

WHO IS THE WRITER?

MARCELLO VITALI-ROSATI

IN AN INTRICATED NETWORK OF TEXTS,

This text has several pre-texts. It is the continuation of a dialogue between several writings, and its aim is to try to grasp the significance of these writings and of their enunciatory functions and, above all, the relationship between them. It will be necessary, first of all, to give an overview, or rather a brief schematization, of this network of texts. It would, of course, be impossible to give an exhaustive account of all the textual relationships that weave the fabric of this discourse, for the cross-references, presuppositions, sources of inspiration, repetitions, and pastiches are too numerous—even if theoretically finite.¹

This text chooses a precise point as the centre of its analysis and looks at the emergence of the network from this centre. The centre is the interaction—or, as will be proposed later following the proposal of another text (Barad), the intra-action—between two texts: *The Writer is the Architect. Editorialization and the Production of Digital Space* (Vitali-Rosati) (from now on: *WA*) and *If One has the Floor, does One also need to Dance? Topology, Choreology, and the Structure of Digital Space* (Vučković) (from now on: *OFOD*).² From this center, the network will be followed in a group of other texts that are also signed with the name Marcello Vitali-Rosati (from now on: *MVR*)—in part cited by *OFOD*.

This group of texts will serve here to try to answer the question: “who is the writer?” Or, in this specific case: “who is *MVR*?”

TO PRODUCE A RESEARCHER,

It is useful to compare the exercise of this response with what is required in France to obtain an “Habilitation to supervise research” (Habilitation à diriger des recherches or HDR). This diploma recognizes a researcher’s research experience and enables them to direct doctoral dissertations (“Arrêté du 23 novembre 1988 relatif à l’habilitation à diriger des recherches”). The composition of the file required to obtain the HDR is defined by each university, but normally the file must contain a document—of variable length—that presents the candidate’s research activity, telling a kind of scientific biography of the candidate.³

This scientific biography is a veritable way of producing the researcher themselves. It is a matter of taking a collection of scientific texts, often published over a long period of time, and trying to assemble them into a coherent unit. This unit will ultimately be the candidate’s scientific “essence,” it will be “the researcher” and their name. A series of often scattered, hard-to-connect activities, the motivation for which has sometimes been completely contextual and not at all “necessary,” must be considered as if they were the fruit of a single, coherent intention, with a sure and clear orientation from the outset: the intention of an Author. This scientific biography is thus the production of this Author: an essence embodied in a name, a signature. Here, the writer is the product of their⁴ writings. And, in France, this writer is necessarily institutionalized. Their existence and essence must be stamped by the authority of the institution which, in effect, transmits to a signature a certain authority in the field of knowledge production and research. “X is a true researcher.”

PLEASE FIND A THREAD

This text attempts a similar enterprise, even if it does not ask for the stamp of the French institution: it tries, from a series of texts, to produce MVR. To do so, it has to find a common thread, a coherence, a single guiding main theme in a series of scattered writings. And, with

a certain taste for *mise en abyme*, this common thread is the question: “who is the writer?”

In short, the answer to the question “who is the writer?” here is: the writer is the result of a set of texts asking the question “who is the writer?”

Indeed, it is possible to identify this recurrent question in texts published under the name MVR between 2002 and 2023: the main pre-occupation seems to be that of redefining the relationship between inside and outside, between subject and object. The relationship between writer and writings is paradigmatic in this sense: it raises the question of who writes, who produces, who is active, and who is passive. Is it the writer who produces *their* texts, or rather—as the HDR’s scientific biography seems to suggest—are the texts that produce the writer?

AT THE CENTRE OF THE NETWORK.

But it is necessary to start from the beginning, and therefore from the centre chosen by *OFOD: WA*. So, here are the theses that seem to emerge from *WA*—in its interaction with *OFOD*’s reading of it:

- digital space is a real and habitable space
- writing is the material of which digital space is made
- digital space becomes the main living space for what *WA* often calls “us”—what this “us” refers to is precisely the crux of the problem
- digital space is not given, but is the result of production, of writing
- “we” (as writers) can be the protagonists in the production of digital space.

Yet these theses are put at the service of a need that seems to impose itself right from the start of *WA*: if it is possible to write digital space, this would enable “us” to *resist* against spaces “given” or imposed by

the big digital corporations (the GAFAMs, even though this acronym is not used in *WA*).

In *WA*'s words:

“We can say that we are now living in a digital space and that this space is constructed by writing. [...] The objects that surround us are the result of a writing process.

This situation implies a huge risk—that of remaining passive while private companies organize and develop these spaces for us. How might we avoid this risk? Is it possible, in the digital age, for us to be central to the production of the spaces in which we live? How might literature constitute a tool for the production of the spatial imaginary that enables us to reappropriate the places and territories managed by the information industry?”

OFOD notes a paradox in *WA*'s argument: if space is the fruit of the writer's production—or put another way, using concepts present in other texts, if space is the chiasmatic⁵ result of a contact between outside and inside, between object and subject—then against what could the writer resist? *WA*'s thesis would be hysterical, for it proposes that the subject resist something of which it is itself the origin. The subject produces the space against which, in order to express its subjectivity, it tries to resist.

Hence *OFOD*'s title: either there is a “floor,” something given, objective, before which something else (a subject?) can resist—but in this case the subject's action (the dance) cannot co-produce this given “thing”—or this something is not given; it is co-produced, but then there is nothing against which to resist.

THERE ARE NO “THINGS”;

OFOD is right. For it puts its finger on what seems impossible to say, and what *WA* effectively fails to say: the fact that the two poles—subject and object, writer and writing, dance and floor—are not two

poles. Or better: the two poles *are not*. In the strongest ontological sense, the two poles have no essence, they are not two “things.”

Hence the recurring question: who is the writer? This question is now revealed in all its ontological significance. It is a question about essence, or, even more precisely, it is a question about Being. What matters in the question “who is the writer” is precisely the “is,” the verb to be. The question is ultimately a fundamental metaphysical one: what is Being?

The constant that can link the various texts in the network thus becomes an ontological constant. The texts in question, as *OFOD* precisely grasps, are texts that attempt to bring out a “metaontology.”

FROM THE STANDPOINT OF METAONTOLOGY.

The proposition of metaontology—present in several texts of the network considered here, since 2003⁶—is the key to answering the question “who is the writer?” Metaontology is an ontology that assumes a multiplicity of multiple-Being that are always folding dynamics. Being is always multiple-Being. And these multiple-Being are never stable essences, but the intra-action⁷ between forces.

In short, here are the main theses which structure metaontology:

- Metaontology is an ontology. As such, it proposes an ontological approach to the world. It aims to develop a discourse on Being itself.
- Metaontology is based on an irreducible and originary multiplicity and it considers this multiplicity as an originary characteristic of Being. The topic of metaontology is multiple-Being.
- Metaontology is an ontology of mediation. It considers mediation as the formal structure of thinking and it considers Being as inseparable from thinking. Multiple-Being are thus originally mediated.
- Metaontology considers mediation and thinking always as inscribed material forms. This inscription is prehuman: thinking,

according to metaontology, should not be considered a human action.

- Metaontology is one ontology among other ontologies. It is not a super ontology. It is a metaontology because it allows the finding of relationship between different ontologies, but it does not reduce them to a unique final metasystem.
- Metaontology develops formal logic systems to create relationships between different ontologies without reducing one to the other.

HOW TO SAY THAT?

In a 2003 text (Vitali-Rosati, *Riflessione*), this idea was presented using the notion of “planes of reflection.” A plane of reflection is a fold of Being that manifests itself as such. In other words, reflection, meaning, and thought are not the production of a subject. There is no subject with an intention that manifests itself in reflection. Meaning is the emergence of a multiple-Being. And there is not something like an “immediate Being” which would be given and then “perceived,” “seen,” or reflected by a subject: Being is always a multiple-Being, already reflected, already folded. The polarity object/subject is reduced to the original multiple unity of multiple-Being.

To name this folding of Being, several notions can be mobilized. One is that of chiasm.⁸ Instead of two poles interacting, there is first and foremost the entanglement⁹ of these two poles. Instead of a subject looking at an object, there’s a chiasmatic blend of subject and object, exterior and interior.

This is what *WA* is trying to say by using the idea of “movement”—particularly in the final section, which calls on Valéry. There’s no such thing as a stable, fixed essence. There are only dynamics, movements; everything is virtual, the actual is an *après-coup* of the virtual.¹⁰

But *OFOD* is right to point out the inadequacy of such an argument. A chiasm necessarily always refers to the pre-existence of what is

encountered in the chiasm. The chiasm follows the destiny of all antidualistic thought: it ends up admitting a pre-existing polarity for the simple reason that it is unable to adequately name the alternative to this polarity.

It is a limit that seems to be constitutive of language—or at least of philosophical language.¹¹

TO GO BEYOND THE OPPOSITION,

WA tries to go beyond the inside/outside opposition, and in the text, in fact, there is never any mention of a “subject.” The term is proposed in *OFOD*’s reading of *WA*. This interpretation is not really abusive, as *WA* is not really able to go beyond the opposition between inside and outside. The opposition is re-proposed, and typically imposed in the pronoun “we,” which ends up in opposition to space. There is a space and a writer who writes it. *WA*’s problem is a trouble expressing the fact that the two poles, inside and outside, space and those who inhabit it, writing and the writer, are not “things,” are not “essences.” These poles are not the starting point, but the result of their intra-actions.

The path proposed by Louise Merzeau—with the notion of *choros*, which should replace that of *topos*—goes in the same direction and suffers from the same problem: the space as *choros* is certainly chiasmic, but this chiasm continues to refer to an actor who dances, an active subject who faces a place (the “floor” as *OFOD* puts it) where they dance.

USING THE THEORY OF EDITORIALIZATION

The theory of editorialization, as articulated by Vitali-Rosati (“What is Editorialization?”; *On Editorialization*), points to this problem. While Merzeau clearly asserts the need for human intentionality to produce meaning—the dancing subject—Vitali-Rosati, on the contrary, attempts to affirm the emergence of meaning without intentionality, and above all without human intentionality. The opposition to be avoided, in the field of editorialization theory, is embodied

particularly in the “man vs. machine” poles. On the one hand, there would be a human being endowed with intentionality, who can produce meaning, and on the other, something passive and given, the machine, which does not produce meaning. On the contrary, Vitali-Rosati (“What is Editorialization”; *On Editorialization*) asserts that meaning is the result of a series of dynamics from which emerge, as after-effects, the poles of opposition. In other words, the notions of human being and machine do not pre-exist intra-action. This thinking, which emerged in the 2010s, is obviously even more topical in the LLM era. Vitali-Rosati (2021) insists on this point, explicitly proposing the idea of a meaning that comes *before* the human being.

In this sense, the theory of editorialization is neither a form of technological determinism,¹² nor a reclamation of human freedom in the use of technical environments. Because, according to editorialization theory, there is neither technology nor human beings, the very concepts of “technology” and “human being” are the result of a series of intra-actions, not the two poles of an interaction.

IN A NON ESSENTIALIST WAY

The most recent definition of the concept of editorialization is consistent with this approach, and stems from a critique of previous definitions,¹³ which remained fundamentally essentialist:

“Editorialization is the set of dynamics that constitute digital space and that allow the emergence of meaning. These dynamics are the result of different forces and actions that subsequently determine the appearance and the identification of particular objects (people, communities, algorithms, platforms ...)

[...]

An example may clarify the definition. An individual X is the result of a series of dynamics that define this individual and make him appear. X is what emerges from an ever-changing process that involves different forces and actions: algorithms,

clicks, data structures ... All these forces determine, for instance, that the query "X" on Google Search gives some particular results, that the profiles of X on different platforms are more or less visible, displayed one way or another and that, finally, X is that particular person. These dynamics are inscribed, they are material mediations: if I can think about X, this means that digital environments can think about X in the same way. X exists via this thinking. Access to X and his being are the same thing. The only exception here is that this access is not human, it is present, inscribed, recorded, concrete, material, even without us." (Vitali-Rosati 2021)

This is why *OFOD*'s assertion that: "The agent of metaontology is the subject" is false. The very idea of metaontology is that there is no subject: multiple-Being are always mediated. These mediations are the very structure of multiple-Being themselves. There is no place for an inside/outside structure, because there is not such a separation. The chiasm comes before. Being is the chiasm which consists in a multiplicity of multiple-Being.

And again, *OFOD* affirms: "one must have something—a floor and a dancer, say—to have a dance; and it is only after this that the virtual architecture (re)configures the space as a hybrid, virtual feast." The approach of metaontology is to claim that there is never "something." The "something" is always the result of an intra-action.

INTRA-ACTIONS HELP.

To better understand the idea of metaontology, it is time to introduce a pretext that is, in fact, a post-text from a chronological point of view. The notion of metaontology was first sketched out in Vitali-Rosati (*Riflessione*) in 2003. But it plagiarizes, by anticipation (Bayerd) Karen Barad's *Meeting the Universe Halfway (MUHW)*. This book expresses and explains in the most convincing way the idea of a realistic, anti-essentialist ontology. An ontology in which there are not things, but processes and intra-actions. Based on Niels Bohr's philosophy-physics, this book demonstrates that "things" are always the result of intra-actions. The term is coined in an attempt to avoid

falling into what the idea of “interaction” presupposes: for there to be an interaction, there must first be the “things” between which this interaction will take place. In the case of intra-actions, this is not the case. Intra-actions come first. Things are precisely the result of intra-actions, not the other way around. The materiality of intra-actions guarantees the realism of the ontology, which is in no way constructivist: there is indeed the real, except that this real is not made up of essences, but of actions. This is therefore an “agential realism.”

If there are no things, the aim of an ontological analysis is no longer to identify essences, but to understand how boundaries emerge precisely by creating identification effects, or in other words, by making “things” emerge.

In this sense, according to *MUHW*, there are no such things as human beings. The human is not an essence. And so there can be no opposition between humans and machines—for example—or humans and space, or humans and digital infrastructures. *MUHW* affirms: “My posthumanist account calls into question the givenness of the differential categories of human and nonhuman, examining the practices through which these differential boundaries are stabilized and destabilized” (66).

WHO IS THE WRITER, THEN?

Now, from a theoretical framework of this kind, it is possible to reaffirm *WA*’s point in another way.

There is, in fact, no difference ontologically between subject and object, inside and outside, dance and floor. The idea is to try to understand how and why boundaries emerge to identify and differentiate things (and so also “subjects” and “spaces”). Some chiasmatic intra-action can be analyzed as producing, say, a “collective” and a “power,” or a “human” and a “machine,” or a dancer and a floor. Why are the boundaries stabilized in order to produce a subject and a space? What are the intra-actions to look at in order to be able to produce these two poles?

It would be possible to achieve in another way what *MUHW* calls the agential cut, the cut that chooses some particular intra-actions in order to isolate them and establish boundaries. With another agential cut, instead of a “digital space” and a “subject,” there would be, for example, communities, such as the free software community. This community is made up of a set of practices, interests, values, discourse, code... The notions of human and machine, in this case, are less relevant to the analysis.

It is therefore necessary to examine the ways in which boundaries emerge, so that something stabilizes itself as a “thing.” *WA* proposes the case study of the Trans-Canada Highway. In this case, attention needs to be paid to the intra-actions that cause the highway to stabilize as an infrastructure with some characteristics, and a person crossing it to become a user with some other characteristics. A certain type of agential cut would make the highway look like a useful and efficient infrastructure, designed to speed up the transport of goods. This infrastructure has as its counterpart a user—the human—who is characterized as having production as their primary goal. The user quickly crosses the highway to get from point A to point B as efficiently as possible. The human and the infrastructure that emerge here have definite essences, but these essences are the result, not the starting point, of intra-actions.

In the *transcan16* experience, there is no longer a highway and highway users, but a series of different, heterogeneous inhabitable spaces: those described by literary works, those photographed, those imagined ... and on the other side, readers rather than “travellers” or “users.”

WA’s point—at least as this text is interpreted here—is not to affirm the freedom of a subject, but to lay the foundations for an analysis of the emergence of meaning in which the subject is not only not a protagonist, but also not an actor at all.

So, *OFOD* claims: if there is no difference between inside and outside, it is impossible to affirm the freedom of the subject. Yes, ok, so do not affirm it; just forget about the subject.

Who is the writer then? And who is MVR?

The writer is also the result of intra-actions. It is neither the free actor who—by dancing—produces the space/object in front of it, nor the automaton¹⁴ whose gestures are determined by a technological environment. It could be both, or something else entirely, depending on the agential cut, on how the boundaries emerge.

There is no such thing as MVR. MVR is not a thing, it is not an essence. What is interesting politically and institutionally is to question how boundaries that isolate, define, and circumscribe MVR emerge, how they stabilize and how they destabilize.

This insight and analysis is perhaps at the heart of the activity of philosophy.

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NOTES

1. Some of them are cited in the text, some in the bibliography, some stay implicit, some of them are actually unknown, e.g., the set of texts on which DeepL’s language model, which plays a role in the emergence of this text, has been trained.↵
2. It is important to underline that this center has been chosen by *OFOD*, which is not a text signed by MVR. The center is thus eccentric, in some ways, as the following pages are going to show.↵
3. Wikipedia (“Habilitation à diriger des recherches”) talks about “une biographie (appelée aussi « égo-histoire », document faisant la synthèse de l’activité scientifique des candidats),” “a biography (also known as an “ego-history,” a document summarizing the candidate’s scientific activity).” The notion of “ego-history” seems very appropriate here: this history is, in fact, the very production of the ego, of the subject.↵
4. And the possessive adjective comes too soon here, because there’s no “their” before the texts.↵

5. The notion of “chiasm” comes from Merleau-Ponty (*Le visible*) and is central for Vitali-Rosati (*Corps; Égaréments*) and other.↔
6. The first formulation is in Vitali-Rosati (*Riflessione*).↔
7. Below, this concept will be better explained.↔
8. See footnote above.↔
9. It is an interesting term. In French, Levinas (*Totalité*)—which is the pretext of Vitali-Rosati (*Riflessione*)—used the word “intrigue” that could be translated with the English “entanglement.” This word is the one used in quantum physics and the concept is at the very foundation of Barad, which, as it will be shown below, becomes central in the argumentation of more recent texts of the network analyzed here.↔
10. The notion of the virtual is explored in several texts (Vitali-Rosati *Corps; “Auteur”*) that establish a dialogue with other pretexts (Merleau-Ponty *Phénoménologie*; Deleuze; Bergson *L'évolution*).↔
11. Ce sujet des limites du langage est ici envisagé dans la continuité du dialogue autour des textes de Lévinas, cf. en particulier Derrida; Lévinas (“En ce moment”); Ricœur.↔
12. The ideas proposed by Kittler (*Discourse Networks*) can be interpreted as a form of technological determinism, because there is a clear opposition between the intentionality of a human being—who wants to write something—and the determination of a pre-written machine.↔
13. Especially Vitali-Rosati (“Mais où”).↔
14. The idea of automaton is proposed by Matteo Treleani.↔