CHAPTER 7

Which Sort of Relation Is a Reaction? Relational Sociology and Reaction Research

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Beyond Visceral Counter-Actions

In a recent paper, we envisioned the category of reaction as a "strategic research material/site" (Merton 1987) for sociological analysis, and defined it rather minimally as "action that wouldn't have occurred without someone else's (previous or envisioned) action" (Brighenti and Sabetta 2025, 86). Elsewhere, we highlighted the connection between the concepts of reciprocity and reaction (Brighenti and Sabetta 2024). In this chapter, we seek to locate the notion of reaction more clearly within the premises of relational sociology. The attempt is to investigate what kind of relation a reaction is, and which advantages may derive to the relational approach from using and developing reaction as an additional analytical prism. Highly diverse testimonies—ranging, for example, from the

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anthropology of vendetta in the Mediterranean (Peristiany 1965) to the history of warfare escalation (Bellamy [1990] 2015), from the moral sources of modern selfhood (Taylor 1989) to emotional episodes of transitional justice (Elster 2003), as well as from the spread of viral news on the social media (Al-Rawi 2019) to sport consumer response to the termination of a sponsorship (Delia 2017)—show that reactive formations play a nonneglectable, sometimes fateful role in social life. Reaction tends to effectively enchain actors into series of cascading events, out of which it can be quite difficult to backpedal: not unfrequently, reaction leads to spiraling orbits that intensify the social intercourse, with sometimes dire, even deadly outcomes (Gould 2000).

If there are practical reasons to study reaction, there is theoretical import, too. Far from any simple behavioristic determinism, reaction cannot be "explained away" as a mere response moment within the classic Stimulus-Response circuit conceptualized by behaviorism in the early twentieth century. To the contrary, an accurate understanding of reaction requires accounting for both the continuity *and* the discontinuity that exists between different social acts.[1] Reactivity defines a condition of "opening," whereby the parties involved in social intercourses reveal some mutual "interest."[2] Quite literally, "interest" is what lies in the space between people (*inter est*: "it is in between"). *A minima*, this means that the space of social interaction cannot be neutral, but always carries some stakes. Interest, in other words, forces one party to consider the other party, or parties, *under some respect or capacity*.[3] This might, or might not, entail conscious or rational acts (Crabtree 2003; Retsikas 2010), indicating anyway how hard it is to get distracted from the idea of the *socius*: under this condition, the other exercises an ongoing "spell" upon one.

[1] Pierre Janet first made this point in his discussion of the reflex arc (Janet [1929] 2005; Brighenti 2019).

[2] This also holds true au contraire: the feasibility of social isolation, predictable routines, and smooth patterns of conduct rests on "closing" and preventing possible reactions. In this light, the solitary janitor protagonist of Wim Wenders' last movie, *Perfect Days*, relishes every turn of an asynchronous tic-tac-toe game he plays with an anonymous Tokyo's public-toilet customer insofar as each next move is already predetermined—that is, with only necessary, utterly unimaginative reactions (made almost redundant in "perfect" tic-tac-toe games).

[3] For instance, the whole process of the international circulation of ideas (see, for example, Lamont 1987; Santoro and Sapiro 2017) revolves around the different types of reaction that paradigms, authors, and approaches elicit in different contexts and different respondents.

Gabriel Abend's (2014) discussion of the "moral background" in business ethics comes apropos here. Abend illustrates how psychologists and neuroscientists, to facilitate both operational tractability and empirical measurement of otherwise ineffable domains, tend to construe moral judgments as automatic gut reactions (e.g., hooraying, booing, and ahahing) impossible to disentangle from their triggers, like "a surge of epinephrine at the sight of a snake in the desert or a cop in the city" (ibid., 382). Such assumptions imply a standard S-R viewpoint; but, if "in Physics, action and reaction are more or less equal […] the analogy does not really constitute evidence for the claim that action and reaction are equal *in ethics*" (ibid., 272, italics in the original). In fact, in moral deliberation, actors may always be asked to ground their reactive judgments and explain why they felt compelled to come up with certain evaluations in the first place. Even though they may be short on reasons ("people's responses may be confused, unhelpful, or incomprehensible," ibid., 34), actual reactions remain "always open, in principle, to a demand for reasons" (ibid., 34). The very fact of having reacted attests the compelling force of what provoked the feedback (Luft 2023, 325). By reacting, social actors declare their susceptibility, engagement, and care—incidentally, this explains the old adage according to which indifference is worse than hate.

It is only in the classic behavioral approach that things move ahead essentially by continuity, through call-and-response sequences that spread without any qualitative interruptions. In the 1920s, an earlier attempt to modify behaviorism was carried out by George Herbert Mead, who distinguished a restricted "psychological behaviorism" *à la* John B. Watson, from a more sophisticated "social behaviorism," which Mead himself sought to premiere. In a revealing passage, Mead discusses ants and humans in comparison:

> Contrast these two situations: in one [i.e., the ant nest] there is a highly complex social activity in which the gestures are simply stimuli to the appropriate response of the whole group; in the human situation there is a different response which is mediated by means of particular symbols or particular gestures which have the same meaning for all members of a group. (Mead 1934, 56)

In one case, we may gloss, society emerges out of continuous, ongoing interindividual reaction chains, whereas in the other case it proceeds through discontinuous collective symbols (those having the "same

meaning for all"), which individuals can trade among themselves. That is all the difference between ant society and human society. We can note how Mead seems to take up an essentially Durkheimian trope: the collective, as an order of reality of its own, is necessarily discontinuous vis-à-vis the individual, and discontinuity between the actors can only be bridged by a general medium: in Mead's theory, such is the role of that complex called "attitude-gesture-language"—where Mead attached great importance to "vocal gestures," namely spoken language.

While Mead sought to contrast sharply the situation of ants to that of humans, essentially because of the exceptional function of human language, the discoveries by sociobiology and ethology during the twentieth century invite more caution (Wilson and Hölldobler 2009; De Waal 2019). In fact, continuity and discontinuity can be seen at play *both* in various animal societies *and* in interspecific social configurations, that is, relations spanning more animal species getting in contact (Jerolmack 2009).[4] There is basically no manifestation of social life that does not include heterogeneity and symbiosis. That is why the articulation of continuity and discontinuity across the social domain cannot be resolved through the terms of a simple opposition, like in the classical *differendum* between Tarde (siding with continuity) and Durkheim (siding with discontinuity). A more nuanced scenario of scattered discontinuities is to be seen at play, as a multidimensional manifold where both continuities and discontinuities are exhibited across different respects, according to different traits to be singled out on a case-by-case basis.

In his systematization of relational sociology, François Dépelteau (in Powell and Dépelteau 2013, 177–83) distinguishes deterministic, co-deterministic, and "deep-relational" strands in relational thinking. Whereas determinism remains sternly linear in admitting the causal cogence of structures upon actors, co-determinism struggles to "find the right balance between agency and structures." But only deep relationalism

[4] Ironically enough, a (if not *the*) torchbearer of a broader interspecies perspective on agency, Bruno Latour, unwillingly flattened the concept of reactivity by conflating it with irreflexive/primordial categories as "instincts" and "appetites": "To say that primates other than humans have a rich social life simply means assuming that no primate actor can achieve any goal without passing through other interactions with partners. Instead of imagining a presocial being motivated solely by instinct, reactions or appetites and seeking immediate gratification of its goals-assuaging hunger, reproduction, power-the new sociology of simians, on the contrary, depicts actors who cannot attain anything without negotiating at length with others" (Latour 1996, 228).

definitely rejects the structure/agency dualism to fully embed relations within individuals. Eager as we are to endorse Dépelteau's deep relationalism as a general approach that rhymes with process philosophy, we are also wary that, with his proposal, the epistemological problem is only postponed: either continuism or discontinuism are bound to reemerge, were it not for the purposes of defining individuals and relations in their own terms. As Vandenberghe (2018) has suggested, there seems to be some inescapable "magic" to the notion of relation, and it is not clear whether or not, and to which extent, relational sociology is susceptible to become an integrated field. With this in mind, what makes reaction good-to-think-with is that it condenses within itself the double character of social life, continuous *and* discontinuous, pointing to the question of its proper "location:" *Where* is it exactly that social life occurs, and *How* is its space organized?

Such questions are not merely questions of geographical location, but effectively address the intrinsic constitution or, as physicists say, the "parameter space" of society. The space of effectuation of the social operation raises, not so much a topographical interrogative, as much as an "elemental" one. Capturing the element of social life means describing, not simply the space the social occupies in *extension*, but also the one that, so to speak, it engenders in *intension*. Seen in this light, reaction can be said "concretize" the occurrence of social interaction: it explains "how what's 'outside' gets 'in' and vice versa" (Vaisey 2008, 611) by connecting action's internal (to the extent that both formation and execution of motivations, feelings, goals, etc. respond to others' acts being dealt with) and external spheres (since how acts are acknowledged, received, and confronted largely conditions their real consequences). Reaction unfolds in that element which both enables and constrains how the *socii* relate: it is not the *cause*, but the *proof* of relation. It is the syntax of the interaction order.

Social Life Intensified

To better understand what such "evidentiary" aspect of reaction entails, let us take one historical-epistemic step back. The notion of reaction is thoroughly modern. Indeed, the ancients only knew "action" and "passion"—in Greek, *poieo* and *paskheo*, in Latin *ago* and *patior*—as categories of operation. While the very term "reaction" is first attested in use in the late Middle Age (apparently, in the work of Albertus Magnus), it is only

with modern physics and chemistry that it takes on its current comprehensive signification (Starobinski 1999). Sociology, too, is a modern science, whose constitution could be envisaged only once "the social" asserted itself as an independent level of reality that had to be somehow squared with the classical project of (democratic) politics (Arendt 1958).

Certainly, this does not suffice to establish any direct causal link between the notion of reaction and the possibility of sociology as such. Nonetheless, a certain elective affinity between the two can be evinced. Indeed, one could speak of a structural similarity: just as (per Arendt's famous analysis) the social emerged as the *tertium quid* between individual life and the political state, so reaction analogously emerges as the *tertium quid* between one action and another one. The category of reaction thus offers a way of acknowledging that between one action and another there might be (indeed, *there is always*) quantitative *as well as* qualitative change. Reaction, we contend, can be the name of the operator of such transformation: it is the difference *between action and action*, or, to speak more philosophically, the internal difference of repetition (Deleuze 1968).

Famously, Gabriel Tarde (1890, [1898] 1999) placed imitation at the root of the social operation. Later, Girard (1989, 131) would characterize imitation as the "pure essence of desire," in terms of its capacity to generate tying, agonic relations (determining what Girard calls "sacrificial crisis"). And it is noteworthy to recall that, for Tarde, imitation is but one enactment of the more basic phenomenon of universal repetition (Toews 2003, 89 ff.). Our thesis here is that the structure of repetition can itself be identified as reactive: in other words, it is the same *re-* prefix that has oversight of both repetition and reaction. Repetition is not just a return of petition, but an intensification of it. By the same token, reaction intensifies the meaning and the significance of action. *Reaction is*, in this sense, *the purest form of repetition*, namely *repetition recognized as carrying with it its intrinsic*—or "internal"—*difference*. This means that there is never assurance that what returns, what is "repeated," in any sense equals the "model" of which it is supposed to be a reoccurrence. From this point of view, the problem with interactionism as a social theory is that it has evacuated asymmetry, whereas the latter (or, more precisely, the phenomenon of symmetry breaking) proves essential to understand social life as a specific type of life.[5] To the extent that the *re-* of reaction is the sign of

[5] This is, for example, what makes original certain recent contributions on disruptive interactional moments (Tavory 2018; Tavory and Fine 2020).

intensification (as variously epitomized by potlatches, justifiable homicides, and posthumous consecrations), it indicates that the structural state of the social operation lies in being out of balance.

By incorporating an energetics of the social intercourse into our theoretical framework, we can retrieve a precious Simmelian insight. Simmel's conception of *Wechselwirkung* can be rescued from the soothing idea of symmetrical exchange. Although *Wechselwirkung* is usually rendered in English as "mutual action," we suggest that a more apposite translation could be, precisely, "reaction." Only factoring in an asymmetrical energetic regime can one reveal the complex mathematics whereby, as Simmel put it, "each party offers to the other more than he possessed before" [*jeder dem andern mehr giebt als er selbst besessen hat*] (Simmel [1900] 2004, 80). If actors can literally give "more than they have," this means that the general situation of *Wechselwirkung* is placed outside of the exchange framework.[6] The notion of reaction can offer a more fitting framework to account for this fact. Cutting out a counterintuitive but necessary theoretical space for reaction, here we aim to show that reaction always entails more than knee-jerk reflex. To see this, a terrain of social existence can be laid out where automatisms dilute, without renouncing the impelling quality that relays energy quanta in the effectuation of the social operation by imparting oriented energies to the parties involved.

Reactivity and Adaptiveness

The compellingness of reaction does not proceed without the chance of it swerving into different "solutions" or alternative states: philosophically speaking, reaction affords "transduction," the sudden transformation of a system's state, through bifurcation and the quick expansion of a structuring germ inside an oversaturated solution (Simondon [1964–1989] 2013). As suggested above, there is no simple overdetermination of reaction: neither causally (efficient causation) nor teleologically (final causation) can reactions be equated with what they are supposed to answer to, or for that matter, elicit. Whether by reference to a superior level (the Durkheimian "collective") or not, reaction keeps together the exigencies of social connection and the problem of the "horizon," or medium, of

[6] Incidentally, the idea of *Wechselwirkung* goes back to Fichte, to determine the "mutual formation or reciprocal determination of the mind as both the living form and the determinable matter of its own determinations" (Gentry 2021, 381).

social life. Insofar as reaction is relationality, it does reveal a peculiar facet of what a relation is, and what it can do.

As we are trying to conceptualize it here, reaction pertains to a sort of mid-terrain of social existence, neither completely free nor utterly constrained. This way, theorizing reaction has its payoffs. First, by de-emphasizing action (along with its intimate association with intentionality, planning, and strategy), reaction theory rescues the role of void in social life. The place of meaning, abstract language, and symbolic forms has been greatly exaggerated in twentieth-century social theory; in fact, meaninglessness, emptiness, mechanical and dreary occurrences occupy no small portion in the extent of social life (Brekhus 1998; Sabetta and Lombardo 2023). Reaction, in this sense, reminds us how often social life does not revolve around deliberative thinking, as much as it does around carrying on, hanging in, perpetuating existence (such a blind perseverance, Spinoza once called *conatus*). Second, it is also necessary to "dissect the void," a seemingly paradoxical expression that alerts us to the deeper constitution of the phenomenon at hand: what we call "the empty" of the social state is in fact full of mysterious stuff, which the regular schematics of social theory mostly fail to recognize.[7] In social life, there is always more than meets the eye, and reaction directly taps into such invisible element, into a reservoir of *intension* that is neither entirely psychological nor entirely semiotic. Finally, following Susie Scott (2018, 4), the "absence of something" (circumscribed vacua, lack of specific features/objects) does not equate to the "absence of everything" (absolute void). This unfolds, for example, the space of repressed, hold-one's-tongue aborted reactions as well as tacitly vented ones, as with what James C. Scott (1990) so called the "hidden transcripts."[8] Since people structurally learn and situationally decide to react *or not* also because of their understanding of social rank (Gould 2003), a consideration of the nature of reaction provides some ballast for explaining power imbalances, inequalities, and capital differentials.

From the individual's perspective, reaction is part and parcel of the process of adaptation to the environment. The link between reactivity and

[7] One is reminded here of Georges Pérec's (1989) search for the "infra-ordinary" of social life: Pérec sets out his inquiry into the infra-ordinary precisely with the consideration that the latter will never make its way into the news.

[8] The famous "Ethiopian proverb" (*When the great lord passes the wise peasant bows deeply and silently farts*), which serves as epigraph to Scott's masterpiece, signals how reactions can manifest twice (publicly and secretly) at the same time.

adaptability cannot be stressed enough: indeed, reactivity is the first index of vital dynamism, and the first means to enhance adaptation. Insofar as there is reaction, there is hope of survival, and hope of meaning. There are, however, at least two different models of adaptation to be considered: the first, Darwinian, is fundamentally asymmetric, insofar as the environment does not adapt itself to the organism that adapts to it. To Darwin's eyes, adaptation appears as the strife of the organism to fit into an environment that, by and large, remains indifferent toward it (Darwin [1859] 2011).[9] The second model is, by contrast, symmetric, and could be dubbed Tardeian. In his Lebnizian-monadological elaboration, Tarde conceives of adaptation as the reciprocal accommodation of two entities, calling for some sort of compromise, or collaborative harmonization, of the parties entailed in the adaptive deployment, according to the adage, "Agrégat signifie *adaptat*" [any aggregate is an adaptation] (Tarde [1898] 1999, 109). In sum, we can distinguish between one-way and two-way models of adaptation.

Once we try to interpret reaction in the light of these two types of adaptive models, we appreciate how its prism can shed light onto the problem of the social element: the individual reacts in order to adapt to the environment, but the environment structurally *includes the socius*. This way the socius, in the precise sense of the associative function appended to each individual, and encountered by each, makes its way into the adaptive equation. Since the associative function exists both within the reactant parts as well as around them, reaction can be said to directly weave together the most intimate and the most impersonal or, in Zerubavel's parlance, the "specific" and "generic" visions of personhood (Zerubavel 2023). Reaction literally *moves* the individual, but the latter—insofar as it is a subject who can conceptualize what is happening to itself—can always consider that "there is nothing personal about it." That is why both adaptive models must be kept in mind at the same time, with two-way models emphasizing harmonization and personalization (as in "collaboration"), and one-way models emphasizing disharmonization and impersonality (as in "competition").

Certainly, it is true that one only obeys to the extent that the other commands, that one only learns to the extent that the other teaches, that one only buys to the extent that the other sells, and so on; but such

[9] Before Darwin, Giacomo Leopardi ([1817–1832] 2019) long mused about the same topic.

adaptive developments necessarily unfold in an impersonal element capable of recording within itself a wide range of out-of-equilibrium points, corresponding to a number of possible asymmetrical, nonadapted outcomes (i.e., failures). A reaction research program thus calls for zooming in into what precisely happens in acts such as those of obeying, learning, buying, and so on as they can be evinced in terms of responsive-retrodictive adjustments. Shortcoming is always a chance in social life. Perhaps surprisingly, however, the test of social adaptation turns out to be quite loose: there is no single clear cleavage between adapted and unadapted, rather, varying degrees of adjustment and, complementarily, maladjustment, all of which are entitled to exist *insofar as they are able to exist*.[10] Accordingly, reactivity swings in the uncertain, underdetermined space between too-much and too-little, between too-early and too-late. By the same stroke, reaction engenders its own rhythmic (including, quirky) requirements, to which actors are called to adapt. This dynamic of intensity variations leads to an ongoing modulation of the *relata* through the associative function.

Although reaction seems to be above all about the present (*Hic Rhodus, his salta!*), in fact its temporality is not univocally flattened upon the "now" of action. To the contrary, the past persists in it in the form of memory (habitus, etc.) just as the future is constantly gestured at in terms of emergent (morphogenetic) configurations. Reaction prefigures and post-figures, but it is never in the same way, or by the same measure, that the two effects occur—indeed, as suggested above, reaction could be precisely conceptualized as the difference between them.

Participating and Reacting in the Digital Domain

Neoliberalism, as an economic and political ethos, has developed a whole theodicy of reactivity. For instance, "reactive" employees are imaged as those able to quickly respond to commands, without ever questioning the demand for flexibility that comes with them (Sennett 1998). However, since capitalism also needs a "spirit" to remain a workable social arrangement (Boltanski and Chiapello 2005), a palpable tension ensues from two ideal-typical experiences: on the one hand, *reacting*; on the other hand, *taking part*. Usually, these two phenomena are construed as near opposites: whereas reacting is considered a sort of blind, short-term behavior,

[10] This is another manner of making sense of what Merton (1948, 210) called the (Thomas Love) "Peacock theorem": "whatever is, is possible."

taking part is considered as an active, sustained participation in meaningful activity. Such significations are quite evident, for instance, in political theory and political sociology, although they have also been tackled extensively in media studies. Indeed, the digital domain provides some of the most interesting illustrations of similar adjustments: in contrast to the traditional broadcast media of the twentieth century, the new digital media have since the late 1990s been hailed as enabling users to participate more fully and "interactively."

A whole participationist paradigm in the digital sphere has ensued, which has spanned more than a decade. However, early enthusiasm for the democratic potentials of the new digital media has progressively faded, in parallel to the recognition that, between participation and emancipation, there remains a considerable gulf. In a recent study on digitally mediated interaction, Comunello et al. (2022) have worked out the category of "passive participation" to capture a type of widespread online behavior. Short of being a form of active participation in the traditional sense of the word, the authors argue, new media participation appears to be largely reactive in nature: half-asleep agents react to incoming stimulations ("notifications") without giving them much thinking, and, by doing so, they leave a plethora of traces readily exploited by various other actors and agencies for their private (usually lucrative) purposes. Implicitly, the data-as-the-new-oil metaphor means, in fact, reaction-as-the-new-oil: our precise, imperceptible, constant flow of responses via and toward digital networked technologies (including, for instance, how long we watch a show before switching to the next, which posts we share with which other contacts of ours, how often we engage with certain types of contents, etc.) define us and our "profile" better than any well-polished statement of self-presentation. Moreover, controlling behaviors can also flourish at the micro-level of peer interactions: since social media enable the search for information (whether a partner liked or commented on someone else's post, whether she/he used geopositioning systems, and so forth), any reaction can engender further reactions (including abusive, exceedingly monitoring ones) from significant others (Belotti et al. 2022).

In the new media sphere, "scrolling" seems to define the zero degree of an enlarged reactive regime: one scrolls to the extent that one is offered a self-building multitude of items that appear one after the other and which are recognized as uninteresting, or minimally interesting (incidentally, the algorithm generating data feeds is known precisely as "infinite scroll"). The user moves through scrolling items in some way—mostly, in

distracted fashion.[11] By and large, reaction stays minimal, yet constant and necessary for the user to advance through the feed. A naughty interpretation might claim that the biggest possible reaction (namely, escaping the pull-to-refresh mechanism and go offline) is exactly what is disincentivized, whereas a killing-me-softly diffuse state of minimal reactivity is encouraged by default. Indeed, perspectives stressing the potential of individual self-regulation and it's-all-what-you-do-with-it kind of subjective responsibilizations (i.e., efforts to make people accountable for how—and with which intensity, awareness, frequency, etc.—they react online) are commonsensical and essentially misguided. Quite radically, Baym et al. (2020, 9) contend that activities as "heedful or thoughtful scrolling" are oxymoronic, and come to claim that "consciousness and mindfulness, no matter how diligently practiced, cannot save our landscape from the vegetation cover of Facebook. Disconnective practices may help people find balance in the trap, but they cannot set them free. The disturbances may already be irreversible."[12]

Digital content producers naturally struggle to activate the user to a further degree than simple scrolling, so as to effectively interrupt the scrolling behavior and direct the user's attention toward certain items meant to trigger greater, more focused reaction: this, in practice, may mean a click, a like, a repost, a comment, a purchase, a subscription, and so on. The domain of the digital media thus presents us with series of fleeting focalizations infused within a landscape of distraction and minimal reactivity, which, however, can instantly intensify into implosive "surges" and "flares"—as, for instance, in those infamous public outcries known as "shitstorms" (Montgomery 2016), where both the number and the intensity of reactions (the "epic proportion") determine the very meaning of the phenomenon. But even contentious and distressing contents can be anesthetized through the zero-degree state of web surfing, as in "doomscrolling," namely "the tendency to continue to surf or scroll through bad news, even though that news is saddening, disheartening, or depressing" (Ytre-Arne and Moe 2021, 1741). Indeed, the entire debate on the

[11] Walter Benjamin can be evoked here as an earlier theorist of media distraction and its potentials. The topic of "digital flânerie" (Skees 2010) has also been reprised from Benjamin.

[12] There are, in fact, more nuanced forms of scrolling, as that of "scrolling back" to old Facebook content on one's own profile (to retrieve digital traces of now-forgotten past activities or events), which are so "unnatural" to configure a possible tool for qualitative research (see Robards and Lincoln 2017). However, here we are only addressing the fact of scrolling through *other users' feeds*.

possibility of construing online engagement as predictive of electoral success (see, for example, Murthy 2015) boils down to the question of whether digital reactivity can turn into political action—which is not normally the case (Tumasjan et al. 2010).

Digital Reaction Circuits

Reaction can be best understood, rather than as a given determined behavior, as a shifting range of intensity, a dromology of activation, and a rhythm of syncing in and out of given environments (Brighenti and Sabetta 2024). New media studies have above all emphasized the "infrastructural" power of digital platforms vis-à-vis the "dramas" that are being played out on those same platforms: power in the digital domain is, in large part, power through the algorithm (Beer 2009). Although infrastructures remain unremarked most of the time (Sabetta and Zampieri 2024), there are also instances suggesting that the drama *can* change the architecture. Different reaction circuits actually contribute to shaping the architecture of visibility and intervisibility, with the exigencies of reactivity advancing their own requirements. As a recent case, over the last decade Facebook has "refined" its reaction tools: whereas until 2016 the platform provided its users with just one single "like" button, between 2016 and 2020 five more buttons have been added, in what could be regarded as a substantive increase in expressive reaction range (Paolillo 2023).[13]

Other instances reveal cases where usage tweaks the architectural rules, or exploits architectural weaknesses to directly tap into enhanced reaction potential. For instance, on Instagram, users cannot ascertain who viewed their photos on their main feed unless they receive an explicit reaction (a "like"); however, on the "story" section, they can instantly check out who viewed their story. Since it is easier to get social validations for stories than for posts on the main feed, young people tend to use stories more than the normal feed (Yenilmez Kacar 2024). Similarly, users have awareness that simply checking some digital contents equates with "giving views" to the content creators, so that they refrain from doing so in the case of unappreciated creators (Bainotti et al. 2021). In the digital domain, the

[13] Interestingly enough, the hypothesis of a straightforward "dislike button" had been rejected on the grounds that "it would sow too much negativity," as disclosed by Facebook's chief product office Chris Cox (https://www.bloomberg.com/features/2016-facebook-reactions-chris-cox/).

individual often finds itself in the situation of juggling between different temporal horizons for reaction. In her debut novel, *Conversations with friends*, Sally Rooney describes how a young protagonist works with the deliberate postponement of reaction, interjecting a dedicated propitiatory, offline ritual before actual reception:

> The next day, I received an email from Melissa. I was sitting in the library, typing up a page of notes, when her email arrived. I decided that before reading it I would take a walk around the library desks. Slowly I arose from my seat and began my walk. Inside, everything was very brown. Out of the windows I could see a rattle of wind making its way through the trees. On the cricket green a woman in shorts was running with her elbows working up and down like small pistons. I cast a glance back at my own library desk to ensure my laptop was still there. It sat glowing ominously into nothingness. I walked halfway around the room before looping back to my own seat, as if this circuit around the library desks was actually a physical endurance test of some kind. Then I opened the email. (Rooney 2017, 233–4)

The digital domain, thus, illustrates in various ways the issues of intensity and intensification ensuing from reaction. The manifestation of emotions is a rich domain for new media studies. It is known, for instance, that YouTubers and content creators tend to tactically exaggerate their emotional fruition of reviewed content to trigger further reactions in the viewers (McDaniel 2021). Such *imitogenic* behavior—that is, behavior aimed at fostering imitation as a response—is quite widespread. Online competition for user attention also pushes toward adopting controversial styles of communication, endorsing more disputatious views: for example, in online forums, "a very controversial comment may really get things going, while a huge consensus in comments ('convergence') may lead the thread to finish" (Rooderkerk and Pauwels 2016, 13). This way, online reactivity exhibits interesting phenomena of timing and rhythm. Empirical findings (Castillo et al. 2014) demonstrate that the overall traffic eventually generated by online news depends on the reactions they are able to arouse during the first ten-to-twenty minutes since publication: such is the window of opportunity to reach a critical mass of reactions, past which the chances for a given content to "go viral" diminish steeply. Reaction in these contexts thus functions as a "use-it-or-lose-it" resource, whose importance follows a sort of exponential decay curve. Having something (endorsements, comments, critics, likes, visualizations, followers, etc.) in return is what orient a diverse gamut of digital activities.

Conclusive Remarks

As hinted at the outset, reaction points toward a peculiar location in the effectuation of relational life. Being a relation, reaction inherently reveals that relations are more than positions, or connections. As suggested above, to theorize through reaction means considering the interweaving of continuity and discontinuity in the social operation, where factors of intensity engender out-of-equilibrium dynamics. Reaction comes with rhythmic requirements and ongoing modulations, which compound the pulse of social life; or, as we have tentatively put it, *reaction is the proof of the social relation*. The digital domain abounds with examples of how the range of reactive options comes to shape the meaning and the form of the social process. The new media environments appear as infrastructural vis-à-vis the "superficial" dramas that are being played out in them; yet, we have been able to review several ways in which reactive circuits have momentous consequences that bounce back onto the very architecture of mediation. In many cases, *reaction* is the show people were looking for. But, because of the very excess it encapsulates, owners and regulators have become painfully aware that the game can easily get out of hand. More than of an agency/structure dualism, the workings of reaction appear to be a manifestation of a sort of event/element dualism, which illuminates the domain of social life as the nonformal reservoir of becoming out of which forms, actors, and patterns emerge.

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