

The 'Death of Neighbour' Seen in a Black Mirror - (*Be Right Back* on *Solaris*)

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Introduction

This chapter is the result of the analysis of some episodes of *Black Mirror* and shows interesting insights for linguistics in general, for the communicative interaction between man and machine, and for the aesthetic and spiritual aspects concerning the theme of losing and reconnecting with loved ones. The focus will be on the episode “Be Right Back,” as it is the most representative considering these premises. The reflection begins by trying to define the type of technology represented in the story, continues with a description of the linguistic interaction between the protagonists, adds some thoughts on the concept of body and textuality, and ends with a thought on the immediate relevance of the theory about the state of contemporary humanity by Luigi Zoja: the ‘death of the neighbour’ (2019). Concluding remarks are made possible by a comparison with *Solaris* by Andrei Tarkovsky.

Phatic technologies and linguistic interaction

“Be Right Back” explores the topic of the re-creation of deceased people thanks to technological applications involving artificial intelligence (linguistic *in primis*), the extraction of value from the flow of information in the web, and the synthesis of new materials. The male protagonist of the episode, Ash, dies in an accident shortly before his partner, Martha, finds out she is pregnant. A friend of Martha’s, Sarah, suggests she can use an online service that extracts data about the personality of human beings and reproduces their

linguistic performance. From the first minutes of the episode, it is evident how addicted Ash is to social media, which is an optimal requirement for the service to run. The adequacy of Ash's profile and the functioning of the service are briefly and clearly described by Sarah:

- (1) (10'13")
 -- He was a heavy user, he'd be perfect
 (12'11")
 -- And then it talks back to you, just like he would

Gradually the service to which Martha turns proposes a speech partner that is effective in different levels of interaction and adequate in different models of linguistic situations or scenes, from the chat / IM (texting interaction), to the telephone call (mediated interaction), to the face to face interaction (with a material body).

The adequacy of the service, and therefore its success, is tested in linguistic and communicative terms and explicitly confirmed by the film's characters, as can be seen in the dialogue of the first telephonic interaction between Martha and the service performing the deceased Ash (henceforth 'the performer').

- (2) (18'05"-)
 -- So... How am I sounding?
 Hello?
 -- Hello! You sound just like him.
 -- Almost creepy isn't it? I say creepy, I mean it's totally batshit crazy I can even talk to you.
 I mean, I don't even have a mouth.
 -- That's ... that's just ...
 -- Just what?
 -- That's just the sort of things that he would say.

The performer's statements have no informative relevance, but have phatic relevance: the linguistic acts establish emotional and personal contact, thus a recognition, which is vocal at first (you sound just like him), then fully linguistic immediately after (that's just the sort of things that he would say).

The service provider is a commercial enterprise, as shown by the server / client or supplier / customer relationship that emerges in stages, which are most likely pre-calculated. Actually, viewers do not know much about the enterprise because it remains on an absence / presence threshold: it dissolves constantly in the service itself, but it reappears from time to time (especially to offer upgrades) within the events in which Ash is reproduced (a possible interesting case of parasitism of artificial reproductions of people).

It must be stressed that the relationship between Martha and the service is based on strictly linguistic models and prerequisites. As evidence, note how the service gives its best in scenes¹ wherein the contact is purely linguistic (chat, telephone), abstracting from other factors, above all material ones (and in fact body materiality will create complexity and problems). A complete sharing of the linguistic code (expression and content forms) functional to the identification of the artificial performer with the deceased is re-created (perhaps better: simulated), flanked by a type of artificial intelligence capable of dynamically adapting to the parameters of linguistic interaction,² especially to norms,³ form of speech,⁴ channels, reading keys,⁵ and purposes⁶ of linguistic events down to idiosyncratic sub-codes. The effects simulate a

1 'Scene' designates the 'psychological setting' or the cultural definition of an occasion as a certain type of scene (Hymes 1972a, p. 60; Duranti 1992, pp. 46–51).

2 Cf. Hymes 1972a; Duranti 1997; Saville-Troike 2003.

3 'All rules governing speaking, of course, have a normative character [...]. An account of norms of interaction may still leave open the interpretation to be placed upon them, especially when members of different communities are in communication' (Hymes 1972a, p. 64). Consider also P. Grice's (1975) conversational maxims and Foucault's *order of discourse* (1971).

4 'Even where there is but a single 'language' present in a community (no cases are known in the contemporary world), that language will be organized into various forms of speech.' (Hymes 1972a, p. 63).

5 'Key is introduced to provide for the tone, manner, or spirit in which an act is done. [...] The significance of key is underlined by the fact that, when it is in conflict with the overt content of an act, it often overrides the latter (as in sarcasm). The signalling of key may be non-verbal, as with a wink, gesture, posture, [...] but it also commonly involves conventional units of speech [...]' (Hymes 1972a, p. 62).

6 A distinction must be made between outcomes and aims, i.e. between the 'purpose of an event from a standpoint community' and the 'purpose of those engaged in it'. This point has intersections with the purposes of illocutionary acts for Searle, i.e. the '[d]ifferences in the point (or purpose) of the (type of) act' (1976, pp. 2–3). Cf. *infra*.

competence functional to an inter-agents situation and capable of producing performances fully attributable to a single historical entity, i.e. the late Ash in his essential relation with Martha (Ash as ‘deceased-for-Martha’). It’s a matter of reproducing a historical entity whose essence lies in the discourse dialectics with Martha, but whose linguistic and communicative competence is simulated by serial algorithms that input performances recorded in digital archives, and happened in events whose participants are not known to viewers, but with all certainty are not limited to Martha (‘public-Ash’).

To better analyse the quality of the relationship between Martha and the performer, and the kind of communication they establish (or try to), a few preliminary words should be spent on the concepts of competence and communication, and how they are related in the terms of linguistics. First, the core of the competence of the performer is engineered, while that of Martha is natural. The experience that uniquely characterizes the competences of Martha and the performer is of social origin, but again for the performer this means media (mainly social media), and for Martha means a human social environment, intersubjectivity, and proximity.⁷ The kind of engineered competence the service is provided with allows it to perform not only mere grammatical utterances, but also appropriate and adequate ones. At least to a certain point. Engineered linguistic competence here is understood as a technical simulation of a natural property. The core of this natural property is creativity.⁸ The authors imagine a technology able to generalize linguistic rules at any level from a mass of raw data. Such a technology should not be easily considered as a system that knows a language, but as a system able to exploit statistic and probability algorithms to imitate human inter-active performances. The core of these performances is linguistic. The purposes are social, i.e. communicative.

Due to this, the concept of communication should be investigated. Only a rough distinction will be advanced here between two kinds of communication: in one respect, the transmission of information, and in another, the creation of ties of union. Now the power of linguistic performance is primarily social, rather than informative; so is the service in “Be Right Back.” The authors gave the right importance to the phatic quality of the service. Be it

7 On the nature of this ‘proximity’ cf. *infra*.

8 This means that is not dependent on statistical generalizations. Cf. Chomsky 1967. See also Graffi (*forth.*), and Cimatti 2018.

derived from the observation of everyday life, or from basic intuitions, it is actually an established topic in the academic research on media, technology, and communication. A particular pertinence has the identification of phatic systems and phatic technologies in which people are keen to develop trust (Wang et al. 2016).⁹ According to Chomsky:

the use of language is a very important means by which this species, because of its biological nature, creates a kind of social space, to place itself in interactions with other people. It doesn't have much to do with communication in a narrow sense; that is, it doesn't involve transmission of information (Chomsky and Osiatynski 1984).

Chomsky also states that the larger part of language use is internal. Of the external use, the larger part is phatic, leaving very little room for informative communication.¹⁰ The model of the implicit factors with their related functions in the linguistic act as presented by Jakobson (1960) is still very clear: the referential function is the most pertinent to the concept of communication as transmission of information; the phatic, instead, is to establish, verify, and keep active the psychological contact between sender and receiver (the physical contact, represented by the channel, is necessary but not sufficient). This is what contributes to the creation of a social space of interaction, recalling what B. Malinowski (1923) called the phatic communion.¹¹

In light of the considerations made so far, it should not be surprising to conclude that the largest amount of data in social media is phatic in quality. As a consequence, a machine engineered to utilize this kind of source should score its best results in phatic communication. Human beings are

9 For important steps in the development of the research on phaticity one can refer to Laver 1975 (communicative relevance); Žegarac and Clark 1999 (phatic interpretations); Miller 2008, and recently Gradinaru 2018 (phatic culture). About the phatic function of visual communication cf. Niemelä-Nyrhinen and Seppänen 2019, Szpunar 2019; for phatic as a rhetorical function Porter 2017 (all with references).

10 <https://youtu.be/TzZuPMA8s7k>; <https://youtu.be/-72JNZZBoVw?t=4033>; <https://youtu.be/1urwLy25adk> (Accessed 2/1/2018). About the question of the main function of the faculty of language see Chomsky 2012.

11 Together with Szpunar (2019), interpretations that see in the work of Jakobson a significant departure from the ideas of Malinowski caused by the influence of Shannon's mathematical theory of information are here rejected.

increasingly familiar with social media, which is more and more pervasive in everyday life. The integration of such technologies in the social relationship amongst people has far reaching consequences, especially considering that they are phatic technologies.

Wang et al. (2011, 2012, 2016) built a theory of phatic systems adapting Giddens' (1990) *consequences of modernity*. First, they recall theories on technology (Wang et al. 2011, p. 45), getting rid of the commonplace understanding of technology, i.e. just tools and machines to improve production. They explain that technology is a more general concept. Most important is 'technology as general methods to accomplish tasks in society' (based on Ellul 1954, see Wang et al 2011, p. 45). There are communication technologies, a subset of which is constituted by phatic technologies; "a technology is phatic if its primary purpose or use is to establish, develop and maintain human relationships. The users of the technology have personal interactive goals" (Wang et al. 2011, p. 46).

They explain the linguistic origins of phatic technologies (p. 47-48) and how the internet should be regarded as the primary source of phatic technologies (p. 49). In a second paper, Wang et al. 2012 argue:

certain abstract social conditions that are characteristic of modernity amplify significantly the human need for, and thus the technical development of, phatic technologies. [...] we propose that phatic technologies enable the reconnection of social relations that have been stretched across time-space. A phatic technology creates a social community constituted by its users (from two to many) and individuals within that social community become dependent on the phatic technology to fulfil some of their social needs. Giddens' concept of trust is used to explain why technologies are able to connect individuals from different regions and countries across time-space, as well as why intimacy can be sustained at distance (Wang et al. 2012, p. 85).¹²

Another important observation is that some contemporary technologies are not simply pervasive, but 'an integrated part of daily life':

It is, however, the transformations of social life and personal relationships enabled by the internet and associated technologies that have moved tech-

12 Cf. Giddens 1990.

nology from an external facilitator to a stage of being internal to man (Wang et al. 2012, p. 87).¹³

They further reflect on the work of Giddens (1990) and consider in particular the notions of dis-embedding and re-embedding of social relations in modernity, wherein 'modernity' is understood as an abstract social theory. Wang et al. claim that there is a process in the integration of phatic technologies in everyday life. They hypothesize three stages:

- (i) Facilitative—where the technology simply performs certain tasks in the context.
- (ii) Pervasive—where the technology is widely used in the context.
- (iii) Embedded—where the technology is fully integrated in the fabric of the context.

(Wang et al. 2012, p. 88).

A third paper, by Wang and Tucker (2016), finally makes explicit a theory of phatic systems in digital societies. Again building on Giddens' (1990) theory of modernity, they concentrate on the theme of 'trust vs. risk' (Wang and Tucker 2016, p. 142).

The dis-embedding of a social system is the lifting out or abstraction of its social relations from some local contexts of interaction; and their re-embedding is their reconstruction in a form that spans space and time without local restrictions (*ibidem*).

While for Giddens re-embedding is dependent on trust in expert systems, Wang and Tucker claim that trust is now given to phatic systems, which becomes the means of the re-embedding.

Now a service like the one devised in "Be Right Back" covers exactly the characteristics of a phatic tool within a phatic technology embedded in a phatic system. But when it is implemented into a reproduction of the body of a single historical being, the phatic technology is dis-embedded from its original system and has to face and experiment with a human relationship. And here it probably fails to work as a means of re-embedding. How

¹³ But cf. already some intuitions in Ellul 1954.

the authors imagine exactly this relationship is of great interest, especially if compared with other reflections upon the topic of re-embodiment of the deceased.¹⁴

Having discussed the relevance of the theory of phatic systems, a more accurate analysis of the engineered competence of the performer will be now considered. This competence does not recall simply the concept of competence in the well-known Chomskian competence-performance dichotomy (Chomsky 1965). While this dichotomy is of great help, it is however necessary to expand it to a broader and more intersubjective and socio-cultural field of action.

The idea of competence in Chomsky is connected to creativity and reveals that language acquisition in human beings is not substantially based on statistical generalization. Such a generalization is, however, typical in artificial intelligence and big data mining. So, the Chomskian concept of competence, together with the more recent concept of I-language as opposed to E-language, helps collocate the engineered linguistic abilities of the performer against a theory of a biological human capacity specific for language (Chomsky 1986, 2012, 2016).

In response to the Chomskian concept of competence, D. Hymes (1972b) and J. Habermas (1970) advanced the concept of communicative competence. It is preferable, with Chomsky, to use a narrower value for the term 'communication', and therefore it is considered useful to modify Hymes' expression into 'pragmatic competence' (cf. *infra*). In fact, language plays an instrumental role in conjunction with other systems of contact and transmission. It is therefore not possible to reduce the essence of language to a number of functions (Chomsky 2012). It is also important to make clear which is the role of language in the phatic function. The faculty of language does not serve this purpose in its full potential (it is not specifically designed for this purpose); rather, as semiological values, linguistic expressions happen to serve this purpose economically and effectively and therefore they are used universally.

Some more observations on the interaction between Martha and the performer should help further clarify the notion of competence, and the roles of phatic and pragmatics.

14 Cf. *infra* for a short comparison with Tarkovsky's *Solaris*.

Pragmatics, body, and textuality

The relationship between the two protagonists of the episode (Martha and the reproduction of Ash) works pretty well when it is reduced to the linguistic component, in the absence of a body. When it is integrated with the factors determined by the presence of the body things are more complicated, but it works well up to a certain point, a turning point, when the relationship deteriorates. The problem does not depend on the active communicative components involving the body (proxemics, kinesics, etc.), but for the very presence of a real (or presumed) body model (cf. *infra*). The data provided by the collection of linguistic expressions are based on heuristic techniques, training, and probabilistic algorithms. The challenge is to propose a service that is not so much suitable in terms of Chomskian linguistic competence, but mainly as communicative or pragmatic competence. The linguistic competence involves the ability to decide whether a given expression is well-formed. Chomsky considers language as a scientific object in terms of an individual and internal system (I-language), which cannot be easily identified neither with a more commonplace concept of language, nor with the semiological-structuralist definition of language (both E-language).¹⁵ Such a concept of competence, or I-language, does not immediately correlate with performance, if by performance it is meant not simply what people do, but what people choose (more or less consciously)¹⁶ to do: action and reaction. Choices are loosely conditioned by well-formedness. They are heavily constrained by all factors involved in linguistic interaction. What counts is what is done with words. In this sense, it is preferable to talk about a 'pragmatic competence'. The performer has to make choices. Knowledge and experience of the relation between language and reality is necessary.

The performer must adapt to the shared norms of interaction and be ready to integrate missing information, parts of which may include idiosyncratic realities, especially in the cases of participants in constant and privileged (if not almost exclusive) contact, like couples, lovers, etc. The ultimate challenge of advanced linguistic artificial intelligence is to respond to idiosyncratic details within one or more social frames. See the following dialogue:

15 On 'I-' and 'E-language' cf. Chomsky 1986. Further important discussions in Chomsky 2012, 2016.

16 It is not possible here to open a section on the concept of intention. See Duranti 2015.

(3) (from 19'44')

- (M) and you threw a jeb thinking it was poisonous.
- What's 'threw a jeb'?
- Oh, it's a phrase we had, like throwing a fit
- Oh. Ok. So I threw a jeb

Using an expression known only by two individuals excludes others from understanding the discourse. Here the lack of competence is rectified immediately thanks to Martha's collaborative attitude. The dynamic learning skills of the performer adapts to an idiosyncratic sub-code that used to be shared between Martha and Ash only.

In this other dialogue Martha drops her telephone while speaking with the service, interrupting the communication. She fears that the phone might be broken and the contact might not be re-established. Luckily the phone works.

(5) (23'28")

- (M) I dropped you. I'm sorry. It was just... It was... I'm sorry
- Hey. It's all right. I'm fine. I'm not in that thing, you know.
I'm remote. I'm in the cloud.

The performer's linguistic act has the effect of calming Martha, not by virtue of its informative value (even if correct), but thanks to the re-established contact.

The relationship between speakers is affirmed by the act of communication rather than the content of communication. Thus, in social life, phatic conversation serves to reassure that communication and interaction are alive and well (Wang et al. 2012, p. 85).

Notice that in the case of "Be Right Back" there is an analogy, almost a coincidence of one of the participants (the performer) with the communication and the interaction themselves, as long as the performer is the phatic technology at work, not just a participant into a phatic communion.

Once the psychological contact and the recognition of the interlocutor is established, the events are open to realize all other functions (emotional,

referential etc.), but also to clash with the reality of interaction in a more complex system wherein language is not the only or main factor.

Explicit difficulties come with the body-material upgrade. The turning-point is in the scene in which Martha indicates a place on the body of the performer and says: 'He had a mole there' (32'52'). Technically speaking, Martha is the administrator of the performer. The performer then adjusts the visible surface according to the information received by Martha. This detail is decisive, not only in the plot, but also to understand the model underlying the conception of this (engineered) body. The body of the performer is treated as a linguistic system, better, as a network of linguistic events, and therefore as a sort of text, or even better as a text-carrier. It can reformulate and even contradict itself, that is, it can correspond or not with what is known of the body of the performed, it can change the program and change itself to meet the demands of its administrator, and it can change skin, modify the reproduction of the body of the deceased by re-writing its surface. It's clearly understood as a commodity, a thing, but it works within a network of persons, not things. Thus, the choice to modify the skin reveals itself as inadequate, because it is induced by the fact that the performer over-interprets Martha's linguistic acts. This happens because of its essential nature. The adapting body traces the model of the linguistic adaptations seen before. But the body does not share all of the characteristics of language and brings other factors into interaction, from spatial and temporal ones (it redefines them) to proxemics and kinesics (complicating linguistic interaction) - from those conditioned by its biological reality to those that determine it as 'world' in relation to 'words'. Here is to be observed the first big inter-agent error. The error can be well described using the theory of the direction of fit in how words and world are supposed to match, by J. Searle (1976).

Expanding J. Austin's (1962) theory, J. R. Searle produced some works that later became foundational (1969, 1976). Taking up the distinction between locutions, illocutions and perlocutions, Searle attempts a classification of illocutionary acts by proposing a series of parameters (dimensions of variation).¹⁷ The crucial point is the differences in the so-called 'direction of fit'.

17 For a brief but very clear presentation of the works of Austin and Searle and a tentative integration with phenomenological approaches, see Ricoeur 1973.

Some of our utterances are supposed to match how things are in the world [...] like examples such as “all men are mortal”, “the cat is on the mat”, and “Socrates is bald”. All of these are supposed to match an independently existing reality, and to the extent that we do, we say that they are true or false. I like to think in simple metaphors. Think of these as matching reality or failing to match. They have what we could call the word-to-world direction of fit [...] But not all utterances set out to be true or false, and not all of them attempt to describe an independently existing reality. Some are designed to get people to change reality, and typical examples of such utterances are orders, promises, commands, and requests. Such speech acts have the world-to-word direction of fit, because the aim of the speech act is not to tell us how things are, but to try to get the world to change in the form of the behavior of the speaker or hearer so that the world changes to match the content of the words. (Searle 2002, p. 29).

By making the mole appear, the performer fails to interpret Martha's illocutionary act, creating an unexpected and unnatural perlocutionary effect. As mentioned, the performer is interpreting the body as the carrier of a text, and obviously it interprets itself as a textual component. Thus, if it lacks knowledge, as above in (3), it integrates it. But the presence of a mole on the natural body of a human being does not depend on the knowledge that there is a mole on that body. The body of the performer instead depends on the knowledge of the body of the performed, not existing any more, but represented in linguistic and visual traces, which are texts. It is also conceived within a client / server dynamic, and understands the linguistic acts of its administrator (Martha) as requests to be satisfied.¹⁸ But when Martha says ‘he had a mole’ she is only expressing a memory, and perhaps she expects sympathy or the like. Matching the world to the words has no place here.

A fourth class [of illocutionary acts] are cases where we take the fit for granted and express some feeling or attitude about the state of affairs represented. So, if I apologize for stepping on your foot, thank you for giving me the money, or congratulate you on winning the prize, then in each case I take

¹⁸ In the most dramatic confrontation with Martha, the performer defines its function in these terms: ‘I am to please’. The framework of the goals within which it operates is therefore not adequate to an interaction between rational beings on terms of equality.

it for granted that I have stepped on your foot, that you have given me the money, that you have won the prize, and the whole point of the speech act is to express some psychological state about that. In such cases, I say the fit is presupposed. I call these Expressives (Searle 2002, p. 29).

Martha is not expecting a change, having in front of her a realistic model of a human body. Martha's illocutionary act is of the 'expressive' type (in terms of Searle). The performer, instead, takes the world-to-words direction of fit, adapting the world (i.e. the surface of the body) to the propositional content (the information) of Martha's speech act. Linguistic interaction shows a fundamental flaw here.

The performer in practice does not behave according to freedom, going against the expectations connected with the kind of being it emulates. Actually, the service stops at a limited level of simulation, and therefore it cannot be ascribed to the category of 'rational beings in general', (which includes human beings). In Kant's terms, it remains a thing (*Sache*) to dispose of;¹⁹ it actually understands itself as such. It is a modern kind of thing, a dynamic service, able to adapt itself to the surroundings and to new requests. The service however confuses the field of interaction by proposing a realistic perceptive model. This kind of body is a body/thing dependent on the knowledge of something different: a body/person. A human being, who is a kind of rational being, knows himself and comprehends his peers and fellow humans. In such a way it enters into a rational dynamic over a natural one ('natural' in Kant's terms, i.e. 'necessary'), difficult to reproduce on an engineering scale. The concept of 'adapting the world to words' could be understood also as a path of adjusting to a pre-comprehension, as an engineered and thus a 'poietic' truth and specifically not a 'poetic' or artistic one. Furthermore, one should also suggest to consider the notion of 'the adaptation of words to the world' as a dialectic comparison between pre-comprehensions and true understanding, which can become an almost ascetic, spiritual journey. To develop these thoughts, "Be Right Back" will be now compared with Tarkovsky's *Solaris*. A richer reflection could be developed in future contri-

19 About the relation person/thing in Kant cf. Esposito 2014 (especially about *Die Metaphysik der Sitten*; Cf. etiam Kant's *Zum ewigen Frieden. Ein philosophischer Entwurf*).

butions from these considerations, involving topics such as ‘body’, ‘person’, ‘thing’, ‘anthropopoiesis’,²⁰ mediated textuality,²¹ etc.

Having recognized the linguistic priority of the operation, and the textual nature of the ‘performer’ it should be clear, that such an artificial body is not a replica, or a replicant, much less a clone. It is important to clear the field of a premise of this kind. Commercially, it is a device (as a material and cognitive use value) and a service (as a social value). Ideally (and artistically) it should not be ascribed as much to the model of the replicant, as to that of the ghost, and that of ephemeral texts. This suggestion originates from a comparison to a formidable moment in the history of cinema: *Solaris*. The original novel by S. Lem will not be considered, due to the value of the personal, philosophical and artistic appropriation made by Tarkovski.²² Incidentally, it was Charlie Brooker himself who defined “Be Right Back” as a ghost story.²³

The ‘death of the neighbour’

As is well known, in the film *Solaris*, the protagonist Kris Kelvin stays in a space station over an alien ocean called ‘Solaris’ and experiences contact with (kinds of reproductions of) his late wife, Hari. This is the point of connection with “Be Right Back” to be briefly investigated.

In Tarkovsky’s film, the Solaris ocean is known as a sort of neural system / brain. There is a scientific discipline, called ‘solaristics’, which studies this strange entity and tries to understand if it is intelligent and able to have

20 Esposito 2014; Heidegger 1994/1949; Remotti 2013.

21 An interesting expansion of these thoughts would concern not only the body as both a literal and metaphorical carrier of texts, but also the topic of mediated texts, i.e. text that are reproduced more or less perspicuously in other texts (Manco 2015, 2017; Rizza 2018). The issue is complicate, as the status of cinema and textuality is not straightforward. A discussion could start from a novel evaluation of essays like Metz 1968, 1971, with new insights into the topic of fractal narrative, like Duarte 2014.

22 On the relationship between the book and the film, see the interviews released by Lem and collected at the website <http://english.lem.pl/home/reading/interviews> (Accessed: 2 Jan. 2019).

23 Temperton 2016.

free thoughts.²⁴ Following contact with human explorers, *Solaris* begins to shape, agglomerating neutrinos, human figures that somehow embody the mental images, memories, and desires of the members of the missions. Each reacts in different ways, but everyone is shocked. Attempts to get rid of these bodies fail. Kris has an intimate image of Hari that *Solaris* perceives and materializes, materializing also the sense of remorse and guilt, at least in the beginning, but then things change. Kris matures a complex and rich human relationship. The new Hari rapidly develops an increasingly autonomous personality even though she is emotionally linked to Kris.

The profundity of Tarkovsky's thinking about this topic (a story of ghosts, after all), is immeasurable when compared to "Be Right Back," both for the artistic results in general and for the cinematographic ones in particular. The abysmal difference between *Solaris* and "Be Right Back" is above all a sign of the times. I am convinced that the plot and the reflections proposed in "Be Right Back" are a testament to the most modern desire for technical power without being able to criticize it. I think that my previous reasoning and the comparison with Tarkovsky's *Solaris* reveals that "Be Right Back" depends on cultural models that adheres and tends to dissolve into technocratic ideology. This is an ideology that nowadays presents itself in the market as a supplier of more and more individualized products (material and not), to the point that these cannot be exchangeable any more, and are therefore deprived of social values. This has disaggregating effects on the intersubjective realm of the world of free-willing life.

While the question in *Solaris* is knowledge and science, in "Be Right Back" it is technology and market. This difference depicts quite well the cultural situation characterized in Zoja's (2009) theory of the 'death of the neighbour' (recalling the 'neighbour' of the gospels).

The inability to reconcile social ties and desire always equates to the latter's victory. The construction of a group of equals requires a continuous will, made of wakeful states, of tedious adjustments and sacrifice: otherwise, like the miracle, after the first apparition it flattens itself into prayer cards.

24 *Solaris* (29'56")— Thus, it has been established that the *Solaris* Ocean is a distinctive brain. Right after that, an even more daring hypothesis came out, suggesting that the Ocean is a thinking substance. Incidentally, this hypothesis still cannot be confirmed or refuted.

The desire, however, survives by itself, even in the laziest being, even while sleeping.²⁵

The spiritual and philosophical cultural paradigms that underlie the concept of the Tarkoskian *Solaris* seem to belong to a lost and incomprehensible world. It is true that “Be Right Back” does imagine the social failure of the experiment of the reproduction of a loved person. But should we think that technology has not gained primacy over humans? I do not think so. The world narrated in “Be Right Back” is a world of ghosts. All characters are ghosts for each other: none of the protagonists are able to establish a living human relationship with their ‘neighbour’. What can be seen is the new paradigm of human relationships in which the neighbour is no longer present, belonging by now to the world of the dead. The living are ghosts more or less reproducible with different artificial solutions, to the point that even when they meet each other with direct and reciprocal perception of proximity, the very human sense of proximity, of closeness, is constantly denied. It is denied between Martha and Ash at the beginning, before Ash dies; it is denied both between Martha and her friend Sarah and between Martha and her sister, and it is impossible, notwithstanding the promising start, with the reproduction of Ash. When Hari and Kris develop a relationship of human proximity, this remains even after the annihilation of the agglomerate of neutrinoids. There is no such relation with the re-creation of Ash, simply because no such relation existed between Ash and Martha, and because this re-creation is a consumerist commodity, it comes from the market.²⁶

A short sketch of the comparison between the reproduction of Ash and Hari could be the following:

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- 25 L'incapacità di conciliare legame sociale e desiderio equivale sempre alla vittoria di quest'ultimo. La costruzione di un gruppo di uguali richiede una volontà continua, fatta di veglie, di noiosi aggiustamenti e rinunce: altrimenti, come i miracoli, si appiattisce in immaginette dopo l'apparizione iniziale. Il desiderio, invece, sopravvive da solo, anche nel più pigro, anche mentre dorme (p. 99).
- 26 Explicit reference to *Solaris* by Brooker (Temperton 2016) could not be found. This may be simply due to a negligence in the present research. An interest in the history of cinema is however alive in “Be Right Back”, but dedicated to another great author: W. Herzog.

<i>Ash (- Martha)</i>	<i>Hari (- Kris)</i>
created from an external image	created from an intimate image
does not resume intimate feelings between the two	does resume intimate feeling between the two
new intimate feelings do not evolve	new intimate feelings evolve
no sense of proximity / 'neighbourhood'	a feeling of proximity / 'neighbourhood' is retained even in the final absence of a material reproduction.

The very concept of body clearly changed. In the reproduction of Ash, the 'body' is a perspicuous reproduction of a 'text', a public one, based on data, i.e. external knowledge. Hari's body is the material sign of an intimate and complicated relation, once failed, but still open.

Further considerations can be drawn from the reflections reported *supra* in the chapter made by Chomsky on communication:

		Ash (- Martha)	Hari (- Kris)
internal use		irrelevant	maximal relevance
external use	phatic	high	low
	informative	little	important
outcomes / aims		customer satisfaction	open

Time and space conditions are conceived on different cultural and spiritual backgrounds. The ones in "Be Right Back" represent the effects of Zoja's (2019) 'death of the neighbour'. According to the theories of Wang et al. (cf. *supra*) a technological phatic system serves the purpose of fulfilling social needs across time-space by trying to sustain intimacy at a distance (in the case of "Be Right Back" the distance is that of death). In the frame of 'death of the neighbour', embedded technology, with its embedded client / server, or supplier / costumer, and data-dependent structure, absorbs people's trust and creates a new mediated perception of neighbourhood, radically different from the original.

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