

Where are you? Mobile ontology

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‘The client you have called cannot be reached at the moment’

Recorded message for Vodafone

‘Where has he gone? Where is he now?’

L.N. Tolstoy, *War and Peace*

A writing instrument

Had I been wholly immodest, I would have like to give this paper a title akin to those of Aristotle’s treatises, *Perì mail* or ‘On the Post’, ‘Concerning the Post’ or ‘The Post’, just like the *Perì hermeneias* or the *Perì psuches*. And it is precisely a question of the post, and not for instance ‘On the Telephone’, that I mean to talk about. For, despite appearance, *the cell phone is a writing instrument, like a typewriter*.

To support this claim, I set out in the first section of this discussion some of the more obvious changes that the cell phone has brought about to the idea of being present. In the second section I try to show that these changes follow from the fact that the cell phone is a writing instrument. In the third I argue that writing is a matter not so much of communication as of registration. In this, I follow the line of thought proposed by Jacques Derrida in 1967, that is to say at a time where there were neither computers nor mobile phones, as we can see from the 1968 film *2001: A Space Odyssey* where they use normal typewriters and the role of Hal 9000 is to think. In the last section, I try to bring out the role that registration has in making up what John Searle has called the ‘huge invisible ontology’ that is the essence of social reality.

1. Talking

1.1 ‘Where are you?’ I’m on the train; I digit a number and the ‘client I have called’ replies. He greets me without asking ‘hello, who is it?’, because my name has already popped up on his cell phone which has it registered in his address book. But the first thing I ask is ‘where are you?’. Until just a few years ago, the question would have seemed absurd: ‘where do you think I am? I’m here, just where you called me’. The cell phone has changed all that. Messages can reach us anywhere and we can be anywhere to receive them. This is the most

far-reaching change as between the landline and the mobile phone, and it brings in its wake a range of other modifications that it is worth our while to scrutinise.

If both the fixed phone and the mobile ring, which do you answer first? One person might say the mobile, because the call is surely for you, while on the fixed phone it might be for anyone. Another might object that you should answer the fixed phone, because it is more institutional, like the telegrams of yesteryear. Thus there arises a clash of two worldviews.

The obsolescence of answering machines for someone with a mobile follows from a simple dilemma: either they reach you on your cell phone or they leave you a text message on it.

'I'll pass you to him' was once a common enough phrase. The house phone rang and someone answered, but it wasn't the person the call was for. I say 'I'll pass you to him', then I shout for him and he arrives at the phone. Hardly a trace of this little scene remains in the memory of young people today. While in the past there was some dislocation in the fact of being present, now on the contrary it is ubiquitous. It is not so much a matter of 'everything around you' as the slogan of one mobile phone company puts it, as of 'everyone around you', ready to pounce.

'Hello, is that the Smith home? Could I speak to Barry please?'. Here we have another turn of phrase that is going out of currency, and not just because of the increasing number of people living alone. It would be odd to call a cell phone and make such requests. The mobile is not in a home, but in someone's pocket. At most, one might call John's phone in the hope of speaking to Barry, who just happens to be with him but has his phone off or has no signal.

Two people are walking and talking in the street. At a certain point the cell phone rings and *one of the two starts talking to a third person* with all her gestures directed at the absent third party and not at the person next to her. It is a nice question to ask where, precisely, is the person who is replying to the cell phone.

Even the narrative imagination has to come to terms with this development. Whole films would have been impossible if there had been the mobile phone. Dr Zhivago sees Lara as she recedes into the distance. He doesn't know how to stop her. But what's the problem? Just give her a ring. Hollywood is now taking note and basing films on this possibility.

1.2 'Hello, who is it?' is thus a question that has had its day. The question, 'where are you?' is a sort of generalisation of the tv quizmaster's question, 'where are you calling from?', with the crucial twist that we put the question to the person we are calling and not to someone who is calling us. But a moment's thought shows that things are rather more complicated. While

we have lost certainty about where our interlocutor is, given that he could be anywhere, we have gained a certainty, one that was unthinkable just a few years ago, about who he is, given that his name appears on the cell phone's screen.

And there is also the promise of an *absolute knowledge* at least for someone like Big Brother. While we private users don't have the foggiest idea where the person we are speaking to might be, so that we have to ask, this is not the case, for instance, for the telephone company. They know perfectly well where we are, even though, for the most part, they don't care. Unless I'm badly misinformed, they know to within an accuracy of about 10 meters, which is close enough to target smart weapons. And that is not all. All the message traffic, including e-mails, is recorded and stored somewhere.

Moreover, the cell phone is an object that *calls itself*, that you can call so as to know where it is. Unlike all the other objects that seem to enjoy hiding, the cell phone helps us find it.

Even within this absolute knowledge, the cell phone can nevertheless nourish a previously inconceivable effect of *radical isolation* even in the most mundane situations. Given how we have become used to being able to trace someone, if we can't manage it, the failure to do so generates high anxiety. The most threatening sentence of all is 'the client you have called cannot be reached at the moment'. Conversely, ontological isolation begins when we learn that 'there is no signal' and we throw ourselves into recapturing it as if we were dowsing for water. We feel deserted, even though only a few years ago we were always in this situation.

1.3 'When are you?' However deep-seated these changes might, however, we should set a limit to them so as not to fall into the postmodern trap of supposing that every technological change brings with it a radical turn in ontology.

We have considered the question 'where are you?' as if it represented a radical transformation of the ways of being present. But this is still up for grabs. When I ask someone 'where are you?' I am trying to locate her in space in just the same way as when I look for my glasses on my desk.

The real transformation would come with, for instance, 'when are you?'. It is worth emphasising that this is not the question, 'when are you at home?' or 'when are you in the office', but the question, 'when are you?' without further specification, as if our interlocutor had ceased to be an object and had become a purely temporal event. Which, pretty clearly, doesn't happen. And the moral to draw is that presence stays just what it was, while what has changed is our manner of accessing it. The spatio-temporal coordinates of the person we are in contact with are exactly the same as on a landline phone, except that we happen not to

know them. Hence, to suppose that presence has undergone some change would be like arguing that a man mounted on a horse is present in a different way from a man on foot.

We can make this a bit more precise. It is one thing to talk of *dislocated* presence, which is what we have when we walk rather than sit still or when we use a cell phone rather than a fixed one. And it is quite another to talk of *deferred* presence, which is what we bring about when we use any form of registration, whether it be on a piece of paper, a recording or a text message, where receipt is not simultaneous with transmission. But in neither case do we really have to do with *transformed* presence.

Here then is my theoretical claim, the core of my cellphone ontology: the real transformation that the cell phone has wrought is not so much by way of changes in presence, supposing that there have been some, as in the fact that *a gadget for talking has become an instrument for writing*.

2. Writing

2.1 The System. ‘When it is closed, it seems like a tiny simple mobile phone (10 centimeters by 6 and 2.5 thick). But when you open it you see what it really is: a mobile phone that can compete with a pc: with a full keyboard, a 7 centimeters screen and wi-fi and Bluetooth connections. Expected price: around \$900’. For sure, it’s not cheap any more than are the cell phones today that read e-mail. Soon its price will tumble and in a few years it’ll be entirely out of date.

But there is a reason why this advertisement is already comic, connected not to the wonders of science but to a philosophical error about the ‘Form’ of the mobile phone. The ‘what it really is’ that the advertisement attributes to this special cell phone is a personal computer, which is to say a writing instrument, an advanced typewriter. Fair enough. Nevertheless, the point is that *already* and *since their first appearance*, even the most modest cell phones are *writing instruments*.

Let us take stock. Cell phones have *letters* on their keys, and not just numbers. The letters are not just to help us remember codes, as on the old dialling phones. For instance, in Maigret’s code ‘Alma 2327, ‘Alma’ stood for the Paris phone area where all the numbers began with 2562. Rather, on the cell phone, the letters are there for composing messages. And even the *numbers* in their turn are there not just to ‘dial the number’ of the person we are after, but to text to someone in an exam that Columbus discovered America in 1492 (where the number is a date), to set an alarm (the number as a time), to get a result out of the

calculator incorporated in the phone (and here, the number is not a code, nor yet a PIN for a credit card, but, so to say, a real number the genuine ideal object).

Even if we decide to use the cell phone only to talk, it *will write* to us. It will tell us when the client we have called can now be reached, that the recharge has been registered, that we have only €3 euros of traffic left, that we have left Slovenia and are entering Croatia, (if we are Italians) that we should go to vote, or (if we are British Muslims) when it is time to pray towards Mecca. And so on.

Here we have the *System*, which traces a dialectic that Hegel would have delineated in terms of the alliance and not the opposition between the telephone and the typewriter. The Thesis is the landline phone and speaking. The Antithesis is the personal computer and writing. And the Synthesis is the cell phone in which speech and writing come together, with latter having the upper hand.

2.2 Thesis: the telephone. In the beginning was the word: telephone, radio and television. Not many years ago it looked as if writing was on its way out and the future seemed to privilege the apparently more immediate, primary and intuitive functions of speaking and listening.

The point, however is that a voice carried over a distance by the telephone or by radio, a picture broadcast through the cinema or television is a prolongation of writing, not its antithesis. In both cases we find the transportation of a message through space, just like with letters; and it is no accident that the radio in its infancy was called the wireless *telegraph*. That is to say, in the very words adopted for these technologies and in their extensions, writing was lying dormant, ready to awake.

2.3 Antithesis: e-mail. It is no surprise that, at a certain point, there came about an explosion of writing, with the computer, e-mail and the Web. This apparent opposition masks a real continuity, given that what previously underwrote the system of orality was writing, which now comes to the forefront. We cannot agree with those who say that what we have here is a creolisation, in which the written becomes a variant of the spoken; it is not so and we can prove that it is not.

Let us take the *formula* that is typical of spoken language, made up of set phrases, of fixed turns of speech, of redundancies and repetitions of the sort we find for instance in Homer. And someone might be tempted to argue that in e-mail messages, what we find are formulæ that create a creole between the written and the oral. And I suppose that one might have in mind abbreviations like ‘asap’ (for ‘as soon as possible’) etc.. But this is the nub of the

question: I have just written ‘etc.’: is this an intervention of the spoken in the written. I wouldn’t say so. And if I had written ‘e.g.’, it would likewise be hard to say it was a creole return of orality, unless there was a return right from the start on Roman ruins and in medieval codices, which are full of abbreviations, including the notorious @, which stood for ‘*apud*’ meaning ‘in’. If I then receive in my postbox a solid card inviting me to a soirée or a ceremony written in a fine old English copperplate, it can easily have on it the formula, not so different from ‘asap’, just rather less bossy: ‘RSVP’: ‘répondez s’il vous plaît’. Is this an invasion by the spoken in the written? A creolisation? Good on those who can believe that.

Thus we come to the question of *linearity*. If we assume that linearisation is the prime characteristic of writing, then we might challenge anyone to find something more strictly and rigorously linear than an e-mail message. For sure, it aims to ‘get rid of the useless lines’ to gain space, but it would be inconceivable without the lines; in this it is unlike what is on offer in a manuscript letter, where one can, if one wants, insert a monogram or a diagram. And the habit of splitting one’s correspondent’s message so as to reply point by point is the most written thing in the world.

Turning now to the use of *emoticons*, which are ideograms like these: :), :-), :-(, :-|, ;-)) to stand for various degrees of happiness, sadness, indifference and quizzicality, we might ask whether there is any sense in seeing this inflation of ideograms as a symptom of the prevalence of the spoken, when after all here we so not even have pronounceable writing.

And lastly there are the terrible *chatrooms*. Here we do have a case in which, like telephone conversation, the writing is synchronous. And indeed, the spoken does intervene in the written, with the abbreviations and formulæ, the interjections and sloppy grammar that are characteristic of orality. But, on the one hand, it would be like treating ‘gulp’ and ‘pant’ in cartoon books as signs of creolisation. On the other, it is too easy to forget that, unlike telephone conversations (at least those that are not being monitored), the chatrooms are permanent, just like writing. Even allowing that chatting is a rather slower sort of telephone, for all that it is in principle permanent, it must be admitted that text messages are much quicker letters and equally permanent, again at least in principle.

In any case, it is possible to argue that the telephone itself was readying itself to receive writings, and not just in terms of the blanket consideration of teletransporting outlined earlier. Consider the humble *fax*. Here we have an instrument that was modern twenty years ago and that is now relatively obsolete. Now why does no-one ever mention the fax? Because it is old? If so, why did no-one mention it when it was young? Simply because the fax is a perfect example of the triumph of the written: even a handwritten letter passes down the telephone

wires that were traditionally given over to transmitting orality. And no-one ever wrote a learned disquisition to show that orality was being creolised by the written. No-one.

A final example. Shortly before the fax, *answering machines* started appearing in people's houses. And it was inevitable that someone would think of writing down epistolary messages where we have a He and a She who correspond with each other, each never finding the other on the telephone, by leaving messages on the ansaphone. The idea is pretty obvious really, but is curious that no-one followed up the obvious consequence, that of writing an epistolary novel based on the answering machine, and this must be because, just like the fax, the answering machine encodes a bit of writing, a peak or perhaps a whole continent surrounded by a sea of orality. Exactly like writing, the answering machine is a *registration* which allows a message not only to be moved in space but also to be deposited across time. If someone had wanted to, she could have used her answering machine to take notes, phoning them to herself, just as one can save a text by sending it to one's own e-mail address, that is using a tool for communicating with others as a tool for registering for oneself.

2.4 Sintesis: the mobile phone. Everything we have said about e-mail, about personal computers and about the Web today applies also to the mobile phone, which is nothing other than a writing instrument. Before carrying forward the analysis of the situation, I would like to point out a strange feature of what is going on.

There have been predictions of things that then didn't come to pass, such as the monorail as a normal form of urban transport. But no-one predicted the vast upsurge of writing that we see everyday. What I have in mind is not just the crashing obviousness of computers, e-mails, texting, not to mention credit cards with their signatures and cash cards with their PINs; but also the fact that IT shops are enormous repositories of typewriters, among which the cell phone has pride of place.

The reason for all this blindness is nevertheless rather boring. It is simply that *you can't predict what was already there*. And writing was already there. It was already there in the traces left by animals marking their territory, in Stone Age cave painting, in Egyptian tombs, on papyri, in books, in libraries, at the newsagent's, on the very pages on which our prophets made their prophecies and science fiction writers outlined the future.

The cell phone, brining together in a single limited physical space all the functions that we have already listed (telephone, radio, cinema, television, e-mail, Web and data storage) is the absolute instrument. It is what the hand was for Aristotle and for Hegel. If we needed proof that German is a philosophical language, we could appeal to the fact that the Germans use a

rather touching Anglicism for the cell phone, calling it ‘*Handy*’. And here we have to hand, within our grasp (as Heidegger would have put it *Zuhandenheit* and *Vorhandenheit*) the absolute tool, the machine that puts an end to all other machines because it summarises them all within itself. And the thing that is so serviceable – and the word ‘manageable’ has the Latin root for hand – is not, I repeat, an instrument for talking but an instrument for writing.

If this much is established, we have to get clear about what ‘writing’ really means, given that it is generally regarded as *essentially* a means of communication, while it is so only *accidentally*.

3. Recording

3.1 Sumerians, 3500 BC Suppose someone tells us or writes to us that ‘The oldest writing to have come down to us and to have been interpreted – that of the Sumerians from around 3500 BC – seems to have been invented for practical purposes, to retain the memory of certain facts: the most ancient texts are about cereals and sheep. For a long time what we now call literature was passed down orally; after the invention of writing religious and other poems, like the Homeric epics, came to be transcribed’. For all that a claim of this sort seems to be a banal report of solid fact, it nevertheless hides a prejudice that can be brought to the surface by considering the strange slip of the tongue it contains.

‘Writing was invented for practical purposes’. And why else would it have been invented? As a way of wasting time? What is being insinuated here is something else. It is that those silly Sumerians invented writing all right, but they didn’t understand that its essence is not to record, but to communicate. Or at least that is what it is believed to be. First we record and then we discover that we can communicate, and so we become really clever. But is this true?

3.2 Hanover, 2005 AD. Five thousand five hundred after the Sumerians, the story of the cell phone teaches us not only that the instrument is for writing as much as it is for speaking, but also that writing is not *essentially* a matter of communicating; rather, and here the Sumerians were not so far wrong, it is a matter of recording or registering. Now, to believe that the essence of writing is communication is more or less like believing that the essence of a sofa is to let Hollywood producers seduce starlets: it is to muddle one of the thing’s functions, perhaps its most noticeable and picturesque function, with its essence.

This can be easily demonstrated. Let us take an article that describes the most recent information technology fair held in Hanover under the significant title: ‘Beyond the Voice: the Cellular Revolution’. Here are a few passages from the article in question.

The cell phone [...] will no longer be just an instrument for making calls or for being reached wherever you are. It will be something else, something more: it will become the means for connecting to the television and to internet from wherever you are, for downloading music from Mp3 portals [...] with the new wireless lines you will be able to have broadband connections to internet [...] Even while travelling for work or leisure, we shall be able to look for whatever we need online [...] The extended memories of the new minimobile allow us to see our favourite television programmes online [...] The new cell phones replace the music lover's walkman [...] And it is in direct competition also with handheld Gameboy and PlayStation: if you use the cell phone to access any site, you can download or play and videogame in real time. [...] Last but not least, the cell phone is becoming a portable videophone. It doesn't merely take photographs, but also movies with a resolution of three million pixels

The Hanover mobiles are just like the Sumerians: they write to record rather than to communicate.

3.3 Save. What then is involved in registration? There are at least three elements that saturate the society we live in; and for good reason, given that they constitute it.

The first is the possibility of *manipulation*. Not so long ago, there was in circulation the rather ponderous title for computers that were dedicated 'text editing machines'; which meant, more or less, that the computer could be used to write and to modify what had been written. This hits the nail on the head and gets to the essence of what writing is. In effect, writing consists in two basic functions, that of *marking* and that of *cancelling*.

These were the two functions that Freud attributes to the mind in his *Project for a Scientific Psychology* (1895). He illustrates with the image of the 'mystic pad', a waxed tablet covered with a sheet of cellophane, on which one can easily write with a stylus (the letters appear where the cellophane is in contact with the wax) and very easily erase (taking the cellophane off the wax). These two mental functions are not found together when one uses paper, for there, while it is easy to make a mark, it is not so easy to cancel it without leaving some trace. In the computer and in the cell phone, on the other hand, this is just how it works: writing on paper at last becomes as malleable as writing on the blank tablet of our memory. As Hamlet vowed to Claudius:

And thy commandment all alone shall live
Within the book and volume of my brain
Unmix'd with baser matter

Second, there is the possibility of *saving*: How does one save? This is a relatively new question. Once upon a time, there was no need to save; the problem was not to lose what there was. Long, long ago men made carbon copies. And then along came the photocopier. But the idea remained that the original was one thing and the other, less perfect, less exact, was the

copy. And there was an outcry when photocopies came to be so good that the copy was no longer distinguishable from the original: parliamentary questions and philosophical essays were launched on the issue.

But now things are different. The page you have laid out before you on the computer (supposing that it is a page; it is like one with its letters and pictures, but unlike one in not being there when the computer is off) or on the table (if the worst comes to the worst) is indeed the original; but it is also something that needs to be saved. Immediately. Otherwise, even though it is there in front of your eyes, it will disappear. What is set on foot is what we might call an anxious ontology: the things you have in your head have to be saved onto paper or in a file. And this is the old system, as ancient as the invention of writing. But then the file or the paper are not enough, the computer is not enough. You need a backup on the computer, on a diskette, on the zip and then on so distant a site that you have no idea where it is – here is the genuine ‘where are you?’ of our time – but that seems pretty damn safe.

What this process tells us about is the complete history of *idealisation*. The aim of saving texts to distant locations, making them independent of any accident or incident, is to be able to recover them when needed by use of the appropriate tools. If this is not immortality, and alas it certainly is not, it is at least an approximation to it and philosophers have long called it ‘idealisation’. The computer can break, the house or the archive can burn down, yet all is not lost: way out there, in some remote place, it is all saved and subtracted from what we might pompously call the ‘transitoriness of things’.

3.4 Memory stick. Into this process a fine transactional object has inserted itself, halfway between physical presence and remote saving. This is the memory stick or key, which is a very interesting item from the metaphysician’s standpoint. For it has the shape of a pen and the exactly opposite function of being an enormous writing surface, an almost endless piece of paper or wax tablet.

Think of the advantages. On the 6th November 1824, Champollion wrote to his brother:

I passed my hands over the names of years of which History has completely lost record, the names of Gods who have had no altar raised to them for fifteen centuries, and, hardly breathing for fear of reducing them to dust, I collected a certain tiny piece of papyrus, the last and only resting place of the memory of a King who, when alive, may have found the immense Palace of Karnak too confining for him!

If only the Pharaoh had had a memory stick.

The memory stick is another ‘*Handy*’, less powerful than the cell phone but of the same family, a more modest variant of the absolute instrument. Just so, the mouse, an animal in

shape but a hand in function; but unlike the memory stick or the cell phone, the mouse has no memory: it is an extension of the hand and not itself a writing instrument.

4. Building

Well, what do we construct with all this writing? What do we construct with all these registrations? Certainly not physical objects like tables and mountains; nor yet ideal objects like numbers and theorems. These things can be recorded and calculated, photographed and memorised using the writing system built into the cell phone.

But there are things that can be built in a radical sense out of the capacity for recording. These are *social objects*, such as promises, money, capital, bonds, treaties, contracts. In all of these, a system of recording and registering is at work. And in view of what we have seen about the System, the cell phone is the absolute instrument given that it allows us to register, to connect to all the recording systems, to check our bank account, to pay for goods and to send a donation to the victims of the Tsunami. This, then is the nub of the thing.

All this writing going on in cell phones and their ever-expanding memories is the writing that defines the identities of persons (their birth certificate, their identity card, their tax code, their driving licence) of states and of companies. It defines even the identity of the Telecom that organised this conference. After all, which are the physical molecules able to define the identities of these things? Are they those of physical objects with their many molecules? Or rather those of the records made with just a few?

I would like to conclude with a little anecdote. In Italy once, Telecom was the owner of telephone handsets and of the phone wires. But in the last fifteen years everyone has been allowed to buy the phone he wants so that Telecom phones are no longer the only ones to be found in Italian houses; and today they are in a decided minority. What is more, Telecom has gradually divested itself of its monopoly in landlines. Should we then infer that Telecom has become a different thing? In one sense, yes, it is no longer the monopoly company in Italy. But it has nevertheless persisted across time. Moral: handset and wires can disappear or change hands, but that does not imply that Telecom disappears. All that is necessary is that the records shouldn't disappear. If that happened, we would be in deep trouble. Yet, for all their size, all those records, like the name of the Pharaoh, can fit in a hand or a *Handy*. Which leaves us with the merely apparent paradox that the whole of the Telecom can be contained in a part of itself, in a mobile phone.

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