

Ivan Illich and the Phenomenology of the Incarnation*

by Giovanna Morelli

The theme of incarnation (and its opposite) first appears in Illich in the second half of the 1970s when he discusses the body as a terrain conquered by medical rationality. The theme grows in importance during the 1980s, in his study of vernacular man as the carnal subject of history and his analysis of the disincarnating power of contemporary paradigms. It continues in the 1990s, with the anthropology of sensory deprivation in the cybernetic age, culminating in the metaphysics of the Incarnation. In his last conversations with David Cayley, Illich points out the continuity between his interest in the history of the body and his way of understanding the Gospel.¹ The theme of incarnation – which gives Illichian thought its specificity – is therefore studied on sociological, historiographical, and philosophical levels to then be transfigured and completed on the level of faith².

The counter-productivity of the *technological society* can now be re-interpreted in the light of this theme; a theme

* For reasons of space, only a few stages of Illich's reflection on the theme of incarnation will be considered here. For a more exhaustive analysis, I refer to my text from which this essay is taken: "Ivan Illich and the phenomenology of incarnation", in *In cammino sullo spartiacque. Scritti su Ivan Illich*, edited by A. Arrigoni, E. Morandi, R. Prandini, Mimesis, Milano-Udine 2017, pp.33-69. Neto Leão and Samar Farage translated this text. Giovanna Morelli offered helpful corrections and suggestions to improve the final text.

1 I. Illich, *The Rivers North of the Future. The Testament of Ivan Illich as told to David Cayley*, House of Anansi Press, Toronto 2005; trad.it. *I fiumi a nord del futuro, testamento raccolto da David Cayley*, Quodlibet, Macerata 2009, p. 203.

2 "Voice donc un contemporain dont les yeux du cœur voient dans le mystère de l'Incarnation la source de son inspiration et de ses actes », see J. Robert, V. Borremans, "Préface" in *Oeuvres complètes*, Fayard, Paris 2004, p. 11.

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which is now emphasized by the advent of new informational devices as well as by the disembodied epistemology of man as a system, according to the eco-systemic imaginary. In his analysis of the present, Illich reaches the mental horizon of the cyber-future by exploring the past. He presents us the past – as a sort of beneficial shock from a direct epistemological contrast – thanks to which the alienating enchantment of the new system-cybernetic order becomes evident. The past does not provide Illich a model to emulate but the occasion to encounter carnality (fleshiness) which is a fundamental dimension of the human, a *conditio sine qua non* of personal ontology and its freedom. This carnality is understood as a two-sided experience: a rooting of the self in the concreteness of the body and, conversely, an existential elaboration of one's own living and dying in the flesh.

If it seems that Illich conceptually referred to carnality in a negative way by his analyses of what it is not,³ it is also true that he calls us to experience it in terms of a virtuous circle between body and self. This convergence of incarnation and individuation constitutes one of the most precious hints left to us by Illich.

The lost body: from the art of suffering to iatrogenic expropriation

Early in his research, Illich claimed a redemption of the body from its material disablement by the radical monopoly of out-of-proportion techno-practices. In *Tools for Conviviality*,⁴ he speaks of the body as the prime mover, the *causa efficiens* of appropriate technologies; in *Energy and*

3 See . B. Duden, "The quest for past somatics" in L. Hoinacki , C. Mitcham, *The challenges of Ivan Illich: a collective reflection* , SUNY Press, Albany NY 2002, chap. 19; quoted by D. Cérézuelle, "La technique et la chair" in *Jacques Ellul, penseur sans frontières*, edited by P. Troude-Chastenet, L'Esprit du Temps, Le Bouscat Cedex 2005.

4 I. Illich, *Tools for Conviviality*, Harper & Roy, New York 1973.

*Equity*⁵, the body is spoken of as *causa efficiens* of personal transit as opposed to transportation. The consideration of the body returned to its flesh is articulated in *Medical Nemesis*,⁶ anchored in the history of bodily pain and by the “evolution of bodily perception in the technological age.”⁷ The history of pain attests to the status of the body beyond itself, until the fullness of human *pathos* starting from the great question that men, unlike animals, ask themselves about the existence of pain and of the flesh, which is the matrix of pain. Devoid of “congenital evolutionary mechanisms that guide him to a balance,” man suffers his own body and at the same time exists creatively in it. The *ethos* of each tradition configures the sense of the body.

Pain is thus absorbed within the context of *Leistung*:⁸ the work, performance, or human art of confronting being born, living, and dying in the body.

Each culture shapes its own particular *Gestalt* of health and its own particular type of attitudes towards pain, disease, impairment and death, each of which is a different species of that human interpretation traditionally called the art of suffering.⁹

Illich underlines both “the cultural uniqueness of health” and

5 I. Illich, *Energy and Equity* (1973) in I. Illich, *Toward a History of Needs*, Pantheon Books, New York 1978.

6 According to B. Duden : “A cette époque (1976) the “ matière “ que la médecine a transformée en l'espace de quelques générations , c'est-à-dire le corps , ne pointait pas encore à l'horizon de sa critique des institutions,” in *Illich, seconde période , Esprit*, 362, 2010, pp. 136-156. However, in the light of many passages in the text, I think it can be argued that in *Medical Nemesis* Illich sets the stage for his body history.

7 I. Illich, *Limits to Medicine. Medical Nemesis: The Expropriation of Health*, Marion Boyars, London 1975; trad.it. *Nemesi medica. L'espropriazione della salute*, B. Mondadori, Milano 2004, p. 153.

8 Ivi, note 8 p. 149.

9 Ivi, p.141.

the profound consubstantiality of culture with bodily experience. In this sense “health and culture are in part the same thing” and *ethos* is a virtue of the soul and a training of the body. This double face of *ethos* analyzed in *Medical Nemesis* introduces us to the nucleus of that experience which Illich will refer to with the triad of terms “flesh, carnality-fleshiness, incarnation-enfleshment.” Beyond a narrow use of the term — as brute satisfaction, as the dominance of the “appetitive ego” over other human proclivities — carnality is expressed in the range of existential arts by which we realize ourselves in the realm of physicality. For Illich, *ethos* and *aisthesis*, ethics and aesthetics (as realm of sensible experience) are one and the same in the enfleshed subject. Illich claims that this configuration is completely different from what will triumph in Descartes. “The body and the soul became separate” when Descartes constructed:

...an image of the body in terms of geometry, mechanics or clockwork [...] The body became an apparatus owned and directed by the soul, but from an almost infinite distance. The lived bodily experience, which the French refer to as ‘*la chair*’ and the Germans with *der Leib*, was reduced to a mechanism that the soul could inspect.¹⁰

Here, Illich heralds the fundamental dichotomy in his history of the body: *Corps/chair*, *Körper/Leib*, *body/flesh*.¹¹ On the one hand the lived experience, and on the other hand, the abstract notion of the body, objectified in the very perception of the sufferer. With regard to the modern medicalized body/pain, Illich speaks of a *schizo-aisthesis*: the technical management of pain alienates the subject from the existential elaboration of his own sensual reality

10 Ivi, p. 164.

11 I. Illich, *Gender*, Pantheon Books, New York 1982; trad.it. *Il genere e il sesso*, A. Mondadori, Milano 1984, p.144.

and his earthly condition. Further stages of disincarnation follow the medicalized body: the “iatrogenic body” which coincides with a sanitized image of the body regardless of its state of disease, and the “cybergenic body”. The medical profession becomes an accessory to the dictates of Public Health by erecting a medical and therefore a biopolitical edifice around the body.¹²

Techniques in combination with language, ritual, and myth were once applied to the human art of suffering pain. In the ancient European tradition, writes Illich, a single approach was unthinkable. “The medicalisation of pain, on the other hand, has caused the hypertrophy of only one of these methods – technical intervention – and accentuated the decline of the others.”¹³ Reflecting on the “cultural iatrogenesis” caused by a medicalized body, Illich began to trace the deep meaning of technical nemesis. Accordingly, Illich would come to speak of a “fetishism of life”¹⁴ that puts “life” before the person (a fetishism that includes the macabre iatrogenic survival, by law, on already comatose organisms). The *bios*, in its original existential sense – *curriculum vitae*¹⁵ – is dethroned by its purely biological successor, “life”.

As Illich notes in *Medical Nemesis*, the “progressive flattening of virtuous personal performance,” goes hand in hand with the loss of pleasure. “The consumer of pain-killers” is distanced from an existential dialogue with his own body and does not know how to accommodate himself to

12 I. Illich, *La perte des sens*, Fayard, Paris, 2004; trad.it. *La perdita dei sensi*, LEF, Florence 2009, p.256.

13 I. Illich, *Nemesi medica*, cit., p. 160.

14 See I. Illich, “Demistificare la bioetica: un appello” (1987); “La vita umana come nuovo feticcio” (1989) *In the Mirror of the Past*, Marion Boyars, London 1992; trad.it. *Nello specchio del passato*, Red editions, Como 1992.

15 I. Illich, D. Cayley, *Ivan Illich in Conversation*, House of Anansi Press, Toronto 1992; trad.it. *Conversazioni con Ivan Illich*, Elèuthera, Milano 1994, p. 211; I. Illich, *La perdita dei sensi*, cit., pp. 108,110.

pain or pleasure. The “increased threshold of physiologically-based experience” induces a demand for ever stronger stimulants. In this sense, by fleeing the specter of masochism we lose every authentic hedonism, precisely while we ideologically claim our right to enjoyment. Pushed to the limit, the manipulation of pain and the body could produce a new species of horror, “the experience of artificial numbness.”¹⁶ This “anaesthetization” of a body that would like to be technically amortal, threatens, according to Illich, our own “experience of the ego”, which is so deeply rooted in the whole range of sensual experiences to which we owe “the sense of being alive.” This incarnated subjectivity cannot be defined in terms of pure physicality or in the equally abstract and objectifiable terms of psycho-physical unity.¹⁷ It presents itself as the most intimate, personally dense datum that can only be appropriated by oneself. Consciousness of oneself and of the world emerges from the carnal depths; its otherness with respect to the body is given only through the body. I think thanks to and through my flesh, my thought is nourished by everything that comes to me from the experience of flesh, space and time, the forms, and the written-spoken body of language without which there is no thought.

Here we meet the paradoxical ambiguity of the incarnation: our most evident limit – the Gnostic “night of the flesh,” the antiquated “prison of the flesh” that is so disliked by the cyborg utopia – is at the same time the foundation of our person and its liberty, which for Illich will finally be crowned by the revelation of transcendence in the carnal dimension of individuality.

The incarnation of the vernacular gender

16 I. Illich, *Nemesi medica*, cit., p. 167.

17 I. Illich, *I fiumi a nord del futuro*, cit., p. 207.

The analysis of the incarnation and its opposite — technical excarnation— proceeds in Illich's subsequent writings through the perspective of the "vernacular". Vernacular means, for Illich, the millennial daily grammar of lived experiences, the art of existing that has marked the history of man in the variety of his styles, through the communal ways of life beginning with the style of dwelling: "a house made by people and not for people, it is a place generated by bodies."¹⁸

The vernacular makes its debut in some talks at the end of the 1970s¹⁹ where Illich asserts that he has undertaken "the study of history as a privileged way" to isolate the *novum* of *homo oeconomicus*. *Shadow Work*²⁰ follows, whose themes are deepened and refined in *Gender*. If traditional community cultures are sociologically interpreted by the vernacular, this latter, in turn, is interpreted in this text by gender. Thus, gender attaches itself to the other characteristics of the vernacular — the conviviality of instruments, the organic nature of learning, the dominance of commons, the self-definition of occupations, and the exceptional nature of wage labor. For Illich, above all, gender allowed him to pose "the epistemological question of modern European ways of perception."²¹

Like pain and pleasure, the masculine-feminine duality is one of the cornerstones of bodily experience. This duality is dealt with differently, Illich notes, in the domains of gender and sex, which indicate a duality "of a *very* different nature."²² Gendered identity shapes the totality of experience, imprinting thought, language, perceptions, gestures, places, times,

18 I. Illich, *Il genere e il sesso*, cit., p. 158.

19 Among these "Le tre dimensioni della scelta pubblica" (1979) e "La sfera educativa" (1979) both in *In the mirror of the past*, cit.

20 I. Illich, *Shadow Work*, Marion Boyars, London-New York 1981.

21 I. Illich, D. Cayley, *Conversazioni con Ivan Illich*, cit., pp. 123, 133. Cf. also the introduction to a German re-edition of *Gender*, CH Beck, München 1995.

22 I. Illich, *Il genere e il sesso*, cit., p.37.

tools, and tasks. Gender, inscribed in the practice – virtuous and corporal, ethical and aesthetic – of the incarnate man is, for Illich, a kind of art variously practiced in all vernacular cultures. “Gender transforms the penis into innumerable types of phalluses; sex merely *produces* the only international, menacing, and enviable “penis”²³ For Illich, the universality of gender is open and compatible with the concrete anthropological variety the incarnation assumes in pre-modern cultures. Conversely, sex channels, through the abstract genital polarization of two homogeneous opposites, the same “neutral force which, at the end of the century, Freud would have given the name of *libido*.”²⁴ For Illich as for Foucault – to whom Illich refers – the notion of sex is a recent historical phenomenon which represents, according to Foucault, one of the main “political technologies of life” typical of modernity.²⁵

The objectified neutrality of sexual categories in contrast to the internalized and stratified experience of gender is, for Illich, the most striking and symptomatic form of the neutrality of modern categories. The purely sexual body is to the body of gender what the iatrogenic body is to *Leistung*, the existential experience of pain. As in *Medical Nemesis*, what Illich stigmatizes is the *disembedding* of techno-scientific categories from the entirety of incarnate man, which is dramatically put into crisis by the Christian history of the West.

By illustrating the relationship between the two sides of gender, Illich introduces the concept of *asymmetrical* or *dissymmetrical complementarity*.²⁶ In the realm of gender, be-

23 Ivi, note 7 p. 31.

24 Ivi, note 7 p.30.

25 M. Foucault, *La volonté de savoir*, Gallimard, Paris 1976.

26 After having used the term asymmetrical, Illich will opt for dissymmetrical arguing that dissymmetrical places the accent more precisely on a misaligned but intimately complementary, proportionate correspondence. I. Illich, *The rivers north of the future*, cit., pp. 195-196. For the concept of complementarity Illich refers to R. Hertz, *Il genere e il sesso*, cit., note 57 p. 102.

ing-woman is, with respect to being-man, a completely different phenomenon, located beyond the thresholds of one's own incarnation, and yet tuned, congruent, something "mutually constitutive", in accord with a "reciprocal generation." The alterity of gender charges the relationship with attraction and fear. "A relationship that can never really be grasped, or which escapes as soon as it is grasped."²⁷ The masculine universe refers to the feminine (and vice versa) using the poetic ambiguity of metaphor that relates two alterities without squashing either into the same semantic grid. The contact between genders uses rituals that exorcise the fear of difference, without dimming the amazement. They "orchestrate the dance of life, marking bodies, intertwining genres and then separating them again."²⁸

The mutual perception between the two genders exemplifies a more general sensitivity to ontological variety/complementarity, to the pantheon of otherness in which is expressed the traditional cosmic intelligence of being. In fact, for Illich the concept of "asymmetric complementarity" will present itself as a constitutive trait of the very idea of *kosmos* – from *kosmein*, to pair, "composing two parts or two faces"²⁹ – and of the *ethos* inspired by this cosmogonic intelligence. *Kosmos* here indicates the co-existence of the different in a single order which embodies the differentiation of being without disintegrating into *chaos*. Up and down, right and left, macro and micro, "two armies, two shores, the sky and the earth, the eye and the colors, the ear and the harmonic sound. The composition then results in a battle, a river, the universe, the *visibilia* and music."³⁰ One is referring here to

27 I. Illich, *I fiumi a nord del futuro*, cit., p. 195.

28 I. Illich, *Il genere e il sesso*, cit., p. 167.

29 I. Illich, "Passato scopico ed etica dello sguardo" (1995), in *La perdita dei sensi*, cit., p. 279.

30 *Ibid.*

the sense of “ontological proportionality,” the loss of which marks the progressive advance of the quantitative monotony of modernity.³¹ This feeling of proportionality (and the relative sense of what is “good”) concerns not only the intuition of the limit, as a proportionate relationship between shape and size, but also the intuition of *tonos*, the tension or tightness of a micro/ macro *cosmos* in the asymmetrical proportionality or complementarity of its components.

Conspiratio: The ontology of the Incarnation

When asked about *Gender* by his friend Cayley, Illich not only confirmed the relevance of the vernacular gender, but also acknowledged its irreversible decline.³² Illich agrees with Cayley that “gendered domains are arbitrary limitations on the human freedom to be what we would like to be”; they are also compatible with patriarchal oppression in a closed society.³³

Analogous shadows will be detected, in the reflections presented in *The Rivers North of the Future*, for the overall realm of *ethnos* and its self-referentiality. The pre-Christian *kosmos* is punctuated by a dance of “collective you”: the we/you of gender, of *gens*, of caste, of ethnic group. This naturalized, deeply embodied *ethos* can suppress the subject, orienting and sometimes limiting the path of individuation. Already in a forward-looking passage in *Medical Nemesis*, Illich, following Ellul, distinguishes two forms of heteronomy, traditional and technical. “The roles available to an individual have always been of two types: those standardized by cultur-

31 Ibid. In the same collection, see also “La saggezza di Leopold Kohr” (1994); also I. Illich, *La perdita dei sensi*, cit., pp.194-196.

32 Gender will continue to represent a problematic juncture for Illich, and the text dedicated to it, which has generated so much controversy and misunderstanding, remains the only one which he has never managed to draw up a presentation that clarifies the reasons why he wrote it. I. Illich, D. Cayley, *Conversazioni con Ivan Illich*, cit. p. 128.

33 Ivi, pp.130-131; 136-137.

al tradition and those arising from bureaucratic organization [...] rationally created.”³⁴

It will be the New Testament, in Illichian exegesis of the late 1980s and 1990s (the decade consecrated to “*philia*”) what will introduce us to an unprecedented, flaming sense of personal uniqueness. This virtue/personal freedom founded by the Gospel, breaks with the ancient configurations of the We. The relative sense of the I as singular of a We, is replaced by a new We as the plural of the I, the We celebrated by the Eucharistic assembly of the earliest Christians centuries. The new Christian subject and the Us that corresponds to it transcend the traditional connotations “of status, gender or origin.” Christians, according to Illich, found a community outside the one into which they were born, based on an unprecedented fraternity, a new *philia*.

Christian spirituality involves self-awareness of an unprecedented dimension of incarnated transcendence. It liberates the person from the absolute identification with their own ethnic, historical, and biographical borders and, at the same time, reconciles the person to them. Such a doubly rooted anthropology of freedom, which valorizes the individualized experience of the spirit in the flesh, is at once within and beyond social limits. With the advent of Christ, writes Illich, the tent of God, towards which an uprooted people are in perennial journey, is now implanted “on the earth in the flesh of his son”, and, through Him in the enfleshed You of every other child of God. *Verbum caro factum est* The word was made flesh.³⁵ Illich specifies: “what is being spoken of is not the soma, the body as a whole, but its carnality [fleshiness].”³⁶ Fleshiness, a two-sided experience, a communion of body

34 I. Illich, *Nemesi medica*, cit., pp.130-131.

35 Jn 1:14.

36 I. Illich, *I fiumi a nord del futuro*, cit., p. 203.

and soul, returns to the heart of Christology, opening itself to the seeding of that spiritual principle which completes the anthropology of the Incarnation.

The *Conspiratio* of the early Christians —the liturgical kiss mentioned by Illich—expresses this ontological complicity between spirituality and the flesh, a “spiritual union” rooted in “somatic, bodily depth”. It is in these terms that Illich reads the relation of the Samaritan to the Jew, in his preferred parable.

Just as God became flesh and in the flesh relates to each of us, so are you capable of relating in the flesh, as one who says “ego”, and when he says “ego”, points to an experience that is entirely sensual, embodied and earthly [...] Take away this fleshy, bodily, carnal, dense, humoral experience of the self, and therefore of the Thou, and you will have a nice liberal fantasy, which is something horrible.³⁷

Where there is *conspiratio*, ontological personal difference manifests itself in “the profound asymmetry between our faces.” Each face is preserved “in its exquisite delicacy and impenetrability”, beyond the automatisms of recognition and self- recognition. Illich here recalls Martin Buber’s relational “double word” I-Thou. For Illich, the Thou is suspended in the abyss of its own carnal and spiritual uniqueness, and yet – in ambiguous asymmetry – complementary, proportional, substantially like the I. The face-to-face which constitutes the essence of the *kosmos* is brought back to its most radical, personal ground. The new Christian proportionality concerns the minimal spaces of the free, unprecedented I-Thou proportions where new cosmic relationships blossom, a new front of that creation which continues through the incarna-

³⁷ Ivi, p. 205.

tion.”³⁸

Cybernetic disincarnation

We remember what was presented in *Medical Nemesis*: the weakening of the carnal subject which radically undermines personal ontology. In the new myths at the end of the millennium this trend seems to Illich to have gone beyond the threshold of sense.

We are on the threshold of a still unnoticed transition [...] the experts who gave us needs are now busily at work reconceptualize their gift to us, redefining humanity yet again. To survive, they say, we must see ourselves not as citizens, but as cyborgs [...], infinitesimally small units in a series of inclusive systems, ending no one knows where.³⁹

We now consider the human being as a system, that is, as an extraordinarily complex arrangement of feedback loops; and the fundamental characteristic of that system is to seek its own survival by maintaining an informational balance which keeps it viable.⁴⁰

A self-regulating self-constructed system that requires responsible management.⁴¹

38 I. Illich, *I fiumi a nord del futuro*, cit., p. 213.

39 I. Illich, *La storia dei bisogni* (1988-1990), in *La perdita dei sensi*, cit., pp. 101-102.

40 I. Illich, *I fiumi a nord del futuro*, cit., p. 201.

41 I. Illich, “Twenty years after the first publication of *Nemesis Medical*”, in *Nemesis medica*, cit., p. 299. An appendix consisting of the preamble of the afterword to the fourth German edition of 1995 and of the speech held in 1994 at the Congress of the *Quality Health Research Association* (also in I. Illich, *La perdita dei sensi*, cit., “Medical treatments for immune systems” (1994) pp. 241-252). Despite his pointed criticisms of the text, Illich will argue: “After a quarter of a century I continue to be satisfied with the substance and form of *Nemesis*. The book [...] brought medicine back to the field of

Before the “surreptitiously disembodied force of neologisms such as *coping*”⁴² was brought into focus, this cybernetic model of man was part of Illich’s reflections. He was probably attracted by “autopoiesis” to the extent that he projected into it that idea of “constructive” freedom which he expressed as self-shaping – *Selbstgestaltung*, creative interaction with one’s own limits, in contrast to a purely “negative” experience of freedom as freedom “from the limit.”

From this point of view, *Medical Nemesis* stands as a boundary text between the old and new approach. These are the years in which Illich can still allow himself to speak of personal freedom in terms of “autopoiesis”, the years of the influence exercised on him by Gregory Bateson.⁴³ Illich borrowed the term *coping* from Bateson who used it “to introduce systems theory into anthropology” and spoke of “health as *coping intensity*”:

[...] I believed that concepts such as feedback, program, autopoiesis or information, if used skillfully, could clarify matters. I thought I could equate suffering with the management of my own balance. I was wrong.⁴⁴

This adherence to a certain systemic imaginary, which will be the last object of Illichian criticism, is already substantially surpassed by the depth of analysis and by the peculiar terminological choices. In relation to the idea of “Nemesis” Illich writes:

Using the Greek term, I want to emphasize that the corresponding phenomenon does not fit within the explanato-

philosophy”, *ivi*, p. 298.

42 *Ivi*, p. 299.

43 *Ivi*, p. 302.

44 *Ibid*.

ry paradigm now offered by bureaucrats, therapists, and ideologues for the snowballing diseconomies and disutilities that, lacking all intuition, they have determined and that they tend to call ‘the counterintuitive behavior of large systems.’ By invoking myths and ancestral gods, I should make it clear that my framework for the analysis of the current breakdown of medicine is foreign to the industrially determined logic and ethos. I believe that the reversal of nemesis can come only from within man and not from yet another managed (heteronomous) source depending once again on presumptuous expertise and subsequent mystification.⁴⁵

The autopoietic model will therefore later be disavowed as a rational-cybernetic simulacrum, the mental correlate of a bio-management that drains personal self-perception. Illich points out the counterproductivity of this new semantic field. Indeed, “perfectly legitimate” systemic concepts “lend themselves to a variety of reductionisms.”⁴⁶ Systemic management – “the set of planning and control activities of a system and its resources”⁴⁷ – appears to Illich as a new, insidious, disembodied, and depersonalizing form of power, an extreme technocratic form of denial of freedom. Personal care turns into internalized self-management with an exclusive dependence on clinical parameters of good functioning. “The cybernetic optimum” leaves very little room for holistic personal self-determination. Illich will also speak of a “second level disembodiment” or “algorithmization” in relation to the *abstracta* of statistical entities, the risk profiles.⁴⁸

In the guise of fascinating bio-systems, mechanistic

45 I. Illich, *Nemesi medica*, cit., pp. 42-43.

46 I. Illich, “Cure mediche per sistemi immunitari”, cit., p. 246.

47 I. Illich, “La vita umana come nuovo feticcio”, cit., p. 219.

48 I. Illich, *I fiumi a nord del futuro*, cit., p. 221.

thought surpasses itself in the radical novelty of the “cybernetic dream” and its apparatuses.⁴⁹ These are the same mechanisms that make possible, according to Ellul, the advent of the Technological System, the integrated expropriation of all human practices. The apparatus dematerializes, turning itself into a prosthesis in man: in exchange for minimal material encumbrance, we have increasingly integrated extensive and invasive software. System rationality insinuates itself into the user producing an intimate, paradoxical delocalization -ex-carnation- of the mind. In this context, Illich does not fail to address the “miasma of communication” (as a chaotic flow of data that disables the art of reflection proper to *homo textualis*⁵⁰), and the prevailing *iconomania* understood as a perversion of Christian *iconodulia*. Thanks to increasingly advanced techniques, the new representations are not images of the other but simulations, a pure virtual show⁵¹, a phantasmatic breach that draws our being into a dimension of non-being. Again, a paradoxical excarnation of self and of the world, analogously to what happens with the loss of the “carnal gaze” due to the “exosomatic prostheses of the eye” which produce the “instrumental vision.” The eye, dissociated from the solidarity with the other senses – *synaisthesis* – progresses in both the micro and macro dimensions, being shown the interior of the body as well as the whole planet from the outside.

Mysterium iniquitatis: Christ between ethnos and mechanicus

Illich’s spiritual journey will mark his last step, rein-

49 I. Illich, “L’alfabetizzazione informatica e il sogno cibernetico” (1987), in *Nello specchio del passato*, cit., pp. 202-203.

50 I. Illich, *In the Vineyard of the Text. A Commentary on Hugh’s Didascalicon*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1993.

51 I. Illich, “Passato scopico e etica dello sguardo”, cit., e “Sorvegliare il proprio sguardo nell’era dello ‘show’” (1993) in *La perdita dei sensi*, cit.

serting the reading of history in the context of meta-history. Secular arguments appeared to Illich as no longer sufficient. "One could continue to indefinitely argue the systematic destructiveness of industrial-age service systems"⁵² and the countless aberrations of the era, but, as Illich tells Ellul, the keystone lies elsewhere. "All these horrors derive their ontological status from the fact that they are exactly subversions of what you call "X" and what I [...] would call divine grace."⁵³

In overcoming archaic dimensions and ethno-natural proportions, the Incarnation brings its own perversion to history: *mysterium iniquitatis*, "the mysterious evil that entered the world with the Incarnation."⁵⁴ Iniquity now takes on the features of a "mechanical" mystery, an ontological violation of the Incarnation achieved through the institutional and technocratic management of "philanthropy" that corrodes, from within, the communion of flesh and spirit and the relationships based on it. In this way, not so much the evangelical axiology as its ontology is betrayed, an ontology not sufficiently contemplated both in and outside the realm of faith.⁵⁵ In this sense we can speak of a triple Illichian anthropology, Christ as the watershed between *ethnos* and *mechanicus*.

Universalism embodied in the concrete and unique flesh of each of us is replaced by the abstract, impersonal, and homogenizing universalism of the machine. In this context we understand the double meaning of two fundamental terms of Illich's reflection – "neutrality" and "person." Regarding the new Christian *philia*, Illich emphasizes that *frater* or *adelphos*

52 I. Illich, "L'impresa educativa attuale vista con gli occhi dell'emarginato" (1988), p. 59.

53 I. Illich, "Omaggio di Ivan Illich a Jacques Ellul" (1993), p. 151.

54 I. Illich, *I fiumi a nord del futuro*, cit., p.45.

55 The theme of *ensarkosis logou* in Illich, Ellul and Charbonneau, in relation to the critique of the technocratic society, and the divergent exegeses of the Incarnation in the Christian tradition are treated by D. Cérézuelle, "La technique et la chair", in *Jacques Ellul, penseur sans frontières*, cit. In this regard, the comparison with the Christology of D. Bonhoeffer is fundamental.

is a “neutral”⁵⁶word; in this case, it is a question of a positive meaning of neutrality, the neutrality of an experience placed beyond the pre-judgments of the *ethnos* and strongly rooted in the freedom of personal virtue. The negative meaning of neutrality, the neutrality of institutional and techno-scientist categories with their carnal and existential annihilation, can settle in the space opened by this Christian novelty. The person as a person in Christ, in his uniqueness and density of spirit and flesh, will find himself facing his own *alter ego*, the phantasmatic and abstract (anti) person evoked and guaranteed in many of our politically correct discourses. The double meaning implies the relationship of the term to its own “double”, the worst that can be generated in history as a perversion of the best (*Corruptio optimi pessima*). In the human adventure we encounter a further ambiguity: incarnation includes processes of objectification of the self (creation of the instrumental world, scientific domination, elaboration of works, texts, social structures ...), but the same capacity to objectify, when detached from man’s carnal and spiritual fullness, contains the seeds of dis-incarnation, of self-alienation. Again, the deadly and perverse kingdom of the Anti-Christ settles in the new inner space freed by Christ.

Illich nevertheless reminds us that the advent of the best opens history indefinitely: the best can always regenerate from the worst. A globalized and pervasive power that interactively inserts itself in the ontology of our flesh and person, returns us to get in touch with ourselves. Perhaps we are impotent with respect to macro-dynamics. We are nevertheless powerful with respect to what is still in our hands, which is precisely ourselves, the only source of freedom in history. After he gave up his hope of a large-scale radical reversal (Epimethean renaissance, convivial society), Illich’s focused on the appropriate dis-connection from the system by small

56 I. Illich, “L’origine cristiana dei servizi” (1987), in *La perdita dei sensi*, cit. p. 25.

neo-vernacular resistance groups who were inspired to care for the person and return to the lived and felt body. At the end of the long *peregrinatio* in the ancient carnality of the world, Illichian hope will find its new formulation in *askesis*. “By *askesis*, today, I mean the deliberate escape from consumption when it replaces convivial action”⁵⁷, that is, action incarnated in the creative reciprocity of relationships and in the celebration of our common humanity. And thereby we can reclaim our perceptions, thoughts, desires, pleasures and needs, in the alliance of flesh and spirit against the mechanistic perversion of the person. Illich does not formulate here a depoliticization of action, but rather a radical politicization, under the banner of *philia*. The anarchy of Jesus infiltrates and sabotages management with the ontological liveliness of the I-Thou and of the friendships that can arise from it. We are dealing with free and therefore “vulnerable and fragile” roots capable of founding a unique atmosphere of incarnation (*conspiratio*) through the common and disciplined search for truth.

57 Ivi, “Cure mediche per sistemi immunitari”, cit., p. 249.