

Intercorporeality and Relationality in the Digital Age: Towards a Renewed Pedagogy of Desire

Rosa Grazia Romano¹

¹ Università di Messina; rromano@unime.it

Abstract: This contribution offers a pedagogical reflection on desire in the digital age from a phenomenological perspective that highlights its originally relational, embodied, and intercorporeal nature. Within a post-digital context—where technologies increasingly function as the invisible background of experience and reconfigure modes of being-in-the-world—desire does not disappear but is displaced toward low-risk forms of interaction, marked by the simulation of alterity and the weakening of embodied relationships. The article examines transformations of alterity, emerging forms of solitude, and the growing difficulty of sustaining real proximity to the other, foregrounding the educational implications of these dynamics. Within this framework, pedagogy is called to rethink education for desire as an indispensable formative task.

Keywords: Desire; Intercorporeality; Alterity; Post-Digital

1. Phenomenology of Desire: Body, Intercorporeality, and Alterity

Pedagogical reflection on desire is grounded in the premise that desire is not merely a content, an impulse, or an inner mental disposition, but rather an originally relational and situated process, inscribed in the way human beings inhabit the world and allow themselves to be affected by it.

Desire, therefore, is a posture of openness that—arising between bodies, presences, and distances—is intercorporeal by its very nature. Phenomenology has clearly shown that experience never occurs within an isolated subject, but always within a context, a situation, and a shared world. For this reason, reflecting on desire in the digital age means questioning how the phenomenological spaces and horizons within which our being-in-the-world—and our very capacity to desire—take shape are being transformed.

From an existential perspective, desire is a movement toward what is not possessed, a tension toward what is not given. It arises from an unfillable “lack” (Lévi-



Copyright: © 2026 by the authors.
Submitted for possible open access
publication under the terms and
conditions of the Creative Commons
Attribution (CC BY) license
(<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

nas, 1961/1977), ontologically distinct from need, which is an “absence” that can, as such, be satisfied and filled.

This dynamic reveals the force of relation, that which moves every human being to set out toward another from whom recognition may be received. Understood in this sense, the terms “life” and “relation” can be considered genuine synonyms (Petrosino, 2019, p. 21), since life takes form only within relation.

However, desire also bears an intrinsic ambivalence. On the one hand, it is a constitutive and propulsive force of existence, that which orients life toward a *télos*. On the other hand, it may lead to the illusion that the fulfilment of desire can be achieved through possession of the object—or of the other—and through their manipulation according to one’s own needs. Contemporary society exalts desire precisely insofar as it is linked to possession, pushing it toward a consumerist drift of unlimited appropriation: everything can be desired, everything can be obtained, everything can be bought.

It is within this scenario that the techno-utopian vision of Ray Kurzweil (2024) takes shape. According to Kurzweil, humanity is undergoing a transformative technological revolution in which, by 2030, artificial intelligence will surpass human intelligence and merge with it, overcoming the biological limits of the human being. He predicts that, within a few decades, nanobots will bring about unprecedented transformations, going so far as to hypothesise the possibility of “reprogramming” the body in order to prevent ageing, eliminate hereditary diseases, and abolish death. Ultimately, the individual might even choose to abandon the biological human form altogether in favour of a synthetic or digital body, becoming “posthuman”, no longer bound to natural biology. The body is thus reconceived as an entirely modifiable entity, a form of software that can be updated or reconfigured on demand.

Kurzweil’s predictions of post-biological existence reveal a critical tension of our time: the idea that the body is a limit to be overcome rather than a place to be inhabited, a space of relation and meaning. Yet the phenomenology of desire reminds us of the opposite. The body is not an obstacle, but the site of openness to the other, of encounter, and of the limit that renders relation human.

2. The Displacement of Desire in the Digital Age

The idea that human beings desire nothing but their own enjoyment, and are therefore by nature egoistic or hedonistic, no longer withstands the test of contemporary phenomena and risks becoming an interpretative alibi that avoids confronting the deeper issue at stake. It fails, for instance, to explain why today many individuals invest affection, intimacy, and time in interactions with artificial entities that possess neither a body nor a face. Reducing everything to human egoism is a way of

cluding the central question: why, today, do so many people desire what cannot desire them in return?

In reality, digital transformation does not eliminate desire but displaces it, shifting it into an artificial space that alters its structure, direction, and conditions of possibility. It is here that a number of significant pedagogical questions emerge. If desire arises between bodies, what happens when the spaces of encounter become digitally mediated environments? If desire is openness to alterity, how does it change when alterity becomes adjustable and programmable? How is desire sustained when the “other” cannot desire in return?

When individuals lose the sense of their own corporeality and the beauty of intercorporeality, they increasingly turn to surrogate forms of recognition offered by AI, which promise relationship without risk or surprise, availability without confrontation, and the simulation of emotions and empathy. Eva Illouz has shown how late-capitalist modernity is producing “cold intimacies”: de-emotionalised and functionalised relationships, in which «emotionality becomes an essential component of economic behaviour» (Illouz, 2007, p. 32).

In a related way, Byung-Chul Han, in *The Expulsion of the Other*, shows how our hyper-digitalised time is characterised by a progressive elimination of alterity, replaced by the invisible “violence of the Same”, which neutralises what is different and avoids whatever resists (2016/2017, pp. 7–8). Relation flattens into sameness: the other is admitted only insofar as disturbance, contradiction, and reciprocity are neutralised. Within this dynamic, AI is not the original cause, but a powerful accelerator of the contemporary tendency to expel alterity.

The contemporary paradox is evident: on the one hand, the need for relation grows; on the other, so too does the difficulty—or incapacity—of sustaining real proximity, the flesh-and-blood presence of the other, with their temporalities, silences, contradictions, unpredictability, and conflict. When encounter becomes too demanding, simulation turns into a reassuring refuge, and pornography becomes a simplified atlas of desire and a horizon that desires no one other than itself.

Companion chatbots and algorithms with human or digital semblances do not foster confrontation, because they are programmed to consistently comply with the user’s will (*sycophancy*). Likewise, humanoid sexbots can never generate the warmth, intimacy, or relational tension that only another human being can offer. The other disappears, as everything becomes a mirror of the self, confirmation without opposition.

This relational impoverishment reflects a deeper and more radical cultural void: on the one hand, the crisis of primary educational bonds—familial, scholastic, communal—that once constituted the symbolic and concrete habitat of growth; on

the other, the fragility of adult reference figures, often unreliable, inconsistent, or insubstantial (*yes-child*). Technology thus comes to assume a pseudo-educational and surrogate function, replacing a lacking affective proximity, where relation risks being substituted by mere connection.

At this point, the theoretical knot becomes clearer: when relation loses the body, desire loses its direction. It no longer tends toward the other, but toward a self-reflected on a screen. From a pedagogical perspective, what is most significant is that desire is not eliminated, but diverted—displaced toward forms of interaction that are no longer properly relational. When individuals lose the sense of their own corporeality—and perhaps even the sense of their own existence—and no longer rediscover the beauty of intercorporeality, that is, of being among other bodies, they end up seeking in AI a bodiless presence that reassures them and shields them from the risk posed by the other.

As pedagogues, we must therefore ask: which affective and relational competences are we neglecting? What kind of emotional literacy are we truly offering to younger generations? Are we still credible witnesses of relation for children and young people?

Education is called to bring into being the concrete and meaningful conditions that make authentic relation possible. Pedagogy, therefore, must commit itself to constructing formative spaces in which the art of encounter with the human other can be experienced. In other words, pedagogy must become a laboratory of humanity, where it is possible to learn how to mend the fractures between wounded reality and disappointed expectations, between the desire for presence and the fear of the other.

3. The Other That Remains: Transformations of Alterity and Human Desire in the Post-Digital Age

The epoch we describe as post-digital does not signify the end of the digital, nor its transcendence or a “post-technology” phase, but rather the moment at which the digital loses its visibility. It no longer appears as something added to life, but as the silent background of experience—the implicit texture that shapes our perception without making itself explicit. As Nicholas Negroponte famously observed, “like air and drinking water, the digital will be noticed only by its absence, not by its presence” (1998).

For younger generations, the digital has become the taken-for-granted experiential environment—what one inhabits in everyday living, growing, learning, and desiring. At a deeper level, however, the digital environment takes shape as a genuine ontological infrastructure that pre-forms our existence and our choices, orienting

the way we are in the world. It is no longer only technologies that evolve in response to our needs; rather, we ourselves—as “post-digital beings” (Savin-Baden, 2021)—are continuously reconfigured by hybrid environments that redraw what we perceive as real, possible, and desirable.

The other does not disappear, but becomes thinner, losing corporeality and density, turning into an alterity of low friction and low risk. Yet this reduction of the other does not extinguish the desire for alterity; on the contrary, it paradoxically reveals its tenacity, insofar as human beings continue to seek an Other even when alterity is simulated, attenuated to the point of almost vanishing. The need—desire to be listened to, recognised, and accompanied does not fade away, but migrates toward spaces in which the subject glimpses a response, even when that response comes from a synthetic voice or an interface programmed to offer availability, listening, and attention.

Encounter with the other thus becomes an encounter with a “quasi-other”: sufficient to ward off emptiness, yet incapable of generating life and transformation. Alterity reduced to a profile, an avatar, or an adaptive response no longer compels the subject to rethink themselves, to negotiate, or to reformulate their desires. Desire persists, but it contracts, limiting itself to the search for confirmation within the narrow perimeter of an immediate response.

At this point, a fundamental question arises: why does the person today struggle to trust the flesh-and-blood other, often preferring an algorithm instead? What renders the subject so fragile and vulnerable?

From this unresolved tension—between the need for relationship and the difficulty of sustaining its real weight—arises the urgency to rethink the formation of desire, in order to restore to it embodiment, thickness, and direction within the contemporary hybrid environment.

4. Contemporary Solitudes: Living Without the Other, Seeking the Other

The (post-)digital condition has not abolished solitude; rather, it has generated a genuine ecosystem of solitudes—quieter and more elusive. Despite being immersed in a technological environment that connects us ever more rapidly, why do women and men today feel increasingly alone?

The “solitudes of contemporaneity” (Castiglioni, 2025) constitute a widespread existential condition, particularly in technologically advanced societies. These solitudes are not always visible, yet they are deeply perceptible, and they are not produced by technology as such. Rather, technology intercepts them, disguises them, and at times amplifies them. The crucial point is that individuals feel lonely well before turning to the machine, and when they do turn to it, it is precisely because they

experience the fatigue, difficulty, or disappointment of human relationships. One is not alone because one lacks “relationships” in an absolute sense, but because many of the relationships one lives are impoverished and emptied of lived experience, grounded in individualistic motivations or in expectations that are sometimes impossible and often disappointed.

These solitudes are surrounded by multiple yet fleeting and inconsistent presences that leave no trace in a person’s life or affective memory. They are the symptom of an epoch that struggles to sustain the commitment of bonds, that recoils from healthy mutual dependence as if it were a weakness, and that defines autonomy as what is, in reality, mere independence. One is alone when one never truly feels “encountered”, never recognised, never “at home”.

To this must be added an even more subtle dynamic: solitude as an excess of self-presence. Post-digital environments, by constantly reflecting the subject back to themselves, produce an amplified form of self-referentiality, in which the self-hypertrophies and folds in on itself. Younger people, in order to avoid the acute pain of solitude and emptiness, crowd their digital spaces with continuous interactions, without any pause or silence. These are solitudes made up of uninterrupted conversations and intermittent relationships, governed by the imperative of constant exposure—*always visible, yet rarely truly seen*.

For adults, solitude often takes the form of a crisis of role. The digital environment has made it increasingly difficult to answer the question of what it means today to “be an adult”. There is no longer a single role, nor clear boundaries between closeness and distance, authority and friendliness. Guide? Peer? Mentor? Friend? Postures toward alterity overlap and blur, generating relationships without clear limits. If postmodernity had already reduced the space of relational asymmetries, the digital environment has further flattened it, eroding even the clarity of roles. All of this results in uncertainty about how to be for the other and what kind of presence to offer.

Older adults, too, experience specific forms of solitude: that of technological exclusion, which isolates those who lack access or competences; and that of feeling “out of time”, misaligned with the accelerated rhythm of the digital world. To these is added a solitude that might be called a “solitude of the gaze”: the sense of no longer having interlocutors willing to receive memory and to recognise the value of words, gestures, and slowness. This solitude is lived as a loss of transmissibility, as a difficulty in *traditio* (handing on): the impression that experience no longer finds a face to which it can be entrusted. It is the solitude of those who are no longer sought for who they are and what they know, but merely tolerated for what remains.

And yet, precisely in older adults—in their long memory—there resides an educational resource of extraordinary value.

In all these forms—youthful, adult, and elderly—post-digital solitudes appear as the most evident sign of lack and, at the same time, of a tenacious desire for the other. Even when presence is minimal, distorted, or digitally mediated, the human being continues to reach toward a face, a voice, someone who can listen, recognise, and accompany.

Hence emerges the pedagogical urgency to rethink education for desire.

5. Toward a Renewed Pedagogy of Desire in an Age of Overabundance: Recovering Waiting

At first glance, our time appears to be an era in which everything can be desired and almost everything can be obtained. We do not live in an age of lack, but in one of overabundance, which reveals a silent transformation of desire: desire does not disappear, but loses its direction—that is, the individual's capacity to orient towards what they truly lack. As Alain Ehrenberg has shown, contemporary suffering no longer arises from a scarcity of goods or means, but from an excess of possibilities: «the weariness of being oneself» consists precisely in being crushed by the weight of the possible (1998).

The difficulty of desiring also stems from a different configuration of time. Hartmut Rosa has shown how the contemporary condition is dominated by acceleration, by an ever-faster tempo that produces frenzy and alienation (Rosa, 2010/2015), as well as cognitive, emotional, and visibility overload (Romano, 2024). The German sociologist observes that «when something goes wrong in one's relationship to time, it is equally likely that something goes wrong in one's relationship to the world» (Rosa, 2016/2020, p. 55). Under conditions of permanent acceleration, the subject—no longer able to wait or to listen to themselves—ends up losing the capacity to distinguish between what they desire and what merely stimulates or entices them. Contracted time produces contracted desires: ready-made, rapid, and often futile.

We thus live within a rigid and severe temporal regime, largely invisible and insufficiently theorised, whereby we have moved from the existential horizon of *Being and Time* to a post-digital condition of *being without time*, deprived of the capacity to inhabit duration, slowness, pause, and waiting.

Waiting is a fundamental pedagogical element, because it is the space that lies between what is and what is not, between the already and the not-yet. It is the point of intersection between the known and the unknown, between what one has and what one desires, between the thinkable and the unthinkable. Waiting places us in a

condition of suspension, uncertainty, and almost impotence, insofar as it makes us aware that we do not possess the future and are not its masters.

Simone Weil speaks of waiting as an unperturbable perseverance that gives stability and takes the form of a “passive activity”, a “non-agentic action”. Weil connects the notion of waiting to the Greek expression ἐν ὑπομονῇ (*en hypomonē*), which literally means “to remain under, to stay within, to dwell, to inhabit” (Weil, 1950/2008). Waiting that becomes perseverance is an indispensable educational element, because it teaches one to remain without fleeing from relationships or difficulties, to dwell within unresolved situations, and to inhabit the unknown and the not-yet-understood without demanding an immediate resolution.

Learning to persevere, even when expected results are not immediately visible, fosters greater determination and helps one to discern whether what one is striving for is truly what one desires. *Hypomonē* teaches creative fidelity: remaining faithful to the original inspiration while at the same time remaining open to novelty, venturing onto new paths with courage—remembering that “courage” means “acting with the heart” (*cor agere*).

6. Educating Desire Between Imagination and Reality

If desiring is inevitable, then it is up to the subject to decide how to orient their desire, what moves it, and toward what it is directed. Indeed, one may say that learning how to desire is a necessary life competence, one that decisively shapes the quality of existence itself. It can happen, in fact, that one makes the mistake of desiring something “*instead of*” something else, because one fails to recognise what is truly lacking. In this way, one risks remaining trapped in dissatisfaction, pursuing an illusory desire. For this reason, education for desire constitutes an indispensable task of the formative process.

A decisive feature of education for desire lies in learning to move from one’s own imagination to reality, by traversing the gap between what is expected and what actually occurs. Educating desire means accompanying the person in learning to sustain disappointment, when the other presents themselves differently from how they had been imagined. Out of fear of being disappointed, many cease to desire and come to believe that becoming an adult means resigning oneself, settling for a life emptied of emotion. Desire thus risks being confused with dreaming or with consolatory fantasy, rather than being recognised as a movement that sets one on a path.

The true point of departure lies in desires themselves, for they reveal much about who we are, what we have lived through, and what we would like to become.

Educating desire means taking one's desires seriously, learning to read them, decipher them, and interrogate them, because every desire is a small *hermeneutics of existence*: it expresses the way we interpret life, what we expect from it, and the kind of future we glimpse while inhabiting the present. The criterion for understanding whether what we are desiring is good is not to be found in the quantitative results achieved, but in the quality of the processes we set in motion and in the capacity to allow desire to foster growth, making us more open and more reflective.

7. Conclusions. Limit as the Generative Condition of Desire

What value does *limit* hold in the education of desire? Limit is what allows desire to take direction and prevents it from dissolving into an infinite field of possibilities. It is the essential condition that allows desire to take shape, insofar as it delineates its field and allows the subject to distinguish what truly matters from what merely attracts. Without limit, the realm of the possible collapses into the dis-educative logic of *everything-is-possible*, where the subject encounters neither resistance nor clear contours. Every authentic act of desiring is born within distance, in that space of waiting in which we do not possess what we ask for and where desire can mature, become more precise, and assume boundaries. Without this necessary measure of resistance, the subject grows in an ego-centred manner, increasingly unable to perceive reality and the other for what they are.

Limit, therefore, is not the negation of desire but its *generative condition*. By circumscribing what can truly be chosen, limit restores depth to willing and grants renewed consistency to the *I-can*. Limit compels confrontation, decision, and choice.

Within a hybrid environment, where the digital multiplies every possibility *ad infinitum*, it is limit that returns to desire a human orientation—one that no technology can replicate. For this reason, a pedagogy of desire can be neither nostalgic nor technophobic. Desire can emerge and mature even within digital spaces, provided that these environments are not mistaken for the totality of experience. The challenge is not to “go back”, but to educate individuals to inhabit the digital with depth, discernment, and care.

A world without limits gives the illusion of liberating desire, yet ultimately suffocates it within a uniform amalgam, where everything can be desired in the same way and, for this very reason, nothing retains value. Where everything shines, nothing truly illuminates. Limit—understood as duration, distance, and the resistance of the other—can allow the subject to rediscover the direction of desire, its voice, and its hidden light.

A genuine education of desire makes it possible to inhabit the technological *Umwelt* only insofar as it is capable of reconnecting the human–environment net-

work in a way that is not merely functional or adaptive, but generative of meaning—capable of safeguarding the human within the hybrid.

References

- Castiglioni, M. (Ed.). (2025). *Educar(si) alle solitudini contemporanee*. ETS.
- Ehrenberg, A. (1998). *La fatica di essere se stessi: Depressione e società*. Einaudi.
- Han, B.-C. (2016). *L'espulsione dell'altro: Società, percezione e comunicazione oggi*. Nottetempo.
- Illouz, E. (2007). *Intimità fredde: Le emozioni nella società dei consumi*. Feltrinelli.
- Kurzweil, R. (2024). *The singularity is nearer: When we merge with AI*. Viking.
- Levinas, E. (1961). *Totalità e infinito: Saggio sull'esteriorità*. Jaca Book.
- Negroponte, N. (1998). *Beyond digital*. Wired. <https://www.wired.com/1998/12/negroponte-55/>
- Petrosino, S. (2019). *Il desiderio: Non siamo figli delle stelle*. Vita e Pensiero.
- Romano, R. (2024). *Intelligenza Artificiale Generativa e dilemmi etico-educativi*. Pensa MultiMedia.
- Rosa, H. (2010). *Accelerazione e alienazione: Per una teoria critica del tempo nella tarda postmodernità*. Einaudi.
- Rosa, H. (2016). *Pedagogia della risonanza: Conversazione con Wolfgang Iser*. Scholè.
- Savin-Baden, M. (Ed.). (2021). *Postdigital humans: Transitions, transformations and transcendence*. Springer.
- Weil, S. (1950). *Attesa di Dio*. Adelphi.