

BOOK REVIEWS

Mihnea Maruta, *Virtual Identity: How and Why Social Media Transforms Us (Identitate virtuala: Cum si de ce ne transforma retelele de socializare)*, Bucharest: Humanitas, 2023, ISBN 978-973-50-7978-9, 291 pages

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Virtual Identity: How and Why Social Media Transforms Us is a very popular work, written by Mihnea Maruta, a Romanian journalist and philosopher. The book represents Maruta's doctoral thesis and was praised for its original approach and depth of analysis. Published in May 2023 by Humanitas Publishing House, the book explores how social media platforms influence users' identity and behaviour. Virtual identity is seen as something that appears and lives in the others' minds: is the sum of the others' perceptions, intuitions, judgements regarding an individual who created them for the social media.

The book contains ten poetical chapters (*Self Production, Self Metalepsis, Self Simulation, Self Illusion, Self Seduction, Self Mirroring, Self Time, Self Filiation, Self Shade, Self Dissolution*) that are structured along almost 300 pages. The innovation that the work brings, together with a fascinating interpretation of the virtual identity concept, is the interactivity that it involves, with incorporated multimedia aspects. Maruta made podcasts on the same topic and QR codes embedded in the text serve as a connection between the written material and real-time discussions. This interactive format allows readers to engage more deeply with the content, providing different perspectives and expert opinions (such as Dragos Stanca's, an entrepreneur and media expert) on the issues raised in the chapters, understanding better the definition of the notions and even visualising some paintings, movie fragments in relation to those key ideas.

The author's approach in researching and explaining the concept of virtual identity is an interdisciplinary one, blending philosophical, sociological, and psychological and communication perspectives. The book has the power to allow readers, both to those that use the philosophical notions and to those that are not initiated in this field, to explore both the personal and societal implications of living in a digital era, making it an insightful reflection on contemporary programmed culture.

The central focus of *Virtual Identity* is the way in which social media platforms transform the identity of individuals, responding to the open questions of why and how the process takes place. In today's computerized world, social media is a powerful tool but not only for communication, self-expression, and connection, but for an incredible way of influencing individuals' perception about themselves and the others through platforms like Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and others that shape virtual identity compared to real-world selves. The construction of the virtual identity is crafted, if our "real" identities are impacted by face-to-face interactions, the digital selves are edited through the lens of social media. People carefully select how to present themselves, what to share, and how to reply to others. The virtual self can lead to

a distortion of reality, as people often present idealized versions of themselves, which may not reflect their true selves or the complexities of their lives, but be a completely new identity.

In *Introduction*, Maruta explains the terms he is about to work with during the chapters, in an expressive emanation, with vivid examples, defining what "virtual", "virtual thing", "virtual concept" and then "virtual identity" stand for. The intertextuality is present in all the chapters, producing into the reader an enlightening joy to discover through bright comparisons from literature (such as the Italian modernist novel of Luigi Pirandello-*One, None And A Hundred Thousand*, the Argentinian marvelous realism of Adolfo Bioy Casares-*The Invention Of Morel*, Arthur Conan Doyle's novels) and Philosophy field (from the Greek wits Plato, Aristotle to Martin Heidegger, Philippe Queau), to the Arts field (the painting *Las meninas* by the artist Diego Velazquez, *Narcis* by Caravaggio, *Pygmalion and Galatea* by Jean-Leon Gerome, *The Arnolfini Portrait* by Jan van Eyck), cinematography (the movies of the director Alfred Hitchcock, the films *The Purple Rose Of Cairo*, *Starwars*, *Guardians Of The Galaxy*, *Birdman*, the series *Game Of Cards*) and television's daily Politics (the situation of Ukraine in 2019).

The book touches so many concepts, as for example the digital selves, that are constantly being shaped by feedback from others, as a response to likes, comments, and shares. The feedback loop influences how we see ourselves and how we present ourselves to the world, with psychological effects of this constant validation-seeking behaviour, suggesting that many people derive much of their self-worth from their online persona. The effect is a tension between the real self (who we are offline) and the virtual self (who we are online). The concepts of self metalepsis and antimetalepsis are explained concisely, with relatable examples from Arts and movies, which transform the abstract ideas into revelations for the readers. Maruta makes projections regarding the near future and what our children's avatars will look like, focusing on other key terms, such as the metaverse and many others.

On a deeper philosophical extent, Mihnea Maruta examines the meaning of having an identity in the age of digital technology, questioning the very nature of selfhood and whether the distinction between the real self and the virtual self, where the boundaries between the physical and digital worlds are increasingly blurred. Once the digital era appeared, the person built an alternative to the reality, an ontological level where it is possible to manifest exclusively on screens and in a continuous fission, which is seductive, contracting the dimensions of the image by diminishing it, and which offers a new chance to the suppressed eros, inducing an illusion of rebirth through the others.

The impact on mental health is another important aspect explored in the writing as a consequence of social media use. Research has linked heavy social media use to increased anxiety (such as FOMO-the fear of missing out), depression, and issues with body image. Maruta shows how the constant need to perform and curate an idealized image online can create stress and lead to mental health challenges, especially for younger generations. In the same time, the cold and impersonal network gets to suggest to us to dream about dreams and wishes that are not actually our own (such as the paradisiac islands that can be visited, the clothes, the food to try, the books or movies that we think we would like to see, all suggested by the platforms and algorithms).

Social media promises greater links, a living style for the network, with the intentional wish to converge to immortality and a living style in the network. Maruta highlights a paradox where individuals lose the present moment, sacrificed in order to live a higher satisfaction, an

online pleasure, but the same individuals may feel more isolated, alienated, lonely, despite being constantly connected and living in a superficial way. Living actively in the network is compared to using a mask over the human fear of death, that could protect us somehow from rediscovering that within us is not the same us that exist and that we created online. Users compare constantly their lives with others, leading in the end to a cycle of self-comparison and diminished self-esteem.

The *Postward - Metaverse And The Issue Of Freedom* of the book is a pragmatic glance forward the future of the social media and the virtual identities of our descendants, that might have to live in a very complicated world, not of real human beings, but through visible fictions. If nowadays the virtual universe started with attractive games, such as *Fortnite*, *Roblox*, the very near future will be of a troubling society, with physical and moral torments, many temptations and few bench-marks, an unreal infinite that we will dive in. For the next decades, the battle will be held for controlling the human minds, through all the possible means: propaganda, new media, social media and metaverse. Of course, the free will might save the future generations, if they will choose to limit themselves to their real bodies and a reality without technologies and without the fascinating experiences that surpass the real for the virtual environment.

Maruta's *Virtual Identity* is an essential contribution to the conversation about technology and society and further, the human being, with its conscious and subconscious. It offers a detailed exploration of how our digital interactions are transforming personal identity and reshaping social structures. The book reveals human's biggest fear-of remaining present and not absent, even after physical death, possible thanks to the digital media instruments. The readers are invited to reflect critically on their own virtual identities and the broader implications of living in a world where online and offline realities are increasingly intertwined, to understand the concepts that participate in the very delicate relation of real-digital-virtual and to see which are the risks that might occur to us and to the future generations.