive narratives that communities share about the experience of war and to identify to what extent communities of victims immunize or retrain their public, civil defence, to an aesthetic reaction.

### **Immersive storytelling: competitive narratives about the war between Russia and Ukraine and their biopolitical potential**

It is important to notice that scholars evaluating the role of social media in shaping propaganda and resistance in Russia and Ukraine link current events with those from 2014, related with Crimea’s annexation. The general framework seems to be not that of a particular community – Crimea or Donbas – but that of the former Russian empire that will regain its former borders as democracies of the Western world will fall one by one.

In internet discussions, several frames, in which to place the current Ukrainian-Russian conflict, recur continuously. The fundamental frame, describing the relationship Russia has with the outside world, is that of a decadent trans-Atlantic civilization trying to impose its liberal values on the whole world. (Szwed 2016: 6)

Pro-Russians flooded the media in 2016 with the idea that Fascism conquered Ukraine, a decadent state: nowadays, the shift is from Fascism to Nazism. There are three-phases that shape the interventions of trolls in spreading such propaganda: “luring, taking the bait and hauling in” (Szwed 2016: 7). Social media was then, as it is now, a tool to portray conflict: the myth of the Great Russia is reengaged in public narratives and supported by a virtual framing developed through images, texts and memes. Whenever propaganda spreads, it means that “pluralistic ignorance, the spiral of silence and the bandwagon effect” (Szwed 2016: 8) are tools of controlling public opinions online. Notwithstanding, as we seek to accommodate media and non-media realities, we discover that their framing is what supports the gap between truth and falsity. The weaponization of media is related with the so-called “information war”, that is not only constructing awareness on vulnerable actors, but also supports the conflict between civilization systems. According to Nissen,

As contemporary conflicts are also characterized by being ‘wars of choice’, perhaps ‘necessity’, but not ‘wars for survival’ (for liberal democracies, less so for some authoritarian regimes) and by that they are fought ‘amongst people’ resulting in many spectators and audiences to the conflict, who all have a say in its outcome. (Nissen 2015: 32)

The biopolitical approach lies on these two paradigms: conflicts by choice and wars for survival. In the Russian rhetoric, “war” is avoided: it is a “special military operations” to secure the life of Russian residents from Ukraine. It means that they prefer a biopolitical scenario, but in order to justify a so-called liberation from immunization. Content and narration analysis, by visual and semiotic means, reveal that propaganda functions wherever users prove “pluralistic ignorance” (Szwed 2016: 39), lack of historical education, rejection of Atlantic civilization and models of foreign leadership. Sometimes, users prove to be not pro-Russia but only against-USA or convinced that Ukraine is “the puppet of the EU” (Szwed 2016: 47). Furthermore, the insights of the 2022 war reveal that there is a “fog of war”: conflicting opinions and current competitive narrative overlap with those circulating during the Crimea conflict. Civilians abroad tend to behave as Arendt observed: when everybody lies to you – and this is a state of fact in social media – the consequence “is not that you believe the lies, but rather that nobody believes anything any longer” (Arendt 1973). This truth whole became a loop that Russians’ took advantage from, not to impose their own narrative, but to raise awareness on the defiance that one should have on the opposite stories. Pavlik’s analysis shows up that the biopolitical scenario of Russia vs. Ukraine has been presented by journalists as different from that between “Iraq or Afghanistan” because it is a conflict of the “civilized” world. The most difficult part seems to be “what images of war to show” (Pavlik 2022: 8). Competitive narratives are somehow handled by digital tools that allow us to confront, by recourse to Google maps, places of conflict that can easily be authenticated. An example provided by Pavlik is relevant in this regard.

In one case, a Twitter user examined a video shared on Telegram. – He found a landmark – an Orthodox church with four golden domes. He located it in Irpin, using Google Maps and a file photograph from the Associated Press to generate its precise coordinates. A scan of Discord, Reddit, and Twitter revealed chatter from witnesses of the bombing. Twelve minutes after spotting the footage, he felt confident the video was real, and posted the work on his Twitter account (Verma, 2022). (Pavlik 2022: 10)

But an information war supported by social media augments the uncertainty developed by the real conflict. Texts and images are pieces of subjective experience, not facts. Therefore, moral boundaries are always awaiting to be settled and proved in this regard. To prove aggression means to expose what turns a community to an inoperative status, namely collective death.

On March 6, *The New York Times* featured a photograph of a family killed in Russian shelling near Kyiv (Huggins 2022). Award-winning photojournalist Lynsey Addario took the photo. Guardian news editor Joanna Walters called the decision to publish the photo brave. Walters added that it is – always an agonised debate, how to depict war, how to get the balance right. Publishing uncensored images of the dead is uncommon. The Times has done so on some occasions, including after a 2019 attack at a Nairobi hotel. In a statement to the Poynter Institute, *The Times* defended its decision as balancing the need for sensitivity and respect with our mission of showing the reality of these events. *The Times* added – We want to be respectful to the victims and to others affected by the attack. (Pavlik 2022: 9).

The particularity that arises in this biopolitical scenario is that social-media entangles competitive narrative based on a different, contemporary process, that of immersive story-telling. “Satellite imagery” (11) is used to check if Ukraine’s harmed infrastructure indeed existed before the conflict and has been harmed recently by Russians, journalists combine textual and visual narratives to explore the situation of civilians, whereas immersive journalism concentrates the narratives of more than 6 million refugees belonging to compromised, aggressed communities. Geolocation, “high resolution digital photos”, techniques of “photogrammetry and 3D mapping” are used to argue the destruction of Ukraine’s territories (12). In this struggle, influencers become a war agency.

“This is something pretty common that comes from both Ukrainian and Russian influencers,” says Roman Kolodko, chief operating officer of eastern European influencer marketing agency Mediacube, which represents a number of Russian and Ukrainian creators. Kolodko spoke as he fled Ukraine for Poland. “Many big influencers are in Ukrainian cities that have been and are being attacked right now, and they need to spread their word,” he added – and those who aren’t have family there” (Stokel-Walker 2022).<sup>1</sup>

The Civic Media Observatory’s report concluded that as Facebook banned pro-Russian trolls, propaganda moved to Instragram, Telegram and Vkontakte, platforms Russians-friendly. Content has been reduced to “polarizing narratives” that insist on patriotic reactions. Authors of such contents have a blue checkmark from Instragram next to their accounts but share nationalist narratives after initially being against-war. “A popular hashtag here is #МНЕНЕСТЫДНО (#iamnotashamed)” (Civic Media Observatory 2022).<sup>2</sup> This recalls of Esposito’s argument that fear and pride are two core-feelings of a biopolitical attitude. People embracing such attitude insist on depicting a “munus” that stands for common values, for patriotic convictions. They are engaged differently into competitive narratives on war and communities, as it follows:

*Narratives of pride:* Former Duma Deputy and actress Maria Kozhevnikova created content arguing that she is not ashamed of being Russian; the moral problem is not related to the origin of civilians or politicians, but with their feeling about Russia’s actions, as individuals of a community are a constitutive body of the nation-state and yet can have different opinions or willings.

*Narratives of shame:* Mainly on Facebook, less on other networks, definitely non-existent on Russian platforms such as Vkontakte, Russians criticize war although they risk being arrested. “This narrative is promoted by a diverse set of Russian feminists, human rights activists, economists, businesspeople, actors and authors, some of whom are in exile or facing threats and prosecution. The extent of their audience varies from the thousands to tens of thousands”. They all have in common the ethics of care as part of their life-experience, that declined aggression. The Bucha case has been discussed by influencers such as Mitya Aleshkovskiy, a former director of a large

<sup>1</sup> See the idea of a Tik-Tok war, available at: <<https://www.theguardian.com/media/2022/feb/26/social-media-influencers-russia-ukraine-tiktok-instagram>>, visited on August 29, 2022.

<sup>2</sup> An article on pride and shame, available at: <<https://globalvoices.org/2022/05/12/pride-or-shame-russian-influencers-on-the-war-in-ukraine/#>>, visited on August 29, 2022.

charity, stated that all Russians bear personal responsibility for the war in Ukraine – and argument similar to Jasper’s text on blame and collective responsibility that we all have, in a metaphysical sense, for the genocides that Nazis raised against Jews.

*Narratives of direct-aggression* on Ukrainian influencers turned to disinformation and suspicion. A particular example is represented by Marianna Vishegirskaia, a pregnant woman, victim of the Mariupol aggression on the public hospital. The disinformation campaign started by Signal and spread by Telegram had at its core the idea that the victim is not credible, as she is a model and a popular beauty blogger from Mariupol, on whose pregnancy was poor information before the attack. The Russian Embassy in UK “tweeted a number of times, claiming that Vishegirskaia played two different women photographed at the hospital. Interestingly, the Russian Embassy also referenced Vishegirskaia by her maiden name, Podgurskaia.”<sup>3</sup> Twitter removed the account of the Russian Embassy in UK for misinformation, also after spreading the word that the victim has a realistic makeup that helped her image in sufferance. It proved out that “The pregnant woman, now a mother, can be seen in photos walking on foot through the rubble. She survived and gave birth to a daughter in the days after the bombing. A completely different pregnant woman is viewed in the photo from the hospital bombing, injured and being stretchered out. Sadly, multiple news outlets have confirmed with doctors on the scene that the unidentified woman on the stretcher did not survive. Neither did her unborn child” (Binder 2022).<sup>4</sup> This example reveals that a capital of influence can be manipulated by weakening the core-expertise behind it as resource capable to falsify facts.

*Visual narratives of counter-riposte.* France 24 had a campaign of interviewing artists – such as Vlodko Kaufman, who insist to “fight with image”<sup>5</sup> against propaganda and disinformation. Another example is revealed by Alevtina Kakhidze who portrayed herself “between gifts of arms and good wishes from friendly nations and a battery of Russian weapons”. She declared that “If before the war started I criticised the society of consumption, after 2014, I completely changed the focus. Unprotected shop displays in the windows became for me a sign of peaceful life” (Biedarieva 2022).<sup>6</sup>

Performances broadcasted on social-media became an alternative immersive storytelling, valuable as it has artistic content and social reflections embedded on behalf of the Ukrainian society: it remains representative the Ukrainian-Russian artist Aljoscha who staged an anti-war protest in front of Kyiv’s Motherland Monument. Artists around the world started to expose in public urban art, graffiti and installations, that supported Ukraine: civilians took a picture and disseminated them online, as a gesture synthesized by the tag *#standtoulkraine* (Jeffery 2022).<sup>7</sup> Relevant

<sup>3</sup> See further details available at: <<https://mashable.com/article/pregnant-ukraine-instagram-influencer-russia-disinformation>> visited on August 29, 2022.

<sup>4</sup> See further details available at: <<https://mashable.com/article/pregnant-ukraine-instagram-influencer-russia-disinformation>>.

<sup>5</sup> See information available at: <<https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20220424-shaken-by-war-ukrainian-artists-fight-with-images>> visited on August 29, 2022.

<sup>6</sup> An extended version of the article is available at: <<https://www.ft.com/content/870f753b-2a6a-4dd3-878a-facddda9d8c9>>, visited on August 30, 2022.

<sup>7</sup> An extended version of the article is available at <<https://www.cnbc.com/2022/03/30/artists-support-ukraine-as-russia-invasion-continues.html>>, visited on August 30, 2022.

examples are: A resident walks past mural painting by Bulgarian artist Stanislav Belovski depicting Russian President Vladimir Putin holding his own body in Sofia, on March 15, 2022; TvBoy, the Italian artist living in Barcelona, installs a new collage on the war in Ukraine in Plaza de Sant Jaume, representing three children installing a flag of peace on a Russian tank; or a TvBoy's piece of art that depicts Russian President Vladimir Putin in prison, in Barcelona on March 31, 2022. We see both civilians and militaries taking pictures of such artworks and uploading them on social media, for an artistic resistance. Relevant remains the photography of Ukrainian soldiers uploading on internet the picture of a mural titled 'Saint Javelin' dedicated to the British portable surface-to-air missile has been unveiled on the side of a Kyiv apartment block on May 25, 2022 in Kyiv, Ukraine. The artwork by illustrator and artist Chris Shaw is in reference to the Javelin missile donated to Ukrainian troops to battle against the Russian invasion.<sup>8</sup>

Within Russians borders, the biopolitical dilemma is that between silence and exile: as the government imprisons civilians peacefully protesting against the war, social-media confronts the lack of reaction of many Russians who disapprove aggression but are afraid to react. They also suffer from Russophobia as people tend less to argue that Russia's aggression is not reducible to the Russians' convictions. Others chose to talk implicitly: Sasha Skochilenko is known for getting arrested as she replaced price tags from a grocery store with reports about bombing from Mariupol (Kishkovsky 2022).<sup>9</sup> Russian performance art group "Party of the Dead" hold anti-war protests against the invasion of Ukraine, dressed and disguised and skeletons and peacefully exposing messages from a Russian cemetery, whereas an unknown activist protested Russian atrocities in Bucha, Ukraine, posing outside landmarks in Moscow (Dixon et al. 2022).<sup>10</sup> These are efforts invested both by artists and civilians, whereas experts in VR try to reconstruct part of the damages left by the war through immersive storytelling: in order to believe a visual content, it has to be resented as if you were there. Why, from all these methods and competitive narratives, previously discussed, immersive storytelling might have a different biopolitical potential? First, they allow the navigator to navigate "a fixed universe" evaluated through interpretative relationships that mix reading and viewing (McErlean 2018: 120). It provides multiple "ways of seeing" (2018: 121), that transgress both aspects of biological and nonorganic life. Second, the sense of empathy is higher if a content is consumed through immersive story-telling. It is not "a complete sensory experience" but it performs a certain simulation of a real situation (2018: 121). At the core of immersive story-telling is proprioception, a process that tells us where the boundaries of our bodies are: so immersive story-telling embodies "reduced kinaesthetic loops", and another sense of pursuing spaces in digital environments. Thirdly, a technocentric approach of this kind requires different aesthetics and other regimes of "attention", that contribute to the spiritual practices of self-constitution and virtual fashioning of life. In this regard, is

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<sup>8</sup> Extended details available at: <<https://www.cnn.com/2022/03/30/artists-support-ukraine-as-russia-invasion-continues.html>>.

<sup>9</sup> See the article available at: <<https://www.theartnewspaper.com/2022/04/14/st-petersburg-artist-faces-prison-after-anti-war-protest-in-grocery-store>>, visited on 30 August, 2022.

<sup>10</sup> The article is available at: <<https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/interactive/2022/russia-ukraine-protest-art/>>, visited on 30 August, 2022.

relevant McErlean's reading of St. Ignatius of Loyola's spiritual exercises, that can be understood as "a meticulous description of the mental operations that lead to immersion in a textual world" (2018: 127). Landscapes must be blended with textual geography, experiences such as "hell" must be "described in terms of the senses": thus, any reality must be apprehended as sensitive as possible until it performs a memory place for itself. Consumers of digital content are, in this context, behaving as Schlegel's ideal spectator: it interacts with the characters as real human beings, it performs narrative functions, it enables the collective experience of story-telling with observing presences. Last but not least, such biopolitical potential leads to a perspectivist approach, that divide immersive-storytelling between expositional and expressive narratives: the former involve "strict rules and narrow margins of decisions", whereas the latter are "more like architecture as the visitor can roam freely and the specifics of the plot are less defined" (139). The greatest advantage of such immersive story-telling is that they do not manufacture realities, but expose them in a mixed setup of technological instruments that "deal with life itself as a primary concept" (147). There are authors, such as Sunderland et al who consider that immersive storytelling makes the invisible visible: narrated content is transformational and help audiences to clarify an anticolonial perspective (Sunderland et al. 2020, 1). The biopolitical potential is more relevant and sharper: "digital storytelling's original aim was to amplify the voices of people who experiences social disadvantage and exclusion" (Sunderland et al. 2020: 2; Lambert 2013). The aim is to engage social change as reaction toward peripheral or discriminated communities, so that users as consumers develop self-reflexivity relationships and create "counter-narratives to stigmatising discourses" (3). By this, we have a biopolitical puzzle for immersive story-telling, based on the following five observations:

- 1) Contents provided virtually tailor the identity of aggressed communities and their victims: it develops an ongoing culture of visual depictions of peripheries and centres, that has at its core life as a limited and compromised resource.
- 2) It develops, at its turn, "communities" of followers that share the same values and beliefs: the internet is spread between pro-Russians and pro-Ukrainians with their ideological and moral commitments and nuances. However, mutual banning or tactics of removing accounts that disinform – even these dominant regional uses of certain networks that prove to be more correct with Ukrainians, such as Facebook, and more committed to Russian propaganda, such as Telegram – reveals immunization processes performed by such virtual communities. For different reasons, they isolate, and allow within their boundaries a narrative that has its own truth mechanisms and fictional practices.
- 3) These consequential immunizations arise resentment, so the Nietzschean logics behind this biopolitical framework remains representative. Masses of manipulated individuals – that used to have no will to power or to discover truth – began to counter-react to prefabricated contents. They other exclude themselves from certain communities or become authors of their own version of truth.
- 4) The biopolitical categories discussed by Esposito – fear (of death and aggression), blame (a negative experience that opens the politics of sacrifice),

law (as the only tool that distinguishes the real from the ideal community), the ecstasy of being part of this world and the historical experience of this world (marked by destitutions and death of the others) are equally invested in the creation of the content belonging to immersive narratives, and into the boundaries or moral standards of different virtual communities. There are Russians who fear for their future, Europeans who fear for security issues, Russians who blame themselves for not reacting early, Ukrainians who blame not only Russians but also Europeans abroad for sanctions or public reactions, so on and so forth. So, the setup continues to be biopolitical, but the communization and immunization practices depend on immersive storytelling for a higher credibility.

- 5) The boom of artistic resistance that floods social-media and surprises civilians abroad who consume artistic content related with war is one of the two symptoms that perform the aestheticization of existence. The other one is represented by the increased temptation to spread not only brute and immediate content, but also processed testimonies, memories, images, so that social-media circulates content which is far from being “ready-made”. These mechanisms support, however, a counter-culture that faces war as a state of exception and a peaceful riposte based on solidarity raised through images and texts. If in real life critiques do not reach targeted audiences, in virtual life there is always a chance left to be better informed or to see an alternative to your world.

## Conclusions

After this war, not only Russians and Ukrainians, but human beings from all parts of the world will perform a higher sense of biopolitical virtual cultures and imagery. Poets lie too much – both back in Nietzsche’s times and nowadays – but overcoming akrasia is part of a civilisation process in which social-media makes a difference. In a digital commonwealth, different communities that experienced aggression, hate speech, violence and historical trauma will continue to impose their will to truth: Nietzsche’s idea that we all explore life as people who cultivate, discipline and raise up our taste on reality and authenticity will never be dropped from the immersive reality. Users will cross metamorphoses and influencers will assume, by more or less capitalist slogans, that you have to become who you are, albeit two millenniums ago this was Socrate’s saying and nowadays is Coca Cola’s slogan. What changed is that narrative self-constitution used to encapsulated exclusively aestheticized mechanisms of evaluating life and creating appearances. After this conflict, that happened in the midst of a civilised world, life becomes a resource worthy to be explored and criticized in social-media otherwise than simply aestheticizing it. Politically, sovereignty and negotiation of boundaries will remain concerning topics, but what happens with human life beyond those who master such liberties and power subjections is a question of biopolitics. Social-media is one of the most important pillars of democratic behaviours nowadays: it has the capacity not only to (dis)place individuals in territory, who mark themselves safe after a conflagration or partisans of a certain political movement by their flags from Facebook or Instagram. In fact, social-media gains a capital of power in creating social-cohesion, tolerance and

solidarity, which inevitably lead to inclusive or exclusive social mechanisms, meaning to strengthened communities or immunized social groups. Digital cultures of resistance offer a new chance to construct a sustainable heritage, by recording memories, testimonials and live recordings of resistance, involuntary immigration or destructed homelands. There is less than a century since people used to confront orchestrated death silently, into extermination camps. Nowadays, they get to spread the word about their trauma and this is should be one of the many advantages that virtual environments offer: the opportunity to avoid, in time, forms of genocide, ethnic discrimination and social harm. If influencers would behave more as narrators, the matter of credibility and trust might turn to a new social-contract between users and content providers: until then, social-media aestheticizes life and self-constitution practices that will progressively extend from individuals to communities. #JeSuisCharlieHebdo or #JeSuisUkraine are more than just virtual reactions of solidarity: they immunize individuals in front of aggression and raise a community that is no longer that of ostracized people, but that of all human beings that believe its story and share its values or convictions.

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