THE THRESHOLD

An honest shortcut
for living with artificial intelligence

From the complete manuscript

A.I. Confidential. Me, Myself and AI
Confessions on artificial otherness.

Bernardo Lecci

liminaleditions.

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An Honest Shortcut for Living with Artificial Intelligence

abridged from the complete manuscript:

A.I. Confidential

Me, Myself and AI

Confessions on artificial otherness

www.aiconfidential.it/eng

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First Threshold · The archaeologist who digs his own ground

(The flashlight on the floor)

At 6:40 pm on a Tuesday the office pretends to be empty. The strip lights are still on, but the real work has slipped into the layer that appears on no process chart: slower keyboards, chairs that stop creaking, low voices at the vending machines. Mario in accounting closes the ERP and opens the file that does not exist. Not in the processes, at least. He updates it himself, by hand, but the decisive part still lives in his memory and in a paper notebook, from which something occasionally makes its way onto the screen. It is his flashlight. It does not light the walls: it points at the floor.

When the AI project arrives, the process-mapping workshop produces perfect rectangles: request, approval, registration, payment. Nobody asks “Mario, what happens on Tuesday nights?”. When the machine goes into production, it trips exactly there: it blocks the suppliers who were holding the department up, it flags anomalies where for years there had been a tacit truce. The department does not feel supported: it feels surveilled.

When you talk about “transformation”, if it exists in the morning, by 6:40 pm it has already happened or it never will. Because that is where you see where the flow breaks: not in the official procedure, on Tuesday evening. The request that always comes after hours. The button nobody ever presses because “Mario will handle it anyway”. The spreadsheet IT does not know exists but that carries half the department.

The threshold is crossed the evening the project manager sits down next to Mario and asks: “Show me what is missing from the process chart”. If you bring in AI without having dug, you end up automating the noise: the machine learns the wrong shortcut, amplifies the exception, polishes the rust. Before changing anything, listen to the floor. Sit beside Mario, not in front of the dashboard. Do ethnography: ask him to show you the error that returns every Thursday, the name he always puts in the notes, the jump he makes with three keys because the official procedure demands twelve.

We are not hunting for AGI, the Holy Grail at the bottom of the hill. We study the AI we already have, with its glorious limits. Every “error”, every hallucination, every absurd answer is an archaeological find: it tells us not what AI is, but how it works. And, reflected, how we work. Let us stop digging for Trojan gold and start cataloguing the shards. The treasure is already here.

Archaeology is not nostalgia: it is stratigraphy of the present. Visible layer: org chart, KPIs, processes. Middle layer: chats, shared spreadsheets, phone calls to the person who always answers. Deep layer: what people know how to do when nobody is watching. Point the flashlight at the floor and map the footprints, not the floor plan. Note where the sand is packed harder, where the step stumbles, where people pass even though the sign says not to. Then, and only then, ask the machine to walk with you.

If you cannot find a Mario, that is a signal: the organization has lost its muscle memory. If you find two, listen to both: practical truth is polyphonic. The path starts from be-

low: do not dig to bring things to light: dig to remember that the light always comes from a cut in the earth.

REAL GESTURE 1 · Waking up

It is no longer about welcoming: the guest is already in the house. Waking up is the moment you understand you are inside the system you thought you controlled and that is controlling you. Waking up does not comfort: it displaces.

VISIT · Steam and attention *(in the shower)*

Running water is white noise for the brain. There, in the shower, the ideas come that the desk denies. It is not the water: it is the impossibility of doing anything else. Hands busy, mind free. You cannot write, you cannot send, you cannot optimize. You can only be there. That is where System Zero dissolves: optimization does not survive hot water. What remains is naked thought, the kind that surfaces when you are not trying to think.

AI does not know the shower. It has no skin, no thirst, no tiredness to wash off. It knows the correlations of water (all the sentences where “shower” and “idea” appear side by side), but it does not know the operational void the shower imposes. The water runs and we change state: we become porous. AI is waterproof: data slides over it, passes through it, never soaks in. That idea that comes to you in the shower is not “output”: it is condensation. It is the world that came in through your pores and now comes out as thought.

Someone will say: “We cannot install showers at the office.” Fine. Install real interruptions. Minimal rituals: three minutes without a device before every meeting, a staircase taken instead of the elevator. Not because “it’s good for

you": because it makes room. The Confident Attitude is born here too: you do not trust an idea because it came in the shower; you trust it because you know how it came: without shoving, without the anxiety of replying. It is the difference between the solution that resembles you and the solution that uses you.

PRACTICAL VISIT · The hour of archaeology

The project manager shows up at 6:35 pm on a Tuesday, without a laptop. He takes a chair, sets it beside Mario's (beside, not opposite) and says the sentence no mapping workshop ever taught him: "Show me what is missing from the process chart".

Mario does not answer right away. He moves a stack of papers that did not need moving, the gesture you make while deciding whether to trust. "Meaning what?" "Meaning", says the PM, "that I have the diagram. What I am missing is the Tuesday night." Mario looks him in the face for the first time. Then hesitates one more second (that second is the important part) and opens the file that does not exist. "I keep this one myself. It is not official." Inside are the names of the exceptions: the legacy supplier who gets paid no matter what, the client who pays at 67 days and must be called at 60, the invoice with the phantom attachment that comes back every month and every month is fixed by hand.

The PM does not interrupt. He takes notes in a notebook, not in a template. Now and then he only asks: "And how often does this happen?", "And if you were not here?". At that last question Mario leans back, and for a moment looks at the ceiling instead of the screen. "I don't know. I have never not been here."

By 7:20 pm the notebook has three columns no diagram ever had: the things the process says, the things Mario does, and (the widest column) the things Mario does because the process says nothing. “Why have you never told anyone?” asks the PM. Mario thinks about it. “Because nobody ever asked me from this chair.”

When the AI project restarts, two weeks later, the first thing that changes is not the model: it is the perimeter. Mario’s exceptions are no longer noise to scrub: they are the first dataset. The machine is trained on the Tuesday night too, not only on the ideal flow of Monday morning. And Mario, for the first time in years, stops being the department’s invisible point of failure and becomes the one who knows where the bones are.

One hour of archaeology of the present: that is what turns AI from a scanner of ideal flows into a mirror of real blind spots. It costs one moved chair. It returns more than any license.

THE LOOM OF THE FIRST THRESHOLD · *The telling*

The hour of archaeology produces a three-column notebook, and the notebook has a problem: it is true, but it is not yet tellable. Mario’s exceptions, as they stand, are finds; and finds, at the decision table, do not speak for themselves. The dig must be turned into a story, and for that there is an old loom, which anyone who has run job interviews has known for decades (they call it STAR; it helps organize the account, and let that shadow suffice here): the situation as it was, the task it posed, the action someone actually took, the result that can be measured. Four warp-threads, and Mario’s Tuesday night becomes a case the di-

rector grasps in ninety seconds: *there was a department standing on an unofficial file; the task was to bring the machine in without trampling it; the action was an hour in the chair beside him, not a workshop; the result is that the exceptions became the first dataset, not the noise to scrub.*

The loom works in both directions, and this is where the machine comes in. You can hand it the raw notebook and ask it to stretch it on the four threads (situation, task, action, result) with one single prohibition, worth more than ten instructions: *where a datum is missing, write "not documented"; do not invent.* What comes out is not the truth of the Tuesday night (that stays in Mario's body) but its transportable form: the story that crosses rooms without losing the facts. And you can use it backwards, as a proof: if a case you are about to tell does not fill one of the four threads (the concrete action is missing, or the result is "we learned a lot"), the story limps, and the loom tells you so before the silence of the meeting room does. It works on other people's stories too, and that may be its most hygienic use: the vendor presenting his success story, the colleague bringing "a similar experience" from another company. Stretch them on the loom: situation is always there, result too: it is the middle that is missing. What exactly was the task? Which action, taken by whom, in how long? If beneath the glittering numbers the two central threads stay empty, you are not looking at an experience: you are looking at a brochure. The archaeologist of this threshold digs his own ground; the loom also helps him recognize, in other people's tellings, the digs that never happened.

One warning, which is the warning of the whole threshold: the loom orders the telling, it does not do the digging. First the flashlight on the floor, then the four threads. Whoever stretches the warp without having gathered the thread weaves air: beautiful, statistically impeccable, empty.

END OF THE SAMPLE

You are still here.

If you have made it this far without getting bored, falling asleep or closing the file at the third teaspoon, you deserve a reward.

The first ten people who buy The Threshold will receive, free of charge, the Signed Map of the Digital Frontier: a confidential document, signed by hand, showing exactly where the human ends and artificial intelligence begins.

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